Adrian Stokes: Surface, Form, and (Dis)Content
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Adrian Stokes is giving us a theory of the surface; this is his contribution to architectural analysis; it is a formalism that is not about plasticity, proportion, geometry, spatial deployment or spatial sequence. It is an appreciation of surface that isn’t incidental in its exclusions (interior spaces), but that sees the surface as uniquely 1) the place that unleashes another type of spatiality - one that is metaphorical and symbolic and 2) is uniquely attached to our psyche (it invites and unleashes projection.)

Stokes is operating in a psychoanalytic context that explicitly draws on Melanie Klein, but is also, I believe, consistent with observations made by other analysts – in particular, Lacan - whose theories of self-representation, image formation, and visuality (i.e., how we picture the world for/as ourselves) are exemplified by Stokes. Likewise, Stokes’s understanding of surface can be matched with one associated with Deleuze, who by implication, if not reality, is commonly viewed as offering a definitive theory of surface.

Klein
One of the things that is so fascinating about stokes is that the writing of seeing is itself so persuasive, so evocative; whether you follow the ideology or not, you enter into the aura of his voice. I feel a whole paper could be written on his writing. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it is useful to understand the intellectual framework Stokes is operating in, in particular his use of Kleinian theory.

Amongst other things, Klein suggested that the super ego is in evidence much earlier than Freud had assumed. She said that while children can’t relate to whole objects like the father, or the mother before the phallic stage and the Oedipus complex, they could nevertheless relate to “part object” – in particular the mother’s breast - well before this. Klein came to believe that it isn’t merely the internalized father figure that peoples the inner life of the super-ego, but an entire world of part objects, both paternal and maternal – breasts nipples, tongues, penis’s etc. These part objects are powerful, threatening internal figures. Both they and the mechanisms of defense required to control them are violent. For Freud the main mechanism of defense is reparation, but for Klein, drawing on Abraham and Ferenczi, there are four principle mechanisms of defense. The first 2 are projection and introjection, both of which have their origin in the pure pleasure principal. The ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and eject everything that is bad. Projection, wherein the ego disowns its own impulses and attributes them to the exterior world, is characteristic of paranoia. Introjection is based on the earliest oral impulse to eat the object. The third is identification, which in one direction takes the object as its model and thus is a defense against the lost of the object (or its rivalry with it) and in the other direction takes the subject as model and results in narcissism. The fourth is the splitting of the ego, which involves the bifurcation of the ego into the normal part, which attends to reality, and the other libidinal part that detaches itself from reality and plays its fantasy out. Splitting is associated with fetishism.

Klein replaced Freud’s three phases of the id with her structure of two positions, the paranoid-schizophrenic and the depressive. In the first, the child cannot take in whole objects extended in time and space but only the part objects of immediate sensory experience. These objects are either satisfying (as in the good breast that provides the milk) or frustrating (as in the bad breast that is denied). This position is characterized by the ego splitting into its good and bad parts or by confusion with the object in projective identification. The second position assumes a child who can recognize whole objects, especially the mother, as complete and enduring, as possessor of both the good and the bad breast. This is depressing to the child not only because it learns about the non-
purity of what it considered to be “good”, but because it apprehends its own destructive desires in attacking the mother or the breast. This is the onslaught of guilt, but also of a healthy, realistic approach to the exterior world, in which the ego is integrated and exposed to the conflict of the contradictory impulses.

The implication of Klein’s work on child psychology for visual theory is not spelled out by her, but she exploits those observations of Freud regarding ego and perception that point to visual results. One of these observations was that the ego was the perceptual organ in both the direction of the inner world and the direction of the outer world, i.e., that the ego’s essential role was the perceptual (not merely intellectual) mediation between what the person thought to be outside itself, and thought to be inside itself. In this, the ego is depicted as the layer dividing inside and out; later, Freud writes that the ego is the outer crust of the id. Likewise, implicit in Klein’s work is Freud’s idea that sexual drive cannot be distinguished from its representation; lust does not exist prior to and independent of its object. And finally, she develops Freud’s notion of fantasy. Near the conclusion of the Interpretation of Dreams he argues that “psychical reality” is different from, but no less significant than, “material reality”; he says that it is not real events that alone cause neuroses but fantasies.

