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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 artistically 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. 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 animistically, 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; 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. 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.*
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

Above: Portuguese fisherman’s house, Mendocino, California. The house was later sold and all the decorations removed.
rclusive men, constructed entire vil
gages, 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 enjoy-
ment 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 com-
munal (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 sculp-
ture galleries are closed. The two
most prominent at Emeryville and
Arcata are nature preserves closed to
sculpture-building. The smaller gal-
leries atrophied from road expansion
or lack of interest, abandoned during
the 1980s when unsigned, unremu-
nerated 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
scraped 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 embellish-
ment 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 profes-
sional landscaping, but they have
ample time for beachcombing, one
of the few free recreational activi-
ties available to them. A few insect-
riddled, weather-beaten driftwood
logs outside a mobile home, comple-
mented by an anchor and kitsch
objects—pink flamingos, gnomes,
and plastic fish—suffice for deco-
ration. 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.

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 “con-
silience”—the unity of the arts and
the sciences within a functional evo-
lutionary framework—is helpful in
understanding the impulses to create
and display art made from found
materials. Using what is available,
making the most of one’s environ-
ment, 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 sand-
castles, driftwood forts, and piled stones.

I see an evolutionary perspective
as helpful in understanding these
impulses to personalize front yards
and create small fantasy environ-
ments. 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
geneic line.

The display of found items sug-
gests 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 embel-
ishment 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 territo-
rial 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, putting, or tinkering.
3. See, for example, Deidi von Schaewen and John Maisels, *Fantasy Worlds* (Köln: Taschen, 1999).

All photos are by the author.

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