

Not Vital in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, Serpentine Galleries, London

HUO: I'm curious to know how it all began. For me, it was seeing the Giacometti collection at the Kunsthaus in Zürich when I was twelve. That was the beginning of my obsession with art. I was wondering if there's a moment or epiphany you remember when it all began?

NV: I was living here in Sent, in the Engadin valley. And I would frequently visit Max Huggler just outside of Sent. And that was a very important moment for me because that was my first introduction to art.

HUO: Max Huggler, of course, was a pioneering collector and museum director in Switzerland.

NV: Yes, he studied in Berlin, and subsequently came to Switzerland as a young man. Soon thereafter, he became director at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1931, and also started teaching at the university in Bern. After his time at the Kunsthalle, he became director of the Kunstmuseum in Bern. His exhibitions must have been extraordinary. Huggler organised one of the best Ernst Ludwig Kirchner shows – I think it was in 1933. In the 1960s, he decided to move to Sent and brought his collection with him. And from here he would regularly go to Bern by train to teach at the university.

HUO: And were there specific works in his collection that you remember? He had a lot of great modern works.

NV: Yes, Huggler had a great painting by Kurt Schwitters titled *Ausgerenkte Kräfte* (Dislocated Forces) from 1920, which he later donated to the Kunstmuseum Bern. This painting had a lasting impact on me. Most of the paintings Huggler had were on canvas, of course, and as child, I didn't understand why everything was on canvas. Huggler said, 'But look, I have this phenomenal painting by Kurt Schwitters, which is not on canvas, it's on wood.' And that was a very, very important moment for me. I hadn't yet been to a museum at the time but, from then on, I understood that painting doesn't necessarily have to be on canvas, it can be on any other material. When I came back from seeing Huggler that same day, workers were mounting a new roof on my parent's house. I noticed a drainpipe on the floor, I picked it up, and I painted it white. In fact, this painted drainpipe became my first work. Last year, it was shown at Hauser & Wirth in Somerset, and before that it was also included in my retrospective at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur.

HUO: I saw it in the catalogue: *Chanala da tet* (1964). So that, in a way, is number one in your catalogue raisonné.

NV: Exactly. I was still at school at the time, I must have been sixteen years old.

HUO: How interesting. And there was another work that you did when you were sixteen or seventeen called *Fatschada* (1965).

NV: *Fatschada* is just like the façades of the houses in the Engadin. The bottom parts of the houses here are about one metre high from the road, and usually have another structure and another colour to the rest of the façade. They are much rougher. And that's why the goats like to scratch their backs on the houses. I transferred this typical local façade onto canvas.

HUO: And another one that you also did as a teenager, which is an astonishing work, is *Door + Window* (1965). That was also done when you were about seventeen. How did that happen?

NV: That happened at the same time. I had a wooden frame, and I mounted chicken wire on the frame for it to become a door and a window in one. The notions of inside and outside, and the tension between them, has always been important to me, and is especially pertinent to my architectural work.

HUO: Today we're going to talk mostly about the paintings, the portraits and self-portraits, and it's interesting that there are some really early photographs of works that are kind of self-portraits. Can we talk a little bit about those? Portraiture is already there, but in a more performative way.

NV: Yes. I live very close to the intersection of the Swiss, Austrian and Italian borders – the Dreiländer Eck (three-country corner). And, at the time, my idea was to erase these borders. For *Trekröset* (*Dreiländereck*) (1970) I brought ashes to the point where the three countries meet and threw the ashes along the borders. For *Being in the Shadow of a Tree* (1970), another early work, I stood in the shadow of a tree for a whole afternoon. I asked my father to come to the woods. We chose a tree and he cut the trees around it, so that this one tree would throw a clear shadow. I spent the whole afternoon in the shadow of this tree, constantly adjusting my position to the location of the shadow. So this was kind of a performative and durational self-portrait. But I didn't start painting until later, when I went to Paris. I went to Paris in April 1968, to the Centre Universitaire de Vincennes.

