The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics
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Introduction
Design activism has been a topic of growing interest and research throughout the past decade. Design activism generally is defined as representing design’s central role in (1) promoting social change, (2) raising awareness about values and beliefs (e.g., in relation to climate change, sustainability, etc.), or (3) questioning the constraints that mass production and consumerism place on people’s everyday life. Design activism, in this context, is not restricted to a single discipline of design but includes areas such as product design, interaction design, new media, urban design, architecture, and fashion and textiles, among others.

However, what appears to be lacking in the current understanding of design activism is a firmer theoretical hold on how and why design activism matters. How does design activism work? What is the effect of design activism on people’s everyday life, and what makes it different from its closely related “sister arts”—political activism and art activism? This paper investigates these research questions in terms of how they pertain to design activism in the public sphere and urban environment.

Obviously, the term “activism” is meant to emphasize design activism’s kinship with political activism and anti-establishment movements of various sorts (e.g., anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, etc.). As a result, some authors assume that the activist nature of design activism can be properly understood in terms of concepts and ideas borrowed from either sociology or political theory. Even though design activism shares many characteristics with political activism, however, it should not be modelled one-sidedly on the basis of these external theories. Sociology and political theory no doubt have fine-grained vocabularies, enabling us to shed light on “democracy,” “public space,” “participation,” and other themes explored by design activists, but they offer no language for expressing what is truly unique and singular to the design act. The design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act; instead, it lends its power of resistance by being precisely a designerly way of intervening in people’s lives. This articulation provides the subject matter for design research.

By the same token, design activism has been interpreted in light of practices invented by certain art movements, such as the avant-garde, “social interventionism,” and “community art.” For instance, the subversive techniques used in contemporary urban design activism draw more or less deliberately upon practices of art production that were introduced by the Situationists in the 1960s. However, to better understand what is peculiar about design activism, we need to shift the focus of attention from this art historian genealogy toward the design act itself. The techniques used by urban design activists may be similar to those of the avant-garde, but the effects achieved by exploiting them in a *designerly* way are different. These effects cannot be properly understood, for instance, according to the original avant-garde project of re-defining or broadening the boundaries of art. Nor should they be interpreted according to the grandiose social utopias or revolutionary hopes so dear to the avant-garde. Nonetheless, it is precisely in the intimate interweaving between aesthetics and the political that an interesting answer to the activist nature of design activism is to be found.

The aim of this paper, above all, is to construct a new conceptual framework for understanding what I call the “disruptive aesthetics” of design activism as it is found in the public sphere. The notion of disruptive aesthetics embraces two key aspects of design activism. On the one hand, design activism has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working, and consuming. On the other hand, design activism shares an aesthetic potential with art activism in its ability to open up the relation between people’s behavior and emotions—between what they do and what they feel about this doing. In creating this opening, design activism makes the relationship between people’s doing and feelings malleable for renegotiation. Understanding how the micro-political and aesthetic aspects come together in design activism (as compared to political activism and art activism) defines the crux of the problem.

The paper begins with a brief literature review of some of the existing theoretical frameworks in design research that might be used to understand design activism. In providing such a review, I identify a theoretical “blind spot” in the research literature—one that has blocked our view of how design activism functions as an aesthetic practice and not just a socio-political one. To remedy this shortcoming, I introduce some notions from French philosopher Jacques Rancière that enable design research to better explain the close interrelationship between aesthetics and the political in design activism. I then demonstrate their application through a series of case examples from current urban design activism. On the

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basis of this study, I then offer a new framework that differs from existing frameworks in that it offers more meaningful concepts for the practice and study of urban design activism.

**Frameworks of Design Activism in Design Research**

Thorpe argues that “[d]esign lacks a good conceptual framework for activism, but fortunately sociology has one to offer, a typology of activism.” She then uses this typology to systematize a large number of design activist cases into a limited set of design act categories. Design activism may thus manifest itself in six different forms: (1) a demonstration artifact that reveals positive alternatives superior to the status quo; (2) an act of communication, in the sense of making information visual, devising rating systems, creating maps and symbols, and more; (3) conventional actions, such as proposing legislation, writing polemics, and testifying at political meetings; (4) a service artifact, intending to provide humanitarian aid or for a needy group or population; (5) events such as conferences, talks, installations, or exhibitions; and (6) a protest artifact, which deliberately confronts the reality of an unjust situation in order to raise critical reflection on the morality of the status quo.

