

C E V D E T

E R E K

BY HG MASTERS

BBBBDDRRUUUUMMM!



One night in mid-February, Cevdet Ereğ was standing alone on a small stage with a large Turkish bass drum, a *davul*, on the darkened top floor of Karga, a bar in an old wood-and-brick building in Istanbul's Kadıköy district. With a soft-headed mallet in one hand, and thin sticks in the other that rattled against the drum's skin and frame, he struck beats that built into tracks of long, intense phrases. The crowd was rapt; at one point the building itself began to quiver. When he finished a sequence, he would pause briefly to reset himself and then start again, as the sounds engulfed the dark room. After the end of the first set, which lasted about 25 minutes, he stopped and announced that after a short break he would repeat the exact same thing again.

The idea of recreating this trance-like intensity was a wry joke, although of a serious kind. Ereğ performed two more sets that night, and has played several other concerts in Istanbul's independent music venues in the past few months, all based on improvising with two or three basic rhythms. This method is the basis of the seven tracks on his solo album *Davul*, which was released in 2017 by the Berlin label Subtext. A genre-defying album, it has been categorized on online music sites as "avant-garde jazz," "dance" and "electronic"—even though there was no digital manipulation of the drum's sound. Ereğ's focus on performing live concerts in Istanbul followed the conclusion of the 57th Venice Biennale, where, in the official Pavilion of Turkey, Ereğ had created a massive architectural and sound installation, titled *Çin* (2017). In concrete and yet abstract spatial, sonic and visual terms, the installation synthesized the experiences and moods of an abject period in the country's recent history.

Ereğ's interest in sound, space and abstraction take form in music, art and film. In the 1990s and 2000s, he was the drummer in the experimental metal and noise band Nekropsi. He is also a professor at the Center for Advanced Studies in Music at Istanbul Technical University, where he studied sound engineering and design. To film-goers, his musical score drove the critically acclaimed 2015 feature film *Abluka* ("Frenzy"), directed by Emin Alper, about a trash-collector-turned-police-informant during a period of political violence. His artworks have been featured in the 2003, 2011 and 2015 editions of the Istanbul Biennial, and in many other exhibitions in Istanbul since the mid-2000s. A legendary meeting of his multiple worlds was a performance in 2007 by Nekropsi at the former Platform Garanti building (now SALT Beyoğlu) with each of the four band members playing on different floors and Ereğ on the top level sending beats through the entire building.

For international audiences, Ereğ's explorations of sound within the context of architecture—the latter was his original field of academic training—were given a major showcase at Documenta 13 in 2012, where on an empty floor of Kassel's C&A department store, he staged the first in a series of works called "Room of Rhythms," featuring speakers in different parts of the room projecting areas of percussive sounds. On walls and tables, objects and drawings served as notations for the measurement of time, sometimes creating visually rhythmic repetitions, such as the repurposed store signage layered across the length of a wall so that it read "RE/RE/RE/RE/RE/RE/RE/RE/REDUZIERT," and a tabletop with the cut portions of a tree trunk transformed into a ruler with the growth rings marking both time and distance.

After staging versions of "Room of Rhythms" in venues like the MAXXI in Rome after Documenta 13, Ereğ composed a version for his home city in 2015, when Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev curated the 14th Istanbul Biennial. This time, the work occupied an old concrete carpark built in the 1940s that was slated for demolition. For *A Room of Rhythms - Otopark* (2015), Ereğ tweaked and abstracted the space itself. The walls were repainted, the top half in white and lower half in a dark concrete gray. Four hanging curtains dividing the open space were similarly treated, as was a fluorescent-lit advertising light-box, which leaned against the wall, all but its top painted gray. The funereal air was enhanced by a gray Jaguar sedan that was coolly parked in a corner, the air gone out of its tires—a relic of the space itself. Nearly imperceptible directional speakers on the ceilings

(Previous spread)  
**DAVUL**, 2018, documentation of performance at Karga, Istanbul, 2018. Photo by Canan Erbil. Courtesy the artist.

