



**ARTIST**

Bern Porter

**TITLE**

left: photopoem, a polarized-light photo with words by George Leite right: photo cover, photogram technique, both from Circle Magazine

**DIMENSIONS**

11 in H x 8.5 in W

**MEDIUM**

Offset Lithography

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2015.170

**CURRENT LOCATION**

Bern Porter Portfolio

**DESCRIPTION**

Donated by Tom Bryan in 2015

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**BERN PORTER**

**BORN**

1911

**DIED**

2004

**BIRTHPLACE**

Porter Settlement, ME

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

European-American

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1994

**LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

Menschel Gallery Catalogue 35  
Contact Sheet 132

**ESSAYS**

Growing Up in the Nuclear Age Leaving the dining room of the Faculty Club, University of California, after a more than pleasant lunch, I entered the Club's lounge, picked up that morning's edition of the New York Times to read not only that a bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima but also exactly what I had been doing with my life and talents the past four years at Princeton, Oak Ridge, and Berkeley. One physicist reader started crying, screaming in wild destructive frenzy and had to be carried out strapped tightly to a stretcher. Another, dazed, voluntarily stumbled into asylum for relief. A third took off for Minnesota to become a dairy farmer. Myself, I am still numb after thirty-seven years, yet strong enough to have lived since in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Norway, and Russia in a futile attempt to understand what took place that August day of '45. I am very sorry that Madame Currie and Lise Meitner did not keep their findings to themselves, that their facts ever got into the textbooks, that war makers pulled their ideas out and ran wild with them to destruction in the interests of nationalism and money. I am even more sad about my part in it all, even ashamed, and do here now apologize to all and sundry, as if such as that could conceivably aid, even assuage my conscience now that time is too late, and of course my confessing does not help in any way, it is too late, the monster is permanently out. War is a mental disorder of the highest order, a public manifestation that all who arrange, direct, participate are madly deranged. The insanity touches us all and we have nowhere to go. Bern Porter, Belfast, ME 1978 This summer, during a video taped walking tour and performance in Belfast, Maine, Bern Porter entered the local bank at lunch hour. He stood in line. He waited and waited and waited and finally it was his turn to approach the teller. He approached her, smiled, and said hello. Then he turned and left the bank. If you walk past Bern Porter on the street, in his coastal hometown, dressed in his 'Poet Laureate' brown robe carrying a huge cardboard 'A,' creating and reading his poetry on the street's corner or leading his own parade, you would probably stop to contemplate whether he was a genius or a crackpot. If you knew Porter, you'd know that he has transcended even these most conspicuous labels. His actions take the ordinary and make them extraordinary and rebellious, creating a hum of confusion about the artist's personae in our culture. Entering the bank to say hello alters the behavioral and cultural norms we expect from people in this space and this act is synonymous with most of Porter's art and his life. Both are unorthodox. As one who invents and harvests eccentric and bizarre ideas that make sense, Porter has spent seventy-five years making art from objects, images, and situations that most would rarely contemplate let alone have the confidence to execute. Porter is a bundle of mad momentum, an atom hurled by the intensity of his own energy, making artist books from newspapers to trade for milk and eggs in his hometown in Northern Maine. Now Porter is the published author of some sixty artist books and poetry collections. He has also published the work of many emerging authors, performed and shown his work extensively, and he is the subject of many author's writings. See(MAN)TIC is an exhibition that concentrates on Porter's photographs from 1937 to pieces made specifically for this catalogue and exhibition. The culmination suggests a lifelong career dedicated to producing art and ideas in a wide variety of disciplines that demonstrates he 'cannot escape the feverish inventions of the mind.' Porter is an artist and a physicist whose work requires that we 'show how big our brains are.' His acute imagination, and the desire to escape his feelings of isolation which result from being so forward thinking, have propelled him to seek those in the avant-garde who 'cut the crusts of accepted forms' ranging from the Surrealists to the Dadaists, the Beats to the Fluxists, the Abstract Expressionists to the (Post)Modernists. As a Sciartist (scientist-artist), he