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The avant-garde says: We begin. But the genuine question of the beginning is that of its present. How does one sense, or how does one experience, one’s own beginning? (Badiou, 2007: 135).

The writing of ‘Conversation in an Air Raid Shelter’ first began as a response to a musical composition called ‘Dismantle’ by Tom Kazas. In the latter, rebellious piano notes erupt like fragments of speech from a two-chord structure (a bifurcated drone). This duotone, the main feature of the work, evoked for the writer the ominous sound of a siren. These musical elements (and others) were brought together with voice for the soundtrack used in the live performance of ‘Conversation in an Air Raid Shelter’ at the 2012 Double Dialogues conference at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. This collaborative project took inspiration from Badiou’s plea for philosophy to propose a ‘retardation process’ (1999: 51). It is a question, he writes, ‘of philosophically reconstructing, with a slowness which will insulate us from the speed of the world, the category of truth’ (1999: 52). Our work sought this kind of ‘space’ (or rupture) using music and voice. Its focus was upon the subject as a militant of ‘truth’ in the active desire for metamorphosis.

Such a metamorphosis is suggested in the phrase ‘to speak is to age’ which had emerged early in the writing process. We were interested in the idea of the sentence in writing as constituting a movement in time. We wanted to re-imagine this movement in the oral form and follow its associations. Such is the encounter depicted in ‘Conversation in an Air Raid Shelter’ (from hereon, CIAARS) of the harrowing attempt of a man and a woman to speak inside the compressed space of an air raid shelter. In the shifting spaces ‘outside’, under the strain of the 21st century, love looks like it’s losing the war.

This sonic poem presents lovers who are indistinct and shadowy in form. The pressure is to speak since one of the ‘conditions’ set up in the writing is that to touch won’t reveal what they are. With their pasts (as in the ancient Greek imagining of time) spreading out before them, and their futures unseen (and indescribable) behind their backs, how should they begin?

Let’s start with the war ‘outside’…or rather, the proliferation of written technological mediums in the 21st century and the implications of these for the spoken word. What happens in the face of the loss of this kind of conversation?

Although many of the written mediums of communication (emails, text, instant messaging and various forms of social media) were present in the latter part of the 20th century, these means of ‘speaking’ arguably have intensified in this century; they are deeply embedded in all our social experiences. This is exemplified in Llana Gershon’s book The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media. She describes how, in the case of breakups, the structure of technology is either integral or often implicit in the stories people tell about them (2010: 51). The dubious nature of ‘connectedness’, which these forms purport to foster, has been well documented and is also a theme explored in earlier performance works by Josephine Scicluna (‘Stuck Inside a Mobile’ 2008 and ‘Each Doppelgänger Love’ 2010).

In the current collaboration the desire for metamorphosis takes further inspiration from Badiou’s politics – a ‘meta-politics’, which aims to ‘restore’ politics to concerns of thought and truth. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano explain this as Badiou’s attempt to resist the pact between academic political philosophy and… ‘capital-parliamentarism’ (2010: 100). This concern for thought and truth, conjuring Plato and Aristotle, appealed to us as a reminder of the emphasis placed on the oral form in early philosophy, although Power and Toscano do qualify the surface idealism which seems to appear in Badiou’s idea of politics. This then had further implications for our discussion of the pivotal phrase in the CIAARS soundtrack, ‘to speak is to age’. 
This article offers a context for and discussion of the composition of CIAARS. In it, love and politics, two of the ‘truth’ procedures described by Badiou, intersect in a discussion of music, poetry and time.

II: The writing

Badiou resists the conjoining of love and politics; for example, in In Praise of Love he describes the term ‘a politics of love’ as a meaningless expression and he also writes that the issue of the enemy, which is so important in politics, ‘is completely foreign to the question of love’ (2012: 59). However, regarding the two as quests for truth, he finds a ‘striking similarity’ (52) and recognizes the possibilities for intersection of one truth procedure with another. As Bartlett and Clemens write, ‘[for Badiou] it is the very intersection between political and amorous truth procedures that forms the subject-matter of an artistic truth procedure in the form of many novels’ (2010: 21). We extend this recognition to our composition, which due to its hybrid form—combining a mixture of genres: music, poetry, fiction and theatre—is arguably ‘dialogic’. It presents the kind of multiplicity of voices or heteroglossia (1934-5) that Mikhail Bakhtin celebrates in the novel.

