

Sculptural Reality Check

On the potentialities of Not Vital's sculptures

by Christoph Doswald

Swiss artist Not Vital (*1948) leads a quasi-nomadic life between his residences in Agadez (Niger), NotOna (Patagonia/Chile)¹, New York (USA) and his original hometown, the Engadin village of Sent (Switzerland). For two years now, Vital has also had a studio in Beijing—"for the first time after more than ten years, [I have] a sculpting studio again", he says. The works he has created there, some of them very large in scale, are now being presented in the comprehensive exhibition "NOT WHY" at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing.

At the center of Not Vital's work is the exploration of the spatial, economic and cultural contexts of his various places of residence and activity. This has developed since the early 1970's and even then articulated a very modern equilibrium of regional and international approaches. The focus of his largely sculptural oeuvre is on questions of mythologization in the realms of society, culture and scenery. Analogous to the attraction that New York held for artists at that time—luring Vital to SoHo as well—the artist remarks that he is "fascinated by the Chinese passion for art" at present. Beijing's exciting production possibilities, good spatial conditions, vibrant art scene, and intriguing social melting pot—all of these factors have inspired this Swiss artist enormously.

The artist's new environment is clearly reflected in his recent works, characterized—as always with Not Vital—by the highest conceptual stringency, fine irony and a sound knowledge of the local cultures and narrative traditions. "Beijing Duck in Gold" is the title of a sculpture that is formally an emulation of the famous delicacy, but comes with a golden surface and thus alludes to the economic upheavals of China's turbo capitalism. Additionally, Vital has prepared for a more radical version of his sculpture: if a buyer is ready to pay the current cost of the raw materials—1.5 million US dollars—the artist will produce a Beijing duck made of solid gold.

Ecological issues are addressed by "(Mongolian) Cow Dung", a bronze sculptural reference to this still very popular natural fuel. And when Not Vital has the famous wart on Mao Zedong's chin carved out of coal (title: "mao ZHI dong"), transforming it into an outsized sculpture, he is suggesting that the long shadow of the Great Leader and Chairman is still quite present—as illustrated by the cult of personality, which he sets right with the tongue-in-cheek phonetic double-entendre of "Zhi" (痣, meaning 'wart' in Chinese) and "Ze" (泽, as in Mao Zedong).

Vital sees his art making not only as an activity that reflects upon society, but also as a concrete set of instructions for the immediate reality. His adobe buildings in Niger, West Africa, such as the elementary school that he designed practically as a "human sculpture", speak to the artist's pronounced accountability regarding questions of social impact. Right in the middle of the town, Vital erected a clay pyramid that pupils can seat themselves on, transforming the artwork into an open-air schoolhouse. His sculptures often maneuver along the border between art and architecture, and are linked to the classical Vitruvian concept of building as "the noblest art of all the arts".

The exhibition in Beijing presents more models for planned buildings, though it should be said that Not Vital does not pay inordinate attention to the functional hierarchies between models and built reality. For his numerous structures in Niger, he worked completely without project drafts. The other

¹ NotOna is the name given by Not Vital to an island that he bought in Patagonia, Chile. It combines the artist's first name with the name of the indigenous population originally living in the region, called the Onas.

brown observation tower in the Aladab oasis, for instance, was set up without any plans or models. Then again, in Beijing, he presents a "House to Watch the Sunset", a miniature version of this mud brick tower made of steel. The work is a play with potentiality and the shift of context that Vital so much loves to engage in, for it seems somewhat paradoxical to plan the erection of this archaic observatory in smog-choked Beijing.

The playfully precarious importance that Vital associates with building, despite all its physical tangibility, is shown by one of his sculptures bearing the title "Museum for 1 Picabia". This model toys with the idea that it might be feasible to build a museum around a single piece of art, with the construction costs being as high as the value of the work that is presented inside. In analogy to his edifices in Niger, this project again raises the issue of violating the border between architecture and art. In other words, it reflects on the value that society attaches to art.

This whole set of questions is subjected to a reality check by Vital in another project, the "Model for a Station in Ouagadougou, West Africa", which is intended as a prototype for a bus station. While the Picabia museum is still about the playful balancing of material and immaterial values, this bus station model expresses a more existential dimension. Sculpture and/or architecture are concerned with questions of sustainability and authenticity: Vital develops, in model form, a bus station with natural air-conditioning—an adequate constructional answer to the hot climate and poorly developed national economy of Burkina Faso. By taking this African matter all the way to China, says Vital, he is practicing global art.

Finally, Not Vital demonstrates once more that art is capable of producing an immediate effect by means of a sculpture that represents the potential for danger: "Unpleasant Object" is a polished, high-gloss work made of stainless steel that is reminiscent of a Sputnik in shape. From its spherical body, a tree-like antenna grows vertically upward, from which sharply pointed spikes of varying lengths jut out, of the type one may find on the walls of gated communities (to discourage trespassers). "The object is attractive and repellent at the same time", says the artist. And as always with Vital, this sculpture also constitutes an amalgamation of various semantic levels that find a new form that still faintly reminds one of their origins, but through its strange beauty directs our senses towards the new and unknown.

translation: Werner Richter