

Carolyn Chen

We were dead and we could breathe, 2016

world premiere, commissioned by impuls

I don't usually think about breathing, unless I have to. I become aware of my breath when practicing yoga, tai chi or aikido, because they are movement traditions centered around breath as a fundamental force that can coordinate higher order actions. I have to breathe to move. In times of distress, breathing is also a way to return to feeling like myself. I started thinking about this piece while living in Beijing last summer, observing the vicissitudes of the city's storied air quality index from a sixth floor window.

At close range it could be hard to distinguish air pollution from humidity. From a distance, I watched haze smear sunlight, moonlight, traffic lights, street lights. On some days I felt it tickle my throat, or my eyes. This made me uneasy, but of course, I couldn't just stop breathing. I mulled over the idea of these tiny particles, some smaller than viruses, individually imperceptible, but horrific in aggregate – gradually filling the lungs, or passing directly into the bloodstream. Their effect on our bodies is a slow sort of harm, a subtle violence. I thought about these small, slow destroyers and their origins in fossil fuels, once the bodies of ancient plants and animals. Ordinary house dust is itself mostly human skin. I thought about breathing in the bodies of these creatures of the past, breathing in human bodies, human history – the weight of all that living, dying, suffering, distilled into tiny particles that enter our soft lungs which slowly gray and blacken over time.

It is impossible at this moment to think of breathing without thinking of Eric Garner, the unarmed black man who gasped that he couldn't breathe as he was choked by a New York police officer in 2014. His death is a direct and vivid act of violence, but the environment that produced it might seem more like those invisible particles in the air, all-pervasive and impossible not to breathe in. I thought about all these invisible things, and how they disappear into what seems normal.

In this piece, sounds camouflage other sounds. Louder strikes and hits mask subtler activity. Still things move internally. What is constant, smeared light, becomes so normal, it might not need listening at all. I thought of the sho, the Japanese mouth organ that seems to hold forever. Toward the end of the writing process, I ran into this line by Paul Celan, which seems to encapsulate the contradiction of living in permanent emergency.



Carolyn Chen has made music for supermarket, demolition district, and the dark. Her work reconfigures the everyday to retune habits of our ears using sound, text, light, image, and movement. Recent projects include a story for ASL interpreter strung to chimes at a distance. Ongoing projects are for the guqin, the Chinese 7-string zither traditionally played for private meditation in nature.

The New York Times described *Wilder Shores of Love*, commissioned for a 2011 Zankel Hall premiere by the S.E.M. Ensemble, as "evening's most consistently alluring piece ... a quiet but lush meditation." The work has been presented in 22 countries and supported by the Fulbright Foundation, Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans, MATA, impuls Festival, Emory Planetarium, Wellesley Composers Conference, Stanford University Sudler Prize for Excellence in the Creative Arts, University of California Institute for Research in the Arts, American Composers Forum, ASCAP, and Machine Project at the Hammer Museum. Chen has been fortunate to work with ensembles such as SurPlus, Southland, Pamplemousse, Talea, Curious Chamber Players, Chamber Cartel, Die Ordnung Der Dinge, Dal Niente, On Structure, Ensemble This Ensemble That, Asamisamasa, NorthArc, Now Hear, orkest de ereprijs, Ostravska Banda, S.E.M., Prague Modern, Gliss, thingNY, Red Light, red fish blue fish, New York Miniaturist Ensemble, Silent Book, and Zwo. Recordings are available on Perishable, the wulf., and Quakebasket; scores are in *Psychiana*, *China Academy of Art SIMA Journal*, *Closet Music Works*, edited by Janet Oates, and *A Small Book of Rounds*, edited by Larry Polansky. She earned a Ph.D. in music from UC San Diego, and a M.A. in Modern Thought and Literature and B.A. in music from Stanford University, with an honors thesis on Free Improvisation and Radical Politics.

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