

SPOTLIGHT

SHAKING UP THE ART WORLD

WORDS NINA STARR PHOTOS BERNAR VENET AND SERGE DEMAILLY

A pioneer of conceptual art in New York in the late 1960s, Bernar Venet talks to Nina Starr about how he's changing the history of art, his friendships with artists whose works he collects and his ambition for the Venet Foundation, which recently opened its doors in southeastern France

“It is not art if it doesn't change the history of art,”

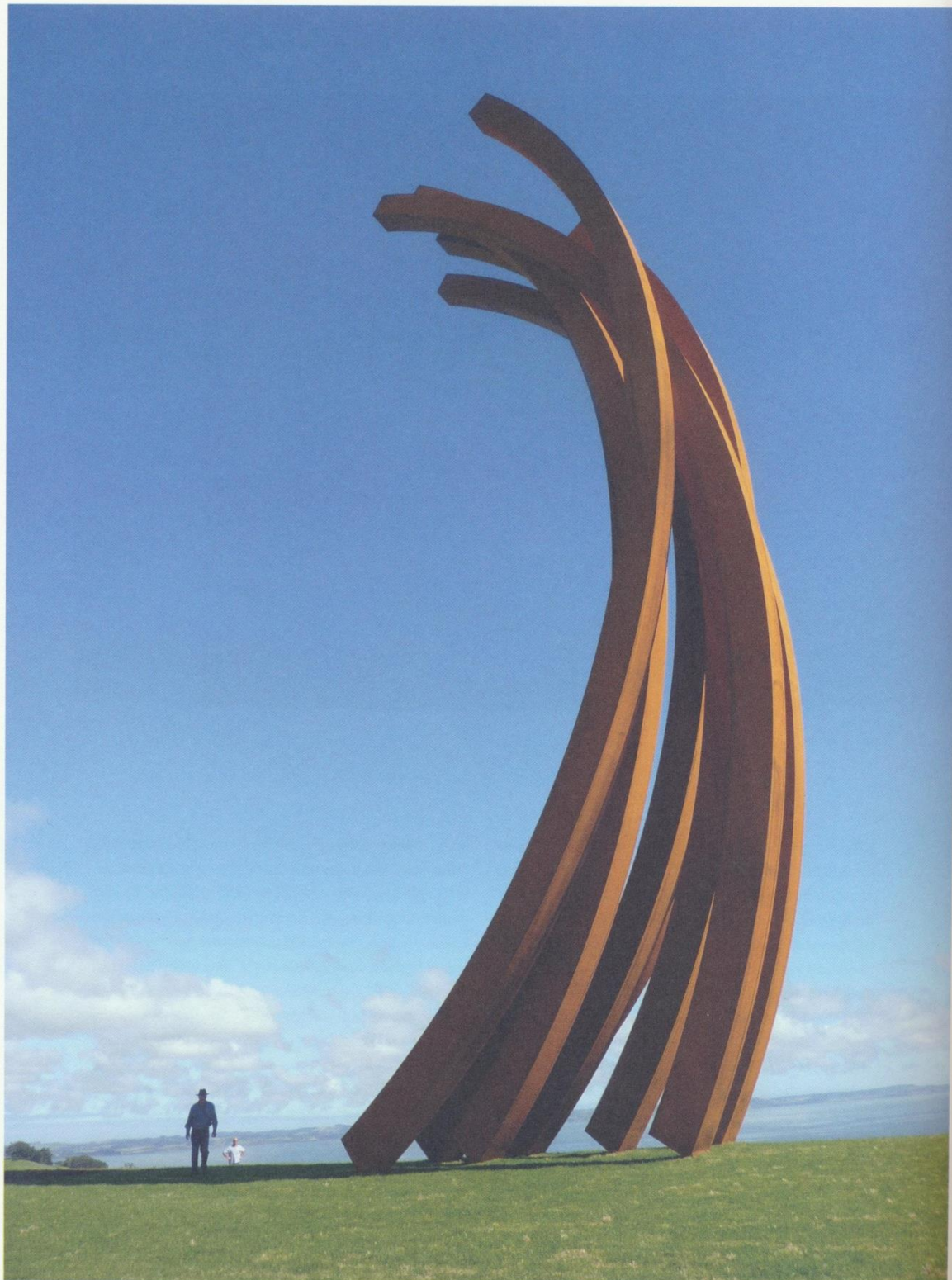
Bernar Venet once said. His aim as an artist has always been to make pieces that raise questions and bring something new to the art world. “Making something that is already understood and accepted by the art world is boring,” he says. His early black tar paintings were daring and his Tas de Charbon (literally a pile of charcoal) was an important piece of art history: It was the first sculpture without a specific shape, where it could be changed; made bigger, smaller or be shown in different places at the same time – parameters that altered the definition of sculpture.

