

NOT VITAL

W O R K S O N P A P E R

Swiss Institute, New York

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In organizing the exhibition "Karl A. Meyer, Not Vital," I was fortunate to have the collaboration of many.

I am especially grateful to Gordon Veneklasen from Curt Marcus Gallery for his continuous assistance. Emil Lukas offered his help without hesitance at all time, he deserves special thanks. Mark Baron and Elise Boisante were most gracious in lending their works for the exhibition and providing me with various information about the etching series.

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Collaborating with Not Vital on this exhibition was a real pleasure. His good humor, availability and interest to details made this project a rewarding experience.

Z.W.

NOT VITAL'S WORKS ON PAPER

Not Vital is known primarily as a sculptor. Yet an important body of his works on paper—drawings and etchings—created since 1985 exhibit new concerns as well as being instrumental in understanding his recent sculptures.

Vital's works on paper are characterized by a resonant tension between hard-edge, and organic forms; between the distinctness of the objects he attaches to the drawings and the misty field of the transparent, black paint he applies to the paper; and between the physicality these objects project and the dematerialized effect of the abstract field of paint.

The fact that Vital's childhood and memories of his mountainous hometown, Sent, Switzerland, strongly influenced his early works (and still affect to a lesser degree, his recent pieces) has been well discussed in other publications. Our concern here is to investigate Vital's recent works within the context of a mature artist's achievements—an artist who during the last two decades has lived and worked in various countries. Having been extensively exposed to other cultures and their art, he is nonetheless an artist who has used his heritage, knowledge of the world, and the events in his life and environment to produce strong works that consistently strive for reduction to essential.

Jannis Kounellis, an artist whom Vital admires and by whom he was very impressed in the early seventies, states in the installation catalogue of the Hallen fuer Neue Kunst: "Everything which is created

comes into being at a particular, clearly definable point in time. No artistic development can take place independently of historical events." He then adds: "These events occurring through time and history influence and alter the work of an artist. His works are reflection, discussions, dialogues and commentaries on historical facts related to all spheres of human life, both past and present."

Vital's ideas about art differ, however, from Kounellis's on several points, the most important of which is that he does not consider himself a political artist as Kounellis does. Vital's work is neither polemical nor critical of society; rather, his aesthetic is rooted in personal experience and belief.

Vital embarked on his artistic career at a significant moment in the history of twentieth century art. As a young artist, he had learned about various post-World War II artistic movements and witnessed the birth of others.

In 1968, at the age of twenty, Vital left Switzerland for Paris, where he lived and studied for three years. Living in a large metropolis tremendously increased his exposure to a breadth of experience. The late sixties and early seventies were important years for critical examination of modern western society. These also were years of varied artistic movements. In Italy Arte Povera established itself and its ideas and philosophy soon penetrated other borders. In Germany, Joseph Beuys developed his "sculptural theory," and in the United States a group of young artists, later labeled Post-

minimalist, waged a crusade against Minimalist aesthetics.

Vital's sojourn in Paris was followed by one in Rome. From there he traveled frequently and became well acquainted with Arte Povera. He was particularly impressed by the works, ideas, and aesthetics of Kounellis and Giovanni Anselmo.

By the time Vital moved to New York in 1974, he had already been exposed to countless, often contradictory ideas about the nature of art. In New York, he became better familiarized with American postwar artistic movements, such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, and Minimalism. Confronted by a vast variety of possibilities, the young Vital eventually chose to develop his own ideas about art and to create works based on his native culture and its own forms of expression. The first of these works was a series of abstract paintings, but Vital soon began to create tridimensional objects based on prehistoric images and local myths he had heard of in his hometown of Sent. Impressively strong works, they contain the germ of Vital's most recent art. Although figurative in appearance, they are extremely simplified and although usually large in size, Vital's special treatment of their surface makes them look weightless. Indeed, Vital's sculptures are usually hollow.

Sometime in late 1985 or early 1986 what could be called an aesthetic of confrontation manifested itself in Vital's works on paper; it appeared about a year later in his sculptures. Vital had been invited by Mark Baron to work on a series of etchings, *Notes*, (fig. 2). He chose to

draw on copper plates some of the images previously used in his sculptures. It is possible that the act of translating these images from three dimensions into two incited Vital to dismiss all details and to concentrate solely on essentials. For he has carried simplification so far that the abstract quality of the work overrides its figurative one. The time-consuming process of working with copper plates had also encouraged Vital to use some of the plates in other pieces. He began making large drawings in which the entire surface of the paper is painted black, dense in some areas and transparent in others. To create contrast and to initiate a dialogue within the work, Vital attached his etching plates to the paper. He subsequently, made use of other objects, such as a Chinese paintbrush or a metal bar. In other instances, he painted some areas white. In later drawings, such as *Untitled*, 1987 (fig. 4), the black paint covering the paper is transparent throughout, while the copper plate is painted opaque black. It is interesting to note that Vital usually makes iron frames for these drawings. The objects Vital attaches to his drawings are found objects, but their use in his work has specific meaning. They exist all to point up differences between emotion and logic, between life and nonlife, between freedom and restriction. Finally, they refer out to life itself, composed as it is of differences and contradictions.

