



**WALK ON THE BEACH**



# WALK ON THE BEACH

THINGS FROM THE SEA,  
VOLUME 1

EDITED BY  
MAGGIE M. WILLIAMS AND  
KAREN OVERBEY

TINY COLLECTIONS

**WALK ON THE BEACH: THINGS FROM THE SEA, VOLUME 1**

©2016 Maggie W. Williams and Karen Overbey

This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or publishers endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

This work first published in 2016 by **tiny collections**,  
an imprint of **punctum books**  
created by the **Material Collective**  
[punctumbooks.com](http://punctumbooks.com) | [materialcollective.org](http://materialcollective.org)

The Material Collective is dedicated to fostering respectful intellectual exchange and innovative scholarship in the study of the visual arts, in the academy, and in the broader, public sphere. We believe that excellent scholarship can grow out of collaboration, experimentation, and play, and we work to create spaces where scholars from many different backgrounds, both traditional and non-traditional, can come together for mutual enrichment.

Tiny Collections are gatherings: thoughtfully assembled things, presented in warm light with a murmured "lookit" for introduction. Tiny Collections are the things we do, together.

ISBN-13: 978-0692707647

ISBN-10: 0692707646

Book design: Chris Piuma.

DON'T LOOK  
AT ME  
THAT WAY

# THIS IS THE FIRST

This is the first of two *Things from the Sea* collected in October 2014 at the Third Biennial BABEL meeting, *On the Beach*. This first thing, *Walk on the Beach*, catalogues the Material Collective's session+flash-exhibition, an experiment in collecting and curation. The next thing, *Sea Monsters*, will include the papers from the session "The Nature of the Beast/Beasts of Nature: Monstrous Environments."

*Walk on the Beach* began with conversations about the sea, collaborative meditations on chance, discovery, agency, beauty, and material ecology. We talked about the fraughtness of *home* and of coming to be there, the confluence of the personal and the professional, the delicate care of treading the world, and the possibilities of storytelling. We thought about what happens when we encounter stuff, when we take it, change it, *do something with it*. When we display it, or sculpt it, or collect it. When we make some thing an object, and an object of looking.

Then we met on the beach. We walked and talked about loss, home, agency, and liminality, we collected things: we picked up stones, feathers, seaweed. We pointed to stuff, gathered it, let it strike our fancy. Every shell nurtured a conversation among artists, scientists, historians, poets, archivists, surfers, philosophers, and pirates. We brought the sea-things back, manipulated them, and displayed them as works of art.

*Walk on the Beach* is a souvenir of that project, a record of our bounty. It also exposes a process that is at the heart of art historical work: close looking. Thinking through objects, thinking with objects. Letting the things help us to tell their stories. This tiny collection immerses us in the visual and the material and the process of looking, together.

—Maggie M. Williams and Karen Overbey















At the margin  
between the  
infinite expanse of  
oceanic consciousness  
and  
the materiality of  
the shore,  
the walking human  
is an embodied  
hinge.



