

# WADDINGTON CUSTOT

PRESS RELEASE

## Bernar Venet: When Steel Dreams of Code

6 June–19 July

Opening Reception: 6 June, 6–8pm



Waddington Custot is pleased to present 'When Steel Dreams of Code', a solo exhibition of 12 new generative artworks by celebrated French conceptual artist Bernar Venet (b.1941, Château-Arnoux, France).

Marking a major milestone in Venet's six-decade-long practice, this exhibition introduces his first use of artificial intelligence in art making. Though new in process, these pieces extend Venet's continued investigation into systems of disorder, entropy and authorship. 'When Steel Dreams of Code' will be the first presentation of Venet's *Generative Angles Paintings* in the UK, and will coincide with London Gallery Weekend.

Bernar Venet is an artist internationally recognised for his conceptual approach. A major figure in the 1960s New York avant-garde, with works in the collection of MoMA, the Guggenheim, the Hirshhorn, and the Centre Pompidou, amongst many more, the artist has long used the conceptual languages of mathematics, science and philosophy to interrogate the boundaries of art. Later making monumental sculptures in steel, he is also known for performative acts in which steel motifs – lines, arcs, and angles – are toppled and left where they fall: a spontaneous outcome within controlled parameters.

Rather than a departure, Venet's turn to generative art is a natural evolution of this spontaneous practice. While generative art today is often linked to recent advances in digital technology and algorithms, its underlying principles – chance, entropy, and systematic variation – have been central to Venet's practice since the 1960s, seen in the sculptural 'Pile of Coal' (1963), to his *Déchet* and *Goudron* paintings (1961–1963), to his 'Performance in Garbage' (1961).

In a 1967 essay by the artist, Venet famously rejected the idea of style as an artistic signature in favour of content. He favoured a non-expressive approach to art, giving more importance to the concept than to the

aesthetic of an artwork, not interested in problems of form, colour and material. This concept continues to shape Venet's multidisciplinary approach. Venet applies consistent conceptual qualities – such as the use of minimalist materials and structural simplicity – to express conceptual consistency across sculpture, painting, photography, and now, for the first time, code.

"I've always resisted the idea of style as an artistic signature," Venet reflects. "My goal has been to privilege content over appearance, using whatever materials or techniques best express the idea, whether that's black pigment, cardboard, steel, or now, code."

These new works, the *Generative Angles Paintings*, originate from digital images created in collaboration with a team of coders. The artist uses algorithms to generate variations of the recurring motif of the angle: a central form in his practice since the 1970s. For Venet, angles – two lines sharing a single point – represent a rare form of visual purity. Unlike abstract or figurative imagery, which may carry multiple interpretations, angles belong to the language of mathematics: they are monosemic, or, singular in meaning. The digital compositions are then printed onto canvases that have been hand-painted by Venet.

The *Generative Angles Paintings* extend his renowned *Accident* and *Collapse* series, where straight lines, arcs and angles made of steel are toppled and piled on top of each other, with gravity deciding their final form. In these works, Venet substitutes gravity for artificial intelligence. Through this process, the artist has been able to supercharge conceptual ideas of content and autonomy, with the algorithm providing infinite variations of the angle motif, capitalising on randomness within controlled parameters. The work continues his conceptual exploration of control and authorship, allowing works to generate themselves autonomously. *Generative Angles Paintings* series is in constant dialogue with the artist's pictorial work, underscoring that in his exploration of the physical and digital realms, each inspires the other.

The exhibition marks Venet's second solo show at Waddington Custot, following his 2022 exhibition 'Hypotheses', which also focused on his *Angles* series. 'When Steel Dreams of Code' continues this radical inquiry at a moment of growing debate around ethics, creativity and authorship that come with these new forms of technology.

The exhibition is open from 6 June until 19 July 2025 at Waddington Custot.