One of Vital's most striking works on paper, which should permit a better understanding of his artistic orientation, is his recent etching, *Le Sei Sorelle* (the Six Sisters), 1988 (fig. 5). The etching is done after a sculp-

ture of the same title, from 1987-88, that comprises a group of six slender, vertical elements standing side by side. Each is made of a found object—stick, tree branch, or piece of wood—and is completed by another portion—metal, plaster, or wood rod—that Vital has added to them. The reductive and abstract quality of the work demonstrates Vital's new artistic concerns, but the physicality of the piece and the use of varied materials distracts from its underlying aesthetics. In the etching version such diversions are totally eliminated. Here, not only is the viewer unable to walk around the piece, but the use of black on white paper focuses the viewer's attention on its purely aesthetic aspect and simultaneously stresses its reductive and abstract quality. Although each element is clearly outlined, the black surface of these images conceals any reference to illusion or volume.

Understanding Vital's works on paper should assist us when confronting his recent sculptures, such as *Untitled*, 1987 (fig. 1). This piece strikes us with its elegance and beauty, but also with the contrast resulting from the reductive nature of its slender rod and the formlessness of the object resting on its top; from the air of threat and energy lent by the pointed rod and the passivity of the lifeless shape of the object.

The essence of Vital's work may remain enigmatic, mysterious, and puzzling, but a key to understanding and appreciating his works, especially his sculpture is his works on paper.

Ziba de Weck

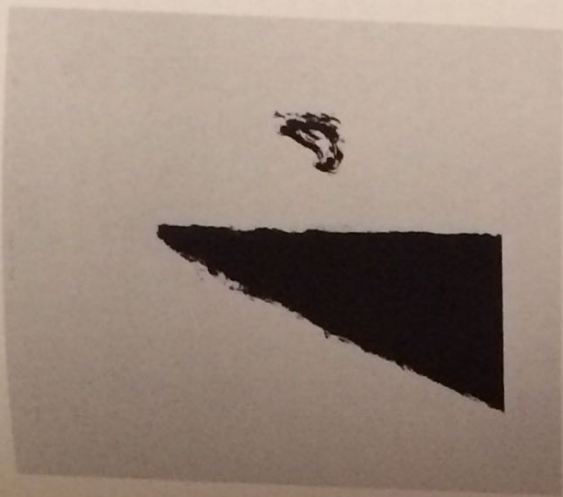
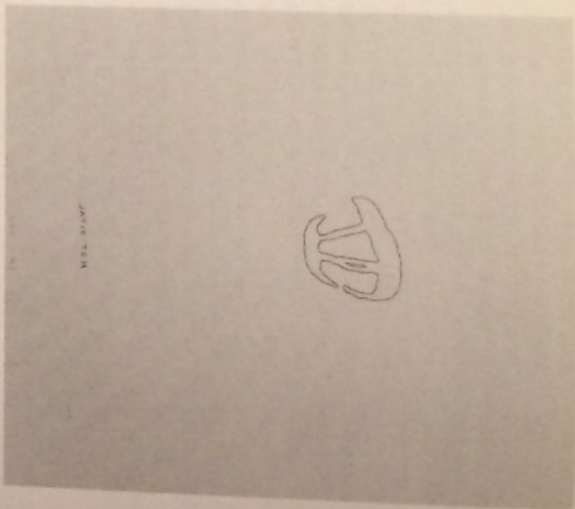


Fig. 2. *Notes*, 1986
A portfolio of seven etchings with aquatint, drypoint, soft-ground etching, lift-ground aquatint, plate-size 14 x 11 inches, sheet-size 18 x 15 inches each print.
Paper: Fabriano Tiepolo. Printer: Donna Shulman, edition 19, 5 artist's and 2 printer's proofs. Publisher: Mark Baron Editions, New York