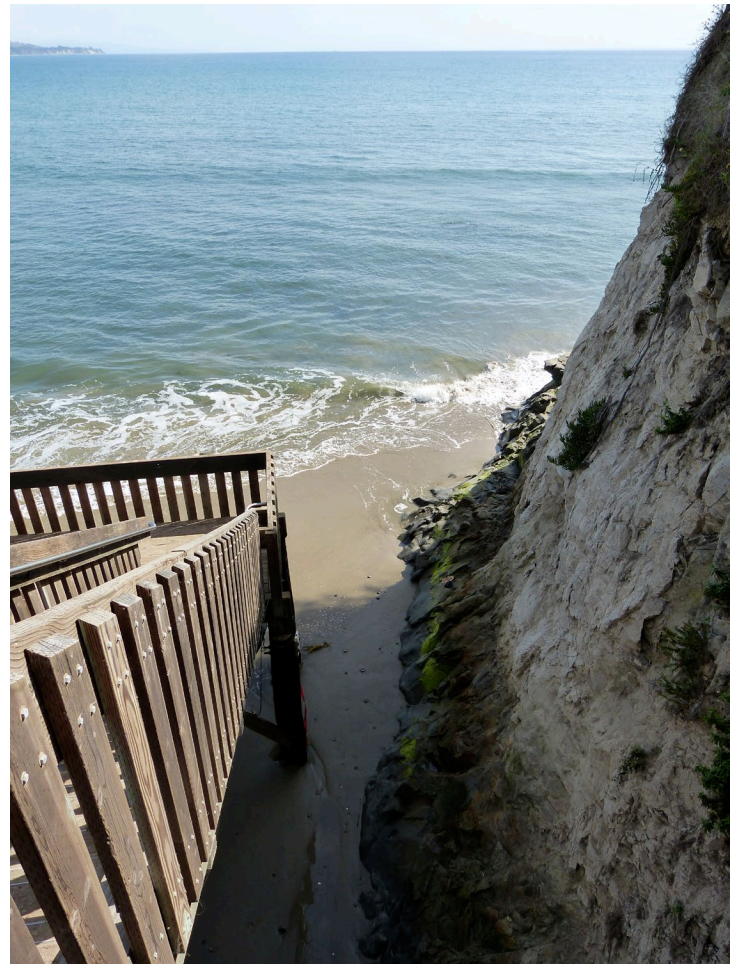








An image (?) of  
water-lines in sand









# BEACHCOMBING

Maura Coughlin, Asa Simon Mittman, Lora Webb and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen traded images of objects they had found while beachcombing.

Their descriptions of these items, going clockwise from the top left:

“I found it in Destin, FL when I was probably 8 or 9.” (Lora)

“Found on the banks of the Thames, right by the Banker’s Pub, this past summer.” (Asa)

“A petric egg gleaned as I wandered the coast of southern Maine. It still tastes salty if you lick it.” (JJC)

“Found in September of 1999 on a beach in Nova Scotia. A sheep’s horn (I think) with a hole drilled through it. That’s how I found it.” (Maura)

Then they created the following new stories for the objects.

Originally posted to In the Middle, October 12, 2014:  
<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2014/10/beachcombing.html>





## MAURA COUGHLIN

Hey, Beachcomber: Pick me up.

I'm worth it. Look, I was a brass key when that really meant something. Brass. No stars or leopard print or any of that stupid shit.

You had to be cut back then, held up to the original, proofed for fit. It mattered. I was a blank, then the old guy dragged himself to the back of the hardware store and ground me down.

Tell me a plastic card has the charm. Tell me you can wear that piece of trash on a chain around your neck or leave it under a rock by the beach for that woman you sent the letter. So what if she never came. You get what I'm saying?

Can't you see that I'm the REAL THING? Just pick me up — my lock still works . . . I know it. I can feel it.



## ASA SIMON MITTMAN

Ok, so, I get it, I'm an ornament, a bit of decoration, an *objet d'art*, if you will, and I know this is a pretty sorry existence for a fine bit of battle gear like myself, but I tell you what: I been around a damned long time, and this is the best stretch I've had. I mean, when I first sprang out of that guy's head, I thought this was going to be fan-frickin-tastic. All day, bash this ram, bash that ram, the satisfying, hollow knock of horn on horn, and it was like that for a while, but then, turns out the fella I'm strapped to, well, he ain't exactly the alpha male, if you know what I'm talking about. So, when we're just little lambs, knocking around, it's good fun, but then we're getting hammered pretty good, and spending more and more time lurking at the edge of the flock, munching grass on our lonesome. No fun, that. And then, bam! Like a clap of thunder, and there's this searing pain, and then I can't see a damned thing, because, it turns out, I'm lying in the tall grass, broken off. Ages, sitting there, doing nothing, listing to the flock braying softly in the distance. Never did find out what happened to my ram. Then, one day, hey, something's happening! Great! I'm picked up, handled carefully, and I think things are maybe on the up and up, but then, out of nowhere, this guy pulls out a freaking drill, and starts boring a hole straight through me! In one side, out the other. Unbelievable. Then, he threads a strap through the hole. He fills me up with some black powder, and jams a plug in my opening, and slings me on his belt. For the next few years, it's nothing but blam-blam! Hunter shooting dumb brutes who got no idea what's happening, and now I'm wondering, am I complicit? I've got no choice, but still, who hangs around, holding this jerk's gunpowder for him? Yeah, me. Would have been worth it, if he'd ever have shot that brute who broke me off my ram, but never did. Then, one day, the strap breaks while he's jumping over a stream, running after some damned deer, and I'm down, right in the water. At any rate, I get the powder cleaned out, which feels good. Never liked the taste of it. And then, slowly, I'm carried, bouncing, down toward the sea. The journey takes ages. Years? Decades? No idea, but at the end of that, the beach seems nice. For a while. Sand and some sun, sometimes, but sooner or later, some idiot with a dog always shows up, and then, I'm like any other bit of detritus to them. Tossed into the surf, hauled back in a drool-filled mouth, out and back, out and back, and then unceremoniously dropped on the sand. Sometimes, I'm buried in the sand, nothing but crabs and sand lice passing by now and then. Other times, the tides haul me out, and its more damned dogs. "Come on, boy! Go get it!" Pathetic. So then this hand

