

# UNCERTAIN SUBJECTS

01.02.2017 to 31.01.2019

a practice-based research project  
by Uta Kögelsberger





Valerie Bossman-Quarschie, Teaching  
Cover Supervisor and Mother, British  
"I fear there is no certainty for the UK  
outside the European Union."



# Statement

[Uncertain Subjects](#) was a multi-part practice-based research project by Uta Kögelsberger. The project brought together photographic portraiture with live performance in the public realm and on billboards. It explored alternative material strategies for the production, distribution and reception of photography. It was developed in five stages between 2017 and 2019, each stage resulting in distinct work in the public realm, including a mail art project, photographic billboard performances and an extended installation.

Contextually, Uncertain Subjects was developed in direct response to the complex social and political landscape in the UK between the EU referendum in 2016 and the UK's exit from the European Union. It aimed to engage the public with the real-life impacts of these political events. The parts of the research built on each other by focusing on different groups within the UK population and their experience of the process of Britain's exit from the European Union.

127 photographic portraits of individual subjects were made in Parts I-IV. During the photo shoot, each subject was interviewed, with agreed quotations extracted from each interview included in the final image. 63 portraits were selected for printing as billboards and/or postcards.

## Creative Outputs

- 2017 [Uncertain Subjects Part I](#): A mail art project of 1000 postcards launched at 4Cose, London, curated by artist duo Cullinan and Richards.
- 2018 [Uncertain Subjects Part II](#): an 8-hour photographic billboard performance as part of Art Night, London, curated by the Art Night team with the support of the Hayward Gallery, the School Strategic Research Fund and Build Hollywood.
- 2018 [Uncertain Subjects Part III](#): A series of five durational billboard performances on the side of a shipping container in Jubilee Square, Brighton, for the duration of the Brighton Photo Biennial (A new Europe). Commissioned by the Brighton Photo Biennial, with the support of Jack Arts.
- 2019 [Uncertain Subjects Part IV](#): a single 8-hour billboard performance on a specifically installed billboard at the Grainger Market, Newcastle, funded by and developed with the support of Newcastle City Council's Art Team and the support of Jack Arts sister company, Build Hollywood.
- 2019 [Uncertain Subjects Part V](#): four large scale billboards, sited as a series of stills at the Great Eastern Wall Gallery, Village Underground, London.
- 2018/19 [Uncertain Subjects Part VI](#): A series of 32 framed postcards and a time-lapse video included in a group exhibition curated by the Contemporary Art Society, which included works by Catherine Opie, Martin Parr and Sam Durant.
- 2019 [Uncertain Subjects Part VII](#): A series of Uncertain Subjects VII, photographic stills exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer exhibition, curated by Jane and Louise Wilson.

## Talks and Contributions to Panels:

- 2020 Uncertain Subjects, artist talk, Kingston University.
- 2020 Uncertain Subjects, [Artist Talk London Independent Photography Network](#).
- 2020 [Interview with Lisa Le Feuvre](#).
- 2019 Decolonising Series, [Creative Practice and Migration](#). Royal College of Art, artist talk as part of Brexit-related panel discussion.
- 2018 [Brexit and the Arts](#). Panel discussion, with Simon Roberts, Shoair Mavlian, Mahtab Hussain, Natasha Caruana and Michael Lightfoot, Brighton Photo Biennial.

## A Selection of key Articles, Reviews and interviews:

- 2017 From Pots to Posters and the Press, UK Artists use everything they can to oppose Theresa May. An article about artist responses to Brexit, reviewing Jeremy Deller, Cornelia Parker, Grayson Perry and Uta Kögelsberger. Hettie Judah, Artnet.
- 2018 Brighton Photo Biennial 2018 review. Gülnaz Can, The Guardian.
- 2018 Five Photographers Exploring how Brexit is Changing Europe. Lexi Manatakis, Dazed.
- 2018 Brighton Photo Biennial 2018: A New Europe. Paul Carey-Kent, Photomonitor.
- 2018 Brighton Photo Biennial 2018 review: new director brings light touch to heavy subject of 'A New Europe'. Artist Newsletter.
- 2018 Exploring a New Europe at Brighton Photo Biennial. Brighton Independent, Shoair Mavlian.
- 2018 How Wolfgang Tillmans is rebranding Europe. Article about responses to Brexit, reviewing the work of Wolfgang Tillmans and Uta Kögelsberger. Rob La Frenais, The Makery.
- 2019 Uncertain Subjects. Great Eastern Wall, Interview with Uta Kögelsberger.
- 2020 Brexit Through the Lens. In depth article about artist responses to Brexit by Mathilde Bertrand, reviewing the work of Tillmans, Simon Roberts and Uta Kögelsberger. Academic Online Journal, LISA.
- 2020 Uncertain Subjects. Six-page article (with illustrations) in conversation with Julian Stallabrass. Source Magazine, December 2020.



