

Petzel

Timo Feldhaus, "The Soul of Simon Denny: A portrait of the artist on his way up," *Spike Art Magazine*, Summer 2015.

# SPIKE

## THE SOUL OF SIMON DENNY

A portrait of the artist on his way up

by Timo Feldhaus



*In March this year I visited the artist Simon Denny in his Berlin studio. It was four weeks before his first US solo show (at MoMA P.S.1) and a few more weeks before the 56th Venice Biennale, where he was one of the youngest participants to represent New Zealand, with an exhibition in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana as well as a presentation at Marco Polo Airport. Denny was in work mode. It was clear that this was a decisive time, when the artist needed to make the most important decisions of his career.*

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*Denny works around the psychology and abstract language of the new media economy, corporate design, creative capitalism and innovative forms of content management. Fascinated by the figure of the entrepreneur, he describes his works as products and himself as a brand. Denny seems to follow his own path with impressive rigor and clarity, throwing the traditional clichés of the dreamy bohemian artist overboard. He seems to have always known exactly what he was doing.*

*But this summer was when he would make it or break it. How did all this feel for Denny, a Städelschule graduate who, at the age of 32, already had gallery representation with Friedrich Petzel and Buchholz Gallery? The curtain was about to fall, and the art world's anticipation joined forces with a period of intense productivity to create a ball of energy.*

## **What does your typical day look like these days? What are you doing?**

I get up at half past seven and make Marta a cup of coffee, have a shower and run out the door and it's a 45-minute commute whether I take my bike during the summer or the train during the winter. And then I'm here by nine.

## **At what time do you finish your day?**

Well, at the moment pretty late. Anywhere between 6 and 12. It just depends on what's urgent for the day. Sometimes if I'm lucky I get the evening off. Otherwise I'm just working through.

## **In your practice you deal with a lot of information and research, but the final product is an exhibition: an installation with objects, most of the time sculpture. At what point in the working process do you take the step from research or information to the actual production of what you're going to show? When do you know what it will look like?**

I have a subject and a number of research angles that are ongoing; things I'm interested in and trying to keep up with. If an opportunity comes along to present an event or an exhibition, I try to marry what seems most appropriate of my interests with that situation. For example, if I have an exhibition at Portikus; a particular room in a particular city. This Samsung mythology that I've been very interested in for a long time actually pivots around Frankfurt. So that is a great moment to make something about that, because it would be the best exhibition experience I can make within my known language. I think that as an artist, I have to think about what an audience expects; one can either do the opposite of that audience's expectations or you can go with it; but there are expectations. And that also becomes information to work with because ultimately the exhibition is a transaction between exhibition maker and audience.

## **Are there points at which you doubt your way of working?**

Totally, all the time.

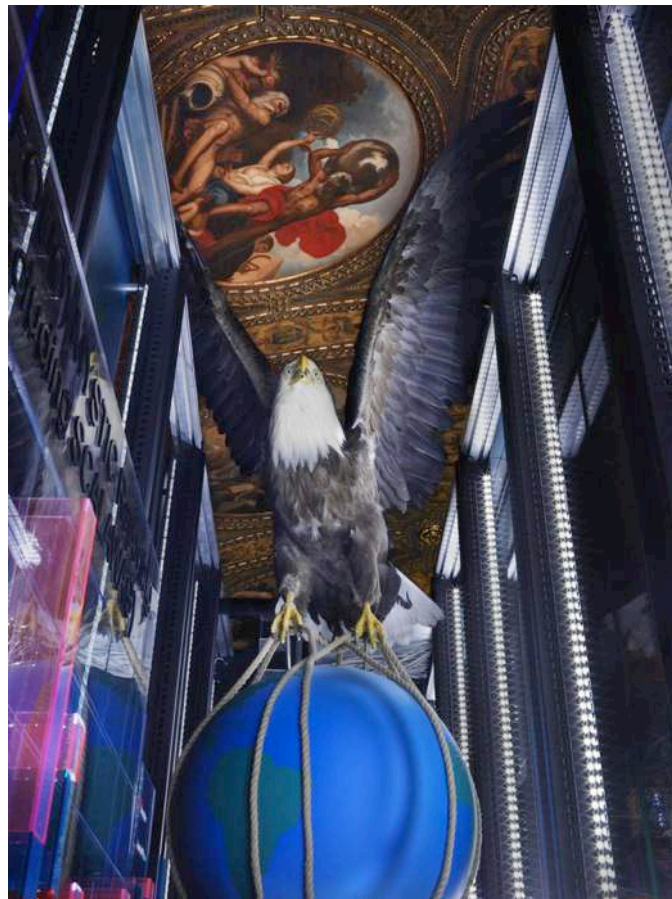
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## What do you do when that happens?

