

TACTICS FOR NOT KNOWING

PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Emma Cocker

Not knowing might well be the ground from which creativity springs, however, to inhabit the experience in affirmative terms is not an easy task. It is not inherently productive or generative nor does it always lead to new and imaginative lines of flight. Not knowing can be paralysing, prohibitive. It can usher in the feelings of anxiety and embarrassment, the debilitating sense of being at a loss or lost, unable to see a way out or forward. From nursery age, we are initiated into the project of converting what is not known into what can be named and classified. The blurry and indeterminate realm of flows and forces in which we spend our early days is swiftly brought into line, once words are learnt to differentiate one thing from another, the self from everything else. The capacity to recognise shapes and sounds is celebrated as a developmental milestone; language grows exponentially in response to new situations needing to be described. Schooling emerges as a discipline for increasing the territory of what is known, an accumulative undertaking where knowledge is thought of as information to be taught and duly tested. Here, to not know is treated as a deficiency or failure, as a mark of stupidity, the lack of requisite knowledge. Over time, the pleasurable potential of not knowing becomes squeezed into designated timeslots called play, breaks of unruly abandon where what is known can once again be rendered unfamiliar, the uncertain or unexpected met with rushes of brief wonder and delight. Less sanctioned forms of not knowing often remain hidden, muted, scarcely shared. To attach worth to not knowing is something of a challenge then, for culturally it would seem that we are conditioned away from such experiences, encouraged to view them as marginal or meaningless, as somehow lacking in true merit.¹

Or else the experience of not knowing is conceived as the provocation that prompts investigation, further scrutiny. The unknown is taken as an anomalous breach or gap in existing thought that must be filled, bridged by the production of new knowledge. Not knowing is the state from which we strive to make sense. Yet, the sense of what is *not* known can increase rather than diminish through experience; the limits of one's knowledge become more palpable the more one knows. The pursuit of knowledge is thus an irresolvable quest, endlessly producing new frontiers ever in need of conquest, ever more territorialisation. Here, not knowing reveals a virgin site still to be explored and conquered, or a zone of indeterminacy that thinking attempts to move *from*, ultimately leave behind. To place value on not knowing as generative or productive *in*

itself is to work against the tide of certain teleological thought, which imagines progress as a one-way passage, the move from what is not known towards the goal of knowing more and more. Working against the grain involves a degree of skillfulness and tenacity, a capacity to operate counter to expectation. To inhabit the experience of not knowing in affirmative terms requires some preparation; one's capacity for not knowing might need to be practiced, rehearsed or relearned. To prepare for the unknown or unexpected is often considered a preventative or precautionary measure, anticipating the unforeseen future in order to limit its damage, planning a course of action for every eventuality so as not to get caught out. Once again, the not known situation is imagined to harbour some potential risk or threat, which contingency plans attempt to diffuse or neutralise by preparing for the worst. Yet, unknown situations demand a speculative approach for you can never be wholly sure what to expect, what skills will be required. Indeed, there are practices that plan for contingency in other ways, whose anticipation of the unknown is hopeful rather than delimiting.

For the artist, to prepare for the unexpected has a dual function. It is the gesture of developing readiness (for anything), a state of being at the cusp of action, mind and body poised. It is also an act of scarifying the ground, an attempt to create the germinal conditions within which something unanticipated might arise. Artistic practice recognises the value of not knowing, less as the preliminary state (of ignorance) preceding knowledge, but as a field of desirable indeterminacy within which to work. Not knowing is an active space within practice, wherein an artist hopes for an encounter with something new or unfamiliar, unrecognisable or unknown. However, within artistic practice, the possibility of producing something new is not always about the conversion of the not known towards new knowledge, but rather involves the aspiration to *retain* something of the unknown within what is produced. In these terms, the new is that which exceeds existing knowledge, not by extending its limits but by failing to be fully comprehended within its terms. Paradoxically, perhaps, art involves an attempt to smuggle a trace of something infinitely unknowable *within* the parameters of finite form. Artistic enquiry might toil towards making something *less* rather than *more* known, actively moving towards rather than away from the experience of not knowing. Whilst not knowing plays a generative role in most artistic practice, for some artists it is actively sought and courted at the heart of the work itself. Rather than waiting for the auspicious moment of not knowing to arrive, within certain practices it is possible to witness the use of tactical approaches or methods that seek to *produce* the conditions of uncertainty, disorientation or indeterminacy. There is a practice that sets out in search of the capricious wind or current that will send them sideways or disturb their even keel, for it is in such moments of crisis that new ideas often emerge. New forms of operating are provoked into being through the encounter with a situation unlike what has come before.

