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Lead

施肇基个人则因其在五四新文学运动(译介加入文学革命)的大胆提倡而著名。¹⁴

丁氏所著的《达尔文科学史》为20世纪世界最早的中国科学通史和科技史,书中包罗了19世纪和20世纪初世界主要科技史。该书翻译了1936年出版的一本荷兰语科技史著作。该书命名为《达尔文科学史》,原书为荷兰语。

同年,他成为了南京国民政府外交部的科技参赞。1937年,他应丁惟汾的由南京赴桂林考察。1938年,他应丁惟汾(当时任中宣部负责“文艺室”主任)之邀,前往桂林,在桂林的“文艺室”任主任助理,负责桂林的文艺工作。¹⁵ 以及湖南沅江(沅江)的沅江师范学校任教。¹⁶

terms of gaining recognition outside of his native Hsin, Sze took upon New Year's Ark, which updates the biblical story of Noah with that of a man tasked "on someone 'beneath him' with having a group of strange creatures that appeared in the bathroom of his apartment. The work consisted of 'classical painting' (Noah's Great Flood), a small stone with the inscription 'you' on it (which Noah had found that same morning under his pillow); 12 drawings of the Ark, one book which describes everything in depth, strange sounds of running water and many, many colorful plastic creatures, crawling to their (but not our) deliverance.' (The stone was apparently sent in to banish the evil it was worshipped.) On the Benjani and nine Solomonic

高技科夫以另一个装置展结束了1990年代：作为代表保加利亚的艺术家在1999年底尼斯双年展上以名为“声明”的艺术行动大出

What followed was a decade of participation in various exhibitions and residences around the world. These included the recent exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and again in 2003; the same year he participated in Rome Biennale and later in founding the 4th International Biennial "Orientation" and became a board member of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia. In 1997, he participated in, among others, "Heavenly Public View/Private View," curated by Joshua Decker at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, and the Kwangju Biennale "Landscape on Earth," curated by Suee Wan Kwong.

过画中一个把猪鬃削成白色, 一个把猪鬃削成黑色, 云云。答曰:

Curated by Iara Buhanova, Solakov produced 15,000 postcards and 200 T-shirts, both printed with Bulgaria's tricolor and on which a statement announcing Bulgaria's preparedness to "properly participate in the next Venice Biennale in 2017" is written. After a near 30-year absence from the event,³ of course, the

the re was no Bulgarian Pavilion in 2011—to this day, Bulgaria is the only European Union state without a national pavilion. Nevertheless, Solakov did participate that year in Harald Szeemann's main show, "The Plateau of Humankind," staging *A Life (Black & White)* in one room of the main venue. The work involved two war heroes/painters following each other, one painting the walls of the exhibition space white and the other painting them black, for the entire duration of the exhibition.

The impact of these Venice participations cannot be understated, both in terms of Solakov's own practice as well as in the context of Bulgaria's contemporary art scene. In 2006, for example, an exhibition exploring the conceptual use of text in Bulgarian art at the Sofia City Art Gallery—curated by Maria Vassileva and Daniela Radeva—referred to Solakov's 1999 Venice Biennale in the title of the show: "Important, no income, not."

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足', 因为“至少在国际革命战争的天雷步轮
门轰击达成了相对和平。”

莱利科夫在每件作品中同时反映自己的身份并满足自己。这逐渐融入了他的整个创作实践——无论是保加利亚—俄罗斯武器设计师还是国际军火贸易的参与者，他关心的主题，还是他在“木偶”系列中设定的主题：“最终将是相对的和平。”

In one work, the Salavkova once celebrates his identity and subverts it—process that is embedded into his entire practice and whatever he produces, whether the focus is on something as specific as Bulgarian-Russian negotiations, or as universal as the absurd faces the artists wear on gilded, wooden surfaces and structures as part of his “icon” series. Absurdity as a form of potent meaning in Salavkova’s world, after all, is also exemplified in Negotiation, his Salavkova’s response to a 2003 invitation to exhibit *Net Ajiv Si Divi Gargara* for which the artist represented a representative of the Israeli State and a representative of the Palestinian Authority in Sofia, and asked if the Israeli and Palestinian leaders could have temporary cease-fire during his visit to Israel.

This steadfastly irreverent recalls Solakov's confession in *Top Secret*, and the newspaper article he published after exhibiting it back in 1990. In that article, he wrote: "I wanted to be a warning to all young people who might be misled to fall into the meticulously woven webs of the Institution." Most likely Solakov was also writing a warning to himself, one that

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(True) confessions: Nedko Solakov. Author: Stephanie Bailey
LEAP, February 2017

LEAP, February 2017



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

“ I have never
 Dreamt of Being an
A R T I S T
 AND THEN THAT
 ‘ S T A T E M E N T ’
 TURNS OUT TO BE
 THE BEGINNING OF
 SIX ROOMS FULL
 OF ARTISTIC STUFF. ”

By Iara Boubnova



Nedko Solakov is an internationally known artist, the master of witty narratives that are full of numerous, meticulously executed details. The narratives involve paintings, drawings, objects, text and the use of multimedia; they rely on space arrangements and achieve the perfect level of command over the total installation. However, each media used by the artist does not lose its own “dignity” and specific identity. Solakov is one of the most successful among the generation of artists that entered the profession at the end of the 1980s. For him, however, the meaning of “entering” had additional connotations, because it was not an act of simply joining the ranks of colleagues, as is usually the case with the advance of age and skills.

In 1989, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the world changed radically—most of all for the artists from the former Soviet bloc, to which Solakov’s native Bulgaria had belonged. The world became bigger and practically limitless. In this new world there were exhibitions, which were quite different from those that were organized according to the strict rules of the official Union of Bulgarian Artists at home. There were the international biennials, expositions of contemporary art initiated by famous museums and global art initiatives, art fairs and a basic freedom of movement between and contact with (though limited at first) events, venues, countries, curators and audiences. The term “nomad artists” came to the fore in the 1990s and was used to describe artists, including those of the post-Soviet generation. As a result of such optimistic dynamics, these artists were not only constantly on the move, but many of them eventually settled in geographical points that would be most beneficial for their work, with locations ranging from Berlin, Vienna and Hong Kong to London and Paris. Solakov is one of the few artists of his generation who is still living where he started—in Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria, the poorest country in the European Union, which the international media refers to as an epitome of corruption and social inequality.



Features: artslapacific.com

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Interview with Iara Boubnova.

Iara Boubnova: Why?

Nedko Solakov: That is a good question. Usually my answer is that I need Bulgaria to feed me with the sense of the absurd that exists in the present, in the everyday, in real life. Sometimes I am really jealous when I discover that an absurd story, outrageously hilarious, had happened before I could interfere with it. I only have to record it, but I usually don't do that. In the early 1990s, when there were hundreds of young artists emigrating, I was kind of nervous about all those people leaving the country and only me remaining here . . . (That did not come about and, actually, none of the people from my inner circle, which I've had for so many years, ended up leaving Bulgaria.) For quite some time my wife Slava also wanted us to emigrate, but I've consciously, and subconsciously, felt that it will be better for us to stay here. So I would say that for the last ten years or so, the question hasn't existed for me at all. It's just because I have the option to travel abroad for exhibitions and to always come back to Sofia. I know it may sound somewhat sentimental, but I love the nature of my country. This is despite the fact that we can walk in the woods in Germany or in Switzerland, and they are fantastic of course; yet the feeling I get at the end of the day is that Bulgaria is home for me, and that there is such diversity in the nature of the country. I really love it. Even though I am protesting all the time about the messes within society and actual daily life, in some ways that kind of stimulates me to make my own work and to keep on living here. And we have a very low income tax, by the way.

IB: During the era of socialism and the cultural isolation of Soviet countries (which in your case meant that your professional education as an artist was limited to a 19th-century academic model based on life drawing and other classical methods), you studied mural painting. How did that help you in your search for your own artistic language?

NS: When I entered the National Academy of Art, Sofia, in the mid-1970s, it was extremely prestigious to be an artist. If one were to rank the prestigious professions at the time, then, in a way, mural painting was at the top of the pyramid. At the same time, I actually touched turpentine and oil paints for the very first time only after I entered the Academy. Then it took me nearly three years until I got a hold of things and started to understand what I was doing. I began to make small paintings with a narrative in them that I really enjoyed. Fortunately, none of my professors

taught me how to build composition in a painting. In mural painting you were supposed to learn the techniques of fresco, secco, mosaics, sgraffito, stained glass, and to master drawing with various media, and so on and so forth. In spite of that it was still a very conservative learning process in the Academy. Yet, I still adhere to my professor Mito Ganovski's words: "No matter when you, as an artist, enter an architectural setting, even if the architecture was made especially for your artwork, you are always the second one there." I continue to follow these words for all of my narratives in three-dimensional spaces. I try to obey the architecture in order to start coexisting with it, and to win over it, in a way.

IB: How did it happen that, after starting from small canvases with narratives that were so acclaimed by critics in your country, you began getting rid of traditional painting in the mid-1980s?

NS: In 1986, I moved to a new studio in my parents-in-law's attic, and that space was full of a lot of old objects and various beautiful things, so I started adding stuff onto them. At the same time, I was still painting and taking part in the traditional artist's life in Bulgaria, showing at national exhibitions (and selling to state galleries, because, since 1980, my family and I have always lived off of my work). Meanwhile, five popular young painters, including myself, were approached by an art critic, Filip Zidarov, in order to make an exhibition without paintings ("The City?" 1988). This was a great stimulation for all of us. I already had started to make small assemblages and other things in the attic. For this show all of us made installations—even though we did not yet call it "installation" at the time, nor did we use the word "curator." But there was a moment when I was kind of pissed off that I was making paintings, and so I literally destroyed many of them. Some of their parts I stretched into smaller frames and by connecting them physically with other "stuff" I produced the first polyptychs.

IB: Would you agree with the metaphor that in your polyptychs there are actually whole exhibitions condensed in one piece?

NS: Maybe it's better to say that each of my exhibitions is one piece. But you know, I have kept on producing "polyptychs." Even now, all of the series of drawings displayed on my table for "ready drawings" are following the same path. It is out of the question for me to think that



drawing #1, for example, will become drawing #8. That's because there is a kind of narrative where they all work together visually, but also organized conceptually.

IB: When did you start producing your large series of drawings?

NS: That was for my very first show in a private gallery. It was interesting that I already had three solo shows in museums with no international gallery presentation. It might have been different if I had lived in the West, where everybody knows the usual way for an artist to become known. After the changes in the Eastern Bloc I strove to make my work familiar in the West. By the early 1990s I had already started making museum solo shows, like in 1994 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje, where I presented the installation *The Superstitious Man* (1992–94), which was also shown at the Bard College Museum in upstate New York. In the same year, I had *The Collector of Art (Somewhere in Africa there is a great black man collecting art from Europe and America, buying his Picasso for 23 coconuts . . .)* (1992–) exhibited in the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, and all this without any gallery presentation. In my first international gallery show in 1996, with Arndt & Partner in Berlin, I exhibited something like a three-dimensional “polyptych,” to follow your question. Different stories were shown under the common title of “Desires,” including a large series of drawings—my first really big one—comprising 50 pieces, entitled “Once Upon a Time” (1995–96). Since that time, I’ve made drawings in series of seven, nine, twelve and so on. At one point the biggest series was “Fears” (2006–07), consisting of 99 drawings, which was made for Documenta 12 in 2007. Then, in 2008, after the global financial crisis began, I started the series “Optimistic Stories” (2008–09). Here, I made 123 drawings, just because the figures “1,” “2” and “3” looked optimistic as a sequence. At that time I very naively thought the crisis would be over by the time I completed the 123rd drawing on February 13, 2009.

IB: Could you name some of your drawing cycles? It seems that you are making cycles of drawings and that you give them names as a type of personal exorcism in order to get rid of a disturbing thought or feeling.

NS: It’s a really tricky question, because I kind of forget their titles and their stories. But it’s true—I have always been doing this. When I used to get pissed off by the socialist existence, I put everything down either on paper or canvas. Even nowadays I do that if something really pisses me off, and I think, “Okay, now that I have put it down it’s a little bit out of my mind.” Then, along comes Facebook with its very, very specific audience. I do admit that, for the last couple of years, if I make something that I feel is a good drawing I have been posting it almost immediately on Facebook, because then you get an immediate reaction—which, I guess, is one of the biggest illusions, since these reactions, or “likes,” are not really from an art audience.

IB: What’s the genesis, or what comes first in your drawings? And how do the text and images in your work co-relate with each other?

NS: First is sort of an image. If I have absolutely nothing in my mind that I want to put down, I usually start at the center of the paper, slightly to the left, by making strokes in a little bit of a senseless manner. This goes on for a couple of seconds, and while I am in the middle of these “preparatory” movements, usually something pops up in my mind. Very rarely it is exactly what it will be at the end; often the strokes become like a tree, and then a forest or a seashore, or something completely different. Sometimes when I start a drawing, I sense that it will take a long time to achieve the rendering that I really like. At some point, I start to write down the

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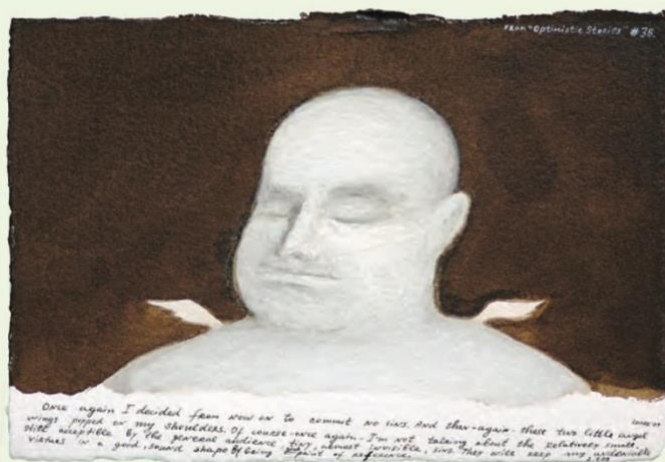
NEDKO SOLAKOV, *A Life (Black & White)*, 1998–, black and white paint, two workers/painters constantly repainting the walls of the exhibition space in black and white for the entire duration of the exhibition, day after day (following each other). Installation view of “Plateau of Humankind,” 49th Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2001. Collections of Peter Kogler, Vienna, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Hauser & Wirth, St. Gallen, Museum fuer Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, and Tate Modern, London. Photo by Giorgio Colombo. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page)

NEDKO SOLAKOV, *People with (Numbered) Worries #7*, 2016, sepia, black and white ink, and wash on paper, series of 8 drawings: 19 x 28 cm each. Courtesy the artist.

