

## **The Tongue is My Yardstick**

**Thomas Kellein**

'The tongue is my yardstick' – to quote Not Vital. Once again he has transformed a sense organ – all but unmediated – into a sculpture. In 1994 there were ears: countless black bronzes stuck into a thick, upright plaster shape, entitled *Sausage and Ears*. This was followed by *Antlers + Eyes*: white plaster antlers with plentiful dark eyes, like leaves on a tree, gazing down from the wall. And then there was the teaching that Vital took on in December 1988 in Cairo – when his Egyptian students asked what sculpture was, he referred them to their own noses. This led to the making of *171 Egyptian Noses* in 1990, consisting of a tower of organs cast from individual human faces.

Take almost anything by Not Vital, and you will find human organs and their sensual function. Sensuality means sensitivity, sensitivity means pain. Vital's sculptural method involves making casts of the organs and impaling them. Now, after more than twenty years preparing the ground, the 'tongue' has emerged as the outstanding motif, a monument in its own right – upright and chased in stainless steel.

At first, in his early gallery shows in New York, there were plaster or bronze animal cadavers, fixed to a wheel like a trophy on some sort of mountain path. Even the *Pole Animal* on a tree trunk (1982) was upright and 330 cm in height, like an orientation point in the Swiss Alps, where you have to be prepared for snow drifts and avalanches in winter. Similarly impaled on rods are the *Sei Sorelle*, six sisters, embodiments not only of the principle of totems and taboos, but also of Picasso's famous maxim, 'I do not seek, I find!' Vital finds sensuality, but not only for himself – it is for us, too. His tower-like sculpture *Gramophone* is a homage to our sense of hearing. His immensely elegant sequence of marble hearing aids, *His Master's Voice* (1992), was dedicated to the deaf Ludwig van Beethoven.

However, with this new *Tongue* for Beijing, the time of the trophies, shocks and *memento mori* seems somewhat to have passed. Vital's sights are no longer set on papillae, the little nodules that alert our brains. This *Tongue* of Vital's – not only a taste organ, for it also touches and sucks and registers the temperature of foods, before passing them on to the digestive system, now (more than ever before) – stands before us in even greater sublime splendour. Gleaming, it points to yet another function – human speech. And in the People's Republic of China, it may well also relate to the fact that medical students, training to become tongue diagnosticians, are said to have to scrutinise between fifteen and twenty thousand tongues during their training.

The story of *Tongue* began in 1985 when Vital bought a calf's tongue in a butcher's shop in Lucca. He then took it to Pietrasanta, made a plaster mould and had it cast in bronze. The ensuing, first bronze *Tongue* was thirty-nine centimetres tall and perhaps Vital's most impossible work of art. We need only recall reports of the horror that met Auguste Rodin's *Age of Bronze* – a cast made, after much consideration, directly from the fine figure of the soldier Auguste Neyt with elegiacally raised arms, only to be initially rejected by the jury of the 1878 Salon in Paris. Because it was a cast! The extent of the jury's mistake is clear when one views their decision in light of Rodin's search for physical immediacy, for direct feeling, and his battle against historical traditions, in particular the canonisation of the art of Classical Antiquity. It fell to Rodin to pave the way for the twentieth century, a century that was to know direct pain.

The good citizens and art connoisseurs of Switzerland have been able to see Not Vital's work, including his *Tongues*, for some time now. I have heard some of their comments: 'I don't know whether it's good or bad.' And they were not especially amused by Vital's hypertrophied *Testicles* of Michelangelo's *David* (now measuring 138 x 120 x 97 cm) hanging on the wall in Kunsthalle Basel. So can a *Tongue* be a work of art?

'If I say so', might be Vital's answer, but he held his tongue. He enlarged his 1985 *Tongue*, and ten years later – by now 200 cm in height – it was shown on a sculptor's stool in the Sperone Westwater Gallery. On that occasion in New York, you could have walked into a virtual huntsman's room and responded to the sight of body parts of dead animals with a grim, grinning dance. But what Americans would feel like dancing at the sight of animal entrails? 1996 saw the making of Vital's *Tongue* in Carrara marble; this version is now in Kunsthalle Bielefeld. At the time, Germany had its own

Rodin moment with the sculptor Not Vital. 'Of all the pieces you've bought, I have my doubts about this one,' was the reaction of one of my most valued colleagues.

Admittedly, as yet there are no comparisons to be made with Vital's work, no style and no library – as in the imagination of Jorge Luis Borges – where you could read clever things on the subject of tongues and, very important in art history, find a foothold. Although in 1951 Albert Einstein did allow himself to be photographed with his tongue out because the paparazzi were getting on his nerves. He took the newspaper picture (having cut out his companions) and sent it to his friends as a portrait of himself. And in 1973, the artist Peter Weibel – to name a contemporary of Not Vital – had his tongue cemented into position for an hour as part of the Action *Raum der Sprache*.

But while the tongue is still as much of a sculptural taboo as ever, Vital simply takes this as his cue to enlarge the work. In 1995, he installed a bronze *Tongue*, 360 cm in height, outside his parents' home in the Engadine. Once again he held his peace, and just showed the work with a smile. Now at 768 cm, the work has been chased in stainless steel for Beijing. It rises up like a monument to the twenty-first century. 'The tongue is my yardstick,' says the artist, perhaps suggesting to us – as the beholders of this work of art – that if sculpture today wants to break its own boundaries, it can celebrate an organ that uniquely links our cognitive capacities, our sensuality, our sex drive and our consumption of food and drink. What else is there? We are connected – by our tongues – with all other human beings and with all mammals. Archaic is the new modern. And, wherever possible, Not Vital adds pleasure to pain.

Translated from German by Fiona Elliott