The Endless Mountains Spirit
M.C. Richards and Paulus Berensohn

March 21 through May 8, 2015
Suraci Gallery
Marywood University
Scranton, Pennsylvania

Right: Paulus Berensohn
Astral Ripening from Finding One’s Way With Clay
ca. 1970–1971
each approximately 5 x 4.5 x 4.75”
Over the past several years I have learned about Black Mountain College in North Carolina, a past center of amazing creativity and artistic activity. I would read about one ceramist or another and every now and then Black Mountain would come up. At the same time, as I read more, another place kept appearing, the Endless Mountains Farm. It became apparent to me that a similar nexus took place between Paulus Berensohn, M.C. Richards, various artists, friends, and the Endless Mountains Farm.

Happily, with what seems to be a lingering energy from The Endless Mountains Spirit, we have been able to sew together a brief history and document the creative and communal haven just down the road from here.

Matt Povse
The Spirit of the Endless Mountains Farm

Spirit can be defined by many different terms: spirituality, creativity, enthusiasm for life, the soul of a certain location, and human will; it is a truly powerful experience when all these qualities come together. These alignments have occurred throughout ceramics history at many different locations. Communities like Black Mountain College, North Carolina; Gate Hill Community, Stony Point, New York; Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Maine; and Penland School of Crafts, North Carolina, just to name a few. These places brought together the human spirit and the creative spirit and connected them to the soul of the land.

In 1965 the process was set in motion for such a spirit-filled alignment to occur in Northeast Pennsylvania, when Paulus Berensohn purchased a farm north of Scranton, nestled in the region called the Endless Mountains. Although not as well known as the aforementioned locations, its importance to the region and to the ceramics community is significant. A few years later M.C. Richards joined Paulus at the Farm. What developed was a life-long dance between these two creative souls and the land. Through the combined synergy of these two artists, the Endless Mountains Farm became a melting pot of both the creative and human spirit, bringing together individuals from various backgrounds to create a special place and time in ceramics history.
A Historical Account of the Farm

Paulus bought the Endless Mountains Farm in 1965, and he lived and worked at the property until 1972. Paulus retold the story of how this ownership came about in a recent interview with Marywood University. He had an exhibition at the Philadelphia Print Club and sold all his pots on the first night. He was interested in finding a place to purchase outside the city, and with the help of friends, Larry Wilson and Laurie Graham, he found property in the Endless Mountains region of Pennsylvania. In 1965, he took the money he made at his exhibition and with a handshake agreement with a local banker in Forest City, Pennsylvania, Berensohn bought 100 acres with an old farmhouse and a barn. He stated, "The thing that attracted me was the long field. I stood at the end of that long field and looked up at the mountain and liked it."

Paulus moved to the Farm in the summer of 1967 to live and work as a potter. In 1968, Mary Caroline Richards found her way to this special place and joined her student and long-time friend as resident on the Farm. Even though neither of them lived full time at the Farm, both leaving from time to time to pursue other interests and commitments, their combined influence on this place attracted others throughout the history of the Farm.

In the spring of 1971 Larry Wilson and Laurie Graham moved back to the Farm while Wilson completed his senior project for Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Besides making pottery, he constructed four geodesic domes on the property. The first dome became known as the “weaving dome” and it was there that Laurie Graham had her looms and pursued her work in fibers. The other three domes became their home.
Wilson saw the construction of the geodesic domes as an extension of the pottery process; the working of the cement and plaster to form the geodesic shell was similar to forming a clay vessel. Wilson’s sister and brother-in-law, Kathy and Peter Taylor came to live and work at the Farm in August 1971. They lived in the weaving dome while Taylor helped Wilson build the domes, a new studio for Paulus, and a new gas kiln. Taylor worked in the barn studio with Paulus during that winter. In 1972, after pursuing a term at Penland School of Crafts, the Taylors moved on to work and build a pottery studio for the Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York.²

Paulus left the farm in 1972 due to a health scare, and traveled to California to pursue treatment.³ However, his association with the Farm did not end there, and he returned and stayed at the Farm throughout the years. The arrangement that he and M.C. had regarding the ownership of the property allowed both of them the freedom to pursue their lives and interests, yet still have an ongoing connection to this sanctuary.
The help Paulus and M.C. received from the association of friends and family established a long relationship with the land and laid the foundations for the Endless Mountains Farm’s ability to nurture the creative spirit and foster the spirit of community. Around 1974, June Ekman, Burt Supree, and Remy Charlip began coming to the Farm. The trio would leave the city to visit on weekends and summers to work in clay, garden, and relax. When asked about what she did at the Farm, Ekman stated, “I would sit on the roof outside the studio and sun bathe while they all worked in clay.”

