

David M. Mills

## **Book Review**

# **Creative Construing – Personal Constructions in the Arts**

**edited by Jörn W. Scheer and Kenneth W. Sewell**

Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2006, Paperback, 216 pages

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reviewed by

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## **PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A PERSONAL SCIENTIST**

*Student:* I've been reading about Personal Construct Theory and I get the man-as-scientist metaphor, but I'm not so sure about where the arts come in. What's creative about construing? I mean, sure we are all something like an artist, just as we are all something like a scientist. But I'd like to know more about this connection between PCT and the arts. You are all artists of some kind. What do you think?

*Singer:* Well, I don't know that I'd say I am an artist. I enjoy singing, and that is certainly an important part of who I am. But I wouldn't call myself a singer.

*Dancer:* I think if you sing, you're a singer. Just like I dance, so I'm a dancer.

*Singer:* In a way, yes, but the difference between singing and being a singer is a significant one—being a real singer, I mean. Vivien Burr talks about that in her essay, in that book on creative construing.

*Dancer:* And Sara Bridges says similar things about dancing. I know that I construe myself as a person who dances, and that is very important to me, but whether that means that I am a dancer is another question. It's a matter of who gets to decide.

*Actor:* Of course we actors are always construing ourselves in at least two ways at once, as the character and as a member of the cast. I usually don't have time to think about whether I construe myself as an actor.

*Reviewer:* Personally, I find all this autobiography to be a bit daunting. Do I have to construe myself as a reviewer before I can throw my hat into this conversation?

*Dancer:* Well, you could construe yourself as a recreational reviewer, I suppose.

*Writer:* Is reviewing an art form? Or something else?

*Reviewer:* The question of how people involved in the arts construe themselves is just one of the fascinating questions considered in the collection of essays, *Creative Construing: Personal Constructions in the Arts* edited by Jörn W. Scheer and Kenneth W. Sewell. It is, like its subject matter, an eclectic and personal mix of creative explorations. So I will construe myself as a person who has been involved in one way or another with all of the forms of art discussed in the book and join the participants in

wondering about the interplay of psychological and artistic construing.

*Constructive Construing* opens “A PCT view of novel writing and reading” by Don Bannister, followed by Max Farrar's discussion of Bannister's own novels. The novel is seen as an extended form in which the constructive aspects—both in the writing and in the reading—emerge slowly enough to be laid out for easier viewing. Fay Fransella contributes an essay on Kelly as a literary figure—his storytelling and his poetry—in which she wonders whether we may find in them secrets about Kelly's own view of his psychological work.

*Writer:* So both Bannister and Kelly seem to have used literary creation as a way of getting at things they couldn't reach in psychological mode.

*Student:* That is consistent with what Kelly himself said about how the poor scientist and the poor writer “both fail in their make-believe.” Kelly and Bannister are both willing to use both kinds of make-believe to get to what they had to say.

*Reviewer:* Well, yes, and then in his essay, Chris Stevens lets a group of fiction writers speak for themselves about their use of 'non-validation' as an important part of their creative process. They describe a kind of deliberate holding open of the Experience Cycle to create a space in which their characters can find their own path in ways the writer cannot anticipate. Or rather, it is a different sort of anticipating, “a bodily stance toward one's world” except in this case toward the world they are creating. Stevens and the writers describe this as more a 'waiting upon' kind of anticipating than a 'looking for.'

*Student:* So writing is more like a personal natural history than a personal science?

*Writer:* Yes, I suppose it is; it's like moving into new, unknown territory and just waiting to see what comes along and making sense of it as it comes. And one of the fascinating things about that is what it reveals about myself. As the story comes together, I find myself coming together in a new way as well. And often it actually 'feels' different. Interesting how such an obviously mental activity like writing a

novel reveals what a bodily activity construing is.

*Dancer:* Hmm. That's interesting. I feel like that after I dance, but I never thought of writing that way. And Personal Construct Theory can help us understand things like that? I wonder why this hasn't been looked at before.

*Reviewer:* The premise of the book is that Personal Construct Theory can be useful for taking a fresh look at the arts, and in particular how artistic activity affects the artist's self-construing. In the process, it also shows that the arts provide a fresh look at PCT. Richard Bell goes so far as to cast Poetry *as* a form of Personal Construct Theory. But this is a group that takes the personal in Personal Construct Theory seriously, as we find in Sean Brophy's personal account of writing haiku as a means of elaborating vitally important meanings.

*Writer:* As Brophy says, “Reading and writing are acts of philosophy.” There is a close parallel between the construing involved in writing and the equally revealing construing in reading. I wonder if this same parallel is present with other art forms.

*Musician:* You know, speaking of personal accounts, Jörn Scheer actually interviews himself about PCP and jazz. He says that being “a PCP person” and being “a jazz person” have a lot of similarities—both are somewhat out of the mainstream and both are in some way “in between.” Anyway, talking about jazz rhythms, he cites Jerry Coker's book on improvising, a book I happen to have myself. I remember that Coker received a letter from a jazz pianist named Browne who taught theory at Yale, and I think that Browne had some very PCT sounding things to say about improvising.

