the something else
NEWSLETTER

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About Bern Porter and his I've Left

by Dick Higgins

Down Maine they don't talk much, according to the old saw with no more and no less teeth in it than most other simplifications. Maine is a middling sized state with middle sized mountains and ridges that turn up every time you round a corner, and with narrow roads that make for isolated communities and slow communications even in the summer. Colorado, for instance, is many times the size of Maine, but you can drive all the way across it faster than you can get from Presque Isle to Kennebunkport. Even historically, in spite of their relative proximity to the Atlantic communications system, the whites colonized Colorado long before inland Maine was settled. In fact some counties still have the same population density as parts of the Sahara Desert. Frontiers

Without being regional in the slightest, Bern Porter is Maine. Hard to get into—logistically very very difficult. Typically the subject matter in his work is minimal, but the formal experiments and structures are the contribution. It's as if he didn't offer to give a visitor a slice of bread, but simply handed one out and assumed the visitor wanted it. Except, of course, that it isn't bread that's being offered, but something far less standard—works that have unique functions and forms, that resemble nothing in our experience except occasionally a few things by Diter Rot—the only influence of any kind on Porter that I've been able to detect, of which more later. One feels like a Chaucerian scholar whose relationship to automobiles is to be driven in them from time to time but who is suddenly handed a carburetor.

Porter hails from Porter Settlement, a potato and lumber town in the North of Maine, poor and isolated even today, almost archetypally a mill town in its pollution. Even then the beautiful St. John River which divides the USA from Canada, Maine from New Brunswick, showed the seamy side of technology. Naturally Porter became a scientist. In high school they called him "Bug" and the school annual has a picture of him in the band, holding his clarinet. He went on to Colby College, graduating in 1932. Lived, among other places, in New Jersey and the San Francisco Bay Area. Biographical information is scarce and only obliquely relevant for this period. During the 1930's he became radicalized, like so many of his generation, and also involved with the surrealists (towards the end of the decade). Work of the early 40's appeared in *View* magazine, the most important of the surrealist publications of the time. At the same time his science activities were intensifying. And he began to publish the work of others with whom he was associated, most conspicuously Henry Miller.

In those days Miller was known for his supposed pornography, and was not taken very seriously if taken at all. Porter was at that time working on the atomic bomb. In 1944, he published Miller's anti-war tract, *Murder the Murderer,* which did not endear him to the United States government. Shortly after that,—in spite of the general popularity of the war effort (difficult for us, in the aftermath of Korea, Lebanon, Vietnam and Cambodia to imagine),—Porter quit, an act of incredible courage. He was not about to contribute to the extermination of the civilians of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This was done in typical Porter style—no fanfare, no news releases: just the action, to speak for itself. Like his works.

At that time Porter's other struggles began. He ran an art gallery for a time in Sausalito, California, where he had many fine photographic and graphic shows. Did lecturing on the arts and on physics too. He was a one-man art and technology movement, long before "Tech Art" was the cliché it is today. In the early fifties

there was a brief hiatus in his work, while he lived in the Marianas and worked only on the local military magazine. But by the mid-1950's he was hard at it again, travelling and living here and there, from Nevada to Australia to his native Maine. Intermittently he worked for the United States government on this or that aspect of the space program. They didn't trust him but they couldn't do without him—his struggles to get security clearance and some measure of financial stability were matched only by the official Science Czars' attempts to figure out what to do with such a brilliantly inventive but uncrackable Maine hickory nut (from their point of view). And all the while, Porter kept doing, doing. The years in Waldwick, New Jersey and Huntsville, Alabama in the 1960's were particularly productive. As he always has, though, Porter (Anteas-like) returned in the late 1960's to his home state to touch his feet on his home soil, where questions are answers and one answers inquiries with questions in order not to insult the asker by implying that he doesn't really know the answer all along, deep inside. At the moment, there he lives, in Rockland, Maine, under trying conditions and in a tiny upstairs apartment. As usual the powers that be needed him. They gave him a project to do, and he did it unbelievably brilliantly: a planning and design project. They needed something to be referred to, as an inventory of what was located in Knox County, and as a means of getting money from their state legislature to pass among this and that person or "committee." Instead, Porter produced a brilliant social design that inventoried what was there (but not how to get more tax money from it), then predicated both what would happen if nothing was done (diaster) and some of the things that might be done. He meant his report to be acted upon. Naturally the Knox County syndicates were embarrassed and refused to release the report except among themselves. Though many copies were printed, few were circulated, and the report is among the scarcest of Porter's always scarce items.