As always, such typologies and categories should be evaluated according to their ability to describe and provide new insight into the subject matter under scrutiny. In this regard, I argue, along with Fuad-Luke, that Thorpe’s framework is insufficient for several reasons. First, by using action concepts from sociology as her preferred conceptual tools, Thorpe put emphasis on what design activism has in common with social practices, but very little is revealed about the central elements of the practice of urban design activism itself: its techniques, design activist methods, the intended effect on people, and other aspects.

Second, the concepts in Thorpe’s framework seem too vague to allow for conceptual distinctions that would help us to understand the complex nature of design activist interventions. Thus, when her framework is applied to design activist projects, one often realizes that these projects defy easy categorization and resist being fitted into Thorpe’s framework. Instead, they must be described in terms of conceptual hybrids such as protest-demonstration-service artifacts. For instance, the Recetas Urbanas project by Santiago Cirugeda (of which I provide more detailed analysis in the next section) falls between all three categories. Surely, anomalies are most welcome in theory construction because they can help us to locate inconsistencies in a theory that calls for repair. However, if design activist projects tend to fall in between the categories of a theoretical framework as a rule, rather than the exception, then these categories are too imprecise analytically, and the framework must be modified substantially to make it more reflective of the particular nature of design activism.

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7 Thorpe, “Design as activism.”
Third, sociological action concepts reveal little about the intended reach of design activism and, most importantly, about its effects in terms of eliciting social and behavioral change. Interestingly, Fuad-Luke points toward disruption as a central notion for understanding the effect of design activism: “Forms of activism are also an attempt to disrupt existing paradigms of shared meaning, values and purpose to replace them with new ones.” Furthermore, he couples the notion of disruption with aesthetics when he argues that design activism calls for a revised notion of beauty: “We need new visions of beauty—we could call this beauty, ‘beautiful strangeness,’ a beauty that is not quite familiar, tinged with newness, ambiguity and intrigue, which appeals to our innate sense of curiosity.” In bringing the notion of “beautiful strangeness” into the discussion, Fuad-Luke draws attention to aesthetics as being a central discipline for explaining how activist design artifacts promote social change through their aesthetic effect on people’s senses, perception, emotions, and interpretation.

Unfortunately, in his otherwise detailed introduction of various frameworks, Fuad-Luke does not discuss further how the relation between disruption and aesthetics could be valuable for understanding design activism. Instead, his main argument seems to be that design activism should be analyzed according to the issues and problems in the world that it addresses. For this analysis, he proposes the Five Capitals Framework “as a means of examining where activism aims to exert an effect on different capitals:” Natural Capital (i.e., concern for environmental resources, recycling, eco-design, sustainable solutions, and so on); Human Capital (e.g., concern for all human needs and skills); Social Capital (concern for strengthening relations between social networks to increase civic engagement, communal health, social inclusion, etc.); Financial Capital (e.g., alternative banking and micro-loans); and Manufactured Capital, which refers to man-made artifacts that enable and improve production (e.g., architecture, infra-structure, and technologies).

The Five Capitals Framework certainly helps to understand the many problem spaces of design activism and also the ideological agendas that design activists share with, for example, environmentalists and non-profit organizations; nevertheless, it leaves the question of how design activism works on its own conditions unanswered. Admittedly, Fuad-Luke’s book offers a rich toolbox of techniques and methods that designers can use to engage people (e.g., through participatory means or co-design), but these methods are not tied specifically to design activism. Rather, they are in widespread use in almost every area of design. Even more critical is that neither of the frameworks examined thus far says anything about how urban design activism uses the sensuous material of the city while exploring the particular elements of urban experience.
To fathom these conditions, I argue that design research needs a new, alternative framework based on the notion of design activism as a disruptive aesthetic practice. In introducing this notion, my goal is to focus attention in particular on the effects evoked by urban design activism. Only with such a focus can we understand how design activism promotes social change by addressing the urban experience itself.

