

ESSAY

# ART STANDING IN THE FIELD

by Curt Meine



Field Note: Corn | See p. 10 for information about Field Notes along the Farm/Art DTour

At Fermentation Fest and the Farm/Art DTour, we celebrate the people, places, and processes that, through quiet chemistry, make wonderful things.

Things to eat and drink: beer, wine, cheese, chocolate, pickles, pepperoni, cider, vinegar, sourdough, sauerkraut, yogurt, tofu, chorizo....

Things to see and savor: living landscapes rendered through open frames, straw bales and corn cribs retrooled into sculpture, bluegrass returned to the grassroots, objects rewoven into fields and prairies and woods....

“... everything that connects soil and spirit, from the microbial to the metaphysical

Things to share and ponder: everything that connects soil and spirit, from the microbial to the metaphysical; and that, through those continual connections, sustains and renews and transforms everything all over again.

What place does art hold in our lives and landscapes?

When I was growing up in and around Chicago, one of my hangouts was the Art Institute. My mother worked at Orchestra Hall, directly across Michigan Avenue. Rather than hire a sitter (or bribe one of my older brothers to attend to me), she let me cross the street to wander at will the halls of the Institute. I quickly forged trails through the warren of galleries to visit my favorites: Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*, Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, Dali's *Inventions of the Monsters*, Blume's *The Rock*, Hopper's *Nighthawks*. I believe I could still find my way through those hallways at night, without a flashlight. I knew the floor plan of the Institute the way a honey bee knows its flower fields.

On one early exploration, I took a new back-trail. Closing time was near and the gallery attendants were shooing us out. I lingered, then followed what I thought was a shortcut back to the Michigan Avenue entrance. Rounding a corner and crossing a threshold, I found myself face-to-face for the first time with the old pair, familiar even to a young kid: the stern farmer and daughter of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*,

recognizable as much from the parodies as the original. But here was the actual painting, the real thing: the humorless but homey gazes, the tight collars, the white house with arched window, the pitchfork held resolutely in Mr. Farmer's hand.

On every subsequent visit to the Art Institute, I took that back trail out at the end of the day, pausing for a moment in Wood's rural Iowa. I also became acquainted with his immediate neighbors: directly across the aisle, Claude Monet's *Haystacks*, changing through the four seasons in the Giverny countryside. For me, in that small gallery, in the shadow of skyscrapers, on the shore of Lake Michigan, in the cultural heart of the Midwest, all of space collapsed. The distant land was brought inside, the city was put in its place, the inside opened up to its prairie setting — and to the even further provinces of France. And who knew where that would lead! (To Gauguin, likely.)

Only later on did I learn about Grant Wood's other works, his time studying right there at the Art Institute, his return to his home landscape in Iowa, and his role in the Midwestern Regionalism movement.

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**FARM/ART  
DTOUR  
INFORMATION**

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## ART STANDING

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And only later yet did I find myself one day crossing southern Iowa, in the small town of Eldon, coming face-to-face with the small white house of American Gothic fame, quite as unexpectedly as I'd encountered its image in Chicago. Now here was the real thing. Once again space collapsed, but this time from the other direction, from the outside back to the inside, from the land back to the hand of the artist, from the prairie soils back to the towns and cities we have built on and out of it.

Grant Wood's Midwest has changed. As the farms have grown larger, so many small towns have grown smaller. The population of Eldon today is half what it was when he painted American Gothic in 1930. Iowa farmers in the 1930s regularly grew and sold three dozen kinds of crops and livestock, from apples and berries and bees to turkeys and watermelon and wheat; today, corn and soybeans thoroughly dominate. Chicago and Milwaukee, Des Moines and Minneapolis process commodities and finances for distant markets, and in the face of globalization seek to revitalize their urban economies apart from the vital soil. The land and waters still connect our rural landscapes to our towns and cities, but the quiet, creative chemistries that keep it all healthy are pushed hard and stretched thin.

What place does art hold in our lives and landscapes?

A place somewhere between the inside and the outside, where those chemistries work to hold us and our communities together—to connect us, surprise us, and enliven us. Our culture is right here in our hands, and it is all around us. Our works of art are not confined to the interiors of our in-town galleries and institutes. And the art we bring to our work expresses us everywhere, regardless. Here in

the hills and fields of western Sauk County, for this festival, our neighbors lend their land and their talents, making foods and making impressions. But the art of it goes on every day, on the ground, around the next corner and across the next threshold. •

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## COMPOSITION OCTOBER 13

work entitled *Germinations* at.

led Decomposition, Graminy. It will be a 'D'-composition. The region will respond to something new out of its themes.

style that brings together jazz, from Copland to Celtic, jazz, and more. Drawing on music, which includes lots of singing.

e. The name "Graminy" Gramineae, as the group's music in all places and ecologies.

nd location to be determined. [compositionfest.com](http://compositionfest.com) for updates. •

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