

To Win is to Lose, Eric Aichinger on Fred Lonidier at the Silberkuppe, Berlin

The exhibition of the US American Fred Lonidier (b. 1942) at the *Silberkuppe* raises first of all the question of the persistence of conceptual positions in socio-political engaged strands. Among Lonidier's works are "The Health and Safety Game" from 1976, a wall filling photo-text installation which contrasts photos of workplace injuries, statistics and the statements of company spokesmen. Up to the present the acknowledged Marxist and unionist has been engaged in exposing social abuses with the instruments of research and documentation in an analytical manner. The artist and critic, who has been teaching at the University of (*sic*) San Diego since 1972, has found his primary exhibition locations in universities and union-halls, as well as shopping malls — this too in the sense of encouraging a democratization of art which seeks to render the borders between daily life and art more porous. Lonidier pursues this approach with all its unwieldiness without ideological or finger pointing pathos. Also, his four works presented in Berlin are characterized by dry, biting humor and self-ironizing distance.

"Certified Loser" from perhaps 1976 consists of two framed, very officious documents that the magazine Reader's Digest sent as advertisements for their products, such as books, tapes and personal hygiene goods. The writings guaranteed trusting customers their personal participation in "exclusive" free offers which however in fine print resulted de facto in an order. (This marketing method worked well for years, in 2001 however the US mother concern was required to pay 6 million dollars to the victims of its misleading games.) Lonidier added two elements to the certificates. one a photograph of himself in his office with the framed certificates; the other a receipt from an art supplies business. An employee had written "done" on Lonidier's order of plastic packaging film. What further use Lonidier got from the transparent film, he had ordered it voluntarily, and as the receipt showed, also received it. The tarnished document shows only as a juridical claim the supposed winner as loser in the free market as unrestricted deception.

The two part work, "Create a Clock" from 1978 sets up the concept of work in relation to production and free time. It consists again of an advertising coupon enlarged by Lonidier, that portrays a wall clock fashioned from the enlarged coupon. As an example of this photo ideal thematizing family and private enjoyment, according to the motto, we have the hardware, you do the (presumably individual, fundamentally escapist) rest. This *pars pro toto* marketing campaign Lonidier has title in handwriting "Time — Aestheticized" and otherwise unchanged sent to the manufacturer. Back came the already assembled, ticking clock with the enlarged order as background. The second clock was similar, except that Lonidier selected no less *clichée* filled photo copies of factory work on huge machines as the background motif and flanked with the title

“Time — Rationalized.” Lonidier may have been suggesting through this unorthodox selection of images to the workers who were making these watches reflected on their own working conditions and their after work time, which in the final analysis served merely to maintain their own employment. In addition the work demonstrates, precisely because it concerns itself with pictorial *clichées*, the limits of the co-determination of the customers with the world of commodities, in which those products can be made or have made according to personal preference, that mass products might also promise individuality.

Another tone is found in the work “29 Arrests” of 1972, which consists of 30 unframed parts, pinned together in one block. A typewritten page indicates the title and place of origin of the 29 following black and white photographs: “Headquarters of the 11th Naval District, May 4, 1972” — that base, from which at that time troops and weapons were sent to Vietnam and Cambodia. The photos themselves show the arrest and removal of 29 Anti Vietnam War demonstrators, who were only photographed resisting. Of course, the photographically “detained” were not looking into the lens of the artist, but into those of the helmeted police photographers, over whose shoulders in turn Lonidier was photographing. What a photo shows, depends obviously on the angle of the shot. In another sense though, it always shows what one brings to it externally. Photographic meaning is not neutral, but depends on context and interests. The police photographer uses the photographic medium as a means of proof, in order to document identity and presence of the “criminal element” at the demonstration. (Interestingly enough, both the powers that be and the protesters photograph each other long since at demonstrations, both thus trusting in the persuasiveness of the medium. Yet each photographic image is also a sign whose meaning is created in the real-historically determined use context of the specific means of portrayal. Precisely what evidential value such a photo might have in a court of law is therefore also a question of the ingenuity of the prosecutor. Lonidier, on the other hand, maintains the praxis of this use and reminds us that photography is also used as a means of control and domination.

On the one hand Lonidier is concerned to call into question the claim of traditional documentary photography to guarantee as technical device direct referentiality and thereby objectivity. On the other hand he wants to use photography programatically for a new exploration of the documentary to show up real misunderstandings. Later, he will make use of the medium in its indexed function, of course only in connection with different, commenting textual strategies. In the early work “29 Arrests” he turns generally in a critical manner against a conceptual fetishizing of photography, through amateurish snapshots in the Duchampian tradition regarded as ready-made and transformed into an aesthetic object. And concretely — as the laconic title, snapshot aesthetic and serial order suggest in an unconcealed manner, toward the conceptual use of photography in the manner of Ed Ruscha. In 1972, 9 years after the appearance of “Twenty Six Gasoline Stations” and several other art books on the theme of pools, palm trees and parking places, these appear to some extent as the most important

impulses with respect to the critique of reality stemming from pop-art to the picture fetishism of the consumption object. Yet, beyond an esoteric-aesthetic discourse and with respect to such pressing problems as were presented by the Vietnam War, could one not find more artistic capital from the photographic image production and its socially institutionalized ubiquity for a socially relevant discourse? Lonidier's political and artistic interests are concerned up to the present with real life situations, in which open conflicts between concrete economic-political interests (most recently California's immigration politics) as well as views of its portrayability in the media. To such an extent "29 Arrests" marks an important demarcation in his development toward a complex definition and praxis of a photographic-documentary pictorial language, which, coupled with text, which uses gestures which are neither naive nor self-referential. As well, there is the factor of maintaining control of his work with respect to, exhibition, publication and distribution which does not encourage market interest.

A comprehensive reception of Lonidier's work remains to take place. It might offer — possibly in contrast to the now canonical positions of Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler — a good example for a critical analysis of strategies of politically engaged conceptualism, as they formed themselves in the widely known formalistic variants on the American East as well as West coasts. The questions, in any case, which Lonidier's approach raises, of an applied, critical realism not only with respect to the hierarchization of present visual practices with respect to the representative credibility and capability of presentation of a political subject, have certainly not become less politically actual. That the genuinely political moment of his work lies not only in the mere portrayal of historical events and social conditions, whose visual products are then not seldom ennobled institutionally as "political art", but which remain without consequence, but rather develop out of a potential, demonstrate a work concretely in its developmental context and thus to render visible for the involved actors/target audience, is certainly not a sign of helplessness. Rather, it owes its existence to a connection with respect to its intended public and the idea of reflecting on the changeability of those really existing conditions of life and to work seriously with them.