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NEDKO SOLAKOV, *Optimistic Stories #38*, 2008–09, sepia, black and white ink, and wash on paper, series of 123 drawings: 19 x 28 cm each. Photo by Bernd Borchardt. Courtesy the artist, Burger Collection Hong Kong, and ARNDT, Berlin.



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story. Even though I know that the drawing that will go above it will still need quite a lot of work. I never ever write stories on the side of the paper. I start at the bottom and always think positively that I'll have enough space to complete the story. Sometimes it's only a line, but at other times it's an elaborate narrative. Usually my stories have one turn, then another, and then another turn, where I might need to have a three-millimeter strip of extra paper added to the edge of the work's surface, which is not possible of course. There is a sense of suspense for me: how do I end the story in a logical way? Usually it happens. In any case I don't consider the text as an explanation of the image, nor the image as an illustration to the text.

IB: You also make these lovely, very human installations, where you create tiny figures and discrete texts directly onto the walls of an architectural space that look empty at the first glance. You often refer to these as "doodles."

NS: When I enter into a given space to make doodles, I never think in advance about where, how or what their stories will be. I just feel the environment, trying to imagine the moves of the audience later – to squat down to see the right-hand corner, or look toward the ceiling of another corner. And then I just start. The supposedly ideal-looking "white cube" is not ideal at all; there are always small cracks, or little dried up blotches of paint, that become little mountains and valleys, accommodating my little figures. That's how the work *A (not so) White Cube* (2001–) came about.

With a big narrative installation like *Discussion (Property)* (2007), the story shapes up differently. I read about the dispute—to put it mildly—between Bulgaria and Russia, which has the right to produce AK-47, the infamous assault rifle. And then I started to develop my story by collecting the different parts that would make the whole. It was the same with *Knights (and other dreams)*, which I made for Documenta 13 in 2012. At a certain moment the accumulated "mess" just takes off; a structure appears and then I can write the main story. It has to be edited perfectly in English in order for people to get it right away. Usually the sub-stories need good English too. For the sub-sub-sub-stories that just spring forth directly in the space I use "my" English.

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NEDKO SOLAKOV, *Paintings with No Texts #19 (Father-Volcano and Son-Volcano, Fishing)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Photo by Dimitar Solakov and Irena Solakov. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua San Gimignano/Beijing/Les Moulins/Habana.

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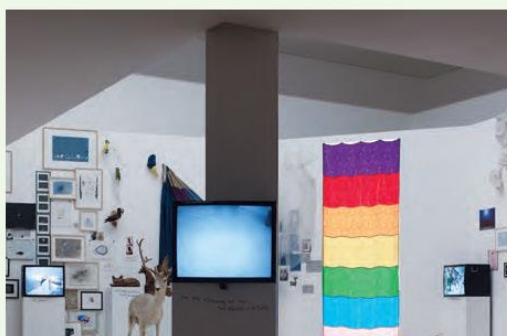
NEDKO SOLAKOV, *View to the West*, 1989, text, bronze plate, telescope pointing west, the red star on the top of the headquarters of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Sofia, dimensions variable. Installation view for the exhibition "The Earth and the Sky" at the Club of Young Artists on the roof terrace of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Shipka 6 Gallery, Sofia, 1989. Courtesy the artist.



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Interview with Iara Boubnova.

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IB: To continue the discussion on this particular type of work from your oeuvre, I would like to ask you now to name five narrative installations of your choice. Perhaps you could begin with *View to the West* (1989), a seemingly simple story that works with public space, popular sayings, illusions and irony.

NS: Those I know very well. On a side note, it is really strange that I can name all of my narrative installations, but I can't do that with my drawing series. Maybe I am really making [the drawings] as a sort of exorcism, as you mentioned earlier, and to just rid myself of those things that I want to get out of my consciousness—to feel better. That's why I kind of forget them, because I don't remember the stories afterward. The very first narrative installation was actually *New Noah's Ark* (1992–2007), followed by *The Collector of Art (somewhere in Africa...)*, *The Superstitious Man*, *The Paranoid Man* (1997), *This is me, too...* (1996–2005), and the last big installation, *Knights (and other dreams)*. I'm continuing to make large narratives, the latest of which might not happen at all—it is about figuring out how and what it means to feel content with your life. What does it mean to be satisfied by your existence? So far, it seems that nobody wants to hold an exhibit on what it means to be a satisfied or dissatisfied man... Oops, forgot to talk about *View to the West*, but it has a very precise caption on your far left that tells the story.

IB: Your installations are alluring and very critical. The earliest ones are critical of the establishment within the contemporary art world, as well as the structures and the conditions of artistic life. The later ones are more critical toward society as a whole, and its various relations, and yet some of them are very poetic. Do you choose the topic of your installations based on a logic they adhere to, or according to the themes of a potential show? Do you feel independent from, or vaguely connected to, big art shows?

NS: If I go back to the *New Noah's Ark*, the "trigger" for it came when I found an opportunity to access the thermoplastic production line at a factory in Botevgrad, Bulgaria. And exactly then was when the idea came to me to start making creatures out of it, which became the most spectacular part of the installation. On the other hand, *This is me, too...*, the work that I made for Manifesta 1 in 1996, was directly related to one of the biennial's venues, the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam. And the tricky part is that I created this particular installation (and all other narrative projects) also to work later in other spaces. For the time being I manage to do that.

IB: Was your work for Documenta 13 based on the Brothers Grimm Museum, where your installation was exhibited for the event?

NS: When I was invited to participate in Documenta 13, I had another possible option for a venue—the so-called Gardener's House in Karlsruhe Park. But at the end I choose the Brothers Grimm Museum where I could use its entire ground floor. Meanwhile, working on another *I miss Socialism, maybe...* project, I had shot a video with Bulgarian ex-child actor Oleg Kovachev, who played the main character in one of the country's best films, *Knight without Armor* (1966). At some point I realized that these three confessional minutes are priceless and I got the feeling that I could build up numerous stories about dreams and knights around them (I never use them for *I miss Socialism, maybe...*). Of course, I felt closely connected to the Brothers Grimm Museum, because since childhood I've loved their stories, and because I had the possibility to build a narrative across six consecutive rooms, like a chaptered tale. I respected as much as possible the museum's architecture and I did my best to make my stories look an integral part of it.

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NEDKO SOLAKOV, *New Noah's Ark (The Creatures)* (detail), 1992–2007, thermoplastic and metal, 96 pieces, dimensions variable. Photo by Anatoly Michaylov and Konstantin Shestakov. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua San Giminignano/Beijing/Les Moulins/Habana.

(This page, middle)

NEDKO SOLAKOV, *This is me, too...*, 1996–2005, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view of the exhibition "All in Order, with Exceptions" at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea Serralves, Porto, 2012. Collection of De Vleeshal, Middelburg, Netherlands. Photo by Filipe Brag. Courtesy the artist.

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NEDKO SOLAKOV, *A High Level Show with a Catalogue* (details), 2002, felt-tip pen on wall and objects; a catalogue with close-ups of stories displayed at a height of 4.5m, dimensions variable. Installation view at Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu, 2002–03. Courtesy the artist and CCA Kitakyushu.

IB: It seems that you often put yourself in the “shoes” of your viewer. How would you imagine your audience to behave in experiencing such narrative installations? I love *A High Level Show with a Catalogue* (2002), where you pressed the visitors of your exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu in Japan to refer to the show’s catalog while in search for your hard-to-see doodles high up on the museum’s walls. Do people read and search in your other installations as well?

NS: They read. The most satisfying example is *Discussion (Property)*, with text that normally takes 16 to 17 minutes to read, which for visitors at the 52nd Venice Biennale, where it was shown, is a lot—especially during the preview days. It depends on a work’s ability to tell a story, or even stories. Additionally, it’s very important how you start a story. I guess it was an effective beginning for the Documenta 13 piece to start with the line: “I have never dreamt of being an artist.” And then that ‘statement’ turns out to be the beginning of six rooms full of artistic stuff. It’s a little bit of a challenge. It’s meant as a hook to make you start reading. In my stories there is usually one main line, which is very general but also peculiar, and yet simple. You don’t need to read a thousand books in order to get it; it is understandable. Then there are the sub-stories and the sub-sub-stories. By the way, I don’t mind if the viewers don’t read and see everything. This is absolutely alright with me. The feeling that they can’t get everything is quite satisfying.

IB: Here is a simple, non-simple question in the style of your web site (<http://nedkosolakov.net>): do you feel that you are part of a generation?

NS: Sure, I feel part of my generation of fellow Bulgarian artists. I feel associated with the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia, and as part of the wider group of East-European artists of my generation, as well as other similarly aged Western peers who started in the early 1990s, even if the environments were very different. When socialism collapsed I was already a pretty recognized young painter, but also an “avant-garde” artist in the Bulgarian art scene. But coming out of Bulgaria, you are a complete nobody in the larger world, which is made worse, because of the fact that nobody knows anything about your country. But one must deal with that and to turn it into advantage. It’s not so easy.

NEDKO SOLAKOV is a Sofia-based Bulgarian artist whose work has been exhibited internationally for over 20 years. His works employ humor and absurdity to question art institutions and societal norms. His work was featured in numerous biennials, including six iterations of the Venice Biennale, and Documenta 12 and 13. In 2003–05, an extensive mid-career retrospective titled “A 12 1/3 (and even more) Year Survey” was presented at Casino Luxembourg, Roseum Malmö and OK Centrum, Linz. His retrospective “All in Order, with Exceptions” was presented in 2011–12 at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Fondazione Galleria Civica in Trento, SMAK in Ghent and Fundação de Serralves in Porto. Solakov’s works belong to more than 50 international museums and public collections, among them Museum of Modern Art in New York and London’s Tate Modern.

IARA BOUBNOVA is a Sofia-based art critic and international curator of contemporary art. She is the founding director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia and a deputy director of the National Gallery. In 2013, Boubnova was the prizewinner for best curatorial project of the state-sponsored Innovation Prize for the second Ural Industrial Biennial in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The following year, she was awarded the “Golden Pen” by independent Bulgarian cultural institutions for critical writing.



Views

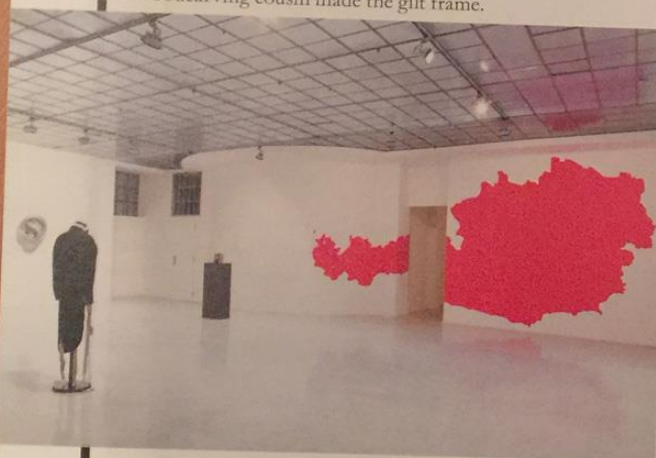
VIENNA

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Nedko Solakov
"Stories"Georg Kargl Fine Arts
13.5. – 30.7.2016

With works that are both disarming and well calibrated, Nedko Solakov (*1957) combines a literary sensibility with straight-up painting, site-specificity, sculpture, and installation. The self-reflexive and confessional works in "Stories" (all works 2016) are those of a diarist who happens to make pictures. Yet his riffs on the history of painting are many, tongue-in-cheek, witty, and possibly sincere. The ripped mixed-media canvas (*not*) *Nervous* suggests a lighthearted jab at the digital/painting axis thematized by younger American artists such as Ken Okiishi and Michael Williams. A bunch of computer cables and mobile phone plugs adorn its top portion like a wreath adorning the painted face just below.

In the first room, an ornate gilt-framed picture, *The Abstract Painting (with no frame)*, plays up kitsch to the hilt. Hand-painted micro texts across the gold frame offer a narrative of its own creation, claiming "she felt miserably insignificant" and "nothing meaningful emerged." In the center a small black square with human legs is in the act of walking away from a painted wall. By the time you read the entirety of the text on a separate sheet of paper, the dots connect family and art since a woodcarving cousin made the gilt frame.



Dominating the large main space is the wall painting *Inside/Outside*, rendered in the red of the Austrian national flag and the shape of the country as seen on the map. A small red figure stands outside the edge of the red paint while a small white figure stand just within the red line. "May I come in?" says the red one, "No, I have enough of your colour around me!" says the white. The text reads like a humorless bureaucrat's reply to the refugee influx and the point is made that it's not so funny being left on the margins. Humor creates an implicit sense of tragicomedy throughout. These works are vignettes of Solakov's orbit as a traveling, in-

ternational, East European art star. He is cleverly subversive in critiquing institutions while using his own ambiguity as painter to slyly demystify his own medium. *Ears* is a pair of identical ears, cast in aluminum, one upside down, the other right side up. One section of the wall text speaks of, "the righteous informers of state security"; another of the "sinful informers" maintaining state security.

secretly hoping that I MAY
be spared by a MUSLIM TERRORIST
if I publicly show a healthy level
OF BLASPHEMY towards MY OWN
RELIGION (although I am an atheist).



