Weaponising Speculation

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Preface

Michael O’Rourke

Let’s start with the insignificant: dust

– Jussi Parikka, Dust Matter

To pulverise the world but also to spiritualise its dust

– Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque

One day or another, given its persistence... dust will probably begin to gain the upper hand over the servants, pouring immense amounts of rubbish into abandoned buildings and deserted stockyards: and, at that distant epoch, nothing will remain to ward off night terrors, in the absence of which we have become such great bookkeepers


I’ll shew you alive/The world when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy

– William Blake, Europe: A Prophecy

Each particle of dust carries with it a unique vision of matter, movement, collectivity, interaction, affect, differentiation, composition and infinite darkness – a crystallised data-base or a plot ready to combine and react, to be narrated on and through something. There is no line of narration more concrete than a stream of dust particles

– Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials

We could also mention Bergson’s invocation of life as being composed of eddies of dust

– Ben Woodard, Slime Dynamics: Generation, Mutation and the Creep of Life
The space, or endo-bacterial dust, is a relic with untraceable zones of migration and traversal, a swarm-particle creeping off the radar system, a speck of dust you never know whether you have inhaled or not

– Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials

As an inter-dimensional carrier, dust scavenges xenochemical particles (outsiders) as its cores or constituents, introduces and implants them into compositions, creations and establishments

– Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials

Dust is, of course, the unmistakable emblem of death, decay and dissolution. But it is also, under certain circumstances, powerfully generative

– Steven Connor, Pulverulence

Dust already counts

– Jussi Parikka, Dust Matter

THE Dublin Unit for Speculative Thought is an art/theory collective which was formed in late 2012 by Paul Ennis, Fintan Neylan and Michael O’Rourke. The impetus behind our coming together was a shared emphasis in our work and our thinking on speculative realism and a mutual antipathy towards and marginal position vis-à-vis the academy qua institution. Initially, we could agree that the main things we had a fidelity to were speculative realisms (broadly conceived) and para-academic modes of thinking which could be deployed in a DIY fashion outside the walls of and alongside (even parasitical on) the business as usual operations of the academy. There is very little that theoretically we three have in common. Paul did a dissertation on Heidegger but is now mostly aligned with a bleak theoretical position. Fintan also began with Heidegger but his work now focuses on the philosophy of Manuel DeLanda. Michael comes from a background in literary theory and his writing is heavily underpinned by Derridean deconstruction. While these are highly reductive accounts – for the sake of shorthand – of our three theoretical and philosophical trajectories they do serve to demonstrate that there is not some unified agenda which DUST was brought about to serve or promulgate. Quite the contrary; it illustrates that DUST is, in fact, a collective (in
the truest sense) which has as its mission the ‘opening’ up of speculative realism and of philosophical thinking more broadly. From our para-academic (non- and even anti-institutional) position we can afford not to hitch ourselves to any particular strand of speculative realism. As the quotations above (chosen completely at random) attest, DUST interests itself in and opens itself to the widest possible spectrum of thought: continental realism, accelerationism, post-continental thought, weird fiction, Object Oriented Ontology, posthumanism, new materialisms, transcendental materialism, actor network theory, non-philosophy, eliminativism, dark vitalism, assemblage theory, transcendental nihilism, dark or xeno-phenomenology (the list could go on…).

The martial implications of our collective’s name, the Dublin ‘Unit’ for Speculative Thought, should alert the reader that we are each committed to weaponising these many and various fields of thought. Rather immodestly perhaps we set ourselves the task of in some way renewing, reinvigorating, making vital again the ambitions and aims of philosophy in the dust of poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction (without, of course, leaving any of those trailing completely in our wake). This attempt to revitalise philosophy is not something that one can do alone. DUST then was set up to bring together disparate groups of theorists and artists with a shared interest in speculative thought who might not otherwise come together or find each other. Together this group of philosophers, artists, theorists and aestheticians works together to create new techniques of thought (not prescribable in advance), to fashion tools with which to remake and transform the landscape of contemporary philosophy. As Paul has said in an interview with the Visual Artists’ Newsletter we are all pragmatists when it comes to philosophy. We pick up a tool here, another there, and see if it works (no matter to us if it doesn’t). This idea-theft, in Félix Guattari’s sense, is in response to an assertion from François Laruelle that philosophy does not ‘reach the real’. With this in mind, DUST creates desiring-assemblages of artists and theorists who are all committed to approaching the real and affirming a speculative thought which is resolutely material and worldly (whether our approach is eliminativist or generative, aimed at dissolving the world or world-making).

