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How Bern Porter Saw the World

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By Alex Irvine

port
Lives don’t come any more interesting than Bern Porter’s. In his 93 years on this Earth, he contributed to the invention of television, worked on the Manhattan Project and the Saturn V rocket, and made the acquaintances of Einstein, Oppenheimer, and Werner von Braun. He published Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen, and Kenneth Ginsberg, and many others you might name. He exerted a profound influence on the phenomenon known as mail art, traveled hundreds of thousands of miles on cruise ships, was married three times (once happily), spent several years in Guam, was an irascible crank, theorized a union of art and science called Sciart, was briefly committed to a mental institution, wrote more than 80 books including important bibliographies of Miller and F. Scott Fitzgerald, had a massive FBI file, lived and worked in Rhode Island, New York, Tennessee, California, Texas, Alabama, and Tasmania. At last he settled in Belfast, Maine, where he ran for governor, served on the Knox County Regional Planning Commission, called his house the Institute of Advanced Thinking, barraged the local paper with letters, and at the end of his life subsisted largely on soup kitchens and food gleaned from the munchie tables at art openings.

You’d think that biography would merit an obituary somewhere other than the Waldo Independent, a twice-weekly newspaper in Waldo County, Maine. Porter’s passing, though, was largely unremarked; a few mentions in online poetry discussions and the single obit of a few hundred words.

Escaping via college, as so many other bright Maine kids have, Porter went to Colby and did graduate work at Brown University and was considered one of the brighter physics students. But the artsy end of the college scene drew more and more of his attention. Then in 1933, he was caught stealing from students in Brown’s Lyman Gym, where he was working to make ends meet, and his academic career ended. But former professors put in a good word for him and by the fall of 1935 Porter was working for the Acheson Colloids Corporation in New York. While working on the cathode ray tube, Porter also took art classes and hit the museums, where he first started to encounter surrealism and the found aesthetic. He had always tinkered with making sculptures out of found objects, including old lab equipment at Colby; now he found himself able to look at works by Duchamp and Alexander Calder every day.

In the fall of 1937 Acheson sent Porter to England and then Paris, where he went to Gertrude Stein’s house “on instinct,” listening to what he later called “the carved, sculptural flow of her language,” which would have a profound impact on his later performance poems. In subsequent years Porter would meet the artists who fled to Europe and ended up dropping by Peggy Guggenheim’s weekly receptions: Chagall, Dali, Mondrian, Pollock, and others. By the late 1930s Porter was enough of a celebrity that the Portland Press Herald remarked on his return to Houlton for Thanksgiving in 1938.

By 1940 some of his graduate school work at Brown had caught the attention of what later became the Manhattan Project, and Porter was covertly drafted and sent to Princeton University, where he worked on the separation of uranium isotopes—and met Albert Einstein, whose simplicity of lifestyle made a deep impression on Porter. J. Robert Oppenheimer, By 1940 some of his graduate school work had caught the attention of what later became the Manhattan Project, and Porter was covertly drafted and sent to Princeton University, where he worked on the separation of uranium isotopes—and met Albert Einstein, whose simplicity of lifestyle made a deep impression on Porter. J. Robert Oppenheimer,
It’s not easy being an icon, and it was never easy to be Bern Porter. A bookish child in 1920s Aroostook County, he was labeled a “cold fish” by his mother, an incident that was still finding poetic expression as late as 1984 in “The Cold Fish Saga,” from Sounds That Arouse Me: Selected Writings:

When Mother said
I was a cold fish
She did not specify
Cod
Halibut
Trout
Sword
Or
Finnan Haddie
All cold.
She only called me A Cold Fish.
To which I reply
Yes, I am cold
In temperature
In mannerisms
In approaches
In techniques
In ways general
But being a fish
That I do not know.

Crucifix of the Virgin, photogram, circa 1946.

who would later head the Manhattan Project, was also there at the time. Porter worked in Oak Ridge and Berkeley, and by 1943, because he hung around with poets, the FBI was compiling a file on him.