#### ABOUT BERNAR VENET:

Bernar Venet (b.1941, Château-Arnoux, France), is a French conceptual artist best known for his sculptures in steel that appear to defy gravity. Aged 17, Venet moved to Nice to work as a set designer for Opéra de Nice, before dedicating himself to art making. During the 1960s, Venet developed his Tar paintings, Relief "cartons" and his iconic 'Tas de charbon' (Pile of Coal), (1963), his first sculpture with no specific shape. In 1966, Venet established himself in New York, where, over the next five decades, he explored painting, poetry, film and performance. 1979 marked a turning point in Venet's career when he began a series of wood reliefs, Arcs, Angles, Straight Lines and created the first of his Indeterminate Lines. That same year, he was awarded a grant by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Venet's career has been marked by a series of celebrated milestones. In 1994, the then-Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, invited Venet to present twelve sculptures from his Indeterminate Line series on the Champ de Mars. From the success of that installation, a world tour was developed, visiting Asia, Europe, South America and North America. In 2007, Bernar Venet was chosen by the French Ministry of Culture to paint the ceiling of the Galerie Philippe Séguin, located in the Cour des Comptes in Paris. The following year, Sotheby's invited Venet to present his work on the grounds of the Isleworth Country Club, Florida; it was the first time they had exhibited a single artist at the venue. In May 2010, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France inaugurated Venet's 30-meter tall sculpture to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Nice's reunification with France. Bernar Venet became the fourth contemporary artist to be offered the grounds of the world-renowned Château de Versailles in France for a solo exhibition of monumental sculptures in 2011. During that same occasion the French Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp of his 22-meter vertical 'Arcs', framing the iconic statue

of Louis XIV at the entrance of Versailles. In October 2019, his 'Arc Majeur' of nearly 200 feet was inaugurated in Belgium on highway E411 between Namur and Luxembourg: it is Europe's largest sculpture.

Venet had his first retrospective at the New York Cultural Center on Columbus Circle in 1971. Contributions to major art events include 'Documenta VI', Kassel, in 1977 and frequent appearances at the Biennales of Paris, Venice, and São Paulo. Venet is the most internationally exhibited living French artist and his public sculpture exhibitions amount to over thirty, to date. In 2022, Venet's largest and most comprehensive retrospective to date opened at Kunsthalle Berlin, Tempelhof Airport. In 2025, the artist has had major, institutional exhibitions at the National Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia, and the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China.

Venet's work can be found in more than 70 museums worldwide, including such venerable institutions as The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; and Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva. Bernar Venet has also received commissions for sculptures permanently installed in Auckland, Austin, Bergen, Berlin, Denver, Paris, Neu-Ulm, Nice, Seoul, Shenzhen, Tokyo and Toulouse.

Venet has been the recipient of several distinguished honours, including France's Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. He has also been awarded the 2013 International Julio González Sculpture Prize, the 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center (ISC), the Prix 2017 Montblanc de la Culture, the Prix François Morellet 2019, and became a fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors in London in 2020. The Venet Foundation, inaugurated in July 2014, aims to preserve the site of the artist's home in Le Muy, France, conserve the collection and ensure that Venet's work lives on after him.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

### Exhibition Information

Title: Bernar Venet, When Steel Dreams of Code

Dates: 6 June–19 July

Opening Reception: Friday 6 June, 6–8pm

### Image

'Generative Angles Painting - Black and White 11', 2025. Image courtesy the artist and Waddington Custot

### About Waddington Custot

Waddington Custot was formed through the partnership of French art dealer Stephane Custot and long-time London art dealer Leslie Waddington, in 2010. Located in Cork Street since 1958, formerly as Waddington Galleries, the gallery has a rich heritage and an international reputation for quality and expertise in works by modern and contemporary masters, with a particular focus on monumental sculpture. The gallery has cemented its reputation over several decades for high quality and well-researched exhibitions of significant artists operating in the mid-twentieth century and beyond.

Gallery opening hours: Monday to Friday 10:00–18:00 ; Saturday 11:00–18:00

### Contact

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