



IS IT GOOD?

A publication on the occasion of the exhibition *Inventing Color*
and the launching of the M.C. Richards Program

Edited by Nathaniel Williams

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INTRODUCTION

Early this year, the idea of an exhibit of a selection of paintings from M.C. Richards' last decade of work started out as a conversation with Cornelius Pietzner. Cornelius reached out to me after hearing of a new program that I have been developing with a circle of colleagues, which is named in honor of Richards. The ambitious goal was set to have the exhibit coincide with the launching of the program in August. *Lightforms Art Center* agreed to host the exhibit. Cornelius offered to loan the paintings and to allow their reproduction in this publication. Sabine Otto figured out how we could access the archive at Camphill Soltane in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, during a summer that made travel and collaboration particularly difficult. Some additional ceramic works were loaned for the exhibit from Diedra Heitzman. Kerst De Jong milled moulding for us to use in constructing frames in the Camphill Village woodshop in Copake. Julia Connor, the literary executor of M.C. Richards' estate, granted us permission to publish a selection of poems. I need to thank Ella Lapointe for help with the layout and Lucas Dreier for help with editing. Laura Summer has also played an irreplaceable role in birthing not only this exhibit, but the new program that will begin in its midst.

The following contributions contain memories of Richards' life and work, characterizations of her place in the momentous shifts in art in the US during the last century, insights into her connection with anthroposophically-oriented contemplative practices, a celebration of her dedication to wholeness, craft and substance, an article on the depth of her faith in art as the wellspring of a renewal in education and a painting inspired by her poem *At Ground Level*.

In gratitude,

Nathaniel Williams

Director of the M.C. Richards Program



no title,
acrylic on paper, 33x36
year unknown

A LETTER

Cornelius Pietzner

Dear Nathaniel,

July, 2020

You've asked me to share a bit of context regarding the works of MC Richards for her exhibition in Hudson. I have to reach back in my memory over 20 years to do this, but it is also a wonderful opportunity to reinvigorate her being and presence in my mind.

MC's elegant eccentricity always appealed to me as an indication of an individual who was both certain of herself and curious, meaning open to new things, people and ideas. I recall an impression of polarities with her – a spontaneous and loud social laugh and an immediate earnestness and intensity, with one sometimes following the other in a matter of seconds. In the same manner, she had an inwardness that seemed to source her immense creativity, which then burst forth into artistic expression, untrammelled by convention or tradition.

MC clearly had “personality,” and a long and distinguished academic and creative career with many of the most innovative personalities in the culture, arts and academia of her time. My own sense was that her engagement did not have a focus on negating the developments and activities of her era, but rather emphasized putting forth alternatives and options, mostly in collaboration with others, that simply showed a different way, and drew on and presented the creative sources of those she worked with. For me, MC always had something noble about her, and at the same time something humble that allowed her access to all kinds of people, including those with developmental disabilities with whom she worked towards the end of her life in Camphill Village Kimberton Hills.

My own relationship with MC developed after she moved to Kimberton Hills. I would periodically visit her in her studio or elsewhere, and she would show me her work. In particular, I was interested in her paintings, which she had begun during this time. The energy and joy – and “untroubledness” – of her work was refreshing, and also energizing. Yes, I did indeed feel energized after studying her work, and I loved the impression that her creativity and spirit seemed to jump off the paper directly into my soul.

Whether it is true or not doesn't seem to matter, but it felt like she painted unfettered and free, and this appealed to me greatly, particularly as I myself was struggling to undo anything I had learned in this regard

and liberate myself a little bit from convention. MC was miles ahead – a lifetime ahead really – and I think she saw my appreciation for her way of painting.

Out of these discussions, and my evident attraction to and appreciation for her paintings, she shared with me her concerns about what to do with her artistic legacy once she passed on. I think part of her concern was that personal responsibility was more powerful than general institutional commitments. These were gentle conversations, but at some point ended up by her asking me, or me offering, to take on a selection of her paintings and caretake them.

I had already taken on this responsibility for the works of my father, Carlo, and George Kalmar, former artist in residence in Camphill Village Copake, and had built a suitable climate-controlled and protected storage for the over 1500 artworks in Camphill Soltane that landed in my care under the aegis of the Carlo Pietzner Fund.

In this sense, it was a natural step for me to accept the request of MC to care for and manage part of her painting legacy, and we decided to structure this “properly” through her testament. She indicated to me that some of the additional work would go to individuals, to university archives, and to several museums. The largest share of the paintings would be given over to my care in the manner indicated above.

This was a great relief to MC, and a task I gladly accepted.

It is therefore with great pleasure to note that your new program is named in her honor, and that I can contribute to the exhibition at Lightforms Gallery by loaning a selection of her paintings. I hope others, too, can feel the energy and joy of her work, as I have been able to do for so long.

With all good wishes for the exhibition and your work,

Cornelius Pietzner
Dornach, Switzerland





(above) Before the Beginning
acrylic on paper, 48x36
1993

(left) no title,
acrylic on paper, 36"x36",
November 1993

IS IT GOOD?

Nathaniel Williams

I

The exhibition of late paintings by Mary Caroline Richards now opening at Lightforms Art Center in Hudson, New York, was first conceived in a conversation with Cornelius Pietzner, a friend of Richards and steward of some of her late work. He reached out to me upon hearing of a new program named in her honor.

