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## The Anamorphoses of Felice Varini

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### Abstract

In the works of the Swiss artist Felice Varini, the fusion of color, space, architecture, geometry and visual perception make room for spectacular spaces. Taking advantage of the synergy between the anamorphosis and color, the artist creates optical illusions. The colored forms assume their real semblance only when observed from a particular point of view. From all the other angles they seem to be just random stains of color. The right point of view is generally situated at the average height of man along the inevitable route, for example along the way from one location to another. However, this is not always so because not all spaces have a systematically superimposed obvious way of passing through them. He brings forth and uses simple geometrical forms: squares, triangles, ellipses, circles, rectangles and the like. These forms are generally created with primary colors: red, blue or yellow, and very rarely with such colors as white or black.

Keywords: anamorphosis; optical illusions; geometry;

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## 1. Introduction

Felice Varini is a painter whose artistic language consists of simple geometric forms: Squares, ovals, circles, rectangles, lines and so can be compared to Mondrian and Van Doesburg. To create his forms he applies only one color at a time, usually using primary colors and only sometimes secondary ones or black and white. His approach to art is unique because he never uses canvas for his creations. Instead they are all supported by the architecture of various places. Secondly, he makes consistent use of the optical effects of anamorphosis, i.e. a geometric painted figure that can only be seen from a single point of view predetermined by the artist (Varini, 2014). Thanks to this artistic devise the observer sees at a first glance some deconstructed elements, which assume full geometric form only when observed from a single point of view. Thus, ultimately, the artist forces the observer to move in space and reconstruct the work by himself. Obviously this can only be achieved through a prearranged design where the artist has to imagine the desired form in space before going to apply on architectural structures colored elastomers or elastic rubber bands that allow him to form a film that protects architecture and that is easily removable (Geovoyage, 2014). The anamorphic devise - the basis for Felice Varnini's art - was already known as early as the XV century. Piero Della Francesca mentions its principles in his "De Prospettiva Pingendi". 'Anamorfosi' as a term appears for the first time only in the XVII century in the treatise and specifically in the "Magia universalis naturae et artis" (1657-1659) of Schott under the name of "Magica Anamorphotica". Anamorphism is an optical illusion achieved by projecting an image on a plane in such a way that the original subject can be seen only when viewed from one particular and predetermined standpoint. Viewed from other positions it remains deformed (distorted) and completely unrecognizable (anamorphosis derives from the Greek ἀναμόρφωσις, composed of ana and mórfosis = a reconstructed form). Anamorphosis can be classified into two typologies: the direct variety and the indirect one. To the former belong the ones that can be correctly seen directly by the observer and are defined as optical or perspectival anamorphoses. The latter can be seen correctly only through the intermediary of a special instrument, the anamorphoscope. If it is a mirror, it creates catoptric anamorphosis. When it is a lens it will, be the origin of the dioptric anamorphosis. Felice Varini usually uses optical anamorphoses by applying color, although he is well experienced with catoptric anamorphoses where mirrors are applied. The art of Varini clearly shows that the perspective still holds firm as the relief although a great many modern artists seek to get emancipated there from.

### 1.1 Geometry for construction and display colors

Taking advantage of the principle of anamorphosis Varini paints fragments of colored geometric forms on architectural structures. Thus his works always present a double face: on the one hand they are a geometric form that we "can" see only from a unique, correct standpoint, while – on the other hand – they exist as geometric forms scattered in space: the eternal dialectic of part and whole. The color of the fragments helps us understand the genius of Varini: The importance of his work is not revealed only when we perceive the whole form. On the contrary, it comes alive in the explosion of colors of the scattered fragments. In fact it is the fragments that are arranged on architectural surfaces constructed independently of the artist's will (Bougault & Milonas, 2013). His will is only interested in "designing" the projection of a geometric form legible form only one point of view. Color of the fragments plays efficaciously a communicative role as much as it continuously varies the visual stimulus in the eye of the observer. The colored fragments emerge as a narration of a reconstructed geometric figure while at the same time leading to a revelation of the whole geometric form, in a way re-inventing architectonic space. Let us consider as an example the work entitled "Corone e centri concentrici per l'angolo, arancioni" (Crowns and concentric centers for a corner, orange) realized by Varini for the l'Expo "Arte in Ticino 1953-2003" (The Arts in Ticino 1953-2003), where the spectators can only see colored fragments on walls, stairs, ceilings. The color attracts and holds attention of the

observer. The fragments seem to signify something as parts of something else, they are not endowed with any structured geometric form, yet when the observer finds the correct point of view, they re-compose to create perfect concentric circles revealing that – although separate – they belong to a whole (Lequeux, 2012). Thus, the greatness of his art seems to have its source in geometry and in human perception: the eye of the observer “perceives” a fragment as part of a whole and while seeking the right point of view it re-composes the geometry (Broggi & Steinegger, 2012).. It is important to note that color is used only on single fragments: Only these elements are painted in reality. Everything else the observer sees and perceives, as a whole is simply an optic illusion. Felice Varini has never painted whole figures, only the fragments that compose them geometrically (Varini, 2008). In terms of technique he starts with defining the point of view, a place at his eye level.