They all met Paulus through the New York dance scene. Ekman came to New York to dance with the Martha Graham School of Dance. Supree was a dancer, writer and the Dance Editor for the Village Voice in New York City. Charlip was a dancer, choreographer, and founding member of Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He performed with the Company at Black Mountain College and later went on to write and illustrate many well-known children’s books including Fortunately and Harlequin and the Gift of Many Colors. They came out to the Endless Mountains to visit Paulus and M.C. and became part owners, of not only the Farm, but to its legacy. The Farm was set up as a cooperative between them and they all owned “shares” in the property at different points of its history. It was a special place for all of them and Paulus recalled that this cooperative ownership of the farm was based on trust.

“We all had shares and the agreement we made with each other is that no one would profit from the sale of the farm.”

In 1975 the Farm was split between M.C., Supree, Ekman, and Charlip, who together owned the farm-house and 50 acres; Larry Wilson and Laurie Graham bought the other 50 acres. Two years later in 1977, Ekman and Charlip sold their shares to M.C. and Supree to pursue their training in the Alexander Technique. M.C. and Supree continued living at the Farm, making it a base in between their travels. This arrangement made it possible for Paulus, Ekman, and Charlip to visit throughout the years and maintain their connection to the property. After Burt’s passing in 1992, M.C. was the last official owner of their fifty acres.

Then in 1993 M.C. needed funds to pursue her commitment at Camphill Village in Kimberton, Pennsylvania. She, with Paulus’ consultation, decided to bring the property back together and sold her 50 acres of the original Farm to longtime caretakers and stewards, Larry Wilson and Laurie Graham. Paulus stated, “We thought that Larry and Laurie... by that time they had begun to transform the Farm, that they should have it because they loved it and they were taking care of it and we didn’t know how to do that.”
Paulus Berensohn, M.C. Richards, the Farm, and the Legacy of the Creative Spirit

Throughout the long history of the property, the connecting force that attracted all the participants to create, enjoy, and live at the Farm was the creative and charismatic energy of Paulus and M.C. Although they pursued different goals, over the decades their stories would intertwine with the Farm to create a separate but joined narrative. Paulus bought and lived at the Farm with the intention of pursuing pottery making full time. Although clay was the medium he worked in at the studio, his interests ranged from needlepoint to paper weaving. A true artist, he never stopped exploring and the environment of the Farm only encouraged this sentiment. It was during his years on the Farm that he started exploring the technique of pinching clay. It was a process that would lead him to write *Finding One’s Way With Clay*. Paulus stated, “Frustrated by the interference of thought while attempting to meditate, I got up and went to the studio where I prepared a ball of clay thinking to climb up on the wheel and start the day’s work. Instead, I sat down again, melting, this time into a deep thoughtless state. A half-hour later, when I opened my eyes, there, in both hands was a small pinched bowl, received as a gift. I’ve been pinching clay ever since.”
However, he was drawn further and further to the spirit of teaching, learning, and sharing his love of clay with others. Like his teacher and friend M.C., Paulus’ interest in creativity, and the need to connect to the human spirit, led him to pursue a life of teaching. Prior to coming to the Farm, he was an instructor at Swarthmore College and founded the Potters Guild in Wallingford, PA. He was also a visiting instructor at Haverford College in Haverford, PA. He went on to lead workshops at area Pennsylvania colleges, Keystone and Kutztown, and in Williamsport as well as many locations nationwide and around the world, including teaching trips to Australia and Germany. The relationship fostered at the Farm with M.C. allowed Paulus the freedom to branch out and pursue the varied directions of his art.

