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Luca Cerizza, "Fishbowl Space," *Kaleidoscope*, Summer 2011, pp. 178-183.

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Michèle Abates
Sunglasses, Lips, Head, Reflection, detail, 2009
Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York
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COLUMNS: MAPPING THE STUDIO

FISHBOWL SPACE

All photos: Caila Herikel

Artist SIMON DENNY reflects on production, distribution, and consumption of television with the attitude of a curious investigator and ironic Do-It-Yourself-er, addressing the conditions of boredom and apathy and our daily role as spectators.

words by
LUCA CERIZZA



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Hanging on the far wall of a room that is both studio and bedroom are three television sets. Or rather, there are no television sets: At the foot of the bed, where you would imagine a television to be, you find only the image of a television monitor multiplied by three. Printed on canvas and spaced by aluminum slats, these images capture three different moments of a perspective view that pushes past the wall, going deeper and deeper.

Born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1982, Simon Denny moved to Frankfurt in 2007 to attend post-graduate courses at the Städelschule. In those years, one point of reference for Denny was the teaching of Willem De Rooij, and in particular, De Rooij's analysis of the forms of production and presentation of the image. About a year ago, following in the footsteps of many of his classmates, Denny moved to Berlin. He nonetheless maintains strong ties with his home country, even though his work seems somewhat at odds with New Zealand's dominant culture. While New Zealand is a land of natural beauty and the cult of sport and physical activity, Denny's cultural references seem to come from the life of a nerdy teenager who spent hours walking in shopping malls, watching television, playing video games, and reading technology magazines.

In the small apartment in the Mitte area of Berlin where we meet, there are not many signs of his profession except for a couple of reams of posters and a beach towel with an image printed in black and white (it is actually an artwork). Denny uses this room as a place to do research, mostly on the Internet, while his work is often produced elsewhere.

When confronting the three monitors mentioned at the start of this text, it is only natural to look for the ironic and carefully studied gesture, almost as a declaration of intent. By replacing the TV with his copy, Denny seems to be drawing attention to the irreversible crisis the appliance is undergoing. The computer, following on the heels of the television as a tool for spreading content, has changed the function, appearance, and social significance of what once was the center of the home, the meeting and sharing place in the household. While the screens reproduced here are based on entirely outdated models, they are as thin as the new ultra-thin monitors that have flooded homes, offices, and more or less all public and private spaces in the world today. As Denny points out during our meeting, it is curious to note that the decrease in the importance of television as a medium and the decrease of its thickness go hand in hand. The gradual reduction of its presence seems like a desperate resistance to its ousting as the leading medium of recent decades.

Denny's work is, for the most part, a reflection on the forms of production, distribution, and consumption of television; it is an analysis of the television's obsolescence and the ways in which television and the TV set, thanks to the introduction of new digital technologies, are un-

ABOUT THIS COLUMN

In every issue, LUCA CERIZZA visits an artist's studio in order to analyze methods and practices of art production, and understand the art scene of a city through the eyes of someone who lives and works there.

ARTIST'S BIO

SIMON DENNY (b. 1982) lives and work in Berlin. He has had solo exhibitions at NAK, Aachen; T293, Rome; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Artspace, Sidney; Standard (Oslo), Oslo; Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; and Luetgenmeijer, Berlin, among others. His work has also appeared in group exhibitions at Renwick Gallery, New York; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne; Kunstmuseum, Bonn; GAM Underground Project, Turin; Witte de With, Rotterdam; Malmö Konsthall; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; Portikus, Frankfurt; and Mother's Tankstation, Dublin.



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dergoing drastic changes in form, content, and use. For Denny, the form and "architecture" of the TV set are also the elements of a broader reflection on the methods and forms of vision, on our role as spectators. Many of his works suggest a network of free associations between different ways of "framing" the gaze: from the window of a house to a landscape painting, from the TV monitor to the aquarium (which is nothing but a domesticated form of landscape). Some of his earliest exhibitions, particularly those between 2008 and 2009, humorously juxtapose the TV set with the aquarium. The most common forms in these exhibitions were the cheap metal boxes that contain the skeletons of old TV sets encased in Plexiglas or a sheet of plastic. The same sheet of plastic, poorly applied so as to suggest the image of moving water, and images of fish applied to the inner surface of the box, clearly refer to the aquarium space. In some of these works, the TV set looked just like one of those fake archaeological relics that often serve as questionable decorations in aquariums themselves. Both televisions and aquariums allow viewers to engage in entirely absent, passive, and at times hypnotic consumption; in Denny's work, they overlap each other in their decorative function, as a background for other activities. If images of exotic fish and aquariums are among the most common screensavers, the aquarium was (and occasionally still is) the screensaver of our three-dimensional life.

