

Chess boxing: From page to performance to sport, exploring the transition of art to competition

Chess boxing, a sport in modern times that likely does not ring many bells for people. It is a hybrid sport that combines the beauty of the mind and intellect through one of the oldest, still well-known board games: chess, with the brawl and violence, and all that is physical, through boxing. A sport composed of eleven alternating rounds of boxing followed by chess. This means six four-minute rounds of speed chess with five three-minute rounds of boxing. Moreover, winning conditions are only through knockout, checkmate, or if drawn, then points will determine the winner¹. A rather unique sport, but also a unique history. This paper will investigate the unusual evolution of chessboxing, tracing its development from a fictional idea introduced in a comic book to its reinterpretation as a performance-art piece and, finally, its transformation into a fully institutionalized modern sport. By following this trajectory, this paper argues that chessboxing serves as a case study for understanding how artistic creations are not fixed in meaning, purpose, or identity but instead remain open to reinterpretation as they move through different social contexts. The shift from a symbolic, expressive art performance to a structured athletic competition seen in chess boxing reveals how external forces, such as artistic reinterpretations of an already existing work can reshape an artwork's function over time. Through the lens of chessboxing, this paper demonstrates that art can inherently be dynamic: it can build new layers of significance and cross boundaries into entirely new domains of human activity. The evolution of chessboxing will illustrate how an artistic concept can be reimagined to

¹ Zivkovic Bora, The Best Science Writing Online (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 181.

the point that it becomes a sport, showing that the line between artistic expression and competitive practice is far more fluid than usually assumed by people.

“Froid Equateur” or its English translation title “Equator Cold” was published in 1992 by Yugoslavian-born French comic book creator Enki Bilal. The third book in the trilogy, titled “The Nikopol Trilogy,” sets the stage for the first introduction of chess boxing the world had seen. While I will not dive into the specifics of this trilogy, I do want to elaborate on the specific portion of this work where chess boxing is introduced. It begins with the introduction of a character named John Elvis Johnelvisson, who is the champion of the northern hemisphere in all categories of chess boxing within this universe where the plot takes place. He is set to take a train ride to Equator City, where he will be “chessboxing” an opponent named Loopkin. The comic demonstrates chess boxing as a very intensive and arduous competition that is composed of two portions evenly split.

For the first half, boxing and only boxing are present. Standard rules apply as to modern boxing; however, after this half is done, the competition shifts to only chess, and standard chess rules also apply to this portion of the match. If the winner did not win during the boxing half, they can only win in the chess half. As for the winner of this competition? Loopkin wins the match during the chess portion through unconventional methods (He uses his god given power of the Egyptian deity Horus to shoot lasers out of his eyes and disintegrate his opponents face)². Nevertheless, Chess boxing was first introduced to the world as a fictional sport in a science-fiction comic book that originally consisted of a first half of boxing and a second half of chess. Its goal? To determine the fittest being on Earth.

² Bilal Enki, The Nikopol trilogy (Humanoids Publishing, 1999), 141-162.

Although the format of chessboxing within the comic was impractical (one full match of boxing followed by one full game of chess) and the impossible nature of determining who is the fittest person on Earth simply through one sport, it did inspire curiosity in a Dutch performance artist named Iebe “Joker” Rubingh. In 2003, Rubingh was inspired by the premise of chessboxing introduced in “The Nikopol Trilogy” and decided to bring this idea to life. As an artist, he believed people tended to divide everything into different worlds, yet he thought worlds were more connected than people saw them at first. Rubingh unveiled his performance at the German art gallery Platoon Kunsthalle Berlin, an experimental space for artists and creatives. The performance served to explore how concepts that are divided into specific categories are, in fact, more closely related through their ability to combine and form something unique and expressive³. Performed with the assistance of Rubingh’s friend, Luis “The lawyer” Veenstra, the performance was adapted from its original format in “Equator Cold” to include alternating rounds of both boxing and chess to create this constant flow to the performance. It also highlights how the movement of the performers can reflect the idea of world concepts interacting with one another more frequently than people think⁴.

