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SIMON DENNY, *SI X SD LEGACY
SELFIE STICK LUXURY TECH
REISSUE*, 2016
July 25, 2016



Why Simon Denny
Bootlegged the World's
Oldest Selfie-Stick

What do Venice and Shenzhen have in common? Aside from the obvious (and inaccurate) response of Marco Polo, the answer would have to be something along the lines of: Compression.

Much like the story-book Venice of old, which spilt over with merchant activity, Shenzhen (a city founded 36 years ago that now has a population of 20 million) is this century's locus of ultra-pressurized, hyper-financialized human activity. It's one of the world's largest Special Economic Zones, home to a 12 km-square high-tech industrial zone, an eye-burningly vertiginous city that acts as a by-word for a combination of advanced technology, hyper-capitalism, cheap (inhumane) labor, and an irreverent relationship with intellectual property. It is a place where new cartographies are being drawn real-time at an accelerated, high-definition pace.

While setting up his pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale, the Berlin-based, New Zealand-born artist Simon Denny noticed the beginning of a new mode of visual culture rising in the tourist squares outside of the international exhibitions. While discussing the boom of selfie stick vendors with Swiss Institute director Simon Castets, the two came across the first-ever selfie stick: a 1984 collaboration between the camera brand Minolta and the futurist fashion house Courreges.

Produced 26 years before the first iPhone was released with a front-facing camera, this was an early digital camera produced explicitly to take self-portraits. It included a small mirror in the center of its white and gold facade, and was described as “more like a powder compact than a camera” in press at the time. Seen from 2016, it read more like a premonition of the lifestyle aspirations of present-day tech.

Denny’s recreation of this selfie stick—inspired by China’s Shanzhai bootleg industry—operates in similar fashion to his Berlin start-up culture monuments and historical dioramas for brands such as Samsung. It creates a historical context for something that feels new, while at the same time pointing to the real-time details of how innovation transpires in today’s capitalism. Through the lens of Shanzhai, mass-production does not create homogeneity but rather its opposite: an environment where hardware can be chewed up and contorted into a infinite range of iterations.

THOM BETTRIDGE: How did you discover this Minolta x Courrèges camera?

SIMON DENNY: To be perfectly honest, the whole project as well as the discovery of the camera started with a conversation with Simon Castets. It was a couple years ago – I think around the time I was preparing for my Venice pavilion – and suddenly there was a new product on the streets in Venice they were selling. Selfie sticks were everywhere.

During this big art event, you’re seeing this turning point in popular image-making.

Totally. And I then I dug around a bit on the internet to try and find out a bit of history. Because these things always have a history and I am interested in how an idea in tech can evolve.

So you were searching for the antecedent to the selfie stick?

Exactly. But then this is often a concern of mine – and something I was in a way doing with my Venice pavilion – to find a longer cultural moment or context for seemingly new things. So with my pavilion, it was about contextualizing contemporary data visualization

made inside state organizations with masterpieces which depict the value of knowledge from another empire – drawing a line from illustrators at the NSA to master painters and cartographers from the Venetian heyday. And with the selfie stick I wanted to try something similar. To look back and see where these ideas first came to the market. The Minolta camera we found was the first camera to be manufactured and marketed with a selfie stick as a part of its kit. The camera has a mirror on it – before screens on cameras made it possible to look at an image of yourself as you are taking it. It was also a very early collaboration between a kind of high tech company (Minolta) and a high fashion brand (Courreges). So the first selfie stick was actually a fashion-tech crossover.

Which is something we think of as being very 21st century, not earlier.

Totally.

Is the part of the purpose of discovering something like this to cool the conversation about how all these developments are creating a radical break in history? Because you always see this panicked headlines, like, “THIS IS HOW INSTAGRAM HAS CHANGED OUR LIVES FOREVER.”

Haha maybe... I am always searching for more context. Because I think that the rise of luxury and the rise of tech in the contemporary world – which Instagram is also part of – also says something about where politics are right now.

In what sense?

There's an idea that this growth is an outcome of liberal policy across the board for decades, and a move away from state-regulated systems in finance, etc. The rise of luxury and tech seems to come hand-in-hand with wealth being concentrated to the very rich. The divergence of income levels. So then by the numbers there are more people in the luxury sector, because there are more very wealthy people. But of course also far far more very poor people on the other side. And tech is also involved in this, because automation concentrates power as well, because the means to produce is owned by fewer if you need to employ fewer and fewer people to get the products out there. And as “software eats the world,” more and more industries are subject to this process – not just manufacturing and heavy industries but also more white-collar industries.

And then at the same time a luxury product like the iPhone is becoming more and more accessible – leading to this idea that wealth is growing in a more widespread way.

Yes, and this is the wonderful thing about the contemporary moment: There are lots of contradictions in it. And the traditional framework for understanding what is happening – like the vaguely Marxist one I just applied to luxury and tech – are not available to encapsulate everything that is happening. Tech is at once a democratizing force and a power-concentration force. I feel like we are still slowly unpacking the meaning of the huge amount of rapid change that has come with increased networked communication on a global scale.

I feel as though it's a similar conundrum with regard to bootlegs and Shanzhai products. Normally things like this are spoken about in this very post-modern, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown "Duckhouse" type of way. But actually this semiotic, language-based way of understanding commerce doesn't really encapsulate any of the desire or affect that products are all about.

