

Petzel

Alex Greenberger, "Bitcoin is for Winners: Simon Denny's Crash Course on Cryptocurrency," *The Village Voice*, September 20, 2016.



Bitcoin Is for Winners: Simon Denny's Crash Course on Cryptocurrency

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2016 AT 9 A.M.



Courtesy the artist/Petzel, New York

At the opening for Simon Denny's latest show at Petzel Gallery, "Blockchain Future States," a colleague and I stood in front of a vitrine devoted to the tangled origin story of Bitcoin. My colleague read the first few lines of text UV-printed onto it and gave up. "I feel like I'd have to read about this forever to understand it," he told me.

It's an apt comment, since seeing a Denny show often feels like a crash course in Silicon Valley culture, without anyone to explain the technospeak. Emulating the mise-en-scène of product launches and tech stores, his installations rely on screens, collected data, and text-ridden sculptures. Words like "blockchain," "API," and "cryptocurrency" are thrown at viewers, as are dioramas, games, videos, economic charts, emails, inspirational quotes, and various doodads. Denny's exhibitions are exhausting, but they aren't tiresome — his shows consistently feel fresh, as though the young Berlin-based artist were tearing open digital technology's clean exterior and, each time, revealing something new about the people who control it.

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Denny takes Bitcoin as his subject in a mostly smart look at how information, ideas, and money flow online. He's created what effectively feels like a three-act play with an ingenious overture. The main section of the show explores three Bitcoin-related start-ups, starting with Digital Asset (democratic in theory), moving to 21 Inc. (questionable), and ending with Ethereum (mildly terrifying).

But first, Denny wisely provides an introduction: an exploration of the myth of Satoshi Nakamoto, the founder of Bitcoin. Through a series of Plexiglas vitrines devoted to the currency's pioneers, we discover that Nakamoto, once treated as an inspirational figure by the tech-as-freedom cadre, was possibly just the alias of Craig Steven Wright, a businessman (or at least, so Wright claims in an email reprinted here). Nakamoto himself is represented as an oversize Alucore cutout of a Pokémon character — in the process turning him into an identity that can be traded in a larger game of control over Bitcoin. The goal is to own every aspect of it.

Likewise, each start-up gets its own larger-than-life, personalized version of Risk, the board game in which world domination is the goal. (Digital Asset's edition replaces countries with financial centers; 21 Inc.'s focuses on offshore territories; Ethereum's sets players against anarchist cryptocurrencies.) Risk unfurls a somewhat obvious metaphor: Bitcoin is simply a game in which the start-ups' founders are the preordained winners; Bitcoin users are just pawns.

As usual, Denny employs the optimistic language tech companies use to describe their products. He also appropriates the visual language of Silicon Valley culture: The exhibit is installed like a trade show, with pristine surfaces and flashy signs. Digital Asset's installation, for example, comes with a promotional backdrop. (It reads, in part, "Blockchain for Efficiency, Security, Settlement speed, Compliance in existing markets.")

But that trade-show aesthetic gets punctured by the show's end. Behind the installation for Ethereum — a platform that can store not just Bitcoin, but also lots of other kinds of data, including birth certificates and various forms of ID — the gallery drywall has been ripped open. Ethereum's logo is emblazoned under the gash, with the slogan "A SAFE DECENTRALIZED SOFTWARE PLATFORM" beneath it. But someone (is it Denny?) has crossed out the word "SAFE" and spray-painted, "Dont trust the network." It's a warning worth heeding.

Simon Denny: 'Blockchain Future States'

Petzel Gallery
456 West 18th Street
212-680-9467, petzel.com
Through October 22

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