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Thinking About Bern Porter

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I’m thinking about Bern Porter, and it’s about ten years now since the collagist Ray Johnson sent me a brochure about Bern that described him as a scientist, an artist, and virtually all kinds of things that end in “-ician” (except “magician” which might have filled the bill) and said I should write this man and place myself in contact with him. In spite of a now very extensive correspondence with Bern, whom I have only once in my life met face to face, I keep having the sensation of being on an iceberg, with very little surface exposed, but all buoyed up by the unseen mass.

Checking through my notebooks, I find I once described Bern to the German poet Hansjörg Mayer as having only one parallel — the composer Charles Ives. Like Bern, Ives came from New England, the very heart of American cussedness and independence. Like Bern, Ives worked with values that led him to extraordinary techniques which confused his contemporaries. Like Bern, Ives saw beyond the clichés of these contemporaries, that there was no real opposition between art and science, art and life, that these were residual hang-ups and bags which might once have served as useful containers but which in our times were no longer serviceable in terms of the exterior world but merely habits and carry-overs. But unlike Ives Bern continues to carry the good fight.

It’s a good many years since Bern began to find readymades in the world of scrawled, printed or otherwise “presented” writing, which thus, by his noticing them, became “found poems,” a genre since developed by personalities as diverse as Willi Bo-gaard, in Germany, Thorsten Ekbom in Sweden, and John Giorno and Ronald Gross in the USA. Neither of his major works in this genre have been published, This, Then, is thy Future or Found Poems. The production problems involved in either are formidable, since the format questions are colossal. It would simply not be the thing to put them onto even a large page — this would violate their spirit. They should be printed as exact facsimiles. And they will be, because already the legend is growing.

But this is only to name a technique as if it were the whole.
Bern’s extraordinary gift is not his drawings, his designs (often brilliant). It is his way of just sort of mysteriously noticing things and calling our attention, quietly, to them that is the common denominator. It is this which explains the peculiar effectiveness of his designs, his constructions and his found poems. He presents us with something and tells us it is a poem. Unlike a wit who simply tries to stretch our semantics and to demonstrate how “far out” he is, when Bern shows us something and says it is a poem, he shows us how huge our minds are, how sensitive he has been in choosing this or that. It is impossible, really, to disagree with his identifications. If he says something is a poem, we really experience a feeling that he is right, and how extraordinary it is that we hadn’t noticed it before. Noticing: that is Bern’s art. I know he has done a considerable amount of serious photography. I would suspect that even the simplest snapshots are interesting because these always depend upon noticing and being sensitive to the moment.

At the risk of being accused of historicism, I would like to make a few notes on historical perspective too. Bern Porter belongs to a generation, like John Cage, which was too young to assume any radical leadership in the thirties and which most suffered the impact of World War II. During the war years, when these men were in their prime, the USA cultural scene was dominated by the most academic sort of surrealism, and this made easy functioning difficult, to say the least. Then came McCarthy + Eisenhower, and even if an artist happened to be rather conservative in his actual political views it was difficult for any mass media to open to them or to assume anything else than skepticism towards any real avant-garde concepts. They didn’t seem to fit into the Good Life somehow. It was not an easy time. And many of the artists and poets of this period whose work didn’t fit into the conventional molds have suffered accordingly, to an extent that those who were old enough to go to Paris in 1920 or to San Francisco or New York in the late 1950s never were compelled to experience. We are only now uncovering these men’s works. Kenneth L. Beaudoin is another huge figure for the horizon of the next generation. And there are others.

But the best of these men are not to be considered such isolated figures as Ives. Though neither Olson, Porter nor Beau-
doin, to name only the poets of this generation, is institutionalized or New Yorkified, they seem somehow more in tune with the country they have, by birth, experienced than those who have been digested, in the sense of overwhelming naturalness in relation to one’s environment, sometimes regretting it (as the environment regrets itself sometimes) but without the air of wild rejection and negativeness that sometimes seems to characterize the so-called “Beat” generation that came after them. My own generation is too young to be beat, too old to be hippy, and much too cantankerous to accept any such labels anyway. We (myself, actually, named it) developed the idea of intermedia, from a reality (which it already was) into a described reality. Previously there was the concept of mixed media — separable media of communication existing simultaneously in works. We were attracted to the works that seemed to spring into being, at their very cores, from the ground between music and poetry, theater and music, poetry and type design, visual art and time, intention and the unintended. We had no fight with history — it was a good way of knowing what had been done, how certain problems had been solved, and what it was no longer necessary to duplicate. And lo and behold, we found suddenly that we were reaching a gigantic public, simply by sympathetic resonance, and that whole bodies of material existed in the works of artists (or whatever we wish to call them) of the generation of Porter, Cage, Beaudoin whom the circumstances of their times (with the exception of Cage, whose amazing vitality and initiative never allowed him to hide — for very long) had never allowed us to know. All that is changing now. The Porter generation was never torn between the conflicts of identity, of being sometimes a composer and sometimes a philosopher, sometimes a designer and sometimes an essayist. The common denominator was always this business of noticing things, and why allow one’s sense of identity to forbid a valuable work to exist? And Bern Porter is a very great noticer of things. It must always be Springtime in him, somewhere, to keep in such sympathy with the real world that he can maintain the innocence of his eye and not stereotype himself.