

Refraction

George Legrady

George Legrady's Refraction

Abigail Solomon-Godeau

For those familiar with George Legrady's recent work, *Refraction*, a multi-part artwork employing lenticular optical screens might seem like a technological throwback. Given the complex cyber-based and interactive media that Legrady has worked with since 1995, *Refraction* appears disarmingly artisanal, almost playful in its use of an old-fashioned mechanism of optical illusion. However, as I will argue, Legrady's adaptation of the relatively simple technique of lenticular imaging does not mean that *Refraction* is unrelated to those of Legrady's previous works using more cutting-edge technologies. Indeed, like most of the work he has made with complex cybernetic and information technologies, *Refraction* shares his programmatic (and ethical) commitment to the concept of interactivity, in the present case, an interactivity literally embodied in the viewers' own movements. As in his earlier works, Legrady seeks to animate viewers by affirming their implication (from the Latin, *implicare* – to be folded within) in the production of meaning, including aesthetic meaning.

In this discussion, however, I want to consider this somewhat anomalous work in Legrady's oeuvre in terms of its medium, or media (since the work draws upon both black and white still photographs as well as lenticular screens). In this respect, and given the history of lenticular imagery, we can consider it within the larger context of those outdated technologies and techniques, remnants of earlier periods, that have been eclipsed by more advanced or specialized forms. For Walter Benjamin, certain of these artifacts -- the pre-industrialized photograph, the panorama -- were talismanic; they were conduits between historical and contemporary consciousness, ghostly relics of technologies incorporated, transformed or expelled in the great crucible of capitalism. Their potential to galvanize connections between the historical past and the time of the "now," were what prompted Benjamin to conceive them as "dialectical images." ("The 'shock'

of recognition with which the juxtapositions of past and present are perceived is like electricity."¹)

As Wikipedia handily informs us, lenticular image technologies were developed as long ago as the 1940s, primarily for the commercial production of "novelty" items, such as campaign badges ("I Like Ike!"), prayer cards, or Cheerio box favors. Most famously, perhaps, it was the medium used for the Rolling Stones' tongue logo. Rarely used by contemporary artists (although there are exceptions), by virtue of its vintage and its often somewhat kitschy applications lenticular imaging is not without its vaguely retro, vaguely nostalgic associations. It is, however, this notion of obsolescence that is pertinent here, for the lenticular image, no less than the black and white image plucked from a photographic reportage or documentary, is outmoded. (In this respect, it is worth noting that analogue black and white photography, like the use of antique cameras such as the Diana, is now largely the preserve of art photographers).

In a number of essays, Rosalind Krauss has persuasively argued that the obsolescent, the residuum of industrial and technological plays a particular role in the demise of media specificity as an aesthetic norm (if only within an institutionalized modernism). Tracing the logic of Benjamin's theorization of photography's relation to modern art, especially as it evolved from his earliest account of 1931, Krauss, paraphrasing Benjamin, sees the time of obsolescence as one that permits for artistic reinvention: "Photography has, then, suddenly become one of those industrial discards, a newly established curio, like the jukebox or the trolley car. But it is at just this point, and in this very condition as outmoded, that it seems to have entered into a new relation to aesthetic production. This time, however, photography functions against the grain of its earlier destruction of the medium, becoming, under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence, a means of what has to be called an act of reinventing the medium."²

1. Susan Buck-Morss, [The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project](#) (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989) p. 250.

2. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," [Critical Inquiry](#), Vol. 25, No. 2, (Winter, 1999), pp. 289-305.

Krauss's examples of contemporary artistic reinvention include the slide tape works of James Coleman and the "stone-age" cinema practiced in the 1990s by William Kentridge. Interestingly, these artists' practices involve complex considerations – dialogues --with the medium of cinema, especially with what are understood as cinema's generic affinity to narrative. In this respect, Legrady's *Refraction* alludes directly to this intermedial relationship, which is, at the same time, an intertextual one. And the intermedial, like the intertextual, respects few boundaries. Inevitably, therefore, a work like *Refraction* poses the question of medium, or to put it differently, it poses the concept of medium as, precisely, a question.

