



NOTvital

The self-proclaimed outsider fills his provocative installations with natural and unnatural wonders
By Marc Spiegler Photographs by Diana Lui



TO UNDERSTAND MOST ARTISTS, you can visit their studios, those cauldrons of creative angst and activity. Not so with Not Vital. "I never spent much time in the studio," the Swiss artist confesses. "You could even say that I have only pretended to have studios. I've never needed a place for all my tools, neatly arranged, and I'm not very good with my hands, so I'm happy to have others manufacture my pieces. The real studio is in my head—in a way, it's everywhere I go."

A man so filled with wanderlust that even his Sahara-trekking Tuareg tribesmen friends view him as a nomad, the 56-year-old Vital makes his home in three wildly divergent places: New York City, where he has lived since 1976; impoverished Agadez in central Niger, a thousand miles from any international airport, where on impulse he started building a sprawling residence in 1999; and the Swiss village of Sent, where he was born and raised.

A morning's walk from the spiny mountain ridges where Switzerland, Austria and Italy are stitched together, Sent left an indelible mark on Vital—starting with his name. Pronounced "note vee-tal," it comes from the Reto-Romansch dialect that locals still speak and was bequeathed at birth—not invented, as many assume, by the artist as a mischievous moniker.

Sent, which to foreigners seems an alpine wonderland, has inspired some of Vital's most memorable works. He is known for transforming elements of the natural world (trees, animals or an entire landscape) into surreal, disconcerting and often mystifying installations. But Vital never solves the mystery for us. When pressed, he will only say what sudden insight or incident inspired a piece. Beyond that, it is what it is.

Vital left Sent at 14 to attend the canton's only high school, far below in the valley. His father cautioned Not and his brothers against joining the family lumber business. "Five generations had done it already," he explains. "He thought it would be somehow incestuous for us to do the same thing." But Vital's fascination with the art world was already growing, thanks in large part to former Kunsthalle Bern director Max Huggler, who moved to the area. The two became friends, and on weekends, Vital dived into Huggler's art collection, which included works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee and Kurt Schwitters, as well as contemporaries such as Joseph Beuys and Jannis Kounellis.

After attending art school outside of Paris, Vital arrived in New York in 1972 intending to be a sculptor. By the '80s, he was part of the downtown scene, selling anthropomorphic drawings and sculptures at the seminal East Village gallery Nature Morte and hanging out with Malcolm Morley, Susan Rothenberg and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Yet Vital hardly ranked among the art stars of that decade.

"I always remained on the outskirts," he says.

"I've always been in the outsider role—just 10 percent of the words I have ever spoken were in my mother tongue. I've never felt the desire people like Julian Schnabel feel, that needing to be at the center of things."

Vital returned regularly to his parents' home in Sent—where his mother, Maria, still lives. Five years ago, he transformed one room into a capacious studio with a 35-foot-high catwalk for working on towering pieces and a waist-high black marble tub for washing his hands. Almost any sculptor would envy the space, yet Vital struggles to recall actually working there, furrowing his wide brow. In the end, he cannot confirm that he has ever made anything in this majestic setting.

Nonetheless, the space is filled with Vital works—many en route from artisanal workshops in Lucca, Italy, and Agadez to various collectors and galleries. He is

showing recent work, including a new series of orbs, at Sperone Westwater in New York from April 2 through May 1, and at Galerie Nordenhake in Berlin from April 27 through June 5. Made of white ceramic or silver, the orbs appear to be pure geometric forms, but each contains the desiccated remains of an entire camel. (He also shows with Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris and Salzburg and Caratsch, de Pury & Luxembourg in Zurich.)

Despite his decades in the art world, Not Vital remains sui generis—hard to slot into any genre, style or movement. Depending on the exhibition, he can seem a romantic or a prankster, a sculptor or a conceptual artist, a modernist obsessed with narrative or a minimalist who draws inspiration from raw materials (his 2001 "Golden Calf" sculpture used 40 pounds worth of the precious metal). "I used to consider Not the Joseph Beuys of Switzerland, because he has such depth and such a strong connection to mountains and to animals," says Kunsthalle Bielefeld director Thomas Kellein, who staged a solo exhibition of Vital's work in 1997. "But when I look at his recent work, I think he's a unique phenomenon, not influenced by other artists."

