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## Simon Denny's MONA exhibition brings a giant board game into the gallery to teach visitors about data mining

ABC ARTS – BY ARTS EDITOR DEE JEFFERSON

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PHOTO Mine, by Berlin-based NZ artist Simon Denny, uses the board game format to illustrate the "extraction mindset" inherent to multinational corporations.

SUPPLIED: MONA/JESSE HUNNIFORD

It's 1:18pm on Thursday at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, and 1,200 visitors have already been through the door and all of them are working, in a sense — without realising it — because their experience within the museum is making money for someone else.

Not only are they working but since they've bought a ticket, they've paid for the pleasure of it.

How so? Because as the Economist proclaimed two years ago, [data is now the world's most valuable resource](#) — and these 1,200 visitors are producing it every second they're in the gallery, and giving it away for free.

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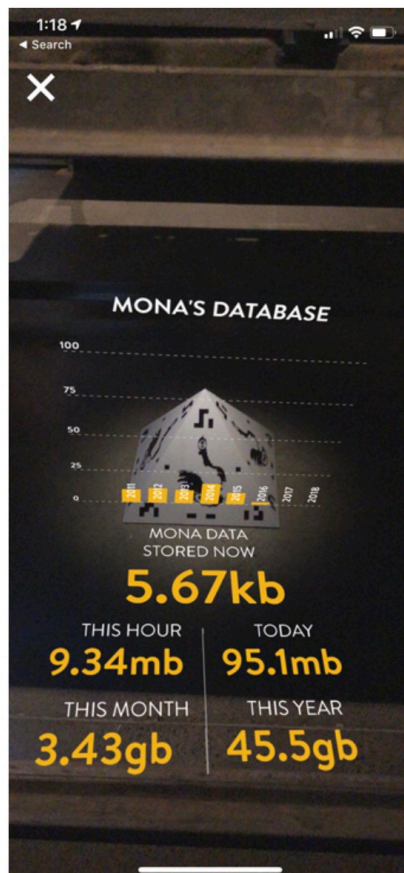
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The hardest working among them are using MONA's custom-built navigation device, the O, without which they won't know who made the artwork or object they're looking at, or when they made it, or why.

Somewhere — probably in 'the cloud' — it is being recorded that 1,625 artworks have been logged by O users in the last hour: what they are, who looked at them, for how long.

"We're collecting your data ... and you're oblivious to us and to what we're doing with it," says MONA's Jarrod Rawlins.

And that's not unusual. If you've got a smartphone with apps or a personal computer, you're being mined minute by minute for [data that is being sold for a profit you'll never see](#).



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## Human resources

Rawlins is co-curator with Emma Pike of MONA's latest exhibition, titled Mine, by Berlin-based New Zealand-born artist Simon Denny.

It's exactly the point of the exhibition to draw visitors' attention to the fact that their data is being mined.

Denny has designed the exhibition to look and feel like a game. The main gallery floor features a wall-to-wall reproduction of the 60s-era Australian board game Squatter, an Antipodean version of Monopoly but with sheep farmers instead of property investors.

On this board game floor sit giant pieces modelled after contemporary mining machinery.

Even the name of the exhibition, and its location (MONA is entirely subterranean) is a kind of word game.

And instead of the usual exhibition catalogue Denny has created a board game, a contemporary version of Squatter called Extractor, which is on display in the gallery and on sale in the gift shop for \$65 a pop.

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It's not just a gimmick. Extractor was made by a professional game producer in China, was tested by the artist and curators, and has been tweaked for optimal gameplay.

It's designed for 2-6 players, each taking the role of a different data platform business. At first dice roll you're all start-up operators.

By the game's end, one person will have achieved Amazon-like status — a planetary scale business for the storage and monetisation of data just like the data generated by those MONA visitors, but ideally more valuable.

Co-curator Emma Pike, who played Extractor with Rawlins and Denny, said: "It happens almost immediately that you want all the data profits, and you're pissed off because climate change keeps getting in the way".

"I became a super capitalist," Rawlins confesses.

