

Responsible Future · 04 June 2021

Looking to the future of the art world beyond Covid-19

Simon Denny doesn't just give his shows any old name. When the New Zealand-born artist picked the word 'mine' as the name of his 2019 show at Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), he had several different meanings in mind. Firstly, it fitted with the subterranean nature of the museum itself (60,000 tonnes of rock and soil were apparently excavated to make way for the 6,000m² exhibition space). Secondly, Simon had created a show exploring – among a dizzying array of other things – the political and environmental significance of mining, such a foundational industry for the modern Australia.

In Conversation with Simon Denny





The third reason that the name felt right was more personal. ‘It’s about my own legacy,’ Simon explains, over video call from his gallery in New York, Petzel, where Mine is on show once again. ‘It’s about where I come from, it’s about having a relationship and thinking about that. And owning that.’ So, Mine also tackles his own ancestors’ and his family’s complicity in the troubled colonial past of New Zealand, as a Pakeha (a Maori term for New Zealanders of European descent). ‘Mine really is the perfect four-letter bridge between all of these things, which are so interrelated,’ he says.

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Without wanting to stretch the metaphor too far, it's also clear that mining would be a suitable word to describe Simon's creative process. 'I do a lot of research,' says the 38-year-old artist, who has previously had exhibitions at MoMA PS1 and London's Serpentine, and who represented New Zealand at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

For him, everything starts with dialogue, with conversations between him and his friends, whether they be fellow artists, journalists or businesspeople. 'I see the fundamental part of my research process as discursive,' he says. But when he lands on a topic that he finds truly fascinating, he starts to dig. He stocks up on researchers, gathers a huge body of information together and gets into what he calls a 'world-building headspace'.

Afterwards, the challenge is to step back far enough to see what Simon calls the 'nodes of entry', where an audience might access the fundamental truths of the concept. Often this point of entry is playfulness. This was certainly the case with *Extractor*, an installation piece created for *Mine*, which turned an entire room of the museum into a giant boardgame. Simon created his own human-scale version of *Squatter* (a kind of Australian Monopoly based on sheep farming), but instead of rearing sheep the participants are tasked with mining data in the information economy.



For Simon, the playful tone of the room was a Trojan horse for more sinister and foreboding revelations. ‘I think it’s helpful to keep a tone where it doesn’t feel too difficult to enter or too easy to shy away from,’ he says, ‘more something to be playfully explored, but then realising that you are also dealing with stuff that is really serious.’ He also wanted participants to take on the role of the extractive businessperson in the game to demonstrate the extent to which we are all complicit in some way. ‘Taking a more systemic view of the fact that there are these contradictions, which are really hard to square, for everybody’s position, is important to me,’ he notes.

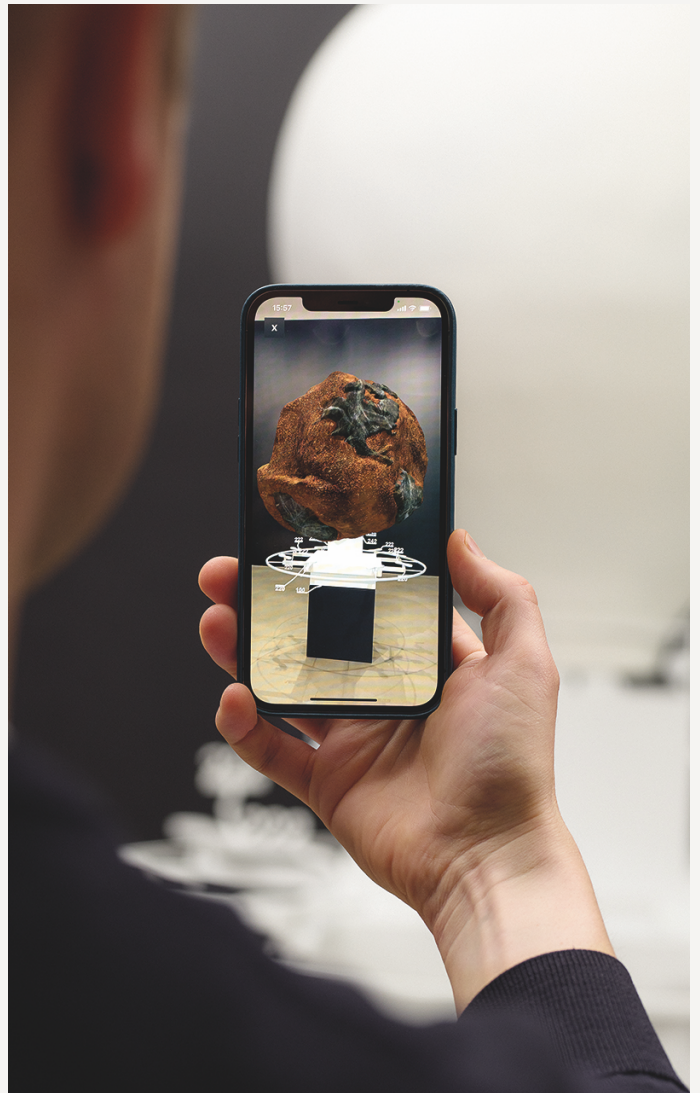
'There's been an explosion in online activity, but it's also made me want to go to museums more than ever. Because I want to have the social experience of seeing a museum,' says Simon Denny.

