Weaponising Speculation

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This paper is a compilation of notes and thoughts in response to the brief of Weaponising Speculation. It is a paper that is written in the way that I write best, erratically, with fluctuating styles – I am not a writer, I'm an artist.

I make objects that are large lumps of vibrant matter made from the material oil paint. I am often referred to as a painter, although I don't believe I fit into this category. In the term painter, there is a suggestion that the subject is tied to a strict, and perhaps conservative tradition. Materially I am tied to this tradition, as I invest in well developed tools that are made for very specific tasks. But my methodology is thought driven. I have no interest in imagery, or the abstract that has no base in reality. Because of a very specific logic that I apply to art making I seem to have stumbled into this Speculative Realist and Object Oriented bracket, happening through no intentions of my own. I have only been aware of continental and analytic philosophy for about a year and a half now. I have spent a lot of my time since then trying to catch up on things which are seemingly relevant, and it seems that there are a lot of parallels, and a lot of similar questions, problems and ideas are being posed. Historically, it seems that art often mimics, or at least is influenced by, current thought at the time of its production. Since Marcel Duchamp, and his value of thought over aesthetic which transformed art into something of value not only to the eyes but also to the mind, it was only a matter of time before art and philosophy started to crossover. Perhaps one day, academically, they could amalgamate into one system of ideas, but at the moment I feel there are problems with this. There are definite rules at play in engaging with art that just don't translate into theory, and vice versa I presume. An artist can have all the theory to back their argument up, but for some reason their art is weak. I can't delve into this theoretically, because I'm not a theorist, but I do look at a lot of art and generally speaking, can didactically explain why an art isn't working.
I am going try to avoid directly talking about objects, or ontology, as by talking about my practice I hope that the same, or at least a similar point is suggested. I guess that this is one of the things that art does. It discusses philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, sociology etc in an alternative way to the academic norm. I find that sometimes when art and theory are mixed, and the boundaries between them are not kept clear, it all gets a bit wishy-washy, a bit confused, or maybe, just a bit shit. Speculative Realism has been popular in Irish art circles for about a year now and I have seen artists alter their statements and press releases to suit this trend, literally swapping certain words for certain other words, particularly this one word, object. This is easy to do of course, because we all know that everything is an object. Everything has definitive parameters in space and time which give a thing its objecthood. So what is the point to this petty and obvious observation, I guess the observation is the point, given that Weaponising Speculation seems to be asking a question about the relationship between art and philosophy. Artists seem to want to be on top of things when it comes to what’s hot in philosophy circles, maybe this works both ways. Perhaps I sound cynical, assuming that there is a negative ulterior motive for people deciding to talk about their work within the
subject of objects, but I would suggest that this recent surge in attraction to objects is not a negative one. Perhaps it is something divine, or political, or maybe it’s just an area of aesthetics previously unexplored, and of course, these three things are inherently related. So am I cynical? No, of course not. I accept that things are topical. I appreciate and wholeheartedly enjoy anything that intelligently and gracefully makes the art that we experience more interesting, more challenging and more beautiful.

So back to my own work, thus far, I have built my very young and emergent practice around one simple phenomenon, paint is liquid when removed from a tube, it then responds to air and gravity and turns into a solid. In critical terms, if I had to sum my practice up in one sentence I would say that it is Modernist abstraction as an object rather than a subject, although I try avoid talking about it this way as it is very boring – I guess because the work is essentially about observation. I use shapes and forms that have come into being because of the legacy of Modernism – for instance, colourful squares on a wall or cuboid sculptures placed on the floor, but when using these visual tropes I am not alluding to Modernism for any kind of conceptual reasons, it is more because they are shapes and forms that are now instilled in our contemporary visual vocabulary. I will try to explain this a little more using an analogy.

The music genre Black Metal, and I am using this specifically because of its relationship to Speculative Realism, like most Modern music uses a basic formula. Intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, end of song, or some variation of that. For those of you with some basic music theory knowledge, most of it is just 4/4 timing at varying tempos and use of the pentatonic scale with some minor augmentations. Bear in mind I’m not putting lyrical content and the identity that this genre had conjured aside. Although Black Metal uses this very common songwriting template, it is not an allusion to rock and roll, or at least, it doesn’t seem that way to me. This music template is now just something that happens to be. When it is used it is not alluding to where it came from, it is a template that has a life of its own. I would say the same about some contemporary art that uses shapes, forms, colours and methods of display that came to be during the period of Modernism. I would say this about my practice. I have been told by teachers, books, artists and friends, that the colours that Modernist artists used were an expression, a symbol, or a statement about optimism, and that the shapes they used were an enquiry into certainty and geometry. So when introduced to Modernism for the first time in third level education, for me, the colours just were what they were. The shapes just were what they were. I had grown up in a world where these things to me had always been. They had turned into nature and it was difficult for me to think of them as anything other than that. For some, art historians especially, this may be difficult to fathom, but when it comes to art making, you always have to carry the weight of all the other art that has ever been made before you on your shoulders – and what made sense for me to do, was to examine what these legacies actually are, rather than what they once represented. They were objects for me to play with, objects that held no metaphysical properties – only physical realities. So in the way that Black Metal is just a variation of a Modern song writing template, with a load fuzz thrown in, I guess you could call my work Modernism with a load of goo, slime, texture or whatever you’d like to call it, a Modernism that uses contingency rather than certainty.

I mentioned Marchel Duchamp earlier, so before I show you some images of my work I will end this paper with a quick note on a quote of his; ‘The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.’
This is one of thousands of aphorisms used to justify art, what it is, why it exists and why it should be part of our society. Although these quotes are often poetic and inspiring, I think that they’re bullshit. Art, like science, is just a method. It is a way of translating a thought into a medium, which, is just an agency between two people. It is not an outlet for people to have their head in the clouds as often depicted in popular culture. It is a platform for serious speculation. The procedures and outcomes aren’t tied to tests and rules like in most strands of academia. I consider this freedom to be a good thing, but unfortunately, we are all dependant on funding, which, is often dependant on results rather than speculations.