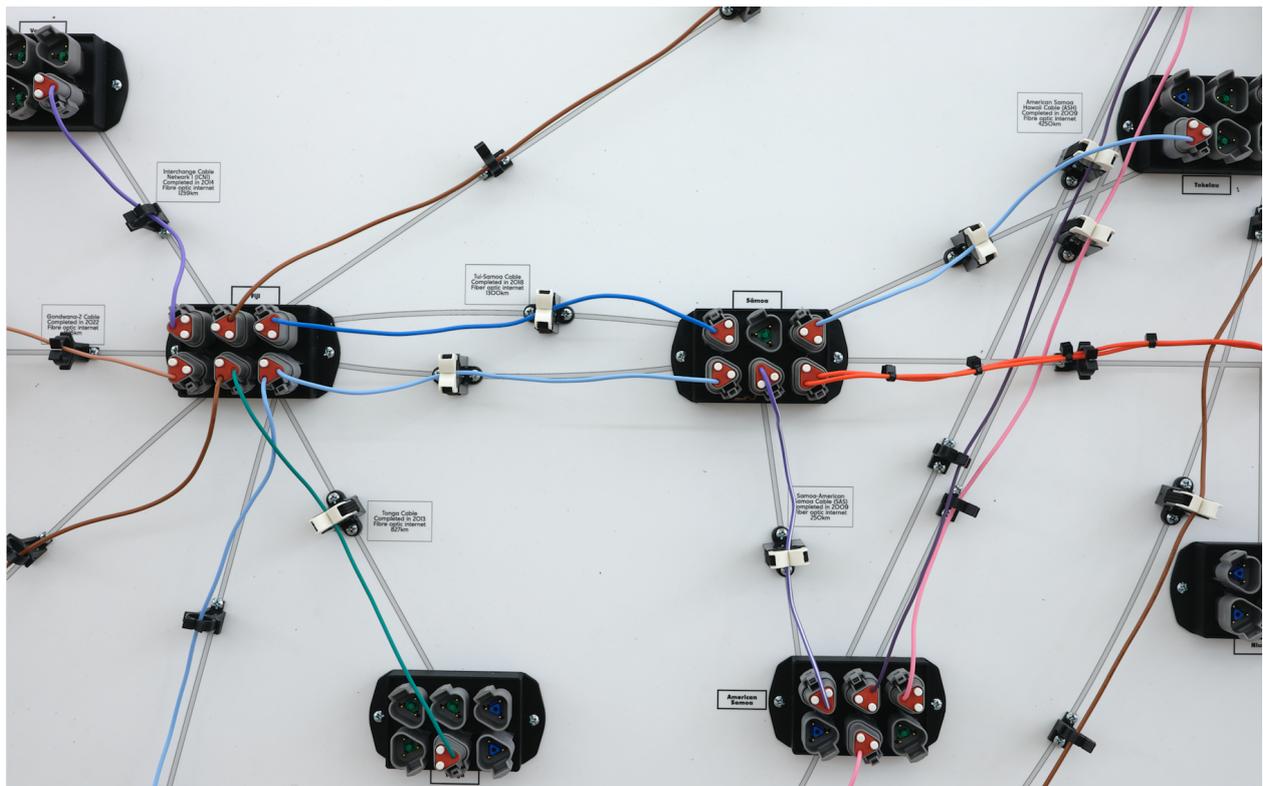Genealogies

November 7, 2022

# ON DECENTRALIZED CURATION

Simon Denny and Karamia Müller share their strategy for curating crypto's entangled ecosystem with Alex Estorick



Credit: Simon Denny and Karamia Müller, Creation Story Cable Harness 4 (detail), 2022. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artists and Michael Lett

*Simon Denny on his collaboration with Karamia Müller:*

*I began talking to Dr. Karamia Müller in 2017 in a bid to unpack the outcomes of my earlier exhibition project, "**The Founder's Paradox**." That installation contrasted influential libertarian investment book,* The Sovereign Individual *(1997), with Max Harris's* The New Zealand Project *(2017), presented as board game distillations of a New Zealand refracted through the **Peter Thiel**-verse as well as The Lord of the Rings. Part of the project evoked the emergence of cryptocurrencies as supranational money, which Kara was also investigating at the time. The role of her cousin, Luka Müller, in legally architecting the Ethereum token sale rhymed weirdly with my great uncle's role at the Reserve Bank of New Zealand in*

