

Olivia B. Murphy, "In Blockchain Tribute, Simon Denny Imagines Future Crypto-Economies," *Artslant*, September 20, 2016.

ARTSLANT New York

'rak'rüm (noun);
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Simon Denny



Simon Denny

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Simon Denny was born in New Zealand in 1982 and received his degree at the Städelschule, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Frankfurt. Denny has exhibited widely internationally including WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels (2016); Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London (2015); 56th Venice Biennale (2015); MoMA PS1, New York (2014); Portikus, Frankfurt (2014); Kunstverein Munich; Muse...[\[more\]](#)



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New York, September 2016: This past Thursday, I arrived at Petzel Gallery amidst a flurry of installation activity, scissor lifts backing furtively out of the installed exhibition spaces, and the last of the vinyl lettering still going up on the walls and windows. Simon Denny, the New Zealand-born, Berlin-based artist was speaking fervently to Friedrich Petzel and a few others about his work, visibly excited and engaged about his latest exhibition, *Blockchain Future States*, due to open that evening.

In a walkthrough, Denny eagerly explained each piece in the show, giving the historical and cultural context for everything from a Poké Ball sculpture, to the blockchain-themed Risk recreations. Each of the individual works builds upon the narrative he is constructing: one of imagined future states based on the utilization of cryptocurrencies, like Bitcoin, and the blockchain transaction database used to authenticate them. This may sound like another language to some, but as in his work on management strategies, tradeshows, and even the NSA, Denny has found a way of using the medium of the “art exhibition” to enlighten viewers about developing networks and technologies. Looking at Ethereum, 21 Inc., and Digital Asset, three financial companies advancing Bitcoin and blockchain applications in different ways, Denny playfully speculates how this digital currency and technology might evolve within our given and future societies and economic systems.

Olivia Murphy: You've broken up this exhibition into two parts: one room containing the mythology of the “founding fathers” of Bitcoin, and the other containing different iterations of how the blockchain protocol is being utilized by three different companies. How do you take these ideas from the cybersphere and turn them into physical sculpture or print media?

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Simon Denny: It's a bit of a give and take; I look at the aesthetics and the cultural space that the blockchain companies and products draw on or reference, like gaming or corporate life. For instance, it's been speculated that Ethereum took their logo from a Magic the Gathering card, so I took my aesthetic cue from there and looked into fantasy imagery, which lead me down one side of the cultural inspirations for people that work with blockchain. Then with Blythe Masters [CEO of blockchain company Digital Asset], she works in a very traditional banking space, which has a very classic aesthetic. So I decided her portrait should be something that reinforces this idea of a safe traditional system—things that a bank might use. Banks are very classical, they have simple design, evoking trusted, old things—like bank notes having founding fathers on them, etc. So a sort of woodcut aesthetic could be used for depicting Blythe. Every company has their own kind of aesthetic context if you look into it, so that helps me form the objects, and choose the “look” for each part of the presentation.

OM: In terms of the objects, there is a back and forth between the information you are trying to relay and the aesthetic appeal. How much do you see this information, that is sort of coded into the works, as necessary to get across to the viewer?

SD: I think everybody comes to an exhibition with a different set of expectations in mind. One of the great things about art is that it is different for different people.

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Generally people who want to come and look at art have the time and headspace and the expectation to have a kind of contemplative moment to think about things in an exhibition. So I try and give those people a rich, dense experience with things to read and complex ideas to think and talk about, if that is what they seek.

But I also try and give a very emotional, or visceral experience to those who have no interest in the supposed subject matter of the show. As much as [the exhibition is] a carrier for information, it's also its own language of form and color and texture—all the things I fell in love with as a young art student. It's not an essay, and it doesn't try to be an essay. Rather, it's supposed to be a way of entering this content and seeing all the aesthetic locaters of blockchain together in the same room and asking, *what does this feel like to be around all these derivatives of a liberal tech future?*

OM: And what does it look like? For instance, within the progression of the exhibition, you can see the break down of ideology—from corporate to radical—in the physical exhibition space, as you go from a very clean, commercial marketed space to a sort of deconstructed cyber punk realm.

SD: Yes, and that's as much a valuable starting point for thinking about and experiencing these potential futures. There are many possible futures for this technology. It might be that the traditional banking sector completely absorbs the disruptive changes proposed by blockchain, or it might be that it develops in a kind of anarchic space and creates the infrastructure for a new supra-national future governance system. And this is what the contrast in the exhibition is exploring. Not everyone wants to read about blockchain, it can seem a bit dry and complicated. So these forms that you can recognize and relate to in a different way, on the one hand makes the intellectual content of it a little more approachable, and on the other hand, it can just be a great way to experience new things.



