



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Dallas Artists Fight Workplace Injustice, Win Coveted Andy Warhol Foundation Grant for Texas Public Art

Dallas, Texas – June 27, 2012 – “The American Dream is dead!” exclaims conceptual artist Scott Gleeson when asked his views on the epidemic of wage theft plaguing the Texas construction industry. “The systemic abuse of workers by contractors and homeowners amounts to a tacit policy of exclusion within our community and forces us to fundamentally reconsider the economics of homeownership and how far we are willing to go as a society to achieve that dream.” Gleeson, and his collaborator, artist Dane Larsen, are the creators of a controversial new Dallas-based public art project, Las Manos Negras (The Black Hands), a grassroots initiative designed to facilitate communication between exploited day laborers, contractors, and labor advocates, and to empower workers to assert their legal and moral rights to social justice, an effort for which they have been awarded a coveted 2012 Idea Fund Grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

The Idea Fund is administered on behalf of the Warhol Foundation by Houston-based DiverseWorks Artspace, Aurora Picture Show, and Project Row Houses and awards ten \$4000 grants annually to support experimental public artworks that envision alternative models of engagement with new constituencies. “Historical forms of public art, such as monumental sculpture sited in public spaces, tend to gloss deep social divisions in their representations of official narratives,” says Gleeson. “LMN reacts against this model by establishing a forum where marginalized participants may express their voices in their native languages and to an audience of their choice, typically other workers or labor advocates.”

Since August 2011, LMN has been operating at known day labor hire sites in East Dallas, Plano, Garland, and Irving talking to workers about their needs and studying their distinctive uses of the urban landscape. “Workers are understandably mistrustful of our intentions at first and many are reluctant to speak out about victimization for fear of losing employment opportunities,” says Larsen, “the stories we have heard thus far corroborate statistics in wage theft reports published by the Workers Defense Project (Austin) and the Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project (El Paso); however, we are finding that certain workers are more at risk than others, with some experiencing repeated incidents of wage theft.”

LMN is using the grant funds to develop an audio archive of worker’s narratives of exploitation and their perceived role within the local economy and community. MP3 players containing audio files of each participant interview, along with ceramic impressions of the worker’s hands made with clay from the banks of the Rio Grande, will

be loaded into vintage construction worker lunchboxes, forming a portable archive capable of being deployed in a variety of contexts. The listener will be encouraged to manipulate archival documents and ceramic casts while listening to the recorded narrative. Worker's stories will be available to the public through a bilingual project website, www.lasmanosnegras.org (September, 2012), administered by nationally recognised public artist Justin Shull. Additionally, LMN has established an ad hoc print studio, Taller Graphica de Las Manos Negras, for the production of a darkly comic series of illustrated leaflets and *calaveras* containing workers rights information, which will be distributed at day labor sites. LMN will release limited edition woodcut illustrations for sale to the general public as a way of promoting the wage theft issue and insuring the sustainability of the project beyond 2012. All day workers are paid for their contributions to LMN, offering immediate financial relief for wage theft victims. Members of the public wishing to obtain a catalogue of available prints may write to info@lasmanosnegras.com or call (214) 810-3499.

About Wage Theft in Texas

The crime of wage theft is one of the most immediate threats to the success of immigrant communities in Texas because of the destabilizing effect of financial hardship and poverty on families and worker self esteem. This issue has drawn significant regional and national attention, however, current avenues of support still leave many of the most vulnerable workers, especially migrant day laborers, exposed to repeated incidents of exploitation, intimidation, and workplace violence.

Under current legislation wage theft is classified as a form of "theft of service". The recent passage into Texas law of Senate Bill SB 1024 has also reclassified the partial payment of wage claims as criminal act, rather than a civil matter. LMN interprets wage theft as a fundamental human rights violation in contravention of Article 23 paragraph 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. The clause states, "[e]veryone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work." LMN recognizes the challenges of enacting legislation that transforms abstract human rights into concrete and legally enforceable civil rights.

The Texas Workforce Commission is the state government body responsible for resolving wage claims. Most day laborers are classified by the TWC as "independent contractors" and are therefore ineligible to file wage claims, effectively rendering many workers powerless to pursue legal remedies against the contractors who hire them. The cities of Garland, Plano, and Denton established Day Labor Centers to provide essential services and to help prevent wage theft by facilitating contractor negotiations. In Plano, a no-solicitation ordinance was enacted to drive workers from the K Street zone to the DLC nearby. The city of Dallas does not have a day labor center.

