PAUL RYAN

VIDEO PIONEER

A Willoughby Sharp Interview

WS: Who are you, Paul Ryan?

PR: For the readers of Video 80/81, I'm someone who rode the video anomaly for nine years, from '68-'76, and have had the last five years to think about it.

WS: What do you mean "video anomaly"?

PR: An anomaly is something that doesn't fit normal expectations ...

WS: Like a five-legged dog?

PR: Like a five-legged dog. When I started with portable video it was brand new. You edited by developing the sync marks on the video tape with a chemical solution, cutting the video tape, lining the marks up on a splicing block and taping the two ends together. In that first rush it seemed that video would fit everywhere. In fact, it didn't really work anywhere.

WS: Can you be specific?

PR: Well, the normal expectations of the educational world were conditioned by the linear, sequential pattern of print. They didn't know what to do with the feedback loops video provided, so video equipment got locked in closets. The psychotherapeutic community was used to dealing with the "subconscious" based on dreams and interior monologues. Seeing evidence of the "subconscious" suddenly embedded on video tape by the movement and posture of the body was data that they couldn't deal with. Lots of grassroot radicals began gathering information on video that they felt was politically relevant, but the political procedures don't really include ways to handle replayable events, candid information, or "on the street" interviews. Only the art world with its "tradition of the new" was willing to deal with video at all.

WS: Thinking of video and art then, it's probably fair to say that there were two basic brands: "Video Art" and "Art Video." People like Bruce Nauman, Terry Fox, Vito Acconci were established visual artists before they were videoists; they put their art before their video. The other group, the Raindancers, the Video Freaks, People's Video Theatre and allied video makers, used video as their primary medium and came from video into art, rather than the other way around.

PR: Yes.

WS: You are among a whole group of early people who were devoted to video to see what it could do, and if it could be seen as an art, so much the better. What were the things you did with video then?

PR: I learned from working with video and Montessori kids for six months. I did a lot of feedback with myself, hanging the camera from the ceiling, running around, living with it for years. Worked with high school kids and cable TV. Worked with actors. Did a lot of consulting work. Did a piece in the Howard Wise "TV As A Creative Medium" show where people could see themselves on video in private, and then have it erased. Worked with the alternative video group Raindance. Did a twelve-hour *Video Wake* for my father when he died suddenly of cancer in the spring of '71. The tapes were played back immediately for people in my Riverside Drive apartment. Later, in '76, I reenacted the wake--live--at the Kitchen Center.

WS: Was that all you did?

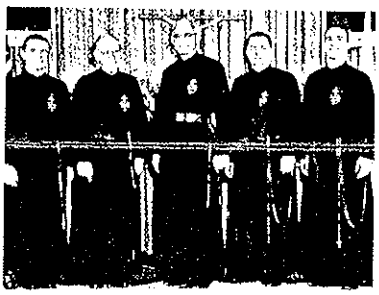
PR: No, I also used video in an attempt to create an intentional community that would use video for self-correction. Ideally, the community would decode the ecology and feed it back to a local community over cable TV. I also invented a repertoire of behavior patterns that would work for three people the way yoga works for an individual. I developed a method of video camera work based on T'ai Chi movement. Developed a video landscape methodology at the Great Falls in Paterson for six people. Spent a year studying a waterfall with a video camera. Wrote essays about video for *Radical Software*. My writings were published by Doubleday Anchor in 1974 under the title *Cybernetics of the Sacred*.

WS: How did you get on to the "video anomaly"?

PR: I understand the experience in terms of evolution. When the forms that organize life no longer work, no longer hold things together, a sporting time ensues--a search for new forms. When the sporting time of the '60s hit, I was in a Roman Catholic monastic preaching order. I left in February '65, found my way to McLuhan and worked with him at Fordham University in '67-68. During that year, I got hold of some Sony portable video equipment and went sporting for new forms.

WS: You were in a monastery?

PR: I was a teenage monk. *(Laughter)*



Paul Ryan (at right) as a Passionist monk, 1964

WS: From a teenage monk to a video bareback rider. From something very old to something very new. Exploring anomalies is supposed to yield new paradigms. Have you a new paradigm, a new model?

PR: Yes.