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**DAVUL IMPROVISATION**, 2017, documentation of performance at Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin, 2017. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page)  
 Installation view of **A ROOM OF RHYTHMS - OTOPARK**, 2015, mixed media, dimensions variable, at the 14th Istanbul Biennial, 2015. Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren. Courtesy the artist and Istanbul Biennial.



projected overlapping rhythms that Ereğ had recorded earlier in the space with his *davul* and then edited into tracks. The effect was of walking through a visually sparse space that nevertheless changed sonically with every step as different rhythms meshed together—in a reversal of the hierarchy between sight and sound. It required a re-tuning of the brain to a more introspective, aural key, while in the most abstract manner it represented how we navigate overlapping scales of time, from the instantaneous, to the daily, to the yearly and the historical. It was also a tribute, said again through a series of concerts by musician friends that Ereğ hosted even after the biennial ended, to an ordinary yet historical space, and moment, of the city.

Before our conversation in early March, the last time I had spoken at length with Ereğ was at the 2016 Biennale of Sydney, where he had made another "Room of Rhythms" in an outdoor area of Cockatoo Island. That "Room of Rhythms" was subtitled "Long Distance Relationship," since Ereğ had not been able to visit the site before the installation period, and had instead developed the work only through examining images and plans. The eight speaker towers emitted low-frequency beats and high-pitched clicking, evoking heartbeats and dance tracks—with *ritardandos* and pauses in their patterns, which alluded to the slow-down and stoppage tactics of Australian laborers trying to reduce the work-week to 40 hours. The work became a sonic memorial of an architectural space—and a political movement—in an area where guards' barracks had once stood.

Since Sydney, Ereğ has further developed his methodology of the "Long Distance Relationship," due to teaching and family commitments. For example, in a show that opened in late October 2017 in Mexico City at Espacio de Experimentación Sonora (EES) at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo—he took the term as its title and "borrowed the eyes, senses, brains and experiences" of an architect (Adalberto Charvel) and percussionist (Iván Manzanilla) to share their observations about the spaces in which he was invited to make works. Ereğ expanded on his awareness of how the visual environments of art spaces are often neutral (whites and grays) while acoustically chaotic, whereas musical spaces are the inverse, sonically neutral but often visually busy. The space at EES had a wall of wooden blocks jutting out at various lengths, and Ereğ

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established the grid—which could be read eight ways, left to right, top to bottom—as a score for a percussive performance with Manzanilla, a recording of which played in the space. In the process, Ereğ explained to me, the work made the architecture of the space more visually apparent, through sound. A second performance, *Close Far Close*, involved two instruments—a drum with two cymbals and a drum with a *kornetto* horn—used during matches in the nearby football stadium—which Ereğ and Manzanilla played off each other as they altered their distance between one another. The recording played in an underutilized courtyard in the building, drawing on the artist’s interest in “ornamenting” spaces with sound, an idea he had previously explored with percussive sound installations situated in empty-looking courtyards for biennials in Sharjah (2013) and Marrakech (2014).

Additionally, for his Mexico show, Ereğ reprised his series “Rulers and Rhythms” (2007–). He brought several older works—transparent plastic rulers, with his customized forms of measurement, one of which marks the dates of Turkey’s military coups d’état, and another showing only the years of the Istanbul Biennial. He displayed these past pieces with a horizontal mounting of the blue-and-yellow scarf of the nearby football club’s colors, which became the work *Ruler Summer-Winter*. The colors reminded him of two hues that his friend, the artist and painter Leyla Gediz, said she associated with the two seasons, and so the scarf became a visual representation of passing time—*summer winter summer winter summer winter*—while also becoming a rhythm. He also created a circular transparent ruler, *Ruler Quincena*, to mark the ongoing two-week payment cycle of Mexican employees, echoing one of his earlier circular rulers that similarly illustrates the cyclical routine of a week, with the weekend marked around the 9 o’clock position.

