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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 Arsenale 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



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
14x46x39 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.



Above:
Negotiations
2003
DVD stills

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

Under this very wing there is
a very small rain drop
hanging on to the silver
metal.... somewhere close to
the wheel.... She is very
happy. Why? Because later
on she intends to drop down
on that (sometimes snowy)
mountain where her
beloved cousins live.
They are some of
the best snowflakes
in the World.

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.'² 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

