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Nedko Solakov: Arguing as another art medium

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Nedko Solakov's project for *What is to be done?* is titled *The Freedom of Speech (or how to argue properly)*. Here, the Italian performers are forced to argue with their hands tied to their thighs; in other words, they are deprived of any recourse to traditional gesticulation to support their arguments. With typical restrained irony, Solakov is proposing an enforced utopia of mutual respect, which is questioning the very possibility of arguing properly – and people's inclination to resort to cliché when representing other nations. At the same time, it is making fun of the notion of freedom of speech – the performers are not really free, but they still have “speech”.

Solakov's artistic biography and bibliography are extremely impressive – a vast quantity of texts have been written both about the artist and his work. The authors of these texts tend to underline the regional geography and the historical period with which he is connected. He was born in Bulgaria in 1957. This concise information signifies a small European country with a very short modern history, as well as continuous political dependencies; it marks the birth of a generation that in America is called the ‘babyboomers’, related to a certain historical optimism, but in the context of Europe and Solakov's reality, it signifies a totalitarian regime, cultural isolation and an ideological system of values. The artist's motherland (with which he is closely connected not only through his ancestors, upbringing, education, and everyday life, but also, for the future, through his children who also grew up there) has changed radically in the last twenty years or so. For good or bad, Bulgaria is becoming part of the globalized world. The larger part of Solakov's mature life coincides with a period that the political jargon defines as “transitional”, a period with unpredictable temporal parameters and with a scale that so far has not been measured.

Solakov's multi-media art is tied up to the substance of this process. While never negating his identity or his life-long experiences, the artist does not stress his biography. Instead, he creates a complex web of commentaries by building up a conglomerate of personal reactions and generalizations in his works. He looks into the private and societal dimensions of change, into expectations and disappointments, into absurdity, into the status of contemporary values (of art in particular), and how a society of deficit transforms itself into a society of middle-class lifestyles. The chaotic and unpredictable nature of transitional contemporaneity is the “fuel” for his themes and metaphors; his sometimes sharp and sometimes lyrical irony builds up the distance that is necessary for reflection.

Solakov is an acknowledged story-teller, a creator of narrative and visual novels; his art is populated by a multitude of personages – real and copied, mythological, historical and purely imaginative. The existence of these characters is “conducted” by the artist, who allows them to communicate with each other, build up relationships, revenge each other, depend on each other, through a great variety of artistic means – from oil painting to digital animation, from microscopic drawings and wall texts to context-specific total installations.