The attention brought to ageing in a Western context, with its obsession with a culture of youth, risks misnaming ‘to speak’ in the pejorative. However, this became all the more reason to retain the phrase, due to the rich and contradictory territory it seemed to suggest for our response to Badiou’s plea for a re-invention of love and politics. Here became a place to acknowledge the noble aspects of ageing, for example, the capacity to surrender to the currents of time. ‘Time’ is integral to Badiou’s philosophy of love since his interest is in love’s duration beyond the event of the encounter, rather than the precipitous nature of the encounter itself. For Badiou, the declaration, ‘I’ll always love you’ ‘is simply a commitment within time’ (2009: 48). Love is acknowledged for its capacity to resist being, in the words of Shakespeare, ‘time’s fool’ (Shakespeare 1991: 51). This recognition is also beautifully described in Badiou’s In Praise of Love in the declaration quoted from Andre Gorz’s Letter to D:

You’ll soon be eighty-two. You have shrunk six centimetres, you only weigh forty-five kilos yet you are as beautiful, gracious and desirable as ever. We have now lived together for fifty-eight years and I love you more than ever. In the hollow of my chest I can feel again that ravaging emptiness that can only be filled by the warmth of your body against mine. (as quoted by Badiou with Truong 2012: 45)

In his essay ‘What is Love?’ (1992), Badiou describes love as a kind of ‘process’ and operation. This notion of operation and process is central for our discussion in the sense that it offers a ‘thinking through’ and by extension, the kind of ‘slowing down’ which our collaboration seeks. Indeed, in Badiou’s conception, quoting the poet, Fernando Pessoa, ‘Love is a thought’ ‘our emphasis] (2012: 87).

Badiou rejects a fusional concept of love, pointing to the danger of this kind of mergence: ‘an ecstatic One can only be supposed beyond the Two as a suppression of the multiple’ (1996: 38). The political implications of this are manifest in our discussion of music later.

The basis of Badiou’s rejection of ‘a One’ is the same ‘as that which dismisses Being-for death’ (1996: 38). For Badiou this figure is a disaster. Rather, Badiou’s vision of love as explicated in ‘The Scene of the Two’ is one of immanence and is atheistic in its non-subscription to absolute transcendence or a Trinitarian doctrine (2003b).

In Badiou’s rejection of ablative love, ‘love is not the prostration of the Same on the altar of the Other’ (1996: 39). Indeed it ‘is not even the experience of the Other. It is an experience of the world, or of the situation under the post-evental condition that there were Two’ (ibid).

Here, Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of the self as an event constructed by time and place is useful in trying to grasp the seeming paradox in Badiou’s concept. That is, that love is not actually an experience of ‘the Other’. In Bakhtin’s project, the locus is shifted from the interior of the individual and into that individual’s location in time and space and the relationship between them. This situational aspect also comes to the fore in Badiou.

Bakhtin’s distinctive project of the self ‘placed radical emphasis on particularity and situatedness, the degree to which it insists that apparently abstract questions about selfhood are pursuable only when treated as specific questions about location’ (Holquist,1990: 12).

The idea at the centre of Bakhtin’s earlier philosophically-oriented writing (and which informed his later more sociological and linguistic work) was the ‘recognition that meaning must be actively produced in an “aesthetic event”’ (1994: 6). This event can only take place when two consciousnesses meet and that the meaning generated from this is a ‘self’:

This other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something of his body that is inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back… As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes… to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person [our emphasis] (1994: 6).

This kind of aesthetic operation in the context of love can be further illustrated by Slavoj Zizek...
who speaks of love as a violent act – one that chooses something out, selects and separates from the mass, and in so doing creates an imbalance (2005). Žižek’s sense of rupture could be related to Badiou’s idea of the encounter in love. Since there is no ‘third position’ in Badiou’s conception of love, what ‘takes the place’ of this, is the event (1996: 40-41).

Finally, Badiou rejects a “superstructural” or illusory conception of love (1996: 39), one in which love is seen as ‘merely an ornamental semblance through which passes the real of sex, or that desire and sexual jealousy are the foundation of love’ (ibid). This series of rejections is implicated in the following discussion of what Badiou considers to be threats against love. In our view, these threats have intensified in the 21st century. They form the subject matter in CIAARS, which tries to give dramatic form to the impact of technology, within the sphere of love, specifically in relation to dating sites (which principally rely on the written medium), and to the ubiquity of pornography on the internet.

