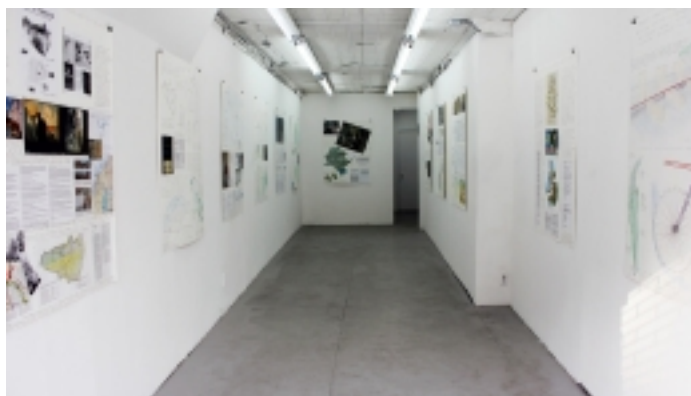


Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Docu-Matters: Q+A With Iconoclast Peter Fend

by Cathy Lebowitz 01/27/12

Peter Fend is a hard-driving, opinionated environmental missionary who for several decades has challenged perceptions of what art can do. During the late '70s and early '80s in New York's East Village, Peter Fend collaborated with various artists (Paul Sharits, Wolfgang Staehle and Joan Waltemath, among others), buying satellite photos of environmental and political hotspots, adding analysis and reselling them to TV stations. His ecologically minded schemes involve collecting plants in still waters for biogas and building channels in desert areas to restore plant and animal habitats. Fend showed regularly with Colin de Land at American Fine Arts through the '90s. In the early 2000s, he left New York for Germany and ultimately began traveling to various locations where he could work on specific projects, most recently spending time in New Zealand.



Fend Installation View 1;

"Uber die Grenze (Out of Bounds)" at Essex Street gallery on the Lower East Side marks his return to New York. The room is hung densely with documents—photos, hand-drawn models (lightweight offshore rigs, waterwheels) and maps, e-mails and official letters, with extensive handwritten commentary from Fend—that both track his attempts to make "applied earthworks" and detail how those endeavors have invariably met with failure.

Fend walked *AiA* through the show one Sunday, revealing his take on the unheralded functions of historical earthworks.

CATHY LEBOWITZ This is a solo show, but much of your work is done with others. One of your early collaborations was The Offices in the late '70s. How did that happen?

PETER FEND The Offices were during Colab. It was a spin-off that was pretty much spearheaded by Jenny [Holzer], to work with six people. But it didn't work. We did some things. We renamed 112 Greene Street as White Columns.

LEBOWITZ The Ocean Earth Development Corporation still serves as the umbrella for your pursuits. Did it come out of The Offices?

FEND A boyhood friend of mine had gone to law school and was working on Wall Street. He saw somewhere I was having a show and came to see it. Then he visited The Offices and said, "This is ridiculous. You're not legal, you're not incorporated—you're just a bunch of artists together. You have to have a corporation." In response, Jenny proposed a nonprofit company. But this lawyer said his firm did not want to back a nonprofit. I had proposed a for-profit company, and out of that came Ocean Earth. The corporation was not meant to be *the* success; it was just a legal thing to allow for the kind of projects that we were trying to do.

LEBOWITZ How did you and dealer Maxwell Graham come to work together for this current show?

FEND I don't exactly know the chronicle, but I believe Barbara and Howard Morse, two collectors of mine, had a role in it. I had the

impression that [*Artforum* associate editor] Carly Busta had some kind of role.

LEBOWITZ Did you already have the idea for the show?

FEND I did have the idea of showing work that I had not been able to show. It was getting scary actually. I do a lot of work, I spend a lot of money and I lay out lots of effort, and I get zero. So I felt I really needed to exhibit some of this. I made the offer to some galleries in Milan, and they didn't like it.

I was at a career impasse. I would be asked to do a project. They'd know what I was doing and I'd send stuff in and they'd like it. I'd meet all the scientists, everything's wonderful. Then when I would go back six months later, someone has stepped in and taken control. They offer me some money, but say I can only design a pavilion, for example. Basically they tell me I can't do my work.

LEBOWITZ Is this an issue of intellectual property? Have you explored applying for patents to protect your ideas?

FEND I've talked to lawyers about that. Most of these things are not really patentable in the normal sense. How are you going to patent, let's say, rowing to collect sea plants for biofuel? How do you actually patent the idea of cutting away part of a marsh to support life? I've done this with models. I know it works, but it's more like, how do you patent earth art? These things are domains of activity.

LEBOWITZ Are there other funding possibilities?

