

PIN-UP

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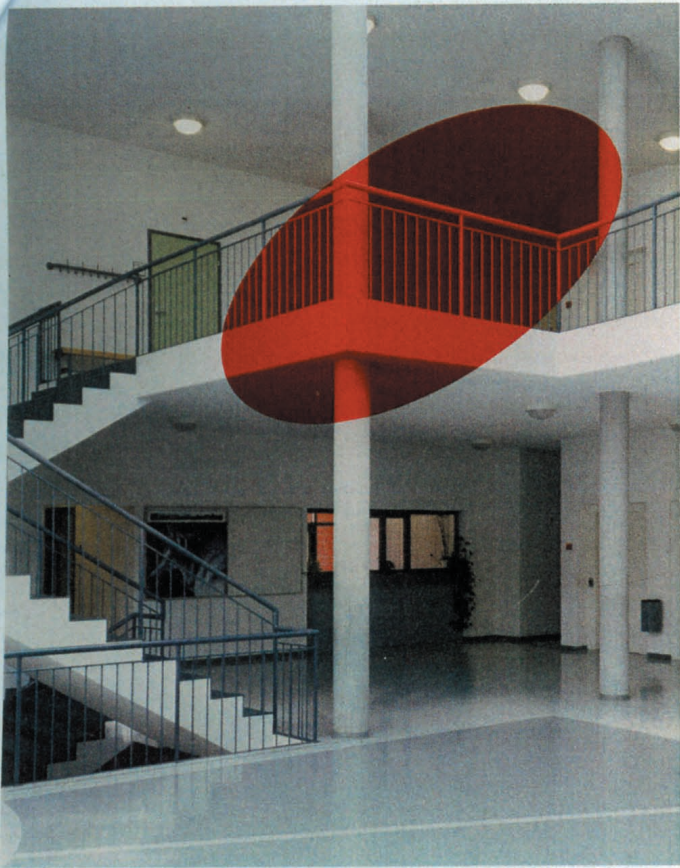
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**Featuring
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Elisse Rossa Piena, 1996; Lugano-Besso, Switzerland.
© Felice Varini

PANORAMA

Painting Camelot

Swiss artist Felice Varini paints on buildings.

By Andrew Ayers

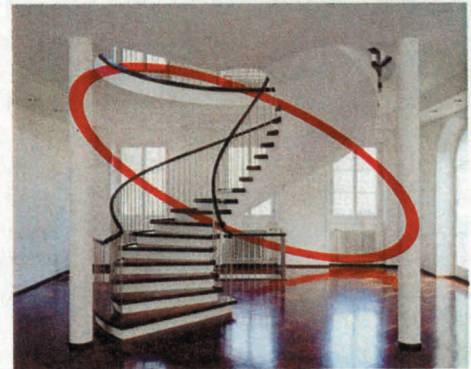
How do you go beyond Mondrian, Malevich, and Pollock? For Felice Varini — who set himself this challenge on arriving to Paris in 1978 — the answer is by breaking out of the picture frame and painting directly onto the surrounding environment. But Varini's works are no simple murals: approaching them, you will at first see only a confusing jumble of deformed fragments spread out across the built surface; then, all of a sudden, when viewed from one particular fixed spot, a perfect two-dimensional image takes form before

your eyes, appearing to hover in a virtual space entirely separate from its support medium. Created using light projectors, Varini's paintings are a variation on the anamorphosis of Renaissance curiosities, such as the skull in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533, National Gallery, London), or William Scrots's *Portrait of Edward VI* (1546, National Portrait Gallery, London), adapted to incorporate architecture in such a way that, as with sculpture, movement on the viewer's part is essential to appreciate them. His works reverse the

usual functioning of pictorial perspective: instead of two-dimensional images appearing to take on depth, we have paintings spread out in three dimensions that suddenly appear perfectly flat when viewed from the projection point.

The principles of anamorphosis have long been used in architecture itself to contrive fixed-point illusions. A famous example is the Opéra Garnier, in Paris: when viewed from the exact center of the entrance to the Place de l'Opéra, the façade's colonnade appears to be topped by a pediment; when viewed from anywhere else, however, one realizes that the "pediment" is entirely unrelated to the colonnade and is in fact the gable of the opera's enormous fly tower. The parallel between the Palais Garnier and Varini's paintings is striking: a plastically complex build-

ing, fully articulated in three dimensions, suddenly, at one fixed point, transforms into a two-dimensional elevational drawing of the kind so dear to the Beaux-Arts movement. And just as Charles Garnier carefully calibrated the three dimensions of his building to create a two-dimensional illusion, so Varini carefully calibrates his two-dimensional images to fit the three dimensions of the architecture on which he paints. To achieve this, he generally relies on photographs, which serve as preparatory plates onto which the two-dimensional compositions are drawn. Employed at the outset, photography is just as important at the end of the process, since, as with architecture itself, it is the photographic record that allows Varini's paintings to reach a wider audience. Although he likens his compositions to musical scores that can be



Ellipse Rouge en Diagonale Pour Deux Colonnes, 1997; Ermatingen, Switzerland. © Felice Varini



Ellipse Rouge en Diagonale Pour Deux Colonnes, as seen from a different angle. © Felice Varini

played more than once in different surroundings, each “performance” is nonetheless unique, and can therefore be preserved only via film and photography.