Not knowing comes unannounced; still, there are methods for increasing the likelihood of its occurrence. Moreover, what *can* be prepared is a capacity for recognising its advent, for noticing its arrival.

Not knowing is encountered as an opening in the fabric of what is known, which requires a reciprocal openness, receptivity to its potential. Not knowing is a state of suspension, comprehension stalled. Stalling thought disturbs its habitual rhythm, creating the spacing of a missed beat within which to consider things differently to what they already are. However, not knowing is an experience easily squandered, for it is hard to override those habits which usher certainty into the indeterminate scene. The tongue shapes words all too quickly, and once named, edges reappear. The eye's glance is incisive; knowing describes the capacity for clarity, of being able to see. Yet the eyes can only see what they have been conditioned to notice; recognition involves the re-seeing of what is already known. The rest remains blurred, out of focal range. Distractions direct attention elsewhere; we are often quick to fill or close the opening that not knowing affords. Whilst a critical part of creative practice, the experience of not knowing is not always encountered easily, it can be difficult or testing, uneasily endured. We are sometimes swift to look to other things, divert our energies towards more pressing matters, towards tasks which offer a more instant reward. Blind spots are inherently difficult to recognise, often go unseen. An artist might develop tactics for attending to that which is habitually unnoticed, for slowing down their process of observation, for cultivating second sight. To overlook something can also signal towards a form of over-attention, amplified or heightened ways of seeing. Close up the world can appear *less* recognisable. Closing the eyes can be adopted as a critical operation for seeing that which the retina refuses to acknowledge. The faculties of perception by which we come to understand the world might need to be restricted, limited or otherwise impaired. There are forms of seeing which do not belong to the ocular realm, visions produced through rather more experimental means. Some things cannot be viewed directly; sometimes you have to look away. Seeing shadows requires a degree of blindness to the light; not knowing is the condition linked to being in the dark.

To be open to the experience of not knowing might involve doing and being *less*, becoming creatively passive—a touch purposeless or empty at times—so as to remain receptive to possibilities that cannot yet be comprehended or controlled. Tactics for not knowing might strive towards stripping things away, paring them down in order to make manifest a gap or space. An action is begun before knowing what it might enable. A conversation is initiated in the absence of intention; attention given to the pauses and durations breathed between the words. A line is scored in order to conceive of the negative space; to think *beyond* presupposes a line.² A frame can create an opening into which something unplanned can then be *called* or conjured, where what is not known is

invited or invoked rather than reached towards or grasped.³ Submission to the logic of a rule or instruction can operate as a device for not knowing, as a way of surrendering responsibility, absolving oneself of agency or control within a practice in order to be surprised. The rule becomes adopted for its capacity to produce unruliness, for generating outcomes that the conscious mind could never have planned. To follow the rule is thus not always based on obedience or diligence, but rather demonstrates a desire to be led astray. Following in the footsteps of another can also create the conditions of *dépaysement*—a sense of being taken out of one's element, or of *égarement*—the errant practice of straying from oneself.⁴ To wander is to become a little aimless or unanchored; it can be a tactic for losing one's bearings, for getting lost. Here, maps might be misused as a ruse for willful disorientation, as tools for de-familiarisation and misdirection as much as for finding one's way. Journeys are undertaken in pursuit of outcomes that seem improbable, ambiguous or arbitrary, or else with guidebooks that are misguided, whose content is obsolete.

