



braziers

international artists workshop 2006

Running a large house for now

Liz is working in the coach house. Presumably it was once where horses and livery were kept, now it's filled with tools that are in use and furniture that isn't; a piano, a wardrobe, an industrial sewing machine, bedsteads and bed legs, an armchair, rusty radiators that work. Coach house or garage, it's funny how places designed to house modes of transport become dumping grounds for stuff that goes nowhere. But could do, might do, should do, was going to...

After being at Braziers for few days, Liz said she began thinking about the 'sheer amount of labour' needed to run a place like this effectively; maintenance of the buildings, productive use of the land, feeding everyone. Be that the collective labour of an intentional community, the organisers of the artists' workshop or the volume and workload of 'service' staff that would have been employed by pre-community gentry. Hosting the artists workshop provides revenue that helps keep Braziers going and the all-female (I noticed) house team provides the domestic labour that services it. They do it well, meals appear on time, everything is kept clean and orderly. However around the Braziers estate, although there are areas that are clearly well tended, one sees much that is ramshackle and unkempt and various half started or abandoned projects; the skeleton of a poly-tunnel, apples rotting in the grass, out of bounds out buildings wrapped in danger-tape so old it no longer spells



danger, a coach house full of junk... The amount of things to be dealt with seems overwhelming.

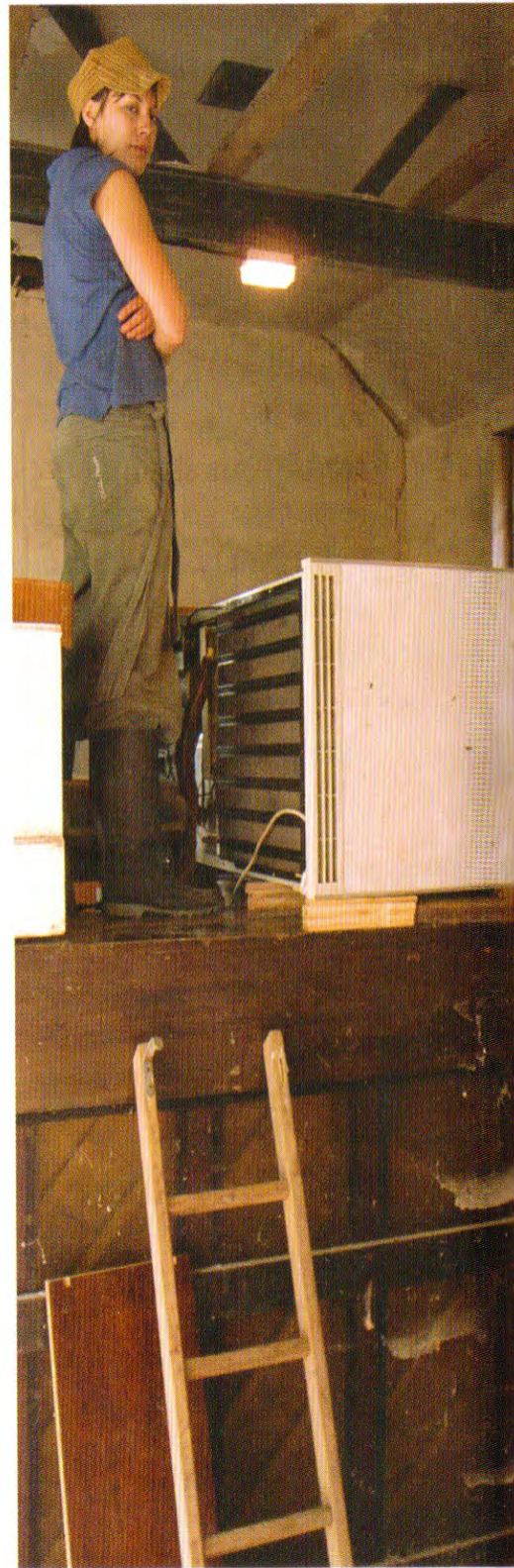
Initially it's hard to grasp what the community's relationship to this once grand house (a grade 2 listed building)— and its lands, might be, except that it's a beautiful place. One long standing Braziers member (and ex resident) refers to it as a millstone; for others it has huge symbolic value; for others still, it is, or was, home and if not that precisely, steeped in personal associations. Not one of these relationships to the place would necessarily take a traditional conservationist approach to its care; after all community, family and 'education' are about people; interaction and growth, not objects, and anyway with limited resources there is only so much one, or a few, can do ... One has to prioritise, work out where energy is best spent, think about what's important, plan for the next group of visitors. The range of interests, investments, available time, knowledge, skills and stamina that have to be considered, by committee (of which there are several) make for a complex and drawn out decision making process. And then there's the doing of the eventual thing decided, and doing of course often involves more decisions as new information and problems become apparent. Decisions, that again, have to be brought to a meeting.

