

BERNAR VENET RÉTROSPECTIVE 2019-1959

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Bernar Venet, *Effondrement : Angles*, 2012

Exhibition: Mücsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest, Hungary, 2012

Photo credit: Alexandre Devals / Archives Bernar Venet, New York

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LYON

BERNAR VENET, RÉTROSPECTIVE 2019-1959

The exhibition presents an exceptional, never previously seen collection of more than 170 works, including early performances, drawings, diagrams, paintings, photographs, sound works, films and sculptures—the whole show spanning 60 years of creative output. It is the most comprehensive retrospective ever staged.

The aim is to examine all the stages which, at the beginning of the 1960s, led a young twenty-year-old artist to “*want to remove any expressiveness contained in a work in order to reduce it to a material fact*”, then to appropriate astrophysics, nuclear physics and mathematical logic, to abandon his practice for five years and then come back unexpectedly with paintings on canvas, *indeterminate lines*, *accidents*, *collapses*, *random combinations*, as well as the *angles*, *arcs* and *straight lines* of huge corten steel sculptures for city spaces.

The exhibition occupies three floors of the Museum and should be visited from bottom to top in reverse chronological order. Hence the exhibition title: *Bernar Venet, rétrospective 2019-1959*.

Thierry Raspail,
exhibition curator

1ST FLOOR (2018-1980) FROM THE INDETERMINATE TO THE ACCIDENT

“There is a mathematical beauty; it is the beauty of immediate simplicity, of the purity of a formula reduced to four perfectly articulated symbols, like Einstein’s $E = mc^2$, which encapsulate a fundamental law of the universe”

In the mid-1960s, Bernar Venet began borrowing diagrams, theories and formulas from **mathematics**. He was particularly interested in geometry, and the line became a central element of his work.

In 1979, the first of the *Indeterminate Lines* gave us a freehand line unrestricted by the rigours of mathematical determination. That line led to *Indeterminate Surfaces* (a saturation of the surface area with indeterminate lines) and *Gribs* (from *gribouillages*, the French word for doodles or scribbles); these were lines, drawn with a swift, spontaneous movement of the hand before being captured in steel.

In some of his performances, the artist would knock steel bars to the ground, which caused other bars to fall and form a random sculpture: “*Random combinations of indeterminate lines or Accidents can be identified with recent mathematical approaches, such as chaos theory or catastrophe theory, or complexity science.*”

Bernar Venet uses a type of **corten steel** for his sculptures; it is treated with chromium, nickel and copper so that it rusts to a very deep colour.



Bernar Venet, *GRIB 4*, 2014
Photo credit: Archives Bernar Venet, New York
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2ND FLOOR (2014-1966)

MINIMAL, CONCEPT, MONOSEMY.

In New York in 1966, Bernar Venet met the minimalists Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Dan Flavin. Their approaches found a resonance in Venet's praise for the depersonalised artistic gesture. This was the period when he designed his *Tubes* (1966), which were cylinders cut on the slant that stood firmly on the ground because of their shape and because of gravity. An **industrial drawing** describing all the characteristics of these objects made him realize that *"it might be more interesting to provide information about the object rather than to show the object itself."*

The advantage of industrial drawings *"was that they described things, and the world, objectively, concretely, and not according to the subjective interpretation of the author."*

So he started copying plans and then mathematical diagrams onto canvas or paper.

This neutral language conferred a single, unambiguous meaning on the work, leaving no room for interpretation.

Soon, Venet transferred photographs by enlarging them: mathematical formulae, diagrams, weather maps, stock market prices, etc. Then, in 1967, he began devising **performances** featuring scientists (astrophysicists and mathematicians, for example) who chose the subject themselves.

Between 1971 and 1976, having decided that he had reached the end of his research into form, Bernar Venet took a break from production to work as a teacher in France and abroad, and to devote time to theoretical investigations into art in general and his own work in particular. In 1971, he adopted semiologist Jacques Bertin's term '**monosemy**' as a retrospective description of all the works he had produced between 1966 and 1970: these *monosemic* works, like mathematical symbols or a diagram, are open to only one level of meaning.

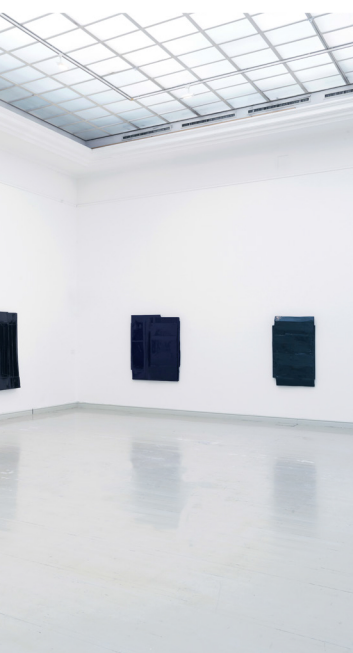


Bernar Venet
Exhibition: Kunsthalle Mücsarnok, Budapest, Hungary, 2012
Photo credit: György Darabos, Budapest © Adagp, Paris, 2018

In 1976, Bernar Venet returned to the art scene with paintings of angles and arcs accompanied by their measurements in degrees and radians.

In 1979, he made his first *Indeterminate Line*, i.e. a line that is not mathematically determined. As he was cutting a stretcher out of plywood, he noticed the semi-circular offcut that had fallen to the floor and decided to display it directly on the wall. This chance occurrence gave rise to the first *Positions of Arcs* and *Positions of Angles*, which were made from wood.

