

...might be good

## Interview: The Transition From Firstness to Thirdness - Kara Hearn

By Rachel Cooke, September 16, 2011



New York based artist, author and teacher Paul Ryan recently published an essay through the dOCUMENTA (13) publication series, *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, on his idea of threeing. The essay is a three-way interview between Ryan, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri titled “Two Is Not a Number.” In Ryan’s idea, threeing is a way of being with two others. Ryan relates the idea of threeing to being born in a two-parent household, the nuclear family: child, two parents and how you balance your relation to each parent, from an unchanged position. As a child of psychologist, whose mother wrote her dissertation on what happens in a marriage after the birth of the first child, the idea of the ever evolving relationship between parents and children hits close to home. However, in Ryan’s mind threeing is an art form; “the art of three presencing to each other in the oneness of one form.” He thinks of it as a way to make it possible for three or more people to create collaborative, sustainable relationships.

In Kara Hearn’s most recent project at Recess in New York City, Hearn created a situational “threeing” of sorts. The evidence and residue of this project is a feature length film titled *Tremendous*. Recess is a storefront space in Soho, billed as part residency, part interactive exhibition venue. Hearn built a movie set and invited the public to join her in the making of this film. When entering the space there were a series of sets—the bedroom, the platform with a microphone, the intimate table scenario, the living room television scene—each small vignettes within the film. Instead of becoming a mock reality television episode, Hearn was able to capture a range of contributions—from the heartfelt, and sincere, to the more jovial and sarcastic—from members of the public who came to participate in the project. All the while, Hearn herself becomes a character, slowly nudging the arc of the narrative along.

I’ve asked Hearn to read Ryan’s essay and discuss it within an interview context, so that the object of our reflection could float between the essay and *Tremendous*.

Rachel Cook [RC]: Do you think there is some truth to what Ryan is saying when he breaks down the roles of firstness, secondness and thirdness, and did you see some of these relationships play out/instigate them yourself while working on *Tremendous*?

Just for reference, here is Ryan's breakdown:

- \* Firstness: Spontaneous, fresh
- \* Secondness: Role of the other
- \* Thirdness: Mediate between firstness and secondness

Kara Hearn [KH]: Definitely. I like Ryan's idea of threeing because it's a way to explain a dynamic that entered into *Tremendous* again and again. I was initially concerned that visitors would feel confronted by the project and pressured to participate. As a shy person wary of participatory projects myself, I wanted to create a feeling of freedom by giving people a lot of options for entering or not entering the work. I made an intake form that visitors could sit and read in the "waiting room" set to give them a sense of the scope and tone of the project along with a number of ways to participate. I think this was an intuitive way of building a thirdness into the relationship that would maintain a feeling of balance and act as a buffer between my goals for the project (firstness) and the visitor's desire to contribute or not (secondness).

A similar but less intentional dynamic entered the project when we were actually shooting. I could not believe how intimate and vulnerable total strangers were willing to be with me only moments after we had met. It felt like something quite magical and a little discomfiting when it was happening, but to use Ryan's language, it was perhaps, "the art of three presencing to each other in the oneness of one form." My willingness to be present and create a stage (firstness), and the participant's willingness to be present and to be on that stage (secondness), was completed and balanced out by the camera (thirdness) which acted as a buffer, a mediator, a witness and as proof of something bigger to come that we would all be a part of: the final video—which might be considered the "one form" that we're "presencing" ourselves to in this case.

I was so enamored with this dynamic that I used it as the structure for the final edited video. There isn't anything resembling a traditional narrative in *Tremendous*, but there is a quiet subtext that someone behind the camera has facilitated a series of moments that rise and fall about her and about the audience by extension.

RC: I couldn't agree more. While I was never able to participate in the filming aspect of the project or see the installation myself, I still get a sense of how the space was laid out and feel present as a viewer within the situations that the people play out in front of the camera. What I think is interesting is when you talk about how "this structure" (which I am taking as the three-part structure of camera, you, visitor) inspired some of the editing process. Maybe you can reveal a bit more about how that operated?

KH: My touchstone throughout the project was a dream I'd had about being overcome and killed by a tidal wave. It made sense to overwhelm, not only in terms of the content of the video, but in the process of making the thing as well. I had no idea what material I would have to work with in the end, but I knew I wanted to fashion something like a narrative movie out of the mountain of footage I'd compiled. Because I had so many participants doing so many different things, the only constants from scene to scene were the sets, the camera, the project and me. I decided to have the line start there. I thought it would be interesting to have a protagonist who is barely there but always present behind the camera or at the edges of the frame. I hoped it would create the odd effect of being lost in a narrative without having anything to grab onto, besides the moment at hand.

RC: How do you feel your presence affected the various situations, and do you think the participants felt as though they were collaborating with you? Especially because in the end, you screened the film and I am sure some of them were in the audience. This seems like a particularly relevant point considering all the discussion surrounding participatory, and interactive performative work.

KH: While there was a moment of collaboration with every participant as we sussed out what they would do, I was always conscious that I was the director, and that this was my project. I did get confused when I started editing. It was really hard for me to cut people out completely because I'd developed a mini-relationship with each person who came in and was so grateful for every contribution that I wanted the final piece to reflect that. But in the end, I had so much footage and a specific experience I tried to create. Not everything fit into it. I had to very consciously shift my focus beyond the initial audience of participants to a future viewing audience. I'm not sure I'd call it a burden, but it was a challenge. I worried about it at the first screening.

RC: Ryan talks about threeing being a way to combat the two against one dynamic, and how it can be both a non-verbal and verbal process. For me, watching *Tremendous*, I felt a tension between those two things; there are unspoken gestures as much as there are spoken ones. Also, the typical scenario of bringing a camera into the room and talking to people from behind it (i.e. reality TV, candid camera, home movies, etc.) doesn't happen in *Tremendous*. There is a certain authenticity, even if it is actually fiction. Ryan also says something about non-narrative and how threeing is a social practice. I guess in some ways I feel that Recess became a site and a social engagement exercise for a month, with which *Tremendous* participated. Finally at the end, he says that threeing needs to be grounded in a place, and I guess I would argue that your work continuously does this, whether it is a physiological, traumatic place of memory or a physical place. The place itself takes on a certain form and entity of sorts in the work.

KH: There was just an article in the *New York Times* about how the term "authenticity" is losing its meaning because it is being overused by politicians and celebrities, so I'm inclined to find a different term. Wasn't there an *Art Lies* issue about "sincerity"? Is that overused too? At any rate, there was a certain quality of sincerity or real-ness I looked for throughout the process.

I do think all of the qualities of threeing that Ryan describes were at play. The camera's thirdness created a natural balance in the relationship and a degree of comfort that made a sincere response on both parts possible. Even though I tried for a vague sort of narrative in the editing, the process was decidedly non-narrative, and that definitely allowed for an openness on my part to all kinds of contributions. I'm glad you brought up Ryan's idea of threeing needing to be grounded in place. He likens the continuity of space to a circuit, which is an exciting idea. I have been increasingly interested in limiting productions to a single space to eliminate as many distractions as possible, but it might also create a larger continuity for me and for the participants that allows this threeing thing to happen.

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