With the stated ambition of opening up new forms of thinking and doing as our platform we wrote the following brief for DUST:

Distinct from the norm. Distinct even from the academic norm. Twice removed the para-academic is doubly unwanted. The ones you have trained are set loose and they know your secrets. They are pests and they want to be armed. The contemporary para-academic is untethered. Promises have gone unfulfilled and yet avenues have opened up elsewhere. To the artists, to the creators, to the fringe, wherever the real can be captured. It is in these topoi that the real work happens. Speculation: to think the world of experience, beyond such experience. But how to seize this reality, how to speculate upon that which the academy has prohibited? Before the storms the para-academic needs to equip herself. Not only with tools, but weapons. DUST is an exploration of the various expressions of DIY theory operative in the elsewheres, the shafts and tunnels of the para-academy. We seek those thoughts that go beyond the institution, beyond the linguistic, beyond the human, to the far reaches of the incommensurate and the extinct; we seek conceptual armoury which will aid thinkers in the siege to reclaim the real.

The real work, or work which approaches the real, that DUST has done since its inception has included several talks, a conference, and a week-long exhibition. We began in January 2013 with a talk at Flat Pack Gallery and Studios by the theologian and non-philosopher Anthony Paul Smith on François Laruelle and
the speculative turn; next up was a talk at the National College of Art and Design by Smith’s co-explicator of Laruelle John Mullarkey on the posture or stance of the philosopher; in March we held our signature event, a two day conference at Independent Colleges entitled Weaponising Speculation which ran alongside an exhibition at Block T gallery (with the same name) featuring the work of the artists Alice Rekab, John Ryan, Andy Weir, Teresa Gillespie, Rob Murphy, Alan Boardman and Ciara McMahon; later that month Michael spoke at the exhibition ROTATOR by the artists Niamh Moriarty and Ruth Clinton at Pallas Projects and Studios; in April DUST held a dialogue inspired by the work of John Ryan and especially his solo exhibition ‘Cling’ at Temple Bar Gallery and Studios; in May DUST held a dialogue between Paul Ennis and the film theorist and philosopher Steven Shaviro plus a talk by Shaviro at University College Dublin; and in June two talks by the feminist theorist and Laruelian philosopher Katerina Kolozova took place at Basic Space studios.

In a review of the Weaponising Speculation conference for Figure/Ground Communication Liam Jones wrote: ‘Who knows where DUST will head to next, and this only serves to add to the audacity and pertinence of the collective.’

If DUST is, as we hope, all about and for thought in and as the future then perhaps our manifesto, written by Fintan Neylan and read at the opening of the Weaponising Speculation exhibition at Block T Gallery, will give some idea of the possible coordinates and future trajectories for speculative thinking set in motion by this coreless experiment we call D.U.S.T:
DUST manifesto:

Every possible barrier has already been infiltrated.

The situation of contemporary theoretical work is one where it is at risk of atrophying within the bounds of institutional walls. Output, inter-disciplinarity, and internationalisation have become the watchwords of the contemporary university, contributing to an ever accumulating body of work – one which actively defangs itself – and a faux-openness, comprehending only to that which it expects to find.

But boundaries are porous, for decay is present within their genesis; as intense its efforts may be, along the academy’s walls there is always illicit transit with the outside. The academy denies these itinerant lines of transit which run through it, those which it recognises as not its own. It is along such axes we move, encrypted within the institution’s own generation. Our infiltration is not an entry from some exterior point, and neither have we been transformed by some seditious force: we have always been of the outside, but have found ourselves on the inside.

Travelling along such lines, amidst every barrier, there is movement of material, carrying an infection of that which we know not into the sterile zones of academic discourse. This is the movement of DUST. It does not just bring in that which institutions sought to prohibit, but also exhibits that which the contemporary university has failed to maintain: DUST seeks to bring theory back to the outside. Beyond the supposed theoretical divisions concocted by administrators, we investigate not through one discipline, nor even through inter-disciplinarity or multi-disciplinarity, but by way of non-disciplinarity: on the outside there are no such distinctions – there is only theory.

DUST creeps inside by its own secret machination: it is swept into the living’s lungs by the desire to breathe; it is the decay which life must concede to in order to survive.

We infiltrate, but also are aware that we ourselves may have already been infiltrated by others, that we may be playing host to something else entirely. Awareness of such forces comes only when it is too late. One cannot predict such infiltration, so to think it, one must speculate: to think the world beyond experience – to the absolute and the extinct.

Not hemmed within confines, to speculate means to realise that we are already on the outside, amidst the incommensurate.