Klein’s depiction of the child’s world, in which phantasized bodily parts are projected out on to the outer world through the plane of perception (ego) and incorporated back into the inner world through that same plane is an elaboration of this Freudian manifold. Indeed, phantasy, the term she uses to describe the manner in which these sexual instincts represent themselves in terms of appropriate object (the biting mouth, the piercing penis, etc.) is precisely the collapse of the drive on to object; it is an “affective interpretation of the bodily sensations”. (While phantasy was the term she used for effect, symbolism was the term she used for the process itself.)

But Klein goes farther than Freud. As an analysis that principally explains how the ego functions perceptually to manage the figures populating the id/superego inner world and their application onto and absorption of the external world, Klein unlike Freud, depicts an ego that is almost entirely described by its image management. Her conceptual shift from Freud’s “stages” of development to her “positions” is significant not only because it is a spatial as opposed to temporal paradigm, but because it assumes a place taken up vis-à-vis the world, or, I might say, its visual unfolding. She also goes farther in depicting a rich visual manifold. The floating, swarming bodily-parts that are the objects of the child’s lust are thick, aggressive, swarming, threatening. Vision in this case is the opposite of transparent; it is thick, robust, layered. Moreover, because the child has no real sense of itself as an integrated ego, the vagaries of these phantasies don’t just project from the child, they are the child.

Lacan

Before describing what Stokes does with this, the variation that Lacan makes of this is interesting to examine; in this way we can see Stokes as not just a representative of Kleinian theory (which he literally was), but as a representative of a larger mode of psychoanalytic thought in which both Lacan and Stokes participated.

Lacan was involved in the work of Klein in the 40’s and 50’s, and it is Klein’s notion of phantasy that most intrigues Lacan. Like Klein and Freud before her, Lacan assumes that phantasy is a way of organizing reality rather than avoiding or opposing it; phantasy is our means of registering the exterior world; hence the inner world is our outer world. Moreover, the narcissism and aggression ignited when the child sees itself in the mirror of Lacan’s mirror stage is based on the false illusion of its integrated ego – false because the Lacanian child’s ego at this point is, like Klein’s, uncentered, fragmented and made of floating body parts. The Imaginary, with which the mirror stage is associated, emphasizes the importance of the visual field and the specular relation that underlies the child’s captivation with the image. It is he who offers the description of the child at this stage as assuming that objects wear their specularity upon themselves. In other words, much of what Lacan describes of the Imaginary world is a re-writing of Klein’s part-object position. But there is as well something more, or, something less. First, the mirror offers – overtly, unlike Klein – the plane, the surface – hard,
brittle, reflexive – upon which the visual model operates and comes into being. The plane of perception which was implicit in Klein is pulled off of the eyeball/skin and identified physically, as its own spectural condition. A conceptually identifiable object is made.

There is as well the difference in what Lacan wants to suggest becomes of phantasy. Because he is not satisfied to ultimately leave phantasy out of the linguistic register, he emphasizes that it as a essentially a system of absence, where the phantasy stands in for the missing real object. Phantasy is “set to work in the signifying structure” because it “robs (the subject) of its object.” As he puts it: “Phantasy, in its fundamental; employment, is the means by which the subject supports himself at the level of his fading desire, fading to the extent that the very satisfaction of demand robs it of its object.” With this observation, Lacan continues to see phantasy in a more negative light than Klein (he criticized Klein for equating phantasy with imagination). While fundamental to his notion of Desire - phantasy as precluding the successful fulfillment of desire is precisely what keeps Desire alive – phantasies, and imaginary identifications, block the chain of free association and resist the unfolding of speech; it is part of the ego mechanism to give us a false appearance of coherence. (The Klein-Lacan Dialogues, “Phantasy in Klein and Lacan,” Darian Leader)

So, in reference to visuality, other things are transformed from the Kleinian model. 1) Lacan, being less interested in (but still assuming) the bodily contents of these phantasies, redirects attention to the abstract signifying system that is at play here. If we have already identified that he brings into the model an identifiable plane, he also describes how the plane, that surface, operates in an epistemological structure. And 2), in linking phantasy to desire, and the impossibility of desire’s fulfillment, he condemns the visual system to constant repetition. In this, Lacan, like Freud, made much of the falsifying character of the ego; its job is to maintain a false appearance of coherence and completeness, but, with the privileged, phantasied identity objects that are linked to the pregenital objects of breast excrement, the look and the voice, block other identifications.

