

Bernar Venet

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Spotlight: Artist Bernar Venet Has Installed Four Monumental, Mathematical Sculptures in an Outdoor Exhibition at Mayfair's Grosvenor Square This Summer

Presented by Waddington Custot in collaboration with Art in Mayfair, the installation will be on view through August 29, 2023.

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Installation view of Bernar Venet, *Three Indeterminate Lines* (2010). Photo: Barney Hindle. Courtesy of Waddington Custot, London.

What You Need to Know: Frequenters of London's Grosvenor Square this summer will be met with a series of four large-scale steel sculptures from the French artist Bernar Venet. Supported by the Venet Foundation and presented by London gallery Waddington Custot in partnership with Art in Mayfair, the exhibition of Venet's monumental Cor-Ten and rolled steel sculptures illustrates the artist's mathematic and scientific approach to artmaking and sculptural composition. Considered one of the most important French artists working today, Venet's work is recognized as self-referential, with the lines, angles, and curves stripped of any symbolic allusions or decorative adornment. Instead, the works operate as irreducible monoliths that affect perceptions of the sites they occupy. The exhibition of works will remain on view in Grosvenor Square through August 29, 2023.



Bernar Venet, *Indeterminate Line* (1992). Courtesy of Waddington Custot, London.

About the Artist: Conceptual artist Bernar Venet (b. 1941) is most well-known for his precise, mathematically rigorous sculptures frequently executed in steel. Within his artistic practice, he has also undertaken ongoing experiments with other industrial materials, such as coal and asphalt. In the 1960s, Venet was influenced by the work of Arman and the New Realists working in Paris and began crafting sculptures out of cardboard. A 1966 visit to New York exposed him to Minimalism, and he subsequently shared a studio with Arman in downtown Manhattan and interacted with artists such as Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. Over the subsequent decades, the artist honed his signature style, and his work came to reflect his ongoing formal artistic investigations. In 2005, he was awarded the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur, and in 2014 he opened the Venet Foundation, a museum and archive of his work. This year, 2023, marks the 60th anniversary of Venet's seminal work *Tas de charbon* (1963), made of coal, which heralded the start of his meticulous investigative practice.

Why We Like It: Summer weather demands time spent in London’s city parks—and the addition of Venet’s immense steel sculptures makes Grosvenor Square an unmissable destination in the coming weeks. Featuring examples of the artist’s “Arcs,” “Lines,” and “Angles,” the concise exhibition of works in the open air allows viewers to circumvent and perceive each sculpture from myriad perspectives and immerse themselves in Venet’s singular artistic vision. The scale of the sculptures makes them a natural addition to one of the city’s most famous garden squares, and the juxtaposition between the precisely executed works and the organic and built landscape surrounding them lend to new insights into both the works themselves and Venet’s practice itself. The open-air exhibition also invites prolonged looking and consideration, as a site of leisure and respite, Grosvenor Square presents an opportunity to engage in an unhurried reflection on the work of one of contemporary art’s most influential sculptors.



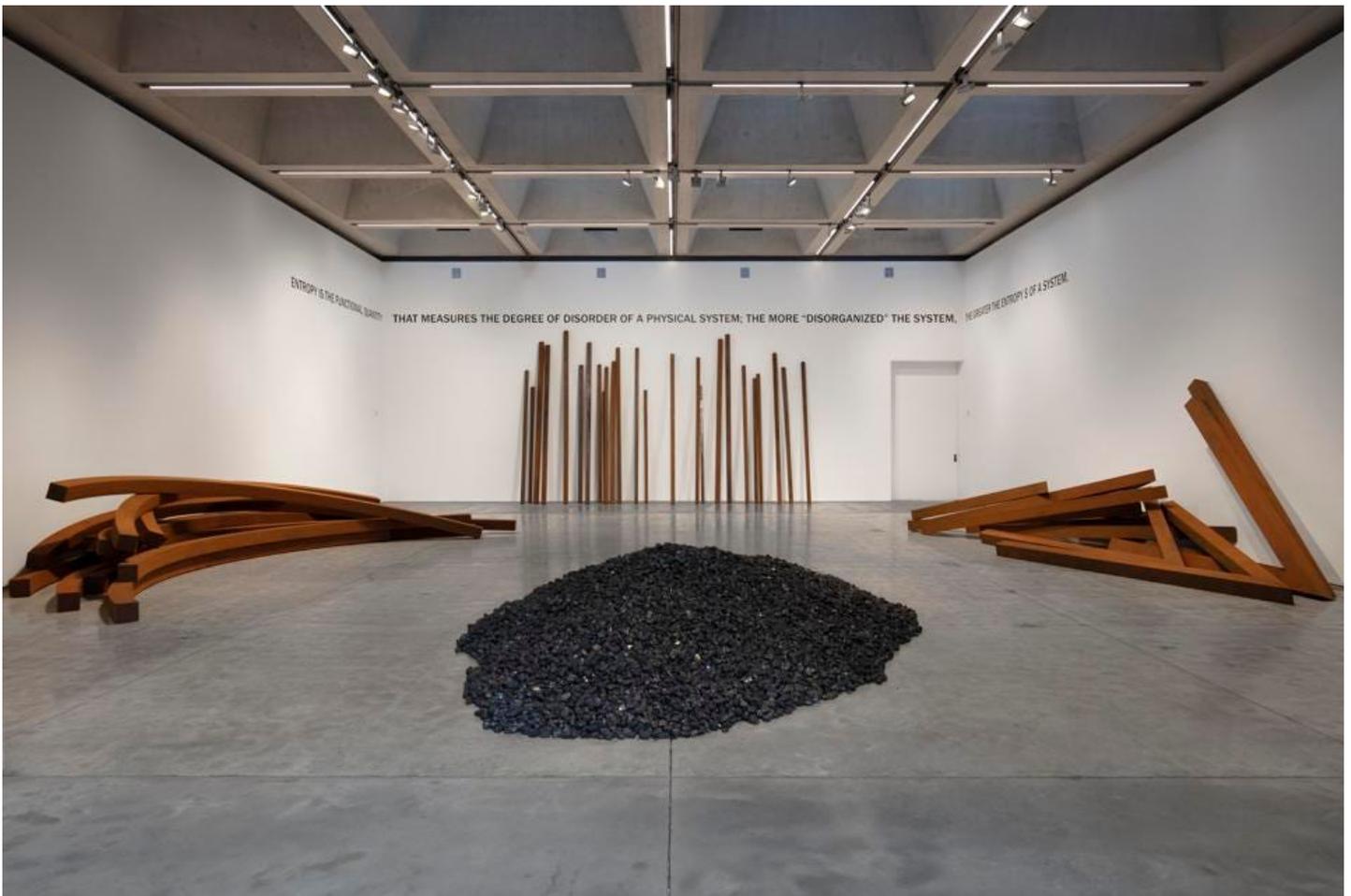
Bernar Venet, *12 Acute Unequal Angles* (2021). Courtesy of Waddington Custot, London.



Bernar Venet, *218.5° Arc x 21* (2006). Courtesy of Waddington Custot, London.

French Conceptual Artist Bernar Venet Invites Us Into Chaos At Kasmin

NATASHA GURAL
NOVEMBER 2022



Installation image of Bernar Venet's 'Gravity' at Paul Kasmin Gallery. PHOTO BY DIEGO FLORES.

Wearing a black suit and black gloves, 81-year-old French conceptual artist Bernar Venet carefully adjusted four of 25 flat-rolled steel bars leaning against the back wall before lunging and pushing the one furthest left. The domino effect created a clanging that left only two bars erect as the others toppled. Each bar weighs roughly between 110-198 pounds.

Venet's performance of *Accident* (1995–2022) kicked off the opening of *Gravity*, featuring major large-scale works on view at Kasmin in New York's Chelsea art district until December 23.

The performance was conceived in Le Muy in Southeastern France in 1995 and most recently performed at the Kunsthalle Berlin in 2022. Building on the legacies of Dada, Fluxus, and Minimalism, the performance underscores Venet's re-imagining of the environment through art.

The wall text framing Accident reads: "ENTROPY IS THE FUNCTIONAL QUALITY THAT MEASURES THE DEGREE OF DISORDER OF A PHYSICAL SYSTEM; THE MORE 'DISORGANIZED' THE SYSTEM, THE GREATER THE ENTROPY OF A SYSTEM."

Years ago, Venet assembled a lexicon of words central to his creative process: "Disorder / Instability / Rupture / Dissipation / Imbalance / Antagonism / Entropy / Disorganization / Disturbance / Unpredictable / Deviance / Uncertainty / Randomness / Disintegration / Transition / Unexpected / Turbulence / Chance / Collision / Irreversible."



Bernar Venet performing 'Accident' at the opening of 'Gravity' at Kasmin. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER STACH

To simplify physics, entropy is the measure of a system's thermal energy per unit temperature that is unavailable for doing useful work. It also more loosely means a lack of order or predictability, or a gradual decline into disorder.

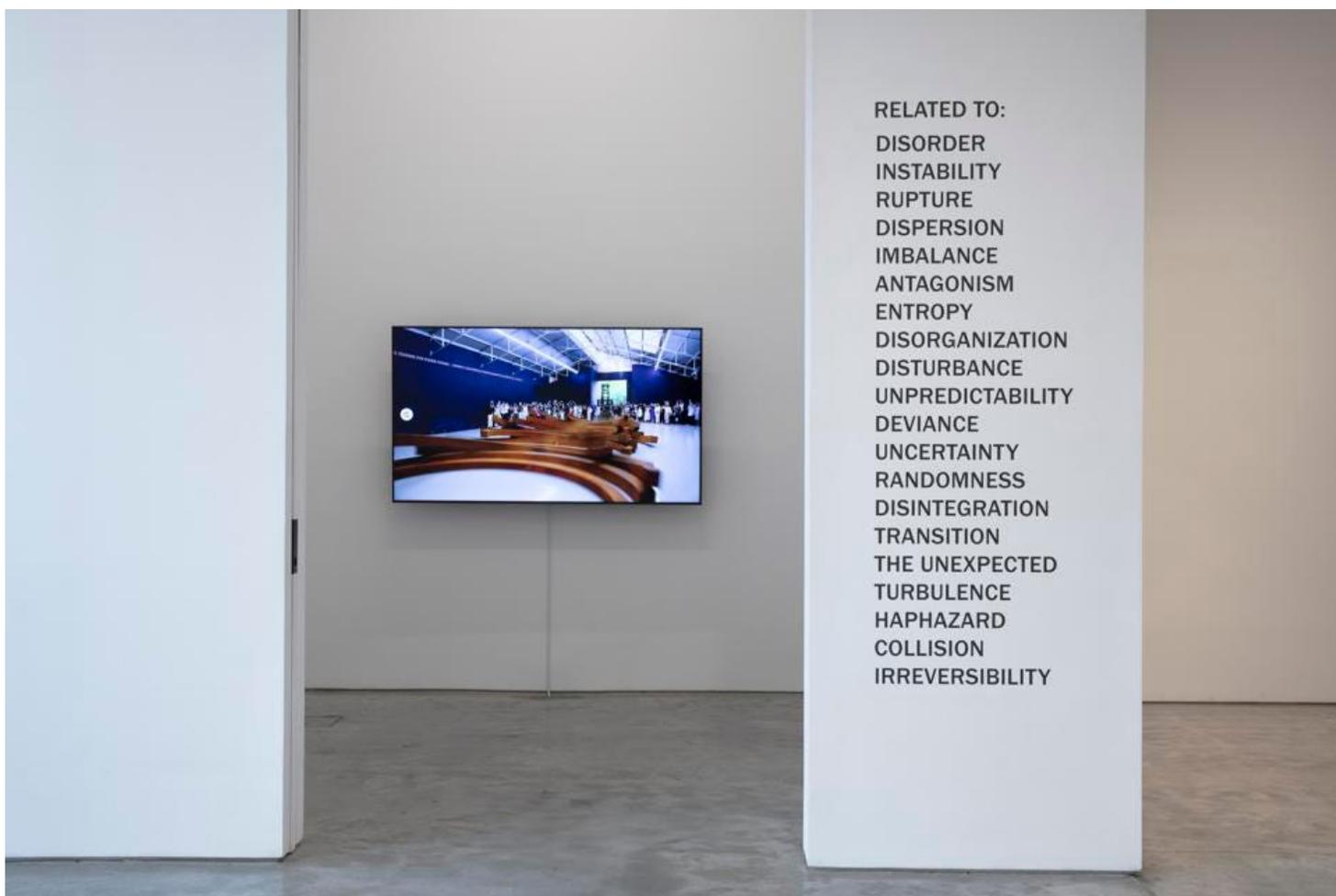
"Venet has been able to translate through words what he has done in his visual body of work. His bilingual anthology called Poetic?Poétique? is full of texts that confirm his commitment as an artist and faithfully reproduce what he has undertaken

elsewhere,” art historian and curator Maurice Fréchuret explains in the first English version of his essay *Bernar Venet: The Hypothesis of Gravity* translated by John O’Toole and published in *The Kasmin Review* to support the exhibition.

The site-specific nature of Venet’s work lends to the disorder, each iteration building on and deviating from the last.

We stop to gaze downward as we encounter the first New York presentation of *Pile of Coal* (1963), Venet’s first sculptural work, in the center of the gallery floor. This seminal work, Fréchuret says, “admits the double principle of the gestural and gravity.” Venet was inspired when he saw a mound of gravel and tar from road work near Nice’s Promenade des Anglais, according to Fréchuret.

We think about the sound of coal being dumped into a heap, the slightly earthy smell, the feel of hard rock which can be burned as a fossil fuel. Within the gallery space, the composition of shiny jet-black rocks evokes a painterly play of flickering light.



Installation image of Bernar Venet's 'Gravity' at Paul Kasmin Gallery. PHOTO BY DIEGO FLORES

Around the same time in 1963, New Realist Ben (a French artist born Ben Vautier who goes by only his first name) observed a pile of gravel, and interpreted it through the Duchampian readymade, Fréchuret writes. Venet eschewed what was already formed and chose a constructive approach by creating his own pile.

“What the artist wants to highlight isn’t some artistic feat or the virtuosity of the sculptural gesture, but the ability of the material – coal – to find a form as soon as it is subjected to the force of gravity alone,” Fréchuret explains.

Each of Venet’s sculptures illustrates its myriad compositional possibilities and he utilizes his body in his creations and performances as an act of determination.

Rejecting symbolism and allegory, Venet borrows from the coded language of mathematics and scientific data and theory.

Each iteration, each performance, builds on Venet’s early embrace of chaos theory.

The exhibition draws us into Venet’s singular practice, interpreting his monumental, trailblazing sculpture without a specific shape alongside works on paper and documentation of his earliest artistic gestures from the 1960s. In a world encumbered with routine and pressure to succumb to order, Venet beckons us to embrace randomness, disorder, and unpredictability.



Installation image of Bernar Venet's 'Gravity' at Paul Kasmin Gallery. PHOTO BY DIEGO FLORES.

Bernar Venet: “In another life I would be a saint”

The French artist and collector on sardines, silence and his secret calling.

VICTORIA WOODCOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIVIEN AYROLES

AUGUST 10, 2022



Bernar Venet in Le Muy.

My personal style signifier is simple: I avoid having one. I look at artists like Pierre Soulages, always dressed entirely in black, or those who wear white in summer and black in winter, like Daniel Buren or Joseph Kosuth—maybe they think they need to look like an artist. I don’t want people to recognize me as an artist. So I don’t have a style at all. You might see me dressed in black, yes, but then the next day you’ll see me in yellow and red, like David Hockney. I change all the time.