*Uncertain Subjects, Part III, Installation Shot, Brighton Photo Biennial, 2018*

# Contextual Information

## Research Aims

By inserting photographic practice in combination with performance into the public realm, the research aimed to explore how the power and relevance of photography can be expanded through different material and durational modes of production and dissemination during a period of political urgency.

Throughout its stages, Uncertain Subjects aimed to develop a research process where the production, distribution and reception of photographic practice in public spaces would invite spectators to engage intellectually and empathically with a specific political situation. It aimed to create a platform to generate and open up a different kind of discourse.

The research sought to give voice to individuals' lived experiences of wider political events as they unfold, with each new stage involving changing and additional contributors.

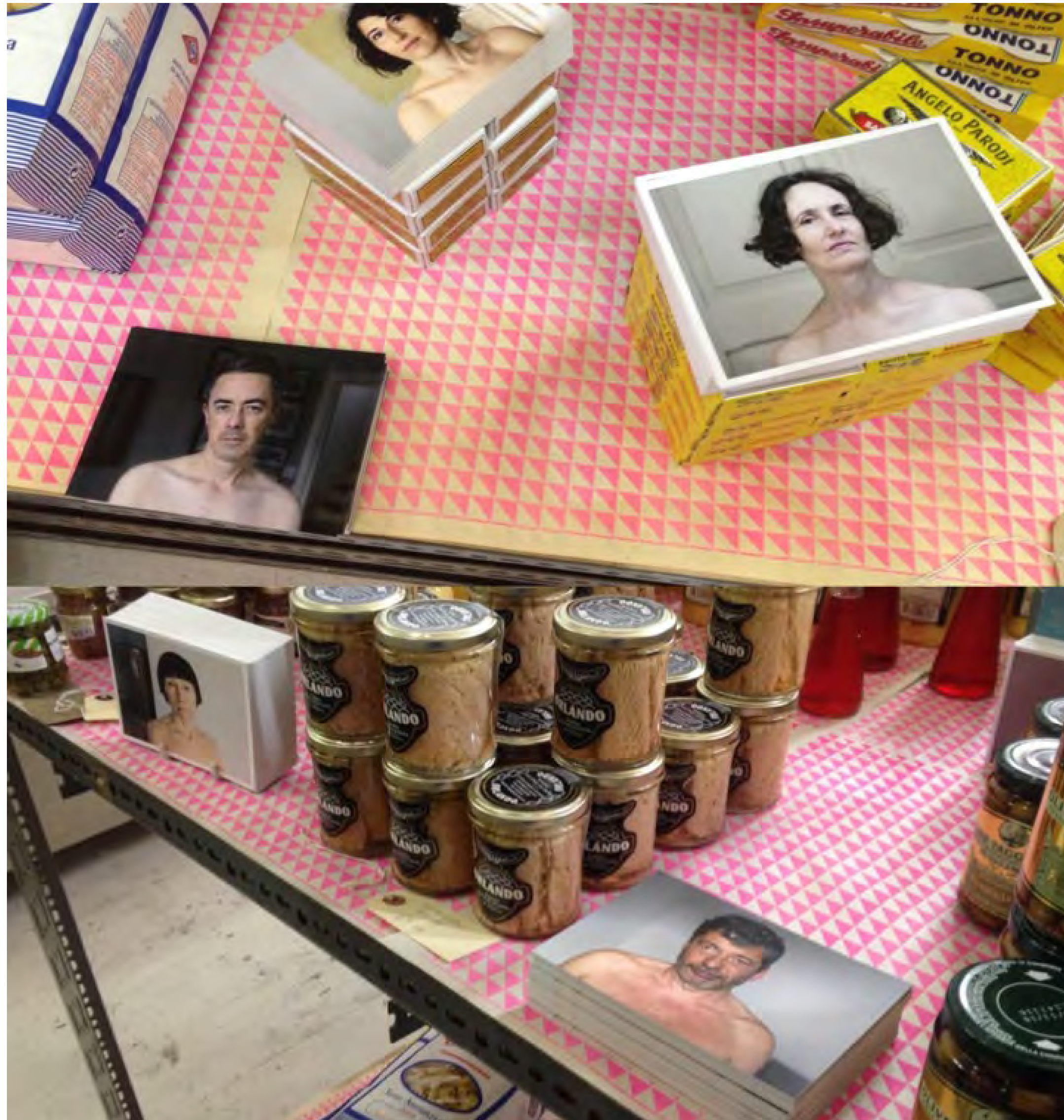
The subjects of **Stage I** of the mail art project were European citizens who were long-term UK residents with 'non-confirmed resident' status, and whose residency status was called into question as a result of the referendum.