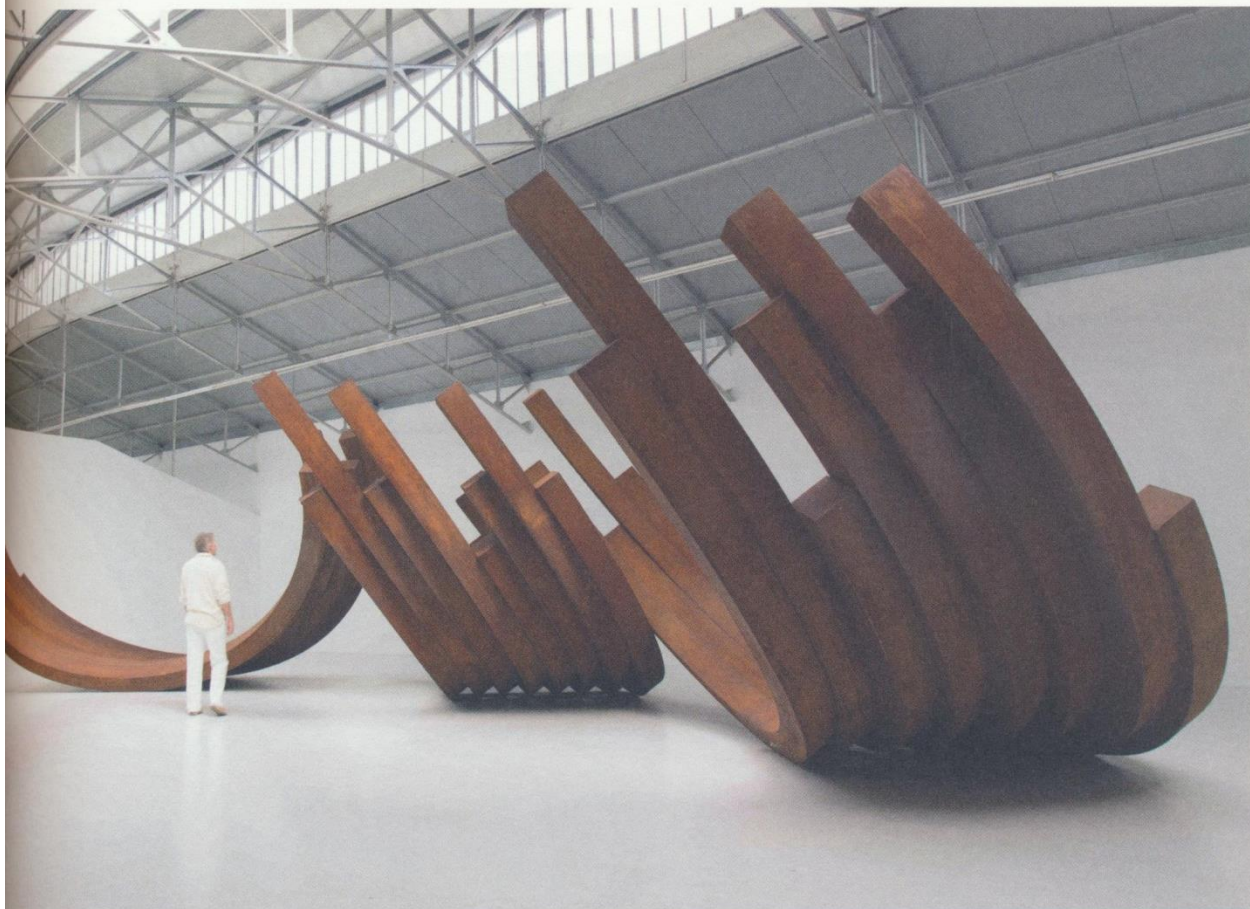
Working with different mediums — sculpture, painting, photography, film, music composition, performance art and furniture design — a focus on an

art piece's concept remains a central part of Venet's style, as much as its visual appearance. He is best known for his Indeterminate Lines, Arcs, Angles and Straight Lines sculptures – some so big that he has to move hundreds of tonnes of sculpture by truck or have them transported in pieces to be assembled on location – based on concepts of disorder, instability and uncertainty, which have changed the face of art.

