

Fred Lonidier Cardwell Jimmerson



Fred Lonidier is probably best known for *The Health and Safety Game* (1976), a photo/text installation about on-the-job injuries in organized labour. Lonidier, a San Diego-based photographer and political activist, came of age in California in the late 1960s; along with artists including Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler, he forged an alliance between art and social practice through his participation in demonstrations and activist organizations. The majority of the works in 'Fred Lonidier: Photo/Text/Video, Artworks 1969–Present' at Cardwell Jimmerson dated from the mid-1970s and early '80s, and were mostly photo and text installations, with texts either from news and official documents or personal interviews with

Lonidier's subjects. Viewing it required a huge investment of time. Works like "NAFTA" #17 Archive, a box of photographs, graphics and English and Spanish articles on US-Mexico trade and the 'imperialist' global capitalism of the North American Free Trade Agreement, could be grasped but not absorbed without a thorough read.

With the first-person narratives, Lonidier taps into a principle of mainstream media, that sentiments are more compelling than statistics. 'L.A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems...' (1980) is a series of 11 panels with photographs of civil employees, including an adult-education teacher and a welfare eligibility worker, accompanied by descriptions of their job duties and grievances. Lonidier's photographs have the offhand quality of snapshots, something that lends an aura of 'facticity' to the image, disavowing, in a sense, the value of the artist. *The Health and Safety Game* is more direct in its social agenda: blue-collar workers are represented through photographs of their injuries, personal accounts and medical documents or x-rays, but their identities remain anonymous, and smaller panels adopt corporate terminology (for example, 'Management Strategies', 'Control the Professions', 'Break the Law') to expose the 'Game' – namely, management's manipulation or breach of company policies and federal law to avoid proper worker compensation or negligence charges.

As much as Lonidier is committed to working-class interests, 'L.A. Public Workers...', *The Health and Safety Game* and other related works, are equally about the mechanics of representation – the ways in which terms such as 'worker', 'management' or 'victim' are constructed and strategically inhabited as identities. Lonidier is a sort of active spectator, a position that's not oppressive to the worker, but clearly is not the same. And if we can't tell from the ideological distance between the documentarist and his subject, it's embedded in the vantage point of '29 Arrests' (1972), a series of photographs of sit-in arrests taken from behind a police photographer, which allows the artist an unfixed identity (his sympathies are unclear).

My point is not to condemn Lonidier for being an artist rather than a wage labourer, particularly when corporate or governmental bodies rely on the invisibility of the worker to silence their missteps. At its best, his work is free of the self-righteousness so often attached to social responsibility and gives voice to people who need it, often in contexts that rarely permit it. Lonidier has spent much of his career exhibiting in alternative venues, like union halls and offices. The commercial gallery points up the remove between the subject matter and the viewer and carries with it the currents of capitalist complicity. However, Cardwell Jimmerson is nowhere near the behemoth of some nearby galleries. I was reminded of an exhibition called 'Blood Drive' at Zach Feuer Gallery in 2009, for which the artist Kate Levant converted the gallery into a blood bank for two days. Social action has no 'correct' context or actor, but it requires a leap from the language of change to one's participation in effecting it. Lonidier's language is stained with the dirt of experience.

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