Now Porter is home, for a bit, in Maine. But Rockland is on the sea, and one sits with him on a pier and eats a lobster oneself—he won't ("conspicuous consumption," waste) though Rockland is the Lobster Capitol of America—and he keeps saying, he wonders what it's like in Portugal, over there, he has an idea about music (will he suddenly turn composer too?), if his health and that of his wife Margaret will permit, he'd like to go to the Azores. And he talks about all the books he's published—when he has money, that's what he does,—by others even more than himself. And what to do with them. And what to do with anything anyway. And one remembers Margaret Porter's remark, when she borrowed a child's copy of W. H. "Green Mansions" Hudson's *A Little Boy Lost*—about a little boy who couldn't help travelling, who almost died getting to distant mountains where he found a sort of Eden, who left that too to get to a still more distant ocean, (and meaning his work, not just his life)—"It's about Bern."

So much for biography. A few little things, then on to the work itself. First, virtually nothing is in print, since most of it has been privately published. The same was true of Charles Ives for many years—with whom, apart from Yankee origin, Porter has many parallels (they are both research artists for one thing). Secondly, *about* Bern Porter there are only two significant sources. One is James Schevill's book, *The Roaring Market and the Silent Tomb* (1957), a rhapsodic and rather cryptic adulation of Porter. You'd have to know him personally to know what it was about. The other is the very useful if small *Colby Library Journal* for June, 1970, "A Salute to Bernard Harden Porter." It has a vast wealth and bibliography of Porter information and opinion. This can be ordered from COLBY COLLEGE PRESS, Waterville, Maine 04901. Third, the master collection of originals and unpublished items is at the Special Collections Department (Brooke Whiting is the curator), at the UCLA Library in Los Angeles. At the time of this writing, most of Porter's work is there, and unless economic subsidies become more available than at present, the library will have to assume that these works will remain there unpublished, and to assume a curatorial, museum role. Below, in mentioning Porter's works, I have placed an asterick (*) beside the first mention of each work where it has never been published. Fourth, I am not going to take up here the works of others that Bern Porter has published, which define over the years his role and attitude, as well as being ont of the major statements of what can be done, simply by their existence. That would require another kind of documentation. I want to deal here only with the description of the work of which *I've Left* is the spin-off.

The earliest work which Porter has seen fit to preserve dates from the mid-1930's. However, with Porter the live part of the work, any work, comes from the conception, not the execution. Asked about that once, he just laughed and laughed and laughed, which is something he seldom does. Did it appeal to his revolutionary instincts (to which he seldom gives vent)? We'll never know. And that guy ain't telling, even though he was born on Valentine's Day (1911).

Two of his pieces, *Found Poems* and *Waste Maker*

(1926-61)* he dates from very early. Both are accumulations of visual or literary "objects trouvés" and the early ones are very literal. So although he didn't actually "find" the poems till later, the initial dates of his sources are a way of acknowledging the originators of them.

In neither series is there any particular 1930's bias. No explicit political orientation. No surrealistic attraction towards the lurid. In this respect—and generally, aesthetically, Porter seems very close to his almost-exact contemporary, John Cage (their mutual objectivism structurally, while including whatever their subjective eye happens [objectively] to fall upon is another similarity). Porter's work, like Cage's, seems to be both a product of but also somehow outside and transcendent to its time.

Very little of the late 1930's work even survives. One would like to know more about it. The *Colby Library Quarterly* bio refers to Porter's late 30's period as being when he met Dali, Ernst, etc., got involved with surrealism and began to do photography. As such, there's virtually none of this at the UCLA. Only references to the *Metamorphic Rhizome* (before 1937?), a "natural sculpture," presumably something in the found work vein. Again, in the early 1940's, Porter's main field seems to have ben photography. Apart from his publishing and various surrealist work, of course. Very little has survived. Only reproductions in *View* and in *Circle,* a magazine Porter edited with George Leite in the 1944-46 period, and which was important not only for its reference to Porter, but for its inclusion of such major figures as Henry Miller, Philip Lamantia, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, Anais Nin, Dane Rudhyar, Max Jacob, Paul Radin, James Laughlin and Wallace Fowlie. *Circle* never printed any of Porter's best work though.

