



BUREAUCRACY TO PLOUGHSHARES
On Peter Fend at Essex Street, New York



Peter Fend, "Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen Or Read Or Done", Essex Street, New York, 2012, exhibition view

Julian Assange's spiritual father goes by the name of Peter Fend. Long before confidential documents found their way via WikiLeaks into the wide-open spaces of the Internet, the American artist made information that was supposed to be kept under wraps public by using it as the basis of his works.

The topics he has addressed in his art accordingly include issues such as the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, the pollution of the environment, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Yet even more important to him than the disclosure of secret materials, it seems, is pointing out the mechanisms employed by the authorities that seek to prevent the public from gaining access to such secret knowledge. That, at least, is the impression created by his most recent exhibition in New York.

In 1979, Peter Fend – working under the aegis of the Ocean Earth Development Corporation – formed a subsidiary collective with several artist and filmmaker friends including Colleen Fitzgibbon, Paul Sharits, Taro Suzuki, and Wolfgang Staehle.¹ They conceived of their group as a militia, or more precisely, a "space force", exercising the civil rights to bear arms and organize in the name of national self-defense as stipulated by the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution. But rather than firearms, their weaponry of choice was information, namely Landsat civil-satellite data of crisis-prone regions, which they would purchase, crop, color, and strategically distribute revealing such geopolitically sensitive data as an analysis of resource extraction in the

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Amazon basin and its impact on the Caribbean Sea (1983), key geological oversights regarding radiation containment following the Chernobyl meltdown (1986), locations of several Soviet submarine bases (1986), and the site of Pakistan's nuclear facility (1987). In other words, Fend and his co-conspirators, via a Foucaultian rethinking of "bearing arms", used the Constitution to legally effect a kind of proto-WikiLeaks or GlobalRev.² Of course then, like now, forces of authorities made efforts to stop Fend's flows, to take fragments of his content out of circulation. But you get the sense that Fend found these omissions to be incredibly interesting, as they precisely isolated the places where the power structure could best be destabilized.

In Fend's recent solo show in New York, "Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen or Read or Done", what we were shown was just that –



the images, proposals, and correspondence from twelve projects that had been censored, if not placed in a state of perpetual bureaucratic deferral, as well as the names and affiliations of who had banned or denied what. For example, one work featuring various satellite views of Chernobyl's reactor site included the following observations and facts: THE LANDFILL FOUNDATION WE FOUND, WAS NOT STABLE: THE DANGER WOULD BE ONGOING. THE RIVER AND MUD KEEP PRESSING ON THE REACTOR SITE. THIS CAUSES THE DANGER OF RADIOACTIVITY LEAKAGE. And then on the opposite edge of the page, THIS ANALYSIS WAS REMOVED FROM MARC JANCOU GALLERY BY THE GALLERIST, IN 1994, AND FROM THE "ATOMICA" SHOW OF 200, [sic] BY JANE LOMBARD.

As with the eleven other works on view, the evidence – which variously comprised topological maps and statistical facts, printed emails annotated in pen with cost break-outs and contact information, technical drawings, illustrative sketches, media clippings, and correspondence on corporate letterhead explaining why certain studies could not go forward – was presented across as many uniform sheets of approximately 3.5 x 2.5-foot page of heavy art paper. There was a logic to the ordering: Loose registers chronologically detailed the history of each project beginning with the initial idea up top, a mid-section outlining the public, private, and media response, and then, at the bottom, Fend's thoughts on how the project might evolve next. But within each page and within each register, the information was densely layered, sometimes overlapping such that these painting-size folios seemed as much working documents as manuscript illuminations or frozen track-changes Word files producing a kind

of analogue screenspace filled with data, physically cut and pasted.

Yet as much as these works so emphatically relay particular geographical spaces and new ways of engaging them, what we were really given in “Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen or Heard or Done” were images of bureaucracy; indices of the nightmarish administrative barriers that have been placed in Fend’s path as he has endeavored to realize his incredibly innovative plans – politically fantastic as they may be – for restoring the salt seas of Libya or replacing fossil fuels with biogas made from kelp harvested in New Zealand, Japan, and Montenegro, which would in turn revive the aquatic life of each region. If, in the 1980s, Fend and his colleagues took “information” to be a more potent weapon than firearms, here Fend articulates, in his own baroque para-administrative syntax, the reciprocal defense that governments and corporations have used to thwart his advances. A COMMISSIONED EFFORT TO BUILD A FRESH WATER PLANT-TO-GAS INDUSTRY, one work reads, WAS IN 2010 FIRST RIDICULED AND THEN TAKEN OVER BY AN [sic] N.Z. UNIVERSITY, WITH BIG FUNDING FROM THAT NATION’S APPLIED-SCIENCE FOUNDATION. ALL MY AUTHORSHIP WAS REMOVED. One conception of bureaucracy is as a class of weaponry³ – a sophisticated, immaterial technology, unrecognized by world watch groups and the media as a form of warfare, but with no less power to incapacitate those subject to it.⁴ It is to this invisible, intermediary matrix that Fend’s recent work testifies and in doing so, calls the viewer to react.

