Inside the Many Houses of Not Vital, Maker of Dreamscapes for Adults

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By ANDREW O'HAGAN October 18, 2013

Painter, sculptor, house builder, designer, explorer, philanthropist, bon vivant — the Swiss artist Not Vital sees the universe in his own singular and most elegant way.

Slide Show

Life As He Knows It

Photographs by Stefan Ruiz. Produced by Gay Gassmann

The most important thing about artists is that they should behave like artists. Who wants a creator who sounds like a real estate agent when you could have one who walks his pet lobster through the Palais Royal gardens on a blue silk ribbon? Responsible behavior in an artist is like modesty in a stripper: unbecoming, dispiriting and not at all what you signed up for. Today they often appear like business gurus or politicians, slick with financial nous and

deep into the yoga of modern public relations, and it's possible to forget that we once looked to the artist to ridicule our common pieties. We once had Salvador Dalí teasing his mustache and the public's unconscious. We had Andy Warhol creating a scene, producing movies, art, fashion, offering himself as a strange and wonderful embodiment of the idea that the artist could be a work himself. Who is the Picasso of today — driving a herd of symbolic bulls through the gardens of convention and changing our idea of how to see?

His name is Not Vital. He was born in 1948 in the village of Sent in the Engadine, an outrageously scenic valley in eastern Switzerland. He has been around for years, quietly productive, secretly admired, but sometimes it takes a few decades for a culture to catch up with an artist. Environmental conditions have to be ready, ideas must come to fruition, and then, and only then, does the artist of that moment appear. So here in his ideal element at last is Not Vital: sculptor, painter, house builder, nomad, explorer, arranger of wonder, part-time genius of interior decoration, investor in miracles and officially the nicest man in contemporary art.

"It's maybe like James Bond. Maybe poetic," he said. "Into the womb." He started laughing at my reaction. We were high up in the Swiss mountains early one morning when a grass-roofed house built by Vital suddenly slipped from view.

"Did you just press a button to make that happen?"

"Yes," he said. "I was lucky to work with this engineer. I wanted something that would disappear."

I spent three days with Vital in his strange mountain wonderland, and by the end I didn't want to leave. He showed me his three Swiss houses, including one that holds his foundation, and I met all his friends, and the artist somehow convinced me that the impossible is close at hand. The disappearing house in Sent lies in a park that he built. Yellow roses are planted at the opening next to a marble bath once used by the poet Heinrich Heine. (Everywhere you look in the park there is art, but art as comfort, too, as living space, as function.) There was a swimming pool down below with a giant stainless steel lotus emerging from it, based on his 2008 sculpture "Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom." We were setting off round the park, but a number of young people were partying by the pool. "Come down!" shouted one of them, a guy from Cuba who looked like a Versace model.

"Barbecue! Wow!" Vital said.

"Not, are you coming down?" he shouted.

"We are not coming to see you! You and your perfect bodies," Vital responded. "We are into other things."

There is a metal camel's head on a tall pole, and when Vital pressed another button a jet of water came shooting from its mouth down toward the pool. We trekked down the path to see the work he has done. Apart from the disappearing house, there is a house made from a cross-patch of old wood. In another part of the forest there is a stainless steel bridge across the river, with a door to nowhere, or everywhere.

“It’s difficult to make a dreamscape for adults,” Vital said as we walked opposite a series of camels’ heads, these made out of aluminum, embedded in the hillside. We talked about Vaslav Nijinsky. Someone once said that Nijinsky’s genius was to have seemed “to pause in the air,” and I mentioned this when Vital showed me an iron stage built by him in a clearing beneath the mountains. We stood on it. The scene appeared to dwarf us, and yet there was this unmistakable vitality coming from the artist called Vital.

He lives in Beijing for half the year and is back in Switzerland for the rest, except for those days he spends at the opening of a new show or at a house he built in Niger or in a cave in Patagonia. He has always traveled.

The first day I spent with him, he was preparing for a show of young Chinese artists he was hosting at his foundation in Ardez, about nine miles from his family home in Sent. “I don’t have good equilibrium,” Vital said to me. “My life is absolutely . . . it has no rhythm. Two weeks ago I was in South America but it is winter there. It was dark at 9 o’clock. I could sleep longer. But I don’t want to waste too much time sleeping. I have to begin to do something.”

We were beside a pond he had made. I suggested that he is obsessed with habitat, with the idea of where to live and how to be. The image of the disappearing house was still in my mind. “So, Mr. Not Vital. Where would you like to be buried after you die?”

“Nowhere,” he said. “But if they catch me, I’d like to be burned and put in different places. I would like a little bit here in the village, and some in Agadez [his house in Niger], then in Rio a little bit, and then at the island in Patagonia. I would like to have my ashes travel the world.”

