

Bern Porter: an interview

Editor's Note: This is a reprint of an interview with the late Bern Porter, printed in *Umbrella* in September 1980 (vol. 1, no. 5). During a brief visit to Los Angeles, Bern spent an evening in Venice during which time the editor of *Umbrella* interviewed him on 22 January 1980. Poet, physicist (he helped develop the cathode ray tube, pioneering television, as well as the atomic bomb) and pioneering bookmaker, Bern Porter lived in Belfast, Maine when he wasn't going around the world on cruises. *He died in June.*

In 1920 I started making books. Up in Maine my problem was the simple act of reproduction. In those days, Xerox had not arrived and mimeograph was very crude—certainly too expensive for me, and rubber stamps had not yet come in or certainly were not available in Maine, so my problem was to draw them by hand. This meant writing, printing the text and making the illustrations, and it meant an edition of five copies, an incredible work in terms of hours and of effort.

The trick was then to condense, to re-digest, to state and to hand letter and to hand-illustrate an edition of five copies. My first such book was done in 1920. It was handsewn, hand drawn, hand-lettered, and it had a slipcase which was also handmade. And since I had difficulty with titles in those days, I simply called them numbers, like 179B, and the next book, of course, was CD21. Thus, every title had at least one number and one initial.

My audience was a woman who lived down the street about four blocks, and when I completed a book, I would take it down to her, and she would give me a dozen eggs which I would take back to my mother. So I was making artists' books in those days—one book for a dozen eggs—a sort of barter system, the lady who received, my mother who received, and I who made it received no money.

I continued with this edition of five, and as far as the woman who swapped the eggs for the book, some friends from Boston would come to visit her in the summer and she persuaded them that they should give me the magnificent sum of one dollar and would take one of my books and take it back to Boston and take it into a gallery to some of their art friends and see if there were anyone in Boston who would like to swap handmade books. My first out-of-Maine client, I've forgotten his name, was also making a kind of art book (I don't think they were as sophisticated as mine) but he was playing with words



and putting them on numbers. . Those were very rich years, 1920-21, in Maine with swapping and bartering and the man in Boston who sent the books to some folks in Philadelphia, who bought some books, and the next thing you know they were tied up as far as New Mexico after about a year and a half of production. At no point were the editions more than five copies. I've been told that one of these editions that I produced in those days now sells at auction for \$750, somewhat different from a dozen eggs which in those days sold for about 30 cents. I personally have no more of those, but the master collection at the UCLA campus in Westwood does have the magazine which I hand-lettered, which runs to about three pages, so I began at the age of 9.

MAIL

I also did what has later become mail art about that time, and was receiving postcards through the mail and would take a razor blade and cut them up into three sections and then re-paste them together, so that we had a sort of a montage, in fact, of a distorted image. Later I encountered in Copenhagen a man named Diter Rot from Iceland, and he and I swapped cards which we had cut and we called those simply "cut cards", to make it easy. So mail art was beginning in those days, and I later found that Marcel Duchamp was doing it about the same time and Kurt Schwitters in Switzerland I later learned [they were independent of each other, but 1918-1922 was a very rich time for the beginning of artists' books, mail art, and what we later called posters]. It was always shattering to me to sit in Maine thinking that someone else was also doing the same thing, and we got to know one another, becoming

friends instead of rivals. The first artists' books went through the mail and were swapped very much as we do mail art now.

As for artists' books, five copies of 30 pages was really a Herculean task! The network was basically word-of-mouth, and the mail service was considerably different in those days than it is now, probably just as unreliable, but we were quite adaptive in those days.

Suddenly, the church that my parents attended acquired a mimeograph machine. This was a marvel of the first order, because it came all the way from New York City, north of Maine, and I happened to have a job as a janitor in the church and every week when no one was looking, I used to turn the crank and produce some pages on this marvelous machine! I was able, therefore, to run an edition up to 10 copies. This was a very advanced technological development. Mimeographing had arrived in Northern Maine!

Were you as pleased with the product?

No, and neither were my recipients. They felt that the ink impression that I made with an ordinary quill pen and a bottle of India ink was far superior to the sort of muddy gray that this marvelous machine produced.