So, we can review the theory of vision implied by Klein/Lacan:

1) the viewer/child sees what it desires; what it sees is a metaphor, a symbol, a substitute. As a metaphor, it is overdetermined, in flux, unstable. It is deeply physical, bodily. The bodily aspect of it makes it very physical at the same time that this physicality doesn’t limit or even locate its referential ability.

2) It is insistent, motivated, repeating; it doesn’t just occur incidentally when we “look”; it demands it repeated application onto the exterior world.

3) there is no self at the center from which looking or seeing occurs; at the same time, specularity, which has been described as being worn on the objects, now must be seen as wearing that specularity on a plane (the plane of the mirror, or the epistemological plane); it isn’t divorced from the object; rather, the object is flattened against it. As a screen, it both divides and connects the inner and outer world.

4) At the same time, what the child sees, being made up of floating, unlocated bodily parts, is thick and plastic; it operates in a spatial context, moving in and out of the inner world; passing through from one side of the layer of ego/perception to the other. If this is reconciled with the above urge to flatness, what we get is a notion of perception that is flat in its location but thick in its implication. Flatness comes with a density that both qualifies it and challenges it. The coexistence of the flat and the thick is an ongoing and never disappearing tension.

Stokes

We should read another passage from Stokes, from Venice: an Aspect of Art. This is a book, written in 1944, seen as par t of a trilogy with Inside Out (1947) and Smooth and Rough (1951), in which Stokes begins to make more apparent his psychoanalytic indebtedness; it is his “coming out”. This text is of particular interest because, writing during the war, he is working wholly from photographs of buildings in Venice. He not only doesn’t hide the fact that he is not talking about the buildings themselves but rather about their two–dimensional, black and white reproduction; he is liberated by their flattened abstraction. While Stokes's vision would
flatten the three-dimensionality in any case, of the photos heighten the implications of vision’s obsession with the spectral plane. The photo’s surface denies a “natural” hierarchy of the depicted objects’ meanings (our knowledge, for example, that the building is more important than the birds or clouds) and allowing an easy replacement with a projected inner world. One should notice the manner in which Stokes positions (in the deepest Kleinian sense) himself vis-à-vis the object. He instructs us to search the terrain of the photograph. We, like him, visually finger the surface of the image. Then, because the surface of the thing being looked at collapses both the tree-dimensional world it depicts and our thick, plastic, “inner world”, enormous pressure cones to bare on it. (It shouldn’ be overlooked that the architecture of Venice is so essentially one of surface and facades.)

Here he describes “A Venetian House of the 17th Century.”

Once again, the white squares of the thick stone surrounding the barred lower window, in a manner of clear and white arrest, epitomizes transaction within. The washing above hangs white and listless: but the liston below of the Isterian stone takes an added density as the sum of apparel. We see approximation and differences as in a family. The monolith Isterian jambs to the door give added density to the layer upon layer of thin transverse bricks and even to the worn horizontal planks of canal door. Yet brick and wood seem to partake of the stone from their intercourse. These static things appear teeming things arrested and ordered for the eye. In terms of distinctness, we have the sense of things fused.

**Stokes's visuality**

In Venice, Stokes displays his theory if vision, he no longer, as in his earlier books, feels obliged to explain it. But we should run through it, because he is quite clear about why he does see the way he does and why he does privilege the architecture of flatness like he does. His paradigm in all of the arts was work whose spatial essence was presented flatly and immediately for the eye, whether it be the stone of a sculpture or building façade, or the pigment and color of a painting. Only the eye allowed an immediate (whole, unsplit, unsequential) grasp of the object, and only in this grasping of and onto the object could the subject find the mirror, the essence of his/her inner world, his/her psyche. His hope for objects was that they would demonstrate and make us experience their otherness; only in its otherness would we both lose ourselves and ironically, find our selves.

