

DEVALS

Biography

What interested me was to replace the subjective vision of artists with rational, objective knowledge, the results of scientific analyses. And there I had a whole unexplored field of language and images that I thought was necessary to show.

— Bernar Venet

Bernar Venet's work has been shaped by a persistent question: what remains of art when the artist relinquishes the obligation to compose a recognisable form?

Born in 1941 in Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban, in the south of France, Venet emerged in the early 1960s with an approach that challenged the inherited distinctions between painting, sculpture and the idea of the artwork itself. Over six decades, he has moved between material experiment, mathematical systems, performance, language and monumental steel sculpture. These developments are not successive styles so much as recurring investigations, repeatedly reopened and tested against new conditions.

Venet's early formation took place in Nice, where he worked as a stage designer at the Opéra de Nice before devoting himself to art. In 1961, while completing military service near Carpiagne, he encountered a flow of tar on a rocky slope. The substance's slow movement, density and resistance to conventional painterly handling suggested a way to make the material itself the subject and agent of the work. From 1961 to 1963 he poured industrial tar onto paper and canvas, allowing gravity and the irregularities of the surface to participate in the result. The dark, compact paintings retained the physical evidence of their making while resisting the expressive gestures then associated with painting.



Fig. 1 Bernar Venet in his workshop, Nice, 1963. Photo : Philippe Bompuis
Courtesy Bernar Venet

A second encounter, in 1963, proved equally decisive. Seeing gravel mixed with tar beside a road, Venet recognised a model for sculpture that did not depend on an imposed silhouette or a predetermined composition. He began presenting piles of coal as works in their own right. In these pieces, the material was neither a medium to be mastered nor a means of representing something else: it was the work. Its shape emerged from gravity, accumulation and the conditions of its placement. This radical displacement of authorship—from the artist's hand to the behaviour of matter—anticipated questions that would become central to Minimal and Conceptual art. Venet's early experiments also belonged to the restless artistic climate of Nice, where figures including Arman, César and Jacques Villeglé encouraged a reassessment of what could constitute an artwork.

By the middle of the decade, Venet was extending this inquiry beyond the traditional object. His industrial cardboard reliefs, uniformly coated in black lacquer, reduced painting to a controlled procedure. His Tubes of 1966, meanwhile, brought an industrial object into the exhibition space alongside technical drawings that described it. The drawing offered a crucial proposition: perhaps information about an object could take the place of the object itself. The work could be approached through a description, a diagram or a set of relations.



Fig. 2 Bernar Venet, *Tube*, 1966, *Les origines*, 1961-1966, Espace de l'Art Concret, Mouans-Sartoux, 12 June 2016 – 28 May 2017 (exhibition View) . Photo : Jérôme Cavalière
Courtesy Espace de l'Art Concret & Bernar Venet

In late 1966 Venet moved to New York, where he entered into close contact with the city's developing Minimal and Conceptual art scenes. He encountered artists including Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Sol LeWitt, while developing a practice of unusual analytical rigour. Mathematics, astrophysics, nuclear physics and scientific notation became systems through which art could be reconsidered. Venet translated formulas, data and diagrams into visual propositions, investigating whether an artwork might communicate with the impersonal clarity of scientific language.

The conceptual works of 1966-70 encompass mathematical paintings, diagrams, printed matter, sound, poetry, performances and lectures. Their apparent austerity belies an ambitious redefinition of artistic production. In place of a singular object, Venet could offer a proposition, a process, a record or a body of information. Publications and editions were integral to this practice: they allowed ideas to circulate beyond the gallery and unsettled the assumption that the unique, handmade object was the necessary centre of art.

Venet's position within Conceptual art was distinctively radical. His interest in science was not an attempt to lend art the authority of scientific fact; rather, it tested the possibility and limits of objectivity. Mathematical language appeared to promise a meaning that was stable and univocal, in contrast to the shifting associations of ordinary language and figurative imagery. Yet the act of selecting, translating and exhibiting such systems inevitably introduced questions of authorship, interpretation and context. Venet's work thus occupied a productive tension between the impersonality of a rule and the choices required to make that rule visible.

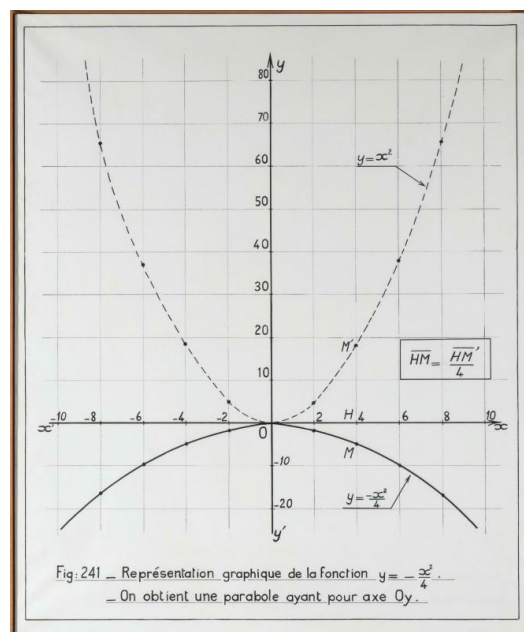


Fig. 3 Bernar Venet, *Représentation graphique de la fonction $y = -x^2/4$* , 1966.
Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris & Bernar Venet

In 1968, Venet began to articulate an unusually radical programme: he would follow a defined sequence of investigations and then stop producing art. On 31 December 1970, he brought his artistic production to a halt. The decision extended the logic of his work into the organisation of his own career, turning the artist's activity into something that could be examined, documented and deliberately concluded.

