

frieze



Autumn 2011



Fred Lonidier

Silberkuppe

Fred Lonidier, *29 Arrests*, Detail, 1972

There were four socio-critical works from the 1970s on display in this solo exhibition, Fred Lonidier's first in Germany since 1981. There was also a text by Lonidier, who situated the works discursively and facilitated an unequivocal reading of the art as socially engaged. In the two-part work *Create-A-Clock* (1978), Lonidier implores us to make our own clocks and avails himself of two identical wall clock kits. While the background of the clock on the left is made up of family photos and the instructions that came with the kit, the clock on the right shows two black and white photographs of workers in a factory. Time is visualized as an economic factor, a conveyor of the rhythm to which the workers must 'tick'. The appendage to this form of rationalized time, as he calls it, is aestheticized time: free time as the luxury of having time to be free.

The main concern of these works, and of Lonidier's entire artistic practice, is to draw attention to social ills. He takes his principal subject matter from the 1960s American labour movement, from the organization of the working class into unions. Basing his approach on that of the Russian Constructivists and their confrontation of proletarian grievances around 1920, Lonidier attempts to draw working-class problems out of the seclusion of their respective discourses. In *29 Arrests* (1972), a group of photographs capturing demonstrators being arrested during a sit-in, Lonidier's position is rendered unclear by the ambiguous perspectives from which the photos were taken. The artist operates as a sort of participant observer here; the rows of police through which the pictures were shot operate as foils in the foreground, extending his distance from the 'victims'. Although the artist positions himself as a sympathiser of the disadvantaged and the activists, *29 Arrests* makes no obvious judgement in favour of either group. Rather, it seems Lonidier is concerned with producing an (apparently) impartial depiction of events.



Fred Lonidier, *Photo License*, 1978

By contrast, the effect of *Photo License* (1978), which consists of six converted car licence plates printed with text from automobile industry workers, is almost overly striking in its confrontation of the discrepancies between the American dream of freedom and the hard realities of the working world.

In light of the heavy political impact of these works, it is not surprising that Lonidier favours public space and union buildings over conventional gallery and museum spaces: those whom the work actually concerns – the artists preferred audience – can be addressed far more directly and called to active participation here. Lonidier entirely in line with Marxist theory wants to criticize the instrumentalization of man. But this endeavour presents its own problems: the shifts from proximity to distance that are visible in the works mean that his encounter with the working classes takes place on terms that are not always equal. Art is conceived of as a protest tool to be applied actively. And in this Lonidier even goes so far as to vicariously sign a loser certificate (*Certified Loser*, 1976): a receipt for the losers of a performance-oriented society.

Translated by Jonathan Blower

—by *Melissa Canbaz*