picks me up, and I'm figuring, here we go again, and I brace for the spiraling throw to the waves, but instead, I get some interested murmurs. I'm gently turned this way and that and, eventually, slipped into a soft jacket pocket. A while later, I'm rinsed in the clear water of a sink, and then, thank god, finally let to dry out for the first time in who knows how long. And then, I'm set on a shelf, by some nice looking books. On occasion, someone picks me up gently and turns me over, but mostly, I just get to sit here, calmly, quietly, undisturbed.



## LORA WEBB

In the beginning, I was much larger. I was born in the hot depths of the earth. Cooling slowly, I became solid, white, and speckled. I was a layer of the earth for a long time until the ice came, gouging a hole through my middle and splitting me into huge boulders. I became we. We traveled together beneath the sheet of ice, becoming smoother and rounder as we rubbed against one another. By the time we reached the sea we were with many other stones — some white like us, some reddish, some very gray. The ice plunged us into the sea before melting away. Years and years passed and I was rolled back and forth, back and forth in the water, I became smaller and rounder, smaller and rounder. With every storm, we were mixed more and more with the other stones. Some times I would end up far out to sea, other times I would be washed ashore. I've been picked up by human hands many times. People admired my roundness, my whiteness, but they always put me back, or balanced me on one of my fellow stones, making tiny, ephemeral towers. But the last person kept me and took me away from the sea. For now, at least, I no longer roll with the other rocks and the waves.



## JEFFREY JEROME COHEN

*tooth, possibly fossilized, England*

When Augustine combed the beach at Utica he discovered on that receding shore the tooth of a mammoth, which he mistook for a giant's molar. He committed to parchment a reverie about his find, a story of vast humans and time out of memory, but the tooth he hurled back into the sea. Currents moved the thing from Africa to India, then around the jutting coasts of Europe. Because a saint had once grasped the tooth, the object cannot erode. It has over time diminished, however, and when discovered along the Thames held no narrative of woolly beasts or primordial giants or a holy man walking the beach and dreaming theology.