Solakov the "serious" painter appears in the wall installation *Five Paintings (The Formalistic One, The Quarantine One, The Imprudent One, The Rookie One and The Hand Made One)*. Each of its constituent parts has a waggish text scrawl commentary around its wooden frame and they all made me think of Richard Prince's joke paintings. As art is no joke but a humorless man is a bore, so Solakov knows how to play the magic card of painting with conceptual dexterity.

A Magician's Nightmare is where Solakov comes closest to classic deadpan Kippenberger humor. A customized tailor stand props up a magician's tuxedo, secret pockets and all. Strips of canvas spill down to the floor, with text explaining the story: "A smart handsome magician had a nightmare. Instead of just keeping the magic cards, pigeons, flowers, and rabbits that he needed for his spectacular tricks, his tuxedo's seven secret pockets seemed to store his intimate secrets – and not only storing them, but candidly revealing them to the audience. And the worst part was that the audience liked it."

An Attempt at Possible Prevention, 2016
Black drawing ink, white stickers over
a found Nativity icon, handwritten text
60 x 50 x 4,5 cm

Installation view, "Nedko Solakov. Stories"
Georg Kargl Fine Arts

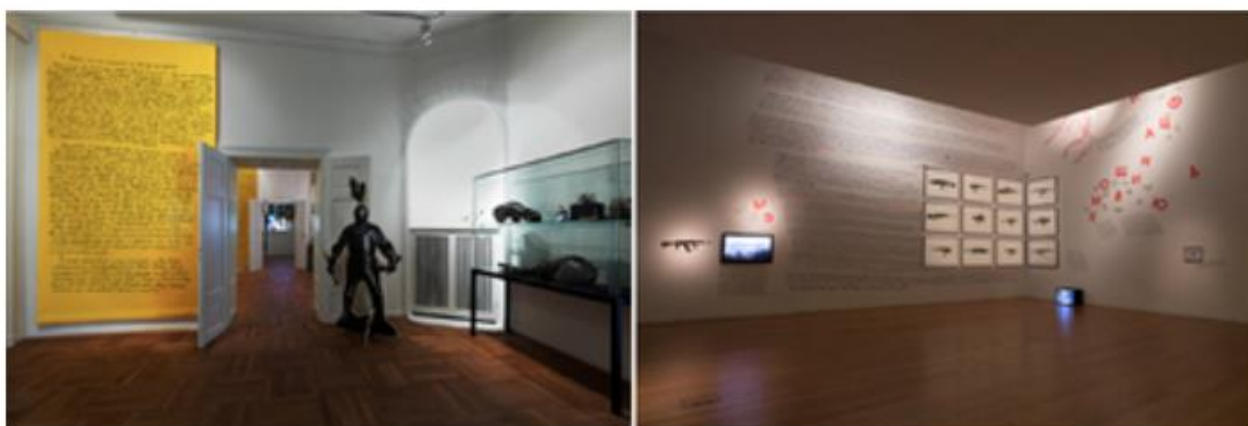
Spike, summer 2016

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

NEDKO SOLAKOV

September 28, 2012 • Nedko Solakov talks about his retrospective



Left: Nedko Solakov, *Knights (and other dreams)*, 2012. Installation view, Documenta 13, Brüder Grimm-Museum, Kassel. (Photo: Ela Białkowska) Right: Nedko Solakov, *Discussion (Property)*, 2007. Installation view, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, 2012. (Photo: Dimitar Solakov)

Nedko Solakov.

ArtForum, 28 September 2012

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/nedko-solakov-talks-about-his-retrospective-34598>

The Sofia, Bulgaria-based artist Nedko Solakov is known for his narrative-driven installations that merge his biography with history and fiction. His unorthodox, multipart, touring survey exhibition “All in Order, with Exceptions” is on view at Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves in Porto, Portugal, until October 28; over the past year, it has been installed at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK; S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Belgium; and the Fondazione Galleria Civica in Trento, Italy.

I GRADUATED in mural painting at the Sofia Art Academy in the early 1980s and by then I was producing small paintings. It is in these works that I began incorporating stories. Later, when I began making installations, they continued to have tales in them, as I added text. Today, I can say that there has been a lot of writing in my work and that, frankly, sometimes I am kind of sick of it.

The stories that I tell are built in space and are very different from those laid out in a book. They need the viewer's movement: The bending, the squatting, and the looking in the corners—all this completes the work. In the installations, almost everybody experiences the key narrative. Yet not everybody apprehends the subnarratives—and there are many sub-sub- and sub-sub-subnarratives as well—but I am OK with this.

Nedko Solakov.

ArtForum, 28 September 2012

Sometimes there is no fiction in my stories, although one might assume there is, given the untruthfulness of the narrative. For example, *Discussion (Property)*, which was presented at the 2007 Venice Biennale, is inspired by the dispute between Bulgaria and Russia about the copyrights for producing the AK-47 assault rifle. There's also no fiction in *Top Secret*—a work made in 1990 (after the fall of the Berlin Wall) that caught attention at Documenta 12—even though many people still think that I invented my youthful involvement with the Bulgarian Secret Service.

Documenta 13 asked me to produce a new work and I made *Knights (and other dreams)*. Working at the Brothers Grimm Museum was unforgettable: For the first time, I had a suite of rooms, a natural path for my stories. I did my best not to be an intruder into the institution; for example, the way I showed the texts and all the other elements of the work matches its display techniques. More important, I tried to respect as much as possible its architecture. As my old professor from the Sofia Art Academy used to teach his students, “Architecture is always first; you—the artist—are the second!”

This work was made while my survey exhibition was taking place. In the last room of *Knights (and other dreams)*, I connect the two of them: The yellow folders, part of the “made-up young artist’s dream” section, come from the first venue of the retrospective, at the Ikon Gallery. Unlike most touring shows, the curators of the retrospective agreed to play a game with me: Rather than focus solely on my mature works, all from the past thirty years—even those made after I graduated in 1981—were to be considered. Also, at least one work per year had to be chosen. After two days of meetings, they came up with a checklist of “good” works for each year, a selection reached by consensus. Later, out of this checklist, each one of them chose only one work per year; some works overlapped, some didn’t. Nevertheless, for Trento, I selected thirty works rejected by the curators of the other three venues, the best of the “bad” ones. I called this selection “All in (My) Order, with Exceptions.”

ArtForum, 28 September 2012

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/nedko-solakov-talks-about-his-retrospective-34598>

Some of the choices were challenging to deal with. For example, both S.M.A.K. and the Serralves Museum selected *Insolent Art* for 2004. This installation consists of a wall or gallery where one or various of my works are supposed to be presented; instead, there is this handwritten sentence: YOU, VIEWER, ARE PART OF AN AUDIENCE WHICH IS NOT SO IMPORTANT TO MY CAREER; THEREFORE, IT IS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR ME TO EXHIBIT SOMETHING MORE SUBSTANTIAL HERE. To make this installation properly would mean to present nothing, which was very tempting yet too uncomplicated—and I am all for complication! Luckily, the work chosen for 1999 was *Quotations*—stuffed black velvet quotation marks originally displayed around a huge, not-to-be-moved-from-a-Sofia-museum-wall painting that was disturbing a group show in which I was taking part. So, I “blocked” *Insolent Art* with *Quotations* . . .

— As told to Miguel Amado

Nedko Solakov.

ArtForum, 28 September 2012

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/nedko-solakov-talks-about-his-retrospective-34598>

Frieze

MAGAZINE FAIRS ACADEMY ON VIEW VIDEO

Reviews /

Nedko Solakov



BY KASIA REDZISZ

01 JUN 2012



A Life (Black and White),
1998–ongoing, two
workers constantly
repainting the gallery
walls black and white for
the entire duration of the
exhibition

Nedko Solakov. S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium, article.

Frieze, June-August 2012

<https://frieze.com/article/nedko-solakov-1>

For Nedko Solakov's touring retrospective, 'All in Order, with Exceptions', each of the four venues presents a unique set of works chosen according to strict curatorial criteria imposed by the artist. First, Solakov prepared a comprehensive image catalogue of every work he made between 1980 and 2010 – a collection of 5,683 digital files. From this archive, curators from IKON Gallery in Birmingham, S.M.A.K in Ghent and Museu Serralves in Porto each selected a set of 30 works for their own institution, under the strict condition the each could only include one work from a given year. The exhibition's final venue, Galleria Civica – Solakov's commercial gallery in Trento – will feature the artist's own selection from the works rejected by the curators.

At S.M.A.K., Solakov slyly expanded this *salon des refusés* by making images of all the unchosen works accessible to the public in folders containing an overwhelming 1,353 pages of documentation. *THE FOLDERS* (2011) – the '31st work' in the show – constitutes a unique archive scattered throughout the gallery space, smuggling in everything that was initially excluded by the curators. It's hard to tell if Solakov's choice undermines the very idea of a retrospective or genuinely seeks to present his achievements in their totality. There is a paradox embedded in 'All in Order, with Exceptions', a contradiction between an overdose of information and a haunting impression of incompleteness (we are, after all, aware that there are three more versions of the exhibition). This ambiguity is characteristic of Solakov's often humorous and ironic oeuvre.

Throughout the exhibition at S.M.A.K., which features everything from doodles on the walls, to paintings, videos and large-scale installations, Solakov offers a pretext to looking at his artistic production through his own figure as 'the artist'. The first room contains a complex installation entitled *This is me, too...* (1996–2005) encapsulating absurd incarnations of Solakov dressed as 'The Humble Snowflake' or 'The Ammonite'. The oldest work in the show is also a self-portrait: the painting *Studio* (1980) represents the artist lying in bed, perhaps thinking, or in a state of idleness, while occupying the space traditionally connected to professional activity.

If one can see Solakov as performing this futile action against the official Communist rhetoric of his native Bulgaria at the time, it also represents the usual first take on him, namely, his status as an Eastern European artist. His 1989 work *The View to the West* originally consisted of a telescope pointing west, paradoxically focusing on the iconic red star crowning the Communist party headquarters in Sofia. An ironic and semi-exotic take on the artist's homeland also reappears in 2008 in *A Recent Story with Ghosts, a Pair of High-Heeled Shoes, (a Couple of Floods) and Some Other Mischievous Acts*, a large-scale installation which portrays Bulgaria as a country in which disasters and accidents are attributed to the ghosts of medieval emperors rather than inefficient politicians – a witty but bitter reflection on national identity and the country's current state of affairs.

Nedko Solakov. S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium, article.

Frieze, June-August 2012

<https://frieze.com/article/nedko-solakov-1>

The tension between Solakov's Communist past and his attempts to overcome it recurs in his work. But it is this tension that reveals the strategic equilibrium he maintains between the local context in which he makes his work and the more global context in which he knows it will be received. The works included here range from subtle institutional critique and questioning of the art market to timely issues like the value of money and the banking system. The trajectory allows us to identify the persistence of certain motifs, but also to spot Solakov's moments of searching and transition – often aimed at transgressing the local art circuit and establishing his international career. We can observe, for example, how his written texts switch from Bulgarian into English, or read his disarmingly honest confession about the influence of Anselm Kiefer on his work after attending documenta 8 in 1987. Not least, the format of the show itself, and its comprehensive catalogue, proves that Solakov is a skilled promoter of his art.

Solakov's constant self-consciousness is reflected in his trademark texts, which often accompany his works or even constitute the works themselves – from spontaneous additions scribbled on the wall to lengthy informational captions. Regardless of their status, they have a personal, casual tone, in which he exposes his concerns and unveils his weaknesses. In *Fear* (2003), Solakov (who is afraid of flying) presents small clumps of clay he squeezed in his fists while on a plane. The modest sculptures occupy a small surface of a table, but the narration describing his phobia takes over a whole wall next to it. In Solakov's practice everything seems to be justified and transparent. The author's comments leave little space for doubts or mystery.

Nedko Solakov. S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium, article.

Frieze, June-August 2012

<https://frieze.com/article/nedko-solakov-1>

On the other hand, *A Life (Black and White)* (1998–ongoing) is a performance without text, involving two people: one is instructed to paint the walls of the gallery white, while the other effaces them with black paint. Rather than a monochromatic binary between black and white, the abstract splashes and drops of paint on the floor remind us of the intervening shades of grey. Seeing this simple yet deeply existential work alongside more revealing and effusive text-based pieces, I couldn't stop thinking: if so many lines have been written, is there still a need to read between them?

KASIA REDZISZ

Avery Singer lives in New York, USA. Last year, she had a solo show at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Germany. Earlier this year, her work was exhibited at McLellan Galleries as part of Glasgow International 2014, UK. Her solo show at Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland, will open on 21 November; it will travel to Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy, in 2015.

