

Kat Herriman, "Understand Bitcoins? You Will After You Visit This Exhibition," *The Creators Project*, September 20, 2016.

The Creators Project

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Kat Herriman — Sep 20 2016



Simon Denny, Blockchain Future States, Installation view, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

For those unfamiliar with blockchain, a type of database associated with Bitcoin transactions, Simon Denny's new solo show, *Blockchain Future States*, contains a three-minute video that serves as a brilliant crash course to the 2009 innovation. Best experienced back to front, Denny's installation is screened on the furthest wall of Petzel's Chelsea white cube.

Made in collaboration with a tech agency, the informational short breaks down the revolutionary basics. The graphics are sleek but not sterile. A warm voice narrates. The video begins: "Imagine a world where trust is guaranteed, a world without borders, a world in which each and every one of us takes part in the whole, this

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world is already here, embedded in the Blockchain." Benign in its methods, Denny's film lays out the anarchical

possibilities embedded in blockchain's seemingly incorruptible transparency. When listing its capabilities, the video is careful to mention voting, an application that feels disappointingly out of reach given the fact that the upcoming presidential election will still rely on paper.



Simon Denny, *Blockchain Future States*, Installation view, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

The future of governance is a theme that weighs heavily on Denny's entire installation. Progressively radical models for blockchain are played out through a series of hyper-designed *Risk* boards in the exhibition's left wing. Like the childhood game, complex concepts are simplified into plastic pieces and dice. When looking at Denny's three hypothetical maps, it is impossible not to think of Alighiero Boetti's *Mappa* series (1971-1994)—where the artist created approximately 150 embroidered maps displaying the shifts of political regimes.

In Luca Cerizza's in-depth analysis of *Mappa* for Afterall Books, the author writes, "The Dutch cartographers and painters of the 1600s and others in their wake 'simplified' the world to represent it flat before our eyes. Boetti aimed precisely at this extreme reduction that utilizes a desubjectivized, rather than subjective, point of view, and moved toward the abstraction of a language that can be more widely used and shared." Denny's exhibit is what Boetti's maps worked to achieve; an

educated new perspective in processes that are considered linear.



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Education is fundamental to understanding Denny's practice as well. "The art-going audience is an attentive audience, they will stay and learn," says Denny on a walkthrough of his show. "It's my goal to present information in a

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way that aids new understanding."

Like Boetti, Denny doesn't achieve this alone. His work is highly produced, created by a team of collaborators who add levity to the idea of a more democratic network. Working together to achieve clarity, the final product is sleek, approachable and slightly humorous. Each game board is accompanied by a whiteboard globe and a metal character cutout. Blythe Masters of Digital Asset Holdings (DAH), the blockchain startup, is the first mannequin to greet you. Masters, a former CFO of JPMorgan, hopes to use Bitcoin to speed up the way transactions are done. She envisions blockchain as an infallible, cost-saving intermediary for banks, individuals, and corporations. Masters is the least radical of three models presented, and her *Risk* board reflects that. The aesthetics are professionalized and corporate. The blue vinyl banner over the game board reads, "Blockchain without decentralization."

Walking further, the imagery gets less corporate to reflect increasingly disruptive models. For *Ethereum*, the most radical platform of the bunch, Denny removed an entire section of the white cube only to spray paint its concrete guts with its logo. Crypto-anarchist Vitalik Buterin stands guard, representing the most extreme suggestion: "Open, decentralized internet, and distributed governance infrastructure."



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On the right side of Petzel, Denny muses on the myth surrounding Bitcoin's inventor. Those re-entrenched in *Pokémon* will be happy to find some familiar faces. Ash, the franchise's lead character, is strangely central to the Bitcoin founder story. Satoshi Nakamoto, Bitcoin's shadowy creator, supposedly takes his first name from the Japanese game character and his last name from a 17th century Japanese philosopher named Tominaga Nakamoto. Denny erected a group of plastic vitrines around the room, each representing a different person accused of being Nakamoto, from Hal Finney to Craig Steven Wright. The plexiglas vitrines are adorned with the men's faces and supposedly incriminating evidence. The mysterious and the transparent come together to form an image defined by oscillation.

Denny embraces the perpetual change. His games are conceivably playable in that they are flexible, mobile, and designed to embrace a variety of outcomes. The artist doesn't elevate one solution above the rest, but instead offers a structure for

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multiplicity. The gallery becomes a kind of three-dimensional map onto which Denny stages a digestible view of a dynamic landscape. It is a map that bridges reality and the virtual, and invites viewers to the same.

Blockchain Future States embodies the same transparency its subject promotes. You can even buy Denny's work using Bitcoin; Petzel set up a wallet. As blockchain becomes integrated into our culture, inevitably the map will shift again.

Simon Denny's *Blockchain Future States* is on view at Petzel Gallery through October 22, 2016.

<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/simon-denny-brings-blockchain-to-the-art-audience>