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FEATURES

Vasarely's Victory

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Photo by Leon Chew

Vasarely at work in 1980 Annetsur-Marne, France

Op-art inventor Victor Vasarely's monumental eye-bending works are both familiar and forgotten—which is what enabled members of his family to steal and sell thousands of his paintings. But one relative is fighting back. At the late artist's 1976 foundation near Aix-en-Provence, his only grandson is renovating not just the building's neglected hexagons, but the legacy of a 20th-century master.

On the road in front of the Vasarely Foundation, on the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence, a jet of water from one of the museum's broken sprinklers is slowing traffic. Drivers roll up their car windows and proceed—but not mine. Unwilling to sully his freshly waxed Renault, the cabbie drops me off at the bottom of the graveled driveway. Approaching by foot, the air of neglect is undeniable. Seen through the geyser across the scrubby landscape, the building, faced with huge alternating black-and-white squares framing white-and-black circles, resembles a shuttered World's Fair relic fading in the Mediterranean sun.

Born in Pecs, Hungary, in 1906, Victor Vasarely's fame reached its peak in Paris in the mid-1960s. By this time he was regarded as the godfather of Op-art, the popular form of abstraction based on optical-trickery and experimentation that encompassed such names as Yaacov Agam, Richard Anuskiewicz, Jesus-Rafael Soto, and Bridget Riley. Vasarely's celebrity had already begun its decline by the time he opened his Aix foundation in 1976. It was his grasp at immortality. Not only did he lay down the plan—a honeycomb-like cluster of 16 hexagons by a shallow pool in the shape of a two-mouthed Pacman—he also fronted the money, naming it the Centre Architectonique d'Aix-en-Provence. His dream was to integrate his own art and architecture seamlessly into a democratic space, a nostalgic homage to the Bauhaus and Gestalt ideas that shaped him as a young art student in Budapest. He also embraced the optical illusion's potential for populist appeal by making his art available and affordable through a shop selling prints, posters, and postcards. As he liked to say, "The art of the privileged must become the art of the community."

Vasarely envisioned a community of artists, designers, psychologists, even weavers rising up around his creation in Aix like a town around a church, an artistic utopia winking across the horizon at Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire. And yet while his idea

for such a community never materialized (unlike, say, the Marfa of Donald Judd), the foundation's failure is almost as interesting a story. On this sunny morning, as I watch dogs from the surrounding apartment complexes romp in the overgrown grass, it looks as if the only utopia that came of Vasarely's vision is a canine one. Dogs don't mind the broken sprinkler.

At 10:00 a.m. the purple-tinted glass doors unlock and the artist's only grandchild, Pierre Vasarely, greets me. In the past few years, Pierre has brought hope to this forgotten icon of a forgotten artist and to admirers of its sagging tapestries and chipped mosaics. The leaky roofs, composed of thousands of small glass circles, are finally fixed. Next on his to-do list is heating and air conditioning (a stable temperature is crucial to preserving artworks). But the most important project Pierre has undertaken on behalf of his grandfather is the restitution of the thousands of works that members of the family stole from the foundation in the mid-1990s. Though Vasarely intended the bulk of his archive to remain here at his foundation—or at the museum he'd opened in 1970 in nearby Gordes—most of it, from oils to prints, serigraphs, and architectural studies, has vanished. “He would have been very shocked to see that his family has broken his dreams,” admits Pierre. All that's left is this building and the 42 large “integrations” hanging on the walls of seven connecting hexagonal rooms.

To walk through the rooms of the foundation is to disappear inside one of Vasarely's more hypnotic paintings. The full range of his career—from his “kinetic” black-and-white works to his further investigations of colorful grids of shapes inside squares—is neatly summed up in these installations. Their language of color and shape inside the square is what Vasarely called (and tried to patent as) his “plastic alphabet.” He wrote: “We no longer create for centuries to come, but for daily plastic needs.” From certain angles, the enfilade appears as the curve of a fractal. As my eyes take in the shapes inside squares and bulging trompe l'oeil spheres, I'm suddenly engulfed in the vibrating rooms. The paintings and the architecture share such affinity, they function as a single work—one that leads the viewer through what Vasarely called the “inner geometry of nature,” a world of secret passages and color combinations imbued with spiritual power. After a tumble through these phenomena, the viewer is meant to emerge transformed.

