

Public Art in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi: Kurt Perschke's Red Ball Project

By *Isabella Ellalah Hughes*



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John Ruskin, a leading English, Victorian-era art critic, patron and philanthropist said in regard to public art, “the measure of any great civilization is its cities, and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks, and its squares.” As Abu Dhabi is in the midst of building a great city, with numerous ambitious projects and developments

planned beyond the incessantly hyped Saadiyat Island Cultural District, it only seemed befitting for the Emirate to welcome the Red Ball Project in late fall of 2011 in conjunction with National Day Celebrations. The Red Ball Project is a gigantic, red, inflatable ball, which is temporary in nature, highlighting public sites whenever in a new host country or city. Beyond Abu Dhabi, it has travelled to cities such as Barcelona, Taipei, Toronto and Chicago. All in all, it has been to 12 international locations as of February 2012.

The history of contemporary, public art in the GCC is not long, let alone temporary public art, such as the Red Ball Project. There are a few exceptions, for instance, Saudi Arabia, where in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a municipal focus to bring quality art to the



public, which resulted in numerous public sculptures by renown modern artists. Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, Jean Arp and Joan Miró, can all be found in public areas, notably in the city of Jeddah, typically placed on roundabouts, eclipsing the garish, tacky and decorative ‘sculptures’ that tend to be placed on roundabouts in the GCC. Recently, Doha opened the MIA Park, a public sculpture park in front of the Museum of Islamic Arts, inaugurated with Richard Serra’s first creation in the Middle East.

In most GCC countries, such as the UAE, there is no official public art commissioning authority that one finds in other, international, cosmopolitan cities. This is a subject that Abu Dhabi’s Emirates Foundation Executive Director of Arts and Culture and art historian, Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, is passionate about and ready to champion. She explained during a telephone conversation in November 2011, how one useful model for artistic residencies would be where the end product is public art, created for the host city by the artists-in-

residence and then placed throughout the city. Given the cultural and artistic ambitions of that unite most GCC countries, it seems probable that soon something akin to what Dr. Mikdadi speaks of, could indeed become a reality and we will see the establishment of public arts commissioning authorities on national and local levels, utilizing residencies and cultural exchanges to build public artwork collections.

The Red Ball Project is the first large-scale, public, nomadic artwork to travel to the UAE and is the brainchild of American artist Kurt Perschke. Perschke’s Red Ball Project consistently accomplishes what good public art should do: it inherently makes its host location a more creative place, bringing together the community in social spaces, fostering a sense of civic pride, adding an element of fun, making contemporary art highly accessible and engaging, and ultimately, stimulating new ideas. The Q&A below with Perschke, gives the artists’ perspective on the Abu Dhabi edition of the Red Ball Project and shares his thoughts on public art.



Q&A with Kurt Perschke:

IEH: The Red Ball Project (RBP) has traveled all over the world and through royal patronage in Abu Dhabi, came to the UAE to coincide with National Day celebrations this past December. Had you always wanted the RBP to come to this region?

KP: My time living in Cairo left me with a long-term interest in the Middle East. The chance to come to the UAE at such an exciting time for Abu Dhabi was a great opportunity.

IEH: Public art, especially temporary public art, is relatively new to the region. What were some of the challenges you faced when communicating what the RBP is all about to a UAE audience?

KP: I think it is the first time a temporary public artwork of this scale has come to the UAE, which brought both challenges and opportunities. Opening new paths is never simple, and just the idea that this huge thing on

the street is an artwork is a completely new notion. In a gallery context that potential ambiguity is dangerous - it's important people think the work is 'art' - but on the street it becomes something else, an advantage.

IEH: Why do you feel that public art is important and more specifically, for the region?

KP: The origins of art are public, not private. Now we often think of public art as monuments of remembrance, but both the past and the future of work in public space is far broader and more alive. I think we will see artists increasing looking to engage with the public, because after some neglect, it is once again a new frontier. A country's culture is a reflection of its imagination and liveliness, public art is part of this. In the region I think it's vital to understand public works, whether temporary or permanent, [it] is a process of curation, not collection.



IEH: What was your favorite site for RBP in Abu Dhabi and why?

KP: The sites together create the work; each site alone is like a note or a phrase. So no one site can have all aspects of the work in it. A site like the Sheikh Zayed Bridge, by Zaha Hadid, stands out as a fantastic image and a technical achievement, a grand ambitious site that many people helped make happen. Another site, like Madinat Zayed, was quite humble, but alive with public interaction in response to the installation. The project spans this diversity and feeds of it.