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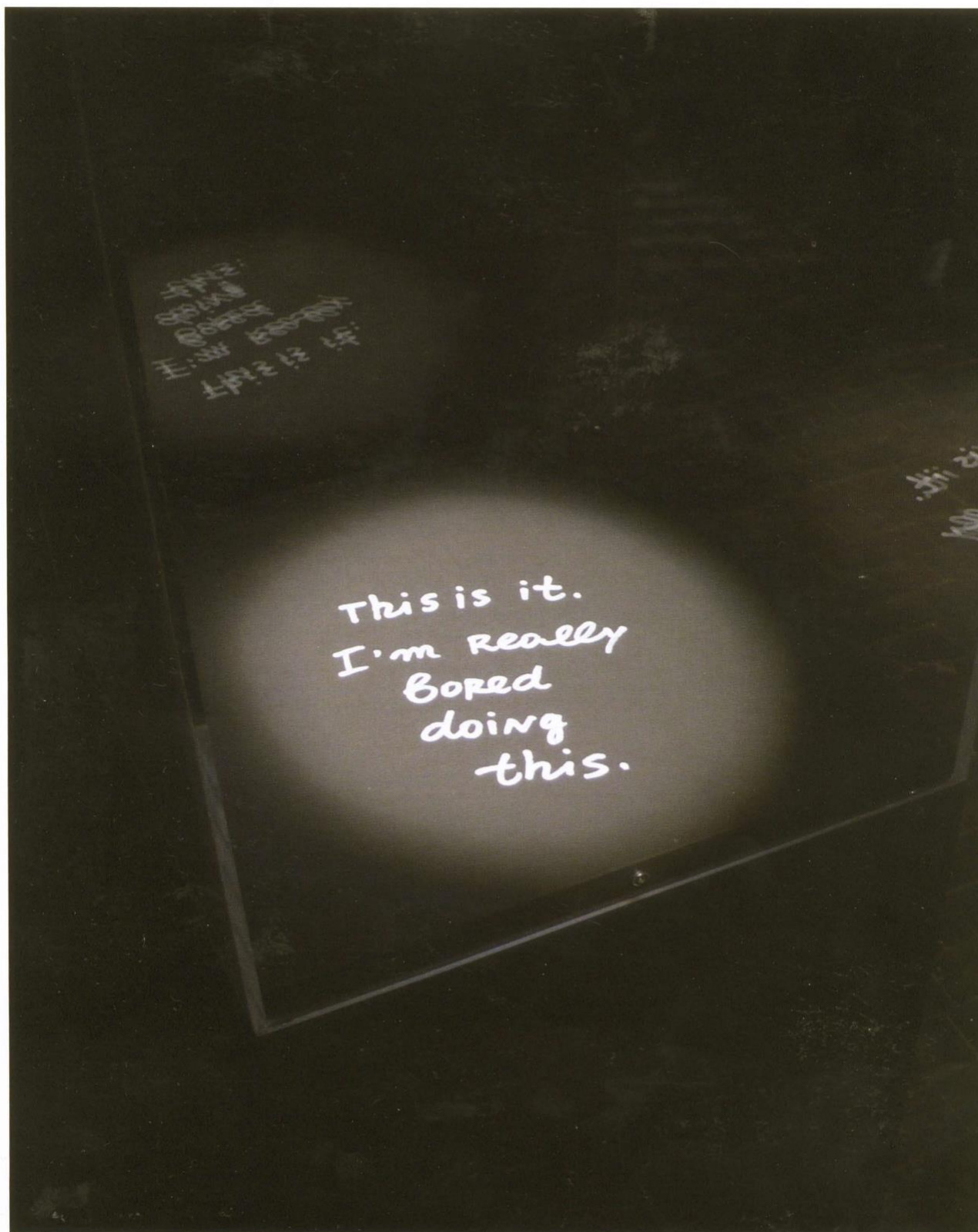
Jun - Aug 2012

Nedko Solakov. S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium, article.

Frieze, June-August 2012

<https://frieze.com/article/nedko-solakov-1>

FEATURE



72 FlashArt • JANUARY FEBRUARY 2010

Nedko Solakov and the rest of the world, article. Author: Vladiya Mihaylova

Flash Art, January-February 2010

<https://www.flashartonline.com/article/nedko-solakov/>

Nedko Solakov

AND THE REST OF THE WORLD

Vladiya Mihaylova

LAUGHTER, SHAME, FEAR, love, anger, happiness, euphoria, boredom, depression... and if irony was an emotion, then especially irony. "Emotions" is the most recent large-scale project of Nedko Solakov. Shown already in the Kunstmuseums in Bonn (2008) and St. Gallen (2009), the final part of the project, "Emotions (without masks)" at the Institut Malthildenhöhe in Darmstadt, was unexpectedly and radically different from the first two "Emotions" exhibitions. With a typically Solakovian manner of transforming and energizing the gallery space, the exhibitions at the Sofia City Art Gallery (2009) (his first retrospective in Bulgaria) and in Darmstadt showed again how Solakov's various stories and texts create a system of total mediation of the world. Within this system the figure of the artist stands between reality, the work and the institution as a privileged participant in an endless game of possible acts of communication and signification of the "real."

Sometimes this can mean putting reality into quotes, which is exactly what we saw in the exhibition in Sofia where, at the entrance to the gallery space, large quotation marks of stuffed velvet [*Quotations* (2009)] were placed, turning the world outside into a big quote in the exhibition. In Darmstadt, however, the focus was on the art world and the artist's ability to play with its conventions, institutions and rules of communication. By way of introduction Nedko Solakov said, "I have done so many exhibitions, so many solo shows. I keep trying to make them different, at least for the cliché reason of amusing myself first and then amusing the viewers. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't." The artist uses this fatigue from the routine of the art world — and it seems to be a fatigue of being a producer rather than an author — both as an excuse and motivation to do something else, to start playing and changing what is expected. "Emotions" at Malthildenhöhe wasn't what it was planned to be, therefore making the public either exited or angry about not seeing the expected show (some



Opposite: *Emotions (without masks)*, 2009. Installation view at the Institut Malthildenhöhe, Darmstadt (detail). Courtesy the artist and Malthildenhöhe Darmstadt. Photo: the artist. Above: *A Beauty 2*, 2000-2009. White artificial fur, black cloth, stuffing materials; watercolour on paper with a cut off crescent-moon-shape opening, sanded glass, bulb. 110 x 200 x 500 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo Minini, Brescia.

visitors even wanted their money back.) Inspired by the previous Malthildenhöhe exhibition "Masks: Metamorphoses of the Face from Rodin to Picasso" (2009), Solakov decided to leave the whole layout in place — including plinths, showcases, hooks, devices, covers, spotlights — except for one thing: the masks. Moreover, works from the "Emotions" project ("Some Nice Things to Enjoy While You Are Not Making a Living" as well as series of drawings, videos, etc.) were left packed up in the crates they arrived in, and stayed there till the end of the exhibition. Only two of the crated pieces were displayed at the end of the succession of rooms, in a storage area, because of the demands of the lenders — an Italian collector and a Dutch museum director. In the empty, quiet, somewhat

theatrical space, the viewer could only see the minutely crafted model of the "real" exhibition "Emotions," with the crates placed on the spots in the exhibition space where they were supposed to be according to the curator's plan. In the blank areas without masks, wall labels and reference materials from the just-ended show stood as strange, surreal lyrics, competing somehow with Solakov's typically small, handwritten texts and creatures all over the place, pointing to nail holes in the walls and other almost-invisible things in the space. These details fragmented the space and focused the viewer's attention to certain parts of it, as if what the artist pointed at was "reality" (a physical reality.)

These short narrative structures transform the space into media by working with it primarily as a specific physical environment that the artist inhabits over a certain period of time, rather than a place for art. Nedko Solakov seems to enter into some kind of competition with the institution and, in this particular case, the routine production of the art world, "claiming" its function as an intermediary between the artist and the viewer. This post-modern and post-conceptual game with authority is ironic and paradoxical — the artist simulates his Authorship with a capital "A," though physically, emotionally and mentally always remaining "simply" Nedko Solakov.

The unique ability to tell stories in a personal and at the same time artistic style is one of the most special and consistently developed elements in Solakov's works. It can be traced back to early pieces such as *Top Secret* (1989-90), perhaps the most controversial and discussed work of the artist, along with the series of 99 drawings, "Fears," that was included in Documenta 12 in 2007. The chest-file contains in alphabetical order notes with texts, drawings and small objects that tell about the life of the author and about the period between 1976 and 1983, when, as a student who believed in Socialism, he collaborated with the secret service of the former political regime in Bulgaria. The retrospective at the Sofia

FEATURE



City Art Gallery was organized in a similar way, building upon both personal and artistic stories, in the form of a large installation of paintings, objects, documentary photographs, posters, catalogues, prints and videos. As if carelessly placed into the center of the gallery, upon *The Yellow Blob Story* (1997-), and sprawling on the floor, they suggested the idea of a chronological archive. The perception of immediacy and apparent chaos was heightened to an absurd degree with *A Life (Black & White)* (1998-): painters who were constantly repainting in black and white the walls of the gallery, spinning endlessly around the works in the center. With less laughter and daily absurdity than usual, the texts in the exhibition (shown for the first time in Bulgaria) told about the life and career of the artist, from his earliest works in 1980s to the present. It was nevertheless the logic of sharing or of a strange, public rapport, that involved the viewers in "the story" of the exhibition as well as the story of Nedko Solakov. Not just his personal and professional life, but the whole of reality can be mediated and transformed through the figure of the artist who, by developing a text/narrative, builds a parallel world within the frame of the work, sometimes turning the work into an

institution in itself that has the authority to tell the truth — as in the early installation *The Truth (The Earth is Plane, The World is Flat)* (1992-1995).

A similar principle, yet much more complicated, is present in the newer works like the one included in Prospect 1 New Orleans Biennial in 2008: *A Recent Story with Ghosts, a Pair of High-Heeled Shoes, (a couple of floods) and Some Other Mischievous Acts* (2008). The story features and connects different events and disasters from recent floods in a Bulgarian village named Tsar Kaloyan to hurricane Katrina. The accidental, blind and senseless tragedy is turned into a "fantastic" absurdity through the story that goes back to 1205, when the Bulgarian Tsar Kaloyan defeated Baldwin I — the Latin emperor of Constantinople at that time. Furious about the suffered defeat, after Baldwin's death his ghost begins to take revenge on Tsar Kaloyan. Where normal (social and political) logic breaks down, fiction begins, giving way to all kinds of strange events, as when a building (closed to Tsar Kaloyan Street in Sofia) collapses "by itself," killing two girls; or when the former head of the Ministry of State Policy for Disasters and Accidents in Bulgaria shows up in high heels in the middle of a mud puddle after the flood. ■

From left clockwise: A 12 1/3 (and even more) Year Survey, 2004. Installation view at Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö (detail). Courtesy the artist and Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö. Emotions (without masks), 2009. Installation view at the Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt (detail). Courtesy the artist and Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt. Photo: the artist. Installation view of Nedko Solakov at Sofia City Art Gallery, Sofia (2009). Courtesy the artist and Sofia City Art Gallery, Sofia. Photo: Dimitar Solakov.

Vladiya Mihaylova is a curator and art critic based in Sofia. She is curator at Sofia City Art Gallery and teaching assistant at the Sofia University.

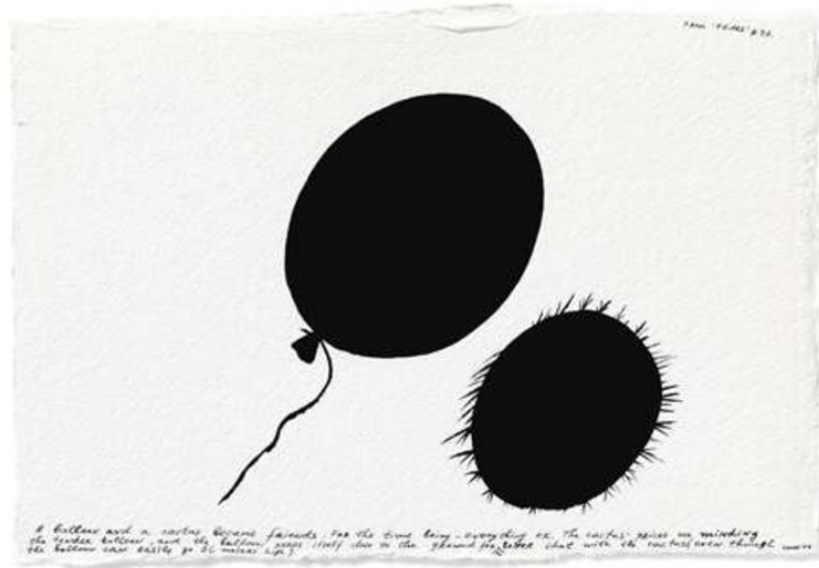
Nedko Solakov was born in 1957 in Cherven Bria, Bulgaria. He lives and works in Sofia.

Selected solo shows: 2009: Dvir gallery, Tel Aviv; Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt; Sofia City Art Gallery, Sofia; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. 2008: Kunstmuseum, Bonn; Whitechapel, London. 2007: Massimo Minini, Brescia; Galleria Continua, San Gimignano (IT); Arndt & Partner, Berlin. 2005: Kunsthau Zurich, Zurich. Selected group shows: 2009: "Play Van Abbe" Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; "For the Use of Those Who See," Kunstwerke, Berlin; "1989. The End of History or Beginning of the Future," Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; "Techniques," ICA, Sofia; "Making of Art," Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt. 2008: Prospekt1. New Orleans Biennial; 16th Biennial of Sydney, Sydney; "Laughing in a Foreign Language," Hayward Gallery, London. 2007: "The Word in Art," Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (IT); documenta 12, Kassel; 52nd Venice Biennial.

Between the Lines | Nedko Solakov

BY VICTORIA CAMBLIN

AUGUST 7, 2008 5:33 PM August 7, 2008 5:33 pm



Nedko Solakov, "From 'Fears' #37", caption reads: A balloon and a Cactus became friends. For the time being — everything OK. The cactus' pricks are minding the tender balloon, and the balloon keeps itself close to the ground for a better chat with the cactus (even though the balloon can easily go 56 meters high).

The Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov's dark wit and worldly anxiety have made him a joyfully neurotic voice amidst a sea of art-world self-importance. His multimedia work has been the subject of countless exhibitions all over the world, including the The Venice Biennale and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. This fall, Phaidon will release "99 Fears," a collection of his ink-and-paper drawings published together in a book for the first time. Here he speaks with The Moment about fear and laughing, the English language, and his own understanding of his role as an artist.

