

Contributions To Phenomenology 64

Francis Halsall  
Julia Jansen  
Sinéad Murphy *Editors*

# Critical Communities and Aesthetic Practices

Dialogues with Tony O'Connor on Society,  
Art, and Friendship

 Springer

# Critical Communities and Aesthetic Practices

CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHENOMENOLOGY  
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Francis Halsall • Julia Jansen • Sinéad Murphy  
Editors

# Critical Communities and Aesthetic Practices

Dialogues with Tony O'Connor  
on Society, Art, and Friendship

 Springer

*Editors*

Francis Halsall  
Faculty of Visual Culture  
National College of Art and Design  
Thomas St. 100  
Dublin 8  
Ireland  
halsallf@ncad.ie

Sinéad Murphy  
Philosophical Studies  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
Herschel Bldg., 6th Floor  
United Kingdom

Julia Jansen  
Department of Philosophy  
University College Cork  
Lucan Place 1-2  
Western Road, Cork  
Ireland  
j.jansen@ucc.ie

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# Contributors

**Graham Allen** is Professor in English Literature at University College Cork. His recent books are: *Mary Shelley* (Palgrave, 2008); *Readers Guide to Shelley's "Frankenstein"* (Continuum, 2008); *The Pupils of the University*, (ed.) (Routledge, 2006); *Figures of Bloom: The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*, (co-edited with Roy Sellars), (London: SALT, January 2007) and *Roland Barthes*, (Korean translation), (LP Publishing, 2006). He is also working on longer term book projects on: theories of the university and teaching; the work of William Godwin; the relationship between P. B. Shelley and Mary Shelley.

**Gary Banham** was Reader in Transcendental Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University and is now editor of *Kant Studies Online*, and general editor of Palgrave Macmillan's series, *Renewing Philosophy*. Recent books include: *Kant's Transcendental Imagination* (2006, Palgrave Macmillan); *Kant's Practical Philosophy: From Critique to Doctrine* (2003, Palgrave Macmillan); *Kant and the Ends of Aesthetics* (2000, Macmillan).

**Robert Bernasconi** is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. He is well known as a reader of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas, and for his work on the concept of race. His books include: *How to Read Sartre* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); *Heidegger in Question: The Art of Existing* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993); *The Question of Language in Heidegger's History of Being* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1985).

**Douglas Burnham** is Professor in Philosophy at the University of Staffordshire. His research areas include Kant, Nietzsche, recent European philosophy, philosophy and literature. His most recent publications include *Kant's Philosophies of Judgement* (Edinburgh, 2004), "Heidegger, Kant and 'Dirty' Politics" (European Journal of Political Thought, 2005), *Reading Nietzsche* (Acumen/ McGill-Queens, 2007), and *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Edinburgh, 2007), as well as a number of papers on philosophy and literature.



**Edward S. Casey** is Distinguished Professor for Philosophy at Stony Brook University and current President of the Eastern chapter of the APA. He works in aesthetics, philosophy of space and time, ethics, perception, and psychoanalytic theory. His published books include *The World At a Glance* (Indiana University Press, 2007); *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Indiana University Press, 2000); and *The Fate of Place* (University of California Press, 1999).

**Nicholas Davey** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Dundee and a past president of the British Society for Phenomenology. His principle teaching and research interests are in aesthetics and hermeneutics. He has published widely in the fields of continental philosophy, aesthetics and hermeneutic theory. His recent book, *Unquiet Understanding: Reflections of Gadamer's Hermeneutics* was published by State University Press of New York in 2006. He is also completing *The Fiery Eye: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and the Imagination* (forthcoming).

**Duane H. Davis** is associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. Recent publications focus on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and he is the editor of *Merleau-Ponty's Later Works and Their Practical Implications: The Dehiscence of Responsibility* (Humanity, 2001). His areas of specialization focus on ethics; nineteenth and twentieth century continental philosophy; and social and political philosophy. He is currently in charge of the Phi Sigma Tau Philosophy Honor Society.