Since, a quickened variety of time has visited the world. It is amazing that the exhibition is happening at all. A virus that, it appears, originated with one of our animal cousins, has started to make its way around the planet. The art center was closed for many months, and the start of the new program seemed precarious. In New York, everyone was encouraged to stay at home as much as possible, and many social and collective dimensions of life were abruptly called off. Festive exhibitions of art and in-person learning have become questionable activities. The sky was emptied of planes and the schools of children.

In this situation, a series of deaths, some of them filmed, many involving people of color and police officers, ignited protests not only throughout the country, but the world. Millions left their confinement to protest. Justice is important enough to risk life for. They continue all around the country. On the bottom of Warren Street, less than a mile from the art center, a giant mural reads BLACK LIVES MATTER.

And here we are, launching a program named after M.C. Richards, founded on aesthetic education, contemplative inquiry and action research. And we are showing paintings.

Well, isn't that nice.

No, it is not nice.

Nice is to the good as a dictionary entry is to a poem by Richards. And the greatest challenge of these events will not be whether they are nice, but whether they can contribute to the good.

Words do not relate meaning. Everything is in between. This is so true it is also false.

II

Richards hovered in the periphery of my life until about ten years ago. At that time, I came across her book *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*. A year later, I met a student who had attended Warren Wilson, not

far from the site of Black Mountain College. As a student there, she had heard a legend of Richards. Richards was invited to deliver a speech. In my imagination, I felt the warm climes of North Carolina during May, accompanied by the itchy sensation of the appropriate attire, attire aggravated by the austere formalism typical of such occasions. The legend goes that Richards delivered a speech by repeatedly stating, “ART.” Over and over. Art, Art, Art was placed in terrible isolation before those gathered.

I have learned over the last decade that this is definitely true.

I don’t know if it actually happened.

“Until our worst fear befalls us, we are not born.”¹

Richards gives thanks for her early formal education, which culminated with a PhD, as a wounding process that set her on a path toward wholeness for the rest of her life. In the legend of her speech, I sense her pointing an assembly of young people, who have followed their superstitious belief to the altar of American higher education as unwitting sacrificial lambs, toward the wholeness and the good as she had found it. Could they intuit what words could not convey by a delivery that left so much up to them?

Richards started college with the conventional superstition that the verbal, abstract, intellectual culture of the academy carried within it the door to a superior form of life. She dove into practices of logic, analysis, generalization and survey as a gifted student. As she reached the pinnacle of achievement, her doctorate, she was tortured by the lack of wisdom she actually possessed, and the anxiety that she would be found out for the fraud that she was. Coming to terms with the truth of this experience was one of her first exercises in sensing facts: “One of the first facts I was called upon by life and my ‘discipline’ to recognize was that I and my bright associates were idiots in some extraordinary way – moral idiots, at least unable to find our path into the good life which we had expected to be ours.”² Instead, she found herself in a circle of people who were “falling on each other with violence, resenting and betraying and fawning, filled with righteous despair.”³ At first, she blamed her teachers. They had offered her no wisdom in working with human relationships, or how to work with crisis. They had not shown her that she was a part of a real outer and inner world. Nor had they shown her a path to inner resources for transformation. She was furiously angry with her education because she felt it had “betrayed her trust.”⁴

In her writing, this early process appears as a journey of death that set the stage for a life dedicated to rebirth and wholeness.

ART Receiving a teaching post at Black Mountain College was a turning point in Richards’ life. She began to work with ceramics and foster many of the insights described in *Centering*. John Andrew Rice, a founder of the college, had insisted that art be at the center of all learning. This was not to make artists, but “democrats,” people capable of choosing what it was they proposed to believe in, what was going to be their world. A student “sensitized to movement, form, sound and other media of the arts, gets a firmer control of himself and his environment than is possible through purely intellectual effort.”⁵ Those educated through

1 M. C. Richards, *The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings* by M. C. Richards (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 243.

2 M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Wesleyan University Press, 1978), p. 14.

3 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 210.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Martin B Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (W.W. Norton, 1993), p. 39.

the arts are capable of being active participants in collective processes of choice, for they are “least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own.”⁶ Decades later, Richards wrote that people do not “want to be educated to be servants of a system, however benevolent. We want to be inspired to create forms of living and working which will serve the needs of persons and their development. Of freedom and community. Of self-government. We need places to practice.”⁷

ART Many forms of modern art encourage looking at the perceptible as if it were capable of contenting us by its mere appearance. Just through its physical presentation. “Art is the most physical of our sciences. It is the consequence of our passion to make our inner life visible and sense-perceptible, to embody it.”⁸ This is a single object that need not be useful, or logically meaningful. It is a place of playful apprehension, yet imbued with reverence and interest. This gaze informs our encounters, when we look toward each other with this expectation of surprise and the encounter of creativity that exceeds our generalizations. We develop a sense of the individual spirit that gives its life its own meaning and cannot be determined by belonging to a group, be it by gender, race or faith. There is a part of us that is flame, not reflection. This leads to the experience that “We carry light within us. There is no need to merely reflect. Others carry light within them. These lights must wake to each other. My face is real. Yours is. Let us find our way to our initiative.”⁹ An important part of tilling out racism and sexism will involve the cultivation of practices and pedagogy that can reveal the “real face.” This apprehension evades our typical sociological and genealogical gaze. It consists in a pictorial attitude of receptivity in the face of another that becomes a ground for revelation. What is a person?