Statements By Wage Theft Experts Authorized for Publication

Roberto Corona (Founder and Director, Pueblo Sin Fronteras, Dallas): "Despite suffering repeated incidents of abuse, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions, day laborers' willingness to persevere shows no limits. Pueblo Sin Fronteras will be standing with the day laborer community in the struggle for justice and the improvement of social conditions. No one should be exploited in our own backyard."

Vanna Slaughter (Catholic Charities of Dallas, Director of Immigration and Legal Services): “Our program has advocated on behalf of low income immigrant workers for over twenty years. The problem of unpaid wages by unscrupulous employers is among the most menacing of the issues we have confronted.”

Dr. Joerg Rieger (Wendland-Cook Professor of Constructive Theology, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University): “Worker issues are never merely special-interest concerns but always reflect on society as a whole, not only our politics and economics but also our values and beliefs. LMN is a powerful project that can help us understand not only others but also ourselves better and lead to transformation.”

Cristina Tzintzún (Executive Director, Workers Defense Project, Austin, TX): “Wage theft isn’t just an economic crisis, it is a moral crisis, that is allowing hardworking families to be victims of some of the most egregious form of human rights abuse. Manos Negras highlights a critical issue that is often overlooked in our community. By bridging art and public awareness LMN will make a critical impact on this issue.”



LMN

Illustration for Leaflet #1: “El Sueño Americano Está Muerto”

Artist Proof 1/6, edition of 60

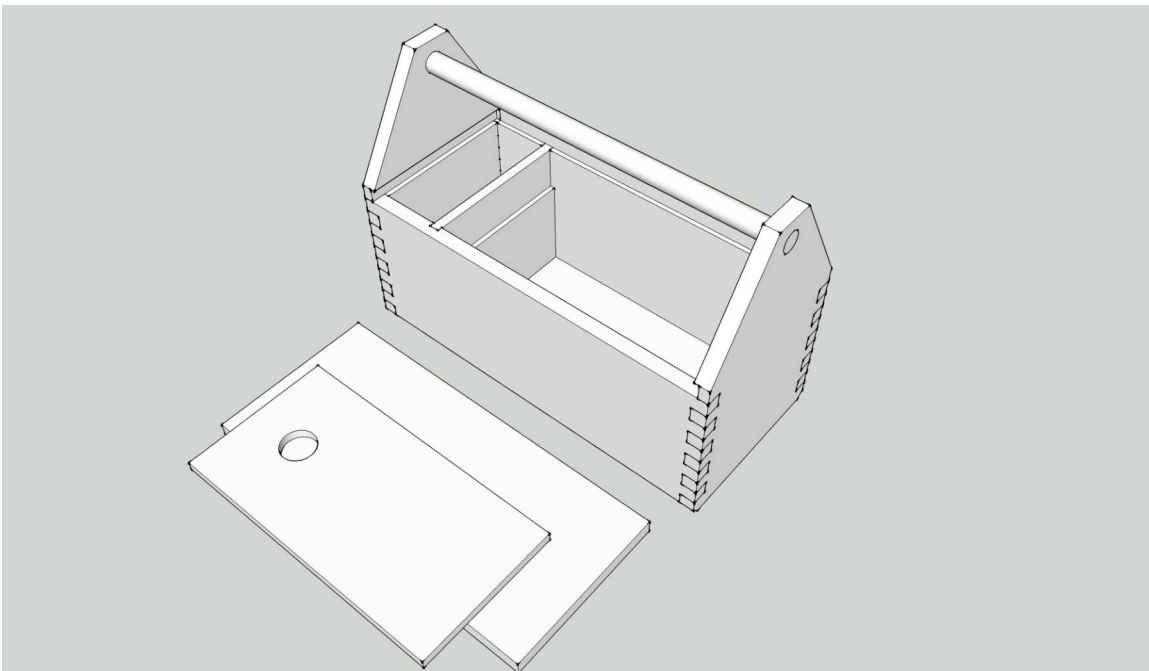
Woodcut on handmade paper

Sheet: 8.5” x 11”

Image: 8.25” x 6.375”



LMN: Model for mobile archive including vintage lunch box, cardboard model of wooden inner box, terracotta hand casts, iPod with headphones, and documents.