In the early 1980s, Vito Acconci stressed the relationship between television and the aquarium ("Television space is fishbowl space," he wrote in an essay titled "Television, Furniture, and Sculpture: The Room with the American View"). Denny's work seems to contain a number of references to the beginnings of video art, especially in Fluxus. Although his work is oriented toward the current media and technology landscape, Denny shares with artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell the same destructive and irreverent humor regarding technology, translated into sculpture and installation. If the Fluxus artists, and Vostell in particular, had an ironic take on the leveling power of American-derived culture, which pervaded postwar Western Europe, Denny operates in a new social and technological landscape where the new colonizing culture seems to come from the aesthetically questionable but certainly productive China and South Korea. The apparent "lack of quality" of their products, the cheap look of their packaging, the second-rate graphics that accompany their screensavers, are a constant aesthetic reference for Denny; they are the visual aquarium in which his work swims.

While earlier exhibitions, like "Aquarium Videos" (Ursula Brinckle Stiftung, Kraichtal, 2008) or "Watching Videos Dry" (T293, Naples, 2009), crudely reconstructed the hybrid and slightly monstrous forms of TV-aquariums or aquarium-TVs, Denny later began to make his work look slicker. He began to print images on canvas and mount them on



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TV panels, like the work I saw in his room, while at the same time, he began using different types of television sets as ready-mades.

Since his exhibition "Celebrities Houses at Night: A Projection" (Standard Oslo, 2009), Denny's work has taken on a more narrative dimension, setting the television within a wider network of references. Using the popular television series *The Prince of Bel-Air* as a starting point, Denny created an "update" for the plot of an episode that was never released on DVD. Homes of celebrities in Oslo were photographed at night and mounted in frames that suggest the appearance of the new models of LCD screens. Underneath the images, Denny mounted LED lights, thereby concatenating two current formats for watching TV.

In two recent exhibitions, Denny's focus has shifted away from direct reference to television and toward an investigation of the documentary format and new forms of production and consumption. "Cruise Line," Denny's recent exhibition at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, is structured around a local factory that specializes in chrome finishing on steel used in large cruise ships. The exhibition revolved around these two poles, the factory and the cruiseliner. Along with other elements, he presented a 3-D video of the plating process and a display reminiscent of the deck of a cruise ship. Denny showed here his interest in the processes of production and consumption today, highlighting the seemingly kitschier manifestations of both with his mixture of critical attention and perverse fascination.

Finally, in his second exhibition at the gallery T293, Denny presented the restoration of a documentary about Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, or Myalgic encephalomyelitis, a somewhat mysterious condition discovered in the mid-1980s, characterized by persistent mental and physical exhaustion. A series of prints showing the improvement of the quality of the documentary after restoration was displayed on a wall, while documents and gadgets related to the disease were arranged chronologically on the floor. By dividing the space in two, Denny's display hinted at a parallel between improved technological quality and the attention given by the media to the disease.

If the condition of boredom and apathy related to consumption and entertainment has been one of the recurring themes in Denny's work, the prospect of this analysis seems to have changed. While at first, the artist looked mostly at private forms of consumption, in recent exhibitions, Denny has shifted his focus to collective processes and more socially-related issues. What does not seem to change is the attitude of the curious investigator and ironic Do-It-Yourself-er that characterizes Denny's consideration of our daily role as spectators and consumers. ♦

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

SIMON DENNY's work is featured in the exhibition "That's the way we do it – The Techniques and Aesthetic of Appropriation from Ei Arakawa to Andy Warhol," on view at Kunsthaus Bregenz until 3 July 2011. His work will be also on show in the exhibition "Based in Berlin" on view at five locations in the German capital until July 24.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

LUCA CERIZZA is the Berlin editor of *Kaleidoscope*. A curator, writer, and art historian currently based in Berlin, Cerizza teaches at NABA Academy in Milan. His most recent book, *L'uccello e la piuma: La questione della leggerezza nell'arte italiana* (The Bird and the Feather: The Question of Lightness in Contemporary Italian Art), was published by Et al. Edizioni. He recently curated the exhibition "Scene Ouverte" (Centre Culturel Français, Milan) and cocurated, together with Massimiliano Gioni and Francesco Manacorda, "Alighiero e Boetti Day," a 12-hour event dedicated to the Italian artist (Auditorium RAI, Turin).

