THE CREATION OF IMAGINATIVE SPACES: NOT VITAL ON PAPER

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A drawing done in 2005, entitled *My Noise in the Room* reveals some of Not Vital's major concerns, his interest in space, movement and interaction. At first glance, it does not seem to open up a whole universe of questions, but in fact, as in many of his works, it encapsulates the essence of his thoughts. The drawing shows a few black, horizontal bars structuring the surface of the paper. They do not reveal any kind of perspective, but nevertheless they question Not Vital's interaction with a room. It might stand as a philosophical question without any further relevance to art in general or to Not Vital's works, but: what is space? What does it mean? What does it mean for him? Does it exist, or is it a concept created through the perception of mankind? Overall, how does it interact with our ideas, our ways of looking at things? Are there any cultural differences between notions of space?

Very quickly it becomes obvious that these questions relate to the heart of Not Vital's art and understanding, although they are not isolated. The discussion about space has a very long tradition, going back to ancient philosophers, developed by Renaissance scholars up to the discussion during the eighteenth century, leading to an approach which liberated the discussion from any theological background, and concentrating on scientific discoveries. Over the centuries, a vast controversy of exchanges and thoughts took place, enhancing various aspects and developing new notions. A large number of different approaches can be put forward, covering theological, philosophical, mathematical, scientific, sociological or artistic aspects.[1] Even without going into great detail, one has to distinguish between these definitions of space and the more historical or emotional dimension.[2] In any case, the important issue remains always the interaction between the perception of space, the idea of how it is developed and what consequences this might have on the understanding of space and the emotional involvement of the creator or spectator. A distinction can be made between a space with lived experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) and a space which causes expectations (*Erwartungsraum*).

Both can be real, existing spaces or to the contrary entirely virtual; both can be depictions of spaces, constructions or a real environment. Although this distinction is primarily a differentiation to understand a particular context of historical situations, it can be used to comprehend in a first instance the depiction of landscape since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[3] At the same time, such a definition might be helpful to analyse contemporary approaches, not just to landscapes, but any kind of spatial use. If intended in this particular way its characteristics open up the awareness of space, the consequences of any kind of interaction, but it also might provide a deeper insight into the artistic involvement, despite the fact that both criteria focus primarily on the perception of the work or space and do not explain the production or creation of an artwork. In general a 'space with lived experience' (*Erfahrungsraum*) implies the personal experience of the spectator. The work in general might reflect emotions, memories or a certain knowledge that the spectator could have experienced in the past, either directly or indirectly via movies, films, photos, descriptions or any kind of account. The 'space which causes expectations' (*Erwartungsraum*) is less clearly defined. The expectation is nourished from ideas, visions or analogies with other lived situations.

But how does this relate to Not Vital? One of the major difficulties is to understand what 'space' is considered to be in the particular context of Not Vital's work, on what levels and in what media. The use of landscape, the forming and interacting in natural or artificial contexts, the partial addition of elements in historic settings, the depictions of space in his photographic works and in some of his drawings or prints, or the creation of space in works on paper offer a nearly endless variety of approaches and different points of comparison with other facets of his work.[4]

In some rare cases he uses the same title for two different works. This is the case, for instance, for a sculpture and a print, both called *Le Sei Sorelle* (both from 1988). The print is neither the reproduction of the sculpture, nor is the sculpture the three-dimensional formulation of an idea developed earlier in another medium. They have the same starting point and they use the same formal elements, but there are major differences between them. The sculpture is an artistic manifestation occupying space, using three-dimensional objects, where the artist works with light and shadow, and has the potential to change the sizes, depending on the distance between the six elements. Each part of the sculpture has its own quality of surface, adds another aspect, such as different shapes, and therefore interacts with the environment in a different way.

