

Karen Archey, "Corporations Are People Too," *Modern Painters*, June 18, 2013, pp. 52-54.

MODERN PAINTERS

Corporations Are People Too

An artist looks to data for new ideas

BY KAREN ARCHHEY

IN RECENT YEARS Simon Denny has gained attention for his investigations of the waning of television, both in terms of its physicality—the flat screen replacing our old cathodes—and its withering domination as the prevalent method of information dispersal in Western society. The most obvious art historical analogue to Denny's tech-centric sculptures, canvases, and expansive installations is the work of Korean video art pioneer Nam June Paik. This may seem like an easy association; both artists use the television as a sculptural element. Yet, as is the case for fellow video art greats Dara Birnbaum and Ant Farm, Paik—and to some extent, Denny—is interested in challenging television broadcasting's corporate capitalist entanglement.

But while earlier generations directly critiqued, through video itself, the firm hold that corporations had on television—ensuring its continued existence as a one-way mode of address despite its potential to become more—Denny appropriates corporate logic and its chilly rhetoric to explicate its functionality. A few of Denny's exhibition titles reveal his adoption of corporate language, including some that are a direct appropriation of lines from trade magazines or corporate buzzwords ("All You Need Is Data," 2013; "Envisaging Vocational Rehabilitation," 2012; "Corporate Video Decisions," 2011; and "Introductory Logic Video Tutorial," 2010).

It goes without saying that Denny works in a societal moment very much unlike the 1970s and '80s heyday of video art. But,



just as his predecessors investigated how television's omnipresence indelibly changed society's fabric, Denny shows corporations' sway over media. He examines how the increasing sophistication of new technology—specifically



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the Internet's two-way communication—has changed us in equal turn. Denny lays bare the fact that our contemporary moment is largely defined by global economic woes and the expansion of corporations' control over mass audiences, often through their analysis of Big Data, made possible by progressively intelligent technology.

The concept of progress as it relates to technology, as well as to television and analog broadcasting, was the subject of Denny's *Channel Document* at Art Basel's Art Statements in 2012. A New Zealand native now based in Berlin, Denny focused on the recent redesign of the country's passport, as well as the controversial 2012 withdrawal of public funding and consequent shuttering of the short-lived public-service, ad-free television channel TVNZ 7, founded just four years earlier. *Channel Document* is a large-scale mixed-media installation comprising found objects (such as a *Pirates of the Caribbean* TV promo and a Metallica New Zealand tour T-shirt) and Plexiglas "canvases," printed with digital compositions relaying the chronology of TVNZ 7's short life. These compositions juxtapose Apple's skeuomorphic calendar icons, TVNZ 7 logos, and informational tidbits rendered in distressed fonts to communicate the conflict between TVNZ 7 supporters and a new, more conservative New Zealand government in a faux-positivist manner.

Denny also commissioned a New Zealand video journalist to produce a documentary about the nation's passport redesign, which was prompted by new international biometric travel document requirements. The redesign features the usual gamut of wildlife native to the nation along with an account of the nation's bicultural history and a chuckle-inducing narrative about the way the country came to develop navigation technology because, well, Kiwis have a knack for travel since New Zealand is in the middle of nowhere. (Whoops, your colonialism is showing!) Shot in the style of TVNZ 7 programming, the film is shown as part of *Channel Document*. The installation reflects the artist's broadening network of references and movement toward working in a documentary format, including the use of elements typical of museum display and its systems for arranging knowledge, like the chronological timeline, the documentary video, or the vitrine. While a viewer might initially find it difficult to wrap his or her mind around the breadth and tone of information presented in the work, it considers the value and continued viability of noncommercial information dissemination. And it simultaneously critiques the capitalist, technological-

determinist outlook that to refresh, revitalize, and update is tantamount to propelling society forward.

In a similar fashion, "All You Need Is Data," Denny's 2013 show at Kunstverein Munich, parodied and chronicled Digital-Life-Design (DLD), a rather exclusive technology conference that takes place in Munich every January. One can think of DLD as an amalgam of TED and a tech-heavy trade conference with a dash of cultural programming. Speakers have ranged from Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg to the artist Olafur Eliasson. Denny's exhibition chronicled the events of DLD12 rather than the entire history of the conference, and re-creates it a year after its initial occurrence. This shift in temporality carries a tacit critique insofar as the product purveyed

at the conference is up-to-the-minute, forward-thinking information by global industry leaders. And it serves as a prescient reminder that the millions of dollars poured into these conferences pay for information with the relative life span of a fruit fly, along with a plutocratic, "exclusive" experience. (In a gross analogy, it's like the leftovers of a Michelin-starred meal the night after.)

The museum's foyer greets the viewer with a collection of awkwardly hung banners previously used to guide visitors to and demarcate spaces at DLD12. The main gallery features a maze of canvases printed with digital compositions. Similar to those featured in *Channel Document*, these pieces take the branding associated with DLD12 and recap the conference event by event. (There's even a canvas for



Detail of tvnz 7 Timeline, 2012.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Simon Denny in front of Kim Dotcom's house, New Zealand, 2013.

Installation view of "Remote Control" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2012.

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lunch.) Yet the quotes Denny has pulled from each of the recapped talks are telling; they range from informational buzz phrases to embarrassing outtakes. The canvas with the words "Mobile Facts" at its head reveals the platitude "Apple is really leading in mobile," whereas the composition titled "Entrepreneurial Capital" features the cringe-worthy statements, "We've been pushing Washington to not overregulate public companies" and "Silicon Valley is just this incredible machine of strength." Rendering words of the leaders of many tech-related industries in what appears to be an Apple version of Comic Sans typeface—an, um, less than authoritative font that the conference participants likely had a hand in implementing—prompts viewers to reconsider the humanity and humility of

Denny appropriates corporate logic to explicate its functionality.

the speaker in a setting as alienating as a technology conference, a setting in which a forced optimism is imperative.

For the current Venice Biennale, Denny reformatted an earlier piece shown as part of the exhibition "Remote Control" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; it consisted of plopping inside the museum the giant analog machinery responsible for broadcasting BBC's Channel Four to East London households. In an exhibition opening July 4 at Mumok, in Vienna, Denny is restaging the lair of Megaupload founder and public enemy Kim Dotcom, where

he was famously placed on house arrest—replete with a gargantuan, custom-built horsehair bed and rife with bad art.

Denny's ability to operate within the organizational logic of the content that he mines is unique. Whether it be a trade magazine, passport redesign, or technology conference that he's riffing on, all of these exist within the umbra of corporate alienation. He pushes against such alienation by revealing the obfuscated humor within their aesthetic output, reconfiguring it to be just a tad too extreme, a little embarrassing, and very human. MP