

# From Video Replay to the Relational Circuit to Threeing

Paul Ryan

When I was a young man, I was fortunate to take part in an honors seminar at New York University taught by Horst Janson, the author of *The History of Art* [1]. What impressed me most in Janson's account of art history was the invention of *contrapposto* by Greek sculptors. By means of this technique of twisting a human figure on its vertical axis, sculptors could represent freedom of movement using the medium of stone.

As I became involved in the early video movement [2], *contrapposto* haunted my mind. This technique became my model, my analogue for something yet to be invented that would provide a way of making art in the chaotic world of early video and performance art. Just as *contrapposto* made it possible to "liberate" stone from its inert mass, so I was looking for a way to "liberate" human behavior from patterns seemingly "set in stone." Just as *contrapposto* enables artists to shape stone into moving figures, I was looking for a formal technique that would make it possible to shape a more flexible repertoire of human behavior. Whereas *contrapposto* provided a

technique for depicting movement in stone, with video the rendering of moving behavior was already a given. In a world already in motion, I was hoping to invent a "figure of regulation" for creative collaborative behavior. I was not trying to produce a video product; rather, I was using video recording and playback to help me invent an art of behavior.

Technical inventions require rigorous thinking. Fortunately, I met the anthropologist Gregory Bateson at a 1970 Princeton conference on social change. Bateson had participated in the multidisciplinary Macy Conferences that spawned cybernetics (1946–1953). Cybernetics involves the rigor of thinking in circuits.

Bateson explained thinking in circuits as follows:

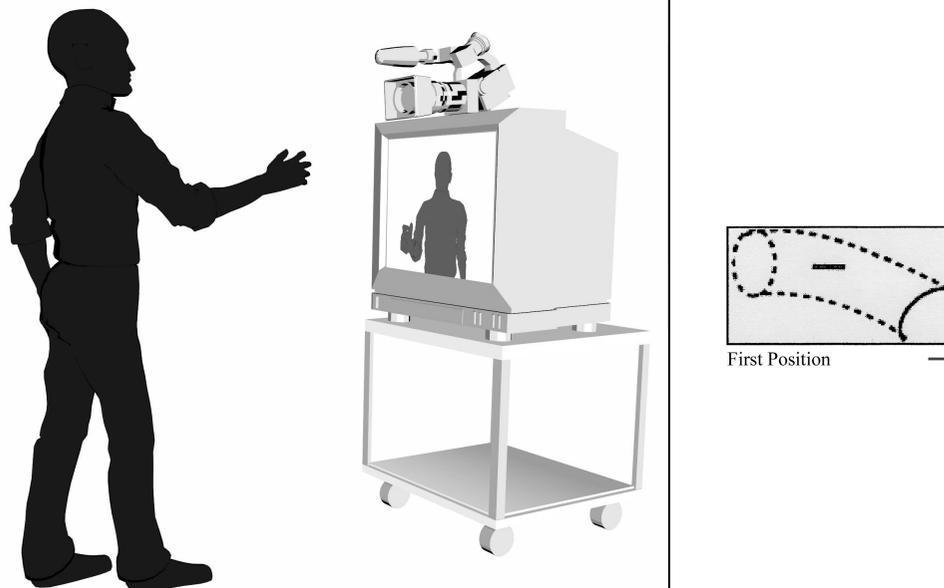
Suppose I am a blind man, and I use a stick. I go tap, tap, tap. Where do I start? Is my mental system bounded at the handle of the stick? Is it bounded by my skin? Does it start halfway up the

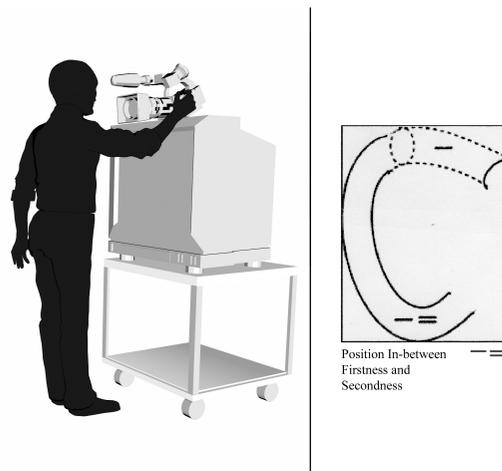
## ABSTRACT

This article traces the invention of the relational circuit, which makes possible an art of relationships called Threeing. This process of invention grew out of extensive video replay. *Contrapposto* made it possible to depict motion in stone. The relational circuit likewise makes possible a formal art of relationships for three people. This art form can be viewed in the light of relational aesthetics, a theory that judges artwork based on how it prompts inter-human activity and engagement with the world.