*overseeing the transition from pounds to NZ dollars in the 1960s. Biographies, social graphs, company histories, colonial histories, and community value became central to our investigations of our own family histories between Samoa, New Zealand, and German-speaking Europe. Following an invitation from the University of Auckland's contemporary art museum, Gus Fisher Gallery, we began to plan curatorial and sculptural gestures that became the exhibition, "**Creation Stories**," which closes this month.*



Installation view of "Creation Stories" at Gus Fisher Gallery with works from left to right: Daniel Boyd, *Untitled (T/1)*, 2015; Simon Denny and Karamia Müller,

**Alex Estorick:** Kara and Simon, your recent collaboration brought together artworks by leading artists from Aotearoa New Zealand and around the world. The outcome was a "social graph" which visualized the network of connections between Europe, the US, Samoa, and Aotearoa. Visitors were invited to consider their own position within this network in a way that unsettled hegemonic narratives around culture. At a time when Web2 corporate institutions are increasingly interlacing themselves throughout Web3, it seems we need to unsettle those narratives around decentralization that conceal the real hierarchies at play. I wonder if we can confront the lure of new tech paradigms by applying *a decolonial approach.*

**Simon Denny:** I would describe my own domain as legacy art first [and] crypto art enthusiastic. Kara and I have been in dialogue for quite a long time and our collaboration is still current. We started to talk about where one speaks from as a creative and cultural voice, as well as our own family histories in relation to technology, and where different viewpoints lead when you're talking about emergent things like crypto.

We come from the same city in the same politically defined country, but we recognize the differences in our experiences.
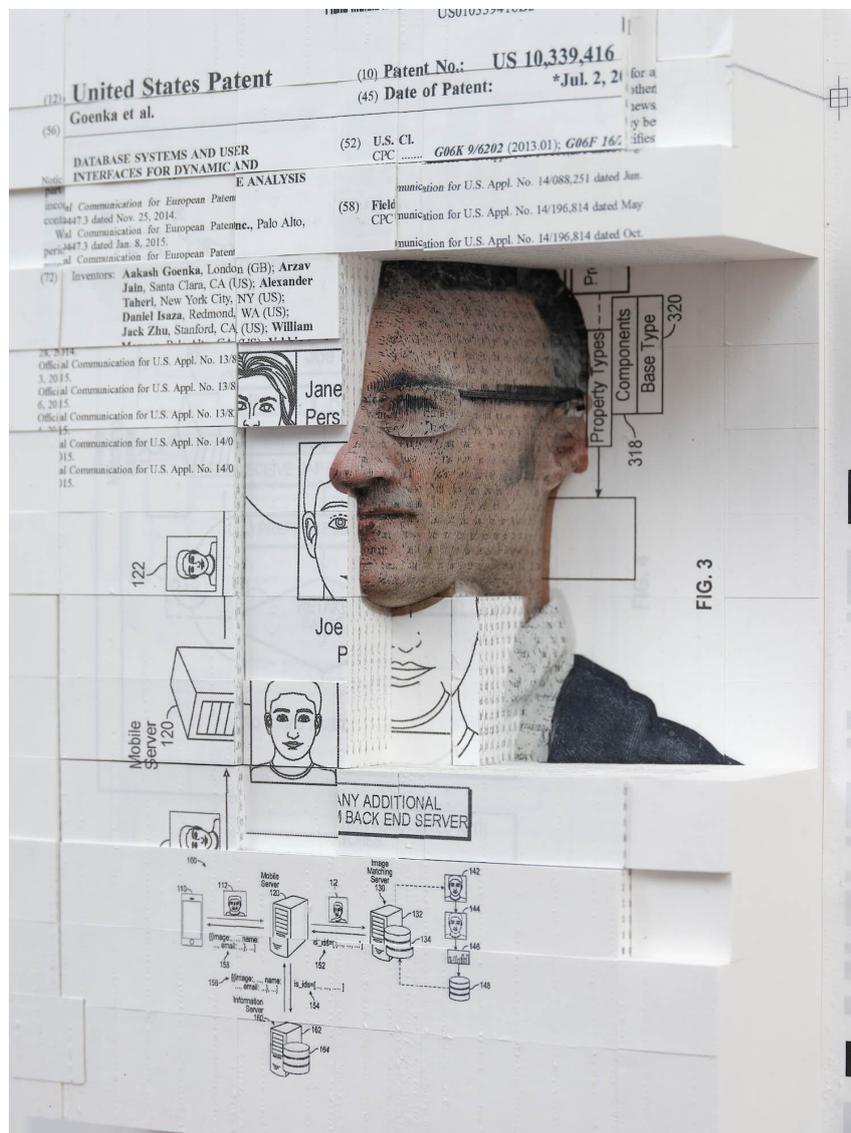
Simon Denny, *Document Relief 29 (Palantir Image Identification patent)*, 2021. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett

My family on my mother's side was involved in legal legacies in New Zealand and in Samoa, where my great grandfather was a Chief Justice during the First World War just as the German occupation was passed to the New Zealand government. We started discussing Kara's own family between German-speaking Switzerland and the Pacific, which quickly led into a discussion of her cousin in Switzerland, who designed and implemented the legal framework for the Ethereum token sale in 2014, and modeled several other token sales after its

example during the 2017-18 crypto bubble. It turned out that my great uncle was also involved in issuing New Zealand currency as head of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand in the 1950s and '60s, overseeing the transition from pounds to NZ dollars, which also has colonial legacy implications. We wanted to map those projects and question monetary value creation, but also value creation in terms of who gets to determine what and where. We then wanted to turn our diagrams into more substantial material objects.

We came across a practice called cable harness design, which is used in the manufacture of large machines like cars and airplanes. This involves laying out different and often independently-produced cables into intricate weavings, which are then shipped to be assembled into a larger machine. This industry has touched Samoa pretty heavily in terms of employment, import, and export. We saw these cable harnesses, which look like genealogical trees as well as woven patterns from different types of epistemological practices that we're both interested in. [...] We produced these diagrams which were also mining ETH during *The Merge* — at a time when proof of work and mining as a practice were being turned off and made obsolete.

**Karamia Müller:** On the question of whether or not cryptocurrency or blockchain can be decolonized: *previous views* seem to underscore that it can't because of its colonial nature. That is something that I can weigh in on from a collaborative perspective that takes on the narrative of blockchain or cryptocurrency, particularly within my own biography. I think decolonial theory is concerned with who has

power and who that power is being shared with. When it comes to NFTs and the way it plays out in the context I'm in, it is actually too small to take on the [same] kind of volatility or bubbles.

> This is the concerning aspect for marginalized communities — you can take part, but the stakes are different, and the way the stakes are mapped is too capitalist for it to ever be equitable.



Simon Denny and Karamia Müller, *Creation Story Cable Harness 1*, 2022. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artists and Michael Lett

I listen to a radio station here in the mornings which is predominantly listened to by Māori and Pacific people like me from here. They have a competition called "Bills or Thrills," where

someone rings in and the radio community elects which one they'll pay for. A woman rang in and said, "I have an outstanding power bill for $300. My thrill is I want to go to the first ever Australian convention for cryptocurrency, and I've got my plane ticket there, but I don't have my plane ticket back." The community decided to pay for her bill. She was really disappointed that her power bill was getting paid amidst an affordability crisis.

> This sums up a certain tension — we don't have shared political horizons when it comes to crypto or blockchain technologies and the issues facing marginalized communities. In terms of a libertarian politic and a decolonizing agenda, they don't align politically but the aesthetics is disruptive.

What is interesting to me from my collaboration with Simon is how we were mapping these particular histories, but it was impossible to land anywhere — which is both deeply tragic and comic. I think that's a mode that appeals to Simon but it doesn't always appeal to other communities that I work with, because of the stakes. You can't trace a line of accountability. Everyone is accountable and no one is accountable. We do have figures, but linear

accountability, once we start to map our own histories within this broader terrain, proves slippery. That "inability to land" is interesting to me, or at least it can be depending on the setting.



Installation view of "Creation Stories" at Gus Fisher Gallery with Buck Nin, *Putahi Incandescent*, 1968. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato

The European discourse around Pacific culture and traditions of Indigenous peoples have been set on developmental models that suggest that we were progressing in this nice, tidy form and then settler colonialism happened and we were frozen in time. That has perpetuated a kind of white body supremacy because, as people — developmentally, intellectually, and philosophically — we're also frozen in time, as are the knowledge systems that we're working with that ontologically and epistemologically form our worldview.

It's interesting to disrupt that through contemporary moments formed out of these entangled histories, which disrupt the way we conceptualize accountability and aestheticize that disruption. For me, It felt like those moments of entanglement were embodied in this person saying that she would rather go to the cryptocurrency convention in Australia. I thought it would be interesting to ask her what her political vision is.

