

This text is written to be spoken, delivered September 2016 at the Whitney Museum. Centenary Celebration for Richard Pouset Dart, Panel: Adam Weinberg, Charles Duncan, Patti Trimble, Jennifer Powell, Barbara Rose, Christopher Wool.

Hello, I'm pleased to be here. thank you Charles Duncan and Adam Weinberg and the Pousette Dart family for inviting me. Richard here is going to be looking over my shoulder, keep me straight.

In 1984 I met Martica Sawin and through her, Richard. I'd heard he was a spiritual painter, a transcendentalist, and that interested me, but I was also wary. I was 29, a painter, and I'd worked in abstract-expressionist studios for six years, so I knew when you work in an artist's studio you essentially agree to work in his or her mind. That week, Jim Brooks poured me a glass of wine and said we need to talk with you about something. Charlotte said, yes dear, we are worried. We heard from our friends that Pousette-Dart believes in God.

On my first day, I asked, So exactly how religious are you? Do you believe in miracles ? or angels? Richard laughed. He said, "Of course there are miracles. How is there blood in your veins, how do people talk with one another. And think about children!"

Richard said he was simply interested in the creative imagination, in the act of creation. He developed studio practices to engage with the metaphysics of meaning, symbol, and form, and to explore transcendental possibilities available to the creative artist. Much of his studio practice focused on the phenomenon of change, a practice that required nothing less than the transformation of self. He spoke of this practice as "pushing through the physical to the spiritual".

I'm going to tell you a few studio stories, and I hope I convey Richards integrity and his unflinching dedication to the transformation of the self through art.

Remember those Tom Waits lyrics, What's he building in there? What's he Building in there?

Hieroglyphs

When I worked for him Richard painted two or three or large canvases at once. In the hieroglyph paintings I first saw the cyclical nature of his painting practice, his engagement with metaphysics. With small brushstrokes or sticks or fingers, he painted gestured marks he called hieroglyphics in color fields, complete all-over paintings that looked finished to me. Then, applying the same quiet steady dabs of color, he nearly erased the entire painting, softening and disappearing hard edges, shifting tones in the color field. Then, in continuous calm attention, he allowed the shapes to reform under his hand. Then again he dissolved the shapes and shifted the color field. I don't know how many times he repeated his wholesale

construction and destruction before calling any given painting "finished". I do know a week later those hieroglyph paintings had been transformed into more alive versions of themselves. Richard told me, "I don't trust false beginnings." He said, "all of creation is a cycle of construction and destruction" He said if an image is important and true, it will insist on itself, and each time it returns it will be more true. Images did return, and some faded, as if they were struggling to be born out of the primordial sea.

Richard read extensively on religion and philosophy. In the 80s he was reading about chaos theory. It's interesting to read now the definition of chaos theory in relation to Richard's painting practice of attention: *a study of complex systems whose behavior is highly sensitive to slight changes in conditions, so that small alterations can give rise to strikingly great consequences.*

I also recognized in his practice a Buddhist understanding. Buddha's four noble truths remind us of the impermanent nature of things and how our human suffering is caused by our attachments and expectations; they also give us the possibility of ending suffering, by ending grasping and clinging, by paying attention to the present moment and accepting the constancy of change. Richard participated in change with deep attention, not holding onto to imagery. He engaged energetically, joyfully letting his attachments to his work and ideas dissolve away. His practice was to witness impermanence. And as witness to, and participant in the continual transformation of the material world, he knew himself also in a constant state of becoming. This is the creative self, humbled, dancing, joyfully engaged, ever changing. All artists, all people, understand this miracle of transformation. Richard consciously practiced it, named it, pointed to it, showed to us its beauty. His paintings show a record of his journey, and also the promise of a continued, endless change.

Birth of Language, Brasses

Thinking about Richard's work with form, language, and symbol, I first thing of the Dadaist, modernist, distrust of language and historic narrative. We can't underestimate the effect of WWII on these artists lives. In conversation with James Brooks, Hedda Sterne, I have often thought of abstraction as a mute response to despair, a visceral and real loss of words. Richard looked at this issue with his usual transcendentalism. He considered where language originates, and how word and image come to *mean*. He viewed the artist as Creative Being, the image of god, and so as Creator he began at the beginning. In the moment. He artistically approached his question of "origins". I laughed when I saw the large Radiance painting yesterday at Pace. In that amorphous sea of white on white, I found one tiny, tiny, nearly invisible white circle. I thought, Richard, in attention, stopped his brush just as language began to form.

In San Francisco, at Richards drawing show a woman turned to me and said, Now I understand where form came from.

A visual arabesque when placed properly, being's to *mean*.

Richard's shapes and symbols hum just below the level of verbal or historical meaning. They are not quite communicative, they hum in their beingness. They symbolize their own existence, a coming into being. They direct us to consider origins.

One evening in the rain Richard showed me his small brasses and I saw a performative practice that seemed Catholic, a ritualized aura-making, akin to a sacrament. In the dark basement, a lamp created a pool of light. Richard opened his notebook and showed me how he drew shapes until they took on a living form. He showed me how he traced a shape onto a thick sheet of brass, cut it out with a coping saw, and sanded and smoothed it by hand, to a softness of a worn stone or relic.

He said I began to make these because my mother loved crosses, so I thought I would make her a cross.

