

# ASAP

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## For, By, and About Class: Fred Lonidier's Challenge to Art Criticism By Avram Alpert



Installation view, *Fred Lonidier: Two Works from the 1980s*, Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York, New York, 2018

For the past four decades, Fred Lonidier has developed an artistic practice in conjunction with his political work as a labor activist. From his best-known work, *The Health and Safety Game* (1976), about workplace injuries, to his recent *N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All)*, about the inequities and injustices of labor for American companies on both sides of the border, Lonidier has produced works, as he puts it, “for, by, and about class.” In other words, his work is not simply a representation of labor struggles from an artistic or objective perspective because Lonidier is not an outsider to these struggles. He participates in union campaigns and actions; he is part of the ongoing work of any union to build trust and relationships among members; he archives, documents, and brings to light union grievances; and, finally, as a public university teacher, he is himself a union member.

Critics of Lonidier's work sometimes forget that it is as much “for and by” labor organizing as it is “about” it. An *LA Times* critic, Sharon Mizota, for example, called *The Health and Safety Game* “an overwhelming record of workplace injuries.” And a critic for *Frieze*, Melissa Canbaz, offered a more general assessment of his career: “The main concern of these works, and of Lonidier's entire artistic practice, is to draw attention to social ills.” This is certainly true of his work at one level, but to circumscribe it as recording and drawing attention to labor issues, rather than participating in their amelioration, obscures some of the significance of Lonidier's own labor. This allows critics to see him as an outsider, for which he is in turn criticized. Canbaz thus continues: “But this endeavour presents its own problems: the shifts from proximity to distance that are visible in the works mean that his encounter with the working classes takes place on terms that are not always equal. Art is conceived of as a protest tool to be applied actively.”

While there are of course inequalities *within* labor movements that must be acknowledged, such criticisms of Lonidier's work force a separation between art and politics, and between artist and worker, that is foreign to his practice itself. In a programmatic statement, "Blueprint for a Strike" (1995), Lonidier focused attention not just on "social ills" as such, but precisely on the problem of an art practice that is separated out from such ills and then seeks to be applied back to it. "What is at stake for me . . . are the issues of the role of the work and the role of the artists." The work, at a minimum, must "be intended to align itself within class struggle." And the artist must avoid what is increasingly commonplace today: "a socially critical stand which rarely connects to struggle." Struggle does not mean occasionally showing up to a protest, signing a petition, teaching students critical consciousness, or volunteering at a nonprofit organization—although it may also include these things. Struggle is here conceived as the ongoing and organized effort of labor (including intellectual and cultural laborers) to control their own conditions of production and reproduction in the name of shared social wealth whose founding premise is our equal dignity.

"Political art," in this sense, is first and foremost about how the art is made, what the relation is of the artist to the struggle, and how the art advances the work of the struggle. This is why to speak of Lonidier's art as being only "about" politics, or seeking to draw our "attention" to politics, or being "applicable" to politics, or even being a "record" of politics, is to misunderstand it from the start. Lonidier's work provides its own interpretive framework: it is the history of the class struggle of which it is not just a *representation*, but also, because the struggle is ongoing, an *action*.

Still, that language is not quite right either. Lonidier's cultural theory is based in Marx's work on sublation: a philosophical understanding of how antinomies do not resolve, but rather are partially cancelled and partially preserved in such a way as to abolish their contradiction and raise their unity to a higher level. Marx's innovation on this idea (whose origins lie in Schiller and Hegel), is that this process does not happen in aesthetic reflection (Schiller) or the movement of history (Hegel), but through the overcoming of the contradictions of political economy. Thus we are better to say that the work sublates the representation/action distinction. Because it comes from and remains part of the labor struggle, it is both representation and action at the same time that it sheds the fixity and distance of representation and the lack of reflection that is a necessary part of action. It becomes an action-representation or a representation-action not because it merely claims this, but through its alignment with the struggle in the activity of its producer (i.e., Lonidier as active participant).

Allan Sekula early on saw the risk that has haunted Lonidier's reception, writing in a 1976 catalogue essay: "a cult of authorship, an auteurism, takes hold of the image separating it from the social conditions of its making and elevating it above the multitude of lowly and mundane uses to which photography is commonly put." It is necessary thus to view Lonidier's works in their *specific* contexts, which include him as a participant. These contexts are not themselves to be romanticized, as Sekula also reminded us when he expanded the essay into his well-known "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Photography." Lonidier, he noted, is idealizing neither the workers nor the unions. After all, the Cold War union embrace of capitalism makes Lonidier's Marxist aspirations suspect not just for union leaders—as Sekula noted—but also for many rank-and-file members.

I have given an overview for Lonidier's work prior to a description of his recent show on the Lower East Side because understanding its context is a prerequisite for experiencing the reorientation of vision it offers. Although all shows at Essex Street Gallery require the viewer to descend a staircase in order to arrive at the exhibition, the architectural condition feels particularly appropriate for approaching Lonidier's show, *Two Works from the 1980s*. After all, so much of Lonidier's concern is that the artworld views politics from an abstracted, bird's-eye view: surveying (and more often lamenting) the declines of labor power, but without the necessary frequency and force of engagement with unions themselves.

