

# 'WHY ART AND FARMING?'

Georgina Barney & Helen Thompstone

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## 2007

**HT** I have been working on the farm continuously since March and find myself beginning and ending each day with farming. It's a combination of endless routine and unpredictability, and my jobs can feel quite monotonous, but the monotony does leave a lot of time to think and I find I think a lot about art when farming. The routine and the nature of the tasks feel very close to the artistic process and I have begun to link the two.

**GB** My interest in art and farming stems from visiting my uncle and aunt's farm in Powys where they combine the running of the farm with theatre work. What interests me is how the two occupations complement each other, and the difference between an arts event in rural Powys and those I've experienced in towns or cities.

As an art student, I felt the farm was a long way away from the metropolitan 'art world' but I began to think of the farmer's way of life as being very similar to that of the artist: artists and farmers have a similar independence, self-motivation and wilfulness, as a result of being occupied with producing something which depends on less stable factors than time and money. And as the farmer is his own engineer, decision maker, vet etc. so the artist is also usually very good at improvising, responding to problems and challenges in a one-person-show.

Visiting and working on farms has given me a very physical and sensual experience, essentially sculptural and aesthetic. And I have felt that working on the land, producing something of value from it, has given me a profound sense of place. So farming has become a metaphor for creativity as it symbolises really living in a place.

I am interested in what you say about linking what you were doing on the farm with art and that you say that the routine and nature of your tasks feel close to the artistic process – what do you mean by this?

**HT** Linking what I was doing on the farm to art came from the repetition of the tasks and importantly the continual handling of materials. Having focused on a process-led practice in my own work at art school, this daily routine was something I could relate to as an artist.



Reflecting on the professions of both artist and farmer is one of the main points of interest for me. The struggling, misunderstanding and ignorance one encounters in both ways of life is a definite parallel and I also see those similarities you talk of in your last email.

I have also been thinking about how both artists' and farmers' work is made visible. Farming – like art – covers a huge range of practices, and the work of either may never be entirely visible through any single end product.

I think it is important that you highlight the experience of farming and the creative satisfaction to be gained from actually participating in agricultural activity, rather than just observing it. You mention 'sculptural' and 'sensual' qualities; I would be interested to know your views on participation and experience in art?

**GB** I think that through farming I've fitted into my practice things I lacked at art school, but have found to be extremely helpful, if not necessary, to being an artist. You mention some of them - the handling of material and routine.

On Material: One of the ironic things about me farming (I once joked about giving up art to become a farmer) was that it has brought me closer towards physical 'making', for example by helping a farmer weld a cattle crush back together. At art school I

never developed familiarity with a particular material or technique, but on the farm I found myself appreciating the process aesthetically and sensually as well as understanding its practical purpose.

On Routine: By working on the farm I occupy my time in an obviously useful way, and in the process sort of receive an education in the material I like working with (e.g. stacking a pile of firewood or building a stone-wall which are both clearly very sculptural activities). I learn about it, appreciate it, and often the more menial and mundane the task the better. My mind is fairly free to probe, question, put together metaphor... and usually this results quite naturally in me being able to make something meaningful at the end of the process.



You ask me about participation, which for me is more of a question about access, which leads me to the important point that farming is an industry which is almost exclusively rural, and art has, until recently, been almost exclusively urban.

**HT** I find it interesting that you talk about seeking out through farming some of things you lacked at art school; a lot of the time I felt very dissatisfied in that environment. Returning to the farm in between did increase the feeling of being very remote from that reality whilst in London. Unlike you the actual activity of farming wasn't something which had a direct impact on my practice at that time; instead, it was the farm itself as a place that I thought about in relation to my work.

I feel a strong connection with a place or environment has always been behind much of my own work and I am certain growing up on the farm is why this is so important

to me. So my experience of the city, the things I was drawn to and thought about there were informed to an extent by my relationship to the farm.

In the city and on the farm - these are two huge spaces which are fascinating for an artist. How do you feel about the scale of the farms you encountered in your journey?

I share your appreciation of putting together something meaningful from the mundane; however it can be frustrating to be tied to certain tasks seven days a week. Unlike your experiences, work doesn't always feel a novelty; but it may only take a simple change to the day to make the experience of being on the farm feel new and different. For instance, helping to move a lame heifer from a stream recently, I was struck by how unique the experience felt. Walking to the animal in heavy rain, deciding how to get it out of the stream and back to the farm, standing in a particular part of a field I had never stood in before, the activity of moving the animal – all these completely altered that day and my experience of the farm. Seeing the animal picked up with the mechanical arm of a JCB was an extraordinary contrast to the normal routine.

The need to adapt when the unexpected arises is so much part of the farming lifestyle – things can't be put on hold. So the question of routine is interesting;; it's constantly disrupted by surprises and as an artist I value that potential for new ways of looking at things.

**GB** The difference between town and countryside is a massive issue but I wonder whether it's not so much a division between 'rural' and 'urban' as between 'local' and 'global'. After all, lots of people live in villages in the countryside, but don't work there. Farming is important to culture and identity because farmers live and work in the countryside. As I've been travelling, I've begun to worry that people think they understand the countryside through going on holiday there or driving through it on the motorway (I've been guilty of this). Now I know that there's a massive difference between being in a place and depending on it to live.

You asked me about scale. Yes, this is one of the things which is appealing about farms, the massive amount of space available to work in - in contrast to the scrabble for the often small sterile spaces of city galleries. And although I have just talked about the field being the farmer's working space, I am struck by the potential opportunities for artists, particularly in this economic moment (it's been called 'post-agricultural') where farmers are given money not to farm and buildings lie redundant.

