

(Made in 1997 with Peter Fend in New York, Previously unpublished)

Interview with Peter Fend

Zeigam Azizov: Why did you decide to use maps?

Peter Fend: Earth art required located action. You have to spend a lot of money to build, so you have to be sure WHERE to build. I would make an image, a map, of the region in which one can build. Then be able to zero in. All the maps done in order to record past actions and to set up future actions. Robert Smithson, Denis Oppenheim and Joseph Beuys, they all practiced mapping in order to locate actions. An action of mapping is followed by an action in the site mapped. One maps a “plan for the future”, one even maps the future itself.

A painting, for example, does not normally indicate a plan of action. Nor a sculpture, nor even a perspective drawing, a rendition. But a map always predicates an action. Or, if historical, it records an action.

Mapping compels or indicates a chain of events.

The domain of mapping, then, is architecture.

Not painting, not sculpture, not drawing per se, but architecture.

I have thought that Earth artists, like Robert Smithson, are initiating a new architecture. I had a very simple idea about architecture: it is three

dimensional forms positioned in space, in space which we can move. Getting through a space within which we can move requires charting out that space and mapping the space. If an artist makes structures, an artist must think how to locate them. Hence maps.

Z.A: How would you describe your work?

P.F: It is architectural practice. If I write, that is meant to wake people up. It is not my main work. It is only meant to allow people to practice my sort of work. To practice their artistic ideas. The art world now is manipulated by the governments. It is being used by outside parties for their own propaganda or public-placating ends. It does not have its own sovereignty of decision. It does have an ability to move from drawing through painting and sculpture to built landscape, to built worlds. It is blocked by being patronized, supported, and otherwise bought out, all for ulterior motives. When I say this, people accuse me of being paranoid. As if there were nothing wrong with the current state of impotence among artists and architects. So, my work is architecture, but I am trying my career, in my public life, to reconnect art with architecture and make both powerful.

Z.A: For a long time you have developed a discourse on the ecological crisis. How do you see this problem today?

P.F: The problem results from the impotence of architecture. There are many kinds of jobs in society. There is the job of the scientist, who must Know, of the lawyer, who must Argue within the rules of conduct, of the business executive, who must Mobilize people and materials to manufacture goods and services, of the financier, who must Allocate spare funds, of the doctor, who must assure Health. Then there is the job of someone who must

make sure the built environment works, to make sure that it is consonant with ecological and biological needs, to make sure that it supports human well-being: that is the job of the Architect. If there is an ecological crisis, this is a habitat crisis, and this means the Architects are not doing their job. To the extent that there is an ecological crisis, there is a crisis of impotence for architecture.

Z.A: How does one overcome the crisis?

P.F: Architecture, the design of viable habitat, requires art plus science. To use a formula: Art + Science = Architecture. But in the schools, the people that become architects are not learning Art + Science. They are not practicing art, learning of recent art history, then acquiring scientific knowledge and know-how, notably in biology. They are learning about past architecture. As a result, instead of making cities or spaces which biologically and kinesthetically work, they concentrate on making simulacra of cities and spaces, largely from the past.

Today, architecture does versions of what happened before. It does not solve physical problems.

Z.A: Could you talk about your project on the Caspian Sea?

P.F: I would like to install the Clean Air Rig in the Caspian Sea. I'd like to test it in the water. The Caspian has lots of problems today. Soon there will be no fish at all. The problem is both the water being too clean and too polluted. I mean: the water is too deprived of nutrients, of suspended sediments, which come chiefly from the rivers flowing in, AND the water is too full of strange and toxic materials, like petroleum slicks and chemical

runoff. One result from dams and irrigation projects upstream and the other results from present-day industry. As a result, the water-which should be living medium full of organisms and life-sustaining molecules, like blood, is both empty of life and toxic. It is dead water. It is like the water in your bathtub. This why the Caspian Sea, like a bathtub is suddenly rising in sea-level. It is simply filling up with empty, dead water, without proper evapotranspiration or exhalation rates.

Z.A: What are you planning to do in order to realize your projects?

P.F: I need to gain the power to do what must be done. The problem is that such power is denied. If I make an exhibition of models and plans for dealing with ecological problems, whether on the Yangtze or in the Caspian Sea, in Chernobyl, that exhibition is confined to the art world. The objects are confined to the art space only and to the art discourse. This means should only comment on the world around us. They are not permitted within this frame to have any real-world implications or to be taken seriously as proposals for action. This results from the natural tendency of those in power to block change. Free-enterprise capitalism based on freedom of expression along with freedom of contract has been set up to allow continuous struggle between those seeking to gain power. But even the institutions and laws of free-enterprise capitalism have been denied. Governments and other entrenched power structures buy art and “support” art, thus compromising the fair competition of ideas and they forbid-sometimes covertly, often by the sheer weight of regulations-any innovations in the structuring art practice or information. Building codes do this. Art grants from the State do this. Customs of keeping artists isolated and exhibiting as solo expressors do this. Academic tracking of architectecs away from artists, in turn away from art

historians do this. But also covert agencies acting on behalf of industrial interests able to identify themselves with State security do this. I can speak most urgently of the mining industry, notably the oil industry.

