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Constitutional Performance Art?

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A few days into the government shutdown, one Bulgarian artist is hoping to create a commentary about democracy—by staging a “bed time” reading of the Constitution. Ann Binlot reports.

Battles over the nation’s budget went unresolved on Thursday, resulting in the [third day of the government shutdown](#). That same day, Bulgarian artist Borjana Ventzislavova was putting the finishing touches on a performance art piece that reflects on the very documents that serve as the basis for American democracy: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.



Dakota Fine/Borjana Ventzislavova

It may seem like an unlikely marriage of ideas—the Constitution and performance art—but this weekend, Ventzislavova will debut a piece that seeks to fly in the face of that. She has assembled a makeshift bedroom in a corner of the parking garage at Washington, D.C.'s Capitol Skyline Hotel for *15-Minute Constitutional Bed Stories*, a participatory performance piece that will take place for three hours each day of the (e)merge art fair, which takes place this weekend at the hotel.

The artist will invite visitors to participate in the piece by joining her for a 15-minute session in the bedroom, which is furnished with a bed, lamp, recliner and bedside table. Participants are free to move about and recite the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence out loud, state their opinions on them (or even ignore them) while Ventzislavova documents each “performance” by filming it and taking a Polaroid of the happening. Participants will get to keep a Polaroid snapped by the artist. “I really want to let people open up and show their thoughts or feelings—their relationship to those documents and what democracy means,” says Ventzislavova.

The idea for the project came after Ventzislavova did a similar performance piece for a group show at D.C.'s Austrian Cultural Forum titled *Migration Standards*, where she invited visitors to recite the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. People remarked that the document was similar to the Constitution, so when she was invited to do something with (e)merge, she wanted to do something site-specific that incorporated the core documents of American democracy and the hotel's interiors with a transitory space. “It's always on the border of documentary and fiction,” the artist said of her work.

The artist anticipates that the topic of the government shut down will make a cameo during the performance—and inspire participants to create some sort of commentary. “It's a weird coincidence right now that we're doing this project here and the government shutdown and right now outside there is a shooting,” says Ventzislavova, referring to the tragic [shooting at the Capitol on Thursday](#). “It's crazy. It's very interesting and I hope people will make some comments and give some reaction to the situation right now.”

According to the Ventzislavova—who hopes to turn the footage documenting the performances into a video piece—*15-Minute Constitutional Bed Stories* is a way to navigate how people connect with the documents. “I don't try to achieve any answers,” she says. “I really hope to be able to find out how relevant those documents are and what they mean nowadays—if people really believe in them, or if they think it's just a fairytale.”