WS: Tell me about it.

PR: Well, it starts with the piece in the Howard Wise show "Everyman's Moebius Strip."

WS: I remember your work first from Howard's show on 57th Street. Was that the first time you showed in an art gallery?

PR: Yes.

WS: How did that happen?

PR: I was reluctant to do it. I didn't think of myself as an artist but ...

WS: How did you get involved?

PR: Howard Wise called me at the suggestion of Nam June Paik, whom I had just met through his Bonino Gallery show, and he was interested in me, partly because I was working with McLuhan and partly because I had equipment in my home and was doing work. So Howard asked me to exhibit a piece. That put me in a quandary because I thought that showing in an art gallery was something not ...

WS: You hadn't done it before. And your work wa produced with that kind of installation in mind?

PR: No.

WS: So you had to decide what to do in that kind a situation.

PR: Right. So what I constructed was this private booth, "Everyman's Moebius Strip." A videotape o person was fed back after the recording and then er

WS: You brought your own equipment into the gallery and put it in a confessional-type booth, didn you?

PR: Yes.

WS: Explain what the piece looked like.

PR: The participant walked into a curtained-off co ner chair. An audio tape started that ran for two mi utes taking them through certain very gentle exercis like "Touch your face," "Yawn" ...

WS: They were on camera?

PR: Yes, but they couldn't see themselves. No mor tor. "Touch your face." "Scratch your neck." "Reac to certain people." Things like that. Then the tape w stopped and played back for them alone.

WS: How?

PR: An attendant, who worked with the piece all t time, turned the monitor and let them see themselve on a video tape. They understood that they were the only ones who would see it. I was very interested in process and the possibilities that video seemed to affi

WS: Then the next recording was taped on top of t last?

PR: And the other was erased.

WS: How did you decide upon the work?

PR: I was thinking about how TV could work as a creative medium; you know, "TV As A Creative Mec um"! I never went to art school. I don't know the jargon; I don't know the vocabulary. I'm not that interested. I am in a very *deep* sense but not in the ..

WS: Yes.

PR: So, it just seemed to me that that was a legitim thing to do--to provide people with the experience o themselves rather than a painting one could do or an object.

WS: How is that an anomaly?

PR: People don't expect to go into a gallery and see themselves in private on a videotape that will be erase It's an experience that doesn't easily fit into the art tradition. But the more subtle anomaly involved was the difference between video feedback and mirror feedback. If you attempt to shake hands with yoursel in a mirror, the simulation will not work. If you atten to shake hands with yourself in a video feedback situ tion, the simulation *will* work. There is no reversal of image. This manner of taking in your outside can be mapped onto the Moebius strip. The Moebius strip is what you get when you take a long piece of paper, give it half a twist and tape the ends together. Now, the Moebius strip is itself an anomaly--a mathematica curiosity from the last century that really doesn't fit. It has no orientation. No up/down, front/back, or inside/outside. The model or formal paradigm I developed involved moving from the Moebius strip to a

'From Teen Age Monk To Video Bareback Ride

Paul Ryan on the Hoboken docks

six-part relational circuit, a complete and consistent non-orientable circuit which makes it possible to use the phenomenology and semiotics of C.S. Peirce cybernetically, in communications and telecommunications applications.

WS: Can you give me a brief description of your take on Peirce's phenomonology and semiotics?

PR: I can, but it's pretty abstract stuff.

WS: Be brief.

PR: In Peirce's understanding, every phenomenon in the mind can be comprehended in three irreducible categories: "Firstness," "Secondness" and "Thirdness." Firstness is the category of spontaneity, freshness and originality. Secondness is reaction/resistance--being up against the "thisness" of something. Thirdness is the category of mediation between firstness and secondness--of law, regularity and habit. Out of these categories he developed semiotics, or the inquiry into signs. A sign is something that stands in place of its object, for an interpretant. His three categories exfoliate into sixty-six sign classifications.

WS: What does Peirce, the American philosopher with his sixty-six signs, have to do with your idea of cybernetic communications?

