



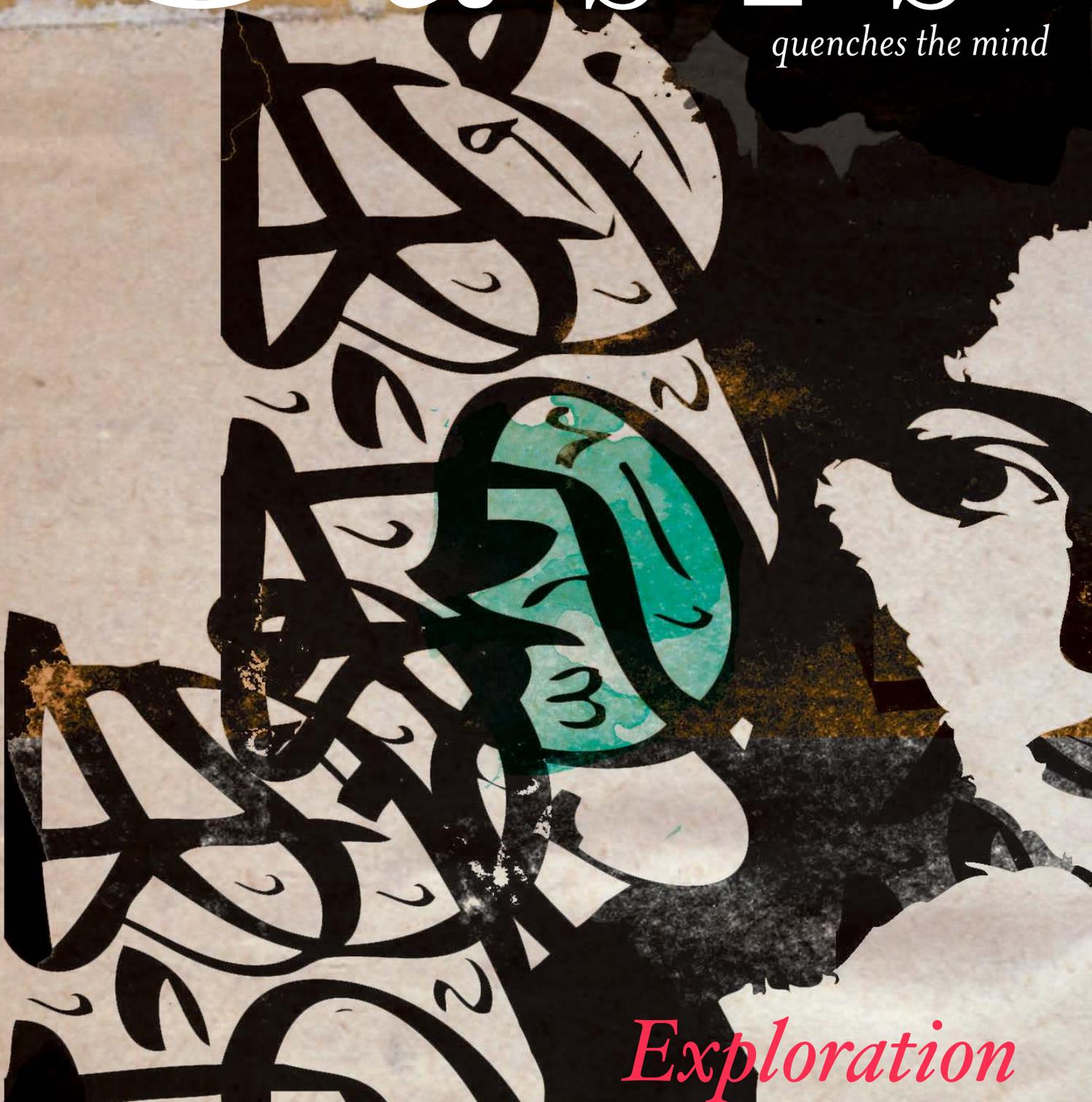
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Exploration



Finding Our Identity in The **Lost City of Arabesque**; On Top of the World with **Saudi Women of Everest**; Exploring the art of **Typography**; Lebanon's Musical Revelation **Mashrou' Leila**; Blind Photography and **Art for Sight**; Van Cleef & Arpels' support of the **Middle East's Art Scene**; & The **Modern Bedouins of Petra**

RIGHT ON THE BALL: *Rocking & Rolling with Kurt Perschke*

BY MAHA MAJZOUB

PHOTOS COURTESY KURT PERSCHKE



You probably saw it if you were in Abu Dhabi last year or in Taipei the year before that. And if you happen to be in England from June to July, you will likely see it dribble down the streets in time for the Cultural Olympiad. It is a 15-foot, inflated sphere that weighs 250 pounds and is always cloaked in red PVC fabric. It is Redball, the world famous sculptural installation by New York based artist Kurt Perschke.

