

A Milestone Year For Trailblazing Artist Bernar Venet

In 2024, acclaimed French artist Bernar Venet celebrates both his remarkable 65-year career and the 10th anniversary of the Venet Foundation, a cultural landmark in Le Muy in southeastern France dedicated to his towering sculptures and contemporary art collection.

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The Frank Stella Chapel and an Indeterminate Line sculpture in Cor-ten steel by Bernar Venet at the Venet Foundation in Le Muy
PHOTO COURTESY OF ARCHIVES BERNAR VENET NEW YORK

As he gets ready to inaugurate the largest exhibition of his life at the end of this month, a complete retrospective covering his 65-year career spread across 10,000 sqm at the sprawling Phoenix International Media Center in Beijing, in addition to a trio of oversized sculptures placed outdoors, **Bernar Venet** looks back on the 10th anniversary of the **Venet Foundation** he established in Le Muy in 2014. A nine-hectare landscaped paradise in the Provençal countryside that includes a former watermill and factory, a sculpture park and a gallery, it has become a vital cultural hub, drawing international visitors who flock to explore the flourishing art scene in the south of France each summer.

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A labor of love and an open-air museum, the foundation showcases Venet's monumental sculptures alongside a rich collection of minimalist and conceptual art by visionaries such as Arman, Larry Bell, Anthony Caro, Christo, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Anish Kapoor, Phillip King, Sol LeWitt, Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella and James Turrell—many of whom were Venet's close friends. Known for his pioneering work in conceptual art, Venet envisioned a space where sculptures could be experienced in their purest form, a place where art lives and breathes in harmony with nature.

In the Venet Foundation's gallery space, which hosts temporary exhibitions, Mexican artist **Stefan Brüggemann** is presenting a radical graffiti intervention for his second solo

artist Bertrand Lavier is presenting a radical granite intervention for his second solo show in France, curated by [Jérôme Sans](#). Meanwhile, the 83-year-old artist continues to push boundaries with his exploration of themes like entropy, gravity, instability, chance and uncertainty, recently culminating in a colossal sculpture of 20 one-ton arcs that he toppled with his bare hands, now on display in the factory space. Though perpetually unsatisfied and driven by a desire to define how his legacy will be remembered, Venet's foundation is set to endure long after him, ensuring his groundbreaking contributions to art will resonate for generations to come.

This year, you're celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Venet Foundation. Do you consider it the most important project of your career?

We could say the foundation is a self-portrait in a way. It's what will be left of my work, with a selection of the best of everything I have done over the past 65 years. But since I'm going to die in 20 years' time, it will be 85 years. My doctor says it's going to be more than 20. You will see. I don't know if I will be as dynamic, but anyway, when you go to the foundation, you have all my production, but you also have the product of my encounters with artists, with art critics, with the art world, and then my collection. It's still not at the stage where it's going to be because I have some news for you. There are two major things which are going to happen with my foundation. Last year, I had an exhibition in Luxembourg and a very important man from Luxembourg, Michel Wurth, who was one of the directors of ArcelorMittal, at its headquarters, came to me and said, "Bernar, what you have done in Le Muy is so incredible. I was very impressed when I visited the last time. I'm thinking that the country of Luxembourg could take care of your foundation financially, organizing many things, selling tickets and books, renting places out, that sort of thing." The country of Luxembourg wants to take care of my foundation, after me, in 30 years' time. I told him that it's too early. But then another huge thing is that a huge collection of minimal art is going to be given to my foundation.





Bernar Venet, 6 Arcs, interior-exterior perception, Cor-ten steel, 2023, on display in the sculpture park of the Venet Foundation

