



Kurt Perschke  
RedBall : Arizona  
Arabian Library Site



Kurt Perschke  
RedBall : Barcelona  
Jaume Street in Gothic Quarter



Kurt Perschke  
RedBall : Sydney  
Old Town Hall

This is an interview with Kurt Perschke on November 7, 2008.

JACKIE: The purpose of this interview is to discuss your public art project RedBall, how did it get started?

KURT: Well, I was in St. Louis teaching and I had a studio practice, but I was applying to the open calls and request for proposals for the local public art venue, which was Arts in Transit, St. Louis. I had been sending ideas in for a year or two and getting rejected and getting to the point where maybe I had had enough of that. Then I got a phone call from the curator of the program basically inviting me to submit a proposal for a commission for one of three sites towards this event they were having.

JACKIE: It sounds like she has been carefully reviewing your proposals and was interested in what you were doing, although nothing had fit into their projects.

KURT: When I met with her I said, "I don't understand why you are meeting with me because you have been rejecting me." And she said, "Well, they were really getting better." And we had a laugh over that. I had no idea that they were getting better; she was the first person that gave me feedback. So, Jenny Strayer [the curator] said, "Come up with an idea for one of these three sites." So I had to pick one of the three locations but the concept was totally up to me. It was actually the process of choosing one that eventually led to RedBall, because I kept coming back to the ugly site, the underpass site that was more of a draw for me than the green grass in the park. I decided to make a piece that why, what was it I saw, and that's the origin of the RedBall project.

JACKIE: So, the Curator had these three sites and asked you to come up with an idea for them.

KURT: Yes, and of course at that point, if I came up with horrible ideas, they could still reject me. But I went through the whole process, drawing and sketching everything, and the day before the meeting, I eventually came up with RedBall. It was the answer to my own question.

JACKIE: What is RedBall?

KURT: The RedBall project is a temporary sculptural performance that usually happens as a public art event. It's literally a fifteen foot inflatable ball that gets squished into architectural locations throughout a downtown area or around a city into archways, between alleyways, and everywhere. It moves throughout the city in a choreographed suite of installations over two or three weeks. It's only at each site for a day.

It's of course public in the sense that it's pedestrian and it's on the street in public space. It's also public in that people quickly get that it's mobile, and exploring the city, and they very quickly start imagining on their own. People use their own imaginations and start throwing those suggestions out, to me, to a volunteer at the site, in emails, in all kinds of ways. This happens everywhere from people in the street, to city planners and maintenance workers. Everybody has ideas. The project isn't a democracy, it's my vision and my sites, but the idea of it enters the public consciousness. And people become engaged in what is essentially an artistic process. That sort of transferring of the imaginative process is a core aspect of the project. In the end it's not about a ball at all, it's what the process creates.

JACKIE: But at the beginning, you were just proposing to squish a red ball in three sites in St. Louis.

KURT: Actually, I wasn't. At the beginning, I kept coming back to the ugliest site they had proposed. The process of thinking about why I was interested, sculpturally, in the ugliest site is really the genesis of RedBall. I was trying to figure out my own work, why I didn't want the beautiful park with the nice grass, but I wanted this underpass. It had to do with the sculptural potential of the site. RedBall was a way to express that and get interested in it. Once I got there, I realized that I wanted to do this in a serial way and that these sorts of sites existed throughout a city. I wanted to be able to play with a whole city as an event as opposed to a monument on the corner.

JACKIE: So, you wanted to work with the architecture of the city and not necessarily just place something in the middle of a beautiful park?

KURT: We live in an urban environment. In the city, sometimes there are famous places and sometimes there are alleyways, but that was the genesis of it in St. Louis. The project was approved and got funded. It went well; in fact it went so well that they didn't want me to move it around. One of the groups funding RedBall wanted to keep it where it was and didn't want it to leave their turf. I was too inexperienced to understand that I could say

"No." So my original plan to have it travel didn't happen and I came away from the project a little frustrated that it hadn't been realized in the way I wanted.

JACKIE: Because it only had stayed in one site?

KURT: It got to only two sites, and I wasn't able to move it throughout the city. Part of it was also on me, because I wasn't able to convincingly explain why the other idea was really the way to go.

JACKIE: Because it was so new. You weren't quite sure yet.

KURT: Right. It was so new to me. A year later, while on summer break, I got a residency in Barcelona [Spain] and I used it as a way to realize the project in the way I had imagined it. I worked with the Can Serrat residency Artistic Director Art Larson, and they loaned me some resources and a van, and I self-financed it. I took the money that I had made in St. Louis and spent it [installing RedBall] in Barcelona.

I literally shipped it over there on a palette of a freighter and learned a lot about customs regulations. I ended up working with an independent curator, Jeffrey Swartz, who also wrote a great catalog essay on it but it was completely done on introductions of friends of friends.

