

Curiously, RedBall was shielded from a potentially excessive instrumentalization with the decision –largely logistical– to not install on the Gothic Quarter street known as Carrer Carabassa. As the narrow lane is threatened with speculative urban renewal that will certainly reduce its heritage value, a resident protest has sprung up, featuring banners hanging off the street’s balconies. If Perschke had opted to use RedBall to block the street it could have been read an aggressive protest tool, and perhaps some of its subtler, more ironical intent would have been lost.

This is why the installation at MACBA was so successful. Quite beyond Perschke’s uncanny ability to conceive a tight and tense fit for RedBall, the contrast between the bright red sphere and the white Meier façade, with its perky geometry and pretensions to modernist rationalism, gave RedBall a particular humor. I personally felt a sort of spoof was at hand. In a very real sense, in art contexts like at MACBA –and indeed if it were to be solicited for exhibit inside a museum, perfectly feasible– RedBall makes a successful play at one-upmanship, upstaging existing cultural parameters and the aspiration to civilized ideals, setting itself as a kind of new visual-spatial standard that constructed spaces, dutifully dependent on function along vertical and horizontal planes, simply cannot rival.

The counterpoint installation among the various ventures of RedBall in Barcelona was done at Barceloneta Beach. Rather than forcing the piece into a fixed position, it was left to move and be shifted across the sands. The installation has been documented around the arrival of the members of an English youth soccer team, all similarly dressed, who engaged RedBall in a way that illuminated its wide sculptural potential. If in soccer the principle is that a team gathers itself around a ball to dominate it and move it collectively towards the opposing goal, here the inverse principle was in place: the ball can be engaged but not “managed”. The tension of the young bodies in dialogue with the indifferent, unmanageable RedBall recall academic studies from the 18th and 19th centuries, with the figures like characters struggling against adversity in a classical allegory.

In conclusion then, the rich and highly suggestive quality of RedBall was enhanced by its “tour” of Barcelona and environs. I am sure that the experience did much to clarify its wider potential to Kurt Perschke himself. Inasmuch as 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, its presence in Barcelona was an unequivocal success.

RedBall could be readily incorporated into this general cultural condition. Casual viewers were to show a certain comfort with it, finding ways of interacting when it pushed into the lines of urban flow. The piece was never challenged nor required to be moved (such as by local police), even though the many interventions were unauthorized. The installation at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) received permission from the museum direction at very short notice, suggesting that its bureaucracy did not have an overly protective attitude regarding the possible artistic interpretations that the museum space, both inside and out, could permit.

The “ease” of installation contrasted with a less comfortable interpretive take, since there emerged a question as to whether RedBall had specifically critical overtones. Perhaps this had to do with the fact that contemporary art has had an uneasy relationship with the planning-related self-promotional efforts of the city administration since at least the early 80s. Rather than enthusiastically echoing the official quest for a place among the pantheon of the world's shiniest cities, local and international creators have sought to provide a critical counterpoint to the marketing ploys and aggressive policy of demolition and human displacement that have gone along with it. Much contemporary work has dealt with the city as a kind of inversed ruin, throwing a sometimes nostalgic, sometimes even tragic note into the optimistically constructive tune.

Thus even though Barcelonans were happy to flow around and interact with RedBall in the course of their daily meanders, it still could be seen as an instrument of query and doubt in the urban space, however light-hearted in its demeanor. This was especially the case in the blocking of a narrow street in the Gothic quarter some 50 yards from Plaça Sant Jaume, where both City Hall and the Catalan government headquarters are found. It was also the situation with the highly successful installation of the piece beneath the expressive tower jutting off from the façade of Richard Meier's bone white MACBA building, itself part of a radical downtown renewal project that has not been without its detractors. In the first case, the radicalism of the total street closure was softened by alternative routes for passers-by, though it did sit with certain defiance below the arch connecting the buildings on either side of the lane. In the second case it was the contemporary museum building itself and all it has come to represent that was cheekily challenged. For all of RedBall's formalist intentions (this is not the place to detail them, though I fully agree with Perschke's view that the piece serves as a formal model for seeing and understanding urban space sculpturally), it cannot be held up as fully autonomous art: there is too much dialogistic potential on its shiny PVC face; it makes too many concessions to the terms of its own reception. Indeed those concessions are at the center of the work.

aggressively pursued its international projection through its pretension to a quality, designed public space. This is a great cause for debate in the city and perhaps a point of excessive tension for those who have to live amidst the city's insistence on expressing itself urbanly. Walking –this is an eminently footworthy town– through Barcelona it is difficult not to be drawn into a certain hyper-awareness of the city's own self consciousness. The fact that the town constantly calls on its passers-by to take note of and recognize its combination of dense yet relaxed humanity and urbane elegance can indeed be bothersome at times, as if Barcelona were unwilling to ever fall into the background.