Contributing to this was a notion of vision as a physical phenomenon.

a) Part of this is his concern with the otherness of vision. Vision, as he liked to point out, is the one sense that is not experienced as belonging to our bodies. The object is perceived as distinct from ourselves. Stokes had an unusual need to get out of himself, a need that was partly ideological (in the Kleinian manner of projecting onto the exterior world) and partly neurotic (as someone struggling with his homosexuality, he wanted to eject out of himself). As he writes, “The world as we perceive it, our animal habit, is the language of every passing mood or contemplative state. Indeed, without this canvas, as it were, on which to apply ourselves, by which we transmute as well as satisfy more directly biological needs, we cannot conceive the flow of the mind any more than the activity of the body. The body is obviously meaningless without a further external world; but so too is the mind. Mental as well as physical life is a laying out of strength within, in rivalry, as it were, with the laid out instantaneousness of space.”

Or,

“I sometimes have the feeling that what I see out of my eyes is a projection of pictures in my head as if I were a cinema reel and the outside world a screen on which the film is projected, put in movement and enlarged.”

b) In this the supposed flatness of vision was pivotal. Using but transforming the British empirical tradition of Berkley and Locke, in which vision’s two-dimensionality made it inferior to and dependent on touch, Stokes, like Ruskin, valorized the flatness as both an aspect of its immediacy and an essential condition for its ability to symbolize.
c) Vision comes to us immediately. As such, it is not mediated by our (internal) intellect, but comes to us purely.

d) At the same time, however, the full gamut of physical sensations were lodged in the eye. Despite Stokes’s insistence that the visual was superior to the tactile, the body was nevertheless wholly present in vision; vision absorbed the other senses into itself. This is his fascination with rough and smooth. As he writes in the book of this name, “In employing smooth and rough as generic terms of architectural dichotomy, I am better able to preserve both the oral and the tactile notions that underlie the visual.” (p. 243)

e) Moreover, the body was literally present in the physical housing of the eye in the torso. All of the ocular muscles, mucous and nerve-endings were experienced in the act of seeing and preventing sight from merely “floating” around ambivalently.

In other words, Stokes’s mode of “looking” twists the Kleinian/Lacanian model in its own obsessive direction.

Stokes’s Theory of Surface

Certain formal preferences result from the Stokes-a la-Klein notion of vision and objective identification:

1. Paintings should never be about their composition or their perspective implying deep space, but rather about their layering; that is, the important relationships aren’t those that operate across the lateral surface of the painting, but those that imply a layered relationship from front (the eye of the viewer) to back (an implicit space in/on/behind the canvas in which actual, literal surface always dominates. (no real figure ground distinction; up/down, not recession; no tension;)

2. Color should be “surface” color, not “film” color, where the former is understood to be “out there”, located on the object and not, like film color, experienced as floating a- spatially in our minds eye. Stokes was himself a painter who hated the work of Vanessa Bell and the Bloomsbury group, which insisted on outlining it figures and making clear divisions between object and between foreground and background (splitting…), His own painting was much more over-all in its composition and used color to make space vis-a-vis its insistence on how paint and color sit on the surface of the canvas.

In sculpture, “carving” was better than “modeling”, where the former, carving, understood (conceptually, for the terms “carving” and “modeling” were not meant to be literal modes of production) that the material fights back (in layers and depth) and challenges the ego while the latter, modelling, allows the maker to just willful mush things around. To a certain extent, this was a very literal understanding of carving in stone, and not just any stone, but limestone. Limestone itself, “the link between the organic and inorganic worlds,” exemplified the essence of otherness, capable of being presented instantaneously, via its surface. “The compactness of (the) grain causes the purer limestone’s to be not only robust as we have seen, but also to posses in many cases this flesh-like glow” (p. 202, I); a proper, Quatro-Cento appreciation of stone comes with “adulation of the plain smooth, but tense surface.” (p53, I); it “refl ects light preeminently.” Thus his love of the sculptor Agostino di Duccio, whose bas-reliefs ensured that not the fi gure, but the stone through the medium of the fi gure, is the content of the work.

It was also his admiration for Henry Moore’ sculpture, about which he says: Mr. Moore has cut and polished this stone to display a silvery light and to offer the swift, greased smoothness of metal, yet it is most lovely to the touch. The slight protuberances, the gradual, unsharpened ridges upon the major forms, the swift convergences that the eye apprehends immediately but around which the hand hesitates, exploring further and further, are as a solid cream upon the surface of this stone, a cream whose clefts are wrinkles – wide, shallow, and smooth.” (p. 311, I) But he is also interested in a more abstract notion of carving, one that admired not carving in stone per se, but rather an attitude about material that respected its otherness.