OM: Your decision to represent these three companies using blockchain as games is especially readable in that sense. Even if one is not familiar with the game, the connotation is clear between a traditional geographic Risk board as a metaphor for global domination in Digital

Assesst's case, versus something that alludes to a more abstract gaming

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space, like a Chinese Checkers board where Risk becomes a more geometric, amorphous exercise for Ethereum. Utilizing that type of visual language, rather than didactic wall texts is extremely powerful in embedding this information.

SD: Absolutely, I am glad that comes across to you.

OM: This is sort of new territory in terms of cyber theory and how we're enacting it in the physical world. Do you see the objects as apolitical?

SD: What I do definitely has a political component to it in that I try to foreground political issues that are relevant to these ideas. I also try and work with an audience's expectations of what an artist's position might be on this material and purposefully diverge from that a bit. I think that makes it both more fun and more potent. But the objects should also be a great physical experience. I like to do both.

OM: In that sense, you also leave a lot open to interpretation. Although the radical ideas and aesthetics of the Ethereum section of the exhibition seem more in line with "art" or an artist's standpoint, in terms of how this blockchain function is going to be enacted on the global economies they are talking to, a ripped up wall is a somewhat disturbing signifier. Additionally, all three proposed futures are radically different, yet treated with the same care and attention. Are you trying to play a bit with the expectations of what we want versus what we need from the ideologies, and our future global economies?

SD: That is a nice way to see it. I'm also trying to activate a space in terms of an art readership. In an ideal world, I think art viewers want challenging exhibitions—at least that's what I want from my exhibition experiences anyway. And I'm a big fan of the modern tradition that values this kind of challenge, so I want to continue to challenge what people think that they want out of a show. Politically my upbringing, and a lot of my sympathies, are situated in the traditional left, which is a space where art is very comfortable, and that art has traditionally occupied. Some of what I try to do in my exhibitions is ask if there is a contemporary answer to the contemporary problems that challenge the world right now. Some of that is looking towards contemporary politics that is not really in that tradition. The fact that we've gone this far down a classical-liberal economic path in terms of finance and governance—maybe even in the art world as well—means to me that we should be asking ourselves if our familiar tools developed under the framework of other moments are the critical tools we want to keep using to unpack a contemporary set of problems that are built on other kinds of assumptions.

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OM: In terms of the aesthetics of exhibition making, your PS 1 exhibition in 2015 played off of the tradeshow, which talks to the “art-fair industry” that’s arisen outside of the exhibition space. There’s a blurring of lines between these worlds. You employ a similar aesthetic here of referencing the trade show or even Comic-Con-like display of the objects. Why have you chosen that reference for this show?

SD: I’m interested in the language of the physical world. I was trained as a sculptor; that was my first moment as an artist—I was sort of a faux arte povera, found objects, scattered installation maker. But then I



started to look at the way other value systems and traditions create impact with objects and space. So obviously if you’re looking at the commercial world, then trade fairs and display aesthetics are where their physical manifestations and celebrations are.

I started to think that if I’m interested in culture around tech and how tech touches commerce, and if I’m working in the medium of the exhibition, then I should pay very close attention to how the language developed for trade fairs, because there is already a set of conventions that are used by people making exhibitions about tech. That’s maybe not happening in art, but it is happening in the commercial space. I try to learn those aesthetics and play with the conventions within that language because it’s the native language to exhibition-making within the tech sector.

OM: Do you see yourself moving back and forth between those spheres at all? Have you thought at all about bringing your vocabulary about these issues into an actual tech space?

SD: I have actually, and that’s something quite exciting I’m about to do in a really serious way. I made an exhibition recently in London at the Serpentine, which was looking at management strategies, and connecting that to self-organized hacker groups. Management in tech often positions the hacker as a kind of hero figure, and tries to incorporate hacker-like practices and environments into management strategies. As a part of that I looked at the company Zappos, which is owned by Amazon. It’s a shoe sales company, but it’s also a kind of poster company for this distributed management system (in some ways not so far in principal from blockchain) called Holacracy. Holacracy basically tries to create a system where every person in the organization is somehow part

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of the governance process. They have complex sets of rules, meetings, and structures that put everyone from the cleaner to the CEO into some kind of decision-making position.

Zappos heard about my exhibition, where I'd included a sculpture about their management system, about their building and the way they use space and office space, and they want to tour some version of the show to Las Vegas, where they are based. It will be open at the same time as the Consumer Electronics Show, which is the most



important trade fair in the consumer electronics space, so hopefully that will be a pretty major step in bringing a tech audience to my work.