The 40's seems to have been Porter's watershed spiritually, and the time of greatest activity, but less haunting than the periods immediately before or after. Of the photos that have survived, the *Schillerhaus Photos* (1947-50) are the most exciting, but they don't recapitulate themselves in one's mind the way Porter's best found poems do.

From this 1940's period there also date various planning, design and architectural projects, such as the 1947-50 *Design for a Church of Light.* This is the aspect of Porter focus that on the one hand culminates in the Knox County Planning Commission projects of 1969, and on the other hand in his extremely early sponsorship of Paolo Soleri, at the moment in vogue for his "arcology" projects, but actually very seriously involved in the predicament of humanizing architecture and planning on the people level, however visionary any given project might look in plan or in "model."

The 50's saw Porter, after his short silence at the beginning, become a "wordless" writer, for which the Maine background had well suited him. To speak subjectively for a moment, this was the time in which I first became aware of him and was fascinated by the science attitude in his work and statements which predated the whole "EAT" ("Experiments in Art and Technology") establishment of the late 1960's. If Porter's work had been known at the time, the complications that later fouled up EAT's own program and undercut it would have been inconceivable. Anyway, Porter was living in Washington County, I sent him a manuscript *(Legends and Fishnets)* which he elected to publish. To start with the intro, titled "What Are Legends?" I was in printing school at the time, and had no more money than he. So we decided he would write out the type by hand, and do the intro first as a separate book. I asked him for a photo of himself as a frontis. He never sent it, so I drew a picture (and I can't draw) of George Washington to stand for him. I printed the book with his calligraphy and his "found art" illustrations—mostly from biology textbooks — and calligraphy. The visual juxtapositions he made here are particularly striking. For instance, I mentioned the collagist Ray Johnson in my text, and Porter made a metaphor of a schematic line drawing of a flea labled "Ray." Except for a very brief, passing encounter in 1961 I never met Porter or his wife until 1970—the collaboration was entirely by mail. In spite of which we had another collaboration in 1967: *Die Fabelhafte Geträume von Taifun-Willi (The Fabulous Daydreams of Typhoon Willy),* a radio play I wrote in German—to test my theories about that language,—a sort of Walter Mitty piece describing a Happening so elaborate that it could never be performed live, each episode of which was a Marxist and metaphorical exemplum intended to show the continuity between the American and European radicalisms rather than the discontinuity, which was usually emphasized in the late 60's. Porter designed the production (finally published by *Abyss Publications,* P. O. Box C, Somerville, Mass. 02143) and provided a number of illustrations with situations and environments and a very-blank-indeed Willy. Quite apart from their humor —their most striking characteristic and one of Porter's as well,—the imagery here (and in most of his work is what I've elsewhere called "blank imagery." If I say "Come rosa in su la spina presto vein e presto va . . ." I am using the rose as a very specific object, whose meaning is tied down by its function. If I say "A rose is a rose is a rose," I have really taken a structure and

filled it in with a rose. It didn't have to be a rose: it could have been a cat. The structure is the point, and the filling in is arbitrary in a sense—hence my term "blank image." A basic common denominator for Porter's work, visual or verbal, is that virtually all his imagery is blank.

Until the late 1950's Porter's work was disconcertingly original. There is simply nothing to which it appears to relate (except for an oblique parallel between Porter's photographs and some of Moholy Nagy's). At that point Porter, in the course of his publishing activity, first encountered the much younger artist/writer Diter Rot. Rot was—and is—a Swiss German or a German Swiss who, in the early 195'0s was doing geometrical abstract paintings and winning every award available in Europe for his textile designs. In the middle of the decade, Rot suddenly left his promising career in Europe and moved to Iceland, where he applied his visual experience to the book format and to literature, pioneering in the start of Concrete Poetry on the one hand and producing very precise, nonverbal and cut books on the other.

