

SURFACE

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SIMON DENNY DECODES BITCOIN

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FOLLOWING A TRAIL OF RESEARCH-INTENSIVE PROJECTS, THE MULTIMEDIA ARTIST DECIDED TO TACKLE THE UNTRACEABLE CURRENCY FOR A SHOW AT PETZEL GALLERY.

BY MARINA CASHDAN

In 2015, at the 56th Venice Biennale, Simon Denny put his name on the map with an installation that outed the former creative director of the NSA. Using information provided in the Snowden-leaked documents, Denny created displays and installations that brought to the surface the visual identity of this very secretive agency—including ephemera from stationary to coloring books. Like much of Denny's work, the piece began with a keen interest in a subject, which, through intense research, blossomed into a journalistic endeavor as much as an artwork.

Born and raised in New Zealand and based between Berlin and New York, the 34-year-old has always held an interest in complex systems. His past shows have tackled subjects like tech company culture, national identity, and neoliberalism, presenting the topics to an art audience in a visually rich way.

This month, Denny opens a show at New York's Petzel Gallery (through Oct. 22) that takes the crypto-currency Bitcoin and its network, Blockchain, as its subject—a continuation of his exhibition at the 2016 Berlin Biennale. His interest in cyber-money came about last year, when Simon collaborated with artist and researcher Matt Goerzen for his show at London's Serpentine Galleries. "When I first heard of Bitcoin," he says, "I thought of it as a zany black market thing and an eccentric speculation tool. But I then realized during research that the networked database behind it—called the Blockchain—contained much more fundamentally exciting possibilities than anonymous money you



Simon Denny at his studio in Berlin. (Photo: Djamilia Grossman/Surface)

Petzel

Marina Cashdan, “Simon Denny Decodes Bitcoin,” *Surface*, September 6, 2016.



Installation view of "Simon Denny: The Innovator's Dilemma" at MoMA PS1 in 2015. (Photo: Pablo Enriquez/Courtesy the artist and MoMA PS1)

could buy drugs with.” Put simply, Blockchain is an encrypted network through which global organizations can verify transactions without any central authority, such as a lawyer to witness a contract, a birth certificate, and the like. “So the true disruptive potential for Blockchain is actually about governance, rather than just money. It’s potentially about sovereignty,” he says.

Denny chose not to focus on the dangers of such a system; he instead paints the dreams that can be built on such systems. For the exhibition, to make this very complex subject more accessible, he chose to focus on three startups working in Bitcoins. (This wasn’t the first time he has followed businesses: His show at Serpentine was built on the Amazon-owned online shoe store Zappos.) Here, Denny worked with designer Linda Kantchev to visualize a postage stamp as an emblem for each company, but also as a visual representation of a nation.

“Sovereignty, money, trusted networks that form infrastructure for communities—these seemed to be the most interesting things at stake. And a stamp seemed to be a great way to kind of emphasize exactly those points,” he says. “Making a stamp about a digital currency seemed to be a way to focus on the issues, but not the ‘materiality,’ of the new currency, to make something that can be alienating in the newness of its format seem more tangible, in a fun way.”

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