I try to go through all the problems. There is obviously a certain point when I have to decide on a direction. I try to take risks with what I make – I guess every producer would say the same thing. But I try to keep myself interested, and part of being interested is challenging what I am comfortable with, what I want, what is possible, and what I can afford. In the situation of making this thing about Burda and DLD there was a big shift for me aesthetically. For the audience, that was a new Denny sculpture and that was really scary at the time. I had a lot of doubt. Is this too busy?

**I KNOW I WANT TO MAKE A TOO-MUCH-  
INFORMATION FEELING, BUT WILL IT REALLY  
WORK TO BE A POSITIVE EXHIBITION  
EXPERIENCE? OR WILL IT JUST BE SUPER  
ANNOYING AND UGLY?**





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**In retrospect, is there anything that you wouldn't acknowledge as a success?**

Yeah, tons of work.

**As a start-up entrepreneur or businessman, it's quite easy to measure success: How does the product sell? But how would you – in your case, as an artist – measure success?**

I judge success within what I understand of the field of art. This is what I try to have a conversation with. For me, a part of defining success is the fact that what I'm doing is participating in a language that has come from a certain tradition. Therefore, you can define the terms of success more easily. Because if you just talk about creating culture, it is very difficult to define successful cultural production. If you

think about what makes a good exhibition, it's easier. For me, a good exhibition is something that makes people feel productively challenged by what they are experiencing. I like an exhibition experience that is complicated, but with a purpose. I like exhibitions that have a lot of nuance and detail, are well-positioned, and carefully executed. But then also have a certain clarity, are not confounding. For me right now, a successful work has a subject. I like an artwork that says: "It's about this." You can identify what it's about and judge it on some kind of subject-base. But it deals with the subject-matter in a way that leaves questions in your mind.

**During the roundtable we had at Spike you said: "a good product is a good product" – whether it's an iPhone or an artwork. What defines a successful product is popularity and sales. And that can be measured by what your friends say, what critics say, and also by whether or not it sells, right?**

I think popularity and sales are important in a good product, but you are talking here about outcomes. There are things that make a good product good. The iPhone arguably has the best user interface of any computer ever, for example. That's a big part of what makes it popular and sell well.

You're asking me about external criteria that define success. And what is easier for me to talk about is what I consider to be important in trying to make a great product. For me, the question of what might make a quality exhibition experience – which I'm try to provide – comes first. One of

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the ways to measure that might be popularity and sales – but there are also other metrics in the art context: critical response for example. And the success of an artistic product also has a much longer timeline than tech. Of course on a personal level if I make an exhibition, I want many people to see it because I put a lot of work, energy, and money into it. But one can assess quality from different angles. These criteria are based on what situation an artwork exists in. I could put my business hat on and say that if I send a work to an art fair, there needs to be a sale. Because that's the criterion for an art fair.

## **And you do that, right?**

Sometimes I sell, sometime I don't. It feels better when you do sell, because that's the expected outcome at an art fair.

## **What would you do if you weren't an artist?**

There are lots of things I'd like to do. In fact, everybody knows art is risky business, a high-stakes, winner-takes-it-all economy. And those who do well, who do really really well, get all the financial and material success. And those who are on the way there, or have been there, get next to none. So, to try and be realistic, I have to realize that some careers are long and some careers are short; and mine could be short.

## **It doesn't look like it.**

You never know. Take a look at a ten-year-old Frieze or a ten-year-old Artforum, look through the ads, and tell me how many names you recognize. There is a quick turnover for art people. Adopting a realistic outlook I have to realize that this could end as a revenue stream, and there have to be other ways to make money because I'm not from wealth. There are lots of things I'd like to try in the future. Friends who used to be in creative things have gotten into law. I also really like the advertising field. I think a lot of people in art have a natural tendency towards the commercial sides of art as well, which I have great respect for.