Varini resists any over-theorizing or over-interpretation of his work. He dislikes the word “installation,” insisting that his creations are paintings. For him, it is a question of pursuing the trail blazed by the great abstract

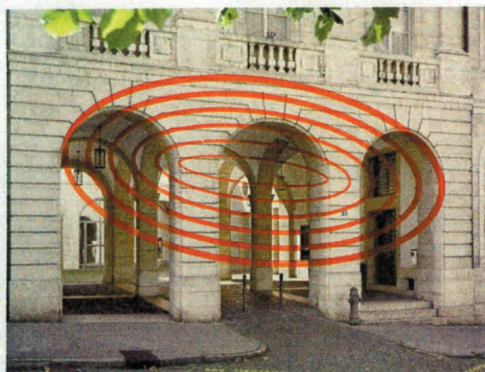
painters and pushing further the principles they championed: that painting should be fully autonomous, concerned only with itself and not with representing, depicting, or symbolizing anything else, least of all the personality of the painter. The already abstract forms Varini uses — lines, circles, triangles, etc. — are arguably further abstracted through their fragmentation, deformation,

and dispersal in space. And authorial intent is subverted to the extent that it is not the artist but the projection process that “decides” how many and where the painted fragments will be, as well as the degree and nature of their deformation — a conceit similar to some Surrealist working methods, where chance, through the medium of an “autonomous” generating process, plays a significant part in the work’s creation.

Despite their precise, “anonymous” geometry, the observer is always aware that Varini’s paintings are not randomly generated by machines but handmade by human beings. Although Varini is modest about the technical difficulties of his work, they can nonetheless pose a considerable challenge, and their successful resolution is one of the “wow” factors to which viewers respond. How, for example, does he manage the huge scale of some pieces? A 2007 painting in Saint-Nazaire, France, had a depth of field of three quarters of a mile; the farthest painted surface, which appeared as the tiny tip of a triangle when viewed from the projection point, in fact covered over 2,000 square feet; and the work’s largest painted surface measured 5,300 square feet. Another piece, created in 2001 at the Castelgrande in Bellinzona, Switzerland, involved painting a perfect red line several thousand feet long onto the craggy surface of a rock outcrop. This was the first time Varini had tackled anything like this, and it took him a month. Now, he says, he could do it in a week. One aspect of his work that he cannot accelerate, however, is the huge amount of preparation required for certain paintings: for those in multi-building urban contexts,

permission has to be sought from every landlord, occupant, and tenant, as well as from the various civil authorities, which can take months to organize.

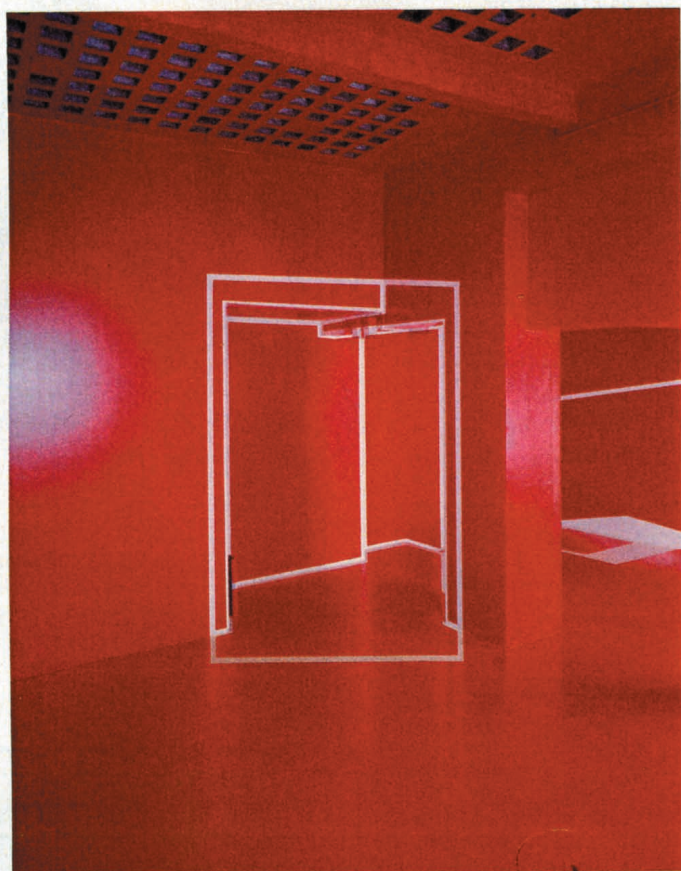
While the technical accomplishments of Varini’s pieces certainly elicit admiration, they are generally not the first thing to which viewers respond: it is of course the moment of discovery, when the two-



6 Ellipses Pour Six Colonnes, 2008; Les Halles, Porrentruy, Switzerland. © Felice Varini



Sept Couronnes Excentriques, 2006; L’Abbaye Saint-Jean d’Orbestier, France. © Felice Varini



30-32, rue de Lappe No. 3, 1986; “F.V.,” Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris, France. © Felice Varini

dimensional image takes form, that never fails to astonish and delight. The surprise engenders an emotion not unlike that felt at the end of a fictional romance, when, after trials and tribulations, setbacks and near misses, the lovers finally come together. But lest this seem too trite, like a Hollywood happy ending, the threat of disintegration is ever present: move just an inch or two and the illusion breaks up, the hovering figure shatters, and, like the Lady of Shallot, we are left with unreadable shards.

— Andrew Jeremy Ayers is a Paris-based art historian and writer.