HUO: I was born in May 68!

NV: Were you? [Laughs] That's a fantastic time to be born! So you can imagine the tension when I went to Paris at the time – a month before you were born!

HUO: And the idea of you going to Paris was prompted by Huggler.

NV: Yes. I already knew at a young age that I wanted to leave Sent. I remember walking through the village and saying to myself, 'Oh, I can't be here. I have to get away.' You always have to greet everyone you met here, and sometimes I was in my own world and I'd forget and would be punished for it. So, for me, there was no option but to leave. I remember that my father talked to Huggler, and said, 'Where should my son go?' And Huggler said, 'Well, send him to Paris.' At that time, young artists would either go to Paris, to Germany, or to Amsterdam. There weren't that many possibilities.

HUO: So in Paris you began to paint?

NV: I remember we had a painting class with a model, but that didn't last very long, because it was considered not only passé, but too apolitical. You know, at the time, the civil unrest was at the centre of everybody's attention. So I didn't paint much in Paris, but you are right in noting that I made my first paintings in Paris. After that, I gave up on painting for a long time.

HUO: It was more a time of posters and activism, no?

NV: Exactly. And the idea of having a studio for painters at the university – which had just been built – wasn't accepted.

HUO: At this time, the Giacomettis were living in Paris. You stayed with Diego, I think. Can you tell me a little bit about how this was? And, of course, also if you met Alberto.

NV: No, Alberto had already passed away two years earlier, I think in 1966. I went to Paris with my cousin, Niculin, who, like Diego, is from Val Bregaglia and speaks the dialect of Bregaglia. When we arrived in Paris, Niculin and I went to see Diego in his studio. And it was great. Diego was there with his cat. He was still making furniture. We walked over to Alberto's studio, which was still intact. There was a lot of dust, I remember. Diego said, 'This is how my brother would have loved it, with all this dust on the sculptures.'

HUO: It's interesting because Paris was just the first of multiple exiles for you. There's this idea that a lot of Swiss leave Switzerland when they're young. I also lived in Paris, in the early 90s, then in Rome and then London. And you had multiple exiles, and still do. After Paris you went to Italy, then you went to New York and then you added more and more places. Can you talk about this?

NV: Coming from Switzerland, I wasn't really accepted in the May 68 movement because I was from a country that didn't even have a Communist Party. It was a very political time. But I didn't stay in Paris for very long, I moved on and went to Rome, where I had a circus. There was nothing else going on in Rome, we would just hang out at the Piazza Navona waiting for Fellini to come and put us in his movies – because he needed all these people to be extras in his films. But basically, people were just doing nothing. And that's why I had a circus.

HUO: Can you tell me more about your circus?

NV: First of all, I knew that I couldn't make money, or I didn't want to make money from it, so it was a non-profit circus. It was actually a street circus – most probably this idea was also derived from Fellini's *La Strada*. I assembled a few friends and we did performances in places that were kind of dangerous, like the Gianicolo, where there's a very sharp curve that the traffic would come down. I wanted the traffic to see the circus, to somehow be involved. There sometimes were accidents, and we were often arrested by the police. The animals that I had were very small because I had to keep them in my apartment. I had small real ducks and a big metal duck that I could wind up. When the fake duck would walk, the real ducks would follow it. And I was a fire-breather. This was the type of performance we did in Rome. Rome was a great and fun place. Fantastic. But then I decided that something had to happen and I went to New York. It was just the right moment to be there.

HUO: And that's, of course, the moment when you began to work more and more with sculpture. You worked a lot with portraiture in the sculptures, initially not with humans, but with animals. I remember the first studio visit I made with you, I think it was in 1986, 1987. I remember in your studio at the time there were all these sculptures, and many of them were connected to animals. You told me that the first work was this animal holding up another animal. It was a plaster sculpture.

NV: Yes, right. Because, as you know, growing up in the village and growing up in an Engadin house, animals play an important role. At that time, the animals were kept in the house – because they would heat it up with their body temperature. Then there was of course the ritual of the hunt, a very important occupation for the men here. In Sent, people are always surrounded by animals, we live with them. It is probably because of this proximity to the animals that I chose to work with them.