## From curious to concerned

From entrance to exit, Denny's exhibition *Mine* is an attempt to convey to visitors the invisible web they're caught in, and how inextricably so.

Even if you're okay with that (you knew about capitalism, it's how the world works) you might be dismayed to discover how much tangible damage you're doing to the environment and your fellow humans just by stepping through the doors at MONA.

Data, Denny points out, is not the clean business it sometimes markets itself as but every bit as dirty as literal extraction. Storage solutions alone take up huge amounts of resources: space, labour, materials, energy.

*Mine* is the artist's most political exhibition to date.

Born in Auckland, 1982, to a professor and a primary-school-teacher turned handcraft printer, Denny grew up with culture in the house, went to a good school, played cello in orchestra. He wasn't very sporty, but found art a haven.

His mother was a practising Quaker (a branch of Christianity that is [typically quite progressive](#), and unusually pluralist in its incorporation of variant faiths), and Denny was part of Quaker youth groups.

"I was really involved in that community during my teenage years," he said.

When he reached art school, he thought he'd be a painter — but exited as a "maker of things".

And then he met a visiting German curator, who pointed him in the direction of an art school in Frankfurt with a small student intake but a prestigious staff that included photographer Wolfgang Tillmans.



PHOTO [Simon Denny](#) represented New Zealand at the 2015 Venice Biennale with the installation [Secret Power](#).

SUPPLIED: MAX PITEGOFF AND CALLA HENKEL

When Denny moved to Frankfurt in 2007, Facebook was in its infancy, the iPhone was yet to be launched, and the Macbook was not even a year old.

He has credited being away from friends and home in this heady tech era with his shift to making art about technology.

In the catalogue for his 2014 exhibition [New Management](#), inspired by Samsung's journey to smartphone domination, he writes:

"When I left New Zealand to live in Frankfurt in 2007 ... my phone and my computer became the most important public and private spaces I occupied. They also served as the main tools for my education and work.

Frankfurt provided me with a gateway to the world — and this is in part how I interpret the gesture of [Samsung Chairman] Lee Kun-hee staging the New Management Declaration here [in Frankfurt] in 1993. With its massive airport and as the European financial centre, Frankfurt represents a symbolically 'international' place."

The kind of art Denny makes these days typically looks like it's been pulled off a trade-show floor at a corporate convention. It's graphic, colourful, slogan-loaded and pathologically persuasive.

At his [2015 exhibition at the Serpentine in London](#), it wasn't clear initially whether you'd walked into a presentation on corporate culture, a satire, or an art show by "that New Zealand guy from the Venice Biennale".

Titled [Products for Organising](#), the Serpentine show looked like a corporate theme park, with diagrams instead of rides, and jargon instead of signs: Agile, Holacracy — and other words ripped from the pages of a management philosophy manual.



PHOTO Simon Denny's exhibition *Products for Organising* explored the management culture of Apple, Zappos and the British intelligence and security organisation.

JOE GRAND (ATTRIBUTION 2.0 GENERIC/CC BY 2.0)

At the Venice Biennale just months earlier, Denny had caused a stir with his exhibition [Secret Power](#), named after Nicky Hager's 1996 book detailing New Zealand's involvement in US intelligence gathering, and designed in part by a former Creative Director of Defense Intelligence for the NSA.

A pattern starts to emerge across these projects. Denny is using the visual language of an organisation to explain that organisation's culture to an outsider.

The young international student, curious about the phone in his pocket, finds he has pulled a thread that unravels, across the years, into ever darker territory.

Denny said the plurality of the Quaker movement and its tolerance of difference has been "fundamental to my world view and my art practice".

"I'm often looking at communities and different ways of behaving that I don't know about, and also often practices that I don't love. I've made shows about technology companies that I think do really harmful things," he said.

"But I think my background as a Quaker has given me this distance and ability to, you know, not hate the player — hate the game."

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PHOTO The board game *Extractor* attempts to replicate the dynamics of "six global data-driven businesses as they grow".