M.C. moved to the Farm in 1968 after she was mugged and robbed near her home in New York City. It was Paulus’ insistence that she move from the city and come up to his farm to live. M.C. lived and created on and off at the Endless Mountains Farm throughout her life. During her time at the Farm she penned several manuscripts including Towards Wholeness and The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings.
While she lived at the Farm, M.C. also led many workshops and lectures throughout the world. In 1992 she left the Farm and settled permanently at Camphill Village in Kimberton Hills, Pennsylvania. There she focused on her love of the earth, art, and social therapy. She lived and worked side by side with adults with developmental disabilities in a dynamic and caring community. Her connection to the Endless Mountains Farm did not end; she would continue visiting her friends Wilson and Graham up until her death in 1999. Still today, M.C.’s spirit can be felt at the property.

After M.C.’s death, Paulus thought he would pinch a bowl of clay mixed with her ashes and place it at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, a place that M.C. had deeply loved. He could not get himself to pinch the clay into a bowl, but as he wedged and re-wedged the clay something simpler occurred. He formed a simple “stone” or “seed” which he placed on a wooden table. Paulus stated, “A single stone and its shadow; it appeared monumental and musical.” Paulus brought these stones/seeds to the Farm and with Sally Palmer, Alison Armstrong, Suzi Gablick, Larry Wilson, and Laurie Graham they distributed individual stones around the property, returning M.C.’s creative spirit to the Endless Mountains. He also sent the stone/seeds to M.C.’s friends around the world.

The Endless Mountains Farm:
A Creative Home for Many

During the time that Paulus and M.C. owned the Farm it became a creative haven for many friends and colleagues. Many would spend time at the Farm’s studio to create their own work. Some would stay for short amounts of time while others stayed longer and used the Farm as their studio space. The environment instilled in the Farm by the relationship of Paulus and M.C. made it possible for others to share in the creative spirit.

Deborah Miller came to live in the farmhouse and worked in the studio from January 1973 to February 1974. After a year she left the Farm to work with the residents of Camp Hill Village in Copake, New York.

Jean Graham, Laurie Graham’s sister, moved into the farmhouse in September 1975. She spent a quiet winter working alone in the clay studio, inspired by the beauty of the land around her and used the time on the Farm...
Jean Graham
1975

(L to R):   1 x 8.5 x 8”   .75 x 6.75 x 7”   1 x 7.75 x 8”

to make some dramatic changes in her work. This new work was exhibited at the Davenport Museum of Art (Davenport, Iowa), a one-woman exhibition entitled “Clay Vessels.” In the exhibition statement Graham wrote, “This change in my approach to my work demanded as well, a change in my own life. I could no longer sell my work immediately as it was finished, so I needed to find a new economic niche. I needed to break my connection with old galleries and over-crowded art fairs so I could begin something new. In this spirit I moved to a farm house in Pennsylvania where I lived alone and for the first time in eight years experienced those dramatic northern seasonal changes. It was stunning. I noticed everything anew. The experience was powerful.”

Jean Graham
Others, like Dan Sheehan, Jack Claussen, and Tom Beers, made pottery at the Farm. They worked with Paulus or M.C. while the two were at the Farm. When either would leave to pursue other creative projects, Sheehan, Claussen, and Beers would continue their work in the studio.

During some of the time that Sheehan was working at the Farm, ceramics artist Mary Law would come and work at the Farm’s studio. While she attended Alfred University for graduate school, she would visit Sheehan at the Farm every month or so, for a weekend. It was during this time that she got to know Larry and Laurie and met M.C. and Paulus. She commented, “I found Paulus fascinating, and charismatic, and I believe most people did and still do.”

Law conveyed an antidote about one of the times she met with Paulus at the Farm. She stated, “I was working with Byron Temple in Lambertville, New Jersey, exchanging studio use for doing his paperwork. Byron had a bad car accident and ended up in a body cast from a badly broken leg. This meant that I needed to step in and make his pots, to fill the orders he’d promised. Susan King was the person apprenticing then, but she needed help with some of the more complex forms. We worked together making his pots, but Byron wasn’t easy to work for then, due to his injuries and enforced rest; we felt unappreciated and frustrated.

One day it occurred to me to give us a little break by driving to the Farm to visit Paulus. When we arrived for lunch, and whined about our situation, Paulus gave us the very best pep talk, reminding us that we were making Byron’s pots, who had studied with Bernard Leach, and we were therefore carrying on the great tradition and lineage going back through Leach to Hamada, Yanagi, and Kawai, and even back to the pre-historic Jomon pots. Of course we found this thrilling, and returned to our work with renewed vigor. The speech might have been a bit hyperbolic, but I never forgot it.”