HUO: And very often it's a disjointed, fragmented portrait. It's not the entire body of the human or the animal. You would carve fragments. How did that begin? Because, in a way, this is also true of the portraits. There's always a certain fragmented aspect to them.

NV: Yes. What impressed me very much as a child here was the butcher. I remember the butcher would come to the neighbour's house in the morning, and they would drag out the animal, let's say a pig, and then cut off its head. It was impressive to see that. I was a bit afraid, of course, but it was also something that attracted me. I mean there was this element of cruelty, but I was also curious to know what was inside the animal and how the butcher would be able to make sausages from this pig that he'd dragged out. You know, this transformation? That made a big impression on me. It was perhaps the reason for subsequently using just one part or a few parts of the animal in sculpture, instead of the whole thing.

HUO: This brings us to the portraits of people. I remember, for example, in your Nietzsche Haus presentation in 1993, there was a sculpture of Nietzsche's moustache. So you wouldn't have the full portrait, but you would have a fragment. Or maybe it was just the nose, or the ear, for example.

NV: Yes. When I first went to the Nietzsche Haus in Sils Maria, what impressed me the most about the death mask of Nietzsche, or the drawings and the photographs of Nietzsche, was this moustache that just grew bigger and bigger throughout his life. In the end, you couldn't even see his mouth. That was incredibly fascinating for me: that this moustache would take over his face, that you probably couldn't even see if he was talking or not. In a way, Nietzsche was almost like a radio. So I made a sculpture of his moustache, and placed it in his bed. Another one of my sculptures from around this time is titled *Arms (Seven Positions for Holding my Head)* (1992): a cast of my arm holding my head. I am always holding my head because it is simply too heavy. I thought, 'One day I have to make something to hold this big head!' And I did a sculpture of my arm holding my head and then picking my nose and scratching my ear and so on. The sculpture shows seven positions for holding my head, which I did with my arm and then cast in aluminium.

HUO: Yes that's such a great piece. And then the other work one can say is a sort of fragment is of course the *Big Tongue* (2008).

NV: I was living in Lucca at the time. I went to Lucca in 1983, and I rented a very old house – it was actually the birth house of Puccini. On the ground floor there was a butcher's shop. And one day, I saw five or six tongues in the window of the butcher's shop. I bought them and I took them to the foundry and we cast one of these tongues in bronze. My first *Tongue* sculpture had the original size of a veal tongue, it was 39 centimetres high. And afterwards, I began to use the vertical tongue like a kind of measuring stick. Because, let's say you want to enlarge a tongue from thirty-nine centimetres to two metres – it's not that you can go five times the width and five times the height to get it right. You have to go maybe five times higher, and only three times wider. And this is what I've been doing for many years, testing these proportions and turning the tongue into a monument. It's such a great organ.

HUO: And then there are the beautiful photographs from Egypt, when you did the portraits of the noses. And that's quite close to the portrait paintings, because people were sitting for you for these portraits. Can you talk a little bit about the epiphany of the noses?

NV: I was invited to Egypt by Andre von Graffenried; I'd met him in New York, and then he became a diplomat in Egypt. He invited me to Cairo and he had this fantastic residence in the Garden City in the centre of Cairo. And I'd spend time at the Nile and I'd go to Khan el-Khalili every morning to drink tea. And after a while, I met a few people and they asked me, 'Why are you here? What do you do? You come here every day to drink tea. What are you doing here?' And I said, 'I'm a sculptor'. And they said, 'What's a sculptor?' And I said, 'Oh come on! You have the best sculptures in the world and you ask me what a sculptor is?' I had to come up with a quick idea almost out of the blue to demonstrate what a sculptor is. So I said, 'You have great noses. Come to the studio, and I'll make sculptures of your noses.' And that's what I did. I brought them to the garden of the embassy and I cast their noses, which was very difficult because Muslims aren't allowed to represent parts of the body or even paint them. It was a bit of a dilemma – a lot of tension. They were looking at me like, 'What is he doing?' But in the end, I had these ten Egyptian noses, and I turned them into a sculpture titled *Ten Egyptian Noses* (1989).

