

ROBERT SOMMER

Art from Flotsam

Marrying art and ecology

“...bashed-in Clorox bottles were transformed into ghoulish heads, a hubcap became a face, and an interesting piece of wood was perfect for an open hand...”

—Art student at the Emeryville mudflats

For several decades, the San Francisco Bay Area was home to a unique form of recycling in which flotsam became public art. Whimsical sculpture made from wood and other tidal materials first appeared on Bay Farm Island in Alameda in 1960, migrating briefly to Golden Gate Fields, before settling for two decades at the Emeryville mudflats by the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge. Other driftwood galleries were created on marshes at the Highway 101 interchange in Larkspur, near the toll bridge station in Hayward, along the shore in Redwood City, at the landfill on the Albany Bulb, and most recently, at a county beach in Rodeo. Each gallery had a start and a finish, several becoming nature reserves or state parks.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described the innovative use of available materials as *bricolage*, in which an artisan finds new uses for what is already present in the environment. Building driftwood sculpture is an ideal activity for a *bricoleur* and a tidal impoundment a perfect work station. Available materials are varied and replenished daily from urban detritus washed ashore. The discards of Bay Area cities became the materials for creative celebration. The artisans revealed a sense of place in what they built, with wildlife a common theme; I could fill pages with photos of bird, fish, and marine mammal imagery in sculpture built and displayed at the Emeryville mudflats.

The work was anonymous (no pieces were signed), ephemeral (a sculpture might last several days or weeks depending on tide and wind), unremunerated (no one made a dime), and mysterious (it was rare to see anyone building). There were, in addition,

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Built and displayed near a busy freeway, the sculpture had an appreciative captive audience (Emeryville 1978).

imported pieces built elsewhere from new materials, such as Snoopy and the Red Baron and the Chinese Junk built by artist Tyler Hoare in his studio and displayed at the Berkeley pier, some of which still stand. But it was the sculpture built on site that was the most intriguing and, I think, important.

The type of wood suitable for building figurative sculpture is more common in tidal sloughs than on surf-pounded beaches. Ocean wood is hardened by salt and sun, rounded, polished, and difficult to nail. Artisans who employ ocean driftwood tend to arrange intact pieces as monuments or build beach shelters. In contrast, bay wood consists of splintery boards that would not have survived the crashing surf and pounding of ocean waves. Most is not virgin wood from the forest, but pieces of old piers, pilings, and other construction that found their way into the bay and washed up on the shoreline. Unlike ocean driftwood, whose individual pieces are beautiful in themselves, the boards in tidal marshes are not attractive. However, they are thin enough to be nailed together to make representational art. Informal

bricoleur rules require a minimalist technology of hammer, nails, and twine.

The existence of informal sculpture galleries around San Francisco Bay resulted from a combination of environmental and human factors that included undeveloped and publicly accessible tidal impoundments with an ample supply of flotsam, proximity to a college or art school, and a major highway with a good view of the shoreline, but not so accessible that vandals could destroy the created work on impulse.

Pieces large enough to be seen by motorists from a busy freeway a hundred feet away required several workers. Even if a lone individual constructed an 8-foot sculpture, other people would be needed to hoist it into place.

I brought several of my Environmental Awareness classes on field trips to the Emeryville mudflats to teach them about the creative use of found materials in a setting where the environment became information and learning was discovery. The following are excerpts from student journals:



Halloween sculpture (Emeryville 1977). Many of the two-dimensional pieces were visually most exciting in silhouette against the setting sun (Emeryville 1977).



The Band (Emeryville 1974) was one of the few composites whose pieces were repaired or replaced when they collapsed.



The large size needed to be seen from the freeway made this a cooperative art form (Emeryville 1981).

“For the privilege of building sculpture, I didn’t have to pay anything. I didn’t need a license or permit. All I needed was the creative urge and the willingness to get dirty. I didn’t feel pressured into being original; it was enough to apply imagination to the available materials . . . Adding to the carefree atmosphere were the unrestricted space, not worrying about messing up the place, or fear of breaking something.”

“Visually the eye is assaulted by the mundaneness of the whole place—dirty browns, boards patterned into muck, broken glass, cans, cast-off plastic bits, moldering cloth, forlorn bushes—even the greens look brown—olfactory sense numbed by decaying organic matter . . . to touch the mud itself is a must. Squishy cool, sometimes slimy. To reach for a stick, to find its apparent firmness already softened, fringed and blending with the earth.”

“As I progress along the marsh I begin to notice the various stages of decomposition of the more degradable paper, wood, and cloth, and the resolute unyielding nature of plastic and styrofoam, aluminum, steel, and glass . . . I know now that my total experience of the objects I initially saw as trash can be enhanced and enriched to the extent to

which I can take their essence into myself and communicate through their manipulation and combination to others.”

Art museums exhibit sculpture in a consistent light. It doesn’t make any difference whether one visits in the morning, afternoon, or evening, or in winter or summer; the art will look the same. A changing visual panorama awaited the visitor to a mudflat gallery. The appearance of the sculpture changed as the sun set and color disappeared. Pieces that were relatively invisible during the day, due to the predominant gray-on-gray quality of wood against bay, become vivid silhouettes against a pink-hued sky. The flowering plants at ground level added color and verve. A first visit to a mudflat gallery brought home images of impermanence and mortality. Most of the wooden creatures still standing were in stages of decrepitude. Arms and legs missing, heads fallen off, everywhere was rubble where now-unrecognizable figures had stood erect until brought down by wind and tide. The center post embedded deep in the mud with a few dangling boards was the last to fall.



