

“ 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

1 6

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.



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

(Previous page)

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.

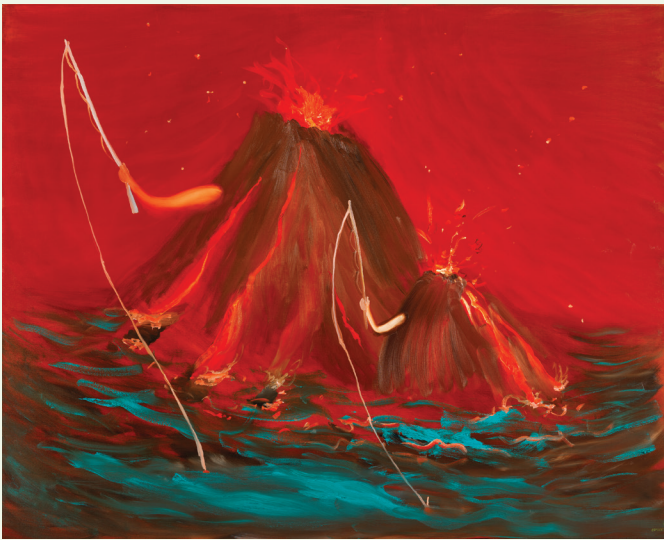
(Opposite page)

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.

(This page)

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.





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.

(This page, top)

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.

(Bottom)

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.





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.

(This page, top)

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 Gimignano/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 Contemporanea Serralves, Porto, 2012. Collection of De Vleeshal, Middelburg, Netherlands. Photo by Filipe Brag. Courtesy the artist.



(This page)
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, Rooseum 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.

IBARA 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.