The last thing I bought and loved was a little ink drawing by Matisse from 1904. I saw it on Gagolian's stand at the FIAC [art fair] in Paris and I could not resist. It's a nude on two pieces of paper. He often started on one piece of paper and finished on another. It's a real beauty; in fact, the Musée Matisse in Nice exhibited it.



Above: The garden at Le Muy Below: The hall of the Moulin (the old mill), with (far left) a compression sculpture by Arman.

A place that means a lot to me is my home in Le Muy, Provence. After visiting Donald Judd's Foundation in Marfa I kept thinking that I should create a similar, appropriate setting for my work. So I did it...Something less serious was my dream to have a "cabanon" [hut] where I could isolate myself away from visitors and assistants. I found it last year – it's tiny, only 6ft by 7ft, but I built a bed in concrete with just a mattress, and I sleep there some nights during the summer. ON the wall is written a quote from Voltaire: *"Tout vouloir est le désir du fou, la moderation est le trésor du sage."* ("Wanting everything is crazy. Moderation is the treasure of the wise.")

I never listen to podcasts, I never listen to the radio. I did do a podcast recently in Berlin with König [Galerie], but I won't listen back to it. I have to create, remain active, not look back. There is too little time for it. I am now 81 and so much remains to be done...



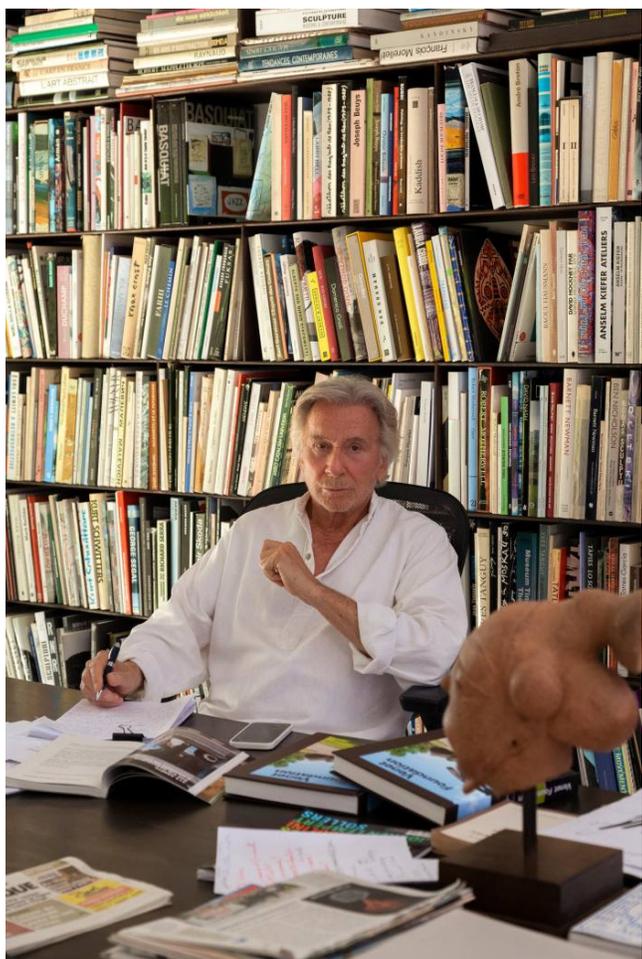
Above: Venet's style icon George Clooney. © Charley Gallay/Getty Images for Turner. Below: Intersection, 2012, by Anish Kapoor in front of Venet's Points, 2013, and (at rear) Elliptic Elliptic, 1999 by James Turrell.

My style icon, and I'm going to be criticized for this in the art world, is George Clooney. First of all, he's a very good actor and director, but also who doesn't want to look like him? And on top of that, he bought a property 20km away from me so he clearly has good taste. Brad Pitt also lives close by and has bought my work.

In my fridge you'll always find champagne or rosé for my guests, but what will never be missing is a box of sardines to satisfy my appetite when I am alone. It's such a pleasure to eat them straight out of the tin, without having to behave.

The last music I listened to was by David Tudor, an artist from the '60s who we are exhibiting at the Venet Foundation in Le Muy this summer. Normally I don't listen to music. It really disturbs me. I have to have silence all the time. In my family, when I was growing up, there was no music – and no art. I was born in Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban in the south of France where there was nothing cultural. But of course, I had to listen to some David Tudor. It's crazy stuff.

I have a collection of contemporary art. It started with exchanges with friends in the early '60s, when I was in Nice – artists like Arman and Ben [Vautier]. Then I went to Paris and started to exchange with new realists: Jacques Villeglé, Gérard Deschamps, Mimmo Rotella, Daniel Spoerri. But it was when I went to New York that my collection became more important, with works by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. And so now we have substantial collection that we exhibit in the south of France. I also have sculptures by British Artists: Anthony Caro, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon. I have a major Anish Kapoor. And Richard Long, two big pieces – one inside, one outside.



Venet at his office table in the Usine.

The thing I could not do without is difficult to pick, because if I lost everything tomorrow, I'd be OK. I enjoy having

beautiful things around but I'm not attached to them. That's the idea of the foundations: everything I have, I am giving away. It doesn't belong to me, to my kids, to my wife – it's going to be for society.

Although one object I would never part with is a little African Senufo sculpture in steel. It's old and rusted, but I've had it on my night table since 1972. Sometimes I think that when I die – if one day it happens; it could happen – I would like to have it with me. But I know that's not a nice thing to do; it has to belong to everybody.

An indulgence I would never forgo is my afternoon nap. When I wake up in the morning, I'm so speedy. It's like I've taken cocaine all night – something I've never done in my life. There's no time to have coffee, and I don't need it anyway. So I work until noon or 1pm, and then if I take a nap, the afternoon is the same: full of energy.



Asymmetrical Pyramid Drawing #428, 1985, and table, 1991, both by Sol LeWitt, and Untitled Wall Painting for Bernar, 2004, by Robert Barry in the mill's dining room.

I recently rediscovered pictures of Sol LeWitt and me together. I found them when I was looking for photography for my new biography. My friend Alain Bizos took them. Nobody has pictures of Sol LeWitt; it's impossible. He never wanted to be photographed. They remind me of spending time together in the south of France, and how I introduced him to a very beautiful girlfriend. They travelled to Italy together and when they came back, she said to me, "Oh, you know, he's very nice, but he's very stingy. We went to the worst hotel and the worst restaurant."

An item of clothing I recently added to my wardrobe was a pair of Brunello Cucinelli trousers. I saw them in a window when I was in London, and they're just the right fit.

My favourite room in my house is my bedroom because I'm surrounded by artworks, one on top of the other. The bed itself is by Donald Judd, and I have the little Matisse and four Picasso drawings—studies for his famous painting *Still Life with Skull on an Armchair*. Then there's a de Kooning, a Ryman, a Tinguely, a Sol LeWitt and an Indiana – a big painting. It's like my own museum. My dream would be to spend the night at MoMA in New York, in the room of paintings by the abstract expressionists – a huge Pollock, a huge Barnett Newman, a huge de Kooning. Each time I'm there, I think, "I should come and put my bed in here."

My grooming guru is my hairdresser, a woman called Jennfyer who lives around the corner and comes to my house to cut my hair. When I was 10 years old, I read in a magazine that Picasso's hairdresser came to his house, and I thought, "My God, if one day I am famous, I will have my hairdresser come to my home to cut my hair." And that is what I've done for the past 20 years.



Left: A drawing by Sol LeWitt on the night table in Venet's bedroom. Right: Round Pearl Saturations, 2014, by Venet and Teneku sculpture in the living room of the Usine

In another life, I would be a saint. When I was a kid I wanted to be the Pope. My family was very religious, but, very quickly, I understood that you have to study a lot to become the Pope, so I wanted to be a missionary. There was a missionary called Charles de Foucauld, who I had a book about. I would wear my nightshirt, put a rope around my waist and pretend to be a saint. But honestly, I would like to give myself to people to do good things.

The work of art that changed everything for me was a book. By the time I was 11, I knew I was going to be an artist. I was obsessed. I was making a painting a day and selling them to the people in my town. Then a lousy local painter told me that if you are an artist you have to paint with oil paint. So I took a bus with my mother to the big city – Digne in the Aples-de-Haute-Provence – and we bought oil paints: one red, one green, one yellow, one blue, perhaps a white one. But in the window there, I saw a book with an image of a painting – a woman washing her feet in the river – and on top of it was a word I didn't understand. So I asked the man in the shop what it meant. And he said,

“Renoir? Renoir is a very famous artist. His works are in museums all over the world. His paintings are worth a fortune.” And that was the day I realized you could actually make a living from being an artist.



Above: A teapot in the kitchen of the mill house. Below: Reading matter in a guest room in the mill.

The best books I’ve read in the past year are by Edgar Morin, a French sociologist and philosopher. I’ve had the same two books – *Penser Global* and *La Méthode* – on my night table for at least the past 20 years. Maybe something by Nietzsche, too. But I’ve never read a novel in my life, I read biographies when I was younger and today I read philosophy and scientific books. I love Morin because his writing has helped me explain some aspects of my sculpture, where I mix order and disorder to create something new.

The best gift I’ve given recently was to my wife on Valentine’s Day. It’s a sculpture – a torso in marble from the first century. I bought it in Galerie Chenel in Paris, where they have very serious archaeological pieces.

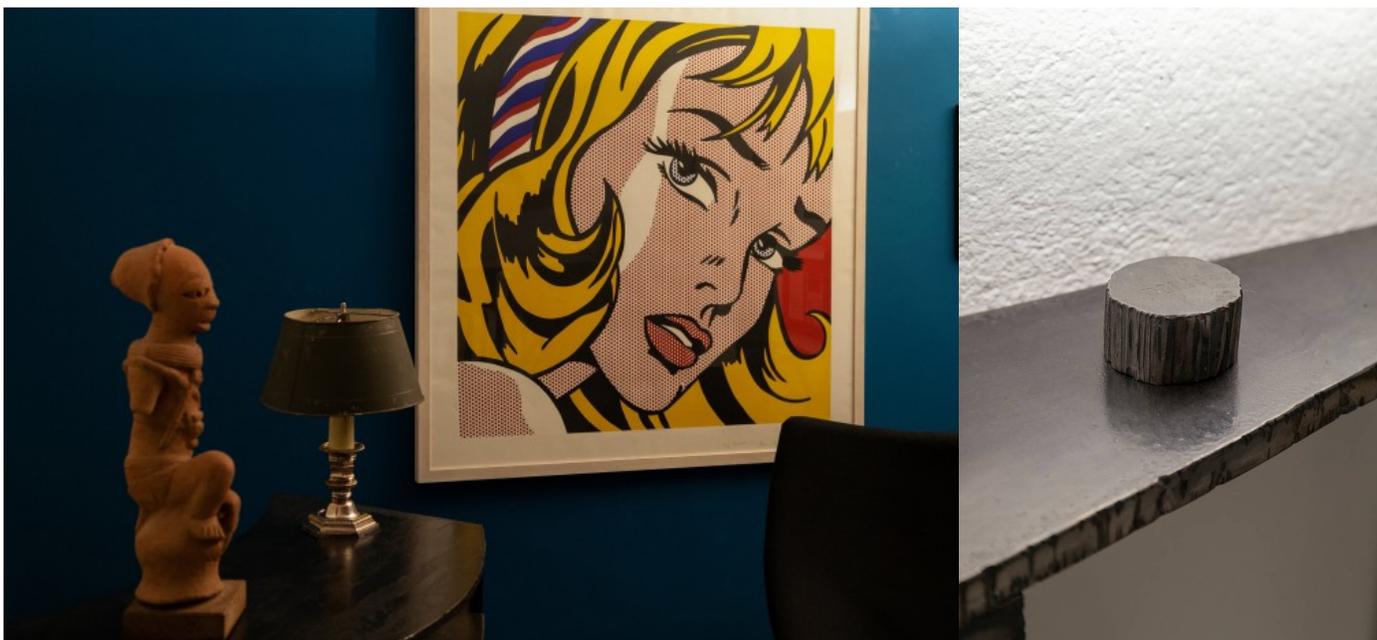


Bernar Venet in his summer house in Le Muy with (left) a detail of his 79.5° Arc x 19, 2004, and (right) Sitting Tattoo XII, 2009, by Jaume Plensa © Vivien Ayroles | © Jaume Plensa. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co and the artist

The best gift I've received recently was from my son, Stéphane, for my birthday. He sent me a USB key, and on it was a movie of me in 1963, in colour, in my apartment in Nice. It was incredible; the best gift I've received in 20 years, because it was such a surprise. I don't have any memory of seeing it before. It was filmed by Alain Fleischer, a young artist in those days.

The one artist whose work I would collect if I could is definitely Ad Reinhardt, a painting, 5ft by 5ft, or bigger – why not? I like things that are extremely sober. I don't like colour or anything crazy. When I was about 20, I was making black paintings, and one day a friend of mine came to me and said, "Oh, Bernar, you think you are doing something original, but look" – and showed me a double-page ad of an Ad Reinhardt show. And I looked, said "Damn it," and stopped right away.

My favourite building is the Louvre-Lens museum, in the north of France. I had an exhibition there last year; it's an incredible place, designed by the Japanese architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa. Outside it's very simple, very minimal – you just see an outline. But it's the inside I really love and the stainless-steel walls, which are 8m, maybe 10m tall. And then you see this collection of art history, from the 4th millennium BC all the way to today.



Left: A Nok sculpture and *Girl with Hair Ribbon*, 1992, by Roy Lichtenstein in a guest room. Right: *Point*, 1984, by Venet

The best souvenirs I've brought home are memories. There is the day that the director of the New York Cultural Center told me I was going to have a retrospective in New York, when I was 29. And the second one is when Jean-Jacques Aillagon, then president of the Palace of Versailles, invited me to show there in 2011. These are my real souvenirs. Objects: they don't matter.

The best bit of advice I ever received was from my mother when I was making my paintings and not succeeding too well. She'd say, "Try again," and remind me of Louis Blériot, who tried many times to cross the Channel in a plane before he did it. So success comes with a lot of passion.

I get my best ideas from accidents. Like when I was making my black tar paintings in the '60s, and happened to see a pile of gravel mixed with tar on the streets of Nice; the day after I did the *Tas de Charbon* [Pile of Coal] – a radical work. Another time I was making a small edition of my indeterminate line sculptures, and my assistant had just piled them up in a box, and this was the beginning of disorder in my work. But I have a new idea every five minutes or so. Of course, not all of them go into production. But I like Gaston Bachelard's philosophy, *la théorie de pourquoi pas*, which is a way of saying, "Why not?"

Bernar Venet: 1961 & 1963: les origins

JOSEPH NECHVATAL
OCTOBER 2021



Courtesy Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris.

I first found Bernar Venet, distinguished doyen of congealed *loop de loops* (*Indeterminate Lines*), in 1969 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago *Art By Telephone* exhibition that emphasized emerging conceptual-minimal artists. Venet's current show, *1961 & 1963: les origins* at Ceysson & Bénétière Paris, puts him back into that post-Duchampian / Yves Klein context with early minimal works that ponder the power of black and the pull of gravity through an inter-disciplinarian methodology. (The show skips 1962 because Venet was in Algeria on military service that year.)