**Figure 1. “Corone e centri concentrici per l’angolo, arancioni”, Expo Arte in Ticino 1953-2003.**

Then, making use of a video projector he projects on an architectural surface a geometric figure designed on a flat surface which he first traces with a pencil and then colors it with colored elastomeric paintings. His method of working remains invariable for all his creations... Formal subjects do not change, either. The only variable element is his language of geometry that stretches from simple polygons to complex ones, passing through circles, ellipses or recurrent sequences of lines (Varini, 2004). Only in compact spaces does he use mirrors or takes advantage of dioptric anamorphosis to render his work comprehensible. In his anamorphoses he uniquely distances himself from his predecessors in that he never creates paintings to “cover” architecture, but invariably realizes only monochromatic geometric figures constructing a rigorous relation to architecture. Hence his work is affected through the experience of perceptual discontinuity, in the dialectic between various points of view and the varied optic impressions generated through the clash of painted fragments, optical illusion and the characteristic features of the architectural context (Meinhardt, 1999).

**Three-dimensional space constructive geometry: The construction of the boundaries representation**

The search for the right point of view is the essential element in the work of Felice Varini. Indeed, it is the key to reading and visualizing his entire opus because he conceived it for this particular point. Hence perspective lies at the foundations of his artistic approach and functions as the point of departure for his technical efforts (Varini, 1999). The point of view is always selected in relation to the characteristic features of the architectural space. It always takes account of the elements to be emphasized on the basis of how the place is going to be used by the spectator.



**Figure 2. Felice Varini, Doble disque évidé par les toits, Salon de Provence / Marseille, Marsiglia, 2013**

The observer moves through architectonic space without any indication as to the position of the point of view, which the artist does not identify or reveal in any way. Thus the work of Varini is based on the duality between the point of view – which fulfils the work of art – and the multiplicity of viewpoints of the observers who happen to use the space catching many various perspectives on various elements of the work. In the stage of designing, therefore, the eye of Varini, assumes the position in the very center of the projection of the perspective while leaving to the eyes of the observer the possibility to catch sight of other perspectives. In this way, he links tradition and modernity, reality and illusory perception. Already by the act of choosing colors he makes the first step towards the world of illusion. As mentioned above he uses primary colors, which are more luminous. They evoke those articulated by De Stijl and are definitely artificial, belonging thus to the world of artefacts and as such they do not exist in the real world. Even though at the beginning of his activity he searched for the tight relation between the choice of colour and space, in his later opus he becomes pretty free and uses colour regardless of the space in which he finds himself to be.



**Figure 3. Felice Varini, Ellipse rouge en diagonale pour deux colonnes, “Points de vue sur Wolfsberg”, Ermatingen, Suisse, 1997.**

When we look at a work of Varini from the ideal point of view, our visual reality is modified and we get the impression of seeing a flat figure in three-dimensional space. On the one hand Varini finds direct support in reality, superimposing painting on architecture, on the other hand one cannot deny

that his works are linked to optical illusion, even though it is evident that spreading colour on architectural structures and not on canvas, he creates a three-dimensional sense of “volume”. He places emphasis on space and always chooses with care the architectural elements on which he is going to paint. He selects carefully the exact position in which to arrange his work and seeing there is no canvas, he offers to the spectator not a single frontal vision but multiple points of view including the possibility of 360-degree exploration. The perspective endows the two dimensional image with a sense of profundity. In Varini's works the situation is reversed: by applying anamorphosis the artist tends to do away with profundity created by architectural volumes in order to present an illusion of two dimensional flat figures (Varini, 1993).

### **Interaction and diversity between space and time**

The study of space often spontaneously relates it to the concept of time. This is exactly what happens in the works of Varini, in which the “time” concept appears in various paradigms:

- time of discovery, i.e. the time necessary for the observer to find the correct point of view.
- time linked to the architectonic locus and to the dualism between a contemporary work and a historical place.
- time related to the existence of the work of art itself which arranged as it is on architectonic space and not on canvas, will be of transitory nature.

