

**INTERVIEW
KENDELL GEERS**



Foreword: A Convergence of Art and Football: An Interview with Kendell Geers

On June 16, 2023, marking the 47th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprisings, a pivotal moment in South African history, Alexander Richards and Phokeng Setai, co-founders of 'Exhibition Match', an experimental artistic project and social intervention, engaged in a compelling conversation with Kendell Geers. Geers, a conceptual artist and curator of South African origin, sat down to discuss his role as the orchestrator of what could be considered the historical predecessor of 'Exhibition Match' an innovative blend of football and art exhibition aimed at connecting art practitioners.

This conversation gains added significance in light of the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale, a remarkable event that unfolded a year after South Africa's inaugural free elections. Titled 'Africus', the biennale united artists from 63 countries, with 20 hailing from Africa, in a sprawling showcase spread across 15 exhibition venues in central Johannesburg. The recorded attendance ranged from 45,000 to 50,000 visitors. Christopher Till, the co-curator of this transformative biennial alongside Lorna Ferguson, aptly summarized its impact by stating, "After years of isolation resulting from the apartheid system, the Biennale of Johannesburg aimed to restore the dialogue between South Africa and the international art scene."

At the center of this interview lies Kendell Geers, a Leondale-born artist who emerged from a working-class suburb on the East Rand outside Johannesburg during the era of apartheid. Geers enrolled at Wits University to evade conscription into the South African Defense Force, ultimately becoming a pioneering figure in the African conceptual art movement. With an impressive roster of international exhibitions and biennales to his name, including participation in the Venice Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, and Documenta, Geers has traversed the global art scene with his thought-provoking works.

In 2007, Geers embarked on his first retrospective exhibition titled 'Irrespektiv' captivating audiences as it toured from BPS22 in Charleroi, Belgium, to SMAK in Gent, Belgium, and beyond, leaving a mark at renowned institutions like the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, DA2 Domus Artium, and MART. The Haus der Kunst in Munich hosted his second retrospective, organized by Okwui Enwezor in 2013.

Through this interview, readers will gain insights into Kendell Geers'; artistic journey, his innovative approach to merging art and sports, and his reflections on the ever-evolving global art landscape. Geers' unique perspective and his unwavering commitment to pushing boundaries make this dialogue a must-read for art enthusiasts, curators, and cultural connoisseurs alike.

We extend our gratitude to Kendell Geers for generously sharing his time and thoughts, allowing us to unravel the depths of his artistic vision and its impact on the world.

Join us as we embark on this enlightening journey into the mind of an artist who continuously challenges convention and sparks meaningful dialogue through his artistic practice.

Phokeng and Alex:

Thanks for speaking to us today Kendell. We heard rumours about an art football match in 1995 but when we looked for info online - we couldn't find any. We found some pics in your book but no text.

Kendell Geers:

A lot of the things that happened between the period of 1990 - 1997 were seminal in what makes South Africa what it is today - certainly in terms of the art system. It's terrifying how few people actually realise this, because the history books have not been written and the information is not out there - and it's before social media and before the internet exploded the way it did - now everything is online. So if it is not in a book or documented you are not going to be able to access it unless somebody talks about it. It's great for me to be speaking to two young guys about this.



William Kentridge & Doris Bloom, *Fire/Gate*, (1995)



Johannesburg Biennale 95 catalogue cover

P+A: Tell us more about your relationship with the sport of football?

KG:

My relationship to football is an interesting one because - growing up during apartheid as a white kid you get born with a rugby ball in your arms - like before you meet your mother. It was a joke my family always made - you know your rugby ball better than you know your parents. An idea of how important Rugby was - at some time in my life I found myself at an all-boys school in Durban and I was in the 6th or 7th team - this shows you how important rugby was - there were 7 teams! And of course the 1st team were taking it very seriously and trying to win but by the time you get to the 7th team you are just kind of having fun and kicking the ball around. Rugby never really worked for me - in school I was a bit of a nerd and it was normally the rugby boys who were bullying me so I didn't have a great relationship to it. Football was an interesting sport to me, at that time, an underground alternative, a thing which was not popular, at least at any schools I went to - I mean I joined the local football team and it always had a sort of magic around it. I think you know that the origin of football is from a Mayan game or ritual where two teams were kicking around a decapitated head to score goals. The idea that football originated in the Global South - the fact that it originated in an off-site - inspired me.