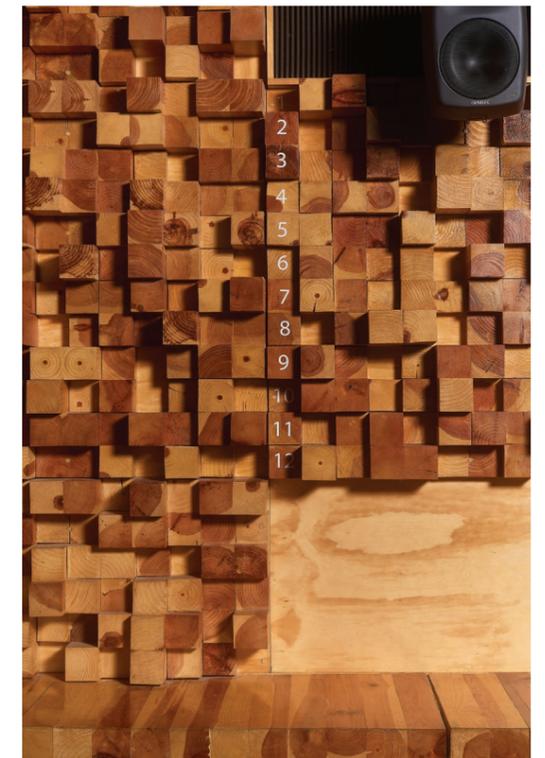
In his exhibitions, Ereğ navigates different scales and rhythms of time, interspersing longterm interests with newer ones. His 57th Venice Biennale installation, *Çin* (2017), relayed his many disciplinary interests, and, for many visitors, contained historical resonances.

The structure he designed filled the rectangular hall in the Sale d’Armi, which has entrance doors in the middle of each long side. Working with a team of architects and designers, Ereğ devised a direct passageway that bisected the Pavilion of Turkey, for “fast-track transit passengers.” For those who wanted to engage with his pavilion, above this channel he designed a platform in raw wood, upon which were seven metal armatures, each bearing five horizontal white speakers that created a percussive “ornamentation” of metallic clanging, tinkling and whispering, and percussive sonic patterns that shifted as you moved around them and the entire space. Wooden staircases led up to this platform on both sides. In one half was a U-shaped, gently ascending ramp that created a forum-like space within, and was lit from above by skylights. On the other side, most of the staircase was enclosed by a chain-link fence, locked with a heavy chain; the windows were closed and the atmosphere dark and forlorn.

Each abstracted component of the installation carried multiple references. The ramp resembled ones installed in Venice to allow handicapped visitors to cross the bridges around Piazza San Marco. The amphitheater-like space evoked classical Greek ruins in places like Ephesus and throughout Turkey. The chained-off portion of the stairs was based on the “away terrace” of football stadiums reserved for visiting fans who had to be protected from violent attacks from the home team’s supporters—though now, in Turkey at least, fans of the visiting team are banned.

Ereğ plainly appreciated the reactions of visitors to his structure. As he recounted: “A vegetarian said it looked like an animal farm. I hadn’t thought about that, but—wow!—why not? Or it could be a camp for immigrants. Or a prison, ten times—why not? Then, coming from Istanbul, like a ‘locked’ public space, fifteen times, why not.” With the locked fence and darkened atmosphere, it was impossible not to see echoes of the once-public, now privatized or prohibited (for “security” reasons) spaces of Istanbul, as well as traces of the mass incarcerations—involving more than 50,000 people, including opposition party members and journalists in Turkey—that the government pursued after the attempted military coup on July 15, 2016.