To develop tactics for getting lost is to practice a form of habituation or conditioning, where the experience of not knowing is entered into voluntarily as a way of cultivating resilience towards its potentially negative effects. Administered in small and controlled doses, it becomes possible to gradually build one's tolerance, augment one's capacity to withstand uncertainty, to become more accustomed to the unsettling experiences therein. However, prolonged exposure can begin to neutralise the efficacy of a given stimulus, gradually making the body unresponsive, a little numb. The intent is not to inoculate against the experience of not knowing, if this means becoming resistant or immune to its charge. Rather, through repeated exposure it is possible to become *more* sensitised to the experience, more attuned to its risings and falls, its intensities and durations. Practice enables the artist to move beyond the initial phase of not knowing, that first wave of sensation where body and mind feel only at a loss. It is towards this sensation that the artist must turn their attention, rather than turning away. Working against impulse, the challenge becomes one of staying within the experience of not knowing for as long as it is somehow generative, for as long as it allows. Tactics for not knowing are practiced as a fall from what is known.⁵ The artist develops methods for surrendering to a fall from knowledge, as the dancer practices yielding to gravity's pull. The studio becomes a gymnasium where thoughts and forms like limbs are made to stretch and flex, arc and fold. In time, the initial hesitation met within the act of falling might give way to strange and vertiginous pleasures, the rapturous fall from self and certainty experienced as playful *ilinx* or as syncope's swoon. The fall from what is known requires some loss of power and control, whilst the passivity and apparent weakness often associated with falling are converted into a potential means of strength. Not knowing is thus practiced as a kind of alchemy, transforming its own perceived impotency or powerlessness into a productive force.

Whilst certain tactics cultivate receptivity or openness to the experience of not knowing, others are used for *making* openings, for rupturing the terms of what is already known. It is tempting perhaps to conceive of such practices only as forms of critique or resistance, working to challenge the authority of various systems of capture and control. Deconstruction serves to unpick and pull apart the regimes of power and order that are used to hold things in place, revealing the constructed or illusory nature of our realities. However, for some artists, the act of undoing or unraveling is performed instead as a ritual reversal, as a practice for not knowing, a move towards the incomprehensible wild.⁶ The term 'beyond comprehension' is often used pejoratively. It is synonymous with all that is baffling or beyond one's grasp, all that is impenetrable, inscrutable or unintelligible. However there is also an archaic meaning for the term where it describes the condition of limitlessness, the state of being boundless. It is towards the latter that certain artistic practices might strive, hoping to encounter something unexpected, something insusceptible to capture by existing conceptual frameworks. Yet, the unknown or unexpected is necessarily unpredictable and must be stumbled upon; the artist's endeavour thus remains somewhat aleatory, improvisatory, a little blind. Practice unfolds as a series of endless *maybes*, an interminable set of tests or trials. The studio creates the conditions of parentheses for dislocating its contents from their habitual surrounds. Here, objects, images, words and sounds can be disassembled and reassembled; stretched; compressed; inverted and rotated; pushed into unlikely proximity, and then prized apart. Familiar forms are worried until they begin to break down and recombine differently; materials are pressured towards their limits, categories tilted to the point of slippage or collapse. The challenge is how to prevent these nascent assemblages from being assimilated all too quickly back into meaning, from becoming classified or (re)claimed swiftly by existing knowledge. The artist strives for that elusive encounter with something momentarily unnamable or unclassified, no longer *and* not yet known.

It is possible to conceive of not knowing as a space of fleeting liberty or reprieve; a brief interlude of potentiality flanked either side by what is known or certain. In these terms, not knowing might be considered a liminal experience, a transitional state where law and logic seem lost or left behind, where the coded conventions of the structural realm appear upturned and abandoned. Undoubtedly, the experience of not knowing can be approached as such; its affordances seemingly provide the conditions of freedom *from* with freedom *to*, temporary liberation from the pressures and responsibilities that come with knowledge. Here, not knowing might be embraced for its lawlessness, celebrated for what it refuses and resists, for what it is *not*. Not knowing can serve to rejuvenate one's experience of reality, enabling it to be encountered from a fresh perspective, seen through re-enchanted eyes. Yet, the desire to not know can also signal towards a form of disenchantment with the