Rubingh took a comic book idea and converted it into this artistic piece that represented motion as a way of demonstrating the manner in which ideas can come together. He did this to create a meaningful performative work that highlights the complexity of topics as impossible to categorize into one single role. His performance through chess boxing revolutionized the concept found in “The Nikopol Trilogy” as a thinking exercise for people to consider the world and its ideas as being more closely related to one another. The performance was also an overall success,

³ Moss Stephen, Wanna piece of this? (The Guardian, 2005)

⁴ Forrest Brett, By Hook or By Rook (Espn.Com, 2007)

inspiring Rubingh to perform his piece once more, but this time with the mindset of potentially evolving his work into a functioning sport.

This shift from a performance expressing motion with a message took on a new perspective when Rubingh introduced his creation for the second time in Amsterdam, three months after its inception at the Platoon Kunsthalle Berlin Art gallery, this time as the “Chess boxing middleweight world championship.” This second appearance of the performance took on a *Fin de siècle* feel as described by Rubingh, and his belief on how chess boxing combined elements of the complete man, one prepared for any eventuality, not a brute nor a hopeless nerd. The feeling highlighted a moment of emergence, taking up a new form and transition to display the performance as serious as being in an apocalyptic situation. It reflects Rubingh’s feeling towards his take on chess boxing as more than a simple creation, but a take on fusing the human mind and human body to push it past its limits⁵. In the end, this championship marked the beginning of the process of chess boxing being described as a “sport” for the first time.

This continued transformation of ideas demonstrates how an idea can take on a new identity when exposed to an external source. Rubingh first took the concept created by Bilal in the 90s and made it functional in the real world. He transformed the identity of this idea to conform with his artistic beliefs and styles, achieving a performance that was personal to him, notwithstanding its original premise found in “Equator Cold.” By doing this, Rubingh was able to reveal the fluidity of art and show how dynamic a piece can be in meaning, identity and in purpose.

Now, the attention Rubingh’s piece received inspired him to continue performing his art, yet by losing its symbolic and expressive meaning to conform with the rules of a competition.

⁵ Ledger Sally, *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History* (OUP Oxford, 2000), 14

Rubingh founded the World Chess Boxing Organizations (WCBO) the same year he first presented his performance to the world in Berlin. However, this time marketed as a hybrid sport rather than an art piece⁶. Once chessboxing entered the realm of an organized athletic competition, its purpose shifted away from the conceptual message that originally defined it. The work was no longer centered on questioning categories, blending worlds, or provoking reflection; instead, the structure of sport required prioritizing measurable outcomes, standardized rules, and the pursuit of victory. In becoming a sport, chessboxing necessarily prioritized winning, training, and competitive performance, which displaced the symbolic and interpretive dimensions that had once been central to Rubingh's artistic intent.

I have talked plenty of chess boxing as a sport, but what specifically allowed Rubingh's art performance to be able to adapt and take the role of a sport rather than staying as an art piece? This can be explained through understanding what it means to even be considered a sport. Using Jay Schulkin's definition of "sport" in his work "Sport: A biological, philosophical, and cultural perspective," we can understand the definition of a sport for our needs. Schulkin states, "A sport must be an activity that exhibits physical prowess that can be practiced and intentional, with applied movements that reach beyond the ordinary. In essence, they must be considered athletes."⁷ When we compare this definition to what it means for a piece to be an art performance, we see that an art performance is a way of engaging with social reality and exploring the specifics of space and how the piece asks questions about identity and what it means to be a work⁸. Chessboxing, hence, was able to shift from an art performance to a sport once it met the criteria Jay Schulkin outlines for athletic activity. Originally staged as a conceptual performance, chessboxing functioned as a commentary on how worlds are actually

⁶ Bryant Sydney, Chess Boxing (Prezi.com, 2015)

⁷ Schulkin Jay, Sport: A Philosophical, and Cultural Perspective (Columbia University Press, 2016), 14.

⁸ Tate, Performance art (Tate, 2001)

more similar than they first appear, targeting the idea that separating creations into different categories was an unjustifiable action, and using the body and space to question this identity and fault in logic. But as the activity developed rules, training methods, and competitive structure, it began to exhibit the “physical prowess” and intentional, practiced movement Schulkin requires. Boxing rounds demanded athletic skill beyond the ordinary, while the cognitive strain of chess under fatigue became a measurable performance factor. Once participants were trained systematically and recognized as athletes rather than performers, chess boxing moved from this symbolic exploration of concepts combined into one, and into a sport grounded in repeatable, competitive physical practice. It is in this manner that Rubingh was able to convert his art performance into the sport he hoped would get attention globally.