**Francis Halsall** is lecturer in the history and theory of modern/contemporary art at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. His research focuses on theories of art after modernism (and in particular the systems-theoretical approach such as that of Niklas Luhmann). He is the author of *Systems of Art* (Peter Lang, 2008) and co-editor (with Julia Jansen & Tony O'Connor) of *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, (Stanford University Press, 2008). Recent articles include: 'One Sense is Never Enough' *Journal of Visual Art Practice* (October, 2004); 'Art History versus Aesthetics?' in Elkins, J, (ed.) *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, (Routledge, 2005); and 'Chaos, Fractals and the Pedagogical Challenge of Jackson Pollock's 'All-Over' Paintings', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, (2008).

**William S. Hamrick** is Professor Emeritus at Southern Illinois University. He holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University (1971). Dr. Hamrick's last book was *Kindness and the Good Society: Connections of the Heart* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). In 2004, that work was the winner of the Edward Ballard Prize from the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology. He is also the co-editor, with Suzanne L. Cataldi, of *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy: Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007). Since retiring, he has remained professionally active as a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, as a member of the Executive Council of the Metaphysical Society of America (MSA), and as the representative of that group to the American Council of Learned Societies.

**Joanna Hodge** is Professor of Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University and immediate past president of the British Society for Phenomenology. Recent publications include: *Derrida on Time* (Routledge, 2007); “Authenticity and Apriorism in Husserl’s Phenomenology”, for Gary Banham (ed.): *Husserl and the Logic of Experience*, (Palgrave: London, 2005); “Walter Benjamin on elective affinity”, for Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hansen (eds.): *Walter Benjamin on Time*, (Continuum: London, 2005); “Ethics and Time: Levinas between Kant and Husserl”, *Diacritics: Journal of contemporary criticism*, Vol. 32, number 3, Spring 2004. She is on the Editorial Boards of *Angelaki: Journal for Theoretical Humanities* and of the *Journal for the British Society for Phenomenology*.

**Julia Jansen** is current Head of Philosophy at University College Cork, Ireland. Her current research explores the intersections of Kant’s Philosophy of Mind, Husserlian Phenomenology, Aesthetics, and Cognitive Science. Her recent publications include: ‘Imagination in Phenomenology and Interdisciplinary Research’ In: Shaun Gallagher and Daniel Schmicking (eds). *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Springer, 2010) and “Husserl’s First Philosophy of Phantasy: A Transcendental Phenomenology of Imagination,” in: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2005). She is the co-editor (with Francis Halsall & Tony O’Connor) of *Rediscovering Aesthetics* (Stanford University Press, 2008) and author of *Imagination in Transcendental Philosophy: Kant and Husserl Revisited* (forthcoming).

**David Farrell Krell** is professor of philosophy at DePaul University in Chicago and the founding director of the DePaul Humanities Center. He has written eleven scholarly books, translated six volumes of philosophy, and published three novels. His most recent work is an annotated translation of Hölderlin’s mourning-play, *The Death of Empedocles* (SUNY Press, 2008). Among his other books are: *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Indiana University Press, 2005), *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (Penn State Press, 2000), *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Indiana, 1998), and *The Good European: Nietzsche’s Work Sites in Word and Image*, with Donald L. Bates (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

**Alphonso Lingis** is an American philosopher, writer and translator, currently Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. His areas of specialization include phenomenology, existentialism, modern philosophy, and ethics. His publications include: *Excesses: Eros and Culture* (1984); *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (1985); *Phenomenological Explanations* (1986); *Deathbound Subjectivity* (1989); *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (1994); *Abuses* (1994); *Foreign Bodies* (1994); *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (1995); *The Imperative* (1998); *Dangerous Emotions* (1999); *Trust* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); *Body Transformations* (Routledge, 2005); *The First Person Singular* (Northwestern University Press, 2007); *Violence and Splendor* (Northwestern University Press, 2011).

**John Mullarkey** is Professor in Film and Television at Kingston University London. His recent books include: *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009); *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*, (Continuum Press, 2006); *Bergson and Philosophy*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1999) and (ed.) *Henri Bergson: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Bergson Centennial Series), Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007. He is also co-editor (with Beth Lorde) of *The Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy* (Continuum Press, 2009).