He held a brass shape under the light, cradling it in his palm, as if he could invest it with love. The tender rite had a logic. I do not understand this but I witnessed it. Reverence and solemnity. Preindustrial attention to craft. Theater of private mystery. The night was cold and dark, the studio hidden, warm, ceilings high and church-like. Walter Benjamin: *The artist invests his work with an aura, that is, with the ability to look back at him*. The shaman as midwife to symbol; a holy initiation of shape. I am the altar boy. Tonight the curve is born, and the straight line, the circle, square, triangle. I feel I should be writing this at a hand-hewn wooden desk, into a leather book with a quill, my hand slowly traversing the page like a holy road. Like in Jerusalem, light a candle, genuflect, invest things with spirit and let them speak back. People have always held up objects and said ah.

Richard said he thought the brasses were his best work.
Perhaps because they hold paradox;
they have a solid physicalness, that also speaks about change;
they are symbolic objects that summon doubt

Can a symbol exist outside of a set?
At what point in time/space does a mark begins to mean?
Why this shape instead of that?
This could have been language if people agreed.
This is language and it is not

Possibly modernism did unearth a truth: as humans we make marks that *mean*. We transform material to meaning. But we knew this already: Water to wine, parted seas, Osiris rising from the dead.

Hudson Studio

One more studio practice that was holistically transcendently Richard.

Richard kept a warehouse studio on the Hudson and we went there to tend to his paintings. It had been at least three years since he'd been there, and on the drive, he talked more than usual, pointing out the fall colors. Maybe he was worried about his paintings or possibly about inviting someone (me) into his hermetic cave. He relaxed when we finally stood side by side, looking. The studio was a cavernous moody theater, twenty-foot ceilings, no interior walls. Rows of grimy windows, a silver fog of light from the river. In my memory I count maybe twenty-five, thirty large paintings, placed with a renaissance-like order, leaning under windows and against the walls and stapled on the floor. Richard said his heart attack had stopped his train of thought. His idea was to create in this river studio a garden of color, a real garden to celebrate Creation, Creation with a capital C. He pointed to spaces between the floor canvases, open garden paths.

He began collecting dried paint tubes, and handed me a broom, said just walk on the paintings and sweep them. From the Dominican bakery below, rose the smell of fresh bread and a disco beat. I wondered if those guys had any idea what was over their heads. I swept up dust, and I began to make out semi-abstract fields of flowers, violet pink; blue and white galaxies; vague golden and green sunflower fields. Some paintings were finished and others half-done, so I guessed Richard had been painting the canvases all at once when he was interrupted, dancing around the room to tend them, as one would grow a garden. The horizon of the garden was not the usual one: galaxies spun at eye level and below my feet. Flowers bloomed beside shining orbs, a few rainbows, rising and setting suns.

I laughed and asked Richard how he planned to talk about this work with his New York School colleagues. I said, Richard, really, you are painting *flowers*? He laughed, and said with a calm and happy sincerity, there is nothing more beautiful than a flower, in its delicacy, in the way it blooms and then is gone, and in the marvelous, marvelous saturation of color. He turned and announced to the room: I want to make things grow. I tell you, I am interested in all of creation.

He then said, lets take a walk. So we strolled side-by-side, looking around; silent. Then the ritual kicked in——our pace quickened, we walked with open eyes, open awareness, listening, looking, feeling, tuning up.

Our walk was ceremonial. Richard had painted this garden to walk within the flowers and suns of his imagination. The metaphysics is not unusual. Man creates image. His images work on him to inform him about order, beauty, and the great Mind. Painter and assistant get high on physical manifestations of the painter's mind.

So many painters wish they could immerse themselves more fully in their work. Richard actually leased and theatrically organized a space big enough to take a hike in his own mind.

Got ourselves back to the garden, set our souls free.

Gertrude Stein tells a story of inviting "all the painters" to dinner. "You know how painters are. I wanted to make them happy so I placed each one opposite his own picture, and they were happy -- so happy that we had to send out twice for more bread."

Mirror upon mirror, self and the created world.

We walked in circles and down paths, in impressionist fields, where galaxies rose and set, sunflowers bowed in their season, universes passed Where have we been. who are we, where we going. Definitely not a question.

Richard said the painter doesn't have to think about communicating, communication happens on inexplicable levels if the artist works to the highest thing he knows in himself. Here was one "high" thing Richard knew. As we moved through the space, a shift occurred, in the room and in our consciousness. I became happy. Richard's expression was ecstatic, beatific. He extended his arms and opened his palms and walked with easy vigor as if swimming in a sea of light. He beamed and I beamed back. Can I say I saw a light surrounding us? Perhaps. Joy in creation, where the grasping self bows down to the holy physical world.

Closing

Richard's practice was thorough, constant, lifelong. He told me, *You can't fool people, you just can't fool people.*

An artist makes metaphysical paintings by experiencing metaphysics, and dancing and singing and shouting about creation.

What was he building in there? Communication systems, practices to let go of the grasping self, rites of transubstantiation, performances of origins, places for us to walk among the ten-thousand things.

In closing here are two more quotes from Paris:

Alice B. Toklas: only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang

Take him and think of him. He and think of him. With him think of him. With him and with think with think with think with him. — Gertrude Stein