

GRIDDING A GRID: A REVIEW OF  
SEBASTIAN DI MAURO'S "PASSAGES" EXHIBITION

(Dr.) C.T.Patrick DIAMOND  
Director  
Queensland College of Art

## THE CRITICAL COMPOUND

In discussing postmodernist fiction, McHale (1987) provides thirty-four notes on the references he cites just in his twelfth chapter. In its thirteenth note, he interprets Brooke-Rose's (1975) use of shaped typography in *Thru*. One of these verbal icons is thus seen as portraying a traditional classroom of writing-desks arranged in rows (words arranged in a rectangular grid). He comments:

The rectangular word-grid appears in the early pages of the text as an iconic representation of a rear-view mirror, then later metamorphoses into an academic timetable, then into the classroom, and so on, forming a chain of icons of shifting meaning, spanning the text (p.252).

The grid thus does multiple duty. In his recent catalogue, Di Mauro (1989) describes his continuing use of the grid to represent his own pre-sence as artist so that "these images could be titled self-portraits". Each work bears his imprint.

Ray (1984) depicted structuralist critics as seeing an interpretation of a work as as much the property of the collective that furnished the conventions of the reading or response as of the individual that provided it. While this serves to challenge the association of tenant with property that underpins the authority of "established" scholars and their "definitive" readings, yet another bureaucracy is put in place which ultimately reinstates an authoritarian privilege. A new class of technocrats takes control of the artistic critical economy and with their burgeoning "theoretical lexicon (they) displace the historical erudition of scholarship" (p.208). Ironically, however, their mastery of meaning depends upon:

Mastery of an recondite metalanguage (that) most critics find beyond their grasp. So rapidly do the subcategories and refinements to the theoretical grammar proliferate that even the best - intentioned critic has difficulty maintaining fluency -- and hence a share in the conversations he is supposed to subsidise (p.208).

The scholars or high priests have difficulty remaining in contact even with one another, let alone with the artists. Holly (1989) represented this fading jungle telegraph at work when he cited recent comments attributed to Tom Wolfe in interview which may in turn be misquoted here as relevant to the hold of the "Compound" (the critics) on the "Art Village" (the artists and the community). Wolfe was alleged to describe art that is understandable and acceptable to ordinary mortals (like artists) as undercutting the special position of the Critical Compound. To ensure their hold on the Village, the Compound

sought the weapon of obscurity and so discovered Deconstructionism. Rooted in unreadable but constantly retranslated French philosophy, Wolfe described Deconstructionists as existing in a "Mannered Marxist-Mist", pulling any artistic system (and others) apart, deconstructing it, in a way that they, the critics, control. Thus the Compound retains its hegemony and turns its back on the Village and Downtown Culture.

#### EXIT THE CRITIC:

##### UNDER ERASURE OR CANCELLATION

Sebastian Di Mauro's current exhibition, "Passages", at the Roz MacAllan gallery shows that a grid is a structure consisting of parallel rows and parallel columns. Just as in electricity where the grid controls the flow of power from filament to plate, Di Mauro uses the grid to depict man's grim existence as "changed with the grandeur" of hope and regeneration. Light leaps out of darkness and life is sparked out of death. To be reborn man has to "fall, gall and gash (himself) gold vermillion..."

##### RECOIL AND RETAKE

In what follows, an artist is encouraged to speak with his own authority and we can listen to his mastery of meaning. To help shake off the hold of the Critical Compound there will be no footnotes and no concluding gloss of notes on the references. An artist's voice supplies the essential perspective and the evolution of its grain, tone and quality constitutes his professional development. Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs and its tailor-made Repertory grid serve as a conversational heuristic for eliciting and re-visioning such personal understandings and bodies of expert knowledge. Shaw's (1980) FOCUS computer package then supplies a statistical way of recovering such submerged aspects of artistic consciousness and connoisseurship.