Venet's 1961 breakthrough as an artist was inspired by a tar spill. It manifests with his first black industrial paint on cardboard paintings called *Scraps* (*Déchets* in the original French) and *Gravier Goudron* (*Gravel Tar*) (1961); an *outré* sound art recording of a clattering wheelbarrow circling the gravel yard of the Tarascon military barracks where he was stationed. That hardware centers many intentionally unaesthetic *Scraps* that resemble garage workstations for automobile oil changes. Conversely, listening to the recording charmed me with repetitive jingling, at once musically plaintive and pitiable, similar to the Joe Jones or Jean Tinguely tinkling machine recordings.

Sometimes, as with the triptych *Goudron* (1961), Venet used his feet to smear tar around sheets of paper; *à la* Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga's foot paintings of the mid 1950s. Implying disrespect for aficionados of painting, it is shorn of any auxiliary symbolic-poetic associations and might have set Venet's path towards the worst of all possible worlds:

formalist solipsism. Indeed, Venet's self-stated goal was to remove any form of expression in art in order to reduce it to material fact.

The audio/materialistic juxtaposition puts in play notions of visual opacity connected to the vibrational trembling of sonic perception. As a mandated military man, Venet seems tormented by an itch for exalting dumb materiality tinged with the flux of temporal values. As such, his early work hovers in a suspension between stupefaction and passion.

The same year, 1961, Venet had himself photographed strewn among garbage. *Performance in Garbage* was an explicit response to Klein's *Le Vide (The Void)* (1958) exhibition at Galerie Iris Clert. Based on Rosicrucian metaphysical ideology, Klein avowed to indicate to the world a new "Age of Space" and cleaned out and whitewashed the gallery. For *Performance in Garbage*, Venet, in contradiction with Klein and in front of fellow soldiers, lay bare-chested among garbage as his accomplice, Jean-Pierre Quarez, photographed the brief performance. That cannot help but recall Arman's earlier answer to Klein, *Le Plein (The Full)* (1960), in which Arman filled Galerie Iris Clert to the brim with garbage.

In 1963, the paintings become elegantly restrained, climaxing as black monochromes. Here Venet situates himself within a rich archaeology of Western contemplative black magic. Yet his choice of solid black also denotes the humbleness of the Black Monks and reminds us of Venet's early religiosity. He once considered becoming a missionary. But in 1963, his stated aim was the making of self-referential art intentionally devoid of spiritual expression, which proved impossible. The black monochromes convey a Klein-esque transcendent-timeless depth. Glances are absorbed into a shimmering black excess without fixity and produce the contrary: an inexpressive neutrality.

With the color black and material viscosity still as their *raison d'être*, *Cardboard Reliefs* (1963) are heavily spray-painted black monochromes of industrial car paint applied by professionals. But as pointed out by Ben Vautier, these black monochromes came too close to Ad Reinhardt's, whose black requiem for expressionistic painting was already well underway, even though Reinhardt's mat surfaces suggest a mystical darkness that can permeate the mind like perfume, and Venet's don't.

But in 1963, Venet was on a black roll, with a poem "Noir et noir et noir" (Black and Black and Black) that is pretty far out in the post-humanist mode, and the achingly beautiful—if nihilistic—*Black Book* (1963), printed with only black pages. With those works and the melancholy grandeur of *Pile of Coal* (1963) Venet found his capacity as a visual poet of the tragic-comedic material world. Created by gravity, the very physical yet ephemeral pile, predating Robert Smithson's *Gravel Corner Piece* (1968), has no specified shape or dimensions and feels amusingly random.

The 1963 *Tars* series puts his mysticism at bay through activating Duchamp's desire to trade paintbrush painting for a sensual-intellectual-spiritual stance. Venet poured warm tar onto horizontal canvases, spreading it evenly over the surface and orchestrating gravitational downward flows as it hardened.

Following gravity downstairs, I found behind a black curtain a projection of *Tarmacadam* (1963), his black and white film of a stretch of asphalt highway passing under his car. It shares the same materialism and metaphysical pessimism—and the same ruthless realism—with the rest of the show. But designating almost unaltered material as art proved not to be the way for Venet to pave the road to the audacious digital future.

Renowned French Artist Bernar Venet Defies the Law Of Gravity

Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE
DECEMBER 19, 2021



The Hypothesis of Gravity exhibition at the Louvre-Lens Museum. Photo Frédéric Iovino

Bernar Venet, one of France's greatest living artists – known for his 2011 Chateau de Versailles solo show and his 60-meter-tall sculpture, *Arc Majeur*, in Belgium considered the world's tallest public artwork – discusses his *Collapse* masterpiece in the factory building of his own Venet Foundation in the south of France and his current exhibition *The Hypothesis of Gravity* held at the Louvre Museum in Lens, France, until January 10, 2022, where 110 Corten steel beams explore concepts of disorder, entropy, gravity and uncertainty.

Describe the *Collapse* sculpture-performance you carried out at your foundation in Le Muy last summer.

On July 17th of this year, I carried out a *Collapse* of 30 five-meter-tall *Arcs* in the big enclosed space of the factory in Le Muy, an action thus instantaneously generating a 30-ton sculpture. I was thinking more about creating a sculpture than an artistic performance because for me it was first and foremost a question of creating a work that obeyed new principles within the context of my work, certain possibilities to which I am currently attached: instability, disorganization, the unexpected, among others. It is true that the gesture, the method of creation, is spectacular and that on that day I had an audience invited to attend the event. That's why my gesture was mostly interpreted as a performance, a very brief performance since it lasted only three or four seconds.

Tell me about the element of unpredictability that's part of this artwork.

With the help of a forklift, I pushed this group of 30 Corten steel arches, lined up in such a way that, like dominoes, they would collide one after the other and end up collapsing on the ground a few meters from the spectators. I had previously done some tests on a model and I didn't think that a steel bar could be deflected and touch someone dangerously, but some people in the audience guessed my concern because nothing was totally predictable. The very spectacular, powerful and brief gesture took place with a deafening noise: 30 tons of steel collapsing in a red cloud of rust dust...

Did the outcome live up to your expectations?

There was a slight jostling among the spectators, but the result, the presence of these intertwined arcs, torn for some, lying on top of each other in a very disorderly manner corresponded, on the whole, to what I expected. The deliberately different dimensions of the arcs had created enough inequalities so that the work was not too regular throughout its length. I got exactly what I had wished for: the sudden disintegration of an aligned set of *Arcs* perceived as a constitutive, organizational passage of a new form and towards a new state of stability.

What's the significance of holding a solo show at the Louvre-Lens?

I can say it like this, and all artists think so: there is first of all the symbolism of the word "Louvre". More than any other museum in the world, the Louvre embodies the idealized image of this paradise where all the greatest artists in history meet forever. Cezanne, the first, was well aware of this when he said that he would stop painting immediately if his work never had access to the Louvre. The Louvre is the image of a dream. To enter it is the fulfillment of this dream. To remain there is an enormous challenge, not easy to merit it. Let's say that it is the final test, for the happiness of the chosen ones, the last judgement in a way, of which only time constitutes the jury.

How did the idea to exhibit at the Louvre-Lens come about?

The Louvre-Lens is a sublime horizontal extension of the Parisian palace, all in architectural finesse, where Kazuyo Sejima has built a space that allows a masterly staging in the Gallery of Time. I discovered it in 2018, invited by Marie Lavandier, its director. I was dazzled that day when I entered the Glass Pavilion. She explained to me that it was intended for temporary exhibitions of living artists. I quickly understood during the conversations that followed that a good project of mine would be welcome and that we would talk about it at our next meeting.



Exhibition view of The Hypothesis of Gravity with 110 Corten steel beams. Photo Frédéric Iovino

What was your initial idea for the exhibition?

I had many ideas because a place like this stimulates your imagination. But my experience taught me all the constraints related to the installation of heavy, bulky and voluminous sculptures, problems of access and movement inside a museum and questions related to security. The obstacles are usually multiple when one is confronted with a place of this importance, almost new, and where the least accident can take on a disproportionate dimension. The floor is impeccably maintained in this pavilion with walls about 10 meters high, made of transparent glass. Obstacles, yes, but obstacles quickly put into perspective by the determination of Marie Lavandier, who immediately encouraged me to carry out what seemed to me to be the ideal gesture for this place. A strong gesture was possible: it was necessary to imagine it and to make it a reality.

What were the technical difficulties involved in installing the exhibition?

With the help and great professionalism of my friend, the transporter Pierre Garrone, who has installed my most demanding works for more than 30 years, it seemed possible to us to create a very big Collapse over 1,000 square meters by taking up the entire space of the Gallery of Mirrors, and to occupy the external park in which 10 groups of leaning Arcs would be installed. An enormous logistical work was now going to take into account the transport of more than 150 tons of sculptures from the south to the north of France. Several tractor-trailer trucks would be necessary, huge cranes and telescopic forklifts to install in the best possible conditions each element of my two installations. Also, 140 large stainless steel plates had to be provided to protect the ground from shocks during the potential fall of the steel bars in their often too precarious balance. It took us four long days to install this Collapse with the Garrone team and my assistants who came especially from Le Muy, turns on the complexities derived by the receiver.



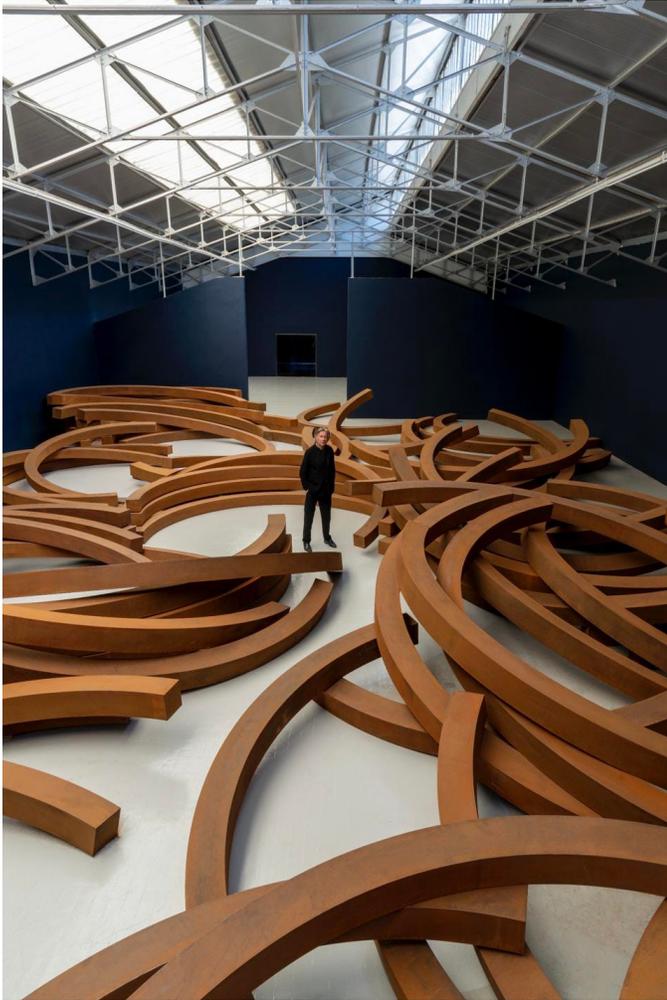
10 groups of leaning Arcs are displayed in the gardens of the Louvre-Lens. Photo Frédéric Iovino

What were the greatest challenges?

It was physically demanding work that required a great deal of concentration to avoid accidents because each element which weighs approximately one ton was installed, often in conditions of not very favorable instability. We can be the victims of unforeseen falls when imbalances have not been anticipated... all sorts of events that we do not control but which have the advantage of creating surprises and offering the viewer richer configurations than those we had imagined.

Did you know from the start what the end result would look like?

During the development of a similar installation, it is impossible to visualize from the beginning and even during the assembly the result that one will obtain. Yes, I give instructions on the positioning of each element, and yes, the randomness is far from being absolute, but I let these elements arrange themselves according to the possibilities offered in a configuration that's always yet to come. This final heap, this extreme and totally irreversible disorder, obeys more the laws of gravity than my limited orientations made up of uncertainties.



Bernar Venet in the factory building of his foundation in Le Muy in the south of France
Photo Jerome Cavaliere

You had previously displayed other oversized Collapses in Le Muy...

In 1994, I made a large model in which I presented a disorder of lines composed of Arcs, Angles, Straight Lines and Indeterminate Lines. Impossible to make it a reality in an ideal size at the time because I did not have enough elements in large dimensions available, I could nevertheless show in various places what I call "Collapses". The most voluminous was created for the first time in 2014 in Le Muy, in the large factory space, with 200 tons of Arcs, whose configuration I changed each year that followed. Less voluminous Collapses were sometimes presented in different places: in Venice, Versailles or Dunkirk, for example, at the Gigantism exhibition in 2018. But these were always works that could be perceived globally at a glance, as with a sculpture around which one can turn easily. The Louvre-Lens was therefore for me the ideal opportunity to finally present an important Collapse to a large public outside Le Muy. Composed of Straight Lines, Arcs and Angles, it was big enough that one could not apprehend it with a single glance and it became possible to move inside it, even if all these intertwined elements did not make the access easy.

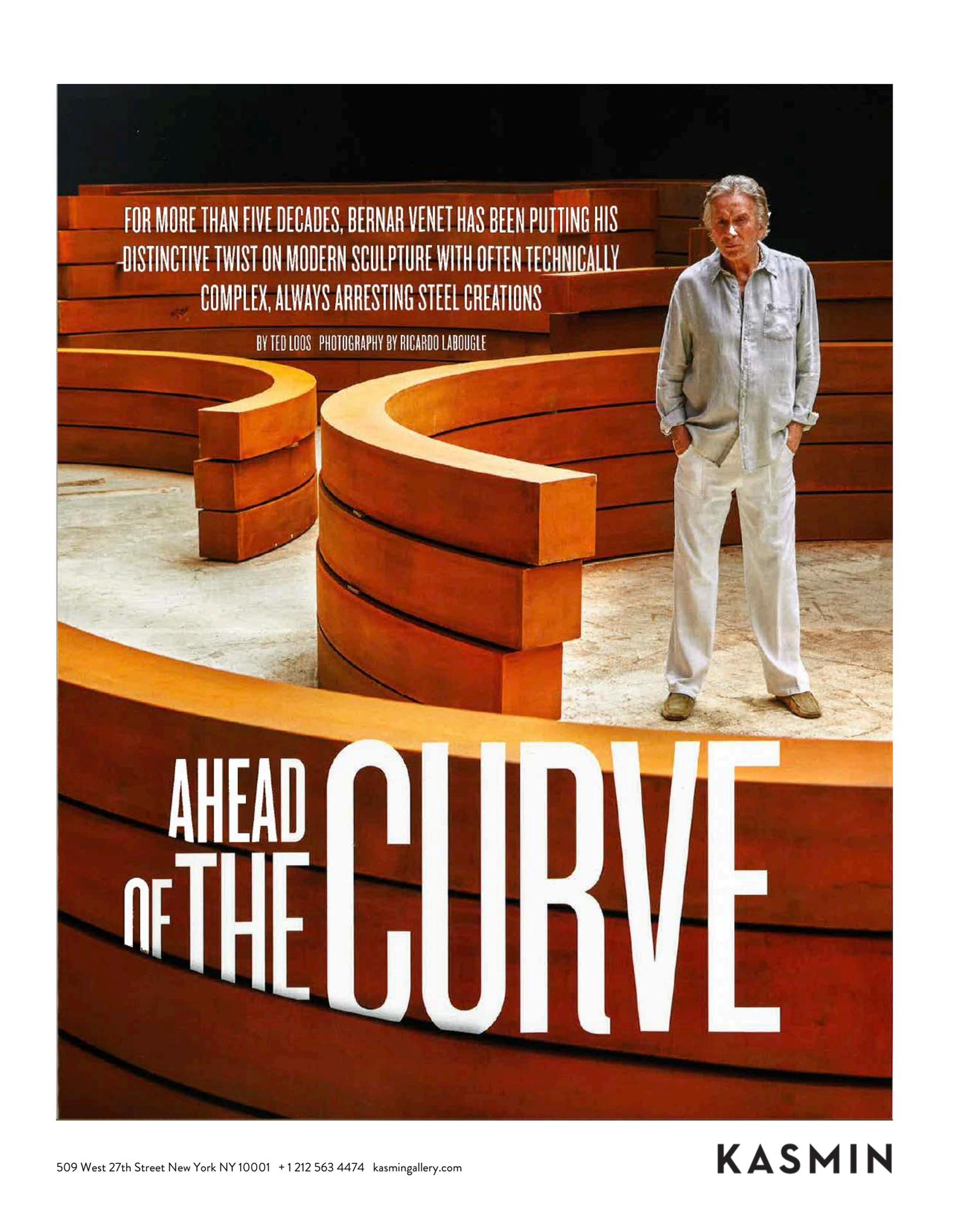
Galerie

Ahead of the Curve

For more than five decades, Bernar Venet has been putting his distinctive twist on modern sculpture with often technically complex, always arresting steel creations

