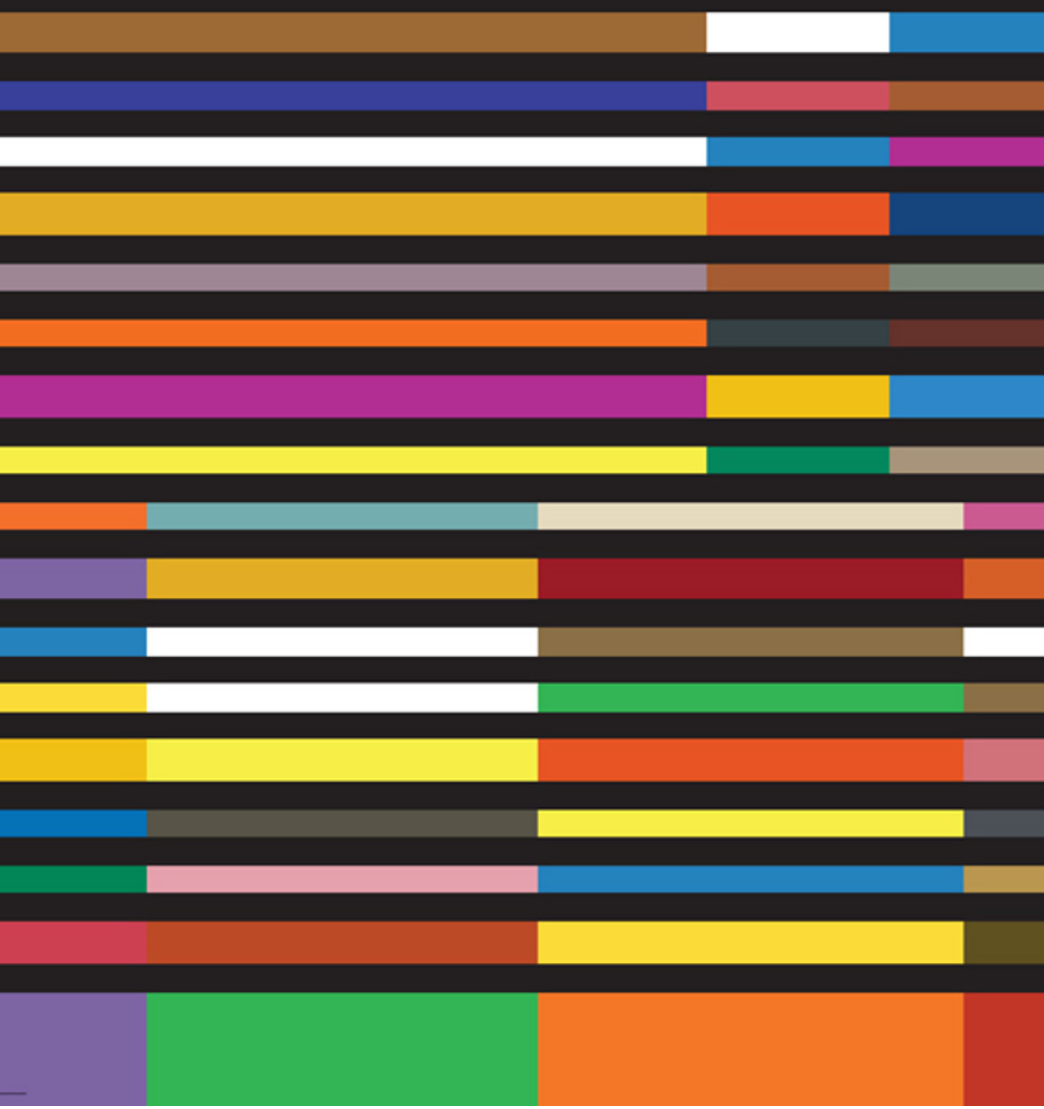


**IMPOSSIBLE
OBJECTS
INTERVIEWS**
SIMON
CRITCHLEY



Impossible Objects

Impossible Objects

Interviews

Simon Critchley

Edited by Carl Cederström and Todd Kesselman

polity

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Introduction

In the time that it takes the word “philosophy” to leap off the written page, onto the glassy surface of your eye, and down that astonishingly complex and dark tunnel that we call the mind, most of us have already conjured up a few definite associations: timeless, absolute, true without qualification. Philosophy is *supposed to be* about those things we need to be most certain about, those categories or concepts where the stakes are the highest, and which determine what it means to be human, to be alive, to be on this planet. For this reason, and understandably so, most philosophers are intellectually constipated: they are more than reluctant to say anything out loud unless they are sure that they want it to ring eternally in the hallowed halls of the academy. For the philosopher, to speak is a great risk; it is to risk everything, insofar as once one has spoken, one puts in jeopardy everything that one has already said, and everything that one will say. To risk error is to risk eternity. And what could be more frightening than that.