“They’ll never catch you in one place.”

“Even after death,” he said.

Not Vital was part of a disparate group of artists in New York in the 1980s that included Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. “There was never any doubt he’d be an artist,” said Steve Mendelson, who owns the Mendelson Gallery in Pittsburgh, where Vital had his first solo show in America. “He was always moving forward. He knew that New York was the right place to be. He’s a shining light. He draws people to him.”

Vital’s family, going back many generations, were wood merchants and he grew up in comfortable circumstances. Yet he’s a self-made man: all his recent properties were paid for from the sale of his own artworks around the world. In fact, his father didn’t want him to go into the family trade. ” ‘If you do the same thing as your father,’ he said, ‘it’s kind of like incest, so you’d better come up with something.’ ” After time in Paris and Rome (where he did street theater), Vital ended up in New York.

Relatively unnoticed, Vital worked in the city for years, moving into a space on the Lower East Side. “I got a place on Forsyth Street,” he said, “on the seventh floor. It had windows all around — too much exposure.” He split his time between New York and Switzerland. In 1978, he bought his own loft space near Washington Square Park for less than $30,000. “You could buy these lofts then — it was huge. My father gave me the money. He sent me a

check. I was very impressed. It took me a while to make it. You'd do group shows. You'd carry your piece on the subway. . . . I did a group show first, and there was a small article in something like the Village Voice and I cut it out, I read it over and over again." And that has been his life.

He's been collected by discerning art lovers all over the world, and is represented by galleries like Sperone Westwater in New York and Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris. Vital is part of no school or collective, yet he's an individual who has moved with the times and has emerged as a singular thinker. He has sculptured huge tongues in bronze, a golden calf, a plaster enlargement of the testicles of Michelangelo's David. He has sculptured a large aluminum copy of Nietzsche's mustache, many camels' heads, marble sleds and "50 Snowballs" in Murano glass. There are "portraits" of Mao Zedong, Francis Bacon, Jean Genet and Audrey Hepburn as panel-beaten silver boxes. There are shroudlike dark paintings of his assistants, of himself in various personas, of his friend the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. He is possibly most famous for 1,000 bronze sculptures of cow dung, which he made and sold to help burn victims in Nepal.

Then there are "the houses." In recent times, Vital has begun to emerge as a major artistic philosopher of habitat and material life, of appearance, you might say, and disappearance. I went with him to his house in Tschlin, the last town in Switzerland before the borders of Austria and Italy. My head was already full of his "social sculpture" experiments, the house he'd built in Agadez, Niger, out of local materials. He also built a school there and a tower from which he could watch the sunset, a tower to protect from sandstorms and another tower to watch the moon. The effort to make these "sculptures" was hair-raising — at one point, according to his friends, involving a kidnapping and a ransom — but they remain testaments to the mind of an artist deeply in sync with our capacity for wonder. Giacometti, who came from the same valley as Vital, once said that if an artist had a true friend the friend would tell him to give up. But Vital contradicts this: his work exudes a spirit of true belief.

And yet his houses would also sit beautifully in the pages of any interiors magazine. When we entered the house in Tschlin, it was immediately obvious how special each object was: a Japanese teapot sitting on a perfect wooden bench, a stove painted azure and a shelf of bronze statues from Orissa. In the hallway, Vital's plaster sculpture of Nijinsky is attached to the wall. The dancer is poised midair, with a cuckoo clock, all modeled on the famous late photograph of Nijinsky in a Swiss sanitarium.

We climbed to the top of the house, to a wooden room with an antique desk and a bed on the floor. I thought it was probably the world's most handsome writing room. "One thing I was very scared of as a child was boredom," he said. "And it was easy to run into boredom here. It was my biggest fear. I just still am running away from boredom. I would not be able to stay here two weeks. It's too much."

"This place is a sculpture," I said, "but also a home. Could you ever imagine a single house in a single place?"

“The closest I came to that is the house for the sunset in Agadez,” he said. “When you make a house to watch the sunset, then you have purpose. Living there is secondary. You wake up and you get water from the well and you go behind a tree to pee and it’s very nice. There’s no waste and you give what you have back to the plants. That I found to be luxury.”

Before the gallery opening at the foundation in Ardez, I asked Vital to take me to the house he grew up in. It is a stunning white building on the edge of a hill. On the drive over there, we discussed a previous project of the foundation with the American writer Gore Vidal. “I went to see him in Los Angeles,” Vital said. “And I told him he must be from here, from this part of Switzerland. My family name Vital is the same as Vidal. So I said, Why don’t you come, and while he was in Venice, where he was with Gorbachev, we went and drove him up here.”

