



Espace de l'Art Concret
centre d'art contemporain / Mouans-Sartoux

BERNAR VENET

The origins 1961 - 1966

12 June - 13 November 2016

Curator / **Fabienne Grasser-Fulchéri**, assisted by **Alexandra Deslys**

Castle's gallery

ROOM 1 -

In 1961, one of the most astonishing flashes occurred in contemporary artistic thought. If one were to stick to the facts as they occurred in that year one would speak only of some strange acts performed by a young man who was barely twenty years old and who was then almost entirely self-taught painter who had an essentially bookish experience of modern art.

If we did not know what was to happen in his life from the years 1963-1964, we would, no doubt, view them as nothing more than a handful of micro events tied to personal experiences that are symptomatic of youthful inclinations for the bizarre and that might amuse us because of their curious resemblance with certain extreme expressions of the art of the last third of the 20th century. But, knowing that which we know, one can only be astonished by the absence of a common measure between these incongruous acts, which in hindsight appear evident, and the insignificant character of their unfolding in the artistic field of the time. The objects, images and stories that emerged at this time were later to resurface with full force in the flux of events which we call the history of contemporary art. But in their initial and sudden appearance, Bernar Venet's artistic propositions – those at least that were to matter later on – were formulated outside of any relevant legitimizing cultural context.

- Thierry Lenain

ROOM 2 - *Early tars*, 1961

Although they still maintain a conventional support (the white paper sheet that came after the cardboard), the first tars also demonstrate, and this in a particularly spectacular fashion, the obstinate will to break with tradition that drove Bernar Venet in 1961. These paintings not only signaled the abandonment of the paintbrush, but also that of pictorial color (except as a secondary ingredient). In this case one cannot even speak of industrial paint, which is a matter made to color objects, but only of a substance that has no relationship with painting in any shape whatsoever.

The young Venet was making clear his direct connection with the support. A sheet of paper, for example, would be laid on the floor and paint spread randomly over it, blindly kicked around until it covered nearly all of the surface, revealing long traces of the arch of the foot as it dragged the pigment over the support.

ROOMS 3 & 4 - *Scraps*, 1961

Cardboard in Venet's work gives rise to a reflection that is inherent to the fleeting quality of the support. Initially he used it in his *Scraps* series, works whose surfaces were spotted

with tar drips. Such pieces made overt references to duration, and Venet considered them as short-lived things that would eventually disappear. The very permanence of the work of art was called into question, for the *Scraps* pieces would eventually come to bear the wear and tear of time, accidents which they, consenting victims as it were, would be subjected to. There can be no imaginable restoration of a work of art whose deterioration is an integral part of it. *Scraps* (Déchets in the original French) is a title that conjures up a cycle; the painting's elements indeed sprang from leftover rubbish, and once they had been worked by the artist, the completed piece was to end up as trash.

ROOM 5 - ***Tarmacadam, 1963***

In keeping with a principle similar to the one at work in the sound piece *Gravier goudron* (Tar Gravel), Bernar Venet did another recording, a visual one this time, of a long stretch of highway but in motion. He filmed the asphalt passing under the front of his car. In this case, viewers watch the grain of road surface dissolve in the smooth flow of the moving image playing out from the bottom of the screen to the top in keeping with the elementary reality of the film reel as it unspools.

ROOM 6 - ***Black and Black and Black, 1963***

Taking the manuscript of his 1963 poem *Noir et noir et noir* (Black and Black and Black) as his starting point, Bernar Venet proposes an immersive on-site adaptation of the text for the exhibition. The viewer's body is completely surrounded by this chromatic and typographic installation that verges on the limit of the visible.

ROOM 7 - ***Performance in garbage, 1961***

One day, on his way out of the refectory, Venet came across a pile of garbage. Right away, in front of his incredulous fellow soldiers, he lay down bare-chested among the old cardboard boxes, metal dustbins, and other miscellaneous objects. He asked his accomplice Jean-Pierre Quarez to photograph the performance, which lasted a few minutes. The remaining photographs of the event show him stretched out in a death-like position, which it is easy to see as an allusion to the fate that might have been awaiting him in Algeria, in a matter of months. But he always denied this interpretation, emphasizing the concrete nature of the gesture, which was derived from his idea of opening up the domain of art.