Like many visions of the future, Vasarely's is an insightful glance into his own age. But he was really ahead of his time. He stipulated that the foundation use computers and suggested that slides, rather than the works themselves, be sent for traveling exhibitions. To Vasarely, the difference between the work and its reproduction was insignificant. Experienced in the round like this, in the world of his own making, he is barely a painter at all—he has the hand of an engineer and the soul of a poet.

Considering the foundation's travails, the works have held up remarkably well, as Pierre Vasarely quietly reminds me. In his khaki flannel suit and white T-shirt, he exudes a dignified modesty, as if repenting for his family's sins. The relatives in question are Michèle Taburno, Jean-Pierre (a.k.a. the artist Yvaral), and André Vasarely—Pierre's stepmother, father, and uncle, respectively. Their byzantine story has engulfed the foundation in scandal for well over a decade. In fact, so notorious is the history of the family and the foundation that the French press has seen fit to divide it into two periods: “L'affaire Vasarely” and now “la nouvelle affaire Vasarely.”

The original affaire began when Taburno took over as president of the foundation in 1995 and proceeded to mastermind an arbitrage that determined that the sons, as inheritors, were owed 290 million francs (almost \$68 million). Because the foundation was broke, payment was settled with oils and canvas. By the time of Vasarely's death in 1997, the Gordes museum was closed and the Aix foundation continued to deteriorate around the 42 installations and a handful of moldy velour sofas.

La nouvelle affaire began officially in 2006 when a court installed Pierre as a foundation board member with the same authority that his grandfather had had. "He [Victor] wanted me to look after the foundation—'petit Pierre' was programmed for that, because I wasn't an artist like my father, or a doctor like my uncle." Pierre swiftly launched an attack on his stepmother, who had moved to Chicago in 2004, and availed himself of what had become a sympathetic legal system. Owing to Pierre's efforts, a court decided last April that Taburno should pay the foundation nearly \$8 million, and a tribunal was convened for fall (after this story went to press) to look into the shady dealings of 1995. Pierre says that André has since joined the fight and plans to tell the judge that he never wanted to harm the foundation, that he was manipulated by Taburno (who continued to oversee André's financial interests until June 1, 2007), and that he will give back any works he hasn't sold. After Taburno was arrested in Chicago this past summer for theft (she was caught trying to move hundreds of Vasarely works from one clandestine storage unit to another), it looked quite certain that the Provence legal administrator was ready to bring Taburno to account for her actions.

Pierre recognizes that his father and uncle were under Taburno's control: "Nobody could say anything against her. She told them, 'I will make you rich men.'" Pierre says he and his father were "the best friends in the world until 1997—after that, our only relationship was in front of the judge." His father filed for divorce from Taburno in 2001 but died a year later, before it went through. Some days before his death, however, Pierre says his father "signed many documents for Mrs. Taburno and against me." Taburno tried to prevent Pierre from attending his father's funeral, but he made a point of going. "I have no difficult feelings at all toward my father. I just find it was terrible for him not to know his two grandsons [Pierre's children] because of the presence of Mrs. Taburno. My father and the friend he was to me has nothing to do with the man I had in front of me between 1997 and 2002."

One of Pierre's biggest challenges as he continues his efforts to reclaim the works is to regain the faith and support of the people of Aix-en-Provence. After so many years of dysfunction, most of them have simply lost interest in the place. "We have to rethink our presentation and come up with new projects," he says. Despite all that has happened in France, Pierre is relieved that his grandfather also established two museums in Hungary—in Budapest and Pecs—both of which escaped Taburno's greed. The directors of those museums stood up to Taburno, and he says she "didn't insist." This fall Pierre has even arranged for a traveling show of 60 of Vasarely's works (from the Pecs museum and private collections) to make a stop at the foundation in Aix through October 30. Vasarely never foresaw the necessity of showing his early works in Aix, because that's what the Gordes museum was for. Nevertheless, says Pierre, "he would have been very proud of this collaboration between his two favorite countries, and two of his museums. It's an important event, and very symbolic. We need to show the importance of these works through

contemporary researches, to show that he's a part of art history." He adds: "What I do now for the institution is in memory of these two great men—my father and grandfather—in order to respect their will."

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