**Felix Ó Murchadha** is Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy, NUI, Galway. Recent publications include: *Being Alive: The Place of Life in Merleau-Ponty and Descartes*, *Chiasmi International* 'Glory, Idolatry, Kairos: Revelation and the Ontological Difference in Marion' in E. Cassidy & Leask, I (eds.): *Givenness and God. Questions of Jean-Luc Marion* (New York: Fordham University Press); 'Ruine als Werk. Die Grenze des Handelns als Urmoment der Geschichtlichkeit', in H Hüni & P. Trawney (eds.): *Die erscheinende Welt Berlin* (Duncker and Humblot 2002); 'The Time of History and the Responsibility of Philosophy. Heideggerian Reflections on the Origins of Philosophy', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (1999).

**Sinéad Murphy** lectures in Philosophy at the University of Newcastle, Ireland. Her background is in Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and literary theory, and her current research is into the extent to, and manner in, which hermeneutic philosophy exemplifies a constructive mode of philosophical practice. She has published on Kant's sublime, on feminist literary theory, on style and fashion, on literature and other related themes. She is author of *Effective History: On Critical Practice Under Historical Conditions* (Northwestern University Press, 2010).

**Hugh J. Silverman** is Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Literature and Executive Director of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature (IAPL). The inaugural Fulbright-Distinguished Chair in the Humanities at the University of Vienna (2001), he has also been Visiting Professor at Warwick and Leeds (UK), Turin and Rome-Tor Vergata (Italy), Vienna and Klagenfurt (Austria), Helsinki and Tampere (Finland), Sydney and Tasmania (Australia), Trondheim (Norway) and Nice (France). In 1998–2000, he was President of the Stony Brook Arts & Sciences Senate. Author of *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (Routledge, 1994, German ed., 1997, Italian ed., 2004) and *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism* (2nd ed., Northwestern, 1997), editor of the Routledge Continental Philosophy series, including *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty* (1988/1997), *Derrida and Deconstruction* (1989), *Postmodernism, Philosophy and the Arts* (1990), *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (1991), *Questioning Foundations* (1994), *Cultural Semiosis* (1998), *Philosophy and Desire* (2000) and *Liotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime* (2003), his many edited/co-edited books include studies of Piaget, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, hermeneutics, deconstruction, postmodernism.

**Talia Welsh** is associate professor in Philosophy at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She has a Ph.D. from State University of New York. Her main areas of research are philosophy of psychology, phenomenology, nineteenth and twentieth century European philosophy, and Feminist Theory. In particular, she writes on the connection between phenomenology and psychology. She has published articles in French, German, and English. She is the translator of Merleau-Ponty's *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949–1952* (Northwestern University Press, 2010). In the past few years she has presented over 15 conference papers in Honolulu, Belgium, Boston, Philadelphia, Ottawa, and at several other venues. At UTC, she is a core faculty member in the UTC Women's Studies Program.

**James Williams** is professor of Philosophy at Dundee University. He has published widely on contemporary French philosophy (Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, Kristeva, Derrida, Badiou, Postmodernism and Poststructuralism). His most recent book is a study of Gilles Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* (Edinburgh University, 2009). The book explains and evaluates Deleuze's philosophy of language, philosophy of events, philosophy of thought (as opposed to philosophy of mind) and moral philosophy. The work develops ideas from his earlier book on *Difference and Repetition*, also with Edinburgh (2004). He is also author of *Lyotard and the Political* (Routledge, 2000).



# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Critical Communities and Aesthetic Practices

Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Sinéad Murphy

At the 2007 Venice Biennale, Sophie Calle filled the French Pavillon with responses, by more than 100 women, to a personal letter that had originally been addressed to her; an email, to be precise, with which a boyfriend informed her that he would leave her. ‘Take care of yourself,’ the email ends. This phrase became the title for the piece in which each participating woman responded to the email in her individual way and according to her profession.

‘Take Care of Yourself’ raises important questions and it challenges the expectations that are commonly brought to artworks. It also throws an interesting light on this book. Why would an artist make her own personal life public? Is it legitimate to turn the personal into art and to make art personal? Precisely four decades after Roland Barthes pronounced the death of the author,<sup>1</sup> can we allow Calle to be a ‘first-person artist’?<sup>2</sup> Suspicions arise. Is this first-person really her? Is the email authentic? Is the personal that Calle so readily reveals in her work (but not in interviews, we might add) real, or is it just a clever fiction?

