

# Tactile compositions

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## Opening things

This chapter is an opening onto compositional theory. Here, compositional theory takes the form of a sharply impassive attunement to the ways in which an assemblage of elements comes to hang together as a thing that has qualities, sensory aesthetics and lines of force and how such things come into sense already composed and generative and pulling matter and mind into a making: a worlding.

Something reaches a point of expressivity. A line, a refrain, a tendency, an icon, a colour, a groove of habit or hope, or a rhythm or chaos of living take on qualities, a density, an aesthetic, become somehow legible, recognizable. Rather than rush to incorporate the thing coming into form into a representational order of political or moral significance, compositional theory tries to register the tactility and significance of the process of coming into form itself. Some assemblage of affects, effects, conditions, sensibilities and practices throws itself together into something recognizable as a thing. Disparate and incommensurate elements (human and non-human, given and composed) cohere and take on force as some kind of real, a world.

Scenes becoming worlds are singularities of rhythm and attachment. They require and initiate the kind of attention that both thinks through matter and accords it a life of its own. The tactile composition of things is about the meeting point between interiority and world (Thrift 2009).

In his essay *The Thing* Martin Heidegger (1971) asks what it might mean to meet the world not as representation, interpretation or raw material for exploitation but as a nearing, a gathering of the ringing between subjects and objects into something that feels like something. To thing is to world. An object that has become a thing is not flat and inert before a voraciously dominant subject but an enigma, a provocation. It is matter already configured (Grosz 2001). Bill Brown theorizes the thing as the amorphous characterization of concrete yet ambiguous things so pervasive in, and basic to, the everyday. We say 'There's a thing' about that person, scene, phenomenon that we recognize but cannot quite name. The very naming of the something as a thing acts as a placeholder for some future specifying. The thing marks an excess in things that remains physically and metaphysically irreducible to an object and can take the form of a fetish, a still life, or a scene of some potential (Brown 2001).

Elizabeth Grosz describes a thing as a point of temporal narrowing and spatial localization that constitutes a singularity out of the sensations, vibrations, movements and intensities that comprise experience. We recognize a thing coming into form through a kind of empirical attunement: a leaning into the scene of something throwing together (2001). Thought becomes a responding, a recalling, a gathering together, a becoming vigilantly protective of the gathering of a world in the presence of a thing (Heidegger 1971). This is a basis of the animacy of things.

Tim Ingold outlines the qualities of what he calls the open world in which ‘persons and things relate not as closed forms but by virtue of their common immersion in the generative fluxes of the medium – in wind and weather’ (2007: S19). Such attunements are pervasive and ordinary. An atmospheric world or thing is mobile and generative; it produces multiple potentialities for coherence and shift. An emergent world, always almost there, is itself always leaning into a mobilization.

Thrift historicizes the question of emergent force and coherence in terms of sensory shifts in ways of being in the world prompted by emergent forms of capitalism, digitalization and built environments. Capitalism now aims to directly incite and capture the semiconscious flows of affect that constitute sensations and sensibilities. The minutely calibrated digitalization and mapping of objects in everyday use prompts the kinds of perceptual labor and expertise that can read the animacy of objects or the framing up of thin slices of life into worlds (Thrift 2004). New forms of intuition become capable of rapidly reading gatherings of elements as things. Sensory contact zones breed alterations in the sense of being in the world. Lived atmospheres are continuously generating suggestible forms of coherence. We live in a paradigm of suggestion, looking for ways to use built life within us (Thrift 2009, 2011).

Derek McCormack adds that an attunement to things coming into form is an ethics. Tactile compositions animate both objects and the attachments and attunements that constitute selves. They are ‘felt as ways of going on in the world’ (McCormack 2003: 495), as ‘increases and decreases, brightenings and darkenings’ (Deleuze 1998: 145). Approaching the generativity of an emergent world requires attention to the way that subjects and objects emerge from a connective multiplicity of human and non-human forces, the power of which traverses people and matter in extensive, intensive, temporal and ontogenetic ways (McCormack 2009).