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**Fig. 1. Creating the relational circuit with video replay, step 1. (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) Perform any activity in front of the camera and record it. This creates a first position, that is to say, a position in the circuit that will be contained by two other positions.**





**Fig. 2. Step 2.** (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) **Rewind the tape. This creates a position in between the first and second position, that is to say, a position in the circuit that will be uncontained.**

stick? Is it bounded by the tip of the stick? But these are nonsense questions. The stick is a pathway along which transforms of differences are being transmitted... if you are trying to explain... the locomotion of the blind man... you will need the street, the stick, the man: the street, the stick and so on, round and round [3].

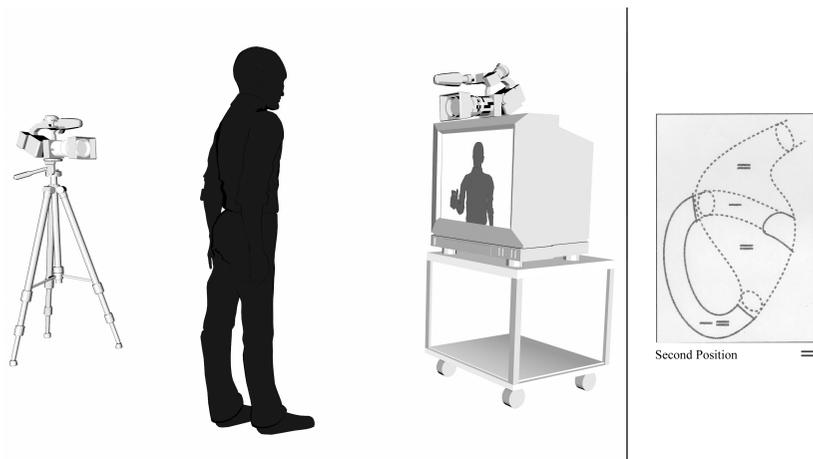
In other words, to explain the blind man walking, one must follow a circuit of differences that make differences. Differences in the street make differences in the stick, which make differences in where the man walks next, which make differences in what part of the street his stick touches next and so on around the circuit.

When I first got hold of a video system, I was fascinated by the difference between my “live” self and my “live-on-tape” self. When I watched a video replay of myself stroking my chin, where did “I” begin and where did “I” end? How does the

video transform differences about myself? How could I map the circuit of differences that make differences? I carried out extensive experimentation, recording and replaying myself on video. I used two video systems so I could record myself, replay the recording and then record myself responding to the replay. I did as many as seven layers of recording and replaying myself. I struggled to diagram one circuit that could account for both my live and live-on-tape experiences.

As I was trying to map or diagram these experiences, Bateson’s definition of information was key. He defined information as “a difference that makes a difference” [4]. I expanded his definition into a question: “A difference in *what* makes a difference in *what*?” The answer that came to me was, “A difference in *position* makes a difference in *relationships*.” This answer was critical in formulating what I came to call the relational circuit.

**Fig. 3. Step 3.** (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) **Replay the first tape. React directly to what is played back on the TV screen and record these reactions with a second camera. This creates a second position in the circuit, that is to say, a position that contains the first position.**



The relational circuit proved to be a figure of regulation for organizing an art of relating in terms of different positions (see Figs 1–6).

With formal inventions, there is a before and after. Before contrapposto, no representation of motion in stone was possible. After contrapposto, such representation was possible. Before the relational circuit, a formal three-person art of behavior was not possible. After the relational circuit, an art of behavior for three people becomes possible.

