

A Life in Craft

It's unlikely that Penland School has a better friend than Paulus Berensohn. Since 1968, he has been an instructor, a neighbor, an advisor, a sometimes challenging presence, and an inspiration to hundreds of craft students. He is the author of the renowned book, *Finding One's Way with Clay*, which began as a long letter describing the work he was doing during a residency at Penland in 1970-71.

In 1979, he was invited by Director Bill Brown to live at Penland—his official role was to “encourage students,” and for several years in the mid-1980s he was the school's program director. He has been a guest in dozens of Penland classes and has frequently read poetry at the all-school meetings that open each session.

Although he claims to have retired, Paulus has supported himself by teaching craft workshops throughout the country. The focus of his recent work has been hand-made artist's journals, which he refers to as “portable studios.” Last fall, Paulus was inducted as an honorary fellow of the American Craft Council in recognition of his lifelong work in teaching. What follows is an excerpt from the speech he wrote in acceptance of the award.

Whatever We Put Hands On Is Putting Hands On Us

With things one finds oneself drawn to so passionately that years are given to it, so much sacrificed in its pursuit, surely there is an underlying myth; stories larger than oneself and the objects one thinks one creates individually.

My imagination is in love with the stories of craft and what they whisper in my ear.

The story of our materials, for instance—the evolving stories of living materials. Fifty years ago at the beginning of the hand craft revival, we were told that clay was inert. Now we know that clay is a living evolution of stardust and our direct ancestral mother, just as Native American potters have been trying to tell us for three hundred years.

Fifty years ago we didn't know about the string theory of quantum mechanics. We only intuited that everything, everything in the universe was weaving and woven, including our bodies which are woven structures. Now the story tells us about the universal nature of the fiber arts: strings connecting, losing connection, and reconnecting—in eleven dimensions—on a circular loom.

John Neff Award

Four years ago Agnieszka (pronounced Anyeska) Stefaniak arrived in Pittsburgh with her sister to make a new life following the death of their parents. She had not pursued art in her native Poland, had no thought of being an artist and did not know that art could even be an option. Now she is enrolled in Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn and has set her feet firmly on the path to making a life based on her ability to communicate what she sees and feels through the visual arts.

What made the difference? Agnieszka spent her senior year of high school in Pittsburgh and during that time discovered the Manchester Craftsmens Guild.

The Guild, which works with public school students through the arts, has twice brought groups of young people to Penland supported by a grant from the Grable Foundation. Agnieszka was part of the first group and spent a week at Penland in 1997—a week which she says totally changed her life. She had never been around artists at work and was captivated by seeing them do what they loved and knowing they were able to support themselves through their work.

Fifty years ago we thought of iron as the densest material we worked with. Now the story of iron includes its delicate life as a behavior, a behavior that makes it possible for us to breathe and makes human consciousness possible. It's a behavior of iron that gives us the colors of fall. Yes, .02 percent iron layered in the tissue of the maple seed gives us the fires of autumn in the reducing atmosphere of the kiln of the year. It gives us yellow, ochre, brown, orange, saffron, burgundy, and green glazes for the flowers of the earth we keep making with the warmth of our blood red iron rich forming hands on.

My imagination, that is my sense for reality, tells me that the genius of the craft arts is that they are bridges to the more than human world of a deeper ecology, an aesthetic ecology—and are therefore the most appropriate fine arts and politics of our de-Naturing times.



Paulus Berensohn

In addition to teaching a journal workshop at Penland last summer, Paulus was guest artist for an unusual class called “Ethics and the Art of the Bowl.” The class was taught by Gerry Williams, the editor of *Studio Potter*, along with Lisa Blackburn and John Hartom, whose Empty Bowls project has inspired hundreds of craft/food events across the

country and raised millions to feed the homeless.