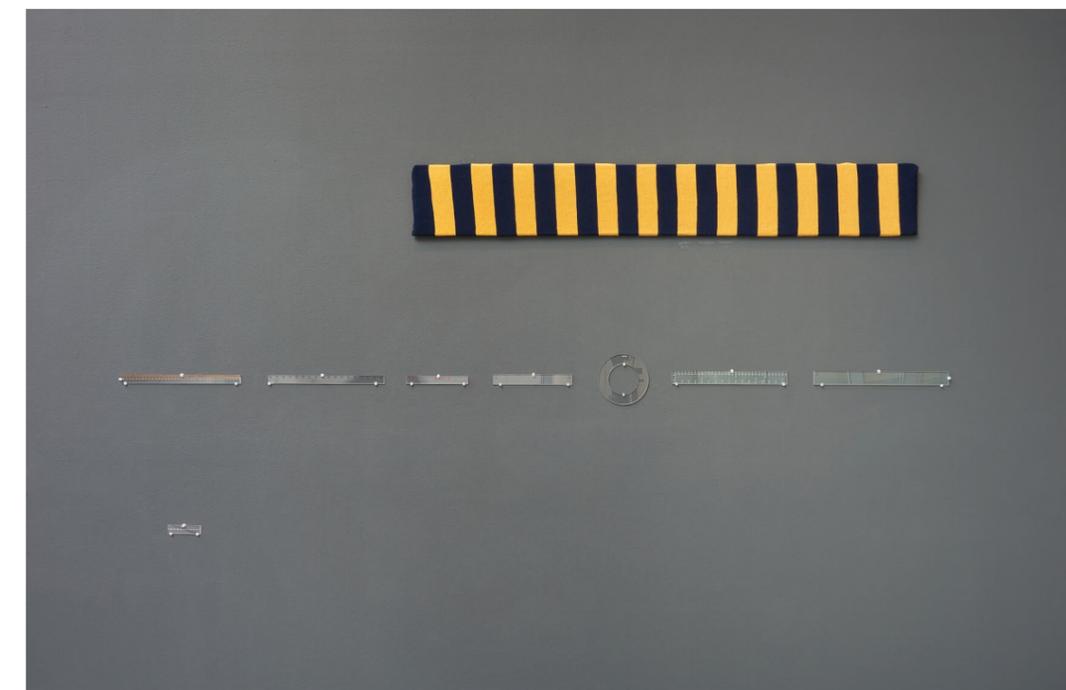
In conjunction with architecture, sound is also a crucial component of *Çin*. Among the 35 individual channels of ringing sounds were recordings of whispered words that allude to various ideas condensed in the piece. The work’s title, *Çin*, and the spoken lines “çın çın çırçırın

