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New Zealand at Venice

Simon Denny's 'Secret Power'

Christina Barton, Venice

Simon Denny's presentation at the 56th Venice Biennale has been an undoubted success, for the artist and for New Zealand. Staged across two high-profile sites – Marco Polo International Airport and the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in the Piazza San Marco – there have never been more visible locations for a New Zealand artist since we started attending the Biennale in 2001. Denny has turned the disadvantage of having to seek a temporary venue outside the Giardini and Arsenale into a major component of the success of his two-part installation, 'Secret Power'.

Trading on the attention being paid the artist by the art world at large, for a string of recent achievements including a solo survey at New York's MoMA PS1 and acquisitions to MoMA's permanent collection, features in *Artforum* and *frieze* magazines, and several substantial projects in the United States, Europe and New Zealand, for once New Zealand officials did not have to hustle for attention. Quite the reverse, press coverage for Denny's exhibition has been extensive. During the Vernissage in May, key art world players made a beeline for his pavilion; *frieze* launched its Biennale issue among his works in the Marciana library, and his was widely touted as one of the unmissable presentations to see in Venice.

Such success and attention is unprecedented, and deserved. 'Secret Power' continues, extends and refines a trajectory the artist has taken over the last five years in which he anatomises and repackages aspects of digital culture to investigate the effects of this technology on how we envisage, connect, communicate, do business and exercise control in the world today.

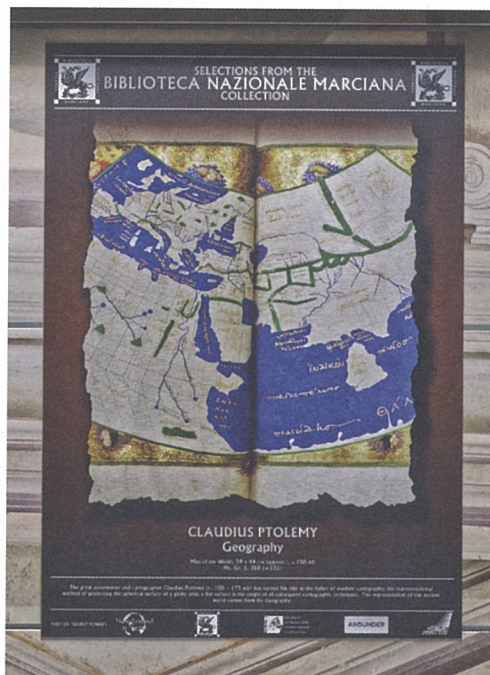
Denny describes himself as an exhibition maker and a documentarian; claims that are cleverly borne out in his exhibition. His core subject is the set of PowerPoint slides leaked by Edward Snowden in 2013, which expose how

the National Security Agency (NSA), through its Five Eyes network (involving security agencies in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) has undertaken surreptitious mass surveillance on a mind-boggling scale due to the integrated nature of contemporary communications. Denny has re-visualised these slides and drawn attention to David Darchicourt, one of the NSA's graphic designers who produced imagery for them, in a

complex installation of repurposed server racks. These he decked out as sleek vitrines featuring layered displays of found, manipulated and manufactured objects and images, so re-presenting the two-dimensional domain of the computer screen as a fully 3D sculptural experience. With carefully worded labels and signage on each vitrine, the exhibition betrays an almost nerdy attention to a minutiae of references that inform the graphic style of the PowerPoints and unpack the language and techniques of latter-day spying, proving the sophistication of Denny's own open-source information gathering.

Arriving up the wide marble staircase of the library's own entrance (tourists usually access the library via the adjacent Museo Correr), visitors pass Fra Mauro's world map of c. 1450, one of the most famous artefacts of Renaissance

world knowledge, and are confronted by a freestanding vestibule with faux sliding doors flanked by flags of the Five Eyes nations and a map of New Zealand Denny commissioned from Darchicourt, now a freelance designer based in Maryland. Beyond this, glazed server racks are ranked in two rows, carefully arranged in relation to the frescoed space. Denny's 'room' is nested into its context to draw out the fact that both are dedicated to the collection and storage of information; indeed, that the destiny of the former may in fact be playing out in the latter, as western intelligence agencies endeavour to re-colonise the globe.





Top:
Simon Denny, *Secret Power*, installation view,
Marco Polo International Airport, Venice, 2015; photo: Michele Crosera

Opposite:
Simon Denny, *Plaque (Claudius Ptolemy, Geography)*, 2015, installation view,
Marco Polo International Airport, Venice, 2015; photo: Paolo Monello

By avoiding the label 'installation artist', Denny cleverly manages his circulation within the contemporary art system. As with previous exhibitions that function both as multilayered and integrated installations and as collections of discrete sculptures, his rack units can be appreciated singly; four have already been acquired by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, with others destined for museum collections. Well-supported by his dealers (including Michael Lett in Auckland, Sarah Cottier Gallery in Sydney, Petzel Gallery in New York, Galerie Buchholz in Berlin and T293 in Rome), the artist has captured the attention of the market as well as the critical community.

Denny's knowing grasp of contemporary art-world politics extends even more tellingly to his decision to install a second component at the Marco Polo International Airport. Here he has laid out a 1:1 high-resolution digital reproduction of the ceiling and wall decorations of the Marciana library on the floors, walls and baggage carousel in the arrivals area. Visible only to incoming passengers as they transit through immigration control, this massive installation has been self-consciously designed to capture the attention of Biennale visitors, instantly impressing Denny as a figure of note while simultaneously identifying his other venue. Even if such subtleties are lost on the harried traveller, these reproductions speak as a kind of lingua franca for the enduring lure of Italy as a destination for cultural tourism, linking the Biennale to the wider tourist industry on which the city of Venice is so reliant.

But this is no mere marketing stunt. Conceptually, the airport installation figures a spatial reversal – from 3D to 2D – that is the obverse of the method deployed in the library. By such means Denny renders literal the slippage that now occurs between digital and real. He also reminds us that the challenge of *pictorial* representation, at least since the



Above:
Simon Denny, *Secret Power*, installation view,
Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, 2015; photo: Nick Ash

Renaissance, has been to figure depth. By connecting the city fathers who commissioned the library's decoration to global governmental agencies, he demonstrates the historical manipulation by those in power of the codes and conventions of visual representation as they have evolved in the West. To construct an illusion of 3D space on the smooth surface of a gesso ground or within the slim membrane of the computer screen is to create the conditions where truth can supposedly be illuminated.

Some critics have castigated Denny for the assumed objectivity of his stance vis-a-vis the political issues he delves into, calling him out for his mere replication of the systems and formats of control and commodification. I would argue otherwise. Turning to the lavish publication produced to accompany 'Secret Power', which effectively draws together all the installation's elements – Snowden's PowerPoint slides; Nicky Hager's whistleblowing exposé of contemporary surveillance systems; the layout and functions of the library and the airport; the graphic language of the NSA; and Denny's artistic modus operandi – the whole enterprise is tellingly prefaced by a quote by fellow-contemporary artist Trevor Paglen. Using Paglen's words, Denny warns that what follows should not be construed as 'comprehensive, historical, or even consistent'. He reminds us that his 'images' are 'fragmentary, torn out of context, inconclusive, unreliable and deceptive'. Poised between an artist of his own time and a host of eminent predecessors, Denny seems to be suggesting that all and any representations are not to be trusted. In this he exposes the complicity of art in the machinations of power. This, I would suggest, is where the true strength of his practice resides.

Simon Denny's 'Secret Power' is exhibited at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and Marco Polo International Airport as New Zealand's presentation at the 56th Venice Biennale until 22 November 2015.