



*Tue Nov 20 2012*

A committed Marxist and union activist, photographer Fred Lonidier prefers to exhibit his work at such non-art-world venues as shopping malls, universities and labor halls. This rare gallery show brings together a small but representative selection of pieces from the 1970s, a time when Lonidier and fellow graduate students at the University of California, San Diego—Phel Steinmetz, Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula—were formulating a politically and socially engaged approach to art that would challenge the supposed neutrality of conventional photojournalism.

The exhibition includes a group of commercial products contextualized to reference their own production. A pair of create-your-own wall clocks (the result of customers sending in favorite photographs and having them returned enlarged, framed and fitted with a battery-powered movement) features, respectively, a photo of the item's original advertisement and an image of factory workers from a time-and-motion study. A set of faux-tooled-leather-bound photo albums contains lists of questions that Lonidier sent to the company that made them, inquiring about working conditions (these seem to have been received and sent back without comment).

The most riveting work is the text-and-photo piece *Love You Always, Mart* (1973). In 1957, a high-school friend of Lonidier's moved from California to Missouri. Rather than write to the artist himself, the friend enlisted 15-year-old Marcella Mae McNary to do the corresponding. Twenty of this young woman's extraordinary letters have been reworked as columns of type, each paired with a photograph of the original missive and a second image of an abandoned house, discovered by the artist in the 1960s; its interiors form a visual parallel to Marcella's distinctive voice. With its multiple, interwoven stories, the piece heralds the start of a career grounded in the complexity, urgency and wondrous oddity of real life.—*Anne Doran*