When I visited Vital at his home in Sent on a crystalline day in February, he quickly steered me away from the studio and toward an extraordinary park a half-mile down the road. Designed in the 1920s as a sort of alpine Xanadu for a local pastry-and-coffee magnate, the hillside site had long lain fallow. But since he bought it six years ago, Vital has unleashed the same mix of visceral touches that distinguish his art, creating a fairy-tale setting with totemic overtones. "To me, the sculpture park in Sent is Not's major piece," Kellein says. "It's like a mountain that he has created for himself and now always needs to climb again."

Wearing calf-high hiking boots, the lean artist provided a tour through the valley. We entered at the top of the park, where large prosciutto hams and Toblerone chocolate bars hung from the branches of a tree. Below, a long aluminum ladder lead up to a small wood-and-rope aerie with an unobstructed view



Depending on the exhibition, Not Vital can seem a romantic or a prankster, a sculptor or a conceptual artist

This page: An untitled bronze, 1999–2000; Opposite: Clockwise from top left: The silver version of *Camel*, 2003; *Bremer Stadtmusikanten*, 2004; the white ceramic *Camel*; Vital's house in Niger



JANUARY
AUCTION

across the valley. "I call that *The Tuor da Silenzi*, the tower of silence," Vital explains. "I built it with a psychologist friend from Manhattan who is afraid of heights, so the process was a kind of cure for her. Sometimes I sit up there for hours."

Snow lay thick on the ground, and pockets of waist-deep powder sometimes forced us to double back as we tromped around. But it didn't stop us from traversing a gully. To cross onto the next rise, I had to walk perilously across the brows of aluminum donkey heads perched on poles as high as 20 feet above the ground—an installation echoing Vital's camel-headed bridge for the 2001 Venice Biennale. Once I was safely on the other side, the artist offered congratulations, explaining that the experience is less harrowing when thick snow drifts have not pushed the heads out of alignment. Next we descended glass steps, designed by Venetian master Pino Signoretto to resemble slabs of ice. They lead to a small house, also glass. Inside, the space is suffused by a light so intense and refracted that it could be the interior of a glacial crevasse.

Vital sometimes even sleeps in the park, inside a curvilinear A-frame hut formed from fragrant pine. In one corner, a slender tree grows through the floor and out the wall. "Growing up here, we had no cinema, no TV," he says. "I would go into the woods and build huts, tree houses and cabins, dreaming day and night about making the next one. The park gives me the same pleasure in adulthood. When I have too much to do, too many people to deal with, I come here—sometimes even for just 20 minutes, because I can absorb so much and feel this transformation, toward an almost dreamlike state."

Lately the artist is consumed by architectural works. He recently added a schoolhouse for 400 children to his property

in Agadez, and he has been renovating a large farmhouse in Tschlin, a hamlet high up a windswept slope near Sent. The ancient structure—discovered while Vital was trying, unsuccessfully, to locate a residence for his artist friend Wolfgang Laib—required a series of engineering interventions just to prevent it from collapsing. Today, only one room has been fully redone, lined floor to ceiling in pine and outfitted with a bed, a table, two chairs by Le Corbusier and four sleek Italian lamps.

In the entry hall hangs a life-size plaster cast inspired by the last photograph ever taken of Vital's idol, Vaslav Nijinsky, by then an aging, potbellied man, suddenly launching into one of his famous leaps in a London insane asylum. Art also dominates the basement, where cows once wintered. One room teems with small glass orbs by Vital that appear to contain snowballs; another is transected by a Richard Long floor sculpture made of rough stones, which look more at home here than in any white cube. With relish, Vital recalls the first time Enzo Sperone, his longtime friend and gallerist, visited. "Enzo walked around, amazed," says Vital. "Then he said, 'This is not a house. Not. It's a sculpture.'"

Le Corbusier, one of Vital's heroes, famously described the homes he designed as machines for living. Today Vital, with his architectural projects and the sculpture park, seems to be creating machines for conceiving art.



Vital has made his mark on a farmhouse in Tschlin, Switzerland, with his series of orbs, left, and assorted drawings, right. Below: *Greyhound Carrying My Broken Leg*, 1997



