

Peter Fend, *City Bild*, Installation view, Esther Schipper Gallery, 1990. Courtesy American Fine Arts Co.

Construction and Development

A Conversation with Peter Fend

Jérôme Sans

Jérôme Sans: *What is the exact meaning of OECD and why do you work under this acronym?*

Peter Fend: Ocean Earth is an attempt to integrate the art of recent decades into an architectural program. After witnessing the failure of architects to implement the large-scale ideas of artists, e.g., the earth artists, it was decided to establish a corporation of artists directed towards multi-person, large-expense projects.

Ocean Earth Construction and Development Corporation was invented in response to a legal requirement for an original name. Several names were attempted, such as Oecological Construction Company, to achieve an acronym with "o" and "e." Then Ocean Earth was devised, in part because it could be directed towards or situated within the ocean-basin regions already adopted as an architectural framework. Finally, the full name acceptable to the State of New York as "new" was, by coincidence we noticed, the acronym OECD, which we decided to keep. "We" included: the lawyer Richard Cole, founding shareholders Coleen Fitzgibbon (from the offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince and Winters), Wolfgang Staehle, and Joan Waltemath.

Why did you base yourself in the art world when you deal with real-world issues and when you work in this real world instead of bringing pieces of it into the art world?

I wanted to be in the real world. I don't much respect the art world. It's too small, too impotent. But when I tried to function

in the real world, in the World Bank or international law, I discovered first that policies were being wrongly formulated because of ignorance of current art, as if there were a certain visual concept or intellectual backwardness, and, secondly, that the overwhelming need in time would be a new technology in relation to ecology, a new means of production, which—as a prominent scientist wrote to me—would require not more science but "new" culture. I found such a cultural source in artists like Beuys, Smithson, or Horn, Oppenheim, Schneemann. . . . For this reason, seeing a world unaware of art's contribution, I chose to enter the art world in order to expose it and cast it in a wider, larger forum, in the real world of mass media and architecture.

Are you considered a "political" artist?

I am not trying to do "political art," nor am I trying to use art to advance ideas from outside art. Instead, my work is to develop art into a force commensurate with its imaginings and intentions, rather than with the relatively minor market of the art world. Therefore, although of course I have some artistic or architectural creations of my own that are unique, stand-alone inventions, I could be regarded as less an "artist" in the sense of someone with craft skills and rather as a new kind of dealer, a kind of "packager" of ideas and works from art, but into a much larger market. Thus there is a somewhat competitive situation with gallery dealers and curators, who seek to represent a "me" or even the "we" that is Ocean Earth. The chief difficulty I have with dealers is that, as with virtually all the art world, a large



Peter Fend, *Beijing (Peking) China*, Satellite photograph. Courtesy American Fine Arts Co.

succession of exhibitions is generally considered to be all that is required in a career. Rather, any exhibition should be seen only as an advertising effort, part of many other types of advertising, designed to get the ideas or images established in everyday life and commerce. An exhibition in the art world should be seen as nothing more than a beginning or a launching towards the implementation of ideas. Often I am told that selling to news networks or scientists is not "art," but whatever they get is also what I show in art galleries, so obviously it is not a question of whether sometimes I do not do "art," but whether sometimes, or usually most times, I'd rather take the art out into a much bigger market than the art market. Why? Not only because I want to communicate with other people in the world and not just a fish bowl, but also because normally the outside world understands what I show or sell to them better than curators or other artists in the art world. At the time when a prominent New York critic was saying she could not understand my basin maps, I was showing these same maps with the same statements to a national audience on a prime-time talk show with great success. This suggests to me that the art critic was blind. A prominent art-magazine editor told me that artists were only supposed to have ideas but not actually realize them. To which I would comment "Why have an idea if you cannot make it happen?" and "What are the Pyramids if not a large-scale executed work of art?"

Are you doing politics?

Yes, and also no. Yes, as anyone doing art, when a new idea conceived, born and brought up in the world prefigures at least a part of the future, that is a political act. If it is not political, i.e., laden with implications, it is not art. No, also. I am not acting with any political ideas from outside art. I am certainly not running for office, for example.

What are your intentions within the art world?

One: building up a label, a brand name for ideas or reputations for certain brand names.

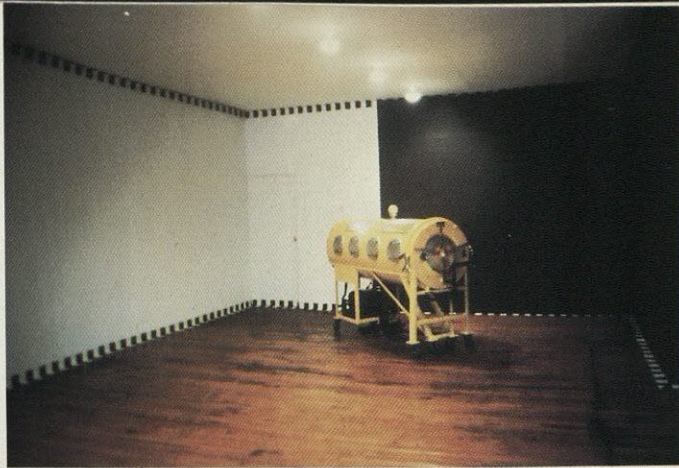
Two: testing new inventions and ideas without having to be accountable for all details or errors. The art world lets you make mistakes.