Many of the jobs to be done require a level of skill and knowledge, or at the very least some thought; how they are planned and carried out now will have repercussions for Braziers community in the future, be it next week or next decade. The place is, no doubt, littered with legacies. Responsibility, sustainability; the environmentalist mantra,



here at Braziers comes in from the global to very, very local. However, in a situation where conventional ideas about 'the best person for the task' are questioned and people do things — albeit at times through necessity — because they are willing rather than skilled (although they may be), outcomes are less predictable. It's not a job after all — although confusingly some people are paid — it's a commitment to process, a life choice — for as long as you are here anyway. As in most groups that seek to redefine 'knowledge', the notion of 'expert' or 'specialist' is treated with caution; knowledge is power and unshared knowledge within a community, a potential weapon. However, as elsewhere, at Braziers it seems that ignorance also has its uses; as a form of resistance or refusal. To what precisely it is hard to say but surely in general to choose ignorance is to refuse — to varying degrees — responsibility and complexity? It must be tempting.

Liz, who one imagines has a copy of Mrs Beeton's Guide to Household Management, has started pickling walnuts; they have already been soaked in brine and are lying out to dry in rows on a long wooden table in the coach house. It looks like an abacus. It looks like work. Proper work. The walnuts were picked from a tree in the grounds that Liz came across in her wanderings. Liz knows about pickling things, people are quite impressed. The 'walnuts drying on the table' of course also looks like art; it can't be helped. Artists don't 'do' things like this, they make them, to make a point. There's a distinction and a value system. She has also begun to 'deal' with the furniture in the coach house by making an inventory and stacking it into a single tower that reaches to the ceiling. Henry, Lucy



and Nick, the technicians employed by the Artists' Workshop have been helping her. She's managing to get on top of it all, which is good. It's freed up loads of space and it looks great; there's something about stack art. It's a shame that it's half blocking the entrance — means you have to squeeze round it a bit. It might have to be dismantled and moved at some point. I hope Liz doesn't have to do it.

Yesterday I watched a group of the overseas volunteers — who provide support labour to the Braziers House Team — clearing weeds from between the tiles on the big terrace, except they weren't really; they were just snapping them off, they'll be back just the same next week — and they'll all be gone after the summer. Still it was a lovely afternoon and it looked like fun in a worky sort of way. They often look a bit isolated in their tasks so it must have been nice to work together for a change.

Liz might not have time to finish the walnuts and anyway now she's got involved in the furniture has probably lost interest a bit, but it doesn't really matter; she's shown initiative and joined into the spirit of things, which is what counts. It's not as though they're going to waste; no one else was going to be doing anything with them. As John, who told me he'd like to die here says, it can be hard to keep the momentum going in a place like this. In the dictionary in the Braziers library, (a 1939 edition of Webster's Unabridged), the entry for momentum reads so: force of motion acquired by a moving body as a result of the continuance of its motion; impetus. Various artists have come to Braziers and felt moved to help in some way. Liz's sympathetic projects are more gestural; she's only here for a short time and there's only so much one can do. She is however going to print off 200 copies of the coach house inventory.