TED LOOS
FALL 2019

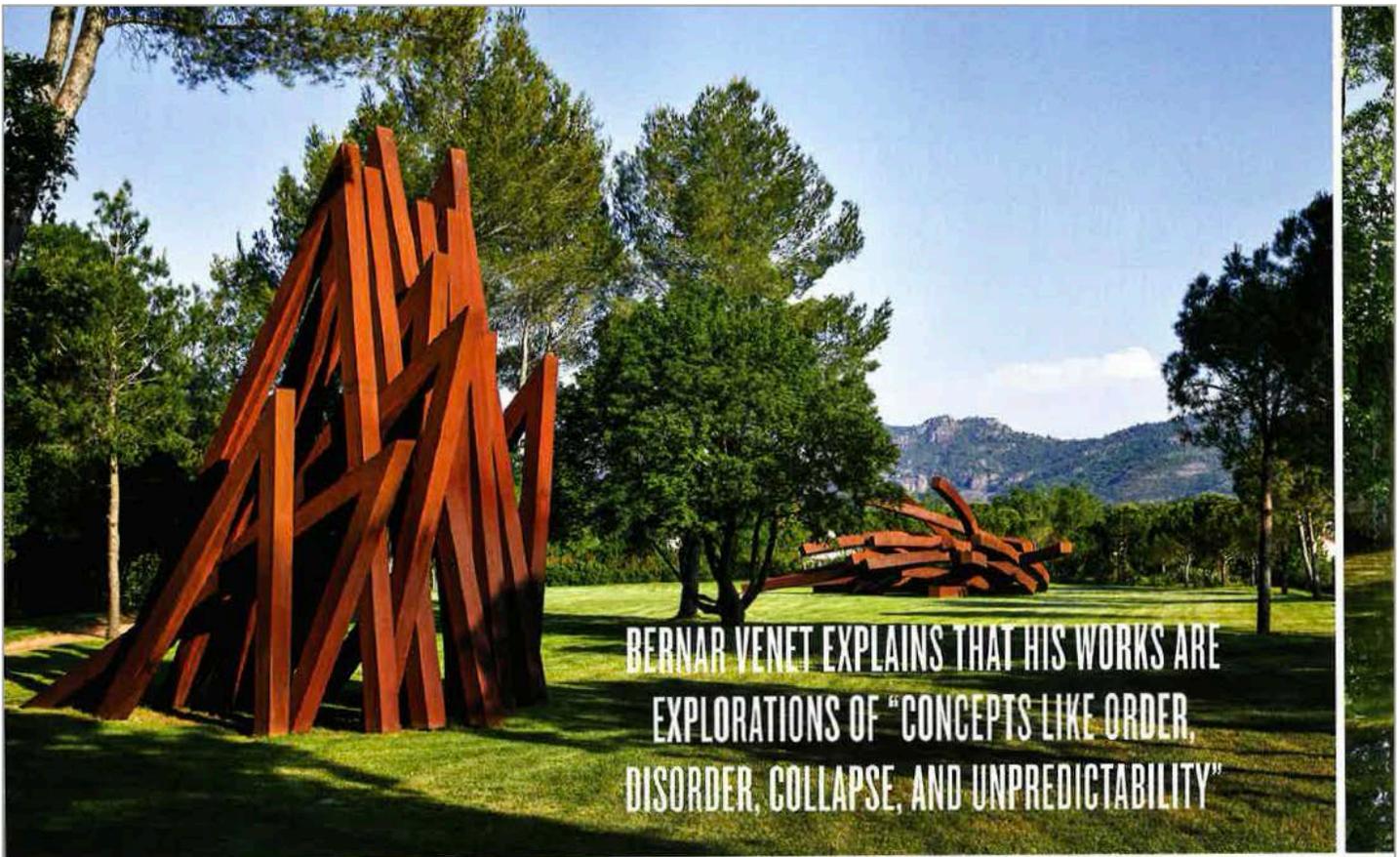


A photograph of Bernar Venet standing in a gallery. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and white trousers. He is surrounded by large, curved, rust-colored steel sculptures that form a circular path. The background is dark.

FOR MORE THAN FIVE DECADES, BERNAR VENET HAS BEEN PUTTING HIS
DISTINCTIVE TWIST ON MODERN SCULPTURE WITH OFTEN TECHNICALLY
COMPLEX, ALWAYS ARRESTING STEEL CREATIONS

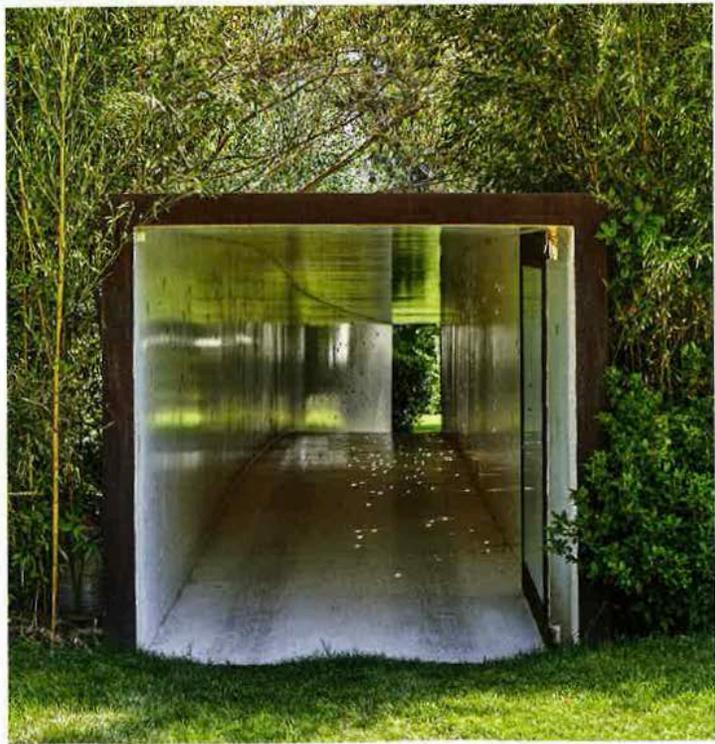
BY TED LOOS PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICARDO LABOUGLE

AHEAD OF THE CURVE



BERNAR VENET EXPLAINS THAT HIS WORKS ARE EXPLORATIONS OF "CONCEPTS LIKE ORDER, DISORDER, COLLAPSE, AND UNPREDICTABILITY"

Clockwise from top left: Works from Venet's "Angles" (foreground) and "Arcs" series that were originally conceived for a 2011 show at Versailles. A nearly 40-foot-tall "Arcs" sculpture overlooks the Nartuby River, which runs through the property. Torch-cut steel reliefs from the artist's "Continuous Curve" series line the walls of a foundation gallery. The Arc bridge that Venet designed to connect the parts of the property on both sides of the river.





W

hat Richard Serra is to steel slabs, Bernar Venet is to steel bars. Venet may be less famous than his counterpart, but he is a giant of modern sculpture in his own right and, like Serra, a master at bending massive pieces of weathered steel to his will.

Since the 1960s, Venet has been producing endless variations on his complex tangles, bundles, and piles of ruddy steel. Ranging from rigorously

geometric to almost spontaneous in feeling, all of his pieces are products of a meticulous conceptual approach. One might imagine the 78-year-old Venet, the holder of a knighthood in France's National Order of the Legion of Honour, as a grand old figure sketching in a leather-bound notebook at his Provençal estate as the wind whistles through the cypresses. But *non*.

"I don't sketch," says the energetic Venet, speaking from Le Muy, the town in southeastern France where he has a home and his namesake foundation is based. "I have an idea in mind, and I make maquettes immediately." These rough studies, typically in steel measuring a foot or two in height, are a crucial part of his creative process, often producing happy "accidents," as he calls them. Later, a team of people in a Hungarian factory translates the models into finished sculptures.

But Venet says his most important work actually happens before all that, when he is simply thinking and reflecting. After all, he is the rare artist who is also well-known for not making art, such as when he took five years off in the 1970s to ponder and construct a theoretical basis for his life's work.

"Michelangelo said that you don't make art with your hands, you make art with your brain," says Venet. "And there are many people who just enjoy painting or enjoy making sculptures, but they don't spend much time thinking and asking the questions about the nature of art."

The fruits of his many decades of questioning are on view all over the place these days. On the heels of a major retrospective at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lyon, France, last fall, Venet showed new works at Blain|Southern's Berlin gallery, with more to be presented at Kasmin in New York, beginning September 12. Among the pieces displayed will be five large-scale sculptures from his "Indeterminate Lines" series.

Then, in October, Venet will unveil what he calls “the most major piece of my life,” a public artwork titled *L'Arc Majeur*, which he created for Belgium's E411 highway. Cars will appear to drive through a massive broken circle embedded into the landscape. Because of the work's size—it stands nearly 200 feet tall—and its striking visual impact, the artist describes it as a career high point: “I will never go beyond that.”

Venet was born and raised in France, but it was in New York that he was born as an artist. “I felt terribly lonely while I was in France, because nobody was taking my work seriously,” he says. Traveling abroad helped open doors—and open his mind. Seeing Jean and Howard Lipman's seminal collection of modern sculpture at the Whitney Museum in 1966, when he was 24, was “a shock,” he recalls. “I said, ‘That's it. I'm not alone.’”

Venet settled in New York—his primary base ever since—soaking up its influences. “I took very important lessons from American formalism, its power and its strength,” he says. At the same time, he made career-shaping personal connections, becoming “the kid” among a group of older, influential conceptual artists like Donald Judd, with whom, he says, he enjoyed “intense conversations,” and Sol LeWitt, who became a close friend.

As a result of those relationships, Venet acquired a significant collection of works by Judd, LeWitt, Ellsworth Kelly, James Lee Byars, Robert Indiana, and others. More than 100 pieces are now part of a private museum that his foundation oversees in Le Muy. There's even an outdoor chapel designed by Frank Stella, featuring six of his large-scale wall reliefs and a four-ton spiraling glass-and-steel roof. (The Venet Foundation, currently featuring a Claude Viallat show, is open on a limited, reservation-only basis during summer, this year through September 13.)

The foundation also features Venet's own art, of course, notably a number of pieces from the “Collapse” series, which the artist began about 15 years ago and describes as “the best of my work.” Several “Collapse” sculptures were on view in the Lyon retrospective, including a stack of steel rods at acute angles and an arrangement of rusty circles lying on top of each other. Works like these reflect the artist's particular interest in “concepts like order, disorder, collapse, and unpredictability,” as he puts it.

Despite a prolific career spanning more than five decades, Venet confesses that he's never satisfied. “I know that there is so much more to create,” he says. “And I constantly try to push the limits.” □



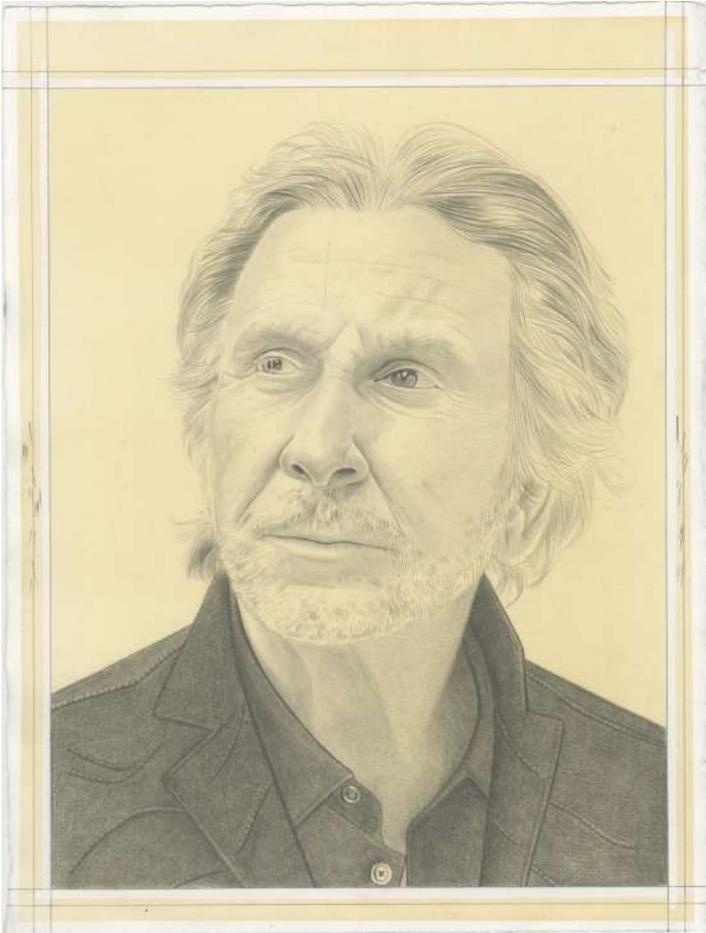


Clockwise from top left: In the living room of Venet's residence—which is called the Moulin, after the centuries-old mill building it occupies—a piece by Frank Stella hangs next to a steel table and chairs made by Venet. A work by François Morellet is installed above the fireplace, also in the living room, while several of Venet's own "Candelabra" sculptures are arrayed below; he also crafted the sofa using torch-cut steel. The exterior of the Moulin. A crumpled-metal sculpture by César stands in the entrance hall, where a Lawrence Weiner text piece scrolls along the staircase.

Bernar Venet with Robert C. Morgan

“I think an artist should never have a sense of a work before they start to make it art. We have to be adventurous and just try, allowing our personality to take over.”

ROBERT C. MORGAN
FEBRUARY 2020



Portrait of Bernar Venet, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Bernar Venet is an internationally renowned artist, born (1941) in southern France who has been called both a sculptor and a conceptualist. Throughout his extensive, highly prolific career, he has made a concerted effort to bring form together with ideas. Rather than detach one from the other, he insists on the viability of both as integral to the creative process, often on a monumental scale. This was revealed in his recently completed *Arc Majeur* on a major highway in Belgium, a project on which he began working more than 30 years ago, prior to its completion on October 24 of 2019. In addition to his steel and concrete monuments Venet has worked extensively in other media, which include painting, drawing, performance art, and a particular style of mathematical poetry.

