

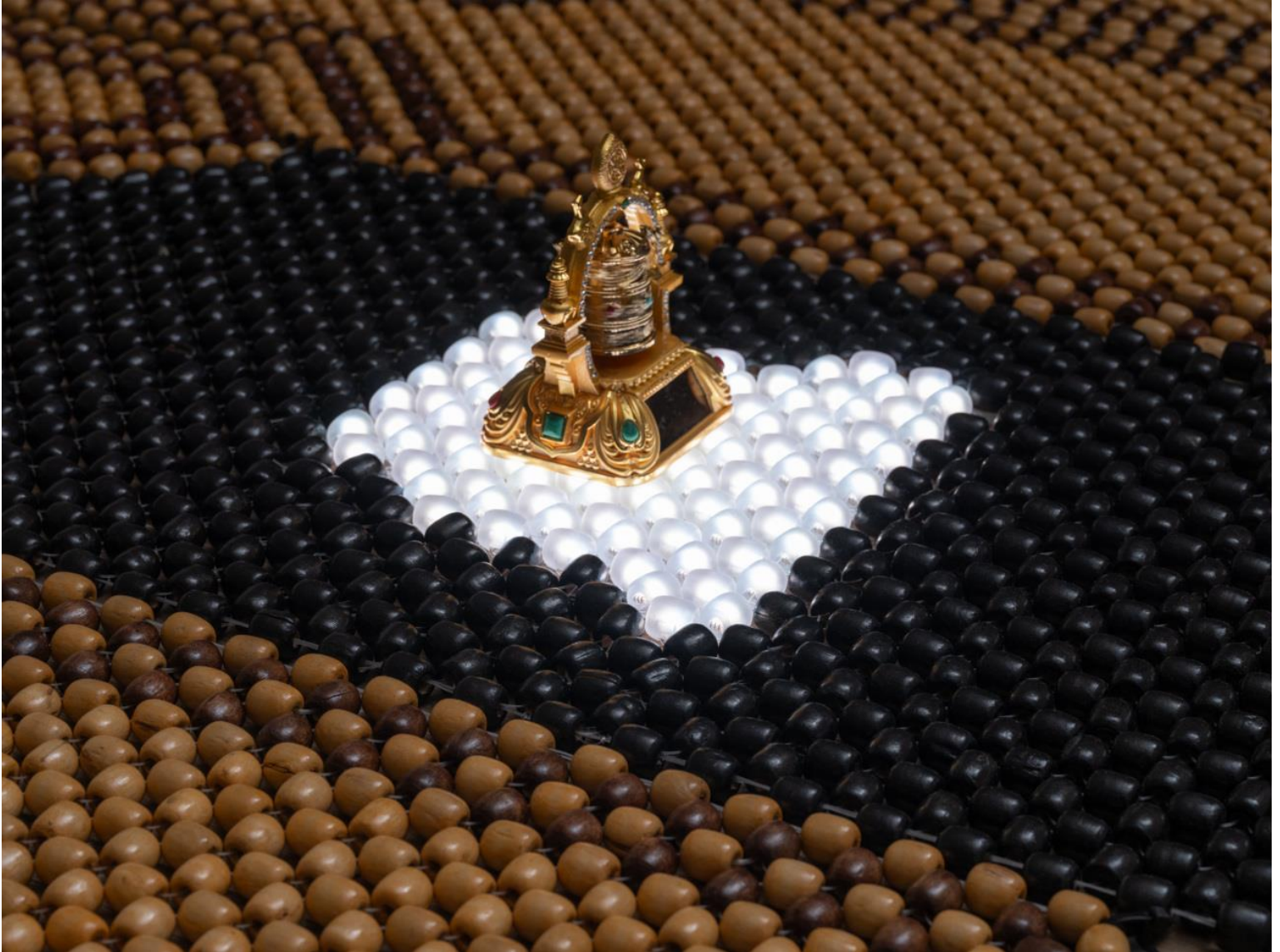
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A.I., Income Inequality, and Labor Organizing: Two New Exhibitions Take on the World of Work

By John Vincler

John Vincler reviews two contemplative New York gallery shows, at Bridget Donahue and Maxwell Graham, on the lives of working people and, maybe, the origins for our current political moment.



