

Art in America

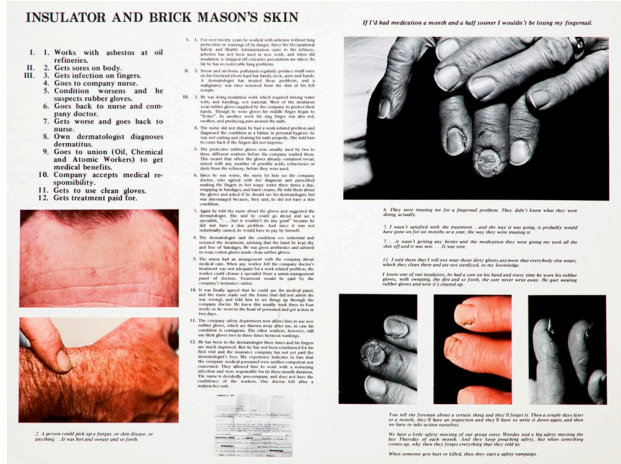
REVIEWS JUN. 18, 2014

Fred Lonidier at Essex Street

by Aimee Walleston

The motto "an injury to one is an injury to all" has been used by the Industrial Workers of the World since the early 1900s. It also seems to underpin San Diego-based artist and union activist Fred Lonidier's seminal work *The Health and Safety Game* (1976/78). Composed of 26 wall panels and a 20-minute black-and-white video, the installation elaborates upon the job-related medical conditions of workers in various fields. Specifically, it outlines the bureaucratic barbed wire that these laborers—who are portrayed anonymously, identified solely by their injury or illness—had to negotiate to receive health care and monetary compensation.

An introductory panel explains that the goal of the titular "game" is for each corporate entity to "maximize their gains and minimize their losses" when dealing with workers—to win, financially. The other panels, each named after a person's affliction—"Machinist's Lung," for example—are densely laid out with text, close-ups of injured body parts, documents and X-rays, telling the workers' stories. Three numbered lists appear on each. One list offers bullet points describing the injuries and subsequent attempts to get care and go back to work. These are presented as chronological facts, though they often possess an unexpected poetic refrain. On "Egg Packer's Arm," items on the 11-point list include: "8. Has unsuccessful surgery on the arm. 9. Has unsuccessful surgery on the chest. 10. Has unsuccessful surgery on the leg." The second list goes into greater detail, and a third list employs anecdotal quotes from the worker. "Shipyard Worker's Hand" relates the circumstances of a man who cut his fingers on a table saw. He has been put on "one-hand duty" and expresses his humiliation: "I'm a crippled idiot standing there. They'd say 'Here comes the witch,' because I always got my broom." Lonidier's photographs ask to be received as formal evidence, but their arresting compositions often artfully exceed journalistic documentation.



Detail of Fred Lonidier's *The Health and Safety Game*, 1976/78, 26 photo-and-text panels, black-and-white video; at Essex Street.

of a pinto pony. On "Waitress's Back," a painful image of a woman's corseted back is juxtaposed with a photo of her documents strewn wildly on a patterned bedspread.

Lonidier's work has only recently made its way back to New York—in 2012, he had his first New York show in 35 years. Lonidier became acquainted with Martha Rosler and the late Allan Sekula while studying at UC San Diego (where he still teaches). His practice is often aligned with these artists, and Sekula's 1976 essay "Documentary and Corporate Violence" was featured on a poster accompanying the exhibition. First shown at Long Beach University in 1976, *The Health and Safety Game* appeared in New York in a 1977 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the AFSCME District Council 37. Thirty-seven years later, Lonidier's work returned to the Whitney as part of the 2014 Biennial, which featured photo panels from his ongoing project on labor rights in maquiladoras (foreign-owned factories in Mexico).

Lonidier's oeuvre brings to mind another self-identified socialist and California resident, author Upton Sinclair. Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle*, initially serialized in the socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason*, novelizes the plight of workers in Chicago's meatpacking industry. The book illustrates the way expository social critique transcends itself, acquiring the value and legacy of literature. Similarly, Lonidier's elegant and devastating work strikes one as an epic workers' poem composed of image and text.