In architecture, space is denigrated; inside and out side must collapse on surface; all must proceed from the vertical plane, press from it or on it; no interest in plasticity; emphasis on texture, on what is rough and what is smooth; a world/space of incrustation; anti Corb.:
Much more is brought upon the surface. Pilasters, with their arch moldings lying upon the bright marble wall-space, are the inner dark ferment in architectural form on the marble. The darkness of the windows is like a residue both of the inside of the church and of the dark canal. The base of stone is entirely conjoined with the canal as a bank is formed by the stream.

The consequence of this for architecture was his dismissal of modern interest in plasticity and space, for "modelling" concerns. "Be it modernist or academic or whatever else, the simple, swift or "masterly" organization of masses is characteristic of modelling, be it oil paint that is slickly splashed about or Le Corbusier's lightening concrete.... (emphasis his) these materials have little emblem of their own, with an armature of steel Le Corbusier can make you a room of any shape you like. He can express speed with a building. Rooms will be fashioned. Their organization will be simple sheer design." (p. 244, 558, I) But in any case, in both sculpture and architecture, the textures are paramount and the juxtaposition of rough and smooth, especially around the apertures of a façade, are of major significance, again because this is where the exchange between an inside and an outside of a building is made, but presented, always, a single surface.

All of the things on the positive side of these equations were initially associated with Klein's healthier depressive position. Everything is given to you whole, instantly, before you could do your splitting, paranoid schizophrenic work. Later he seemingly saw that this good/bad polarity was itself "unhealthy" (split) and advocated that a psychoanalytically successful work of art would allow one to experience both sides of the equation, experience the fluctuation from paranoid-schizophrenic to the depressive. With this late aesthetic formulation, he became more interested in art that can envelope you, not just land you visually on a plane. In The Invitation to Art (1967?), the enticement is the enthralled, enveloping affect on the spectator when part-object positions are coupled, as with the case of turner, the painter, with a whole-object sensitivity to reality. Stokes here has changed his attitude about how absolutely other and distinct from you the work appeared (he was less paranoid of losing himself) but he hasn't given up on an aesthetic that privileges the all-over over the clear figure-ground distinctions and the hierarchically composed. Turner now becomes the painter of choice. Indeed, this is emphasized in the second part of the invitation in art entitled, "The Gasometer and the Tower," in which he makes a scathing attack on the architects and builders who produce explicitly phallic "erections" that "attack" the beholder. The objects – towers, gasometers – represent the epitome of the bad aspects of the part-object position.

In all of this, the main point regarding surface is that real space limits the possibility of letting lose one inner space.

**Deleuze and Surface**

We can continue this line of thought by moving to Deleuze and Guattarri, who fall into this discussion of surface not only because of their usurpation into formal architectural discussions by "blob" practitioners like Greg Lynn and others but (more importantly) because they, too, have a Kleinian becground and a developed epistemological theory that implicates vision, form and representation.

Their position is ostensibly contradictory to that above which weaves a theory of what I've called “thick” vision. Deleuze and Guattari are, indeed, specifically anti such (merely) representational ways of thinking through subject-object relationships that come with visual imaging; or, more explicitly, they are anti-phantasy. “There is an essential difference between the psychoanalytic interpretation of the phantasy (bad) and the antipsychiatric experimentation of the program. (good). ... The Body without organs is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and objectification's as a whole. Psychoanalysis does the opposite: it translates everything into phantasies, it retains the phantasy. It royally botches the real, because it botches the body without organs.” (p. 151) Likewise, their anti-psychoanalysis position – their thought that psychoanalysis wrongly cures us of a schizophrenia that in fact is the proper psychic state in capitalism - is in direct opposition to that of Klein, who appears consistently to be the premier negative example psychoanalytic work.
But like Lacan, who wants to distance himself from Klein just as he uses her so strongly to formulate his description of the Imaginary, Deleuze and Guattari perhaps protesteth too much. The entire repertoire of affects, multiplicities, haecceities, rhizometrics, bodies without organs, etc. can be seen as precisely the uncentered, un hierarchical, shifting, realm of swirling swarming, mutating part-objects that Klein’s paranoid, schizophrenic position elaborates. Moreover, despite the claims to a thinking that is non-visual, I would say that precisely because of this anti-image exploration of subject-object relationships, they are more dependent on metaphors of (descriptions of; theories of; structures of…) surface to locate any of the terms (multiplicities, haecceities, rhizometrics) that are used to describe, as I have said, the subject-object relationship once we see both subject and object as uncentered, multiple, and mutually mutating (affecting). As they say so succinctly, “Psychoanalysis has no feeling of unnatural participation’s, nor for the assemblages a child can mount in order to solve a problem from which all exits are barred him: a plane, not a phantasy.” (p. 260; emphasis theirs). Thus you can read 1000 Plateaus as a celebration not just of the part-object position with all of its swarming bodily parts, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic references, but of the plane, the surface itself on which that schizophrenia is played out: the plateau, the quilt, the piece of felt, the smooth, the striated, the stratified; the plane of immanence; the plane of consistency, etc. Images that introduce the chapters are so interesting in this regard, not only because they are all involved in a depiction of surfaces/planes of high intensity, but because, in this, they depict the same thick surface I’m ascribing to Stokes.