On the occasion of his recent exhibition/performance at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in September 2019, the staff was kind enough to arrange a comfortable space on the second floor of the gallery at 293 10th Avenue in West Chelsea for an interview. It was 11 o'clock in the morning on September 14 and later in the day the full moon would reveal itself. The energy was intact. The artist, who had spent several years in lower New York throughout the development of his early career was kind enough to speak in English, which at times became challenging but always in keeping with the ongoing tempo of our exchange.

Robert C. Morgan (Rail): Let's begin from the beginning, I wanted to ask you where you were born and when you first discovered yourself as an artist.

Bernar Venet: I was born in a small town called Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban, in 1941. I was ok at school but academic studies were not interesting to me. I was very sickly and I missed about one day out of three.

Rail: I am familiar with that. I grew up with asthma.

Venet: It was really bad. I had an obsession with drawing and making paintings and around the age of 11, I had my first two important experiences. One day, I made a drawing at school and my teacher, who had never shown any interest in me, said, "Did you make this drawing?" I replied, "Yes, sir" and he said, "It's fantastic! Can you make a bigger one? We should put it on the wall." That was the first time that someone showed a level of admiration for my work.

Rail: How old were you at that time?



Installation view: Bernar Venet: *Indeterminate Hypothesis*, Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2019. © Bernar Venet 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Kasmin Gallery.

Venet: I was 11. There was a painter in my village called Marinig, who was making paintings of flowers and seascapes. It was all very commercial, but for me, at 11 years old, he was an artist. And so, my mother introduced me and I showed him my drawing and he said, "Oh this is very good! In three years you'll be as good as me." I thought, "Oh my god!" And so I started to paint and paint, copying his paintings or any image that I could find. The big moment came when my mother took me to the city of Digne in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. We took the bus and went to a shop where they sold books and art supplies. I chose some oil paint because I understood that this painter (Marinig) was using this medium so I thought that in order to be like him, I must also use oil paint. We chose five or six colors and while my mother was paying, I went back outside and looked in the window where there was this book, with a reproduction of a painting of a woman washing her feet in a stream. On top of the book there is something written which I didn't understand: "RENOIR." So I went back to the man and asked "What does Renoir mean?", "Renoir is a very big painter" he said "very famous—an Impressionist." That didn't ring a bell for me and then he said, "He's famous, he is in museums all around the world, his paintings are worth a lot of money, and look there are many books on him." This was the day that I understood it was possible to make a living out of being an artist. At this point my whole family: my grandfather, mother, father, and brothers, were all working in the village factory, and I thought for the first time perhaps I could do something different. So, of course, I put all my energy into art. I was lucky because very early on, at the age of 11–12, I understood that there were artists that were part of art history, as in, they were making history.

Rail: So at this point you began pursuing art seriously?

Venet: Exactly, I became obsessed with it. And luckily there were some lecturers that would come to the city—I remember one about the Impressionists; I was around 13 years old, my mother took me there, she was really good at putting me in the right environment, buying books—I was only reading books on art, the life of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Goya—I knew everything about those guys in those days when I was 14–15. Then I heard a lecture by René Huyghe, a very big art historian in France who wrote a book for Skira about Modern Art. I was obsessed with discovering this new world, and I already understood that creation was the most important thing.

Rail: I remember you telling me that at one point, while you were in Algeria during the late '50s.

Venet: 1961–62.

Rail: You somehow convinced one of your officers to give you a space where you could make art, I thought that was quite extraordinary. I can't conceive of something like that happening in the American military.

Venet: Yes, we were at a place we called the Center of Selection where younger people would come to pass their military tests and then be sent to whichever faction they had applied to—aviation, marines, infantry. It was in the city of Tarascon and as soon as I arrived, I realized that there were some huge lofts which were totally empty. One day I asked the corporal, do you think I could use one as an art studio? He said "A studio? You're in the army! Go ask the Captain!" I went to see the Captain and he said "I can't give you permission, you have to ask your Colonel" and so I went to see the Colonel. I introduced myself and I lied that I had a contract in Paris, I had exhibitions planned and

that I needed to paint. While my friends would go have beers in the evening after finishing their duties, I would go to the studio and work on my art. He said to me:

“Eh, you are an artist huh? What do you do?”

I said: “Art, it’s very special, I paint with my feet.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

I said, “Oh no sir, it’s modern art.”

“Oh, like Picasso?”

I explained, “Not quite, Picasso is figurative and I do abstract.”

“What do you mean? What does that mean?”

So I ended up giving him a course on abstraction, beginning with Malevich till the present.

Venet: He said: “Take it, but I will be watching you, ok?” and I got the studio for 10 months. I was not doing much work in the Army; I was just doing my thing, making my art.

Rail: Fantastic! It occurred to me this morning that one year ago you opened your exhibition in Lyon, your retrospective curated by Thierry Raspail. Today, one year later, here at Kasmin, how do you reflect on this retrospective in terms of your career?

Venet: I think that I couldn’t have done a better retrospective because of the amount of space. I had the entire museum and this allowed people from France and beyond to discover how my work evolved. People know my sculptures really well, but they don’t usually know where they originate, they might not know about the original reliefs that came before the paintings or even the tar paintings, and what I did in the Army at the very beginning. The evolution of my work, the breadth of the exhibition, was very important, and that's why this exhibition was so well received.

Rail: You were given the entire museum, am I right?



Installation view: Bernar Venet: *Indeterminate Hypothesis*, Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2019. © Bernar Venet 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Kasmin Gallery.

Venet: I had the entire museum: I had all the three floors plus the ground floor with wall paintings and furniture as well. I really had a lot of space, and the show looked serious and spectacular at the same time.

Rail: Let's go back a bit to when you were doing your exhibition, called *Five Years* in 1971. I think you were in the United States at that time, weren't you?

Venet: That exhibition covered precisely everything I did from 1966 to the end of 1970.

Although I had produced a lot of work already, in those days I had such a radical vision of art that I was keen to forget about the tar paintings and the *Pile of Coal*, even though today they are so interesting and significant in the context of that period. I was just thinking that anything related to formalism is not interesting, so that's why we did the *Five Years* show. And that starts with the first industrial drawings and diagrams, which ultimately showed the evolution of my work that dealt with different scientific disciplines.

Rail: I remember there was a very early painting from 1966 called *La droite D'représente la fonction $y=2x+1$* , and you were trying to show the line for what it is—a line. You were very interested in the monosemic idea in art. By the end of that *Five Years*, if I recall, you were dealing with the linguist Jacques Bertin, who introduced you to the idea of monosemy [singular meaning], and how that differed from polysemy and pansemy. Apparently that was a big step for you to understand that you were looking at the line as a line, not as a representation or an expression. And this was opening up new territory for you, which was maybe closer to science than it was to aesthetics.

Venet: I can be very precise about that. You see I started to make those mathematical diagrams intuitively, in 1966. I had no predetermined feelings about it when I started. I think an artist should never have a sense of a work before they start to make it art. We have to be adventurous and just try, allowing our personality to take over.

Rail: I call that the mistake of the *a priori* theory.

Venet: Absolutely yes.

Rail: It doesn't belong in art.

Venet: Only people who copy others have pre-existing feelings about their work. In those days, all I knew was that if mathematical diagrams could one day be accepted as art, then there was something different happening because I wasn't making figurative art, or abstract art, at least not in the way we think of it today.

Rail: ...polysemy and pansemy?

Venet: Well at that stage those two words did not exist in my mind. I was just intuitively going in a direction that was unknown, let's say, and that was really my goal. Once I decided to stop making work I still had difficulties articulating precisely what my work was really about. I had to get involved in doing it. Some critics were trying to justify the fact that what I had been doing was art that seemed to solely focus on trying to find relationships with things in the past. I said "no, there is no relationship between the past and me; this is like a cut, as radical (I hoped) as what Malevich did with the black square or Marcel Duchamp with the readymade."

Rail: They were the same year, you know. The black square and the first readymade both happened in 1913.

Venet: Yes, yes. So I wanted to make a break like that, and the day that I discovered from an art magazine—a text by Jacques Bertin. I read this text and suddenly I understood what he was suggesting. He was proposing three different categories for visual images. Some were figurative, and he called them polysemic, others were abstract and he called them pansemic, and then, he said, there is a world of diagrams and maps where things are being presented in a very precise way—there is no confusion, no ambiguity; there is no possible misinterpretation, you know, they are giving you precise information. And suddenly, I said "this is it! Pansemic, polysemic, and me, I am monosemic!" And I remember thinking that just the same way Yves Klein was monochrome—I was monosemic. This was a definition for my work.

Rail: Well it opened up a possibility for you obviously.

Venet: For me and possibly for others by showing that it was radically different and not related to artworks of the past. But it was only in retrospect that I felt any need to demonstrate that my work was entirely forward facing and not related to anything in the past.

Rail: Your exhibition of the *Five Years* project was shown at the New York Cultural Center. It was located up on Columbus Circle. I remember there was a catalog for the exhibition that I poured over when I discovered it some years later. If I am not mistaken, Donald Karshan was the curator of that show. It was one year after the Information show at MoMA curated by Kynaston McShine. But you seemed to question McShine's idea, by suggesting that Conceptual Art was really about scientific inquiry.



Bernar Venet, *The Straight Line and the Pictorial Memory of the Gesture*, performance, Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2019. © Bernar Venet. 2020 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Kasmin Gallery. Photo: Chris Stach.

I think that was a whole new take on everything that was shown at MoMA; it was a kind of a turning around, to rethink what the term might mean from your point of view, which I found completely interesting. And also, I think you borrowed the idea, you can tell me if I'm wrong, of Duchamp's readymade in asking scholars, in physical science and so forth, to lecture. In other words, you weren't doing the lecture, you were asking them to do the lecture—I mean it's sort of like a readymade situation in a way.

Venet: Yes, but you know my story with Marcel Duchamp?

Rail: You were talking directly to him?

Venet: When I was 27, I met him and I took this opportunity to develop the idea that my work was, in the context of art history, a lot more radical than his work.

Rail: Oh I think you told me this.

Venet: Perhaps without Duchamp, certain gestures from artists would not have happened, but I don't feel very connected to him, you know, because he was still dealing with the real world, with objects that could be painted by Van Gogh, by Chardin, you know a bottle rack could very well be in still life of Chardin or Van Gogh or Cézanne, where a mathematical equation could not be in a still life of those artists. And I was also introducing people who were not in the art world. Not using actors who are artists and putting them on a stage to make a performance that was actually a larger proposition. Yes, you can say it's related to Duchamp because we take something outside and put it in the context of art but I was going way beyond the object. In one exhibition at Daniel Templon, in 1989, I

created an exact replica of the factory where I make my sculptures. I brought everything from the factory: the steel, the workers, and we just ground, burned, and cut the steel. This was all I was presenting, it goes well beyond just the object.

Rail: Of course, I understand that. Then after 1971 there were six years where you didn't really produce much related to art. You took a hiatus from art, and I think that lasted until 1976 if I'm not mistaken.

Venet: Yes. The reason I stopped was not because I was discouraged or because I had no more ideas, it was because I thought that I went as far as I could in the context of objectivity and rationality. You know, by 1969 I was getting to a point where in order for me not to make a predetermined aesthetic choice on the subject that I might present, I was going to Jack Ullman at Columbia University saying "Jack, tell me about a radical new science book, and I'll present it as an artwork." So he would make the choice and I simply sent it on to the curator of the exhibition. Jan van der Marck for *Art by Telephone* at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1969 for example.

They would make a blowup and present the work and I would not even go to the opening, just to show the distance that there was between the artwork and myself. So I was trying to push the limit as much as I could. Then when you do that and you get to that point, what else can you do? This is it; I had gone as far as I could.

I thought that there were three career periods for an artist: one when you're learning, and one when you're producing, and then there is one where you can easily just go on copying yourself. I was certain I didn't want to go down that route. An artist who copies other artists is bad but an artist who copies himself is equally bad. So we have to keep on moving. If we can't move, we have to stop. So I stopped, and started to define the true nature of my own work. This is when I discovered Jacques Bertin and his thoughts on categorization that I mentioned earlier.

At this time in 1976, I thought I was giving up forever and I couldn't imagine coming back and doing anything more radical or different from what I'd done so far.

But what happened is that I worked so much during those six years, testing the limits of what I had done before, that suddenly I realized it was now possible to do something else. I resisted and resisted and then one day, I remember being in Connecticut visiting friends for the weekend, and suddenly, I just knew I had to go back to my studio in New York, and be alone, and make a painting. It was entirely visceral and I did exactly that. I abandoned everybody: my wife, my kids, and everyone, and I went back by myself to Manhattan. I was on West Broadway and I made my first painting; a triangle with the measure of one angle.

Rail: Yes, yes.

Venet: And I thought "Okay, look. It's an idea: I'm not going to show anybody, I'm gonna make some drawings," and then for two, three, four, five months I worked on a lot of them. But I was not showing them to anybody, as I was not sure this work was good enough to deserve attention. Until the day Jan van der Marck, again, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago came to visit me. He was a very, very close friend. And I said to him, "Jan, I have a surprise for you and I'm going to show you what I have been doing recently." He was so surprised that I had

started making work again. I showed him the new paintings and he said, “Bernar this is fantastic, I’d like to invite you to documenta ’77. You will be part of the show.” So I thought, “oh, look if I am at documenta then I am going to show my work to everybody.” And then I just kept on working. I moved very quickly—to find new formal and conceptual directions.

Rail: But that’s typical in a way. In terms of your situation, particularly coming from France and that kind of exposure that you were having and so forth. Listen, let’s move ahead a little bit because I’m very interested in, I don’t want to load this with the word “dichotomy,” but you know often you are introduced as a conceptual artist, still at this point. And sometimes you were introduced as a sculptor and I think in the essay that I recently wrote, I tried to deal with that issue because I don’t think it’s either-or in your case. I think they are inextricably bound to one another from my point of view. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Venet: Yes. I have the tendency to now say that I am not a conceptual artist. I used the term originally in connection with the way other artists used language as a rejection of anything formalistic.

Rail: Well anything that was formed.

Venet: Yes.

Rail: That was my objection in my essay actually.

Venet: Yes, yes. Well but originally this is how I thought.

Rail: I see.

Venet: Any formal issue was to be completely negated, you know, refused. So only the use of language was the real, pure, hardcore Conceptual Art. Since then Conceptual Art has had some good influences, but also some bad ones.

Rail: I agree with you.

Venet: Yes, some very bad ones. But anyway, of course concepts are still the origin of my production because you see it’s not just taking a piece of steel and bending it and saying, “Hey, that looks good. That’s original.” No. I have concepts, I have order, disorder, *Effondrement* (collapse) and transition. If you look at a selection of my work, you can see that the material, say the line, might be what I use to make my proposition visual, but it comes from the concept. When I do a collapse, it’s actually physically collapsed, that’s why today my sculptural practice is open to so many possibilities. I can do things with arcs, I can do it with angles, with straight lines, indeterminate lines, you know, there’s control or no control. These are the concepts that direct all my work. That’s why it’s so open.



Bernar Venet, *The Straight Line and the Pictorial Memory of the Gesture*, performance, Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2019. © Bernar Venet. 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Kasmin Gallery. Photo: Christopher Stach.

Rail: In your exhibition at Kasmin you're dealing again with indeterminacy, but we are looking at work of yours that is earlier, probably from the early '80s?