PHOTO FLAVIO MERZAGORA. COURTESY OF THE VENET FOUNDATION

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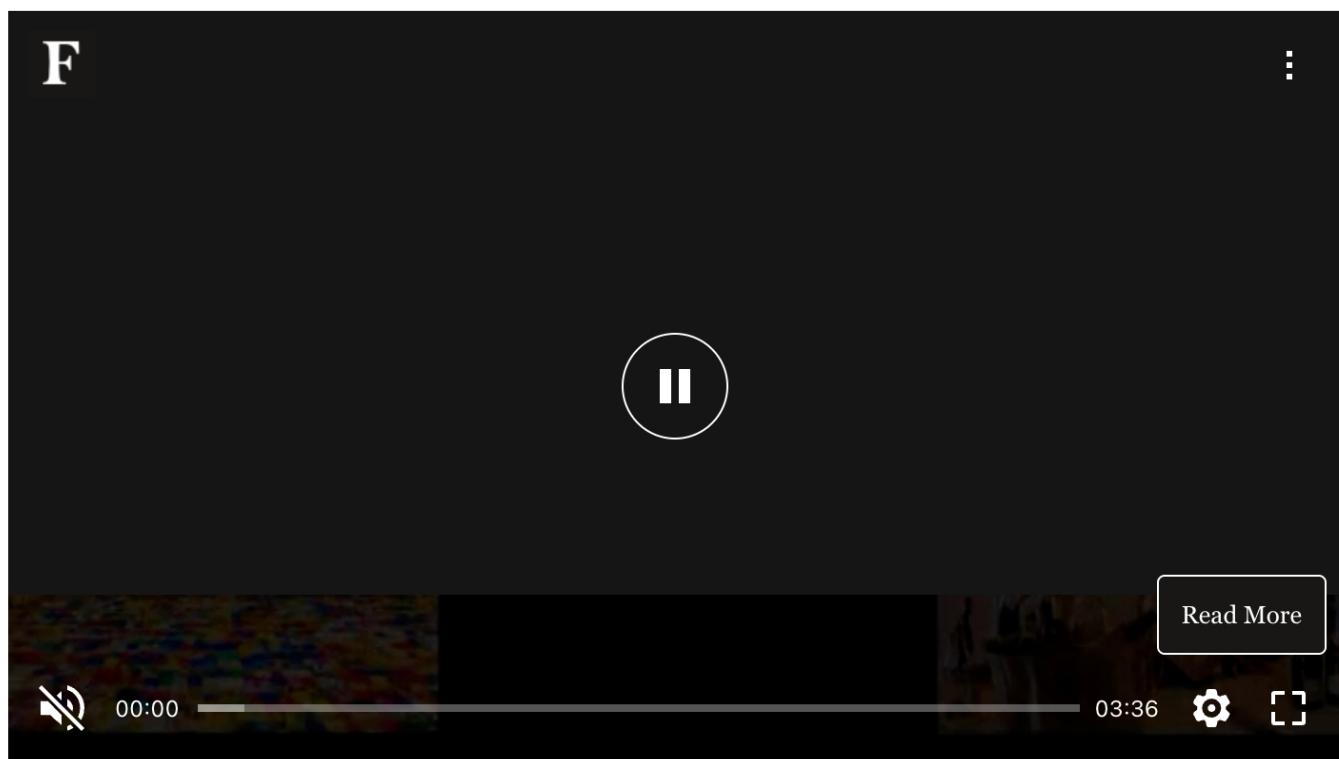
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You're referring to the minimal artworks from the Wolfgang and Anne Titze collection. How did you meet the couple?

That explains why they are giving me all this. Thirty years ago, my wife said to me that her friend, Anne de Boismilon, was going to be married in Vienna, and we were invited to the wedding. I'm not into weddings, but my wife went and came back and said that Anne's husband is fantastic, very successful, but also an incredible mind, and that I should meet him. One day, they came to spend the weekend. We opened the door of the mill, and the man looked at the floor and saw some pieces of steel on which he was supposed to walk on, he saw the compression of a car and strange things on the wall. He went upstairs to the salon and saw stones on the floor, neons coming out of the wall. He said, "I'm sorry, but what is this?" And me, with my enthusiasm, I started to talk about the Dan Flavin, the Frank Stella, the Richard Long. He pointed to a felt piece on the wall and said, "Is this a work of art?" It was a major one, from the '60s, by Robert Morris, it's anti-form, when gravity is giving shape to the work, it's a reaction against minimal art. The guy is listening to me and he's thinking he's going to spend the weekend here. And he turned out to be one of the top collectors in the world.



He started to collect art after meeting you?

That day. And each time he holds an exhibition, for example, he had a huge show at a

museum in Vienna showing a big part of his collection, when he makes a speech, he says, "I had a fantastic life doing this and that, making money, and one day I met Bernar Venet, and boom, I started to have a new life." One day, he called me and said, "Bernar, I want to give you my collection." But I don't want everything. It's 500 pieces. I said no, I cannot deal with that, it's too much, so in the end, I'm going to have five or six big Donald Judds, five or six Dan Flavins, Frank Stella. He told me I can choose now what I want because the collection is going to be divided into three parts: one in Switzerland, one in Austria and one in France here. So it's going to be a big thing. Officially, he's donating them when he dies, but he says I can already take the pieces if I want.

