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Bern Porter
Sheila Holtz
Natasha Bernstein

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Artful Codger

Manhattan Project physicist, author of eighty-five books, and founder of the Institute for Advanced Thinking, Bern Porter is also Belfast’s foremost eccentric. By Sarah Goodyear.

The whole city of Belfast was the setting for Porter’s eightieth-birthday celebration, which included a parade through downtown and ritual “baptisms” on the waterfront (above). At home in his sculpture garden at the Institute of Advanced Thinking (right), the octogenarian original wears his poet’s robes, just one of the many costumes he dons to articulate his myriad identities and moods.

The house is conventional, a slightly shabby brown Victorian on a back street in Belfast. The yard is tidy, although sculptures made from found materials — scraps of metal and plastic and mirrors — are placed in strategic spots. The atmosphere is quiet. There is no car in the garage.

Inside is Bern Porter, and he calls this building at 22 Salmond Street the Institute of Advanced Thinking. He says it is “the oldest think tank in the world … Belfast has no other institutions which claim to be crackpot. He shows up everywhere, especially if food is being served: at art openings in Belfast’s lively gallery scene, at city-council meetings, at public forums, at parties.

Who is Bern Porter? He is a physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project and the development of the Saturn rocket. He is a writer and artist who has produced eighty-five books in his eighty-two years on this earth — most recently a volume of poems, essays, and random typographical marks titled Sounds That Arouse Me (Tilbury House, Gardiner, Maine: 164 pp.; softcover, $9.95). He is a publisher who has given exposure to many innovative writers, including Henry Miller. And he is like no one else in Belfast — or anywhere.

The inside of Porter’s house is cool and dark, the furnishings spare. Artworks by Porter and others are the most prominent objects. Porter wears pink ballet slippers and sweatpants around the house, where he spends his time writing and creating. One afternoon he was putting shredded gum wrappers into empty plastic soda bottles, then carefully inserting pictures of women’s bodies cut from cheap lingerie magazines into the bottles so they looked like labels. Porter has always worked with found materials and found words. He creates with the debris of the twentieth century, although in some ways he himself is a creation of the nineteenth.

Bern Porter is an old man, and despite his constant round of activity he is clearly tiring. He sits slumped in an aging recliner, one hand on his forehead, his eyes closed, as he remembers.

"Maine is divided into plantations, settlements, towns, and counties,” he be-
"Maine has everything. Always has. All one has to do is relax to the vibration, the radiation of what I call the Maine condition."

There was no shortage of followers behind Bern Porter's standard on his eightieth birthday (above), but he is more often spotted roaming the streets of Belfast alone, frequently stopping to cast a critical eye on the passing show of small-town life (lower right). Those who visit Bern at home (upper right) find a house crowded with art created by his many admirers, as well as some he has conjured up himself.

Houlton and formed Porter Settlement. And I was Porter number twenty-four. I had twenty-three uncles, cousins, nephews.

"Well, when I was three weeks old and I encountered these twenty-three competitors I asked my mother to go back in her womb. When I was six months old, I figured out that if I was going to compete against twenty-three Porters I would have to do things that they did not then do nor would ever do. By the time I was a year and three months old I figured out that I would have to devote my life to thinking (none of them would ever think), on things that had never been thought of before. With the result that I am the author of this — to me — incredible system of fusing physics with the humanities."

That system, which Porter calls "sciart" (pronounced "sky art"), a combination of science and art, is his life's work. And yet the recognition he has received for it — and for all his books and art — has been sporadic. Around Belfast, he is better known for his after­noon trips to a local bar to watch wrestling on the television there, for his occasional practice of taking abandoned meals from recently vacated restaurant tables, and for his irate letters to the editors of the two local papers.

"It's rare that a week goes by that I don't hear from him. Sometimes it's every day," says Toni Mailloux, editor of the Waldo Independent, whose offices are in downtown Belfast. Porter complains about taxes, corruption, civic eye­sores, and ugliness, among other things.

