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## Art in Wisconsin—Out on the Farm: Rural Art Residencies Thrive in Wisconsin

BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS |  
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Nested within rustic landscapes, far from urban art centers, artist residencies thrive and survive in the rural regions of Wisconsin. In these spaces, artists develop not only their own artistic practices, but also foster relationships with agrarian traditions and local communities. Artists work in environments that directly influence, and intervene, with conventional art-making.

Many residencies in Wisconsin grew out of a culture of deficit in Chicago. Residency founders Michelle Grabner (Poor Farm), and Jay Salinas (Wormfarm Institute) discuss cost of living and lack of space as motivating factors for moving their artistic practices northward. “Wisconsin has always offered escape and renewal for people from Chicago, and sometimes it takes an outside eye to see,” Salinas says.



ACRE kitchen dinner/Photo: Niekrasz

### Poor Farm

Since 2008, Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam have operated the Poor Farm in Little Wolf, Wisconsin. The original building, constructed in 1876, was built as a home for the indigent, or a work prison. The Poor Farm website does not begin with a mission statement or profiles from past residents. It starts with a poem by art historian Linda Nochlin:

If you were decrepit, had no work, no family and couldn't afford

The price of a loaf or even a slice of bread, you went.

The Poor Farm was cold;

The Poor Farm was mean;

The Poor Farm licked your old bones clean.

What Grabner and Killam have created from origins of agricultural servitude is now an "appeal to artists and ideas," Grabner says. "Raw and rudimentary" elements of the Poor Farm remain, and in this way, artists are tasked with finding their own strength. The building holds remnants of the past in its rough brick edifice.



*Gretchen Bender "Total Recall" (1987) Tracking the Thrill at the Poor Farm, Waupaca County, WI (2012-13)*

There are no applications to enroll at the Poor Farm. It is not competitive, nor does it offer an elite line for an artist's résumé. A former resident describes having "lost my muse" and made an appeal to come and "look at the clouds." The Poor Farm has acted as a chrysalis for expansive projects. 2022 MacArthur award winner Sky Hopinka created a solo exhibition within the walls of the Poor Farm itself, documented in the book "Downward, Upward, Around and Around the Spinning Whorl," published by the residency's own Poor Farm Press. Projects by Gretchen Bender and Robert Longo have moved from the Poor Farm directly into the critical discourse of international art centers.

The Poor Farm will also be participating in the nineteenth International Venice Biennial of Architecture in 2025.

Grabner has described the Poor Farm as a “place of wild aesthetic imaginings in rural Wisconsin (which has become) profoundly conservative and angry.” The political landscape in Wisconsin necessarily affects artist enclaves in rural areas. How can art be a catalyst for communication, for expanding understanding and trust rather than furthering division?



*Joni Clare at Wormfarm*

## **ACRE / Wormfarm**

In the Driftless Region of Wisconsin, surrounded by the unglaciated terrain of rock formations and hills, resident artists combine art, communal farming and active engagement in social justice.

Jay Salinas and Donna Neuwirth, self-described “anarchists,” offer a rural immersion on their residency, Wormfarm. Wormfarm is, according to its website, “not a retreat, but rather an engagement in the life of a working farm.” Artists spend fifteen hours a week cultivating the farm’s garden, which produces rice, beans, flour and spices. There are also opportunities for exhibitions and collaborations with the local community.

“Rural communities are vital to the health, wealth and well-being of us all,” says Salinas. Every year, Wormfarm hosts “Farm/Art DTour,” an exhibition of site-specific works installed around fifty miles of fields and roadsides on neighboring properties and farms. The tour includes massive installations, puppetry and performance.



Wormfarm also hosts “Fermentation Fest,” which brings together artwork, music, food, speakers and classes in the local community. In this way, Salinas and Neuwirth directly challenge the differences between artists and community members, and create nourishing opportunities for both.



*ACRE screenprinting*

Sixty miles to the west, the ACRE residency (Artists’ Cooperative Residency and Exhibitions) sits at the confluence of three rivers. The residency invites “emerging artists or artists in a formative place” says executive director Kate Bowen. Residents don’t come with projects planned, but to experiment and collaborate. It is not a place for artists “to do famous shit,” says Bowen. Many residents return to work on staff and to farm the property. Bowen also offers that ACRE is an environment for social justice and community, to create what is needed to “survive and resist.” In addition to the rural location in Wisconsin, ACRE maintains a gallery in Chicago that mounts exhibitions from resident’s projects.

## Reward/Risk

Starting and maintaining intentionally creative communities in rural Wisconsin comes with challenges. Small towns in Wisconsin often struggle to attract investment and creative talent. Emerging art incubators have difficulties finding funding and a like-minded community. There is an interest in rural development, but the struggles to keep creative projects afloat are considerable.

The PARC Department, in Princeton, Wisconsin is a nascent organization working to invest in the creativity already present in their small town. “The PARC Department positions local artists and makers as the visionaries informing our work,” directors Matt Trotter and Greg Wright say.

Wright discusses how arts education has become more limited in schools, and that their rural location can be a beacon of renewal, that artists “can actually be living their life in a generative space... You could actually live here, there is a high quality of life for artists.” Wright describes how small towns in Wisconsin have affordable real estate and spaces in which to work and focus more fully than in other more competitive markets.

Other residency projects have been less successful. Ripon, Wisconsin was host to a residency and event space called the Heist that was unfocused and financially unstable. A large art deco bank building became what amounted to a speak-easy, and though creative projects and residencies were a part of the mission, unpaid taxes and bad relationships with the town forced an abrupt closure and a condemned building. This kind of outcome can prompt local hesitation in supporting like projects, and leads to negative interaction between creative communities and their neighbors.



*PARC Parlor*

Even so, rural Wisconsin offers artists a sanctuary to live and work in community with nature and local economies that benefit both.



*Wormfarm's barn chickens*