## River thing, Barton Springs

Newcomers to Austin first see Barton Springs from an elevation. You look down steep, green grassy banks shaded by century-old pecan trees to a river-pool thing a thousand feet long. Preternaturally long and river wide. The water swells against concrete sides built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, its colours almost bruised with force and density. In places it has a brilliant green and turquoise hue. In other places it goes turgid brown and even, where the plants grow thick and rise to the surface, a true black. The spring that fills the river-pool is a tear in the limestone bedrock eighteen feet below the diving board in the dead center of the pool. This tear in the rock pumps out twenty seven million gallons of water a day. Bodies twist and flip over it, cutting the surface of the water with a belly flop or the expertise of ten thousand dives. It is a thing to plunge deep enough to catch a watery glimpse of the spring-tear pulsing like a steady heartbeat: the literal ‘heart of Austin.’

The water on the surface above the tear churns in a cold, dense vortex, like a wine cooler. At a year-round temperature of 68 degrees, it pulls body temperatures down fast on a triple-digit day.

At the shallow end of the river-pool thing, families, young lovers and rowdy groups of friends slip over the irregular rock bottom, slick with algae. Performing the shock of the unbelievable cold, they try to avoid full immersion, or they jump in, or flat out refuse to take a second step in.

People-watching here is a tactile, visual submersion experience. There are hairdos, tattoos, swimwear of all kinds, dares, refusals, splashing, 'Oh, *come on*.' People explore the cliffs that line one side, looking for the crawfish that peak out from under the rock ledges.

The far end is for floats. On a hot summer day, it is an acre of bumper-to-bumper plastic beds in bright colors. Oiled bodies lie in the sun, wrists and ankles hanging in the dark water. Young women strut around topless on the sidewalks.

The high grassy banks on either side are a sea of gazes, reading and lazy talk. There are drum circles, Frisbee throwing, dope smoking, yoga, Tai Chi.

Lifeguards perch on high stands down the length of the pool, leaning over the water like the great blue herons that lurch over the concrete sides in the early morning, piles of crawfish carcasses and fish bones at their feet. In the winter, an early-morning fog rises from the water. Die-hard lap swimmers troll up and down in wet suits like sleek black river creatures. At night, lights sparkle across the water and there is only the sound of the quiet strokes or a giggle. There may be an element of fear.

The pool is in the channel of Barton Creek. A chain-link fence over the dam at the deep end divides the pool from the downstream creek that flows out into Town Lake. Here, the water rages out of the dam and then goes shallow across treacherous rocks. This area is called the dog pool. There are dogs, boom boxes, homeless people, kids, more dope smoking, kayaks, ducks, runners, babies in strollers. The rocks shape-shift as people fashion them into bridges across the creek or circles of Zen rock sculptures.

All of these scenes, moments and habits are 'things' at Barton Springs: the toplessness, the families with small children hunting out crawfish on the ledges below the cliffs, the practice of jumping into the freeze or slowly immersing, the people watching, what goes on at the diving board, the swimmer devotees, the music-making, the dog pool.

The compositional tactility of Barton Springs incites framed thing-events. I have seen a wedding (bride and groom taking the plunge off the diving board), modeling sessions with long-legged waifs in black leather and lace, a contact dance performance, a *Keep Austin Breastfeeding* flashmob, and an aqua dance troop performance in which fifty dancer-swimmers invented water figures and movements as they swam the length of the pool as a single wave, a seal, a brood of mermaids.

It also incites political movements and citizen action volunteer projects, infusing them with its compositionality. The *Save Our Springs* (SOS) alliance, created to fight upstream development on Barton Creek, became a force in Austin municipal politics beginning with an all-night performance of three-minute speeches before the state legislature and leading to many green initiatives in the city. Friends of Barton Springs Pool enlists city council members to work on their *Clean the Pool* days, when 100 volunteers, fed by Texas Coffee Traders, Torchy's Tacos, Maudie's Tex-Mex and Alamo Drafthouse, sweep up and down the drained pool in a Zen push-brooming conga line.