I still feel that the machine stands in the way between me and the product. Today we are involved with computers, space satellites, and communication devices, and the artist is particularly very much in the background.

We have discovered recently that we are unable to talk with one another, and the reason is that everyone has a different definition for one and the same word. So it is necessary now to examine the word. And some of us are making desperate attempts to do this. The word is in a bad way in our culture. This is a universal problem, but few people understand one another because this difference of word meaning to each person exists, and I feel it is time for the individual word to be examined.

I find this is a product of our time, when we have nothing but words coming out of the woodwork and all of them are generally instilling fear, doubt, uncertainty, untruth. It is almost impossible to find the truth in this great tremendous morass of words which now surround us.

How did your master collection get started?

My master collection has been forming at UCLA since 1942, started by Lawrence Clark Powell [the University Librarian at that time]. I was working as a physicist in Berkeley on the atomic bomb, and he was interested in having California

people preserved in the library. And in this category, I am reminded that Henry Miller's wife, June, used to go from bar to bar selling one single sheet of paper about six inches square on which Henry had written some words. I was able to give some of those sheets to my collection at UCLA. I look upon those as a very important form, the precursors to the handbills, the free handbills, with the exception that she sold them, and she was doing this entirely around 1924 or so.

I personally add to the collection at UCLA every six months or so, with the result that by now it is very considerable in volume. I have a secondary collection at Colby College in Maine where I graduated and in the case that I have a certain kind of split personality, I also have a split collection, a master collection on the West Coast and a secondary collection on the East Coast.

In my isolation in Maine, it seems to me that I just plowed ahead in a great number of forms and sort of called them my own and sent them out on waves, so to speak, and if other people were independently doing the same thing or later imitated me or followed me in any way, I was very pleased and surprised. But in general I worked alone all these years.

EUROPE, THEN THE STATES

It has been interesting to me that the things I have created have first appeared in either Germany, or England, or France, and later they somehow were brought to the United States. So I found that making such things as photographs without a camera trying to interpret the quality of early jazz, Louis Armstrong, the old funeral bands from the streets of New Orleans, I was able to interpret themes of 1930 and found a music magazine in French which would produce it, and to my knowledge I was not able to get one produced in the United States.

I find every European curious to know what is going on in America. It's as simple as that. So they write to me, and if I don't have something of my own, I send some examples of other work. They look at America as the birthplace of many innovations. It is true that once they absorb them, they seem to imitate them very successfully and advance them and improve upon them in a sophisticated way. But in general they are highly excited about what goes on in America. And in my case most of my things appeared there.

There is a greater interest in my work than there ever was. I still think it is America which is leading in such things as outer space exploration, computers and what not. They look to us in the arts, as they do in science.

I was in the West at a very fortunate time, 1942-52, when the soldiers were rushing off to the wars in the Pacific, and then were rushing back to G.I. loans and stopping in San Francisco and Berkeley to study. There was a tremendous fervent at that time in just about anything you can mention—music, poetry, painting, playwriting. Historically, they refer to it now as the San Francisco Renaissance. Those of us who lived through it, I'm sure we were starving to death, but were nevertheless excited about what we were doing, and we never thought we were "renaissancing" anything.

What's your opinion of intermedia?

We are indebted to Dick Higgins for having brought the word to our attention; even now I believe it has lost its meaning, because there are so many things happening simultaneously. However, it was a very valuable contribution, and we operated without the use of that word for many, many years.

I suppose that *The Wastemaker* is as close as I'll ever get to an unusual composition. I've done experiments since, but I've left the appendix that was first published as *Physics for Tomorrow*, which contains as far as I'm concerned a system of consequence for the next 20 years. It actually is my greatest contribution of consequence.

What do you think of your retrospective exhibition?

My retrospective is very flattering to me. Here I am 70 years old, and I could easily ask the question: "Why does it take so long?" It's fair that I ask myself that question. In this case, it was a matter of throwing into a box some 68 items I had lying all around and shipping them off to New York. That's 68 items that I could spare for the duration of six months. But it is very flattering to have this recognition as this time. I'm certainly grateful to all who took part and will be taking part. In my silence I ask how I could be functioning for these 60 years and only now come to the surface?