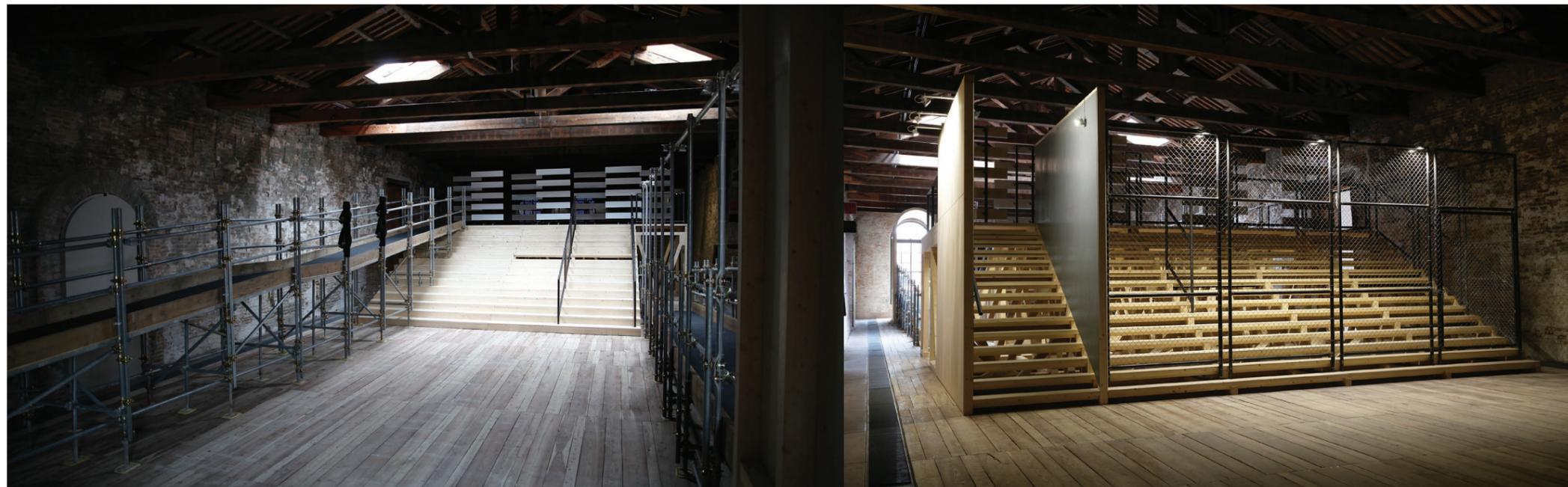


(This page)  
Installation view of **ROOM OF RHYTHMS - LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP**, 2016, mixed media, dimensions variable, at Cockatoo Island, 20th Biennale of Sydney, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
Installation view of works from the series “Rulers and Rhythms” (2007–), dimensions variable, at “A Long Distance Relationship,” Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2017. Photo by Oliver Santana. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, far right)  
Installation view of **MEASURES TAKEN** (detail), 2017, mixed media, dimensions variable, at “A Long Distance Relationship,” Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2017. Photo by Oliver Santana. Courtesy the artist.



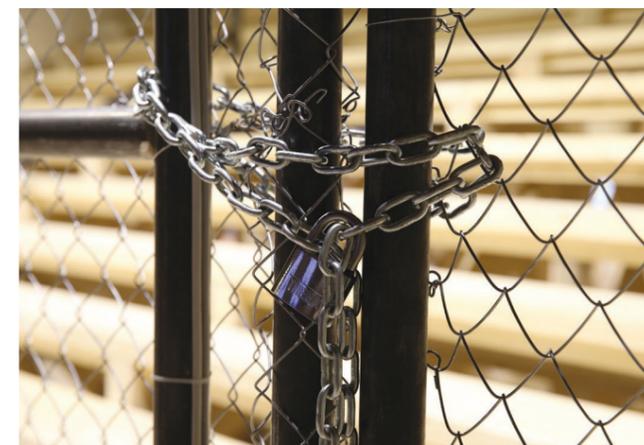


çin çığıçin çığı are onomatopoeic words in Turkish, roughly equivalent to the English “ding.” They refer to tinnitus—a ringing in the ears or, as in Ereğ’s lyrics, “war and death / reset with new jolt / ear pain,” in what could be read as an allusion to the societal rupture caused by the failed coup. “Face history / or / keep on masking it,” the lyrics continue, a universal refrain that, in the Turkish context, echoes criticism of the state’s still-ardent denial of the Armenian Genocide and its long history of persecuting Kurdish communities.

A pair of trans-historical references, alluding to the artist’s own influences, appears in the lines “zang tumb tumb / drummer in the battlefield scene / a momentary hesitation in her hand / may the war end.” *Zang Tumb Tumb* is the title of the concrete poem and book by (war-admiring) Futurist and fascist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, written between 1912 and 1914 to record his experiences as a reporter during the Battle of Adrianople (today Edirne) between the Bulgarians and the Ottoman Empire. Marinetti used an experimental typographical layout to emphasize the sonic qualities of words—techniques that resonate with Ereğ’s interest in the representation of sound. The character of the drummer in these lines, Ereğ explained, relates to his encountering a similar figure in a massive war painting in the Doge’s Palace, which depicts a battle between the Ottomans and the Venetians. The practice of regimenting a march with a drum corps was derived from Ottoman military *mehter* music—which brought terror and rhythms to conquered populations. The line “a momentary hesitation in her hand / may the war end” is at once an acknowledgment of the power of the drummer, and a fanciful hope that the cessation of the drum beat might trigger the end of fighting itself. In our conversation, Ereğ also suggested that he was trying to implicate everyone who fuels wars, perhaps even unwittingly.