Inclusive three-person relationships are not normal among humans. As with other mammals, the normal pattern when three humans get together is for two to combine and exclude the third party. An experimental study with baboons in the wild makes this pattern clear. There are no “free” females in a baboon troop. The males possess the females and will fight to hold onto them if necessary. Much fighting is avoided, however, since seeing a male-female pair generally inhibits a rival male. When such a triad is put together, the social behavior of the rival is inhibited while the social behavior of the pair is enhanced. In the presence of the rival, the pair bond matures rapidly. The rival “outsider” is excluded and extruded in the process [5]. Sound familiar? “Two’s company, three’s a crowd.”

In a series of video studies of three-person behavior that I performed in the 1970s, this same pattern kept recurring: Two parties would combine to exclude a third party. It was clearest in the instances where one party was blindfolded and the other two were sighted. The two sighted individuals recurrently combined against the blindfolded party and reinforced their relationship at the expense of the third party.

The relational circuit makes possible an inclusive art of behavior that I call Threeing. Threeing is a three-person solution to relational confusion. At the core of this solution is a voluntary practice in which three people take turns playing three different roles: initiator, respondent and mediator. Through this role-playing, a clarity and an ease about relationships emerge. This clarity and ease can be cultivated by practice and developed into healthy, sustainable relationships.

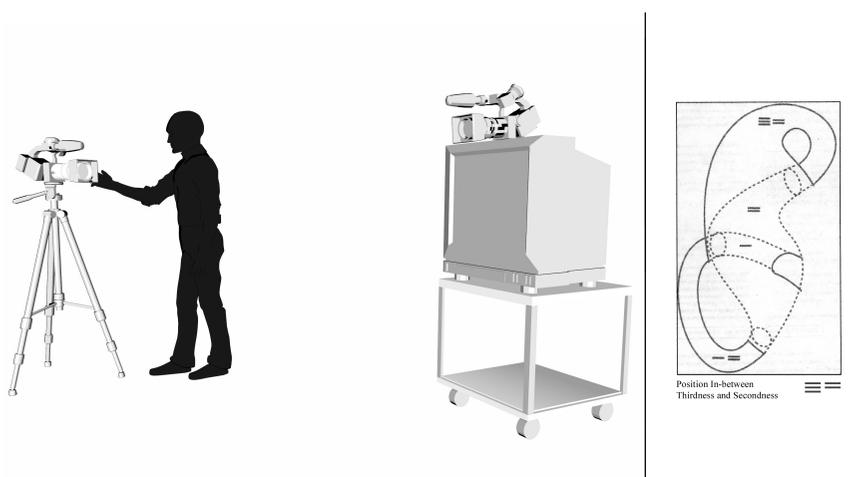
Our tendency is to view any three people interacting together in classic dramatic terms, but the structure of Threeing is not a narrative structure. The three do not interact dramatically, following a storyline to an ending. Rather, the three interact recursively, following a circuit

that balances relationships. To understand the process of Threeing, narrative expectations must be abandoned.

In a sense, Threeing can be described as a “yoga” of relationships. When one learns Threeing, one stretches one’s capacity to relate in three different roles. Just as yoga can prevent back pain and mental malaise, Threeing can prevent relational confusion. Just as practicing yoga can keep a person healthy and thriving, so the practice of Threeing can keep relationships healthy and thriving.

In Threeing, two-against-one dynamics are precluded. This preclusion is achieved by mapping the six unambiguous positions of the relational circuit onto the floor. Participants learn a way of moving through these positions so that they can interact with two others in a nonexcluding way. In the relational circuit, one is never forced to choose between Jack and Jill. Choices are made in terms of unambiguous positions in the circuit, never in terms of picking one person and excluding the other. A difference in position makes a difference in the relationship.

