

Material Witness



MATERIAL WITNESS

The Selected Letters of Fairfield Porter



EDITED BY TED LEIGH

Introduction by David Lehman
with additional notes by Justin Spring

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Preface

Experiencing a true work of art, Fairfield Porter wrote to Paul Mattick in 1940, “[is] like being in a new dimension, the way a two-dimensional creature would feel if he could be taken into a third dimension and for the first time in his life see a square at once and as a whole.”

My friendship with Fairfield stirred a similar metamorphosis in me, starting with his visits to my studio at Amherst College. Though his personal manner (no greetings, no farewells; no small talk) left me startled and uneasy, flailing at conversation, he paid my painting profound attention. Looking at pictures worked on him. As he concentrated, the tip of his tongue moved back and forth between his lips. After a silent incubation, if he had a comment, it was delivered like gleaming ore falling to the floor. His sudden insights made our get-togethers feel like visitations.

In his May 22, 1965, letter to Arthur Giardelli, Porter mentions as lamentable a cultural attitude termed “the American cramp” by the sculptor Robert White. According to Porter, this affliction is our national distrust of the pleasure and significance of art. I had a serious case of it. Fairfield supported my talent and that of many others, and, as he would display in so many letters like the one to Garrett Brown (March 13, 1973), he generously expressed his support. After Amherst we corresponded. His replies were lengthy, attentive, riveting. I had never experienced the likes of them before. I became more real around Fairfield and glimpsed myself whole.

Fairfield’s published criticism struck me in another way. There is an element of personal pathos in some of his fiercest critical writing related to the same ambivalence about painting that I felt. I was electrified to think that this man who had affirmed my work so deeply might have experienced a struggle like my own.

In one of his most scathing reviews, of the 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibit “New Images of Man” (which purported to protest against humanity’s “fate[,] to become a thing”), Porter wrote,

if one takes as his subject matter the pit of Buchenwald, as Lebrun does, one takes for subject matter something safely remote from the smallness of daily-life experience. . . . The violent image of man has the purpose of making a creation acceptable to critics, it gives an easy subject matter to critical writing, for these paintings and sculptures seem to mean something profound in proportion to the amount of distortion and the violence of their appearance, and in this way the artist clears himself from a conscience made uneasy by his choice to be only an artist. . . . The artists want to be as needed as scientists or generals. . . . [They] may seem to be courageously facing the human predicament, but this courage saves [them] from the harder necessity of accepting the difficulties of art.¹

Despite a family tradition of ideological independence and love of the arts, Porter faced a lifelong challenge in following his impulse to be an artist concerned with the “smallness” of everyday life and resisting the marching orders of others. In an episode that illustrated the strands of rejection that were woven through the family fabric, he wrote to Claire White, April 24, 1972, about being sent, when he was a young adolescent, repeatedly and painfully to a portrait photographer by his parents with results that disappointed them, alone among the photos of their five children. A painful dimension of his daily-life experience was the struggle against the deep-seated message “that I, Fairfield, am the way someone else has decided I am” (as he put it to White). But he was buoyed by his tenacity, devoted wife Anne, and increasing surrender to his love of painting. The same struggle sired his crusade urging “respect for things as they are” and lent authority and bite to his art world politics: he would never be straitjacketed in critic Clement Greenberg’s (or anyone else’s) portrait of the artistic future.

Porter’s manner in person and in letters were dramatically different. John Bernard Myers, the director of Tibor de Nagy Gallery (where Porter showed for many years), remembered in a diary, “There is a sense in which Fairfield is never *with* one. He engages in discussion with intensity, says what he has to say with animation, is suddenly silent, looking elsewhere, or, from time-to-time, stares piercingly at the person to whom

1. “New Images of Man,” *Nation*, October 17, 1959.

he is speaking. It's put up or shut up. At the same time, his detachment is almost planetary, with him on the other planet."² The painter Nell Blaine wrote to me in September, 1984, "Often he sat quietly, appearing to be in a black mood, then suddenly . . . he would blurt out a very strong statement. Afterwards he would fall into silence again." Because in letters Fairfield was gracious, easy, full of news of family and work, and also self-revealing, the disparity could be confusing. On my second and final visit to Southampton to see him in 1974 before his death a year later, I was introduced to Johnny Porter, Fairfield's oldest child, who suffered from autism and whom I knew nothing about. After supper, Fairfield, his daughter Liz, and I stayed alone at the table, and I asked him as delicately as I could about Johnny, whose conversation had been bewilderingly filled with puns. Fairfield got up angrily and left without a word.

Anne Porter's permission to collect the letters five years after his death was heaven sent; I had another chance to meet Fairfield—and a uniquely transparent one.

In his catalog essay for the 1981 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, retrospective of Porter's work, the show's curator, Kenworth Moffett, disparaged Porter's monograph on the American painter Thomas Eakins. Porter had written that, in contrast to the radiance and pleasure so evident in French impressionism, Eakins's work had a dreary light and his sitters a defeated look. Porter believed that because the enormously talented Eakins was supported by family money and "had to convince his conscience that painting was work," this muting of sensuality served as a kind of penitence. Moffett complained that Porter's assessment contained "more than just a little projection or identification." Porter's own "inorganic conscience"³ about art, according to Moffett, led him to muse about abandoning painting and becoming an organic farmer (important work to an environmentalist like Fairfield) late in his life—while doing his best paintings.

