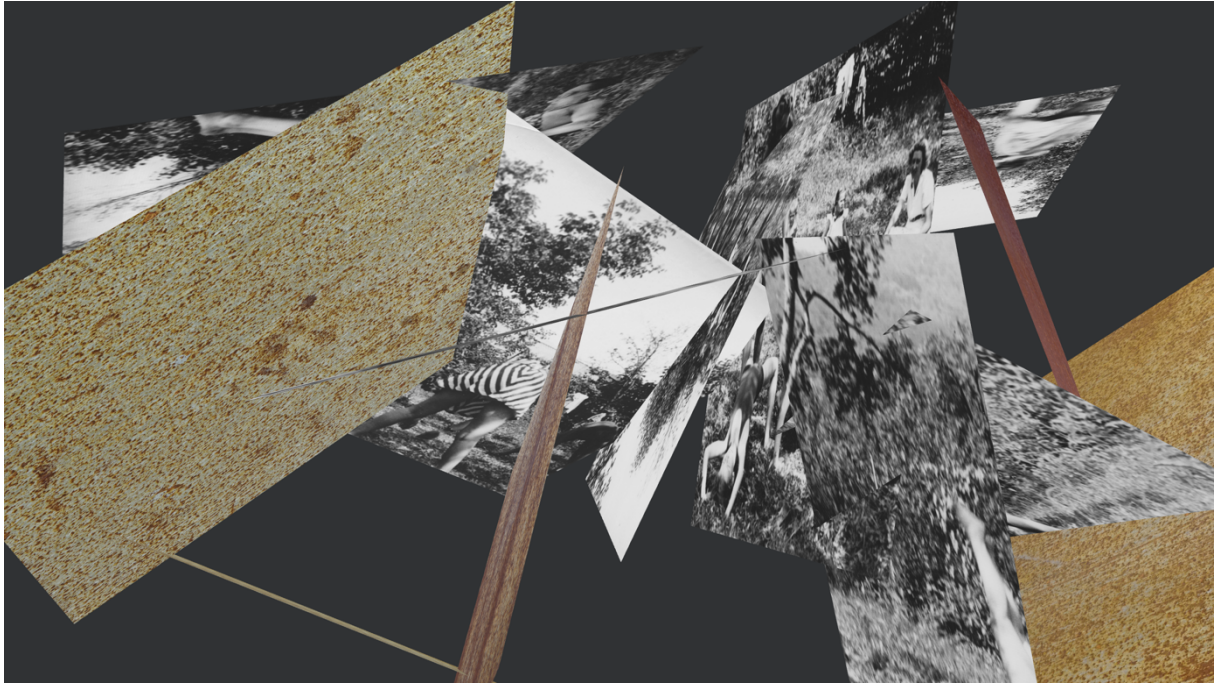# George Legrady Interweaving Time & Fluid Spaces

Jeanette Zwingenberger

California artist George Legrady's first solo exhibition in Budapest takes him back to his roots. At the age of six, he and his parents left Budapest during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution emigrating to Montreal, Canada. His father, Thomas Legrady was a musician and a composer. George Legrady also studied classical music and in the late 1960s played as a keyboardist in various Montreal bands. His musical background provides an essential context for his artistic work.

Proustian Moment

In his exhibition at the Inda Gallery titled "The Continuity of the Still Image", a small set of family photos taken in Visegrád, a resort village north of Budapest appear in a number of works providing thematic variations. The snapshots were taken around 1940 in the garden of his grandfather's country house. They capture a carefree, lighthearted time just prior to the second World War. Children are playing and young women are exercising and lounging in the grass.

Legrady is searching for Proustian moments of "pleasure and enlightenment," before the catastrophe of the war and the postwar occupation to come. The airiness of the light glittering through the leaves and branches of the trees resonate with the transparency of these images. The garden and trees suggest the natural rhythms of all life. For Freud, the garden is the space of inner projection: the place of the unconscious. The black-and white photographs bring us back to a time past. Legrady's computational reframing of the real photographs, inserting them into simulated 3D virtual spaces, takes them into a fluid interactive dynamic using computer software, This artistic process brings into motion the frozen "still images" from individual and collective social memory before the political collapse in East European countries.