Intuition may be essential in his creative process but Venet keeps an open mind to the unexpected. “I'm someone who experiments all the time,” he notes. “I believe there is so much to invent in art. I'm never convinced that I have done something interesting enough. My goal is really to do something determinate in art history, that in 300 years' time, people will say, ‘Look at what he did.’”

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it was to buy art," he says. And given his relations with many notable artists, his collection boasts a number of pieces specially produced for him.

MODEST BEGINNINGS

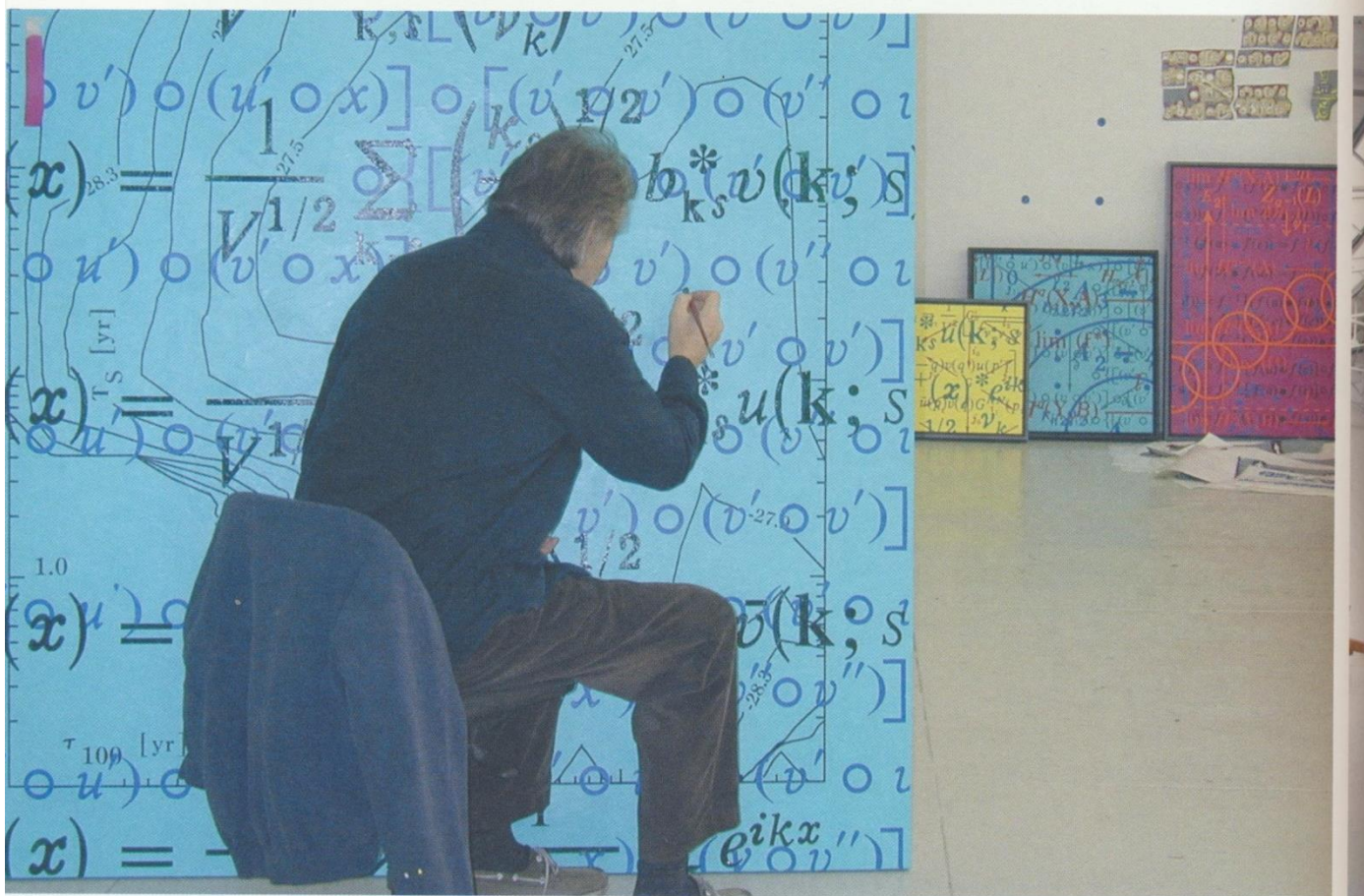
Born in 1941 in Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban in the French department of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Venet was the youngest of four brothers. Asthma saw him spend long periods in a health spa in Saint-Raphaël on the Côte d'Azur. He tells me he would have had been a missionary if not for the encouragement of a local artist. "I was from a very poor family... just a regular kid," he relates. "And one day I made a drawing and I saw admiration in the eyes of my teacher for the first time. He said he was going to put it on the wall. Suddenly he noticed me and I started to understand that art was a way for me to get noticed and to exist. Finally I had