More interesting than answers to these complex questions is the possibility that these answers need not matter. What does matter is that the ‘personal’ origin of

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<sup>1</sup>Roland Barthes, “La Mort de L’Auteur” 1968, in *Essais Critiques IV, Le Bruissement De La Langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 61–66.

<sup>2</sup>Alfred Pacquement, “Preface,” in *Sophie Calle, M’as-tu vue*, ed. Christine Macel (Paris: Centre National d’Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 2003), 15.

F. Halsall  
National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland  
e-mail: halsallf@ncad.ie

J. Jansen (✉)  
School of Sociology and Philosophy, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland  
e-mail: j.jansen@ucc.ie

S. Murphy  
Philosophical Studies, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK  
e-mail: sinead.murphy@ncl.ac.uk

Calle's work enables something to emerge which *could not have been* without it; the collage of voices, performances and texts exhibited as 'Take Care of Yourself' can only be because of the personal; however 'real' or not, this may be.

The same is true of this book – with the important difference that we *do* know of the real existence of the philosopher Tony O' Connor, in honour of whom it was conceived.

*Festschriften* such as this, although meant as tributes to especially esteemed colleagues, are often considered of lesser academic value. Articles come together in them, it is said, only arbitrarily; that is, as random selections of texts written by groups of people linked only by their personal connections to the tributee. However, the articles in this book have been arranged to highlight coherent themes which are shared by the contributions and which always informed Tony's thought and work; these are: the hermeneutics of art, politics and ethics, and friendship. And there are two themes running throughout the book as a whole and contributing to the sense of community amongst all authors.

First, all papers are, broadly speaking, phenomenological in outlook and demonstrate how contributions to phenomenology are always applied to particular and practical examples. Second all papers engage in questions of aesthetics broadly conceived. It is for this reason that we have chosen to open this introduction with the example of a work of art. Sophie Calle's work suggests a different perspective on this very personal book. What matters is not only its real occasion – Tony's retirement from University College Cork in Ireland – but what emerges from this occasion. Here, we find a rare openness and experimental spirit among the contributors, which perhaps is only possible in this more personal (although still public and academic) context in which one feels justified in leaving (some) institutional conventions and constraints behind.

Douglas Burnham's contribution to this collection emerges from the research project at Staffordshire University, in which he collaborated with Tony and others to interrogate the similarities between making art and making philosophy. The commitment to inquiry is, Burnham explains, central to this project, to the extent that making art and making philosophy – if conceived of primarily as processes of inquiry and less centrally in terms of the objects they produce – can be understood, together. They are both modes of interaction, engagement and dialogue. Market, institutional, career pressures tend to obscure the potential of philosophy as a process of inquiry. Reflecting on the practice of philosophy, in conjunction with art practices (as in the Staffordshire 'Inquiry in Art and Philosophy' project) can have the effect of reducing these pressures and restoring to philosophy its potential as inviting process and open exchange. The articles in this book demonstrate this last point.

Thus, like Sophie Calle's 'Take Care of Yourself' artwork, this philosophical book brings together individuals who are united in their attempt to respond, with care and according to their expertise. They all respond to Tony O' Connor as philosopher and person, all in different ways: by interpreting Tony's work, by thinking through issues they know are on Tony's mind, by offering their own work for discussion, and by addressing Tony personally. What emerges in this open, inviting, but by no means uncritical, context reflects the breadth of processes that, as David Krell in this

collection puts it so succinctly, ‘have almost all their life ahead of them,’ processes that, as Krell describes, are not only not limited by original conditions – by an author’s intention, by strong notions of text, by career interests, by personal circumstances – but live into the future in a manner that both foregrounds our human finitude and gestures towards the unbounded possibilities for interpretation that are the effects of this condition.

This is not, however, to deny that processes of inquiry, open and inviting as they may be, have their particular directions. And this book is no exception, collated as it is around its central concern with ‘aesthetic practices and critical communities.’ These two themes ‘regulate’ the articles in this volume and lend the book its focus and systematic character.