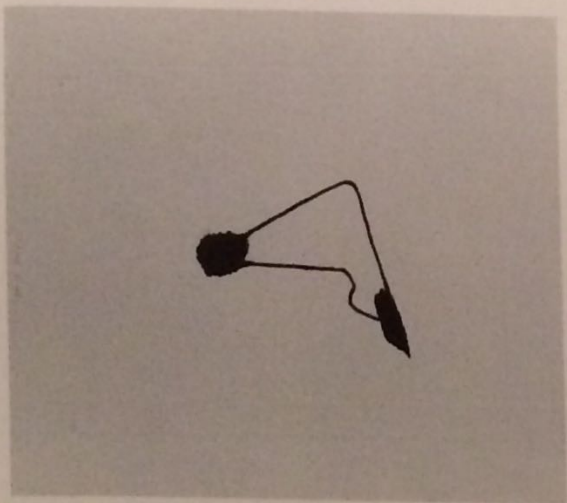
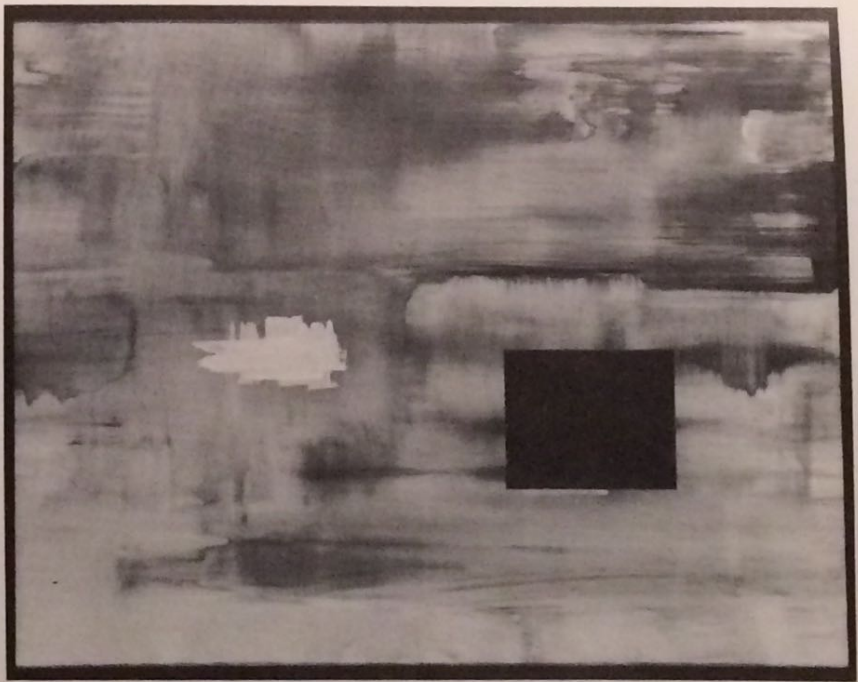


Fig. 4 *Untitled*, 1987
Acrylic and copper plate on paper
78 x 61 1/2 inches
Curt Marcus Gallery, New York



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width;
precedes depth.

Notes, 1986

A portfolio of seven etchings with aquatint, drypoint, soft-ground etching, lift-ground aquatint, plate-size 14 × 11 inches, sheet-size 18 × 15 inches each print.

Paper: Fabriano Tiepolo, Printer: Donna Shulman,

edition: 19, 5 artist's and 2 printer's proofs

Publisher: Mark Baron Editions, New York

Tango, 1986

Acrylic & oil stick on paper

76 × 60

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1987

Acrylic and copper plate on paper

78 × 61½

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1987

Silk, wood and hydrocal

140 × 12 × 4

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York

Le Sei Sorelle, 1988

A single work comprising six component sheets lettered (A) through (F) on verso, hard and soft-ground etching, aquatint and writing, in pencil, by the artist.

Paper: Somerset textured white

Printer: Jennifer Melby, edition: 17, 4

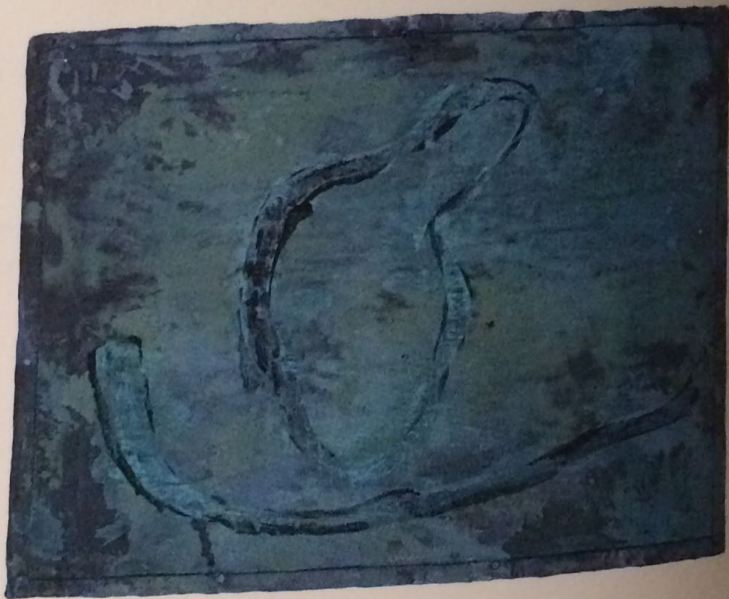
artist's and 2 printer's proofs

Publisher: Baron/Boisante Editions, New York

KARL A. MEYER

November 9 - December 25, 1988

Swiss Institute, New York



Head of an Idol, 1988
Lead and acrylic on wood
19 1/4 x 13 1/2
Collection of the artist

Head of an Idol, 1988
oil on paper
54 x 42
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 1988
Woodcut on paper
61 1/2 x 47
Collection of the artist



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width.

Untitled, 1988

Diptych: one panel lead and acrylic on wood,
one panel oil on incised wood
48 × 77

Collection of the artist

Head of an Idol, 1988

Lead and acrylic on wood
19¼ × 13½

Collection of the artist

Head of an Idol, 1988

Oil and liquid graphite on wood
96 × 96

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Woodcut on paper

61½ × 47

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Woodcut on paper

61½ × 47

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Oil on paper

54 × 42

Collection of the artist