

sculpture

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A Renaissance Artist of the Third Millennium

A Conversation with **Bernar Venet**

by Laura Tansini

For Bernar Venet, being an artist means not only to paint or to make sculptures, but also to speculate—in art, science, philosophy, mathematics, geometry, and music. He is an internationally recognized painter, sculptor, and composer (of concrete music), and his main interest in art is to raise questions, to push his work further and farther, and to search for new approaches. At the end of the '60s, Venet went through a strict rational moment that brought him to what he thought was a dead end. He was saved by the "benefit of doubt," the necessity to question himself, and the capacity to face changes.

In 1967 Venet frequented the Mathematics and Physics Department at Columbia University. He was a conceptual artist then and created non-visual works on magnetic tape: "My interest in art was focused on the content, not on the visual side." He set a 3.5-year program of work and decided that at its completion he would stop artistic production. For six years he focused on lecturing and writing. Of course that was not enough: he needed to move ahead, to make new experiments and have new experiences, and to find new ways in art. In 1976 he again began to paint and make sculptures.

Laura Tansini: *After Coal Piles (1963), which you consider your first sculpture, you abandoned sculpture until 1979.*

Bernar Venet: Not exactly. Three years after *Coal Piles*, I created and exhibited my "Tube" sculptures in Nice. These works are less known because they were not exhibited as much, and yet they fit quite logically into my evolution. They even play an essential role because they are at the origin of my

industrial drawings (tube plans), which marked the passage toward my conceptual period when I abandoned the object in favor of diagrams.

I sought to develop a work with an industrial character, as impersonal as possible and devoid of imagination, a work that underscores a rupture with the understanding of the artwork as an expression of its author. My propensity for neutrality led me to present sculptures without getting involved in the production stage. The buyer could thus choose the length of the "tube," the ends of which were cut according to his wishes, in slants or perpendicular to

Two Indeterminate Lines, 1988. Painted steel, 12 meters high. Work installed at La Défense in Paris, France.



its length. The tube sculptures were made with cardboard rolls and painted industrial yellow. Others were made out of industrial gray polyvinyl chloride pipes. The smallest acted as models that I later reproduced on a larger scale in steel. These sculptures were empty, that is to say, their surfaces were visible both from the inside and the outside. (Donald Judd was also interested in transparency and, in 1966, he too created open parallelepipeds.) My sculptures were directly dependent on the laws of gravity because the slanted cuts determined their positions. The Lodz Museum (Poland) tube, whose ends are cut at 90 degrees has neither top nor bottom, neither front nor back.

These considerations are not only theoretical. They add nothing to the aesthetic of the work, but they create new experiences—each time compelling one to learn how to look in a new way. This was my main interest at the time.

LT: *At the end of the '60s you stopped making art.*

BV: Yes, to be more precise, I stopped my activity at the end of 1970.

LT: *What does it mean for you to be an artist?*

BV: To be an artist is to ask questions about the very nature of art, to have a creative activity that allows one to ask these questions. Unfortunately, the public mind associates any painting or sculpture with an artistic product. These objects may be devoid of real cultural value, without any formal originality or substantial innovative content. They are only paintings or sculptures and don't, in my view, merit the status of a work of art. Their authors faithfully base themselves on the foundations of the past, on a repertory of

known forms, and it is through a resemblance to past art that they believe themselves to be making artistic work. They act according to the principle of duplication, of repetition and multiplication, when true artistic activity should be conceived as an uninterrupted construction of innovative events. I have little respect for looking back, for rediscovering primitive or primal sources of expression. Increasing levels of abstraction and complexity frighten those for whom art is a means to attain a comfortable expression of calm, luxury, and delight.

LT: *Were you confused about your role as an artist?*

BV: No, my position and my convictions were very clear. If one understands the ideas from which my work evolved, if one accepts its rational, methodical, depersonalized, almost scientific character, one can then comprehend the logic that led me to cease all activity. In 1967 I established a work program, a list of disciplines to be explored within the context of my artistic activity in order to broaden its sphere. This program was to end in 1970. That is what I did.

LT: *And was that the end of your strictly conceptual phase?*

BV: Yes, it was the end of the period during which my work developed around the principle of monosemy—the use of texts and mathematical diagrams with only one level of signification. This principle can be found in my sculptures on which the measure of degrees is systematically inscribed. There was no way around it, there was a logic to it and I had to respect it. I thought that I had pushed my process to its extreme limits, and this called for an end. Otherwise one only speaks of art or one lets oneself slip into a production that suffers in quality. At 30, one has convictions. An artist explores, he does not exploit.

