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Public and Private Alternatives

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Go for a walk in the woods. Notice the spotted yellowing leaves, the bare branches standing above the forest canopy. Visit your local garbage dump. Observe the sheer mass of waste, reflect upon what is going on in there. Walk along the St. Lawrence. Dare take a drink.

There is enough information on the personal, regional and global levels of contemporary experience to demonstrate that our culture's relationship with the natural environment requires a profound and relatively rapid revision. But the task is not easy. At the roots of the problem, there is a basic assumption — shared strongly enough by ideologies as divergent as Capitalism and Marxism — that the world exists for the use of mankind, that it is a mine of raw materials offered to *Homo Faber* for exploitation. Two points are involved here — our species' excessive preoccupation with its own welfare and the dominion it exercises over the lithosphere, atmosphere and biosphere through activities of transformation or work. What has become clear is not only that there are limits to exploitation but that, in order to achieve a renewable, on-going, and creative approach to work, we must displace ourselves from the position we have assumed and learn how to work *with* rather than impose our will *upon* nature.

What does this have to do with art, especially the theme of *Public and Private Alternatives*? In a general way, art, as work, participates in the building of culture; it is both a product of cultural conditioning and a model of cultural transformation. If, in culture, there exists a site which raises concern, art attempts to respond. This has been the tradition of art. How much more, then, should art be concerned when issue must be taken with our most fundamental assumptions?

In practice, I do not believe that this situation renders traditional forms of art obsolete, but that their task requires reassessment in view of their role in the current cultural context. There are, however, particular approaches to art which lend themselves to a more direct involvement with the main issues while remaining relatively accessible to public involvement — I am thinking in particular of mine and garbage reclamation projects, environmental landscape gardening. These works grow out of various traditions, but their process requires collaboration with natural functions and a corresponding displacement of the artist's traditional position as author. And that is where our problems lie...

Philip Fry
Artist