something where people said, 'Did you see what Bernard Venet did?'" The talented Venet had already started selling his drawings and paintings by age 11.

At age 24, Venet visited the United States and was, metaphorically, welcomed with open arms "The collectors in Nice were buying everybody except me, so my nature is such that when things don't go well for me, I just go somewhere else," Venet says. "And the somewhere else was New York because I knew that there was a real circle, where when you go there, you meet the right people, and if you succeed, you succeed at the right level." He eventually settled in the city a year later in 1966.

WORK PROCESS

Venet currently divides his time between New York and Le Muy (his summer home). However, it is in



NEW ADVENTURES

Meeting the artist during the 25th anniversary of Le Muy – his four-hectare estate in the Var in his native Provence, allowed me to know more about the launch of the Venet Foundation and witness the presentation of Venet's new 150-tonne steel sculpture, *Effondrement* (Collapse of Arcs).

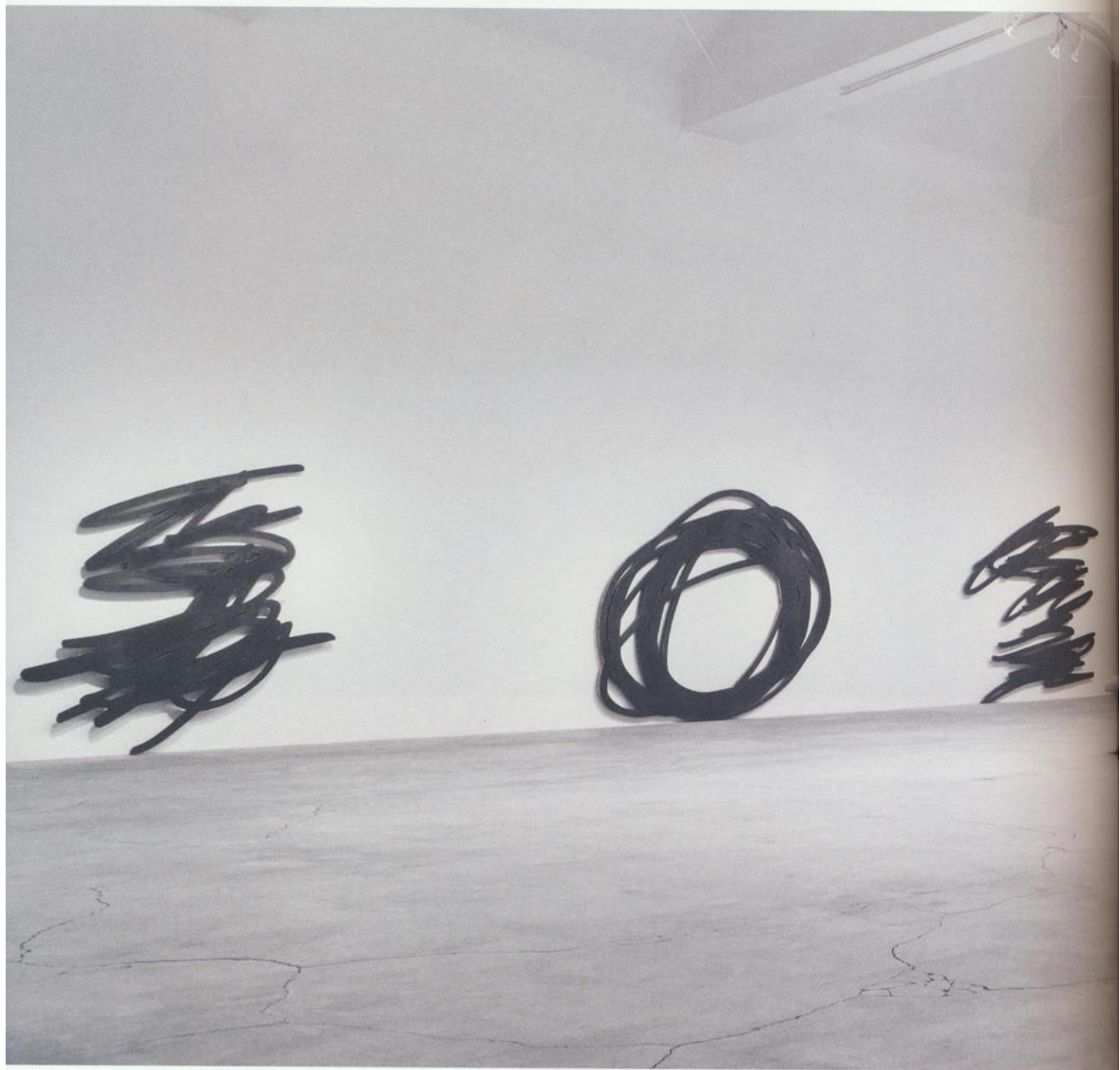
Celebrating 50 years of art-making and his lifetime dream, the Venet Foundation is Venet's long-time work-in-progress and a symbol of his exchanges with well-known artists who became his friends. A visit to his apartment in Paris revealed walls mounted with artwork from friends like Yves Klein, Dan Flavin and Donald Judd.