**Stage II** opened up to include British citizens who felt they had no representation in the current political discourse.

**Stage III** included British citizens who had changed their position subsequent to the referendum.

**Stage IV** opened up to also included those who consistently supported the referendum outcome.

## Contextual Information



### *Social and Political Context:*

Uncertain Subjects responds to the complex social and political climate in the UK in the run up to the EU Referendum (23 June 2016) through to Britain's exit from the European Union (31 January 2020). This was a period rife with controversy, triggered by the unprecedented political situation and aggravated by contentious political actions, such as the breaking of electoral law, the controversy surrounding Cambridge Analytica, and the proroguing of parliament. This unique set of circumstances brought to the fore the complexities, strengths and weaknesses of our democratic system, and provided the starting point for the research developed as part of Uncertain Subjects. This aspect of the research was informed through academic debate about the rise of nationalism, and by the nature of the portrayal of news and current affairs in national and social media, which itself influenced the political landscape.

Expanding from the immediate political situation, Uncertain Subjects addresses a context where issues of identity have been foregrounded through tensions between regions and communities, the nature of national borders, the situation of migrants and refugees, and the complex entanglements of these issues with networked images and their circulation.

Uncertain Subjects Part I: Installation shot, 4Cose, London, 2017

# Contextual Information



Catherine Opie, *James*, 1993, chromogenic print on card  
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/catherine-opie/james-GvhDI40LsBbO64yfq8MlrA2>



Uta Kögelsberger, *Uncertain Subjects, Freddie*, 2018



August Sander, *Farmer from Westerwald*, 1931  
<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/40597/august-sander-farmer-westerwald-bauer-aus-dem-westerwald-german-1931/>


## Photographic Practice:

The circulating of information and images through networked technologies has had a profound impact on our understanding of the relationship between the global and the local, of geographical space and national borders. Whether a cause or a symptom, this brings about the fear of losing something in the process; identity, local culture, individuality.

*Uncertain Subjects* positions itself in this wider context of a renewed focus on issues related nationhood, belonging and identity. It is situated in relation to contemporary and historical photographic portraiture and approaches that include an element of comparative photography, where identity and difference are highlighted by the juxtaposition of cultural signifiers, such as clothing, framing and posture. Examples of this include: August Sander's photographic portraits that connect people and their profession, or Catherine Opie's remarkable portraits from the Los Angeles' leather community. In contrast to practices where identity is lived out through the articulation of difference, *Uncertain Subjects* focuses on developing photographic strategies to foreground shared humanity, by highlighting what we have in common instead of focusing on what separates us.

Each subject gaze is directly pointed at the camera to engage the viewer in an empathic exchange. By presenting the subjects with bare shoulders, with neutral backgrounds and consistent framing, the portraits aim to literally and metaphorically bring our bare humanity to the fore. *Uncertain Subjects* develops a dynamic compositional process that emphasises what people have in common instead of revealing external identifying differences.





Gaia Ladler  
Structural Engineer,  
British  
"It feels like my identity as a  
European is under attack."

## Methods and Processes - Photographic Portraiture

Uncertain Subjects developed in collaboration with the over 120 people, who were photographed as part of the research. Each collaboration resulted in a portrait with a statement. Agreed excerpts from interviews, encapsulating how the sitter was personally impacted by Brexit, together with their name and occupation, were added as captions within the portraits. Contributors were given the right of first refusal of any photograph taken or text arrived at. Through this process, the person photographed becomes a co-author of the work.