You can never count on the quality of the reception during phone interviews, and the Berlin-Sofia connection when I spoke to **Nedko Solakov** earlier this week was about as static-filled

as it gets, despite our efforts. In this case, though, the inevitable distance seemed appropriate: "Before 1989," Solakov explains, "I sometimes had people spying on me on the phone, people listening in. And right now I have the same feeling — it's a good background for the 'Fears' project." He was referring to his anxiety-filled ink-and-paper drawings that were exhibited last summer at Documenta 12. A lot of the literature surrounding Solakov's work lately has tapped into a Cold War vocabulary of secret spying and the "others" lurking in the shadows, but I can't help hear a broader message. "99 Fears" seems to point to something else: that the culture of farce and the culture of fear are not that unrelated — and, as Solakov's work suggests, maybe even penned on the same page.

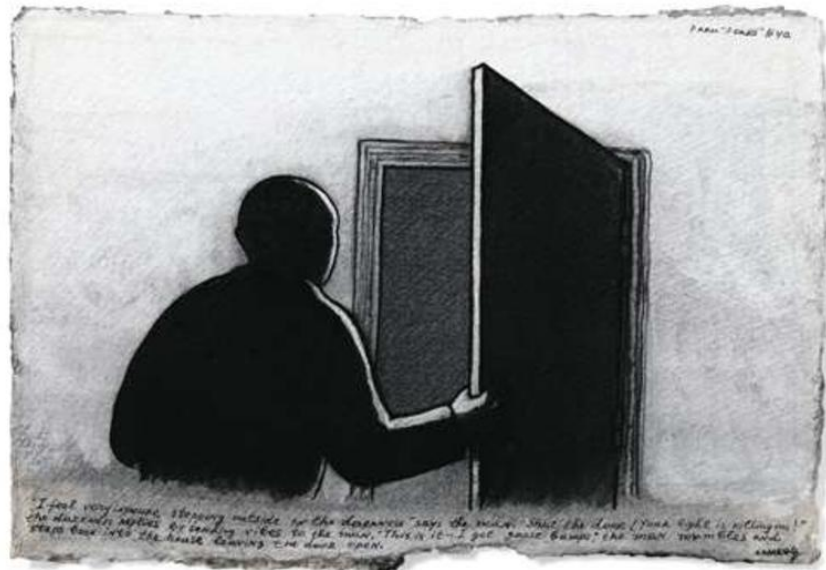
Much of your work has dealt with secrecy, and yet there is an intimacy there. How autobiographical are the vignettes in "99 Fears"?

If I'm talking about myself explicitly, then it's very autobiographical. I give the viewer the impression that there's something very secretive, very personal in "Fears." Even when I combine personal stories with absurd ones that are clearly not true, they still feel secretive somehow. That's why people are so eager to look at these drawings and to read these stories: because they touch upon common fears that people share. And it seems that when I speak in a very open way, when I tell my own secrets, the viewers appreciate and identify with that. I've had collectors who own my drawings say, "I have the feeling that you made this drawing for me, that you are describing me." And I hear this from many different types of people — maybe from an older collector, a lawyer, a doctor or a lady in Geneva. You become really open to the people in front of you, even though I can't see them when I'm working in my studio.

How does this work with collective fears? Fears that exist, say, whether you're operating under a capitalist or a Communist society?

I think it's important not to link too many things in these drawings to Communism. This is generally a problem with Westerners, in fact — once you have this idea of Socialism in your mind, you can manipulate that. I have done some work with this, but believe it or not, I'm not interested in that topic anymore. I know that, along with the Cyrillic alphabet and coming from Bulgaria, I could use this aspect, but there are much bigger problems at stake here — it's about the way people exist and the way they live.

<https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/between-the-lines-nedko-solakov/>



Nedko Solakov, "From 'Fears' #40", caption reads: "I feel very insecure stepping outside in the darkness", says the man. "Shut the door! Your light is killing me!" the darkness replies by sending vibes to the man. "This is it – I got goose bumps," the man mumbles and steps back into the house leaving the door open.

Do you identify as a particularly “Bulgarian” artist? Apart from your signature, which is always in Cyrillic, you never seem to write in Bulgarian, only in English. ...

I just see myself as an artist. Sometimes in my work I use the fact that I come from Bulgaria, but I try to do so in a universal way. I want people to be able to approach the work. My drawings do say “Solak,” which is the first part of my family name in the Cyrillic alphabet — again, I know that the Cyrillic alphabet might be kind of an “exotic” addition to the drawing, but I don’t particularly like to play with that. Writing in English is just a question of getting closer to the viewer, of better communicating with people. Whether you want to accept it or not, English is the lingua franca.

What is scarier, though, Communism or capitalism?

I really couldn’t say! They each have their own scary aspects — it all depends with the way you deal with the world around you, the way you try to stay yourself, in a way.

<https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/between-the-lines-nedko-solakov/>



Nedko Solakov, "From "Fears" #11", caption reads: "A big fear, a medium-sized fear and a small fear decided to work together on a family of four."

There's another way of looking at the question: what's scarier, the past or the future?

Good question ... I think if you know what to do with the present, the future is less scary than the past. But if you don't know what to do with your present, then the past is scarier than the future.

You seem to have a sense of humor in the face of these fears, though.

Humor is very important to me — it's not a very light sense of humor, of course, and as I get older, it's becoming deeper and deeper and deeper. I'm also trying to be self-ironic; I can't be critical about other things without being critical of myself. And at the same time I'm aware that it could be very dangerous to try to make everything funny — there has to be something more underneath the stories. And there is. They are both funny and sad; they deal at the same time with sadness and with love. And that's real life. You never have something that's only to laugh about or something that's only to be sad about. But I think in the end there's kind of a ray of hope in my stories, a peculiar or absurd happy ending.

Between the lines / Nedko Solakov, interview. Author: Victoria Camblin

T magazine, 7 August 2008

<https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/between-the-lines-nedko-solakov/>



The Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov. (Dimitar Solakov)

All photos courtesy of Phaidon Press.

Between the lines I Nedko Solakov, interview. Author: Victoria Camblin

T magazine, 7 August 2008

<https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/between-the-lines-nedko-solakov/>



Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 110 October 2007

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The Self-Preservation Society, article. Author: Christy Lange
Frieze, October 2007

The Self-Preser

Nedko Solakov has an ambivalent attitude
curators or attempting to resolve an East
work expresses a scepticism of authority

"These preliminaries settled, he did not care to put off any longer the execution of his design, urged on to it by the thought of all the world was losing by his delay, seeing what wrongs he intended to right, grievances to redress, injustices to repair, abuses to remove, and duties to discharge. So, without giving notice of his intention to anyone, and without anybody seeing him, one morning before the dawning of the day (which was the hottest of the month of July) he donned his suit of armour, mounted Rocinante with his patched-up helmet on, braced his buckler, took his lance, and by the back door of the yard sallied forth upon the plain in the highest contentment and satisfaction at seeing with what ease he had made a beginning with his grand purpose."

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1605

And so it was with similar bluster and gusto that Nedko Solakov set out to resolve the heated ten-year dispute between Russia and his native country, Bulgaria, over who owns the right to produce one of the world's most popular automatic weapons, the Kalashnikov rifle. For his piece at this year's Venice Biennale, *Discussion (Property)* (2007), Solakov forged his way forward into the world of weapons manufacturing and intergovernmental conflicts, in an attempt to convince the opposing sides to speak together in front of the camera. Although he eventually managed to secure a meeting with the manager of one of the leading weapons makers in Bulgaria (who granted him a one-minute interview on video), the Russian side failed to co-operate, and Solakov eventually had to leave the negotiations to the diplomats.

Solakov's account of the story – scrawled unevenly on the wall of the Arsenal in his characteristic, slightly erratic lettering (the hand of someone more accustomed to the Cyrillic alphabet) – unfolds as a matter-of-fact account of the origins of the work and the artist's various developments and setbacks in making contact with both parties. But the tale is also scattered throughout with interjections of fear and doubt, parenthetical asides, mistakes and digressions. At one point the writing suddenly shrinks, and a note to the reader appears in red: 'I guess, if you are still interested in this story, you won't mind reading it in small letters because of lack of space.' Predictably, by the end of the story Solakov admits that he did not succeed in resolving the conflict about the rifle, and



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The Self-Preservation Society, article. Author: Christy Lange
Frieze, October 2007

vation Society

towards institutions. Whether antagonizing European gun dispute, his darkly humorous and power *by Christy Lange*



Top Secret
(detail)
1989–90
Mixed media on
179 index cards in
wooden box
14×46×39 cm

the evidence he presents is less factual than improvised and arbitrary – including a video of the exterior of the Russian embassy as a substitute for the Russian representatives' statement, drawings of guns that he admits took two female assistants two months to make, a real but non-functional Romanian-made Kalashnikov (purchased in Italy) and several asides about other disputes between the countries over the origins of the Cyrillic alphabet and yoghurt bacteria. There is no final resolution, nor does Solakov ever officially take sides.

This narrative tone, which frequently vacillates between the factual and the confessional, is typical of Solakov's work. He does not hesitate to disclose that his lofty quests and acts of bravado are actually motivated by his own fears and anxieties. *Negotiations* (2003), a precursor to *Discussion (Property)*, created for his show at the Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv, began with the admission: 'In general I am not so brave. Even though sometimes I do things that may be considered to go beyond common sense or secure behaviour, I have to confess that I am kind of a coward when I have to exist under dangerous circumstances' – which is what prompted him to meet with representatives of the Israeli State and the Palestinian Authority in Bulgaria in an attempt to arbitrate a temporary cease-fire between Israel and Palestine for the duration of his exhibition (calling it 'the only reasonable step'). As he readily admits in a wall text that is part of the piece, his foray into international political negotiations arose less out of an altruistic concern for engagement with peace than from a need to protect himself from being grazed by a bullet on the way to his opening.

But is this narrative persona the self-effacing voice of an artist who unknowingly dashes into dangerous negotiations, only to end up retreating from any didactic or definitive statement, or is it an *alter ego* that functions as a strategic device? Although he could genuinely be setting out to pacify bitter enemies in the service of heartfelt goodwill, Solakov could also be using his own 'modest proposals' to satirize the absurdity and dead-endedness of their conflicts. Most of his works – despite being made with such disparate motives and heterogeneous media that a retrospective of his work can look like a group show – are, in fact, 'negotiations' between himself and the viewer, the artist and his conscience, or fact and fairy tale.

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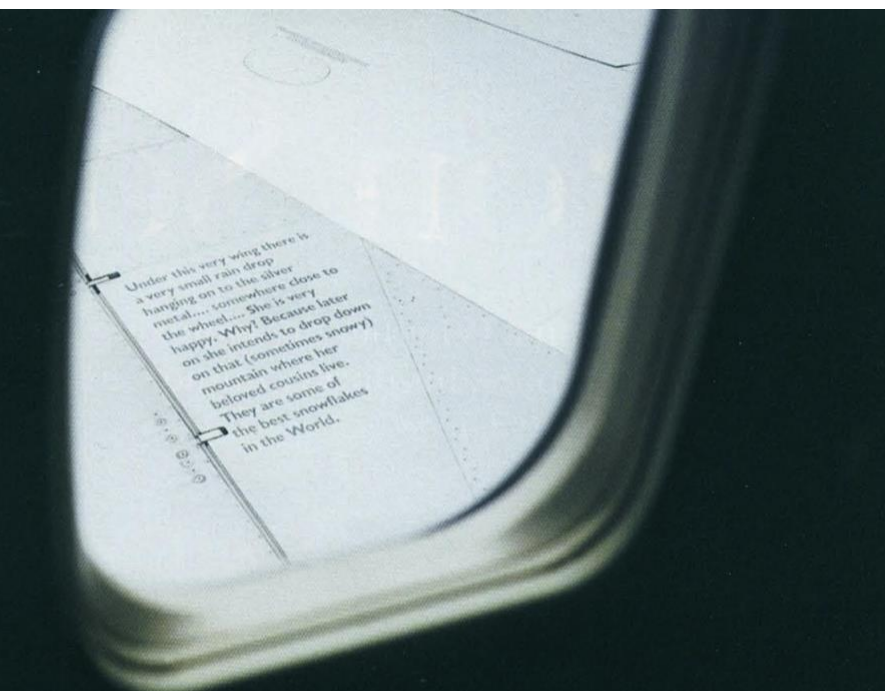
The Self-Preservation Society, article. Author: Christy Lange
Frieze, October 2007



Above:
Negotiations
2003
DVD stills



Right:
On the Wing
(detail)
1999
Vinyl lettering on the wings
of six Boeing 737s
Dimensions variable



Solakov's conflicted relationship to authority is central to his work – a struggle between eagerness to collaborate and refusal to be manipulated.

Either way, Solakov the artist can usually be found standing sheepishly in the middle, genuinely trying to connect with his audience or coyly shrugging his shoulders, ending his narratives in a way that makes the final result seem inevitable, as if to say, 'So you see, it had to be this way'. This shrugging character crops up again and again in what Solakov calls his 'complicated works' (epic sagas of good and evil or intimate personal confessions), as well as in his 'simple works', such as his site-specific 'doodles' and prolific drawing series. He is not only the narrator of his own works but also the judge and the defendant, compulsively questioning and undermining his own – and others' – authority.

It's difficult not to read Solakov's quixotic attempts to arbitrate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or an old Eastern European gun war in the light of his most iconic work, *Top Secret*. Made between December 1989 and February 1990, and exhibited in April 1990, *Top Secret* began as a box with two drawers containing handwritten postcards, some abstract drawings, doodles, reminiscences and found objects. The archive incorporates alphabetically ordered assorted memories, such as badges from now-defunct Bulgarian youth organizations, documents of the artist's school achievements and a photograph of his former lover in bed, to form a loosely assembled fairy tale of his life as a young man. The incendiary part of the work, which sparked a scandal two months after it was exhibited, is reflected in just a few cards found near the front of the first drawer, which divulge the artist's work, from the age of 18, as an informant for the Bulgarian secret service between the years 1976 and

1983. The narrative is difficult to follow and is constantly broken and peppered with red herrings and digressions. Characteristically, the archive reveals Solakov's deep ambivalence about his involvement, constantly questioning himself and his audience. One card is typed with the words 'I am guilty!'; underneath, written in pencil and dated one year later, he added, 'No, I am not guilty!' In the retrospective video that the artist made to accompany the work at documenta 12 he sifts through the old cards reading extracts from them. In what we suspect may be the juiciest, most revealing parts, however, the subtitle reads 'not worth having subtitles' – we can only listen to him read in Bulgarian.

