

The Centre of the World – the first stage of a monumental land-art installation by Michel Comte, reaching beyond the border into Syria from ancient Turkish city of Harran, will be completed in 2021

The multi-media artist, climate campaigner and photographer is currently working on an artwork so large that once complete it will be visible from space

Located in Upper-Mesopotamia, roughly 20 kilometres from the present-day border with Syria, Harran lies at the heart of where mankind first bonded in settlement. Archaeological remains – such as those at the site of Göbekli Tepe very close by – demonstrate the earliest signs of civilisation as we know it: where the cultivation of crops and the domestication of animals first came into practice and the first connections between religion and architecture were formed. The city, populated by the Sabians – a community of star worshippers, was a vital trading post in the ancient world. Its geographical location provides an outstanding view of the constellation of Orion. Constructed here were the world's first observatory and university, of which the great archway still stands today. Much later, in the 9th century AD, Harran was the leading city within the Arabic world for the production of celestial globes.

Working with Japanese architect Mitsunori Sano, Comte will chisel an initial series of five (potentially seventeen) circular excavations ranging from 20 to 25 metres in width and a minimum of three metres in depth into the desert ground and covering an area of over 120 kilometres. The scale and position of each circle will mirror the formation of Orion in the night sky, especially visible in the months of February and March. Each evening as the sun goes down and until the moon is visible, the outline of each circle will be gradually lit, forming a connection between the knowledge of the ancient Sabian star worshippers and technology today.

“Appreciating this work will require commitment in the strict sense of the word: ‘The Centre of the World’ is not at first easily visible, plus it is located far from the beaten track, in a site loaded with history extending from the beginning of civilisation to the current time. People first have to make their way here and then they have to experience it at different moments of the day in order to fully appreciate all the variations that light and shadow will create.” Michel Comte

Comte chose to work in Harran because of its multilayered historical, societal and religious legacy in combination with the complex socio-political reality of today. His aim is to build a bridge between the ancient and the new, as Comte notes, “*a road to peace*”.

Comte's commitment to socially-orientated projects started over thirty years ago. In 1994–95 he worked to support the building of an orthopaedic hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, travelling there many times over the year. Similar projects followed, including auctions to raise money for the International Committee of the Red Cross and organisations alike worldwide. Throughout his years as a fashion photographer he worked on photo assignments from the International Red Cross in war-ravaged regions including Bosnia, Angola, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan and Somalia. Comte's book *People and Places with no Name*, published by Steidl records much of what he saw during these years. During the Gulf War he went twice to Iraq and also worked in Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Syria.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Born in Zurich in 1954, multimedia artist Michel Comte studied in France and England. He began his career in art restoration, specialising in contemporary art; his restoration works include those by Andy Warhol, Yves Klein and Miró. In 1979 Comte met Karl Lagerfeld who gave him his first commercial assignment for Chloé and later Chanel. He has since collaborated with Vogue Italia, Vanity Fair and Interview, and with brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Gianfranco Ferré, Calvin Klein, BMW, Ferrari and LVMH, among many others.

Comte later traveled to conflict zones to raise funds for humanitarian projects such as "People and Places with No Name." In 2008 he met Ayako Yoshida and has since dedicated more time to art and personal projects; together they produced their first 3D feature film *The Girl From Nagasaki* in 2013. Comte opened "Neoclassic," his exhibition on the rise and fall of neoclassicism, at the National Gallery of Parma in fall 2016. He has completed four exhibitions from his "Light" series: at Museo Maxxi, Rome; La Triennale, Milan; Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing; and most recently at Dirimart, Istanbul. "Light" is a study of natural landscapes through large-scale sculptures, photography, video installations and projections, exploring the impact of environmental decline on the world's glaciers and glacial landscapes.

Upcoming projects

In spring 2021, Comte will have a major solo exhibition at the Old Royal Naval Collage in Greenwich, London. In summer 2021, he will sail to Spitsbergen, a Norwegian archipelago in the North Pole as part of a project that will include a light installation that will highlight how much ice is being lost in the area. In the second half of November 2021 Comte will exhibit a 3D map profiling glaciers — in real scale — against the buildings of the Vatican City in Italy.

Publications

Comte's published books include *Thirty Years and Five Minutes; Images of Man, The Best from 50 Years of Photography; Charlie Chaplin, A Photo Diary; People and Places Without Name; Michel Comte: Faces: Michael by Michel; Aiko T; Michael Schumacher: Driving Force and Light*, and more.

Produced as part of a new collaboration with Steidl and published under the name Steidl Comte, forthcoming books include Comte's artworks and photography, their art direction and design are by Jens Remes, Michel Comte and Gerhard Steidl collaborating as an artistic collaborative. Future titles include *Aviator, Neoclassic, Light V, The New World Order, One Night in Wien, Garden of Beauty and The Water in Between*.

Aligned with *The Centre of the World* in Harran is his forthcoming publication also with Steidl Comte, entitled *El & Us*, or 'engineering life & us'. Exploring the thin line between contemporary art and molecular research, this publication marks a collaboration between Michel Comte and NCCR MSE (National Centre of Competence in Research Molecular Systems Engineering) at the University of Basel and the ETH Zurich, to translate science into art and reveal this life-changing research to a broad audience. The cutting-edge combination of biology and engineering allows deep interventions into living organisms that are now on the verge of substantially impacting human health and disease treatment. Such comprehensive, paradigm-shifting change accordingly requires the consent of a society well informed through interactive and ethically conducted debate. To facilitate this and bridge the communication gap between complex science and the general public, the NCCR MSE has created Art of Molecule, an interdisciplinary framework through which contemporary artists discuss, challenge and (re-)form the project's research goals. *EL & Us* is Michel Comte's proactive contribution to this project and its central issue: can engineering life lead to a better future?

For further information on any current or future projects, for images or interviews please contact:

Rhiannon Pickles and Cecilia Vilela at Pickles PR

E: rhiannon@picklespr.com | Tel: +31 (0)6158 21202

E: cecilia@picklespr.com | Tel: +44 (0)7449 872 799