ART Artistic practice involves the immediate apprehension that nothing exists in isolation. There is no action in isolation. Everything is connected. “The potter wets his hands and moves the spinning clay upwards into a cone, pressing it together and lifting it up and downwards into a plane, stretching it and compressing it – moving it, up and down, in and out until the whole ball of clay moves into a center, that is, moves into equilibrium. Centering is the giving of a certain quality to the clay, so that the centeredness is distributed throughout it in an even grain... The center is everywhere.”¹⁰ The an-aesthetic thinking of our time takes parts as wholes. I recently read a widely circulated opinion in a newspaper about the Swedes and their choices in trying to face the pandemic. The author wrote that they gained nothing, as they had neither economic gains nor less deaths than neighboring countries. I wish this kind of judgment was atypical! The Swedes called on the intelligence and goodwill of the whole population, practicing the virtue of democracy. Even if they only fostered more democratic culture and respect for autonomy in collective governance, surely this is not nothing. There have been many other ways people have died to further democratic culture.

ART Art offers us lessons even for the re-organization of our economy. The vocation of the artist has been understood as one where the meaning of the work is paramount, and the means to produce it is secondary. Authenticity and fidelity to inspiration are foremost. Richards did not advocate for liberty and anarchy in economic production. She saw that “The lonely soul labors toward fraternity. He labors to free

6 Ibid.

7 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 140.

8 Ibid., p. 179.

9 Richards, *Centering*, p. 18.

10 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 177.

himself from pride and ignorance and sloth so that he may live as a brother to other men. It is a lifelong task. Community life helps in this process. Mutual effort and understanding, practiced over a long period in the earnest spirit of a discipline, tend to help us toward our freedom. Certain jobs can be done only together, for a society of men provides a sinew no man has alone. People need each other in order that out of the multitude a whole image may be formed.¹¹ While individual autonomy is characteristic of the artist, and collaboration characterizes the production of most economic goods¹², the ideal of intrinsically motivated work should permeate all sectors of society. The performance of some task in the economy should be a dignified action in itself, helping to contribute to a future world one would like to inhabit. Art reminds us that the ideal economy would not be powered by wages, but by work being dignified and meaningful. While one may not work with the same level of individuation as an artist, each loaf of bread, house built, crop harvested can be felt as a creative contribution toward a good world. This is the foundation of Joseph Beuys' whole conception of art.¹³ Art points toward a future where wages will not be experienced as a distraction from the demand that our economy be GOOD. In a good economy, one is paid to meet one's own needs so that one might creatively contribute to the meeting of certain needs in the community. The meeting of those needs itself should be able to inspire pride and dignity, and be pursued with a feeling of creative liberty. Today, many receive money to do work that they feel cripples them and contributes to a society they do not want in the future. This is the seed of so much despair and disillusionment, while our wages often pay our way into one of the infinite reveries of consumerism offered through our ingeniously manipulative advertising culture.

ART One of the greatest global threats today is the environmental crisis. While we can anticipate that the trajectory we are on will make the recent pandemic out to be mild, we continue on. We are so distant from the natural elements and life of our planet, and generally alienated from its cycles, rhythms, beings and reality. Our way of coming into contact with the natural world is largely informed by the impressive and powerful practices of modern science. But what of the good? If science is so supreme, Richards inquires, how has it led us so far astray in our planetary health?¹⁴ For modern science offers us an-aesthetic and distanced knowledge of our planet. It has largely forsaken the aesthetic. A crucial weakness in our current culture of learning is the lack of aesthetic natural-scientific practices. These are not artistic practices! They are an empiricism so true that it overcomes abstraction and connects to life. The biologist Craig Holdrege has developed them in his methodological portrayals of plants and animals, and the physicist Georg Maier has developed them in the aesthetic thinking of his practical optics. If aesthetic education in the arts prepares us to apprehend the individual life of other free humans and live in a democracy, aesthetic natural science allows us to apprehend the life of non-human presences and processes on the planet. The one contributes to modern democracy and human rights, the other to ecological democracy and regenerative society.¹⁵

ART Art, while the most physical, is also spirit. It is one foundation stone for what is today called

11 Richards, *Centering*, p. 113.

12 <https://www.freecolumbia.org/blog/2020/3/31/liberty-equality-fraternity>

13 <https://www.freecolumbia.org/blog/can-everything-be-art>

14 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 182.