##### THE REPERTORY GRID

Given Kelly's engineering background, the Repertory grid provides a drafting board for the exploration and elaboration of an artist's implicit frames of reference. It is described as a Repertory grid since the technique consists of a sorting task which discloses the repertoire of ideas (or fictions) that an individual projects onto his life and work. As well, the data are yielded in grid or matrix form. In Latin, matrix means the womb or origin from which life or meaning is generated.

In a structured interview format, Di Mauro was presented with a prepared grid which consisted of just ten of his twenty recent works. As shown in the completed raw (or unprocessed) grid (Figure 1), these ten works were used as elements for him to consider and to construe. They were listed along the horizontal axis as columns. Nine sets of three works or triads were systematically indicated by asterisks and then construed for each of the nine rows. For example, for row one, works hung as Nos. 1, 3 and 5 (Passages No. 26 , 8 and 4) were considered by Di Mauro who then decided one way in which, for him, any two of these three works were alike (in some important way) and then how the third was different from the similar pair. His explanations for this first demonstration of similarity and difference were recorded in the left and right hand panels of this first row. He described works 1 and 3 as alike in their "reaching, smouldering" and work 5 as different in its "connecting of points". This procedure was continued until all eight succeeding rows were also completed and his individual views recorded. The tenth construct was supplied by the interviewer as "most versus least effective" and was re-defined by Di Mauro as "gets there versus I don't know (or unsure)". In a rated form of the grid, the works or elements were then rated in terms of all the constructs. Each element was thus placed along the scales defined by all the construct poles, from 1 to 5, that is, from "most" to "least" (and reversed).

The hour-long, structured interview produced a list of nine bi-polar constructs elicited from Di Mauro. He rated all ten works on all ten dimensions to yield a 10 x 10 matrix or grid. This was then analysed using Shaw's multivariate FOCUS computer program. This provided a two-way cluster analysis to re-order the rows of constructs and the columns of elements to produce a FOCUS-ed grid in which there was the least variation between adjacent constructs and adjacent elements. This was done with respect to the way the elements were ordered by the constructs. The relationships were visualised as dendograms or tree diagrams for the constructs and elements which showed the highest similarities in the clusters (see Figure 2). By being re-presented, the original information was rendered more understandable. The FOCUS-ed grid shows the patterning in blocks of like responses and these are emphasised by the inserted contour lines.

FIGURE 1:

REPERTORY GRID FORM:  
"Passages"