The Maya ballgame (pok-ta-pok or pitz), was only one type of several played throughout Mesoamerica

P+A: And then tell us a bit more about your works about or around Football - particularly 'Masked Ball'

KG:

My work is a lot about language and what predates language are very basic human needs like food, music, weapons (to hunt or defend ourselves) and sport and art. And it is interesting if you take those categories and you put them together - so sport and weapons ends up as football - music and art or weapons end up as ritual - and how these things end up then construct our faith - but art is always there - from the origin of the species - and sport is always there. So this relationship with art and football as these two primary things working together always fascinated me and I was always interested how we could mix up art, sport, politics and populism without compromising any of the languages. I'm also interested in mysticism and symbolism and the fact that there are 22 people on the playing field is fascinating because this is an extremely mythological number. The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and Greek alphabet - it's a very powerful number and interesting coincidence - I suspect it might not be a coincidence.





KG:

So I made a work that has two titles because it exists in two ways. One is called, 'Kicking Against the Pricks' a text from the bible and Nick Cave made an album of the same title and the other one is called 'Masked Ball' and there are 11 presidents - up until very recently they were all white and male - Putin was always there, back in the day there was Tony Blair, George Bush - it changes each time to keep up where these white men are going. There is a football inside each of these latex masks - you kick these presidents in the face - a bit like the Mayans kicking the severed heads and the work is that you participate in this kicking a politician in the face. The work when showed in a Museum questions how we use a museum - the middle of the word museum is 'use' and how do we use a museum - and I always took offense to the 'hands behind your back' and walking possibly around a white cube space that resembles a quarantine zone or a toilet - nothing you would want to spend time in - and I wanted to activate that space, make it fun. I wanted people to laugh to scream to run to actually do something like being alive.



KG:

Kicking a ball is an act that makes you feel very alive. Of course there is the risk then that the ball gets kicked into a painting or somebody else's work of art - I mean if you get very excited there is the risk you could do that. Until now I have never had someone damage another work of art with one of my masked balls but I have had my masked balls stolen - almost every time I show the work. I did that for a few years and then I realised I had started collecting these dirty balls - and I liked the title 'Dirty Balls' so I decided that another symbolic, free mason number 33 - would be perfect for these balls and put them in a football goal net in a way that made them look like testicles hanging from the ceiling and that was the work 'Dirty Balls' - it's really a nice symbolic, political monument to people having kicked these 33 presidents in the face. My work is always European and African simultaneously - and the African mask has its value from how often it's been used, the value is the patina, and the more a mask is used or danced the more authentic it becomes. Following that logic these 33 dirty balls have a deep authenticity because they have been worn, they have been used, they have acquired a patina of time, the patina of a function.





P+A: Tell us a bit more about the 1995 Biennale in Johannesburg.

KG:

Lorna Ferguson was a good friend and I was extremely supportive of the biennale from the very beginning and I was on the committee - I was one of the first people that Lorna came to speak to about what a biennale was and I gave her advice. By the time I saw the biennale coming into shape - I realized that I wasn't going to see the exhibition that I wanted to see - so I then resigned from the committee and I put in an application as a curator. As a South African curator - I think there were maybe 20 shows permitted by South Africans. But I observed that the model that Lorna had chosen was the 'Magiciens de la Terre' model - I have deep respect for Jean-Hubert Martin and what he did in 1989 - but it wasn't a model I was interested in as I felt it was a in favour of the European or American Avant-garde and 3rd world artists were naive artisans painting wood. The idea of the intelligent, sophisticated Avant-gard-ist from the Global South was not part of the discussion. Lorna chose this model because she needed the show to be popular and supported so that there could be the second biennale in 1997.



Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou in August 1989

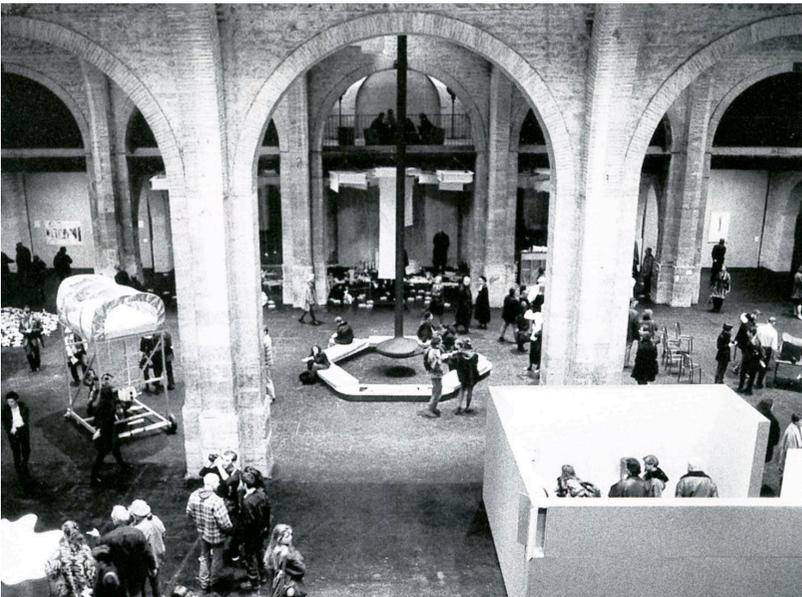
So I wanted to see an exhibition of 3rd world artists but the artists needed to be smart, sophisticated, cutting-edge, intellectual and uncompromising - there were two exhibitions themes proposed by the Biennale - 'Volatile Alliances' and 'Decolonising our Minds' - so I put those together and titled the show 'Volatile Colonies' and I invited seven artists from the 3rd world - Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Janine Antoni, Hany Armanious, Carlos Capelán, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov and Paul Ramírez Jonas. I got a lovely fax from Félix González-Torres saying he would love to be in the show but he is too busy doing his retrospective at the Guggenheim. These were all kick-ass, Avant-garde artists from the 3rd world, and this in many ways laid the foundation for what eventually becomes the 2nd Joburg biennale. At the time it was scandalous - there I was a South African curator making this international exhibition of artists nobody had heard of - today if you say Rirkrit or Phillip or Ilya - you cant imagine that in 1995 they were unknown here. The artists had to wear little name cards - so if all the artists on the South African show had the label 'South African Artist' - so I was walking around the biennale with 'Felix Gonzales-Torres: South African Artist' - because no one had figured out he hadn't arrived and wasn't South African - so all these people were looking at me like how the fuck and the South Africans were like who is that.



A group of artists in the Johannesburg Biennale including Lisa Brice and Brett Murray

So the football match comes in at that point. So most South Africans took it for a joke - it was like something silly - I had a reputation of doing stupid things - I was known as the 'enfant terrible' - I was exhibiting things that weren't works of art and on the front pages of newspapers. I was a joke. So a football match in a biennale was not taken seriously - it was entertaining - a lot of people came to watch - it was a big audience. It was so fun.

What I really liked about the football match and what made it really powerful then as well as today - you know there were 22 people playing - 22 artists, 22 writers, 22 different memories, 22 different winners and losers. The origin of the work is in the context of the show in Bordeaux 'Traffic' in 1996 - Nicolas Bourriaud - curated around his idea of 'Relational Aesthetics' and Philip and Rikrit were two of the most important artists on that show in terms of defining what relational aesthetics is. I met Nicolas just before he curated the show, he wanted me to be on the show, and I said I don't make relational aesthetics I make relational ethics - I was a tough little revolutionary at the time and I was not interested in aesthetics.



Traffic, CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, March 1996



Group photo of artists on *Traffic*, 1996

KG:

I can't remember how much money I was given for the exhibition - I think it was R20 000 - really not a lot of money. But I got the budget for a South African exhibition because I was a South African curator - I wasn't allowed to apply for an international show. And basically I had enough money to pay for the air fair of the artists - that's all. So I called up these international superstars and I said I want to invite you to South Africa - this is the deal - I'm going to buy you an aeroplane ticket and then when you arrive in South Africa - you are going to sleep on a friend's sofa - I am going to give you a student who would act as a translator - very little production fee and come to South Africa and figure it out - make a work. There was no budget for anything and yet they all said yes based off the idea of my project.