SD: Where I find play is in problematizing categorizations, working with that artistically and culturally — putting things out there that don't quite fit, to take expectations and end up in a place where it's not so easy to say, "this fits here and that fits there." I really recognize your reflection Kara in that, of course, I have the affordance to do that where others have a more urgent political agenda which is tied to more existential questions about justice, allocation, and opportunity that makes mine less interesting as a gesture.

> Problematizing doesn't help get key wins that need to be fought for and claimed.
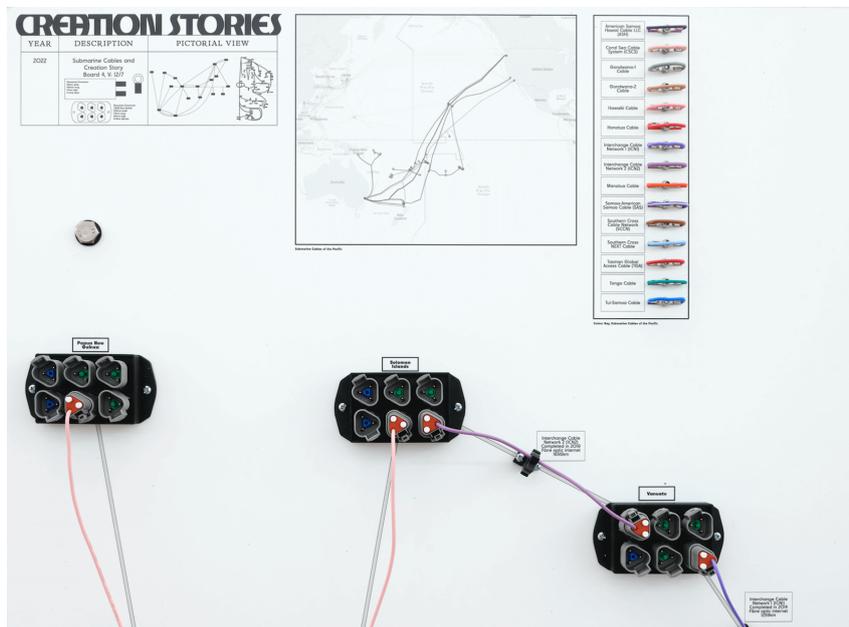
Simon Denny and Karamia Müller, *Creation Story Cable Harness 4* (detail), 2022. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artists and Michael Lett

But I think some of what was enjoyable for both of us was to take up my instinct to play with things that aren't often afforded the space to do that work. Is that fair?

**KM:** Yes it's fair, I like it.

**AE:** There is a fascination in Web3 with a kind of primordial token economy at a time of hyper-financialization. How do we deal with a new tech paradigm that is consumed by technostalgia?

**SD:** Some parts of the Web3 and crypto community claim lineages. Constructing histories is a whole craft and claims are often made regarding various non-fiat monies from different cultural contexts being written as prehistories of crypto. One of the key stories that is often invoked in prehistories of Bitcoin is that of material trade asset formations in the Pacific. Kara, can you speak about your interaction with those histories that came up in our research and conversation? Because that wasn't ultimately

very explicit in the show, but it was something that informed our direction quite a lot.

**KM:** It didn't seem to me that people who came from those worlds were actually shaping that narrative. And that definitely seemed like room for pause and a level of cynicism.

I grew up in the Solomon Islands, where women created shell money, and the amount of time that is spent creating these meters and meters of shell money has been paralleled in a way that suggests it shares the same genetic ideological code with the Bitcoin blockchain.
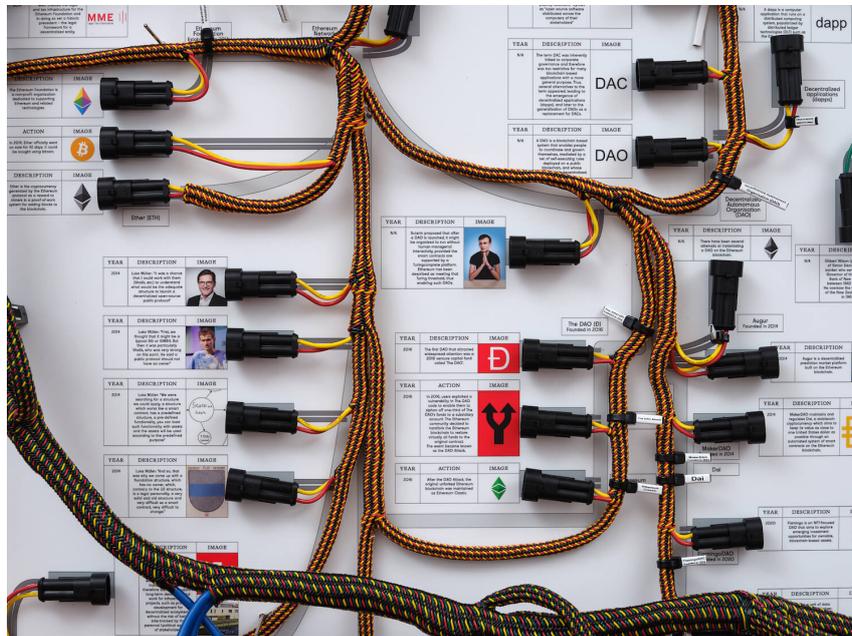