LT: *During the time you stopped making art, you continued your activity as an art theoretician, writing and giving lectures. You could not escape art.*

BV: Art theoretician is saying a lot. It is true that I taught theory in 20th-century art at the Sorbonne and that I wrote and gave several lectures. I didn't abandon the artistic field, but teaching and thinking about this discipline did not make an artist of me. To the famous statement, "This is art if I say so," I countered: "I am not an artist if I say so."

LT: *In 1976 in New York you started painting again, representing mathematical equations, a very unusual subject. You are not interested in the meaning of equations, you simply use them as images, forms for your paintings. Did that happen by chance or because you were searching for a new language?*

BV: When I resumed my activity in the fall of 1976, my mathematical subjects were different from those I used in the '60s. Notably the "Straight Lines," the "Angles," and the "Arcs" became the basis for my investigation into the theme of the line. First translated onto canvas then in relief form, these subjects, to which the "Indeterminate Lines" were added, took on a central place in my sculptures. Motivated by



the desire to constantly enrich what I had previously created, over the years a shift occurred that allowed me to move from the “dematerialized” art of the '60s to today's rather large-scale sculptural activity.

LT: *Do you agree that scientists, mathematicians, and artists are similar in that they are all researchers?*

BV: I've read many books written by some of the most prominent scientists and researchers. I think that their intuitive process is very similar to that of artists. It happens that the most implausible hypotheses are at the origin of original ideas and have the richest potential. One must then prove the validity of these first intuitions—they may perhaps bear fruit or they become something else even more unpredictable. Some think that scientific thought is more oriented toward reason, demonstration, and objectivity. I sometimes feel quite close to these methods, which have the advantage of short-circuiting the wait for inspiration.

LT: *Does aesthetics have any role in your work?*

BV: Aesthetics and concept go hand in hand because it is in the aesthetic field that my activity and ideas co-exist and stimulate each other.

LT: *What do you consider to be aesthetics?*

BV: All that which, in my eyes, has a profound intrinsic beauty. All that provides me with satisfaction and intellectual pleasure, often transcending the field of the visual. It is a vast territory, covering all of art history from the first artistic expressions of humanity all the way to today. Even when it is enriched by knowledge, the aesthetic feeling remains profoundly subjective and cultural. No one will ever provide a definitive definition.

My aesthetic feelings are satisfied far more successfully by Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* than Marie Laurencin's *Bouquets de fleurs*. But the aesthetics I am most interested in is the one that remains to be discovered, the one whose meaning needs still to be formulated: all these objects or phenomena that I am not yet sensitive to, that surround me without my even taking notice; objects or events that remain foreign to me, to which I am deaf or blind, like those people who pass by an Ad Reinhardt without feeling its charge. The aesthetic sense allows me to move to another level of perception. It is a more subtle perception when I am familiar with the theoretical or contextual framework. In this case, the black painting on which one can barely distinguish a cross becomes the site where the subtlety and originality of Reinhardt's vision is concretely exteriorized.

LT: *Your sculptures have their own beauty, based on balance, the strength of the material, and changes in spatial perception. When you create a new sculpture do you start with a drawing or small model?*

BV: I never make preparatory drawings, and if you are alluding to the “Indeterminate Lines,” each one was the result of improvised, intuitive, empirical work. I am uncertain of the result during the entire process. Steel imposes its limits: I must yield to this and accept its nature.

LT: *Would you say the work creates itself?*

BV: No, these sculptures don't create themselves. One must witness their production to understand

Opposite: *7 Arcs*, 2003. Rolled steel, project for a sculpture for the Louvre Garden, Paris. **This page:** *10 Arcs*, 2004. Rolled steel, 12 ft. high.



Above: *Three Indeterminate Lines*, 2003. Rolled steel, 104 x 102 x 173 in. **Opposite, top:** "Arc Installation" for the Robert Millery Gallery, New York, 2004. Rolled steel, approx. 10 x 18 x 18 ft. **Bottom:** *13 Arcs*, 2004. Rolled steel, 7 x 21 x 6 ft.

how difficult it is to cold-twist steel bars that measure 4.5 inches in section. One then understands the danger and the physical effort. At each instant it is necessary to find improvised solutions so that I can attain the desired goals.