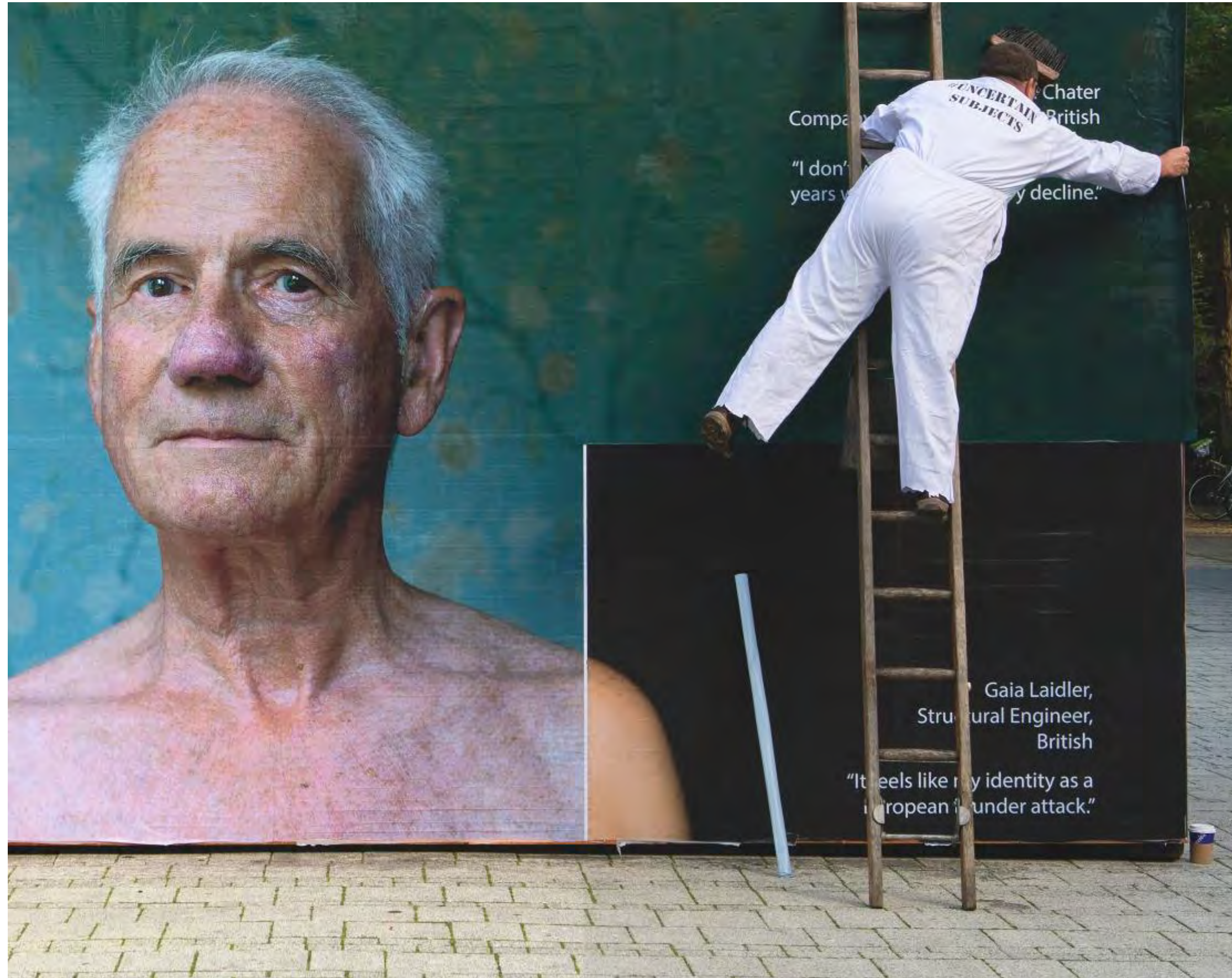
Each portrait was the product of a structured and sustained exchange between the subject and the photographer over an extended period of time (email, telephone, in-person exchanges). This process was an integral part of building the relationship of trust necessary for the intimacy of the the bare shouldered portraits.

The photographs were shot in the subject's home, to both highlight the all-pervasive impact of the political situation and to contribute to the intimacy of the photographs. This changed in Part IV, where established outreach channels enabled Kögelsberger to reach an otherwise difficult to reach community. These final portraits were therefore taken in community settings.

Each subject's gaze is directed straight into the camera, drawing the viewer into an exchange of looking at and being looked at; an exchange that became more palpable through the scale of the image.

