

## **“Three Black Circles in Air” by Felice Varini**

Art Spot Talk by Eric Epstein, 23 July 2010

I’m speaking to you today as a board member of Site Projects Inc, the non-profit guerilla art force that brought you

- **Leo Villareal’s** mesmerizing LED sculpture on the NH Green, “Chasing Rainbows New Haven”
- **Matej Vogrincic’s** iconic boats afloat in the Farmington canal cut behind the Creative Arts Workshop
- **Jason Hackenwirth’s** whacked out balloon sculptures, the Megamites, in the Peabody Museum’s Great Hall of Dinos

And now two magical works by the Swiss artist, Felice Varini: **“Square with 4 Circles”** (in the alleyway between Zinc and Ann Taylor), and this piece, **“Three Black Circles in Air”** which will remain here through the end of September.

Today I’d like to speak with you about 4 aspects of **“Three Black Circles in Air.”** 4 because it’s Friday at 5pm and we all want to be getting on with the weekend; 4 because you only paid \$5 to get in today, after all—if you want more you’ll have to buy me dinner; and 4 because that’s the number of extraordinary aspects of this installation I want to mention tonight.

### **1 – THE LIBRARY**

How is it possible to find something like that (Three Black Circles in Air) in a place like this (the main branch of the New Haven Public Library)? Libraries don’t normally offer themselves up as the epicenter for cutting edge art, but there you have it. And what better place to confront the general public with such work than the center hall in the mothership of New Haven’s public library system? So, congratulations to the Library staff and leadership for the foresight and courage to sponsor this installation.

### **2 - THE ARTIST’S CRAFT**

- **EXPERIENCE:** Varini is really good at what he does. The common wisdom is that you need to put in 10,000 hours before you can claim mastery. Varini has certainly put in his time. Visit [Varini.org](http://Varini.org) and you will see dozens of pieces of all scales all over Europe, some several KILOMETERS across, that Varini has realized since he began working thirty years ago. This piece and the one in the Zinc/AnnTaylor alleyway, by the way, are his first in the US
- **PRACTICED EYE:** during his site search for these installations, Varini showed us his keen eye for unusual 3-dimensional space and an adventurer’s enthusiasm for degrees of difficulty.
- **ATTENTION TO DETAIL:** Felice knew what it would take to put his ideas into play. He specified paint, tape, brushes, lifts, projectors, helpers and time. It was still up to the monster efforts of Site Projects to put the pieces together—the permits, the crane with licensed operator,

the neighbors' approvals, security, insurance, volunteer helpers. But that's what we do, though we're still working up to that 10,000 hour benchmark.

- PROFESSIONALISM—Felice is a hard worker having fun doing what obviously gives him great pleasure. He works carefully, knowledgeably, a practiced hand laying out these enormous works with precision, speed and grace, all the result of years focused on the magical nature of this special and particular area of human perception

### **3 – I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ART, BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE...**

I'm not an expert in the history of art so I won't be placing this work in that context for you. You'll have to do your own homework. Again...what did you expect for 5 bucks? But as an architect, I am visually trained, and I have a few of my own 10,000 hour weeks that enable me to occasionally actually see what I'm looking at. For me there are 2 particularly astonishing things about this work:

First, Varini selects deeply 3-dimensional spaces for his installations, spaces with a complexity of surface and variety of material. Even in the smaller interior work, like this piece in front of us, he chooses to install his pure geometry in a zone of convolution.

When I am at what Varini calls the "pointe de vue," the purity of the geometry flattens out the space it's in. My visual experience has taught me to see these circles as a 2-dimensional graphic, and I am tricked into ignoring the spatial cues of the architecture and overriding the clues of light and shadow. This deeply 3-dimensional space is overwhelmed by this pure geometry, and is rendered flat. It's a magic trick!

Second, surprisingly, this phenomenon works as well in reverse. As soon as I move away from the "pointe de vue," the graphic's geometric purity is violently shattered, and the 3-dimensionality of the space comes crashing back, beyond my expectation of normal. My eye overcompensates and the space becomes hyper-dimensional. This is even more noticeable with the piece in the alleyway across the Green—the orange arms of the thing come at you at an alarming speed with your first few steps down the alley.

So there you have it: This simple, static application of tape or paint within an architectural space flattens the three dimensional world—an audacious move—and then pulls it back, past a depth that is reasonable to expect. This is where, if we close our eyes, we can see Felice's wry little smile. He squashes space unmercifully, then stretches it to the breaking point.

The work challenges us to question how we see and what we see. It forces us to re-evaluate our perception.

If that's not art, I don't know what is.

Which brings me to my 4<sup>th</sup> and final point:

#### 4 – LIFE IMITATING ART

I spend my days—as you probably do—immersed in the details of life, the minutia of work, family logistics, the needs of my dog. Each of these details is a tiny mirror on my own life's little disco ball. What gives me joy, and the people I love, are what glues these disparate little tiles onto the pure shape of the life I've managed to create for myself.

But every now and again, sometimes when I least expect it, the ball stops spinning, and I'll feel like I'm seeing it from the other end of the telescope, in its beautiful entirety. Something I'm reading, a clear night sky, the death of my father...and the ball will come to rest. I'll step back from the individual tiles and the pure geometry of the whole will seem to be revealed to me: Oh...it's a BALL!

Of course it's not always a ball. It could as easily be a wasp, and I'll have to run like hell. But it's an a-ha moment nonetheless, when things seem to make a kind of fuller sense. Such is the nature of Varini's *pointe de vue*, where the random marks overlaid onto so many surfaces coalesce into a pure simple form. Our eyes are keen to see this purity, are seduced by it, and we crush the space the form inhabits down to 2 dimensions to embrace it.

But that's only how life is every once in a while. Most of the time we're in life. Most of the time, it's the chaos, where marks are flying about the walls, the music is throbbing and we're stumbling around inside it all. Relationships between the pieces are fluid—confoundingly so—and we have to constantly adjust the way we see to remember who we came to this party with and which way is the exit.

When we enter this library from the chaos outside, the grace and scale—the purity—of these black circles lures us into seeing them in favor of the commotion of the space their marks occupy. The architecture collapses down into the flat, crystalline world of simple black circles. It is a surprising pleasure, and a relief. But there are people behind us trying to get into the library, too, and we're forced deeper into the lobby, maybe up the steps into the insides of Varini's work, and the world starts to spin: The 3-dimensionality of the architecture is suddenly alive again. The columns, balconies, walls and railings are now moving at different speeds.

But here's the thing...

THEY ALWAYS DO!

The truth is that as the black marks that used to be circles start to move and break apart, they call attention to the relative places of other elements in the space because they're STUCK to those pieces, and we rediscover perspective; we are reminded of how space works. As a result, the depth of the space seems pushed beyond what is reasonable to expect or possible to imagine. It changes our perspective as it changes its own.

I truly admire this work. I am thrilled our great library had the courage to offer itself up as the site for this experience. I hope you feel the same.