Kenneth Tam, "The Medallion" (Installation View), 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue.

Kenneth Tam through March 8
Bridget Donahue | 99 Bowery, 2nd Floor

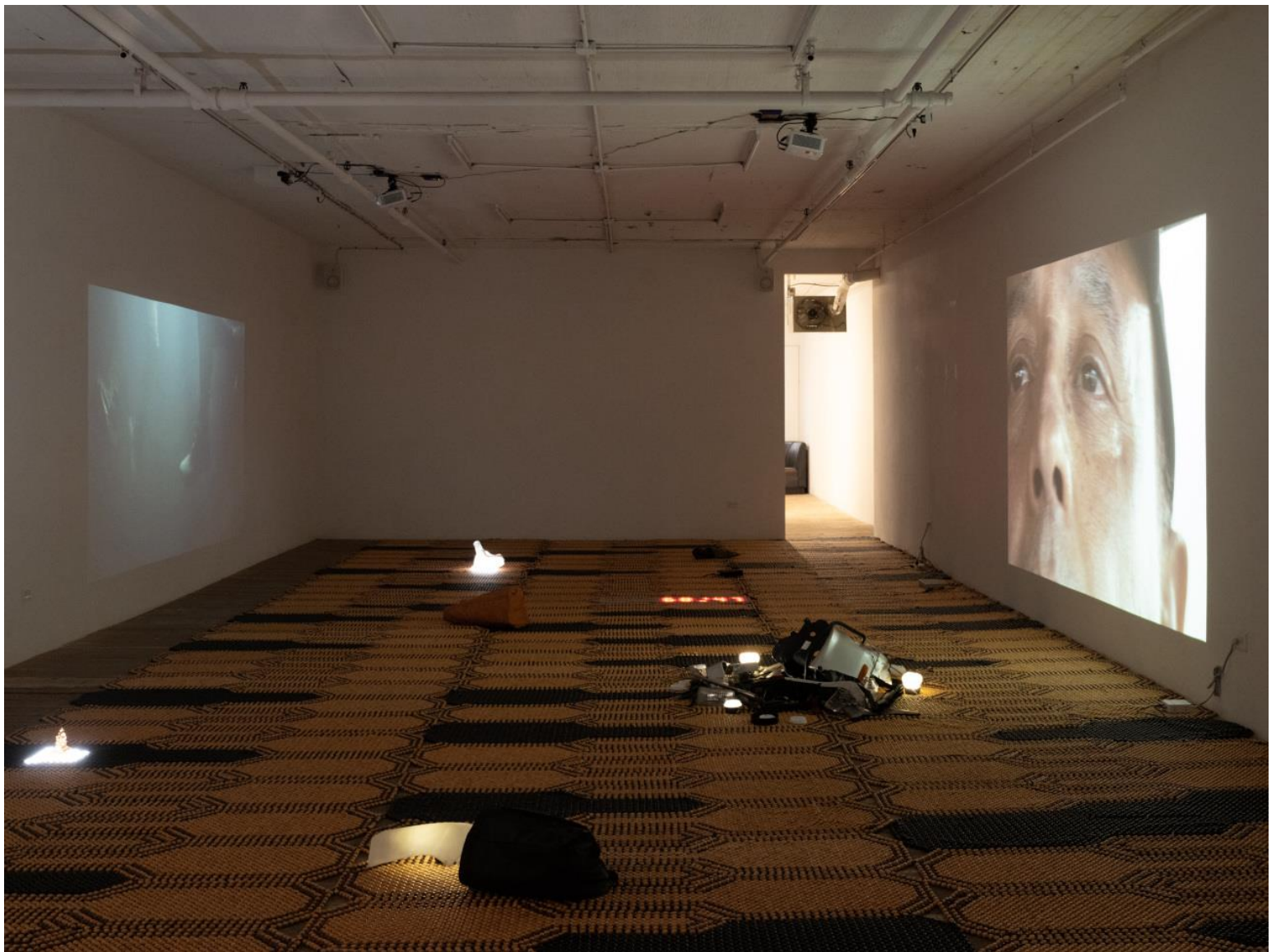
Fred Lonidier through March 1
Maxwell Graham | 55 Hester Street