world. At worst, it might be considered akin to the nostalgic quest for innocence lost, a desire for experience untainted by knowledge. At times, to claim to not know is to pretend towards ignorance, by turning a blind eye, electing to forget that which is troublesome or a burden. Or else, not knowing (better or different) is the condition of the oppressed, the unquestioning passivity of the dumbed down and acquiescent. Indeed, the experience of not knowing is inherently ambivalent; it can be inhabited in radically opposing ways. For the artist, the question perhaps is how the experience of not knowing can lead towards new lines of flight, conceived as new forms of invention and intervention *within* reality, rather than performed as an escape from it. Not knowing is not experience stripped clean of knowledge, but a mode of thinking where knowledge is put into question, made restless or unsure. Not knowing unsettles the illusory fixity of the known, shaking it up a little in order to conceive of things differently.

To navigate an uncertain ground requires some skill, due care and attention. Against logic, it is necessary to *know* how to not know. Here, knowing is different to the knowledge of the encyclopedia, for its forms of knowing *of* or knowing *that* are not equipped to cope with the contingencies of this terrain. A *different* knowing to knowledge then, perhaps more aligned to *confidence*. Confidence is the knowledge that the right decision will be made when required; it involves trusting that a response will be performed intuitively at the propitious time. Yet, this is not about placing faith in a form of tacit knowledge, if this describes an already embodied *know-how*. Instead, what is activated is a model of *known-not* knowledge capable of working within situations that remain indeterminate or newly encountered. Or maybe it is a form of ever-emerging knowledge that is activated simultaneously to the unknown situation that it attempts to comprehend, that is alone adequate to the task of comprehending that situation. To navigate the not known requires slowing down or stalling the rhythm of habitual routines at the same time as building capacity to respond with unexpected speed and intensity when the time is right. Like the helmsman sailing a course through the contingencies of the water and the wind, the artist must become attuned to the pressures of contradictory forces, skillful in the art of holding back (the familiar or repeated) whilst ushering in (the unforeseen, the still unknown). Indeed, it is not the chance wind that sails the boat, but the helmsman's capacity for knowing how to work (*with*) it, for exploiting the possibilities immanent therein.⁷ Similarly, the experience of not knowing is not always productive or generative in itself; rather, it might *become* so according to how its opportunities are seized.

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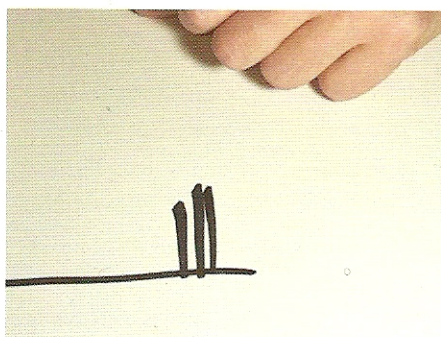
Rachel Lois Clapham and Emma Cocker
Re - (performance extracts)

2013

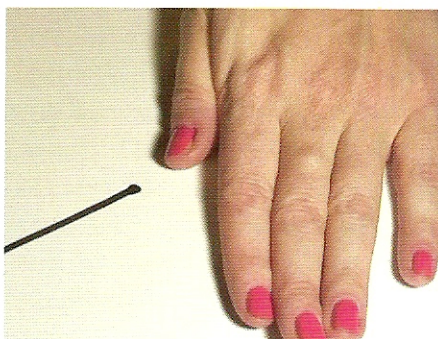
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In order to progress we have to ... just go with the idea.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾

(T)his is (a) space which is generative and I don't quite know what that is (but) [...]



if I have a hope for it ... it is that something *not* known, or not previously known is somehow produced [...] Ultimately it is a question of form [...] *and* (of) an endeavour.⁽⁶⁾