is constantly experimenting to find the potential behind, or the possibilities within, the 'matter' which he encounters. His art is the result of his constant experimentation. His biographer James Schevill writes, Porter is always conducting research, 'examining the arteries of American Power and culture where they flow visibly. The images he witnesses are reflected inevitably in his artwork.' One of the central locations for his current research is the trashcan of the Belfast, Maine post office. An avid mail artist, Porter visits this 'lab' daily. His base data is rich from the abundance of junk mail findings, once cut and altered, they form the base of his collage work. Perhaps from his physics training or equally pertinent social belief that conformity and specialization should be avoided, Porter asserts that something new has to be produced in order to alter the old matter. There is no denying that the material in the trash could stand some improvement and Porter finds inspiration in reclaiming trash. His 'Yankee-Puritanical' upbringing may be the root of some of his trash ingenuity, but his personal experience as a physicist working on the Atom Bomb as part of the Manhattan Project in the early 1940s also contributes. The explosion of the bomb in Japan in 1945 'blasted a hole through his idealism' as he realized exactly what he had been building. He resigned from the Manhattan Project the next day disparaged, disillusioned, and devastated by his personal role in the destruction of humanity. Porter vowed from that day on he would contribute to and reclaim humanity rather than aid in its destruction. He says, 'I merely felt that I could and should do more good. The reaction from destruction was simply to do something constructive with what limited funds and talents I had.' Because Porter is a physicist, his knowledge of the elements, formulas, and technology used to explain the universe are essential to understanding his connection to photography. While special relativity, light composition, and lens optics are central to his process, Porter also explores the more esoteric ideas of order and chaos. His artistic expression seems to shift back and forth between making order out of chaos and chaos out of order, always relaxing or intensifying our expected perceptions. Take for instance the Manhattan pone book. This book is the epitome of order and referential information. Introduce the energy of Porter, and the book is cut and clipped and shuffled upon a tabletop, adhered into a montage of impromptu found visual poems and word pictures Porter uses the same process with travel brochures, magazines, junk mail, newspapers, and objects to make everything from artist books like Sweet End to photograms and bottle poems. The series of eight Bottle Poems are medicinal bottles filled with found material like pretzels and nails, photographs and shredded paper, bird food and fabric, offers visually 'the cures for what ails ya.' These poems suggest that the contained chaos is the antidote for our instant gratification society, we are, after all, a throw-away culture creating chaos in the trashcan so that we appear ordered. Porter, however, 'feels the semblance in chaotic form' and notes his distaste for ordered reality. In turn, his Bottle Poems offer us a revised dose of our own medicine. Porter understands that what holds things together is usually not so different from what breaks things. His desire to tear down the gallery walls, discard the frames, dig through the trash, break words into sounds and pictures, transform the audience, build alternative environments, teach innovation, and issue proclamations all relate to a single concept, he can make something new by breaking up and rebuilding that which exists. Using founds, Porter invents new material and alters structures by changing the environment and the relationship of the combined elements. As his friend Buckminster Fuller said, 'Our world is held together by tension' and its structures can be altered and still support the weight of humanity's demands. If art, or the physical world, cannot support and exist on unique and ever changing forms then it will, in Porter's words, 'collapse to zero.' In his 1948 Sciart Manifesto titled The Union of Science and Art, Porter begins, 'Finite worlds of infinite realities and beauty revealed by the tools and discoveries of science are ripe for aesthetic development.' He claimed that such combinations as photography and painting, topography and portraiture, photography and poetry, and biology and sculpture create yet unrealized textures, patterns, forms, devices, and techniques. To further this idea of the infinite realities available to our culture Porter proclaims, in his autobiographical manifesto I've Left, begun in 1954, that art has to be everywhere, as is the military and technology, in order to escape the false traps of specialization, structure, bureaucracy and stagnation. According to Porter, this