One of Porter's most pressing concerns has been the restoration of bus service to Belfast. Until 1989, Greyhound had a stop downtown; the company aban­doned the service as not profitable enough, and Porter, who has no car and loathes cars (although he'll happily accept or demand a ride from a friend), was hit hard by the loss.

"Well, I was highly dependent on it, and so were the scholars who came to town," he says. Porter claims a world­wide membership of thirty-four scholars for the Institute of Advanced Thinking, many of whom use the bus to reach Belfast. Earlier this year, almost as if Porter's edicts had been obeyed, two bus lines suddenly restored service to the city.

But even with public transportation available once again, Porter insists Belfast is a place apart. "We are in total isolation, 6,200 people in total isolation," he says. "And in this morass of isolation, we are obliged to entertain one another. Which may explain why we have two newspa­pers, four art galleries, four drama groups, and incredible cultural activity." Porter enhances his own isolation by refusing to install a telephone in his home. "That's another reason for the productivity, the creativity, we have here."

BELFAST wasn't always such a cul­tural hotbed. Truxton Hulbert, an assistant librarian at the Belfast Free Library, remembers the impact of meet­ing Porter in the early 1970s, when he first came to town. "It's fair to say he changed my life," says Hulbert. "I first met Porter through his wife, Margaret, when I used to hang out around the li­brary. I was a typical young hippie of the times, except that I listened to classical
music. Porter took an interest in me. He came to my house with a load of books, and said ‘You start a book business!’ He gave me a very good pep talk. I love pep talks.” As a result of Porter’s advice, Hulbert started a New Age book business, and it was on the strength of that effort that he got the job with the library, a job he has held for twenty years.

But Hulbert’s relationship with Porter has had its ups and downs, friction which Hulbert attributes to Porter’s “dual nature.” This duality is evident, says Hulbert, throughout Porter’s life. At once scientist and artist, he is a man who has worn tuxedos to dinner on the Queen Elizabeth II, and who sports thrift-shop attire for his journeys to eat at the soup kitchen.

The details of Porter’s passage through the century have recently been recounted in Where To Go, What To Do, When You Are Born Porter (Tilbury House, Gardiner, Maine; $39.95; softcover, $16.95) by an old friend of Porter’s, James Schevill. The book follows Porter from his childhood, through his education at Colby College and Brown University, to his checkered career as a physicist and his attempts to support himself and promote his ideas through publishing. Porter has also lived through three marriages, the first and the third of which ended in divorce.

His second wife, Margaret, was a stabilizing influence in his life. “She kept him kosher,” says Hulbert. Margaret died in 1975. Later, Porter donated several thousand dollars to the Belfast Free Library to establish a room in her memory. The Margaret Porter Room, intended as meeting and exhibition space, goes largely unused now, a fact that disappoints Porter.

One of Porter’s more legendary attributes is his involvement with the development of the atomic bomb, an involvement of which he says he is “certainly not very proud.” He also says that he was unaware of what exactly he was doing during his days at the Oak Ridge plant in Tennessee, where he supervised the separation of uranium. The workers, he says, were “what we would call hillbillies — people who lived in log cabins, wore no shoes, had no underwear. We told them, ‘This is a refrigerator factory.’ It’s one of the horrors of my life.”

The day after the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, says Porter, “I read in the New York Times what I’d been doing.” He left the project, and went on to develop his literary and artistic ties. His

return to government-sponsored physics, on the Saturn rocket project in the 1960s, also causes him concern. “Here we are blasting into space, and we still haven’t figured out what we have here.”

These days, Porter is focused intently on “what we have here.” He has analyzed Belfast’s provincial social structure with a scientist’s precision. “I want to point out that Belfast, 600 people, is officially divided into twenty-six groups. The incredible part of it is that thirteen of these twenty-six are religious and thirteen are non-religious. And these groups refuse to recognize one another’s existence. They’d rather argue and confront than live peacefully and naturally together, and this is typical worldwide. In Belfast it is pronounced.”