FEND There have been rumblings, people saying that it's important that art get serious and be ecological and all that. There is a man in London, who also teaches and operates in the Hague, who is with a big investment company. And the general idea is that-because we see the need for some kind of shift in the way art works and the ways culture, technology and society work-we're going to have patrons fund art projects to the tune of 500,000 to 2 million dollars, or actually euros. It will be a way to do new things.

But, I have to say, after some things happened over some months, there was suddenly silence.

LEBOWITZ From this patron?

FEND Yeah. I mean, nothing. Not "we can't do anything," just silence.

LEBOWITZ What happened?

FEND I don't know. I think it's about a Merzbau symposium I participated in. They said, "We want to do a Twitter project with you and we want you to say whatever you think." So I began to say whatever I thought about Libya and about Fukushima, and I said a lot of things that were not very pleasant in terms of World War I and the oil industry and how we messed up with the Persian Gulf, and then, of course, nuclear weapons and nuclear power. We have to really rethink these things because that's why Kurt Schwitters had such a miserable life, and suffered during World War I and World War II.

I got a really severe email, from the guy who had set up the meeting with the potential patron: "Do not come back to this country." Well, of course, I probably can, but I was being told I was persona non grata, and I'm told the funder doesn't want to hear from me ever again, because I have, essentially, doubted the British empire.

LEBOWITZ And now?

FEND I'd like to find a platform where I could have a couple hundred thousand dollars to just test ideas and see if they work at all. Ideas from Gordon Matta-Clark, Dennis Oppenheim. No one has even tested Tatlin's Tower. We don't know if it works! I think that's rather bizarre.

I'm saying you can take various structures designed and imaged, say designs by Oppenheim that were proposed to the government of Iran, and actually build them in the desert. And they would work-or at least I guess they would work. We would have to try it out. Almost everything here goes back to something else in art history.

LEBOWITZ Dennis Oppenheim stopped making Earth art. You told me that you signed a contract with him, giving you rights to build the earthworks he said he wasn't interested in making anymore.

FEND It was very dramatic when he stopped making earth art. I was there. It was threefold. A dealer backed off on funding a big scheme. He just wanted to take the models to Basel. This was a huge blow to Dennis. He had believed the dealer when he professed to be into commissioning artworks. And there was Virginia Dwan's abandonment of funding. Then there was the crisis in Iran, where Dennis was going to do some earthworks. The revolution put an end to that.

And he was shaken by the experience. Plus there was a very untoward write-up in the *Village Voice*, where he was essentially attacked for being a pro-Shah, pro-torture, pro-totalitarian artist. His work changed very much, and he became what he became, which was very different from what he was before he was about 40.

LEBOWITZ Are there any projects documented here that are the most important to you?

FEND I guess the answer is whatever's going to pay. I mean, I'll do anything that someone is willing to pay for, and I don't get into too much trouble with.

In Bristol, England, where they have a tradition of engineering and all that, there was quite a bit of talk about doing Matta-Clark's balloon housing idea. And I worked on that. I published on it four or five times, the idea of a balloon in a suspended structure, maybe a bridge. But when I found an engineering company that would do a feasibility study for £1000, which is nothing, they said—"Ah, I don't know."

LEBOWITZ This was the government in Bristol?

FEND Well, the Bristol City Council. And some other entities, like the Arnolfini—nobody wants to do it. We can't do that, they say, we just want to make art.

It's a curious art historical problem. The balloon idea actually started in 1911, in Russia, was then developed in 1927 by Ivan Léonidov, and taken up by Matta-Clark in 1977, and then was given over to me to handle.

Also we should test De Maria's *Lightning Field*. I think it would be good to see if it actually does create more immunogens and antigens in the ecosystem and therefore improve ossification. You see this in Venice, by the way, quite prominently near the electrical fields, so it might be a good idea to check it out. But they just get up from the table and say "God forbid anyone ever build the *Lightning Field* twice. God forbid anyone do any kind of art piece ever again in any way." Of course never mind Sherrie Levine. So, we never had a test. Even with Dennis, he would say, "Well, you can do it, Peter. I'm just trying to do contemplative things."

LEBOWITZ Do you think art is stuck in the visionary and is not allowed to be practical, from your experiences?

FEND Well, no. Renaissance painting has been systemizing to photography, to video, to all kinds of display systems. We build according to that. The application of art seems to me fairly normal.

When the Rubells were asking what I do, we happened to be in a gallery where there was a painting by Mark Tansey of the *Spiral Jetty* with some Native Americans and their horses looking at it. I said, "That's what I'm trying to do—return to a viable habitat with buffalo and a more respectful use of land, and using Earth art as a modus operandi to revive rivers and marshes."

You might not call it art, I don't call it art, I think it's architecture. Everything I do is architecture. I've given more talks at architecture schools than at art schools. But it's in a curious realm, it's neither art nor science, it's actually both as architecture.

LEBOWITZ Do you see your work with ocean basins as architecture?