The tactile compositionality of a thing might be heavily marked, even iconic. Or it might be in a state of potentiality, or perhaps slowly accreting more or less unnoticed. It might be intimate or coldly calculating, eventful or a dullness, a drag. It might be densely consequential, the smell of a sea change. Or more mechanical, like revving an engine.

Compositional theory, then, might skid over the surface of a thing throwing itself together or take pains at a slow description that pauses on each element. It might spread itself across a scene, sampling everything, or hone in on a single strand to follow it as it moves, maybe document how it pulls into alignment with other strands or falls out of sync, becoming an anomaly or a problem. It might hone in on the cold of the water. Or tell the ironic story of unintended consequences of how the Barton Springs salamander became a protected species and forced the

closure of the springs in a battle between the SOS alliance and developers. Or it might linger in the dressing rooms and showers, built without roofs so that the air is fresh and the sun warms wet bodies.

## Beach thing, Holden Beach

Visceral attachments incite and animate identifications, responsibilities and connections (Connolly 1999: 21). Singularities of water, sand, sun, cold, shells, breasts, mold, blue herons, lifeguards, turtles, sharks, swimmers in suits, or a fleet of Portuguese men of war blown into contact with human skin throw worlds into form. This is why 'the beach,' for instance, is so compelling as a thing. And why surprise encounters across species carry the charge of an opening.

Coming in to Holden Beach, North Carolina, you drive through flatlands past country churches, farm stands, crab shacks, dollar stores, a bookstore. At the end of the road, there is a steep climb up the bridge that crosses the intracoastal waterway. It is only when you reach the top of the bridge and hit the sharp curve to the right that you see over the rooftops of oceanfront cottages built high on pilings to the blue green ocean stretching across a vast horizon. The sun is bright, the colours, saturated. A row of pelicans flies close to the surface of the gentle ocean.

At the centre of the beach thing here is the Turtle Watch Program. Volunteers patrol the beaches on all-terrain vehicles in the predawn. They are looking for crawls. Giant sea turtles, mostly loggerheads, use the island as their hatching grounds, returning to the same shore where they were hatched twenty or twenty-five years before. The intervening years of a long youth are spent travelling around the world on the great sea currents. Only the females return to ground, only to hatch. They are an endangered species. Their moon-crawls can be thrown off course by the lights of oceanfront property or the flashlights of night beachcombers. Every rental property is equipped with instructions on how to limit human interference, little squares of red cloth to cover flashlights, and a red turtle refrigerator magnet with the Turtle Patrol's 24-hour pager number to report mother turtles laying nests, injured or stranded turtles, unattended hatchlings, disturbed nests or the harassment of a sea turtle. Calls are returned in less than five minutes. A fine of up to \$100,000 and/or a year in prison is the penalty for harassing a sea turtle or disturbing its nest. All unattended beach equipment must be removed from the beach each day between 6 p.m. and 7 a.m. to ensure a clear path for crawls. People are asked to pick up any rubbish, especially plastic, from the beach.

Do not release balloons on the beach. These items look like jellyfish to sea turtles. Fill in any large sand hole you dig before nightfall, they could trap a turtle, cause a night or early morning beach walker to fall and possibly break a leg, or cause an accident to Turtle Patrol ATV riders in the early morning.

Every Wednesday night, Turtle Patrol hosts an educational turtle programme at the Town Hall. The official Holden Beach t-shirts sport turtle designs. There are also, of course, turtle earrings, necklaces, flipflops, puzzles, boogie boards and beach towels.