HUO: And there are so many more experiments with portraiture preceding your return to painting. There's also this idea of being someone else, assuming these different identities – you as a rice farmer and so on. And that's something that also appears in the work photographically, not only in the early performances in the 1970s, but also in the print series, *L'Asen da Sent* (1992). And it's an amazing transformation. Can you tell me about *L'Asen da Sent*?

NV: You know that in this part of the Engadin, every village represents an animal? *Sent* is associated with the donkey. The people from Scuol are pigs, the people from Ftan are oxen, and the people from Ardez are sheep. And it's all about these stories, which probably date back to the nineteenth century. As the story goes, the people of *Sent* wanted to make a dinner for the whole population. And one man said, 'I've seen a huge hare outside of *Sent*. And if I can catch that, it will provide enough food for the whole population.' He caught it, but then, while they were eating, someone found a horseshoe on their

plate. They said, 'Well, that wasn't a hare, it was a donkey.' And so, since then, the people from Sent are donkeys and the people from Scuol are pigs and the people from Ardez are sheep. And everyone here knows that. It's kind of a nickname that got stuck. So, since I'm from here, I really wanted to do this transformation of me slowly turning into a donkey.

HUO: So you did this photographic series.

NV: Yes, I did it with Mark Baron of Baron-Boisanté Editions in New York. We made an etching in eight parts. And in my exhibition IR, which is now on view at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, there's also a sculptural self-portrait in which I turn into a donkey called Half Man Half Animal (1998).

HUO: I want to ask you about another exercise in portraiture. I've always been fascinated by these photographs from 1993 where one sees you working on this incredibly intimate sculpture Adam, One Afternoon (1993). The photographs are like a performance. Can you tell me about the genesis of this very special portrait?

NV: The title of this work comes from a novel by Italo Calvino. I stole 'Adam, One Afternoon', which I thought was a fantastic title. And there are photographs of me doing that in New York?

HUO: Yes, there are a lot of great photographs in this 2017 catalogue from Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur, a lot of rare photographic documents that I've never seen. It shows you putting plaster on the model.

NV: Yes, the model was Olivier Renaud-Clément. At the time, I was doing etchings with Mark Baron, and one day I said, 'I'd really like to find a model with a big Adam's apple.' And Baron said, 'Well, I know someone who has a big Adam's apple.' And it was Olivier. So they brought him to the studio, and he was very thin, but he really had this huge Adam's apple. So he was on the kitchen table, and I took a cast of his Adam's apple. We have been friends ever since.

HUO: Yes, one sees you doing that in the photograph. It's again a fragment. We could go on for a long time about the portraiture that appears in different ways in your work. But before 2008, it's mostly in sculpture, it's in photography, it's in performance, it's in drawing. And then something happened in China. At the UCCA, Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in 2011, the painted portraits were shown for the first time. It all happened in China. And I'm very interested in how it happened.

NV: After 2000, I gave up my studio in New York, because I felt like New York was over once artists had to move away from the city. In the 80s, we never even went to Brooklyn, but suddenly the city had changed and everything became expensive. Soho was no longer the creative centre. I went to Beijing, which was the right move at the right time: you had space in Beijing, and there were a lot of artists coming to the city. I got this place in Caochangdi, and an assistant of mine from Japan, Mitsunori Sano, who'd been working with me and was an architect, designed my studio. And it was so good that I immediately felt at home in Beijing, working there in this new environment with all these professional assistants and a completely different work ethic. In China, you work from seven to seven without talking. So that was kind of contagious. I suddenly had so much time. One day, in 2008, I went to the art store with Li Gao, one of my assistants. I bought a canvas, I bought a few paints, and a few brushes. And then I painted Li Gao. It all happened really fast. And I was astonished: 'Wow! I mean, it looks like Li Gao.' Then I started to get very interested in portraiture. I would also continue to work on sculpture, but most of the time I was in one corner of the studio, painting.