His first retrospective at the New York Cultural Center in 1971, *The Five Years of Bernar Venet*, presented this concentrated period of work at a moment when his conceptual contribution was becoming increasingly visible. During the ensuing years, he continued to lecture, write and reflect on the conditions of art, while maintaining a critical distance from the production of new works.

The pause ended in 1976, when Venet returned to making art. This return was a reconsideration of what they had made possible. He resumed painting and explored a wider range of formal languages, refusing to allow a single method to harden into a doctrine. The line gradually emerged as a central element: at first governed by geometric and formal decisions, it became increasingly independent of predetermined composition. In the *Indeterminate Lines*, begun in 1979, the line is neither a diagram of a known object nor the expression of a controlled design. It is a form whose course cannot be fully predicted, a record of movement and a structure that holds together chance and decision.



Fig. 4 Bernar Venet, *Two Indeterminate Lines*, 2003
Frederik Meijer Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, MI.
Courtesy Frederik Meijer Sculpture Park & Bernar Venet

This shift brought Venet back to the physical world without abandoning the questions that had animated his conceptual period. His lines were first developed in drawings and reliefs, then translated into steel. The material required the artist to negotiate with weight, resistance, heat and the practical conditions of fabrication. In the large-scale sculptures, the line leaves the flat support and enters architectural and public space. Arcs, angles, straight lines and indeterminate lines articulate a vocabulary that is at once rigorously reduced and capable of innumerable configurations. Their scale makes the viewer conscious of the space it occupies and the body moving around it.

From the 1980s onward, Venet expanded this vocabulary through works that explored accident, dispersion and instability. In the Accidents, straight steel bars appear to buckle, collapse or lose their orderly alignment; in the Dispersions, elements spread through space according to arrangements that resist a single compositional centre. These works make disorder visible without turning it into mere chaos. Their apparent spontaneity is grounded in decisions about material, scale, balance and installation. Venet's sculptures stage the encounter between a system and forces that disturb it.

The process of making is central to this encounter. Venet has often remained closely involved in the fabrication and installation of his steel works, treating the material's response to heat and pressure as part of the sculptural event. The finished form bears the trace of a negotiation between intention and physical necessity. In this sense, his practice retains the conceptual artist's interest in procedures and conditions while embracing the contingencies of a material that cannot be reduced to a diagram. The sculpture is not merely an object offered to the eye; it is the outcome of a process involving time, space, labour and the behaviour of matter.



Fig. 5 Bernar Venet, *Straight Lines - Accident*, 1998
Courtesy Bernar Venet

Venet's engagement with public space has given this work an expansive civic dimension. His monumental sculptures are installed in cities, parks and architectural settings across Europe, North America and Asia. Their scale establishes a direct relationship with the built environment, while their open, often unstable configurations resist the reassuring function of a conventional monument.

They alter the perception of a place: they redirect movement, frame views and make the surrounding architecture newly legible. In 2011, his monumental Arcs were installed at the Palace of Versailles, setting a contemporary sculptural language into dialogue with one of France's most historically charged sites.

A major example of this public practice is *Arc Majeur*, inaugurated in October 2019 beside the E411 motorway in Belgium. Rising approximately 60 metres, the work spans the landscape with a sweeping steel arc that is perceived differently according to the viewer's position and movement.

The sculpture's encounter with the road, the horizon and the speed of travel extends Venet's longstanding interest in the conditions through which a work is seen. Here, monumentality is not simply a matter of size: it is a way of organising perception across space and time.



Fig. 6 Bernar Venet, *Arcs en désordre: 5 Arcs x 5*, 2011 (installation view)
'Venet à Versailles', June 1 - November 1, 2011
Courtesy Bernar Venet, ADAGP Paris, 2024
Photographer : Phillipe Chancel

Venet's first retrospective took place at the New York Cultural Center on Columbus Circle in 1971. He has contributed to major art events such as Documenta VI in Kassel (1977) and has frequently participated in the Biennales of Paris, Venice and São Paulo. In 2022, Venet's largest and most comprehensive retrospective to date opened at Kunsthalle Berlin, Tempelhof Airport. Other notable recent exhibitions include: 'Bernar Venet: Disorganizing Order' at Wetterling Gallery, Stockholm (2024); 'From the Rational to the Virtual: Paintings by Bernar Venet' at the National Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia (2024); 'Bernar Venet: Beyond Concept and Matter' at the Phoenix Centre, Beijing (2024); 'Bernar Venet – 1961... Looking Forward' at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice (2024); 'Bernar Venet – Du Tas à l'Effondrement' at Halle Verrière, Meisenthal, France (2023); and 'L'Hypothèse de la Ligne Droite' at Chapelle de l'Observance, Draguignan, France (2023).

