

Droste Effect Bulletin #8

Simon Denny New Aesthetics of Change

by Vincenzo Estremo



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Abstract

Is our society busy with technological determinism? And how is contemporary art building social and cultural alternatives? In this perspective, technological innovation is observed in its social consequences and shaped by society itself. This paper tries to address these questions through the artistic practice of New Zealand artist Simon Denny, who we have followed and interviewed during the *Political Populism* exhibition at Vienna's Kunsthalle.

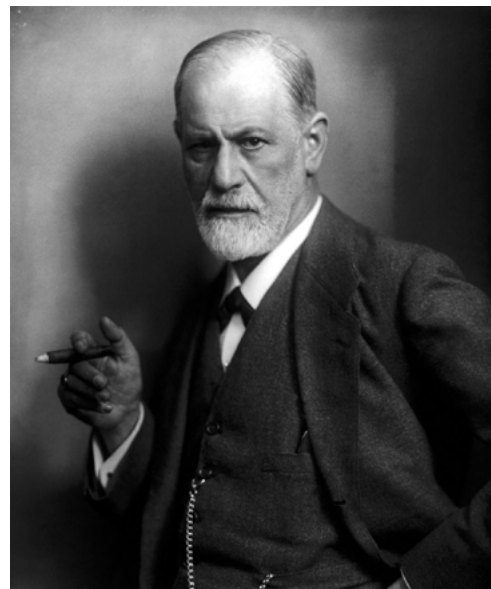
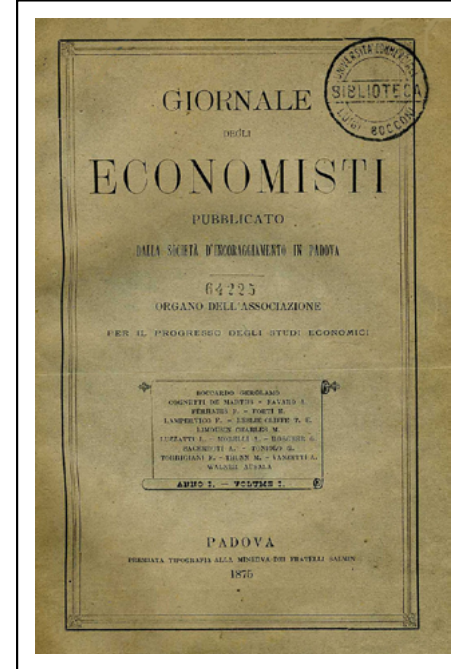
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How to read the Tables

Each Table is composed by six images. Each image is correlated with the first image in the Table. The interconnection between the images varies in each Table, with no predetermined order. The function of these Tables is not didactic, but hypertextual. The Tables do not illustrate anything contained in the text, rather they add a further level of textuality.

¹ Maffeo Pantaleoni (1857-1924) has been one of the founders of pure economics. His *Principi di economia pura* (1889) is a book that sees the hedonist hypothesis as the base of economic science from which every theorem has been derived. For Pantaleoni, economics should provide a criterion to distinguish between economic (rational) and non-economic (irrational) behaviors. Pantaleoni is a very interesting figure to understand the «deregulation» that characterizes nowadays' economic theories. According to Pantaleoni, the economic approach has to be based on the observation of concrete reality, on psychological and biological studies. And since people reveal their preferences, economists are able to know much more about mankind's behavior than natural scientists. Pantaleoni's economic theories, although formulated at the end of the nineteenth century, might be considered as the base for modern subjectivization in the Internet experience.

In these turbulent and divisive times, international politics witnessed a drastic set of changes and upheavals. Recent history has been marked by the rise of technology and the concrete risk of a pure technological determinism. By technological determinism, we mean a way of showing technical developments as the key agent in history and social change. In some of today's strategies for global markets, technological determinism – a kind of reductionist theory – seems to be more and more linked to global financialization trends and economic neo-liberal theories. It is not a coincidence, if nowadays neo-liberal theories are rooted into the late nineteenth century, the same period of the rise of the positivist and technocratic theories.¹ Even if marginal, an attempt to oppose a technologically determinist way of thinking has emerged within the framework of the social construction of technology. In this perspective, technological innovation and its social consequences are shaped by society itself, through the influence



of culture, politics, economic arrangements, and so on. From this point of view, what matters is not technology as an independent engine for change, but the socioeconomic system in which technology is embedded. But as Paul Virilio would say, we always have to expect an «integral accident» to happen, when we enjoy the fruits of technology – a sort of belief or hope in the possibility of a «bug». Thus, in a world where power is increasingly defined by private companies, forms of critical strategy are more than desirable – they are needed. The conception of fight or struggle has been questioned and re-questioned, also in the framework of contemporary art. In light of these developments, how can perspectives from different disciplines offer new insights and analytical tools that concretely thematize present-day aggressive neo-liberalism? According to Simon Denny, many of the businesses that are utilizing new economic tools, like the blockchain technology, are starting from a neo-liberalist, right-wing view

