

## Towards an Attitude of Openness: Preparing for the Unexpected

Emma Cocker, key-note presentation at *Uncertain Knowledge(s)*, a one day colloquium organised by the Material Encounters research group, Birmingham City University, 7 July 2021.

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How is the being-in-the-midst of artistic thinking-in-action: the contingent micro-moments of incipient decision-making; the navigation of competing forces and resistances; the dynamic process of figuring things out and of feeling one's way? How is the encounter with the unknown or unforeseen activated within the doing of artistic research, conceived as a co-constitutive, co-emergent process of collaboration between human and non-human forces and agencies? Rather than seeking to control or steer the research process towards a predetermined telos or outcome, how might the artist-researcher cultivate an attitude of openness, receptivity towards the unplanned for, that which cannot be anticipated in advance? Indeed, how does the artist-researcher prepare for the unexpected?

My research involves the dual attempt to bring to reflective awareness the practising of practice (specifically the affective, embodied, relational sensitivities and intensities within collaboration), whilst searching for linguistic approaches capable of operating in fidelity to that experience. It is an enquiry into the live and lived experience of artistic exploration, and the challenge of finding linguistic means adequate to the task of speaking with, through and from that experience. This is not so much the revelation of process as concrete skills, techniques or ways of doing things, but an attempt to engage specifically with the 'thinking-feeling-knowing' as well as 'not-knowing' within artistic process. My enquiry often unfolds through collaboration with other artist-researchers within durational projects where the studio-gallery or site-specific context becomes a live 'laboratory' for shared exploration. As a writer-artist, my approach involves both the experience of being within (involving practice-based, artistic research) and being with (involving the slow, sustained witnessing of and thinking-with the practice of other artists).

In this presentation, I want to explore bringing these two modes - being within and being with - into proximity. I will be showing materials from the artistic research project, *Choreographic Figures*, a collaboration between myself, artist Nikolaus Gansterer and choreographer Mariella Greil, for exploring those forms of 'thinking-feeling-knowing' emerging between the lines of choreography, drawing, and writing. I will be reading fragments of 'contiguous writing', a mode of writing-with that I have been developing over the last decade (for example, gathered in *The Yes of the No*) that seeks to touch upon rather than being explicitly about. The text-fragments shared today are drawn from three separate texts written in-touch-with the practices of artists Belén Cerezo, Derek Sprawson, and Lisa Watts, and form part of my forthcoming creative prose publication, *With + Through*.<sup>1</sup>

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The dithering of the artist is not the restless inability to decide, overwhelmed by choice or intent on keeping options open. Neither is it dilatory, where slowness to act only postpones and delays, puts off until a future time. Rather the artist's hesitation forces open a gap or interval. Dithering holds back, refusing to decide, either to affirm or to deny. In ancient skepticism, the term epoché refers to the practice of suspending judgement, refraining from decision for or against as a way of achieving ataraxia - equanimity or serene calm. Dithering arrests, creating space to ponder, to wonder.

Unwavering wavering — practised dithering has patience, is prepared to wait. Yet, dithering is neither calm nor still, but rather a state of vacillation or agitation, oscillating back and forth. Agitate: to disturb or stir up, to incite or set in motion. Unwilling to settle for what is given, dithering agitates the ground, holding a space open for the emergence of something not yet known, that which conscious mind may never have foretold. An attempt is made not to allow the work to become too quickly fixed into definitive form. This is not to privilege the process above the product, but rather to dispense of these categories altogether. The work of art is the work of art. The working of the work can be unpredictable, unforeseeable in advance. Known only when seen, recognisable only when found. Necessarily then, the artist proceeds somewhat blindly, in the absence of a clear plan. Still, this is not to say that artistic work is vague or imprecise, unthinking or impulsive. Rather, because she does not yet know what she is searching for, the artist must remain

vigilant and alert, attentive and receptive to the possibilities within every instant. Too strong her intent and she misses the kairos.

The artist's work paradoxically involves the discipline of play. Play exhausts things as a method for inviting in something new. Its emptying-out of sense or meaning makes a clearing for the unexpected to arise. Making material acquaintance: a getting-to-know things so as to not-know, familiarity for rendering strange. Capture the workings of this stage with care and caution, for the act of reflection risks pulling the player out of play, rupturing her field of absorption or immersion. Playing a field of possibilities not yet fully actualised, it is hard to know what to record when the focus of enquiry is not yet clear or named, when a direction has still to be defined.

Out of play, towards experiment: experiential know-how based on the risk of living and the felt event, born of trial and error, the testing of innumerable versions, iterations and attempts. To get to grips with: an enquiry into material affordances and inclinations, a material's tolerance and resistance. To get a handle on: handle – to hold in the hands, to feel or deal with. Experiment along the threshold between a material's capacity (what it can receive or hold, perform or withstand) and its capability (its undeveloped potential or power). Towards the unpredictable: knowing what something can do – its range of expectation – in order then to be surprised. What if? What else? Working against: using the material's constraints and limitations as leverage. Working with: harnessing its qualities, seeing how far it can be pushed. Mutual modification: adapting one's behaviour in correspondence with the material encounter. Materials-in-relation: How do material properties change through the proximity and combination with other things?

