



Nedko Solakov. Improvements

25 April 2015 – 31 January 2016

The artwork of Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov is known for its wit, humour and accessibility. For his project for the Ringgalerie, Solakov curated paintings by the Director of the Salzburger Kunstverein, made when he had previously practiced as an artist. Placing the paintings under Plexiglas boxes, Solakov invites audiences to draw/correct/comment upon the works and thus to “improve” them.

Nedko Solakov, born 1957 in Cherven Briag, Bulgaria, lives and works in Sofia

Nedko Solakov: Improvements

Text by Séamus Kealy

Generally, projects by Nedko Solakov begin with a story that are then told in space, as he says himself.

So begins this project.

I first met Nedko in Kassel in 2012 at documenta. He was standing outside the Brothers Grimm Museum, where he had just installed his epic work, *Knights (and Other Dreams)*. I had seen the work earlier that day, and I didn't hesitate to walk straight up to him and congratulate him on its success and humour. The work unfolds in a series of rooms that Nedko had filled with complex, auto-biographical gestures, originating from his youthful, boyhood dreams to play the drums and to have a remote-control helicopter combined with a fictitious (but believable) childhood fantasy to be a knight. We see videos, photographs, portrait paintings, drawings and hand-written texts on the walls, vitrines with

various materials, free-standing sculptures, and of course, knights in armour, drum sets, and helicopters. The project reaches a mad climax when we see he finds a way to combine all three. I told him that I found the work to be witty, and especially fresh given the context, then I shook his hand and walked off.

What I hadn't said, was that the work, to me, created a rupture in this context of the great contemporary art exhibition; documenta being the emperor of these multi-year art events. Namely, the installation and the journey it offered the visitor seemed to me to be a brilliant series of gestures that effortlessly raised notions that many artists continually grapple with, and are often unable to demonstrate directly in their work: Here was a work that was both a highly sincere as well as a creative critique of notions of authorship and authenticity, and a clever means to draw upon the association of childhood and childhood fantasy (and their importance as the foundational material of the artist) that the Grimm Brothers' Museum naturally contains in both its space and mandate. Further the installation begged the question of what constitutes art by employing an honest and characterized role of the artist, almost like a confession of the artist, in a means that engages public audiences in an entertaining, open manner, often using non-art language, so to speak, and disrupting the art space, and thus, the expectations of an art audience. The work for me also returned the art experience to the naïve viewer, which I have always felt that we all are when we encounter exhibitions, no matter how qualified or professional we may be. And in the centre of the work hard questions about art and truth are exposed, histories of art and its ongoing canonization, and thus, the work itself is altogether a playful undermining of the "seriousness" of the art world and the notion of "genius" of the artist as well as its formation in relation to childhood and desire, through a set of hyper-self-conscious clichés employed with wit and a kind of grace. This makes the work all the more powerful than it first appears.

I was well impressed.

We didn't meet again until 2014, when we worked together in Belgium for a jury for accepting young artists into a postgraduate program. Over dinner one evening, as we were in the middle of discussing the possibility of him doing a project at the Salzburger Kunstverein, Nedko asked me more about my own background. He discovered that I had started my career as a painter (and photographer), having abandoned my artistic practise to engage in curating full-time.

His eyes lit up.

In an instant, he proposed that we would switch roles. He would curate a series of my paintings and install them in plexi-glass boxes in the Ringgalerie of the Salzburger Kunstverein and offer them to the public in a manner that they could comment on them, or even draw on them. With my consent, of course.

I said, why not, and invited him to come visit Salzburg at his earliest convenience. In the meantime I had to venture back to Ireland, where many of my paintings are stored, and I photographed about thirty of them and sent images of them onto him. We met soon afterwards in Salzburg. Nedko happens to drive through Salzburg regularly, on his long

journeys from his home town Sofia up to Europe for his exhibitions and projects. He and his wife always stop in the same hotel and eat in the same restaurant, just outside the city. We met there one evening (I was very late, he and his wife were very understanding) and spoke more about the project, and after he visited the Salzburger Kunstverein the next day, the concept crystallized. We walked through the space, he scratched his beard, and provided precise instructions for the designs of the plexi-glass boxes. The public, he said, would be provided markers that they can write on the walls with and on the plexi-glass boxes with, to add commentary and enable them to participate in a process of suggesting ways that my paintings could be improved.

On his next visit, we met again at the same restaurant (punctual this time) and I showed him a few of my paintings in the flesh (which I dare say, he liked very much), and on the following visit to the Salzburger Kunstverein, we looked at a plexi-glass box prototype, which had been earlier constructed and now contained one of my paintings.

At which point, I confessed to Nedko that I liked the work very much as it was presented in the plexi-glass box, and that I felt almost re-united with my work. What I didn't say was that I began thinking again about how I made these paintings, about the time I had put into conceiving them and working on them in the solitary space of the studio, and then exhibiting them, storing them wherever I lived, shipping them when I moved, putting them away again, eventually into an attic in Ireland, and thinking not much about the fact that I would probably never exhibit them again. This was the narrative going on inside my head. I also remembered the mild scoldings that I had received when living earlier in Vancouver where I was both curating and presenting my own work as an artist simultaneously, over ten years ago. I was told then that I would not be taken seriously in either camp. This didn't discourage me, but time passed and I found more opportunities and more immediate satisfaction in working as a curator and later a director. I simply enjoy working with artists and developing projects that can test the spaces of art, politics and ideas that might impact on our thinking.