The theme of aesthetic practices has its starting point in the rich and suggestive openness of aesthetic experience, but reaches far beyond a preoccupation with art or issues of aesthetic appreciation. It rather addresses practices from the full range of human interests which involve views, values, and norms that are not settled, for once and for all, but do, by appeal to particular communities, still claim validity beyond their relative standpoint. Like Kantian aesthetic judgments, these views, values and norms are taken up ‘freely,’ that is, with a degree of independence from cognitive and moral laws. These judgements appeal to shared, contextual and communal, criteria, and not to universally objective standards. They do not function in any neutral and absolute way, but as interlocutory, argumentative and open to agreement or dissent. Thus, aesthetic practices and critical communities are the two sides of a historical and social, hermeneutical, process from which common standards emerge and in which practices and communities are themselves continually co-constituted.

This process has its dangers, of course. It can, as Alphonso Lingis shows here, bring us to the very edge, even to the breakdown, of conventional conceptions of meaning. Ritualistic collective performances, such as initiations, ceremonies, parades, dances, do not just establish meaning by means of shared cultural symbols (identifiable by anthropologists); they can also open up a, potentially disruptive, space for creativity fuelled by feelings, movements and rhythms. It is not primarily through words and laws, then, but also through such concrete ‘aesthetic’ practices, that humans are able to partake in a ‘historical consciousness’ and, to borrow Nietzsche’s term, ‘eternally repeat’ and reappropriate the frames and conditions of the communities to which they belong. Hence, as Lingis concludes, meaning is ‘not just intellectual, conceptual meaning, grasped in conscious acts,’ but also embodied, ritualised, and performed. Meaning is potentially transcendent not only of the conscious individual and the present in which the performance takes place, but also – in experiences of joy and splendour – of any attempt to grasp meaning with a settled interpretation.

The concern with ‘aesthetic practices and critical communities,’ then, immediately involves the basic insight that communities and critique are, given our irreducibly historical natures, inextricably associated. That is, critique is not an achievement abstracted from historical conditions and communities, and communities are neither established nor identified outside of conditions that are subject to, and constitutive of, possibilities for critical appraisal. When there is no single perspective available from which absolute judgments can be made and absolute laws established,



what remains is a ‘sensus communis’ – a sense shared – an appeal to which one cannot force assent but must use the available means of negotiation and persuasion. In the best cases, these practices of negotiation and persuasion, which rely upon and appeal to a sense of community, give rise to a critical sense of a community whose members are not only critical of the claims they are presented with but, in an awareness of the fundamental corrigibility of any adopted position, also self-critical.

Critique, then, can never be abstracted from historical conditions and particular communities. Communities, likewise, are neither established nor identified outside of conditions that are subject to, and constitutive of, possibilities for critical appraisal. This means that no critical communities can ever be politically neutral. It is for this reason that the contributors investigate politics, not in terms of laws, parties and state constitutions, but of critical communities of embodied, desiring human beings. In short, they discuss the politics of audiences, peers and friends.

Above all, the contributions share the hermeneutical commitment to dialogue, which has motivated the process of editing this collection and which most characterises Tony O’Connor, as a philosopher, colleague, and friend. James Williams’ contribution to this collection convincingly demonstrates how communities without a strong, pre-given, or tenaciously assumed, identity reveal other modes of being, which can be experienced as valuable and important, in spite of (perhaps because of) their fragile and fragmentary qualities. Our hopes for this project have centred on the possibility that just such a valuable and important community might surface: a community constituted by association with Tony’s philosophical interests and activities; a community that has been years (a professional philosopher’s lifetime) in the making but only fleeting; and only here, in its full realisation. This is a community whose members, already in the business of being critical, might, by the juxtaposition of their voices, open up new and surprising possibilities for critique and anticipate a long and varied life out ahead.

