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Member Voices

# Studying Unformed Objects: The Provocation of a Compositional Mode

FROM THE SERIES: [Studying Unformed Objects](#)

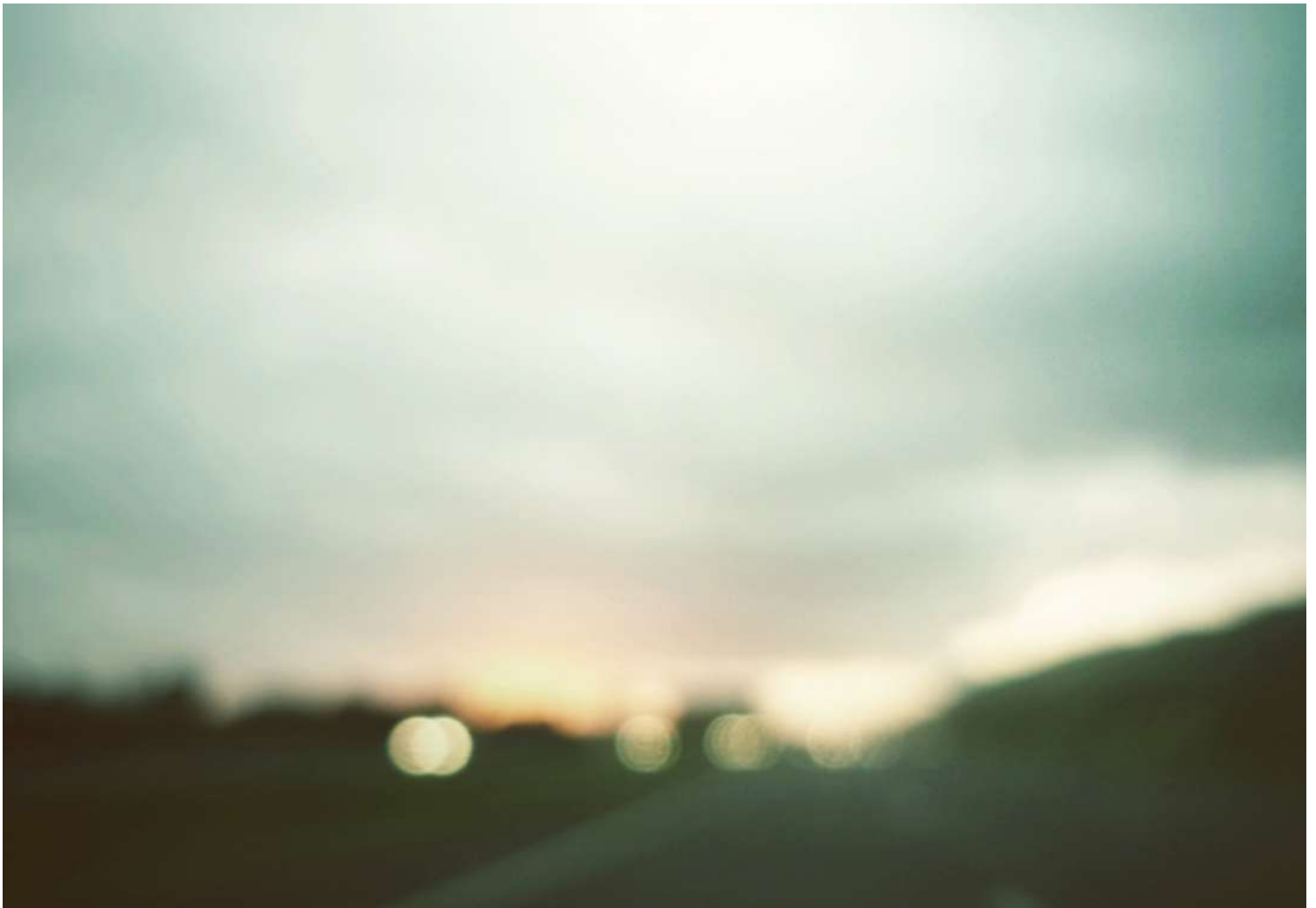


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A real is a tangle of elements thrown together in a radical composition. In nonrepresentational theory and new materialism, objects are lines of action and mood etched across the sensations, vibrations, movements, and intensities that comprise both experience and states of matter. The subject and the social, too, are part of the ongoing becoming of worlds written in whatever is emerging in circulations or resting in stone or the facades of strip malls.

A compositional writing worlds object-reals. It becomes a nimble associational register of connections and differences, materials and noumena, coagulations and diffusions in order to keep up with the distributed agencies of what's throwing together and falling apart.