Moffett was right about the family money that helped Porter for much of his career and right about his doubts, but he missed a deeper point. Porter's similarities to Eakins, once pointed out, would not have

2. Quoted in John Ashbery and Kenworth Moffett, with contributions by John Bernard Myers et al., *Fairfield Porter: Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 41.

3. Kenworth Moffett, "The Art of Fairfield Porter," in Ashbery and Moffett, *Fairfield Porter*, 28.

surprised him. It was precisely his dogged, conscious, and imperfect struggle to come to himself, to work out his “cramp,” that enabled Porter’s work to grow in sensuality and boldness to the very end. It enabled him to so deeply sympathize with Eakins, angrily lament the loss to his work from his conflicts, and, equally, to celebrate *liberated* talent. He wrote about another “American problem,” John Singer Sargent, “His painting was full of discarded possibilities. . . . His [portraits’] absence of sentiment made him a caricaturist. . . . When he forgot himself in the unseriousness of some work that he may not have considered important to do, as in his oil sketches and especially his watercolors, truly called dazzling. . . . [He] . . . present[ed] the light as no one had quite done before.”⁴ As Porter’s pleasure in painting and his personal confidence grew, so did light and color in his pictures and the light he cast on the art and culture around him.

Porter’s luminous prose and telling observations are compelling enough, but it was his Kierkegaardian compass, measuring the degree to which art was in concert or conflict with the artist’s “deepest self,” that I treasure most. If Wallace Stevens’s title *The Necessary Angel* points to art’s ability to connect us to a dimension larger than ourselves by tactile, concrete means, Porter was a necessary evangelist. When Porter wrote, “Wholeness is as close as you to yourself and your immediate surroundings. You need not pursue it. You have only to accept it,”⁵ he offered solace and a challenge to a culture forgetful that transcendence is even possible.

Acknowledgments

My first and greatest debt is to Anne Porter, who allowed me to undertake this labor of love. Anne has been unstintingly generous and kind (including, in the first year, reimbursement for expenses) and, except in only one or two instances where someone living is mentioned unflatteringly in the letters, unrestricted about their inclusion. Some of the background information relating to her marriage to Fairfield was painful to share, but she never shrank from discussing it, and the resulting collection is more complete, compelling, and inspiring for her courage. Anne

4. “Sargent: An American Problem,” *ARTnews*, January 1956.

5. “Class Content in American Abstract Painting,” *ARTnews*, April 1962.

is patience personified; while this volume has benefited from requiring more than twenty years of labor, more than once she must have despaired of seeing it published.

I thank all of Fairfield's extended family, friends, and colleagues who contributed letters, some of which were quite personal.

Laurence, Katharine, and Elizabeth Porter all shared important memories of their father, whose letters and work included them frequently. Ruth Channing Middleman, Fairfield's niece, did the same from the vantage point of a teenager on Great Spruce Head Island. Laurence Porter, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Michigan State University, also lent his expertise in French literature.

David Lehman ushered this manuscript into the University of Michigan Press and wrote its introduction. He has done much, through his book *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, magazine articles, and radio interviews, to stimulate awareness of Porter and his circle and enlarge the audience for this book. When the poet Ron Padgett told me, with restrained excitement, "I just had lunch with David Lehman and he was interested in the letters manuscript. Ted, send it to him, you couldn't find a better person to help get this out!" it was a considerable understatement.

This volume has benefited from Justin Spring's insightful biography, *Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art* (1999). Justin's thorough research helped throughout, but especially with respect to Porter's activities in the 1960s and his relationships with Ilse Hamm Mattick and Jimmy Schuyler. Justin was extraordinarily generous with encouragement and advice. Little did I know when I lent him my collection of material for his project just how richly I would be rewarded.

I drew on the work of John T. Spike for biographical information. His sumptuously illustrated volume *Fairfield Porter: An American Classic*, is a necessity for anyone interested in Porter's painting.

Happily, Carl N. Schmalz, Amherst College Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts, went over the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb. One of the committee that hired Porter as visiting artist at the college for 1969–70, Dick Schmalz could share his impressions of Porter from the vantage point of a colleague.

Special thanks to David Shapiro, who shares with me a filial devotion to Fairfield but knew him better. David referred me to agents and friends in my search for a publisher, wrote a poignant memoir that I have

quoted, and I know would have loved to be the first to read these letters as they arrived.

Ron Padgett was one of my earliest advisors about this work and a constant friend.

Claire Nicholas White, Robert White, Kenneth Koch, Ilse Hamm Mattick, Barbara Mettler, John Ashbery, David Kermani, Robert Dash, Paul Cummings, and, before their deaths, James Schuyler, Nell Blaine, and Elaine de Kooning were among the friends to give me a variety of help about Porter.