The print uses the same shapes of the objects, assembling two of them on one sheet, and adding three other objects. Therefore in the end, the portfolio contains twice six items, six sheets of paper and six depictions of objects, but does not unify them. It presents a completely different approach than in the sculpture, adding space to the images, whereas this occupation of space can be caused through the installation of the sculpture. However, the three sheets not bearing an image are not empty either. They show the platemark of the blank plates and each bears a part of the title, written in pencil. The print becomes something more varied and different from the sculpture.[5]

Although this is a particularly rare case in Not Vital's oeuvre, it shows the two basic functions of works on paper for him: all prints and drawings can be distinguished into two main parts. One part of his prints and drawings depict a space and use an existing three-dimensional space as the basis for a further production. The second way is to create space through the installation of the work itself, its use of surrounding environment and the interaction with it.

One particularity of Vital's prints is the use of three-dimensional items as a starting point for the creation of his prints. In 1990 for example, the artist used a cow's tongue to create an aquatint titled *Tongue*. What seems to be an easy task was in fact a carefully planned setting. Vital did not make a drawing or used a photograph. He placed the tongue directly onto the prepared plate, discussing later with the printers the following steps.[6] As the tongue will lift off some of the ground, it was important to get immediately the right balance, placing it correctly to achieve the envisaged result. With a photomechanical technique it would have been straightforward, and the image could have be put in place without great difficulty, whereas with the real object it became much more complicated. Everybody having seen a tongue before, for example at a butcher shop, is able to immediately recognise it, and has therefore an idea of its volume. Vital transforms the two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional idea. The image serves as a vehicle to link the individual experience and the perception into a space and to attribute qualities to the image which go beyond the factual description. The image creates a chain of associations, certainly distinctive for everybody, but nevertheless pushing the depiction of the natural object. Three years later, Not Vital used the same approach and the same image he employed for *Tongue* but changed dramatically the inherent meaning, when using it for the portfolio titled *'Artists against torture'*. While in the earlier version he inscribed his full name onto the plate, which then got printed in mirror writing, in

this particular case he reduced it to his christian name, evoking with the mirroring of his name the German word for 'sound'. Suddenly, what was initially used as a natural image, a link to animals and a background in his native Engadine's rural society, also became a political image.[7]

The approach that Not Vital used with these two prints is, however, radical in a previously unseen way. Using the surfaces of objects to create material prints is a rather well-known procedure, but it is generally used to create an appearance or an aesthetic form. For Vital the approach is different as he pushed the limits even further with his next print while adopting the same idea. In his portfolio *El Maktoub Maktoub* (1990), he employs on the one hand some drawn elements, such as dervishes, the head of an eagle, the outlines of dogs or some Arabic characters, and, on the other hand, an undefined surface, providing some kind of mysterious volume beneath the clearer parts. Vital had placed the prepared plates in his hotel bed in Paris and they are finally nothing else than the off-prints of his own body. While he is combining here two approaches, he uses items or silhouettes to create the appearance of space. Also, in some later prints he uses similar ideas, but each time in a different manner. In *Kiss* (1996) for example, he placed two dead lambs coated with lift-ground solution onto the plate, later on touched up the off-print and continued with the usual aquatint process. The image is not the representation of the lambs, such as in another portfolio with the 'portraits' of his flock of sheep in Sent. In this print Not Vital uses the forms of the animals; he evokes their bodies and therefore the space they would occupy. The third dimension is not directly represented, but it is inherently present. The use of natural items helps to create space and, at the same time, constitutes the subject of a discussion which is very important for Vital. The animals represent a magical power, not as a symbol or as a theological idea, but as a way to transport an understanding of natural forces, of memories and links to particular places. In some instances, as for example in the two series of *Dung* and *Les coulées en couleur* (both dating from 1997) partly produced in the Engadine, partly on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania, this process is particularly evident. He dropped cow dung onto copper plates, covered with a resin, removed the dung and then applied the aquatint. The two versions, one in black and white, the other in colour, show only the outlines of the cow-pat, but through their different places of creation they are interlinked not just on a formal but also on an intellectual level. Vital uses the process of printmaking in that instance for transferring and uniting volumes. The places of production were different, not as before for example in his *Ten Egyptian Noses* (1989). Although the multiple was physically executed in Italy, the forms were all taken in Egypt, whereas for *Dung* and *Les coulées en couleur*, the

