

ARTFORUM

Peter Fend

ESSEX STREET

114 Eldridge St

September 7–October 26

In “Rebels Are Reasonable,” Fend brings a spirit of understated subversion to three interrelated projects—a deadpan video documenting the ebb and flow of the sea, sets of panels, and a series of redrawings of flags from around the world. In an effort to unseat traditional orientations of countries in the global South to those in the North, Fend exposes the flag as nothing more than an empty symbol often bearing the legacy of imperialist violence.

Flags, 2014, consists of ten aluminum panels over which abstractions of national flags have been printed. Fend illustrates ten distinct regions, including the paragon of colonial history, the United Kingdom, whose flag becomes a distorted, abstract mess that is a far cry from the respectability for which it affectedly strives. Printed with inkjet, the images are marked by horizontal lines, and are revealed to be as flimsy as national borders themselves, or, by extension, the artist’s authorial role. As a white man from the United States, Fend could be thought of as representative of the imperialist project in his well-researched but nevertheless self-aggrandizing reformulation of the borders and cultures of others.

That said, Fend uses the impersonal kitsch of the printer cartridge to take on very serious issues of public space; this method paradoxically effaces the artist’s presence from his self-admittedly personal activist work. We must contend therefore with a productive absence of answers that emerges from Fend’s irreverent and self-critical relationship to materials. By folding criticisms of his own political views into the show, Fend makes a punk-inspired intervention that opens his work to multivalent critique. — William J. Simmons



Peter Fend, *ISIS*, 2014, UV inkjet print on aluminum, 12 x 18".

A discussion related to the 09.26.14 Picks listing:

Re: Peter Fend by essexstreet (10.12.14 04:37 pm)

Response by the artist to the critic.

I behave as I do because I am a US citizen. I've learned this after living 20 years overseas: we US citizens have been drilled in the Bill of Rights, unlike others. Mr. Maxwell Graham, of Essex Street, asked me to produce a show that responds to current events, and after very much back and forth we arrived at a practice I launched with Documenta in 1992: producing new flags for sovereign states or regions. We also showed my word-stacks on serious issues, and my video observation of a site in Staten Island where the Labrador Current arrives 24/7, and where I want to do my renewable-energy tests.

I presume that Mr. Simmons is also a US citizen. But I am not sure that he read the text that accompanies the exhibition. The text shows that I was not acting “on my own.”

The text shows that in almost every case I acted in response to requests by other people. I was asked, with some urgency, and on the basis of my experience with satellite data and earth art, to propose territorial solutions for: Algeria (their Ambassador to France), the Islamic world in North Africa and the Gulf (Iranian diplomat asking for an “Islamic solution”), Scotland and Britain (work commissioned in Aberdeen), Haiti (Basquiat and Bedard), Jamaica (the head of the North America Office, UN Environment Program, a Jamaican), Russia (a trader in securities from Russia, Ukraine and Kazakstan), Korea (a public dialogue with an authority on North Korea), Belarus (as part of a world-respected analysis of Chernobyl, with consequences already in Ukraine), and so on.

There was nothing “kitsch”, “self-admittedly personal”, “irreverent”, “self-critical” or “self-aggrandizing” in my proposals. I was exercising my right and duty in this country to express an opinion. The opinion, further, was not my “own political views.” I just make what a number of prominent people say visible.

In speaking up and showing, with explanatory text, what I propose for various countries of the world, I exercise my Constitutional right and duty to voice an opinion, and to contribute to the discourse about US world policy. This task has become crucial. The Financial Times editorialized recently that US foreign policy is “rudderless,” and is quickly spinning out of control. Even David Letterman voices alarm, saying recently, “We can’t put up with 2 more years of this nonsense.” The Financial Times calls for a thorough overhaul of US foreign-policy appointees. It calls for a shift from simply reacting to events towards effecting events. It calls for a policy. I recommend this. So, I exhibit and write.

So, why does the art critic think I'm being “dead-pan”? Why does he think that speaking up on how the world proceeds I am just “self-aggrandizing”? And how, given what I wrote in the show's text, does he surmise that “Fend exposes the flag as nothing more than an empty symbol”?

Presumably, Mr. Simmons has read the Constitution. How, from such an childhood education, could he suggest that my being “a white man from the United States” makes me a “representative of [an] imperialist project”? Am I, due to gender and race, disqualified from participating in a necessary discourse in our country?

For the moment, I'm supposing that Mr. Simmons viewed the show but did not read the accompanying text, then chose to ignore the fact that I am a fellow citizen of his, in the same sinking boat.

Peter Fend
first a US citizen
second, architect/artist
third, of Bavarian-Swedish ancestry
fourth, a male

Re: Peter Fend by wsim123 (10.12.14 10:16 pm)

The best artists are the ones who cause you to rethink the parameters of your relationship to art history, and I'm very grateful to Mr. Fend for raising important questions about my assessment of his exhibition.

I should begin by reiterating my unwavering support of and respect for the artists of Collaborative Projects (COLAB). These activists and creators have had an immense impact on my growth as an historian and a critic.

Moreover, I will reaffirm that my review of Mr. Fend's show was positive. It was my hope to explain how the works incorporate potential post-colonial critiques even at the level of making; the objects' materiality illustrates our complex relationship to representation in the imperial context. I wanted to show how Mr. Fend, unlike many artists who attempt to make work in the age of globalism, exhibits a refreshing sense of self-criticality and a dedication to on-the-ground engagement in various regions of the world. I sincerely apologize if my point did not come across; in any case, this is a show that is thought-provoking, and unequivocally worth seeing.

One of the most wonderful aspects of Mr. Fend's practice is the wealth of knowledge and supporting material that he brings to his shows. If I missed some background information about the creation of these objects, that was certainly my oversight. Perhaps Mr. Fend's gallery could consider ways to make supporting materials more readily integrated into their programming.

Disagreement is the core of truly progressive discourse, and I'm so excited to have been a part of the ongoing discussion of Mr. Fend's work.