CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVENTAL DISTENSION: RESTLESS SIMULTANEITY IN
STEVE REICH’S PIANO PHASE—TOWARDS A
REHABILITATION OF THE REAL

Marc Botha

Summary

This work argues that a contemporary resurgence of realism rests on what might seem little more than an intuitive observation: that what is Real is contingently so and that this contingent existence unfolds in a time which is irreversible. If this contingency was not, in fact, a necessity, or if the time in which a Real object existed was actually reversible, then the Real itself would dissipate. Yet aesthetics problematizes this realism in numerous ways, none more clearly than in the case of minimalism. By turning to Steve Reich’s epochal minimalist composition *Piano Phase*, this piece traces aesthetics fraught relationship to the real to the point at which a new entity emerges—an event, following the vocabulary of Alain Badiou. Tracing the temporal ambiguity which an aesthetic experience of *Piano Phase* effects—the inability precisely to determine beginning or ending, forward or backward direction—this essay argues that Reich’s composition effects an evental distension, an apparent stretching of the event from within its own emergence. While this in no sense diminishes the Real, it takes us a step closer in understanding our fraught contemporary relationship to realism and reality.

1. A Resurgent Realism

1.1 I begin with a manifesto of sorts: five points offered in consideration of how to tie a resurgent philosophical realism to the experience of aesthetic multiplicity, and, if the proof on the basis of which it is forwarded holds true—Quentin Meillassoux’s *Principle of Factiality*—then the realism it endorses is neither naïve, nor the assertion of some primary quality that is pervasive in certain entities and absent in others. From the perspective of the post-dogmatic realism I adopt here,¹ there simply can be nothing in being that is genuinely beyond the Real, that could not be Real in some possible world. The work that

¹ I attempt in this formulation a partial synthesis of some points raised by Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux.
follows this manifesto is an attempt to come to terms with a small part of the sphere that so often seems at odds with such a realism, despite the fact that, technically, there is simply nothing with which to be at odds in the Real. It is a sphere that, in the multiplicity with which it attaches itself to questions of meaning and identity, seems to belie the absolute aspect of the Real. Broadly named, I refer here to aesthetic experience. What is begun below is the recuperation of the Real in a manner that reinstall it neither as a quasi-transcendental condition of being, nor as a metaphysical dogma.

Because commencing such an enterprise is often itself the prime difficulty, this manifesto sets itself in relation to the notions of beginning and continuation, or, in the terms I develop here, event and evental distension. I offer this latter denomination to account for a peculiar temporal retracement of the event, an internal expansion of evental properties, that is exposed in holding the aesthetic experience encountered in Steve Reich’s epochal composition of musical minimalism Piano Phase to the revealing, if discomforting, light of a contemporary realism.²

1.2 I offer the following five points:

i) Being does not begin; so what we call beginning takes place within the conditions of Being. Being is pure multiplicity and as such has no conditions to which it is tied.³ Such Being without condition is Absolutely Real, inasmuch as the Real is the mark of that which is beyond any necessary positing, access or interpretation. The only necessity implicit in the Real is the necessity of contingency.⁴ Thus

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² Steve Reich, Piano Phase (for two pianos or two marimbas) (London, Universal Edition, 1980). All references to the score are to this edition.
³ Alain Badiou, Being and Event (Continuum: London, 2005), 40–8. Hereafter BE. For further explanation, see Peter Hallward’s, Badiou: A Subject to Truth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 61–3.
⁴ This is the principal maxim to be extracted from Meillassouxs’s critique of what he terms correlationism—“the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Quentin Meillassoux, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency, trans. Ray Brassier [London: Continuum, 2008], 5). Hereafter AF. The many versions of correlationism share a rejection of the Absolute, which Meillassoux argues can be recuperated (constituting the basis for a post-naïve realism) by recognizing that there exist no necessary, universal laws, with the sole exception of the law