locations were different. Works of art can in most cases be moved from one place to another. However, within the context of Not Vital's work particular attention has to be paid to the relation to their location of creation. Often it is at least as important as for some of his sculptures and buildings. In one case, *Tschaina per 6*, dating from 2001, he even decided to use a particular event: a dinner party for six people in New York. In principle this is a well known form; Daniel Spoerri for example has mastered this on many occasions. But while Spoerri kept the whole tables with plates, glasses and the entire setting, Not Vital reduced it to something imaginary, just keeping a document, a kind of reference from this evening, but not as a three-dimensional object. The surface of the table was used as a printing plate with all the marks left by the invites, plates, bottle and glasses.

In Not Vital's drawings this approach is, for technical reasons, not so easily repeatable, but the artist has found other ways to achieve similar results. Of course he produces regular drawings with any kind of ink or crayon on paper, but in a great number of unique works on paper he combines drawing and collage. Contrary to more conventional methods, he rarely uses paper to produce an image, but rather prefers small objects to create a form which is in itself a three-dimensional item. Often he refers to some of his sculptures, realised or projected buildings, although also his drawings are neither preparatory works nor formulations of ideas already developed elsewhere. They remain works in their own right, not fully independent as they are related to others, but separated as they have a peculiar interest and expression, interact with their environment and put into question the usual ways of perception.

The interaction with the environment is not limited to the creation of space through the work of art, but can include in many cases also the integration of places and spaces into prints and therefore open up another chain of association through spaces of memory or experience. Three portfolios well illustrate this concept because here, the artist refers to images from West Africa and his experiences there. In he two series *Notes* (the first from 1986, the second from 1994) and the portfolio *55* from 2008, Not Vital uses the outline shape of a building as a reference to his activities from the past few years and links these prints to his other work. Suddenly a portfolio created entirely in Switzerland becomes the important connection to other places elsewhere. They do not contain a straightforward depiction, but an allusion which most people will understand because they know his work. In this respect, it is matter of an artistic strategy using abbreviations to indicate something else, to evoke another place or the occupation of a different space.

This interaction is even reinforced with most of his paper multiples, which represent for him a relatively new form of work. Their starting point is a few prints and drawings with a limited range of colour, mostly white on white. These works, such as for example the aquatint *Snowballs* (1999) or some of his drawings, demand great attention when looking at them, otherwise nothing will be visible. While with *Dung* and *Les coulées en couleur* the use of these roundish, flat forms are visible although not easily recognisable, in *Snowballs* he radicalises his approach by allowing to disappear what in the end he wants to show. A few years later, with some of these paper multiples, he took on the idea again, but in a new manner, by producing circles. The process seems, as one consisting of placing natural items onto printing plates, very easy: the artist grabs into the wet paper pulp to produce holes in the surface. In some cases these holes are visually reinforced as they are circled in black ink distinguishing three layers: the view onto the mounting sheet, the paper itself and the 'drawing'. One could argue that in every print or drawing various layers appear, but here the difference is clear and detemines the understanding of space. The ink is not used to provide a form, or to depict an object or an item, neither is the paper just a support. It is shown in its particular quality as handmade and partly translucent, and the surface of the paper is an important part of the appearance of the artwork. The combination of wholes, surface and drawing establishes space, not as a depiction, but as a physical interaction. It creates a kind of intermediate spaces, of various layers and notions.