As a sport, chess boxing experienced its first major competition in Cologne, Germany, when German police officer Frank Stoldt took on Zoran Mijatovic for the European Championship title. Rubingh described this process as one of his greatest successes, being able to bring serious competition into what was once just an “art project,” now attracting serious talent and changing the view of chess boxing from a performance to a serious combat sport⁹. Hence, what has come about from chess boxing in modern times? While still relatively niche, there have been major moments in the sport in recent times that have really propelled and cemented Rubingh’s performance into the sport it seeks to be taken as.

In 2022, a popular streamer and youtuber known for his comedic and varied content, ranging from online video games to live challenges to chess, named Ludwig, organized what would be to this day the biggest chess boxing event yet. His Mogul Chessboxing Championship event, according to a Chess watch article by Alexey Borisov titled “Mogul Chessboxing

⁹ Forrest Brett, By Hook or By Rook (Espn.Com, 2007)

Championship recap: Ludwig sets new personal YouTube viewership record,” explains how “The Mogul Chessboxing championship reached 317,000 peak viewers, fans watched the event for 1.4 million hours, and there was an average of 252000 viewers tuned in to every match.” A critical detail showing how a popular online event greatly increased interest in the sport and curiosity in so many people. Borisov continues “Viewers praised the event, many claiming they were not fans of either sport, but still enjoyed the event, moreover the event was not only broadcasted in English but in French and Spanish as well.” This line reveals how chess boxing has been able to reach diverse communities and capture a broad audience of viewers, effectively building a greater fanbase for the sport and increasing awareness of its existence¹⁰.

Even so, potentially the most important development for chess boxing yet would be its appearance at the 2024 Paris Olympics, a quite poetic milestone for chess boxing, as it was first introduced to the world in France through “The Nikopol Trilogy” back in 1992. Chess boxing appeared as an exhibition match as part of the cultural event of the Paris Olympics 2024, and also featured the first ever official match fought between female fighters at the Intellectual Fight Club, a chess boxing event within the official chessboxing organization in France. With over 2500 live spectators and over 200 international journalists, it truly highlights chess boxing’s transition into potentially becoming part of the Olympics, a dream Rubingh had since its inception¹¹.

Ultimately, through chess boxing's transformation from a page to a performance to a sport, we see this identity change in a work of art that nonetheless once existed simply as an idea.

The original meaning of chess boxing present in “The Nikopol Trilogy,” was a match of fitness,

¹⁰ Borisov Alexey, Mogul Chessboxing Championship recap: Ludwig sets new personal Youtube viewership record (Chess Watch, 2022).

¹¹ Popli Tina, Sneha Waykar Clinches the Title in Cultural Olympiad - IFC 6 Chessboxing Fight (ChessBase India, 2024)

which was transformed by Iepe Rubingh to be a social commentary on how humans have this unjustifiable reasoning to divide ideas, concepts, and topics into different categories. It served to represent and criticize that idea and show the world division is not the answer, displaying this through its combination of what is considered two very different concepts: chess and boxing. Furthermore, the performance then experiences a change in identity of its own when it moves into acquiring a sport identity. While it can still serve as a commentary on human thought, it is nevertheless presently seen as a sport where winning is the most important goal. This marks how external forces can evolve a work or idea to achieve this ever-changing flow and creativity in art.

Finally, I want to explain why this is even important in the first place. Why does the creation of chess boxing matter? Chess boxing illustrates this idea that I believe all art goes through. What begins as a simple artistic impulse can evolve as new interpretations and contexts that reshape it, gradually transforming the identity of the original work. It allows for this constant creativity that we saw with chess boxing; a limitless path where one idea leads to the other. It also allowed art to reach broader audiences and really demonstrate that nothing really stays the same forever if there is someone to just play around with an existing concept and bring a new twist for the world to learn and possibly benefit from. While my paper analyzes that transition in chess boxing, there may be other ideas awaiting to follow a unique path, such as the one chess boxing experienced (and likely will keep experiencing exciting developments).

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