

ARTFORUM

New York

Simon Denny

PETZEL GALLERY | WEST 18TH STREET
456 West 18th Street
September 8–October 22

"Imagine a world where trust is guaranteed—a world without borders." These words, spoken in the confident, masculine voice of authority, open Simon Denny's video *What Is Blockchain?*, 2016. With slick graphics and soaring music, this infomercial-cum-TED talk promotes decentralized network technology (which serves as the basis for Bitcoin) as a high-tech solution to social problems ranging from the loss of privacy to geopolitical conflict. Projected onto the gallery's back wall, the video bookends the show's first room, which introduces us to Bitcoin's pioneers, embodied by Plexiglas cases screen-printed with their names, portraits, and techno-utopian quotations. (There's also an achingly of-the-moment invocation of Pokémon, relating to a play on words involving the name of the mythic founder of Bitcoin, whose real identity remains contested.) Next comes a series of rooms in which we learn about three financial companies capitalizing on blockchain—Digital Asset, 21 Inc., and Ethereum—representing the technology's most visible proponents: venture capitalists, bankers, and libertarians. The ethos of each company is communicated through a variety of objects, including a diagram of ideas, hand-drawn in colorful markers on the surface of a globe-shaped whiteboard; a life-size cutout of its leader; a customized, hypertrophied edition of the board game Risk; and a series of modified computer cases and "deal toys."

The smooth and glossy materials of these components (mostly Plexiglas and aluminum) invoke the frictionless world conjured by blockchain's evangelists. But instead of inspiring confidence in this panacea, the show encourages paranoid visions of confidence men, marketing their wares in successive booths at a trade show. And we aren't the only ones with doubts. Adjacent to *What Is Blockchain?*, an outer layer of the wall has been removed, revealing a painted sign that reads, in part, "A safe decentralized software platform," but the word "safe" has been crossed out. Nearby, the voice of authority rejoins: "Blockchain is the truth."

— Tina Rivers Ryan



View of "Simon Denny," 2016.