HUO: And it's not surprising that this happened in China, because in Sent you were surrounded by mountains and, in Niger, surrounded by the desert. And of course, in China, you're always surrounded by people.

NV: Exactly, you're constantly surrounded by people. If you go out, there are thousands of people around you. And the first thing you look at is, of course, the face. That's why I started to paint people. But in my portraits, it's very important that the face isn't depicted from the side – it's always fully frontal. When people sit for me, it's very important that they look straight at me. Sometimes it's a matter of millimetres. If you tell someone to look to the right, they usually go too much to the right. It has to be just right. The work on the invitation card for the show in London is called *The Fly*. Have you seen it?

HUO: There's a tiny fly on the left, but the protagonist looks straight at you.

NV: Yes. The painting depicts Tian Tian, who's one of my favourite models, and a fly that is approaching him from his right. But Tian Tian is not moving. He looks at the fly, but without moving his head. If a fly approaches you, you turn to look at it, right? But he didn't. And this is exactly what I want, this tension. I once read that the most difficult thing is to make a frontal portrait. But this is the only way I can do it.

HUO: Alma Zevi writes about this in the catalogue for the Beijing show *Full On*: that in the fully frontal approach, she sees connections to Giacometti. And of course, it's a little bit obvious to talk about Giacometti in relation to your work because of the Engadin connection, which may not be so interesting. But it is interesting to note the fact that Giacometti, a sculptor like you, painted these fully frontal portraits. So I was just wondering about your relationship to Giacometti's work.

NV: Well, in a way, yes, there are parallels. For example, with regards to colour. Our colour asceticism definitely comes from our origins in the same region, where grey is the main colour. But in Giacometti's case, I have a feeling that he paints more like a sculptor. He builds up. It's very muddy. I build up too, but I also destroy. And if I think of influences, of course there are many, but I think more of Rothko. I'm thinking of some of my very dark paintings, like *Man with Dark Glasses* (2012): the painting is almost completely dark, or dark on dark. The very dark paintings of Rothko interest me enormously. When I did a show in Helsinki at the Ateneum Museum in 2017, I saw the collection and there was this painter called Helene Schjerfbeck ...

HUO: Whom I love! We showed her in the Musée d'arte moderne once in Paris, in a show called *Visions du Nord* curated by Suzanne Page.

NV: She's really fantastic. I didn't know her, so seeing her paintings at the Ateneum was a true discovery. And the curator, Susanna Pettersson, pointed out in her essay for the catalogue that there's some kind of a connection between her work and mine. One can always find connections. But, as I said before, Giacometti is a little bit too close. I personally think more of Rothko.

HUO: And there's also Francis Bacon. There's the idea of the glass – Bacon always put his paintings behind glass, as you do.

NV: Yes. When I paint, I am always aware that the painting is not finished if it's not behind glass. It's only done, and it only comes alive, when it's behind glass. This is what Bacon said. He said even a Rembrandt should be behind glass and I would have to agree completely with him. You know, the *Cristo Crucificado* by Velázquez at the Prado, one of the most phenomenal paintings ever painted, is behind glass. And I like that, for many different reasons. I like that the glass becomes like a skin. It gives life to the painting. It attracts, but also it inflects and reflects. It keeps you away, gives you the right distance to look at a painting. I have no doubt, my paintings have to be behind glass. And when they're not behind glass, they're not finished.

HUO: And also, there's another link to Bacon, which is the often almost mutilated or dismembered parts. If I think about *Straightjacketed* (2010) for example, there's something almost violent, I would say.

NV: Yes, some of the paintings have it. In the London show, for example, there is a painting titled Gu Cheng (2010). Gu Cheng was a famous Chinese poet who died in 1993, when he was in his late thirties. He was schizophrenic and he killed his wife and then he hanged himself. So yes, Straightjacketed and Gu Cheng both have that violence.

