

*Kurt Mueller for the Made in L.A. exhibition catalog*

Maldistribution, Scott Benzel's 2011 installation at Los Angeles's Human Resources, featured a curated selection of "repurposed" objects. Glass cases displayed marijuana pipes disguised as lipstick tubes (contraband); posters for the 1967 psychedelic movie The Trip, with their original "LSD" ad copy whited out (censorship); and Chinese knockoffs of the Nike "Heaven's Gate" SB Dunk, a sneaker never produced by the sportswear company following its controversial association with the eponymous suicide cult (counterfeits). Benzel's exhibition, and its accompanying publication, highlights the circulation and consumption of these seemingly banal mass-market goods as friction-filled. Each object is an instance of discordance, an embodiment of the conflicting desires of multiple authors, audiences, and social authorities.

Benzel is a connoisseur of such contrarian bits of culture. He collects artifacts whose intended appearance and meaning are augmented, and often suppressed, by misuse, mythologizing, or market-capitalization. He pulls equally from popular and avant-garde histories, and from both visual and musical sources. Carefully arranging his found objects and appropriations in focused, minimal presentations—including vitrines, musical scores, and poems—Benzel calls attention to his material and its accumulated readings. Yet by isolating and abstracting these artifacts and stories, he enacts a further modification, encouraging additional interpretations rather than a distilled understanding. His checklists, liner notes, and essays explain only enough to engage the viewer in the contradictions of the "altered" objects that they describe.

The cabinet Fromage de Guerre (2011), for example, juxtaposes the spy fiction of Gérard de Villiers with cheese over the space of two glass shelves.

Each novel, as evidenced by its book jacket, absurdly sexes up a real-world theater of war. Benzel matches Villiers's "cheesy," digestible fiction by accompanying each paperback with a wedge of a fromage native to the book's setting—for example, Celtic cheddar for Furie à Belfast.

Benzel amplifies such associative leaps and linguistic turns in his musical work as well. For the suite *Inversions I–IV* (2010), Benzel literally inverted the scores of music by John Williams, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Charles Mingus, and others by arranging the upside-down and backward pages of each work to be performed by a string quartet. Not surprisingly, some of Benzel's sources were already repurposed works—a Beach Boys song written by, but not attributed to, Charles Manson, for example—but the artist further mixes high and low, familiar and obscure, to suggest parallel, if not intersecting, narratives.

Benzel's performance for Made in L.A., Threnody / A beginner's guide to Mao Tse Tung (2012) similarly evokes a palimpsest of Vietnam-era counterculture and hippie politics gone tragically awry. Extending the bizarre logic of a 1967 Esquire article that provocatively pairs actress Sharon Tate with aphorisms from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book, the artist configures two reel-to-reel tape players to spool an electronic composition around the bodies and accoutrements (e.g., a bayonet or Coke bottle) of moving dancers costumed like Tate's Esquire Maoist rebel. Meanwhile, musicians improvise an accompanying score on cello, viola, violin, and percussion.

Benzel slips between the roles of visual artist, composer, poet, and curator. He at once inhabits the "culture industry" of easy-to-swallow entertainment postulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and positions himself as its critical dissident. It is not surprising that the histories that Benzel invokes concern nonconformists and anarchists, from basketball misfit Bison

Dele to black bloc protests. Benzel's visual and aural arrangements disrupt cultural orthodoxies and hierarchies, sending objects and viewers on imaginative, often wayward trajectories.

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