I always have been aware of the fact that I can produce a great deal more if I had more outlets, so in a sense I am like Emily Dickinson who wrote her poems and tucked them under the rug, and I produced things and sent them off to UCLA. *The Wastemaker* sat there for 11 years, and sometimes have sat longer than that. They have one copy only and one of these days I'll go there and take it out and revive it, I'm sure.

I earned my living as a physicist all these years, and the income from that has gone into all of these artistic efforts. And the art forms have evolved from physics' domination

and physics have enmeshed themselves into my productions. I'm very concerned about the human eye; I'm also concerned about our five senses. Along with taste, people don't feel anything. Some people can still smell, but their hearing is limited; but I'm highly concerned how to see, and I'm particularly disturbed about the printed lines. The human eye does not need all the letters in the alphabet. The lines are not typed and set and adjusted to the eye reading; the other eye should be indented—the other eye jumps in a very crude fashion. Take these days when we are moving while looking at something such as television—or in the third case, where the object seen is stationary, then we have a clear visual difficulty, then I am very concerned about our five senses being mutilated, and even slowly disappearing, which is an incredible phenomenon which is in process now. And this of course is traced to bad air, bad food, bad water, just the bad environment that we have created for ourselves.

As for the new media such as microfilm, microfiche, lasers and holography, they are an indication of our running out of space, of an artificial eye for the light that we have is not adequate, of the total degradation of the culture. The disappearance of the act of seeing will create the acceptance of artificial eyes, artificial seeing devices, to take the place of nature characteristic of technology at the moment.

EULOGIES TO BERN

From Mark Melnicove:

BERN PORTER, FAREWELL

So here is death again
Reflecting moonlight.
It has a pinkish cast.

Sometimes it is blue;
Black death is blue.
When I mention this, people

Say, "Where you been?"
I get out of it
By saying, "I usually go

Away for the winter,
I'm here later than usual,
Blah, blah."
Then they go on to tell me
It can be yellow;

Death is yellow.
So here it is—
How tremendous
To see it again.

For now it is white.

Bern Porter, "poet laureate of the universe," died June 7, in Belfast, Maine, after a long illness. He was one of the greatest visual and found poets of this age (or any other). His 1954 book, *I've Left*, a manifesto for the union of science and art, is a neglected classic.

A pioneer of small press publishing, he was part of the post-WWII San Francisco Renaissance. Among the authors he published were Henry Miller, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Patchen, Phillip Lamantia, and James Schevill. To read more about Bern, go to James Schevill's *Where to Go What to Do When You Are Bern* (Tilbury House, 1992).

To get a first hand feel for his oeuvre, visit the Bern Porter collections at these libraries: Bowdoin College, Colby College, Brown University, Unity College, State Library (Augusta), UCLA.

I had the pleasure of performing with Bern Porter and publishing some of his books (**Bern! Porter! Interview!; The Book of Do's; Here Comes Everybody's Don't Book; Sweet End; Sounds That Arouse Me.**)

The author of *The Last Acts of Saint Fuck* is gone--"Far, far away and out in front so very much so."

FROM CARLO PITTORE:

Bern Porter, who died in Belfast, Maine, at the age of 93 after a long illness, was an internationally reknown found, concrete, and sound poet; an early small press publisher (publishing Henry Miller, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Patchen, Philip Lamantia, James Schevill); he had a long and distinguished relationship with mail art. His *I've Left* (1954), a manifesto of science and art, and republished with a forward by Dick Higgins (1971) is a neglected classic. Part of the Post WWII San Francisco Renaissance, Bern was the publisher of *Berkeley*, a journal of modern culture (1947-50) and showed the paintings of Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell, Walter Kulhman and John Hultberg in his Sausalito Gallery (1949-50), as well as showing photography as fine art. An extremely inventive and multiform artist, who was also a physicist/scientist (working on the Manhattan Project in WWII). Bern's experiments gave him a deserved international acclaim, and his total commitment to shared

publishing, and the creative process, and to the mail art community which he watched blossom throughout the 1970's, earned him a vast network of correspondants, admirers, and publishers all over the world. His Institute of Advanced Thinking in Belfast, Maine, where he had settled with his second wife, Margaret (d. 1975) boasted a steady stream of visitors from the states and abroad.