What is more, the fact of placing painting upon architecture creates in his work rather unique oppositions and connections: tensions between content and form, concrete space and abstract space, between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality.



**Figure 4. Felice Varini, Tra il pieno e il vuoto, Collezione oncologia Varini&Calderoni, Lugano, 2003**

The observer cannot see the fragments and the re-composed figure at the same time: while exploring architectonic space he observes architecture on which colored fragments are painted; but when he intercepts the point of view, his eye concentrates on the geometrical figure and in fact fails to see the surrounding architecture.

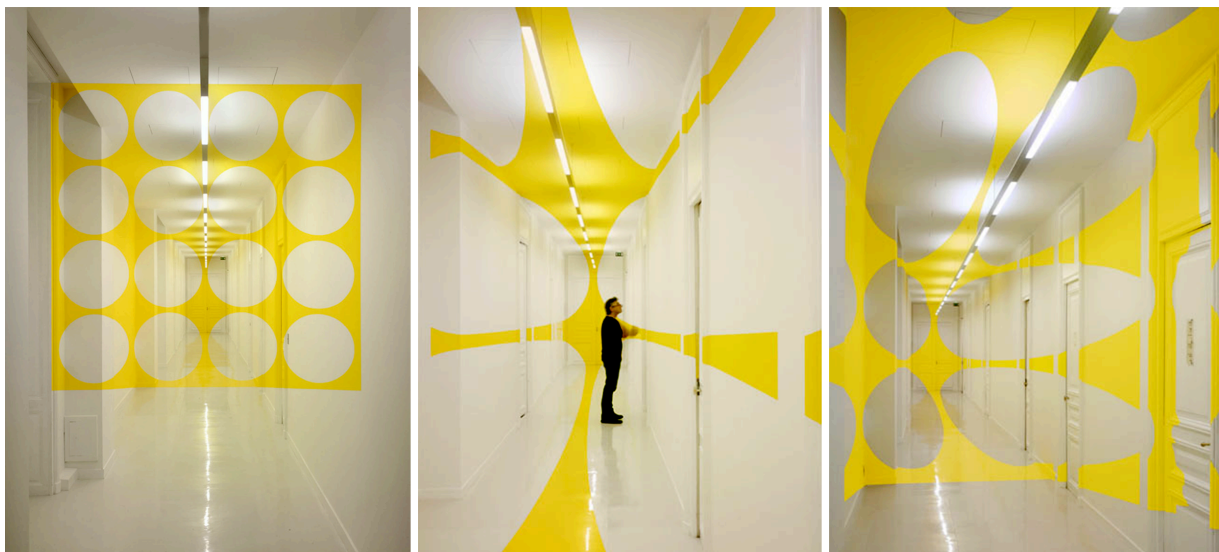
All this seems to generate a tension between content and form, between three-dimensionality and two-dimensionality, between concrete and abstract space and between real and illusory space. Prior to intervention

Varini analyses with utmost precision the concrete space taking into consideration various factors, like light, shadow, form of the place, full spaces and empty ones, etc., in such a way as to be able to use their potentialities to the full. Thus, the concept of time becomes comprehensible thanks to associating it with the lifetime of the work.

The latter cannot be replicated in another place, neither can it be ascribed a meaning different from the one that it expresses in this particular architectonic space, as it is conceived and painted precisely there.

After all the very concept of anamorphosis obeys geometrical rules which map out the form of the place that will allow the artist to obtain the visual perception not always possible to actualize in another place without losing the final completeness of the reconstructed form.

Arrangement and dimension of the architectonic space are obligatory if one wishes to recreate the anamorphosis itself.



**Figure 5. Felice Varini, Carré aux seize disques, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Parigi (2011)**

## 2. Conclusions

Multi level approach of Felice Varini makes him an artist capable to create in the spectator strong tensions and contradictions by taking advantage of color, geometry and architecture. Initially the device of anamorphosis creates a powerful dialectic between the colored fragment and the perception of the reconstructed work that forces the observer to frenetically search for the point of view ideal to reconstruct the form, without which the random fragments would be devoid of any meaning. In a certain sense the opus of Varini puts an end to painting conceived as an object of static contemplation. The use of Varini's works extends towards dynamic contemplation, giving importance to the architecture on which his realizations are arranged, including such features as two dimensionalities of painting within three dimensionalities of architecture, which in the way integrate the two "media" of work thanks to the use of colour. Thus, painting and architecture are placed on the same level.

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