

4Columns

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Fred Lonidier

By Alex Kitnick

Nearly a quarter century after exhibiting in a traveling tractor trailer, the artist's agitprop arrives in New York.



Fred Lonidier: N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All), installation view. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham.

In 2003, Fred Lonidier, a professor of visual art at the University of California, San Diego, rented a tractor trailer and drove to Tijuana. The vehicle was a kind of Kunsthalle on wheels, carrying over twenty didactic panels about maquiladoras, internationally operated factories that mushroomed south of the border in the wake of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement. While NAFTA expedited the deindustrialization of US labor that was already underway by eliminating tariffs on goods shipped between Canada, Mexico, and the US, it didn't empower Mexico as a result: the wages in the maquiladoras were notoriously low and the working conditions hazardous, facts well documented in Lonidier's show. (The first iteration of the exhibition, at Tijuana's Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in 1999, was unceremoniously canceled just after it opened, prompting the artist to take matters into his own hands.) The goal of Lonidier's project, however, was less to bring this situation to the attention of a global audience than to organize Mexican workers. He parked the trailer in front of various factories, invited schoolchildren to visit, and, on the occasion of his UABC presentation, distributed flyers at factory gates. Lonidier's art, aiming for political intervention, is agitprop in the truest sense of the word. The intention is noble, but what it actually does, especially years after its initial intervention, is less straightforward.



Fred Lonidier, N.A.F.T.A. #14 "Maquiladoras: a 'rights-free zone?' / ¿Maquiladoras: una 'zona libre de derechos?'" a rejected billboard proposal to INSITE, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham.

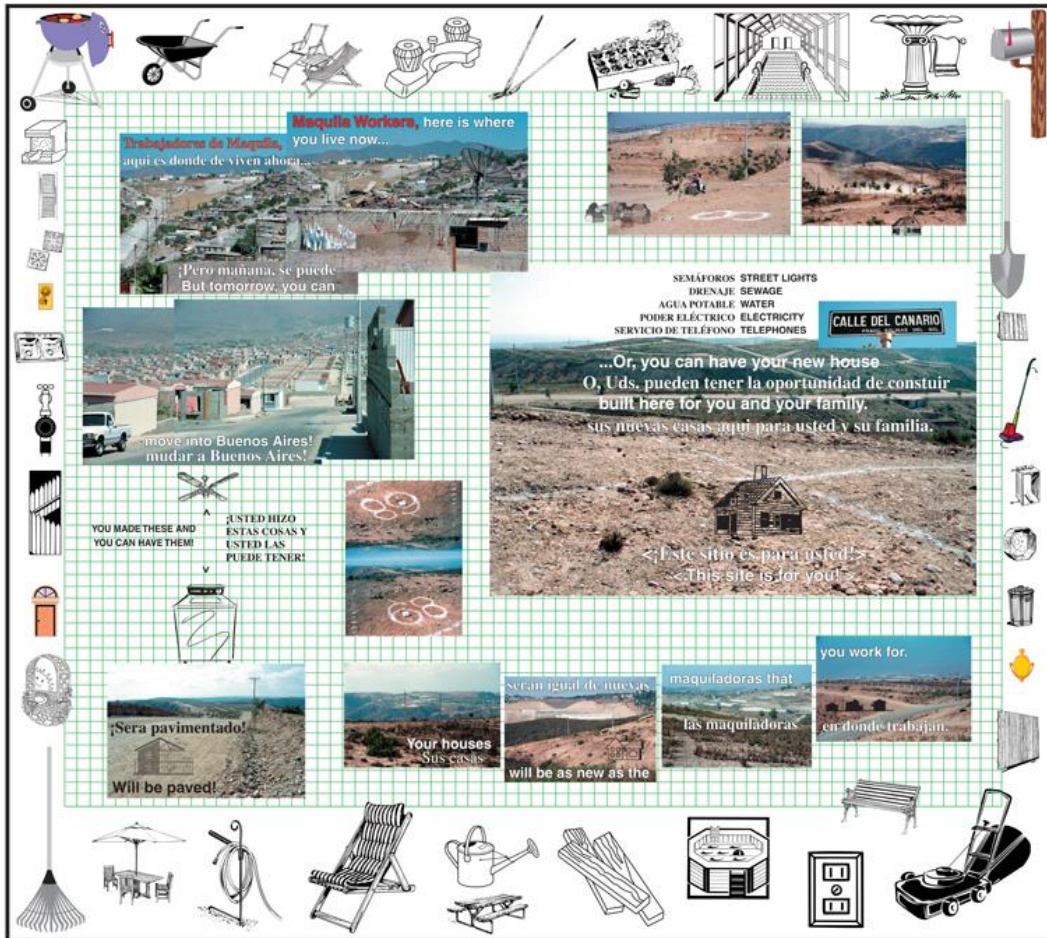
Some twenty-five years later, N.A.F.T.A. (Not a Fair Trade for All) has arrived at New York's Maxwell Graham Gallery, providing an opportunity to consider how politics and art practice have changed in the interim. Witnessing Lonidier's work as Trump weighs massive tariffs on Mexico—as well as Canada and China—leaves one wondering: If free trade redistributes exploitation and inflated tariffs foment nationalism, what is to be done? Neither open markets nor large-scale levies appear ethical, and a middle-of-the-road option would seem just that. At the same time, one can't help noticing the ever-widening gulf between Lonidier's activist art and a growing coterie of artists today who, patinating canvases with strange eyeballs and wan figures, half-think they're Odilon Redon. While Lonidier has claimed that his "work is for, by, and about class struggle through organized labor" and often exhibits in union venues, he has consistently shown in what he calls the "avant-garde art world," as well. In this latter context, Lonidier's practice has an astringent quality, calling out behaviors deemed exceptional ("masterful brushwork," "visionary expression") but which are, in fact, business as usual.