+twins





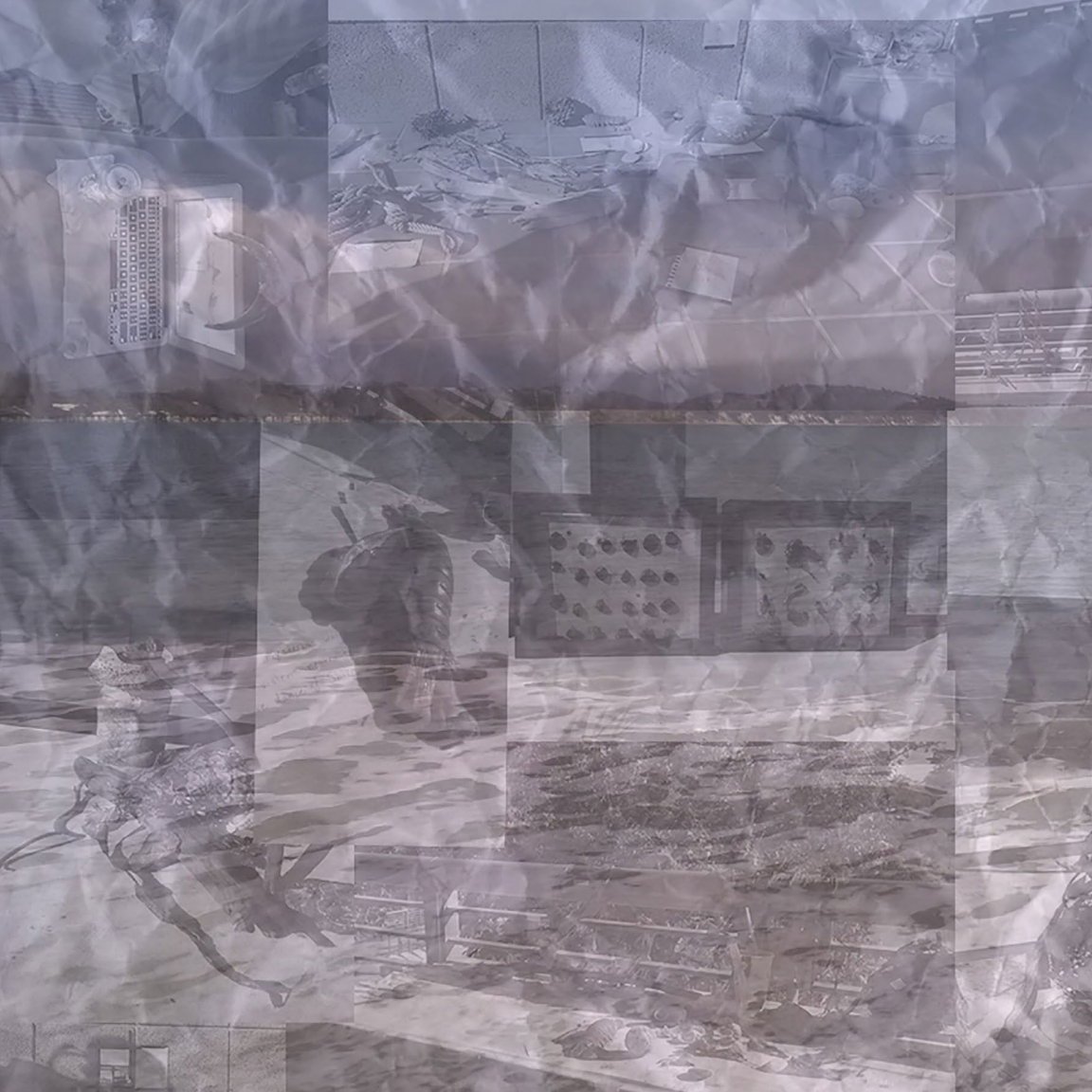


oil  
is the  
opposite  
of tax.









# BEACH INTENTIONS, ADRIFT

EMILY RUSSELL

I intended to spend time at the beach. I imagined myself walking along the hot and stony sands of the western Michigan coastline, stopping to inspect pieces of driftwood — my summer obsession. I desired to get swept up by the thing. The idea. The story

Spurred, spurious, spurned — taken in and turned out. Washed up. What remains, relic-like, of a mighty rooting

My own rootedness pulled at me. Tugged me home. Family illness redirects. My intentions adrift, I reached. I imagined

Of Ymir they made the earth, those gods of old. His blood the seas. His skull the skies

Driftwood. A motion-material; collaboration between earth, air, sea. No longer belonging, a moving with waves and washings

Until it lands on sand with granule hands

Hewn

Flesh became earth and from the earth came new flesh — male and female.  
Beginning of man                      A liquid carpentry

Drifters, those who are easily moved by their material, become too attached and are taken and sea-tossed. They often find themselves washed up, worn down, and marked by their journey. Submerged deeply, when they surface, they are something other

