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Disappearing Act: Front-Yard Bricolage along the Pacific Coast

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For several decades I documented front-yard displays of beachcombed items along Highway 1, the winding road that follows the Pacific coastline along beaches and steep bluffs from Mexico to Canada. In the 1970s, it was common to see driftwood logs artfully arranged in front of weathered wooden houses, multicolored Styrofoam fishing floats festooning fences, driveways lined by abalone shells and glass floats, fish nets hung from trees, and pieces of wrecked fishing boats alongside garages. These were all found items, available on beaches for the taking. Typically, their reuse involved only display, the artful arrangement of objects; but occasionally the items were combined or embellished into folk sculpture.

Above: The Zig Zag Zoo in South Beach, Oregon, built by Loran Fitch, was scrapped after the owner died.

It was less the finished products that interested me than the resourceful seeing and thinking that went into the work. The artisan who converted kelp into humanoid forms perceived something that most people missed. Or if they saw it, they did nothing to develop the image further to bring the *genius rei*, the spirit of the thing, into tangible realization.

Walking on the beach, most people will pass a pile of driftwood without attention and connection. Others will view it in practical terms, as potential firewood or raw material for shelter. However, a very few perceive individual pieces animisticly, as containing the potential for a different reality, and an even smaller number will set about releasing the trapped image through an exercise of art or craft. What is intriguing is that all people, including the most unaware, can see the form after it has been released by the craftsperson. They have this potential to liberate the *genius rei* within them, and it does not require great technical skill to create kelp people or stack rocks.

These exercises in making beautiful or meaningful things from available materials typically fall into the category of bricolage. The term has multiple origins, all involving some degree of improvisation. The *bricole* was a harness used by men to move guns into place when horses were unavailable. It has also been used to describe

a catapult for hurling stones (pulling back to go forward), a bank shot in billiards, and a rebound in tennis off one of the court walls. Such uses have helped give rise to the French *bricoles* (plural), meaning odd jobs or trifles; *bricoler* (verb), to tinker or potter[1]; and *bricoleur*, a jack of all trades, handyman and potterer.

These meanings carry over into current usage in the arts, where bricolage refers to adapting and reusing available items. Unlike the professional painter who starts with a blank canvas or the sculptor with a marble block, the bricoleur starts with a collection of discards, asking "What can I do with this?" and "What is that good for?" This involves a dialogue between self and materials. Improvisation is the critical element, adapting what is available rather than buying new parts.

In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss contrasted the bricoleur's style with that of the engineer.[2] The former operates by a seat-of-the-pants situational logic, constructing and repairing things from available parts. Being adept at seeing multiple uses, the bricoleur keeps a collection of junk which can be adapted to new uses. In contrast, the engineer creates and follows formal plans and blueprints. A missing or broken part must preferably thus be replaced with an identical piece ordered from a storehouse or catalog.

The engineer's workshop is clean and uncluttered, with shelves of catalogs, manuals and blueprints. The engineer tries to go beyond the constraints of the immediate situation, to find the best method of solving a problem regardless of whether parts or labor are at hand. The bricoleur operates within existing constraints, making do with what is there.

Many Attractions

The appeal of creating bricolage is enhanced by self-imposed rules, which may be codified in competitions, such as sandcastle or rock-stacking festivals. Rock-stackers apply no mortar, cement or shims. Sand sculpture is made from items found on the beach. A front yard may likewise also only contain items personally found

Above: Fishing floats were frequently used in yard decorations in Oregon and Washington.

Above: Portuguese fisherman's house, Mendocino, California. The house was later sold and all the decorations removed.

by a family member, or pieces from a particular geographic locale, or consistent with a theme.

Another attraction of bricolage is foraging. One combs the shoreline primed for possibilities of artistic expression and display, imagining what can be done with a mottled driftwood log or a green serpentine rock. A forager has future usage in mind, converting a stroll into a hunt, and so acquires more than a passing knowledge of the landscape.

Along the Pacific Coast Highway in the 1970s, front-yard driftwood, shells, and fishing nets became part of a regional style, in which beachcombed items served as decoration or art. Beach access was key to the presence of this style. It was generally absent even a few miles inland. There was also scant ocean detritus in front of houses or shops along the highway in California's Big Sur—which spectacularly overlooks the Pacific Ocean but lacks convenient access down steep bluffs to the small beaches below. In areas of Washington State where Highway 1 meanders inland the iconography also reflected more forest than ocean.

However, in other areas beachcombing made far more aesthetic and economic sense. After a heavy storm, the shoreline could be covered by piles of logs, mounds of uprooted kelp, seashells, and human-made flotsam. All this attracted scavengers from near and far, and dozens of coastal communities in Oregon and Washington advertised beachcombing as a tourist attraction. Yard display was a practical storage method for an abundance of found items. What else could be done with colored fishing floats, piles of abalone shells, or interesting pieces of driftwood?

Starting in 1970, my wife and I drove the coastal highway from San Diego to Seattle photographing these front-yard displays. Most of the time we stayed on Highway 1, but occasionally we took a local road closer to the ocean. Beachcombed materials varied by region. In Southern California, they consisted mainly of seashells; in Northern California, driftwood and abalone shells; in Oregon and Washington, Styrofoam floats and nautical artifacts.