In In Praise of Love, in dialogue with Nicholas Truong, Badiou argues that love is under threat due to its reduction by liberal and libertarian ideals (2012). Here, Truong calls upon an analogy made by sociologists Sennett and Bauman between the non-commitment of finance capitalism to the casual worker and that of relationships influenced by liberal and libertarian ideals. “No commitment for my part” the “lover” tells his or her partner as they float in a world where relationships are made and unmade in the name of easy consumer permissiveness’ (2012: 7).

Badiou continues to describe what he considers to be two threats against love: the first is safety or the perception that one can have no-risk love (marketed by dating sites) and the second, a counterpart to safety, which denies that love is at all important: “love is only a variant of rampant hedonism and the wide range of possible enjoyment…[its] aim…to avoid any immediate challenge, any deep and genuine experience of otherness from which love is woven” (2012: 8).

The dim space of the air raid shelter depicted in CIAARS interchanges almost imperceptively with the virtual spaces of the internet throughout the sonic poem, for example, the speaker asks ‘how many more chances do we get?’ now that ‘so many more have opened up on the net’, and later concludes that since so many vacancies have opened up, that what has opened up is just more vacancy (Scicluna & Kazas, 2012).

Glen Fuller in his analysis of the film Punch Drunk Love reflects on the problematic nature of forming relationships in a world of ‘post-institutional modes of sociality’ (2007: 1) in which relationships rely more on a ‘hit and miss style of dating…and perhaps even commodified through an e-Bay-style online catalogue’ rather than relying on traditional institutions like the family or workplace or even on ‘love’ itself. He suggests that ‘meet up’ sites in some ways ‘transform romance into the online equivalent of the logistics dock at your local shopping centre’ (2007: 1).

The formulation of ‘data selves’ (Data and the Virtual Self, 2012; Jurgenson, 2012) demarcates the passage into a sense of reduced responsibility towards others and growing desensitization. There is a similar implication in Fuller’s description: ‘instead of image-commodities there are image people’ (2007). As Badiou writes, ‘If you have been well trained for love, following the canons of modern safety, you won’t find it difficult to dispatch the other person if they do not suit’ (2012: 9). If that person suffers it’s his or her own fault for not being part of modernity (2012: 9). Badiou likens this to the way “‘zero deaths’ apply only to the Western military” (2012: 9) whose bombs ‘kill people who are to blame for living underneath… Afghans, Palestinians…who don’t belong to modernity either’ (2012: 9).

In asking what ‘humanity’ signifies in a non-humanist sense, Badiou finds it attested to ‘if and only if there is (emancipatory) politics, (conceptual) science, (creative) art and love (not reduced to a mix of sentimentalities and sexualities)’ (1996: 41). The ubiquity of pornography can be implicated in the growing sense of emotional disconnection and reduction in humanity suggested here and also in the liberal denial of love of which Badiou speaks. In CIAARS the pervasiveness of pornography is reflected upon when one of the speakers, in an address to city and sky, begs to know if there is anything else ‘out there’ beyond the ‘thousand bodies/ which heave inside the net’ in quadraphonic sound in character of seduction (Scicluna & Kazas, 2012). A play is made here upon Baudrillard’s writing about pornography: ‘Pornography is the quadrophonics of sex. It adds a third and fourth track to the sexual act’ (Baudrillard, 1990: 51) and further:

Pornography says: there must be good sex somewhere, for I am its caricature…Now the whole question is whether good sex exists, or whether, quite simply, sex exists somewhere – sex as the body’s ideal use value, sex as possible pleasures which can and must be ’liberated’. (1990: 28).

Baudrillard’s critique forms a coincidence with Badiou’s rejection of the concept of illusory love ‘through which passes the real of sex’ (1996: 39) and elucidates this ‘real’ by his description of pornography as adding ‘a dimension to the space of sex’ (1990: 28). In this way pornography makes sex ‘more real than the real – and this accounts for its absence of seduction’ (1990: 28).

The proliferation of access to pornography via the internet and its self-destructive effects is discussed in an article in The Guardian (2010) which describes the self-destructive effects on consumers of the $100 billion dollar global pornography industry. The article describes the setting up of a website to discuss feminist perspectives of pornography from men. The professor of Journalism at the University of Texas, Robert Jensen, says that ‘if pornography went towards a world of built-in emotion that was about mutuality, respect and egalitarian relationships, then men wouldn’t buy it because they are using porn to avoid those aspects of sexuality’ (Guardian: 2010). Jackson Katz...
(an anti-sexist educator and activist) suggests ‘that the porn industry has an obvious interest in undermining intimacy between men and women – if couples were to find sexual fulfillment together, the market would plummet’ (Guardian: 2010).

