

Simon Denny
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ART REVIEW

Digital Dogma, Deconstructed

By Roberta Smith

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Simon Denny, a young neo-Conceptualist from Berlin, is having his second show at the Petzel Gallery, and it's one of the bright spots of the summer season. "All you need is data: the DLD 2012 Conference REDUX rerun" is a mind-expanding installation of 90 sizable inkjet paintings that cleverly deconstructs the 2012 incarnation of Digital Life Design, or DLD, an elite invitation-only media conference that has been held annually in Munich since 2005.

For the length of his fairly brief career, Mr. Denny, who was born in 1982 in Auckland, New Zealand, has demonstrated an interest in technology, obsolescence, methods of display, the transmission of information and the readymade, that art formula on which the sun never sets.

He once made an installation piece from some of the bulky outmoded equipment discarded by television stations as Britain switched from analog signals to digital. For his participation in "The Encyclopedic Palace," the central exhibition of the current Venice Biennale, he is exhibiting actual-size photo panels (also inkjet on canvas) of this equipment in a piece titled "Analogue Broadcasting Hardware Compression." He makes a much stronger impression at Petzel.

"All you need is data" teeters on the cusp between art and life and reminds me of a useful maxim, evidently about art, from the Dutch artist Eric van Lieshout: "I couldn't care less what people call it, as long as we can do what we want."

I confess that I tend to care what people call "it." I value the distinction between art and life, and find that blurring them doesn't necessarily do either category any favors. But that's another article. Mr. Denny's work is unusual because it works exceptionally well both ways, as art and as something more like life.

For people who frequent galleries and museums, it has a fairly high art quotient — and I.Q. — in the ways it builds on Conceptual art, appropriation art, relational aesthetics and institutional critique in its presentation, design and subject matter; its ancestors include all kinds of environmental art, from the '60s Happenings to the installations of Cady Noland and Martin Kippenberger in the '80s and '90s.

But I suspect that lots of people who know next to nothing about contemporary art will be fascinated by the information that the piece imparts about contemporary culture and enjoy the spatial manner in which it does so. It's a public service, in a way, as well as a walk-in version of a news article about the conference or, more accurately, a journalist's notes for one.

"All you need is data" functions as a kind of compressed time line in real space. Each painting is devoted to a single event on the DLD conference's crowded schedule — from registration to lunch to keynote addresses, speeches and panel discussions. The paintings hang on waist-high railings made of sturdy metal pipe that wind through the gallery in labyrinthine cattle-chute formation. It's as if the current trend of hanging paintings anywhere but on walls has been melded with a livestock-soothing slaughterhouse design by Temple Grandin. The stanchions at airport security checkpoints may also come to mind.

The installation retrieves the details of the conference from DLD's archives, taking the viewer deep into a highly specialized world. Invention, idealism and opportunism mix, and the potential of the digital is celebrated and debated but mostly celebrated.

The atmosphere is heady. Young, suddenly-rich digital entrepreneurs like David Karp, a co-founder of Tumblr, and Andrew Mason, a co-founder of Groupon, rub shoulders with the publisher Arianna Huffington, the theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson and the artist Yoko Ono. Ms. Ono is not the only art type on hand: also present are Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky), Olafur Eliasson, Corey McCorkle and the most ubiquitous of all curators, Hans Ulrich Obrist.

Among the banalities of conference life are welcoming remarks. Those at DLD were delivered by Martin Zeil, Bavaria's minister of economic affairs, and reflect Munich's status as one of Europe's Silicon Valleys: "We always say Apps and Alps."

Yet most of the paintings are slightly more substantial, presenting bulletin-board-like arrangements of speakers' photographs and sound bites beneath the events' titles: "Extrasensory Reception," "From Bauhaus to Data," "Digital Diplomacy," "Understanding India." Mr. Denny, who may have learned a thing or two from Barbara Kruger, has rejiggered some titles, often cribbing from their subheadings to make them catchier. A conference discussion that was titled "A Dynamic Dance" becomes "Need, Speed and Greed." One phrase that he seems to have pulled from thin air is labeled "Inattentional Blindness," in a painting that features the writer Linda Stone lamenting that "We've evolved from multitasking to continuous partial attention."

Some of the quotations — which are not always attributed — resonate more today than they did at the conference a year ago. For example, the recent revelations about broad surveillance by the National Security Agency give added meaning to this assertion from a keynote speaker: “People need to be informed about the processing of their data in simple, clear language they can understand.”

Adjacent paintings on the subject of privacy include less-than-reassuring remarks like “People don’t understand that data is the oil of the 21st century,” and “We as little brothers are the collective big brother. It’s a democratic kind of totalitarianism.”

Then there’s “Future of Stuff,” with the optimistic forecast that “the age where people can make what they want to have is coming.” That age seems frighteningly close now, now that 3-D printers have been used to produce semiautomatic weapons.

Between the quotations and a spatial layout that makes the paintings almost aggressively accessible, Mr. Denny’s installation has plenty to offer. That is not to say that it won’t make you a little queasy. From the discussion “Ways Beyond the Internet,” one sentence stuck with me: “Your animated gifs run on burnt coal and your computers — they’re made by slaves.”

It’s interesting to note that the original DLD conference was titled “All you need is Data?” Mr. Denny’s removal of the question mark for his work may be troubling, but the resulting statement can be taken as his current *modus operandi*.