SUPPLIED: MONA/JESSE HUNNIFORD

## Explaining mining, at MONA

Denny is still wondering about his phone, but these days, he's moved from curious to concerned.

In his exhibition at MONA, the smartphone becomes a locus for these concerns. Pop-ups on the O device, which, he explains, is essentially a single-app smartphone, inform you about the natural resources extracted from the earth to make its various components (including copper for wiring, lithium for batteries, praseodymium for the speakers). Other pop-ups show what data is being mined from you when you're using the O.

These pop-ups are delivered via augmented reality (AR) on your device, and in fact about half of the exhibition's content exists exclusively in-app, including a set of videos. If you don't use the O, you cannot fully experience *Mine*.

In art, as in life, you feel coerced into using the system.



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PHOTO Mine is full of QR codes that visitors scan to access in-app components of the exhibition.

SUPPLIED: MONA/JESSE HUNNIFORD

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The exhibition opens with a schematic-style diagram for the next generation of the smart device: Amazon's Echo, the equivalent of Google's voice-activated virtual assistant [Alexa](#).

The diagram, created by researchers Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, is a holistic map of what is needed to make and run an Echo — from mining of natural resources to manufacturing and distribution; the whole granular gamut.

When I commented that it's overwhelming Denny said: "Yes. And it should be — because it is overwhelming".

"As a whole, the exhibition, to me, is about humans' relationship to the natural world and the [machine world]. This [the diagram] is that idea through one device."

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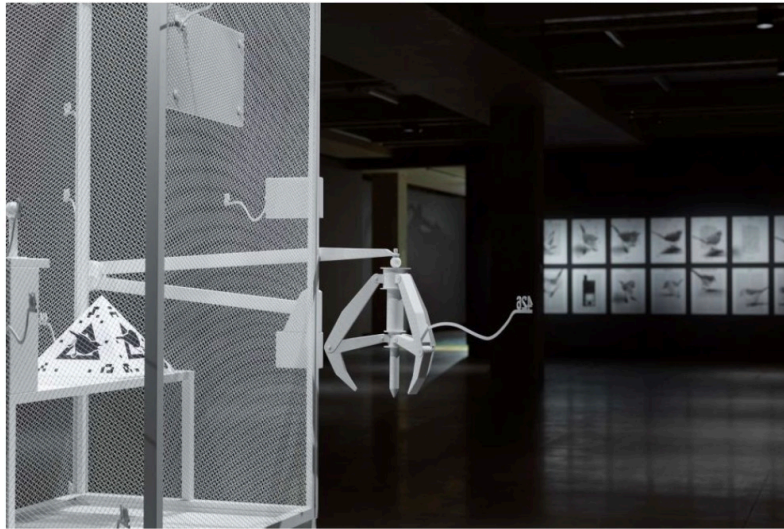


PHOTO For Mine, the artist made a model from an Amazon patent for a 'human cage' that would allow factory works to integrate with machinery.

SUPPLIED: MONA/JESSE HUNNIFORD

## Hate the game

Mine has a mascot that appears in AR pop-ups on your O device and on the walls of the gallery; a little bird, modelled on the King Island Brown Thornbill.

The critically endangered species, native to Tasmania, tops Australia's list of most likely to become extinct, and it represents for Denny the canary in the coalmine for our planet — the dying bird that tells us the environment is not safe for humans.

But the Thornbill species has recently received a more hopeful diagnosis thanks to field data. A didactic note for one exhibit tells me that the data about the bird collected by researchers from the Australian National University will significantly increase its chances of survival.

Denny wants visitors to his exhibition to understand that 'data' is not the enemy but rather the extraction mindset that sees everything as a resource to be exploited for profit.

"We're in a moment where climate change is becoming a lot more visible, the effects of industry are becoming clear, and we need to take another look at what is happening with minerals and humans' relationship with the earth and other non-human things," he said.

**Mine runs until April 13 at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art.**

**Simon Denny's work also appears in the group exhibition [The Invisible Hand at 4A Centre for Contemporary Art](#) in Sydney from June 28-August 11.**