of economics. Denny's work draws a caricature of the universe where this kind of economic system grows, and his aim is a sort of mockery of what these policies represent. In the following interview, we will talk about the financial system and how the world has been infected by the increasing power of private companies. Simon Denny's production isn't entirely critical, but his way of using elements such as videogames, data, tablets, gadgets, and Internet aesthetics, invites the viewers to draw their own conclusions about technology. In order to do so, the artist «withdraws» unabashedly from the world of tech conferences. Simon Denny's work is also a collection of inspiration quotes from tech luminaries. For this reason, the following text will be composed of parallel paths: on the one side, an interview and an excerpt from a masterclass; on the other, a series of notes about several characters who have contributed to the development of the current financial and economic system, as well as technologies.

The following text is composed by the interview released by Simon Denny during the opening of the *Political Populism* exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien, and by the partial transcription of the artist’s masterclass at the Kunsthalle. Both occurred on the same day, November 6, 2015. I met Denny after his speech, and we had a nice talk in a very noisy place. I would like to thank Kunsthalle Wien for inviting me to take part as an art writer in *Political Populism*, as well as curator and Director Nicolas Schaffhausen and Katharina Murschetz, Head of Press and Communications.

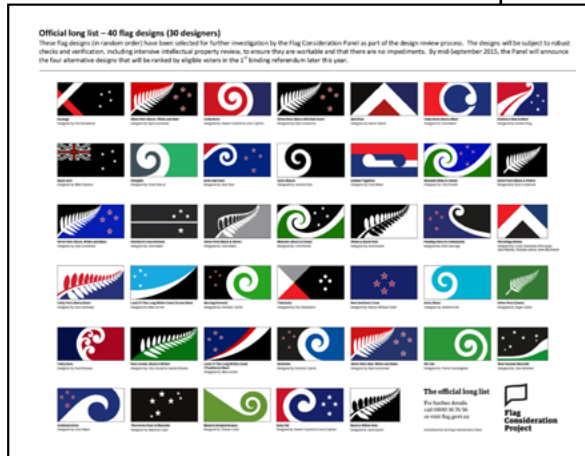
Interview with Simon Denny

Vincenzo Estremo: I know you were involved in the redesign of New Zealand’s passports. When I heard about the new design of your country’s flag, I found it even more than post-ideological. It is, in a way, a redefinition of identity – but isn’t this more like a change of corporate image (as in graphic design), rather than that of a nation’s identity? Isn’t this way of defining a country not different from that of a company, a corporation? I would like to know your opinion about the new

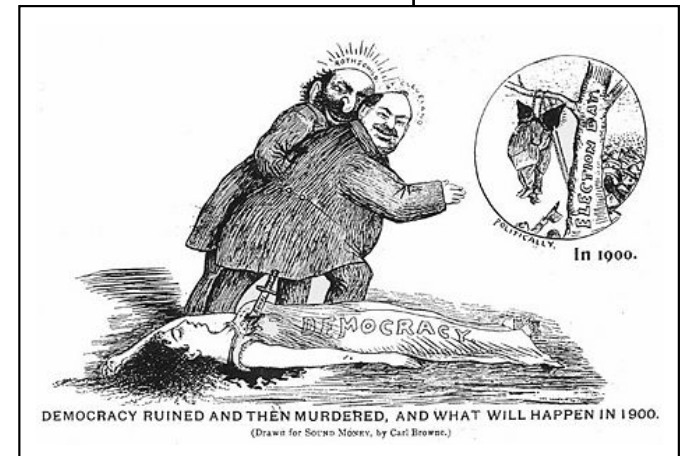
flag, as well as on the passport redesign. Don't you think that this type of operation is a manner of applying a marketing strategy to a country?

Simon Denny: Sure, that's absolutely the case. That perspective is close to my thinking, to me the idea of turning a public state into a private sector in the contemporary world doesn't make a very good model. I did a project that somehow reminisces of what is happening right now with the New Zealand flag redesign.² When the new passport came out, about ten years ago, I did a project where I spoke to the designers. I asked them why they chose that sort of narrative and images, what the aims were in the design project, and so on. Of course, the people who did the design for these national documents – in a way, the most detailed visual representation of the country – were an advertising company. This gives you an example of who makes the visual portrait of the state. I believe the flag redesign is mostly an example of John Key's populism [*New Zealand's prime minister*], like a branding

² The first referendum took place from November 20 to December 11, 2015. It asked voters to rank the five shortlisted flag alternatives in order of preference. Voters chose option A, which contended with the current national flag in the second referendum. The second referendum was held on March 3-24, 2016. It asked voters to choose between the current flag and the winning design selected in the first referendum. Voters chose for New Zealand to keep its old flag.