Fred Lonidier, N.A.F.T.A. #01 "A Big Barrier," 1997/2000. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham.

This double-barreled approach—operating in putatively "political" and "aesthetic" spaces—is very much to the point. Lonidier's partisans see him descending from the historic avant-garde, a latter-day fellow traveler bringing the lessons of committed art practice to the present moment. The Dadaist John Heartfield, one of the inventors of photomontage, is often enlisted as precedent, and, in the right light, Lonidier's laminated panels—composed of photographs, news clippings, texts, and clip art—reboot an earlier moment of invention and extend its ethos into ever-new crises. But while Heartfield created discordant cutouts in the 1910s, which registered both the unsettledness of universal time and the repercussions of the First World War, he transformed his practice in the

1930s, creating seamless denouncements of Hitler's rise to power for the cover of the illustrated worker's magazine AIZ. Heartfield, in other words, realized that different times require distinct graphic tactics; Lonidier, in contrast, has remained committed to a profoundly lo-fi anti-design throughout his fifty-year career.



Fred Lonidier, *N.A.F.T.A. #05 "UnRealEstate,"* 1997/2000. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham.

In an attempt to détourn glamour toward radical ends, other artists at the turn of the millennium embraced corporate aesthetics, but Lonidier stuck with the leaflet—or is it the seminar room? Curator Brian Wallis has described Lonidier's as a science-fair aesthetic, and this seems right. The artist locates us within the realm of education, wedged between a chalkboard and a PowerPoint: the panels maintain the proportions of a screen, and their compact cacophony of documentary images would seem to demand a narrator. There is much to learn here, but significant effort is required to pry knowledge from these densely packed panels. One of the show's most powerful moments is also its most direct: a large photograph of a used maxi pad tagged with General Motors' "mark of excellence" is framed by text explaining how the maquiladora bosses require female laborers to prove they are not expecting.



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But looks, of course, aren't everything. Lonidier closely tracks the circulation of his art, feeding its travels back into his work, and his project becomes more complex and self-aware as he charts its course through the world, almost as if it were a character in a picaresque novel. In 2005, he added a preface to N.A.F.T.A. in the form of two large panels featuring photographs of the aforementioned tractor trailer; first shown in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, the images are now installed in the gallery's mezzanine. Here, Lonidier acknowledges his own subject position in a comic addendum to the installation's original title: *Getting the Correct Picture: A monolingual, trade union descendent of Swedish immigrants and Cajuns goes across the border of the United States of America and the United States of Mexico.* While Lonidier, as an English-speaking son of Swedes and Cajuns, might seem out of place—and lonely—south of the border (echoing, perhaps, the status of his artwork in a New York gallery), this rather bemused self-appellation simultaneously suggests the importance of attempting to bridge seemingly incommensurable gaps, while at the same time acknowledging the ever-decreasing chance of succeeding. It also recasts his art less as a heroic deed than a quixotic adventure.



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Such work makes for a compelling narrative, but it would be hard to encourage all artists to unite under Lonidier's banner. There is something unpleasant about being told how the world works. (How the world works, of course, is unpleasant, too.) The artist's brand of anti-aesthetic, moreover, is almost unimaginably clunky, and, while it connotes an anti-corporate sensibility, it is sometimes simply hard to read. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and yet one also needs to respond nimbly—the tractor trailer was quick thinking. What might be most interesting here, however, is the opportunity to consider the half-life of socially engaged art, how it functions differently as its time and place shift. Its initial context does not necessarily need to be reconstructed in order for the work to be properly appreciated. The work's specificity opens up in its passage through time, but it also becomes a document. Offering evidence of what someone has done, Lonidier's project offers an intimation of what one might do still, but also what one might do differently.