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**BLOUINARTINFO**

# Artist Simon Denny On Silicon Valley, Skeuomorphic Design, and Tech Conferences

BY ASHTON COOPER | NOVEMBER 04, 2014



An installation view of Simon Denny's "All You Need Is Data: The DLD 2012 Conference REDUX Rerun" at Petzel Gallery in 2013.



(Courtesy Petzel Gallery)

Simon Denny. Photo by Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff

You might have seen Simon Denny's overwhelming installation "All You Need Is Data: The DLD 2012 Conference REDUX Rerun" when it was at New York's Petzel Gallery in the summer of 2013. Inspired by a real life [Digital-Life-Design](#)

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[conference](#), the piece forces visitors to walk through the kind of winding, regimented lines one might find at the airport, in order to view panels with snippets from different speakers at the event. In the piece's current iteration at the Montreal Biennial, many visitors avoided walking through the metal lines altogether. Denny, whose work focuses on design, obsolescence, and technology, is currently preparing for his role as New Zealand's representative to the 2015 Venice Biennale. ARTINFO caught up with Denny to discuss tech conferences, skeuomorphic design, and his plans for Venice.

**Thematically, what do you hope people will take away from the piece?**

There are many different outcomes, but I think something that's important for me was some kind of way of framing that community, the community from Silicon Valley, trying to make a picture of its thoughts and hopes and dreams, and the key players at a certain moment of time. What I really wanted to do was create some kind of frame for people like Sheryl Sandberg, Jimmy Wales, and Jack Dorsey, all these people that have such a massive influence on the way we are able to communicate in the world and our understanding of all sorts of things. To kind of picture a candid moment as a group — I think that was something worth trying to do. And then this opportunity came along to work quite closely with this conference, which is also quite unusual. I'm a fan of the tech world and it's a hard world to enter from the outside. There are a lot of values that are similar to art values, I think. Like, innovation is really key. DLD is run by Hubert Burda Media, this German media company. Obviously it's a certain view of a community but I think it's a legitimate grouping and I think what they have to say is important to look at very closely.

**To me it reads as a negative critique. Does the tech world see it as a glorification of their activities?**

People bring different things to it and I have had very different reactions to it — polar opposite reactions to it. In Munich, the first time we showed it, people would come through and be like, "How could you make this giant advertisement for a media company like Burda?" At the same time other people would come through and say, "Yeah, this is a very astute critique of the neo-liberal rhetoric." So there are both of those angles. I just showed the piece

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in New Zealand as part of a Turner Prize-type thing that New Zealand does and the judge of that prize was very critical and obviously taking it as a straightforward mouthpiece for this community.

### **Where do you position yourself then?**

This material is so dominant and such a big part of our lives that it is important to look at it. I think some quotes you can pull out of that piece and they are genuinely amazing. I think a lot of those people are really innovating. But obviously there are some darker sides of that space as well and that community also acknowledges it in certain things. The fact that fewer people are providing similar services and jobs are becoming obsolescent is something that community is very aware of. There are certain things that I engage with positively and negatively in turn. I hope that viewers relate to that as well. You know that this stuff is important, you know that these people do amazing things, but you aren't sure of the effects of the whole thing. So this "Not sure, can't decide" position is quite legitimate.

### **I also think there's a lot of frustration over who controls those conversations and who is included in that community.**

Absolutely. The gender problem in that community is quite problematic. DLD, they address that. They have DLD women. I think there are lots of critiques about how they're addressing that. I've heard people say that having a special conference for women is a ghettoizing sort of thing. Again, the community is aware of these problems. It's a really big problem. But it is also in art.

### **How did the aesthetics of your pieces come out of DLD?**

So in January 2012 I wanted to look at one of the most dominant systems of representation in that context at that time which was iOS 6, believe it or not. Back then, the current mobile platform was still iOS 6. This was an amazing platform graphically because it was the end point of a long trajectory of skeuomorphic design

that happened from basically the '70s onwards. The key to Apple's success was making computers usable for you and me and accepting those objects into our

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lives and our organizational systems — the file going into the trashcan aspect of the way they organize their user interface. The extreme endpoint of that was iOS 6. Suddenly you had all this revolution; you had all these colors. It was not a problem for the display anymore. You could have stitching on the page and little crumples. It was a real extreme endpoint to that logic and then afterwards we had a backlash and now we're kind of in the flat space again. But at that moment, that was the current design and so I wanted to flatten all these graphic design elements in the design of DLD into this iOS 6 style. Obviously I took some of the more extreme elements of iOS 6 — the cartoon and comic sans, every photograph was a Polaroid with a sticker on it or a pin. All of that stuff was really current at that moment. Now it looks so out of date, which is kind of amazing. I've been long interested in the relationship of design to obsolescence. Even by the time I exhibited it a year later, it was an out of date system.

