

PRESS RELEASE

On Wednesday 23 October 2019, the Arc Marjeur of Bernar Venet is officially inaugurated, at kilometre 99 of the E411 motorway on the border between the Belgian provinces of Namur and Luxembourg began in mid-March of this year.

Arc Majeur: art as a challenge to technology

Conceived in 1984 already by the internationally renowned artist Bernar Venet, the work was manufactured in the workshops of the John Cockerill Group's Welding Expertise Centre (Seraing). Spotlight on this outsize project!

From dream to reality: a human adventure

From the time Bernar Venet drew his first sketch, it has taken 35 years for the *Arc Majeur* to come into existence. This is a story of passion, the story of an essential oeuvre in the artist's 'projects' and of the various people who have carried the project over the years. It is also the story of a meeting between two men driven by the same wish: to turn a dream into reality.

Genesis

The *Arc Majeur* project was devised by Bernar Venet in 1984, at the request of Jack Lang, the French Minister for Culture under President François Mitterrand. After having travelled up and down the network of French motorways, the artist chose the site which was to host the world's largest steel sculpture: the Porte de Bourgogne, between Auxerre and Avallon.

Johannes Schaub became the project director, and he poured all of his energy into it, looking for sponsors and technicians, commissioning feasibility studies, and more. At the instigation of Françoise Calvet, the Friends of the *Arc Majeur* Association helped to turn the proposal into a reality. Photographs, and even a film, imaged the *Arc Majeur* framing the A6 motorway. The sculpture had yet to come into existence but it was already tangible in the minds of many people. To such an extent that people close to the artist claimed to have seen it, even though it was still merely a sketch. Unfortunately the project had to be abandoned. Twice in Bourgogne, and then a third time, in Moselle.

Encounter

The first meeting between Bernard Serin and the *Arc Majeur* dates back to 1993. Having returned from the United States, the current president of the John Cockerill Group learned that feasibility studies had been carried out in France by the Usinor research laboratory, one of the group's subsidiaries. He took an interest in the project, one of a kind in its particular field.

Bernard Serin met Bernar Venet in 2004, in Belgium, at the head office of the John Cockerill Group in Seraing. At the time the artist was working on an exhibition project with the city of Liège. Circumstances led the two men to meet again several years later, within the context of a work being produced for the city of Salzburg in Austria. The plan failed to materialize, but the steel was reused

and the John Cockerill workshops produced a monumental sculpture that was affixed to the façade of the Dongkuk Steel building in South Korea. Contacts between Bernar Venet and Bernard Serin grew more and more frequent, and a friendship developed.

Apotheosis

In 2014 the John Cockerill Group commissioned two twin works from Bernar Venet: the first was installed in the Group's head office, the second given to the city of Seraing. Marking the link between public and private spaces, the two sculptures echo the gesture made by the founder John Cockerill, who in 1870 had two identical statues made, each illustrating the four occupations cherished by the city and the businessman: coal miner, mechanic, blacksmith and iron puddler.

Bernar Venet and Bernard Serin met again at the opening ceremony of these works and of the company's new building. The *Arc Majeur* was still on their minds, implicitly present in their conversations. On that day, in the company of representatives of the Walloon Region, the decision was taken. The *Arc Majeur* would be manufactured in the John Cockerill Group's workshops. Funded by the company with the support of its partners, it would be offered as a gift to the Walloon Region, a symbol of its time-honoured know-how.

What followed was a series of meetings, sketches and designs, feasibility studies, assessment meetings involving specialists and thousands of work hours.

The *Arc Majeur* is at once a work of art, a technical challenge and a human adventure. A dream which has become a reality, 35 years after its initial conception.

E411, km 99: the ideal setting

Once the decision to manufacture and install the work in Belgium had been taken, choosing the location became one of the first steps. The artist once again drove up and down a network of motorways, but this time in Belgium, a territory close to his heart.

The site that had to serve as the backdrop for the *Arc Majeur* had to be free of any building, free of any axial lighting. Surrounded by greenery while providing a vast panorama. Visible from a distance, so that the work may be viewed from a distance, so as to then be discovered while moving towards it before going through it and then watching it recede in the distance.

At kilometre marker 99 on the E411 motorway, at the level of Lavaux-Sainte-Anne, the choice of location became obvious: it was there, and nowhere else, that the *Arc Majeur* would come into existence. And today, on the summit of a hill, the steel sculpture elevates its majestic lines. Both monumental and graceful, it fits perfectly into its natural setting. Its dimensions have been adapted so as to nestle into this environment. Overhanging its surrounding landscape, its metal curve of 205.5° appears to carry the sky. It gracefully encircles the landscape, its two symmetrically shaped visible arcs joining up virtually under one of Europe's busiest motorways.