



ARTS

Co-Lab Oration

Talking with community arts instigator Sean Gaulager

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER, FRI., JAN. 21, 2011



I'm sitting at a wooden picnic table in the well-tended side yard of Co-Lab, the busy art space at 613 Allen on the sunrise side of I-35. The top of the table is covered with faux-wood flooring; the table's legs extend a carefully crafted "shadow" of AstroTurf onto the actual lawn below. The sun rose hours ago, and its benevolent eye throws a midwinter Texas warmth onto this clearing amid the patchwork of trees and residences and Eastside industry, onto me and the man on the other side of the table. That man – the young, focused co-founder of Austin's *Cantanker* magazine – is Sean Gaulager.

Gaulager runs Co-Lab, and Co-Lab runs constantly. Over the past year, the humble venue has housed more than 30 separate exhibitions, many of them installation-based and enhanced by performative, interactive, or video elements, providing an arena for some experimental, dynamic work that more reserved organizations might shy from considering. In the coming year, the same sort of hell-bent or heaven-sent schedule will complicate the space and keep Gaulager entangled with enough for any three people to deal with.

Right now Gaulager's just finished installing a stereo in his girlfriend's car, he's sitting at the picnic table with an alt-weekly reporter as the sun burns bright above, and he's dealing with little but answering a few questions for your edification.

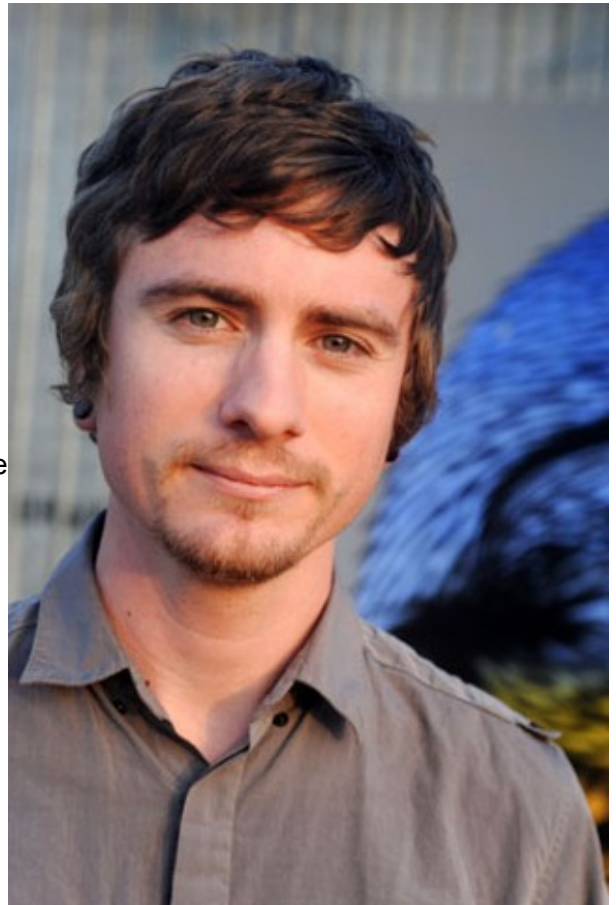


Photo by John Anderson

Austin Chronicle: *How long have you been running Co-Lab?*

Sean Gaulager: About two and a half years.

AC: *And before that, you worked at Volitant Gallery?*

SG: Yeah, Xochi [Solis] and I. She directed, and I assistant-directed.

AC: *And what happened with that? Volitant was huge and fancy and had gorgeous shows, and then it went away.*

SG: Yeah, it was really amazing. They started out with a lot of investors, and I think they kind of dwindled away gradually as they realized that Austin wasn't the market where they were going to strike it rich having a gallery ... and then I moved on to this, and Xochi got the Visual Arts Center job – well, the CRL [Creative Research

Laboratory] job, and *now* the VAC job – so maybe it was a blessing in disguise. Because both of us went on to do maybe not *bigger* things but *better* things, things more intrinsic to our kinds of personalities.