"At the time I was doing reliefs in cardboard, using a gestural type of painting that was very much inspired by the tar spill I'd seen previously. The idea of the performance arose from my urge to go beyond these pictorial practices, and to break with a certain

idea of art. This performance was of course another artistic act ; it enlarged the field of possibilities. I knew about Schiitters' work, and Arman's dustbins ; and my liking for ordinary materials, and lack of interest in the facile, seductive effects of color, were already pointing me in a direction that was unconventional, spare, austere."

ROOM 8 - *Five drawings in three seconds*, 1961

Venet, in a single flurry of movement, did five drawings in three seconds, throwing Indian ink from a bottle onto sheets of paper laid on the floor in a manner that was more restrained and minimalist than that of Pollock and some other abstract expressionists. Aside from the movement of execution that Venet (as a joke intended for Ben) reckoned to be the world's fastest, the performance produced a contrast between the work and its documentation procedures, which took on particular importance.

The drawings had no value in themselves ; what counted was that the spectator was aware of their production through a series of photographs on which more care had been taken than on those of the rubbish-heap performance. Unlike abstract expressionism, this type of performance, involving gestures, actions, and spaces, was not aimed at the creation of a new pictorial language, or even the abandonment of a given pictorial language. The performance in question was the closing statement of a period – that of paintings done with the feet, that of vain strivings for formal control over what was produced.

ROOM 9 - *Tubes*, 1966

"In the spirit of the *Cardboard Relief* paintings, which preceded these *Tubes*, I sought to develop a work with an industrial character, as impersonal as possible, a work that underscores the rupture with the understanding of the artwork as an expression of its author. My propensity for neutrality led me to present sculptures without getting involved in the production stage.

These *Tubes* sculptures made with cardboard rolls were painted in an industrial Kodak yellow. The smallest of them were considered as models that I later reproduced on a larger, definitive scale in steel."

Two sculptures are presented in the garden of the Castle.

ROOM 10 - *Gravel tar*, 1961

Sound Piece

In June 1961, Venet made his first sound recording. He attached a tape recorder to a wheelbarrow, and recorded the sound of its iron wheel on gravel, which, along with an image of the wheelbarrow and the tape recorder, constituted a work in its own right. This performance made Venet one of the first artists to produce an auditory piece that was neither musical nor poetic ; above all, it was a piece that existed only in the form of a recording. A decade later, sound made a still more decisive entrance into the register of

art. Musicians (Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Tony Conrad) and poets (William Burroughs, John Giorno, Bryon Gysin) encountered a generation fascinated by the decompartmentalization of the arts. Curiously, the radicality of Venet's approach was not followed up for some time afterwards, and it was only with his auditory pieces at the start of the nineties that people were able to form an opinion about his proposals.

Albers-Honegger Donation

ROOM 1 - *Pile of Coal*, 1963

Pile of Coal (Tas de charbon) was the work that freed Venet from the constraints with which he began. A work that has no specified shape or dimensions, it is installed loosely in response to the dimensions of the venue. It never exists twice the same, and hence is ephemeral. Lacking dimensions, it is indeterminate. Since it is not precisely arranged but loosely thrown down, it involves randomness and unprecictability. Even more than the *Tars*, it is created by gravity.

Starting about 1968, Robert Smithson exhibited various works of this type, from his *Non-sites* (bins of uncut rocks) to a heap of gravel (*Gravel Corner Piece*, 1968), and, in 1969, a heap of broken glass. Kounellis presented various exhibitions of heaps of coal beginning in 1967 – and so on. But there is something special about Venet's *Pile of Coal*, something genuinely primordial : it seems to have been the first recorded act of designating an unaltered and unmanipulated natural material as a work of art.

ROOM 2 - *Black book*, 1963

The chromatic aspect as a visible attribute of the material, of course, contributes to the constitution of the plastic object ; in this regard the artist needs to take in into full consideration. Several works from 1963 are concerned with this aesthetic exploration of the chromatic side of black matter. This is the case for the *Black Book* (*Livre Noir*). Completly thwarting the expectations of a "reader" who turns page only to each time come up against an entirely black paper rectangle, this object plunges us into a perfect semiotic abyss which abolishes the principle of linear progression that generally defines what a "book" is.