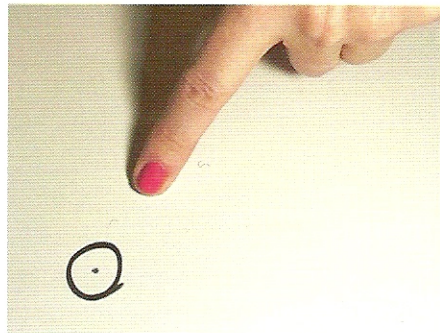


In other ways it is really [...] *open*

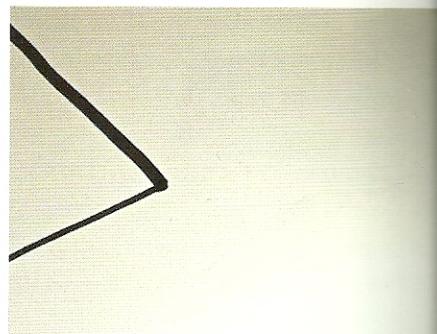
(T)o build in spaces that are more speculative you have to build in spaces that are more speculative.

(B)etween proposition and response [...] some sort of pattern of not knowing.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

Possibilities escalate in terms of what it is capable of and how different meanings are produced [...] There is a definite play.

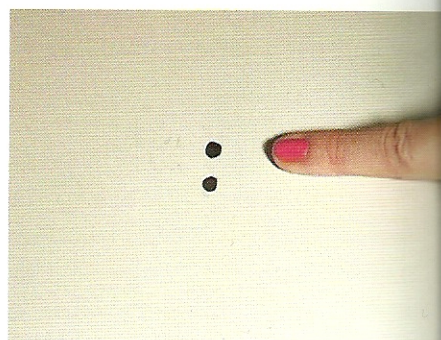


(S)omething is being diagrammed towards [...] A gesture is drawn in advance of knowing what it enables.⁽⁷⁾



(T)he active spaces of the work are the places [...] where I am not *quite* sure what is happening.⁽⁹⁴⁾

It is ultimately speculative which isn't to say *not definite*. (They) are trying to say something, but not [...] enough to *know* what they are saying.

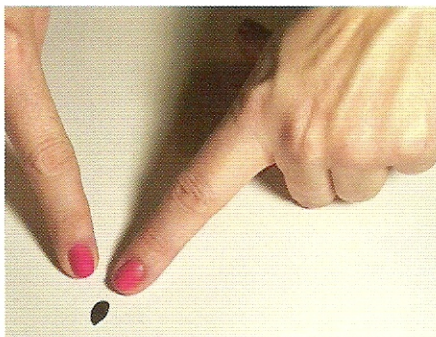


The thing that is *not* being said [...] is where the work comes from. (It) reveals itself in the shadow of what is being consciously produced.

(T)he points (where) a decision is made ... to *do* something. It is (o)nly ever an accumulation of [...] decisions.

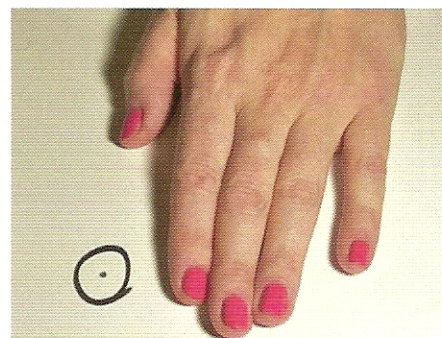
(T)here is a repeating structure, but [...] how do you have change within that?⁽³¹⁾ (H)ow do you repeat *without* repeating (?)

At times, the reaching out is purposeful [...] but it doesn't quite know what it is going to get.⁽⁷³⁾



(W)hat (does) it ... mean to prepare for the unexpected? (B)eing open to (the possibility of) letting something [...] (in).

(T)here is something to do with the way that (action) deviates from its plan [...] (its) purpose *swerves* (;) (it) is accidentally found.⁽⁷⁾



(D)istracton ... shape(s) things in way(s) that you couldn't anticipate. (O)ther things will always come in.⁽³²⁾

(It is) a gesture forward and (of) surrender.

Maybe it is the difference between waiting for something to happen and making something happen.