Destiny and Encounters

The "Anamorphic Frolic" multimedia installation interweaves different media that includes photography, cinema and performance. The images on the screen are constrained in a three-dimensional virtual rectangle with the screen functioning as a window into the virtual scene created by the artist's custom designed software. Legrady's starting point is the seven black and white family photographs of young people playing in the garden. Legrady transforms the two-dimensional photographs into a three-dimensional virtual environment.

On the electronic screen we see photographic images floating and interpenetrating horizontally, vertically, diagonally and obliquely creating interwoven images that tighten and then unfold and open up again. Different planes interact, making visual the concept of interconnectedness. In the "Anamorphic Fluid" animation, the software continuously recombines these images through the simulation of movement in the fluid-like virtual environment. The images are disrupted by gestures from the spectators when they stand in front of the screen, as their movements are registered by a motion-sensing camera.

As the images move around within the virtual space, they bounce back whenever they collide with any of the boundary walls of the virtual space they inhabit or the screen itself, simultaneously triggering sounds such as shattered glass, rattling keys, cymbals, etc. creating a contiguity of various stimuli. This kinetic, physical performance allows the spectator to observe and listen to a stream of time punctuated by moments of crashing. The continuously aleatory sound sequences coalesce into an abstract musical dimension.

Based on chance action, the crisscrossing and overlapping of the images and sounds brings us to reflect on the nature of encounters and destiny itself. The activated weaving mechanism in the 3D space creates a postmodern dimension of intertextuality. In the 20th century, our whole sense of unity has fallen apart. Only non-linear sequences remain – we think of T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* saying "*these fragments I have shored against my ruins."*

Process of Remembering

Legrady's multi-perspective generates crossroads of perception and memory that diverge and converge. Here linear time, past, present and future, are interlaced. Legrady's goal is to recreate for the viewer the flow of spacetime. His work makes visible the merging of time experienced through his sequences, passages, transitions and transformations. We enter mental space of stratified dimensions that also makes us consider the nature of multi-scale neural networks. His visual language questions the process of remembering and thinking through images. "*What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance.*" [Excerpt from Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past"]

The spatial intersection resembles a card game, where each plane crosses the other and the cards are redistributed. The computer makes the play go on indefinitely. This process expresses the stratified vision of the relationships between multiplicities and vanishing lines. Legrady reminds us of a scene from Alain Robbe-Grillet's film "Last Year in Marienbad" where the husband and the lover are playing cards and through this game, negotiate their relationship.

"Visegrad-Voronoi" brings to mind Walter Benjamin's definition of the *aura*: "*a strange web of space and time*, (ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit)[1]." Gespinst in German means a web, a cocoon and even a ghostlike feature. "It is an act of identity, a fight against cultural amnesia, a retrieval of personal memory" that Legrady's work embodies.

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[1] Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, Band II, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977 b, p.57 (own translation)

Tableaux Vivants

"In Montreal in 1973, I photographed the annual Hungarian Ball. I was looking at two groups, the guests with whom I was familiar through the Hungarian community, and also the serving staff who represented for me, an invisible infrastructure." [Legrady]. Waiters prepare drinks, men smoke near the bar, small groups are absorbed in talk. Windows, mirrors, glasses, chandeliers and lamps create a play of light filling the hall with brightness, a stage set for the coming together of the guests. Legrady remarks, "no one really noticed me shooting." He is the lonely observer in this elegant ambience. His gaze is trying to penetrate this scene of urban leisure time. In capturing this time-environment, he seems to enter into it through his presence and also to emerge from it. Nevertheless, he and we are excluded from the scene.