The process of experimentation does not always lead to the new or unexpected. Discovery is not something that can be willed into existence, brought about through the brute force of effort or intent. Too tight a frame or focus can serve to suffocate and stifle. The revelation of epiphany can show up unannounced, suddenly come into view. Unfathomable: existing beyond the mind's grasp, not to be comprehended. Unbounded: appearing without limits, without borders or bounds. Through practice, the artist tries to move beyond what they already know. Yet, the not knowing sought is not heedless nor inattentive, not oblivious nor vague. Towards unknowing — not through

closing one's eyes or looking the other way, but rather through a willingness to become undone, a capacity for experiencing perplexity and bewilderment. Per-plex: through folding or entanglement. Be-wilder: to be lured or led astray. The artist tries to hold a space open — holds back from giving explanation or account. Un. Un. Un. Un. Un. Uttered as invocation, ritual practice for clearing the ground or for emptying things out. Said as a hesitation marker, the sounding of the momentary pause to think within speaking as in um, uh, ah. Saying nothing, yet holding the space open. Biding one's time. Un. Un. Un. Un. Un. Deep abyss of unmeaning — the profound encounter with an absence of sense.

Be vigilant, yet remember that discovery often happens at the periphery of action or attention or in the very instant when focus eases, becomes relaxed or is turned away. Be wary of looking too hard, for what emerges might not be what was anticipated, even sought. Be willing for something to happen (inclined, receptive) rather than wilful (stubborn, too eager, else headstrong). Gently, quieten the will — for if something happens it is not by one's own doing alone. The concept of invention privileges the agency of inventor as the originator of the new, by merit of her skill and ingenuity. Invention: from venire meaning "to come", or else invenire, "to encounter". Indeed, many an invention is come upon rather than created, arrived at and not simply thought into being in advance. The inventive breakthrough can emerge from error, accident or chance. It can come as a flash like lightning, or else slow burn in its arrival. So, wait. Wait. Sharpen one's curiosity like a poacher's knife, the angler's hook. Wait. Steadiness, in readiness. Bide one's time yet be swift to act when called. Invention emerges from in the midst: the artist's role is medial, navigating a sea of forces as the tiller steers a course through — or rather with — the water and the wind. Here, the artist does not so much work her given medium — material or technique — as become a medium herself. Artist as intermediary: intervening agency in a field of other agencies.

Extended field of operations, of movements and actions of relation. Verb: an expression of action or of being. The artist's notebook might well be full of verbs: recollection of doings done, of operations yet to be commenced. Yet verbs are rarely neutral, since they determine the power relation between subject and object, between doer and done-to, knower and known. Disrupt the relationship between cause and effect: subject no longer agent of action but rather its patient, acted upon or affected as much as affecting. Be careful

with nouns, for names can tether the named to a predetermined role or identity. What to call things then once their original function falls away? New names are tested through acts of contingent naming – a poetic naming based on fleeting tendencies, vitalities and relationships, rather than on fixed function or form.

Linguistic articulation of a material practice foregrounds a challenge therein, for the speaking I can only tell things from her own side. Her account is filtered through the prism of her individual experiences and senses, memories and desires. The situation from the material's side can only be guessed at, never truly known. Epistemological accounts of artistic enquiry often cite the tacit knowledge or embodied know-how involved in creative production, the personal possession of a knowing (or not knowing) not easily transmitted or shared. While challenging the hegemony of rational thought, these other ways of knowing maintain the hierarchy of the human as the holder of knowledge. Beyond the anthropocentric: towards new languages for reflecting practice in its co-emergence. Towards solidarity: a mutuality born of being-with, densification of the relationships between human and non-human. Begin by dampening the ego of I to become more attuned to the reverberations of other agencies. Operation: capable of having an effect or cause. Operator: the facilitator of action, of making something happen. Yet the cause of change or transformation is irreducible to one. Complex causality: beyond a linear sense of single cause, single effect. Beyond the play of human and non-human, notice the intermediary forces and energies: of gravity, of air, of time. Consider the making of bread: the effort of the baker wasted if dough is not given enough time to rest and rise.