Despite the mastery I have acquired over the material, there is always an element of surprise that awaits me each time that I finish a "line." The most recent "Indeterminate Lines" handle these unexpected results the best. I now create installations with "Indeterminate Lines" of variable configurations. I can propose five, six, or seven lines tangled up in each other. The same lines are then used for different configurations according to the available space.

LT: *When you create monumental works, you make a maquette: form, weight, and balance are calculated and decided in advance. Do you do everything by yourself or do you work with engineers?*

BV: According to the importance of the project and the installation difficulties that I expect to encounter, I sometimes create several different models. I then choose the one that best corresponds to the site and to the limits that I must work within. The role of the engineers is limited to "wind testing" problems, especially for my big vertical arcs, which are subject to vibration phenomena (galloping). They also study the volume of the foundations and other technical details that I know nothing about.

LT: *Do you make changes between the maquette and the final work?*

BV: Only in the details. My greatest difficulty consists in properly calculating the square section of the line in accordance with the work's dimension.

LT: *The titles of your works often suggest contrasting meanings—for example, order-disorder.*

BV: That's true. My sculpture is based on concepts that appear to be divergent, but which in the context of my activity organize themselves in a complementary manner: order and disorder, the determinate and indeterminate. We know that matter, nature, and life organize themselves according to complementary principles (organization, disorganization), and my work is no exception to this universal model.

Accident—1995 obeys the "disintegration" principle; the result of the falling bars is "unpredictable." This presents another sort of assemblage that no longer depends on the controlled organization of the artist, and I have to accept the completely "unexpected." Some may be tempted to speak of a contradiction between works in which randomness intervenes and the very simple determinate lines such as "Diagonals" or "Arcs," the *Nice Arc de 115°*, for example, I need these oppositions to move forward; this complementarity is vital for my sculpture. I understand that my work may appear incoherent at times. That is because the observer bases his reading on frameworks from the past, on explanatory schemes that I no longer subscribe to.

LT: *In your sculptures you use different forms. Are they all originated by the line?*

BV: Generally yes. The better part of my sculpture (with four variations) originated by taking the line as a point of departure: the straight line ("Diagonals"), the curved line ("Arcs"); the broken line ("Angles"); and the line freed from mathematical constraints ("Indeterminate Lines").

In 1979, I created an "Indeterminate Surface" in wood, a relief covered in graphite. In 1995, I had more success in solving the problem of "surface" by creating an entire series of large-scale steel "Indeterminate Surfaces" cut with a blowtorch. The "Point" is a subject that I have also focused on, which allowed

me to create an installation in 1984 at the Musée de Villeneuve d'Ascq, where I showed the relation of volume, surface, line, and point.

LT: *Do you like to create outdoor works?*

BV: I take as much pleasure in installing my sculptures in interior, more neutral spaces. The relation to the landscape can affect the identity of the sculpture. Observation can be deformed by the beauty or richness of the surrounding nature. In the same way, on a neglected or cluttered site, the sculpture will be diminished and lose all its impact. Sometimes the situation is different. Right now I am working on the installation of a large straight line that leans against a chateau in France. In this example, only the integration of the steel bar into this environment legitimates its status as a work of art.

LT: *When you develop a new sculpture, what is your main interest—material, form, balance, space?*

