

ARTFORUM

Nedko Solakov

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

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.

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.”

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