

# OCULA

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## Artist Simon Denny's First NFT is a Trojan Horse

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Berlin  
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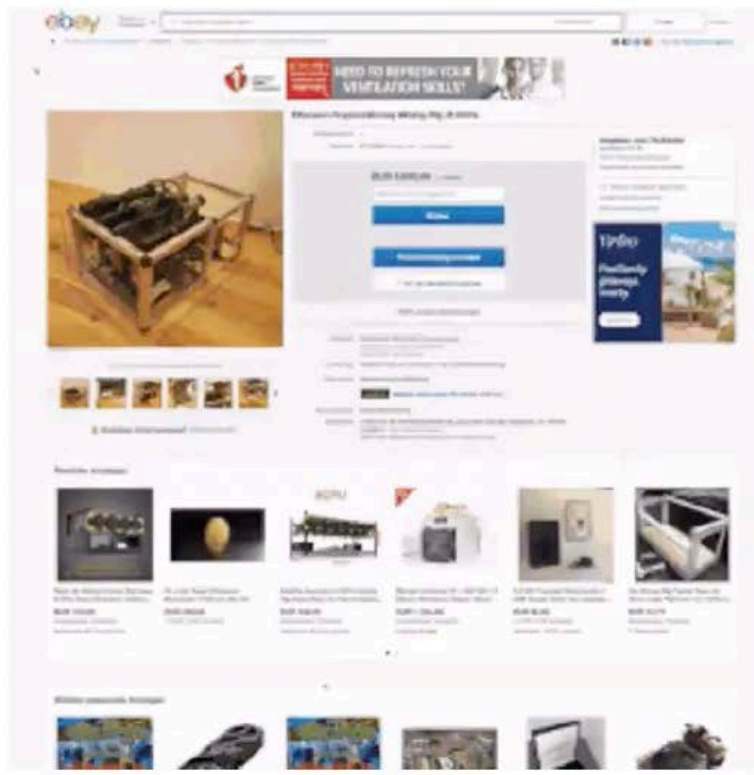
The work is one of five NFTs Denny will release in the coming weeks, each a gesture of insurgency against the resource-hungry blockchains they are minted on.



Exhibition view: Simon Denny, *Mine*, Petzel Gallery, New York (18 March–15 May 2021). Courtesy Petzel Gallery.

On 19 March, Simon Denny's first ever NFT artwork was minted, listed on NFT marketplace SuperRare, and acquired by 'anon21' for 28.0Ξ.

For almost US \$50,000, 'anon21' purchased sole ownership of a 23-second digital video entitled Mine Offset: Ethereum Kryptowährung Mining-Rig (2021), which shows a 3D model of a cryptocurrency mining rig spinning in front of a changing background. First it's an eBay auction page, then a beetle crawling out from under a coin etched with the Ethereum symbol, followed by a heat map of the earth displayed on climateprediction.net, and finally a mineral model of the earth stripped of its flora, fauna, and oceans.



Simon Denny, 'Mine Offset: Ethereum Kryptowährung Mining-Rig' (2021). Courtesy the artist and anon21.

Bundled into the purchase was the promise that Denny would retire a real world mining rig, bought on German eBay for 3,000 euros, from its carbon-costly task of carrying out transactions such as NFT sales on the Ethereum blockchain. Instead, the rig's processing power is now being donated to computation-heavy modeling conducted through climateprediction.net, an environmental research project overseen by scientists at the University of Oxford.

The retirement of a mining rig is yet another spin on 'mining' from Denny, whose practice over the past two years has drilled into disastrous forms of extraction in the 21st century. This practice is well showcased in his current exhibition *Simon Denny: Mine* at Petzel Gallery, New York, through 15 May.

Many of the works in the Petzel show originate from an exhibition of the same



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name that took place at the Museum of Old and New Art (MoNA) in Hobart, Australia, from 8 June 2019 to 18 March 2020.

Along with cardboard sculptures of autonomous mining machinery, the show included a stark white 'worker cage' that Amazon patented to help employees navigate busy warehouses. Inside the cage, an augmented reality bird modelled on the endangered King Island Brown Thornbill plays the part of the canary in a coal mine. It serves as a warning of both mass extinction brought about by habitat destruction and mass exploitation caused by the harvesting of human labour and the mining of consumer behaviour on websites like Amazon.com.



The exhibition travelled to Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, Germany (5 September 2020–17 January 2021), where Denny introduced another way 'mining' persists in the digital age. Works were also exhibited online, in Minecraft. Games, which are another of Denny's fixations, have never been more effective at mining out attention.

Denny created his own board game for the MoNA exhibition called Extractor.

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‘We are witnessing a gold rush, with both creators and collectors scrambling to stake out their claims.’

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The game is based on the 1960s Australian game Squatter but instead of farming sheep, players farm data.



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'I think extraction is central to the way that businesses have worked under extended colonial capitalism for a number of centuries,' Denny told *Timeout Melbourne* in 2019. 'Something as disparate as sheep farming, and digging things out of the ground, and harvesting activity online; they're all part of a very similar extraction model.'

Works in *Mine* were in large part inspired by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler's essay 'Anatomy of an AI System', which understands the Amazon Echo as 'an anatomical map of human labour, data and planetary resources.' They point out that even the existence of something as seemingly innocuous as a smart device requires the extraction of Lithium from Bolivian salt flats for its batteries, fossil fuels to power the device, armies to staff warehouses that store them, users to train its neural network, and more; putting lie to the notion that virtual products like NFTs, collected and displayed on our digital devices, are without social and environmental costs.

Denny isn't the only artist to draw attention to the carbon costs of NFTs.



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Computational artist Memo Akten wrote a widely-read essay on the topic back in December, and on 21 March, Pace Gallery artist John Gerrard minted a single edition work called *Western Flag* (NFT) and listed it on Foundation with a reserve price of 250€.

If the work sells for almost half a million dollars—a price Pace Gallery said is 'consistent with the software edition of *Western Flag*'—50 percent will go towards carbon sequestration through regenerate.farm, Gerrard's 'Emergency



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Ethereum Cryptofund for Climate and Soil Regeneration'. A spokesperson for Pace Gallery said the energy used by the blockchain to power the sale itself would also be offset at the rate of 0.1 $\text{\text{€}}$  per tonne of carbon dioxide.

NFT boosters have begun to address the technology's carbon costs. A fundraising event conceived by the Social Alpha Foundation raised \$6.7 million dollars for the Open Earth Foundation, \$6 million of it from Tron founder Justin Sun's purchase of Beeple's *Ocean Front* alone.

Jehan Chu, one of Social Alpha's founders, pushed back against the carbon costs of NFTs. He told *Ocula Magazine* that 'the blockchain does take a lot of energy, but compared to other monetary systems it's quite low.' Chu does believe the outsized prices NFTs are fetching are unsustainable. 'I think there will be a correction,' he said. 'The quality of art is not there to justify the prices and the volume of transactions.'



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Lindsay Lohan and Ja Rule have sold NFTs for tens of thousands of dollars, and on 25 March, Hong Kong-built robot Sophia sold a self-portrait for \$688,888. Established artists backed by big galleries—including Random International, Rob Pruitt, Petra Cortright, Jonathan Yeo, Mark Titchener, Michael Joo, and Neil Beloufa—will all sell works on SuperRare in a collaboration with Verisart. Following Christie's Beeple auction, which realised \$69 million, Sotheby's is working on an auction for digital artist Pak.

Amid this gold rush, creators and collectors are scrambling to stake their claims, with people inside and outside the art world experimenting with new ways to extract as much value from NFTs as fast as they can. —[O]