The very air of Holden Beach rings sea turtle in a kind of ecstatic naturalism. Under the sign of the sea turtle, a responsive attunement, or at least the possibility of it, lodges on the surface of beachness here and becomes resonant in encounters with objects, creatures and scenes. It is as if the proliferating phenomena of sea turtleness here mobilizes a vague, worlding space between forms of reality, knowledge and practice (Thrift 2011). A pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies are thrown into a realm of potential (Stewart 2007). The virtual has an existence

(McCormack 2009). The subject, in searching out the contours of a world, attaches to the moving, striking, and sometimes strange or weird intensities that pull attention into alignment with phenomena.

Sea turtles are older than dinosaurs. They eat jellyfish, sponges, algae, sea grasses and crustaceans. They live to be over one hundred years old. Loggerheads can weigh up to four hundred pounds, but leatherbacks, now 'returning' to the island to nest, are much bigger. It is bizarre, beyond belief really, how sea turtles find their way back to the island where they were hatched twenty years earlier. Only females ever come ashore. A mature female turtle (twenty to thirty years of age) returns to her natal beach every two to three years to lay nests. Each season an egg-bearing female lays one to seven nests, with an average of four nests.

Once a sea turtle crawl is found, a team assembles to find the eggs. If the nest is in an unsafe location, as many of them are, each of the over one hundred eggs is painstakingly mapped in its place in relation to the other eggs as it is removed. Each is carefully carried to a new nest hole dug to exactly the same depth (i.e. the length of the mother turtle's fin) and precisely resituated. The site is staked off. A sign is put in place warning that this is a 'Sea Turtle Nest Protected By The Endangered Species Act.' For sixty days, the nest is monitored. Toward the end of the incubation period, shallow trenches are dug for the hatchlings' first crawl to the sea. The first sign of a hatching is a boiling of the sand. Turtle Patrol members hold vigil throughout the hatching and crawl, recording each hatchling and its progress to the sea, each non-fertile egg, each strangeness. The temperature of the sand determines the sex of the hatchlings. Only one in ten thousand hatchlings reaches maturity. There are freaks of nature: five-inch, elongated eggs with five yolks each, eggs whose shells are black and hard as nails. There are situations to become attuned to: tides, hatchling confusion, formations in the sand. There are natural predators to know: ghost crabs, foxes, raccoons, birds, dogs and large fish. The sharpening attunement to the turtle world comes with the deepening recognition that the real problem here is the very presence of humans: boat propellers, fishing gear, debris and trash, construction on nesting beaches, artificial lights and pollution are the bottom lines of sea turtle endangerment.

Turtle Patrol is the slow rhythm of watching for a hatching, sharp eyes looking out for a crawl, emergencies and dramas of good and ill, metrics and science factoids, and tones of voice. It is a thing made out of the existence of retirement and retirees and the concept of the vacation. Families with children are closely aligned with it, as is, I suspect, the very feeling for children for those who have it. Metrics and machines are also central to it, all the measuring of nests and eggs, the coolers used to transport the eggs, the all-terrain vehicles, the turtle sea rescues by kayak. In 2010, there were twenty-nine nests with 2897 eggs. The first nest of the season is usually late to hatch. There are stories of turtles being guided in from the sea. Returning turtles are often identified by their shell markings and scars; they are named. There is a Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre for those turtles that need medical care or a place to heal.

On Holden Beach, the sea turtle is a major scene of the beach thing coming into form. There are also things forming up around sharks, pools, yoga, heat, afternoon thunderstorms, hurricane season, boats, shrimp, beach music, peaches, Crazy Mary's folk art, class, race, ice cream, beach access, bicycles, the stuff that memories are made of, salt water taffy, specific forms or tempos of function and dysfunction, collective ownership of places, and spoiled and damaging utopic dreams of the getaway or the perfectly settled life.