A collective chortle was almost audible when the Chinese artificial intelligence company DeepSeek debuted a product that was competitive with those of U.S. companies, brought to market in less time and with just a fraction of the start-up capital. But investors in the California-headquartered chipmaker Nvidia weren't laughing when its stock lost \$589 billion of its market value last Monday in response, the biggest drop ever for a U.S. company.

When DeepSeek's American competitor OpenAI called foul, claiming that its own proprietary model was used to train the open-source competitor, the *schadenfreude* was palpable. OpenAI itself had been accused, by *The New York Times* in a lawsuit, and others, of scraping the content of authors and journalists—without compensating them—to train its own models.

Behind the muted laughter is the recognition that there is no social vision for A.I., so there is little national pride in the achievements, or concern over the failings, of U.S. A.I. companies. To most, A.I. seems like yet another tool for accelerating wealth concentration at the expense of working people. No one really believes that the techbrogarchs are laying the groundwork for some utopian sci-fi fantasy, where the machines are going to do our work so that we can have more leisure.

"40 years working in this business and this happened to me? Why?" I thought about the many waves of *disruption*—to use a preferred tech-industry term—to the lives of working people, while listening to a cab driver attempt to account for what happened to his personal and professional life, in the two-channel video that is the central element of Kenneth Tam's lush and elegiac exhibition, "The Medallion," at Bridget Donahue.



Kenneth Tam, "The Medallion" (Installation View), 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue.

Tam, who was born in Queens and now works in Houston, transforms the large gallery space into a visual and sensory wonder, much like the intimate public-private space of a taxicab itself, by cleverly mixing the familiar and the strange. The length of the gallery floor, except for a narrow walkway, is covered with woven beaded seat covers. Ubiquitous accessories for those who spend

their days driving, they create an unsteady feeling underfoot. This massive expanse of woven texture, which extends between the facing walls of a large-scale projected video, is interrupted by an array of sculptural objects. Among them are several resin-cast rucksacks, the kind that drivers might use to secret a small selection of personal items (some are empty, one contains a shoe, others, car parts).

Small LED lights—covered by white plastic coffee lids and radiator-fluid reservoirs, or woven into the beadwork on the floor—help illuminate the darkened space. One larger beaded section becomes a display for flashing numbers (I couldn't make sense of them—gas prices, debt amounts?) and, occasionally, words, like “leaky,” “error,” “urine,” and “class.” On another patch of glowing white beads, a battery-powered dashboard prayer wheel spins. More obvious industry signifiers, like Yellow Cab yellow, are absent from the room, adding to the show's uncanny, cozy yet unsettling vibe.



Kenneth Tam, "The Medallion" (Installation View), 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue.

In the two-channel video centerpiece, Uber and Lyft are never mentioned. But we don't need to hear the name of those ride-hailing apps to understand how, approximately a decade ago, an entire trade, once capable of providing a decent living wage, was destroyed. Cabbies in New York had to own or rent a medallion, and the city issued a fixed number of them, effectively regulating and stabilizing the industry, until it didn't any longer, and the value of medallions plunged. Many drivers, especially those still paying off loans, were brought to financial ruin. The driver in Tam's video asks, "When will I be free from this loan?" The haunting answer seems to be—as he attempts the math—*never*.