In 2025, the artist had major, institutional exhibitions at the National Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia, and the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China, and unveiled a monumental public sculpture in Beijing, coinciding with French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit. In 2026, his 9 Acute Uneven Angles was installed in front of the Palau de Congressos in Palma, Mallorca, Spain.

Venet is the most internationally exhibited living French artist, with over 30 public sculpture exhibitions to date. His work is displayed in more than 70 museums worldwide, including esteemed institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; and the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva. Venet has also received commissions for permanent sculptures in cities including Auckland, Austin, Bergen, Berlin, Denver, Paris, Neu-Ulm, Nice, Seoul, Shenzhen, Tokyo and Toulouse.

Venet has been honoured with numerous awards, including France's Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. He has also received the 2013 International Julio González Sculpture Prize, the 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center (ISC), the 2017 Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award, the 2019 Prix François Morellet, and became a fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors in London in 2020. The Venet Foundation, inaugurated in July 2014, aims to preserve the artist's home in Le Muy, France, conserve the collection and ensure that Venet's legacy endures.

PUBLIC & INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

Akron Art Institute, Akron, OH
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR
Atlantic Richfield Corporation, Los Angeles, CA
AT&T, Minneapolis, MI
Bank Audi, Beirut, Lebanon
Bosch GmbH, Stuttgart, Germany
Busan Museum of Art, Busan, South Korea
Citibank Corporation, New York, NY
City of Metz, Metz, France
City of Vancouver, Vancouver, Canada
Colonnade III Plaza, MEPC & Equity Properties, Dallas, TX
Commanderie Peyrassol, Flassans-sur-Isole, France
Contemporary Art Center, San Diego, CA
DaimlerChrysler Collection, Stuttgart, Germany
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Espace de l'Art Concret, Mouans-Sartoux, France
Esplanade de Uni Mail, Geneva, Switzerland
Esquire Company, Seoul, South Korea
The Fields Sculpture Park, Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY
First National Bank, Seattle, WA
Fonds d'Art Contemporain des Musées de Nice, Nice, France
Fondation Clément, Le François, Martinique
Fondation Looser, Zürich, Switzerland
Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Switzerland
Foundation Domnick, Nürtingen, Germany
Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, MI
Gateway Foundation, St. Louis, MO
Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA
Gibbs Farm, Makarau, New Zealand
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany
He Xiangning Art Gallery, Shenzhen, China
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
Ho-Am Art Museum, Seoul, South Korea
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
Ilshin Spinning Company, Seoul, South Korea
Ilwoo Foundation, Jeju Island, South Korea
Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain
Internationales Künstlerhaus Villa Concordia, Bamberg, Germany
Jumex Foundation, Mexico City, Mexico
Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, Germany
La Défense, Paris, France
Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia

Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Ludwig Museum im Deutschherrenhaus, Koblenz, Germany
Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France
McCrory Corporation Collection, New York, NY
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
MIT Permanent Collection, MIT, Cambridge, MA
Musée d'Art Contemporain de Dunkerque, Dunkirk, France
Musée d'Art contemporain, Lyon, France
Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, Switzerland
Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland
Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France
Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Saint Étienne, France
Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture, Grenoble, France
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France
Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon, France
Musée du Québec, Québec, Canada
Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
Musée national d'Art moderne de Liège, Liège, Belgium
Musée Sainte-Croix, Poitiers, France
Musées Royaux de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium
Museum im Kulturspeicher, Würzburg, Germany
Museum of Art, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Museum Sztuki W. Lodzi, Lodz, Poland
Museum / Kunsthalle Würth, Künzelsau, Germany
The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea
National Museum of Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia
Neue Galerie im Alten Kurhaus, Aachen, Germany
New York Public Library, New York, NY
The New York University Art Collection, New York, NY
North Fork Bank Collection, Melville, NY
Parc de la Boverie, Liège, Belgium
Person's Weekend Museum, Tokyo, Japan
Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL
Quadrat Josef Albers Museum, Bottrop, Germany
Sakip Sabanci Müzesi, Istanbul, Turkey
Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA
Sara Hildén Foundation, Tampere, Finland
Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea
Seoul Olympic Museum, Seoul, South Korea

Shanghai Sculpture Park, Shanghai, China
Singapore Management University, Singapore
Smalley Sculpture Garden, University of Judaism, Los Angeles, CA
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
Sonja Henie - Niels Onstad Foundations, Hovikodden, Norway
Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art, Kyongbuk, South Korea
Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, Hungary
Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea
Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN
Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal, Germany
Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT
Wheelock Properties, Scotts Square, Singapore
Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany
Yale University, New Haven, CT
Yuanta Financial Holdings, Taipei, Taiwan