In his description of the work's component parts, Legrady uses the word "composition" by which to designate the composite image made by the superimposition of lenticular screens. In their catalogue reproduction, the series of three individual photographs that are combined to produce each of the eight compositions appear on the page facing the reproduction of the [simulated] lenticular version. In designating these syntheses as "compositions," Legrady refuses a strict identification of the nature (or definition) of *Refraction's* medium: "composition" is the vaguest of descriptive terms, applicable to music and language as well as images. All that the term "composition" indicates is that the internal organization of a given work is not random or wholly accidental, like a Rorschach blot, but the result of prior decision or purpose. "Composition" therefore leaves open the question of the role of medium, and to what degree the physical medium employed is itself productive of meaning, what are its possibilities and its limits, what it potentially enables or forecloses. But *Refraction*, a work that uses "classical" black and white photographs as one of its components, makes the identification of its own medium both enigmatic and effectively undecidable. On the one hand, the black and white photographs culled from his outtakes were selected out of a series, a temporal sequence. They are derived from a documentary-type project made in 1972, in which Legrady, himself a recent Hungarian emigrant to

Canada, photographed the yearly Hungarian Ball in Montreal. As a member of the Hungarian diaspora, Legrady's presence at the Hungarian Ball might be analogized to that of the participant/observer, a position which is by definition both inside and outside of a given situation or environment.³ But while the original photographs were made by Legrady in 1972, variously selected, re-worked, re-signified and re-cast in 2011, their meanings are, inevitably, more or less fluid. Like a clock stopped in *media res*, the Hungarian Ball is now the space of ghosts, which doubtless why it lends itself to classical cinematic connotation.

Congeaed in a series of singular seconds, we are witness to a nationalist celebration of ethnic identity, but one staged in international cosmopolitan style. (It is this element, I decided, which reinforced my reading of the images through a "European" rather than Canadian contextual frame). Certain of the images seem almost Hitchcockian in their suggestion of occulted meaning, obscure prompts for an undisclosed plot. Because of the ways in which the lenticular compositions "piggy-back" on the trio of quasi-cinematic moments and camera movements depicted in the photographs, the relation between the different images is both internal to the groupings, but also external to them, encompassing what is seen in the other groups. *Refraction* is thus a hybrid object that oscillates optically and materially, narratively and temporally, complicating the attempt to locate meaning within either of its visual containers. And insofar as the analogue photos and the lenticular process both belong to the category of the "outmoded," or obsolescent, the work is founded on the paradoxical combination of a historically passé form and its contemporary recasting into the register of the intermedial and the interactive.

Obviously, one of the most salient medium-based properties of the lenticular image is to do with its

3. "(...) even though I was familiar with the language and the customs,...my 'Hungarian' identity as I knew it had only a ghost-like resemblance to the culture which was in place. Time has gone by and I find myself displaced between three cultures, part of each but belonging to none." Cited in Anne Bénichou and Jacques Doyon, *Collection/Fabrication: Regards croisés sur l'oeuvre de George Legrady*, *Parachute* 92, 1998, Montreal

temporal illusionism. Unlike the still images that each composition incorporates, it moves, or appears to move, as the spectator shifts her viewing position. Like a flipbook (another old-fashioned technology of the visual) it both anticipates and then mimics the very technology that superseded it. Legrady thus simulates very generally the illusion of change and movement conventionally deemed the property of the moving, rather than the still image. (That this is itself the foundational illusion of cinema, the 24 frames projected each minute, is obviously relevant to *Refraction*, which uses 24 still images in groups of three).⁴ Optically, visually, the slightest movement of the viewer in front of the lenticular image changes what is seen, a perpetual becoming that never resolves itself into fixity, thus altering precisely that quality of the still image thought to contribute to its memorability. As Giselle Freund once remarked, "It's always the still image and not the one in motion that stays etched in our minds, becoming ever after part of our collective memory."⁵ Where the still image's obdurate fixity invites and ultimately frustrates investigative contemplation, the lenticularized image produces a mercurial oscillation of a visual field that the eye can scan, but cannot focus on. But by counterpointing both kinds of image, Legrady encourages consideration of how these two image types produce different significations; in one form, the illusion of life provided by movement, in the other, the presentiment of mortality conveyed by stasis, a moment in time frozen forever. Both are illusions. And because of the non-fixability of the lenticular image and its optical fluidity, refusing to settle or congeal, it mimics both the fugitive evanescence of memory and the radical instability of meaning itself.