Plastic beer can holders became fish scales (Emeryville 1974).

The practice of making art from recycled materials continues in many forms and venues, including the creative reuse depot in Oakland and the artist-in-residence program at the San Francisco dump. What made the mudflat galleries so special was their connection to place. The sculptures not only creatively reused found materials, they were not portable, not intended to be moved, and therefore had to be displayed where they were built at a scale intelligible to distant passersby. Often this required a several-foot elevation with a false front facing the highway. The large size called for multiple hands and made this a cooperative and anonymous art form. There was no plaque to acknowledge the multiple participants.

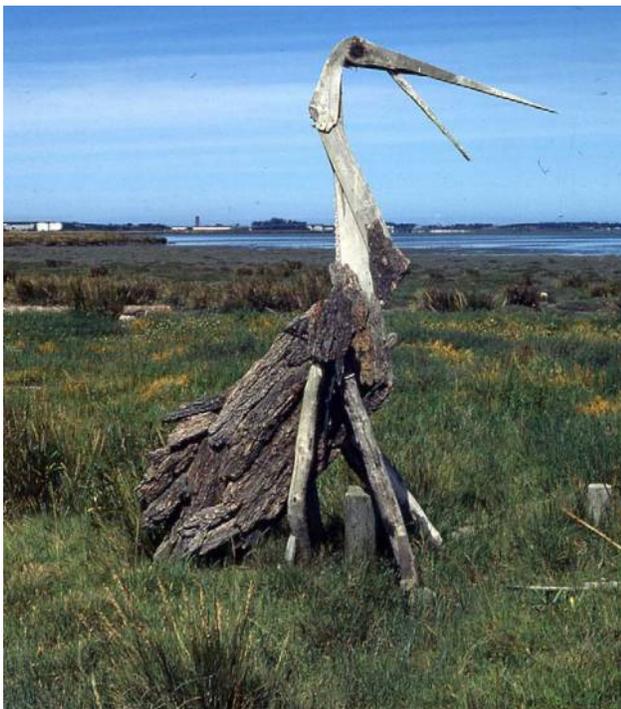
Driftwood sculpture had its heyday in the 1970s. It belonged to a time, place, and culture. When these changed, the practice waned. Professional art can survive lean times on the continuing interest of commercial galleries, dealers, critics, patrons, and collectors, art schools, and museums. Non-professional public art without monetary value lacks this support system. Yet to mourn for the

driftwood sculpture would be short-sighted, Organizing to preserve tidal marshes as galleries seems equally foolish without a cadre of artisans interested in building sculpture. There was not an organized campaign to save the flagship Emeryville gallery. When the proposal was made to turn it into a state park, there had been more than a decade of mediocre or no new sculpture. The time has passed, the people have changed, and the places have become nature reserves. I would have preferred co-existence between artists and wildlife—I have many photographs of shore birds in and around the sculpture. America has not been particularly kind to its artists, but it has been genocidal to its birdlife. Happily, the Emeryville Crescent and the Albany Bulb are now part of a linear shoreline state park. The sister gallery to the north on Arcata Bay became a national waterfowl reserve. These areas will remain undeveloped and a protected habitat for local and migratory birds.

Still, there is a certain nostalgia about the mudflat sculpture among artists and observers. Photographs of the sculpture continue to be a matter of civic pride and have been featured in films, videos, newspaper and magazine articles,



The Arcata Marsh was located across the road from the local airport. This wooden airplane was constructed by students from a nearby community college (Arcata 1974).



Tree bark gave texture to the egret's feathers (Arcata 1974).

book chapters, postcards, calendars, and exhibitions. The Bay Area is temporarily without a mudflat gallery. But given the fact that there have been already seven sculpture sites around San Francisco Bay, besides sister galleries on Arcata Bay and another near North Bend, Oregon, it is likely that future artisans will find another shoreline site to exercise their creative impulses.

The art world has expanded beyond studio lofts, museums, and galleries. Murals bring color to building exteriors and performance art enlivens city streets. The driftwood galleries presaged these developments with a noncommercial cooperative art form suited to a shoreline habitat and a public interest in recycling urban detritus.

For art classes, an outing to the marsh was a refreshing contrast to studio work. Scavenging was essential, and those who wanted to build had their chance while others collected materials. Decision-making was consensual rather than individualistic or authoritarian. A division of labor developed naturally and was nonhierarchical, with one person leading first, then a second and a third, each feeling



Huge dinosaur towered over passing motorists on Highway 101 (Arcata 1975).

connected to the total effort in the sense of accomplishment that completion brought. With each tentative and hesitant placement, the group decides “perhaps” or “let’s try it another way.” Time runs out sooner than expected and finishing touches must be added, the base strengthened, a prop

put into place as support against wind and tide. Departing the marsh at the end of the workday, students saw the flotsam strewn about in a new light, imagining how it fit into new sculpture. No longer litter, it was art material waiting . . . waiting. **B**