HUO: Others have a certain opacity about them. And it's interesting because I've been rereading Edouard Glissant, the most important philosopher and thinker for me. He coined all these ideas like Mondialité – and Creolisation was important for him. But in relation to your portraits, I find this notion of opacity really interesting: a lack of transparency, an untranslatability, an unknowability. He says that opacity has a radical potentiality for social movements to actually challenge and subvert systems of domination. Because he says that we have to understand – and this comes to my mind with your portraits – that it's impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth that they wouldn't have generated on their own. And in a way, every relation starts in opacity: we have to admit that our identities depend on others, as Manthia Diawara says. And in a way, there's a right to opacity, Glissant says, that brings us actually to 'unthink the condition or legitimacy' – again, a quote from Diawara – 'of identity tied to singularity or fixity or purity'. He resists this idea of a fixed identity. And the self-portraits where you assume these different identities are the opposite of a fixed identity. Opacity allows the diversity of the self.

NV: Yes, it's very much like in a movie in which you can play different roles. In one work, for instance, I imagine what it would be like to be North Korean. It's not in the show in London, it's titled Self-portrait as a North Korean (2009). It allows me to branch out, to play a different role, to be who I am not. There's another painting like that: Self-portrait with Alzheimer's (2011).

HUO: Yes, I saw a reproduction. It's an incredible painting that also made me think of Bacon.

NV: I like this possibility of playing someone that I am not. I like to branch out – it requires complete concentration. Self-portrait as a Camel (2019), also on view in London, is a good example of this kind of portraiture.

HUO: Can you tell me about that painting, because it made me think of your sculpture Camel (2003) where you have a camel within the sculpture. It's almost like a Russian matryoshka.

NV: Yes. Having done so many works with camels and camel heads, I just wanted to see how you could put the two together – like half man, half animal. And this is what I like to do. Like last year, in Beijing, I did a painting titled Man with 3 Snowballs (2019): this man is balancing snowballs on his head, which is probably related to what I did in Rome with the circus. So it's very concentrated, but also leaves windows open to all kinds of situations and interpretations.

HUO: Beautiful. And to come back to the paintings, it's interesting because they're kind of the opposite of Zoom, because they have a lot to do with embodiment: there's a direct confrontation between you and the models or you and yourself. So it's not photographic. A lot of portraiture in painting over the last fifty years has been photographic, from photo paintings to hyperrealism to, more recently, digital painting and post-digital painting. But yours are not photographic because it's really a confrontation where you and the model look at each other. I was wondering what these sittings are like? I sat for Elizabeth Peyton some years ago. She doesn't talk while she does a portrait, so there was silence, but to make the situation more comfortable there were chocolates, which I thought was fun. When Alex Katz painted me, it was the opposite. It was very conversational. I actually recorded it. It was almost like a DIY lesson: how to make a portrait. Then with Gerhard Richter, when he painted me, that was photographic at first – he took a lot of snapshots after dinner in the restaurant. And then he over-painted them. And then with Verne Dawson, it was an endless series of sittings. I probably sat for him fifty times and he kept 'losing' me. And then, after about two years, he somehow got me back. So there are lots of experiences and each is quite different. How is your process? Is it fast, is it slow, is it silent? How does it happen?

NV: It depends. I usually don't talk, or very little, until towards the end. When I have it, I might say something, but there are no chocolates or even music, because if you listen to music while you paint, you tend to listen to music you like. And then the good music makes the painting seem better than it actually is. Which is why I don't listen to music while I paint. The studio in Sent is usually just quiet and dark, because it has no windows. I didn't want any windows because I felt like I had to keep the natural beauty outside in order to be able to concentrate – the beauty of the landscape would simply be too intense. I built the studio with my brother Duri. And from the very beginning, I was certain about not wanting any windows. In Zürich, maybe it would be different, but here in the Engadin with all this light and so on, I have to protect myself from the outside world. In Beijing too, the studio can be very dark. I like it sombre. In this subdued light, I usually start by painting the aura around the head. The size of the aura varies from model to model. And then it's really fighting, trying to get the eye or to get one part of the face – as you said before, it's always one part of the face. But that detail is very important. I have this house in Rio, and someone sprayed on the house *A vida é um detalhe* – 'Life is a detail'. I try to catch the detail and put it in the portrait. And it can go fast; it can go slow. With Tian Tian, who's the model in *The Fly*, it's easy, it's fast; but I don't know the reason why. Perhaps it's great to catch him. It's easy. And then there are other portraits where I have to fight much longer. But it usually doesn't take me more than one or two hours.