4. In certain of his interviews and in his own writing Legrady has acknowledged the importance of filmmakers like Marker, Resnais, Godard and Bresson. I see also references to Bergman, to Ophuls, to Duras, to Antonioni and so forth. It is, however, this prolixity of reference that is the point of the selection; although drawn from documentary reportage, the individual images Legrady selected prompt the same desire in (and desire for) narrative that Cindy Sherman explored in her black and white film stills. This filmic nostalgia for a particular period in European art cinema is not the only one that raises the issue of nostalgia as both a cultural and individual affect.

5. Cited in Rosalind E. Krauss, "...And Then Turn Away?" An Essay on James Coleman *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer, 1997), pp. 5-33, p. 7.

The issues and questions that underpin Legrady's digital and interactive artworks may be seen, therefore, as no less present in the relatively low-tech production of this most recent offering. For like his *An Anecdoted Archive of the Cold War* of 1993, Legrady's interactive cd-rom and installation work addresses the ghosts in the machine, whether these are considered as embodied in the collective (as in the contents of the historical archive) or in the personal (the contents of the family album).

"*Refraction*," a word with multiple valances in scientific as well as vernacular discourse, describes a process, an action, and an effect. Its obvious relevance for optical perception (and its genealogy within a lengthy history of optical devices and so-called philosophical toys) is evident in *Refraction's* material structure and fabrication. One of the word's meanings is, in this regard, especially suggestive: "The phenomenon whereby a ray of light (or other electromagnetic radiation) is diverted or deflected from its previous course in passing from one medium into another, or in traversing a medium of varying density. More widely: change in the direction of propagation of any wave as a result of its travelling at different speeds at different points on the wave front." (OED).

This "diversion" or "deflection" from an initial point or trajectory suggests its own analogies in the work of art, independent of the medium or media employed. Leaving aside the ways in which light rays determine the optical properties of the (analogical) photograph as well as those involved in the lenticular screen, it would seem that within this given work, *Refraction* pertains at least as much to subjectivity. This is the central focus of the work. Insofar as we encounter the world refracted through our subjectivity, just as our lived experience is refracted through our senses. Moreover, our knowledge of what temporally came before -- let us simply call it memory and history -- is refracted though the media in which they are variously expressed. Finally, the entire sensory and mental concatenations that constitute "world views," belief systems, ideologies, points of view, and so forth, are inevitably refracted through language and all other materials of representation. Accord-

ingly, neither the intentions of the titular author/artist, nor the final appearance of the completed object or image can fix or definitively secure the migratory meanings of an art object once it enters the sphere of reception. This is one of the reasons that photographic media historically found favor in artistic practices as nominally diverse as surrealism, constructivism, and postmodern appropriation.

In her incisive discussion of photography's assimilation into various avant-gardiste practices, Rosalind Krauss traces how this assimilation of a medium she characterizes as a "wrecker of unitary being" functioned to subvert modernist notions of artistic autonomy as well as medium specificity.⁶ Following the logic of Benjamin's two essays on photography, she emphasizes the shift in his thinking from the "Little History of Photography" of 1931 to the more developed position in 1938, whereby after claiming its material specificity as medium, photography is seen to simultaneously destroy the value of the aesthetic as such, as well as its status as an "independent" rather than contingent medium.⁷

Returning again to the material qualities of the lenticular image, I want to again evoke its technological "outmodedness." For the evocation of retrospectiveness that lenticular imagery may spark is itself paralleled by the black and white photographs that form *Refraction's* "base," or substratum upon which Legrady performs various operations. Certainly it is the case that black and white photographs have become culturally marked as signifiers of pastness itself (cf., Fredric Jameson); retro-styles in advertising and music videos, as well as cinema have for

6. Here, she is referring to the photomechanical attributes of photography, its status as "copy" of the physical world, the multiplicity of such copies, and the absence of an original, all that which collectively liquidates the aura of the original work of art in its own space and time.