You built up your foundation's art collection with works by your artist friends, like a journal of your life and your friendships, but many of them have since passed away. Do you still collect today?

No. You see, my collection is a family thing. My artist friends have passed away. When you come to Le Muy and you see the foundation, it's really a family story. These were the guys I exhibited with. They were of my generation, except they were all older than me. I was always the youngest one. I took lessons from those guys, and today everybody is together here. I don't have the eye to see what's very interesting today. In 1968, if you had asked me to name 10 artists who were going to be at the top level in art history, I could not make a mistake. I could have missed one or two, but I would have said Judd, Flavin and Sol Lewitt, the minimalists. You could mention of course the pop artists and so on. But today, it's complete confusion. At the beginning of the 20th century, all the big artists were in France, and that lasted until 1955. Then the Americans took over. It was clear it was one generation after the other: the American abstract expressionists, then pop art, then minimal art. It was simple and it was just a matter of having a good eye and seeing which ones were the best. And I had the eye. That's why I acquired a Flavin for \$1,000 that my friend bought two years ago for \$1.4 million, and a Judd for \$3,000 that he paid \$2 million for. But today, I'm buying land. I'm buying everything I can. It's getting bigger and bigger, you will see. I'm buying all of my neighbors. Right now, I'm buying a big piece, which is going to really make a difference. I'm very ambitious for Le Muy.

Do you expect to maybe double the size of your foundation?

Not double because it's already so big. When you have nine hectares full of sculptures, it's very difficult to keep it in perfect shape. I now have six guys working on the garden at the same time. But I can visualize how it will grow, and I don't even have a doubt. I know it's going to be like this. It's so natural now at this stage. We have museums after museums that visit. We had the friends of the Walker Art Center, the Beyeler Foundation and the Antwerp Museum who came, people who are extremely sophisticated in terms of art, so it's going to be incredible.



Inside Out exhibition by Mexican artist Stefan Brüggemann at the Venet Foundation
PHOTO JEROME CAVALIERE

How has the Venet Foundation contributed to the local and international art scenes over the past decade?

To the local, for sure, we do something because we have schools coming constantly, even kids from the village of Le Muy. We pay for the bus to come from Draguignan and

other places like this to visit. People from the area come. It opens their minds for sure. Internationally, a magazine mentioned the 10 most beautiful sculpture parks in Europe and we were at the top of the list, and the collection travels all the time. But one thing that I should say is that when the idea to open a foundation 10 years ago started to come to my mind, it was just a way for me to make sure that this is going to be permanent, to my mind, it was just a way for me to make sure that this is going to be permanent, that it will last, because it's so ridiculous to spend your life doing such a thing, and then when you die, your kids sell it because they don't have a choice, they sell the property and part of the collection. This would be impossible. I made a foundation for that, and my wife and kids accepted the idea that they are not going to inherit it. It's so much better like that because since it's going to last, they will come, they will have all the artworks around them, they will be able to sleep there, and one of my granddaughters could become the director of the foundation. It's just perfect. It will remain the way it is. When you inherit a chateau, a fortune, factories and so on from your parents, you have a duty to pass it on to your kids, you know, you are just a link in the chain. I was born with zero, nothing at all, and if I managed to survive, it's thanks to the context in which I have been living, this art world that accepted me, that helped me, so I have a debt to society. So giving everything I have today back to society is the most natural thing.

What can viewers expect from your retrospective that will open on September 28, 2024 at the Phoenix International Media Center in Beijing?

I'll be showing about 160 pieces, everything since my first symbolic paintings, what I was doing when I was in Nice when I was 17 or 18. Then one day, I joined the army and I stopped all that and I got into abstraction and very radical, black dark paintings. So from that kind of work all the way until today. Not so many sculptures indoors because it's very difficult to bring them inside, even my wall reliefs, the "Grips" in metal. But outside, I will have three major works. And one of the pieces is very important: it's a present from 10 of the biggest companies in France working in China to the government of China, with the support of the French government. It's a "Convergence", 15 meters tall, and it will stay there permanently.



By [Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle](#). Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle is a reporter focusing on art, design, architecture, horology and jewelry, and has been writing for Forbes since 2014. She has interviewed [Ai Weiwei](#), [Bernar Venet](#), Jeff Koons, Takas...

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