Positive experiences with Threeing in performance, production, education and worker training provide evidence that this approach can sustain collaborative creativity in diverse settings. Performance experiences have included workshops in Istanbul, New Orleans, San Francisco and New York City. A collaborator in generating Threeing, tap dancer Brenda Bufalino, subsequently incorporated it into her choreography. Three actors premiered my work *A Ritual of Triadic Relationships*, exhibited on video at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City during the 1984 exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art [6]. In video production, I taught summer workshops for teenagers through the Parks Council. The youngsters produced video of nature in New York City using the process of Threeing. One group’s tape won a national prize. Also, as the founder and editor of *Talking Wood*, a bioregional magazine for northern New Jersey (1979–1980), I successfully used the decision-making process used in Threeing to organize the editorial staff. In education, I used Threeing to organize curriculum development workshops for educators and New York public-school teachers on sustainability and other subjects. In my graduate course on semiotics for digital producers, students make video using aspects of Threeing. Another educator used Threeing to organize an educational conference [7] and teach undergraduate and graduate architectural



**Fig. 4. Step 4.** (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) Take tape number 1 out of the camcorder on the TV. Take tape number 2 out of the camcorder on the tripod. Place tape number 2 into the camcorder on top of the TV. Put tape number 3 into the camcorder on the tripod. This unrecorded activity creates another uncontained position in the circuit.

students. Threeing served as the basis for four 48-hour intensive job-search programs for workers displaced from defense-industry jobs at Pratt & Whitney. I conducted two of the workshops, and people I trained conducted the other two. Regardless of who taught the workshop, five out of six participants secured jobs [8]. These successes with Threeing indicate the variety of settings in which Threeing can operate to nurture collaborative human interaction with the world.

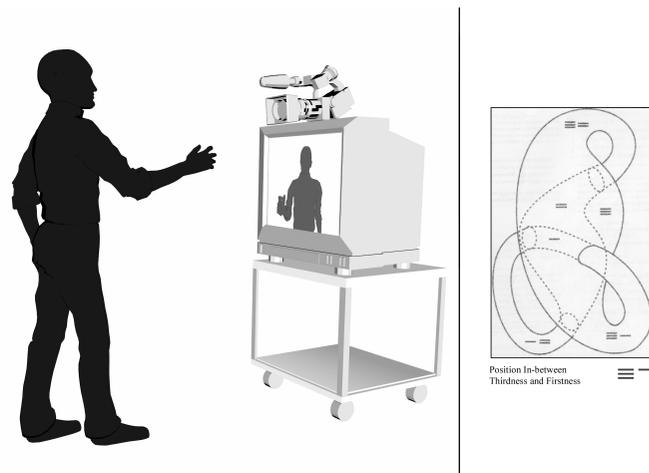
If we take the development of contrapposto as a measuring stick for the development of Threeing, then Threeing is somewhere in an early stage such as that of the Greek “Standing Youth” statues. No performance of Threeing to date rises to the level of a Hellenistic *Poseidon* statue or Michelangelo’s *David*. Such work is yet

to be created. Having reported on Threeing as an art of behavior, let me ask, How does this new behavioral art relate to the history of art, particularly the theory of relational aesthetics?

Consider painting. A painting embodies the gaze of a painter, that is, the painter has successfully detached him- or herself from the normal reciprocity of gaze between humans and, through prolonged looking at the canvas, successfully enshrined his or her “gaze” in the painting itself. Van Gogh withdrew his gaze from normal human interactions and gave us *Starry Night*. In contrast to interpersonal relationships in which we “catch” one another with a look or a gaze that invites face-to-face interaction, the painter, skilled in hand-eye coordination, catches or traps the gaze of the viewer

**Fig. 5. Step 5.** (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) Replay the tape on the camcorder on top of the TV. Comment on the relationship between the spontaneous self and the reactive self. This commentary creates a position in the circuit (third position) that contains two other positions (second position and third position).





**Fig. 6. Step 6.** (© Paul Ryan and Mark Watkins) Start over again by going back to the position of firstness. This creates a new uncontained position, in between the third position and the first position.

with pigments on canvas. The painter transforms his or her gaze into the aura of the art object and invites viewers to feast their eyes on the art object without reproach. Viewers look at the painting, not at the face of the painter. The painting is framed and fixed in place. It will not turn away and exclude us from its gaze, as happens in live human face-to-face interaction. How many viewers have feasted their eyes on the aura of *Starry Night* and thus engaged the transformed gaze of van Gogh?