PR: Among other things, communications is the creation of redundancy patterns. Cybernetics understands creating redundancy patterns partly in terms of self-correcting circuits. Self-correcting circuits allow one to identify and eliminate error in establishing communication. The more coherent and complex the circuit, the more capacity it has to identify and eliminate error. The six-part "circuit" I developed out of the Moebius strip anomaly makes it possible to use Peirce's three categories and sixty-six signs to create very reliable electronic communications systems. The "relational circuit" is both simple--in that it is based on three irreducible categories--and complex--in that it has, in effect, sixty-six subcircuits.

WS: From "Everyman's Moebius Strip" to "Ryan's Relational Circuit." How long did it take?

PR: Over a dozen years.

WS: Why did you concentrate so much on relational circuits rather than on, say, producing and promoting your own tapes?

PR: It just seemed to me that without the development of some formal principles, the real cultural opportunities inherent in video would be lost. The real possibilities of video would stay mired in a spaghetti city of narcissism, careerism, mythology and madness. You don't get beautiful, free-standing Greek statues by chance. Without a principle like contraposto, stone remains stone.

WS: Why do you think that you got hooked on the Moebius strip anomaly in video?

PR: Well, I was always fascinated by the non-orientation of the Moebius strip. The reflexes in my body are oriented in opposition to most people. I mean, I'm left-handed and in things like high diving I find it easier to throw my chin up and flip backwards. Most people find it easier to tuck their chin and flip forward. For me, it's easier to do a full gainer--go off the diving board frontwards and flip backwards--than do a simple front flip. Somehow the fact that in the Moebius strip up and down, left and right, front and back didn't matter--somehow that fact got me going. Some of the early tapes I did with video infolding and feedback could be taken as a series of back flips with a le ed twist. And, of course, I parachuted into the c of the sixties from a medieval monastic life. I w the alert for whatever clues might help me mak out of what was going on. Anomalies are cultur

WS: When were you in the monastery?

PR: I went into the Passionist Monastic Order high school in September 1960 and stayed four half years, until February 1965.

WS: Why did you go into the monastery?

PR: I thought I had a vocation, a special callin Catholic sense. Andrew Ansbro, a preacher fron order, came through my high school with an in impact and I decided to apply there. In retrosp was looking for something challenging, somethi would demand discipline. Partly, I think that I underlying fear that without it I would have tro with the drink, as my father had. Addiction an cism. The decision to go into the monastery lie where in there.

WS: What was it like?

PR: Chanting for two and a half hours a day, ing breaking your sleep in the middle of the nig an hour. The chanting was part of the liturgy, t *Opus Dei*, singing the praises of God. Meditatio another hour and a half. Solitary walks. Silenc of studying, mainly philosophy and spirituality in silence, sometimes with a spiritual book bein aloud. After meals, brief periods for talk. One week for recreation, a day of manual work.

WS: Did you like it?

PR: Oh, yes. That's an old tradition, monastic

photo Raindance Archive

"...without the development of some formal principles ... the real possibilities of video would stay mired in a spaghetti city of narcissism, careerism, mythology and madness."

They know how to get high and stay there. The order I was in had lots of good men. Real joy in community. I had a master of novices whose explanation of love included Aquinas' understanding of the role of charity in the pursuit of wisdom and Carson McCullers' insights in "A Tree, A Rock, and A Cloud." I was young; I believed it all. It all worked. I had a friend there who used to say, "Some people are called to serve God; we're called to enjoy Him."

WS: Did you take vows?

PR: Yes, temporary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

WS: Poverty?

PR: I owned nothing. Not even underwear. We shared the "reggies." Every week they'd issue you two sets of these great flannel European 19th century underwear that one wore under one's robe. The vow of poverty left your mind very free. No worry about rent, food, clothes, bills, etc.

WS: Chastity?

PR: No women. Out of sight, out of mind (mostly).

WS: Obedience?

PR: Worked great when there was faith. When the doubts came with the Vatican Council, it was rough. You'd be given orders just to reinforce authority. Blind obedience. We called it "watering the dry stick."

WS: Tell me more.

PR: There was also a special vow to preach the Passion of Christ. The order had been founded in the north of Italy in the 1700s by a man named Paul Danco to preach to the poor. The ideal was six months of monastic contemplation and six months on the road preaching the Passion. The order was called "The Passionists," and its founder is Saint Paul of the Cross. The monks told a story about him I really like. As an old man, he was once seen shaking a stick at the garden flowers. "Quiet, quiet," he was saying, "you shout too loud of the Glory of God."