Although he stopped his collaboration of his own volition in 1983, the implications of his work were drastic: after the scandal in the summer of 1990, he left the Union of Bulgarian Artists, effectively leaving the Bulgarian art world. At present in Bulgaria the files of the secret service are still closed, and there are no documents about his collaboration in the public domain: no one would have found out if he hadn't exhibited the piece. After the scandal broke, he also published a letter in a local newspaper – a third-person narrative told in the form of a fairy tale – which became an extension of the work. In it he writes: 'I wanted it to be a warning to all the young people who might be misled to fall into the meticulously woven webs of the Institution. Because if in two or three years time (or even sooner) some of these young people are asked by the future 'appropriate services' whether communists, anarchists, etc. are having meetings together, these same young people may not hesitate to tell and this act would

be perfectly normal and moral for them ...' Since then, his conflicted relationship to institutional authority has been a central part of his work – constantly echoing his internal struggles between his eagerness to collaborate and his refusal to be manipulated. Many of the ideas for his exhibitions arise out of a playful (or not so playful) antagonism toward curators, institutions and patrons. When invited to exhibit at Kunsthau Zurich in 2005, he famously opted to display 99 of his unsold works in a show titled 'Leftovers', giving himself a self-appointed retrospective and a chance to auction his back-catalogue. His show 'Rivals' (2004) at the Centre d'Art Santa Mònica in Barcelona came about when he wanted to show one work while the curator wanted to show another. So the exhibition ended up manifesting itself as a contest between artist and curator: seven points were awarded to the person with more hair, eight to whoever's team won a tug-of-war or who could make the museum guard laugh first. As Solakov puts it: 'I'm well aware that this is institutional critique, but at some point it turned into a situation of "I am criticizing you but come on, let me in".'¹

Solakov's ambivalent relationship to authority extends to a reluctance to make an authoritative statement with his own artwork. As a student, he studied mural painting, and in some ways one could consider all of his works to be murals. From his seminal *A Life (Black & White)* (1998–ongoing), in which one painter covers a wall in white paint while another continuously paints over the white with black, to his tiny scribbles in hard-to-reach places, his wall paintings are constantly retreating or shrinking away

from the grandiose or didactic. *The Yellow Blob Story* (1997), a white wall half-covered in yellow paint as though someone has used a roller to paint as far as they could reach and then given up, is qualified by Solakov's handwritten note beside it: 'I ordered this yellow blob from the exhibition assistants but later on I completely forgot the reason for this.' The yellow blob hovers on the wall like an incomplete statement – a sentence or thought promisingly dreamt up and subsequently abandoned. In more elaborate installations such as *The Truth (The Earth is Plane, The World is Flat)* (1992–5) Solakov boldly presented fabricated evidence and testimonies asserting that the world is, in fact, flat. Slogans or propaganda such as 'Yes, the world is flat. Believe it!' are painted on the wall in mock-official exclamations. (The wall painting also reads: 'The strange thing is that, in one way or another, this story is related to Bulgaria'.)

Solakov's series of improvised, site-specific 'doodles' on the walls of exhibition spaces take his ironic false modesty to an extreme, as though apologizing for the status granted to him as an artist or competing to see how intimate a wall painting can be. As Solakov describes it: 'I am like the typical Bulgarian murmuring something while standing in a queue.¹ These murmurings are often hard to detect and are full of nuances, mistakes and insecurities. A white cube, a corridor or a toilet can seem perfectly ordinary and empty until one notices Solakov's inconspicuous drawings and scribbled notes: a white smudge on the floor laments, 'I am so alone'; an empty hole with a missing screw begs, 'Screw me, please!'; while two minuscule figures are engaged in a struggle atop the shadow cast by a banister. These anthropomorphized details, to which the

artist lends his voice, implicate the viewer in a kind of performative game, in which we're prompted to break the typical conventions of gallery-going – kneeling on the ground or squinting at the wall to see the work. In one of the first such works, *On the Wing* (1999), produced in collaboration with a Luxembourgish airline, Solakov arranged to have his own texts printed on the wings of a fleet of passenger jets. Like an invisible friend, the artist turns this hulking industrial machine into something more personal – a site for 'public sculptures' that



whisper only to those in the window seats. He coaxes the viewer into his own secret game with provocations such as: 'The same text appears on the right wing too ... but you better check!' At times Solakov has an even more mischievous streak: in a set of mirrors with tiny handwritten messages on their gilded frames (*Mirrors*, 2001–3) he pokes fun at the viewer or asks them to be complicit in games that might humiliate them: 'I am a very sophisticated mirror and I firmly oppose serving your ordinary face. Bye-bye.' Then, he adds, 'But hang around just in case I change my mind.'

Does this inner monologue – alternately self-effacing, playful, insecure and intimate

– belong to the artist himself or an *alter ego*? Does Solakov cultivate a sense of false modesty to undermine his own authority or as a pre-emptive strategy to protect himself from criticism? In his installation *El Bulgaro* (2000) he relates the tale of the long-overlooked *alter ego* of El Greco, who, tiring of painting 'elongated, slimy unhealthy figures all day long, day after day, commission after commission', began to paint 'mighty, natural-looking men and women, bites from daily life'. As the story goes: 'The limelight on El Greco's widely acclaimed, glorious altarpieces and official portraits found its counterpart in the moonlight illuminating the weird El Bulgaro's modest but no less honest little paintings.' This dual identity, invented to cope with an internal struggle between the artist's eagerness to please authority and a humbler, more insecure persona hiding underneath, may explain the duality in Solakov's work. The story is accompanied by a portrait of Solakov himself, shirtless and wearing pantaloons sewn by his wife, in the guise of El Bulgaro – the artist who willingly makes himself a bit of a fool or buffoon, but only as a way of negotiating between art-historical traditions and his own doubts about those traditions. For Solakov, art is never 'proof' of anything, and there can be no strictly authoritative version of any story. 'Facts are the enemy of truth,' as Quixote proudly proclaims. 'And so on and so forth,' as Solakov would say.

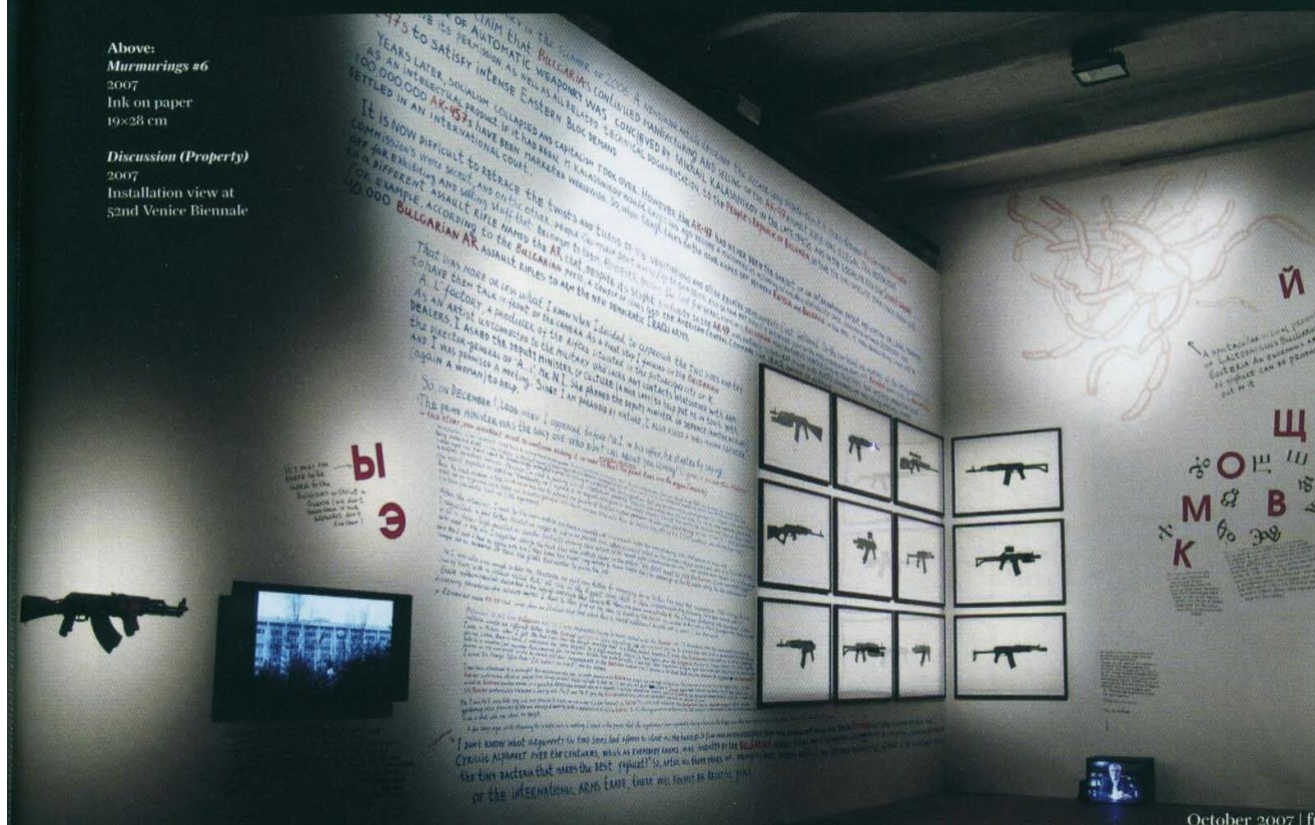
Christy Lange is a writer based in Berlin, and assistant editor of *frieze*.

Find out more about Nedko Solakov at frieze.com

1 Interview with Nedko Solakov by Iara Boubnova in 'Nedko Solakov: A 12 1/3 (and even more) Year Survey', exh. cat., Malmö, Folio, 2003, pp. 73–4
2 Ibid., p. 75

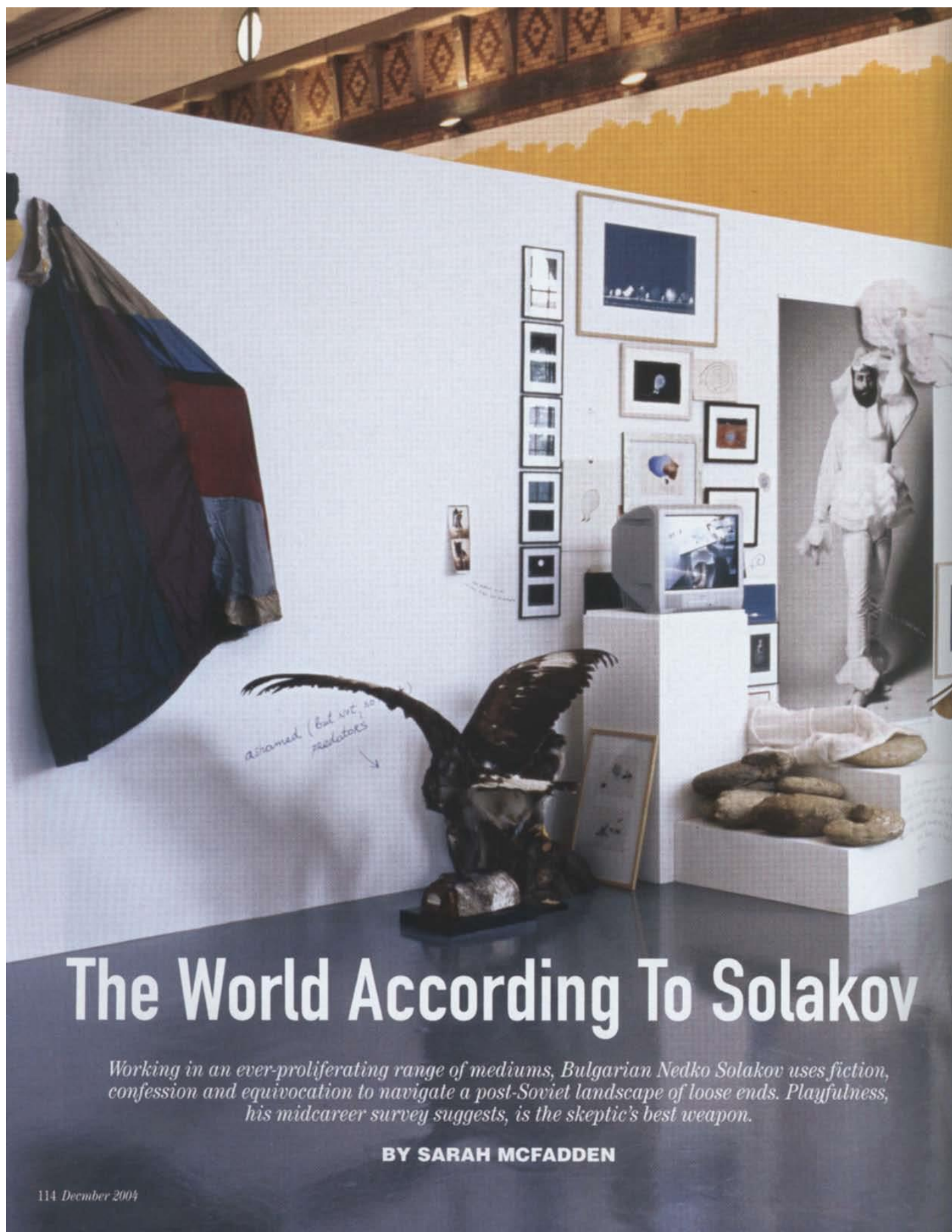
Above:
Murmurings #6
2007
Ink on paper
19x28 cm

Discussion (Property)
2007
Installation view at
52nd Venice Biennale



October 2007 | fr

The Self-Preservation Society, article. Author: Christy Lange
Frieze, October 2007



The World According To Solakov

Working in an ever-proliferating range of mediums, Bulgarian Nedko Solakov uses fiction, confession and equivocation to navigate a post-Soviet landscape of loose ends. Playfulness, his midcareer survey suggests, is the skeptic's best weapon.