There have been events on disused farms, but I feel strongly that it's the working farm which can most extend our understanding of the countryside, and might be most re-

warding to work with. I am especially drawn to the 'moments in time' when a space is available. For example, in May when the farm is so empty because the animals are out in the fields and none of next year's silage/hay/straw/crops has been harvested from the fields. There was a fantastic moment this year when the last of last year's silage had just been cleared out of the silage pit and I stood at the front of that massive, empty space and it felt like standing in a cathedral. It was a huge, wonderful space, perfect for some kind of performance or event. Wouldn't it be fantastic to use some of these opportunities, for artists to understand, make use of and celebrate these moments, which are also incredibly poetic and poignant?



Of course, there are also massive potential difficulties with such projects, particularly in the way that the fact that farming doesn't operate by the calendar in the way that the (metropolitan) art world does. However, I suspect that these challenges of working on or with a farm might become what's interesting about it, and would really enhance our understanding of the living, working countryside and place.

**HT** I too have been thinking a lot about what it means to live in the countryside. I realise how very different lives can be within a few miles of each other. I have taken for granted the sense of community that farming has and the involvement in this of my parents and their friends, who in one way or another are connected with farming or the land. Farming is still very visible within a community, as work is conducted publicly, almost as a seasonal performance. The fact that it is no longer the focal point for the majority of the community is something I feel very aware of, though.

I worry about the lack of young people truly living within the rural community and in a way that reflects my own sense of isolation both as an artist and as someone living on a farm. I think this is a crucial problem, that as a contemporary artist there is a lack of a network in many rural locations.

This idea of a 'post agricultural' age relates to the issue of diversification: it is true that farmers are having to look for other ways to survive and use their resources. I think art may be really important here in that it is something that can exist alongside farming practice, whereas other diversification 'enterprises' may actually replace it, which seems extremely sad. What is most important is that farmers can keep farming.

I can relate to your thoughts on different spaces with potential for appropriation by artists. So many spaces I come into contact with daily are loaded with potential for art: cattle cubicles; the silage clamp; disused barns; backs of trailers. Stacking bales a couple of weeks ago – when we reached the top layers, which were staggered, it felt like sitting in the upper tier of a theatre looking out for a great performance. With the satisfaction of completing the bale building as well – I enjoyed the moment.



There is so much that can be said about the possibilities for art on farms, but there are problems too. It may not be a practical or viable option for many farms; however for some it might be possible to use art to help sustain, aid or complement agricultural practices. The roles of artists and farmers are quite unique and combining the two could contribute towards a greater understanding of each and how they fit within British life and culture today.

## 2008

**GB** It is interesting to look back at this a year on. Much of what I said in our conversation last year still holds true, but a lot has changed, both in farming and in my own life. I'm no longer working on farms as a 'labourer' and I've spent most of this year living in London, so I've become much more of a spectator. Meanwhile, in terms of farming, I'm guessing that the issues are dominated, as with the rest society, by the rising cost of oil and recession. I would like to know more about farmers' fortunes, but I don't think that the 'plight' of the farmer is the hot topic it was in the public agenda.

So some of what we talked about seems very dated, particularly our interest in diversification, which doesn't feel as significant as it did then. And I also feel very uncomfortable with the phrase 'post-agricultural' as though agriculture is no longer important which it clearly is. I have been thinking about this a little more since visiting Laxton in Nottinghamshire, in an event organized by Nottingham Contemporary. Laxton's open field farming system (a pre-enclosure, medieval method) has somehow managed to survive into 2008. But what is remarkable is that it has survived, not as a tourism initiative or 'example' for teaching or for enthusiasts of agrarian history, but because the people who live there still want to farm in that way and have somehow managed to balance economic pressures with their own choices. What struck me about this is how agriculture is a *process* and not a 'thing'. You can't preserve it or 'save' it (with art) if it can't save itself – which it must, if we're going to carry on living. Furthermore, I have faith that it will, because *people* are gutsy and imaginative, but it might not be in the form it was before.



So looking back to last year's thoughts, about how you might 'combine' art and farming, I'm a lot more cynical and doubtful. I still find it deeply fascinating, but there's also a precariousness about it all, particularly in the way that you, as an artist, negotiate relationships with farms, farmers and farming organizations. It's as important, I feel, as it ever was, but in no way simple.

**HT** I agree, reflecting on this now throws up many new concerns alongside the original discussion. This term 'Post-Agricultural' troubles me too, I personally find it unhelpful as it seems to imply that agriculture has actually ended. Public focus has altered in the last 6 months but I don't think farmers themselves are off the public agenda at all. Economic problems have changed the spotlight but in a way that keeps farming and what farmers do at the heart of the problems faced by society today. People are thinking more than ever about the price of things, particularly food and fuel, and many of the farming industry's own difficulties are linked very directly to these specific issues.

I think my own priorities and perspective have changed in the past year too. I am still interested in how my experience of farming and my encounters on the farm can filter into other activities, in various ways through art. I find my own situation remains a difficult one to balance but I am in some way seeking more of a distinction between these two aspects of my life.

I have always been very reluctant to assume that as artists there is an automatic responsibility to become a voice or support for a very specific group of people. Thinking about my own connection to farming and your reference to 'the plight of the Farmer' and comments about Laxton, I am very conscious of how I fit into this. I don't think I have ever imagined or been interested in the idea that art could 'save' or 'preserve' agricultural activity itself. Thinking about my own family, my responsibilities and contribution to the operation of the farm, these things actually have very little to do with art.

Often the role of the artist is talked about and I think this is a more important concern. I feel this more as I continue to try to establish myself and my creative ambitions at the farm, negotiating the practical issues this brings. Ideas about how to connect with people seems to be at the heart of this and whether this is with a public, other artists and organizations and even family, the very idea of what these relationships can mean becomes ever more complex and interesting.