The critical importance of the fragmentary communities that Williams describes – communities constituted, as in the case of this project for instance, around the occasional or personal – really comes to light with the philosophical acknowledgment that contexts, communities and contingencies affect even highly reflective practices. Critique occurs, as Foucault describes it, somewhere ‘between the high Kantian enterprise and the little polemical professional activities,’<sup>3</sup> somewhere, that is, between the expectation that properly critical practices are beyond historical effect and the interested immersion of strongly purposeful pursuits. In this regard, Foucault directs us to Kant (Nicholas Davey’s reference to the ‘inescapable heritage of Kant’ expresses well the extent to which the contributors to this collection are, in different ways, already there), specifically to Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’, in which the title question is addressed, indirectly it would seem, via a series of reflections on ‘the century of Frederick.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth & Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 42.

<sup>4</sup>Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” in *On History*, trans. L. White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963), 9.

Kant defines critique, not by defining critique but by defining something else.<sup>5</sup> Under historical conditions, critique exists, first and foremost, as a relation to something other than itself – it is not ‘pure critique’ (the ‘high Kantian enterprise’), but it is an attitude to people, events, institutions (to ‘little polemical professional activities’) that partially annuls the effects of their prejudices and purposes.

The critical importance of engaging – with different disciplines, ‘outside’ interests, ‘practical’ and ‘personal’ concerns, and always with others – is, then, central to the hermeneutical commitment to what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls ‘effective history.’ Engaging accounts for the enthusiastic persistence with which Tony has, throughout his philosophical career, conducted a highly productive engagement, in particular with literature and film. This engagement has generated interdisciplinarity in his teaching and his research; constituted communities within the university and beyond; and provided Tony and his interlocutors with a whole set of possibilities for critique, where what is at stake is not simply the ‘illustration’ of abstract ideas but a genuine education of (his and others’) philosophical practices in the ways of more conventionally creative experiences.

Those who know Tony will also know that this manner of dialogue with him can often be, in more than one sense of a word so provocatively discussed by Edward S. Casey in this collection, ‘edgy.’ Casey, very fruitfully, distinguishes between edge and limit; the limits, of a dialogue for instance, are its conditions of possibility, which are very difficult even to recognise let alone to submit to critical scrutiny. Philosophy, certainly since Kant, has placed many of its hopes on questioning its limits, but Casey very interestingly draws our attention to the, more accessible to ‘everyday’ philosophical dialogue but still hugely formative, operations of edges, which designate not so much the limit conditions of a particular discourse as its internal angles and props. To expose these to question, one does not require a radically different perspective; indeed, one must enter into the spirit of their particular commitment in order to address them at all. And, characteristically from an edge of the assembled crowd – from some corner in the back row and near the door – and often from deep within his own ‘edge’ philosophical interests in 1940s films and contemporary soap operas, this is precisely what Tony is so good at. Tony will generously enter into the particular question or commitment under the discussion but be always interested in exploring its edges, the ways in which it juts out in places, its repercussions for practices not immediately at stake. Edgy and engaged, with different disciplines, with ‘outside’ interests, with ‘practical’ and ‘personal’ concerns, and always with others.

But this engaged, this edgy, philosopher, is not any new and original figure, of course. Indeed, it returns us to the very beginnings of Western philosophy when, as Gadamer shows us, for Plato the questions that engage philosophers are not to be treated as constituting objects in themselves that can be ‘held in safekeeping,’ but are defined ‘as referring to something else that alone really “exists” and is really “good” – and they are defined as something that really exists only in this referring,

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<sup>5</sup>Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 47.

that is, as something depending on what they refer to.’<sup>6</sup> In short, the distinction between theory and practice – and between the academic and the personal – which removes the philosopher from responsibility for the application of her ideas, from engagement, is one we must continually throw open to question, in a general way and also in the more particular inquiries. Such particularities are demonstrated by John Mullarkey’s analysis in this collection of the contextual nature of standard theories of film that distinguish between the realism of Hollywood, and the reflexivity of European cinema. Such theoretical designations of films, Mullarkey shows, are contingent upon the conditions of their audiences, in a manner that thoroughly upsets any straightforward ‘theory’ of films, conceived as somehow removed from (highly contextual) practices of viewing them.