Most recently, some insights into these effects have been laid out by DiSalvo, who has studied projects falling under the rubric of “design for democracy.” DiSalvo suggests drawing on political theory as a conceptual resource for developing a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of design activism. Notably, he argues that the distinction between “politics” and “the political” would be beneficial for the practice and study of design activism. In political theory, “politics” refers to the means and structures that enable a nation, state, region, or city to be governed. Included among such structures are laws, procedures of decision-making, systems of election, legislation, and public regulation of people’s behavior in the urban environment. In contrast, the “political” is a condition of society, of on-going opposition and contest. The political can be experienced through acts of interruption, disturbance, or resistance in public space that either reveals or confronts existing power relations and systems of authority.

Following from these definitions, DiSalvo then proposes to make a distinction in design research between design for politics and political design. Design for politics is when the purpose of design is to support and improve the procedures and mechanisms

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of governance—for example, when designers work to improve the graphic design of ballots for presidential elections in the United States to prevent uncertainties about votes (as happened in the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush).

Political design is when the object and processes of design activism are used to create “spaces of contest.” For DiSalvo a paramount example can be found in the Million Dollar Blocks project. By using mapping techniques and diagramming, this project creates spatial representations showing the residences of prison inmates throughout four U.S. cities (see Figure 1). Usually, crime analyses are based on data about where crime events occur, but here the idea instead was to start from data representing where the prison population live. In so doing, the project makes striking patterns visible—namely, a set of city street blocks where the government spends more than $1 million annually to incarcerate residents of those blocks.

The reason why the project qualifies as political design is because the objects and processes of the design (maps and diagramming) at one and the same time reveal and contest existing configurations and conditions of society and urban space. The project reveals the understandings and information most often left out of standard analyses of crime occurring in the city; what it contests can be seen in the way the “maps effect an on-going series of contests and dissensus concerning the relationship between crime, the built environment and policy.” With this notion of revealing and contest, DiSalvo suggests that we begin to consider political design as a “kind of inquiry into the political condition.”

I find DiSalvo’s notion of political design particularly relevant because—in contrast to Thorpe’s and Fuad-Luke’s frameworks—it allows us to study the effects evoked by practices of urban design activism. Notably, these effects consist in revelation, contest, and dissensus.

The only problem with DiSalvo’s approach is that he treats urban design activism merely in its relation to political conditions—that is, as a contest against those in power and authorities. Meanwhile, he does not say anything about how activist artifacts might also enter directly into the realm of real-life human actions. The Million Dollar Blocks project contests government, decision-makers, and urban planners, whereas the citizens of the street blocks themselves are left largely uninfluenced. By focusing too narrowly on the political, DiSalvo thus neglects a crucial element of urban design activism.

Urban design activism is about introducing heterogeneous material objects and artifacts into the urban field of perception. In their direct intervention into urban space, they invite active engagement and interaction, and simply offer new ways of inhabiting urban space. In so doing, design activism alters the conditions for the urban experience. Insofar as these objects and artifacts set new
conditions for people’s urban experiences and actions in daily life, design activism should be seen as having an aesthetic dimension, along with its political dimension. Aesthetics here is taken in its broad, Kantian sense as pertaining to the fundamental forms of our everyday experience, although not so that these forms are a priori or universal, as Kant would have it. On the contrary, they are the result of ongoing social construction and negotiations of urban space.\footnote{Cf. Oliver Marchart, “Art, Space and the Public Sphere(s): Some Basic Observations on the Difficult Relation of Public Art, Urbanism, and Political Theory,” European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0102/marchart/en (accessed February 5, 2010).}

The remainder of this paper unravels this aesthetic dimension of urban design activism because no framework to my knowledge has devoted adequate attention to this aspect. First, I introduce the notion of disruptive aesthetics, as found in the work of the French Philosopher, Jacques Rancière. Second, I use this notion as a backdrop for a case analysis of the disruptive aesthetic of urban design activism—mainly focusing on some of the basic categories of urban experience: walking, dwelling, playing, gardening, and re-cycling.\footnote{Giovanna Borasi, “City 2.0,” in Actions: What You Can Do with the City, 21.} On the basis of this treatment, I propose a new framework for urban design activism that replaces sociological action concepts with action concepts grounded in the urban experience. Case examples along the way provide illustration of these concepts to make the framework operational for the practice of design activism.

