

Forbes

September 2014

French Conceptual Artist Bernar Venet Launches The Venet Foundation In Southeast France

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“It is not art if it doesn’t change the history of art,” [Bernar Venet](#) once said. His aim as an artist has always been to make pieces that raise questions and that bring something new to the art world. At the back of his mind is always the thought: “Can I show that as a work of art?” The challenge is to convince people that it’s possible and to have it accepted, to one day see it in books and museums. “It’s the only goal, actually,” he admits. “Making something that is already understood and accepted by the art world is boring.” His early black tar paintings were relatively daring and his *Tas de Charbon* (literally a pile of charcoal) was important in the context of art history, as it was the first sculpture without a specific shape, where you could change it, make it bigger, smaller or show it in different places at the same time – parameters that altered the definition of sculpture.



88.5° Arc x 8, 2012, Corten steel; Collection: Gibbs Farm, New Zealand (Photo courtesy of Archives Bernar Venet, New York)

In 1966, invited to participate in an exhibition at the Céret Museum in the Pyrenees, Venet sent a blueprint of a tube instead of the tube itself. Aware of the objective nature of blueprints and their semantic character, he chose diagrams as his subjects, which became his first monosemic works. He recalls, “Nobody made a plan like this and presented it as a work of art, so I thought what if I present it as a work of art? Why make an object? Everybody makes objects. How about showing the information about an object, but not the

object?” He has also introduced his *Saturations* featuring mathematical equations on canvas – neither figurative nor abstract paintings – which he had accepted as artworks having only one possible meaning, that weren’t open to interpretation. Very specific, what you saw was what you got.

Continuing to evolve, Venet works in different mediums – sculpture, painting, photography, film, music composition, performance art and furniture design – but the basic idea from his beginnings as an artist is still present in his work today. He works on the concept behind an artwork, not just its visual aspect, thus his ease in shifting from one medium to another. However, he is best known for his *Indeterminate Lines, Arcs, Angles* and *Straight Lines* sculptures – some so big that he has to move hundreds of tons of sculpture by truck or have them transported in pieces to be assembled on location – based on concepts of disorder, instability and uncertainty, which have changed the face of art.



Three Indeterminate Lines, rolled steel, 275 x 497 x 280 cm; Exhibition: Sotheby's, Isleworth, FL, 2008 (Photo Patrick de Warren)

While intuition remains essential in the creative process, Venet keeps an open mind to the potential results that an accident or unpredictable gesture may yield. “I’m someone who experiments all the time,” he notes. “I believe there is so much to invent in art. Too many artists come up one day with one idea and they reproduce it all their life, and they make a lot of money, but it’s not the way I think because I’m never convinced that I have done something interesting enough. If you compare yourself to Picasso or Leonardo da Vinci,

you are never satisfied. My goal is really to do something determinate in art history, not just to be a well-known artist while I'm alive. What I wish is that in 300 years' time, people will say, 'Look at what he did.'”

Talkative and loving to share, Venet tells me that he had recently visited Singapore to install a commissioned sculpture at the headquarters of a wealthy businessman. The new museum of natural history in Shanghai has also asked him to create a massive sculpture for its park. However, I was actually meeting the artist to discover the story behind the 25th anniversary of Le Muy – his four-hectare estate in the Var in his native Provence acquired in 1989 and the site of an abandoned factory and 15th-century watermill with a river running through it – and the launch of the [Venet Foundation](#), which includes the opening of a sculpture park and galleries housing his historical and recent creations, the presentation of his new 150-ton steel sculpture, *Effondrement* (Collapse of Arcs), an exhibition featuring emblematic works from his personal 100-piece collection of conceptual and minimal art by 80 artists (including works by Roy Lichtenstein, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Serra, François Morellet, Carl Andre, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst), and the inauguration of the Frank Stella Chapel designed by Stella himself and showcasing six of his recent large composite reliefs (450 x 250 x 150 cm), in the tradition of artists' chapels by Rothko or Matisse.