Fundamentally, Simon sees his role as an artist as twofold. Firstly, it is to trigger an emotional response to some of the more complex forces acting in the world today, and to thereby help people process what might be happening to them. Or, as he puts it, more succinctly, 'My aim is to move people.'

The second role is entering a space with relatively little baggage and opening up conversations ('dialogue' is a word Simon uses time and again). This can be seen best in *Security Through Obscurity*, which exhibited in early 2020 at Altman Siegel, a commercial gallery in San Francisco. The sculptural works in that show explored a broad range of topics, from income inequality to homelessness to the now-global phenomenon of the tech bro sporting a Patagonia vest. Was Simon cocking a snook at Silicon Valley executives? 'I don't see my role as giving people the middle finger, that's not interesting for me,' he says. 'Rather than be wilfully antagonistic, I think I can come in as an outsider and give voice to powerful things that it's hard to speak about from a certain perspective.' In this way, he says, art can lead to more open and honest dialogue.

In the end, pointing the finger of blame is easy and that's not what Simon believes art should do. 'I want to see actors who want culture to be complex, who want culture to be important, who want to talk about the real issues,' he says. It is surely the role of art and artists to be all these things, to prioritise 'the real issues'. However, the question then

becomes: Has the pandemic threatened artists and this kind of ‘important’ art? How do you protect this kind of art in 2021? And how should such work be funded today?



To start with the pandemic, Simon has seen a great deal of turmoil around him in the art world over the past 12 months. Mainly, shifts that were already happening have been expedited. Already before Covid-19, for instance, the art world was witnessing a large-scale consolidation, with big global galleries such as Gagosian, David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth taking an increasingly large share of the market. Since the onset of the pandemic, several once-legendary ‘mid-

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tier galleries', as Simon describes them, have shuttered, which has only quickened that trend (thankfully Petzel is still going strong).

Similarly, the importance of private individuals and private foundations in the funding of particular kinds of art is growing, according to Simon. 'I think the role of those people in playing custodians for what is important – politically, culturally and artistically – has again been accelerated during this pandemic,' he says. In the future, this source of funding could become increasingly vital for him and his peers. 'Looking at the landscape, private foundations supporting art is going to become more and more important, if we want to support certain types of project, like the art that I make,' he says. 'If that is valuable, it needs support, and state support for that all over the world is shrinking.'

He isn't actually concerned for his own personal prospects, though. While the pandemic has undeniably – and belatedly – increased what Simon refers to as people's 'bandwidth for accepting digital experiences as art', he predicts a fresh boom for the kind of imposing sculptural and installation work that he most often creates (once we can all get back into museums and galleries, that is). 'There's been an explosion in online activity, but it's also made me want to go to museums more than ever,' he says. 'Because I really want to see a painting, a real painting. I want to see crazy big installations as well, I want to be in a room, I want to have the social experience of seeing a museum. I think you

will see a return to experience-based things, because people want that.’

Perhaps coincidentally, the pandemic has also heralded an uptick in interest in Simon’s work, he explains, maybe because ‘some of the topics that I’ve been focusing on for a long time have clarified in how important they are’. Few people wanted to know about the blockchain, for instance, when he was making work about it five years ago; now, with NFTs proliferating online (Simon recently launched one himself through Petzel), it’s all anyone can talk about. From data mining to the automation of labour, Simon has always seemed to tackle topics a year or two ahead of their uptake by mainstream culture. Could the artist be our very own canary in the coalmine?

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