During this period, Porter was occasionally exhibiting photographs and sculptures and publishing a poem or two. He also began his career as a publisher, bringing out small editions of Henry Miller’s anti-war essays, which in fact were Miller’s first American publications. In the 1940s, Porter published Bay Area poets Kenneth Patchen, Parker Tyler, and Kenneth Rexroth.

Then came August 6, 1945. And, three days later, August 9. Porter left the Manhattan Project almost immediately, saying later that this action “wasn’t wholly from guilt, nor could it be called strictly a compensating contribution to society. . . . My reaction from destruction was simply that I had to do something constructive with what limited talents and funds I had.”

What he did was immerse himself in the cultural life of the Bay Area. Watching the early flowering of what would later be called the San Francisco Renaissance (a movement with which he is often wrongly identified), Porter met and married Helen Hendren, a University of California student. The age difference and his various obsessions, including sexual difficulties, wrecked the marriage after only a year—a year during which Porter was offered, and declined, the opportunity to publish William Burroughs’s first novel, Junky.
In 1948 Porter established an art gallery in Sausalito, California, alongside a “house of creative thought” he called the Schillerhaus. Here he drafted the early versions of the Sciart Manifesto, which was to be a guiding principle for the rest of his life. Here too, in 1950, came the event that seems to have broken his life in half.

Porter’s parents came out to visit the Schillerhaus and see their son the “cultural entrepreneur,” as James Schevill would later characterize Porter in his biography, Where to Go, What to Do, When You Are Bern Porter. During this visit, Porter’s father was arrested for fondling a 12-year-old girl, and Porter discovered that his father had a long history of molesting children in Maine. Refusing to see his father, Porter ran, not just from his family but from America. He spent the next five years in Guam, first as a commissioned officer of the United States Navy, then as a private in the U.S. Marine Corps. During this time he worked for the Red Cross, dispensing cash to prisoners of war.

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working for the *Guam Daily News* and moonlighting as a waiter at the Club Bamboo, then writing for an ad agency. During this time, Porter traveled widely in the South Pacific and spent several months in Japan, meeting artists and writers and observing the rebirth of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On his return, he wrote *I’ve Left*, a sort of strange apologia for his life so far. Schevill writes that *I’ve Left* is part of “the tradition of distinctive autobiographies that express meaningful rebellion and the discovery of a new identity,” and it seems true that Porter’s *Wanderjahre* in the Pacific changed him. When he returned to the United States, he began designing books and broadsides. His second wife, Margaret Preston, had known him before he left for Guam, and about a year after his return they were married. In contrast to his comfortable marriage, Porter’s working life became very difficult during these years; the paranoid security apparatus of the time and his own prickly personality resulted in his leaving a number of military/technical jobs after only a few months, often followed by unflattering assessments of his mental health.

Trying to get away again, the Porters split for Tasmania, but only stayed four months before coming back to Maine, where Porter tried to teach high school English and French. That didn’t work, and with the label “eccentric” starting to ring in his ears, he found himself back in the embrace of the government, at the Marshall Space Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

There followed, in 1967, an event the full truth of which is surely lost to history. Schevill’s version of it is that Porter was out for a walk, got startled and fell over when a cop pulled up next to him, was run in for drunkenness and then arbitrarily committed for three weeks to the state mental institution, where he was diagnosed as having a paranoid personality and then released. Whatever really happened, the Saturn moon-rocket project couldn’t have security risks like that on its payroll, so after a brief sojourn in Guatemala, the Porters came to Maine again, this time for good.

In 1969, Porter wrote a 700-page report for the Knox County Regional Planning Commission, decriing—surprise—control of the Midcoast region by outside interests, primarily summer residents and real-estate speculators. The commission published a heavily chopped 200-page version, and an infuriated Porter decided to run for governor. He didn’t make it through the primaries, but thus was born the familiar Belfast persona of Bern Porter, town gadfly.