**Why did you format it with this metal track that people have to walk through?**

Timeline. Timeline is such an important platform for that community. Facebook and Twitter and a lot of things are based on a linear timeline scroll. I wanted to make this timeline aspect very concrete, very heavy. It's a strong system. Linear timelines are something that people question in various fields, but it's still the dominant organizational system for these platforms, which are very important to the way that we experience information and lots of other things. I wanted to really emphasize how solid that thing is. I wanted to make it more monumental as a space. The fact that people feel very directed in the way that they are able to move through a space, I think that's something I wanted as well.

**Right. And I saw a lot of people purposefully avoid having to go through it. What is your reaction to that?**

I think that's fantastic. That's recognizing that there's a system there and choosing to interact with it in a different way.

**And you are New Zealand's representative to next year's biennale. How does that feel?**

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It's a really interesting brief. A national pavilion is a really interesting set of things to work with and it plays into my interests very well because I've done work in the past that engages with New Zealand-ness. Probably the piece that people are most familiar with, if at all, is about the redesign of the New Zealand passport, which I showed at Art Basel Statements in 2012. So there's a lot of interesting things that I try to unpack from what is essentially official, government-sanctioned information about design and concepts of space and identity. I've also done a piece, which is ongoing, about a really prominent tech figure in New Zealand — Kim Dotcom, this guy who owned Megaupload. He's a German guy who moved to New Zealand and was busted by the New Zealand police on behalf of the FBI. He's being extradited to be tried in the US for piracy stuff. Megaupload was this platform where you could put all sorts of things. Many people used it for sharing music and videos so the US government wants to try him for all sorts of copyright things. That's a very interesting thing because it says a lot about the way that we exist in the world as a country. Especially at this moment, there's something about technology and the way that it's affecting nations and the way that people think about communication online. I think it's a poignant moment for that conversation and to be addressing that in an official, semi-diplomatic event is a pretty unique opportunity that I don't ever think I'll get again. I was really honored.

**Tell me more about the exhibition in your pavilion.**

I'm trying to do something which addresses some of the issues we've just been talking about, but addresses them from a context of trying to think about ways of imagining the globe right now, ways of imagining geopolitical space. It's a process — I made a pitch about a certain topic, which was trying to unpack the Snowden releases, these slides which I found to be really compelling cultural documents (and I think a lot of artists have been attracted to these objects).

It's a long process. One of the things that New Zealand has to do is find a venue. We don't have a permanent building. I saw that as a really good opportunity because you can choose something that interacts with the content really strongly. Very quickly we came to this amazing library, the Biblioteca Marciana, which is right on San Marco and also housed somehow within the Museo Correr. It's a building designed by Sansovino. The interior is amazing. The building and the interior are designed as an allegory for the benefits of

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acquiring and keeping knowledge. There are these Titian paintings on the ceiling, of wisdom — it's an amazing space. Plus, the library collection is really amazing too. They have a number of important cartographic pieces. One of the most famous ones which will be in my exhibition somehow is this Fra Mauro's world map, which is a very famous world map from that period which is supposedly the first map from Europe that included depictions of Japan. To put this type of imagery alongside the imagery that's used in his slides is a very productive thing to see this material in a longer cultural view.

There's been a lot of unpacking of this material but I don't think so much has been done from the visual angle. There's been a gut reaction of "Oh they're ugly" or "Oh it's a PowerPoint slide," but there hasn't been a lot of unpacking. There's a lot of material to put that alongside these other systems from another moment from another commercial empire — if you think of these intelligence systems as very sophisticated ways of reimagining what the globe means in a geopolitical sense and also in a physical sense. This physical network of undersea cables and various satellites has become more important than a lot of other pathways through the earth. I think to look at that with a longer more cultural view, not with an aim to work on the more controversial aspects of that material, but to try to look at what some of the imagery means and how that looks within a context like this, I think that's a really fun thing to do.