A man of letters, Bern delighted in the alphabet, and used the abc's like others used words or ideas. He loved to cut them up, redesign them. For him, simplicity had integrity and was everything. He abhorred gimmicks, insincerity, the 'tried ("failed!") and true' ("false!"), and poseurs. Renowned as Maine's greatest crank, Bern had disrespect for conventional thinking, and thoughtlessness masked as convention that inhabits almost all actions at all times in all situations. He kept books and papers in his refrigerator, new projects in his oven, an art gallery in his living room, and sculpture in his garden.

Speaking before the Union of Maine Visual Artists at their first statewide Artists convention in 1976, he walked up to the podium attired in a formal tuxedo, and proceeded to scold all those gathered for being there and "talking" about art, when they ought to be in their studios "making" it. He hosted poetry readings at his home, collected art (i.e. supported artists), made movies and audio tapes with technically advanced colleagues, (he never owned a car, gave up his phone, and only bought a television in his declining years) gave performance art on tour with poet Mark Melnicove, and was a frequenter of art openings ("always bring a plastic bag with you, to fill it with the food on the table, cause that's the only support you'll ever get for your art"). He has been seen dressed in his wife's clothing, or could model naked when almost 70. He ate the free sugar out of the packets in restaurants, or feasted on their courtesy ketchup and relish, while his companions ate like bourgeoisie. He had a low opinion of most institutions, and their land locked mentality, and of most people generally, unless they made poetry or art, or published or supported those who did.

Although he was Henry Miller's first American publisher, and published a host of San Francisco poets (Allen Ginsburg asked him to publish "Howl"), the Maine State Commission on the Arts continually refused to recognize Bern as a publisher. He once ran for Governor in the Maine State Republican primary (he withdrew), and was totally opposed to war and to those who supported war as a way to resolve

conflict. His image was published on a maple syrup dispenser, and small press publishers from Dick Higgins to Keith Haring delighted to publish him.

In his lifetime, he had a biography published about him (Where to go, what to do, when you are Bern Porter, by James Schevill, Tilbury House, Publishers), and had more than 50 of his own bookworks published, as well as thousands of individual pieces in other publications. He won a \$10,000 National Endowment for the Arts Literary Fellowship. The Museum of Modern Art Library, the Getty Museum, Special Collections at Bowdoin College, and at Colby College (his alma mater), Special Collections at the John Hay Library at Brown University (where he received his Master's) and Special Collections, University of California at LA Library, boast collections of his handmade and published works.

Bern Porter was all business/ promptness, and his business was poetry/art. If he had a friend, the relationship was based on art. He could be charming and often was, especially with women, and particularly with artist ladies. Idiosyncratic and ornery, he was never shy about being rude when felt put upon, interrupted, or bored. Intellectual and detached, emotionally he could cry like a baby (at the news that Henry Miller had died), or respond like ice. Patient and abrupt, generous and scrooge-like, serious and playful, he was not boastful, or brash, but wholly consumed by his own vision and program.

In 1991, at the conclusion of the 1st Gulf War (which he opposed), a party was held in Belfast honoring Bern on his 80th birthday. There was a great baptism by the water's edge, with Bern inducting the anointed into the Institute, attired in Cardinal's raiment, an elaborately costumed and loud musical parade throughout the streets of Belfast, and a lavish poets' party of unbelievable speeches (Bern counting from 1 to 80), songs, poems, performances, and good food and lots of laughter, and anyone who attended that unforgettable event must know how dull and ordinary most of life is, without Bern Porter.

—Carlo Pittore

Carlo Pittore has just been diagnosed with stage 4 esophageal cancer metastasized to the liver and given 2 - 12 months. If you would like to send him greetings, send cards to Carlo Pittore, 216 Post Rd., Bowdoinham, ME 04008. Our prayers are with him.

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