Since 2001, RedBall has thrown caution to the wind and traveled across the globe, adopting cities as its canvas. Squeezed between buildings and underpasses, lifted up in town squares, and hoisted above bridges, RedBall explores the unique architectural landscape and history of each city it finds itself in. Examples include Toronto, Sydney, Barcelona, and St. Louis where RedBall's expedition began following an urban site commission by the organization Arts in Transit. Perschke is also in the habit of documenting RedBall's trips to every city with the most thrilling short films usually directed by Tony Gaddis of the U.S. based The Fountain Studio.

Overwhelming Kurtesy

"Through the RedBall Project, I utilize my opportunity as an artist to be a catalyst for new encounters within the everyday. Through the magnetic, playful, and charismatic nature of the RedBall the work is able to access the imagination embedded in all of us," Perschke explains. On the surface, the experience seems to be about the ball itself as an object, he continues. "But the true power of the project is what it can create for those who experience it. It opens a doorway to imagine what if?" It represents the immediate creative im-





pulse that lies in all of us – the simple act of seeing afresh, he remarks. And as it is set in urban environments, the possibilities are endless.

Perschke sees delight in the eyes of kids who reach out to touch the colossal ball. RedBall's humor, charm, and accessibility make it greatly appeal to adults as well who take part in carving the mobile sculpture's experience in the city. "As RedBall travels around the world, people approach me on the street with excited suggestions about where to put it in their city. In that moment, the person is not a spectator but a participant in the act of imagination. I have witnessed it across continents, diverse age spans, cultures, and languages, always issuing an invitation. That invitation to engage, to collectively imagine, is the true essence of the RedBall Project," Perschke adds. As Canadian art critic and curator Jeffrey Swartz puts it, "RedBall straddles the realms of formalist sculpture, street performance, ephemeral urban installation, and hands-on art object, without ever deciding for any one terrain over the others."

On a rebound

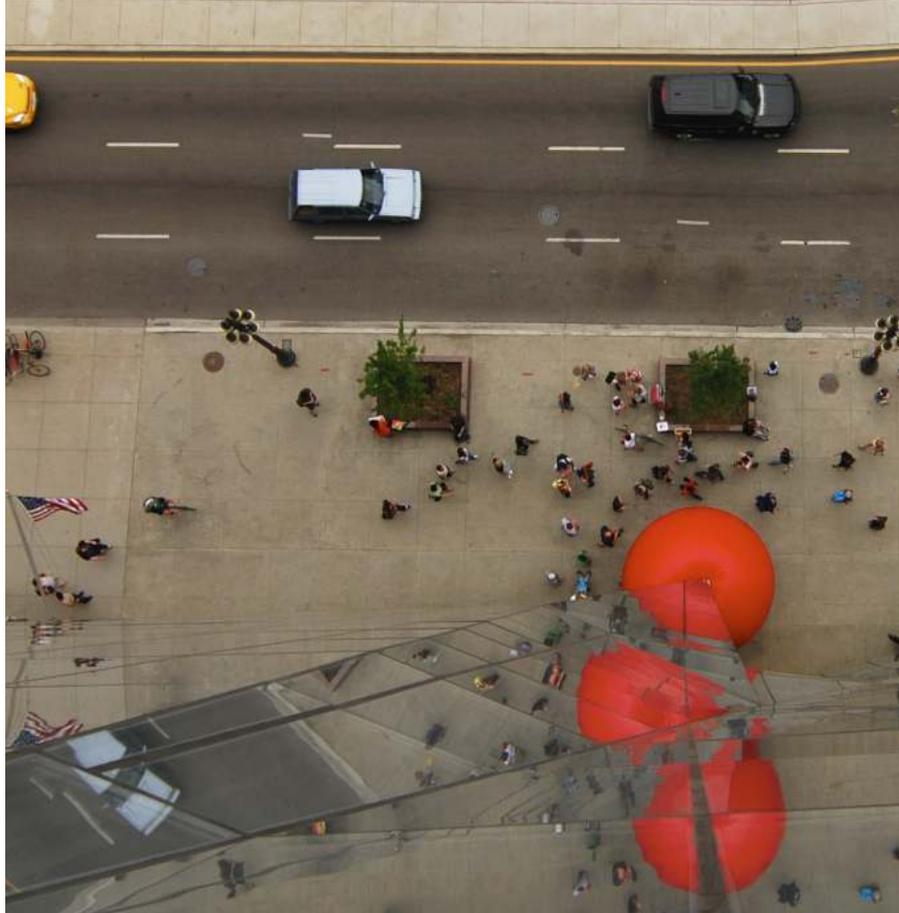
A recipient of a National Award from Americans for the Arts Public Art Network, RedBall made its debut appearance in the Middle East in 2011 when it hit Abu Dhabi. And while there are patterns in how the public exhibits interest in the red object, every city is different: "you never know how the public will react," Perschke asserts. "In Abu Dhabi, many things felt the same as a city in the West or East – the tak-