7. The later essay is, of course, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction." "If Benjamin also deplores the photographer's benighted struggle to acquire aesthetic credentials 'before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning'... this does not assume the radically deconstructive position Benjamin would take five years later, in which photography is not just claiming the specificity of its own (technologically inflected) medium but, in denying the values of the aesthetic itself, will cashier the very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography." Krauss, *Critical Inquiry*, p. 252.

decades mined this connotational lode⁸. Moreover, the 24 photographs constituting the raw material with which *Refraction* is fabricated, is also redolent of this quality of time past. Not the remote past, by which the viewer might be prompted to identify a "historical" event, but that nonspecific anteriority that is experienced as having occurred at a sufficient temporal distance from the present moment of its reception. Hair styles, women's' gowns, sideburns, long gloves – all these sartorial and stylistic cues further imbue *Refraction* with this aura of the "that-has-been," one of the qualities of the photographic image that theorists, especially Roland Barthes, have identified as structurally integral to the photographic medium itself⁹. Together, what the photographs depict, and the lenticular treatment that is superimposed on the sets of three still images, are powerful signifiers of mortality, memory, and anteriority: that is to say, the connotation of "pastness" that many black and white photograph convey, and whose evocations of mortality and fatality so much photography theory has explored.

But the connotative chains that may be mobilized by the Hungarian Ball photographs are hardly exhausted by their invocation of a time past. There is, as well, something recognizably cinematic in their effect, even as still imagery, an effect prompted by the glamour of some of the participants, by the luxe of the occasion, table arrangements, floral designs, the architecture of the ballroom itself. This filmic effect is further suggested by the ways in which the camera's position brings the viewer closer or further from individuals, its shifting point of view encompassing close-ups, long and middle views, its isolation of random gestures, exchanges of looks and various activities manifested both by wait staff and the invited guests. In certain of the pictures, the subject looks back at Legrady, the photographer; and therefore, at

8 See in this regard, Fredric Jameson "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983) pp 11-125 and Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992, pp 1-54.

9 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) and Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

the viewer; in others, the subjects are seemingly unaware of being photographed. In all these respects, the black and white photographs Legrady revisited for *Refraction* make them easily "misread" as stills from a movie, reminiscent of European cinema of the 1960s and '70s.

That the photographic base of this work is drawn on Legrady's own pre-digital "documentary" photography is equally significant, for *Refraction* materially shifts the discursive placement, or location of the photographs from their previously "private" status among the residual materials of his past artmaking to the public space of the gallery. The various meanings of these pictures for the artist who made them are not, therefore, available to the spectator, whose function in "completing" the work is to produce, indeed, to mobilize and activate new and unsuspected meanings that are a function of their new context, as well as the viewer's own meaning making capacities. As described by Marcel Duchamp in his now-classic essay, "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his [sic] contribution to the creative act."¹⁰

Consequently, in posing the deceptively simple question of how meanings are produced (or projected) in the range of objects and practices we culturally (and honorifically) recognize as "art," it is the viewer, no less than the artist, who confronts and navigates a dense array of signs encompassing all aspects and attributes of the given work. In the first instance, there is the fact of its material, physical composition (e.g., meaning perceived in a drawing is of a different order than meaning perceived in a photograph), which initially prompts the viewer's recognition of what she is perceiving. But "medium" is not reducible to material, and intermedia, of which *Refraction* is one particular instance, makes formal identification an open question, destabilizing cat-

10 Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act" in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), p. 819.

egories even as it plays with the mobility of optical perception. To the brute "givens" that orient the viewer and which may be perceived simultaneously, are the complex series constituted by the rhetoric, syntax, codes, genre – even style – through and by which the work is expressed or articulated. "Subject" or "contents" are in and of themselves only one factor (e.g., Stieglitz's photographs of parts of O'Keefe's body are for most viewers, distinguishable from those in anatomical texts or Playboy centerfolds.).¹¹ This "brute" material identity, however, already establishes a framework through which additional information is received and organized, a template upon which increasingly complex identifications and discriminations are based. But this initial identification is also contextually determined by the physical and material circumstances in which the work is encountered and experienced (e.g., in a book, an art gallery, on a computer screen).