But while Porter stands outside the city’s society and examines it, he also tries to effect change through its established institutions, like the city council, where he is a regular and vocal presence. Belfast’s ebullient mayor, Page Worth, laughs long and hard when asked about Porter’s role in the city, but she concedes that “he comes in with sometimes rather good things he wants to see straightened out. BERN fought like a tiger to get the buses back, and by golly, we’ve got not one but two buses going through here. No.” She chuckles again. “He’d better be riding them, too, otherwise we’ll shoot him.”

Porter values his connection with the world community as well. “You may say, how can you survive in Belfast,” says Porter. “The answer is that I can survive because I am in touch throughout the English-speaking world through mail art.” Mail art, the exchange of images through the world’s postal systems, is another of his favorite topics. “I invented it when I was a year and a half old,” he says seriously. “In those days it was a pen club in which people all over the world communicated with each other by writing, by pen. And instead of writing I added art. And this is by now a worldwide system in which a theme is set at a given point and some 800 to 1,000 artists respond through the mail. So as I sit here now there are samples of my art in Marseilles, Bucharest, and Lisbon.”

N March of 1991, an eightieth birthday celebration for Porter was held in the streets of Belfast. Dozens of people turned out for the parade and party, honoring the person who has become so deeply and emotionally involved with the city.

Porter says he derives the essence of his creative strength from his physical surroundings, which is perhaps one of the reasons he chose to come back to Maine in his old age, a time when many people go south. “Only in Maine is it possible to concoct and conceive all the things that we do,” he says. “It’s because of the Maine qualities, the four seasons, the air, the isolation, the need to survive. Maine creativity comes about with the mere act of surviving.” And although he has traveled the world and moved in sophisticated circles, Porter is not a snob about the small city where he lives.

“Maine creativity comes about with the mere act of surviving.”

“Twenty years ago, there was an infusion here of people escaping the so-called rat race. They brought with them incredible talent.” Porter sees the dark side of Belfast as well. “We have all the conditions here that you find throughout the world. Unemployment, violence, drugs, child abuse, sexual immorality. there's anything there, we have it here.”

There is a mystical side to Porter too, and that may be why he is able to maintain his independence and eccentricity in the prim Victorian streets of Belfast, a typical small New England town where “talk” can ruin a person’s life. Porter has been talked about, often negatively, but he doesn’t seem to care.

“I'm a physicist. We don't use the term God. We use the term originating force. I'm very much in touch with the originating force,” says Porter. “One thing you want to bear in mind about Maine: The Europeans came here around the year 1000, and when they arrived, they found that people had been here for 12,000 to 15,000 years. There is an energy of habitation. energy left by people who lived here. One reason Belfast is highly exciting is due to this energy of habitation.”

Porter doesn’t lack a thing in his native state. “Maine has everything. Just everything. Always has. All one has to do is relax to the vibration, the radiation of what I call the Maine condition.”
When Natasha returns to Belfast, she feels that she is already living in the twenty-first century.

“\textit{In the 21st century all large scale projects will lead to the establishment of general misery. In the 21st century no fast communication system will be able to transport real information. In the 21st century only small scale projects and slow speed activities will bring human fulfillment, edible food, safe energy, practical peace and integrated art.}”

Jose Vandenbroucke

When Natasha returns to Belfast the future is now; the past and present merge and blend. Belfast is the Timeless Void, a discontinuity, a black hole where the spatial-temporal continuum is bent and twisted by the power of many avid minds -- the physicist, the gardener, the clown, the mime, the witch, the lobsterpicker, painter, poet, muse. The drunk, the saint, the construction contractor, the librarian and her dog, the shopkeeper, and all the children and matriarchs.

Belfast is the event horizon into which all things disappear; they may emerge somewhere in a parallel universe, or they may simply sizzle and snap and dissipate back into Nothingness.

Who can say?

It is the consequence of random acts.

III.

When Natasha returns to Belfast she labors in solitude and obscurity. She loves her work. Yet, she loves companionship, and when Natasha returns to Belfast, here she finds her kindred.