Z.A: What was your experience?

P.F: Our experience was with civil satellites.

We artists acted in accordance with the law and in the spirit of laws establishing civil satellites to buy data and process data for conversion into video and photo documents for delivery to the public. This sharply enhanced flow of information would of course open up existing power structures, like the oil industry, nuclear industry and arms race to public scrutiny. Such was the intention of the legislators of the US Congress. But such is not the intention of industries and these industries have been able through corruption to persuade the covert agencies of the State-the CIA, MI6, BND, and KGB-to work for them in violation of principles of free expression or free enterprise. The result is that our efforts at portraying what is truly going on in the true spirit of art as revelation were totally blocked. The access of civilians to data for industry-sensitive sites is worse now than before we got involved in the 1980s.

The satellite work which we did was an attempt to gain credibility and therefore power. And this it did. But as it did, it was blocked by the government for essentially anti-capitalist, anti-competitive, anti-market reasons simply to protect vested industries. Unfortunately almost everything I do and everything any artist would try to innovate even in simple building projects based on the logic, say, of Matta-Clark and Richard Serra are blocked. Due to entrenched power's tendency to build legal moats and

harden orthodoxy into code. This is clear, as well, with the “profession” of architecture. How can one produce the new architecture resulting from current art and science within such a profession with all its rules?

Z.A: What would an artist need to do?

P.F: The need of the artist is to work with other artists and professionals, forming groups, often in outlaw or raw countries. Work where the power structure is not entrenched, all set up and where there is a chance to play a decisive role. Take Azerbaijan, for example.

They are starting a new state. If artists are grouped together and strong they could set up, for example, new art based systems of land use or regional observation and management. I have spent 20 years now with ideas for cities and hinterland based on art, exhibiting these and building models, but I haven't built anything real at all, which is pretty amazing. That is because whatever I propose or exhibit is worked out through the government or rich-patron cultural machine. And these machines have no intention of giving artists any power. Nor any realization of the big ideas. Great plans of even the most distinguished architects, like Kenzo Tange or Leonidov or Archigram or Kurokawa or by the most visionary art movements like Futurism, Constructivism or Earth and Conceptual Art cannot be realized. The most successful artists either build a few one --of--a kind gestures, like Smithson or Heizer or they build temporary structures, like Christo. Some entirely new political landscape must be found.

Z.A: Do you have any alternatives?

P.F: In order to realize projects, we need to be in groups. The idea of the one artist, alone, is meaningless. Ideas do not form this way. Only the constant disenfranchising efforts of the powerful with their demand for each artist to

compete alone with each others, force individual artists to try stealing as much as they can from each others around them, then present as much as possible under their own name...as no more than simulacra, as no more than a kind of Potemkin village version of the original set of visions, images and values. If 50 cutting-edge artists from NY landed on deserted island and had perforce to build a society, they would perforce hang together and collaborate to build structures, landscapes and even industrial systems with their group body of ideas. But if these same artists try surviving in a society with entrenched and corrupted power they must each try to outshine the others-with no energy left for more than just the more ersatz constructions. Result: nothing dreamed up by the artists to come to pass. The ideas current among the artists have no real-world consequence and therefore have no meaning. As each artists dies or declines, the projects they have identified with themselves-be that the earthwork of Oppenheim or the computer image processing in Sonnier's Animation II or the Split House of Matta-Clark-die with them. Art companies are different. They can realize projects without being confined to the lives and fortunes of individuals.

Z.A: You are often quoting Alberti. Do you think his requirements for the architect to assure fresh air and water, for example, are viable today?

P.F: Take, for example, Mexico City. You can't breathe there. Alberti's requirement for clean air was probably chiefly about a dominant problem then: malaria. To solve that problem then architecture built cities up in the mountains. Now the dominant problem is industrial. Bad air results from combustion of fuel by engines and furnaces. So the city is aggressively damaging to human health. It does not work, it anti-works. The city is a problem. But in architecture today most of the responsibilities being taught

have extended into decorative form not into the choices and use of technologies. There might be a few buildings or a few arrangements of buildings in planned landscapes, but is scarcely an inhabitable environment.

Z.A: Do you think modern art, including Bauhaus, had these problems too?