WS: Why did you leave?

PR: It was complex ... A group of us got radicalized by a new understanding of the Catholic Church coming out of the conflicts in the Vatican Council in 1964. Out of my original class of about thirty "postulants," only four were ordained.

WS: From a monk to an artist. From the ascetic to the aesthetic. If you were to found an aesthetic order now, Paul Ryan, what would it be like?

PR: The death throes of faith as the birth pangs of art—it's a good question. The ascetic orders of the West are a sort of holding action against the destructiveness of resentment. The hope that these orders hold is that the human species would someday be free of resentment, jealousy and revenge. Now these emotions arise mostly when one is excluded. The slave resents being exluded from the master's power. The jealous lover is one who fears his or her place will be taken by another. In a sense, a monk is a voluntary exile who would rather be cloistered than become what Nietszche calls a "whirl of revenge."

WS: I see that you have read Nietszche closely. Are there other authors who have influenced your thinking deeply?

PR: Besides Peirce and Nietszche, Gregory Bateson, Rene Thom, Wallace Stevens, Warren McCulloch and Marshall McLuhan have been important to me. But, to continue this business of resentment and exclusion: it has deep roots in human interaction. I did over thirty hours of people spontaneously interacting in sets of three. One pattern recurred: two persons would combine to exclude the third. The function of the triad is to reinforce the dyad. The third party is extruded in the process. Now, in the face of this extrusion pattern, what I did was set out to "invent" triadic behavior. I can show you a series of tapes done from '71-76, *The Triadic Tapes*, five and a half hours edited from about forty-five hours of raw tape; they are half-inch black and whites and they embed the invention process. What I actually invented was a relational practice that works for three people the way yoga works for an individual. Yoga practiced on a regular basis can stabilize health. The relational practice, done regularly, can stabilize a three-person interactive process in which no one is excluded. In normal experience, our health begins to break down without some exercise like yoga. In normal three-person interaction, the relationships are routinely subsumed by acts of choice. The dynamics between Tom, Dick and Jane are normally such that Jane is forced to choose between Dick and Tom. In the relational practice, the effects of choice on relationships are neutralized.

(Note: For Ryan's explication of the relational practice, see "Relationships," Ryan, Vol 1, Issue 4, 1980 pp 44-55 "Talking Wood," Box 364, Pompton Lakes NJ 07442–WS)

So, to begin to answer your question, Willoughby, I would base an aesthetic order on this relational practice. The practice is inherently aesthetic. It frees people from the fear of being forced to choose one over another and allows the sort of choices that go on in a painter's mind as he builds relationships among colors.

WS: Would there be a vow of poverty in this order? How would such an operation be supported?

PR: It would probably need an endowment to get going, but such an order would have to make its way in the information economy. Rather than a vow of poverty, engage in intransitive profit taking.

WS: Intransitive profit taking?

PR: We're moving from an energy/money economy to one based on information. Information is a matter of differences that make differences going around a circuit. Video production, to video distribution, to home viewing, to changes in habit that viewing makes, around to how these habits effect further video production. Each transformation of difference represents a possible locus of profit taking. But if the profit taking is such that you fail to cultivate the circuit or break the circuit, you're destroying your chance for long-term stability in the information economy.

WS: Say more about this information economy.

PR: It's just emerging. It's not clear what shape it will take, so in a way it's only possible to make broad generalizations that appear obvious. Certainty is at a premium and, as always, error is expensive. Creating coherent redundancy patterns generates certainty; identifying and eliminating error saves money. For an organization to make it in the information economy, be it aesthetic order or whatever, it needs the sort of capacity to generate certainty and eliminate error that the relational circuit I described to you earlier makes possible.

WS: And would this aesthetic order have a vow of obedience? Would they water the dry stick?

PR: Obedience is a notion linked up to language commands. As children the developing integrity of our perceptual system is stunted and linked up to language commands. "No. Don't touch. The oven is hot." Using video and the relational practice, it would be possible to develop a system of information transmission married to environmental realities and not competing and often contradictory commands of various language authorities. The work of this aesthetic order would be to produce such a system based on a shared perception of the environment. They would take their "orders" from the figures of regulation they found in the ecology. They would not be wasting time watering dry sticks.