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan understands the social function of this feasting of the eye as a sublimation of envy [9]. He finds the most exemplary instance of envy in Saint Augustine's account of his younger brother looking with love at his mother while feeding at her breast. This sight had the effect of poisoning the older brother with a desire to tear the younger one to pieces.

For Lacan, the civilizing function of painting is to tame this desperate gaze of envy. Among other things, art objects provide partial satisfaction for us when we are excluded from the aura of face-to-face human interaction. The proliferation of art objects that trap the gaze and the narrative connection between these objects constitute traditional art history.

Some artists have recently sought to withdraw from making objects and address inter-human encounters directly. This movement has been recognized and identified as relational aesthetics [10]. In keeping with this effort, Threeeing supports artists concerned with nurturing relationships. In the voluntary practice of Threeeing, it is possible for participants to maintain reciprocity of gaze without envy and without resorting to creating objects as art. The compensatory satisfaction of

viewing objects as an excluded third party can yield to a fullness of feedback among three nonexcluded people. Threeeing is a way of establishing an inclusive experience of aura among three people.

Walter Benjamin wrote that ritual allows us to experience emotion in a crisis-proof setting [11]. The establishment of Threeeing as a regularly repeated ritual can create an ongoing fullness of relationships among three people without envy, aura to aura to aura. In effect, the practice of Threeeing can provide artists emotional freedom from the need to make art objects. Yes, art objects can be produced collaboratively using Threeeing, and connecting this technique to current video technology can yield sophisticated digital art. Given Threeeing, however, it seems possible to actually reorder the economics of exclusion and envy that organize the art world. For artists who are so inclined, Threeeing makes it possible to engage the art world as a social system and link that social system more directly with efforts to address our ecological crisis.

To address our ecological crisis, let me again refer to the author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson. Bateson argued that in our current situation art could be a short cut to ecological sanity [12]. I argue that collaborative art-making based on Threeeing can be a short cut within that short cut. Rather than focus on object production, artists can use Threeeing to collaborate in the production of digital streams of aesthetic intelligence about our planet that support the survival of the human species.

The question becomes, How can art support the survival of the human species in this world? Bateson contended that the Darwinian theory of evolution had

misidentified the unit of survival as the breeding organism, the family line or the species. He argued that any species that destroys its environment destroys itself. Bateson insisted that the unit of survival must be re-identified as a flexible species in a flexible environment. He thought of the unit of evolutionary survival as a unit of mind [13]. Based on cybernetic theory, Bateson specified criteria for what qualifies as a mind, arguing that any system with the circuit structure necessary for self-correction is a mind, whether that system is a single organism or the larger system of organisms in an environment.

I have argued elsewhere that the relational circuit satisfies Bateson's criteria for a unit of mind [14]. Here I will discuss the relational circuit in connection to the role of aesthetics in human survival by citing an old friend of Bateson's, the biologist C.H. Waddington. After a study of modern painters, Waddington reasoned that as a species we humans transmit information over generations both genetically and through speech and writing [15]. Speech and writing inevitably result in authority structures, someone telling someone else what to do. The child is told, "No, don't touch, the oven is hot." The child's perceptual system is stunted and his or her behavior is linked up to the language commands of others.

Based on his examination of how modern painters had learned to see nature without language, Waddington suggested generalizing this artistic achievement for the human species as a whole. He thought we could generalize the silent success of painters such as Monet, Cézanne and van Gogh and evolve an information transmission system based on shared perception of environmental realities rather than language.

Based on the relational circuit and Threeeing, I have elaborated a notational system that provides a framework for evolving a shared perception of the natural world along the lines suggested by Waddington. The notational system is called Earthscore [16]. Using this notational system I was able to design an environmental television channel dedicated to representing the ecology of the Hudson Valley to the people who inhabit it so that they can learn to live there without destroying the valley [17].

Relational aesthetics is fledgling. The relational circuit is new. How these emerging possibilities play out remains to be seen.

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*Paul Ryan's video art has been presented in Japan, Turkey, France, Germany, Holland, Spain, Denmark, Ecuador and throughout the United States, including at New York City's Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Ryan has written Cybernetics of the Sacred (1974) and Video Mind, Earth Mind (1993). He is a member of the Core Faculty in the Graduate Media Studies Program at the New School.*