ROOM 2 - *Method of Covering the surface of Painting*, 1963

These paintings represent the last step in the series of black works (tar or collage paintings). The idea entailed making the canvas into a grid of 10 x 30 cm rectangles (the size had to be a multiple of these two figures). The painting started to exist as

such, the day when the first rectangle was painted with a colour chosen by owner, the only colour which was to be respected up to the final phase. Then, very methodically, every month, another rectangle was painted from the left to right and top to bottom. In general, several years were required to complete the work. The principal of this work, is for to be only considered as a "work of art" when the surface is being covered. Then, as the demonstration no longer exists, the owner is supposed to destroy the work or start the process over again, if desired.

ROOM 2 - *Photographs*, 1961 - 1963

Two photographs make use of respectively the whole and the margins of what can be seen when you move in close to the point where the final rays of light are scattered. Printed on glossy photographic paper, these shots show the reflective power of any smooth black surface, its paradoxical ability to insatiably devour light while returning, almost against its will, the mirror image of whatever is located in front of it.

ROOM 3 - *Tars*, 1963

"In order to make the paintings, I poured tar directly onto a canvas on the floor. I used a scraper to spread it evenly over the surface. Then I held each up vertically to spur on the downward flows caused by the unevenness of the layers of the tar, and turned them around several times on each side until the tar began to harden. This method has nothing in common with what painters usually do. I rejected the paintbrush as an intermediary. I respected the specificity of this viscous liquid that obeys the laws of gravity all by itself. Nonetheless black had its *raison d'être*. For two years, until 1963, the somber and the sober hemmed in my universe. Even at that time, I was already convinced that art is not made for pleasure but for knowledge."

ROOM 5, 6 & 7 - *Cardboard reliefs*, 1963

The radicalism of Venet's works in the early 1960s results from the introduction of a new type of presentation, that is, impersonal, self-referential works stamped by the rejection of the notion of style. Thus, the first monochrome *Cardboard Reliefs* appeared in 1963. Assemblages of packaging cardboard, these unrefined reliefs served as supports for monochrome works done in industrial paint and executed, not by the artist, but by bodywork specialists, divesting Venet of any stylistic claims beyond that of the purest uniformity. "The colors I employed, which are used to paint car bodies, weren't definitive. They were meant to be changed after a few years by me, an assistant, or the owner of the piece. "

Bearing in mind the reproducibility of the paintings he turns out, Venet has cautioned that he will not recognize a work that is damaged and hence does not conform to the original he once exhibited : "Nowadays I would consider a work that hasn't been repainted since its realization as unsatisfactory and not up to being shown."

This exhibition was organized in close collaboration with the artist, Bernar Venet. Without his confidence, this exhibition couldn't have taken place. We extend our sincerest thanks to him.

We also thank the following institutions and lenders:

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Opening /

Open from Wednesday to Sunday, beginning on September 1st, from 12 PM to 6 PM.

Open every day from July 1st to August 31st, from 11 AM to 7 PM.

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Around the exhibition

Rendez-vous concrets : 1h / free

Free guided tours of the exhibition

03rd, 09th, 10th of July / 06th and 17th of August / 18th of September : 04:30 pm

08th et 09th of October : 11:30 am

Flash guided tours : 15' / free with the entrance ticket / 15th of July to 15th of August

Arty holidays : 03:00 to 04:00 pm / 7€ for adults / free for kids

Special guided tour for Kids and their parents

Every Thursday in July and August

Sundays : 17th of July, 21st of August, 25th of September, 23rd of October and 27th of November

Rendez-vous documentaires : 02:00 pm / free

Documentaries screening related to the temporary exhibition and the permanent collection.

24th of September - 05th of November

Open air screening : 09:30 pm / free entrance

20th of July

Bernar Venet – sculptures / Film of Thierry Spitzer (2011, 52')

With the presence of Bernar Venet

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