When Natasha returns to Belfast it comes in bits and spurts, but it comes. Praise Jah! It comes.

When Natasha returns to Belfast she receives a sacrament. She receives life in her body. When Natasha returns to Belfast she receives the sacrament of ecstaticy. She drinks the blood of ecstaticy. She eats the flesh of ecstaticy. She bows low before these.
When Natasha returns to Belfast she feels herself to be as old as the Universe, as old as the Big Bang. She feels herself to be as great a mystery as a quantum singularity. She feels the whole of organic life evolving within her. She feels.

"I am vast. I contain multitudes." (Walt Whitman)

She feels all of creation unfolding within her.

"Chiti of her own free will brings forth the manifest world." (Pratyabhijnahrddayam, Sutra I)

She is food and she is the digestive fire.

"Brahman is the offering and Brahman is the sacrificial fire. Brahman is poured into Brahman." (Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 6)

She feels the beat and rhythm of language which the sages call Matrika Shakti. She appropriates all language and all that is known, for her own sport. And she sports with the consciousness of the word itself!

When Natasha returns to Belfast, she feels herself to be an artist and a craftsman of the word. She sculpts in living medium -- mind, body, heart, vision. All the shapes and forms hidden within, lurking unarticulated, are brought into the light and given name, and attribute -- from formlessness to form and back again. This is her mothering. She is Kalachakra, the Great Wheel of Time, which nurtures and consumes. She is Kali-Durge, Mother-Destroyer.

"The bloody maw of Mother Nature" (Paglia) is the SAME as art, no antithesis. It is She who gives birth to all creativity, and She who reabsorbs it all at the end of the cycles of time, when all that was formed dissolves into pure consciousness from whence it sprang.

This awareness is Natasha's work in Belfast. For this work she comes each year to live with the octagenerian physicist. He makes the space for it to happen and she is entirely and eternally grateful. He gives her energy and inspiration for it is his destiny. She gives him love and love and love, she absolves and assuages him, placates and forgives him, blesses him and curses him, and laughs with him, and pities him, and touches him, for this is her destiny.

Natasha Bernstein

(to be continued, next issue)
Then there's the painter / poet / memoirist Nguyen Ducmanh, who seems to have a permanent revolving solo show in the small but elegant bathroom of the prestigious Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street. The last time we looked, on the wall opposite the commode, "Duc" was showing a collage painting featuring a Valentine heart filled with fluffy human hair, entitled "No Fat, No Taste.

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**138 Odyssey**

*The sea is immense*

*The sky infinite*

*I give my soul*

*to the 4 winds*

*I My body to clone*

... Am I Immortal Nay

*Just a lotta breadth*

*Miracle of earth water*

*Fire air!*

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Floyd Cantwell's Used Cars on Farm Road 2243 out of Leander cool spring March-wet Texas half-mile east on a winding two-lane blacktop roadside art of bluebonnet wildflowers church-row marching files of stacked auto hulks on the left side nothing runs but the wind & a three-colored plastic sign some day I'll go back there with camera.

original unpublished idea complex written by D.A.R. who passed by in a '91 Dodge 3/4-ton pickup Cummins diesel engine hauling a 24-foot gooseneck trailer down the road a ways was a ten-thousand pound rock hammer I had to take back to the shop.

slowly then the second time past Floyd Cantwell's Used Cars

ah wonderful fun this life full of beauty and wreckage.
Belfast — "You're going to see the Cheshire Cat!" exclaims director Mary Weaver of The Playhouse's Alice in Wonderland, running through May 28. "You're going to see the Mad Hatter and the March Hare! You're going to see a gaggle of playing cards!" Presumably not a full deck. "And you're going to see what is believed to be the only Gryphon—(half eagle, half lion)—living in the United States at this time," she continues excitedly.

Three cast members worked on the script with help and direction from Weaver, Amber and Ramonna Rogals and Brittany Riley. Their inspiration was the Disney cartoon version of Alice in Wonderland. Weaver took them back to the original source, as well as annotated versions and the John Tenniel pen and ink illustrations. The result is a remodeling of their favorite scenes.

