

“Envisioning Objectivity in Art: The Case for Venet’s *Angles*”  
Robert C. Morgan

During a recent phone conversation, while on a train from Nice to Basel, Bernar Venet carefully explained how the line gradually became the basis for his work. Right from the beginning, the artist was predisposed to the method of linear deduction in art, which many of his colleagues rejected as a method closer to science. Venet persisted in his argument and went on to say that science and mathematics were to become the content of his work. He was less given to creating metaphors than in making literal decisions. Drawing a straight line was not interpretative. It was not a lyrical expression about surface space. Rather for Venet, it was about the line itself. (1)

He discovered this logic in his early paintings of scientific theorems beginning in 1966. This was a year of critical importance. One of the first diagrammatic paintings was called *The straight line represents the function  $y = 2x + 1$* . This was followed by other obtusely related paintings and some drawings, such as *Vecteurs egaux*, made with oil stick on paper. In addition to the line, Venet’s interest in working with angles became clearly evident when he painted a series of shaped geometric canvases, the earliest being an Equilateral triangle. This was done concurrently during the same period he inaugurated his well-known *Five Years* project (1966-70) that would link his work to the Conceptual Art movement then spawning in New York.

During the *Five Years*, the artist focused primarily on advanced and applied mathematics in addition to the latest developments in the physical and natural sciences. Similarly related to Duchamp, the artist became less concerned with making works of art than in selecting previously existing works that might serve as propositions for the possibility of becoming art. For Venet, the propositions were involved with the documenting scientific knowledge. His point was to present the most up-to-date findings in various fields of scientific research by exhibiting diverse information including not only diagrams and texts, but reel-to-reel tape recordings and actual lectures by scholars in various fields of science. In doing so, Venet became eager to put forth the idea that objective research in science was the real content of Conceptual Art. Although problematic for some of his colleagues, his point of view would eventually come together in an important (but relatively little known) exhibition, *The Five Years of Bernar Venet*, masterfully exhibited at the New York Cultural Center (1971). (2)

The *Five Years* were followed by a hiatus of teaching, more like a parenthesis in Venet’s career, that persisted over another six years in which the artist decided not to work as an artist in any direct plastic sense in order to come to terms with the direction he wanted his career to follow. During this time, the artist was introduced to the work of a French linguist, Jacques Bertin, who had put forth a theory where dividing the application of linguistic codes into three discrete categories: the monosemic, the polysemic, and the pansemic. Venet believed that his work fit the domain of monosemy, which referred to forms “pared down to a single irreducible core.” In contrast, to monosemy, the applications of polysemy and pansemy were different in that they dealt more with figurative and non-figurative imagery

respectively. In the latter two, the application of imagery gave way to subjective interpretation related to their intrinsic connotative attributes. What attracted Venet to monosemy was the legitimation that everything the viewer needed to know was made immediately direct and visible – denotative not connotative; objective, not subjective. For Venet, any form of symbolic structure that required an excess of interpretation or expressive content was unnecessarily. This absence would become the direction of his sculpture, a theme that would run through the breadth of his large-scale Cor-ten steel works ranging from the *Indeterminate Lines* to the *Angles*.

In 1976, six years after the *Five Years*, Venet began to paint again. The angles and curves returned after a decade to play a major part in his revival. Venet had returned to painting shaped canvases, more refined and reductive than those painted a decade earlier in 1966-67. Examples would include the *Position of two Angles of 120° and 60°* and *Angle of 72 degrees* (both 1976). The first being a curved diptych of two different angles that added up to 180 degrees, and the second an angle within the shape of a triangle. It is worth noting that at the time the *Angles* as such had not yet defined themselves as a series. They did not find their way into sculpture until three years later in 1979, initially in wood before turning to steel. Moving into the 1980s and 1990s, the use of both straight and curved lines would continue to inform his large-scale sculptures, including the *Angles*, *Arcs*, and *Indeterminate Lines* became the works for which he has become widely known.

Venet has proceeded to extend his thinking in relation to art in terms of material and form. A recurrent thought was how to see form apart from its utility. This would eventually lead to ideas on indeterminacy even as he was dealing with determinate lines and highly reductive structural parameters at the time. Venet's work has consistently revealed an extraordinary ability to vacillate between moving forward and then back again to ground zero. Despite his interest in the future of art, he often found himself at the primary stage, indeed, the primordial stage, where thought became matter and matter was formed through a close interaction between body and mind. It was within the realm of phenomenology that Venet's early work finally began to achieve significance. In his studies on time and space, he was often reminded of the fundamental experience of how motion is perceived in the everyday world and of how we assimilate seemingly indeterminate patterns that surround us.

In addition to his exemplary soaring diagonal lines, arcs, and angles in numerous varied out-of-doors locations, the impact of indeterminacy in Venet carries a strong and vital presence, in many ways as profound as the "chance operations" advocated in the musical and sound compositions of John Cage. (3) In Venet's work, the impact of indeterminacy can be felt not only in his provocative and wayfaring *Indeterminate Lines*, but in other ways of ordering. This would be the case in his "deconstructions" of mostly interior groupings of elongated steel bars, or some case, pilings of steel arcs generally installed in exterior settings. The interior works titled *Accidents* (English) or *Barres Droites / Obliques* (French) began one day in 1995 when he entered his studio where numerous steel bars were poised leaning against the wall. He decided intentionally to use the force of his body to push the bars to the floor where they positioned themselves more or less indeterminately. (4) In either case, whether the sculpture is meticulously installed in the landscape (as is often the case) or performed in a studio or museum setting, there is the ongoing potential for

indeterminacy, whether seen from a chance angle of vision on the roadway or seemingly without order on the studio floor, whether seen from a vertical or a lateral perspective.

