

ARTFORUM

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Critics' Pick

Peter Fend

ESSEX STREET



The question of whether art is capable of changing the world continues to spark polarizing debate. Common arguments against art's capacity for such change usually do not make explicit the underlying directives of such pronouncements. If art cannot change the world, a typical subtext runs, it should withdraw from social and political arenas altogether. Peter Fend, known for melding the spheres of Conceptual art and science since the 1980s, situates himself squarely in the opposing camp, fermenting the link between saying and doing, and thereby providing a test case for the relationships between modeling in the art world and carrying out in the real world, and between doing something momentous versus doing nothing at all.

Fend's latest show consists of a sequence of twelve large sheets of paper, hung simply on the wall, as if torn from his sketchbook. Each details in diagrams, photographs, and a surfeit of text several of Fend's plans, among them producing satellite imagery of contested sites for global mass media and citizen uses; growing and harvesting giant algae for biogas purposes; and drawing global maps based on shared saltwater bodies rather than nation-state boundaries. As each piece outlines, these projects were never actualized due to lack of funding, corporate obstructions, etc., thus raising the question: If an artistic project does not manifest the change it intended, is it a failure?

Such a mechanistic criterion for success is problematic, not least for overemphasizing production in an ecosystem that is already strained, as many of Fend's works detail, by way too much stuff. The exhibition proved for me that to expect the lone artist to single-handedly change the world is an absurdly tall order; joining with other fields of practice is a necessary course of action. Within art-world confines, however, Fend makes an important case for sketching as a process of thinking big in a realm where an uphill battle is commonly interpreted as an instruction for keeping calm and carrying on.

— Sarah Lookofsky