Legrady relates, "*…even though I was familiar with the language and the customs, …my 'Hungarian' identity as I had known it had only a ghost-like resemblance to the culture which was now in place. Time had gone by and I found myself displaced between three cultures (Hungarian, French Canadian, English Canadian). I was part of each but belonging to none.*" [*Parachute*, 1998]

In the Refraction series, Magnetic (2011), a glass seems to reflect multiple images from the world outside, but in fact this mirroring effect enables the spectator to look through the window into a banquet room. The two dimensions of the tableau open to a three-dimensional space where people are having a party. Faces, silhouettes, gazes, gestures and movements interrelate in a spectral space, creating a sense of estrangement. The transparency is like a topological Möbius strip where inside and outside interweave into a continuous feedback loop. The spectator trying to figure out what is going on in this café, switches between his/her mental space and a visual experience.

Mental Process

Legrady's work oscillates between the documentary and the imaginary, between images of the social collective and the viewer's thoughts. He takes the algorithm of the software into a personal level through the interactive shared experience. In Legrady's time-based animation "Voice of Sisyphus", the software produces a mechanical and metallic noise suggestive of the fast-pace of society and its increased surveillance. The sound is created by an analysis of pixel clusters in the software translating areas of the image at 30 frames per second. By changing their direction, the light waves are from different levels of perception. The scanning process oscillates between an abstract level of vertical panels, then impressionistic figurative moments of the entire scene, followed by moments when the image gets clearer and the observer can perceive more easily what is going on.

The optical distortion reminds us of Hans Holbein's famous tableau the Ambassadors[2]. In it we see a portrait of friends Jean de Dinteville (1504-1555), ambassador of France and Georges de Selve (1509-1542), bishop of Lavour. The time and place - London on a good Friday the 11th of April 1533. It's an historic moment - Henry VIII's divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, an event that causes the schism between the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church. The formal posture of the two protagonists dressed in ceremonial habits contrasts with a shadow-form in the foreground in a blind spot. Only when viewers approach the painting from the far higher right side, and look from a diagonal angle, they can then see the shape of the human skull. The frontal view of the two men welcoming us represents a shared vision. There is only one place for the spectator to discover the transformation of the anamorphosis. It is a kind of inner transcended vision comparable to the silent reading established in the 16th century in contrast to the public reading always controlled by the Catholic church.

The Greek word *anamorphoein* means transformation. It is composed of two words, "ana" reverse and "morphé", feature. In Holbein's picture, the spectator has to go around the two-dimensional painting to find just the right spot from which to observe the skull, displaying a three-

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[2] Jeanette Zwingenberger, *The Shadow of Death in the Work of Hans Holbein the Younger*. London: Parkstone Press, 1999.

dimensional moving space of the gaze. This scene makes visible two different realities - the social and the individual, and life and death. This field of tensions in "Voice of Sisyphus", suggests complex system theory. Instead of traditional environmental music, Legrady chooses a highly abstract computer-generated sound, of deep tonal textures, a sonification that mesmerizes and evokes the control of information. These two levels of public vs silent reading and seeing, remind us of surveillance images, of an alienated vision.

Montage of Multiple Time-Levels

As with the Holbein painting, Legrady's installation requires an active spectator moving in front of the lenticular prints to perceive the morphing from his Transylvanian family photographs of the late 1930s to night nature scenes from his California garden in the present. This anachronistic operation layers images from the past with those of today, highlighting the historical but also emotional connection of events that repeat again. As the artist states: "You never can see just one of the images in its entirety without the other creeping in, ghostlike. This movement of shifting between two images reveals a new cognitive reality."

Legrady's experience of exile between the self and its lost home is similar to that of "extraterritorial wanderers" (George Steiner) a cross-cultural vision of discontinuous and continuous states of being. His predicament of moving between cultures, living in a liminal space between the here and there, sets the premise from which his art has emerged.

Jeanette Zwingenberger PhD is an art historian, member of the AICA (International Association of Art Critics), independent curator based in Paris, and a Member of the EVA – Paris committee, Multimedia Technologies. She currently teaches at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.