In recent years Rot has produced large verbal texts — notably the books *Mundunculum, 246 Little Clouds* and *Scheisse*,—has done a vast variety of collages and constructions (often using chocolate as a stock material, and also cheese), has moved back to continental Europe for at least part of the time and is anything *but* isolated. In fact, he's one of the most successful and interesting of "German" artists. However, in the 1950's Porter and Rot came into contact, and the result seems to have electrified them both. To this day the standard book trade reference book, *Literary Market Place,* lists Bern Porter among the Foreign Publishers' Agents, representing Diter Rot as an Icelandic publisher. Here was a kindred soul. Not only were Rot's images blank—they were often non-existent. The work was what it was and that was that. Even to describe it—as elegant, precise, original, any adjective that might be applicable—was somehow to miss the point. Rot lived in Iceland. In terms of the World of Fashionable Media that was even more remote than Maine or Alabama. Rot wrote with a razor blade or a scalpel: okay. Porter had been doing so too. However, technical influences aside, Porter's work doesn't look like Rot's. Rot's *Bok AC* (1957-63) is black and white, on cards that line up when they are jogged together, large format (about two feet by two feet) and based on a progression of incisions dividing a square. (There exists a more recent version of this book also, published by Norman Ives in New Haven, Connecticut, in which color is used.) Porter's corresponding work is *ALO 110* (1964),* a magnificent and surprisingly lyrical construction made by cutting up a sample book of Interlaken book binders' cloth. The use of color is implicit, since the sample book naturally includes cloths in an arbitrary variety of colors. Again, starting in 1957 Rot produced a series of unique editions—unique in that each copy was different from each other copy—by taking newspapers from whatever country he happened to be in, trimming them down small with a paper cutter and "padding" them for binding—gluing one side to hold the paper in and make a book-like format. Rot's books of this sort are structural and design oriented. Normally the trim size is very small, though Peter Brattinga's Quadrat series, in the Netherlands, did take a sample copy of *d. r. 61,* a typical one of these Rot cut-newspaper editions, and enlarge it and print it by photo offset, with very striking graphic results. Porter, on the other hand, made two books of this sort, *Scandinavian Summer* (1961)* and *Moscow* (1966),* both based on papers acquired in the course of travelling, and definitive (one version intended, as opposed to each copy being unique) even though derived from an arbitrary stack of material. Porter's material is intended to recreate the impact of the travels in the mind of the viewer: it is less a purse design than Rot's.

This is not the time or the place to go into the details per se of Porter's work, other than to provide a very rough introduction. Sooner or later means will be found of reproducing as art multiples and making available some of the classics in the UCLA collection, such as *ALO 110* or the various works in which an arbitrary object (usually a blocked photoengraving) is included inside a very elaborate slip-case collaged out of this or that found material, and which is, in fact, the poem rather than its content. Any damn fool with a modest production budget and access to a cheap printer with an Itek platemaker could issue the *Waste Maker* (1926-61). That's sure to happen soon with *Found Poems,* which are beginning to appear in excerpt here and there. *Doldrums—a Study in Surrealism* (1941) could easily be reissued, to show the early Porter, with its texts, gidgets, doodles and odd timing. Given the present interest in tech art, *468B: thy future* (1966),* a cut up of computer print-out data, should appeal to somebody to publish. *Day Notes for Mother* (1964)* and *scda 19 by bp* (1969),* made respectively of xeroxes of mechanical drawings and of cut up paper and printing samples, are both suitable for a graphic series. Only a few pieces are really autograph originals and not-reproducible, in the sense that a painting is not reproducible. This would include such works as *The*

Box (1969) and—a major work—*Artifacts* (1969), an accumulation from Porter's Alabama sojourn, with coins, Wallace gubernatorial campaign buttons, etc. One might reproduce these things, but they would always be reproductions, they could never be existentially the real objects.