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exercise for the government – and for those in power at the moment, because if you make a new flag when you are in power, then you have a legacy that will live forever. It's like leaving a mark. It's similar to building an institution in the art world. For instance, if you are the funding director of a museum, then you are kind of living forever. I also see it as an attempt to distract from other issues in New Zealand. The prime minister has a very radical approach, and he's taking things in a very right-wing, neo-liberalist direction. I think a lot of people are not so happy with how the country is going, but at the same time we have all of the media focused on matters like this one, that are much more easy to deal with, and not really complicated. On the other hand, I find the idea of a population defining a symbol for itself really interesting, and that it is a process which is actually very popular, and kind of an artistic dream in a way. At the same time, it is somewhat false – I saw all the different designs shortlisted by a panel of experts (by the way, I don't think they are experts). The chosen

one is basically a symbol that we use for rugby – which is totally fine, because rugby is super culturally important in New Zealand. But this is also a not particularly sophisticated way of designing a flag: to just take a logo and put it over.

V. E. Is your country jumping to a neo-liberalist future?

S. D. Absolutely.

V. E. Is this possible in Europe, too? Or is a country like New Zealand just trying to forget its colonial past through a radical logo redesign?

S. D. I believe there are complicated aspects to how New Zealand views itself and what it does as an entity. A very relevant one, especially if you compare it with other countries, is scale, because it is very small. But New Zealand also thinks of itself as a part of Europe, somehow, culturally. Statistically, it is a very multicultural

nation, but in terms of those in power, they're more often white men from a British tradition. Their heroes are the major Western powers like the US, Australia, and England: strong, much more wealthy and populous states. I think we always act as we're in the shadow of what those countries are. We always try and keep up with the general political trends in England, the US and Australia. And we try to think of ourselves as another nation of that caliber. I believe that the fact that we're involved in the Five Eyes intelligence network (FVEY) is also a reflection of that: we see ourselves as a part of the group, alongside these strong, neo-liberalist countries. I guess there is a transition happening. Whether it can happen in Europe, I am not sure. The thing with our scale is that we're more agile: you can shift four million people with a policy probably faster than in a country like Germany, or Italy.

V. E. In Iceland, they re-wrote the constitution through a popular process, but also with populist consequences. It is a populist wind, and it is

coming to Europe as well, despite its historical background.

S. D. Of course there is a worldwide trend towards the financialization of the State, if you want to catch it in those terms. What many people call neo-liberalism has been seen as the only direction. There is no alternative. This is the direction which every country goes in. Some countries have a lot of historical baggage and infrastructure, while others – maybe like New Zealand – don't have as much baggage in that sense, and shift in that financial-centric direction in an almost complete way.

V. E. The Internet is quite central in your work. Can we deconstruct the Internet, or is it just an interface, and we can only accept it, and use it?

S. D. I think there are many different answers to that question. There are big popular projects, like Bitcoin, that attempt to reimagine what an Internet platform could be. There will be an

evolution of the Internet. Like with the smart phone 2.0, that was a major shift – there will be another one. Some people think it will be with Bitcoin, others say something else. But the key message coming from all literature looking at this kind of process seems to be something like: even if there is an innovation, it is very likely that it will be re-entrenched and re-deployed by whatever power is in play at the moment. As we all know, some kind of capitalism is very agile in that sense, and able to incorporate innovation. It can do it from a critical angle, an alternative angle, but often innovation just gets re-deployed as a stronger message of the same things. I guess I believe in both, I believe in the idea that there can be change, and that there are ways to offer alternatives for important platforms like the Internet, but at the same time history has taught us that these things will eventually become integral parts of those which are already so important to the way that the world is going. You know, like financialization, like individualism, or like worldwide organization structures.