Another article published in The Age (2012) by Andrew Stevens describes sex as ‘a baffling zone where body image, performance anxiety and online excesses have left us feeling hot and bothered’ and then asks ‘in the modern sexual revolution, are we more liberated – or lost – than ever?’ The article quotes a long term study on the effects of pornography in Australia on ‘excessive viewers’ in which the root cause of such behaviour is suggested to be about avoidance of emotional connections ‘especially with those who are supposed to be our nearest, dearest intimates’.

CIAARS dramatizes this by offering a view of intimacy, which was also inspired by a reading of an article in a men’s health magazine in which instructions were provided to men for how they might maintain a sexual relationship with minimum commitment. This involved spacing out contact with a woman so that she couldn’t fully attach and ‘retrieving’ her just in time before she lost complete attachment. In CIAARS a woman is placed under surveillance, her levels of the bonding hormone oxytocin monitored: ‘when her critical level drops/ her last breath of oxytocin/ kiss her shoulder/ quickly! to the bedroom’ (Scicluna & Kazas, 2012).

Badiou speaks of the words ‘I love you’ as being needed to be ‘re-stated’ after the initial declaration (2012: 51). This inspired the forming of a hinge phrase in CIAARS, which added ‘time’ and ‘ground’ to its equation: ‘Love her just-in-time/ I love you at the time/I love you with no grounds’ (Scicluna & Kazas, 2012). Our Two in the shelter were poised on a threshold, their passage arrested, varying and repeating the words love, time and ground.

‘To speak is to age’ became our way of understanding the separation of the centuries and bearing witness to an ageing. To do this we had to slow things down. In seeking our own ‘slow’ space or ‘retardation process’ (Badiou, 1999: 57) we looked to the process music of composer Steve Reich, which is about to be discussed. In CIAARS a woman is placed under surveillance, her levels of the bonding hormone oxytocin monitored: ‘when her critical level drops/ her last breath of oxytocin/ kiss her shoulder/ quickly! to the bedroom’ (Scicluna & Kazas, 2012).

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We found intersections between these ideas from Badiou and the voluntary sharing of operation, achieved by the gradual unfolding of sound, in process music.

III: The Music

In *Writings about Music*, Reich describes the lack of appeal he finds ‘in the use of hidden structural devices in music’ (1974: 10) and his interest, instead, in a ‘compositional process and a sounding music which are one and the same thing’ (1974: 10). Here he is not referring to processes of composition but rather, ‘pieces of music that are, literally, processes’ (1974: 9). In these pieces, due to their extremely gradual unfolding, all structural elements are audible, meaning that the composer isn’t any more privy to the workings of the music than the listener. According to the minimalist composer and musicologist, Michael Nyman, Reich is not interested in ‘secrets of structure that you can’t hear’ (1999: 151), but rather the ‘process is used as the subject, rather than the source of the music’ (1999: 151).

Minimalist music privileges no part, acknowledges that notes and structure are all equally qualified and equally unqualified to be present. In extending the sonic metaphor we could say only ‘in their ears’ (the demos) is the truly political enacted; only ‘in their ears’ can a process be qualified and equally unqualified to be present. In extending the sonic metaphor we could say only ‘in their ears’ (the demos) is the truly political enacted; only ‘in their ears’ can a process be qualified and equally unqualified to be present.

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Minimalist music privileges no part, acknowledges that notes and structure are all equally qualified and equally unqualified to be present. In extending the sonic metaphor we could say only ‘in their ears’ (the demos) is the truly political enacted; only ‘in their ears’ can a process be called emancipatory. Rancière defines democracy as the ‘power of those who have no qualification for exercising power’ (Rancière, 2004: 305). For us, a resonance formed between the overt egalitarianism in minimalist music, and also an extended political comment on the source of the legitimacy, that of the unqualified (to rule): the demos. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary notion of rule by the technocratic, managerial and specialized in representational democracies. Minimalism forms a radical presence adding and subtracting in a non-teleological evolution, directed to no end or synthesis, no narrative resolution, but only always process.