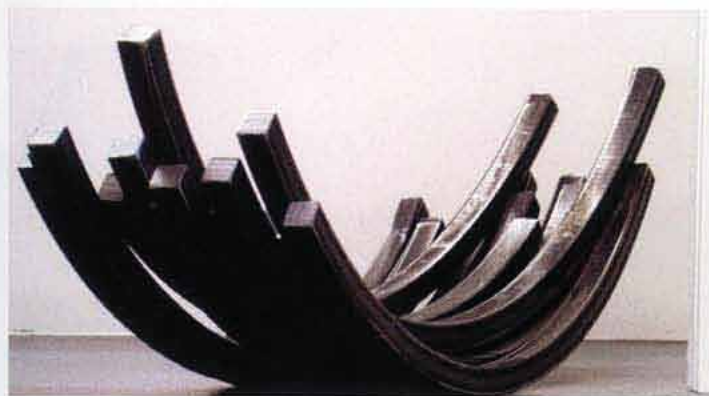
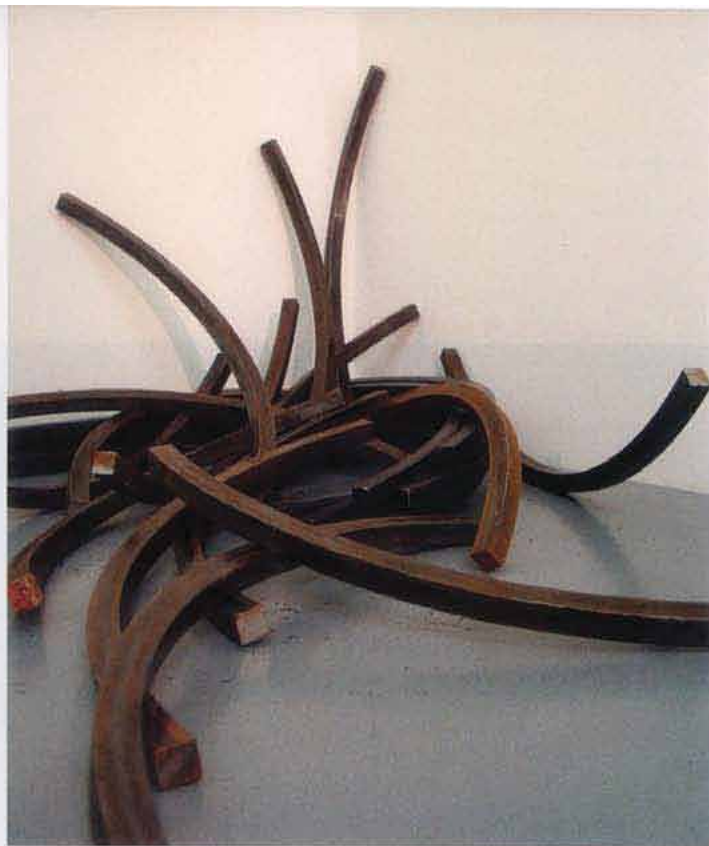
BV: I am interested in discovering how, from certain starting principles that are mine, my sculpture can evolve and be enriched. The best moments are those when, either through chance discovery or systematic study, I discover other conceptual or formal options to advance my work.

LT: *Besides your many current projects—such as the exhibition in spring 2004 on Park Avenue—you are working on a very special project, Global Diagonals.*

BV: *Global Diagonals*, subtitled *Global Art—Global Communication—Global Humanity*, is a very ambitious project I have been working on for several years. The idea came to me in 1989, when the French Minister of Culture asked me and four or five other artists to think about a gesture to commemorate the bicentennial of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. I immediately thought of proposing a large-scale straight line that would virtually link two continents. The two ends of this line were to be visible (about 110 yards long): one in France and the other in a country chosen for its respect of human rights. My idea was not accepted, but with time, I was able to develop another aspect of the project, which concerns the interior spaces attached to it. Since then a catalogue was put together in which a link between New York and Shanghai is proposed. It illustrates and describes the underground part of the project where people can go and communicate directly and in real time with their counterparts on the other side of the earth. We have planned to use giant screens to give the illusion that you are in the other country. Virtual reality has also been considered as a possibility to make communication between people of different cultures and races possible. Through its symbolism and goals, this project goes far beyond the creation of a sculpture. The Eiffel Tower makes it possible to see distant Parisian suburbs, *Global Diagonal* would put the world virtually within our reach.

LT: *What is your definition of art?*

BV: There are artists who, mistaking themselves for Louis XIV, would answer “L’art, c’est moi.” I am not



so self-centered and think that art is multiple because it is where expression is granted the greatest freedom. When speaking of art, we all fall prey to too many personal appreciations, sensations that are difficult to communicate; there is too much vagueness in the interpretation. Traditional aesthetic theories attempted to define art, to formulate criteria that were sufficiently open to be definitive. Today we know that this is impossible, that the concept of art is an open concept. We have to wait for new creations, new entities that will contribute to extending this category called aesthetics. The paradox is that in order to make art one must each time move beyond the sphere of art. For those who believe that they can define what art is and what its goals are, I would like to remind them that, as philosophy teaches us, “the world is intrinsically devoid of meaning, foundation, and finality.” How could it be any different for art?

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