In contrast to “relational” art, which has been characterized in these pages as a form that “can’t effect change at any political level, molecular or

structural” as “it is not open-ended: the ‘relations’ are defined”,⁵ Fend’s work attempts to radicalize his viewers, to unmoor them from their positions as consumers of content and experience via what is, no doubt, a paranoid portrayal of the capitalist forces that order our contemporary governing structures. Whereas relational art “liberates” exhibition spaces only to bait those who visit into providing content – content that is then used as the material image of the work (for purposes of representing it online, in a review, during a sale, etc.) – Fend takes whatever space he’s given, be it gallery or boardroom or lecture hall and then fills it with pieces intended to deliver content overload, to expose perforations in “the system”. And in doing so, he hopes that the individuals he reaches, whether policy makers or mechanical engineers or sons of a corporate executives (note that Fend does not see viewers as blank subjects, ever; a viewer always has an active position in the real world), might be compelled to make effective use of this information, this intelligence, beyond its site of presentation.

Following this same logic, Fend identifies as an artist only when it’s in his best interest to do so. Adopting this subject position, which he assumes neo-liberalism presumes to be wholly benign (even beneficial to its aims), he has little trouble crossing class and international borders – traveling *über die Grenze* – and has much easier access to the resources and particular individuals key to his projects than he would were he to identify as an activist or radical academic alone. In the Chernobyl piece he notes, THE GERMAN TRADE DELEGATION [...] INTENDING TO SELL GERMAN NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY WAS TURNED BACK AT THE AIRPORT IN KIEV. You could say Fend’s relationship to the world at large is topo-

logical: not just his role as an artist, and yours as a viewer, or a critic, a collector, a capitalist, but of all flows of power and even the very primary resources by which that power is fundamentally derived. With this understanding, he then sees the world as a system of flows – of information, but also flows of people and particular skill sets, as well as the blockages (military, financial, bureaucratic) that allow for the aggregation of wealth by certain nations/regions/individuals and the impoverishment of others.

This is certainly not to say that Fend is some naïve do-gooder seeking to save the planet. If anything, his practice is interesting because he assumes that the world is already post-apocalyptic; that Armageddon has already happened and that this is not something that we should find depressing at all. Rather, it gives us license to disregard all existing boundaries and charges us with rebuilding new global machinery with whatever is still salvageable, be it an estuary in the Middle East or the mailing list of a vaingloriously “downtown” young gallery on the now more-or-less dead Lower East Side. For Fend spaces can easily be reterritorialized via art, as well as social relations and bureaucratic structures, too. “Art is a means to survival,” he tells us. “We shall imitate it in order to evolve.”⁶

CAROLINE BUSTA

Peter Fend, “Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen or Heard or Done”, Essex Street, New York, January 8–February 12, 2012.

Notes

- 1 Wolfgang Staehle is a New York-based artist who would later form thing.net, “a flexible and supportive venue (begun in 1991) for developing, presenting and distributing innovative forms of on-line activism, media art and cultural criticism [...] as a dial-up bulletin board system (BBS) that facilitated discussion and experimentation,

primarily within the New York City arts communities.” In 1995, the network launched as one of the first independently networked social platforms on the Internet. <http://the.thing.net/about/about.html>

- 2 GlobalRev (www.livestream.com/globalrev) is a web-streaming account used by activists to independently live-broadcast political demonstrations often highlighting acts of aggression by the state.
- 3 See David Graeber, *Beyond Power/Knowledge: An Exploration of the Relation of Power, Ignorance, and Stupidity*, lecture, London School of Economics, May 25, 2006, widely available as a PDF <http://libcom.org/files/20060525-Graeber.pdf>.
- 4 For instance, the United States legal system may protect its citizens from direct “cruel and unusual punishment”, yet it meanwhile enables the proliferation of highly complex (and largely for-profit) bureaucratic systems (e.g., health-care, mortgage, and student loan lending, immigration) that ensure a state of precarity and alienation that could feasibly be described as “torture”.
- 5 Nicolás Guagnini, “Community”, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 17, June 2007, pp. 73–75.
- 6 Peter Fend in conversation with David Joselit and Rachel Harrison, August 14, 2007. An edited version of this discussion was published as “An Interview with Peter Fend”, in: *October* 125 (Summer 2008).