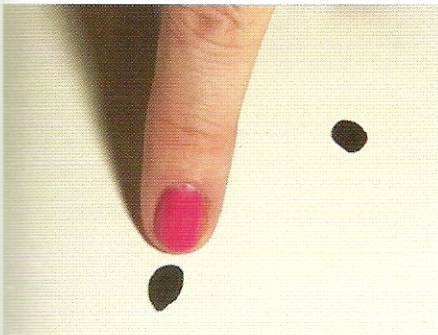
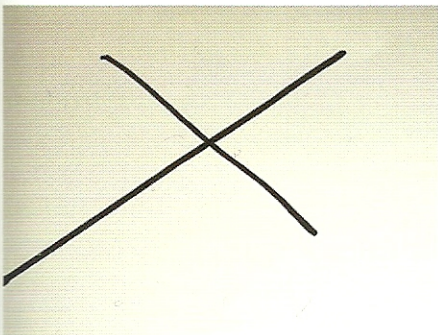
(T)here is a line, (and) it is about pushing that line by degrees, over or under.⁽¹³³⁾

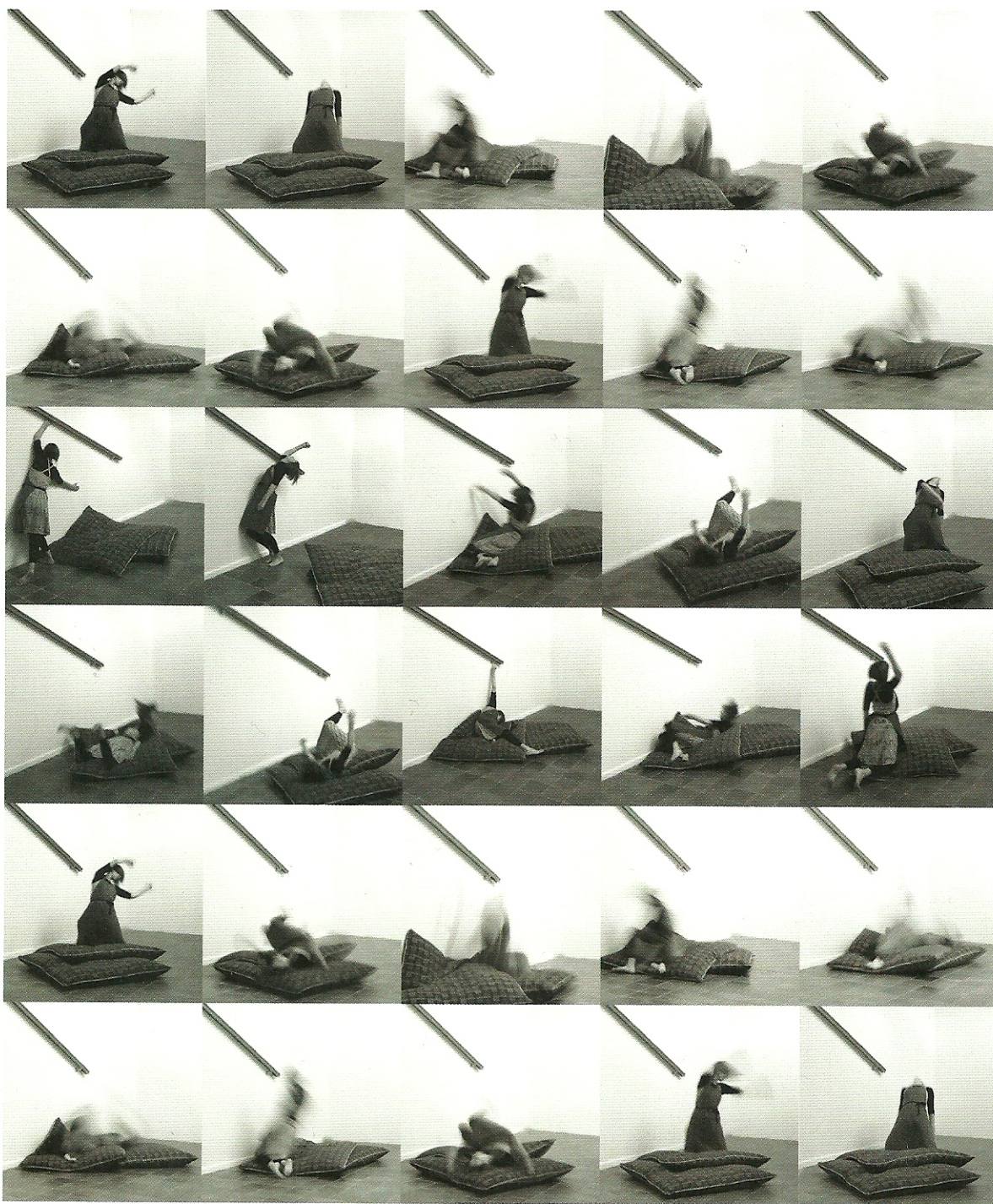
(I)t rests on the relationship between these two (different) modes.

