

ECKER & MEULYZER

CARBON

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"I always feel that the few books worth introducing are exactly those which it is an impertinence to introduce," wrote T.S. Eliot, whose spare and doomy poetry has furnished the titles and maybe the inspiration for earlier music by Koenraad Ecker and Frederik Meulyzer. Eliot meant that all art worth speaking for always speaks for itself. This is true. But a few extraneous words can sometimes file to an even sharper point the ends of art. Here is music from the new wasteland of the capitalocene. It will show you fear in a handful of snow. Eliot wrote, in "The Hollow Men":

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Perhaps he meant to say:

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but the weather.*

The sound of melting ice has always been, in colder climates, the sound of spring, of new life. This album, *Carbon*, which sounds like so many things — and can, at moments, sound like everything — sounds to me, above all, like the clicking, the trickling, the crackling of melting ice. Today the sound of melting ice is the sound of impending doom. Growth is no longer the growth of plants.

It is the growth of the economy, of GDP. It is the accumulation of capital — and of carbon. It is the growth of death.

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Carboniferous capitalism: so Lewis Mumford called the economic — read: ecological — regime that we have too long been in the habit of calling industrial capitalism, as if it only involved putting people and machines to work in a new way and not, at bottom, the burning up, in the form of fossil fuels, of millennia of stored sunlight, as contained in carbon.

Today we see — maybe too late — that *industrialism* and *the economy* were alibis and aliases for carbon. Prior to the advent of carboniferous capitalism in the eighteenth century (the steam engine was invented in the seventeenth, but remained an unimportant novelty for 100 years), human beings had access only to energy that flowed from the sun. The sun fed plants which fed animals, including people, whether those human or non-human animals acquired that energy directly through eating plants or indirectly, through eating animals. It was also the sun which set in motion the wind that filled the sails of ships. It was the sun that melted the snows and built the rainclouds that became the streams and rivers that powered windmills. Only living, flowing, solar energy belonged to us. Then, with steam power, and later the internal combustion engine, came the reign of stocks of dead energy: carbon, in the form of coal, petroleum, or natural gas. Twentieth-century capitalist humanity used ten times more energy than their forebears over the thousand years preceding 1900. Today the mad rate of waste only accelerates.

More than half of all industrial emissions of CO₂ have occurred since 1988, the year that NASA climate scientist James Hansen testified before the US congress that increasing concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere were dangerously warming the planet.

Ecomarxists refer to the *metabolic rift* (which supplies the title to track six on *Carbon*) opened up across the Earth by carboniferous capitalism, or fossil capitalism, or whatever you want to call that system which the newspapers never name. The term “metabolic rift” – describing a situation in which living energy no longer circulates in a more or less stable carbon cycle by way of organic processes, but in which excess carbon poisons the atmosphere and oceans because of its release from the bowels of the earth — generalizes Marx’s account of soil exhaustion in *Capital*: “All progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.”

We thought capitalism meant the increasing dominance of dead labor (or capital) over living labor. And it does. But it also spells the increasing dominance of dead energy (or carbon) over living, solar energy.

The *oikos* — the ecology and economy — of the capitalocene, this new disposition of society and new regime of earthly nature, is the ground of our despair and of whatever hope we have. This is the collapsing household in which we live, and which we must fundamentally rearrange in order to survive.



Something like this forms the silent background to the soundscapes of *Carbon*. What does this music itself sound like? It sounds like the long-ago time that our present period will someday be in the half-ruined future. It sounds like the trickle of new life that is a death rattle. It sounds like *now*, at a time when very little contemporary music smacks of the present. It sounds like the *Winterreise* of a melting world. It sounds of stored seeds, and so of some stirring of hope, and of also of the terrible smallness of the seeds of hope. It sounds, at other instants, of creaking, of groaning, of collapse — sounding as it does so of the long ages of geological time as they are interrupted by the violent lurching motions of motorized human history.





The music on this album is based on compositions originally commissioned by Zero Visibility for the dance performance "Frozen Songs". The source material for these compositions was recorded in and around the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in June 2016. "Frozen Songs" was premiered at the Arctic Theatre, Tromsø, on September 7th 2017.

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All music written, performed and recorded by K. Ecker & F. Meulyzer

Mastered by J. Ginzburg

Photography by K. Ecker

Layout by A. Darby

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