Cinema is a reference point in this collection in honour of Tony, who, intermittently and very entertainingly, shares with students and friends his interpretations of Hollywood classics – especially from the 1940s and 1950s. He is interested in films precisely as reflections on themselves, on their medium, on their resources, and on their audiences. An avid film goer from his early youth, Tony’s love of cinema began under conditions highly conducive to the development of such interpretive skills: packed into standing-room-only theatres among many for whom the occasion presented a chance to share (loudly!) their portion of weekly gossip, and often arriving half-way through the main feature, which meant one had to stay until the next showing if one wanted to catch the beginning. An earlier start on a career of hermeneutical interpretation, a greater encouragement towards the experience of realist cinema as a highly reflexive genre, and a more convincing reminder that ‘theory’ must not forget ‘practice,’ could hardly be deliberately devised.

What all of this brings to light, in the end, is that philosophy as critique is not, on any level, a single identifiable, homogenous activity. It is, we might say, in no sense itself. Rather, to the extent that it exhibits the kind of challenge to conceptions and foundations of identity that historical conditions pose to posited identities generally, it has suffered, and continues to suffer, from conventional definitions of ‘philosophy’ and ‘critique’ that have prevailed in our Western philosophical, and particularly Western Enlightenment, tradition. In this context, Duane Davis’s project here of examining the provenance of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological philosophy and the importance of reading a particular philosophy in terms of the horizon – in Davis’ case, the political horizon – of its emergence, suggests a welcome corrective to the over-determinations of notions of ‘critique’ that make part of *our* philosophical provenance. Such analyses are energising of philosophy. Hermeneutical self-critique – so long as it is undertaken on the understanding that even critique is never itself – must open possibilities for critique and diminish possibilities for presumption in a manner that is less likely to privilege one critical possibility, and therefore one critical community, over any other.

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<sup>6</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1991), 3.

Naturally, opening up possibilities for critique and diminishing possibilities for presumption, in this hermeneutical manner, tests many of our established tendencies, not least our tendency to isolate and objectify communities in such a way as to produce dangers and injustices at their margins. As Robert Bernasconi shows in what follows, one of the most important prejudices to be abandoned about processes of ‘othering’ is the notion that they are generated by a self-identical individual or group that turns against an other. Rather, ‘othering’ (through stereotyping, discrimination, persecution, and so on) constitutes as other not only the other (the Jew, the Arab, the African) but also the self (the Christian, the Westerner, the White) who, in these processes, acts precisely not as individual but in relation to an underdetermined group of others (Christians, Westerners, Whites) in whose name the self feels justified, perhaps compelled, to act. Thus, in order to understand the insidious mechanisms of ‘othering,’ our concepts of community must be rethought in terms of what Sartre calls ‘seriality.’ That is, a critical community is constituted not by individual selves but by the practices of selves who always already think and act in relation to others whose views and actions they can neither know nor predict.

One of the implications of this complexifying account of our identifications of, and interactions with, communities is that we cannot conceive of critical interventions that would redress the injustices and dangers of constituting communities as inevitably active, purposeful, and forward thinking *rather than* passive, purposeless, and laden with tradition. Felix Ó Murchadha’s identification of the critical force of waiting provides a considered and convincing rebuke to such binarist thinking. Opposition not only lies in action and in a new future but it also needs to wait and look at the histories and traditions in whose names we think and act. The association of waiting with uncritical resignation belies the value in what Gadamer refers to as ‘tarrying with,’<sup>7</sup> and what Kant so influentially describes as the ‘playing with’ of interpretive judgments. In fact, the extent to which the model of non-purposive rationality, which makes such an increasingly exciting aspect of our Kantian inheritance, provides fruitful focus for the essays in this collection. Such a model indicates how our practices of aesthetic judgement are bound up with our efforts as philosophers to adapt ourselves and our objects of interest to the inescapably historical and indeterminate conditions of experience. Talia Welsh’s discussion of the manner in which Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perceptual experience as constituted by a shifting range of resistances to cultural categorizations, and as therefore challenging of conceptions of conscious and unconscious as separate, provides us with one example of the extent to which our experiences generally are much closer to the conditions that have traditionally been identified as *aesthetic* experiences than has yet been fully recognized. This insight suggests that the distinctions between determinate and indeterminate, between purpose and purposelessness, between moving and waiting, must undergo serious re-evaluation.