It's great to see that. It's important work, and it hasn't been seen together for a long time. I think that the *Indeterminacy* works precede some of the later concerns—with the measurement of the arcs and so forth—that came into your work very strongly in the '90s and then into the 21st century. I think there are many viewers who identify with your work from the *Indeterminacy* period. It's interesting that after this you moved into something more geometric using the arcs. Here you gave the dimensions by embedding the degrees of the arc into the steel. In more recent work, you are giving the weight of the steel as well.

Venet: I guess I started my real activity as a sculptor with those "indeterminate" years. It took a while before I really started to present the arcs and even longer before I began to present the angles that I exhibited at Kasmin two years ago. I'm also making structures with straight lines. So, I really work on all four of those possibilities. The first *Effondrement* [Collapse] came with the arcs, but then one day, I thought, "Wouldn't it be more original to make *Effondrements* with the angles?" And so, all of a sudden, I am doing the *Effondrements* with angles and straight lines

and even those classic *Indeterminate Line* pieces from the earlier days, there is one that is sort of stuck, collapsed a little bit... If it fell onto the floor, I would leave it the way it is.

Rail: You don't like the idea that it's controlled?

Venet: I don't. Nature is doing the work yet the concept is in my control; it's not in the mind of nature.

Rail: Of course, yes, I like that.

Venet: Nature is just doing the job.

Rail: Nature is always in motion. When I saw the *Effondrements* while visiting you in Southern France, one of them was based on some of the elements that you used in your Versailles installation. You placed these indeterminately in relation to the ground rather than ordering them vertically. I thought it was one of the most important pieces you've done in recent years. I remember how I felt when I first saw this work, and frankly I wasn't the only one. Other people visiting at that time said the same thing. What accounts for that? Why is it so strong? I have my own ideas, but I'm sure you were feeling something similar when you were creating it.

Venet: I love to hear that. The success of that sculpture is certainly coming from the scale. It's true that I knew that they had those 16 arcs that were 20–25 meters long, and then I had this piece of land and I knew that I had to do something. I remember working on maquettes—this is how I work—and if it's really good then I take pictures, if it isn't good I create another one, always with 16 arcs, exactly the same proportions as this one. There was one that, to me, was really looking like a mess. I didn't try to put one piece after the other, I was really respecting the nature of the collapse. I insist on that... What I'm doing is reconstructing, but let's be honest: you can not safely do an actual collapse of steel at that scale.

Rail: Just to clarify, because I know what that was before it was an *Effondrement*. It was upright, vertical, whatever you want to call it, but the weight and the dimensions of those arcs were impressive to begin with. Clearly it was not intended as accidental, at least not from my point of view. Getting back to what you were saying in regards to Conceptual Art, I think you were referring to an earlier period in the late 1960s when language took superiority over form. It was not just chance operations. It was more than that. I could sense a conceptual inquiry embedded in this work where I could relax and see this piece as a total experience... I think the relationship of form to your work is not in opposition to concept. As I stated earlier in my essay, I think you are one of the first artists who, in effect, rejuvenates the use of concept in direct relation to form.

Venet: You say it better than I can. It's really a successful piece, it came out so well. Now I only have one obsession, and it's to make two more of that same quality for next summer.

Rail: I see. Do think they'll be the same scale?

Venet: I'm thinking slightly smaller, but with more weight.

Rail: Let's talk about the piece you did as a performance at Kasmin in West Chelsea. I was very taken by it probably in a different way from others, but I think that you have a history of working from the point of view of these singular steel bars. When I walked into the gallery and saw the steel bars hung horizontally at midpoint on the wall, I hadn't really looked at the other completed works very closely, and given the number of people crowded into the space, it was difficult to focus on what was going on. I just let it happen. Maybe this is an American issue—I don't know if you see this in France—but a lot of people were buzzing and talking, and frankly I don't know to what degree they were focused on your performance.

Venet: I, too, was disturbed by the people talking so much. I could have said "shut up" but I didn't want to, you know?

Rail: Yeah, it was a bit annoying. In performing this wall drawing, it was an opportunity for people to see how you work. Given that you have done very few of these performances in the United States, this was a rare occasion for people unfamiliar with your work to see how you do it.

Venet: I'm really happy with those pieces. The one that I did on the day of the opening came out really nicely. It was the best one I did. I made one the day following the opening, but this one in particular came out very well. It's an interesting experience. Again, it's just that I'm trying anything I think about in relation to my work that seems to be relatively different or new. Only time will tell if it was worth making this, but I don't care. You know, when a writer is writing a book, they can make a mistake, but then they can just take away a page or two. You correct what you are doing. I still think it's a beautiful experience to do that, and I like the idea. The piece in the gallery is something that I've shown before. You have the cables and the bars that were already in my work. In fact, when you look in the catalogue you can see that I exhibited that many, many years ago in other places. I like the idea of using my artwork as a tool to make another artwork.

Rail: I think that the manner of work is something we're kind of losing touch with because everything is on the keyboard now, and this is a kind of physical engagement—or what I'd refer to as technal, which I think is absolutely essential for art, even if it's within the mind, even if it's arbitrarily within the mind, there's video work that I've seen that has that technal sensation, because I can tell that the artist is embedding the sense of touch through thought, and I think we're at a point now—and I'll let you talk about this—where are we going in terms of the way artists will work?

Venet: If I knew the answer, I would do it right away.

Rail: Well, certainly in this country, and in China to some extent, there are artists with many paid assistants who are essentially doing the work—and I'm not being critical of that per se. Rather I'm just wondering if it is correct to call that work "conceptual" because someone else has thought of it while others were working to realize it (for very little money). Is this going to be the future or do you think there will be a turn-around?



Bernar Venet, *Arc Majeur*, 2019, Corten steel, 2362 x 2953 x 88 ½ inches. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery. Photo: Charles Paulicevich / Meta-Morphosis. Installation: km 99, Autoroute E411, Belgium.

Venet: You don't know, there could be a period of production of art, like making a painting, or performances after that period in the late '60s, which was so creative. It's so difficult to make gestures again, the parameters of what constitutes something as an artwork will continue to change. Artists in 10, 20, or 50 years will come up with new ways to think about art. Art has existed for many centuries now, but it will go on for thousands of years. The parameters that exist today will one day become obsolete. I'm very hopeful that many things will happen, but we cannot even begin to think about them today. Perhaps these things may already exist but we can not yet see their originality. Sometimes we are blind in front of new creations, we only see what looks like what was done before. When we saw Basquiat we said "oh this looks like *Cobra*" but in the end, the guy was doing his own thing, and you can recognize his work from afar. Today, perhaps something is happening and we don't see it and something fantastic is going to come out of it. Just like when Picasso did *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) it was a fantastic opening then for Malevich to do what he did and for Mondrian to make those abstract paintings. We just don't know. I just hope that it's going to keep moving.

Rail: I'm sure that there is something to what you're saying, but there is no guarantee that it is moving in a positive direction (whatever that means). There are many different factors relating to how an artist works and how they understand the direction in which they are working?

Venet: Again, if I knew, I would leave you right now and I would go and work on it immediately! It's my only goal! I believe that within the context of my work the period of conceptual art for me, has been a very important period.

Rail: I've often advocated a revised sense of connoisseurship whereby those involved professionally in art at least recognize that in addition to painting, sculpture, printmaking, possibly video, Conceptual Art is important. By

recognizing that a work of art can be reduced to an idea has both historical and aesthetic validity. This does not mean the end of art. Rather it allows the art aficionado to move aesthetically and intellectually to the next step. You can't live in denial by claiming that something does not exist because you do not believe in it. You don't have to agree with Conceptual Art, but you cannot deny that it has a certain validity.

Venet: Yes, it exists and it has been extremely influential all around the world. But if I had to choose two artworks that typified my practice, they would be, firstly, a perfect diagram that belongs to Centre Pompidou in Paris of a mathematical equation, and then the collapse we talked about before. I think these are the two best demonstrations of my work. The best of my sculptural work would definitely be the *Collapses*.

Rail: I agree, but also want to conclude our dialogue by mentioning your recent work, *Arc Majeur*, on route E411 in Belgium, which was officially inaugurated on October 23, 2019. It's not an *Effondrement*, but an extraordinary monumental work that I have seen in photographs and also in earlier versions on the computer. It has been an important work for you over many years.

Venet: 35 years. This is an idea from 1984. Even before, in '79, I thought about it. I was looking at a small sculpture, you know the typical little arc, one of my very first, and I was thinking "what can I do next?" And I had this vision ... well ... it'd be great to have a highway passing through it. But then very quickly, thanks to a lot of helpful people, the idea was accepted in 1984. I then made my first photomontages of the highway and the arc around it. So now it is finally there, in Belgium, on the Highway E411, km 99.



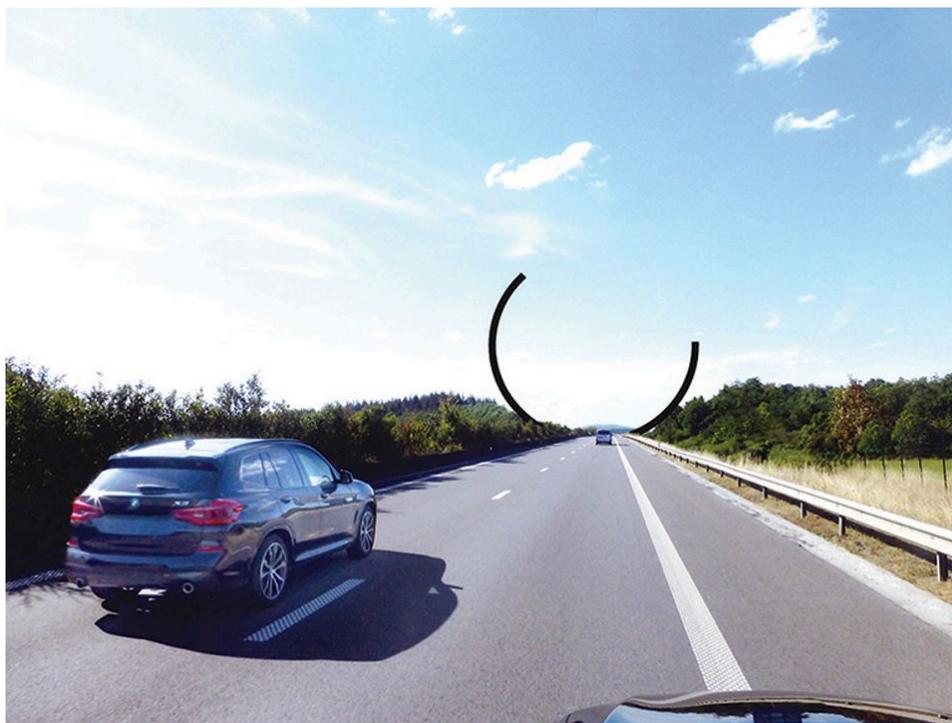
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Europe's largest public sculpture to be unveiled on Belgian motorway in October

The 60m roadside steel sculpture by French artist Bernar Venet was rejected by the French government 35 years ago

GARETH HARRIS

JULY 24, 2019



Bernar Venet's Arc Majeur © Bernar Venet

A colossal sculpture by the French artist Bernar Venet spanning a Belgian motorway is due to become the largest public work of art in Europe when it is unveiled in October. The piece, made from two sweeping arcs, is being realised more than 35 years after it was embraced and then rejected by the French government.

The 250-ton steel sculpture, called *Arc Majeur*, will be installed on either side of the E411 motorway in Lavaux-Sainte-Anne in Belgium between Namur and Luxembourg. The vast piece is in two parts: a large arc made up of three

sections measuring 20m each and reaching 60m in height, will be installed on one side of the road, while on the other side will be a smaller arc, measuring 28m. Motorists will be under the impression that they are driving through the all-encompassing sculptural arc.

“There are higher monuments in the world, but no bigger sculpture made by an artist,” says a spokesman for Venet. “The *Statue of Liberty* without its pedestal is smaller and the *Corcovado* [the statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro] is half the size.”

The €2.5m work is largely funded by the John Cockerill Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the mechanical engineering conglomerate based in Seraing, Belgium. The arcs for the sculpture were made in workshops owned by the John Cockerill company in Seraing.

Arc Majeur was initially commissioned by the former French culture minister Jack Lang in 1984 under the late President François Mitterrand, and due to be installed on the A6 motorway near the town of Auxerre but a local politician blocked the project. In the mid-2000s, another attempt to install the work was thwarted after officials from the French highway company which oversees the transport network requested that the work be painted red; Venet subsequently refused. “After more than three decades, this time it’s for real,” the artist says.

One Of The Greatest French Living Artists, Bernar Venet Holds Two New Exhibitions In France

Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE
SEPTEMBER 13, 2018



Effondrement 16 Arcs, 2018 PHOTO JEROME CAVALIERE. COURTESY OF ARCHIVES BERNAR VENET, NEW YORK

“My goal is to free sculpture from the constraints of composition and to criticize the utopian principle of an ideal order,” says Bernar Venet, 77, whose Indeterminate Lines, Arcs, Angles, Diagonals and Straight Lines sculptures fashioned from manipulated raw metal beams and based on concepts of order, disorder, instability and uncertainty have changed the face of art. Focusing on the concept behind an artwork rather than solely its esthetic, he has also worked in a wide range of disciplines throughout his career, including painting, photography, film, poetry, music composition, performance art, furniture design, ballet choreography and set design. Obsessed with making art that changes the history of art, his early piece, Tas de Charbon (Pile of Coal), was significant within the context of art history, as it was the first sculpture devoid of a specific shape, where you could alter its size or exhibit it in various locations at the same time, and where the coal wasn’t used to create an artwork, but instead was the artwork itself.

Now over 170 of his works including drawings, diagrams, paintings, photographs, sound pieces, films and sculptures showcasing the depth and breadth of his multidisciplinary output will go on display in his most comprehensive retrospective ever, which opens on September 21, 2018 and runs until January 6, 2019 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC) in Lyon. A second solo show exploring his conceptual years from 1966 to 1976 – a critical decade in his career that started in Nice and progressed in the US, when he introduced the abstraction of scientific research and the objectivity and rationality of mathematics to art – will take place from October 13, 2018 to January 13, 2019 at the Modern and Contemporary Art Museum (MAMAC) in Nice.

Tracing the evolution of Venet's work, the two exhibitions examine all phases of his career: from the age of 20 when he wanted to "remove every bit of expression contained in the work of art in order to reduce it to a material reality", when he was photographed carrying out a performance where he laid in trash and when he collaborated with scientists from the nuclear physics department at Columbia University on conceptual pieces to when he took a five-year hiatus from art-making before returning with paintings and his monumental Cor-ten steel sculptures today. "It will be a good occasion for people who are interested in my work to discover the real dimensions of what I have been doing, and to discover again the period when I was doing conceptual art, which was very well recognized in those days, but I never had the chance to present it in France that much," he discloses. "People will be able to discover works that they have never seen of mine. They only know my sculptures. That's where there is a problem. My sculptures are what we call the tree that hides the forest. People don't know what else I have done, so this will be the chance to show it."

