

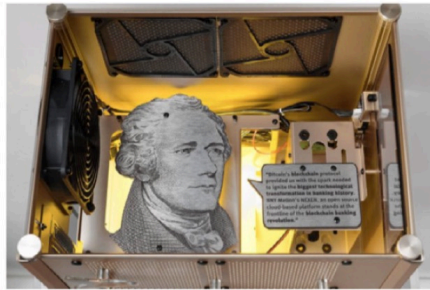
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Blockchain Art Exhibitions Explore the Bitcoin Technology's Future

Two shows by artist Simon Denny, in New York and Berlin, look at competing views on how the little-understood technology underpinning the digital currency bitcoin should develop—and helps translate them for viewers



Simon Denny uses cultural references like computer cases to explore blockchain. PHOTO: JOERG VON BRUCHHAUSEN

By STEVEN NORTON
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Pokémon, postage stamps and the strategy board game Risk. Simon Denny uses everyday objects like these to illuminate how technology shapes the way we live and work. In his latest exhibition, the Berlin-based New Zealand artist explores blockchain, the little-understood technology underpinning the digital currency bitcoin.

Opening Thursday at New York's Petzel Gallery, "Blockchain Future States" looks at competing views about how the technology should evolve. Large cutout images of the leaders of three leading blockchain companies—Digital Asset Holdings LLC, 21 Inc. and Ethereum—stand near globe-like structures meant to highlight how new currency systems could challenge traditional forms of statehood. A Risk board for each firm lays out the company's strategy to create a new world order. A similar installation, "Blockchain Visionaries," is at the Berlin Biennale until Sept. 18.

That contemporary artists are exploring blockchain further suggests the technology has reached a level of cultural significance beyond bitcoin's initial hype. Today, companies from global banks to auto makers and blue-chip tech firms are experimenting with blockchain to find new ways to speed up financial transactions or create safer supply chains.



Blockchain Risk board game prototype by Simon Denny PHOTO: JOERG VON BRUCHHAUSEN

For many, though, the technology remains an obscure subject. Encountering it in a gallery setting can help audiences look beyond digital coins or lines of code and address broader questions about how technology shapes future societies, Mr. Denny says. Seeing the technology through the lens of everyday objects like a Risk board creates a cultural entryway into a highly technical subject (a decentralized transaction ledger) that might bore the average viewer.

"Pretty much everyone who walks into that room will have some relationship to Risk," says the 33-year-old artist.

Mr. Denny first encountered blockchain in the context of bitcoin. It didn't interest him much at first. "Friends were just buying drugs with it," he says.

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But a "2.0 moment" came around 2015, as banks and other firms spent more time and money figuring out how to build upon the underlying technology. "I became interested in how different people with different types of agendas are invested in the future of what this could be," Mr. Denny says.

"Blockchain Future States" sets out his observations. His Risk board for Digital Asset replaces countries with

financial capitals—reflecting the fact that the firm, led by former J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. executive Blythe Masters, is creating a platform geared toward financial markets. The board for 21 Inc., which focuses more on bitcoin, eschews traditional geography for nationalist lands and technologist clouds, while Ethereum, an open software platform, is set in outer space.

To acquaint visitors with the foundations of blockchain, Mr. Denny intersperses popular icons—Pokémon protagonist Ash and a giant game box—with the mythology surrounding bitcoin creator (or creators) Satoshi Nakamoto.

While the Berlin show doesn't include the Risk boards or digital monsters, it benefits greatly from its location: a former East German State Council building that's now part of a management school. Mr. Denny says the space highlights a physical meeting point of different systems of governance, which encourages new ways of looking at markets and sovereignty.

The artist says his goal isn't to come to a solid conclusion about which blockchain future is better, but to tease out the possible opportunities and obstacles of each. "When people come across new technologies like this, they're just not sure," he says. "I'm coming in as a fan and optimist, but not as a blind publicist."