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BERN PORTER: an interview

Editor's note: During a brief visit to Los Angeles, Bern Porter 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 book-maker, Bern Porter lives in Belfast, Maine when he isn't going around the world.

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 redigest, 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 hand-sewn, hand drawn, hand-lettered, and it had a slip-case 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 hand-made 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 pro-



duced in those days now sells in the 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 handlettered, 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 repaste 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. I was working as a physicist in Berkeley on the atomic bomb, and he was interested in having California people preserved there. 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 pruners 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.

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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 France 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 use 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, playwrighting. 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 at 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 some things 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 form that has gone into all of these artistic efforts. And the art forms have evolved from physics’ domination and physics have enmeshed themselves into many of 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 about our seeing. I think there are few people who know 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, either in a car, a bus—or we are 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.

ART PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Marino Marini, famous for anguished works of men and horses, died recently in Viareggio, Italy at the age of 79.

Pontus Hulten, director of Centre Pompidou in Paris, has been named the new director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles effective September 1981. **Richard Koshalek**, now director of the Hudson River Museum, will become deputy director and curator effective in December.

I. Michael Danoff has been appointed head of the Akron Art Institute, moving from Milwaukee Art Center.

Mary Jane Jacob, curator at the Detroit Institute for the Arts, has moved to that post at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Linda Shearer, formerly curator at the Guggenheim, now heads the alternative gallery Artists’ Space in New York City. **Helene Winer**, former director of Artists’ Space, is opening a commercial SoHo gallery with Janelle Reiring.

Sue Fishbein, a former New York City denizen, is presenting a mixed-media installation, *Wherein a Subject Might be Located*, at the Goodman Building, 1121 Geary Blvd., San Francisco. 9 September - 27 September 1980.

Her fourth self-published book, *4 Contemporaneous Ultimatums*, will be available shortly. Inquiries invited to Analog Productions, 146 Freelon, no. 4, San Francisco, CA 94107.

Tommy Mew is showing selected diaryworks 1970-1980 at WPA in Washington, DC from 2 September - 4 October. He is also showing his Diarydrawings at Galerie Rysunku in Poznan, Poland from 6 October - 8 November.

Mary Hays, a lawyer and director of operations for the Theater Development Fund Inc., has been appointed executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts. She is the first woman named as the council’s executive director in its 20-year history.

Nicholas Spill, New Zealand artist but now resident in New York, and **Michael Crane**, mail art historian, are both exhibiting works at the Union Gallery in San Jose State University. Spill shows SX-70 Polaroids and artist’s books and Crane is showing a new series of photographs.

Anna Banana completed her second Banana Olympics, the 1980 version, held in Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey’s Rick Boychuk was the top banana, and a good time was had by all contestants in the athletic and costume competitions! **Anna & Dadaland** (Bill Gaglione) will be touring Canada for three months putting on their Futurist performances, beginning in October.