Design Activism Between Aesthetics and the Political

According to Rancière, the notion of aesthetic activity should be extended so as to include much more than fine art production (paintings, poetry, sculpture and theatre).\footnote{Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics (London: Continuum, 2004); Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics (London: Continuum, 2010).} Generally, aesthetic activity concerns a distribution of the sensible (i.e., a “distribution of space, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution”).\footnote{Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 12.} Clearly, urban design activism could be described as a distribution of urban space and time and construction of alternative ways for individuals to participate in a “common” public environment. However, we need to be even more precise. For Rancière, what characterizes the aesthetic act in particular is that it introduces new, heterogeneous subjects and objects into the social field of perception. In so doing, the aesthetic act affects people’s experience in a certain way: It reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging in and inhabiting the everyday world.\footnote{Steven Corcoran, “Introduction,” in Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, 2.}

Rancière’s philosophical thoughts on the disruptive nature of the aesthetic act contain a significant and hitherto unexplored contribution to the theorization of design activism. Often, disruption is used interchangeably by Rancière with the notion of “dissensus.” Indeed, the aesthetic act, he says, is to be enacted according to “logic of dissensus.”\footnote{Ibid.} What does he mean?
Dissensus must be understood in contrast to “consensus.” Consensus concerns what is considered in a society to be a normative count of the social order. It prescribes what is proper and improper, and it defines hierarchical systems where individuals are inscribed into certain roles and places. Consensus conveys the idea that everyone’s doing and speech are determined in terms of their “proper place” in this system and their activity in terms of its proper function. For instance, when a citizen starts to use the urban landscape as his own garden, sowing seeds of his favorite plants and vegetables in ditches—as guerrilla gardener Richard Reynolds started to do years ago—his action is deemed improper. In this way, consensus not only could be said to delimit people’s doing; it also entails a common feeling of what is right and wrong. Hence, as Rancière makes clear, consensus could be said to consist in the matching of a way of doing and a horizon of affects.

Dissensus, on the other hand, consists in an egalitarian suspension of the normal count of the social order—of consensus. Dissensus is about the demonstration of a certain impropriety, which disrupts consensus and reveals a gap between what people do and how they feel about and are affected by this doing. In creating this opening, the disruptive aesthetic act makes the match between doing and affect sensitive to renewed negotiations. Hence, new forms of belonging to and inhabiting the everyday world can ensue, and new identities—whether individual or social—may emerge.

Insofar as Rancière sees dissensus as being an effect of aesthetic activity, and not only about political practice, his notion of dissensus has more explanatory power than the notion of the political that underlies DiSalvo’s idea of political design. Indeed, Rancière offers several characteristics that allow us to distinguish aesthetic dissensus from political dissensus.

Political dissensus is usually conceived as having to do with one group defined by its opposition to another, the people against the State, friend against enemy, left against right, and other burning pairs of oppositions that characterize ideological propaganda in all its manifestations. Taken in this sense, the political dissensus manifests itself as a struggle between two or more groups that has as its goal a reordering of the relation of power between the existing groups.

In contrast to this dichotomous notion of political dissensus, aesthetic dissensus is not about an institutional overturning or taking over of power. The ultimate goal is not the realization of grandiose social utopias through violent acts, riots, or revolution; but it is a non-violent unsettling of the self-evidence, with which existing systems of power can control and restrict the unfolding of our everyday behavior and interaction. The disruptive character of the aesthetic dissensus lies in the subtle way it cuts across and

exposes hierarchies—hierarchies that control both practice and discourse—so that zones can emerge where processes of subjectivization might take place. The aesthetic act might of course deal with political issues, but it treats the “stakes of politics as a form of experience,” and not as an open-ended set of practices driven primarily by a contest of power and authorities.  