A more balanced contextualization of contemporary Barcelona and its readiness for a piece like RedBall would have to show greater historical range. Most accounts cite the democratic opening after the Franco years and the city's push to restore the quality of its public services and neighborhoods in the lead-up to the 1992 Olympics. In fact, however, Barcelona has been striving to express itself through planning choices ever since the mid-19th century. Building a modern, rational capital for the Catalans was part of this, as the alliance of politicians and architects saw an opportunity to remake Barcelona in the image of a monumental metropolis with a noble past. Luckily enough much of this past did exist in the form of Roman, Romanesque and Gothic architecture, however decayed. The unique street grid of planner Ildefons Cerdà's Eixample (or Expansion, from 1855), with its trademark chamfered corners, then became the theatre for the emerging *modernista* style, that cousin of art nouveau which we normally associate with Gaudí.

A century later, as new-found democracy struggled to make up for lost decades, Barcelona planner and architect Oriol Bohigas spoke of “monumentalizing the periphery”. Thus in the 1980s the city began to streamline boulevards and find space for public squares in long-forgotten *barrios*, often punctuated with fine examples of modern sculpture. As a complement to this, the already popular idea of the street festival was given extra emphasis. These were years when the city was unsure of how its efforts would be taken by its own citizens, though civic pride was given a huge boost with the overall success of the Olympic Games, and not simply on a sporting level. In the post-Olympic period another factor was added to this program; I refer to tourism, including business motivated tourism. As foreign eyes began to define the criteria through which the city interpreted itself and justified its self-esteem, Barcelona's ever-cool though often-edgy preening took on an even more exaggerated tone.

A number of considerations can be drawn from this rather cursory view of the state of the city's public scene for the purposes of RedBall in Barcelona. First, as the artist was to discover during the project period, Barcelonans are seasoned in public spectacle, for which

RedBall's Barcelona

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<http://www.barcelonaculture.com>
(from RedBall Barcelona Catalog)

Kurt Perschke's RedBall came my way through Can Serrat, the rural artist residence his 2002 Barcelona stint was based out of. What first caught my attention was the insistence on fitting the ball into built space, into the gaps given over by hard-edged constructed forms in the public realm. This was exemplified by images of installations done in St. Louis, where a slick concrete overpass or a transit station were the chosen settings. Given the decidedly non-dogmatic character of Perschke's proposal (its apparent willingness to explore its own meaning in new and challenging contexts, as well as its manifestly educational role in opening up sculptural thinking to the challenged viewer), I was struck by his reluctance to separate RedBall into cliché "natural" settings as a type of late, obtuse land art.

No doubt RedBall could have a certain impact in a forest meadow or, indeed, set amidst the rocky crags of a mountain like famed Montserrat, which hangs over Can Serrat with its trademark basalt columns and mythically charged mists. An idealized sphere colorfully calling attention to itself within the ineffable order of the natural world, setting one ideal against another. Rather it seemed that here Perschke avoided an overly-easy visual trope, instead choosing to engage the urban domain in its ideal as a complex shared environment. The multiple common grounds of the city are not simply parks and squares set off from vertical building, but the airy negatives contouring all built surfaces. So as to fit into them, RedBall willingly sacrifices its spherical perfection and much of what it might symbolize, molding itself into leeways and clearances that inevitably oblige it to be squeezed, flexed and distorted.

I took this as positive for Barcelona-centered reasons, since a piece like RedBall would be certainly less pertinent if it could be all things to all contexts at any time, if it were simply a sounding board for any receptive ground rather than the more contextualized, people-oriented piece I believe it is. This was one of the key reasons I chose to incorporate Barcelona Culture Studio into his venture. The final viewing in the large entrance space, along with photo and slide documentation of some of the outdoor installations, served as the closing salvo of RedBall in Barcelona.

Though on the level of an isolated, individual viewer it should not matter, directing an ephemeral public art project towards Barcelona does have important contextual repercussions. This is because Barcelona, as much as any other city in recent years, has