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<sup>7</sup>See Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. R. Bernasconi, trans. N. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

The waiting the waiting around, the ‘tarrying with,’ most conventionally associated with our appreciation of artworks, but now emerging as more generally operative, is associated by Gadamer with a temporality that is very different from the future oriented linearity presupposed by certain traditional accounts of enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> What Felix Ó Murchadha refers to as ‘time beyond instrumentality’ accounts, Gadamer shows, for our experiences of festivals in which duration is felt less as the accumulation of units of measured time and much more as internal to the festival itself. Does Christmas ever feel like the 3 days, or the 14 days holiday, that it, in one sense, is? Does a career in philosophy ever feel like the 30 years, 8 months and 7 days that it, in one sense, is? To the second, we must, perhaps, answer ‘yes!’ Gadamer describes the manner in which ‘youth’ and ‘old age’ have an ‘autonomous’ temporality, internal to the experience of youth and old age and not easily determinable in any strong sense, a temporality that trumps conventional measurement; but a career in an academic institution – particularly when one is retiring from that institution – is (and, we might think, painfully) counted out as the accumulation of days, months and years. Whether it is or has been experienced as such is open to question, and certainly subject to contingencies; the aim of this collection is to, in many senses, restore Tony to festival time and to honour the more autonomous, more playful, temporality that goes to define our experiences of youth and old age, of engagement and retirement. In Tony’s unflagging enthusiasm for dialogue with, and support of, those around him, and in his so-impressive desire to continue to learn, is certain evidence of a temporality that defies conventional assignments and a philosophical life lived, hermeneutically, as if all of it is, in an important sense, ahead of it; we hope that the essays collected here will provoke the kind of tarrying, playful, hermeneutical reading and re-reading that will best pay tribute to this.

And Tony is not excused from his share in this process. Four of the essays in this collection – those by Graham Allen, Gary Banham, William Hamrick, and Hugh Silverman – directly address the theme of friendship. How appropriate! It is, after all, a book of essays written and collected by friends of Tony O’ Connor, friends he has made within and between academic institutions, friends he has made – interestingly, given Allen’s view here of the crucial role Philosophy must play in our resistance to today’s increasingly techno-scientific regulation of institutional relations – primarily through the discipline of Philosophy. Of course, since these friends of his conceived, contributed to, and collated this project as a surprise, Tony has, in one sense, been excluded from it. However, if we take as our model Silverman’s conception here of friendship as ‘postmodern,’ we must acknowledge that the responsibility for what happens between friends is constituted less by some external standard of Justice, Law, or Friendship, or Fairness, and, more convincingly, by the relation between friends. Indeed, Tony’s call, to which Hamrick responds so well here, for ‘a more empirical approach’ to the historical and cultural conditions of friendship than a Derridean deconstruction of extant definitions of friendship, taken on its own, can achieve, would seem to position Tony’s philosophical response to the theme of

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

friendship firmly within the broadly 'postmodern' acknowledgment that responsibility between friends is precisely that: between friends and, to that extent, shared, particular, and on-going.

If so, however, Tony must realise that, although he has not contributed to this collection, undertaken as it has been by his friends and in friendship, he is certainly responsible for its effects. And its effects are uncertain, largely indeterminate, and above all partial – which is to be expected. As Banham demonstrates here through Kant, this is a show of friendship that aims at something other than an institutional giving to Tony his 'due.' For these effects, Tony too is accountable. They are the effects of his philosophical past, of his life lived, of his tradition entered into and critically fulfilled. But they are effects, too, for the future and presents the possibilities of alterity that Joanna Hodge identifies in Derrida's '*a-venir*' and engagingly juxtaposes with the always-to-be-accomplished process of remembering, where 'that which arrives, for good or ill, may arrive as much through the permissiveness of a certain forgetting as through the accumulations of memory.' Thus, since it is almost all yet to be done – the future that lies ahead but also the past that has yet to be remembered – this project places on Tony a continuing responsibility; not an imposition on him, we hope, but an invitation to him, a request of him, a gesture towards him. In friendship.