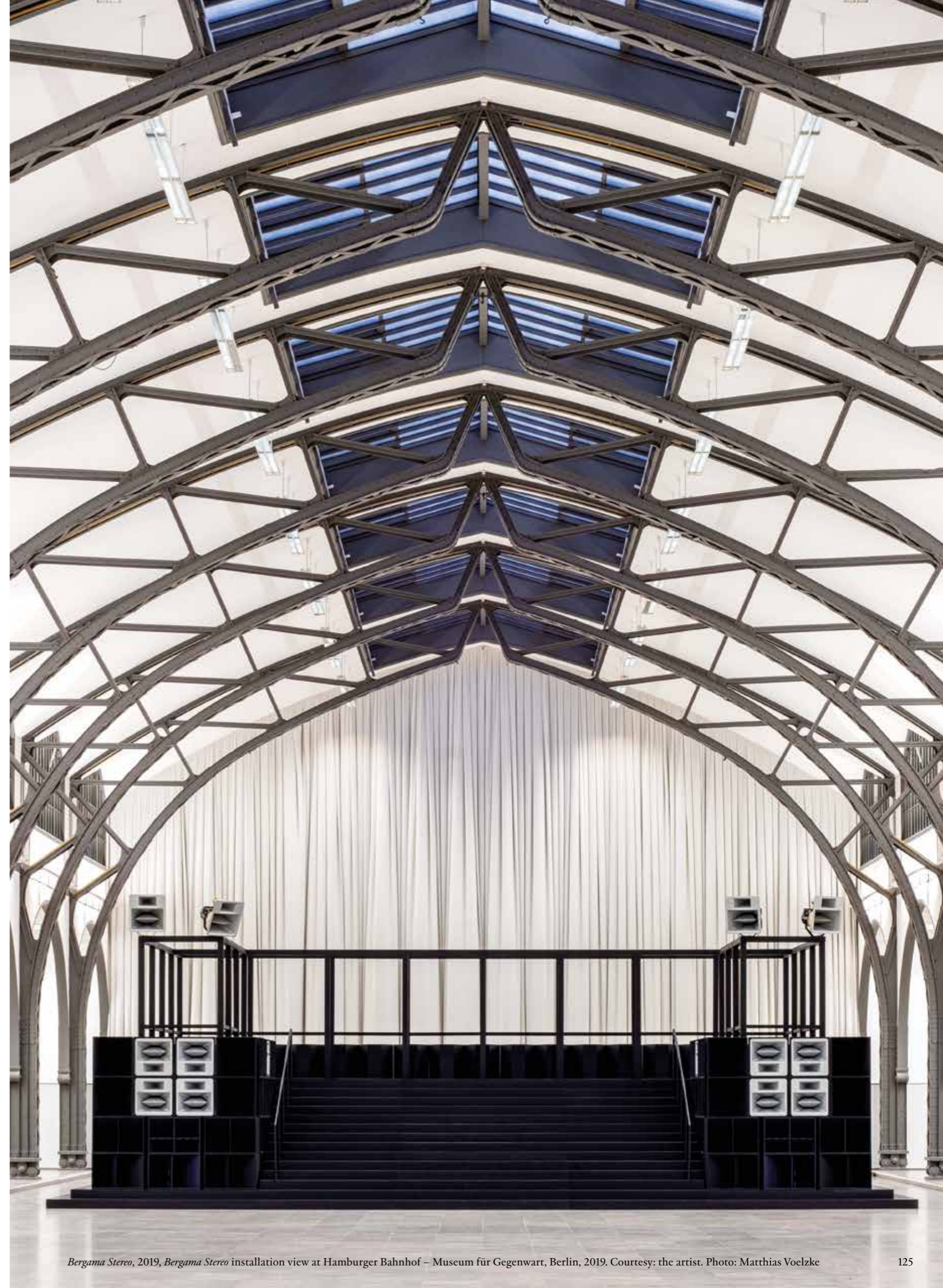




# The Life of the Work

CEVDET EREK  
in conversation with Hendrik Folkerts

*C&UD&T &R&K's  
site-specific performances,  
installations, and sound pieces  
respond to and are anchored  
in their specific contexts.  
Here, EreK speaks with curator  
H&NDRIK F&OLK&RTS  
about the stages of a  
commission, and how distance,  
absence, collaboration,  
and presence give shape and  
meaning to his most recent  
works in Chicago,  
San Francisco, and Berlin.*



CEVDET EREK was born in 1974 in Istanbul, where he lives and works. His artistic practice is anchored in sound, architecture, rhythm, measured time, dance music, and site-specificity. Combining architectural interventions, sound, and graphics he attempts to alter the viewer's perception and experience of a given environment. He is particularly interested in the way we apprehend the world and organize our lives through measurements of space (metric system), time (calendar and clock), and music tempo (beats per minute). Erek has had solo exhibitions at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2019); Art Institute of Chicago (2019); M KHA, Antwerp (2018); Pavilion of Turkey, 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2017); MUAC, Mexico City (2017); Spike Island, Bristol (2014); MaerzMusik, Berlin (2013); and Kunsthalle Basel (2012). His work has appeared in group exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2019); the Shanghai Biennale (2018); the 20<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney (2016); the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2014); MAXXI Museum, Rome (2014); Istanbul Modern (2014); the 5<sup>th</sup> Marrakech Biennial, Morocco (2014); MAK, Vienna (2013); the 11<sup>th</sup> Sharjah Biennial, UAE (2013); the 7<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7), Queensland Art Gallery, Australia (2012); dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (2012); SALT, Istanbul (2012); the Istanbul Biennial (2011, 2013, 2015); and Tate Modern, London (2011).

