



Documentation of the Cocina Abierta: *Help Wanted* event at Hollywood Farmer's Market, June 20, 2014. Courtesy of the artists and LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions). Photo by Jeseca Dawson.





**Cocina Abierta Collective: *Help Wanted***  
 LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions)  
 2014 Summer Residency Program  
 July 9 - 31, 2014  
 Installation on view  
 July 31 - Aug. 16, 2014  
 6522 Hollywood Blvd  
 Los Angeles, CA 90028  
<http://www.welcometolace.org>

#### SPECIAL THANKS

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#### SUPPORT

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Publication Design, Mario Mesquita



# Signs in the window

## Cocina Abierta Collective at LACE

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions' storefront window is currently plastered in black vinyl lettering that reads "Help Wanted," though the gallery is fully staffed. The vinyl is cut to mimic signage that can be found daily in any number of shop windows on Hollywood Boulevard, where LACE has been located since the mid-nineties. The letters form a negative space in the vinyl, providing passers-by with a vantage into the gallery's storefront exhibition space. Taking its queue from its pedestrian audiences the sign has prompted a number of job seekers to enter the gallery and inquire about employment. Visitors who are familiar with LACE as an art space have been less likely to raise this question with the gallery's front staff, assuming the sign to be an artwork with a solely representational function. The sign's straightforward address in the unlikely context of the gallery window produces a productive ambiguity: what is the "help" that is sought?

*Help Wanted* is the title of the Cocina Abierta Collective's summer residency at LACE, during which the collective has developed a significant new body of work as a part of their ongoing project, Cocina Abierta. Translating as "open kitchen," *Cocina Abierta* is an investigation into the experiences of restaurant workers in Los Angeles as well as a platform to address the realities of this industry. As art theorists Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty defined, the work of the collective is 'durational', as their projects "evolve over time, but, instead of prioritizing the moment of display, or the event of exhibition, they allow for open-ended, accumulative processes of engagement." Central to the collective's organization is the work they undertake with restaurant workers as well as restaurant-worker advocacy organizations in Los Angeles.

Understood within the context of their practice, the "Help Wanted" sign might be read as a call to both workers and consumers to participate in the food justice movement that goes beyond mainstream associations with organic and locally sourced foods, to include the labor ethics of the industry at large. The sign also functions as a provocation to the publics of the boulevard to literally inquire within the gallery, where LACE's front staff and members of the collective have engaged in numerous conversations with gallery-goers and curious restaurant workers alike. As an invitation for inquiry and a call for assistance, the sign's message is sincere.

The Cocina Abierta Collective is Cayetano Juarez, Christina Sanchez Juarez, Oakland Bautista and Mario Mesquita. *Help Wanted* is the first public presentation by this constellation of collective members, which counts professional cooks, artists, activists, designers, organizers, and educators amongst the group. Cayetano Juarez and Oakland Bautista are longtime

restaurant workers themselves and along with Christina Sanchez Juarez, are also active members of the worker center, ROC-LA (Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles). This organization provides crucial services to restaurant workers, such as a health care cooperative, as well as advocating for fair labor practices in the industry. The recently-formed collective builds on a project titled *Break + Pausa* that was initiated by Christina Sanchez Juarez and Cayetano Juarez in 2011, when Christina Sanchez Juarez was a student in the MFA Public Practice program at Otis College of Art and Design. Juarez and Juarez initially formed a partnership with ROC-LA in 2011 as a part of *Break + Pausa*, and continue to carry out their organizing work in concert with the worker center in the project's newest iteration.

LA has the distinction of being the wage theft capital of the United States. It is estimated that twenty-six million dollars are stolen from low-wage workers in the city every week. There are few recourses for immigrant workers, allowing corporate management to take advantage of a labor force that is crucial to the industry. Wage theft is made more egregious when less than a fifth of restaurant workers earn a living wage. This reality makes it difficult for workers to afford to stay home when sick, despite the health risks that this poses to consumers. In Los Angeles, nearly ninety percent of restaurant workers are not provided with paid sick days.