At the time, ocean detritus in front yards was so common that local residents took it for granted. My field notes from the Mendocino area written in 1975 declared, "This marks the start of the driftwood decoration area. I photographed every front yard containing driftwood this morning, but by the end of the day I was looking for interesting placements and sculptural uses." When I questioned homeowners about beachcombed objects, the answers were unremarkable—the materials were plentiful, free, and appropriate to modest wood-frame houses. On a cold, gray coastline such decorations added color and interest, particularly where lawns and flower gardens would not flourish.

Thirty years ago, I described Yachats, Oregon, as the driftwood capital of the U.S. Bleached, weather-beaten logs decorated homes and businesses and became fence posts and mailbox holders. More imaginative folks created animistic forms, fanciful driftwood animals and humanoids. A very few residents, typically older

reclusive men, constructed entire villages, producing fantasy environments.

Some coastal communities even hosted informal driftwood sculpture galleries. These were often marshes and mudflats where local people created public art for their own enjoyment and that of passing motorists. Such informal sculpture was built and exhibited in six Pacific Coast locations, most notably, Emeryville and Arcata, in California. The work was unusual for the art world, in that it was communal (several people were required to move and attach heavy logs), unsigned, accretive (people added to existing pieces), and unremunerated.

A Vanishing Ethos

Fast forward to the twenty-first century. The original mudflat sculpture galleries are closed. The two most prominent at Emeryville and Arcata are nature preserves closed to sculpture-building. The smaller galleries atrophied from road expansion or lack of interest, abandoned during the 1980s when unsigned, unremunerated art came to be seen as a relic of a more innocent, spontaneous age.

All the driftwood villages are also gone—Zig Zag Zoo and the painted wooden animals outside Sea Stones Cottages were discarded when the property was sold. Most of Romano Gabriel's front-yard flowers were scrapped after his death, but a few were saved and are exhibited behind glass in downtown Eureka. Most of the informal front-yard displays have also disappeared without a trace, as bungalows and weathered wooden shacks suitable for such embellishment have been replaced by condos, beach apartments, and upscale private developments.

Less material also means less display. Pollution has wiped out many of the mollusks whose shells washed up on Southern California shores. Further north, the abalone season has been shortened with strict species and quantity limits. Only a foolish poacher would line a fence with new abalone shells today. The decline of the Northwest timber industry has reduced the amount of driftwood on beaches there. With a smaller fishing fleet sailing out of West Coast ports, nets, traps and floats also wash up on shore less frequently.

In terms of individual expression, there have been some substitute activities. Mobile home parks (every town has one, sometimes several) remain refuges of bricolage. The residents, typically retired couples on fixed incomes, are holdovers from another era. They don't have space for a garden or money for professional landscaping, but they have ample time for beachcombing, one of the few free recreational activities available to them. A few insect-riddled, weather-beaten driftwood logs outside a mobile home, complemented by an anchor and kitsch objects—pink flamingos, gnomes, and plastic fish—suffice for decoration. The trailer hitch becomes display space for small treasures—sand dollar shells and colored glass pieces polished by waves and sand.

Sand sculpture also remains popular on beaches, with festivals attracting thousands of visitors; but the impermanence of the work makes it unsuitable as yard decoration.[3]

Balanced rocks have experienced a rise in popularity, some traceable to Andy Goldsworthy's films and books. Several coastal beaches with ample supplies of stones have even become galleries of rock art. And exceptional beach stones are still carted off to decorate residential front yards.

Changing Expressions

E.O. Wilson's concept of "consilience"—the unity of the arts and the sciences within a functional evolutionary framework—is helpful in understanding the impulses to create and display art made from found materials.[4] Using what is available, making the most of one's environment, has strong survival value. By manipulating the items, we learn their properties, what they can do for us in terms of construction and embellishment. We also acquire skills in excavation, stacking and weaving. This seems especially apposite for explaining children's interest in sandcastles, driftwood forts, and piled stones.

I see an evolutionary perspective as helpful in understanding these impulses to personalize front yards and create small fantasy environments. It is not hard to imagine these activities as training for young shelter builders. At one time, teaching children these skills furthered their survival and the continuation of one's genetic line.

The display of found items suggests additional evolutionary motives. An impressive array indicates success as a forager, another primordial survival skill. It shows awareness of the environment and of the multiple properties of materials. And embellishment is a means of marking territory. Humans don't secrete substances from special glands or sing songs to mark turf. Instead, we place objects with symbolic meaning. Yard decoration is a form of territorial marking. It also makes a house a more personal place for its occupants.

High land prices have dispossessed outsider artists from the coastline and limited display space for people who can afford to live there. Yet the impulse to collect, arrange and exhibit objects has not disappeared.

There seems little to be gained by trying to preserve the remaining abalone fences and driftwood animals. Because they are ephemeral, we should photograph and otherwise document them to show how people lived in a particular time and place. Front-yard bricolage was a product of abundant flotsam, modest homes with ample yards, and a culture that celebrated roadside attractions. Those conditions have changed, and residents of the region will find others ways to express their individuality and personalize their living spaces.

Notes

1. "To potter," from a Teutonic word meaning "small stick," was to poke about, stir, or do a thing inefficiently. As such, it is related to "poke" and "poky," meaning paltry. Putting these together shows a person who tinkers or potters, not fully engaged, not a serious craftsperson, and somewhat inefficient by professional standards. Most likely this individual lacks formal training—no one receives a degree or certificate in pottering, puttering, or tinkering.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
3. See, for example, Deidi von Schaewen and John Maisels, *Fantasy Worlds* (Köln: Taschen, 1999).
4. E.O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

All photos are by the author.

Above: Ma and Pa Krager exhibit driftwood animals outside their home in Chinook, Washington.