In the 2000s, the *Saturations* series—paintings on canvas, then on walls, were superimpositions of mathematical formulae and theoretical texts.



3RD FLOOR (1966-1958)

THE EARLY WORKS.

In 1961 in Carpiagne, where he did his military service, Bernar Venet noticed a streak of tar running down the side of a cliff. *“That rich, black, oily matter moving downwards, obeying the law of gravity, struck me as an ideal model for the works I was going to do.”*

He was fascinated by the physical properties of this cheap material which had nothing to do with traditional art. In 1961 he made a series of **“goudrons”**—paintings with tar—first on paper, then on canvas.

There are photos from the same year showing him lying in rubbish for his first performance.

During that period, Bernar Venet decided that works in different media could be considered equivalent: a sound piece, *Gravier Goudron (Tar Gravel)* (1961); a film, *Tarmacadam* (1963) showing the road ahead on a car journey; a photograph of tar, *Macadam* (1963-1988); a book with totally black pages, *Livre noir (Black Book)* (1963); *Black Mirror Space* (1963), a space of black mirrors which the public was invited to enter. He has called this the “equivalence principle”, which allows the same content to be transmitted through different channels.

His first sculpture, *Tas de charbon (Pile of Coal)* (1963) was a work that focuses on the interplay of gravity and randomness. *“To show a pile of coal, for me, was to display a sculpture which, for the first time in the history of art, had no specific form. (...) The coal, shovelled randomly into a pile, freed the sculpture from the preconceived notion of composition imposed by the artist.”*

Translation: Jeremy Harrison



Bernar Venet, *Bugatti Painting*, 2012
Photo credit: Archives Bernar Venet, New York
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BERNAR VENET IN 12 DATES

1941

Born in Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban (France).

1961

First paintings, use of tar that gradually spreads to cover the entire surface; first performances and sound pieces.

1963

Meets the artists Ben and Arman in Nice. First sculpture *Pile of Coal* and the film *Tarmacadam*.

1966-1970

Moves to New York in December 1966. Meets minimalist artists. First use of mathematics and diagrams; performances. Exhibitions in Europe and the USA.

1971-1976

Stops producing works in order to devote his time to research and reflection. His first object of reflection is his own work. He introduces the notion of *monosemy* as a retrospective description for his works.

1977

Exhibits at the Kassel Documenta.

1979-1984

First *Indeterminate Line* in 1979. First works in relief: *Positions of Arcs, Angles and Diagonals* (in wood).

1985-1990

Many public commissions, in Austin, Belley, Epinal, Nice, Norfolk, and elsewhere; first monumental *Indeterminate Line* in Strasbourg (1990). Exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

1994

Installation of 12 *Indeterminate Lines* on the Champ de Mars, Paris.

2011

Retrospective at the Seoul Museum of Art, South Korea. Exhibition at the Château de Versailles.

2014

Opening of the Venet Foundation at Le Muy: works by Bernar Venet and major artists from the last 50 years.

2018

Rétrospective 2019-1959 at the mac^{LYON} and *Les années conceptuelles 1966-1976* at the MAMAC, Nice.

Bernar Venet, *77.5° Arc* × 30, 2005
Exhibition: Museum Küppersmühle
für Moderne Kunst, Duisburg, Germany, 2007
Photo credit: Werner Hannapel, Essen
© Adagp, Paris, 2018





EXHIBITION FROM 21 SEPTEMBER 2018 TO 6 JANUARY 2019
MUSEUM OPEN WEDNESDAYS TO FRIDAYS, 11 AM — 6 PM
SATURDAYS AND SUNDAYS 10 AM — 7 PM

IN RESONANCE WITH THE RETROSPECTIVE:

→ Sculptures by Bernar Venet in the city of Lyon: garden of the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Place des Terreaux), Place Antonin Poncet, and 59 Quai Rambaud (opposite the headquarters of GL events).
 → An evening with Bernar Venet on 21 November at 8 pm: Discussion (in French) between the artist and Thierry Raspail followed by *Conjugaison et divorce de la voix, de l'image et de l'écriture*, programme of performances and screenings devised and produced by the artist.



PUBLICATIONS

Catalogue of the Lyon retrospective
 (curator Thierry Raspail), Éditions Dilecta.
An anthology of texts on the work of Bernar Venet since 1961,
 Éditions Dilecta.
Special edition of Beaux Arts magazine
 for the exhibitions at the mac^{LYON}
 and the MAMAC, Nice.

GUIDED VISITS

→ **In one hour** Fridays at 12:30 pm
 → **In 90 minutes** Saturdays and Sundays at 3:30pm. Extra sessions during the holidays: 24, 25, 26 October and 26, 27, 28 December at 2 pm
 → **Lazy morning visit**, with a free coffee at the museum café on Sundays at 12 noon
 → **Visites Théma** Sundays at 10:45 am
 × *Heavy stuff: materials and processes in the work of Bernar Venet*
 × *Mathematics is systematic! Some formulae used by artists of yesterday and today*
 × *The body in action: gestures, interventions and performances in contemporary art*
 Tickets for the visits available on line mac-lyon.tickeasy.com

GROUP VISITS

New ways to find out about contemporary art (in French): Visite Cosy, Visite Easy, Visite Arty. *Guided visits in English can be reserved by telephone. Information and reservations from "Service des Publics"*

INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS

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