Simon Denny and Karamia Müller, *Creation Story Cable Harness 2* (detail), 2022. Photography by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artists and Michael Lett

This nostalgia lends an aesthetic legitimacy to a moment in technological development, and we were considering whether to include these strands of shell money, but it felt thin in the way it was being used to legitimize a particular narrative.

**SD:** We curated art objects that we felt were dealing with histories of value, interconnection, social networks, and ways of making explicit familial histories as value. From my perspective, we decided to move away from showing artifacts that were not produced as art and moved towards trusting the voice and authorship of contemporary artists who were working in many different contexts. So rather than taking a work by *Sarah Friend* such as *Lifeforms* (2021) and putting that alongside shell money practices from the Solomon Islands, we wanted to put it next to work by intergenerational weavers who use contemporary materials from their lives.

We felt it was more meaningful to bring different voices together to speak about value creation than to construct false narratives where we project something from one context onto something else, without the participation or conversation between those communities.

Tunaga Funaki, *Lapalili fakamanaia*, 2016. Photography by Sam Hartnett.
Courtesy of the artist

**KM:** If we weren't able to get conversations or construct a collaborative working space with the women who were making shell money, we felt as if we were contributing to the museological issues around projecting European narratives onto relational exchanges and incorrectly categorizing them. So we started to pull away from things that promoted currency exchange, and moved towards practices that centered relational exchange, because we were also interested in interconnectedness. It brought us away from a focus on a particular kind of narrative, which also brings with it a particular kind of aesthetic.

I can't help but think that even these nostalgic aesthetics have a power-sharing element to them. They can be unpacked using decolonial theory, and we can ask hard questions of them. I think we're starting to feel free enough to navigate the crypto project using different entry

points and to ask tougher questions, which is producing a richer environment and ecology.

**AE:** In recent years, we have witnessed the ascent of the digital outsider artist to the position of celebrated "crypto artist." We are also seeing greater recognition of *hybrid creators* whose core craft is coding. But what happens when Indigenous craft and knowledge is assimilated within hybrid knowledge structures?

**KM:** Right now, there are tensions in Aotearoa to do with how Indigenous histories are being integrated into learning. As Māori sciences and knowledges are being foregrounded by institutions, it poses questions about how those knowledges are broken up and organized into disciplines.

> I feel very positive about access to hybridity, or at least being able to work with a hybrid approach, which feels more congruent with Indigenous knowledge systems.

However, I think we lose something if we are not cognizant of the political contours in which that knowledge is being created. Sovereignty and agency are lost when we're not cognizant of the context in which knowledge is actually being created and produced.

**Karamia Müller** is a Pacific scholar specializing in Pacific space concepts. Currently a lecturer at the School of Architecture and Planning, Faculty of Creative Arts and Industries at the University of Auckland, she is also a Co-Director of MĀPIHI, a Māori and Pacific Housing Research Centre. She contributes to Architecture New Zealand as an opinion columnist, and recently collaborated with Simon Denny on the exhibition "Creation Stories," currently on view at the Gus Fisher Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Simon Denny** makes exhibitions and projects that unpack the stories technologists tell us about the world using a variety of media including installation, sculpture, print, painting, video, and NFTs. He has also curated exhibitions about blockchain and art such as "Proof of Stake" at Kunstverein in Hamburg (2021) and "Proof of Work" at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2018). Solo exhibitions of Denny's work have taken place at at K21, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; OCAT, Shenzhen; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Serpentine Galleries, London; MoMA PS1, New York; and Portikus, Frankfurt; among other venues. Denny represented New Zealand at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. He co-founded the artist mentoring program BPA//Berlin Program for Artists and serves as Professor of Time-Based Media at the HFBK (University of Fine Arts) Hamburg.

**Alex Estorick** is Editor-in-Chief at *Right Click Save*.