

"There are pictures aplenty of worship, anguish, celebration, states of mind; but for many reasons there are few images of work. It is too obdurate for form: painters avoid it." Art historian TJ Clark wrote these words more than forty years ago, around the time artist Fred Lonidier embarked on a career-long project of doing just that: producing images of and about work. And more. For by representing work as he has and exhibiting it as he does in union halls and other labor-related sites as well as art galleries and museums, Lonidier thus intervenes on behalf of labor and in support of an increasingly embattled union movement. Resulting artworks by the artist--including several key vintage photo-text pieces--will be on view in a one person Fred Lonidier exhibition at Michael Benevento Gallery. This show coincides with Lonidier's participation in the current Whitney Biennial of Art and is presented in collaboration with Tomwork and Assembly.

In the late nineteen sixties and early seventies, stresses to the American system opened cracks allowing an at least momentary glimpse of things previously obscured. The Vietnam War was exemplary in this regard, revealing as it did this nation's capacity for a violence that was both horrific and unevenly distributed. For not only was America's young working class disproportionately represented among US war casualties but at home in 1968,"a total of 14,300 people died in industrial accidents--almost exactly the same number of American servicemen who died in Vietnam that year," according to a contemporaneous study by Ralph Nader. Making art alongside his equally young San Diego colleagues Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula and Phel Steinmetz, Lonidier intuited the violent connection linking American foreign policy with American industrial policy and embarked on a critique of both.

The notion of the American workplace as itself a site of violence was most clearly articulated in "The Health and Safety Game," (1976), Lonidier's extended meditation on workplace injury; its routine occurrence, its causes and consequences and, importantly, its meaning within Capitalism understood as a signifying system. For if the so-called free market enjoys a reputation for efficiently allocating resources according to its needs and values then the chronic underfunding of California's Workmen's Compensation system speaks volumes. Here as elsewhere this artist troubles the traditional distinction between "work" and "document," finding as he does that there are at least as many similarities as differences between the two. In 1989 art historian Benjamin Buchloh identified this same interlocking relationship as characteristic of Conceptual art and dubbed it "the aesthetics of administration." Lonidier's "29 Arrests: Headquarters of the 11th Naval District, May 4, 1972, San Diego" (1972) provides a case in point. Here the artist stands behind a police photographer, photographing him as that man photographs each arrested Vietnam War protestor in turn. A particularly grim form of documentary photography is thus captured and redeemed as art photography which functions also as a--surprisingly cheerful--document of protest, all of this

demonstrating finally that boundaries so fluid cannot be easily maintained.

Other artworks on view include "Girl Watcher Lens," (1972-2014) and "Representations of Self-Representation," (1973). Though not overtly political, the two pieces tease out the politics--here, the sexual politics--lurking unnoticed in our institutions and pass-times as they are made manifest by the camera. Taken together with the brute force of "The Health and Safety Game," these somewhat more subtle artworks manifest the art / politics problematic in all of its considerable complexity and in doing so identify Lonidier as the important if thus far under-recognized artist he is.

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