*Richmond Browne:* The listener is constantly making predictions; actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event even will be a repetition of something, or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind. As nearly as we can tell, the listener must come out right about 50% of the time—if he is too successful in predicting, he will be bored; if he is too unsuccessful, he will give

up and call the music 'disorganized.'<sup>1</sup>

*Musician:* Yeah, that was it. Isn't that what the writers were doing? And one way or another the other kinds of artists are doing the same thing.

*Actor:* So art is always a sort of conversation between the artist and the audience—a conversation of setting up anticipations and then validating or invalidating them.

*Dancer:* Or a dance.

*Reviewer:* So there is really quite a bit going on in this little book. The essays fall generally into three categories, though as might be expected from a group of psychologist/artists, few of them will hold still and fit into only one category. Basically, though, there are those, like Bannister's that elaborate an art form or its personal or social uses in PCT terms. Other essays in this group are Eric Button's "Music and the Person," about how we use music in our self-construction, Devorah Kalekin-Fishman's "Construing sounds, constructing music and non-music," about how kindergarten children are taught to construe music and non-music, and Jonathan Raskin's "Sociality and the sitcom."

A second group collect the views, or consider the experiences, of individuals involved in the arts to reveal ways that personal reconstruing through creative activity is extended across people's lives. In "Stand at the back and pretend – the experience of learning to sing," Mary Frances gives us the story of a group of people who were convinced in early life that they "could not sing," and who had the joyful experience of reconstruing both what singing is and who they were. Sabrina Cipolletta does a similar thing with a group of students in dance class in "Construing through the body: The dancing experience," showing through an analysis of the dancers' experiences just how embodied personal construing is.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the most lively essays are those that are personal accounts of con-

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Coker, J. (1964). *Improvising Jazz*. New York: Simon & Schuster

struing and reconstruing in artistic form. In addition to those already mentioned—Brophy's "Haiku poetry: Escape from constriction," Burr's "Becoming a singer: PCT and voice," Bridges' "Music and mirrors: Dance as a construction of self" and Scheer's "Living with jazz: Construing cultural identity"—co-editor Kenneth Sewell contributes "Construing characters and cast: Personal constructs on the stage and in the dressing room." Each of these is a personal reflection in which the author's story as a PCT person is inseparable from their story as an artist. Burr traces her own journey from being a person who sings to embodying her self-construction as "a singer." Bridges tells a multidimensional story in which she returns to dance and yet never left it, and in which she faces the question of who gets to decide whether construing oneself as an artist fits with others' expectations. Sewell's story is explicitly multidimensional, exploring the layers of construing of an actor—as simultaneously a character on a story being performed for an audience and a member of a cast, both on and off stage.

The collection rounds out with C.T. Patrick Diamond's reflection on years of working toward a constructivist and arts-based approach in higher education and Jörn Scheer's helpful "A short introduction to Personal Construct Psychology" for readers who are coming to the book without a PCP background.

*Actor:* It seems that everyone in this book is playing out multiple layers of construing. That in itself says something about the constructive nature of art. I mean, what Vivian Burr says about the postural aspects of playing the role of Singer and how that affects the singing, and the relation to the audience, is similar to what Kenneth is saying.

*Dancer:* Yes, and the way those dancers were embodying their self-construing in how they moved in space and time is like that too.

*Writer:* But it's also like what the writer does. In fact, I've written a haiku about that.

The construing self  
Multidimensional world  
A writer, I am.

*Singer:* Not fair. You're the only one who can put any of what you do here.

*Writer:* Well. That's true. But that's a whole other set of questions about differences between art forms—like how with writing both the creation and the connection to the reader are more extended in time and space. Anyway, what I think we're onto is the similarities. But I do like how so many of the contributors are really telling their own stories. Is that what artists are always doing—indirectly telling their own stories?

*Reviewer:* There is a strong emphasis in several of these essays on the ways in which the art reveals the embodied quality of personal construing. This is naturally most evident in the performing arts, but to go along with the writer's enjoyment of the 'feeling' of a story coming together, I remember a comment by Native American artist, Bill Reid, about the life of a piece of sculpture.

*Bill Reid:* Whenever we look at a particular piece of Northwest Coast art and see the shape of it, we are only looking at its afterlife. Its real life is the movement by which it got to be that shape.<sup>2</sup>

*Student:* This takes me back to the questions I began with. I suppose a person can't really be a scientist without being an artist. Of course, construing must be creative, and it is by observing the arts that we see that in practice most clearly. It seems that not only does PCT reveal something about the arts, but the arts also reveal important things about PCT. They are where we can see personal construing right out in front of us.

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<sup>2</sup> Reid, B. (1971) from *Natural Visions* exhibit at Seattle Art Museum

*Dancer:* And respond to it with personal construing of our own.

*Reviewer:* That's a good idea to finish with. It seems in the end, that every artist, whether they construe themselves to be Artists or not, is actively engaged, committed to action through which the person, as Kelly puts it, "becomes a significant event" in their own experience. And it appears that this is true for the person who engages with art as well as the one who creates it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## REFERENCE

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