And I began to think that there was a kinship, a very profound and dynamic one, between my own desires and aspirations in working as a curator and the field of questioning that Nedko creates within his exhibitions. I believe that this involves a kind of openness, as well as notions of trust between an artist and curator and concurrently and more importantly between the exhibition and the public. I think this also involves a testing of our own responsibility to audiences. And thus, this exhibition, that Nedko has conceived, enables us to come full circle, in a way.

Whenever I talk about my paintings now, what invariably arises is a discussion about why it was that I left painting for curating, a decision that I had made for financial as well as professional reasons. However, I feel that my vocation has never changed, that I am still engaged in a creative process as I had in my studio years ago, but now I work with people, ideas, artworks and spaces rather than with my own pictures. In that way, I feel quite close to this project and to Nedko's ongoing questioning of how to make an exhibition. The process has been telling and rewarding. I am curious to see how the public will react.

List of works

Nine paintings by Séamus Kealy, director of the Salzburger Kunstvereins; plexiglass boxes, markers, participating visitors, courtesy the artists

Biographie

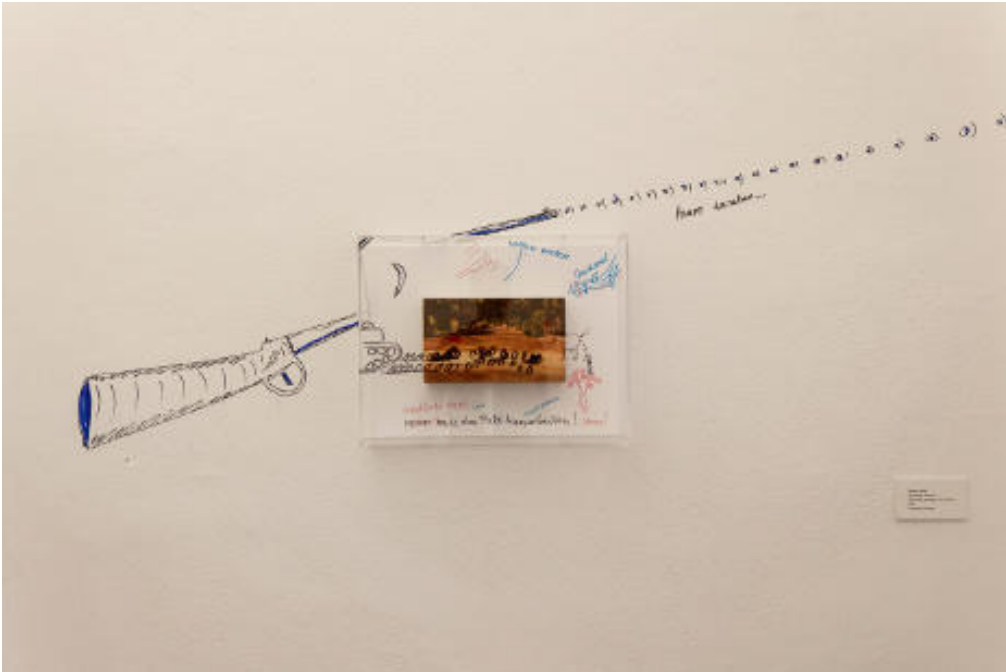
Nedko Solakov

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Nedko Solakov (born 1957, Tcherven Briag, Bulgaria; lives in Sofia) has exhibited extensively in Europe and the United States. His work was featured in Aperto'93 (Venice Biennial); the 48th, 49th, 50th and 52nd Venice Biennial; the 3rd, 4th and 9th Istanbul Biennial; São Paulo'94; Manifesta 1, Rotterdam; the 2nd and 4th Gwangju Biennial; the 5th Lyon Biennial, Sonsbeek 9, Arnhem, the 4th and 5th Cetinje Biennial, the 1st Lodz Biennial; the 7th Sharjah Biennial, United Arab Emirates; the 3rd Tirana Biennial; the 2nd Seville Biennial; the 2nd Moscow Biennial; documenta 12; 16th Sydney Biennial; Prospect 1, New Orleans Biennial, Singapore Biennial 2011 and dOCUMENTA (13). Recently he had solo shows at Museu do Chiado, Lisbon; Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam; CCA Kitakyushu, Japan; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona; Kunsthaus Zurich; Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli; Sofia City Art Gallery and Galleria Borghese, Rome. In 2003-2005 an extensive mid-career "A 12 1/3 (and even more) Year Survey" was presented at Casino Luxembourg, Roseum Malmoe and O.K Centrum Linz, and in 2008-2009 the "Emotions" solo project was exhibited at Kunstmuseum Bonn, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and Institut Mathildenhoehe, Darmstadt. In 2011-2012 his retrospective "All in Order, with Exceptions" was presented at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; Fondazione Galleria Civica Trento ("All in (My) Order, with Exceptions"); S.M.A.K., Ghent and Fundação de Serralves, Porto.

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