

Fred Lonidier

*N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All)*

Exhibition on View: January 22 - March 1, 2025

Opening Reception: Friday January 24, 6-8PM

It wasn't just the politically provocative photographs that got Fred Lonidier's exhibit at Tijuana's public university taken down. It was the fact that he had the audacity to leaflet maquiladora workers outside the factory gates and invite them to the gallery that got his show yanked. University administrators received angry complaints from maquiladora industry executives demanding that the show come down. And it did in early April, less than three weeks after it went up.

The cancelled exhibition by the University of California at San Diego visual arts professor featured 17 photo and text panels lambasting the North American Free Trade Agreement and depicting conditions for maquiladora workers. One panel reads "A free Trade Agreement that is not fair to all," while others depict outspoken factory workers wearing Halloween masks to prevent them from being identified by their bosses.

"The establishment of Tijuana lined up to protect the golden goose," Lonidier said, referring to NAFTA and the more than 600 maquiladora factories in the border city.

Administrators from the Autonomous University of Baja California readily admitted that they caved into pressure from manufacturers. Lonidier said he received an e-mail from a university official the day after he passed out the invitations that read, "Our obligation is to promote art within the university and to promote public points of view. Yesterday, we had a meeting with some members of the industrial community and they informed us that you or your people who work for you have been delivering publicity not only about your exposition but about politics."

"The leaflet brought the show down," Lonidier said from his UCSD studio. "If I hadn't leafleted they would have kept it up." Meanwhile, he says artists, intellectuals and activists on both sides of the border are worked up over what they see as censorship.

Julie Light. "University Professors Photo's Draw the Wrath of Border Industrialists: Exhibit Taken Down After Maquila Execs Protest" *CORPWATCH*, April 29th, 1999.

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For 50 years Fred Lonidier has made artwork "for, by and about class struggle." Since receiving his MFA from UCSD in 1972, where his professors included John Baldessari and David Antin, Lonidier rebelled against the idealized dematerialization of Conceptual art. Initially, Lonidier ordered and intervened in the manufacturing of mail-order customizable photographic products. Rather than putting forth conventional subjects such as travel landscapes or portraits, Lonidier submitted images that primarily addressed the very workers printing and assembling these products. The images acknowledged, warned and offered options of advocacy regarding worker's factory conditions, wages, benefits, access to rights and corporate malfeasance. The messages; printed on t-shirts, clocks, license plates, wallets, frames; when then exhibited in a gallery, were actually being seen for the second time, the connection to their initial context (and site of their manufacture) remaining central and unavoidable.

Lonidier's investigation then spread to a general work force across the country with *The Health and Safety Game*, 1976/78. This artwork consists of 50 photographic and textual panels, alongside 1 video, featuring case studies of occupational disease and injuries. Each panel presents images taken by Lonidier, juxtaposed with first person narrative accounts by workers in their struggles against management and for healthcare. The artwork was developed and toured exhibition venues in the wake of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, signed into law at the end of 1970, when its applicability and efficacy were in dire need of campaigning. *The Health and Safety Game* was seen in countless venues, including at the *Whitney Museum of American Art* in 1977, however its extensive exhibiting inside union halls resonated most meaningfully.

This strategy was continued with subsequent multipart installations such as *L.A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems*, 1980; *I Like Everything Nothing But Union*, 1983, *AZTEC vs A.T.U. 1309: Long Ago In A Faraway Galaxy*, 1996. A list of venues where these artworks were deployed, reads: Rutgers University Labor Education Center, New Jersey; AFSCME District Council 37, New York; New Haven Central Labor Council, Connecticut; Occupational Health & Safety Conference, Craftsmen Hall, California; San Diego/Imperial Counties Labor Council, California; San Diego County Administrative Center, California; Los Angeles UTLA 1021 & CWA District 11, California; Los Angeles Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Headquarters, California; Norwalk Ironworkers Union, Local 627, California; Cedar Rapids Central Labor Council at the IBEW Hall, Iowa and so on.

The diversified venues for the work were so important to Lonidier, so integral to the purpose, that he began to incorporate additional panels into each installation, that documented previous exhibitions of the work.

[The artworks] have a dual social role, one in the art world and another in the unions, but tend to play one or the other depending on the place shown. This art originates from and continues to be a part of the avant garde high art world, and remains there to challenge and contradict a sacrosanct bourgeois cultural institution. Along with other radical artists... I work to prevent high culture from entirely going on with its business and hypocrisies (art for business sake) without having to occasionally answer (and sometimes even concede) to criticism.

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In the labor unions, the work is legitimized by its "artness" as well as by the seriousness of the social issues involved. Because organized labor and its concerns have been relatively marginalized - in spite of an overall membership that makes the art world look like a game of solitary in comparison - unions may welcome an outsider (or in my case, a member of the American Federation of Teachers) who speaks on their behalf to a public audience within prestigious social institutions.

Fred Lonidier. "Working with Unions II." *Democratic Communications in the Information Age*, edited by Janet Wasco and Vincent Mosco, Garamond Press, Canada, 1992.

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The North American Free Trade Agreement was first negotiated and signed by George H.W. Bush, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada and President Carlos Salinas of Mexico in 1992; and then ratified and signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1993. While much American journalism and debate on NAFTA has focused on the effects on blue collar American citizens, Lonidier's expansive project is more focused on the plight of Mexican workers in the maquiladoras. Maquiladoras are factories located within Mexico, producing for American and other foreign companies; largely free of tariffs, and labor and environmental regulations.

Revisiting the work in 2016, Lonidier wrote:

By now trade agreements since NAFTA have become more numerous than the public can keep up with. They are all part of a long-term effort to liberalize commerce in such a way as to expand economic growth across the globe. They are all pitched by the U.S. government as having more winners here than losers but have been accompanied by a host of studies and arguments as to actually who the winners are. Trade unions have been universally opposed to them as being, at least in part, motivated by a "race to the bottom" in terms of wages and working conditions. Indeed, like the World Trade Organization agreements, they are treaties and, as such, override national laws in a number of areas beyond labor laws including the environment and other regulations that were hard fought for by many organizations, legislators themselves and signed into law from local to national levels.

What was a twenty-mile zone along the northern border of Mexico, NAFTA turned the whole country into places for maquiladora "light assembly" production. Whatever the direct impacts of these trade agreement, "N.A.F.T.A. (Not A Fair Trade for All)" represents some of the troubling conditions of Mexicans who work in the maquiladoras. What stands out the most dramatically is the complete circumvention of quite progressive Mexican labor laws. So much so that maquiladora workers see the only way forward is to form their own democratic independent unions apart from the official, but government controlled, unions. These efforts have turned into a very hard and uphill struggle with the Mexican government and its official unions as well as the foreign companies using maquiladora plants throwing everything they can to defeat any defense of the labor rights of these workers.

This is Fred Lonidier's fourth solo exhibition at Maxwell Graham Gallery.