FEND That's just about the frame of the planning, and actually like a literal interpretation of the urinal by Duchamp. There was a verdict at a big conference in London in 2005 that Duchamp's urinal is the most influential art piece of the 20th century. They said it was more influential than *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Picasso. If it's so influential, in what way is it influential? Well, influential as outlined by Jack Burnham in his book *Beyond Modern Sculpture* [1968]. It changes the idea of sculpture from that which is on a pedestal to that which is in a gravity field, an entropy field, a breakdown field, some sort of basin. And, well, here you have a basin, the Pacific basin and the Atlantic basin and the Indian Ocean basin. These are all urinals, so to speak, around Antarctica. And that is the influence of Marcel Duchamp.

If you have Christ on the cross it's going to have an influence on human behavior. People are going to behave like Christ on a cross and go into battle and die and suffer and everything else. In *Les Croix de Bois*, Antonin Artaud talks about Christian iconography and what happens in war. They essentially enact that icon. So we enact the icon of Duchamp.

LEBOWITZ You spoke to some young people at the opening who you said will enable you to project your work into the future somehow. Do you want to tell me about that?

FEND I'm always looking for people who are keen to do something. I'm generally aware of what you might call "the theory of the holy grail." In your 20s, you do your odyssey, you figure out what you want to do with your life. You have that discovery of your mission and your identity. So it's important to work with people who are under 30. They are the ones who are going to try to find something to do. So, I'm always keen on what young people are doing, because they are the ones who are going to carry on. I do the best I can to try to make something happen, hopefully within the corporate frame so I get some money, so I don't get ripped off, but still, I think their voices need to be heard as somehow sovereign. They're more important than my voice, my voice is too weathered.

At the opening, one person, an artist, said to me that the plastic bottles in the ocean are really serious and we have to do something about it. I say, "Okay, I'll try to tackle that." And another one says to me, "Airplanes are a real big problem; they cause per capita global warming." And I say, "you're probably right, more pollution than any other thing." And I have a project I'm working on about fueling airplanes.

LEBOWITZ Did you prepare all these posters for the exhibition?

FEND Posters? They're not posters. Yes, I prepared them. I made them.

LEBOWITZ What are they?

FEND Well, what these are . . . I think this is actually, in many ways, about the Morses having a role, their esthetic. They like the idea of docu-matter, as they call it. Also, the esthetic of Maxwell, who likes the idea of the pages of the book to be evident. He likes to see the edge of the page that has been reproduced here, everything designated. And I understand. They are really into the idea of the document. The document is printed and has a thing-ness about it.

LEBOWITZ Did anything surprise you about making them?

FEND There's more writing than I thought I would do, but then again I was asked to do quite a bit of writing. So this show is more or less a collaboration. Had I had a show in Milan or somewhere, I would have just shown the drawings themselves, of the maps.

LEBOWITZ What about this one called *Noticing a Parallel between Iraq and New York*?

FEND I was actually kicked out of a show at the New Museum for that one. Did you ever wonder, as a kid, why the border of New York is so weird? Why there's New Jersey at all, or Connecticut? They call it the "tri-state area"—why is it tri-state when it's only one place? This came to mind after seeing a satellite image of the Persian Gulf, and I got to know that area very well. Somehow it came into my mind that they must be comparable, and I went to my maps and they're all the same scale.

I looked back to history, and wow, they were divided by the same British colonial office, and actually they're doing a kind of cookie cutter the same way. They wanted to divide and conquer—let's make sure Kuwait and Iraq are never going to get together—whereas New Jersey and New York do get together with things like the Port Authority or the Tri-State Planning commission.

LEBOWITZ Is there anything else you want to say about the state of art or how you will proceed?

FEND I hope people are getting a bit scared by the Ikea-for-the-rich going on at Gagosian now. I mean it's a bit ludicrous to have these dot paintings become a thing we are all supposed to really like. Are we just going to play games like that? Or are we going to get a bit more serious?

I'm going to argue that the reason why this civilization does not have an effective economy, in Europe or the U.S. or wherever, and the reason why it's not having a great ecology, is that we're not giving enough confidence and trust to art. Art isn't great, it's avant-garde. Art goes into the unknown and probes around. Art is the pioneering thing. Science can't do it. Science is very good at organizing knowledge and so on, but you have to give much more credibility and credence to art. If we don't do that, we will perish.

If projects like these in this room could happen, we and our civilization would be much farther along. We would not have the unemployment we do, because there would be plenty of work in developing the technology. The cutting edge of our society is cut off. The avant-garde has no function.

We're reduced to ridicule and silliness—Carsten Höller, and the dot paintings. The avant-garde is not allowed to do its job, and therefore we cannot advance. (Hirst is an architect by the way, not an artist, but I'll tell you about that another time.)