Walking

These insights from Rancière are crucial for understanding how urban design activism matters. To illustrate this significance, I turn to the first of the five urban act categories of my framework: walking. Consider, for instance, the iSee project by the Institute for Applied Autonomy. In cities across the globe today, surveillance technology networks are increasingly being connected to remote monitoring services that stream CCTV data across the city into control rooms operated by local authorities and private security companies. This increasing surveillance is taking place without either public debate or transparency regarding the decisions made about the areas of the urban environment that need surveillance systems. For instance, if the argument for the presence of CCTV cameras is to prevent crime, then setting them up in low-income neighborhoods, and not only in the financial and high-income districts of the city, would seem natural. Such is not the case.

The iSee project is an inverse surveillance system that enables people living in the city to track and avoid CCTV cameras. The iSee website includes maps that provide an overview of the existing surveillance infrastructure in cities like New York, Amsterdam, and Ljubljana. In this way, the iSee project reveals how CCTV cameras permeate the urban environment. However, it also does something more: It gives people the opportunity to create their own routes—so-called paths of least surveillance—that allow them “to walk around their cities without fear of being ‘caught on tape’ by unregulated security monitors” (see Figure 2).
iSee illustrates how design activism as an aesthetic practice has the ability to open a gap between people’s doing and affect. By revealing and contesting the existing surveillance infrastructure, iSee makes citizens aware of how local law enforcement and private industry keep a watchful eye on their actions and doings in urban space. However, in contrast to the Million Dollar Blocks project, iSee invites citizens themselves to react against and change these conditions—simply by using iSee to construct new conditions that elicit more positive feelings about walking in the streets. In this sense, people’s doings and their affects about this doing are matched in a new and previously unimagined way.

Dwelling
Municipalities all over the world place many restrictions on people’s possibilities for dwelling. Especially in densely packed cities, for instance, getting a permit to add an extra room or a terrace to your house involves a lengthy bureaucratic process, and more often than not, the request is rejected. Sometimes aesthetic ideals are used to legitimize the delimiting of home owner’s wishes and creativity. For instance, a home owner might be informed that adding a room to her house would perhaps disturb the homogeneity and visual consistency of the street façade.

However, in a series of projects gathered under the title of Recetas Urbanas (Urban Prescriptions), Santiago Cirugeda shows how citizens can get some of their dwelling desires fulfilled without breaking the law. Municipality officials typically detest graffiti, and so if you ask the authorities for a permit to build a scaffold to remove graffiti from your house, permission is likely to be granted, perhaps for a couple of months or so. In his Scaffolding-project, Cirugeda then uses such scaffolds as an opportunity to add an extra room to buildings where enlarging otherwise has been prohibited (see Figure 3).
The **Scaffolding**-project illustrates how design activism functions as an aesthetic practice in the sense given by Rancière. The scaffolds represent a way of “doing and making that intervene[s] in the general distribution of ways of doing and making.” The “general distribution of ways of doing” refers to the standard procedures and practice for enlarging houses, sanctioned by the authorities. The **Scaffolding**-project, rather than directly contesting these politically determined procedures and conditions, instead exploits these political conditions by using them as conditions that enable unintended urban action. People thus are given the opportunity to expand their house, and in doing so, their felt sense of belonging to the place. In such situations, design activism has the potential to renegotiate the relationship between people’s doing (here, dwelling) and their feelings about this doing.

**Playing**

In most cities, urban planning legislation requires that citizens behave according to certain rules and regulations; the legislation allows people to experience certain things, but not others. However, the consequences of legislative power are far from being transparent, and often they seem not at all to reflect the interests of those living in the city. Citizens typically are not allowed to plant a tree at the corner of their street; they cannot construct a seesaw in front of the local café for their kids to use while they have a cup of coffee, even though the owner of the café and a majority of the citizens think that doing so is a good idea.

