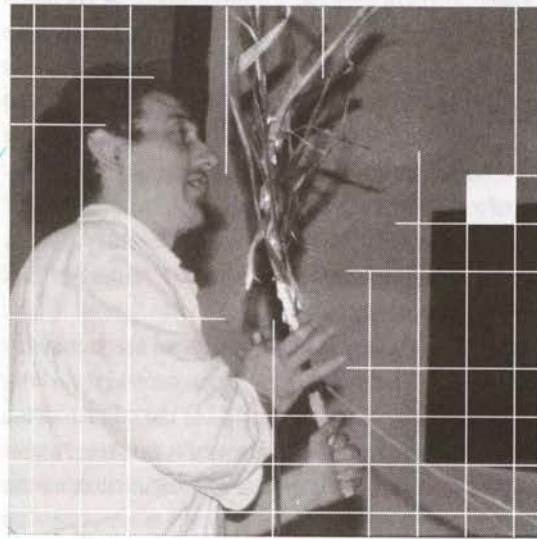


# peter fend goes west

BY CLAUDE WILLEY



Peter Fend Addresses the California Water & Waterways Conference.  
Photo by Claude Willey.



Irvine, California. According to my watch, it is shortly after midnight. As I look up, a white Saturn sedan pulls into the deserted parking lot. The driver sees me and stops the car in the center of the fire lane. I approach, the doors fling open, and from the back seat emerges a slightly disheveled figure who announces himself as "the famous Peter Fend."

I reach into my pocket for the unmarked envelope containing an agreed-upon sum of cash, payable to the deliverer of Fend, a Mr. J.P. Monro. Along with photographer Susa Templin, the weary travelers — dubbed "Team OEDC" (Ocean Earth Development Corporation) — had just completed an extensive trip through the American Southwest, following the Colorado River down to the Gulf of Mexico. After our parking lot exchange, Team OEDC spent the night in a local hotel, and prepared to reveal publicly what they had discovered.

Fend had come to participate in "California Water and Waterways: Artist Intervention in Preservation," a multidisciplinary symposium that I organized at the University of California, Irvine, in December 2000. This event was designed to bring together a mix of artists, scientists, water provider reps, marsh researchers and activists to discuss matters related to our dwindling semi-desert water supply. Peter Fend is the founder of the New York-based Ocean Earth Development Corporation, a firm specializing in "architectural components" and "media services," whose slogan "How Far Can Art Go?" has provided the focus for numerous exhibitions throughout Europe and East Asia. OEDC offers solutions for complex environmental problems, using ecologically positive technologies in conjunction with physical structures based on the principles of utopian architecture and early '70s land art.

As a self-declared "renegade artist," Fend's elaborate designs have included projects based on zero-emissions energy (derived from the decomposition of biomass via methane-producing microorganisms), such as offshore submersible "Soil Rigs" created to grow and harvest algae.

The Ocean Earth brochure efficiently lays out the activities of the organization, introducing "media services" such as Saltwater-Basin Mapping, Motile-Media Site Monitoring, and Renewable Energy Reports.<sup>(1)</sup> That pamphlet, which looks like the promotional literature of a sober environmental analysis firm, reflects Fend's approach to art. It presents a fuzzy boundary between art and life, but the slick design also encourages the "services" described inside to be taken seriously outside of the art-world context.

For example, Ocean Earth sold satellite images to CNN in the 1980s, while the art world, Fend claims, only saw his sea basin data as "nice images." Satellite technology enabled Fend to track toxic micro algal

blooms and observe terrain for, as the brochure explains, "bioproductivity and pollution." (One of Fend's proposed uses for this information is a public finance scheme in which income tax is replaced by taxation based on environmental degradation.)

According to Fend, OEDC's detailed spot (10 meter resolution) and Landsat (20 meter resolution) photographs and video-recorded computer screen images of the Iran-Iraq war zone north and east of Basra opened doors for him, doors that he probably wishes had remained closed. As Fend tells it, he found himself tangled in the Iran-Contra affair when, unknown to him, OEDC-collected photographs, charts, maps, and videotape were given to Iranian officials during a tense time with their neighbors, Iraq. The Director of the Office of the Undersecretaries-General from the United Nations, with whom Fend had made contact, delivered Fend's images to the Iranians. Fend was told that these materials were to be used in peace negotiations, but he was ultimately providing valuable positioning data for Iran.

Fend says the OEDC images revealed "Iraqi long-term construction works—and therefore intentions—pushing towards Kuwaiti territory." It seems these images were invaluable for precise military targeting, with a "geometric-coordinate locatable" quality that rendered them more reliable than aircraft reconnaissance.