Many more people in Belfast know of Porter the gadfly than of Porter the ex-physicist and avant-garde publisher/poet/sculptor. He has his partisans in the broader world of contemporary American poetry, including Robert Creeley and Jerome Rothenberg, and is revered in mail-art and performance-poetry circles. Those aren’t very big circles, which may be why Porter remained largely unknown.

“There’s a couple reasons why he’s not so celebrated,” said Mark Melnicove, a Falmouth High School English and humanities teacher who traveled and performed with Porter from the early 1980s until Porter’s death. “One is that what he got interested in—found poetry, visual poetry—in the world of literature, it’s the least celebrated form. The kind of poetry he did is just off the beaten track anyway.”

The second reason for Porter’s marginal status is that by all accounts he was difficult to get along with. “To say he was cantankerous would be an understatement,” said Melnicove.
In the end, Porter’s most enduring influence is probably the example of his life. “For me,” said Sylvester Pollet of the University of Maine, “the crucial thing was his example of how to work outside the system, to publish whatever you want to publish, without asking anyone’s permission.”

Melnicove agrees. “If you just think of it in terms of Maine artists, I think he’s one of the major Maine writers of all time. He’s a product of Maine. He did incredible things in both science and art, and as an experimental writer, I think he’s a major figure.”

For years, Porter encouraged visiting “scholars” to come to the Institute of Advanced Thinking. University affiliation automatically disqualified an applicant, and many others were doubtless turned off by his refusal to let them use the house’s kitchen or bathroom; nobody, in fact, cooked in the kitchen, since Porter used both refrigerator and stove to store papers and sculptures. Porter almost three months after his June 7 death, his clothes were still heaped on a chair in one room along with a pile of children’s toys—at least some of which were purloined from the yard of the family across the street, who eventually got so exasperated with Porter's sticky fingers that they fenced in their yard. The refrigerator was covered with big plastic magnetic letters; in one corner of an outbuilding Porter called the “hotel,” a pile of moldering mattresses was all that remained of the accommodations of the Institute for Advanced Thinking. The orgone platform was rotting away somewhere back in the woods, and the yard had grown up to obscure many of the found sculptures. Next to the driveway, a child's toy horse reared up out of the weeds.

Colby owns the house now and plans to sell it, with the proceeds to support the Bern Porter Collection at the College, per Porter’s wishes. One wonders if the new owners will know about their predecessor. A museum is unlikely, but to one standing in the overgrown yard the idea has a strange rightness to it—not because of Porter’s contributions to art or literature, or even his scientific work, but because lives like Bern Porter’s aren’t lived any more. “We’re so homogeneous now, so generic,” Pinette said, looking wistfully at the house.

“Things of mine are meant to be touched,” Porter wrote in 1982, “sensed but not read or understood mindwise, though pronouncing out loud is useful.” Twenty-two Salmond Street in Belfast was his final found piece, put together over painstaking years.
Acceptance
Is the word
Take it
Or leave it
This here is the world
Without breast milk
Breast softness
So pliant
Warm
Warm
And the womb gone
Gone
Mother gone
Wife gone
Near mothers gone
Near wives gone
Left

never cooked, preferring instead to loot sugar packets from restaurants or order a cup of hot water into which he would stir ketchup. He was also pretty free with other people’s food, once walking into the house of an acquaintance and lifting her breakfast literally from under her nose.

Somewhere along the line he got interested in Wilhelm Reich’s theory of orgone energy and built a platform for the accumulation of that energy behind his house. In addition, this man who played minor roles in the creation of television, the atom bomb, and the Saturn V refused for years to install a telephone.

Institute attendees were, however, welcome to put up found sculptures in the large yard, and a great number of those sculptures came and went over the years. Many of them are still there. A visit to Porter’s house in 2004 brought home how very isolated he had become in his later years. Nearly

This story first appeared in the Portland Phoenix. It is reprinted with permission. The Bern Porter Collection can be touched in Colby’s Special Collections, in Miller Library.