Three: taking advantage of a lifestyle without national frontiers. At the present time, I am probably better known, certainly better respected, in certain parts of the world of international diplomacy and science. The art world allows me to build that reputation without having to be respectably clothed, housed, or fed.

You claim the basis of your work is architecture. What do you mean by architecture?

I began with the classic premises set down by Leon Battista Alberti, that architecture must ensure cities (never mind "buildings") with clean air, clean water, and a handsome prospect. No

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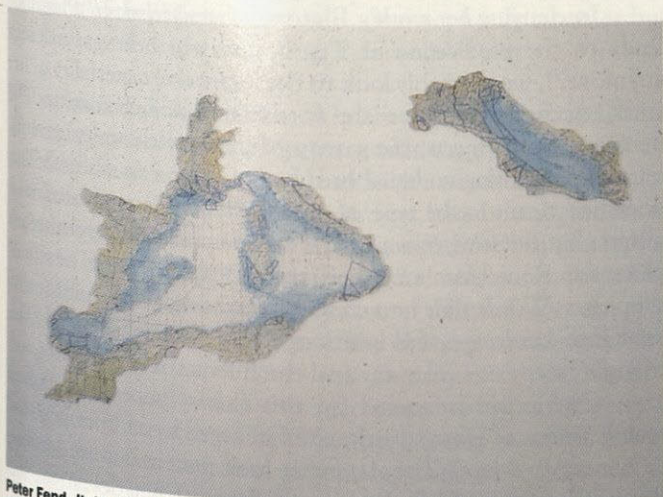


Fend, Scully, Burlin, *Towards An Other Architecture Pneumatic*, Space Studies at Nadln Gallery 80. Courtesy American Fine Arts Co.

city in the world today, given its dependence on fossil fuels and other contaminants, meets its basic requirement. We can say, after reviewing the public obligations of other professions, such as medicine, law, or science, that the profession of architecture—being responsible for the physical environment in which people live—has totally failed to do its job. No other profession has this job. I would have attended a school of architecture, I suppose, but I made these new conclusions. First, no school was preparing architects to do the job defined by Alberti. Secondly, the ideas of artists like Smithson or Matta-Clark were much more fertile ground for architecture than the modernist and postmodernist academicism taught in schools. Thirdly, as history shows, almost no great architect—which is what the world needs now—was educated at an architecture school. Architecture is a reflection of history and requires a timely integration of ideas from art, science, even other fields. It cannot be taught. If it is taught it is automatically passé, and therefore unresponsive.

Precisely; you develop architectural concepts that seem to go beyond the traditional understanding of the word. Are you building new cities and environments?

I am not doing architecture. I am exhibiting aspects of architectural practice and I am building up an authoritative body of knowledge about sites that will soon need a new architecture, such as Beirut and the Persian Gulf and Cold War military bases.



Peter Fend, Italy, 1989, *Aeronautical Charts* mounted on masonite. Courtesy American Fine Arts Co.

This knowledge, for which I am best known in the international press, gives me what my uncle, an architect, said was the first sine qua non in architecture: access to the sites. The only architecture so far realized in my career has been and continues to be News Room. News Room is the business venture involving, at this time, about four principal artists. I am the architect, and through assets from the satellite-monitoring with Ocean Earth, I help furnish information. But I do not "do" it. Whoever is working in the News Room "does" it. I have legally secured the names under which I practice the design and locations or norms where information from around the world can be gathered. The locating act—in establishing a newsroom network irrespective of current TV boundaries—is part of the architecture. Television is territorial, while the actual broadcast material is not; it is spatial, hence architectural. Television as tele-vision, as the transmission of images and messages through a defined space, is architecture; the programming, or contents, of course is not. In this sense, I work with News Room: not as a news project, or programming project, but as a media-rearranging project, through geographical space.

But then what about the maps?

The maps are an architectural manifestation of ideas from conceptual art. They represent the physical frame within which earthworks and megastructural urban design could be planned, financed, and built. They arise by logic from the aesthetic of recent art, just as geometric nation-state forms arose in earlier times from the logic of garden or cathedral forms. The maps have political implications but they exist as valid regardless of what political ideology or party adopts them, or is practiced, or even if nobody lives there. They are simply the basins descending into salt water seas, as variously defined. They are scientific documents. However, they are also subject to a change here or there according to the perceived needs of potential clients. For example, a basin map from the Black Sea may or may not include the upper Don River basin; depending on our decision to make the river flow into prediluvian trenches to the Caspian Sea for the better stability of both the Caspian and Black Seas. Within the Dead Sea basin, according to previous engineering alternative options, there can be included—or not—the politically charged cities of Damascus and Amman. The differences are slight but explosive. □

Jérôme Sans is an art critic living in Paris.