Introduction

DAVE BEECH
Dave Beech is PARSE Professor of Art at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg. He is the author of Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics (2015), which was shortlisted for the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Prize. He is an artist in the collective Freee (with Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan), whose work has been exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial, the Liverpool Biennial, BAK (Utrecht), Wysing Arts, (Cambridge), SMART Project Space (Amsterdam), the ICA (London), the Collective Gallery (Edinburgh), International Project Space (Birmingham), and 1000000mph Gallery (London). He has written widely on the politics of art, including The Philistine Controversy (2002), co-authored with John Roberts. He is a founding co-editor of the journal Art and the Public Sphere (2011-). He curated the exhibition We Are Grammar at the Pratt Institute (New York, 2011) with co-curator Paul O'Neill, and edited a special edition of Third Text on “Art, Politics, Resistance?” (2010), as well as a special issue of Art and the Public Sphere with Simon Sheikh on the biennale (2016-2017). Forthcoming publications include a co-edited book on taste after Bourdieu, a Dictionarium of Art’s Social Turn, and a book called Art and Labour.

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Anders Hultqvist is a composer, researcher and Professor of Composition at the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg. Besides writing for different orchestral, chamber music, electro-acoustic and sound art settings, he has since 2005 been involved in different artistic research projects concerning musical interpretation (“Towards an expanded field of art music”) and sound in city spaces. The research projects “Transmission, Urban experiments in sound art and sonic space” and “Into noise” were undertaken by the research group USIT—The Urban Sound Institute. Hultqvist is currently involved in the artistic research project “At the conceptual limits of composition: A shrinking emptiness—meaning, chaos and entropy”, which explores certain topics concerning the creation of meaning in musical and literary composition. Examples of publications are Sound and Other Spaces (with C. Dyrsen, S. Møssenmark and P. Sjösten, Bo Ejby Förlag, 2014) and Musikens frihet och begränsning. 16 variationer på ett tema (ed. Magnus Haglund, Daidalos, 2012).

VALÉRIE PIHET
Valérie Pihet is developing independent research and consulting activities related to the coproduction of knowledge and articulation between arts, research and society. Since 2016, she is the coordinator for arts and research in PSL University Paris. She is also the co-founder of Dingdingdong—Institute of coproduction of knowledge on Huntington’s disease, with the writer Emilie Hermant. She is a member of the advisory board of the Mobile Lives Forum, research institute initiated by SNCF, and of the PARSE research group (Platform for Artistic Research Sweden). She is the president of The Council (art agency), directed by Sandra Terdjman and Gregory Castera. In the past, she co-founded and directed with the French philosopher Bruno Latour the Programme of experimentation in arts and politics (SPEAP) in Sciences Po Paris (2010-2014). She has collaborated with Bruno Latour on a number of other projects, including the Iconoclash (ZKM, 2002) and Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy (ZKM, 2005) exhibitions, and the founding of the Sciences Po médialab in 2010.
This issue of PARSE explores how and why speculative thinking and speculative activity have obtained a new topicality, especially in philosophy, culture and politics, in a condition marked by the absence of certainty, the crisis of the crisis of metaphysics, the dominance of finance capital and the re-emergence of utopianism in the absence of revolution. Philosophically the reassertion of speculation coincides with the exploration of different practices of knowledge in the development of critical, conceptual and pragmatic tools by which the contested past, present and future can be navigated. Economically and politically, speculation represents both the incontrovertible structuring principle of neoliberal capitalism and the imaginative force that must be deployed against it.

When we take a chance as individuals in everyday life—quitting a job before you’ve lined up something better, falling in love, deciding to read this journal rather than going for a walk—we establish a relationship to the future. We speculate. Speculation, therefore, is a necessary component of human agency. This is why the opponents of speculation appear to be captured by speculation insofar as they hope for a world after the reign of speculation. Utopias and dystopias are speculative designs that are rooted in the very world from which they exit. So, the empirical world is not cut off from numberless speculative futures, but is shaped by all those futures that are presently hoped for, invested in, banked on, planned for and insured against. The future is not remote, but immanent in what is done now in order to bring about change, maintain the status quo or surrender to fate.

All great emancipatory projects begin as speculative proposals of alternative worlds or alternative ways of living. The demand for equality presupposes the imaginative leap in which the subaltern, the disenfranchised and dispossessed might be considered equal in reality not just in principle. Indeed, we can plot the trajectory of many social emancipatory programmes on an arc that begins as something utterly preposterous, becomes idealistic but unrealistic, until eventually it turns into a conservative defence of the existing condition. Utopias are scorned for being unrealistic, but when speculations about emancipation become real, they lose their critical dimension. But speculation is not merely a pragmatic operation; it is an ideological and metaphysical conundrum. Which social imaginaries deploy the tropes of speculation and why? What is the myth of speculation as a danger to the individual, the household and the local community? What is the romance of speculation? What are the rhetorics of speculation?
Between a debate on the specificity of the speculative and a survey of the particular forms in which speculation operates, this issue of PARSE opts firmly for the latter. What is remarkable about the topicality of speculation is that it has become a prominent trope across disciplines without its currency being established by a dominant discursive framing. This leads to conjecture—one might say speculation—regarding such coincidence. The issue thus invites us to think around the notion of distributed cognition, perhaps, through which we can see, among other things, that the arts, sciences and diverse other disciplines converge and transact without necessarily reaching consensus on the matters that connect them. Are the fears about the dangers of financial speculation related to the suspicion of speculative thinking that links philosophy to utopian politics? Speculation is always necessary for utopian politics, even if not reducible to it. Is a world without speculation impossible without abolishing the future, and, if so, what kind of temporal speculation do we need to keep the future alive? How can art practices unfold and generate their own experimental ontologies when speculating about and probing emerging futures? What is the democratic potential or danger of speculative aesthetic objects in the forming of publics?