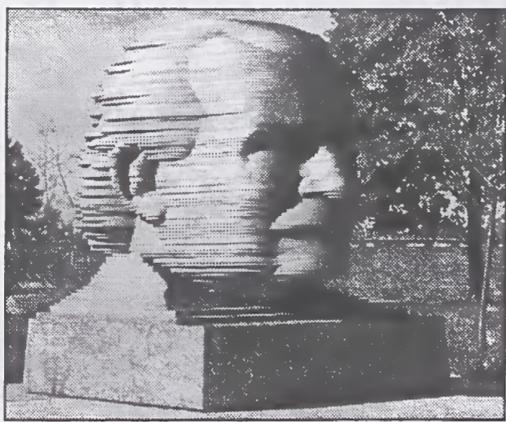
The focus was a deep consideration of the bowl form, but the class took a break each afternoon for open discussions on ethical issues faced by craft artists. The session culminated with an Empty Bowls dinner, a simple meal of soup and bread. The class donated 216 bowls which were exchanged for donations of \$10. Everyone was invited to keep their bowl in memory of all the empty bowls in the world, and the meal raised \$2,160 for The Shepherd's Staff, a service agency which sponsors the local food bank.

The first class discussion was introduced by a talk on personal ethics given by Penland's former interim director, Donna Jean Dreyer. Her remarks will be published in *Studio Potter* with an introduction by Paulus Berensohn.

Meg Peterson, who worked on the Manchester residency, felt right away that Agnieszka was a person of substance who listened intently with her whole body. “You sense a student's level of commitment to their work in a class,” Meg explained, “and there was no one better. She has the technical skills but she backs it up with personal feeling and experience.”

One year after her visit to Penland with Manchester, Agnieszka became the first recipient of the John Neff Award, which is awarded to a student based on financial need and exceptional talent. She enrolled in a drawing class with Mary Ann Zotto, which she described as fabulous. From Poland to Pittsburgh to the Manchester Guild and then to Penland. It was all part of finding her path. Agnieszka exemplifies the intention of this scholarship which honors the memory of former Core student John Neff. —Donna Jean Dreyer

The Neff Award provides a full scholarship each year to a needy craft student of exceptional talent. If you would like to make a contribution to this fund, contact the Development Department.



The Arthur Fiedler Memorial, by Ralph Helmick; Boston, MA.

Public Art Session

The Penland public art session (June 27–July 9, 1999) was conceived as a way of encouraging craft artists to make work for public spaces. We want to give studio artists an opportunity to learn about the process of working on a larger scale, teaming with design professionals and community officials. We will teach the specifics of developing proposals, reading blueprints, and representing ideas.

Making a mark on one's physical environment—claiming it, organizing it, beautifying it, and identifying it as special in some way—is a centuries old human response. The contemporary public art movement continues this tradition by drawing together artists, designers, and social thinkers to create public or shared spaces with particular meaning.

Public artworks take many forms. Some are invisible as objects—they might be an organization of space or a fresh use of industrial or landscape materials. Some are literally functional: benches, walkways. Some are ephemeral and not meant to last. Some artworks are private acts made public by their location. Some are the result of an individual fingerprint while others are communal. All of them spring from a desire to create an artistic experience outside of galleries, museums, and private homes—a desire to make a public gesture.

Some of the classes are materials-based like most of our program; others are more oriented to process and concept. All of them explore some dimension of this growing area of expression. Book artist Harry Reese, for instance, will lead a class on all aspects of the use of text in art. Sculptor Ralph Helmick and engineer Stu Schechter will explore the dynamics of collaboration. Classes taught by textile artist Elizabeth Busch and ceramicist Angelica Pozo will cover the entire process of developing and presenting proposals and models.

The session will also host some special guests. Mel Chin will talk about his conceptual and environmental pieces and Mr. Imagination will engage the school and community in a Fourth of July performance. Regina Flanagan, artist and former director of the Minnesota Percent for Art Program will facilitate afternoon discussions and present an overview of the field. Several other arts administrators and professionals will be on hand to discuss the process of public art.

The Penland summer catalog has descriptions of all of the public art classes and complete information is also available on our website (<http://penland.org>). If you would like to help publicize the session, we can send you some posters and catalogs. Contact Robin Dreyer at Penland or by e-mail: publications@penland.org.