WS: What about sex? Would there be a vow of celibacy in this triadic aesthetic order?

PR: Only for you, Willoughby, only for you.

WS: C'mon, I thought I was in for a menage 3 trois.

PR: To work triadically to develop a shared perception of the environment is one thing; to fiddle with the propagation of the species is another. Pair bonding protects the possibility of a next generation, and to attempt to undo that mechanism might be just plain stupid. We could wind up with geriatric trisexuals with out any young to care for them. We're not a trisexual species, that much is clear. Our bisexuality allows us four possible cases of triadic combinations: three males, three females, two males and a female, and two females and a male. Given these combinations, there are a number of ways people could organize their sexual differences triadically. One way would be celibacy, the way the Shakers did it. Another would be to preserve monogamy and let committed couples work in sets of three to reinforce their relationships. The relational practice could also be used to help stabilize family interaction. Opening up a pattern of recombinant triadic relations that included sexuality is as explosive as it is fascinating. The closest that people have gotten to this as far as I know is the Oneida Community, which survived for thirty-five years and generated children without monogamy.

WS: How did they do that?

PR: Partly through the charisma of the leader,Noyes partly through a mechanism whereby every act of copulation was mediated by a third party. No one was ever approached directly. One major question would be whether the relational practice could be used to restructure the primitive emotions to allow a group of people to engage in trisexual interaction gracefully. Yoga has its Kundalini; I don't know if this relational practice could have an explicit sexual extension. Don't even know if it's desirable. It's the sort of thing that could be explored in a context clearly marked experimental video art, but it's not the sort of thing to fool around with in one's life.

WS: So why not start an aesthetic order?

PR: It's certainly something to think about beyond being just a useful device for this interview. With James Watt now running the Department of the Interior, backed by the Moral Majority of Bible readers, it does seem that traditional religion and the Federal government are both courting the destruction of the world. We seem to need to try other forms of institutions that will take long-term responsibility for the ecosystem of the planet. An aesthetic order that produced an electronic signal system about the environmental limits might be worth trying.

WS: You have a heightened sense of our endangered planet that has motivated a lot of your work. If you had a cable channel at your disposal in an urban set-

MAPPING PEIRCE'S SIXTY SIX SIGNS ONTO RYAN'S RELATIONAL CIRCUIT

The relational circuit (Figure 1) provides six different positions including a position of firstness (-), a position of secondness (=), and a position of thirdness (≡). According to Peirce a sign is something (a first), which stands in place of something else (a second), for somebody (a third). This definition yields ten divisions of signs each with three different modes. Following the general rule that a first cannot determine a second, nor a second determine a third, Peirce combined these ten trichotomous divisions to arrive at an array of sixty six signs. (Figure 2, after Lieb). The schematic provided (Figure 3) shows how these sixty six signs map onto the relational circuit. For further information on the relational circuit see, "A Metalogue," *ALL AREA #1*; 1980; p. 47; 77 Reade St., NYC, NY 10007. For further information on the sixty six signs see appendix B in *Semiotic and Significs*; ed. Hardwick; Charles; Indiana University Press; Bloomington Indiana; 1979.