To address speculation seriously it is necessary to welcome a battery of questions such as these, and to acknowledge that each of them conveys a very different, even opposite, definition and usage of the word. Indeed, speculation itself must be recognised as a carrier of multiple outgrowths from a contested heritage of prolonged etymological and epistemological complexity. Hence, each paper in this issue opens up the question of speculation from within distinct but overlapping disciplines and a range of discursive and ontological traditions, but all raise solemn political questions about thought, the future, structural transformation and the persistence of capitalism in relation to the deep ecological and societal crises we encounter.

The two first articles provide a philosophical and economical springboard to enter into a wider set of debates about speculation against the prevailing tendency to dismiss speculation and the speculative in the history of philosophy as modes of pure theory and abstraction, disconnected from empirical experience. Both intervene in disciplinary conditions under which discussion of the notion of the speculative has been muted in recent decades. It is in this context that Isabelle Stengers, Didier Deboise and Donna Haraway—drawing upon the work of William James and Alfred North Whitehead, among others—have reactivated the word “speculative” and notions such as “speculative gesture”, “speculative narration”, and “speculative fabulation”. Speculation to them
is related to the creation of possibles, rather than the abstract logic of probables. If reviving the concept of speculation within philosophy is to defy the canon, the same is true of the economic field. In heterodox economics, “speculation” has been suspect for its strong correlation with the logic of financial markets, the valorisation of unbridled risk and its alleged parasitism on production, but Costas Lapavitsas resituates the critique of speculation as essential to all capitalist enterprise rather than distinguishing sharply between the production of commodities on the one hand and usury on the other. The speculative logic of capital accumulation means that industrial production, the service economy and finance are all bound by a single principle. Hence, the process of financialisation, which defines contemporary capitalism, is not to be understood as capitalism’s speculative turn, but as the gravitational pull of finance, which results in commodity producing companies becoming more bank-like, and the extraction of financial profit from individuals, the household, workers and consumers.

The following two contributions insert the problematic of speculation not only within contemporary art and its specific urgencies, but within a more general collective programme for inventing unprecedented social relations. Beyond the social relations of the present which appear to be necessary, inevitable, natural or fixed, Jonas Staal and Krzysztof Wodiczko confront these “shuffling times” (to quote Benedicte Zitouni) of the contemporary condition, to construct futures that refute the permanence of the present with experiments in the multiplicity of assembling. Staal meets the catastrophe of speculative capitalism with the creation of spaces for the constitution of new social assemblies in the form of “parallel parliaments, stateless embassies and transdemocratic unions”. These hybrid, hopeful formats of assembly, Staal says, are the “spaces in which we speculate in order to enact the possibility of new future forms of emancipatory governance”. Wodiczko reflects on the processes by which he animates memorial statues and civic architecture as a site for speaking truth to power, a dialogical process for glimpsing social reconciliation and to participate in memorialisation rather than merely witness it. Wodiczko thereby enjoins us to imagine new ways of living with a past no longer conceived as something that cannot be changed.

With the two final articles, the exploration of the history of speculation in philosophy is closely linked with music and the arts. Both papers try actively to inherit speculative thinking, each one in a different way, with its own tools, to find fruitful paths to nourish the necessary co-construction of creation and knowledge in regards societal stakes. Challenging the possibility of creating a totality for one self makes, for Ming Tsao,
room “for new modes of perception to appear that resist representation, conceptualisation, enframing, quantification and instrumentalisation.” “Noise” is important in giving the situation at hand the sense of non-closure. Didier Debaise, Valerie Pihet, Katrin Sohldju and Fabrizio Terranova reflect on the creation of a Master’s degree called “Speculative Narration” within an art school in Brussels, which is a very fragile alliance between philosophy and art. Speculation and narration, both of which are only just emerging from a period of conceptual neglect, fruitfully contaminate each other in a provocative montage of unruly terminology. Their considered unpacking of the issues around both speculation and narration allows a new seizing of speculative thinking and its power within art education.

The future-oriented projections of speculation may be exercises in profit-seeking; they may be ideistically alluring escapisms or refusals of limitation. At the same time, speculation has become a mode of institutional restructuring. The rise of research within the academy and university imprints the humanities with the dynamics of capital. Research, in market terms, refers to the innovation of the means of production and the invention of new commodities, and it is this model of research that could be said to have colonised universities during the neoliberal era. Cultural production has adapted to this instrumentalisation of knowledge by adopting the concept of research in place of the older, now discredited, notions of originality, avant-gardism and shock. Speculation has been professionalised. But what if we see speculation as an act of putting artefacts and concepts in non-autonomous network relations in order to resist the reification of an “outsider” position? If it shows itself, speculative reasoning rises as an emergent property out of artistic strategies at hand, the artistic strategies that at that moment coincide in a thickening of the present.

Sensing the possibilities—by not excluding the subjective from the relevant objects and vice versa—allows us to distinguish between the potential and mere illusions. By acting on chaotic sensations, coming out of different bodily formations of affective knowledge and put in motion by artistic artefacts, projects and concepts, there is a possibility to extend the field of enquiry through the emergence of objects and exchanges not knowingly foreseen.