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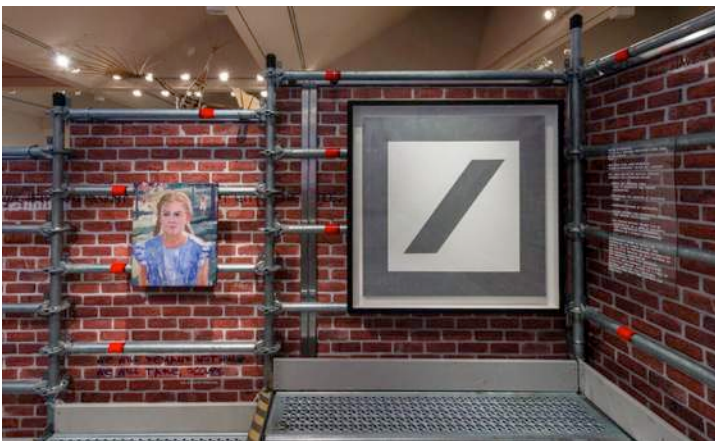


**Do you consider yourself optimistic?**

I think in my best moments I am. I also have a tendency to be pessimistic. But I would like to be an optimist. Let's put it like that.

**Do you think that technology is making the world a better place?**

Those things are not necessarily connected. Technology and its development are two different things. Technology lets interesting and amazing things happen, but I don't think those things necessarily have an overall good effect all the time, or even necessarily part of the time. I think they can, but as the scientist Freeman Dyson said at DLD 2012, the world is governed more by politics than by technology. Technology is a tool and politics is something else. Humans decide how technology gets used. A major problem about what comes from Silicon Valley and its way of looking at the world is that joblessness is going up and influences are getting concentrated. And technology facilitates that. But dealing with it is a political problem. I'm not saying you can legislate to prevent it, I'm not sure that's really the solution. But politics might



play the stronger part.

**It sounds like you don't want to decide if it's yes or no.**

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Well, I think that would be oversimplifying a very serious question. It wouldn't be how I feel about the subject.

## **Why shouldn't we throw our mobile phones and clothes in the garbage and go into the woods?**

I personally wouldn't do that because I like to participate in the world that exists around me. If my idea of being an artist in a contemporary environment is to deal with the cultural implications of the present – which is very broadly my aim – then taking myself outside of where things happen would be a mistake.

## **Tell me what is good about unrestricted capitalism?**

That's a huge question. I'm not sure I know what that is. I like to read and listen to people like Peter Thiel and Larry Page when they talk about what they would do outside of regulation and how regulation stops them from innovation. That's an issue for them. And it's an interesting problem to work through, intellectually: What would no regulation mean? But I don't necessarily think it's a widely applicable social answer. The way Germany runs things in terms of high taxes, a decent support system for people who can't find work seems great. I'm generally a supporter of that environment and I'm very happy to continue to pay taxes at a high level so that I can live in a society where there is not a huge gap between the rich and the poor. But the intellectual problem, the idea of sidestepping regulation for innovation, stepping outside of society – and that is Larry Page's idea and an idea held by other people in Silicon Valley – to create an outside world where rules are different and you can do lots of things that aren't otherwise possible, also financially, is very interesting. And it's certainly something relevant to look at now, because people in power are working like that anyway. The fact that people are trying to avoid paying taxes – also in Germany – and how and why they do that is a really interesting thing to look at.

## **In our roundtable discussion you also said: “I'm not interested in bringing capitalism down.” For a lot of people in our field, that's unusual. And now you're saying again that what is unusual is interesting to look at.**

I always wish I knew more than I do and I wish I had spent more time in school than I did. And here I am now, speaking in public. There seems to be an end-point to a critical project in the arts. I'm going to risk oversimplification here and there are many people that know more about this than I do but, at one point, it seems there was a realization that criticism and critique were not taking capitalism down; in fact, they were doing quite the opposite. Chris Kraus has written in an essay for my upcoming Venice presentation that “If, as theorist Franco Berardi has written, techno-linguistics and psychically invasive media have transformed social life into a swarm that instantly negates refusal, then there is no longer much point in mounting “critiques” that refer back to outmoded ideals of democracy.” Maybe then one should look into different directions for what creative work can be. And I admire people and also artists around me who look for different angles as to how to approach material and attitudes to economics.