It is important that consumers are aware of these realities, as patrons and as potential advocates for the people who cook their food. For this reason, the collective hosted a booth at the Hollywood Farmer's Market during the course of their residency. The collective members, dressed in aprons and white shirts, were joined by Ile Velez, an organizer from ROC-LA, and two interns from LACE for the Sunday morning event. The group handed out over two hundred cookies that had been stamped with statements such as, "80 hour work week," "living off tips" and "LA: #1 in Wage Theft." One batch of cookies bore the phrase, "what is ethical dining?," a question that was central to many of the conversations that the group engaged in with the patrons. The simple invitation to literally ingest these facts was also a clever play on the idea of the unpalatable. At the end of the day, the majority of the cookies were gone, but many marked with the phrase "cooking while sick" remained; a testament to the resonance of the gesture with consumers.

The multi-block attraction that is the Hollywood Farmer's Market is representative of just one aspect of the neighborhood's food scene. Hollywood is a mishmash of high cuisine and fast-food restaurants, bars and tourist joints, as well as being the home of Thai Town, an enclave of largely family owned businesses that are located east of Vine Street. The diverging price points for a meal out in Hollywood are reflective of the late-stage gentrification in the neighborhood. This reality has had significant consequences for its low-wage workers, many of whom cannot afford to live in the area where they work.

The impacts of these changes are just one subject that are reflected in the transcribed interviews that take various forms in the collective's installation. The group conducted these interviews with restaurant workers in the streets of Hollywood during the first half of their residency, as well as during community events. These recordings form the basis of a sound work that plays on the sidewalk outside of LACE, literally returning the testimonials to the streets from which they were collected. The testimonials are also central to the installation in LACE's front gallery, which has been plastered in a large vinyl map of the neighborhood. The map is dotted with colorful, transparent plexiglass tiles, with each tile featuring a fragment from the testimonials, which are written in Spanish, English and Thai. The multilingualism of the installation's text-based works reflect these conversations with the low-wage workforce that sustains the neighborhood's service economy, as well as the collective's practice, which so often finds the group working between and amongst different communities.

It is crucial to consider Cocina Abierta Collective's residence at LACE within the context of their ongoing inquiry in Los Angeles. LACE's invitation to work in Hollywood has supported a period of frenetic activity in their practice, as workers and new partners graciously returned the collective's inquiry for help. For example, during the course of the residency the collective formed a relationship with Thai CDC (Thai Community Development Center), an organization that amongst their many activities, serves members of the Thai community in Hollywood. The organization co-hosted a food-

based event that was open to residents of the Palm Village Senior Housing, where the collective conducted interviews with former restaurant owners and workers of the Thai community. Only over time will it become clear if the relationships that were formed during this brief time in Hollywood will deepen; for as Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty suggest, "a prevalent belief [is] the need for public art to engage with its most immediate public constituencies through hospitality and the development of relationships built on trust, before decisions are made as to how to proceed." Hollywood has long been believed to be a place for new beginnings.

Jacqueline Bell, Curator

<sup>1</sup> Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, "An End to the Beginning, the Beginning of the End," in *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*, ed. Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, (Amsterdam: Valiz, (2011), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, "ROC-LA Supports Restaurant Workers Against Wage Theft!," accessed July 28 2014, <http://www.asianpacificpolicyand-planningcouncil.org/roc-la-supportrestaurantworkers-against-wage-theft/>.

<sup>3</sup> ROC-LA (Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles, "Behind the Kitchen Door: Inequality & Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry," accessed July 28, 2014, <http://rocunited.org/roc-la-behind-the-kitchen-door/>.

<sup>4</sup> ROC-LA (Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles, "Behind the Kitchen Door: Inequality & Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry."

<sup>5</sup> Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, "An End to the Beginning, the Beginning of the End," in *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*, ed. Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011), 8.



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Documentation from the Cocina Abierta: *Help Wanted* event at Palm Village Senior Housing in collaboration with Thai CDC (Thai Community Development Center). Photo of resident Yawares Buranachunter, July 16, 2014. Courtesy of the artists and LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions). Photo by Angel Alvarado.