

ART on the Farm

The Wormfarm Institute puts the culture back in agriculture

BY JEFF HUEBNER



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38

If you were in rural Sauk County, Wisconsin, in October and thought you saw the word *truth* inscribed on a hillside overlooking the Carr Valley Cheese shop near La Valle, it was no illusion. It was a work of art by Cathi Schwalbe-Bouzide, of Chicago, who's created similar mown glyphs in Illinois. In describing the piece, Schwalbe-Bouzide says, "The soil tells the truth." That could serve as the credo for the Wormfarm Institute (WFI), a 12-year-old agriculture-and-arts nonprofit that sponsored her piece as part of a new countywide public-art exhibition, just one of its many initiatives.

The WFI's roots actually go much deeper.

In 1993, ready for a change and anticipating the local food movement, artists Donna Neuwirth and Jay Salinas left Chicago and headed to Wisconsin's Driftless region, a place they'd learned to love during country drives. The couple bought a gently rolling, 40-acre, former dairy farm outside Reedsburg—exactly halfway between Minneapolis-St. Paul and Chicago, 100 miles from Milwaukee, and a short drive off I-94—and started growing organic vegetables for a community-supported agriculture (CSA) enterprise. "Still, our backgrounds are in the arts—you just don't drop that," Neuwirth told me last fall in Reedsburg (pop. 10,000). "So how do you weave these things together?"

Friends, artists, and students who visited did farm chores in exchange for accommodations and workspace. And that gave Neuwirth, a theater prop maker, and Salinas, a sculptor and teacher, an idea. In 2000 they founded the Wormfarm Institute, an "evolving laboratory" dedicated to forging connections between sustainable farming and the arts—as well as linking

people, mostly city folks, with the land where their food is produced. (The nonprofit is named after the precept that most of the world's fertile soil has passed through the guts of earthworms.) Said Neuwirth, "We saw how compatible these two activities were—how [art and agriculture] fed each other."

To that end, the WFI established both an artist residency program (residencies usually last from two to six months and include working on the farm 15 hours a week) and the Woolen Mill Gallery in downtown Reedsburg. Last year the WFI received \$150,000 in "creative placemaking" grants from the NEA's Our Town program and ArtPlace to help support its 10-day "Fermentation Fest: A Live Culture Convergence," a celebration "of all things brined and brewed." It

included the inaugural Farm/Art DTour, composed of field installations, "pasture performances," and rural-culture education sites highlighting the bounty of what Salinas has coined the local *cultureshed*.

"Live culture can be yogurt and it can be music," explained Neuwirth. "Fermentation is about transformation—grain is

CULTURESHED (kul'cher-shed) n.

1. A geographic region irrigated by streams of local talent and fed by deep pools of human and natural history. 2. An area nourished by what is cultivated locally. 3. The efforts of writers, performers, visual artists, scholars, farmers and chefs who contribute to a vital and diverse local culture.

—Jay Salinas, Wormfarm Institute



Works for the Wormfarm Institute's Farm/Art DTour—part of a festival that received \$150,000 in grants for “creative placemaking” from the NEA OurTown program and ArtPlace—included David Wells’ *Farmed Frame* (above left), a “Roadside Culture Stand” by Homer Daehn (above right), Cathi Schwalbe-Bouzide’s *TRUTH in the Driftless Region* (below), and Christopher Lutter-Gardella’s *Boots* (opposite).

transformed into beer. Communities are transformed.” Indeed, the WFI’s activities—in partnership with Sauk County and the Reedsburg Area Chamber of Commerce—have helped spark a renaissance in the town and countryside, winning over skeptics. “Farmers are as excited to participate as we are.”

Beginning October 7, 2011, we followed the 50-mile Farm/Art DTour loop in a leisurely two days, stopping to view art (with a self-guided map) as well as to dine, sample cheese, enjoy the bucolic scenery, and buy vegetables from—and chat with—local growers, including Amish farmers. The growers manned the five mobile, artist-built “Roadside Culture Stands”—another WFI initiative—stocked with produce and books. Altogether, 27 landowners participated.

Some of the dozen or so artworks were fun and family-friendly—murals on silage bags, a Stonehenge structure made of hay bales, giant work boots by Minneapolis’s Christopher Lutter-Gardella. Others served as poetic evocations of the rural landscape: *Field Weave*, an area of fence posts woven with col-

ored acrylic fiber, by Minneapolis’s Randy Walker; *Sky Cage Traps*, tomato-cage towers by Detroit’s Terrence Campagna; and hanging woodland “nests” made out of discarded agricultural plastic, by Katie Schofield, a Chicago transplant who became a WFI manager and settled in Reedsburg.

“My work has evolved and changed so dramatically as a result of my time at Wormfarm that it would be difficult to find a way it has not been influenced by the people and landscape of that place,” said Schofield.

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Take the Tour: *The 2012 Fermentation Fest and Farm/Art DTour will take place October 12–21. For more info, see WormfarmInstitute.org or FermentationFest.com, or call 608-524-8672.*

