

# Interview: Sean Gaulager

by Claire Ruud



Co-Lab

Photo Don Mason

**Co-Lab**, the ambitious nonprofit gallery on Austin's East Side, is one year old and going strong. With a new artist project in the gallery every week, I'm amazed Sean Gaulager, the project's unofficial director, had time to talk with me last week. (BTW I'm sure Gaulager would shun the title director, but really, without him, where would Co-Lab be?)

**...might be good (mbg):** Over the first year of Co-Lab's existence, you've sustained an almost weekly rotation of exhibitions/installations. Initially, what was the impetus behind running each exhibition for only a week?

Sean Gaulager (SG): The rotation schedule was partly informed by the idea that a 'one night only' show would lend itself better to a space focused on new media, and was also a reaction to the lack of attendance during gallery hours on the east side (especially in the 'deep east' district). The thought of sitting on a show for a month that very few people would attend didn't seem like the most prudent use of time and resources. But why justify it? Really, I just like to host parties.

**mbg:** What have you found to be the advantages of the week-long run?

SG: The main advantage is our ability to provide more opportunities to a wider selection of artists. Also, it allows me to take a more relaxed curatorial stance when approached by artists interested in showing; I don't need to limit the opportunities to the 10 to 12 'cream of the crop' artists when we've got 50 some-odd weekends to utilize per year. In any given month Co-Lab may have an

installation one weekend, a performance the next, a screening the third, and the last weekend is reserved for "Critique + Discussion."

**mbg: The limitations?**

SG: I think the limitations are obvious. First of all, artists only have one night to bask in the glory of what they have created and those who couldn't make it out that night don't have another opportunity to view the exhibition in person. Secondly, as I've heard from some people, it can be hard to follow what we are up to any given week. However, I think these problems are somewhat remedied by persistent documentation, web publishing and promotion. Photographs and/or videos of almost every show can be viewed on the website, and I spend a great deal of time keeping the site up to date, sending out newsletters, and taking advantage of online social networks. If you really want to see a particular show, you'll come, and if you really want to know what we're doing, it's not that hard to find out.

**mbg: What is the administrative structure of Co-Lab these days?**

SG: At this point I am spearheading the project, but without the help of my friends, family and fellow artists, Co-Lab would certainly not be manageable. I think a lot about how to build an administrative structure around this space without slowing its momentum. Because Co-Lab is built on an unusual model, I don't have many places to look for inspiration. But I believe that over time the right structure will present itself.

**mbg: How are you funding such ambitious programming?**

SG: I keep the expenses low, as low as they can go (basically just bills and rent). Other expenses include Kilz, we use a lot of Kilz 'round here, and beer (sponsorship anyone?). But since Co-Lab is not a commercial space and there are no contracts or commission rates, I am not providing services like shipping, advertising, etc. It's kind of a bare bones model.

**mbg: You've planted a community garden, too. How's it going?**

SG: It's going about as good as anyone's garden in Texas during a critical level drought. This watering once a week thing is not going to cut it. We've pulled all the spring/summer plants that got fried and are currently in the process of tilling and planting for the next season with high hopes of rain and greener times. Amanda Winkles, the garden's founder and former garden coordinator has moved on, having found employment opportunities abroad, leaving it up to my neighbor Lewis, a few new volunteers and myself to see what we can make of this coming season.

**mbg: Co-Lab places particular emphasis on its relationship to its neighborhood. Practically speaking, how does the organization cultivate this relationship?**

SG: We have tried and will continue to try reaching out to those around us. Mainly we've informed the neighborhood of our larger events by distributing invites written in English and Spanish. Also, earlier this summer we harvested a ton of tomatoes, chard and a few other goodies; Lewis then took baskets of produce to every house on the street and let residents know they could get involved in the garden project.

**mbg: Just over this past summer, a lot of chic new restaurants have popped up in East Austin. What changes are you seeing around your neighborhood? How is this affecting Co-Lab?**

SG: I made it over to Justine's this past week and despite the fact that a mature white crowd drinking French wine and ordering \$20 appetizers is definitely different from what I'm used to experiencing around this neighborhood I'd have to say it's a pretty cool place. Perhaps we'll see a relationship form with the art spaces over here and the restaurant's clientele? The only other changes in the neighborhood have been Meals on Wheels and More expanding their warehouse and the Rhizome Collective getting shut down, but neither seem to be products of gentrification. This area still seems to be one untouched little pocket, however I'm sure that won't last long.

**mbg: What questions is Co-Lab asking right now?**

SG: How can we do more events, workshops, and programming? How can Co-Lab bring more people on administratively without creating a cumbersome bureaucracy? Are there other organizations with similar operational models? Can their models be applied to our own?

**mbg: Have you found any models that interest you yet?**

SG: I actually haven't had much time to do research on other similar spaces but I'd be interested to hear any suggestions. My question is: When I do find such a model how do I go about discovering the real inner dynamics of an administration and not just the polished façade?

**mbg: Any particular goals for the coming year?**

SG: Currently the 'list' includes: refining the exhibition space, opening a commission-free store in the back, expanding the garden, giving out more free food, landscaping the property, building a fire pit, adding Sundays as a community day/open hours/artist talk/workshop time, applying for a grant (or two), obtaining sponsorship, starting a fall residency program and video podcast. Whew!

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