In search of the unforeseeable, faith is placed in what unfolds. The artist abides, bides their time, open to what betides. Betide: to happen, what comes to pass.. Yet, being open to happenstance is not just a case of going with the flow, the path of passivity or of least resistance. Effort is required to suspend one's own habits and expectations, to remain receptive to the unplanned for, embracing of surprise. Beyond what the artist knows emerges from within the event of making rather than external to it, immanent to the process. Whilst truth to materials involves using a material without concealing its nature, the artist's fidelity to materials comes closer to communion, an experience of shared participation or coming together within and through practice. Edging beyond what one already knows can involve leaning back, letting go of

forethought plan or aim. The artist must loosen or lessen their intention, so as to fully intend. Intend: from *intendre*, to give attention, pay heed or else to hear. The artist listens to the emerging work, tending to what it wants. Hold backs, becomes a little shy. Here, shyness is felt as heightened sensitivity to the affective experience of a relational encounter, increased susceptibility to the potential for awkwardness or even perplexity therein. The blush of shyness blooms as a line is crossed, a norm transgressed, control lost, in a moment of not knowing. A radical shyness feels the hot rise of being caught off-guard, then turns towards that experience rather than turning away. Shyness embraced creates the conditions of voluntary vulnerability – an expanded state of openness, neither withholding nor closed off.

The artist lowers or lets go the willed force of their own I, enabling the practice to become truly co-constitutive, a co-emergent process of becoming involving mutual transformation of both the material and the artist. Looping. Lagging. Circling. Meandering. Trying yet without excessive effort or force. To downplay the artist's own will or agency within practice is not a negation of their capacity to act, but rather the artist recognises themselves as an agent amongst other agents, a force amongst other forces. Yet to release one's control does not mean that anything goes. Reduction of individual power allows for an expansion of the self beyond purely utilitarian interests and concerns. Art and artist are radically co-constitutive: each draws the other into being, affirmation of a mutual bringing-into-life.

My interest in the uncertain knowledges of practice persists as a thread that weaves through many lines of enquiry rather than being located clearly in any one. Still, certain recurring questions or concerns can be discerned. How to avoid fixing and stabilising the experiential instability and mutability of research - how to keep the research process open, alive? In parallel, how to avoid reifying unfixedness and uncertainty – how to avoid the rhetoric of not knowing if this means paradoxically fixing and unquestioning not knowing as though some kind of goal. How to deepen the enquiry, what new fields of intelligibility do uncertain knowledges disclose, open up, enable to come into view?

How can the medium of language operate in fidelity to the uncertain knowledges of practice, where research writing is not just about explanation, theorization or conceptual rationalization, but rather the attempt to re-connect

with the fullness of experience in its liveness, in its liveliness. Writing not as a grasping, capturing, controlling tool but as a touching, even mobilizing tool. To mobilize — to render capable of movement - in search of a mode of writing that sets in motion, for activating understanding in affective or experiential rather than only in cognitive terms.

Through close, nuanced attention to the practising of research practice what commonalities, characteristics or qualities emerge. Can we cultivate a sense of the common? How can we shift from the psychological uncertainty of the ego-centric I – the not knowing of the individual researcher - to a sense methodological uncertainty, activated as a critical component of the research process? How might we differentiate between affirming and debilitating forms of uncertainty?

Is there a spectrum of not knowing — are certain modes of not knowing inherently critical or creative, whilst other best avoided? Certainly, art practice and research are underscored by the principles of curiosity and open-endedness; the importance of risk; of trial and error — foregrounding the critical role of uncertainty, disorientation, getting lost, the capacity for not always knowing or being certain. Yet, can such principles and capacities be taught or even practiced – can they be conceived as part of the methodology of one's practice? How do we know how to not know? How to embrace the value of uncertainty and not knowing against the contemporary pressures of the academy, increasingly driven by targets and goals? What preparatory practices might help increase one's receptivity or openness to the unfamiliar and unexpected? Who else could we learn from? Indeed, what might need to be unlearned or undone in order to not know? What are we really willing to let go of? What do we cling to — what scaffolds and supports, what guards and protections? What do we hold on to, what do we hold back from? What views and assumptions, powers and privileges, what is taken as given, for granted or supposed known?

More broadly, what role has the practicing of creative uncertainty within the increasingly uncertain conditions of contemporary life? What practices of uncertainty are needed for activating new conversations on how to live creatively in these uncertain times, offering a tactical toolkit for testing different ways of being and behaving, where the unknown is actively embraced? Are such tactics the privilege of only a certain few — how can they

opened up further through engagement with wider communities of practice? Towards an ethics of uncertainty — how can the encounter with the unfamiliar and strange(r) operate as a micro-political, even ethico-aesthetic practice? How do we cultivate receptivity to experiences and encounters beyond our zone of habitual comfort?

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This presentation draws on the texts by Emma Cocker: 'The Work of the Work and When the Work Works' in Lisa Watts, *Four Hundred and Twenty-nine Significant Moments: Documenting an Artist's Research and Processes*, (2018) [See <https://www.lisa-watts.co.uk/429-significant-moments/>]; 'Touched by a Lighter Sensitivity; or, On How Not to Break the Egg' in Belén Cerezo, *Seeing Bodies* (2020) [See <https://belencerezo.com/publications/>], 'Like the Lichen, As the Hyphen, in Derek Sprawson, (Beam Editions, 2021) [See <https://www.beameditions.uk/>]