In either case, Venet has persisted in deliberately shifting the concept of ordering even further. As early as 1989, he began to develop a precise system of large diagonals in a hypothetical series of installations around the globe. For political reasons, this project was interrupted and has yet to be realized. From Venet's perspective, this is partially related to "chance operations" in which the apparent chaos of indeterminacy and disorder will ultimately reveal itself in the form of an alternative structure.

Given that the focus of the current exhibition is devoted to Venet's *Angles* from a present-day context, it would seem appropriate to suggest there were several works in this series of work that happened in-between. Two of the more important happened at a time when the artist began to venture out-of-doors in doing large-scale sculptures in painted steel. They included *Angle de 50.5 degrees* (1992), now in a private collection in France; and another work titled *Angle aigu de 19.5 degrees* (1986), permanently installed on the exterior of an office building for the Westech Corporation in Austin, Texas. This work, in particular, was influential in opening up new possibilities for scale in the artist's work. It still remains one of the larger (if not the largest) *Angles*, the artist has made to date.

The artist's recent large-scale steel *Angles* appear consistent with the *Arcs* in that they are organized in groups, often adhered closely together, with random spatial intervals, most often with the same number of degrees within the acute angle as within the circumference of a circle. One of these, *Nine Uneven Angles* (2015) was recently installed at the northwest corner of Union Square in New York in the neighborhood where I live. Having spent some time observing this grouping of acute spires over the past month, it would appear that the artist is striving for a kind of equanimity in the new *Angles*. They have returned to the realm of phenomenology where space and time find yet another form of contiguity where the presence of the viewer in relation to the work becomes significant. One might say that this has always been the question that Venet's has sought for in his work, even as the question moves perpetually through various angles of vision..

It is a confounding and erudite question in that Venet's forms, unlike those of the Minimalists, are not archetypical or neutral forms, as in cubes and rectangles. Rather they are determined by the number of degrees, equally employed in the acute (uneven) *Angles* and in the *Arcs*. The sum in either case would be the full circle at 360 degrees. The number of degrees represented by the artist in the spatial intervals noted above suggests a form of indeterminacy. Whether the random choice of degrees in the *Angles* and *Arcs* or the seemingly immeasurable twisting of curves in the *Indeterminate Lines*, both allude to a regeneration of structure found outside what appears immediately perceivable and thus within the conceptual realm of infinity.

The art historian Sir Kenneth Clark once commented that Sir Isaac Newton the most single-minded mathematicians of his time. (5) While this may have been true,

Newton was also deeply engaged in philosophy and the natural sciences, even as he remained single-minded. Perhaps, one might consider the artist Bernar Venet as being of a similar ilk given that his deep involvement in sculpture has extended beyond what some would consider normative, even in the current century. It is no wonder that Venet is one of the most imitated public-scale sculptors of our time. One might argue that the breadth of Venet's work continues to remain inexorable. A large part of it may be attributed to his inscrutable sense of history in relation to how he projects his ideas into the future. This has become essential in allowing him to clarify many of the conceptual and formal issues he has confronted in his work over years, which, in turn, have confused critics and connoisseurs as to the exact nature of his work. But Venet's work has invariably stood the test of time. His keen insights and working method have allowed the artist to pursue sculpture judiciously. Concurrently, since 2000, he has reinvented his approach to painting through a surprisingly beautiful, hyper-formulaic style.

Despite the speed at which Venet travels on land or in air, his work remains on solid ground. The transmission is clear and his method of work is astutely in place. Such an artist is a rarity in today's art world, whatever that world means amid the distortion of reality that seem to accompany an endless production of works fraught with vacuity and despair. Bernar Venet is on a very different ground. He holds an elevated position, I would say, that gives his work the advantage of connecting with a history in which time still exists. The *Angles* are very much a part of his achievement and worthy of serious discussion. They are meditative and profound. They are a kind of projection removed from routine matters. When does clarity about matter replace the anxiety about matters of considerably less importance? The challenge is a constant issue for those capable of discerning the limits of the digital stratosphere in which we are currently traveling, often without a clue as to the structure of the universe guiding the way. Somehow I find the art of Bernar Venet reassuring, a discovery through the intervals of everyday time.

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NOTES:

1) In addition to the phone call, I would draw attention to Deborah Laks' essay, *Nulla Dies Sine Linea* ("No Day Without A Line") in Bernar Venet: *L'hypothese de la ligne droite* (Paris: La Difference, 2010), pp. 183-188.

Much of the information in the earlier part of this edition may be found in Robert C. Morgan, *Periode conceptuelle, 1966- 1970: Le langage des mathematique et l'investigation rationnelle* ("Venet's Conceptual Phase, 1966-1970: the Language of Mathematics and Rational Inquiry") in Bernar Venet, 1961 – 1970 (San Etienne: Editions des Cahiers intempestifs, 1999, pp. 97 – 120.

2) The New York Cultural Center, New York. *The Five Years of Bernar Venet* (November 1971 – January 1972) Curated by Donald Karshan. Exhibition Catalog.

La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. *Bernar Venet* (November 5 – December 5, 1976) Exhibition Catalog with essay by Bernar Venet.

- 3) John Cage, *Silence*. Middlebury, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961; reprint edition, Cambridge Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1966.
- 4) Arnauld Pierre, "*Droite*" et "*Accidents*" ("*Straight Bars*" and "*Accidents*"), Bernar Venet, Milano: Giampaolo Prearo Editore, 2000; pp. 127 – 130.
- 5) Sir Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View*, BBC, 1969. Episode 8. *The Light of Experience*. (New York: Harper, 1969)