BY SARAH MCFADDEN

114 December 2004

The World According To Solakov, article. Author: Sarah McFadden
Art in America, December 2004



... [I]t is precisely this masquerade of fictions and ironies and fantastic scenarios that can draw us out and bring us close to ourselves. The paradox of the arts is that they are all made up and yet they allow us to get at truths about who and what we are or might be.

—Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*

Fiction—quite literally, storytelling—is at the heart of Nedko Solakov's art. The artist's midcareer survey brings together an assortment of materially and formally heterogeneous works—the masquerades and fantastic scenarios of his many-faceted, profoundly entertaining conceptual practice—which since 1990 have been presented mostly one at a time in a slew of international biennials and in other

group and solo shows in the U.S., Europe, Asia and South America. Jointly organized by the Rooseum (Malmö, Sweden), Casino Luxembourg and O.K. Centrum (Linz, Austria), "Nedko Solakov: A 12½ (and even more) Year Survey" opened in Luxembourg, where some 35 pieces fanned out to fill the Casino's exhibition space, as well as a portion of its vaulted brick basement. Physically, the works ranged from a single

View of Nedko Solakov's This is me, too . . . , 1996, mixed mediums, collaborators include Slava Nakovska, Angel Tzvetanov, Stefan Dimitrov, Kalin Serapionov and the Museum of Zoology, Lund; at the Rooseum. Photo Vegar Moen. Collection De Vleeshal, Middelburg, the Netherlands. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden.

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It is probable that Solakov's prolonged experience of political absolutism contributed significantly to his becoming a champion of ambiguity.

statement written on the ceiling to the nearly operatic *This is Me, Too...* (1996), a sprawling, multifarious, 3-D extravaganza that threatens to swamp its nominal subject. (That is part of the intended effect.) In all, there were nine room-size installations; a couple of deliberately unfinished monochrome wall paintings; several extended series of delicately rendered figurative drawings, most incorporating inscriptions; handmade books; diverse small objects; performance videos and DVDs; large-scale color photographs; an interactive CD-ROM; and, from the 1980s, a constellation of works—small paintings, altered found objects and images and a large collage of souvenirs from a month's stay in West Germany in 1988—many of which have not been shown previously outside Bulgaria, where the artist was born in 1957 and still lives.

It's probable that Solakov's prolonged experience of political absolutism went into his becoming a champion of ambiguity and loose ends. No doubt to his delight, it is neither totally true nor completely false to say that the present show tracks his progress from academically trained mural painter engaged in the struggle for artistic freedom in Bulgaria to the successful, globetrotting postmodernist he is today. True, all the ingredients of such a story are assembled, but with the exception of the Soviet-era works, their arrangement is a-chronological. Thus his artistic evolution is "available," but only as one discontinuous subtext among myriad others.

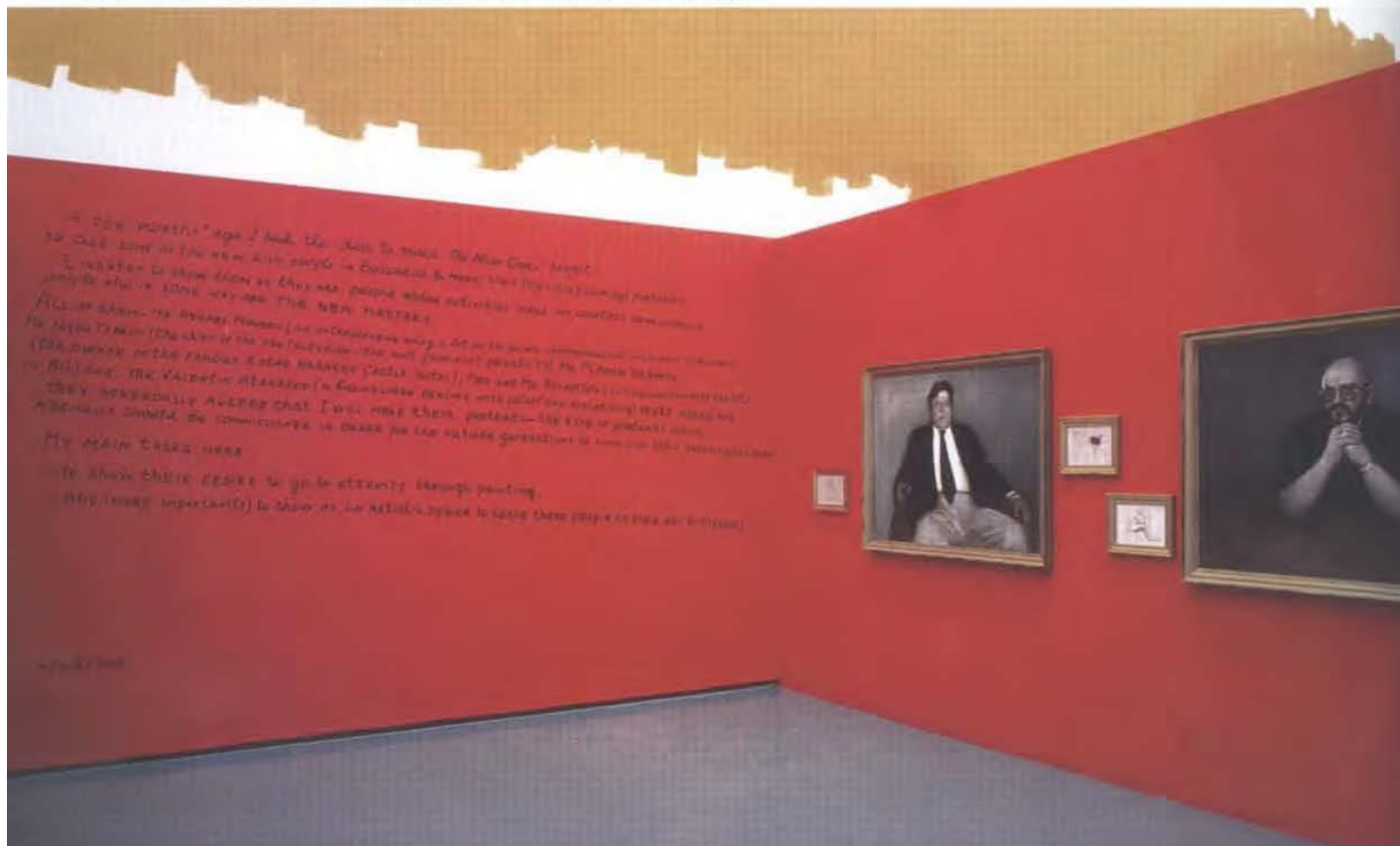
Still, connecting the dots has its rewards, and in this regard the "(and

even more)" group of pre-1992 works was most valuable. Disappointingly, Solakov's so-called "subversive" paintings, some of which made it into the state-sponsored, juried "All-Bulgarian" annuals, were not presented.¹ This lack was partly compensated for by the inclusion of individual components of *The Bathtub*, the artist's first fully realized installation, which was exhibited in a watershed group show in Sofia in 1988.² Made in 1986, the selected objects are bits of altered domestic bric-a-brac that attest to Solakov's already evident proclivity for undermining order—in this case, pictorial. In one of the items, called *Vampire*, a leering black bloblike figure, precursor to a type that still crops up in Solakov's works, has been painted into the background of a black-and-white mass-market print showing a bare-breasted, female Narcissus bending over a pool of water. The lecherous looking intruder transforms the kitsch-romantic portrayal into a batty variant of Susannah and the Elders. In *Hunting*, a traditional hunting scene printed on a serving tray is given a surrealistic twist by the artist's addition of a reptilian blob squirming helplessly in the path of its pursuers. You can't help feeling sorry for the wretched thing.

Solakov's art still nurtures a soft spot for the downtrodden, the unlucky and the woeful, and its obvious sympathies have expanded to encompass the merely fearful and fallible, which is to say, people like himself. But back to 1986: Solakov was already using art to interrupt order, to interfere with meaning and upset expectations. The serving tray, in all its modesty, carries a heavy allegorical load.

Two key transitional pieces made directly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 have the force of a declaration of independence and foreshadow the cathartic, critical and prodigiously inventive admixtures of words, images and objects to be found in the subsequent mature work, which is the subject of the exhibition's main 12½-year time frame. *Top Secret* (1989-90), the earlier of the two, is a small, two-drawer card

Partial view of The New Ones, 1996, five portraits, oil on linen, each 38 by 51 inches, 18 preparatory drawings in ink and graphite on paper, gilt frames, walls painted in "English red," handwritten text; at the Rooseum. Photo Vegar Moen.



The World According To Solakov, article. Author: Sarah McFadden
Art in America, December 2004

catalogue in which Solakov divulged in writing and drawing "everything shameful and depressing"³ that he wanted to get off his chest. An avowedly confessional work, it details most notably his seven-year stint, begun at age 19, as an unpaid informer for the Bulgarian secret police. He ended that collaboration in 1983, before perestroika was even a glimmer on the Soviet horizon, but remained haunted by the experience. Though he was not threatened with involuntary exposure of the kind to which his counterparts in other post-Communist countries were subjected,⁴ Solakov believed that in order to proceed honestly as an artist he needed to declare his past. His use of art as a vehicle for self-disclosure has been called "unique in the context of post-Communist Europe," and in this regard *Top Secret* still stands alone.⁵

It was completed in February 1990 and shown in Sofia that spring.⁶ Predictably, the work caused misunderstanding, and rumors began to spread about the nature and extent of Solakov's involvement with the state security services. In response, the artist published an extraordinary apologia in a local cultural weekly. Beginning with the phrase "Once upon a time," this explanatory text (which is reprinted in the survey show's catalogue) reads like a modern fairy tale until the penultimate paragraph, when a change from third- to first-person narrative causes the veil of fiction to fall away. It's an enchanting piece of storytelling—simply worded, clear and possessed of a beguiling *naïveté du récit* that finds its way into Solakov's later, playfully ironic fictions. (The solemnity of this apologia is unique in his oeuvre.) The tale it tells of youthful trust and idealism snared, exploited and gradually destroyed goes far to explain the strong current of skepticism in his art and his penchant for institutional critique.

The second transitional piece, *Encyclopaedia Utopia*, is a 224-page, three-volume work made over the three months that followed the completion, in March 1990, of *Top Secret*. A tongue-in-cheek compendium of useful knowledge for utopian living (with Communism gone, it was time to start constructing another ideal form of society), its alphabetized entries, which the artist selected by paging through an English-language dictionary, run in a sequence that includes the following: Anus, Aphorism, Apocalypse . . . Headache, Horrible Creatures, the Ill Child . . . Suicide, Torture Instruments and more. Clearly, this is not the catalogue of elevated concepts and principles one might expect from the title.

Disjunction prevails. Physically, *Encyclopaedia's* motley contents resemble those of a scrapbook (the "tomes" are loose-leaf notebooks), with original drawings ranging in execution from crude to meticulous, photographic reproductions and other collage elements incorporated on sheets of assorted sizes and materials. Conceptually, the sole familiar order is that of alphabetical sequencing.⁷ Opposite the full page dedicated to "Eye" ("Organ for seeing different [*sic*] things and events. One of the main organs in Utopian body"), page 50 is divided into sections depicting examples of "external use," "extortion," "extraordinary," "extravaganza" and "extremely long tongue." The last-mentioned shows a photograph of a woman's head in profile, to which Solakov has appended a drawing of a preternaturally long lingua that stretches clear across the page, where its tip rests on the end of a disembodied phallus (lingam). That this entry was not included in the "erotic" section, which harbors an image that is closely related formally and thematically (but with the action reversed), could, if it weren't so preposterous, be seen as a willful flouting of standard criteria used in classifying and interpreting works of art. By extension, and in view of the taxonomic chaos that reigns throughout, its (dis)placement calls into question the validity and reliability of all systems of categorization and judgment, such as the ones that sank in Communism's wake.

Two more "E" listings: "Espionage" is invoked in a small penciled landscape purporting to show seven spies. Each spy's position is indicated by a numbered arrow, but the spies themselves are invisible. This is, of course, as it should be. Over the years, Solakov has developed this type of childish-seeming prank into a refined conjuring act, pulling our



Detail of the installation "New Noah's Ark," 1991-92, showing The Creatures, 96 pieces, thermoplastic, metal, black paint, handwritten text, accompanied by the CD *The Strange Noise*, 30-minute loop on hidden loudspeakers; shown in the artist's studio, 1991, Sofia. Photo Anatoly Michaylov and Konstantin Shestakov.

legs to make us think and see. In another register, "Everybody is Smiling," a heading which, however idiosyncratic, *does* seem to fit the utopian program, is illustrated by a discolored news photo of a group of attractive young women—workers or students, it's hard to say—beaming radiantly for the camera. The image is an obvious throwback to the great Soviet utopia and its propaganda machine. One of the most powerful fictions of all time, Soviet Communism has served Solakov as both model and target.

The exhibition's nominal departure point is "New Noah's Ark," Solakov's first elaborate narrative installation and his first work to attract international attention (at the 1992 Istanbul Biennial, 12½ years prior to the opening of the current show). Like *Encyclopaedia*, it's about starting over from scratch, jettisoning all that's familiar and braving the unknown—a prospect both exhilarating and terrifying, no matter how bad things have been. The protagonist of the narrative is an ordinary fellow, Noah, who is instructed by anonymous authorities to transport to another world alien creatures whose own world has ceased to exist. The creatures are temporarily stranded in Noah's bathroom, which, he is informed, is a buffer zone between worlds and which they have reached via the plumbing. Noah's world is coming to an end tomorrow, so there's no time to lose.

