FISH COULD get hurt. When Olafur Eliasson’s four towering waterfalls in New York’s East River are activated next month, thousands of gallons of water will be sucked up over 120-foot scaffolds and then roar down again. But the artist and his sponsor, the Public Art Fund, claim that no fish or other forms of river life will be harmed, because they have considered how to keep them safe. Eliasson has added large metal cages below the water’s surface to prevent organisms from getting near the pumps and to disperse the powerful impact of the returning flow.

“We did a number of technical modifications to fit the optimal environmental way of doing things,” says Eliasson. There were federal and state regulations to consider. But more to the point, the artist says, there were “ethical questions. This is a work of art, not a so-called environmental project, but as any great work of art, I would claim, it challenges our perceptions of reality and responsibility. That always leads to environmental questions.”

Today it does. With global warming and other man-made environmental calamities upon us, artists are heading toward the no-impact zone. Large-scale outdoor works, from Eliasson’s New York City Waterfalls to Andrea Zittel’s High Desert Test Sites in the Mojave Desert of Southern California, emphasize low-to-neutral effect on their surrounding habitats as part of their mandate.

Some creators of public works have had to consider the environmental consequences because of city, state, or federal regulations. Christo’s Gates in Central Park was staged in February, in part so it wouldn’t interrupt bird migrations. “Every project proposal that we get in, we look for an impact on the environment,” says Clare Weiss, curator of the Public Art Program in New York City’s Department of Parks & Recreation. “Many projects are sculpture, and it’s mostly a matter of making sure we don’t hit tree roots.”

It hasn’t always been so. “Thirty years ago people didn’t think in those terms,” says Lynne Cooke, curator of the Dia
Art Foundation, which supports many huge outdoor pieces, such as Michael Heizer’s *City* in the Nevada desert and Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in Utah’s Great Salt Lake. “Environmental issues came to the fore around the 1970s, but it was more about recuperating what had been desecrated rather than planning ahead.”

All artists working on public land after 1970 had to think about the potential impact of their projects, thanks to the passage of a federal law, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It called for environmental impact statements for any major undertaking on government land. Many states and cities soon followed suit with their own regulations. California, for example, passed the California Environmental Quality Act in 1970, which stipulates that any project that requires state or local permits, even on private land, and that could impact natural habitats needs an environmental assessment.

“A lot of the Land Art projects that started up in the late ’60s and ’70s predated some of the laws,” says Matthew Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a research-based art and science collaborative. Today, as he says, artists tend to be more concerned with the potential impact of their actions for ethical rather than bureaucratic reasons. “I think it’s more about the image of not wanting to be perceived as altering the natural environment,” he adds.

Even Heizer, whose *City* involves moving tons of earth from one place to another, works “very much within ecological boundaries,” says Cooke. “The content of the sculpture is one thing, but the sculpture is sited within land, and he’s very concerned with land issues and good governance.”

Montreal-based Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has experienced firsthand the fallout from working on environmentally sensitive public art pieces. *Turbulence*, his proposed installation in an estuary in Cardigan, Wales, would consist of a cluster of 127 buoys floating in the River Teifi, which is used by boaters and fishermen and is home to otters, lampreys, and salmon. Equipped with loudspeakers, LED light sources, and movement-detecting sensors, the buoys would play back messages recorded by passersby.

Lozano-Hemmer consulted with city officials and wildlife experts. He eventually designed a movable sunken pontoon structure to support the buoys and opted for low-power lighting. But the public had already turned against him and, in a raucous open meeting in March, accused him of putting his project above the needs of wildlife, fishermen, and the community in general. Residents were afraid the buoys would impede navigation and attract vandals.

Impact assessments are being carried out in Cardigan. “If the project will affect the wildlife, we won’t do it,” the artist says. “I learned that the lamprey eel has three eyes and that it’s a very light-sensitive animal—and this is part of what being an artist in public spaces is all about.”

Government regulations and public goodwill aside, reducing the environmental footprint of one’s art remains a highly personal matter: most artists reject preaching a no-impact lifestyle to others. “Lately, whenever I give lectures, I have all these people coming up to me after and telling me how great they are with recycling or gardening,” says Los Angeles–based Fritz Haeg, whose “Edible Estates” project helps householders transform their front lawns into functional vegetable patches. But, he adds, “I just hate that feeling of people feeling guilty or feeling like they have to justify themselves. We’re in this environmental guilt phase.”

Natalie Jeremijenko, who teaches at New York University, where she runs the xdesign Environmental Health Clinic, a kind of collaborative lab for environmental art actions, decries what she calls an attitude of moral superiority. “Two of my students said to me, ‘If environmentalism is about reducing your footprint, using less gas, paper, consuming less—this idea of what you can’t do, then isn’t suicide the best thing I can do?’ That’s the logical extension.” Jeremijenko isn’t interested in such “hand-wringing,” she says. “Cultural workers can do something.”

Something like Jeremijenko’s *No Park* proj-

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