

BEACH ASSEMBLAGE, 2001

From Issue 2.36 (Winter 2002): Grief and Poetics*

On Beach Assemblage

Beach Assemblage was put together over twenty-five years, and the process of adding to it each summer often led me to reflect on the footprint one leaves behind.

I never actually thought about what bulldozers can do.

The assemblage's history is that Al Neil started it in the early 1970s, and that section can be seen as the central part. Then, during my "residency" there, we worked on it together. There were many times when I recall standing precariously up the steep slope behind the whole thing with him down on the deck yelling up to me. "Put that piece twelve inches to the left!" he'd say. "But it won't go in that direction!" I'd holler back, our collaboration reaching its zenith.

Fifteen years on, Al felt less and less interested in adding to it, but we continued our discussions anyways about what piece would go where. Until finally the day came when I could go ahead on my own. I remember rushing into the cabin with the latest object that had floated in on the high tide and asking him where it should go. He looked up from his books and told me that I could go ahead and





put anything anywhere I liked from then on without any more of these confounding discussions. There was a distinct difference in our ages and our experience; I recall thinking at that point that I must have “passed.”

The deck was the third one built there, since they often took a beating during the winter high tides and sometimes drifted off. I built this one in my seventieth summer. It was made from short lengths of used 2×12s interspersed with 2×4s. In various places, the understructure was secured with 8-inch-long bolts. The curved area—with the help of some painting—was planned to look like an oversized keyboard, acknowledging AI’s accomplishments as a great pianist and exceptional performance artist.

The forty-five feet of the assemblage (I paced it off eventually) had a smaller part that wrapped around a cedar tree, though that part is not seen in this photocollage. The whole thing was situated under three giant cedar trees whose boughs draped over it. Even from a short distance away, the assemblage could not be seen by those walking along the beach.

When our Blue Cabin and its environs of assemblages were eventually discovered by Port Authority, there were extensive and productive actions taken by a consortium of arts organizations and philanthropists to relocate and preserve them. The Blue Cabin got saved. But to move this “beach assemblage,” nothing would work. There was an excruciating deadline to get that junk out of there too.

—Carole Itter, November 2021

*Photographic details from AI Neil & Carole Itter’s “Beach Assemblage, 2001” originally appeared in Issue 2.36 (Winter 2002): Grief and Poetics; the photocollage version of the same work published here, alongside Carole Itter’s note, is appearing for the first time. Special thanks to Alan Somerville at Fidelis Art Prints for the digital file. Courtesy of the artist Carole Itter.