

Art in America

PETER FEND ESSEX STREET

Peter Fend is not an easy artist to love, for him a point of pride that has become a theme. The dozen documentary works on paper in his recent show mix rage against the machine—governments of major countries and the institutions that serve them (or vice versa)—and disappointment with the various art world forces that have stood between Fend and the realization of his plans.

Those plans, all concerned with the natural environment's decline, are dazzlingly inventive and madly ambitious. Paradigm shifting is generally their starting point. For instance, it helps, Fend suggests, to think of geography in terms of saltwater basins rather than nation states. He has ideas for restoring water flow around the Arabian/Persian Gulf, and wildlife along with it; he'd do the same for Jamaica Bay, in Queens, and the salt seas of Libya. In fact, he told *A.i.A.* in an online interview that Duchamp's urinal is influential mainly because 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."

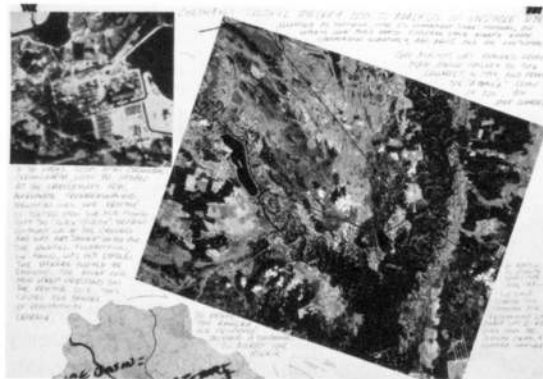
Among Fend's earliest commitments, undertaken with collaborators who have included Jenny Holzer, Wolfgang Staehle, Paul Sharits and Joan Waltemath, was the circulation of satellite data of various geopolitical hotspots, such as a toxic microalgae bloom in the North Sea and the site of the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. Some of the projects outlined here date back decades; none have been completed to the artist's satisfaction. The entities that commissioned and then (he says) compromised then range from Documenta, the Venice Biennale and the Royal Academy of Art in London to *Grand Street* magazine.

For this exhibition, the proposals have been compiled in a form reminiscent of

high-school science-fair posters: hastily handwritten texts and sketches drawn in colored pencil, along with charts, maps and documentation of correspondence and other evidentiary material, are combined on big sheets of heavy paper with little regard for graphic design or even coherence. The result seems credibly urgent but a little odd: cutting-edge ideas put forward with the resources that might be at hand in a cabin in the woods.

Clearly, Fend doesn't care—he's already on to the next dozen projects. His gift, for seeing connections that most others don't, is shared with a handful of other politically minded artists, from Matthew Ritchie to Mark Lombardi. (His anger at finding his ideas applied without credit or compensation is shared, probably, by many more; environmental artist Mary Miss, for instance, has recently found herself in that situation, and not for the first time.) Still, Fend is in most ways on his own. The title of this show, "Über die Grenze," is, the press release explains, a term once used by the German Ministry to describe Fend's work. It means "out of bounds," a characterization he clearly relishes, and has long deserved.

—Nancy Princenthal



Peter Fend: *Chernobyl: Truthful Imagery Led to Analysis of Unstable Site* (detail), 2012, mixed mediums on paper, 50 by 38 inches overall; at Essex Street.