Compared to the homespun *Encyclopaedia*, "New Noah's Ark" is a sophisticated production—a theatrical, walk-in piece with multiple components. In Luxembourg, the original book-length manuscript was displayed behind glass, like an artifact, along with a polished stone (part of the plot) engraved with the Cyrillic letters for the word "you" in Bulgarian. Excerpts from the book, complete with page references, were handwritten on the walls in random order and interspersed with large framed watercolors illustrating the ark models from which the travelers are meant to choose their vessel. An oil painting, its surface clotted with sluglike globs of pigment, showed Noah having breakfast—probably his last. In an adjacent darkened space, a herd of 96 colorful thermoplastic zoomorphs—primitive, visceral-looking forms, each with its own distinct physiognomy—huddled on the floor amid sounds of running and flushing water.

The fun-house appeal was unmistakable, as were the allegorical references conflating the Biblical flood, post-Communist sea changes and (taking Noah as Solakov's surrogate) the artist's task of steering the

As Solakov's career moved into high gear in the '90s, he increasingly mocked his own ambition and success, as well as the art support system itself.

world into the future. However, this not being Utopia, things don't stack up so simply. Noah is not a free agent, and his commanders' manipulative language and tone parody those of spies and tyrants ("Your God, Noah, already resigned"). Furthermore, the predetermined direction of the ark's course ("just open the toilet and go") is far from promising. Faced with imminent extinction, what's a fellow to do? That's all there is to the story, and we are left wondering.

Another conundrum looms in *The Truth (The Earth is Plane, the World is Flat)*, a mixed-medium installation from 1992-95 that constitutes an ingenious send-up of propaganda by its own means. In it, Solakov gathers the testimony of seven fictitious witnesses who claim that the earth is flat. The apocrypha include clippings of published news-

detractor of the Club of the Friends of the Flat World, puts reason on what would appear to be the wrong side, the one, in this piece, of brainwashing and illogic. It reads, in part: "Is it possible that people have become so mixed up as to challenge the obvious? The members of the club are warning us to never see things as absolute and to not be sure of anything."

That warning is the artist's own, and he has repeated it again and again in provocatively iconoclastic, as well as deeply humanizing, works that refuse dichotomies and instead embrace dualities and paradox. Straightforward examples include the drawing series "Good & Bad" (2003) and the installation *Good News, Bad News*, which was first created in 1998. Both combine visual images (composed of wash drawings and small objects, respectively) and written anecdotes that highlight the positive and negative aspects of the situations they relate, ranging from a genetically modified bean pondering its identity to an airplane about to crash into a mountain that is sure to survive the accident.

Concurrently with *The Truth*, Solakov worked on "Well-Known Stories," a series of 23 ink-and-wash drawings, each incorporating a one-line, handwritten caption. The drawings are based on familiar motifs from the New Testament, one of the greatest good-bad stories ever told. Solakov presents his scenes from unfamiliar angles, focusing not on their subjects' well-known sacred side but on imaginary, profane details. Thus, the Pietà is represented from behind, with an atypically broad-framed Mary scratching her back with her left hand while supporting the body of her dead son with her right: "They were so stupid—these little creatures. . . . Even in such a moment they continued to disturb her." Another scene shows her, again from behind, doing the dishes "after their (last) supper . . ." as a group of figures files out the door at the far side of the room. She gets the runs on the flight to Egypt and, after her baby is born, finally has sex with her husband: "and then (after the kings went away), Joseph was for the first time with his wife. . . ." Witty and indecorous, the tenderly rendered drawings are both shocking and affectionate.

As Solakov's career moved into high gear during the '90s, he increasingly mocked his own ambition and success (an effective strategy which led to further success and perhaps higher ambition) and poked fun at the system that supported and promoted them. An outsider on the inside, so to speak, he quickly learned the ropes of the Western art world while staying in touch with who he is and what he hopes to achieve. Both are quite complex.

As a performer, Solakov has a gift for buffoonery. *Some of My Capabilities*, a 1½-minute silent film loop from 1995, features the artist touching his tongue to his nose, crossing his eyes, wiggling his ears, flicking his tongue in and out while blinking his eyes at a frenetic rate, bending his double-jointed thumb, executing penile gymnastics, and making a small line drawing, etc. The film trails off with the words "and so on and so forth," leading us to fantasize about the rest of his repertoire of spectacularly goofy antics, which everyone understands but few can imitate. Solakov uses them as a bridge to his audience, whom he often addresses in his written works as "dear viewer," or just plain "you."

His art can be irresistibly humble and engaging. The show contains examples of the ways he treats interior walls, mirror frames, large photographs and even airplane wings⁸ as message boards and doodle pads. Generally tiny, the notations tend literally to be one with their supports. The caption below a pin hole in one of the Casino's walls read "a hole with a little mouse in it"; nearby a small paint blister was labeled "a little problem is hidden here"; a small oval-shaped bump outlined in ink mutated into "a fussy wet baby." Floral wallpaper patterns and details of photographs provide armatures and grounds for the whimsical antics of stick figures endowed with human drives and capacities for thought, speech, emotion and so on. Once you spot them, an achievement that sometimes requires getting down on

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On the Wing, 1999-present, 14 vinyl-letter texts on the wings of six Boeing 737s from the official Luxembourg Luxair fleet. Courtesy Casino Luxembourg, Forum d'Art Contemporain. Photo Nedko Solakov.

paper reports written and planted by the artist, a made-for-TV interview with an actor playing the part of a former Soviet astronaut, a recorded speech by a made-up politician, drawings, photographs, etc.—exactly the sorts of fabricated "evidence" that can be marshaled to persuade people of just about anything, particularly when belief in the idea being promoted is said to lead to inner peace and well-being. It's a confidence game updated and used for political, or in this case, the artist's, purposes, which seem to lie partly in sowing confusion.

Of course, propaganda is mostly associated with deception, and everyone knows that the earth is a sphere. Its shape is an established scientific fact that we learn in school and take on faith as being true. And there's the rub. Solakov the skeptic would have us keep an open mind about such things. With the ironic aside "The strange thing is, that in one way or another, this story is related to Bulgaria," he reminds us that as the Soviet Union lost its grip, old paradigms—round-world views—were challenged and supplanted by antithetical, and, to many, quite possibly absurd-seeming models. One of the fake documents, a letter from a supposed

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hands and knees or craning your neck while standing on tiptoe, it's like gazing through a zoom lens into another order of reality: what appeared to be mute planes and surfaces teem with life. Kids' stuff again: exhibition as treasure hunt, "bare" walls and occasionally the view out the window as focuses of attention.

The show ricochets between the antimonumental, chatty sublime and the self-mockingly grandiose. Solakov might have been thinking of Van Dyck when he came up with the idea for *The New Ones*, a 1996 installation featuring five gold-framed oil portraits of members of Bulgaria's new rich, plus 18 preparatory drawings hung on walls painted English red. But whereas Van Dyck was paid royally by his wealthy patrons, Solakov painted his likenesses for free, feeling duly compensated by the promise of immortality that went with the job, or so the gambit went. It was the subjects who served the artist by agreeing to sit for him.

Over the past several years, Solakov's art has taken increasingly attenuated material form, with projects ranging from an attempt to negotiate a Middle East cease-fire that would have coincided with a show he had last year in Israel⁹ to diverting funds allocated for a Brussels exhibition¹⁰ to pay for ads for the present survey in last October's issues of *Frieze* and *Artforum*. His most recent installation, *El Bulgaro*, dates from 2000. It is in many respects the culminating point thus far of his narrative work in three dimensions. In it he fashions for himself a mock-heroic lineage that includes El Greco, upon whom he bestows a Bulgarian grandmother, and the great satirist Cervantes, who was El Greco's contemporary. The piece telescopes time, travesties the jealously guarded secretiveness that attends scholarly discoveries, nods at the creativity of unscrupulous art merchants and forgers (fiction-producers like Solakov), includes apocryphal texts that parody the terminology of art historians and psychoanalysts, and features a fetching photographic portrait of the burly artist striking a quintessentially self-important pose while wearing a pair of frilly bloomers, presumably typical attire for a 17th-century male painter working in Toledo. The bloomers too are exhibited, as if to lend credibility to a story in which they have no particular significance.

The rest of the objects in the piece are conventionally aligned paintings, prints and drawings said to be copies of works attributed to El Greco's newly revealed alter ego and esthetic counterforce, El Bulgaro. The copies are signed by Solakov, who, like El Greco/El Bulgaro, is an itinerant artist formed in the East and come to prominence in the West. Ingeniously contrived, intricately woven and cleverly amusing connections such as this point to the penetrating exactness of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's observation at the end of her catalogue essay: "It is as if Nedko were whispering . . . 'What else can a sensitive artist (male, white, European and with a rather 'hulky' physique) do right now but play out his megalomaniac, deep impulses ironically, achieving and denying at once his will to power?'"

Sprinkled among the writings on the walls, the artist's own brief editorial and critical comments—"sorry for the English," "mistake," "failed piece"—speak to what he calls his immediate reaction of assessment and underscore the performative, improvised nature of much of his art. In Luxembourg one of these notations, slightly longer than the rest, was proffered as an independent work (more were intended but time ran out) that was initially planned to assess parts or all of the show. Written in the first person at the last minute (the piece is marked with the time and date), it states that, having just finished installing the works, Solakov lacks critical distance and has to hurry to take a shower before the opening. You can't be sure whether or how much posturing is involved here or in other of his spontaneous-seeming, confessional works, but the effect is a little like that of "Well-Known Stories": a tad indelicate (how bad does

he smell and do we really want to know?) and endearing for all that (the star of the hour gets sweaty and brain-tired just like the rest of us).

"The Pretentious Retrospective," the tongue-in-cheek title of the series inaugurated by the piece just mentioned, is appropriately inappropriate to this generous yet incomplete survey, from which Solakov's best-known and arguably most cogent work, *A Life (Black & White)*, 1999-2001, is conspicuously missing. Labor- and material-intensive, it is an emblematic postmodern performance piece that calls for two hired hands to repaint the walls of an exhibition space continuously for the duration of the show. One painter uses white paint, the other black, and they advance in the same direction, covering one another's work as they go. The piece is finished when the show ends.

Omitted because of its familiarity and high cost, *A Life* is nevertheless not forgotten.¹¹ It is pictured prominently on the catalogue's wraparound cover and features in its pages, where the full retrospective is staged in print. No doubt to the artist's delight, the book is perplexing. To assure that it retains its indecisive, nondefinitive, unruly character, the artist determined the order in which the works would appear in its pages by drawing their titles blindly from a proverbial hat. Actually it was a teacup. □

1. "Some of the jury members were clever enough to realise that such 'subversive' works were useful, even for socialism . . ." Solakov, interviewed by Iara Bounnova, *Nedko Solakov: A 12½ (and even more) Year Survey*, Malmö, Folio, p. 86.

2. "The City?" Rakovski 125 Gallery, Sofia, curated by Philip Zidarov. The exhibition was a key event in a series of projects and debates organized by The City, a small artists' collective whose pioneering efforts are credited with paving the way for contemporary art in Bulgaria.

3. Quoted from Solakov's "The Action is on (for the time being) . . ." originally published in *Kultura*, June 22, 1990. Reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, pp. 105-107.

4. After the fall of Communism, Bulgaria did not stage a wholesale opening of classified government records, as happened in East Germany, for example.

5. *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, New York, Museum of Modern Art/Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2002, pp. 277-80. Quoted in the exhibition catalogue, p. 104.

6. *Top Secret* was later shown in the U.S. in "Beyond Belief," curated by Laura Hoptman. The show opened in the summer of 1995 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago [Sept. 2-Nov. 26, 1995], traveled to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio [Feb. 6-Mar. 24, 1996], the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia [Sept. 6-Nov. 2, 1996], and the Jocelyn Art Museum, Omaha [Feb. 1-Apr. 6, 1997].

7. In his catalogue essay, p. 28, Jordan Kantor notes the similarity between *Encyclopaedia's* heterotopic listing and that of the imaginary Chinese encyclopedia described in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," collected in *Other Inquisitions*, 1952.

8. *On the Wing* (1999-), a project originally executed for Casino Luxembourg's exhibition "Faiseurs d'histoires," consists of 14 short texts printed on the upper sides of the wings of six Boeing 737s belonging to Luxembourg's national carrier, Luxair. The texts are legible from the window seats. One reads: "Hi! Yes, it's me who just said 'Hi!'" And another: "The same text appears on the right wing too . . . but you better check."

9. "Negotiations," Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, dates Sept. 12-Oct. 18, 2003.

10. "Advertisement," Sint-Lukasgalerij, Brussels, Oct. 24-Dec. 13, 2003.

11. Video documentation would have been a welcome stand-in. On Oct. 20, 2001, hour-long recordings of the work were made simultaneously in Venice, Munich, Glasgow and Dublin, where it so happened that *A Life* was being performed. (Like Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, the piece is executed according to a set of written instructions.) Another was made in Solakov's studio in Stockholm (where he was temporarily living); there the artist performed a solo version of *A Life* on a sheet of paper lying flat on his work table. Holding a brush loaded with black paint in his right hand and one with white in his left, he proceeded to paint from left to right, in the same direction as the performers covering vertical wall planes at the other locations. Solakov had to work hand over hand in the manner of a pianist when the black reached the right edge of the paper and he had to resume painting with white on the left. Thus for 60 minutes the conceptual artist experienced some of the painters' physical ordeal.

"Nedko Solakov: A 12½ (and even more) Year Survey" debuted at Casino Luxembourg [Dec. 13, 2003-Feb. 29, 2004] before traveling to the Roseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö [Mar. 17-June 13], and the O.K. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz [Dec. 2, 2004-Feb. 20, 2005]. It is accompanied by a 220-page catalogue with essays by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Jordan Kantor, Daniel Kurjakovic and Saul Anton, as well as an interview with the artist by Iara Bounnova.

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