JACKIE: So you took the initiative to do it on your own.

KURT: Yes. We eventually got official permission for certain sites like the Museum of Contemporary Art. The imagination of the project was realized and the images and story were so great that it got notice in Sculpture Magazine (<http://www.redballproject.com/PDF/SculptureRedBall.pdf>) and a curator in Sydney saw it. I found out later that the curator in Sydney had actually already heard about the project and had been pitching it to people above her, but it wasn't until it was in a magazine that they said yes.

JACKIE: RedBall started in 2001, what has been happening with it since?

KURT: Yes, it this was 2001 to 2003. The project now exists parallel to my studio work and takes me away to travel once or twice a year. From the first time someone contacts me, or says that they are interested, to an actual installation, it can take six months or a year, so there's a lot of work that happens before those two or three weeks of actual installation. I have to go out, visit a city, and select the site six months in advance.

JACKIE: Do you get paid for the time you put into the early preparation?

KURT: I do now.

JACKIE: But not at the beginning?

KURT: Not at the beginning.

JACKIE: But now you learned to negotiate that.

KURT: I would say my understanding of how I should get compensated for the project and the value of what the project has to offer has grown considerably. It's developed from my own experience and it's grown through some honest conversations with PR people, city people, and business people who aren't in the arts but have helped me see the value of such a high profile project. As an artist this was a learning curve for me, we aren't taught to think that way.

JACKIE: How does the RedBall work mesh with your studio practice?

KURT: It integrates with my studio practice because I also do temporary projects that don't operate in a public arena. I do work that involves videotaping temporary actions and animating them. I do photo collage-based work that has the same interests as RedBall. The questions at the core of my work deal with seeing sculptural space. How to perceive and signify space is at the center of my work; the space of objects and the energy of bodies in motion. This is explored in wildly divergent ways, from video animation to inflatable public projects, but at the center the work is knotted together at the root.

JACKIE: How often have you been close to realizing a RedBall project somewhere and it fell through?

KURT: It's been a learning process finding out that I can get excruciatingly close to having something realized and still have it fall through. I've had many cities or administrators that genuinely wanted the project to happen, were prepared to go for it, were prepared to pay for it yet it still fell through for different reasons. I have had it fall through as many times as it worked out. In Salzburg it was the very last meeting a museum before I left, the businessman who had funded my initial trip said he had never experienced a deal end like that. Welcome to public projects.

JACKIE: What have you learned from that?

KURT: I've learned to push to get the project realized while people are still excited about it.

JACKIE: You mean to capitalize on the—

KURT: —on the momentum. In a way, it is like an impulse purchase. It's buying art after all. I've learned that I need to keep the momentum moving as much as possible because it's a long process.

JACKIE: How does an artist do that without feeling too pushy?

KURT: I try to do it by keeping in touch with people, keeping on their radar, keeping a reason to get back in touch with them, and also, frankly, by delivering deadlines. Not just having the administrator tell me what the next deadlines are, but giving them deadlines too. If I say, "Listen. I'm going to be out of town" or "I'm going to be doing this other thing. I need to know by such and such a date." It helps move things along, and it's honestly what's happening for me. It doesn't have to just be a one way dialog. That's one part of it, and the other part is about understanding that while RedBall is a temporary installation, it might involve a six-month negotiation. I mean literally, we spent four months talking about the contract with Sydney.

JACKIE: Do you always have a lawyer check out your contract?

KURT: I've learned to have a lawyer now.

JACKIE: What have they pointed out?

KURT: The lawyers have usually helped me point out areas that I'm either not getting paid for or things that I could be liable for that I don't want to be liable for, and certainly protecting the rights to your work. If you're working with a city, they usually want to write the contract, which means they write a contract that's all about them and not about you. So representation is essential. Besides a peace of mind thing, it's about negotiation and liability. Now, I'm more aware of where my imagery is going and how I control it.

JACKIE: You get weary of RedBall?

KURT: Actually, I don't because even though part of it is familiar to me, the project is essentially new in every city and my experience going there and negotiating in a new environment keeps it fresh. The act of creation for me is actually the site visit. That kind of looking is at the core of my work, so to wander a city looking for opportunities is fantastic. I go to a city knowing I am going to create something there no one has ever seen before, or will ever again. I use the city to make the work, and it's genuinely new to people and I love that.

JACKIE: Is there any programming around RedBall?

KURT: There is increasingly more programming around it. But just to answer that entire question from before, I think this is something that visual artists think and ask me, but performing artists never ask. I think it really depends on your model. A performing artist understands that they create something that will tour and this is what this piece is. When Gerhard Richter's paintings are running around the world for five years, nobody asks him if he's tired. So, I think it depends on whether you think about the act of creation as the little moment in the studio or you think about it as the life of the work. The life of the work is a much broader thing that needs to exist beyond the artist's attention span.