For her volunteer transcriptions of many of Porter's hard-to-read handwritten letters I am grateful to Penny Wright. Thanks to Margie Lytle for word processing and Phil Lester, Frances Courtright, and Anne Levisky for resuscitating obsolete computer files.

For her love, encouragement, and keen literary and editorial instincts, to Thea Osato my profound thanks.

A word about how I approached selecting and editing this collection. Constraints on its length meant that many of the more than five hundred letters in the Porter archive had to go. Some deletions were much easier than others, for example, some of the business letters. Letters during his Council Communist days in the 1930s and later as he developed his ideas about "artistic perception" and technology were in some cases redundant. But at times I had to choose between valuable letters. The most difficult decision was the elimination of all of Porter's letters from Milton Academy and Harvard to his mother (with the exception of the ones written during his summer trip to the Soviet Union). In some of FP's early letters, especially long handwritten ones to political associates, he inserts few paragraph breaks even when the introduction of a new idea might have warranted it. I have provided them occasionally here to give the reader a breath. With Anne Porter's permission, my materials will be donated to the Archives of American Art, so I trust that more complete justice will eventually be done to them. I hope that, despite omissions, I have retained the shape of the correspondence to each recipient and represented the full range of the letters.

All photographs are reproduced courtesy of Anne Porter unless otherwise noted.

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Recipients of Correspondence

- Arrowsmith, William (1924–92). Translator and critic.
- Ashbery, John (1927–). Poet and critic.
- Brainard, Joe (1942–94). Painter and writer.
- Brown, Garrett (1949–). Amherst student of FP, an actor.
- Button, John (1929–82). Painter.
- Campbell, Lawrence (1914–98). Painter and art critic.
- Channing, Katharine Minot (“Kee”) (1882–1960). Anne Channing Porter’s mother.
- Dash, Robert (1934–). Painter and critic.
- Day, Lucien (1916–). Painter whom FP met reviewing.
- Day, Poppy (?). Wife of Lucien Day.
- de Nagy, Tibor (1910–93). Hungarian immigrant, owner of Tibor de Nagy Gallery.
- Downes, Rackstraw (1939–). English-born painter and writer.
- Freeman, Richard (1952–). Painter.
- Giardelli, Arthur (1911–). English painter, met FP in Italy in 1931.
- Greenberg, Clement (1909–94). Editor of *Partisan Review*, critic and writer about art and culture.
- Griffin, Howard (1920–80). English poet, secretary to W. H. Auden, a friend of James Schuyler.
- Henning, Edward (1922–93). Curator of contemporary art, Cleveland Museum of Art.
- Hess, Tom (1920–78). Art critic, editor of *ARTnews* who hired FP as a critic.
- Hudson Review*. Journal of literature and culture.
- Island Family. The Porter extended family who summered on Great Spruce Head Island.

Kenyon Review. Journal of literature and the arts.

Koch, Janice (1930–81). Kenneth Koch’s wife.

Koch, Kenneth (1925–2002). Poet and teacher.

Leigh, Ted (1950–). Amherst student of FP, photographer, painter, and teacher.

Mattick, Paul (1904–81). German expatriate thinker and social theorist, leader of the Council Communists.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Middleman, Raoul (1935–). Painter, teacher, husband of FP’s niece Ruth Channing Middleman.

Moos, Elizabeth (1890–1994). Head of Hessian Hills School, where two of FP’s sons attended.

Morse, Carl (1934–). Poet, anthologist, and playwright.

Myers, John (1920–87). Editor, publisher of Tiber Press (which published O’Hara, Schuyler, Koch, and Ashbery’s work), and managing director of Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

New Republic. Journal of culture and the arts.

O’Hara, Frank (1926–66). Poet and art critic.

Padgett, Ron (1942–). Poet and teacher.

Partisan Review. Magazine dedicated to politics, culture, and the arts.

Porter, Aline (1909–91). Eliot Porter’s second wife, a painter.

Porter, Anne Channing (“Puss,” “Mooie”) (1911–). Poet and FP’s wife.

Porter, Betsy Hart (1938–). Laurence Porter’s first wife.

Porter, Eliot (1901–90). FP’s oldest sibling, pioneering color photographer, showed at Alfred Stieglitz’s American Place Gallery.

Porter, Laurence (1936–). Second of FP’s sons, a professor of French.

Porter, Leon (1967–). Laurence Porter’s son, FP’s first grandchild.

Porter, Ruth (1875–1942). FP’s mother.

Porter, Stephen (1941–). Nephew of FP, American sculptor and teacher.

Rivers, Larry (1923–2002). Painter who showed at Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Schuyler, James (1923–91). Poet and art critic.

Shapiro, David (1947–). Poet and critic.

Shapiro, Lindsay (1947–). Architect and wife of David Shapiro.

Stieglitz, Alfred (1864–1946). Pioneering photographer, owner of An American Place gallery and promoter of modernist artists.

Wheelwright, John (1897–1940). Poet, Socialist Party member, and editor of the radical journal *Arise*.

White, Claire Nicolas (1925–). Dutch-born poet and critic.