While it was evident that Ereğ had expectations for this high-profile project, he said it “was not about representing Turkey but what to do in the Pavilion of Turkey—as someone who is still living in and connected to Turkey.” He added that he didn’t feel any less free to express himself, and was still driven by “what gives me pleasure, art-wise.” He did acknowledge, however, that for a new installation, *AAAAA* (2018), which opened in late January at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), in Belgium, he avoided referencing anything specific from Turkey. At M HKA, in the museum’s peculiar triangular-shaped gallery, he had marked in black paint 1:1 scale outlines of five Antwerp buildings, whose frames (minus the windows) are roughly A-shaped. The idea was borne from

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(This and opposite page, top and middle) Installation view of *ÇIN*, 2017, 35-channel sound and architectural intervention using wood, scaffolding, iron, wire fence, fabric net, directional loudspeakers, computer and light, dimensions and durations variable, at Pavilion of Turkey, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo by RMStudios. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom) Installation view of “AAAAA” at Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, 2018. Photo by Christine Clinckx. Courtesy the artist.

a 2013 residency in the city, when Ereğ developed an affinity for Antwerp’s eclectic architecture—he joked that “a street in Antwerp is like a gang of street dogs: blind, small, fat, one-legged. It felt like home, kind of”—and where he visited an old printing house, which cemented a connection between typography and architecture.

Painted onto the walls of M HKA’s triangular gallery, the five As recede in height—like the visual representation of a screaming character in a comic book, or a concrete poem. In Turkish, Ereğ said “AAAAA” signifies a surprise effect—with a rising tone—or a nervous reaction. The silent scream or shout represented by these giant letters contrasts with the whisperings of *Çin*, but there was no audio in the room. Instead, the slim vertical window at the end of the space looks out onto the street, and allows the city into the building. In a literal reflection of an inside-outside exchange, Ereğ mirrored the position of “street furniture”—primarily metal traffic bollards and poles—into the space itself, placing matching objects in the gallery. To further illustrate this museum-street dynamic, Ereğ created two abstracted replicas of a van: each a boxy, windowless, Monopoly-piece-like form in Corten steel. He placed one on the street in a parking spot and another in the gallery. However well abstracted, or perhaps precisely because of the high degree of abstraction, the windowless vehicle appeared to emulate the type of armored security vehicle that now routinely patrols European cities, whether in Antwerp or Istanbul. Through abstraction, Ereğ transforms the objects and forms of daily life into more conspicuous versions of themselves, allowing them to become spaces and surfaces that reflect our larger concerns.

As we looped back in our conversation to his music, Ereğ said he felt fortunate to work in so many different disciplines, yet he has decided to keep his solo *davul* concerts out of the white-walled art gallery, where the rules of spectatorship, visual codes and sonic expectations are distinct from a live concert in a musical venue. However, just as he was drawing comparisons between the pretensions of an art space and his musical activities in alternative music circles, he insisted that in fact, even in a darkened concert venue, all eyes are focused on the appearance of the performer and on the immediate environment. “I once made a work in Greece called *Same to Different* (2013) [a programmed air compressor playing bird sounds through water-filled terracotta jugs]—in an attempt to work on an imaginary spectrum, from ‘same to different.’ In that way, my drumming and exhibitions are totally different, and in that sense, also the same.”

\*Visit our Digital Library at [library.artasiapacific.com](http://library.artasiapacific.com) for more articles on Cevdet Ereğ.