LMN: Final design for archive inner box for fabrication in 3/8" native Texas White Oak with compartment for iPod, ceramic hand casts, and documents.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Scott Gleeson (born, Dallas, TX, 1977) is a visual artist and art historian specializing in interdisciplinary research on public art, audience participation, urbanism, and the avant-garde. Beginning his professional career while living in Colorado, Scott's early experiments in participatory public art targeted traditional agricultural communities of the Gunnison Valley and culinary rituals of the Navajo of the Canyon de Chelly National Park. In 2007 Scott earned a Meadows Artistic Merit Scholarship for graduate study in the Division of Art History at Southern Methodist University where he spent the following 2 years researching public art and philosophy. Focusing primarily on British public art projects for marginalized audiences, Scott traveled to Belfast, NI, where he conducted archival research on ACNI funded projects for teenagers. Following graduation, he was invited to present his research to the Historians of British Art at the 2010 College Art Association Annual Conference in Chicago. Scott published portions of his research on public art in the *St. Andrews Journal of Art History*, and his article on Richard Neutra's Miller House (1937) was accepted for publication in *Interiors* (Berg, Oxford). Scott has subsequently taught adjunct coursework at Eastfield College, Mesquite, TX, where he directed hands-on creative collaborations with students, including the production of a series of Fluxus-inspired Happenings sited on campus. In addition to running Las Manos Negras, the artist plans to debut his series of paintings and architectural models, *Homes for Convalescent Troops*, in the fall of 2012. To learn more about the artist visit www.scottgleeson.net (forthcoming).

Dane Larsen is a sculptor working in Dallas, TX. He was educated at Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, The Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain, and The University of Texas at Austin where he studied sculpture and transmedia and received his BFA. He has traveled widely, and has lived abroad for extended periods of time. From 1996-1998 Dane worked as a missionary in the Dominican Republic, serving laborers in the foreign-owned factories of the *zona franca* (duty free zone). From 2006-2008 he and his wife worked (undocumented) as English teachers for a small nursery school in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Currently he teaches art at the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, the first all-male public school in Texas.

Dane's art is grounded in the environment, both physical and political, in which he finds himself: as a student in Austin he made unarmed bombs and cooked beans-and-rice from the poisonous Mountain Laurel as a response to post 9/11 rhetoric, and in Thailand he made sculptural installations from construction debris left over from an encampment abandoned by Burmese construction workers. As a teacher he encourages his students to similarly investigate their own environment as they discover natural fiber and dye stocks from which to make their own paper and inks. His current collaborative work with immigrant day laborers utilizes his skills as a Spanish speaker, his interest in making art in nontraditional formats, and his fourteen years of experience working with marginalized communities both in both the US and abroad. Follow the artist at www.danelarsen.blogspot.com.

Justin Shull is a visual artist specializing in new genre inter-media public art projects examining how technology influences historical and contemporary attitudes toward the natural world, and how such exchanges may redefine the human condition. Justin's playful yet sophisticated approaches to troubling environmental and social ills model new forms of activist practice by positing mechanical or manufactured surrogates in place of

natural or human agents. Often released over the Internet, television, or other media formats, Justin's projects are designed to reach enormous constituencies far outside the reach of traditional arts institutions.

Justin is currently based in Los Angeles, CA, where he administers several ongoing projects and serves as a supporting artist, advisor, and Webmaster to Las Manos Negras. Justin has exhibited and performed at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, NJ; CUE Art Foundation in New York, NY; EYEBEAM in New York, NY; The U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C.; Blue Star Contemporary Art in San Antonio, TX; Salt Lake Arts Center in Salt Lake City, UT; Leedy-Volkous Art Center, Kansas City, MO; Eastfield College, Mesquite, TX; and Brand 10 Artspace, Fort Worth, TX. He is the recipient of the Professional Development Fellowship from the College Art Association, and awards from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and the International Sculpture Center. Justin graduated from Dartmouth College with a B.A. in Studio Art and received his M.F.A. in Visual Arts from Rutgers University. Learn more at justinshull.net.

Helen Rieger, LMN Volunteer Artist, Imaging Coordinator, Photographer

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THE IDEA FUND

Complete information about The Idea Fund may be found at www.theideafund.org.

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