As an example of this “construction” of what is essentially an epistemological plane, D/G write of the plane of immanence, “There is a pure plane or immanence… (or)… composition upon which everything occurs, slows down, or accelerates… a unique plane of consistency or composition of the cephalopod and the vertebrate; for the vertebrate to become and octopus and a cuttlefish”. “It is a deep surface upon which everything emerges, and is inscribed, a tension between surface and depth,” as Simone Brott, writing on Deleuze’s theory of surface, indicates.

Greg Lynn in his formal work, uses Deleuze to elaborate his interest in an “envelope of potential”; of pliant form, of the smooth, of folding; he investigates the possibility of an “animate field”, of form/surface as an organism. He uses Deleuze to formulate a theory of the surface that is both literal and poetic, and as such, sees the implicit theory of surface offered by Deleuze in a very different manner than we are now suggesting. Pliancy, as Lynn suggests, “allows architecture to become involved in complexity through flexibility” (The Folded…, p. 111); “[P]liant systems are capable of engendering unpredictable connections with contextual, cultural, programmatic, structural and economic contingencies by vicissitude. (p. 113)

Indeed, as an aside, if we feel frustrated with this as an understanding of Deleuze’s plane of immanence; it is interesting to look at the use of surfaces in the work of Koolhaus, claimed by John Rajchman to be the most Deleuzian of architects: in photos taken of his Prada store in Soho – and again I am here indebted to the work of Brott we can see an interest in a surface that is, much like that which is praised by Stokes, both thick (in terms of the imaginative projections) and thin (in terms of its instantaneous absorption), both enveloping and all-over (ala stokes later homage to Turner) and other.

Conclusion
Stokes is a prostheticizer, a psychoanalytic moralist of sorts. He, like Ruskin before him, felt that building had a power of redemption or condemnation; how they were built, how they took form could either bring us mental health or mental sickness. This judgment of form came form his conviction of how Klein, the Italian landscape and art - of the good kind- had saved him. It is not his prescriptive dimension of Stokes that one wants to emphasize (although, it is not uninteresting as a point of biographical analysis). On the other hand, I would suggest that his writings are of interest to us not just as a curiosity, but as something didactic. And to do this, it is perhaps easiest to continue with the Deleuzian analogy and see where he locates the value of this type of image-formation, particularly as it relates to art. Deleuze describes affect as a kind of sensation. Quoting Rajchman, he is impressed when, against the impressionists, Cézanne says that the sensations are in the things themselves, not in us; and he sees the violence
of artistic sensations as directed against he cliches of a photographic sensationalism.; they are not to be confused with personal feelings; affects go beyond the subject s that pass through them and they are impersonal, almost inhuman. Art not only extracts such sensations, it buts them into a kind of construction, and “architecture”, one we inhabit only through transmutation or self-experimentation, or for which we emerge, again to use Rajchman’s words, “refreshed as if endowed with a new optic or nervous system. (The Deleuzian connections, p. 134.5) Art works are not there to perfect us, or save us, but to complicate things. They revitalize the brain, releasing us from the heaviness of grounded identities and habitual forms.