15 Nathaniel Williams, "Aesthetic Education in the Anthropocene" (PhD dissertation, University at Albany, 2020).

contemplative pedagogy.¹⁶ Richards writes “that life is an art, that life can only be understood if it is approached as an artistic process, we mean that as in theater or alchemy, something is deeply interfused through its physical forms. And to understand the physical forms accurately, it is necessary to see them with a double eye.”¹⁷ This double gaze opens up on inner phenomena and an understanding of the contours of learning culture in our time, when “[u]niversity truth... is changing. And university members are handicapped by attachment to intellect, money, status, materialistic knowledge and role playing. Heart and soul and spirit are blowing their trumpets around the walls. The inner life is asking to be taken seriously as a fact, connected with the physical body of man and earth and stars, and connected with our capacity for knowledge.”¹⁸ Richards often presents her work in the context of anthroposophical contemplative practices of inquiry. “Anthropos Sophia brings to our current research a perspective which would look at people and things and institutions from the inside, seeing substance as spiritual, forms as inwardly sourced (as from the invisible ‘content’ of a seed), all forms together working in learning and teaching in mutuality, spirit in man a part of spirit in the universe, an ecology of human spirit and cosmic spirit, earth and the stars.”¹⁹ When Darwin suggested that species might evolve from one another, and there might be a common ancestor of all life on earth, he challenged the theological dogma that all species were static, created at some distant point in the past and merely reproducing and repeating themselves. Each species was on a linear path that did not intersect with another. Darwin, among others, suggested that two areas held to be utterly independent should be considered as connected, even versions of one another. The most profound sentiment in contemplative morphology challenges contemporary teachings by asking if there can be a morphological relationship between forms of intangible, mental experience and tangible experiences of matter. For instance, could the wonderful, differentiated physical cosmos be a transformation of a distant state of being that was purely mental? What of the connections we notice everyday, that, for instance, light is connected to consciousness, that when we open our eyes with dawn coming through our window our consciousness responds? We associate being gripped by insight with being illumined. Must we consider Emerson’s suggestion that matter is deadened thought “mere” poetry? The pioneer of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner, pursued research that can be understood as a contribution to this possibility. To imagine a physical cosmos that did not contain spirit until a nervous system existed on the planet is convention. This is not a plain truth. While many may find Richards’ talk of “an ecology of human spirit and cosmic spirit” as New Age navel gazing that cannot come to terms with the actual ecological challenges we are facing, they might do well to refer to a recent history of the ecological movement in the USA and its connection with this orientation.²⁰ Here again we find art, as a practice that looks with the double eye of outer and inner.

16 Arthur Zajonc, “Contemplative Pedagogy: A Quiet Revolution in Higher Education,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2013, no. 134 (2013): pp. 83–94.

17 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 181.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

20 Dan McKanan, *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism* (University of California Press, 2017).

Closing Hymn by M.C. Richards

Sweetness stores in the root,
sap rises and descends.
The rhythms of our nature
round us round.

Human Beings, risen,
take eternal life in hand.
Our creative light
shares in world creation.
The Life-Line of our Schooling
is its golden vein.²¹



Fire Flower

²¹ M. C. Richards, *Imagine Inventing Yellow: New and Selected Poems of M. C. Richards* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1990), p. 130.



no title
Acrylic on paper, 36"x48",
year unknown.

APPRENTICING OURSELVES TO M. C. RICHARDS: THREE TEACHINGS OF HER LIFE AS ART

Courtney Lee Weida

It is difficult to write about the late Mary Caroline (“M.C.”) Richards without seeming hopelessly nostalgic. Richards (1916-1999) is enduringly admired by art students, artists, poets, and educators alike. She wrote, sculpted, and taught in a variety of educational settings, including K-12 education, universities, and community workshops for learners across the lifespan. Though many of my fellow arts educators and I traditionally shift from community and K-12 teaching at the beginning of our careers to join universities in what might seem like ascendance in terms of professional prestige, Richards’ trajectory was the opposite, reflecting her commitment to a winding and personal quest. Her participation at Black Mountain College (a short-lived artistic laboratory for the arts) represented her departure from the university tenure system and included experiences as a teacher, student, poet, and potter. Black Mountain catalyzed her work toward a philosophy of creativity and living. Richards’ life and work invites us to celebrate self, mind, hands, clay, word, and community. Her legacy in clay and words powerfully connect pottery and poetry with practices of the studio, the classroom, the home, and the natural world.

My own earliest and fondest memories of childhood were of working with cool, muddy clay at home and within art class at school. I also was fascinated with the histories of other ceramic artists in different times and places, and began searching for women clay artists – puzzling over ways in which the symbols and mythologies surrounding women ceramicists were prominent as “earth mothers” and potters, yet individual names and biographies often were missing. Richards is a notable exception across both ceramics and education literature. Her iconic 1969 book, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*, is a beloved underground classic among pottery students and students of education. Often library copies can be found dog-eared, lovingly annotated, and printed with the eager fingerprints of other readers. M.C. Richards centrally offers artists the hidden insight so many of us come to cherish: “It is not the pots we are forming, but ourselves.”¹

Upon meeting her former students and colleagues while giving a Black Mountain College Museum conference presentation a few years ago, I was enthralled by a sense of her hallowed presence in the room through their words. Surrounded by the shared warmth and memories of those present, it was easy to

1 M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Wesleyan University Press, 1989), p. 13.

imagine her in our midst. Her disciples were also thrilled that her work was inspiring additional generations of contemporary craftspeople and educators. This essay attempts to honor both her and her past students through three lessons drawn from her writings and teachings. Perhaps we can all consider her our teacher and mentor from a distance and across time:

Lesson 1: The Value of Sustained Interdisciplinary Engagement to Creative Endeavor

Richards' communal work was not bound to books, clay studios, or schools, though it originated from and deeply impacts all three. She centrally described the educational philosophy derived from her experiences as an "interdisciplinary study" and "search for wholeness... through the ordeals of life."² Her renaissance approach to life and art was also a quest "to integrate poetry, pottery, inner development, community, and education."³ The philosophical was always linked with the personal for her. Richards' writings defy disciplinary boundaries, and her work with clay was equally unconventional. While many studio potters decry the brightly colorful glazes that are more commercially popular, opting for earthier celadons and shino glazes, Richards incorporated vibrant painting into her art workshops with clay, practiced meditations on color, and authored a book of poems and paintings celebrating the imagination through the color yellow.