Absent the epistemological control of "anchorage," (exemplified in the function of the caption that Barthes saw as prompting and directing the reader/viewer to the "correct," sanctioned meaning of an image), meanings are less controllable, escaping legislative control. That said, the very minimal use of textual "markers" attached to the compositions (respectively, "Magnetic," "At the Bar," "In Conversation," "Cornucopia," "Movement," "Display," "At the Table," and "In-Between.") do function to shape, or direct their meanings, however subtly. But whereas certain of these markers are simply denotational – indicating a location or an activity) others are more aligned with the polyvocal or polyvalent capacities of photographic imagery in general. Thus, "Display," a word that may be either a noun or a verb designates a series of three photographs, a long view of the ball's tables heaped with food and dishes, a close-up of one of the actual food displays, a pheasant roosting on a doily, and a medium shot of a waiter standing behind a tower of plates. Whether the referent of display should here be likened to Dr. Johnson's ex-

11. This is by no means to deny that are many reasons (feminist, especially) to consider such types of imagery in relation to each other. My point here, however, is to emphasize how codes of recognition organize visual perception such that subject matter as such is never exclusively the determining element.

ample from the OED (“At this display of riches every eye immediately sparkled,” or Emerson’s more critical usage (“Fatal to the man of letters, fatal to man, is the lust of display”) is, so to speak, the viewer’s share. But as the lenticular alchemy shifts the image from the dead bird become decorative centerpiece, to the labor of the wait staff, meanings may be discerned that do not reside in any of the three individual photographs. This, of course, is the work that the medium of cinema routinely produces through the mechanisms of montage, especially in what Sergei Eisenstein identified as “intellectual montage.” In this editing procedure, nominally or diegetically (narratively) unrelated images are spliced into a sequence, yielding other meanings. As an ensemble of images, meanings are produced between among and beyond the formal groupings of each composition and the three photographs; thus, the viewer may conjure other stories that seem to arise mirage-like from within and across groupings. And like Barthes’ “third meaning,” which he discovered in the film still and which exceeds the film’s narrative, meanings are generated by supplemental, even accidental details. The dead bird that decorates the table setting can take on yet another meaning when one notices, in another photograph, a stuffed quail placed in the niche of one of the walls.

In all these respects, even a cursory familiarity with George Legrady’s work of the past several years reveals certain overarching preoccupations as these are typically bound into the material functioning of each project. Which is to say that despite the daunting range of techniques, technologies, and modes of presentation that Legrady has employed, his work is moored in a set of questions (or investigations) that pivot on the processes by which meanings are produced both within an artwork and through the communicative apparatuses at work in the activity of individual (and collective) reception. Because Legrady’s art is often situated on the cutting edge of digital and interactive technologies, it might appear to be divisible between analogue and digital modes of representation, such that earlier work produced in “traditional” media such as photography could be separated from projects that were inconceivable be-

fore the advent of contemporary cyber-technologies and information systems. However, and despite the technological divide that separates the analogical from the digital, it seems to me that there is a striking continuity apparent in these preoccupations that overarches his various media. Thus, no matter how complex the actual components of any of his artworks, they seem generated by an array of questions that are (variously) philosophical, phenomenological, psychological and epistemological; questions, moreover, that remain distinct -- although they may be transformed by -- their technological fabrication. In other words, Legrady’s art is premised on an interrogative rather than constative mode, posing questions to the spectator in her physical encounter with the work, whether that work is formally interactive in a technological sense or, as in *Refraction*, interactive in its perceptual alteration sparked by the viewer’s actual movements.

Broadly stated, and as I have argued, the questions that Legrady’s work poses, even in earlier work based on photographic, analogical representation, pivot on how meaning and significance are produced by and within those complex cultural objects we call artworks. And insofar as these interrogative underpinnings are, as I have also argued, inseparable from the forms employed, it seems justified to emphasize this interrogative address, pivoting on what semiotics calls modes of signification, but phrased otherwise, are simply the elements of a given work that are operative, or are mobilized, in the production of meaning. But insofar as we accept the Duchampian model of the creative act, it is the viewer’s share in the production of meaning that is no less at stake, and this too is an element consistently emphasized in Legrady’s work overall. And because the activity of reception is, precisely, a transactional one, the making of meaning involves the mechanisms of projection, introjection, identification or misidentification, engaging both conscious and unconscious processes. To raise the questions, therefore, of how meanings are made, and to make of those questions a kind of artistic axis, is not only to cede the (always popular, if mythic) role of Artist/Author-God, ultimate source of meaning, but also to open the work to its

expressive realization in its open, receptive mode of address. In availing himself, as he does here, of pre-cybernetic media considered obsolescent, and demonstrating their still effective productivity as engines of projection or introjection, identification or misidentification, reverie and imagination, Legrady continues his career-long enterprise: exploring the modalities by which artistic production and artistic reception are both shaped by the givens and constraints of their medium, but equally capable of eluding, surpassing or transfiguring them, for ghosts reside in all machines.