Many people have been attracted to the atmosphere that Paulus and M.C.’s presence created at the Farm. There were many visitors that would drop in and just visit one or the other when they were staying at the property. Daniel Rhodes, ceramics artist, teacher, and author would often visit the Farm. He and M.C. were good friends and he was very interested in becoming a better teacher. They would have long talks about pedagogy.

The creative energy of the Farm attracted many friends and colleagues of M.C.’s from Black Mountain College. Paulus and M.C. saw visits from artists, dancers, writers and actors. Among them were John Cage, John Lennon, Merce Cunningham, Jeff Carter, Irwin Kremen, Charity James, and James Leo Herlihy, who wrote *Midnight Cowboy*. Bruce Marks and Tony Lander, dancers whom Paulus knew from the Royal Danish Ballet, would also visit.
The Kiln Building Festival

The summer of 1968 saw one of the defining events in the Farm’s history. The “Kiln Building Festival” was an ambitious undertaking and a historic event for its time. In 1967, M.C. attended a kiln building workshop while she was in England, led by Ann Stannard. During this workshop they built several types of kilns, which left an impression on M.C.

She wrote home to both Paulus and her friend and colleague, Karen Karnes, to see if they could pull off such a festival at the Endless Mountains Farm, which had lots of space to build kilns. Paulus stated, “M.C. wrote and said that she had met a woman kiln builder who was amazing and what would I think about having a kiln building festival here at this farm.” Paulus continued and stated, “M.C. said she would come back to put in a garden and we could eat out of the garden, and I thought it was a wonderful idea.” In keeping with the creative spirit that the Farm cultivated, the festival was a cooperative learning and sharing event; no one would be paid for the workshop and everyone would share the cost. Paulus and Karnes were enthusiastic about the idea and the festival was held in August.

Paulus recalled the letter M.C. wrote to him. He stated that, “at the time there were kiln building workshops but no women were invited.” Like the life Paulus and M.C. created at the Farm, their workshop would be different. As it turned out a majority of the participants in the festival were women and as Paulus recalled, “Many of them went on to build their own kilns.”

The Kiln Building Festival was a huge success and even after fifty years, the artists who attended still talk about it. About thirty people participated in the event. They camped in the long field and as Paulus stated,
“One day our neighbor, who ordinarily pastured his cows here, forgot that he was not supposed to and let the cows in during that week. One morning during that time, I heard screaming from the house. The cows were putting their faces in the tents startling several participants.”

According to Paulus, he had someone help pour the concrete pad where the kilns were built, and Ann Stannard sent him a letter instructing what bricks to order. Some of the bricks were bought from Susan Hartnett, an artist from Tribeca, New York. The participants of the festival built and fired many kinds of kilns: sawdust, oil drip, salt, and wood. The casting of the arch for the salt kiln was done during the festival and the wood kiln they built was made with wedge shaped brick that formed a circle, and had a four–piece cast cap. Paulus recalled, “My most vivid memory was the last night when we had a half dozen sawdust firings, an oil drip, salt, and a wood firing all happening at once. The whole valley filled with smoke. People got ecstatic, danced and carried on. It was a memorable night.” The workshop brought together many artists, some working in clay and others in different mediums. All the participants came together in the common interest of exploring the creative nature of ceramics.

Some of the participants, including Ann Stannard, Karen Karnes, Cynthia Bringle, and Mary Nyburg, have had long and celebrated careers in ceramics. Ann Stannard was a British art teacher who had a house and studio in Anglesey in North Wales and later settled in the United States, moving with Karnes to Vermont after 1979. She built wood–fired kilns first at Danville, VT and later rebuilt at Morgan, VT. Karen Karnes’ long ceramics career spans decades and she has earned her living as a potter throughout her life. Cynthia Bringle, like Karnes, has also earned her living as a potter. She was the first female clay artist to set up a studio in Memphis, Tennessee in the 1960s. Later in 1970 she moved her studio to Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, where she continues to create, teach, and learn. Mary Nyburg later went on to serve on many boards and councils of craft organizations, including the Maryland Craft Council, The Potters Guild of Baltimore, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and the American Craft Council. Some of the many other participants included Ray Hearne, Helen Penny, Russ Fernald, Ellie Fernald, Alan Kluber, Amy Hart, Shirley Tassencort, and Louise Davis.
Continuing the Creative Spirit at the Endless Mountains Farm

In April of 2002 the Kiln Building Festival was almost a thirty-five year old memory and it had been some time since ceramic work of that scale was produced at the Farm. The kilns from the workshop were still on location when Jordan Taylor and his family came to live and create on the Farm. Taylor, son of Peter Taylor, who worked at the Farms’ studio back in the early 70s, was no stranger to this location. His grandparents lived in one of the houses on the property and he spent Christmas on the Farm as a child.