HENDRIK FOLKERTS is the Dittmer Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Prior to this, he held curatorial positions at documenta 14, Athens and Kassel (2014-2017) and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2010-2015). His texts have been published in journals and magazines such as *South as a State of Mind*, *Artforum International*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Metropolis M*, and *Art & the Public Sphere*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. Most recently, he contributed to monographs on Mounira Al Solh, Vivian Suter, Bouchra Khalili, Carlos Motta, Alexandra Bachzetsis, and Samson Young. Folkerts is coeditor of *The Shadow-files #3: Curatorial Education* (2013), *Facing Forward: Art and Theory from a Future Perspective* (2014), and the journal *Stedelijk Studies #3: The Place of Performance* (2015).



*Thrash softly from afar*, 2019, *Soft Power* installation view at SFMOMA – San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2019. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Glenn Cheriton

HENDRIK FOLKERTS  
In 2019 you presented a number of installations that highlight various approaches to site-specificity in your practice: the installation and performance *chiçiçiçichiciçi* at the Art Institute of Chicago; *Bergama Stereo* at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin; and *Thrash softly from afar* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. These are all very different spaces, with works situated in distinct contexts. By means of introduction, can you talk about how you first entered those spaces? Which aspects of architecture, movement in the space, sonic properties, and site-related histories struck you? CEVDET EREK

I have known the Hamburger Bahnhof for many years, but recently I had been more attentive, asking myself: What would I do if I was asked to develop something for this historic place? Then, when I was actually invited to propose a project, it was not only for that space but also for the Turbine Hall in Bochum, in the Ruhr region of Germany. In other words, I was asked to duplicate site-specificity in the framework of one project! Architecturally speaking, I came up with a work that would be physically installed and deinstalled in one venue, and then reinstalled in the second venue. The structure was built in Berlin, then brought to Bochum to be installed for the first time, shown for six weeks, then deinstalled and installed again at the Hamburger Bahnhof. The sounds were remixed, varied, edited, with some elements added or subtracted. It represented a major shift for me, since previous site-specific works (of similar scale and attitude) were done only once and then disappeared, their materials recycled.

The installations in Chicago and San Francisco were the result of short site visits. I had only been to the U.S. once before, and had never visited those two cities. When I returned to Istanbul, my home and place of work, I did not know yet which space to focus on at SFMOMA, and it took many months to decide. Whereas in Chicago I was certain that the main atrium of the Art Institute's Modern Wing was going to be the space to develop a work in and for. The two commissions developed in tandem, as the installations were going to respond to spaces that are primarily defined through their modern architecture: Renzo Piano's design for the Art Institute and Mario Botta's design for SFMOMA. At the Art Institute, I was intrigued by that very long corridor in the Modern Wing. I imagined a long walkway (or, as it became, a mad run along a fence), and arresting people from a distance, very quietly and very subtly. The installation *chiçiçiçichiciçi* was not about disturbance, but making people aware of the space around them through sound and architectural additions—initiated through an inaugural performance. In that sense, it relates to the new installation *Thrash softly from afar* at SFMOMA, which I see as an experiment with the physical distance between the gallery spaces and a reflection on how music—here, thrash for bay Area—travels long distances in the world.

I love looking at places and buildings. I look at how they function, how people move in them, and how these translate to photo and video. I walk a lot, and I observe, both through my own physical experience and through materials that are shared with me by the institution, for instance architectural drawings, photographs, or video clips. I make loops and walk in rounds, alone and with

collaborators, with whom I try to have a continuous dialogue about how their expertise can inform the project. Doing these commissions is not an isolated job at all. HENDRIK

After your initial encounters with the respective spaces, you returned to Istanbul. It seems that the physical distance also impacts working site-specifically or site-responsively. Can you talk more about that? CEVDET

Indeed, most of the work is done from a distance. I could not even go to San Francisco to install *Thrash softly from afar* because I had to be present for the installation of *Bergama Stereo* at the Hamburger Bahnhof. In Chicago, on the other hand, I was quite lucky to have a decent installation period and time for performance rehearsals, but still, most of the project was developed from a distance—working from far away and then imagining that place wherever you are. It is probably an old technique in the arts: daydreaming with whatever you remember or learn from a place.