As if being implicated in Middle-East warfare isn't enough, Fend says this UN situation also uncovered information about the mysterious assassination of Olof Palme, the former Swedish Prime Minister, arms race critic, and Castro/PLO/Mandela sympathizer, who was shot down in Stockholm in 1986. Fend claims that Palme was "incorrectly using [his] position as a UN negotiator to try funneling military intelligence to Iran, in order to prevent Iran's defeat in the Iran-Iraq war..., and of course, with that, to gain a special 'in' with Iran, a prime source of natural gas, a major source of oil, and more vital geopolitically than even Iraq, given its position between the Gulf and the Caspian Sea."

Fend provided no further details about the agent who nixed Palme, but he did warn me of the dangers of this story. He elaborated on how this whole thing soured relations between Iraq and the UN. "In essence, I was exposing the Iran-Contra machinery," Fend said, "particularly as it linked through Germany to Iran. Also, Iraq was telling me that this scandal proved that the UN could not be trusted. When I visited their embassy in Paris after they invaded Kuwait, to discuss what I had already seen being premonitory, their dossier on Ocean Earth was brought along. It was three inches thick. So, this scandal, the basis of the dossier, had plainly sunk deeply into Iraq's estimation of the UN and of the US-UK." Fend revealed



the saga of Palme's covert aid to Iran to the International Herald Tribune. According to Fend, a "cover-up" ensued.

While much of this story remains vague, Fend presents the details in such a matter-of-fact manner that I'm left feeling that I should study the history of Reagan-era Middle East tensions before reaching any conclusions. Taking all of Fend's reports into consideration, his level of paranoia seems justifiable. How many artists do you know that claim to have weekly conversations with a US security-agent?

A week before our rendezvous in the deserted parking lot, Fend emailed me detailed instructions concerning his arrival in California, his pre-conference research excursion, and his arrangements for transportation from Ontario Airport to the Gulf of California and finally to Irvine:

Dear Claude,

Travel plans are to arrive this evening about 11 PM as Team OEDC, i.e., PF and ST. At that time, I would like to hand over to you the dossier and slides as so far compiled and ordered for presentation, plus the videotape of the Persian Gulf. What I will say will be clear. At that time, also, I would like to meet our driver, JP Monro, a just-graduated painting student from Art Center arranged for us by a philosophy teacher there (and occasional contributor to Coagula, etc.), Fred Dewey.

I expect to have at least \$500 cash.

Fred Dewey has emphasized that there can be no disappointments or shortchanging on the deal.

In return, we would demand 72 hours of hard work (whatever that might be, including 1200 miles of driving) and accommodations/ferrying during the conference. Then, JP Monro would drive Team OEDC to Nevada, that night, for arrival in the White River Valley (which flows into the Colorado River near Las Vegas) by morning. He would undertake a tough schedule. We would travel from the White River to Heizer's Double Negative, then down the Colorado River (US 93?) to the mouth of the Colorado River and Puerto Penasco.

In a separate e-mail, I outline the talk.

Yours,  
Peter

During the days leading up to the symposium I received numerous phone calls from the field. Fend kept me up to date on their progress, findings, and his hypothesis regarding possibilities for the future of Southern California's water. I had dreams of Scully and Mulder knocking on my door in the middle of the night to tell me that Team OEDC had disappeared in the Arizona desert: "Fend's car was found abandoned near Lake Mead, and no personal belongings were left behind..." It seemed the kind of fate Fend would hope for.

At the symposium, Fend's whirlwind talk was a burst of pure energy, dense with information, speculation, and various discoveries obtained on his recent trip. His 140 beats-per-minute speech was unleashed upon a small and sometimes overwhelmed audience who tried hard to keep up. Using a piece of tall grass from the Colorado River as a pointer, Fend unloaded his insights on the construction of China's Three Gorges Dam, and how its impact on the Yangtze could alter Pacific flows and the rainfall patterns in California. If the Gorges Dam is completed, Fend declared, "The U.S. and Japan are screwed." (2)

Fend also expanded on his idea of "Soil Rigs," describing a possible offshore industry for Southern California involving the harvesting of algae to offset the state's power troubles. Fend says his Soil Rigs off the West Coast and in the Gulf of California could provide a model of "increasing bioproductivity using an industrial framework."