Some cast members play one role, while others play multiple roles. Eliza Duggan (8) is Alice, Miriam Baldwin (9) is the White Rabbit, Jeremy Niles (7) grins the Cheshire Cat, and Max Milan Alex (10) and Brittany Reyes (11) are the Mad Hatter and March Hare.

Assuming multiple personalities, Mara Gallagher (13) plays Alice's sister as well as the Queen of Hearts (obviously the key to Alice's dark side). Co-playwright, Ramonna Rogals (11), plays Tweedle Dee, the Gryphon and the Carpenter, while sister, Amber (12), mocks the Mock Turtle, the Walrus, the Judge and Tweedle Dum. Gabi Van Horn (9) portrays the Dormouse, the Knave and the Caterpillar. Julia McCarrier (10) may be the Duchess at one moment, but an Oyster or a Violet the next. Another Oyster is Ingrina Jones (10), who also plays an Iris and a Card. Also an Oyster as well as a Card is Kara Ray (10), but she's also a Tiger Lily, too.

Co-author, Brittany Riley (11), and Sophie Scott (11) share the parts of Mother Oyster, in addition to a Card and a Rose. And the youngest member of the cast, Aleka Greeley (6), has more roles than anyone: The Ace of Hearts, the Cook, an Oyster and a Pansy. Elaine Wooley also helped with the characters and staging.

In addition to the many contributions from various friends and supporters, Meredith Alex created many of the costumes, including the cards and flowers and the Mad Hatter's natty attire; Jean Hardy and Sally Faulkner worked to fashion the Mad Hatter's goofy tea set; Emily Rogals helped on props and sets; Patti Toy crafted and painted props; and Phil Prince contributed work on the sets, as well as the beautiful paper roses.

The Playhouse is located on Church Street. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday May 21 and 22, and at 3 p.m. on Sunday, May 23. Curtain on Thursday, May 27, is 7:30 p.m.; and the Friday, May 28, performance takes place at 6:30 p.m. Tickets are $4 at the door. Seating is limited. For advance reservations, call 338-5777.
Bern Porter’s Book of Light
A Mail Art Documentation

along with

The Mail Art of Ernst Richter
An Exhibition

In 1980 Bern Porter placed a notice in a Mail Art publication requesting that people send to him items related to the theme of “Light.” This Mail Art Call, as it is known, resulted in more than one-hundred individuals from fourteen different countries sending in a variety of artwork, including sketches, collages, inserts, and decorative envelopes. Following Mail Art protocol, all submitted work received by the stated deadline was accepted and displayed. In return, each person would have received some form of documentation, from a complete catalogue of works received, to the simple listing of the name and address of all those who submitted items for the project. With this documentation individuals would be in a position to make their own Mail Art calls, initiating a new wave of art pieces being created and mailed, with revised documentation lists being sent out, all this resulting in an ever-growing network of individuals exchanging their handiwork. This publication includes a selection of the submitted Mail Art pieces from Bern Porter’s Light project.

A three-page intermission titled The Mail Art of Ernst Richter is found at the center fold of this booklet. Though not a correspondent with Porter’s original Light project, Berlin resident Ernst Richter has in the spirit of mail artist everywhere, applied the trade to scores of envelopes sent to the publisher over the last decade. A representative sampling of Mr. Richter’s work which is reproduced in this booklet has been put into focus by Bern Porter’s introductory statements, statements that convey the same sense of excitement that anyone would experience who is the lucky recipient of these artful envelopes.

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Love by mail, sex by mail, comfort by mail. Life ain’t easy, but the day brings new letters and new friends. Kind of sweetens the tea.

—Dick Higgins

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NOTE NEW ADDRESS:
Natasha Bernstein & Sheila Holtz, Editors
50 Salmond Street, Belfast, Maine 04915 USA
(Email: bpinternational@hotmail.com)