Uncertain Subjects, Gaia Laidler, 2018

# Contextual Information



## Methods and Processes: Billboard Performances

Uncertain Subjects Parts II-IV presents images of real people and their concerns in a billboard format. This contrasts with the increasingly routine experience of receiving similar information via the small screen of a mobile phone. The scale of the portraits: 6 x 3 metres shaped the nature of the encounter of the work.

Once one portrait was fully pasted, the billboard worker would begin to overlay it with the next. Careful positioning of the portraits meant that, as the performance unfolded, the face of one sitter would transition into the face of another, emphasizing their human connectedness. By the end of the performance, layers of covered portraits suggested silenced voices. Each performance lasted a full day.

The public nature of the work contrasted with the intimate nature of the photographs. Seating and blankets were provided to encourage viewers to linger. The production team wore specially designed clothing, adding to the cohesive presentation of the work as an event.

In contrast to the dynamic nature of these performances, the still images on the Great Eastern Wall (2019-2021) continue to act as a reminder that a large part of the population did not support Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. The quotations referred to Brexit processes and its anticipated consequences. Where the performances aimed to represent the drowning out of one voice after another, the fixed images on the billboard aimed to afford these voices an extended presence.

The project positions itself in the context previous and subsequent billboard projects by artists such as: Victor Burgin (*Possession*, 1976) and Banu Cennetoğlu (*The List*, 2018). Non-commercial billboard campaigns such as *Led By Donkeys* (2019) were also points of reference.

Uncertain Subject, Part III, Brighton Photo Biennial, 2018



#UNCERTAIN  
SUBJECTS

Nikita Shergill,  
Speculating on social anthropology,  
geography, performance and writing.  
British

"I've always been different in a playground.  
I can't tell whether I belong."

# Contextual Information



## Methods and Processes: Mail Art Project

[Uncertain Subjects Part I](#) took the form of a mail art project. Its intention was to reach audiences beyond the gallery walls, to draw attention to the impact the 'Leave' vote left on EEA nationals and the uncertainty it created in relation to their residency status. It also aimed to trigger the recipient's reflection on the impact our individual actions have on others.

This was achieved by presenting each card's recipient with the choice of what to do with the person that lands on their doorstep: Do they stack the card (person) in a pile of papers, pin it to the wall or simply dispose of it?

In that sense, each decision that was made on receiving a card became an integral part of the work.

Uncertain Subjects, Part I, Postcard Stand, 4Cose, London, 2017

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# Output

## **UNCERTAIN SUBJECTS PART I**

Mail art project, launched with an installation at 4Cose, London, 2017, curated by Cullinan and Richard.

### **Outputs:**

Installation of portraits at 4Cose, London, 7-28 June, 2017.

1000 postcards - produced and distributed via: 4Cose, London, Big Commerce (online marketing site) and Kögelsberger's personal website.

The back of each postcard contained the following information:

Uncertain Subjects

A mail art project by Uta Kögelsberger

Name of the person photographed

Profession

Number of children (if the sitter wanted this included)

Number of years in the UK

Non-confirmed resident status



**Uncertain Subjects, Mail Art Project, Holger Hille, 2017**



**UNCERTAIN SUBJECTS**  
A mail art project by Uta Kögelsberger

order here  
<http://inside-out1.mybigcommerce.com/inside-out-stamped-post-cards/>

Place  
Stamp  
Here

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Holger Hille  
Architect  
Resident in the UK since 2000  
Non-confirmed resident status

# Output

## UNCERTAIN SUBJECTS PART II

An 8-hour continuous public Billboard Performance exhibited as part of Art Night, London, 2018.

**Subjects:** British citizens who felt they were not represented by the dominant political discourse; and EEA citizens resident in the UK.

**Location:** A 4-metre high billboard adjacent to the Leake Street Tunnel, London.

**Supported by:** Jack Arts/Build Hollywood, who part-funded the billboard printing and funded the billboard personnel; and Newcastle University.

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### Outputs

1. 16 billboards (3m x 6m) being posted in a continuous performance on top of one another throughout an 8-hour performance.
2. A series of 500 new postcards were produced for dissemination on the night.
3. A time-lapse video of the performance.







# Output

**Uncertain Subjects Part II was performed as part of the Art Night Open, London, 2018. A team of helpers each dressed in Uncertain Subject overalls, performed the work, most notably the billboard plasterer, moving a six-metre wooden ladder.**

[Click here to view video of performance](#)



Still from Uncertain Subjects, Art Night, London, 2018