Shanzai is a really great example of this. And something the edition hopefully scrapes on as well. Because its hard to know the full politics of it, as you say. On one hand, the factory system in Shenzhen has these awful working conditions very often. And the cheaper production costs that are the reason for so much being made in Schenzhen and China is paid for in crazy hours and low pay. But then the open-source effect that is also created there by factories sharing recipes for tech products that are usually protected in other moments in the supply chain is something that makes innovation explode. And it is the ecosystem created by the fake product production culture there that is widely recognized as the best place to develop hardware because of that openness to building.

How does this practice of copying lead to a type of innovation? Because normally bootleg markets are thought of as parasitic.

This is being reconsidered now, particularly in tech. And that is something I welcome. Because art has recognised the innovation value in "copying" for decades, at least. Like, thank god for appropriation. It brought art to all sorts of crazy interesting places. But letting go of strict copyright tech and developing hardware in a very open-source factory system is such a huge key to unlocking previously untapped wealth pockets of innovation. And that happens also when you compare Chinese tech to Western tech, where you can

even look at a software product like WeChat. To Western eyes, it was interpreted as a kind of WhatsApp copy. But then because of scale, and because China is such a huge and rapidly developing domestic market, it turned into a kind of mega-platform of the kind we haven't really seen in Western tech, where a lot of services go through a chat app, etc. It becomes, though responding to the demands of a very different market, a completely unique product than anything in Western tech.

In what sense do these mutations happen in hardware?

Well, so this is one of the cool parts about Shenzhen. So I recently went on a trip to there and visited a place called HAX, which is kind of a grad school for young companies, what is known in the sector as an “accelerator.” Young hardware companies will go there with a product they are developing and they will improve it with the guidance of the HAX team, and then hopefully bring it to market. And what is totally unique about Shenzhen for that process is that the ecosystem there for hardware offers more than anywhere else in the world in terms of testing and prototyping fast. So they have this headquarters, which is a floor in a downtown high-rise, and it is literally above this amazing central shanzhai – or fake item – marketplace where you can buy anything, like an iPhone in any cray size, or a VR set that sits on your head backwards.

And you can buy components there as well, no?

Yes, any component you like in any size or shape. We toured this marketplace with this guy Noel Joyce, who is the chief product designer there, and he was telling us that one discovers new things there every time one goes in. And as a young hardware company you can find a knockoff product doing things slightly differently than the market leader, and then break that open and learn whatever is happening in there and apply that knowledge to your own hardware company.

Because you are able to see this normally standardized thing in like 20 different iterations. It's incredibly inspiring. Imagine if there were an art museum like this.

Absolutely, it's like a living sculpture of constantly expanding hardware. It's beautiful. And if you're a company working on a new product, you can get the right thing and then just look at the branding on it and call the factory, which is just down the road. And then you can produce a prototype in a matter of days, which is not possible anywhere else in the world.

I remember taking to someone from HBA who visited China just as the brand was blowing up, just as HBA fakes were becoming common in China. And he was telling me that the colorways and designs the bootleggers were making were super inspiring. They were things that they hadn't thought to do.

I talked to Telfar about this too. He says he is in China many months a year now. It's hugely inspiring.

Do you think this notion of innovation is something that makes the idea of intellectual property feel ever-more cartoonish?

To me, yes. But I am a “who wore it best, not who wore it first” type person. I don't believe in plagiarism. I don't think it's a useful concept.

Going back to your selfie stick, which is its own kind of Shanzai product—it reminded me a lot of when the iPhone came out in gold, in the sense that this Minolta product was marketed as a gendered tech product for women. The gold iPhone was also gendered in a way, but it was also rumored to be made for the sensibilities of the Chinese market.

I mean, we live in a world where commerce is hugely important. And “untapped markets” are untapped growth. So the Minolta selfie camera was an attempt to take the gadget market to women, who demographically were thought not to be buying gadgets in the mid 80s at the same rate that men were.



The advertising campaign for the original Minolta x Courrèges camera, which somewhat lumpently emphasised its intended demographic.

But at the same time, it feels so silly when you see an iPhone with a gender-specification. It looks like something wearing bad drag.

Well sometimes the marketing is clumsy. And sometimes its done well. I think a gold iPhone is kind of clumsy. But that's cute too in a campy way. But I totally feel your bad drag impression.

And what's interesting is that when the gold or pink iPhone comes out – and those are “female” – it makes you think about whether the standard iPhone was thought of as a “male” appliance by those who developed it.

Right. And that's why I think looking a historic products like the Minolta is instructive here, because it contextualizes that stuff. I think

we can learn about assumed cultural norms and the attitudes of a moment in time by following marketing and the biases of demographics. “Gadgets” – however they were defined then – were particularly marketed at men, and sold much more rapidly to men. But a crossover into lifestyle and fashion was seen as a way to broaden that appeal and market it with different features. And on the positive side of all this negative stereotyping that goes into framing these demographics is that thank god they wanted to include more lifestyle features in what eventually became the iPhone. Even though equating lifestyle with any gender is incredibly problematic.

So you're saying that the Minolta was the antecedent to the iPhone.

Perhaps :) For me, this is an object that touches all of these thoughts.

I guess you could say that the iPhone could have looked more like a Swiss Army Knife.

Ugh, imagine that! Like, if it had no front camera. Let's remember that the selfie stick was issued as this luxury crossover.

Yes, because having pictures of yourself was once a luxury thing.

Well, the hardware to make a selfie came to tech through luxury and fashion meeting in the 80s, which I find really interesting.

Simon Denny's SI X SD Legacy Selfie Stick Luxury Tech Reissue is available as an edition, through the Swiss Institute.