

## GREETINGS FROM NEW YORK

Robert McKenzie

*One could say that nearly all the 'good ideas' I pursued in the 1970s have been replaced, due to economic pressures, by bad practices:*

*instead of seaweed for biogas, fracking*

*instead of waterwheels, high dams*

*instead of wild-animal habitats, colossal domestic-animal projects*

*instead of lightweight megastructures, massive hegemonies*

—Peter Fend in correspondence with Lucia Della Paolera, 2017

## Why the military should be the first client of art

Since the military assures integrity of territory, the ultimate field of action for art.

I have been aware, somewhat vaguely, of Peter Fend and his art for around ten years. If I had to guess, I think I would have first seen his name in relation to the 1992 documenta. Fend exhibited a series called “Documenta Flags,” where he proposed new national flags that display the shape of major water basins that overlap or intersect with national borders. It was a story, though, from the Brisbane-based curator and art dealer David Pestorius that piqued my deeper curiosity about the artist and his practice. According to Pestorius (and corroborated by the artist), Fend had come to the attention of the Australian secret-service for his possibly inflammatory environmental activities while undertaking an artist-residency at the non-profit art institution Artspace in Sydney in 1995. Concerned about this situation Fend had reached out to a number of potential allies who might offer assistance, including Pestorius, much to Pestorius’ surprise.

I met Fend at an opening on New York’s Lower East Side, where he had a

drink in hand and was expounding on art and politics. Around this time, in January 2012, Fend presented a solo exhibition at Essex Street Gallery. Maxwell Graham, Essex Street’s proprietor, had recently inaugurated his gallery and, following on the work of Christian Nagel and Colin De Land, was presenting Fend’s radical propositions for the reconfiguration of our environmental and socio-political landscape. Both the person Fend and his art impressed me. A passionate speaker on the ideas he believes in, Fend’s art has always struck me as visionary—a sort of magnificent designer/engineer in the manner of Leonardo Da Vinci or utopian architect Boullée. I should say Fend considers this characterization inaccurate, not due to the potential height of ambition, but due to the fact that all his propositions are thoroughly pragmatic and always in earnest. If anything, Fend has said that he would like to be understood as an entrepreneur, and although he has yet to make his fortune I very much hope his success comes soon for both his own benefit and the positive effects that might have on our world.

When approaching Fend about this article, my initial thought had been to

present a very straight forward interview. I met with Fend to discuss this possibility, to which he was gracious enough to agree, and we decided that our conversation should follow on from his statement that, “the military should be the first client of art.” Beginning with all seriousness via email, I was surprised to receive in response to my first question an extremely lengthy reply filled with aphoristic paragraphs both specific and non-specific responses. Within his lengthy text, and subsequent emails, Fend elaborated a theory of art’s possible utility and the reverse scenario, art’s lack of utility, that he sees as existing today. As Fend comments (all italics, Fend’s own words), *we in the West think art is a leisure activity... Ironically, the leisure-class mood encourages less and less genuine innovation. It encourages gestures of studied minimalism, even silence.*

For Fend, the artist has the potential to be, *a cutting-edge thinker and doer, about material culture, or techniques of building, seeing, organizing knowledge, controlling and shaping territory. We saw this with the Renaissance.* Fend considers the current state of art to have failed in relation to this, his ideal metric. Locating avant-garde activity in the technological innovations of the military, Fend states that: *(s)ince humans have no major predator, and since most diseases now are controlled, the sole form of evolution at the human apex of the animal kingdom lies in military and technological competition.* If one considers the radical changes that have occurred through military-related inventions such as the internet and GPS, it is not hard to understand Fend’s perspective.

Fend laments the failure of art to exist in this potential field of utilitarian innovation:

*Very unfortunately, most societies think that art is solely for the luxury market of collectors, and soon after, museums. Such a market only wants relics. It does not want the art as applied in reality, or as it alters how we see, think or organize knowledge. It only wants a tangible, highly-polished artifact. It only wants a cleaned-up, polished piece of industrial or technological archaeology. It also wants the artworks thus collected and exchanged to have no function, no utility, no purpose.*

To better understand Fend’s frustration it is interesting to consider the many

'good ideas' that the artist has been involved with that never came to fruition. Having worked consistently since the mid 1970s on various environmental, geo-political and socio-political questions, the failure of many of these ideas to take hold in the macro political and economic environment has not only been a source of personal frustration, but also a potential cause for the extinction of the human race. Providing context, Fend notes a number of the pragmatic ideas his artistic endeavors have proffered:

*I showed, in 1994, in a much-noticed exhibition, at a critical time in decision-making inside China, that the Three Gorges Dam would harm the ocean, and that other technologies could be used, and these questions were remarked on by the Wall Street Journal, front page, with also concurring opinions of scientists at the World Bank and US State Department but THE EXACT OPPOSITE HAPPENED, with a vengeance: now China builds huge dams all over the planet.*

Further back, Fend notes that:

*In 1976, as part of my initial excitement with Earth Art, and with Joseph Beuys, I wrote Dr. George Schaller, a famous zoologist, What about wild-animal tracts to replace ranching and domesticated species? He wrote back that a good place to start would be Mato Grosso, an area between the Amazon and Argentina. But what happened instead: due to huge demand from China, the wildlife habitat has been converted into vast cattle-raising areas, with serious ecological damage.*

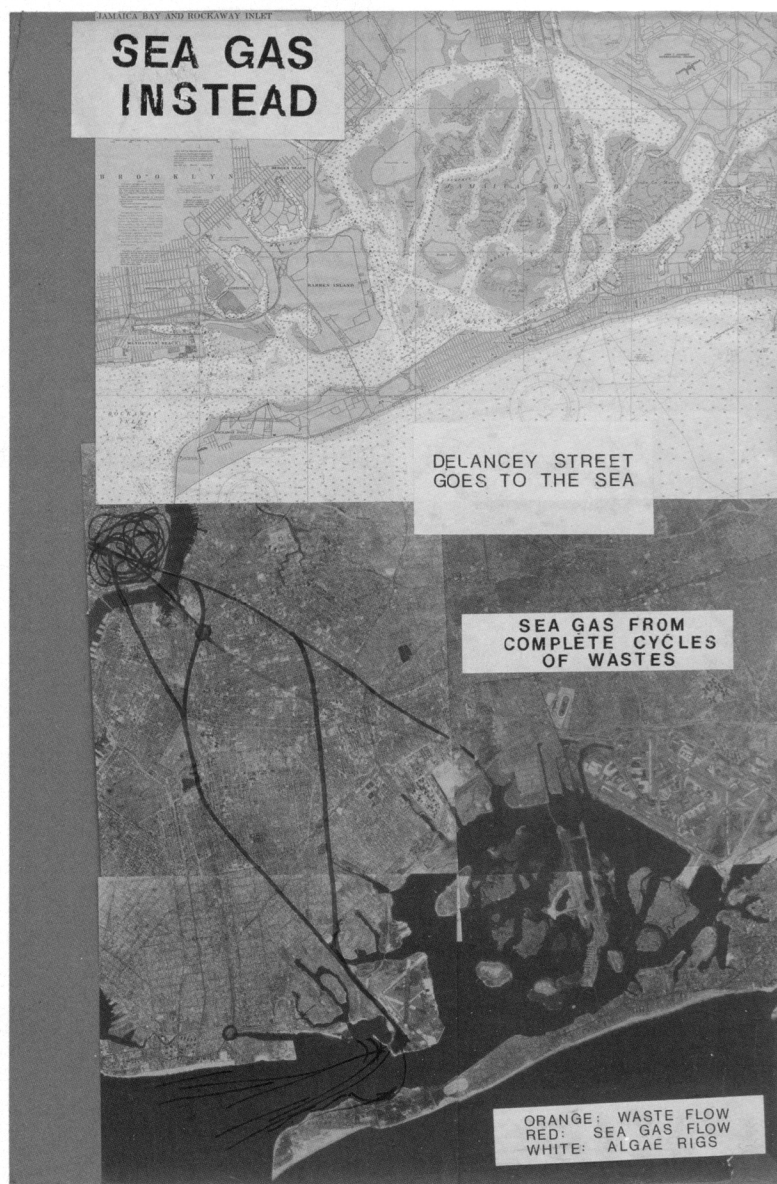
In more recent years, he has been a major proponent of natural and renewable energy sources, with numerous drawings of engineering solutions for its extraction. Fend comments:

*Producing biogas, or electricity, from algae at sea (attached to rocks or holdfast), had been pioneered by scientists in France in 1970, and by scientists from California through the 1970s, and by a US-Chinese conference of scientists in 1981-2: instead, a consortium of Total, Exxon and Shell use millions of government Euros to do an entirely different scenario, which they control, and the oil industry generally resorts to high-risk, damaging technologies like fracking. Global fossil-fuel consumption has tripled since the 1970s: THE EXACT OPPOSITE HAPPENED.*

Due to these frustrations, this constant avoidance of what scientists recommend, Fend suggests selling art ideas instead to the guardians and controllers of territory, to the government. Perhaps what Fend hopes for is a new form of collaboration, whereby the military might productively investigate the ideas and dreams of artists to find better solutions to the environmental and political conflicts of our time. For Fend, *it should be granted that showing in a museum or having an image in a collection should be the START of a larger process in society... Leisure Class Art should be a small part of the market for art. There is real-world applicability, with large industrial*

*and software consequences.*

Considering this potential collaboration with the military, Fend recalls that, *As I learned first-hand, in 1982, our work with Paul Sharits' film techniques, with sifting and comparative display of colors, was very interesting to the Pentagon.* Taking into account all the hopes, dreams and frustrations of Fend's activities over the past decades, we might hear an impassioned plea when Fend asks that *We should have made a deal with the Pentagon, and let them pursue that interest. Artists like Paul Sharits would have gotten more research done, with millions of dollars of funding, not just a few thousand here or here.*



Peter Fend, *Delancey Street goes to the Sea, III*, first shown at "The Real Estate Show," LES, NYC, 1979/1980