So that's sort of what's there. It's a very major and unique corpus of work. I've mentioned most, though not all, of the landmarks along the way—enough to start a traveller and help keep him from getting lost. I haven't detailed the publishing—a work of art in its own right. That's been documented in the *Colby Library Quarterly*. Suffice it to say that, for instance, Porter issued some of and did mechanicals for all of a series of 52 as a series of *Broadsides*. There are 52 weeks in a year. Can't somebody make a calendar?

But I haven't mentioned yet the criticism. This consists of some really beautiful texts, like *What Henry Miller Said and Why It Is Important* (1965), which doesn't convince me to like Henry Miller — nothing could, it isn't my temperament, it seems so curiously aristocratic, alienated and hung-up, — but Porter's is about the healthiest and most realistic statement about sex that I've ever come across. It was published by John G. Moore, a bookseller in Pasadena, California. Looks like a Concrete Poem. No question it's a classic.

All of which brings up to *I've Left,* which is also, I suppose, criticism of a sort—if criticism includes life. James Schevill, an interesting poet and, over the years, Porter's closest admirer spiritually (his work is of a quite different order), says—in the *Colby Library Quarterly*—that "in 1959, Porter completed the fourth draft of *I've Left,* his most important book . . . This was a year of personal disaster. He was rejected for various jobs for which he had applied . . . was refused verbally as 'a security risk' by a personnel officer after a gruelling investigation . . . contested this bitterly." For a physicist with Porter's specializations, this must indeed have been a disaster, no less so because it was understandable in view of his resignation from the atomic bomb project. Porter departed promptly for Australia, —literally "he left." In fact he didn't stay there long. Didn't like the "anti-culture, anti-academy, anti-literature and anti-American" atmosphere, a description that's hard to believe, Australia being what it is, except that Porter lived there in Tasmania — and published there *Physics for Tomorrow* (1959), his final statement on "Sci Forms," the concept of "Sciart" (science plus art) with its subcategories of "Scicom" (science plus communication) and "Scilit" (science plus literature).

So, having left, he came back. But then he hadn't really left anyway, in that he was still alive, still communicating. The title was somehow ironic, since he also hadn't ever "been there," in the worldy sense. But what he had done with the world of the arts and even with America was to leave it behind.

I'm not about to go into an *explication du texte* on *I've Left.* I've tried to present the context of Porter's works and life to provide a millieu to relate it to. I would even assert that in its own way the only other text it relates to is Thoreau's *Walden* (for instance, why did Thoreau go to Walden anyway?). If no other text of our time speaks for itself, this one does. It doesn't need the footnotes of little men running around and whispering "By the way, when he says *A* he really means *B*." In fact it was made when Porter wanted to take stock, sum up, look it all over. That's why it went through four drafts, very rare for Porter. To Porters' it's the key to his work.

To others of us, perhaps it isn't. The manifesto at the end on Sciart (surely a much better word than the critics "tech art," at best an echo of "pop art" "op art," "land art," "concept art," et. etc. etc., verbal liaisons that dont involve marriage or other embarrassing commitments), that manifesto ought to be printed at the back of every science texbook used by any high school in the country, and ought to be silk screened on every window shade in every artist's studio as well. The manifesto is obviously a description of where it's at. The text is something that goes beyond this. Manifestos are good theater. Texts like *I've Left* have to be lived with.

Bern Porter and Diter Rot have never met. Once, when Diter Rot came to Los Angeles, I showed him some of the *Found Poems* of Porter and other things that I had around, pointed out some of the overlaps between their work, and waited for some fireworks. Instead, Rot sat back, smiled, gestured towards my Porter bundle and said, "Ach, but this one is a great one, yes?" To which one might add, as *The North Star,* the magazine of the Houlton (Maine) High School, said of "Bug" Porter—and clearly referring not to class but to achievement—in giving a caption to everyone in the graduating group, "Not in the roll of common men."

His life is a flux of constantly fresh experience and achievement. *I've Left* is a chunk, a more or less static spin-off from this, As such it's less characteristic of the Porter style and experience than most of the other works. But it's a good place to begin.

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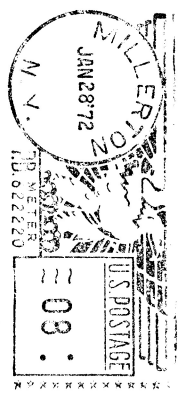

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