In the project **Taking the Street** (see Figure 4), Santiago Cirugeda turns local legislation into urban recipes, providing citizens living in a district in Seville with the steps for transforming dumpsters into playful realms for children, or into other kinds of useful installations, thereby enabling them to actively plan and shape their neighborhood. Even if only on a temporary basis, this project reveals how urban design activism can function as an act of resistance and used to suspend existing structures of power and bureaucracy to make unheard voices and hidden energies resound through the urban landscape.

**Gardening and ReCycling**

Rancière’s notion of aesthetic dissensus is useful for understanding the subtle tactics with which gardening can be exploited in a designerly way for the purpose of constructing disruptive interventions. According to Rancière, aesthetic dissensus is not an effect resulting from acts of striving to overturn or overtake institutional power. Rather, aesthetic dissensus follows from non-violent acts that disrupt the self-evident ways in which existing systems of power control and dominate certain groups in our society. This

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23 Ibid.
The usefulness of these ideas can be demonstrated by analyzing a recent project made by the atelier d’architecture autogérée (aaa). In La Chapelle area, in the northern suburban parts of Paris, aaa used gardening as a tactic for intervening in the area’s wasteland and leftover spaces. La Chapelle area is haunted by a number of social problems, including drug addiction and unemployment, as well as a lack of cultural infrastructure. Typically, such problems deter the financing and the attention of developers that might bring change. However, aaa invited the local residents of La Chapelle to participate in the design and building of Ecobox (see Figure 5).

Ecobox consists of a series of gardens made from recycled materials, as well as mobile furniture for meetings, gathering, cooking, playing, and other forms of social interaction. In addition, a wall built around the Ecobox had a series of peepholes that determined the viewing conditions for people watching and gazing in from the outside. In the form of this wall, the Ecobox contests the dominating visual regimes in public space, thereby suggesting a reordering of the relation of power between existing groups in society. The local residents of La Chapelle were accustomed to being the ones “looked at,” by the police or by surveillance cameras, and many of them, in being considered illegal aliens, had been denied the right to express themselves. However, the Ecobox turns this power of relation on its head by giving the residents the control of the public gaze. Not only an act of political design, then, but also an act of aesthetic practice, the Ecobox changes the conditions for urban experience and provides a means of expression for an otherwise overlooked social group.
A New Framework for Design Activism

On the basis of these examples, I propose the diagram shown in Figure 6 to represent a new framework for the practice and study of urban design activism.

This framework clearly should not be considered exhaustive—it is intended to be expanded as many more categories of urban experience are added. Moreover, the framework does not include a mapping of the techniques used in urban design activism. Such techniques include: tactical cartography—as in the iSee-project, or hacking of urban regulation—as in the Recetas Urbanas project by Santiago Cirugeda. A multitude of such techniques are possible. Some of them are included in the other frameworks examined in this paper; some of them are not. I have chosen not to include techniques in the framework because they in themselves are not what define design activism; instead, the focus is on the effect that can be evoked in the people. Consequently, I have included these effects in the framework.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the development of a new framework is necessary for understanding how urban design activism matters, how it works, and its effect on people’s daily life. The brief literature review shows that most of the existing frameworks are insufficient because they do not take the elements and material of urban design activism into account. For instance, Thorpe bases her framework on sociological concepts, while Fuad-Luke takes his point of departure from environmentalist thinking—namely, as it is represented by the Five Capitals Framework.

Moreover, I have argued that examining the effect elicited by design activism is necessary to make concepts about this practice clearer. Many of the design acts mentioned by Thorpe (e.g., acts of communication and protest) certainly can be involved in design activism. However, the point here is that they should only be considered as design activism if, through aesthetic means and expression, they evoke the effects articulated by DiSalvo: revelation, contest, and dissensus.

DiSalvo makes significant strides in unravelling the political side of these effects, but he ignores their aesthetic dimension. I have argued that a turn toward aesthetics, in the sense given to the term by Rancière, is useful for describing how activist artifacts promote social change by altering the condition for urban experience.

On the basis of this combination of perspectives, I have proposed a framework that, while in no way is claimed to be exhaustive, nevertheless should be considered as an initial step toward a more complete picture. From here, future work and studies of the practice of urban design can contribute toward its expansion.