Rather than focusing solely on Black Mountain College and its rarified atmosphere created in rebellion toward established systems of universities and the art gallery world, Richards sought to bring meaning wherever she was. She did this by synthesizing seemingly disparate philosophies and media. Richards even exhibited her paintings alongside her poems and pottery, using many media to express linked meanings. Black Mountain College itself was a richly interdisciplinary endeavor in the arts, with collaborations in dance, music, poetry, and visual arts. Richards once intended to write a sort of history of Black Mountain, and she has been theorized as someone who took the generosity and freedom of Black Mountain with her into other spaces. Her enduring focus on possibility and multiplicity can be powerful for us to consider. As Richards observed, "Life leads us at a certain moment to step beyond the dualisms to which we have been educated."⁴ In this way, she also deeply engages our needs for individuality and communality in an embrace of contradiction: "To enter into the world of forming... [w]e wish to be fully ourselves and at the same time, as a part of a self-realization, to offer and share with others."⁵

As a kind of mystic of practicality, Richards celebrated "a hidden or occult resonance in all things."⁶ Anticipating current educational renaissances of Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia philosophies in places like Silicon Valley, she mused deeply about possibilities for the artist who lives in a childlike responsiveness to rhythm, tone, color, and story.⁷ As Mary Kay Kramp observed, stories are a "connective medium for knowing... [and the] embodiment of an intimate relation between knower and known, between

² M. C. Richards, *The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 173.

³ Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 3.

⁴ Richards, *Centering*, p. 23.

⁵ M. C. Richards, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980), p. 77.

⁶ Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 150.

⁷ Richards, *Centering*.

storyteller and listener, between researcher and subject.”⁸ This connection was the heart of Richards’ practice of poetry, pottery, and pedagogy. Her poems are about earth and flesh as much as they are expressions of philosophies and metaphors.

Richards’ very approach to teaching poetry in symphony with pottery could be seen as radical. As another philosopher, speaking of Zen and pottery, recalled, “Whenever I have tried to speak to Inoue Sensei [my pottery teacher] about philosophical issues, he has usually answered with silence, or tapped his head and said ‘Only pots in here.’”⁹ Such quietude and nonverbal practices are prevalent in my observations of K-12 ceramics classes as well as clay workshops in colleges and communities for adults. Refreshingly, Richards spoke extensively about and composed odes to colors, concepts, and fellow ceramicists. Putting her life’s work into words, she offered us the charge to be “ready to experiment, be creative, serve, be beautiful, be real” in her poem, “I Am Dying.”

Lesson 2. The Centrality of Craftivism in Ecology and Sustainable Communities

Richards poignantly noted in her 1973 address to artists and craftspeople: “[T]here’s a connection we ought to make between what we ‘profess’ as creatures sensitive to form, and what we practice in community.”¹⁰ During the final decade of her life, after teaching at Black Mountain College and City University, she lived out this truth within a sustainable Camphill village community for adults, including those with developmental delays. This community was inspired by some of the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner and focused not only on education, but also on biodynamic agriculture, crafts, and communal living. Richards blended creative practices with so-called “life skills” or vocational elements that enabled the participation of those with special needs.

Richards specifically emphasized both the nuance and continuity to be found in repeated actions of handcraft through a special sort of rhythm that is educative and accessible to all: “To make a lot of things alike is as exciting as to make one surprise after another... and of course the rewards of sustained working rhythms are marvelous.”¹¹ Sustained learning towards an artistic practice of craftsmanship is an important experiential aspect of craft education for students with special needs and for all learners. She encouraged the creative spark in all her students, and blended inquiries of nature with craft. A continued interest in these ecological ideologies in education is reflected in the “earthschooling” and “wildschooling” digital communities that exchange news items around topics such as nature-based education, ecology, and craft+activism today.

Through her deep focus on metaphor, Richards also pointed out the underlying linguistic link between pottery and our very cells, as the Greek word for cell translates into “hollow vessel.”¹² She noted that each

8 Mary Kay Kramp, “Exploring Life and Experience through Narrative Inquiry,” in *Foundations for Research Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences*, ed. Stephen D. Lapan and Kathleen DeMarrais (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), p. 111.

9 Kenneth R. Beittel, *Zen and the Art of Pottery* (New York: Weatherhill, 1989), p. 16.

10 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 9.