P.F: The problem is that nobody is dealing with primary technologies, like agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining. Nobody is therefore looking at the range of options before societies in how they wrest a living from the land. All these decisions are foreclosed by the powers that be. What's left is entertainment and fashion. The art world becomes another arena for Hugo Boss.

The word "boss" such an irony. Actually, companies like Exxon and leaders like King Saud are really bosses. Their prime ministers, in turn, are agencies like the CIA. These bosses and their ministers decide that the world will function with mineral fuels, despite any ideas from pioneers like Joseph Beuys. They decide that single-crop agriculture shall be the way the wild species are put aside and replaced by a few domesticated ones, with vast reductions in the power of the land. They decide that in countries like India or Haiti the food shall be grain, the fuel shall be wood or imported oil, the land-use shall be confined to a few high-prestige buildings. Whatever art has to say is virtually nothing.

Z.A: How do artists end up with something to do or say?

P.F: By gaining control of primary production. If there is no say in primary production, in the primary sector of the economy, there is no solving of the basic problems. Not even any evolution. This is curious: everyone knows

that there will need to be changes in the fuel base, in the primary sector, even in how we use animals for food and fiber. But no one is clear on who will decide the changes. Yet one can recognize that whoever makes a change in the fossil fuels or in primary land-use, will be a leader in the next century. Given the way ideas evolve, given the role of art in history, I would suggest that all the ideas you need come from Art. But art is too weak to do anything about that.

Here is my historical statement: Artists have to regain the power of their profession and they have to make an historical change, which means they have to defeat and supplant the current power structure.

That can happen. Given the ecological crisis, now on a global scale unique in history, that will happen. The question is who will do it? What will replace the current power structure? An historical change is unavoidable. Conflict will occur or extreme competition and surrogating will occur. But where it takes place, whether in America or Japan or somewhere else or many places at once is an open question. Who knows who will do it? I doubt very much it would be anyone in the mainstream art world today.

Z.A: Do you believe in struggles?

P.F: Yes. Renaissance art had more power than art today because it was constantly being put to use in the struggles of city states. If an artist could not gain credibility in one city, he could go to another, locked in mortal combat with the one. War was everywhere. This may explain why Marianetti was saying: "War is the world's only hygiene". People simply will not accept the new, the pioneering, the artistic, UNLESS there is mortal

terror. It is a bit like what Stalin learned about religion in WW2: people will need this when their backs are to the wall. Similarly with art: people will need it, will heed it, will use it, when their backs are to the wall and when survival is so much at risk as in war that the no ideas cropping up -the new ideas now relegated to art-must become usable.

Peace is no good for art. We can see this most plainly in recitations among the comfortable as in a recent Artnews listing of the “most powerful people in art”. These most powerful people absolutely do not want art to have any power.

Fortunately with the advent of civil liberties and market competition capitalism it is possible to have the conditions of war, the conditions of strife, without physical combat. It is possible to have extreme struggles for survival. Of course, these liberties are being continually undermined, continually corrupted; witness a USA today which is subordinated to Arabian royalists and which is thought-controlled by the secret police. But if the liberties are re-asserted and possibilities for business failure wide-open, then the field of business combat can be restored. Vicious struggle can recur and people engaged in struggles for capitalist survival will use anything. They will be smart to use ideas from the most fertile sources, like art. But nowadays, the hygiene of open business competition does not occur. The Rockefeller monopoly enforcing power through institutions like the World Energy Council, the secret police and the income tax (which creates a wage class and discourages true primary-sector innovation), instead enforces a corrupted control. There is “security”-but only for a while, until the entire system collapses. Can one speak of the polluted cities of Mexico or Iran or

Egypt or of the Greenhouse Effect or of acid rain or of rapid falls in oceanic productivity as signs of a system which works?

There is a brutal need for wide-open struggle. A brutal need for open competition. If not now within the business framework, within a set of rules. Then soon, much worse, as open war-along with also some ecological disasters. If art is to have any role in this it must adopt business procedures and business competition tactics and business group structuring with corporate ruthlessness. One team against another, this is vital. This is how power can be obtained.

Z.A: Why does it not happen?

P.F: In large part because the people now in power concerted to prevent it. David Rockefeller, for example, played a big role in setting up the National Endowment for the Arts in the US-for the purpose, as he told to Les Levine (who told the story), of preventing artists from working together. They would instead be subjected to individualistic competition. Such competition is not business competition. It is a sort of groveling before the King. So you end up with artistic practices which, instead of being aggressive and proud and confident are pathetic. The power structure is very pleased to feature the photographs of Nan Goldin. The world she portrays, all the “artists” engaged therein, they are pathetic, they are powerless, they are foolish, and they are dumb, unable to do things. We must break from this entirely.

December, 1996, January, 1997, New York-London