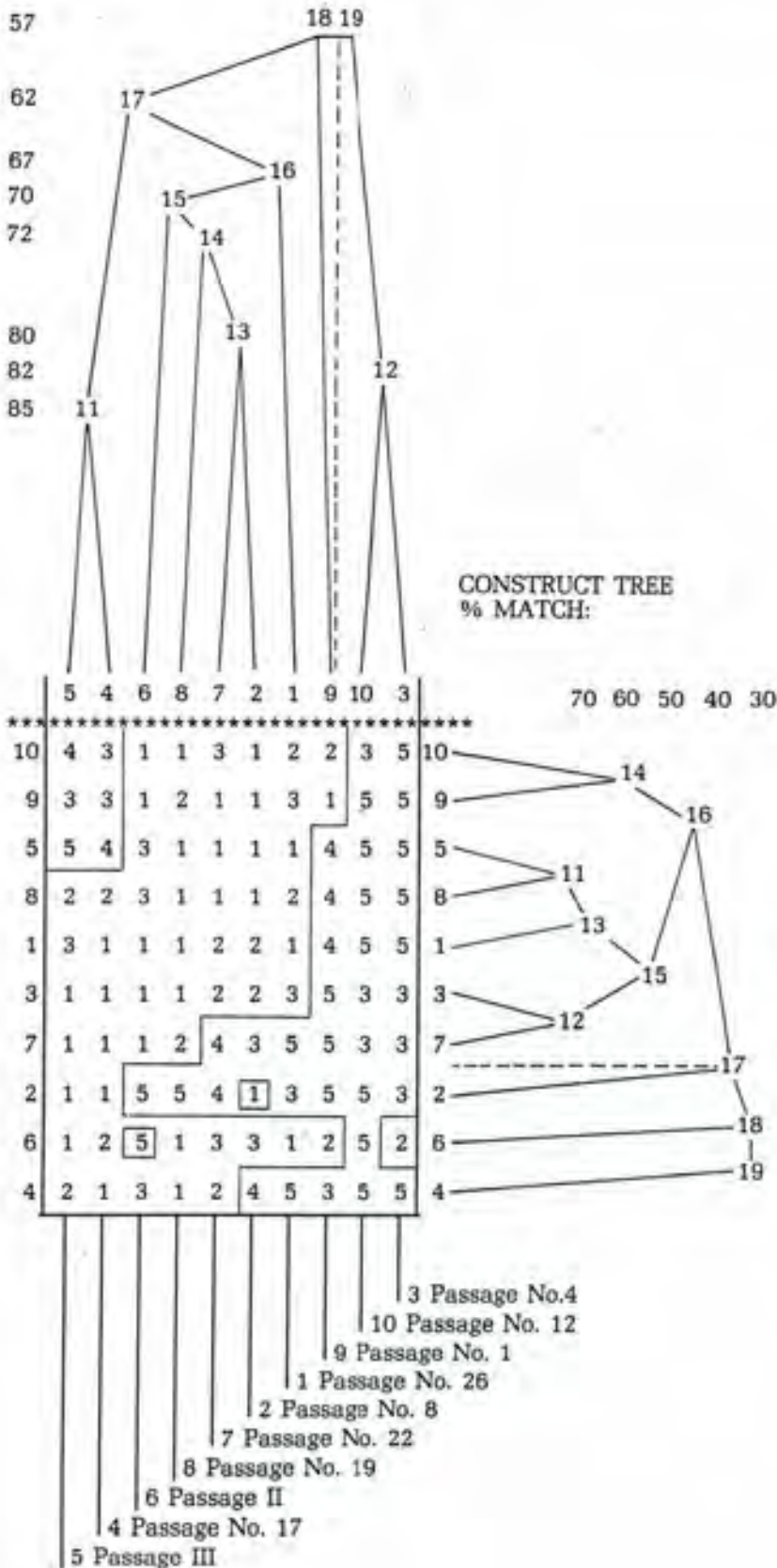
	SIMILAR	As Hung										OPPOSITE
		1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	Reaching, Smouldering	*	*	*								Connecting of Points
2	Straight Grid	3	5	3	*	*	*					Darker, Grid Subdued
3	Out of Abyss Into Light	3	2	3	1	1	1	*	*	*		Turbulent, Tumultuous
4	Powerful Solid Structure	*			*						*	Start of Creation
5	Luminous Top Light	1	*			*	*					Stays in Plain No Rising Light
6	Strong, Stable	5	3	*			*				*	Uncertain, Mysterious
7	Grid Structure, Turbulent	*				*				*		At Peace, Composed
8	Life Out of Death	2	*		*					*		Disturbingly Self-Assured
9	Hope, Light Shimmering	3	1	*			*	*				Darkness, Strength
10	Gets There	2	1	5	3	4	1	3	1	2	3	Unsure

1	Passage No. 26
2	Passage No. 8
3	Passage No. 4
4	Passage No. 17
5	Passage III
6	Passage II
7	Passage No. 22
8	Passage No. 19
9	Passage No. 1
10	Passage No. 12

FIGURE 2:

FOCUSED GRID  
ELEMENT TREE  
% MATCH:

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO'S "PASSAGES" EXHIBITION  
(WORKS: 1,3,5,7,9,11,13,15,17,19)



"GETS THERE" / UNSURE  
HOPE, SHIMMERING LIGHT / DARKNESS, STRENGTH  
LUMINOUS TOPLIGHT / STAYS IN PLAIN, NO RISING LIGHT  
LIFE OUT OF DEATH / DISTURBINGLY SELF-ASSURED  
REACHING, SMOULDERING / CONNECTING OF POINTS  
OUT OF ABYSS INTO LIGHT / TURBULENT, TUMULTUOUS  
AT PEACE, COMPOSED / GRID STRUCTURE, TURBULENT  
GRID SUBDUED / STRAIGHT GRID,  
UNCERTAIN, MYSTERIOUS / STRONG, STABLE  
START OF CREATION, LIGHT / POWERFUL SOLID STRUCTURE