Ilya Kabakov burst out laughing and said I am going to pay my own first class air fair and stay in the Rosebank Hotel. But the rest of them stayed on somebody's sofa - the premise of the exhibition was come to South Africa in terms of relational aesthetics, in terms of the things we do socially and create or generate the works of art. Come here, meet people, work with students and we will figure it out.

I went off to Wits University and Professor Crump said he wasn't going to give me his students - he refused and refused to be involved and make it an official Wits project. So I spoke to other lecturers and had a lunch-time meeting and the word spread. I was specifically looking for second year students - first year student had still a lot to figure out - and third year students would be too jaded and would have already figured everything out - so I needed 2nd years. They were between knowing nothing and knowing it all - and Tracey Rose was one of those students. Prof Crump said to Tracey if she doesn't come to class she is going to fail. I said to Tracey forget about class and that she will learn more with the artists than all her years at the art school.

Titled 'Africus', the biennale was the South African art world's international coming-out party. Now that cultural boycotts were no longer in play, the biennale tried to restore the country's artistic dialogue and exchange with the world.

"... people from all over the world, who are the most rigorous thinkers, were making work out of stuff in real time. That's not necessarily paint on canvas; it's material and matter that speaks. It blew my mind. I cried for a year. I couldn't. I had a breakdown because I realised the depth of the deception and how far and controlled it was. Seeing people of colour make art in my lifetime blew me the fuck away," says Rose.

"It's important to know who came before. All those amazing people ... I carry them with me in my work," she says, after referring to her first encounter with contemporary artist Carlos Capelán from Uruguay.

More than one layer to the art and life of Tracey Rose

Zaza Hlaethwa

Mail & Guardian

29 MAR 2019



Tracey Rose, *Span II*, 1997

We were having dinner somewhere, Rikrit, Phillipe, Joachim (Schönfeldt), Tracey and myself and Philippe and Rikrit wanted to see a local football match - I think they went to see Orlando Pirates play. They were shocked that when they arrived at the stadium they were searched - like at an airport - they didn't understand why they had to be searched. Until at some time during the football match guns come out and people were shooting the air - they panicked. We were sitting there that evening talking about how terrifying that was - and then somehow during our discussions we came up with an idea collectively: let's have a football match.



Artists before the match - Kendell Geers far left, Rikrit Tiravanija second last on the right

We were walking around with these nametags saying 'South African Artist' which they weren't and then about the Xenophobia in South Africa and it was the end of the provincial moment - when we couldn't imagine that there was a better rugby team than the Springboks - a better art world than that of South Africa - so the idea of the match was to then play off that Xenophobia - to play off 'us vs them', foreigners vs locals. Tracey was there, I had a very old video camera like a VHS and she didn't know how to use the video camera so there was a lot of zooming in and zooming out - the footage was unusable - we tried to slow it down to make it look better. I took some photos which are the only photos that exists. Everyone was there but apart from that there was nothing. What was really interesting was - who is the author of that work of art? What's great is that the whole idea of football is something that one shares collectively and I think that specific project there is no author - we are all part of it. Joachim will say it's his work of art, Rikrit and Philippe will say the same - I was the curator, I can say it was my work of art - that's why I often refer to that work as the 'Treason of Images' based of the René Magritte work containing the words 'this is not a pipe' - alluding to the fact that we are all authors - we were all contributing, we were all participating.



René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929

And then regarding the kit. Of course if you are playing a football match you need teams - and how do we identify the teams. At the time - I was very anti-aesthetics, anti the concept of beauty - I had produced a t-shirt saying 'in your eye' as in beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but also fuck you, it's in your eye. I had made those T-shirts as a work of art that nobody cared about - I was interested in art that you can wear, art that you can sit on, art that you can use, art that has social function - I call them my social sculptures - and I still do a lot of them. I had these t-shirts lying around useless - so the one team would be wearing 'in your eye' - the local team. And then with the foreign team, for years I'd been collecting South African news headlines, the ones on the side of the road - in South Africa they are remarkable - I will never forget one that says 'Dog Shoots Man' - they are surreal. And I had a collection of these headlines and I went to a print shop, we photographed and scanned them and printed them onto shirts - so basically these weird surrealist daily headlines mixed with beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Those were the kits.