A work of art in itself and the symbol of his life's passion, the constantly-evolving Le Muy is the perfect setting for the Venet Foundation, which aims to preserve

the site and Venet's work and keep his collection intact after his death. More than a meeting place for Venet and his artist peers, Le Muy also serves as a space where the art of his generation can be shown as the presenting artist intends.

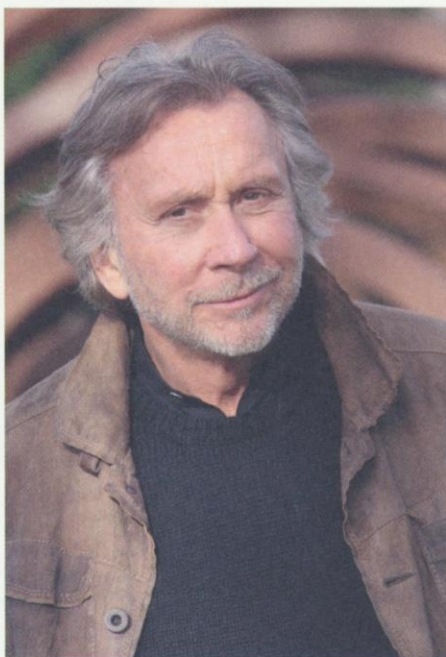
Venet recounts how his life has seen him form close relationships with artists who were game changers in the art world. Among them, notable names like Arman, César and Jacques Villeglé. "When you are a young artist, you want to meet the artists that you admire," he reveals. "Being with them, you are almost a good artist. If you deserve their attention, it means they respect you – you are already part of the family."

A collector himself, Venet reveals: "I just love to have art around me. And I was lucky enough to start to make a lot of money when I was 30 years old, as people started to be very interested in my work. The best way to use



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Brooklyn that he makes models and small sculptures and retouches larger ones. He explains, "Usually when I make sculpture, I make a sketch and give the exact proportions like how thick it's going to be, or I make a model. Then I have an architect who makes it a little better, before sending it to Greisch engineers in Belgium. They calculate precisely how we can build the sculpture. Then there is a team that goes on the spot to install it."

Sculpture fabrication is then done by a foundry in Nagykörös, Hungary, which works exclusively for him. Some can be built in a week, while monumental pieces like those exhibited at the Château de Versailles in 2011 require months of work. When Venet made

Indeterminate Lines, he fashioned a sculpture from one-tonne steel bars through a process of improvisation from start to finish, a laborious task. It would take him three long days of work to decide whether or not the sculpture was completed, which sometimes meant sending it back to the factory to add the finishing touches.

Venet doesn't believe his works belong to him, but to everyone and anyone who has a sincere and genuine passion for artists. "I thought that the day I die, it would be terrible if my collection gets sold because it's too beautiful," he confesses. "I decided that the only way to save it was to create a foundation. Art belongs to the people who see it, not to the people who keep it in a safe."

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