As Reich identifies, the transparency of structure in process music doesn’t make the music any less satisfying since there are mysteries enough to satisfy the listener: ‘the impersonal, unintended, psycho-acoustic by-products of the intended process [including] sub-melodies heard within repeated melodic patterns, stereophonic effects due to listener location, slight irregularities in performance, harmonics, difference tones etc’ (1974: 10-11). Nyman writes that some of the different patterns that arise are doubled, so that what was originally unintended now becomes accepted and intentional. These are what one might call sound objects thrown up in the natural process but which have absolutely no existence separate from the flow of the constant rhythmic stream. (1999: 155)

Reich suggests that the importance of process music lies in its impersonality and the way that gradual music process ‘makes possible that shift of attention away from he and she and you and me towards it’ (1974: 11).

The power of psycho-acoustics and the transition from one to the many is exemplified in Steve Reich's 1966 electro-tape piece ‘Come Out’. Initially we are sure that the spoken phrase ‘come
out to show them’ is a single, mono event. Subsequently, a dramatic rupture occurs to this stable
edifice. One notices the voice starting to oscillate between the left and right channels in the
sound field. The voice still appears as mono, even though it is oscillating between the two poles,
which is the psycho-acoustic effect. The edifice starts to destabilise further until a separation
occurs and we begin to notice that the voice has in fact become two. They are now distinct and
playing out at increasingly different times, becoming out of phase with each other. This rupture
is due to the discrepancies of the playback speed between the two channels of the tape machine
replaying the spoken phrase.

In our composition the Reichian phase process was applied to the phrase ‘to speak is to age’,
which begins the recorded soundtrack. The initial singularity collapsed into difference creating
a multitude of voices, all out of sync and in contrast with each other. A density was built up, a
multitude - a political multitude even.

Reich’s phase technique further explores the nature of poetry by revealing the hidden musicality
of the speaking voice – its characteristics of pitch, contour, rhythm and accents, which are
subsequently exposed by a repetition of the fragment. We encounter rhythmic patterns that
coalesce briefly and then dissolve. These fleeting melodies arise as certain notes are highlighted,
creating relationships with other notes, which in turn suggest new possibilities to, again, only
dissolve back into the sonic field.

There is the emergence of opposition here, of music as an event-less, self-evident process and
iteration, and of the spoken word as an eventful query, a rupture – as an analogy to Badiou’s
principle of division. ‘One becomes Two’ described in The Century. This idea of anti-fusion also
recalls our earlier discussion of Badiou’s vision of love. The music itself is a oneness, an
illusion of stability, whilst for Badiou the experience of love involves two utterly disjunct
positions.

We could form an idea that minimalist music can be experienced as non-ageing. This music,
immune from maturation, is the plateau awaiting the emancipatory ageing of the speaking voice.
We see here that the music is not the corollary of the words or their representation in sound.
The music is therefore in an antagonistic relation to the improvisatory spoken word.

Speaking, for our purposes, was seen as the verbal voice as opposed to internal dialogue, or
thinking. Here we envisioned internal dialogue as creating an ‘outside of time’ experience in
which one is unable to measure where one is in the world, conjuring images of a mute in a cave
or a hermit subject to an internal circular madness. Further, if one only speaks in some Attic or
Shakespearean monologue, the effect is the same. This leads us to the idea that speaking ‘proper’
requires an audience, a dialogue: to be in politics with others, in a philosophy of polemics.

Speaking then can be seen as an emancipatory action, putting us ‘in time’, in process, into risk, into conflict and into place.

In CIAARS the pressure mounts on the Two in the shelter to speak as a means of location (where
do they find themselves in the new century?) or to put it in another, slightly different, way,
without sound is it even possible to have a sense of place? They try to lift themselves out of their
interiority. In an improvisational section two phrases ‘argue’: ‘to speak is to age’ + ‘emails
became bouquets of flowers’. The speaker in the live performance presents the kind of circular
madness suggested earlier by internal dialogue – the phrases are broken up, dismembered, as she
weighs up ‘what is best’ – to email or to speak.

She ends up making the stand against the desire for immortality that writing itself presents. There
are other things to do, she says, ‘Watch. The cockatoos rise in the white siren sky’ (Scicluna &
Kazas, 2012). In the poem, creatures of flight have been a measure of environmental turbulence,
but also location, outside the shelter. To write too much removes us from the currents of life and
future spreading invisible behind our backs.

CIAARS closes with the desire for flight: in the limitless of the unknown skies of Mallarme’s
poem Brise Marine, and in the positive desiring energy of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome
(1987). Though love has been arrested and is under threat, it can be re-invented, or
‘reassembled’, some place else. We emerge from the arrested passage of the shelter with the
future spreading invisible behind our backs.

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10/01/2014


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