Effondrement, 2014 (Photo courtesy of the Venet Foundation)

Celebrating 50 years of art-making and the dream of a lifetime, the Venet Foundation is Venet's long-time work-in-progress and a symbol of his exchanges with well-known artists who became his friends. His friendships with other artists form the basis of his collection, as he swapped works with them or they sold him important pieces at discounted prices. A visit to his apartment in Paris reveals walls displaying the artworks of his friends, like Yves Klein, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin or Donald Judd. A work of art in itself and the history of his life, the constantly-evolving Le Muy is the perfect setting for the Venet Foundation, which aims to preserve the site and Venet's work and to keep his collection intact after his death. Always complaining that their work was never presented properly, he and other artists decided to take things into their own hands and do what museums and galleries had never been able to do for them. A meeting place, where he entertains his artist friends who come to meditate and exchange ideas, knowledge and theories, Le Muy is essentially a place where the art of his generation can be shown under ideal conditions in harmony with its environment, independent of commercial objectives, and wouldn't be distorted by galleries, collectors or museums, thus imitating Judd's foundation project in Marfa, Texas, but on a smaller scale.

Venet recounts how his life has been marked by a series of fateful encounters. As a complete unknown, he formed close relationships with artists who were in the process of changing the course of history – Arman, César and Jacques Villeglé – meeting them through friends of friends, introductions, parties, phone calls he made or letters he wrote. “When you are a young artist, you want to meet the artists that you admire,” he says. “Being with them, you are almost a good artist. If you deserve their attention, it means they respect you – you are already part of the family. It's a very natural thing.” Soon he was collecting his friends' works. Many of the pieces hold special meaning for him and were produced especially for him. Morellet created a work from the letters of his name; Man Ray gave him an autograph with a safety pin; Arman did his *Trashcan* and identity photo; César compressed his car; Jean Tinguely made a baroque candlestick for his 50th birthday; Christo composed a wrapped portrait for him.



Frank Stella Chapel at the Venet Foundation (Photo courtesy of the Venet Foundation)

“I have always had a taste for collecting,” Venet states. “From the age of 20, I have always exchanged with my friends, always with artists that I thought were not just painters doing things and it was nice to put them on your wall, but artists who were serious and thinking in historical terms. I just love to have art around me. And I was lucky enough to start to make a lot of money when I was 30 years old, as people started to be very interested in my work. So money doesn’t mean anything to me – it’s a pure abstraction if you don’t use it. And the best way to use it was to buy art. I started to buy their work that was not selling at the time. You could buy a Dan Flavin for \$1,000 or a Donald Judd for \$3,000, so I started to acquire their pieces, while thinking that it would be nice to have major works, and I started to buy Frank Stella, Robert Morris and Robert Motherwell, which again I was buying for little money, and the collection grew like this.” However, it wasn’t until the Espace de l’Art Concret in Mouans-Sartoux in southeastern France staged the first public exhibition of artwork from his collection in 2009 that he realized he had a serious collection, which was worth safeguarding.

Born in 1941 in Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban in the French department of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Venet was the youngest of four brothers. Having asthma, he spent long periods in a health spa in Saint-Raphaël on the Côte d’Azur and wanted to become a missionary. With the encouragement of a local artist, he drew and painted extensively by the age of 10, and started

selling his works a year later. “I was from a very poor family,” he relates. “I was just a regular kid and one day I made a drawing and I saw admiration in the eyes of my teacher for the first time. He said he was going to put it on the wall. Suddenly he noticed me when he never did before, so I started to understand that it was a way for me to get noticed and to exist. I was very sick when I was a kid. I was very skinny, badly dressed, the girls didn’t look at me – everything was wrong. And finally I had something where people said, ‘Did you see what Bernar Venet did?’”