The interview, one might say then, is for the philosopher a battlefield of anxiety, where one forgoes the right to retreat into one’s quiet study of peaceful contemplation, where one is forced to speak before one knows the real consequences of one’s words, where one’s mouth might threaten to betray one’s mind, or even one’s system of thought. It is the place where opinion muddles the clarity of ‘pure’ thinking – whatever that might be – and where one is forced to take a stance on the world in one’s own time. There should be nothing

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more terrifying to the philosopher, and indeed, nothing more important.

It is in this spirit that the interviews presented here have been gathered and collated. They aim to trace the risk of thinking out loud and with others, within the process of developing ideas and perspectives, for better or worse, until death do us part. This process exemplifies the meaning of what philosophy, for some of us, might be about: our stake in the world, our exchange with others, the movement and praxis of thinking itself.

We originally intended this collection as an appendix to the work of Simon Critchley, but it could also be read in another way. What the written word often tries to conceal is that philosophy does not descend upon us from up on high but, rather, develops, undergoes modifications, and takes its time in doing so. This activity, this struggle in thought, in its time, constitutes the very essence of the activity that is philosophy. As surprising as this may be, its resistance to setting down a final, permanent encampment is intrinsic to it, even if this has been something that has been historically resisted, rejected, denied, and suppressed. The idea that philosophy should only appear in print, when all accounts have been settled and when all debates have been resolved, is itself nothing more than the perverse fantasy of a certain erroneous vision of philosophy that holds onto certainty like a petulant child. In this light, the interview can hardly be a *mere* appendix.

If the tired old cliché of philosophical withholding could be called anal-ytic, the interviews collected here are unapologetically – to use a Heideggerian trope – diarrhetic. They are playful, at times provocative, at times entertaining, but in each case oriented towards the task of genuine thinking, by which we mean thinking that does not simply rest upon what has been said before, but aims to open up new territories, and agitate outdated philosophical platitudes. In this sense, these

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interviews represent thinking as a form of labor; an intellectual *work*, or working-through. This is, we submit, another possibility to consider, the next time the word philosophy should pass through the digestive tract of your psyche.

As Simon Critchley has been interviewed frequently over the last two decades, we were faced with an over-brimming collection of material in bringing this volume to fruition. The selections we have made were based primarily on two criteria; that they cover a reasonably diverse span within Critchley's work, both topically and temporally. The present volume consists in nine interviews, six of which have been published elsewhere in various mediums, and three of which appear here for the first time. With regard to those interviews that have appeared elsewhere, we have taken the liberty of occasionally removing certain passages solely for the purpose of avoiding repetition amongst the different interviews. We have tried, as much as possible, to preserve the original character and flow of each interview in order to maintain the spirit in which it took place.

With the intention of providing some context for the material, each of the interviews is preceded by a short introduction, interspersed with Critchley's own comments and reflections. More than ten years separate the first interview from the last, and, in this respect, the reader will find a shift in philosophical interests: the most recent interview on tragedy concerns material that is still being thought through, while the earliest (from 2000) deals with questions that are no longer as central to his current perspective.

We should also say something about the title, *Impossible Objects*. The term comes from an abandoned project, at the bottom of one of those drawers that most of us have, and in this case it happens to have been from Simon's. The book was to have been called *Paraphilosophy*, and it was to have been a catalogue of those themes that stubbornly resist definition and simple appropriation. At the time, three paradigmatic

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domains presented themselves: poetry, humor, and music. Along with these, the themes presented in this collection – art, deconstruction, political resistance, and tragedy, just to name a few – seem to partake of this same stubborn quality, and for this reason they seem to be appropriate amendments in the field of impossibility. To quote from Simon’s deserted introduction: “These paraphilosophical fragments were meant to be a collection of tiny ladders that should be kicked away in order to look directly at those things of which it is not possible to speak. The point is to let things speak for themselves. Sadly, this is easier said than done.” Since the objects tend to remain quiet, it is fortunate that Critchley has not.

Finally, we would like to thank Liam Gillick for his visual genius in general, and, more specifically, for designing the cover of the book, along with Emma Hutchinson at Polity for her help in culling the vast amounts of textual material, and, moreover, for her infinite patience with us. We would also like to thank each interviewer for making this project possible, and for allowing us to include their work in this volume. And last but not least, a thank you to Simon for his openness in this collaboration, and for giving us so many words to choose from.

