



Piero Golia,
Untitled #1,
2010–11, concrete,
3½ x 9½ x 9½”.

his vehicle headfirst into Golia’s house following an argument over a fare. The driver was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon.

If constellations are aesthetic rationalizations of haphazard stellar events, then Golia’s paintings take stock and make sense of circumstance with a similarly mythic motive. Yet by consolidating and formalizing the archaeology of trauma, suspending its stuff in inky blackness, these paintings rhyme as closely with the muck of the La Brea tar pits as they do with imagined star fields glittering somewhere across the cosmos. Their undulating pitch surfaces—alternately caked and placid, wrinkled and smooth, roiling and oily—have pooled and puddled like vats of congealing primordial goo. We stand in front of a strange and dense abyss, our silhouettes reflecting merely as shadows breached by the twisted, fragmentary artifacts of the artist’s increasingly legendary life.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Scott Benzel

HUMAN RESOURCES

On a boxy monitor in an upstairs gallery at Human Resources—a young Chinatown space dedicated to performance and nontraditional exhibitions—footage from a 1969 TV show played in a perpetual time-coded loop: Beach Boy Dennis Wilson crooning for the camera, sloe-eyed and benign, his lips falling in and out of sync with three takes of the same song. The piece, 1. *The Beach Boys perform “Never Learn Not to Love” live on the Mike Douglas show, 1969*; 2. *Charles Manson, “Cease to Exist,” 1968*; 3. *The Beach Boys “Never Learn Not to Love” studio version, 1969* (all works 2011), was one of twenty-seven objects that comprised LA-based artist Scott Benzel’s solo exhibition “Maldistribution,” a meticulous collection of popular artifacts chosen for their veiled cultural histories, uncomfortable associations, and protracted afterlives. In the video, Benzel’s straightforward juxtaposition of sound and image (and of versions of songs) demonstrated how an unsavory original tune (a gritty number written by a murderous cult leader) was repackaged—with softened lyrics, sunny harmonics, and a pert double-negative title—into a product more palatable for a mass audience.

The indexical stockpile of objects that Benzel accumulated for this show—easily reproducible and in widespread circulation—seemed unified by how easily they lent themselves to consumption. But the inverse was also true, as each object could similarly be defined by its suppression,

the likelihood of it being used for something other than its initial intentions. Among the items on view were a counterfeit pair of Nike SB Dunk high-tops, which the brand stopped producing when they were found on the feet of every corpse of the Heaven’s Gate cult; three posters for the 1967 film *The Trip* with covered-up tag-lines that, at the time, the movie’s own PR firm deemed inappropriate, and a doctored image of a nude Princess Diana. Between the poles of mass production and mass dissension, Benzel located a captivating (even tawdry) value that connects and presents these seemingly dissimilar items with an almost didactic confidence. For example, in one of the show’s three horizontal glass vitrines, a selection of “high” and “low” items was assembled into an orderly display: pipes (disguised as lipstick, encasing fake flowers, and as a mock highlighter); a Kmart-distributed album by psychedelic rockers Silver Apples; Lynda Benglis’s notorious 1974 *Artforum* advertisement; and the first issue of *October*, which had been catalyzed in part by *Artforum*’s decision to permit the artist to run that scandalous ad. The tight combination implicated object as outlaw, discourse as censor, and viewer as consumer.

Approaching these relics with the same studied proficiency and weird invention as his musical scores, performance, video, writing and sound installation, Benzel activated connections between disparate pop histories with wit and fascination. In musical projects like his 2010 commission *Music from The Trip (1967) in the style of a Schoenberg-Gershwin tennis match observed in passing by Dr. Oscar Janiger*, the artist imagines a hypothetical yet fact-based scenario (as the title describes), using it as an entry point for the work. The aura of heaviness

surrounding some dusty hall of infamy may resurface in Benzel’s upcoming works like *La Bas*—a new composition, based on the work of J. K. Huysmans, Olivier Messiaen, and Malcolm McLaren, to be presented in part by the American Composers Forum this fall—and *Funhouse*—which will reference both the Stooges album of the same name as well as the fun-house setting in Orson Welles’s *Lady from Shanghai*, and will be performed during the Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time festival. Less an “object maker” than a collector, fan, researcher, or archivist, Benzel nimbly traces the narratives of how objects come into being and eventually how (at least in the popular consciousness) they cease to exist.

—Catherine Taft



View of “Scott Benzel,”
2011. Foreground:
Counterfeit Nike
“Heaven’s Gate”
SB Dunks, 2011.
Background: Original
posters for *The Trip*
(1967) with original
stickers, 2011.

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Shannon Ebner

HAMMER MUSEUM/LAXART

For nearly a decade, Shannon Ebner has developed a quickly recognizable approach—one at the unruly convergence of photography, sculpture,

and language—that insistently frames the space around and (especially) between things. Most often, these voids or breaks occur between letters and other linguistic symbols that provide the ostensible subject matter. In an earlier series of defining black-and-white images, the artist photographed words, in all caps, constructed out of flimsy cardboard and placed in desolate settings that read as literally blank fields: In *USA*, 2003, for example, the word NAUSEA leans woozily on a cliff above the ocean, and upon repeated viewings one might be as struck by the wild and matted chaparral occupying the foreground as the blunt word occupying the middle.