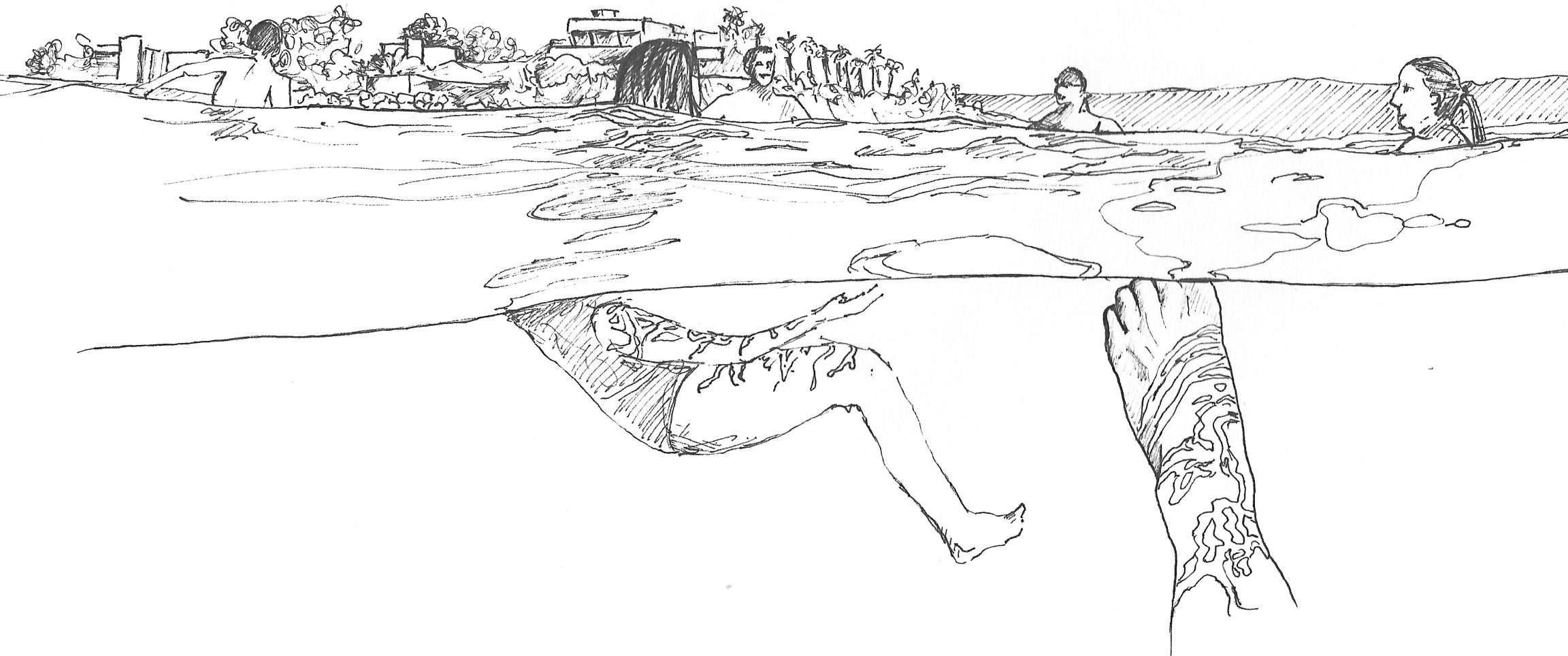
Two trees were taken, made adrift. Fashioned by sea-foam into a new form.  
Askr they called him, the Ash. Her they called Embla, the Elm

Drifting changes the drifter

Moved by the story, I made an Askr, spurious Askr. Far from a Norse god, a first man cannot lay in my hands. Spurred by his story, I shared how I could — an invitation to drift

*This is a reflection on my preparations to participate in the “Walk on the Beach” session at the 2014 BABEL conference. My contribution was a sculpture of Askr who, according to Norse mythology, was the first man. Askr, his name meaning Ash tree, was born out of a piece of driftwood. I loved this idea of humanity emerging from a piece of sea-tossed wood. It led me to explore the relationships between the material components that shape us — in this case, earth and water — and the stories we craft to understand our non-human collaborators. The more I thought about these storied collaborations, however, the more I began to think about what happens to scholars and artists — storytellers — who fall in love with their material collaborators and collaborations. Love moves, and it often takes control. It can leave us adrift.*























## PARTICIPANTS

**Maura Coughlin** lives most of the time on Cape Cod and is frequently picking up seaweed and trash on the beaches there. She is also a historian of 19th-century French art and is associate professor of Visual Studies at Bryant University in Smithfield, RI. Her recent research and publication is concerned with the visual culture of coastal ecology on the French Atlantic.

**Jeffrey Jerome Cohen** is professor of English and director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at the George Washington University. A complete bio may be found at <http://www.jeffreyjeromecohen.net>.