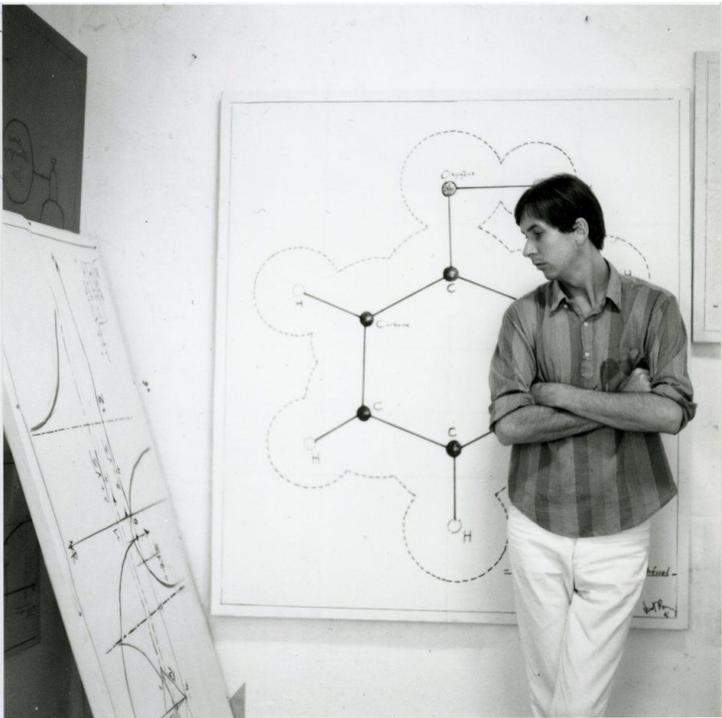


Pile of Coal, 1963, sculpture without specific dimensions; and Tar paintings, 1963, tar on canvas. Exhibition view at the Mücsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest, Hungary, 2012 COURTESY OF ARCHIVES BERNAR VENET, NEW YORK

At the same time, Venet has presented an exceptional installation of Yves Klein's Pure Pigment artwork at the Venet Foundation this summer, its 200-sqm dimensions never seen before, thus pushing back the frontiers of Klein's horizon. Pigments without any fixatives are applied directly onto the floor like a painting on the ground in an infinite sea of ultramarine International Klein Blue, stretching out at visitors' feet, thereby recreating the central figure of New Realism's game-changing flat work of art that extended horizontally in space, originally produced in 1957. Launched in 2014 with a sculpture park and galleries, the Venet Foundation in Le Muy is the

artist's five-hectare estate in the Var in his native Provence. Formerly an abandoned factory and 15th-century watermill, he purchased the site in 1989, which houses a river running through it.

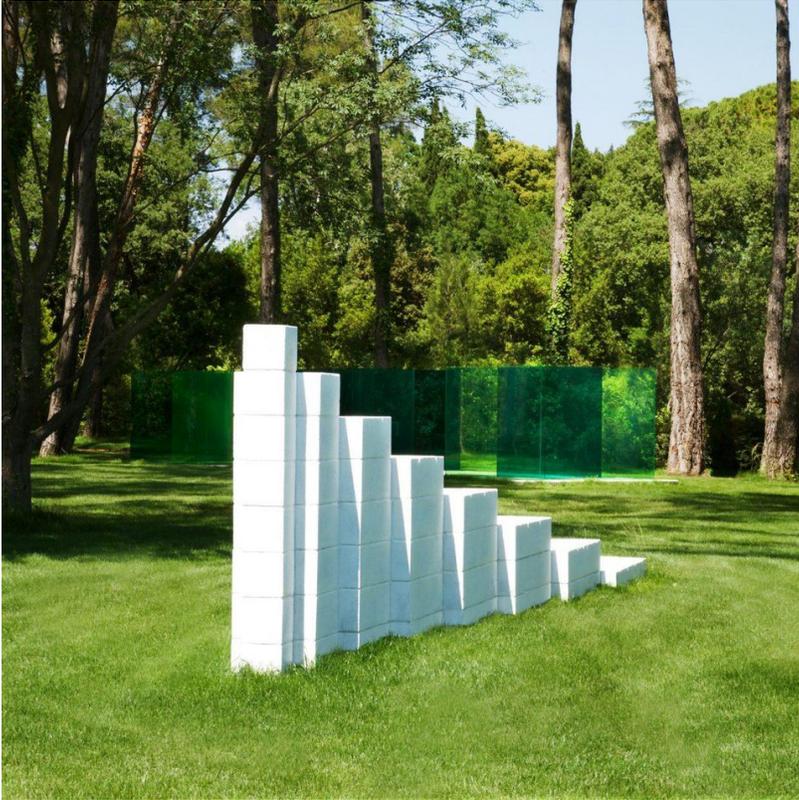
Here, iconic works from his personal 100-piece collection of conceptual and minimal art by over 80 of the movements' most renowned figures – one of the most important in the world – rub shoulders with his own ambitious historical and recent creations. We find pieces by the likes of Roy Lichtenstein, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Serra, Richard Long, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Celebrating 60 years of art-making and the dream of a lifetime, the foundation is Venet's long-time work-in-progress and a representation of his ties with famous artists, such as Arman, César, Jacques Villeglé, François Morellet, Man Ray and Christo, who became his friends. These friendships form the basis of his collection, as he had exchanged artworks with other artists or they sold him important pieces at cut-rate prices. Tracing the history of his life, the foundation aims to safeguard Venet's oeuvre and to keep his collection intact after his death.



Bernar Venet in his atelier in Nice, 1966 COURTESY OF ARCHIVES BERNAR VENET, NEW YORK

An example of his constant reassessment of his work, his *Effondrement* composed of 16 arcs exhibited vertically at the Château de Versailles in 2011 now lies in a disordered heap on the ground as if it had met with a turbulent collision. Elsewhere, set against abundant vegetation are Arman's *Déchainés* (1991) accumulation of heavy link chains, Sol LeWitt's *Horizontal Progression* (1991) stretched-out pyramid, Robert Morris' *Labyrinth* (2012) wire fence maze and Larry Bell's *Something Green* (2017) trio of glass cubes. There's even James Turrell's *Elliptic Ecliptic* meditative chamber with an ovoid aperture in the ceiling open to the sky and a *Stella Chapel* designed by Frank Stella himself for the location showcasing six of his large composite reliefs, in the tradition of artists' chapels by Rothko or Matisse.

Through his collection, Venet is not only building his own legacy, but also perpetuating those of other artists. “We are a family,” he remarks. “My work would not exist without their work, and their work exists also because we were a group of artists influencing each other, but finding our own solutions. I belong to that generation. I was younger, of course. Many of them unfortunately have passed away, but many are still alive. It’s my duty to show their work. Many of them were very generous with me, like Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, and gave me a chance to exhibit with them in major galleries in New York. Today, that I can do that for them is really something very natural.”



Horizontal Progression by Sol LeWitt, 1991, concrete, at the Venet Foundation in Le Muy PHOTO XINYI HU. COURTESY OF VENET FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

Today living between New York, Paris and Le Muy, Venet can create from pretty much anywhere. When we meet in Le Muy, the tireless artist was busy working on eight books about his work and had six one-man exhibitions opening by October in Belgium and France: three in museums and three in galleries. His installation of a 350-ton Arc embracing the E411 motorway between Namur and Arlon in Belgium will be inaugurated in the spring, and next year will see him hold shows in Hong Kong, New York, Berlin, Sweden and Finland, while he is currently in talks to have his sculptures displayed at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and to do a museum exhibition in the Chinese capital.

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Forbes

July 19, 2017

Giacometti, Rodin And Venet: 3 Must-See Sculpture Shows For Summer 2017

Joanne Shurvell



'Arcs in Disorder', a rolled steel sculpture by Bernar Venet at Cliveden | Credit: Jonty Wilde

Among the major sculpture shows currently on in London, the Giacometti exhibition at Tate Modern is sure to be one of the summer's blockbusters. Also essential viewing are works in three different locations by French artist Bernar Venet. I first encountered one of Venet's striking steel sculptures on the grounds of Terre Blanche, a resort near Nice, France, close to his art foundation in Le Muy (open to the public every summer). This summer, Bernar Venet's work can be viewed at three different locations in or near London, his first London shows since his 1976 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

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At Blain Southern, [Bernar Venet](#) *Looking Forward: 1961-1984* traces the development of the artist's conceptual work which led to his large steel sculptures from the 1980s onward. Early paintings from 1961, using thickly applied tar, instead of paint, on cardboard, focus the viewer's attention on the material, the tar, rather than on any idea behind the work. 'Relief Cartons', a series of paintings from the mid-1960s in red, blue and black industrial paint on cardboard are sold with the instruction that each painting must be repainted by the owner so it always looks freshly painted. If these pieces are not repainted, Venet won't acknowledge the work as his own. From industrial paintings, Venet moved on first to create works featuring diagrams and mathematical texts and then to his 'Indeterminate Line' sculptures in hand-twisted rolled steel.

After seeing the smaller versions of Bernar Venet's steel sculptures, I was keen to visit [Cliveden](#), a [National Trust](#) property in Buckinghamshire about an hour by train from London. [Bernar Venet at Cliveden](#), an outdoor exhibition with ten of Venet's large sculptures has just opened and runs until October. This first exhibition in the National Trust's contemporary arts program at Cliveden is already a crowd-pleaser, both with guests at [Cliveden House](#) and with visitors to the National Trust gardens. It would be difficult to miss the imposing sculptures dotted around the property as each piece is up to nine meters high and ranges from two-ten tons, depending on whether the steel is hollow or not. Although the artist also likes to see his work indoors, he is pleased with the way the oxidation of the sculptures transforms their color over time from brown to red and blends with the outdoor green grass and tree backdrop. Bernar Venet commented at the opening of this show that his "sculptures have been exhibited throughout the world and every latitude has its peculiarities and qualities" but he feels that his sculptures "have found their place" at Cliveden.

Another opportunity to see Bernar Venet's work outdoors is at [Frieze Sculpture](#), now open until **8 October** in Regent's Park, London. His '17 Acute Unequal Angles' sculpture is one of the highlights of the Frieze Sculpture display.

Bernar Venet until 22 July 2017 at [Blain Southern](#), 4 Hanover Square, London W1S 1BP.

Bernar Venet until 15 October 2017 at [Cliveden](#), Cliveden Road, Taplow, Maidenhead, Buckinghamshire, SL1 8NS.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Aesthetica

March 27, 2017

Bernar Venet: Versatile Forms



Presented by Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, *Bernar Venet: Arcs*, showcases the dynamic work of the French conceptual artist through six large-scale drawings alongside two new sculptures. By merging these artistic mediums, the relationship between form and material is apparent, whilst the boundaries between them become blurred. As American art critic Carter Ratcliff remarks in an essay on Venet (which is available from the gallery as a pamphlet): "It is easy to make - and to leave unquestioned - the assumption that the drawn arcs represent the sculptural ones. Yet we could just as reasonably say that it is the other way around." The dialogue that arises from the work is not simple - it is subjective, tantalising and provocative.

The curved line sculptures extend from a solid base at variations of 86.5 degrees, and are crafted with rolled steel and black patina, directly mirroring the appearance of Venet's drawn arcs. The creations are elegant in their curvature yet this is offset by the industrial, dark material from which they are constructed, and the harsh points at which they abruptly end. Combining statuary and line-drawings enhances the 3D nature of the sketches which become remarkably life-like. The paintings are finished

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

with a sheen which is reflected in the figures placed in the centre of the gallery floor.

Venet has been presented with a number of accolades including the International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award in 2016, and his art has been displayed in multiple galleries and museums including the Paris Museum of Modern Art. Several of his pieces have become iconic, most notably *Tas de charbon* (Pile of Coal) and *Gibbs Farm*, which is currently located in New Zealand. Venet has been influenced by various movements, most predominantly Minimalism, yet mathematics and logic also play a substantial role in the development of the colossal sculptures.

Bernar Venet: Arcs, 9-22 April, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

More information can be found at: www.paulkasmingallery.com.

Follow us @AestheticaMag on Twitter and Instagram for more updates from the arts industry.

Credits:

1. Bernar Venet, *Arcs*. Installation view. Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Posted on 27 March 2017

<http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/bernar-venet-versatile-forms/>

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Bernar Venet and Kiki Smith Win 2016 Lifetime Achievement Awards in Contemporary Sculpture
03-02-16



The artists Kiki Smith and Bernar Venet have been named winners of the 2016 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Awards, given in New York on Monday.

Venet was previously honored with the French government's insignia of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters, and had his first retrospective at the New York Cultural Center in 1971. He participated in Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977 and has also been included in the Paris, Venice, and São Paulo Biennales. His work is represented in many major collections, including that of MoMA, the Guggenheim, and Centre Pompidou.

Smith's art has been included in three Whitney Biennial exhibitions. Her prints were featured in a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2003, and a 2005 retrospective of her work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art later traveled to the Walker Museum and the Whitney. She is the recipient of the US State Department Medal of Arts and was named to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Founded in 1991, the award recognizes sculptors who have made major contributions to the field of sculpture and is presented by the International Sculpture Center, based in New Jersey. Other past recipients of the award include Magdalena Abakanowicz, Fletcher Benton, Louise Bourgeois, Anthony Caro, Elizabeth Catlett, John Chamberlain, Eduardo Chillida, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude. In New York tomorrow, March 3, Venet will unveil a new twenty-five-foot tall sculpture titled *Disorder: 9 Uneven Angles* in Union Square, where it will remain on view through June 2016.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

artnet®

Bernar Venet Wins 2016 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award
03-02-16
Henri Neuendorf



Bernar Venet
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The French sculptor Bernar Venet received the 2016 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award in New York on Monday. The award honors the careers of major sculptors.

French-born Venet rose to prominence in New York, where he settled in 1966. He attracted attention for his innovative and thought-provoking sculptures that included Tar paintings, cardboard reliefs, and the iconic *Tas de charbon (Pile of Coal)*, one of the first sculptures with variable dimensions.

Tomorrow, on March 3, Venet will unveil an 8-meter tall sculpture titled *Disorder 9 Uneven Angles* in New York's Union Square. The sculpture will remain on view through June.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



Bernar Venet, *217.5 ARCS X 13* in Vancouver, Canada
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Venet earned his first retrospective at the New York Cultural Center in 1971, and invitations to major art festivals soon followed. He participated at Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977, and at the Paris, Venice, and São Paulo Biennales.

In 1979, he created the first of his signature *Indeterminate Lines*, and in 1994 he was invited to present his *Indeterminate Lines* sculpture at the Eiffel Tower in Paris. In 2011 he became the 4th contemporary artist to be offered a solo show at the Château de Versailles, an honor that has developed into a major global milestone for artists.

Venet has participated in a staggering 250 exhibitions. To date, he is the most internationally exhibited French artist with sculpture exhibitions and works permanently installed in cities including Auckland, Austin, Beijing, Berlin, Cologne, Denver, Geneva, Nice, Paris, San Francisco, Seoul, Tokyo, and Toulouse.

His work is also represented in numerous prestigious public collections including the MoMA, the Guggenheim, and Centre Pompidou.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



Bernar Venet *Arc de 124,5°* (1987)
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Venet has won numerous awards and honors including France's *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*, and now adds the 2016 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture to the list.

Founded in 1991 the award recognizes sculptors who have made “exemplary contributions to the field of sculpture,” and have “devoted their careers to the development of a laudable body of work as well as to the advancement of the sculpture field as a whole.”