I have to see how that all feels, and I am going outside of my comfort zone, outside of my traditional community space—and all of that comes with learning—but I want to be open

to these things at the same time. It's a new thing for me to be working so close to a company like this and it's very exciting.

OM: When you have something like that in a white box gallery space, you leave a bit more room for a playful approach. Do you lose that if you are participating within the system you're exploring and questioning?

SD: Well, that's something I have to address, and I think I can only address it by going through this process. Proximity to subject matter has always been something I've had to negotiate, for instance I did a Venice [Biennale] pavilion recently for New Zealand about the NSA and the culture within intelligence organizations. I focused on one designer that used to be at the NSA, who may have been responsible for a number of the slides [Edward] Snowden leaked. This designer left the NSA in 2012 and became a freelancer, so I hired him to make some new work for the show, and based the whole pavilion around his illustration output, contrasted with some of the Snowden-leaked drawings and the playful iconography that was in some of the slides he gave to media. This illustrator didn't know about my plans for the exhibition; the preparation was done independently.

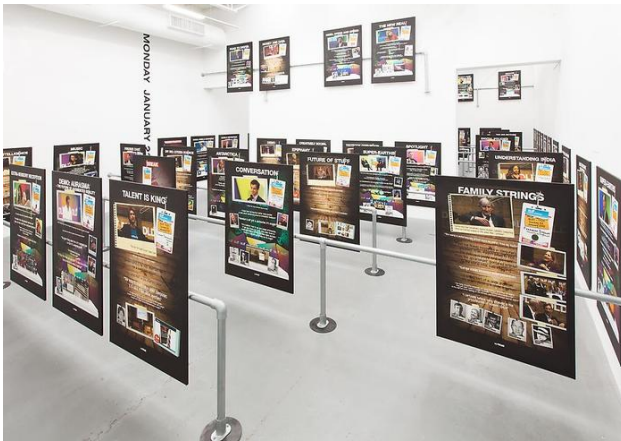
The *Guardian* came to see the show before it opened, and they called him up, talked to him about the exhibition and he had these amazing things to say about his work. This

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completed the project in a really cute way for me, as one of the main newspapers who “leaked” the NSA material with Snowden was now kind of “leaking” my project about that material.

This idea of what is research, and how close are you to the subject matter that you work with, also comes with the question of how independent can you be. Sometimes I will collaborate directly with a company. The last show I did here at Petzel was about this conference called DLD, which is a prominent tech conference in Europe. I worked closely with them, they gave me permission to use all their material. So that was a collaboration in a way, and that meant a different sort of relationship than, say, to these companies in this show, where I didn’t ask permission. I didn’t approach them for any kind of rights, or anything like that.



OM: That show was an analogue reproduction of the tech conference?

SD: Exactly. I built a maze through this entire space where every talk or panel from this conference became a graphic panel. A viewer walked through 90 canvases, mounted on these stanchion devices, which took you through the whole experience of the conference, in a different format. Again, this idea that proximity plays a role in your level of

independence and your level of knowledge also. That’s a game that I haven’t totally cooked yet; I think that’s still unresolved. I think I get a lot from close collaboration with companies, with their permission—that’s something you can learn different things from than independent research at a distance—but then you become a part of their thinking as well. If you share you kind of join...

OM: Have you heard from any of the companies mentioned in this show yet: Ethereum, 21, or Digital Asset?

SD: It’s interesting—a collector came through yesterday who knows Blythe Masters and gave her a call, saying “oh you’ve got this amazing sculpture in here.” It was so cool. My position on this is that it’s kind of like fan art: I’m a fan of these people’s work. I think they’re emblematic for a cultural shift, and I’m trying to celebrate what they’re doing, almost like tech advocacy. I didn’t contact the companies featured in the exhibition before making the exhibition because I wanted to sort of fictionalize their positions to a

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certain extent—so it's based on these companies' actual positions in the blockchain spectrum and what they are producing, but also simplified and caricatured a bit.

I think in a world that's increasingly privatized and branded, artists should be able to make independent work about some of the most powerful forces in the world without having to ask explicit permission. But it's great when this all joins up and there is contact afterward with people like Blythe Masters or the former NSA designer like there was in my Venice project.



Blockchain Future States is open through October 22, 2016 at Petzel Gallery in New York.

—Olivia B. Murphy

Olivia Murphy is a writer and editor based in New York, covering arts and culture. Her work has appeared in various publications both in print and online, including L'Officiel Magazine, Freunde Von Freunden, Whitehot, Riot of Perfume, doingbird, and Whitewall Magazine.

<http://www.artslant.com/ny/artists/rackroom/23755-simon-denny>