Apart from being familiar with Paulus Berensohn from his connection to the Endless Mountains Farm, Taylor had an opportunity to work with him when Paulus came to his high school, Westtown School, as a visiting artist. A talk Paulus gave at the school left a lasting impression on Taylor and moved him to pursue a life in ceramics. Paulus stated, “He (Taylor) claims that he went into the talk, not really knowing what he wanted to do with his life, and that he left the talk knowing that he wanted to be a potter.” Taylor approached his uncle, Larry Wilson with the idea of moving to the Farm to work full time in clay. Wilson agreed and built the house and studio that Taylor, his wife, Mariana Garrettson and their daughter would live in while he worked.

Taylor salvaged some of the brick from the kilns that were left on site from the kiln building workshop. He also brought in salvaged brick from Ohio, and began building his wood kilns. The work he began creating at the Farm ultimately became the body of work that would push and question his ideas of clay, community, and spirit. Soon after Taylor was established, another young potter, Zoë Tilley Poster, served an apprenticeship with him for two years.

Taylor worked as a functional potter before undertaking the work that would define his time on the Farm. Taylor’s stele forms, which were influenced by trips to South America and the indigenous art of the Maya stelae, began a transformation in his work. His ideas of “mass as a formal tool” began with trips to Guatemala but were formally worked out during his tenure at the Endless Mountains Farm.

In our recent interview, Paulus commented on the work that Taylor accomplished while at the Farm. He stated, “My favorite piece of his is where he just took a lump of clay, fired it, a huge un-wedged lump of earth. I loved that piece.” Taylor’s interest in the stele form relates indirectly to the brick form. Bricks that were removed from Paulus’ kilns were inspected and studied in order to build his own kilns. Taylor worked at the Farm for eight years and the work that he created there connected him to the legacy of ceramic work that the Farm has born witness to for nearly 50 years.
Conclusion

What started as a simple need to find a place to work and create evolved into a long and creative relationship between Paulus, M.C., and a small farm in Northeast Pennsylvania. The interaction between all the participants has given this land a unique and creative soul. Empowered and inspired by the beauty of the Farm and the community it fostered, Paulus and M.C.’s relationship became the synergy behind a little known ceramics legacy. An important part of this story are Laurie Graham and Larry Wilson, for without their constant stewardship to the artistic spirit and land, the participants would not have had a place to visit, commune, create, work, and live. The people that Paulus, M.C., and this property brought together, and the events that ensued, certainly place this location as one of the important epicenters of our contemporary ceramics and artistic history. Upon reflection close to 50 years later, Paulus states, “Every time someone visits they add a little energy to the place... all these different people have stopped here and made this place.”

Paulus Berensohn
4.5 x 5.75 x 5.5”
Paulus, May 15, 2014, at the Endless Mountains Farm
Acknowledgements

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Catalog and text: Skip Sensbach

Notes
2 Wilson, Larry and Graham, Laurie. Interviewed by author. Written account. Endless Mountains Farm, January, 2015.
3 Paulus Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology (2001).
5 Berensohn, Paulus. Interview.
6 Berensohn, Paulus. Interview.
7 Berensohn, Paulus. Interview.
8 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology.
9 Berensohn, Paulus. Interview.
11 M.C. Richards, M.C. Richards on Camphill Kimberton, April 18, 2013. www.camphillkimberton.blogspot.com
12 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 11.
13 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
14 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
15 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
16 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
17 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
18 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
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20 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
21 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
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24 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
25 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
26 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
27 Berensohn, Whatever We Touch is Touching Us: Craft Art and a Deeper Sense of Ecology, 12.
May 15, 2014 at the Endless Mountains Farm
Left to Right: Paulus, Sandra Ward Povse, Larry Wilson, Laurie Graham, Skip Sensbach, and Matt Povse