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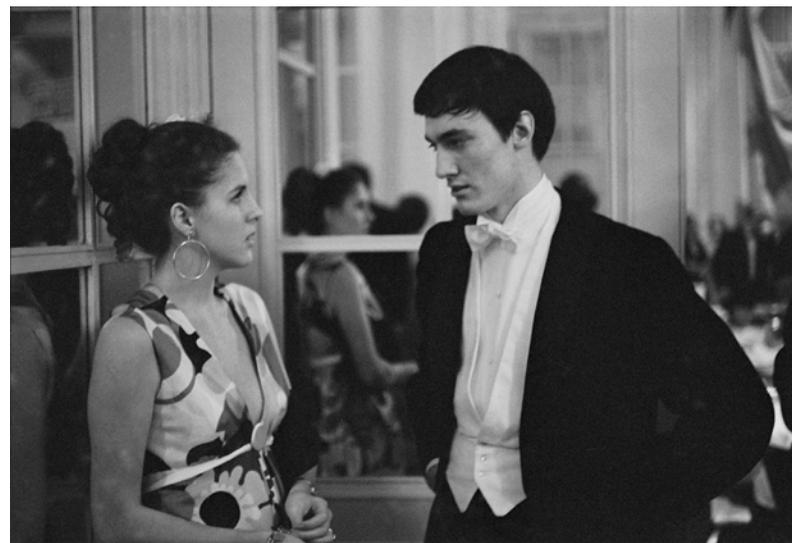
Lenticular Details



Magnetic *(Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)*



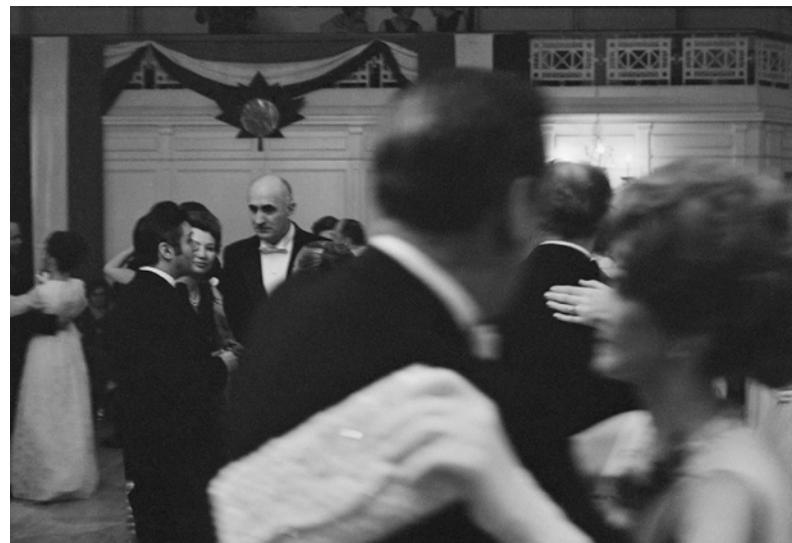
At the Bar (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



In Conversation (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



Cornucopia (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



Movement (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



Display (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



At the Table (Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)



In-Between Moments *(Simulation of lenticular image interlacing the three images on the left)*

Works in the Exhibition

Magnetic, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

At the Bar, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

In Conversation, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

Cornucopia, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

Movement, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

Display, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

At the Table, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

In-Between Moments, 2011

Photographic film on lenticular lens, 32" x 47", Edition of 5

Retelling, 2011

Dynamically generated computer animation for HD or XVGA screen, Edition of 3

Slice, 2011

Dynamically generated computer animation for one or two HD or XVGA screens, Edition of 3

Voice of Sisyphus, 2011

4 channel audio, multimedia installation

Dynamically generated computer animation for HD or XVGA screen, Edition of 3

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Edward Cella Art+Architecture
6018 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90036
323.525.0053 p
323.525.0051 f

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