IEH: Besides the harsh climate, what do you think are some of the greatest challenges facing the growth of public art in the region?

KP: The greatest challenge is keeping in mind work in public space needs to be responsive to the culture, and a reflection of it. To me, a bunch of sculptures by Western artists that every city has, does not create a

public art program in the Gulf - I would hate to see that. The aesthetics I experienced in Abu Dhabi were very striking to me; I think creating public art that plays around those aesthetics and social dynamics would be very fascinating and unique. The artists could come internationally or from the region, but the important thing is the work.

IEH: In some locations the RBP was highly accessible, such as along the Abu Dhabi corniche, while other times, when it was wedged into the cafe at Manarat Al Saadiyat or on the Sheikh Zayed Bridge, it could only be experienced passively, from afar. For you, is the RBP more about the environment or interacting with the audience?

KP: That is why there needs to be a collection of experiences, because you need all of those things, and architecturally and environmentally they are often different places.



IEH: How many months of work in total did it take you to put together the Abu Dhabi RBP?

KP: The project was two site visits to find locations, over about 5 weeks starting a year-and-a-half before the actual installations. The project itself was a bit more than a month. The work is actually created during the site visit; the piece is made through looking.

IEH: Public art tends to be static, but the RBP is inherently nomadic, taking on a transnational identity. Is your decision to have the RBP travel the world a reflection on globalization?

KP: The ease of its movement is a reflection of it yes, particularly in the arts. But the reason for the work to be temporary and moving is that the process of looking and finding never ends. I've spent a decade now traveling the world looking at alleyways, markets, and all the rest and it's endlessly fascinating. And of course when the project is installed, performed, that experience is different all over the world.

IEH: With the opening of Doha's new sculpture park, the plethora of museums open or set to open in Abu Dhabi, Doha, Sharjah and the internationally renowned Sharjah Biennale, do you feel the future of public art is relatively optimistic in the region?

KP: I think it's a very exciting possibility, and I am honored to be at the start of it. Biennales especially can be a very exciting platform for public projects. The trick is to remember that works in public have a different audience, and function differently than museum-based work. So while certain sculptures can span those worlds, not all can or should. It takes a specific kind of curator to understand this.

IEH: You've said before that the RBP brings people together. How does public art and more specifically, the RBP bring people together locally and internationally?

KP: These patterns have always existed beyond art and it comes down to a shared experience.

Whether that is a conversation near the work, or something you experience via social media, it's in the exchange. In the Red Ball Project, the ball is only a lever for this process. If the project set out to do that directly it would fail.

Instead, it exists in a social version of what architect Christopher Alexander calls as a 'pattern language'.

IEH: Will the RBP ever retire?

KP: I'm more interested right now with what it can do or will do, letting it grow and change has been a great experience.

IEH: What are some of the future RBP sites?

KP: Well as I write this, I am in Perth for February. In June it will be on tour in the UK for the London Olympics. I am in talks with a city in South America, so you never know. I'd love to see it again though in the Middle East.

IEH: Are you working on any other public art pieces at the moment?

KP: This year the project has been very full on, and other work has been in set design for dance and studio work, but not public. In the past I have done public video projection work, things like that.



IEH: What makes good public art in your opinion?

KP: Great public work engages the public imagination. 'Public' now generically means to us some general outdoor space, but placing something in such space does not make it public art. That bar is far too low. Great public art engages what 'public' really means, which again, is the communal, the social space we share.

IEH: How does the RBP go around the world? Is it invited or do you sometimes approach people/countries/organizations?

KP: Sometimes I wish I could just point and go where I want, but it really requires the invitation of a local partner. But there are a bunch of cities, like Istanbul or Kyoto, which I would love to work in. Abu Dhabi and Dubai were on that list, and Abu Dhabi was an amazing experience.

IEH: Would you ever retire the RBP permanently in a space if the offer arose?

KP: I was asked this by a curator whom I worked with in Barcelona sometime ago, and it got me thinking - I now understand that the work, like much performative work, could be collected by an institution in the right context. But it would always be temporary; movement is part of the work.

IEH: What are some of your favorite public art pieces?

KP: I can't encompass them all, but in the temporary - Nina Katchadourian did a piece, CARPARK, which I used to show my students. It was a performative piece at a school where all of the student and teacher's cars in a huge lot were sorted by color for one day. I personally feel that it's a beautiful concept and realization, social, participatory, and visual. In the permanent, Richard Serra has one of his steel twists, 'Joe', at the Contemporary St. Louis and it's fantastic. As an organization, The Creative Time in New York City is a constantly pushing in the temporary world, which I personally love.