

Interview by Susanne Schuricht with IEPE B.T.Rubingh, Berlin 2005
(long version / english)

SU: How was chessboxing born? Where did the idea come from?

IEPE: Chessboxing was born in 2002; I was looking for new ideas after finishing my work called "Miracle of Berlin". In Amsterdam I met Luis, a.k.a. "Luis the Lawyer". We were hanging out in a bar and talking, and we found out that both of us had started boxing a year earlier and both of us have been playing chess for many years.

The first idea we had was: Let's have a boxing match. Then I came up with the chessboxing idea from the comic "Froid équateur" by ENKI BILAL, which is set in 2096 and sees inhabitants of a ravaged planet competing in various games, including chessboxing.

SU: Had any of your projects been inspired by a comic before?

IEPE: Yes, a lot of them. My father owned a nice comic collection. I always had some of the pictures in mind. The project "Jokers performances" (joker.iepe.net) was inspired by the comic strip "Face de lune" by Jodorowsky & Boucq. Another source of inspiration was an essay out of the book "Beyond The Brillo Box" written by the art critic Arthur C. Danto.

SU: How does it work? Could you explain to us the rules of chessboxing?

IEPE: In the first place we had no idea what it should be like and which rules the match should have. We had long discussions with members of the Dutch chess and boxing federations in order to develop the idea.

The rules have been made up over a longer period of time. We tried different kinds of chess. The rules as they exist now are not the status quo; they still are being modified and improved. At the moment, they are like this:

In a contest there shall be 11 rounds maximum, 6 rounds of chess, 5 rounds of boxing. A round of chess takes 4 minutes. Each competitor has 12 minutes on the chess timer. As soon as the time runs out the game is over. A round of boxing takes 2 minutes. Between rounds there is a 1 minute pause, during which competitors change their gear.

The contest is decided by checkmate, knock-out, retirement, exceeding the time limit at the board or a referee decision. If the chess game ends in stalemate, the highest scorer in the boxing rounds wins.

SU: When was the first chessboxing event and where did it take place?

IEPE: The first test fight took place at the legendary Platoon Court, in 2003 in Berlin (bog.platoon.org). We wanted to see how people would react, if the idea would work, if the spectators would be bored and if everybody would understand what was going on.

The first real world chessboxing performance took place the same year in Amsterdam.

SU: How was the reaction of the public at that time and in comparison, how is the reaction today? Did anything change?

IEPE: Because chessboxing is a whole new thing, people tend to be very surprised by seeing a chessboard in a boxing ring. The audience is a mixture of people. This time there were also older people and the spectators were much more excited. Sure you can push the whole thing by making a show out of it. The spectators feel like they are the chessboxers themselves. Everybody gets completely caught up in the steady alteration of concentration and aggressive fighting. The emotions turn from a high adrenaline level with uncontrolled shouts to the concentrated atmosphere at the chessboard. They go from one extreme to the other.

There is a nice sentence by a moderator that summarizes this experience: "Now that we go from boxing to playing chess I'm going to concentrate." The spectators think the same, but now we understand better how to deal with them.

SU: Which influence is stronger? The influence of the boxing on the chess or the other way around?

IEPE: In a physical sense the boxing influences the chess match a lot. The level of adrenaline after the boxing is very high and it is hard to get down and regain control over your mind and body. You need to have an excellent physical condition.

SU: You talk a lot about control. Is there another sport where the contrast is so strong – on one side the high concentration at the chessboard and on the other side the sudden physical effort?

IEPE: Maybe biathlon, but there you don't have to think.

SU: Is there a certain procedure in such a chessboxing event?

IEPE: So far there is a rather evolutionary order: first the chessboard is set up, then there is a game between two chess champions. After this there is the boxing: a first round with two women as a part of the show and finally both disciplines come together. The two opponents line up: fighter A comes with a rapper walking in front of him, his trainer behind him, then fighter B same way. The chessboxing then begins.

SU: Where do the chessboxing events take place?

IEPE: We organize chessboxing just in off-locations because of political reasons and the special atmosphere.

SU: You're combining an elitist sport with one that is expected to appeal the masses... to what extent does chess fit together with boxing?

IEPE: For me this is essential. My whole life I've been confronted with different values.

On one side I went to an elitist school, but I came from a simple neighborhood. My father is a carpenter, my mother works at a library. My father made an effort to get some extra education, but still he comes from an working class environment. I also worked as a carpenter before and at construction sites, but later on I went to university.

I grew up in a neighborhood where many Moroccan and Turkish people lived. I got to know people from very different worlds and I figured out that many prejudices were just wrong.

SU: Did you want to bring these worlds together one day?

IEPE: I wanted people to understand that you can bring worlds together no matter how far from each other they may appear.

In both worlds you can find pearls and stupid people. We created something that's a hybrid: chessboxing, something like "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance".

WCBO is kind of an intellectual "Fightclub". The interesting thing in this movie was for me to see how fast such an organization spreads because it responds to the needs of people who are often frustrated for something that includes more than one discipline; it responds to the need to build bridges between worlds that are not supposed to go together, but do.

SU: What about women in chessboxing?

IEPE: I would be very proud to present the first female chessboxing event. Hopefully that will become true soon.

SU: Where will the next chessboxing event be?

IEPE: Definitely in Cologne, in February 2006.
And there are rumours that Vitali Klitschko and Lennox Lewis are interested.

SU: Who is the perfect chessboxer? Which qualities must he have? How do you recrute your chessboxers?

IEPE: You have to be open minded. The perfect chessboxer has to have a natural interest in both disciplines. They come from everywhere; mostly we recruit them through the Internet.

SU: Would you agree that chessboxing is sexy?

IEPE: Yes - body and mind!

SU: Something like this is not often to be found: forms of controlled violence.