“Did it work?”

“Gore had charm and he had style,” he said. “And he could be horrible. But he was funny and he knew so much. His grandfather who went to America was called Felix. When I saw him in Los Angeles, he says to his assistant to bring the picture of his father. ‘I can see the resemblance in the chin,’ he said. And five minutes later Senator McGovern comes to see him. And I was introduced to him: ‘Senator, this is my cousin from Switzerland.’ ”

In the hallway of Vital’s family home, there are four giant Warhol screen prints of cows. We walked to a little sunroom at the back of the house that nests beneath the mountains. Here Vital’s mother sat reading a book in German about several families of local dwarves. “It’s her favorite book,” Vital said. “She reads it all the time.” He showed me his studio, and I met all the young architects and assistants all over the house and outside in the garden, who are helping him carry out his vision of how life may be lived as a series of encounters with the miraculous. He seems so willing to be happy.

“I think it is from my mother,” he said. “Why is my mother so elegant? Why, at nearly 100, is she not like her neighbors? What does she have?” Vital’s brother is an architect, and it is clear that the family is close and that their ideas are close, too: for both of them, houses are a way of thinking about life. Vital has been doing well over the years with private collectors, but I put it to him that his moment of public recognition may be approaching.

“You think so?” he asked. “How great.”

The opening party for the young Chinese artists was held in a house from 1643 in Ardez, a village once visited by Le Corbusier, who admired the small windows on the old houses and copied them. The party was already in full swing when we arrived, a mixture of bright young things, local dignitaries, gallery owners and fashion types. I spoke to Nina von Albertini, a jewelry designer who has known Vital for most of his life. “For us he hasn’t changed. We’re from the same tribe,” she said. “I was 19 or 20 when I got to New York, and he was there. Basquiat was one of my good friends and lovers. They all went to the nightclubs, Palladium, Area and all that. And also the jazz clubs. We knew Grace Jones, the B-52s. They were all friends. The art world was more democratic then. It wasn’t so devoted to society.”

“And was he competitive?” I asked.

“It was competitive,” she said, “but as a game. But he’s very generous and that’s the heart of him.”

Earlier, Vital had taken me up to the top of the house, past a blue tiled bathroom with two baths, past his personal library of books in the rarely spoken language of the lower Engadine, Romansh. The room at the top had an early Basquiat painting — with a joke directed at the owner, “AstroNOT” — and a drawing by Tintoretto from 1570. “Phenomenal drawing. See how he does the body before he even puts clothes on it,” Vital said. He showed me the visitors book and I saw it had been signed by people who already believe in the aesthetic charms of Not Vital: Richard Rogers, Jude Law, Gore Vidal, Richard Long.

“The house is so beautiful,” I said. “Why not stay here?”

“When you’re tired of the looking, reinvent the finding,” he said, laughing again. He gave me a piece of cake. He made me come with him to taste the local mineral waters.

“If you’re a good artist,” he said, “who knows you? If you are a bad actor in a TV show, everyone knows you. If you want to be famous, don’t become an artist. We all like fame in a way, but, when I was 5 years old, I knew I wanted to do something so that when I wanted to go to Brazil, I could go to Brazil.”

After the opening there was a party in the park at Sent. Vital was surrounded by his artworks and his friends. Watching him, I realized how potent it was, his obsession with belonging, when coupled with his restlessness. We walked up the hill to the disappearing house and stepped inside in the dark. He pressed the button and we began to sink, the noise from the party still audible as we went underground.

“Well,” I said. “Eternity arrived rather quickly. It’s dark. What do you want to talk about?”

“Europeans don’t believe as Americans do. Americans are great at believing.” I asked him if he was happy, and he said he was. By this time the disappearing house had come back to the surface, and the noise of the poolside party had returned. When we stepped out, the mountain was imposing and grand before us. I felt I’d traveled all over the map with Not Vital, into his interior spaces as well as the loveliness of his interior design, and the strange multiplicity of his work, so relevant, so now, all of a sudden so powerful, charming and surreal, seemed at that hour so enjoyably simple and necessary. We looked up. I asked my new favorite artist if he’d like to go to the moon.

“Sure.”

“And what would you do there?”

“I’d use the dust of the moon to build this mountain.” How amazing, I thought. What he sees, when he goes to the moon, is a new vision of his own backyard. We walked slowly down the hill to the people who were waiting at the bottom. They were noisy. Neutral little Switzerland suddenly looked like a place that might know how to enjoy its own night life. “I had to go away for a long time,” he said, walking beside me. “You have to take a long trip to find something that is so near. Looking from the moon, the zoo and the Louvre are the same.”