HUO: Very often, there are missing arms and missing necks. So even if it's the opposite of Zoom, because it's so physical, it's like what happens in Zoom talks when you have a background – it does exactly that to the body: you move and suddenly your arms disappear.

NV: I don't see the arms or neck. As soon as I have the head, all the rest just becomes body, or becomes almost abstract. It's like with Rothko, where two colours can react together to create a painting. I don't see arms. I've never thought of arms actually. It's quite abstract, sometimes just the colour, like with Rothko.

HUO: It's beautiful, the connection to Rothko. The paintings do oscillate between integrations and abstraction and sometimes the result is almost like an X-ray.

NV: An X-ray, yes. And the thing is, whatever you paint, even if you paint over it, if you try to take it away, it's still there. If you make an X-ray of any painting, you see what's hidden. This is the great thing about painting: whatever you put in a space, it somehow seeps through. And that's the magic of painting.

HUO: I remember when I came out to Sent to visit you, you told me that the studio is in your head. Of course, the planet is in a way your studio, but painting does need this idea of a physical studio space. And you built both studios yourself. You designed one in Beijing in collaboration with the Japanese architect, where you have the light from above, and then you have the one in Sent, which is your painting studio, which is much more opaque. And I was just wondering about the idea of the studio, because it brings us to one thing we haven't spoken about yet, which is your work with architecture, the focus of the previous show in the UK, SCARCH at Hauser & Wirth in Somerset. And you say that building has been your favourite occupation since you were two years old, when you tried to enter a pillow! So beautiful.

NV: Yes. I couldn't even walk. I crawled into this pillow. When I was three, we had a lot of snow here, and I dug a tunnel in front of the house and I just stayed in this tunnel. I felt so good in it. And it wasn't cold. I remember the details and sensations, like the colour and the smell. And I think maybe this opened up something for later. I thought about how it would be to build my own habitat. Here in Sent, we had so much time off school – we had five months of vacation in the summertime – so we built treehouses. My interest in architecture probably started then. And of course, later, when I went to Africa, it was a dream to be able to build these houses and schools. And when architects work with me, my first question is usually, 'Have you ever thought about building a house for yourself?' I am not an

architect, and of course my projects very much differ from the ones realised by large companies such as Herzog de Meuron or Foster and Partners. I've just read *Architecture without Architects* by Rudolphsky. Do you know it?

HUO: Yes, a beautiful book about the richness and complexity of vernacular architecture.

NV: It's fantastic! And this is what it's all about – this desire to build a habitat for yourself, very much like an animal. We're currently working on a project to build a house in Sent where you go into the garage and you completely disappear. You live underground. No one sees you – very much like a marmot. All these ideas are not from studying architecture, but from not being an architect.

HUO: You've built so many different houses: there's the *Disappearing House* (2007), the *House Against Heat and Sandstorms* (2006), the various iterations of *House to Watch the Sunset*. You've said the *House to Watch the Sunset* is your favourite house. Why is that?

NV: Well, it's just so complete. This house came as a surprise. I built it without having any drawings or models made but, once it was finished, I realised that this house couldn't have been any different. You couldn't add anything to it or subtract anything from it. It's a pure structure. *House to Watch the Sunset* is going to be shown this year at the Architecture Biennale in Venice, if it takes place. It's going to be inside the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, and the sculpture is 13 metres tall. But whether it's a sculpture, a painting or a house, it's all an Aufbau, right? They're all constructions, so it's all related.