Carl Cederström and Todd Kesselman

1 Early Bedfellows

Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethics of Deconstruction

Joshua Mullan and David Hannigan

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, APRIL 2000

This is one of the earliest recorded interviews with Simon Critchley. David Hannigan and Joshua Mullan were two PhD students at the University of Sydney whom Critchley had met on a couple of occasions, and were “serious about having a philosophical conversation.” The interview took place in April of 2000, while Critchley was a visiting scholar in the philosophy department at the University of Sydney. The setting was idyllic.

It took place in the office of Moira Gatens, which I was borrowing for the semester, in the Old Building, which is this beautiful mid-nineteenth century imitation of an Oxford college, on a hill just to the north of Sydney, but on the edge of the city. There was this Jacaranda tree in the quad outside, and these birds would screech and hop around out there.

The discussion focuses on Critchley’s first published book, The Ethics of Deconstruction, which had been based upon his PhD thesis. The great achievement of that book was that it had, for the first time, opened up an ethical reading of Derrida and deconstruction through the work of Levinas. This ethical reading was a significant contribution in that Derrida was routinely dismissed as an empty formalist, or perhaps even a nihilist. In this interview, we find a detailed account of the shaping of these early thoughts. “It is a very accurate overview of what I was thinking in the context of

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the Ethics of Deconstruction.” But it also extends the original arguments, relating them to key themes of the Frankfurt School, especially the work of Jürgen Habermas. A few years prior to the interview, in 1997, Critchley had spent a full year in Frankfurt, debating and working with Axel Honneth. “You can see the extent of the influence the Frankfurt School debates had on me at the time.” Honneth’s inheritance of Habermas is explored here as a means to bridge the gap between ethical subjectivity and political formalism – a line of thought that also appeared in Critchley’s Continental Philosophy, but later receded within his work. “I recall that the conversation was very intense and focused, but I couldn’t even do this interview now. The material isn’t present in my mind any longer. It’s interesting to see how the interview is a kind of slice of time, what one was thinking about at a certain period, and the way that the themes accumulate and pile up.” The interview is here published for the first time, as it had not been carried out with the intention of publication. “I am very pleased that something is finally happening with it. David and Josh spoke with me for their own curiosity, but they were extremely professional, and the result is a good portrait of some of my early obsessions.”

DAVID HANNIGAN: Given that much of your work to date has revolved around the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, can you please tell us when, and in what circumstances, you first encountered their work?

SIMON CRITCHLEY: I purchased a copy of *Totality and Infinity* at a book sale in 1983, which cost almost nothing. I remember reading the preface on the train from Colchester to London and thinking, “This is amazing.” I knew Buber’s work at the time and had been very persuaded by *I and Thou* and so I fitted Levinas into the context of Buber and the Jewish tradition straight away. Derrida, I can remember to this day, I read in a launderette in the University of Essex. Again that was in 1983. We were reading “Structure, Sign, and Play

in the Human Sciences” in the Communist Society reading group at Essex University, which seems faintly comical now. We were very serious. I read that essay and hadn’t really understood it. Then I read the opening page of “Violence and Metaphysics” on Levinas and thought that the first paragraph, where Derrida is talking about the question, the community of the question and all that, was simply extraordinary. Derrida was the avant-garde in continental philosophy and therefore I wanted to understand it. Also, the assumption we shared, without knowing much, was that Derrida was somebody on the left; we read his work in the Communist Society reading group after reading Althusser and Foucault and therefore his works would have had obvious ethical and political relevance. So that’s how I came to them.

JOSHUA MULLAN: And it was out of that context that your initial thesis emerged?

SC: Yes. The problem for me in Derrida’s work was, what prevents this form of reading from simply being a textual formalism without any relevance to contextual questions of ethics, culture, society, politics? I tried to show that the basic operation in his thought is ethical. That deconstruction as a practice of reading is ethical, which was also a claim being advanced by Hillis Miller at about the same time. But I was always a long, long way from the preoccupations of the Yale School. I wanted to make the more substantive claim that there was a phenomenology of moral experience – well, almost – in Derrida’s work, provided you read it in relationship to Levinas. So the idea was that we can save Derrida’s work from what looked like an empty formalism, which was the Hegelian critique of Derrida by people like Jay Bernstein and Gillian Rose at that time in the UK. And we can do this by showing that there was an ethical motivation to his work, with possible political consequences. So that was the specific