art can be treated from the way one gets dressed, by printing art and poetry on playing cards and stamps, and by actively creating new languages, to name a few. This rational theory for Sciart and his art's suggestions for social reclamation do not cancel out the serendipitous qualities in Porter's expression. The descriptions of his artistic process show a playfulness in the subconscious, an approach often associated with Surrealism. In 1935 Porter met Salvador Dali and Max Ernst in New York City, igniting his interests in non-objective and Surrealist modes of artistic experimentation. In 1937 Porter made his first photographic work of double and multiple exposure painting-like montages, like *My Love for You*, beginning his fascination with image manipulation rooted in science but also in a forced lack of rational control. But as the Tao of Physics proclaims, 'It is never nothing, but always something.' Amy Hufnagel Assistant Director Light Work 1991 (All quotes are either the words of Bern Porter, or they are excerpted from the biographical writings on Porter by James Schevill. Biographical formula by Amy Hufnagel.) Bern Porter (1911–2004) Bern Porter, artist, writer, publisher, and scientist, died June 7, 2004, in Belfast, Maine. He was 93. Porter traveled widely before settling in Belfast in 1972. From his home he operated his self-styled Institute for Advanced Thinking. There he hosted traveling artists and maintained a colorful sculpture garden of multimedia installations and contemporary artifacts. Porter was born in Porter Settlement, Maine, on February 14, 1911, according to official records, though he claimed 1910 as his birth date. After graduating from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in 1932, Porter pursued a master's degree in atomic physics at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. He worked in colloidal research on the development of the first black-and-white graphite television picture tube. In 1940 he was conscripted into the civilian service to work in uranium separation on the Manhattan Project. During the course of his work he made the acquaintance of Robert Oppenheimer, the project's director, with whom he was deeply impressed. In laboratories at Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Princeton, New Jersey; and Berkeley, California, many scientists like Bern unknowingly worked on the top secret military program to create the first atomic bomb. Porter has said, "In Tennessee I supervised barefoot hillbillies who thought they were making radiator fluid." Porter himself did not learn the ultimate result of his labors until he read of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, in *The New York Times*. After the nuclear destruction of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Porter was devastated. He walked out of his job, disillusioned with research physics. Thereafter, he devoted himself primarily to the pursuit of arts and letters. He ran a gallery of contemporary art in Sausalito, California, and Bern Porter Books, a small publishing company. He was an associate and early publisher of avant-garde writers Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, and Parker Tyler. With George Leite he published *Circle Magazine* from 1944 to 1948. In San Francisco he met Anaïs Nin as well as Allen Ginsberg and other Bay Area poets of the Beat Generation. In 1946 he was married briefly to a young student, Helen Elaine Hedren. Porter worked on various engineering and construction projects in Guam, Tasmania, Guatemala, and Alaska before settling in Maine with his second wife, Margaret (d.1975). He is also predeceased by a third wife, Lula (Bloom). Porter was one of the founders of the Mail Art Network, sending visual poetry, letters, one-of-a-kind postcard art, and altered images to international correspondents as early as the 1950s. He was associated with the fluxus, neoist, and situationist art movements of the twentieth century. He was known for his contributions to found art, performance art, sound poetry, visual poetry, and Xerox collage. In addition, Porter maintained an extensive literary career in which he authored or compiled over one hundred books, chapbooks, pamphlets, and broadsides. His biography, *Where to Go, What to Do, When You are Bern Porter*, by James Schevill, and a retrospective collection of his prose and poetry, *Sounds That Arouse Me*, were published by Tilbury House, Gardiner, Maine, under the auspices of Mark Melnicove. In later years, Porter's publisher was Roger Jackson of Ann Arbor, Michigan, with whom he produced more than thirty-four titles. A persevering nonagenarian, Porter continued writing and publishing until his last year of life. In October 2003, he moved to Tall Pines, a nursing home and rehabilitation facility a few blocks from his Salmond Street home in Belfast. He received regular visits from friends and admirers until his death, an eventuality that Porter had often euphemistically referred to as "the final final." Collections of Porter's books and artworks are archived at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, at the University of California at Berkeley, and Brown University in Rhode Island, as well as at Colby, Bowdoin, and Unity Colleges in Maine. Collections can also be seen in the Belfast Public Library and the Belfast Historical Society and Museum. A vast and unknown number of Porter's signed, limited edition books and original art works are housed in private collections worldwide. Porter inspired and mentored many young (and not so young) writers, artists and performers. Many of them were frequent or occasional visitors to the Institute—Janelle Viglini, Tamaranda Laeir, Mary Weaver, Amy Flaxman, Carlo Pittore, Phil Nurenberg, Natasha Bernstein, and the late Dan Russell—to name a few. He often advised, "Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair, dear, and confront the page!" Irascible, tender, flamboyant, outrageous, abstruse, enigmatic, and incisive, Porter was, and is, unique. We will not forget him or his legacy. In fact, we are his legacy. In conclusion, all we can say, Bern, is "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Sheila Holtz It was our pleasure to have the opportunity to work with Bern Porter on a number of projects. In 1984 we hosted a performance by Bern and Mark Melnicove at the Syracuse Stage, and we presented a solo exhibition of his work in our Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery in 1994. In addition Tom Bryan, one of Light Work's founding directors, included Bern in a series titled *Not Famous Enough Americans*, which featured short profiles and portraits that were printed on labels for tins of maple syrup that Bryan produced on his farm in Erieville, New York. Reprinted with permission of Sheila Holtz from Bern Porter International, Special Issue (August 6, 2004). Sheila Holtz divides her time between Maine and Philadelphia. She has been active in the Mail Art Network since the 1970s and is the former publisher of *Estudio* and Bern Porter International.