In a political moment as stupid as it is cruel, it's worth looking more deeply at how working people have historically been disenfranchised or, alternately, politically engaged. Tracing a history of how large numbers of workers were undercut to secure the

wealth of a few, is one approach. A few blocks east of Tam's show, at Maxwell Graham, an exhibition of Fred Lonidier's work—photos and texts mounted on panels—takes us back further. The exhibition, “N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All),” takes as its subject the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994.



Fred Lonidier, "N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All)" (Installation View), 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham.

Growing up in the industrial Midwest in the late 1990s, I'm familiar with how NAFTA impacted the region through factory closures and lost jobs. (While the overall economy grew, 5 million factory jobs were lost and 90,000 plants closed between 1997-2020, further exacerbating national income inequality.) Lonidier's project looks instead just across the southern border to Tijuana, Mexico, and the hundreds of *maquiladoras*, or light assembly plants that utilize imported parts, and where workers earned lower wages with fewer safety and environmental protections than their U.S. counterparts.

The graphic sensibility of the photo panels, dating primarily from 1997, with later additions through 2005, is somewhere between a newspaper layout and a precocious student's foam board science fair presentation. They also anticipate the visual economy of the meme but on a maximalist scale, organizing and arranging information for documentary and political purposes.

Like Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler, Lonidier is one of the image-text conceptualists associated with the University of California, San Diego. The panels aren't much to look at, instead, they demand that you actually *read* them.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, "The Last Cruze" (Installation view), 2020. Image courtesy of the artist and Wexner Center for the Arts.

“N.A.F.T.A.” along with Lonidier’s earlier work, especially his series *I Like Everything Nothing But Union*, 1983, with its black-and-white portraits of union members, is a notable precursor to major artists working today. Take, for example, LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic installation, *The Last Cruze*, 2019, now in the MoMA's permanent collection, which documents the United Auto Workers union members impacted by the closure of the General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio. (The closure of the Cruze plant itself was part of the aftermath of NAFTA.) Lonidier’s influence can also be seen in Carmen Winant’s *The Last Safe Abortion*, 2023, with its 2,500 snapshots of abortion clinic employees and volunteers centered upon the mundane day-to-day activities of their work.

On my initial visit, I struggled to think about where this work might look good, where it would make sense to view beyond the gallery. In a home, in a museum, in a union hall? What I was responding to isn’t a failure of this work, I realize, it’s a failure of our art institutions, of how the art world largely cloisters itself away from the world of work.



Fred Lonidier, *N.A.F.T.A. #16* “‘N.A.F.T.A.’ Returns to Tijuana,”/“‘T.L.C.’ Regresa a Tijuana,” 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham.

My favorites here are the 2005 works that document an earlier installation of the 1997 panels, then mounted on the inside and outside of a semitruck's trailer for the workers in the *maquiladoras* themselves to view. Lonidier's work feels like an essential touchstone for artists like Frazier and Winant, who have solved some of the aesthetic and presentational problems that seem inherent in Lonidier's workmanlike displays of text and image. Frazier and Winant go deeper into modes of portraiture, achieving a more ambiguous and more complex-seeming treatment of their subjects. Tam at Bridget Donahue manages something more immersive still.

On the other hand, maybe it is the lack of ambiguity, the clear-eyed political thrust of Lonidier's project that feels so refreshing in this moment. Still—a quarter century after it was created—his work seems to reject contemporary institutional art contexts, asking us to consider what a drastically different way of showing art and engaging audiences might look like. Imagine if the art world was just the world.

So much of what we engage with today mediates and packages our experience. There's a second video, *Dissolved personal archive (2015 - 2024)*, 2025, in Tam's show, that plays silently in an eight-minute loop on a taxi-top video display, here resting on the floor. It appears to show A.I. generated videos based on personal, mostly family, photos wherein the figures are made to explode into vapor. A.I.'s effect is stark: It obliterates the human.