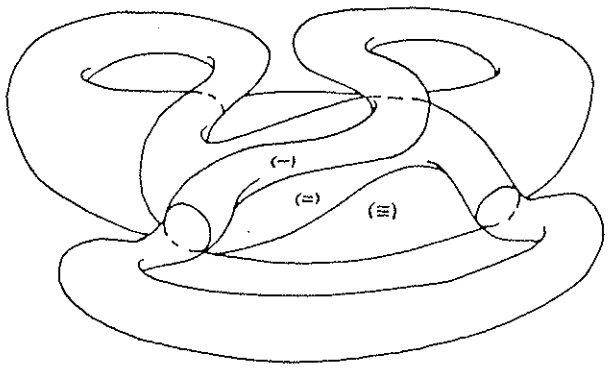


Figure 1 RYAN'S RELATIONAL CIRCUIT

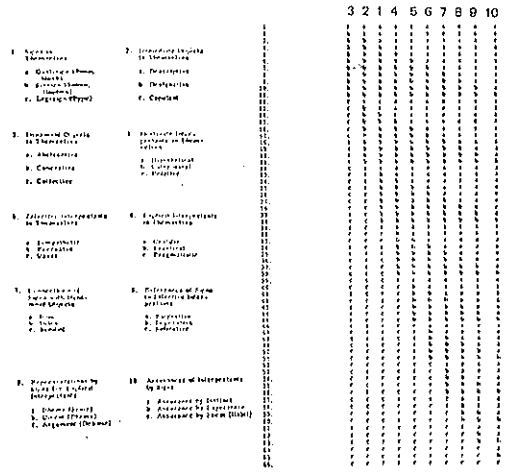


Figure 2 PEIRCE'S SIXTY-SIX SIGNS

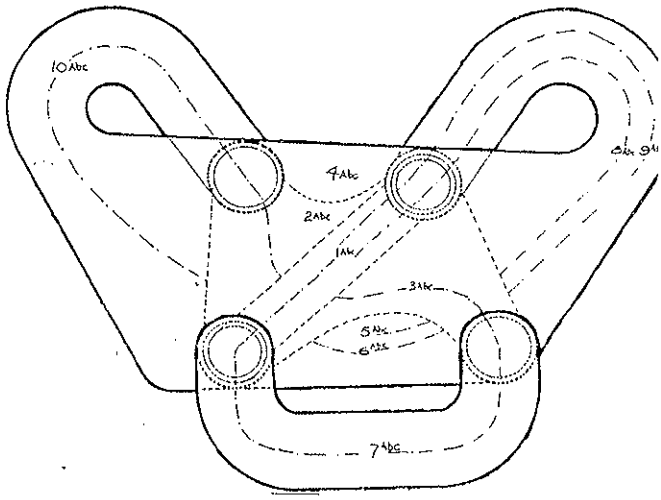


Figure 3 MAPPING THE SIGNS ONTO THE CIRCUIT

ting—say New York—what would you do with it? What difference might it make in dealing with our endangered planet?

PR: That would be a tough proposition. Since I moved to Hoboken, I've spent a lot of time down by the water thinking about this sort of thing. The problem is that New Yorkers live on a space platform. They don't know that they live at the foot of the Manhattan fiord; that the Palisades were gouged by glaciers; that we have a salt water/fresh water estuary ecology to care for. New Yorkers think that the nuclear issue belongs to Israel; they have no idea that the issue is in their backyard. At the top of the fiord is a precambrian rock formation loaded with high-grade uranium. That's something to reckon with.

WS: So what would you do with a cable channel?

PR: I would use Peirce's phenomenology and semiotics to make it possible for people to ground their intelligence in a sharable perception of the actual place we live in. I would use the wire architecturally to make sense out of the bioregion we live in. We're a coastal city at the foot of the fiord, in the Eastern Woodlands. Water issues, food sources, local energy issues, questions about living in this place in terms of long-range biological continuities.

WS: Most people aren't in touch with that.

PR: I agree, it's difficult. Part of the reason is that the media so far has induced us to forego the unmediated experience of each other and of our environment. I would use the cable channel to encourage people to get out and get to know the place they live in through their skin.

WS: You mean what people see on cable they could also go out and see live?

PR: Exactly. Gain some direct understanding of how the perceptible living biosphere actually functions here. The shared perception of the environment via cable could be verified by live perception of the real environment.

WS: That's very interesting. You can't do tha CBS. But if your community had a wire to the region and a lot of programming had live para you could choose between live and video and about the difference. Sounds hot. Before I ask final question would you be willing to indicat an interested reader might be able to contact

PR: Sure. I keep a mail drop in New York: Earthscore, Box 862, NYC 10268

WS: Final question. How would you locate y principal contribution to the culture?

PR: My chief contribution is the principle of lational circuit. I would locate that principle i of cultural evolution. I think that principle ma sible two things that were not possible before. the relational practice, which may eventually l to free us from resentment. The other is the pc of an information transmission system based o perception of environmental realities, somethi before done in our evolution. □