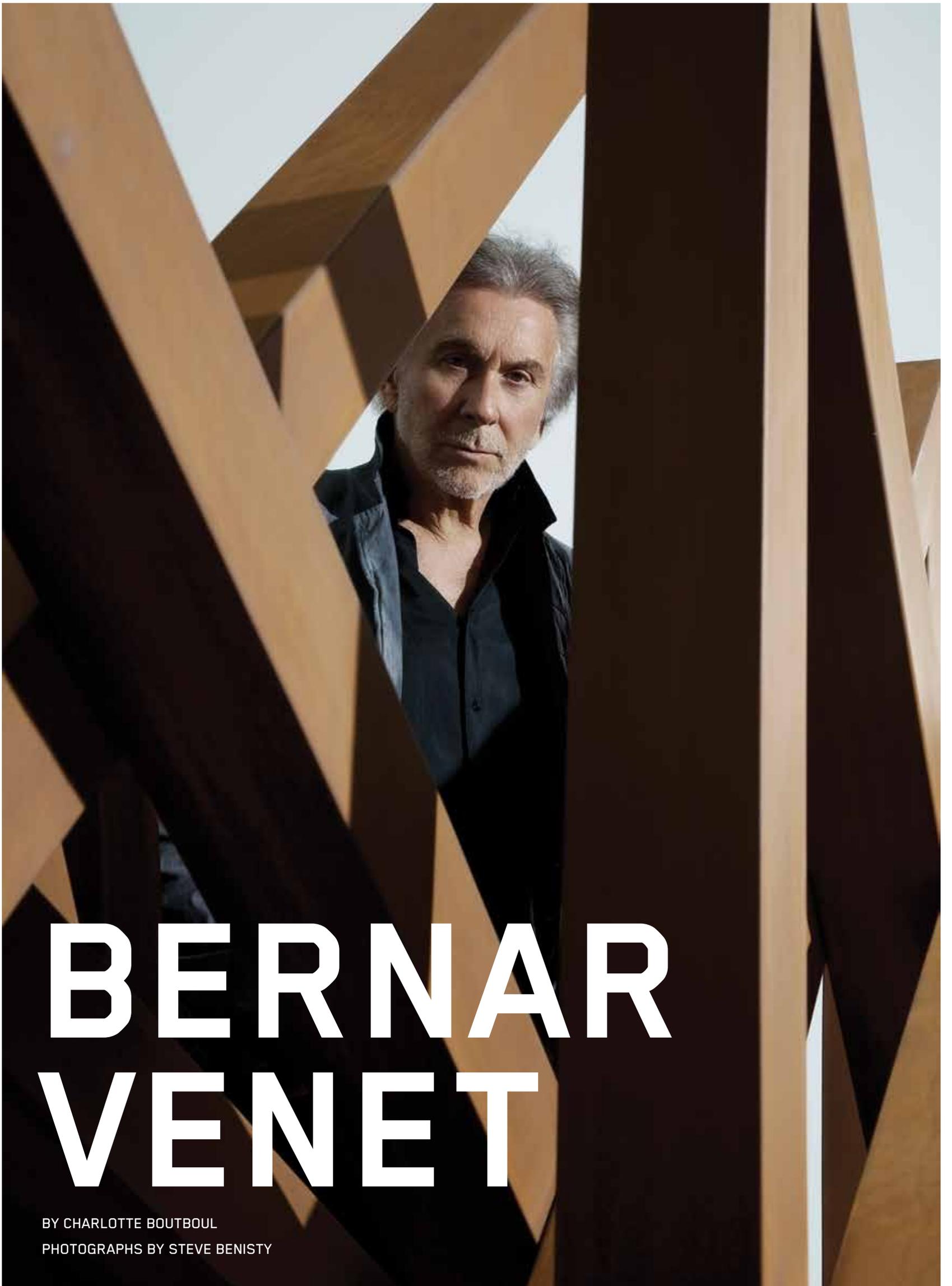
whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

WINTER 2016

THE LUXURY ISSUE

BERNAR VENET - MARCEL WANDERS - ALEXANDRE ALLARD
ETIENNE RUSSO - LINDA PINTO



BERNAR VENET

BY CHARLOTTE BOUTBOUL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY



Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York.

B

ernar Venet's minimalist work brings together some of the most important avant-garde tendencies that defied Pop in the 1960s: New Realism, Fluxus, l'École de Nice . . . This year, exactly 50 years after first setting foot on American ground, Venet is being celebrated by his adopted city, New York, with one of his public sculptures temporarily raised at 17th Street on Union Square, a solo show at Paul Kasmin,

and the International Sculpture Center's (ISC) granting him its Lifetime Achievement Award. Last April *Whitewall* met with the French conceptual artist at Hotel Americano in Chelsea, while he was in the midst of preparing for the opening of his "Angles" exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery. He spiritedly shared some of his memories on his unusual trajectory and thoughts on the evolution of his radical work, which is placing him once again into the spotlight.

WHITEWALL: *New York seems to be celebrating you this year. One of your sculptures just got installed on Union Square, you received the ISC Lifetime Achievement Award with Kiki Smith, and Paul Kasmin inaugurated your first New York solo show in the past ten years. How are you feeling at the moment?*

BERNAR VENET: I'm very glad. It's been exactly 50 years since I arrived in New York. It reminds me of the day I arrived, looking at the city, thinking, "Oh, my God, how am I going to get anywhere over here?" Let's just say it's a great pleasure.

WW: *This is the first new work you've done in a while. How is this exhibition, "Angles," different from your past work?*

BV: It has become obvious that the main subject of my work is the "line." Over the past forty years, I have developed, in paintings, reliefs, and sculptures, different possibilities including "Straight Lines," "Arcs" (curved lines), and "Indeterminate Lines," also trying to find original propositions.

The "Angles" were the subject matter that I had difficulty developing, previously not seeing many possibilities. I could finally find some

interesting solutions when I decided to present them as "Effondrements" (collapses), and as I introduced more and more disorder to their configurations.

More recently, my decision to make some very vertical "Angles" came as a surprise to me and others while they were exploring verticality in a way that was very different from what I have done previously.

My obsession with experimentation can make it difficult sometimes for the public to immediately understand the nature of my work.

WW: *Your foundation in Le Muy is American, as you are an American resident, so why did you choose to have it in the South of France?*

BV: Because I was born in the region and I go there every summer. This is my territory, and where my family and friends are. Living in New York for fifty years has been an enriching experience. And it still is. But with the years passing by so quickly, I feel like returning to my roots and being able to work more peacefully.

The foundation that I created is also one of the main motivators for me to be here. Originally, I was only looking for a piece of land in Provence that I could use to store my sculptures, but I didn't have a specific place in

Top: Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York.
Bottom: Exhibition view of "Bernar Venet: Angles" (April 28-June 25, 2016) at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, photo by Steve Benisty.



mind. That is, until a friend of mine convinced me that Le Muy was the ideal geographic location—close enough to Nice Airport and to Saint-Tropez, and also a relatively short distance to the main highway.

I realize today how lucky I have been to find this property to host the foundation, as it's so easy to access for large crowds visiting the South of France.

WW: *When it comes to collecting other artists' work, what exactly are you looking for? What attracts you in another artist's piece?*

BV: The collection is a bit of a testimony of the life I lived in the art world, in Nice, in Paris, and especially in New York over the course of 50 years. We can see a bit of this world in the book *RAW—Artist Portraits* that was just published this summer. It's a collection of memories, of traces, also a tribute to all these artist friends for whom we can only have great respect and immense admiration.

I did not start with the ambition to collect. I was just making exchanges because nobody was selling their art in the early days. It was only after I acquired the property in Le Muy that I got more involved in purchasing major pieces, when the occasion arose.

I realized that I had a collection when Gottfried Honegger asked me to present it at the Espace de l'Art Concret in Mouans-Sartoux, in France. Now that the Venet Foundation exists, we've had more opportunities to acquire some truly exceptional works, like the Stella Chapel and two major works by James Turrell (*Elliptic Ecliptic* and *Prana Prana* from the "Skyspace" and "Aperture" series), with Alexandre Devals, director of the Venet Foundation.

We are creating a new sculpture park with recent acquisitions of works by other artists, including Richard Long, Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella, and Ulrich Rückriem.

WW: *When did you decide to become an artist yourself?*

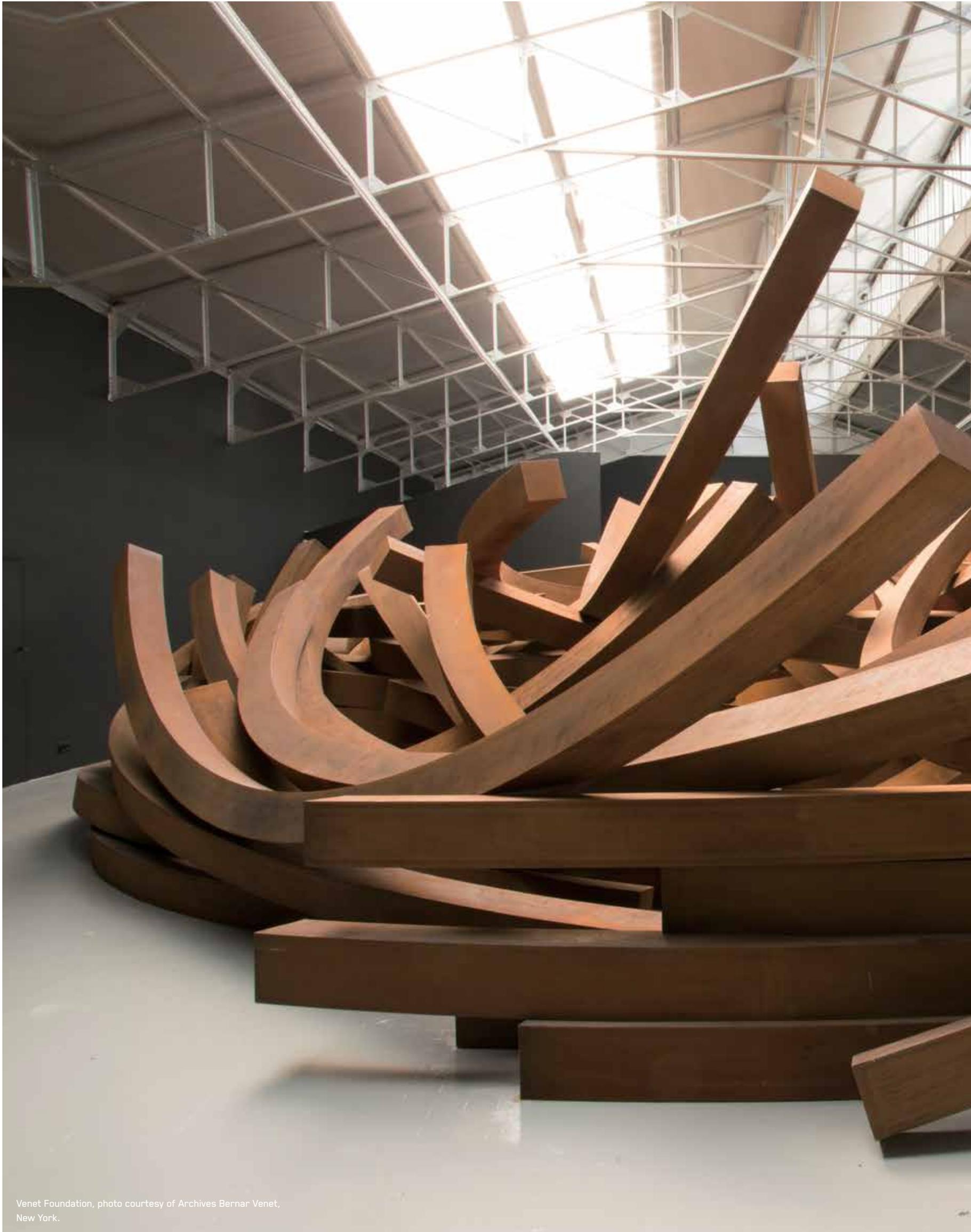
BV: There are two moments that were determinant in my life. The first one was when I was 11 years old. I was an average student, not very interested in academic studies. I remember one day showing a drawing I had just made to my teacher and seeing an expression of surprise and admiration. For the first time, I realized that I could be noticed and appreciated for what I was doing.



“My obsession with experimentation can make it difficult sometimes for the public to immediately understand the nature of my work”

Both images: Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York.





Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York.



“I started to dream, paint a canvas a day, and put all my energy into doing art”

Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives
Bernar Venet, New York.

The drawing was soon hanging on the walls of the classroom. I was very proud to have found a way to exist in the eyes of my student friends as well as my teacher. This was a major moment in my life then, because you have to know that I was very disadvantaged during those days, being a very sick (asthmatic) child, who was also poorly dressed, as well as skinny and unable to impress anybody in my physical activity.

But the most determinant moment happened when my mother took me to Digue to buy some oil paint. I was also around 11 or 12 years old. After selecting different colors and canvases, while she was on line to pay, I noticed a small book—which I still have—in the outside window of the shop. I could see the reproduction of a painting on the cover but could not understand the title. It was totally abstract to me. *Renoir!* I asked the storeowner what that word meant and it was explained that Renoir was a famous artist, exhibited in museums all around the world, that his paintings cost a fortune and many books were published on his work, et cetera. I understood that day that being an artist was perhaps a way to earn a living and that I might not have to grow up to work at the village factory, “Pechiney,” like my father, mother, brothers, and all my friends.

I started to dream, paint a canvas a day, and put all my energy into doing art and reading biographies of famous painters. When I was 14, I had my first one-man show at my school, and at the age of 19, just before enrolling in the army, I exhibited about 50 artworks, most of them on large canvas, slightly influenced by Paul Klee. I was lucky enough soon after the army, at the age of 23, to exhibit my work at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris alongside such artists as Warhol, Rauschenberg, Arman, et cetera.

WW: *That’s a very short time period between both shows.*

BV: It’s a short period, but while I was in the army I was lucky enough to convince my “superiors” and the colonel to put at my disposal a very large studio. I spent ten months doing art almost exclusively, without having anything to worry about. I had a bed, clothes, food, and a studio in which I could paint.

That’s when I started to do some more radical works, using leftover cardboard and tar as my materials, the kind of works that I exhibit this summer at the Espace de l’Art Concret in Mouans-Sartoux.

WW: *What prompted your decision to move to New York from Nice?*

BV: When I was in Nice, I was doing these black tar paintings, canvases whose surfaces were covered in tar. Later on, I made some cardboard reliefs that I would paint in yellow, blue, or red—only I never found anybody to buy them. It was the time where Pop art was really hot: 1963 to 1965. There was no Minimal art at the time, so if you wanted to be “in” you had to do





Top: Exhibition view of "Bernar Venet: Angles" (April 28-June 25, 2016) at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, courtesy of Paul Kasmin, New York.

Bottom: Venet Foundation, photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York.

figurative art, Pop art, or New Realism, and I wasn't doing that at all. I was following a very sober aesthetic and nobody was interested. To tell you the truth, I was not eating every day and I was going to the market to get leftovers. It was a very tough period. I knew Arman, as I would help him occasionally with his work, and my dream was to join him in New York. I knew that this was where everything was happening and I was telling him all the time, "One day I'll come."

One day in 1965, after helping him finish a big piece in his studio, he offered me a work and said, "This is for you if you want to come to New York," and I said, "Yes, I'll come, but I'm not going to sell your work." It's like if someone gives you a Picasso to buy a car with it—forget it! First month: You're happy because you have an Arman. Second month: It's still okay, but after six months when you're not eating well . . . I sold the piece for \$300, spent \$150 on my ticket and had \$150 left in my pocket for when I arrived there. I was on the plane, with no knowledge of the English language, no advice, or telephone numbers. I didn't even have a place to sleep. I had no idea, really! I was on the plane going to New York with \$150. That was it.