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**Could you name some names?**

K-Hole is an interesting space. The way they deal with audience, money, and creating culture is a really interesting thing.

**You often say that it's worth looking at things differently. In an interview about the Portikus show, you said that there are a lot of reasons to look at Samsung because the company is so complex and interesting. But your aim is not to find solutions, to build a final opinion, is that correct?**

I don't think I'm qualified to give solutions. There are definitely people who are more qualified.

**But wouldn't you say that after doing so much research for a project, you are an expert who would be able to take a stand?**

My aim is to present things that are unresolved. Samsung is a good example. A bit of a story about that project is that I approached Samsung through cultural channels. Samsung is involved in art and invested in art. The founding family and the CEO's family also have a very prominent South Korean museum, the Leeum; it's built by Koolhaas. It's part of an international contemporary art circle that I consider myself to be a part of. They are also collectors and put on shows that feature ex-Städelschule students, which is where I studied. It's part of my sphere in terms of cultural production. So I approached them and said I'd be very interested in making something about this Frankfurt declaration. Unfortunately they were not interested in me doing that and wouldn't give me access to the material I requested; they were worried that I would misinterpret it. And I thought: OK, I'm still interested in making this exhibition, without that collaboration. So I made a display that tried to remake this culturally important material so it could be considered by an audience that didn't have access to Samsung's information. And I think that it problematises the material at the same time as it celebrates it. Not having conclusions is legitimate in a situation like this. Because that's how I feel about it.

**I THINK AN ARTWORK THAT EXPRESSES  
THAT FEELING OF HAVING AN AMBIVALENT  
RELATIONSHIP – SOMETHING THAT YOU  
LOVE AND ARE CONFUSED ABOUT AT THE  
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**People often don't dare to ask if over-identification with dominant capitalist power structures, which are part of a lot of art at the moment, represents a strategy of resistance, or something far less intentional and ambitious.**

I think that artists are complicit with dominant power structures when they start to be involved in exhibiting and sales at any kind of scale beyond a local scale. That feels unavoidable – if one wants to be involved in a certain distribution/audience system then one agrees to receiving money from wealthy/powerful patrons and governmental bodies, and therefore not being truly at a distance from those bodies' interests. I think there are then productive ways and less productive ways to be close to this power. But it's often hard to tell what a productive way to be close to these powers would be at the time



when they are happening. As I understand it the reception of Warhol was seen to be uninterestingly close to power by many peers and now it seems it would be harder to make that argument. So things that seem like selling out or whatever might be doing something that is not just that. Then again there are also many non-Warhol examples of courting dominant structures that it would be harder to make a case for. I just feel that these things are nuanced – just because one is working in proximity to power doesn't mean that one cannot make something of wider value, but the opposite can also be true.

## **And what about when someone asks: Are you a neoliberal artist?**

That's not something I aim to be. But I also don't aim to end neoliberalism. I think exploring the textures and cultural values at work today for me involves a degree of participation in those systems. I don't think that my position is apolitical either, but documenting something at close proximity brings different insights to documenting it at a distance.