## Things within things

When the beach becomes a thing, it becomes a new medium through repetitive automatisms: forms, conventions, genres (Cavell 1980). It circumscribes limitless potentiality into a collection

of somethings and so attests to the force of singular improvisations. The beach is a tactile composition that feels ‘full’ and so confirms its own worlding status (Thrift 2011). It is an emergent field on call, on the ready, in which there are always singularities in the process of actualizing (McCormack 2008). It is a field saturated with expressivity, a field in which form stretches from the physical to the virtual, in which form *is* at once material and potential (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Forms activate force, virtuality, continuity, connectivity. Producing examples as singularities is a way of activating worlds. The details of a thing matter not because of their truth value or what they symbolize but because they are the movements of a field forming up. They matter not because of a logic or a hierarchy of what matters but, first, because they have come to matter. And in that instant they pull attention into the form of a tactile perception in which ‘the intensity of such attention can be as important as depth of insight gained, and ... what one folds into an encounter ... can be as important as what one finds out’ (McCormack 2009: 493).

The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day’s pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day’s events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again.

*(Didion 2006: 103)*

In the singularities of a beach thing, recursivity is a force of nature and thought is almost solid, or experienced. The tides, the waves, the shells, rocks, seaweed, boats on the horizon, bodies sunbathing, swimming, riptides and undertows that threaten, the possibility of sharks, the images that circulate, the stories, the habits of walking and looking, what happens to a mind sitting on a beach immersed in the sound of the waves and the unrelenting wind. In a form-become-thing, matter and circuits of reaction touch.

This does not mean that all beaches are the same. On the contrary, it means that the beach thing is a generative emergence of form composed out of the singularities of what happens.

## **The beach thing 2: Plum Island, Massachusetts**

Plum Island, or ‘PI’ as it is called on the bumper stickers, is an eleven-mile long barrier island off the far northern tip of Massachusetts. Two-thirds of the island is dedicated to the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, which supports over three hundred species of birds as well as a broad variety of other wildlife. It is the designated habitat of the federally endangered piping plover and the state-threatened least tern. Its miles of beaches, accessible only by a partially paved road or in some places only by foot, are closed from April 1st to mid-August to protect plover and tern nests. Volunteers are stationed on the beach at the boundary of the refuge to turn pedestrians back. The refuge is a major national research site for undisturbed beach and marsh habitats and the effects of mercury and other pollutants on them. Invasive plant species are pulled up, one plant at a time, to conserve landscape biodiversity: perennial pepperweed, purple loosestrife, brush honeysuckle, phragmites, oriental bittersweet. Three man-made freshwater marshes, or impoundments, are managed to provide optimal habitats for migratory birds and river otters. Water levels are lowered to exposed mud flat for feeding and resting areas during shorebird migration, and raised again during waterfowl migration. The ordinary habits of the saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrow and the tree swallow are followed throughout the year across the microclimates of the salt pannes, shrublands, and extensive boardwalks nestled into the dunes.

The beach itself has been well known since the seventeenth century as a wild and dangerous place. The swift tidal currents make boating and swimming hazardous. The arctic Labrador current flows from north to south along the shore, migrating sand into the mouth of the Merrimack river and chilling the coastal waters to a deep navy blue, near-black, hue. The shallow beach shelf extending some distance out to sea produces deadly undertows and riptides, constant shipwrecks and drownings. During severe storms, the beach is inundated and the breakers strike the dune line.

The intensity of the place is long-figured in literature.

Plum Island, a wild and fantastical sand beach, is thrown up by the joint power of winds and waves into the thousand wanton figures of a snow drift.

*(Joshua Coffin, 1845, p. vii)*

... the roaring of the breakers, and the ceaseless flux and reflux of the waves, did not for a moment cease to dash and roar, with such a tumult that, if you had been there, you could scarcely have heard my voice the while; and they are dashing and roaring this very moment ... for there the sea never rests. We were wholly absorbed by this spectacle and tumult, and ... we walked silent along the shore of the resounding sea.

