

Carolyn Chen about her music

I make music to look into the inner lives of things. This can involve the exploration of social spaces (supermarkets, sidewalks, demolished buildings), or the physical mechanics of everyday objects in motion (the spinning of tops on a timpani, or the ringing of cans, bottles, and heaps of everyday detritus worn as armor on the street in L.A.). Whether sequencing silent tableaux vivant in patterns of light and dark, or describing slow-motion facial gymnastic translations of headphone listening of a Bruckner Adagio, I use sound, text, light, video, and movement to challenge habits of listening. My music confronts concert tradition with found objects, sonic and material, to reorient both contexts. I work with sound as a physical phenomenon as well as a socially and historically embedded experience. In integrating live music and performance with recorded sound, I seek to tease out the social implications of sonic objects – the instant alarm of a helicopter drone or the intimacy of a closely recorded stomach gurgle. I accept these habitual associations and simultaneously seek less-travelled paths of listening by mining their inner workings. I turn over musical figures, physical gestures, and stories, listen at them from different angles, to see what holds and what transforms. If every sound asks for a different kind of listening, I am interested in the conflict and dialogue between these different listening worlds, made possible through extended and varied forms of interaction.

Ongoing video and open music projects are based on aesthetics of the guqin, the ancient Chinese zither traditionally played for private meditation in nature, which I have studied for the last eight years. I remap the instrument's unique aesthetic onto new materials, combining contributions of strangers in public spaces with homemade video animations.

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