Team photo showing the two different T-shirts used. Christopher Till (Director of the Biennale Project) second from the left

We played the match on a tarmac, the parking lot of the Market Theatre - now called Mary Fitzgerald Square. The flea market was taking place there every Saturday during that period between 1990 and 1997. The Market Theatre was really inspiring for me - I remember seeing a play there 'Asinamali!' which was mind-blowing because you had 4 or 5 black actors on stage who were wearing overalls, it was like protest theatre. And then they would want talk about a policeman and they would take out a plastic red nose from their pocket and would put it on and then become policemen and take it off to be protesters again. It was this economy of means that fascinated me - just a simple use of a piece of plastic and you change your character instantly. That inspired me and gave me hope that I don't need a lot of money to make art, I just need the red nose.

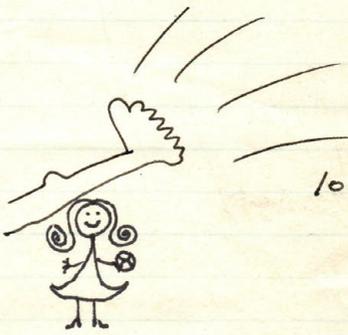
To play a football match you don't need anything, just inspire people to come together and kick a ball around. And the idea of the football match was that the whole exhibition was based off the intelligence from the Global South and I suppose people don't realise that the origin of football was Mayan civilization it's not a European sport.



The Market Theatre in Newtown, Johannesburg



'Asinamali!' programme, circa 1996

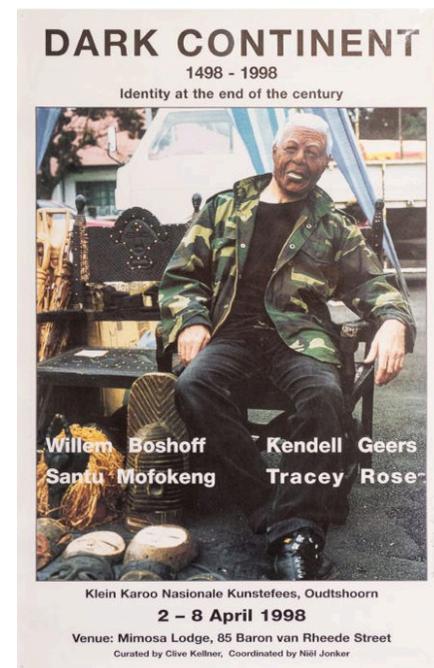
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|----|----------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | • Carlos Capelán |  | 10 |
| 2 | • PHILIPPE PARRENO | | 7 CANTON |
| 3 | • RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA | | MANAGER
2 CANTON |
| 4 | • ALFREDO PERIN | | 1 |
| 5 | • HANY ARMANIOUS | Egypt number one! | 6 |
| 6 | • LAURENT DOUBERT | | |
| 7 | • JOÃO FERNANDES | | 3 |
| 8 | • Luis IANPOS | | 8 |
| 9 | • PAUL RAMIZEE ZONAS | | |
| 10 | • Tony Bard | | |
| 11 | • Hercules Viljoen. | | |
| | • ERIC CANTON4 |  | 10 |
| 12 | • JANIEEN ANTONINE | | |
| 13 | • MONAMED ELBAZ | | |
| 14 | • WARLEN SEBRITS | | |

Hand-written team sheet listing players in the match during the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995

That flea market was loaded - there is a much earlier work of mine - which is from 1993 or 1994 where I am sitting at the flea market wearing a Mandela mask - that pre-dates it all - a work I made when I met Mandela - I was wearing camouflage and a Mandela mask - he shook my hand and said 'I recognise you' and I took the mask off and he signed it for me. It was also a reference to 'Black Skin, White Masks' by Frantz Fanon. So I have a very strong connection to that tarmac - that was our circumstance and reality - I wouldn't want to do that specific match on a nice grass field or make it more professional, we used means that we had at our disposal. We were using the playing field that was our playing field - let's do it there and nowhere else. The only thing I would change is better documentation - I would have had better people filming and photographing. At the beginning of the match the players all put their names on a piece of paper and at the end of the match we all signed the ball. Phillippe and Rikrit have the ball somewhere.



Pre-match discussions in the parking lot outside Museum Africa, 1995



'Dark Continent' exhibition poster