## THE TREES IN THE GRID

### Works or Images

Two distinct constellations of works are shown in Figure 2, from left to right, as clusters 18 and 19. The first cluster consists of Passages Nos. 22 and 8 linked most tightly with Passages No. 19 and 11. Passages Nos. 1 and 26 are more loosely attached to these works as is the pairing of Passages III and No.17. The contour lines reveal how the artist construed these eight works in terms of: "hope, shimmering light; luminous top light, life out of death; reaching, smouldering; out of the abyss into light; at peace, composed; uncertain, mysterious"; and "the start of creation, light". What he considered most important about these works is that they "get there" and are successful. He sees the more remote dyad of Passages III and No.17 as not so clearly "there", perhaps because they "stay in the plane with no rising light". He is convinced, however, that Passages Nos. 12 and 4 are "not yet there" and hence are unsuccessful. These two works are construed in terms of: "darkness, strength; stays in the plane, no rising light; disturbingly self-assured and confident; connecting of points; turbulent and tumultuous; grid structure"; and "powerful, grid structure".

### Constructs

The verbal labels used by Di Mauro to describe his constructs involve light and darkness, life (creation) and death, peace and turbulence. These terms seem to assemble a personal and painterly agenda for him composed of thematic, tonal and dynamic contrasts rather than of technical or stylistic items. This agenda reveals how Di Mauro listens to the visual voice of his own imagery.

He assembled these constructs into one wide tree cluster which itself consists of two tight sub-clusters, 14 and 15, from top to bottom. The first sub-cluster consists of "getting there" and "hope, shimmering light". The second consists of "luminous toplight; life out of death; reaching, smouldering; out of the abyss into light"; and "at peace, composed". Di Mauro seems to be developing (or discarding) three new (or old) ideas (constructs 2, 6 and 4) relating to "grid subdued, uncertain, mysterious"; and "the start of creation, light". He seems to be grappling with the choices represented by "grid subdued versus straight grid, play of grid". The distinction either may supply the impulse for his next exhibition or may have been played out in this present one.

In a half-hour re-inter-view, these explicit representations helped Di Mauro to re-consider some of his formerly intuitive understandings. A process of negotiated feedback completed this initial exploration of an artist's perspectival autobiography.

### CONCLUSION(?)

Kelly's Repertory grid and Shaw's FOCUS computer program provide a phenomenological technique which allows an artist's voice to be heard and his image repertoire to be staged. The artist's elicited personal constructs and their revealed structure can supply the content or text for a catalogue commentary and represent a professional thesaurus. The re-ordering or FOCUS-ing of the works as displaying in the element tree reveals the artist's own preferences for how they may be grouped and hung in the exhibition. As shown in Figure 2, Di Mauro's Passages III and No.17 and then Passages Nos. 12 and 4 could have been paired respectively to attend a larger grouping of most successful works in which Passages II and Nos. 19, 26 and 1 in turn flanked the pivotal images, Passages 22 and 8 (illustrations 1 and 2).

The hold of the Critical Compound can thus be broken by helping artists to resume their guise of creator. Postmodernist art is marked by the re-assertion of artists' mastery over their own work. Their ontological superiority as artists is once again a source of aesthetic interest and excitement. Di Mauro provides a discreet and muted demonstration of such authority and control. "Re-enter the artist" and his perspective.

### REFER-ENCES

- Brooke-Rose, C. Thru. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975.
- Kelly, G.A. The psychology of personal constructs. Vols.1 and 2. New York: Norton, 1955.
- McHale, B. Postmodernist fiction. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Ray, W. Literary meaning. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- Shaw, M.L.G. On becoming a personal scientist. London: Academic Press, 1980.
- Wolf, T. Cited in Holly, P. From action research to collaborative inquiry. International Symposium on action research. Griffith University, Brisbane, 1989.