

# Cross Platform

The installations of  
of  
**Cevdet Erek**  
connect electronic and natural rhythms to explore the impact of mechanised time on our bodies and minds. By **Nathan Budzinski**

Cevdet Erek performing at the opening night of Alt Üst, Spike Island, Bristol



Alt Üst (2014)

Stuart Whippis (Alt Üst); Ben Owen (Erek)

**“It’s not a happy theme** I have to say, it’s a sad theme!” says Cevdet Erek, almost enthusiastically. The Turkish artist and musician is taking me around Bristol’s Spike Island art centre to see the exhibition that he’s just finished installing, called *Alt Üst* – a title that can be translated as lower and top (alt and üst); or upside down (altüst). I’ve just blurted out that the show makes me feel anxious, a feeling sparked off by one work in particular. Two benches sit in front of a tower of white cabinet speakers, as if before an altar. As the speakers broadcast a mechanical pulse of bass beats at the factory setting speed of 120 bpm, the cold, dead tone of a computer text-to-speech generator recites the days of the week: “*Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Day, Day, Day, Day, Day, Day, Day, Monday...*” – each word on beat, ad nauseam. I feel a panic attack coming on.

My first impression doesn’t deter Erek, who talks with an energetic momentum: “It’s not designed to make you feel happy, or sad, or anything like that. For me it’s just a representation of a written calendar... but the funny thing is that you can dance to it, because looking at a calendar is quite boring, I would say.”

At the entrance to the show is a long narrow table holding a selection of rulers, objects that Erek has been making for several years now. Inscribed on them are different measurements. A white plastic ruler measures a seemingly arbitrary space-time block between “Now” and “End”. Another depicts the years from 1974 to 2008 (Erek was born in 1974). One complex metre long stick counts out 1911 to 2011, marking modernisation in Turkey through the years in which changes to its calendar and alphabet took place – from the lunar Rumi calendar to the solar Gregorian calendar in 1925, and then the shift, in 1929, from the Arabic-based Ottoman alphabet and numerals to Roman ones. The rulers show the corresponding shifts in units of measurements. “These are a few older works,” he explains, “but there are some new experiments that are important to me.”

Elsewhere, percussive beats shoot around the perimeter of the gallery, emanating from directional speakers placed throughout the dark, echoing space. Erek tells me to cover my ears and stand with my back to one speaker. A burst of drum machine hi-hat noise pierces a small hole in the back of my skull, blossoms into a decaying fizz through my sinuses, bursts out of my forehead, and continues on to the far end of the gallery. “Amazing, no?” says Erek when he sees my reaction. “I had no idea it would do that, but was very happy to find it!”

I first met Cevdet Erek in London in autumn 2013. We sat by the Thames on the South Bank, and while we talked, he incessantly scribbled notes and made

drawings in a small notebook. We leafed through pictures on his mobile of sparse objects and installations – sometimes, nothing more than a room with a speaker in it – themed around different ideas of time and measurement. It reminded me of the conceptual artist On Kawara’s practice of painting each day’s date, usually in white on grey canvas, since the mid-60s, like blank postcards sent from a stranger. With his minimal aesthetics, I also filed Erek alongside the stark design sensibility of labels like Raster-Noton, whose blankness owes much to ideas about supposed scientific objectivity, but is also a framing device that allows for different objects and ideas to cohabit and seem connected. It’s a look that also fits perfectly into white cube art galleries.

But for all its stark white lab coat aesthetics, Erek’s work changes radically when experienced in situ. The sounds make it intimate, even invasive. It can be raucous-sounding as a whole, but despite the echo problems that are inevitable in a space like Spike Island, the beats, pops and taps that he employs distinctly pull and push you around. Directional speakers grab your attention, only to have another speaker take you on a new trajectory. In one corner, a rapid scuffling comes into earshot, while to the far end of the gallery, a projection of two hands on a table passes the time via expert drumming with their fingers, the nearby sound neatly synched. In the centre of the space is another gallery enclosure split into two levels by a temporary platform made of scaffolding and plywood. The lower Alt chamber contains a ceiling mounted LED strip and a sub woofer playing a bass beat at 60 bpm, a wave of blue light increasing then decreasing the luminosity of the space. A ramp on the outside of the central gallery leads to the Üst level, a tall white space with light glaring down from high windows. It’s a striking contrast for eyes used to the gloom of the gallery, the light above given oppressive weight. The noise from the rest of the show and the sub-woofer below are muffled into a heartbeat sound, like what you hear when exiting a club, ears damaged from loudness. There’s a similar sense of leaving somewhere intimate into coldness.

“I’m not trying to recreate a club atmosphere or something like that, just taking some elements,” Erek says when I tell him about this sensation. He’s more interested in how going out figures into how we join organised rhythms of time: “The place of art is in a gallery, a place that we visit during the day, normally. The other one [a gig or a club] is normally during the night, a kind of struggle against the night. Nature normally tells creations like us to rest, to make our metabolism slower. But for many years now, we have been doing our best to make

our energy levels higher and higher: alcohol, drugs, sexual energy and social energy.”

Alongside getting a PhD in architectural theory, since the late 80s Erek has been drummer in Nekropsi, a group that started out playing metal, went through noise and electronic stages, and in a recent On Kawara type move, released a song a month during 2013. He has also worked as a sound engineer and producer, and this shows: he spends most of the exhibition’s opening night neither drinking nor schmoozing, but roaming about the space with the calmly determined but efficient look of a professional technician, checking and adjusting levels to get the sound just right for the noisy crowd of visitors.

I ask him how all these disciplines and cultures he’s been part of fit together in his work. “I started as a drummer, and so was interested in rhythm and beats, like thousands of other musicians and producers,” he says. “Then a generation ago, electronic music shaped us quite strongly – both sound art and Aphex Twin, Autechre and the like. But at the same time I got interested in rhythm in general, like the rhythms of everyday life, clockwork, working times, or anniversaries, centenaries...” But his methodology, he hints, is flexible. “This is just one world, one place that I have most recently found myself in. It has its rules, its parameters, and I work with those.”

Near the end of the opening night Erek performs a solo set. He wanders through the gallery, the crowds following him as he sporadically beats on a floor tom, testing out the acoustics at the same time as playing along with, or interrupting, his works. At certain points he goes right up against audience members and drums loudly. His head is buried in the hood of his jumper, giving the event the feeling of a ritual or ceremony that’s been hastily improvised. It’s obvious from the performance that Erek has a passion for the material that he uses, and seeing the way he tests, sketches, weighs up and measures is important to the experience of his work.

“There are the things that I love, that I obsess over – music, drumming, rhythm,” Erek tells me as he draws a circle onto a notebook page, dotting it with little archipelagos. “Then there is this amazing huge ocean beneath all of those things,” he adds, sketching arrowed lines descending into another more expansive and vague territory he’s now attracted to. What holds it all together, he says, is that “all of these things, they are unified by time”. Erek presents us with a world of standardised units and rhythms – temporalities that have become inextricable with our mental and physical rhythms, dictating how we think and feel. But he also shows how it’s possible to improvise inside those powerful constrictions, and even change them. □ *Alt Üst* is at Bristol’s Spike Island until 13 April. [spikeisland.org.uk](http://spikeisland.org.uk)