The social-material world as a composition is a world made of entities that are not simply present and knowable but prismatic, flickering, and gathered into lines, angles of light or motion, for people who are attuned to them, or identified with them, or hostile to their existence, or tired of them, or excited to see their outline on the horizon, or sharply excluded from them (Stewart 2010). The social and material are not mere actualities but infrastructures of affect, potentiality, energetics, attunement, orientation, and atmosphere (Stewart 2011).

An object, in such a world, is a compositional node. Take, for example, the way Sarah Messer (2005, 1) begins her eclectic ruminations on what she calls Red House: New England's oldest continuously lived-in house, or so she says.

Before the highway, the oil slick, the outflow pipe; before the blizzard, the sea monster, the Girl Scout camp; before the nudist colony and flower farm; before the tidal wave broke the river's mouth, salting the cedar forest; before the ironworks, tack factory, and the shoe-peg mill; before the landing where skinny-dipping white boys jumped through berry bushes; before hay-field, ferry, oyster bed; before Daniel Webster's horses stood buried in their graves; before militiamen's talk of separating; before

Unitarians and Quakers, the shipyards and mills, the nineteen barns burned in the Indian raid – even then the Hatches had already built the Red House.

Here, Red House is a matter-form worlding landscape and event. A perspectival agency in which things jump into relation but remain unglued. Lines of contact radiate out from it in a prismatic structure of etchings and refrains. What comes into view is an ecology of paths in which any object or angle can be sent into a spin. History, here, literally accretes. Energies distribute across a field of subjects-objects-bodies-trajectories-affects.

The world according to Red House as a compositional node is the forms and forces of emergence and concrescence itself, of accrual and loss, of potentiality and its incomplete capture in the actuality of this and that. Red House, and everything it leans into, become phenomena lifted out of the realm of killed off things. Sarah Viking's writing meets Red House's registers of difference, singularity, motion and transduction like two parallel magical coloring books spreading qualities and scenes across a cartography. Its more-than-representationality veers off the critical track of tacking perception, context and cause onto an order of representations located nowhere in particular or in some paranoid hyper-place like the state or regional prejudice. What happens instead is the throwing together of the phenomena of wood and water, territory, mood, atmosphere, and sensory charge in the labor of a worlding.

People, rivers, time, and space pop with significance like the raised knap of corduroy or a paper doll cut out of a dreamworld. Representational things—things that were once named, perhaps written down, perhaps in some momentary consensus or, just as likely (to say the least) through some kind of trickery, manipulation, or accident, and then somehow metastasized into circulation—are raised, incised, made singular and charged, turned into an ether that reminds us of something or a weight like a diffuse headache induced by a shift in the barometric pressure. Their sensory/noumenal registers activate what Erin Manning (2011, 41) calls the *more-than*: "the ineffable amodality of experience that activates the contours of the event toward a moving, an encountering, a being-moved in a complex ecology of practice."

Space stretches out and pulls in as an immediate surround; time speeds and slows, simultaneously pausing on a still life and zooming through eras as if epochs were clouds casting shadows on the edifice of the shape-shifting house, like a realist film fast-forwarded through great arcs of history-in-itself or place-in-itself. The array of objects pulled into a legibility prompt curiosity and care about the potentialities in the things that happen, their resonances, habitations, and passing or enduring impacts.

What was it like when the white boys . . . when the horses . . . ? What was an Indian then, or a Unitarian, or a Hatch? What else happened here? Under what spell did things happen or half-happen or start to happen and fail? What is the river whose mouth was broken or the field then infused with marsh water? What are the river and the field doing now? What was it like when people and things gave up, or faltered, wore out, or started up again because of something?

My provocation is to draw theory, through writing, into the compositional attunement through which people and things venture out into reals. Reals are not the kind of thing that an order of representation simply organizes as truth and dominates but “transversal arrays of qualities or activities which, like musical refrains, give order to materials and situations, human bodies and brains included, as actions undertaken act-back to shape muscles and hone senses” (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 8). This is not the work of imagination on dead matter but a “mattering (that) is about the (contingent and temporary) becoming-determinate (and becoming-indeterminate) of matter and meaning” (Barad 2010, 254).

The point is that a world is always other than its representation, or what we know of it. Reals, built out of difference and repetition (Deleuze 1994), composed of potentiality and loss (Berlant 2011), lean toward entities that are both present and absent: atmospheres, affects, virtual memories, hauntings. These are themselves moments of endurance (or not), instants of the holding together of the disparate itself (Doel 2010). Being in some worlding is a corporeal and incorporeal capacity to be in a continuous variation of matter and event, one that sets off questions of discernibility (Seigworth 1998). These are the lines of thought and feeling a compositional node like Red House pulls into view and sets spinning.

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