The artist Bernar Venet (Photo François Baille)

Discovering a book on Renoir, he realized that he could have a career as an artist and become famous, instead of being condemned to work in a factory like the inhabitants of his hometown. Aware that he could do something else, he started to dream. In 1958, he studied for a year at the Villa Thiole, the municipal art school of Nice, then worked as an assistant stage designer for

the Nice City Opera. While serving his military service, he was granted access to an attic, which he converted into a studio. He then set up an atelier in Nice and became friends with Arman and some of the Paris New Realists, who offered to share their exhibitions with him.

Finding himself misunderstood in Nice, Venet first visited the US when he was 24, a country that welcomed him with open arms, even when he arrived with no money, no contacts and nowhere to stay. Initially living in Arman's studio at 84 Walker Street, he decided to settle in New York in 1966. "The collectors in Nice were buying everybody except me, so my nature is such that when things don't go well for me, I just go somewhere else," Venet says. "And the somewhere else was New York because I knew that there was a real circle, where when you go there, you meet the right people, and if you succeed, you succeed at the right level. And after two or three years, I was already exhibiting in group shows in the top galleries in New York. I became very friendly with the Minimalists and very quickly I started to show with them. I was very lucky. It went very fast. I went there at the right time."



View of the new gallery in Le Muy with *Diagonal 74.3°*, 2006, painted steel, 15m high (Photo Serge Demailly)

Although Venet currently spends the most time in New York and summers in Le Muy, he can work from pretty much anywhere. The idea for *Indeterminate Line* came to him on a plane over a glass of white wine while flying to New York. Creating in Paris, Le Muy or New York, he has a studio in Manhattan,

on the corner of Spring Street and Sixth Avenue, but it is in Brooklyn that he makes models and small sculptures and retouches larger ones. He explains, “Usually when I make sculpture, I make a sketch and give the exact proportions, how thick it’s going to be, or I make a model, how long it’s going to be and everything. I make decisions like that, then I have an architect who makes it a little better, before sending it to Greisch engineers in Belgium. They make 25-km bridges, so they calculate precisely how we can build the sculpture, like the strength of the wind in that particular place, how the soil is, if it’s sand, rock, if it’s going to be permanent or temporary. Then there is a team that goes on the spot to install it.”

Venet fabricates his sculptures in a foundry in Nagykovács, Hungary, which works exclusively for him. Involving much practical work, they are made by his assistants in the factory. For example, to curve steel bars or thick sheet metal into perfect arcs, they need equipment that is very heavy and powerful. Some can be built in a week, while monumental pieces like those exhibited at the Château de Versailles in 2011 or currently installed in South Korea, the US or New Zealand require months of work. Having collaborated together for so many years, his team in Hungary can work without his supervision, except for certain sculptures, where he has to go on-site, such as the large *Indeterminate Lines* between 10 and 12 meters tall, due to the difficulty the workers have in respecting the specific movements of the lines when working from a 30-cm high model. When Venet was still making the *Indeterminate Lines* himself, he would create a sculpture from one-ton steel bars through a process of improvisation from start to finish, which was tiring, physical labor. It would take him three long days of work to decide whether or not the sculpture was completed, which sometimes meant sending it back to the factory to add the finishing touches.



Living room on the first floor of the mill in Le Muy featuring a wall painting by Sol LeWitt and a piece by Carl Andre (foreground); on the left, Saturation by Bernar Venet (Photo Jean-François Jaussaud)

At the end of the day, Venet doesn't believe his works belong to him, but to everyone and anyone who has a sincere and genuine passion for artists who have shaken up the history of art. "I thought that the day I die, it would be terrible if my collection gets sold because it's too beautiful," he confesses. "So I decided that the only way to save it was to create a foundation, so I talked to my kids and told them that I would give them a lot of things, but that this should stay, and for them it's even better because they will be proud to have a foundation in their name that they can use and come and stay. But it won't belong to them and they won't be able to sell it. Art belongs to the people who see it, not to the people who keep it in a safe."

The Venet Foundation is located at: 365 Chemin du Moulin des Serres, 83490 Le Muy, France. Visits are by appointment only; contact: info@venetfoundation.org.

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