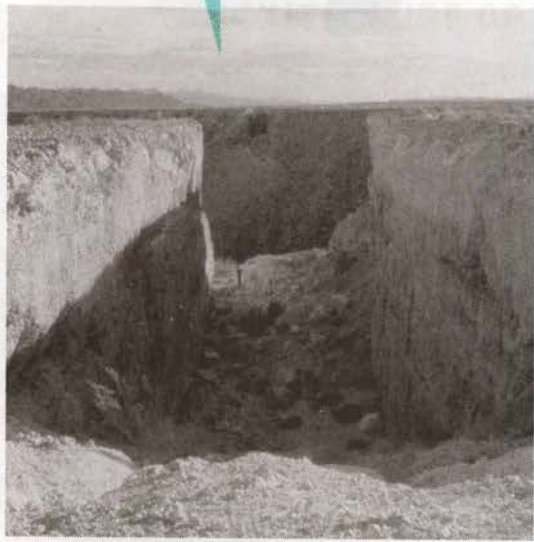
Fend outlined his plans for the American Southwest, including a "wild habitat development in the Pahrangat Basin" near Las Vegas, made possible by keeping tract-homes out of the valleys and constructing terraced slope-housing, thus enabling wildlife and native plants to survive despite intrusions into their territory.

Fend also proposed "a new partnership with Mexico" within the context of the UN Regional Seas Program, and the development of new (unspecified) energy technologies. Fend made clear that such a comprehensive project was only possible through an understanding of the parallels between the Gulf of California and the Persian Gulf; the Tigris-Euphrates River system seems to be at least as contentious an issue as is the use of the Colorado River in the States. The Tigris-Euphrates, which originates in the highlands of Turkey and meanders through Syria and Iraq, is controlled by the Turks, who have more than once threatened to turn off the tap to their neighbors downstream. Water negotiations in the Persian Gulf are often similar to those between California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, though you won't see troops from Salt Lake City invading Los Angeles anytime soon. With increasing populations and decreasing sources of water in all of the mentioned regions, things will get much stickier.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Peter Fend's presentation was his declaration that American earthworks art has the potential to be a multi-million dollar



Michael Heizer, "Double Negative," 1969-70. Mormon Mesa, Nevada. Collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



export. Fend says that the art world tells him: "you can't make art a second time." Fend's reply is: "why can't you?" His reflections on reviving Dennis Oppenheim's never-built "Dead Furrow" opened up a range of possibilities for giving old art concepts new life in water-stressed regions. Fend explains:

The "Dead Furrow," which is a model for a multi-channel canal, with about 20 narrow channels parallel to each other, is identical in concept and form to what the Russians built in the Iran-Iraq war zone in the 1980s to successfully penetrate Iranian territory. This structure extended for about 10 miles, and it would have penetrated the Karun River to complete a mammoth diversion of over 100 miles of the Tigris River. The function of multi-channel work is velocity. The waters are channeled narrowly enough to not braid or slow down, and therefore to not deposit their sediments. The river becomes a gun; hence the title "River Rifle."

Moving on from Oppenheim, Fend flashed slides of drawings based on the reuse of one of Robert Smithson's designs. He posed the question: "Can Robert Smithson's spiral systems, like those used in the seminal earth art piece "Spiral Jetty," be used to mix fresh and salt water to clean out western water irrigation canals?" No one knew the answer.

By the time Fend showed recently-taken slides of Michael Heizer's "Double Negative," a work from 1970 consisting of the removal of 240,000 tons of earth in the Nevada desert to create a large negative space in the side of a valley wall, he had conference participants with pre-

dominantly scientific backgrounds scratching their heads. When he proposed using Heizer's work a second time, comparing it to the Iraqi-built defensive barrier Fish Lake (completed 1986) in which water flows between two occasional salt lakes, some of the "art folk" in the audience squirmed in their seats, trying gamely to look beyond their prejudices against the "reuse" of this piece. Helen and Newton Harrison, the "grandparents" of ecological art practice, almost fell out of their chairs at some of Fend's statements; constant whispering was heard from their camp during Fend's talk.

Fend concluded with a declaration that we must carry on with the "Beuysian spirit" and "return to nature" approach used by artists like the ritual-based earth artist Mary Beth Edelson, and pursue pioneering earthworks devised to revive California's ecological dead zones and wild systems.

## WE NEED ART THAT LETS NATURE MAKE MORE NATURE.

At the post-lecture Q & A, I got the sense that many in the audience were simultaneously boggled and impressed by the depth of what Fend had covered over the last hour. Still, few seemed convinced of the possibilities of earth art revisited, and most grasped, at best, only chunks of what Fend was talking about. Fend's talk included all of the important Ocean Earth positions, but time constraints forced him to leave out needed specifics and the connecting details required to persuade the diverse audience members. Dr. Bill Roley, from the Southern California Permaculture Institute, asked Fend to step down from the podium to let someone talk who has actually had plans physically realized.

On the other hand, Matt Coolidge of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, another symposium participant, told me in an email message that he thoroughly enjoyed Fend's presentation. Fend "is one of those 'world systems' artists," Coolidge wrote, "and has a remarkably broad knowledge covering a sort of McLuhan-esque, Buckminster Fuller-ish 'global architecture.' His roots indeed seem to be in the '70s utopia-through-architecture school, but it's not anachronistic, it's like he climbed a branch of a tree that nobody else followed through on, out on a limb on his own, despite the hostilities that arose against such hubris. And he's kept up with the technologies of surveillance and space imag-



ing. How many artists can you say have done that? Now that we're coming back to some of these ideas, we find Fend has been making progress on his own all this time. I think he's a great resource and am curious as to why he isn't better known."