11 Richards, *Centering*, p. 29.

12 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 56.

being may be viewed as a sort of “living vessel.”¹³ In this way, Richards leads us to both envision and embody our visions of craft and wholeness deeply, scientifically, and in our day-to-day existence. She reminds us that our creativity should lead to deepened work in the world in service of others, asking “What is the goal of the creativity one feels – and wishes to... help others to develop? Is it just to make more and more pots or take more and more pictures? [...] I think that as we become more creative, we move toward a concern with social justice and compassion.”¹⁴

Lesson 3. Exploring the Arts as a Practice of Building Equality

Richards was a deeply prophetic philosopher, not only in terms of craft, ecology, and poetics, but also in her advocacy for inclusivity and equality. Richards argued that “the experiences of centering... through the crafts, the arts, educated perception – may foster a healing of those inner divisions which set man at war with himself and therefore with others.”¹⁵ Although this seems a lofty endeavor, Richards was actually proposing this sort of healing for everyone, everywhere. As she noted in an interview a decade before her death, “If you’re wanting to build a community, you don’t have to wait for some ideal situation. You can do it wherever you are.”¹⁶ The enduring value of craft as a practice of creation as well as community is illuminated as a framework for our immediate individual human growth and humanitarian aims. Notably, women, LGBTQ+ artists, and BIPOC/POC were represented in education at Black Mountain College more fully than was possible at less progressive institutions of the time.

Richards also emphasized the cultural relationships engaged by ceramics and its rich history in every civilization. She has argued that working in the crafts can awaken “consciousness of materials and processes... of different cultures.”¹⁷ In this way, rather than consume or misappropriate the cultures of others, we can begin to feel a true kinship in examining and experiencing the natural materials, creative actions, and shared uses of beautiful and functional objects in our lives. She added that “the intersection between writing and handcraft seems really to lie... in the quality of caring... an ability to respond humanly.”¹⁸ Her cultivations of humanity and caring become central to creative expression and to building a life that is worthwhile. As she proposed, so fittingly for our present moment: “We may carry in our soul this picture of creating little by little the vessel of our humanity.”¹⁹ May we each continue this work.

(right) no title
acrylic on paper, 19x27,
year unknown

17 Richards, *Toward Wholeness*, p. 100.

18 Richards, *The Crossing Point*, p. 22

19 M. C. Richards, *Opening Our Moral Eye* (Hudson, NY: SteinerBooks, 1996), p. 95.

Appendix:

For M.C. Richards

We have been in search of you before we even knew your name.

While weaving or writing at Haystack, at Penland, at so many Waldorf Schools, we call out to you wordlessly, and we look for your imprint.

Your printing press inspires us in our clumsy poems, our zines, and our guerrilla art.

Your pots and paintings are invitations, invocations that rouse us, and that comfort us.

You are our Allen Ginsberg, and you are our ancient pottery master.

You turned away from tenure and promotion and toward children and nature, reminding us that university structures may crumble – without shattering their students and teachers.

You were wild enough to wobble away even from centering itself, when it felt too common.

You danced between New York and the woods as easily as between disciplines of the arts.

We seek magic and mysticism, and we delight that you did too.

Your unabashed honesty about searches for love and companionship is for us, and of us.

In your honor we will walk through our cities at night and leave our rugged little pots and ragged scraps of poetry on the stairs of beautiful cathedrals, and on the thresholds of parks.



REFLECTIONS ON THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ARTWORK OF M.C. RICHARDS

David Adams

Prolific potter, poet, painter, essayist, translator, and educator Mary Caroline (M.C.) Richards (1916 – 1999) was born in Weiser, Idaho and grew up in Portland, Oregon. She graduated from Reed College and received her Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of California at Berkeley in 1942, later receiving an honorary doctorate from Kings College, Pennsylvania. In 1945, she joined the faculty at the legendary, iconoclastic Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where she taught writing, translated plays, danced, studied pottery, and founded *The Black Mountain Review*. At other times she was also on the faculty of the University of California, the University of Chicago, and the City College of New York. Her many books (most of which seem to be written with a characteristic personal and experiential poetic spirit, even when expressed mainly in prose) include the classic *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (1963; probably still her most well known and influential work), *The Crossing Point* (1973), *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America* (1980), *Imagine Inventing Yellow* (a 1991 collection of her poetry), *Before the Beginning* (a 1995 poetry collection), and *Opening Our Moral Eye* (1996), with a posthumous poetry publication titled *Backpacking in the Hereafter* (2014). In her last decade or so, she joined the Kimberton Hills Camphill Village community with disabled adults in Kimberton, Pennsylvania and also took up painting colorful abstractions in acrylics. Eating lunches in the mid-1990s at the Kimberton Hills café, I was struck by how M.C. humbled herself to make her contribution to the community as a waitress and server. Also in the 1990s, she became a visiting teacher at Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California, where I was told she was a much valued and beloved school-community participant.