When combined together, such as in *7 (NOTVITAL)*, dating from 2009–2012, the interaction is reinforced as the various micro-spaces from the individual sheets form a complex group which immediately characterises the room where it is presented. From early on, Not Vital created prints, drawings or paper multiples demanding a particular way or presentation and occupying the space thanks to their size or particular needs for arrangement. In some cases, as for example in *Dung*, the prints were already assembled and Not Vital decided how they should be displayed. No choice is left because the artist decided how they should be presented and defined a clear order. He occupies the space available, and accepts the potential problems this might cause. In other examples, the dimensions of presentation are less strict, but the order is given through the formal qualities or the inherent meaning. The works can be adapted to existing spaces, but the sequence cannot be changed easily. In *Snowblind* (1987) for example, the differences in the size of the sheets and the clear arrangement may lead to a slightly different occupation of space, while in *Le Sei Sorelle* (1988), *El Maktoub Maktoub* (1990) or

L'asen da Sent (1992) the freedom is much more limited. The concept of the prints directly includes the occupation of space, if presented. Works on paper in general, not just prints but also drawings, get a new quality, gain a three-dimensional function, point beyond any kind of representation, and are more than the concretisation of an idea or the starting point of an aesthetic or intellectual discourse. They are the materialised objects of ideas and thoughts; they are spaces of imagination and memories.

Comments

1 For a summary see: various authors, entry 'Raum', in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, vol. 8, Darmstadt 1992, pp. 67–111 and W. Woodward, entry: 'Raum, Raumwahrnehmung', in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, vol. 8, Darmstadt 1992, pp. 111–121. Various authors, entry 'Raum', in: *Encyclopädie der Neuzeit*, vol. 10, Darmstadt 2009, pp. 656–666.

2 One of the most important definitions was suggested by Reinhart Koselleck in his essay '"Erfahrungsraum" und "Erwartungshorizont" – zwei historische Kategorien', in: *Soziale Bewegung und politische Verfassung. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Modernen Welt*, ed. Ulrich Engelhardt, Volker Sellin and Horst Stuke, Stuttgart 1976, pp. 13–33 and 'Die Verzeitlichung der Utopie', in: *Utopie-Forschung*, ed. Wilhelm Vosskamp, Stuttgart 1982, Vol. 3, pp. 1–14. A critical discussion undertaken by Kari Palonen, *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe. Das Umschreiben der politischen Begriffe bei Quentin Skinner und Reinhart Koselleck*, Münster 2004 and Anders Schinkel, 'Imagination as a category of history. An essay concerning Koselleck's concepts of Erfahrungsraum and Erwartungshorizont', in: *History and Theory*, 44, 2005, pp. 42–54.

3 See Christian Rümelin, 'Landschaft als Garten / Au Jardin de la Campagne', in: *Die Verzauberung der Landschaft zur Zeit von Jean-Jacques Rousseau / Enchantement du paysage au temps de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, exh. cat. Musée Rath, Geneva (28 June – 16 September 2012), Cologne 2012, pp. 80–85.

4 For his sculptures see Alma Zevi's contribution in this volume.

5 On Not Vital's prints see: Beat Stutzer, *Not Vital: Druckgraphik und Multiples*, exh. cat. Bündner Kunstmuseum (21 September – 10 November 1991), Chur 1991, and Beat Stutzer, 'Prints and Multiples by Not Vital', in: *Print Quarterly*, vol. 22, 2005, no. 3, pp. 279–302.

6 Not Vital produced most of his prints with the New York printers Harlan & Weaver, who count amongst the most experimental and experienced intaglio printers. They printed for a wide range of printmakers and publishers, many of whom had worked before with Piero Crommelynck in Paris, including Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Mimmo Paladino, Brice Marden, Francesco Clemente and Richard Artschwager.

7 Concerning the simultaneous way of looking at Not Vital see Markus Stegmann, 'Lamm und Libellen', in: *FAT ES FAT*, exh. cat. Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen (15 September – 17 November 2002), Kunsthalle Göppingen (8 December 2002 – 2 February 2003), Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano (22 February – 27 April 2003), Nürnberg 2002, pp. 12–15.