I take Fend's talk as a performance, much like those of the late artist Joseph Beuys, in which complex ideas were discussed within a mix of disciplinary concepts punctuated by visual symbols, technical drawings and blurry metaphysical pictorials. Fend, however, focused on the pragmatic activities of the artist without any detours into the metaphysical. His role is that of a social entrepreneur who works to change systems and provide solutions.

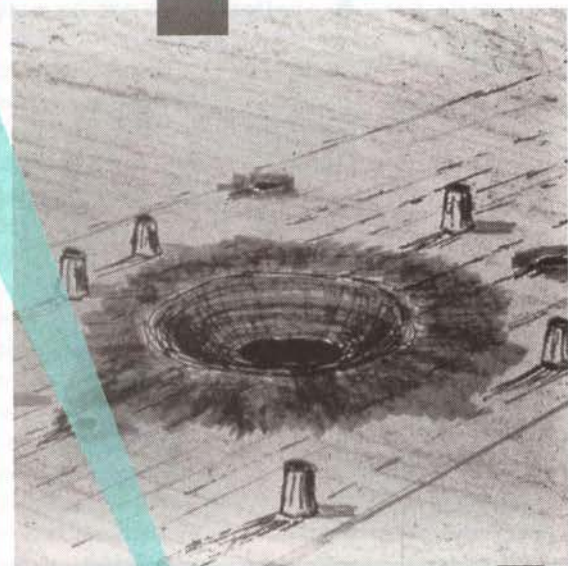
It is easy to dismiss Peter Fend as a dreamer or a kook, but I think he's a type of dreamer the world needs, the kind who can dip their hands into various disciplines and pull together something that can benefit all forms of life. Artists like Fend are, to use Beuys' analogy, sources of energy or links to a type of multi-dimensional thinking that exists outside the academy.

After traveling through the Southwestern deserts with little money, foolishly drinking water directly from the Colorado River, and sitting through two days of presentations, Fend is back in New York, where he recently unveiled his new work, "Big Deal: Revival of the Americas." Nicolai Fine Art's press release states that Fend aims "to tackle the ominous and growing threats of global warming, non-renewable resource depletion, and the widespread degradation of renewable soil/water resources." In conjunction with that show, Fend is trying to raise funds for his underwater Rigs by selling shares of stock in Ocean Earth's subsidiary corporation, Giant Algae Systems. Once again, Fend has a lot on his plate.

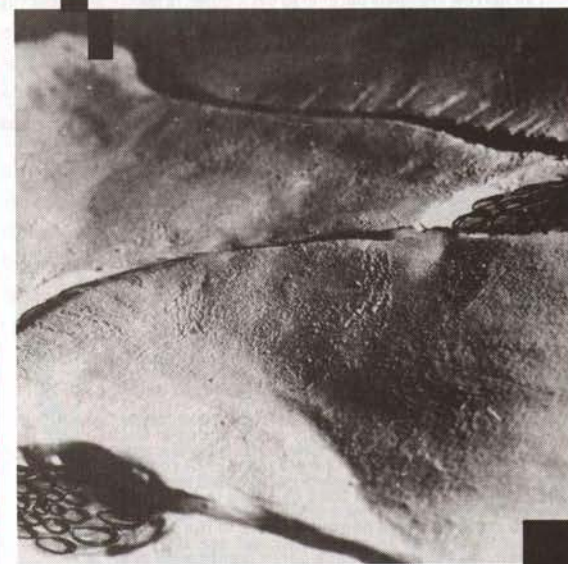
Last night I had a dream. Not about Fend disappearing in the desert, but about his Soil Rigs floating in the Pacific ocean, turning biomass into energy, as all the moth-balled fossil-fuel generators were scavenged for their metal parts. The lights never flickered.

1. The activities of OEDC are reminiscent of the Dutch artist group Superflex, whose methane-producing manure-biogas-digester balloons are used to provide electricity in some small third-world villages.

2. After the event, I contacted a few experts on ocean flow patterns to see if Fend's claim that the rainfall in California would be directly effected by the Three Gorges Dam construction was correct. I was told that "screwed" was a little extreme. One of my contacts said that "the dam will exert some significant influence on the overall flow pattern as far the discharge into the sea is concerned. As far as changes in the SoCal rainfall patterns are concerned, much uncertainty still exists."



Peter Fend, "Buildup of Death Hole and Dry Wells," 1978.



Peter Fend, "Instead of Dams, Highland Meanders and Waterwheels"