**In general, you seem disgusted by a specific way of talking about art. And the reaction is**

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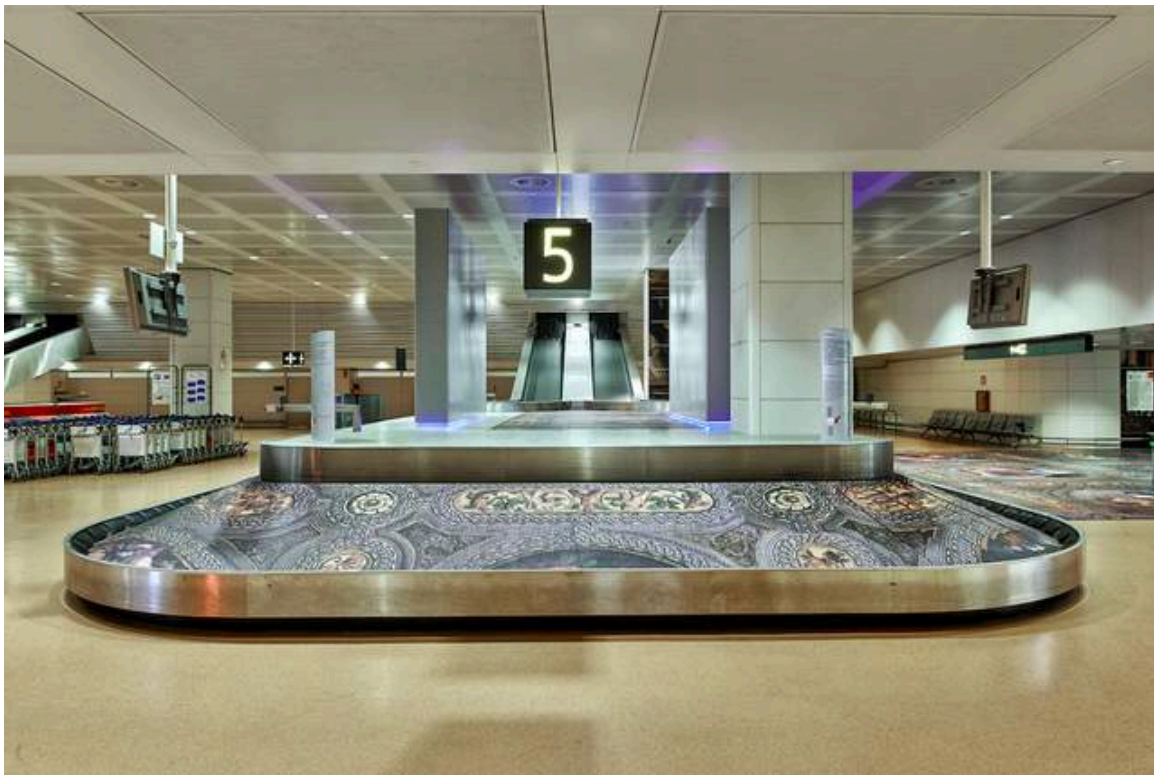
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**that you use another language, also very coded, instead: a techy-nerd-entrepreneur language. Are you disgusted by art?**

No, I'm a fan of art. I'm a fan of the history of art. I think that in using the language that I do, I'm just trying to be as specific as I can. There are obviously producers that have a resistance to commodity culture and want to problematise that. I think that's fine and I enjoy some work that does that. It's also an amazing space to work in, particularly historically.

**But now that's not an appropriate way of talking about things?**

Not for me right now. An artist can only take one position at a time. I think it makes sense for me to talk about work as product. It makes sense for me to talk about experience as a product and exhibition-making as that kind of thing also.



**It is quite interesting that you, as an artist, put yourself in the position of an object within a much bigger system of capitalism. And there is no room for the autonomy of art.**

But that's how I experience the world, and it's also how the society I live in ultimately categorises me. I have a visa to live in Germany in part because I pay taxes here. I am considered primarily a business by this state. I feel totally a part of this system. And when I choose to participate in it more fully my life seems more connected to the world around me.

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**It seems as if the role of the artist has changed a lot.**

Since when? I feel like it might be not that different from a recent past. I think an artists role changes as a society changes. For instance: People in Germany are probably my primary audience. But I'm not German and I'm not naturalised. I've done more exhibitions here than anywhere else in the world. People can see the work online but this is my site of production. I've made work about Germany many times. But I'm also in no way connected to an art-historically German tradition ... I'm not part of that. And that's also a complicated world that makes the conditions I try to respond to. I'm a voice that has a different history than a lot of my audience does. That's part of the complexity of the product that comes out. I think that's interesting because it's a new situation. Expats have been around in Berlin for maybe 20 years in the way that I live here. The culture that comes out of that is interesting: people living in countries where they are not naturalised. That is very common now.

**To me, you represent a working artist. I wouldn't say blue-collar, but as you said earlier, you're not from a rich family. And I'm like that too; I cant get rid of this Protestant work ethic.**

It's the same for me.

