

Uncertain States

An Unreliable History

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When Juneko, who is now running UCS, asked me to contribute to the Uncertain States 10th Anniversary edition I was intending to write something esoteric and/or erudite about how important projects like Uncertain States are to the artistic community, why they mattered and why they still matter.

Then I began to think about the journey Uncertain States has made over the last 10 years, and it made me smile. So instead I decided to write about something that made me smile as I think that it would be much more in keeping with the ethos of Uncertain States than any po-faced, academic rant about collaboration and community from me.

This is entirely my remembrance of events and although I do like the saying “Never let the truth get in the way of a good story”, I hope it chimes with both Fiona and Spencer that although vaguely accurate it is, at the same time, true.

Uncertain States just sort of happened, the way fungi appear, almost magically, after an electrical storm, but there never was, at any point, any semblance of any plan, of any sort, whatsoever.

Fiona and Spencer and myself along with a couple of other photographers whom we had just completed our MA with, were gifted an old shop in Limehouse, London for Photomonth 2009. Fiona had come up with the name “Uncertain States” for our MA show and being both basically lazy and unimaginative we kept the name for this exhibition. Spencer had been working with newsprint on a series of images he had made and suggested he knew a good designer and printer and we should print the show catalogue as a newspaper, funded by dividing the cost between the eight or so artists in the show.

We did exactly that, the model for UCS was set and the first run of 500 was printed. Slightly annoyingly everyone seemed a bit more interested in the newspaper than the exhibition and were still talking about it long after the exhibition closed, asking when we might publish the next issue.

We realized we may have hit on something interesting almost by accident and thought we should publish another (issue 2) using the same self-funding system. It occurred to us that it could be a useful vehicle to circumvent the traditional gallery system by in effect sending an exhibition out into the world that championed photographers we felt were being overlooked and/or unappreciated in the UK. At some deep level I think we understood this included us, so our motives may not have been purely altruistic. Uncertain States could act as a beacon for an alternative photographic community. We seemed to be right and were soon printing thousands rather than hundreds of copies per issue. The three of us would climb into Spencer's car and drive to Northampton and watch each issue printed. We would then load the car up to the roof and drive back into town in a car that was now basically a massive cube of newsprint with a wheel on each corner with three people pressed against the windscreen, reminiscent of the way people look when they photocopy their faces.

We had decided on no cover price as we felt it would mean only photographers would pick it up and we felt as photography is a truly democratic art form we wanted everyone to have access to the broadsheet, and no advertising, as it might impinge on our independence. Some of you may have already spotted the basic flaw in that particular business model, it does not generate any income. Until this point we had been delivering the papers by hand to various places around London but felt it was becoming London-centric, so we applied for Art Council funds to allow distribution around the UK. For some weird reason they wouldn't allocate funds to send it to Wales, Ireland or Scotland but we managed to get some there.

In November of 2010 we decided to have an annual show so people could view the work printed in the broadsheet in a gallery environment, as the artist intended. We were always aware the newspaper was really a conduit for ideas in contemporary practice, as, at times the print quality was atrocious - we once had a cover that came out completely black - no detail at all, not a speck. So began the UCS annual shows and exhibitions.

At some point, for no apparent reason that I can recall, we decided we should have some sort of permanent home as we did all the work in each other's kitchens or in cafés. Spencer knew someone with a café, so we moved in, painted the walls burgundy and hung pictures all over it like a Victorian salon.

Someone (Spencer I think) said, "lets have talks there", so we did. They were very well attended and our First Tuesday talks began which led onto among other things, symposiums, guest speaking and Friday night lectures at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

We didn't last very long at the café and were thrown out because lots of people came along but I don't think they bought much coffee. We then moved the First Tuesday talks to the upstairs room of a very noisy pub in the East End that always smelt of chips because it was above the kitchen. Once a month artists would give a talk around their work, some times having to shout above the noise of the kitchen below (we eventually bought a small PA system), followed by a discussion surrounding contemporary photographic practice. This experience created a pavlovian response in me so that, even today, every time I walk past the open door of a busy chip shop, I think of Walter Benjamin.

Everything we did was driven by a love of photography coupled to enthusiasm that bordered on recklessness. The three of us each brought a different skill set to the project that when linked together created one, almost adult, individual. We were, in effect, the world's smallest colony of ants. Anything we thought of doing, we just did it, the m.o. being - "... how hard can it be?" We laughed in the face of common sense, honked our horns at moderation (sometimes to Fiona's consternation) and enthusiastically took on many of our quests armed with nothing more than the sword of naivety and inexplicably, more often than not, we won. Most things seemed to work out, some didn't - but that's just a metaphor for life, but the failures never stopped us being pathologically gung ho. All three of us were teenagers in the 1970's and were privy to the rise of the punk culture and the ubiquitous home made "Fanzines". These celebrated music and culture and were cobbled together in people's bedrooms, then stapled to be sold at music venues and record shops for minute amounts on money.

That DIY mindset, I think, was adopted by us and pervaded anything and everything we put our hand to. We embraced the failures just as much as we enjoyed success. I always felt we were making a fanzine for the 21st century that celebrated photography rather than music.

In 2014 we began a partnership with Four Corners Gallery to create an online collection (absolute failure) and our first Open Call (smashing success). After the failure of the online collection we

decided we should learn more about collecting so arranged a series of talks at the V and A about collecting photography culminating with a one day symposium at Format in Derby. I'm not sure how much anybody actually learnt, but we all had a lovely day out.

By 2016 we now had a month long show at the Mile End Arts Pavilion. Apart from actually physically designing, building and painting the 120 meters of free standing wall for the exhibition space we organized the UCS Annual Exhibition, the Open Call Exhibition, our Exposure (student) Exhibition, a collaborative exhibition with Street Level (Scottish documentary group), plus talks, photography open days and a film night. We were still taking no money for our time and to this point we had been responsible for around 28 exhibitions, 30 editions of the newspaper, 60 plus talks/symposiums, and printed 10 catalogues/booklets, had over 200 artists, curators, writers and academics associated with the project and UCS Scandinavia had been born.

Uncertain States had been on a very long, extraordinary, journey from "Hey I have an idea, let's print a newspaper..." to where we were in November 2016.

Unfortunately, by this time UCS was becoming a victim of its own success and it was taking a toll on all three of us - we were all very tired and were having what boy bands describe as serious "musical differences". Although we had always had quarrels within the group (some had been very public) we were no longer laughing them off, they were becoming increasingly fractious. It was turning me into some sort of Geordie Kofi Annan and this was compounded by the fact that all three of us had other things we needed to address in the real world. The one thing we had always agreed on was that if any one of us decided to leave the project, we all would. So we did, then we finally made a plan.

We decided we would like someone else to take over the project that might add something new to it, give it a new personality and possibly take it in another direction. Maybe even someone with a plan.

Or maybe not.