Ebner’s ongoing body of work, titled “The Electric Comma,” 2011–, which recently appeared in various manifestations at the Hammer Museum and LAXART in Los Angeles (as well as this year’s Venice Biennale), furthers the artist’s investment in the potential of such voided spaces, with an intensified focus on the structure and syntax of language. Many of these black-and-white pieces employ a modular alphabet first devised by the artist in 2007, in which letterforms are constructed with cinder blocks arranged on a pegboard grid and photographed, with a cardboard slash symbol (“/”) or asterisk (“*”) occasionally appearing as a graphic substitutes for a letter. Several works using this method were on view at LAXART. In *C*MMA*, *PAUSE*, and *DELAY* (all 2011), each word indicates space (or time) between words, and each work consists of five framed photos—one for each character—but the three works are hung along a single horizontal line, paradoxically denying punctuation its place.

Agitate, 2010, also at LAXART, operates to similarly contradictory ends. Here, Ebner assembles the titular word with her familiar cardboard letters, which she casually propped against a concrete wall with rebar rods and photographed singularly. (*A* and *T* are duplicate constructs.) Subsequently, the word AGITATE is broken across four discrete, framed images; the primary agitation proposed by the piece thereby being the disruption of legibility, of reading itself: A sign with such a command—“agitate”—is a possible call to arms, with unavoidable political implications, but in this case the potential action seems pinned against the wall, cut, and voided.

Such frustrations, so elegantly choreographed, point to the instability of language as a signifying agent. Whether the words are constructed of concrete or flimsy cardboard, their assumed solidity quickly gives way to fragmented letters and the spaces between them. In the courtyard of the Hammer, Ebner repurposed four large light boxes to display *ASTER/SK R/SK R/SK*, 2011, in which the word *ASTER/SK* is written in the cinder-block alphabet and broken into two lines, with the light

boxes intermittently flashing, illuminating, and negating individual characters. In an adjacent gallery, a series of four photographs focused on the letter *X*, as constructed by the artist (variously using letters of cinder block and cardboard painted black) and as “found” (spray-painted on a police-car door and tracing a residue of glue). The works’ titles—*XYSYST*, *EKS*, *XIS*, *EXSIZ* (all 2011)—all play on the word *exist*, with *X* acting as both a primary act of inscription (“*X* marks the spot”) and a marker of death (e.g., the crossed-out face of Osama bin Laden on the cover of *Time* magazine).

Another grouping of seven pictures, collectively titled *Incendiary Distress Signals*, 2011, documents arrangements of road flares on asphalt, some still smoldering, with a rock partly slathered in white paint serving as a “period” in the far right image. In context, it’s nearly impossible to resist reading these forms as letters, albeit illegible ones. (Curiously, the work also recalls Lawrence Weiner’s *THE RESIDUE OF A FLARE IGNITED UPON A BOUNDARY*, 1969—an important example of that artist’s use of signs *outside* of language.) If Ebner is signaling distress, it is the continual distressing of language that consistently fires the ignition for her singular, ongoing project.

—Michael Ned Holte

LONDON

Tracey Emin HAYWARD GALLERY

I don’t think I’ve ever seen quite so much pussy in an art exhibition. Tracey Emin’s retrospective “Love Is What You Want,” curated by the Hayward’s Ralph Rugoff and Cliff Lauson, could make even Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* seem almost neuter by comparison. In what is by now a vast oeuvre, represented here by 160 works, the most recurrent image is of a woman with her legs spread, showing her vulva, often masturbating. Emin wants her art to originate from the essence of her being, and, like any good 1970s gender essentialist, she believes the essence of her being is in her sex. At the same time, though, she also senses that the expression of this essence can never be direct or immediate but must always take a detour—must always be mediated. Thus, for instance, her handwriting, a direct expression of the body, is not typically presented as such—it appears in a distanced manner: reproduced in neon, embroidery, or monoprint, which, in spite of its resemblance to straightforward drawing, is the reversed trace of a mark that was made on a plate rather than on the paper itself. One of the most remarkable manifestations of Emin’s drawing is the DVD projection *Those who suffer love*, 2009; the nervous, shuddering quality of her wiry, scribblelike lines is amplified by the spasmodic rhythm of the animation, which perfectly communicates a sense of the work’s subject: masturbation. And again, the actual drawing is put at a distance.

“My emotions force the drawing out of my hand,” Emin has said; but whether she acknowledges it or not, what comes out of her hand is also out of her hands—in the sense that it is ultimately detached from herself. Expressing the inner self means giving up its inwardness; its traces become what Norman Mailer once called “advertisements for myself”—a shift embodied here by neon slogans, for instance. It’s not surprising that from the beginning, Emin has shown an ironically unironic belief in herself as an entrepreneur as much as an artist, or rather, an entrepreneur insofar as she is an artist. (See, for example, her project from 1992–93, for which she offered collectors the opportunity to invest in her “creative potential” almost before she’d even had a chance to show promise, let alone accomplishment.) As autobiographical as her work may seem—and much of it consists of collected memorabilia of a life lived—it is less about the empirical Emin than about the



Shannon Ebner, *Agitate*, 2010, four black-and-white photographs, each 63 x 48". LAXART.