**Are you sometimes sad about that?**

For sure. I wish I could be more chill but I'm not. I like to work a lot of the time. And that's part of that internal thing: to keep myself busy and make artwork that is complicated and needs time and effort and money and all these things. I've created that whole sphere of my life to work well. It keeps me busy in work and I guess satisfies something within my disposition but also complicates deeper commitments to friends and family that I would like to have. That is something I hope to improve in the future.

**I think a lot of people still believe this myth of the artist as someone who is outside of the system; someone who would never say that he has to work too much.**

I love what I do but I also recognize that artists can be somewhat irresponsible socially. And I'm not interested in that.

**I WANT TO BE A GOOD PARTNER FOR MY  
FIANCÉE, I WANT TO BE A GOOD SON TO MY  
MOTHER AND FATHER, AND I THINK THE  
WAY THAT ARTISTS BEHAVE IN CERTAIN  
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**Let's talk a little bit about the position of a successful artist. Right now you are like Samsung, a global player, very successful. And in art, war, and the commercial field, history is always written by the victors. The media only speaks of the winners. And you are also interested in winners. Do you sometimes question that?**

It's great if you and other people think I'm always winning. I guess that helps my business. But unfortunately the truth is a little different. Right now I'm in a great position. Right at this moment, I'm doing what I want. I'm at a really high point, professionally.

**Where do you see the difference between the businessman or the start-up entrepreneur and the artist?**

That's hard. An artist is a person that produces: businessman and artist. That's

unavoidable. In the eyes of the law, you pay tax on your business income as an artist and that's how it's defined in our society. You can not pay tax, but then you're a criminal. Every artist who performs in the same space as I am right now is defined as an artist and a business by those structures. If you sell a work or have commercial exchange you are taxed on that commercial exchange and you operate as a small business. That's not my subjective interpretation of the world. An artist is a person who produces art, a businessman is a person who produces business; and very often those things are the same, but not always. That's kind of simple.

**Why are you wearing this 9/11 keychain around your neck?**

It's my favourite museum; a very complex product. And it contains a lot of really interesting cultural information about a certain view - maybe a dominant view in the US - of our world. That's the kind of thing I hope to be able to create. Something as rich as that. It's underneath Ground Zero, because there are two holes in the ground now. One hole is a descending waterfall that kind of goes in on itself and is huge because it's in the footprint of one of the buildings. And the footprint of the other building is this museum. Actually, both are part of the museum: the fountain is a monumental sculpture and a memorial. A viewer enters, goes down into the hole, and



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everything is so choreographed. There is a concourse that one walks along with a poignant absent space. And then you see a certain big piece of metal that was part of the building. Then you go on to a cabinet space where there are a few objects. And then there are other more intense exhibition areas.

## **Contemporary art?**

No, it's not, because it has a different function. But I think it does do what contemporary art can do very well. You have a series of objects that are really complex and you have information on all these objects: where they come from and why they are there and how they are related to the tragedy. And then you have videos of people taking the planes and calling their loved ones, about to die. And you have a complete history of the building and how it was made and why it was made and how it was received in culture. And then you also have much more complicated spaces that give – for example – a history of militant Islam from the perspective of the 9/11 museum. And it tells the story of how Islam supposedly was at other moments in time, and gives examples of that. The execution of that part is very interesting. And there are the back-stories of the people involved in flying the planes into the WTC and the Pentagon. And it tells you how they entered the US and where they went to school and what they did and where they learned to fly. And they have photographs. I mean, this is deeply political and presented in a way which is ...

## **... emotional?**

Yeah, certainly. But it's also presented from a named perspective: as a memorial of that tragedy for America. And one might strongly disagree with the narrative as it's told there but it is very interesting to see the building blocks of that argument as an exhibition. There are amazing objects in there as well. One of the most amazing exhibits is the front of a store that was right beside Ground Zero and had tons and tons of dust, ash and debris come down on it: onto their Ralph Lauren T-shirt display outside the store, which they left untouched and is displayed in that state in the museum. To me, that's an incredible object. That's why I wear this merchandise. Because I think it's a really interesting and complex museum. Probably one of the best museum experiences I've ever had.

<http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/soul-simon-denny>