The two works on display here were *L.A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems* (1980) and *I Like Everything Nothing But Union* (1983). The former consists of eleven panels, the majority of which are dedicated to telling the stories of workers who have suffered either on the job or because of losing their job. These stories are framed by two panels, the first of which gives a snapshot of neoliberal versus Keynesian explanations of the 1970s economic downturn. The second panel is topped with arrows pointing from the debate and toward the stories, and title text that reads: "This Translates into That: Decoding Some Implications of the Debate." What's happening here is not simply a document of social conditions, or a critique of capital, though it is of course both of these things. It is also a demonstration of how public understanding and debate about what causes the crises in capital "translates" into the suffering being experienced by workers. The word "translate" in the panel's title is carefully chosen: this is not a question of determination alone, but of how a mix of subjective and objective relations come to constitute everyday suffering. Furthermore, the work continues Lonidier's practice of alignment or embeddedness: he is not just documenting; he is also participating in the attempted transformation of these conditions of

production. He is a researcher of class struggle, a union member himself, and his work as an artist is thus not just *about* the union, but also *of* and *for* the union.

*I Like Everything Nothing But Union* is a more sprawling work, spreading across roughly fifty-four panels. The top panels present photographs from a diverse array of industrial and cultural union members, while the bottom half presents quotes in varying font sizes about themes in economy, labor, and life. The final panel of the work again comes with a reflexive nod to interpretation: an image of the work hanging in the offices of the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council, AFL-CIO, where it is a permanent installation, having been commissioned by the Secretary-Treasurer Joseph Francis in 1983. The inclusion of this fact in the work itself is again no mere contextual point. It is central to the work's meaning that though it appears in the gallery, its origin, its permanent home, and its viewership are any who work with the union. The posters, which discuss issues of aspiration, meaning, gender, culture, technology, union history, and political strategy, and which have long sections from Spanish-speakers, underscore how human and material histories intertwine and intersect across shifting identity relations. The shifting font sizes serve to illuminate particular passages, but also to force the viewer to look more closely for words that may *appear* less important. This playing with appearances that forces the reader to interpret is, again, not a general motif of the engaged participant, but a factual relation produced by a work that begins with the producer's own engagement. It is here where the union and its members in all their complexity are explored.

Lonidier's work puts pressure on critics like myself to avoid our own drifting into a "politically correct" posture of appreciation that ignores the incumbent demand for engagement. Indeed, the most questionable curatorial choice comes in the press release, which is no small matter given the importance Lonidier attaches to the context in which works are presented. Rather than a description of *L.A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems*, or some relevant quotes from workers, or histories about the context of the struggle, we are given a kind of argument by authority for the work's importance through the inclusion of an excerpt from a 1984 catalogue essay by Benjamin Buchloh. The mere fact of using a critical authority seems to miss some of what the work itself is about: the participation in, not the abstraction of, class struggle. Ironically, Buchloh himself wrote in a section of the essay not included in the press release that part of Lonidier's importance as an artist was "to resist centralization and the immediate extraction from practice by the cultural apparatus." He managed to do so by "marginalizing the central authority of the apparatus of 'Art,' and its institutions: the critics and the magazines as much as the museums, the galleries, and the collectors"—the very apparatus that attaching a quote by Buchloh would seem to reinstate.

I do not mean in saying this to invoke the somewhat standard criticism that seemingly resistant works are bound to cooptation. There is nothing wrong with recognition. Indeed, much of what drives Lonidier's work is the need for an expanded sense of the recognition of labor: what it is, who does it, why it matters, what it means, what its history and future are, what its conditions are, what values are placed on it. It does not seem to me problematic that work about unions should receive such recognition in places and by people that are generally unwilling to recognize unions, so long as such recognition is followed by actual and engaged support of unions or other organizations capable of advancing equality.

Thus, my concern with the inclusion of the quote in the press release is less about cooptation than *the lack of it* that the quote actually represents. While there are of course many important ongoing struggles about labor in the artworld—such as the work of W.A.G.E.—unionization and fair pay for all staff has, by and large, not spread to the world of criticism or galleries. The labor practices of the art world—and its academic relations—are notoriously unequal, and notoriously dependent on the very excesses of capital it sets out to critique. The only criticism worthy of its name in regard to Lonidier's work will thus not come from Buchloh (or at least does not appear in his essay), nor indeed from myself (at least not as I am writing here), but from a position capable of keeping the work embedded in the union—or similar—struggle. While Buchloh or I may reflect on the work's meaning, and while we may do so with absolutely earnest political commitments, the form of criticism the work calls for is something else. This would be a participant criticism that can do for critical writing what Lonidier has done for photography; that is, a criticism that considers art from a perspective that is based in and self-reflexive about the writer's own ongoing participation in the history of struggle.