It is only at the end [...] that the promise of the beginning is fulfilled.

(W)e are in the territory (between) what we have already done and the possibility of what ... might be.⁽⁴⁸⁾

(T)here is a blindness (;) a grasping or a groping.





Softening the Ground — setting up the conditions; *Preparing to Fall* — warming and flexing; *Entering the Arc* — trust, twist, torque; *A Commitment Made* — working against impulse; *Letting Go* — a liquid state; *Voluntary Vertigo* — ilinx, inclination; *Becoming Diagonal* — the italic I; *Touching Limits* — tilt towards (the other); *Ecstatic Impotency* — the *jouissance* of impuissance; *Folding of Attention* — heightened interiority; *Embodiment / Disembodiment* — mind body partition; *Breathless* — ventilating the idea; *Formless* — horizontality; *Voluptuous Recovery* — return, yet charged; *Recalibrate... Loop* — desire to repeat.

Notes

1. This text draws on a number of recent essays where I have explored different tactics of 'not knowing' within artistic practice, and within which my contextual allies and allegiances are perhaps more fully declared. I would like to thank Steve Dutton + Steve Swindells, Nikolaus Gansterer, Simon O'Sullivan and colleagues in the Nottingham Trent University Fine Art research group, *Still Unresolved*, for both the provocation of their research practices and for conversations in relation to ideas explored in this text. I would especially like to thank Rachel Lois Clapham and Clare Thornton who I collaborate with on the projects *Re—* and *Tacturiency* respectively, extracts from which are presented in dialogue with this text.
2. See Cocker, Emma, "The Restless Line, Drawing.", *Hyperdrawing: Beyond the Lines of Contemporary Art*, R Marshall and P Sawdon eds, London: I. B. Tauris, 2012.
3. These ideas are explored within *Re—*, my collaboration with Rachel Lois Clapham.
4. See Cocker, Emma, "Desiring to be Led Astray", *Papers of Surrealism* 6, 2007, and "The Art of Misdirection", *Dialogue* 5, 2007. Also Cocker, Emma, "Not Yet There: Endless Searches and Irresolvable Quests", *Telling Stories: Countering Narrative in Art, Theory and Film*, J Tormey and G Whiteley eds, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp.17–27.
5. The notion of falling is specifically explored within *Tacturiency*, my collaboration with Clare Thornton.
6. See Cocker, Emma, "Moves Towards the Incomprehensible Wild", *Art & Research*, Vol 4, Issue 1, 2011, in which I discuss the practice of artists Dutton + Swindells through the prism of philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of the 'event'.
7. My current research develops the idea of 'helmsman's knowledge' as an manifestation of the Ancient Greek art of *technē*, a 'productive' or 'tactical' knowledge whose key principles of *mētis* (cunning intelligence) and *kairos* (opportune timing) make it an optimal 'knowledge' for dealing with contingent situations (including perhaps, that of 'not knowing').

OPPOSITE

Emma Cocker and Clare Thornton
The Italic I (from the collaboration, Tacturiency)
 2013
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