**Elizabeth Currans** is associate professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Eastern Michigan University. Her book manuscript, under contract with University of Illinois Press, explores how participants in public demonstrations attended primarily by women claim and remake public spaces. Recent publications appear in *Feminist Formations*, *Social Justice*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Obsidian*.

**Vanessa Daws** is a visual artist and avid open water swimmer living in Dublin. Her art practice explores place through swimming and chance meetings. Stories appear that lead the projects, a process she calls 'Psychoswimography'. In the past five years she has created art projects in watery spaces as diverse as the frozen Pirita River, Estonia; the Rideau Canal, Canada; The President's Fountain, Bulgaria; the Pacific Ocean, Santa Barbara; the M50 Aqueduct, Dublin and the bogs of Ballycroy, Co Mayo. <http://www.vanessadaws.com>.

**Emily Gephart** finds that teaching the history of American art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston doesn't usually permit quite enough time for walking on beaches. Her research concerns the intersecting fields of art, psychology, and physiological aesthetics in the early 20th century, considering how artists gave dreams and the visual imagination pictorial form.

**Elliott Ihm** is a graduate student in Psychological & Brain Sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a member of the META lab. His research interests include peak experiences, neuroplasticity, affective neuroscience, and the nature of consciousness. Elliott can usually be found outside with a book, a bike, or a boat.

**Anna Kłosowska** is the author of *Queer Love in the Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and editor of *Madeleine de l'Aubespine, Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago, 2007). She edited several volumes of essays and journal issues and is the author of more than thirty articles, mostly on queer theory in Medieval and Early Modern French texts. She is now working on trans studies, ecocriticism, race and object-oriented theory.

**Steve Mentz** is professor of English at St John's University in New York. His most recent books are *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minnesota, 2015) and *Oceanic New York* (Punctum, 2015).

**Christina McPhee**'s moving image practice in video, installation and net-based media moves drawing into spaces of environmental transformation. Her media works are in collections including the Whitney Museum and Rhizome Artbase at the New Museum, New York. She lives and works in California. <http://christinamcphree.net>

**Asa Simon Mittman** (Professor of Art History, California State University, Chico) is author of several books and articles on monstrosity and marginality in the Middle Ages. He is the founding president of MEARCSTAPA and a founding member of the Material Collective. A complete bio may be found at <http://myweb.csuchico.edu/~asmittman/>

**Karen Overbey** (Associate Professor, Tufts University) and **Maggie M. Williams** (Associate Professor, William Paterson University) have spent a lifetime collaborating and walking together on the beach. Maggie is author of *Icons of Irishness from the Middle Ages to the Modern World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Karen is author of *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (Brepols, 2011). They are both founding members of the Material Collective. <http://www.thematerialcollective.org>

**Emily Russell** is a doctoral candidate at The George Washington University. She is interested in exploring material ways to connect with and think about literature and enjoys experimenting with incorporating story/storied objects into literary encounters.

**Lora Webb** is a PhD student in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University, where she studies medieval art and architecture.





# CREDITS

Watercolors: Anna Kłosowska.

Drawing: Vanessa Daws.

Film stills: Christina McPhee.

Texts: As listed.

Polaroids and photographs: Beachwalkers.



We began with conversations about the sea. We meditated together on chance, discovery, agency, beauty, and material ecology. We talked about the delicate care of treading the world, the confluence of the personal and the professional, and the possibilities of storytelling. We thought about what happens when we encounter stuff, when we take it, change it, do something with it. When we display it, or sculpt it, or collect it. When we make something an object, and an object of looking.

Then we met on the beach. We walked and talked about loss, home, agency, and liminality. We collected things: We picked up stones, feathers, seaweed. We pointed to stuff, gathered it, let it strike our fancy. Every shell nurtured a conversation among the artists, scientists, historians, poets, archivists, surfers, philosophers, and pirates who had joined the walk. We brought the sea-things back, manipulated them, and displayed them as works of art.

**WALK ON THE BEACH** is a souvenir of that project, a record of our bounty. It emerges from the process at the heart of art historical work: close looking. Thinking through objects, thinking with objects. Letting the things help us tell their stories.

This is a tiny collection of looking, together.