*(Henry David Thoreau 1985: 46)*

Residents are divided between the rich and the poor; both ocean side and marsh side are eclectic mixes of housing but there is also a sense of class divide between the two sides, connected only in one place by a single road. There are vacation mega-mansions and shacks occupied by people who dig clams for a living. Local businesses are eclectic and show attitude or style: The BeachComa, Plum Crazy, Mad Martha's Beach Café, Bob Lobster, Blue – The Inn on the Beach. The winter is harsh. People do what they do. The year-round residents watch out for each other, or they just watch each other. There is a vigilance. There is a movement to secede from the two municipalities, Newbury and Newburyport, which are said to overtax the island for the benefit of the mainland. The tidal marshes are spectacular, especially at sunset, with a continually changing population of birds, ranging from plovers, redwing blackbirds and killdeer to egrets, gulls, marsh hawks, great blue herons, snowy owls and osprey.

And then there are the greenhead flies. They bite hard and persistently, attacking the soft wet flesh on the beach or the exposed areas of limbs in the nature preserve. Unlike mosquitoes, which insert a delicate, needle-like proboscis through the skin to draw blood, greenhead flies bite a chunk of flesh with their jaws and lap at the blood. Peak greenhead season is the month of July and the flies are pervasive on Plum Island because the island is ringed with robust marshland. Adult flies mate in the open marsh. The female lays her first egg mass, containing hundreds of eggs, within a few days. To lay additional masses she needs a blood meal. The larvae are also predacious, foraging through wet thatch, surface muck and marsh vegetation on other insect larvae or small animals. The larvae overwinter, form a pupa, and emerge as adults in late spring. Adult flies have long lives (three to four weeks), and can fly at fifty miles an hour in a range as far as thirty miles.

During greenhead fly season, the island sports hand-painted signs of human skeletons covered in flies to warn off visitors. The painted signs are even used at the entrance gate to the nature preserve.

But in the last two years something magical has happened. You may slowly begin to notice the large black boxes in the marsh. They look like a modernist art installation. These are traps developed originally by Rutgers researchers to measure the greenhead fly population. Box trap

design is circulated on the web. It is very precise, although each trap costs only a few dollars to build. A four-sided box with a screen top and open bottom. Fifteen by thirty-two inches on each side. Forty-inch legs attached to stakes in the ground. The legs buried so that the top sits exactly twenty-four inches above the ground surfaces. This is important because the greenhead usually flies at about this altitude. It is important that the trap be painted a glossy black to contrast with its surroundings and to absorb heat from the sun. Flies enter the trap from below and move into secondary traps on the top of the box. The top of the trap is made of a metal insect screen. Inside there are the cones and collectors. (Cut holes two to three inches from the sides of the trap and two and a half inches in diameter; make cones of insect screen of precise dimensions; cement the cones around the holes; make two collectors out of clear plastic containers such as a shoe box or cake box; fit these over the cones ...) A decoy can be added beneath the trap. A beach ball fourteen to sixteen inches in diameter and painted shiny black helps attract flies when suspended beneath the trap. The decoy should clear the ground by four to six inches so it moves with the breeze. Clusters of two or three traps in a fly path capture exponentially more flies than isolated traps. Vegetation beneath and around the trap should be kept low (four to six inches high) for about a six-foot radius. Traps have collected over one thousand greenhead flies per hour.

Last year on Plum Island, there were no flies at all, they say. This year there were some. But then one day when we decided to go into the preserve there was the hand-painted sign; we turned around.

## Conclusion

A thing throws a worlding together out of objects and attunements, practices and incipient tendencies. The ricocheting between subjects and objects settles for a minute on matter already configured. An attunement to a thing not quite named, and yet singular and precise, produces an opening. A field of potentiality, a virtuality, takes on an existence and pulls itself into motions whether as a set of threats or possibilities, as a shining little something or the dull contours of what is too well known brought into cruel relief. There can be drama, beauty, horror, annoyance in this. The root process of things taking form is ordinary and pervasive: a process of making things matter (like it or not), a leaning in, a vigilance, a way of going on in the world (McCormack 2009).

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