HUO: Going back to portraiture, you've made portraits of mountains. I think it's interesting because the vegetation, the mountains, the sea are characters. They're as important as human beings, no?

NV: Exactly, but I haven't done any paintings of mountains. I've made drawings of mountains. Of course, here, we're surrounded by mountains, but it takes a quite a long time until you find a way to use them. But then I did portrait-sculptures of these mountains.

HUO: I want to ask you about the role of titles in your paintings. Are they important to you?

NV: The name you give to a painting is as important as the name you give to a person. Usually it's the name of the person in the portrait, like *Mahalia Jackson* (2020) or *Nina Simone* (2020). There's one large-scale painting in the London show that's called *God* (2020). When it was finished, it just got that name. And 'God' is God, but in Romansh, 'god' is wood – the forest is called 'god'. So it has a double meaning, like my name. I always sign with NOT, instead of using my last name. A painting I did last week shows me turning into a sheep. And then there are the *Monk Paintings* that I did in Laos.

HUO: Yes, I want to ask you about those, because that's a very important series. What was the epiphany for the *Monk Paintings*?

NV: I went to the old capital of Laos, Luang Prabang, very close to the Mekong River. I would pay daily visits to an old woman who made paper, walking there each day. It was great to see what she would put in the paper – like rose petals, for example. On my way to her, I would pick up what I found on the road: a dead frog or a squashed plastic bottle or a sock. And on my way there, I would pass by the many, many temples. In this way, I got to know a lot of monks. They would invite me into their living quarters. And when I was with them, I saw all the different shades of their clothes, from red to yellow, so I went with them to the shops where they bought their materials and I bought some. When I returned to China, I painted the monks from photographs, onto these textiles. And this series, which I did in 2016, never left my studio in Beijing. And then I saw Thaddaeus' gallery in London, and I thought it would be great to assemble these paintings in this one room and to show them for the first time.

HUO: I'm fascinated by the shortness of your titles. I always think it has something to do with the Engadin. I curated the exhibition of Gerhard Richter in the Nietzsche Haus in 1992. And it was really interesting because we had all kinds of titles to do with Nietzsche and Zarathustra, and he kept saying, 'No, this isn't right for here.' And then he said, 'What's the place called?' And I said 'Sils Maria'. And then he replied, 'That's still too long.' So we called it Sils. I'm wondering whether it has something to do with the Engadin, where all the names are so short.

NV: My name has only three letters, and that's not atypical in the Engadin. My brother's name is Jon. Another typical name is Men. Or Cla. Many names are very short, and that's also true for the place names, especially compared to German. Yesterday I was in a village called Lü.

HUO: I have one last question, which is the only recurring question in all my interviews: I wanted to ask you to tell me about your unrealised projects. We know a lot about architects' unrealised projects because they publish them, but we know very little about artists' unrealised projects. Some are too big to be realised, or too utopic. Do you have a utopian architectural project, or are there people you want to paint whom you haven't yet painted? What's your unrealised project?

NV: Yes. Well, in terms of painting, it's Hans Ulrich Obrist! [Laughs] And in terms of architecture, it's a new project for a house.

HUO: How's that going to work?

NV: I don't know yet. I know that the house should somehow be moving, because it has to go to different places, depending on the view, depending on the light. In general, I'm in this great position of freedom, because I don't have to build houses for other people and I don't have to build houses in the conventional sense. I don't have to build toilets and showers. I don't have to deal with all these laws. That's all irrelevant. I have so much more freedom. I bought some land on the island Folegandros in Greece, and I want to build a house there, just to look out at this one mountain. So these are some of projects I want to realise. People are always asking, 'Why do you have all these places? Why do you need more places?' And I've realised it's because, if you want to do the architecture that I want to do, you need a place to build in, just like if I want to do a painting, I need a canvas, or if I want to do a sculpture, I need a structure to hold the sculpture together. It's all one and it's all related.