IEPE: Yes, that is very important: Boxing is the limit of acceptable violence. In Sweden professional boxing is forbidden, which I think is unhealthy. A society needs aggressiveness. We don't need to fight it, we need it in everyday life. But nobody needs to die in the fight. If somebody dies then there must have been mistakes. The risks have to stay at a low level.

SU: What is IEPE's identity? Is IEPE a chess player, a boxer, an artist, a joker? You create several web sites, different identities--is every project presenting one of your identities?

IEPE: I try to live my many facets as honestly as possible. I'm working with poetical approaches, with entertainment, political, social or decadent approaches...

People are not one-dimensional, so they shouldn't be expected to represent themselves this way.

SU: One can say that chessboxing was born out of an artistic intention, it was supposed to exist for a couple of events, but now a whole sport has grown out of it.

IEPE: Yes, but I wonder when we crossed the border...

SU: Well, this is the interesting point. When did it transform into sport, when was it still art? Or is it art per se because you're an artist?

IEPE: All I know is that, with my art, I try to communicate ideas and to tell stories to an audience, and that for some projects there needs to be a big audience. I started chessboxing because there were so many subjects that were appealing. And one of the most important subjects was: How can you control violence?

We want to organize a fight between a Palestinian and a Jew in Jerusalem to underline the motto of the World Chess Boxing Organization (WCBO): "Fighting is done in the ring & wars are waged on the board." And the winner can decide what happens with Jerusalem.

SU: But then it is art again; in sport things like that don't exist.

IEPE: But there were also sport events like the fight between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling in New York. Schmeling won the fight by knockout of the till-then unbeaten American boxer Joe Louis. The propaganda of the Nazis celebrated the victory over the black boxer as the proof of "Aryan superiority". It was all about "black America against the Germany of the Nazis".

Also the fight between George Foreman and Mohammed Ali went beyond normal sport...

SU: That's right, but these things were due to the political situation. But you are creating something new: if the winner of the fight in Jerusalem can decide what happens with Jerusalem, that has a political dimension as well as an artistic one, even though it is only virtual...

IEPE: Right, that's a little artistic intervention...

SU: Have you ever asked people what they think about the fact that worldchessboxing was created by an artist?

IEPE: In Wikipedia Germany somebody wrote to the notion "worldchessboxing": "Well, that's an artist, he is not to be taken seriously." And then a whole discussion came up about whether an artist is allowed to invent a new sport. I ask: Is an artist only being ironic if he is doing something like that? I'm an artist who has never set himself any boundaries. Since the 20th century there is a common philosophy in modern art that art can be anything.

Art should be as free as possible. This freedom sure has moral limits: you can't kill people for art. But that means that you can make a theater play, music, sport... I can think of everything that is possible. The crucial question is: How can I communicate the idea that in art everything is possible to the people and reach my audience without scaring it off?

I haven't found an answer yet. This outlook is not yet accepted by the people. If I communicate the WCBO only as an art project I wouldn't reach as many people. Art still has an elitist image and is still very far from the general society. That's a shame.

There are examples like Christo who works in a rather broad way and who is very successful and reaches a big audience. Or the Danish action artist Jakob Boeskov who I think highly of, who went to the Chinese police trade fair and tried to sell a gun. Most art is still presented in museums though. For me it is a challenge to bridge the gap between my conviction and the public aversion towards this philosophy.

SU: Probably the WCBO will still exist even after you have left one day...

IEPE: I will become a background player more and more. I will only deal with some structural things, but maybe one day I lose control and it becomes an autonomous thing. That wouldn't be bad though. In the end it is all about the thing itself. But we want to keep control over the aesthetics, we want to control the corporate identity. It should keep its own style and not become a flashy sport thing.

SU: That means if one day a sportshoe-company approaches you...

IEPE: ...then we agree but only with our conditions. It's the same with TV broadcasts. We decide which channel is going to broadcast the event. We would never perform chessboxing in a dictatorship for instance. But it could happen one day that we lose control and get swallowed by the other side.

SU: Do you believe in miracles?

IEPE: Yes, in a poetic way. I believe in nice daydreams but that doesn't mean that I don't know the difference between reality and fiction any more. But sometimes I ignore this difference and prefer thinking that things are like I imagine them. It's a lot of fun and it gives me a certain stability. You can form your life with these games. Sometimes I'm astonished myself that some things really have been brought to life, like the WCBO, even though I was part of planning and leading it. It's like: Wow, great! But where does it come from? It's an experience, and only in the end can you see if everything worked out.

IEPE, thank you

Photos of the fight 2005: www.sushu.de/wcbo2/

© Susanne Schuricht
contact: www.sushu.de

A shorter version got published in the January / February Issue 2006 of the Italian magazine Tema Celeste, ISSN 1128-6601 (No. 113)

Translation: Judith Büttner/Marcus Soifer

short bio IEPE B.T.Rubingh

Urinal 2005, Exhibition, Shopped to Death, Tuteurhaus, Berlin

Chess Boxing Club Berlin, start training, Gormannstrasse, Berlin

World Chess Boxing Organisation, Ausstellung/Demonstrationskampf, T&S Gallery, Tokyo

2003 World Chess Boxing Organisation, Exhibition, MAMA Showroom, Rotterdam

1st Worldchampionship Chess Boxing, cultural sport event, Paradiso, Amsterdam

2002 The Berlin miracle, installation, Hackescher Markt, Berlin

1999 - 2001 Jokeers Performances in Berlin Tokyo and NY, Iepe played the part of a protective fool who expressed social criticism without restraint. Without official authorization, he blocked busy intersections in the city centres with red-and-white barrier tape. 1998 The wall at Potsdamer Platz, installation, Berlin

1993 - 1997 History studies, Amsterdam

1974 Born in Rotterdam