JACKIE: I think that's a big problem in the visual arts. The artist attention span is only in the studio and they forget that shepherding the work out into the world is also part of their responsibility.

KURT: It's something that has taken me a while to understand because I felt very insecure about that question in the beginning. Now I understand it's only because it's being asked from a very specific point of view that doesn't actually have to do with the work. It has to do with the act of making work. And nobody in Barcelona, Chicago, or Sydney cares whether the idea for it was a year ago or five years ago.

JACKIE: Right, which is another thing that visual artists think, "People only want to know about their most recent work."

KURT: And I think that's because the market drives that perception. And artists get bored. You work on something and then you move onto something new. And if this project was all I was doing maybe that would be a problem, but it's not.

JACKIE: So, how does RedBall fit into your larger studio practice again?

KURT: It fits into my larger studio practice in terms of content. It's about things I am interested in and what I think of as sculptural space or environment: public space, architectural space, the space between moving bodies, and the space between buildings. My work is very much interested in these contexts and how one captures and negotiates them. I might think of sculptural space in a weirdly bizarre, idiosyncratic way, but I have come to realize that's how I think about it, and why my work is mine.

JACKIE: That's called artistic vision.

KURT: Right, I guess so. So, my work ties together because of my interests not because of what it looks like visually. Now that there's enough of a span in the work, there are visual connections. They become more apparent to me over time and as they become more apparent I can cut off more of those worries that everything has to be "matchy-matchy". I think of that old line that every playwright is telling one story over and over again. That's true of artists at some level. And I've come to realize that. When I was one year out of graduate school, I was making clay and steel figurative armature pieces. They are actually about the same thing as my fMRI self portraits that were commissioned by Vienna Technical Museum, but they are just a different way of getting there and a different way of thinking about it materially.

JACKIE: RedBall appears for a day in different locations. Do you stay there the whole time during the three or four weeks?

KURT: Yes, I'm on site at least twice for every city, but sometimes much more. The average is two months.

JACKIE: How do you handle documentation? That's got to be really important.

KURT: It is really important. I've always documented the work in video and still photography. The couple things that I've learned about documentation are that whenever I've handed it over to other people, I've regretted it. I had a professional film crew that shot commercials for Nike and were all on board to do the video documentation for the project. They had resources I couldn't dream of and I could never afford. Two days before the project started, they got a different gig. Because of that only half the sites were filmed and I only have the backup video, which I shot. So, I've learned that you can't rely on other people, but I've also learned that their footage wasn't as good as mine. They had performing arts level lighting, film, and video, but finding collaborators who you really trust that are going to be great is actually quite hard.

JACKIE: And they can't really travel all over the world with you.

KURT: Well, they can sometimes if you are clever about what you call them, because now I call them my assistant.

JACKIE: And you put them in the budget line?

KURT: I put them in the budget line as my assistant, that's what they are. Actually, that has become useful, because when a project manager says to me, "We can find a local assistant", I say you can't find a local assistant that will videotape my work the way my person will because they're going to go get a student. So, the more specialized the assistant is, the easier it is to fund. I learned this inadvertently, because I had someone looking at footage from Sydney that my assistant, who was an artist and a former student of mine in St. Louis, had shot. I brought him with me to Sydney and there's a closing shot in the video and somebody who worked in this film firm that worked with Nike said, "You know that's a really amazing shot. Who shot that?" I said, "My assistant did," and he said, "You know that's not easy to find." So, I've realized that you have to be picky. I have also realized that the documentation is a value into itself and that I can charge for it.

JACKIE: What do you mean by that?

KURT: More and more for work that doesn't really exist in a gallery or as public art, when you stop thinking about it as a public art project and you start thinking about it more like cultural event programming and you begin to really understand people who think about events, you realize that the documentation and everything that goes around that becomes really important. Once you are in that model, it suddenly becomes really important that you have great images, because it's going to be really quick and you need to give these kinds of images in advance.

The first time we went down to Arizona, we installed the project for two days just to take photos for a magazine shoot for a project that was going to happen. In terms of documentation, it's not just about documentation after the fact; it's also about the ancillary

things that happen with events. Now there's going to be a project blog, so people can go in real time, talk about what they are seeing, and upload photos. Eventually, there's going to be video, photos, and a catalog. These are all things that happen for temporary projects and events, because you need to capture them.

JACKIE: And they need to be in a budget. They have to be thought of in advance.

KURT: Right. If you are thinking about it in a performance art model, you don't privilege these things, but if you are thinking about it in a core programming model, then you do. It becomes important not only for the artist but also for the agency. It gives them something after the fact. Rather than outsourcing them, I now provide it to them and its part of how the project makes sense financially.

JACKIE: That's fantastic. We all need to think this way.