My project for the 20<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney in 2016 was called *Room of Rhythms – Long Distance Relationship*, a work that tried to connect the dance beat, and stopping or slowing down of a work, as a means of protest. Then, for the solo show *A Long Distance Relation* at the Espacio de Experimentación Sonora of MUAC – Mexico City in 2017, another venue that I could not visit beforehand, I borrowed the eyes, ears, minds, and experiences of those who could be present: an architect and a percussionist. It's been some time that I have been concentrating on these ways of working, and reflecting on these long-distance relationships.

HENDRIK  
Let's talk a bit more about the impact of distance on a commissioning process. On a conceptual level, as you mentioned, it speaks to how the memory of a place (through actual memory or documentation that you made on-site) informs what will happen in the future, as your work starts to inhabit that particular space. Practically speaking, it requires certain tools and modes of collaboration. I also believe this might be an increasingly important and timely way of working, as ecological concerns continue to impact how we travel and exist in the world, perhaps going back to operating more locally or, more likely, using new communication technologies to work from a distance. To address the more practical side of commissioning from afar: What do you need in order to work from a distance? CEVDET

People with curiosity and the will to collaborate are needed. A letter from a person working in a museum in Chicago arrives with some thoughts and ideas, and the possibility of a new work arises. From that moment on, that space enters your life, from a distance, and it does not matter what state you are in. A short description by the institution extending the invitation invites you to imagine that space, along with an intention of how they see that place and how you may do something there. Some knowledge stored in your memory may appear in that moment as well—very broad knowledge, stories, impressions from other artworks, music, film, architecture, references from the news, etc. To focus for the moment on the installation and performance *chiçiçiçichiciçi* at the Art Institute of Chicago: in order to arrive at the final design and dimensions

of railings and fences, we tried various approaches. One involved asking a very old friend of mine, Tolga Yenilmez, with whom I played in our band for a long time and who now resides in Chicago, to go out and check the fences and railings in the streets of Chicago, rub a stick against them while walking, then share the recordings with me, which I used for the design of both the architectural elements and the sound installation as a whole. Then Tolga did the same with the newly designed fences that the museum had produced, this time recording sounds in the Art Institute's workshops in order to prepare for the live performance with the actual fences that were going to be part of the installation. Then, when I arrived to install the work, Tolga and I performed together on the fences, and we both witnessed how working from a distance helped shape the eventual form and intent of the project.



(Above, top) *Thrash softly from afar*, 2019, *Soft Power* installation view at SFMOMA – San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2019. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Glenn Cheriton  
(Above, bottom) Cevdet Erek and Tolga Yenilmez perform during opening of *Cevdet Erek: chiçiçiçichiciçi*, February 28, 2019, *Iterations* series at the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

HENDRIK

Your installation work, commissioned or otherwise, often lives on without you being present. Is it important for you to know how audiences understand and interact with the work? And how do you take the memory of such work home? For instance, is documentation really important to you? Or does it live on in other ways?

CEVDET

As I am writing this, I just arrived in Berlin to perform in and with *Bergama Stereo* at the Hamburger Bahnhof. This is my first time back here since the opening one month ago (the second time after its installation in Bochum), and this time only for three nights. In between the opening and now, I have been working on a version of the work to be realized in Istanbul—how to bring the work's essential elements to a new venue in Istanbul. So there will be another afterlife.

Although tiring at times, the jump from the imagined to the happened is quite amazing. It is remarkable to start learning from a work as it is happening and unfolding. Only after that moment does the artwork start to exist for me, as I and we are learning from it. The work may be frozen in form but it lives on and expands, open to possibilities that are not imagined yet. Something similar happened to my work for the 14<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial in 2015, *Room of Rhythms – Otopark*. First it was extended by one month, then my sounds in the space were muted and it became a performance space for almost one year!

You talked about how memory plays into preparing a commission from far away, but now I want to jump to the memory of that work: imagined, planned, programmed, installed, performed, opened. Then it is left there, and I return to Istanbul. The work resonates for some months. Some of the same people I collaborated with may send feedback, we get some press, or people respond on social media. In the case of *chiçiçiçichiciçi*, it was the curious visitor who was the activator of the work, as they were invited to interact with and play the fences. In the case of *Bergama Stereo* it was another artist or group that took the work forward while I was away. It is an amazing feeling, not witnessing what happens with my work, how it lives on without me, and knowing that something might happen. There are unexpected responses, for instance a review of *Bergama Stereo* that catches me on a Sunday morning at home. That text adds to the memory of the work, expands my perspective on it.

After all, those works, made through commissions, in collaboration with people and realized over time, are extremely physical, even though they are intended to make connections with histories far away, sometimes with places far away as well, with individual or collective memories, including many subtleties. I think that's the reason why only some forms of documentation can please me, as it says so little about the life of the work.



*chiçiçiçichiciçi*, 2019, *Cevdet Erek: chiçiçiçichiciçi* installation view at the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 2019. Courtesy: the artist