Excerpt from Simon Denny's Masterclass at Kunsthalle Wien

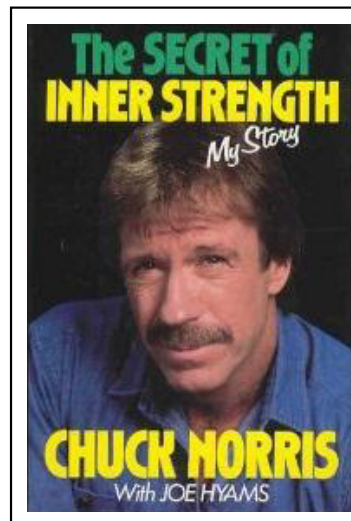
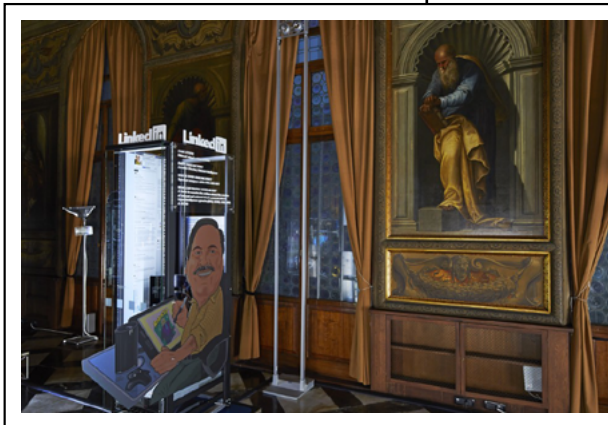
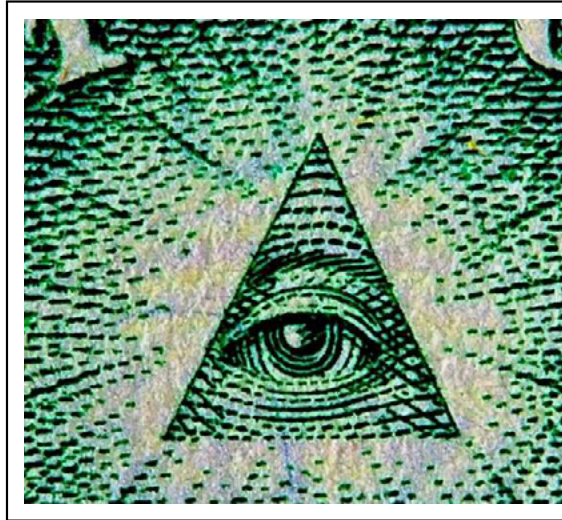
Take what happened with Kim Dotcom and Megaupload Ltd:³ it's much more complex from a New Zealand-centered perspective than it is from an international perspective. As a New Zealander, nobody knew who he was until he got busted. The US came and showed their muscles in New Zealand, like they hadn't done for a long time. You don't get this kind of FBI bust in New Zealand. Cops in New Zealand don't carry guns. In all my life, I have never seen an action like that. And then, it turns out he's living in the most expensive mansion in the country. Turns out he's got all these crazy things going on. Turns out, he is an art collector. Turns out, he's like a Bond villain, which also I'm sure is why the US picked him, to make him an example for people who intend to break the same laws. The spontaneous question was: why is the US picking on this successful businessman, who's innovating, who's doing his own thing? It became a

³ Megaupload Ltd was a Hong Kong-based online company established in 2005, that operated until 2012 providing online services related to file storage and viewing. Founder and CEO Kim Dotcom (Kim Schmitz) is a German-Finnish Internet entrepreneur, businessman, musician, and political party founder, who resides in Auckland, New Zealand.



⁴ Simon Denny's artwork at the New Zealand Pavillion at the 2015 Venice Biennale was about how the National Security Agency (NSA) used images to communicate its methods internally: this was spectacularly revealed to the world in 2013 thanks to the Edward Snowden leaks. The display cases of *Secret Power* (2015), the project that Denny conceived for the Venice Biennale and installed at two venues – Marciana National Library and Marco Polo International Airport – contained squirrels, eagles and other visual devices used by intelligence agencies to represent operations and communicate complex programs. Thus, the iconographic element in the server racks might be considered as a case study about the NSA's visual culture, as based on the work of former NSA designer and art director David Darchicourt.

small-man-against-the-world kind of thing. He was a hero in New Zealand for about a year. Then he started the Internet Party, and things got complicated. There was this time where he flew to Glenn Greenwald, he beamed in Snowden and Assange,⁴ and he had this huge event called The Moment of Truth, with a TechCrunch's Disrupt type of feel. Kim sits on stage with a bunch of heroes, and they talk about changing the world. And he thought that it would be inspiring and motivating to New Zealanders – and New Zealanders hated it. It was too loud, it was too self-important, it was the rich guy paying for people, paying for voices. And so it completely put other people off the Internet Party.





Kim Dotcom ✓

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In the coming weeks and months there will be some big announcements from partners of the new Megaupload. Stay tuned, right here.

03:58 - 10 Lug 2016

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Megaupload comes back on January 20th 2017, the 5th anniversary of the raid. It will be better than the original and it will feel like home.

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