Although I knew M.C. and have read almost all of her books, I was somewhat amazed to learn more recently some additional details about how involved and quietly influential she was in the development of avant-garde mid-20th-century art forms, starting while at the experimental Black Mountain College, mostly from 1945 to 1952. She was:

- an intimately involved pioneer of the beginnings of performance art;
- translator, director, and actor in a variety of experimental/absurdist/surrealist theater productions (one production that also included Buckminster Fuller, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Arthur Penn), with later influential connections with Julian Beck’s adventurous Living Theater in New York City, as well as inspiring other experimental theater pioneers like the Open Theatre, La Mama, and Peter Brook – especially through her pioneering 1968 translation of Antonin Artaud’s *The Theater and Its Double*;

- participant in John Cage’s 1952 landmark, radical “Theater Piece No. 1” (often called “the first happening”) along with Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Olson – the accomplished major poet whom she brought to the College – and experimental music pioneer David Tudor;

- the only woman Chairperson of the Faculty, from 1949 to 1951;
- a participant in the 1949-1951 student-initiated, pioneering multimedia performance art group Light Sound Movement Workshop, led by dancer and later anthroposophist painter/textile designer Elizabeth Jennerjahn (1923-2007) and her husband W.P. [Pete] Jennerjahn, who later studied with Gerard Wagner at the Goetheanum Painting School in Switzerland, and including painter Dorothea Rockburne;

- editor of *The Black Mountain Review* (experimental poetry);
- “potter” student of sculptor Peter Voulkos; and
- a bit later, part of the key 1950s-60s avant-garde art scene in New York City and environs, including as a member of the Artists Club, where she not only lived in the Stony Point avant-garde rural artists community in Rockland County, N.Y., with Cage, Tudor, Cunningham, Karen Karnes, and other artists, but also hung out in New York City with the likes of Jasper Johns and Rachel Rosenthal.

Her endeavors at Black Mountain created bridges between the literary and visual arts, and in diverse ways brought the academic subject of “literature” into living action and performance. Throughout her life, it seemed that she was continually expanding her activities and reinventing herself, as her open-minded interests led her in diverse directions.¹

I recently was inspired to do some further research on just how M.C. first became interested in Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy. In her most autobiographical book, *Opening Our Moral Eye* (which M.C. originally wanted to title *Communion of Worlds* – see poem below), she describes a 1949 visit to England (while still at Black Mountain College), where she received a brochure about Steiner school Michael Hall that caught her attention.² She did nothing to follow up on that then, but later, back at the College, she eventually linked up with virtuoso pianist David Tudor (1926-1996), whom she eventually married and was with for ten years. Tudor, she says, was “an exceptional pianist,”³ whose “abilities were prodigious”⁴ and who became the longtime musical collaborator of the famous experimental composer John Cage. (I attended an interesting, partly

1 Many more details and documentation of M.C.’s varied activities at Black Mountain College and elsewhere can be found in Julia Connor, ed., *M.C. Richards: Centering: Life + Art – 100 Years* (Asheville, NC: Black Mountain College Museum Arts Center, 2016), from which I have freely drawn.

2 M. C. Richards, *Opening Our Moral Eye* (Hudson, NY: SteinerBooks, 1996), p. 54.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

“ambient music”/ partly electronic music performance by the two of them in Florida in 1968-69.) Apparently, Tudor was nearly the only pianist skilled enough during that period to play some of the early 1960s avant-garde experimental music compositions by pioneer composers such as Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, Karlheinz Stockhausen, La Monte Young, Gordon Mumma, etc. More and more, Tudor is today being researched and celebrated for his own experimental (usually electronic or ambient) music and compositions, and it also is being rediscovered how he was more or less of a “closet anthroposophist,” who went to summer conferences at nearby Threefold Farm in Spring Valley/ Chestnut Ridge (as did M.C. while both lived at the “artists community farm” at nearby Stony Point), joined the Anthroposophical Society in 1957, and performed more than once at the Goetheanum (where he normally played more traditional classical music). Tudor was the touring pianist/composer for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company for more than forty years, and often incorporated visual and/or performance-art elements into his compositions and unique “sound installations” (collaborating at times with such renowned visual artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Bill Viola, and Marcel Duchamp), including inventing unorthodox musical instruments from whatever objects were available, incorporating audience participation, and also using recordings of animal and insect sounds from nature.⁵

In *Opening Our Moral Eye*, M.C. writes that “two sources were feeding [Steiner] material into my life.”⁶ First, sometime after she initially left Black Mountain College in 1951 to live with Tudor in NY, he gave her “a book of collected lectures of Steiner in translation,”⁷ and she also explored further on her own (she is somewhat unclear about the timelines for this), developing an interest in Waldorf education, especially via visits to Green Meadow Waldorf School at the Threefold Farm and the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City.⁸ She also mentions reading Owen Barfield then.⁹ The second source was her visits to conferences and events at the Threefold Center in Spring Valley, “a dozen miles” away, where she also learned about the Camphill Movement, with its “new social impulse,” especially by attending several lectures by Karl König (on the twelve senses and the Word).¹⁰

5 For more information on Tudor and anthroposophy, see “David Tudor and The Occult Passage of Music” by musician You Nakai at https://www.academia.edu/35233758/David_Tudor_and_The_Occult_Passage_of_Music or “David Tudor and the Sound of Anthroposophy” by Douglas Kahn, a presentation at a 2001 Getty Research Institute Symposium, “The Art of David Tudor” (abstract only): https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/david_tudor_symposium/pdf/kahn.pdf.