KURT: But, I don't know what I want out there. I mean I want this information out there, but—

JACKIE: You get to edit—

KURT: Well in one city I went down there for the photo shoot thinking I wasn't going to take pictures, because they were hiring a professional photographer who I know they paid more than me. After the first day of shooting, I was stunned because there was nothing there I could use. I took my own camera the second day and shot it, because the PR person said to me, "You know, that might be a good idea." And now, I'm getting paid for all the images that I shoot.

JACKIE: Absolutely.

KURT: They are paying me for the blog and the images. The director said, "Now, I have less loops to go through and I know what I'm actually going to get."

JACKIE: A quality product.

KURT: For less money.

JACKIE: That's smart.

KURT: But it has taken me four cities to figure it out.

When you stop envisioning this stuff as public art and you think about it as cultural programming, you ask different questions. Public art people are making monuments to go in front of buildings, but if you are talking to somebody who is used to doing operas and film festivals, nobody is concerned about those things. They are concerned about exposure and impact.



JACKIE: Christo's Gates was cultural programming.

KURT: It is absolutely, but Christo is an interesting model, because I think there are very few people who have been able to follow in his footsteps. I mean he has enough of a career that he has gone in and out of favor many times, but he is actually sort of unique. The closest that I've seen to that is Matthew Barney, but Matthew Barney had Gladstone [his gallerist, Barbara Gladstone].

JACKIE: What are the kinds of programs that accompany RedBall these days?

KURT: There are events. In Arizona, there is a lot of VIP event programming, which are anything from parties to educational stuff. It didn't happen, but in New Orleans, I was going to be teaming with someone who was going to do an entire educational component that was parallel to imaginative and creative writing in schools. So, it's everything from special events to educational lectures and things like that. It is actually like an expanding field for me in terms of thinking about the project.

Now, I'm moving closer to finding corporate sponsorship, which has a different set of interests when it comes to programming. Artists have this sort of opening model and then it's over. But actually, in an odd way, the business world is more social.

JACKIE: They think about the life of a project. It's not just an opening.

KURT: Right. You start understanding how to maximize it and learn that there are different constituencies. In Arizona, one of the installations happens to be at a senior center where we hope to do special programming. There was another installation in Skate Park (I happen to have a thing for skate parks) and we'll be planning something with that group. So, that is part of the project that has developed over time. It wasn't there initially, but it's grown.

JACKIE: One of the last questions I always ask Kurt: if you were to give a young visual artist who is just starting out in their career advice, what three pieces of advice would you give?

KURT: I would need three hours. If it's three pieces of advice in terms of building a career, I think one of the most important things to start with is understanding, with as much clarity as you can muster at the moment, what it is that you really want. What exactly is the kind of career you want? Artists will very quickly say, "Well I want a great career," but does that mean a career that has gotten significant curatorial attention, a career that's significant in a museum context, or a career that's significant because it's paying your bills and supporting your family? Does that mean a career where you're an art star? There are all these different goals.

Be specific about it, because the clearer you are about what you want, the more you can understand what approach is going to fit that. Also, I think you need to understand as a

young artist, this is going to change. That what you want today and what you want tomorrow will evolve.

JACKIE: Well in different decades of your life, you have different needs.

KURT: Right.

The other thing that is really critical is understanding that the art world, like all things, is a social world. I think that artists who don't have any experience in the business world and never exist in other places because they have always been in the arts don't understand, but when you look within any industry, it's about relationships. And that is just as true in art. While I think people say that's a horrible thing and they really look down on it, it's not just in art, it's true everywhere. All the relationships you have made with your teachers, the people you went to school with, and the people from the city you live in are going to be really critical.

There is a fascinating thing in *Advice to Young Artists in a Post Modern Era*, the William Dunning book, where there was a long term study of artists who do graduate school. It was looking at where they lived. There were those that deliberately moved into the city and a studio environment where they were in relation to other people. It was an important factor and when they thought about leaving it, they knew that they were giving something up. Artists have to think about their own specific community. I mean in St. Louis, I was actually really fortunate to be in a community that wasn't Manhattan right out of graduate school. Because it wasn't Manhattan, everybody would answer my phone calls, I was on grant review panels, and I learned all these things that I could apply later. So, it's not like you have to immediately go someplace big, but you have to understand what different places have to offer and understand that people move around. I think that's something that's obvious in retrospect, but every curator I knew ten years ago is now someplace else.

JACKIE: Right. Those relationships started when both of you were young and starting out. What's your third piece of advice?

KURT: If we are sticking to career, and not the creative act of making, my third piece of advice is to be pragmatic. Develop a long haul plan. I heard an artist <sup>and</sup> e students once and he was explaining how he chose his day job. Basically, if you have a day job, you should have a day job that pays you as much money as you can possibly make in the shortest amount of time, so you have maximum energy for the studio. That's actually the most critical thing. Anything else is wasting your time.

JACKIE: Right. Thank you.