ing of pictures, the surprise, the joy of the kids... What was specific to Abu Dhabi is that this was the first time a work like RedBall had been performed, and in general it has a shyer culture in public space than most cities I have visited, as well as more focused on family. When the work was in a place like the Corniche with tons of families, the reaction was quite intense all at once."

Some of Perschke's favorite sites in Abu Dhabi were outside of the main city where the piece could operate less as "art" and more as sheer wonder and surprise. "In one spot, we stayed into the night with the local shopkeepers. Artwork in a gallery or museum has a 'context', but if you venture far beyond it with a bit of luck you get something magical. We certainly did in Abu Dhabi," continues Perschke, a native of





Chicago whose interests include sculpture, video, collage, set design, and public space.

His most acclaimed work exists as a series of daily architectural installations over one to three weeks. For each commission, this project involves an initial site visit to select the locations and create site drawings as well as securing permissions for the sites while selecting a final group. Perschke also returns to oversee the daily installation of the RedBall in each location, document the event, and meet with the public and the press. The ball, a generator, and inflation equipment are transported to the site every day in a small van or truck, Perschke points out. The ball requires two people to move via wheeled cart to the specific site. It takes some 45 minutes to inflate once prepped and around one hour to deflate. Despite the “malleability” of the RedBall, the project is not bereft of physical drawbacks. “There are always challenges, and some things don’t work. Others seem impossible but become fantastic, like the Sheikh Zayed Bridge in Abu Dhabi,” Perschke remarks. “It is only by pushing the edges that you find such things. But, of course, you need support. In the case of the bridge, the person at the Municipality who found RedBall, Abeer Al-Mutawa, made that iconic installation possible.”

He’s got game

This summer, RedBall makes its first ever tour in the UK as part of the Cultural Olympiad ahead of the Olympic Games. Making stops in Torbay, Plymouth, Exeter, and Weymouth, RedBall will wrap its tour on London’s South Bank. Co-produced by The Torbay Council and The Dartington Hall Trust and funded by the Arts Council England - Grants for Arts, the UK itinerary of RedBall will include visits to several settings in each of the seaside towns. Perschke will be updating his followers about RedBall’s UK excursion with daily tweets and regular Web posts. So we can all still bend it like Beckham even if we’re not frolicking in London this summer.

www.redballproject.com



Before He Bounces

We chatted with Kurt Perschke before he set off to the UK. Here is what he told us.

If RedBall were a person, would it be a male or a female? I don’t think of a gender for the work, because art is a reflection of the viewer. So I guess it depends who’s looking.

Do you think RedBall likes being squeezed, shoved, kicked, and played with so much?

I think so. Play is energy; it’s life, who wouldn’t like that?

Why do you think it’s important for RedBall to take to the streets of England this summer?

The lead up to the Olympics is an exciting time, building with people and energy. It will be a great time for RedBall. It also presents an opportunity; we will be able to go to some sites in England – especially London – that normally might be impossible. Keep an eye out this June, or track RedBall on the Web, because we’ll tweet a picture of each site daily.

Would you like to see RedBall run wild again in the Middle East?

Absolutely. RedBall is about people, and the things that give us joy and surprise or let us play are quite universal.

Where else would you like RedBall to travel?

Well, I have ideas, and sometimes the project has its own ideas. I would love to come back to the Middle East. I learned a lot in Abu Dhabi so I would be excited for that. But it’s a big place – some sites I spotted in Dubai are still in my mind – and all the Emirates are going through a fascinating period right now. I have fond memories of Cairo when I lived there as a student. Who knows what is possible? Globally, South America would be new, and there are some interested folks in Brazil. Asia is overflowing with great cities. I have just visited Hong Kong for RedBall, and Kyoto has always been a dream. The project responds to invitations. I don’t push it, so it has its own flow.

When do you think it will be time for RedBall to end its journey?

Right now I am focused on what is still to come, the future. The world is a big place and RedBall never goes backward – never the same city twice. So it is new for everyone. Journeys do end, but I’d rather put energy into what RedBall can do while it lives. Also, I am about to be a father, so I think my daughter will be quite upset if I take RedBall from the world before she also gets a chance to play.