6 Richards, *Opening our Moral Eye*, p. 54.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pp. 50-51.

9 Ibid., p. 72.

10 Ibid., p. 55.

She also mentions a particularly trying time of “personal crisis” in her life in 1964-65, shortly after her most popular book *Centering* was published, when she had major surgery (as well as “surgery of my emotions”) and was given the book *Meditation* by Friedrich Rittelmeyer (she doesn’t say by whom). She also discovered the work of Olive Whicher, of Emerson College in Great Britain, and went there (seemingly in 1965) to take a course from her (apparently on plant growth and projective geometry), during which she also stayed in Whicher’s house.¹¹ However, it must be said that M.C. did not just parrot back ideas she read in Steiner, but deeply digested and integrated them with her own unique, individual and always developing interests and experiences.

In addition to her innovative work in several more traditional art forms (poetry, ceramic sculpture/pottery, theater, writing), M.C. was especially sensitive to the social connections and relationships between people, and, as she in many ways strove to integrate art and life as well as break down barriers between disciplines, she advocated, like Steiner before her, for developing a new “social art.” My first meeting in person with M.C. took place at the anthroposophical Allegheny Youth Conference in Pennsylvania in 1978. We, the planners, had invited M.C. to participate in this somewhat experimental conference called “Cultivating Creative Will to Meet the Spiritual Challenges of Our Time,” which attempted to work together with its approximately 70 participants in new, more group-conversational, group-reflective, and unplanned artistic-based ways. She fit right into this project and brought along many of her ceramic sculptures to place on the window sills around the rented park pavilion hall. During the disciplined “artistic” conversations of the morning plenums, she often made incisive, even challenging comments and in particular advised us that real inner change and self-knowledge must precede any successful outer change, that real group work involves meeting ourselves in the others, and that we need to transform our desire or demand for living community to become an individual offering to others that will result in making living community a continual, recreative inner activity. At that conference, she also welcomed an unplanned, “free-time” slide presentation by a young art history student from Colorado on the innovative, unusual artwork of German multi-media sculptor/ performance artist Joseph Beuys (another advocate of a new “social art” of “social sculpture”), whom she did not seem to have heard of before but whom she immediately declared “belonged to” our conference.

To not limit the creative human spirit, her means of communication could just as well be verbal as visual, and in 1966 she taught a course at the Haystack School of Crafts in Maine called “Cross-Over to a New View of Language, Verbal and Non-Verbal.” She taught a number of such original courses at crafts schools, including the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. She sometimes conducted a group exercise at conferences or classes where the group involved sat in a circle around a table with a “ring” of modeling clay placed on and circling around the table. While some kind of focused and disciplined conversation took place in the group, each person modeled the clay in front of him or her, spontaneously creating forms that they eventually were led to realize needed to be artistically connected with every other person’s forms around the circle, as attention also needed to be devoted to the intervals or “spaces between” each person and between each person’s own modeled clay forms. Her teaching was almost always structured as a kind of joint exploration with her students, rather than an authoritative instruction. Already in her first book *Centering*, she created a new kind of poetic and philosophical presentation that looked at community building together with self-

11 Ibid., p. 40.

development as a form of moral, artistic, and experiential education. I had a craftsperson friend at college in the late 1960s who carried M.C.'s unique book around with her everywhere for more than a year like a kind of talisman. I have heard that something like this was true of many young souls in the 1960s and 1970s, when the book became a kind of inspiring counterculture classic.

The following M.C. poem from the 1980s gives an indication of what she ultimately aspired to in her multidisciplinary, multi-dimensional artistic work — no less than a communion with angels!

Angel Poems

Introit – Opening Song

In this valley of mountains,
This ocean of deserts,
We gather. We put our ears to the ground
and listen for steps. We put our eyes to the glass
and look for visions. We put our hands to the
clay and touch a swelling breast.
Far out to sea someone sails.
We gather into an ear, a glance, an embrace
To receive our angels. Around us they hover,
plaiting their feathers, gazing into the crystal
of the inner eye, holding the neck of a wild swan.
Ha! Hear their rustle, they are ready to speak.
They tell us to press on with our questions – to
Rethread our needles, wedge our clay and prepare our canvas.
They tell us their crystal is ground in our devotion,
The swan carries them through our clay spheres,
Their braids are the layers of our colors.
Our worlds are one, they say, Look! They are all about us! . . .
Weaving and dancing, afire with high heat, pale and
pearl-like, silvery, and carved like hard wood. What
are they singing? “In art is a communion of worlds!”¹²

12 M. C. Richards, *Imagine Inventing Yellow: New and Selected Poems* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Literary Editions, 1991), p. 5.



Shadowlands
acrylic on paper, 36x45,
1994



Samasara by Laura Summer, ink, paper oil on canvas, 18x24", 2020

AT GROUND LEVEL

MC Richards

Pots are for shards

and

shards are

for shepherds, to cry with.

Shapes, taken, and taking

shape:

avoid it if you can, you can't,

shapes' the void

we're in; order is

the chaos we befriend.

SAMSARA: one

thing and not another, one thing

and then another; samsara, is what

it's called, what we're at and what we're

in: forms, and naming. Names we bandy and

are scouted by, th'outs and innings, everyday a

requiem-birthday,

spilling the shepherd's tears, spoiling the shep-

herds fears –

JOB

the job's

permanent

at ground level.



no title
acrylic on paper, 14x20,
year unknown

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Ayers Rock, Uluru
acrylic on paper, 35x59,
1990