AC: *So for two and a half years you've had events here almost every week. How the hell do you keep such a crazy pace?*

SG: It's a day-to-day thing. Making it my life, making it kind of this ritual or schedule – meeting up with artists, letting them into the space, letting them have free rein with what they want to do. My end is really just making the money to back the space, promoting it, keeping up the website as a promotional vehicle, and helping the artists when they need help. But, for the most part, it's really *artist-driven*, which is why it's more of a studio than a gallery. It's more of a *process*, more *process-related*. It's up to the artists to come to the space and execute their projects. My role is to facilitate in a bare-bones kind of way.

AC: *How much of a one-man operation is Co-Lab?*

SG: It's always a confluence of people showing up and helping. There's so much activity, so much going on; there's always a group of people around and lending a hand – with building the actual installations or doing other projects, or helping build stuff in the yard, or maintenance, repainting the walls, or whatever else needs to be done. There's always a group effort, but it's not an official collective. It's just whoever's hanging out at the moment. We get a six-pack or a 24-pack and hang out in the space and do the job.

AC: *Co-Lab hosts so many installations that take up the whole building's space. They're built, they're taken down, and then they're gone. Are there ever components of the installations that are for sale?*

SG: Usually not.

AC: *But then ... how does an artist make money from such a thing?*

SG: That's not really the objective here. [laughter] I mean, I think that's something that's coming ... not just here, but in Austin in general. We obviously have a lack of an art market. Not so much lack of an art *scene* or lack of people *creating* or showing up and seeing the works. But when it comes to selling, it's kind of, you know, it's very sparse. So I didn't want to start a space that was contingent upon trying to make it in that sense, so I created a model that could be sustained without selling anything.

AC: *How do you fund Co-Lab?*

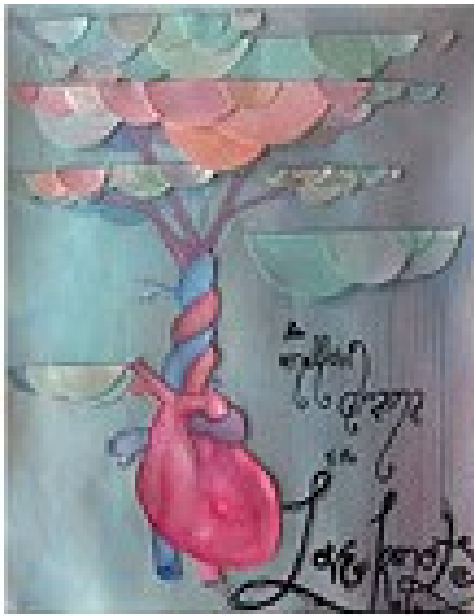
SG: I work as an art installer. I take various jobs: I work at AMOA [Austin Museum of Art], the Blanton, Women & Their Work; I just did a job hanging some work at the W [Hotel]. And I work at a flexible rate. For institutions I work for less; for companies or private investors, people who can afford it, I charge more. If I'm working for an arts institution and being involved in the process, that can determine the pay rate I'm willing to take ... but, all those things combined, I get by by the skin of my teeth every month. And I have a really forgiving landlord, who's an incredible lady. I've fallen behind some months, and she's really flexible with me ... and I always end up getting her back, coming up with the money and paying off my debt to her.

AC: *So when you're doing these installations at AMOA and places like that, they obviously know who you are. But a private place, like the W and all that, they're just hiring this guy Sean because they were told he's a professional. Do any of them research your background and see, like, "This is a man who knows what's going on," and then use you as a consultant?*

SG: Sometimes I'm just a grunt – and sometimes I'd prefer to be that way, you know? If I'm making a decent wage and they want me to just shut my mouth and do the job, then I'll do it. Other times, I feel like I'm brought into the conversation and I'm edging on being a consultant. And sometimes I *am* brought on as a consultant.

AC: *How do you choose artists to show at Co-Lab?*

SG: I have an open call for proposals at all times. People ask me how to propose, and the answer to that



question is, you know, just one or two paragraphs, very simple: Tell me what you want to do physically,

conceptually, in the space, and include an image. And I slot it into the calendar if I think it fits, if I think it works. If it's a show that's in some vein of what we're trying to do here – although it's very loose. Generally I say "yes" a lot and plug it into the schedule. Right now, I'm starting to book into the summer for 2011. And it's not all on a weekly schedule: I'm giving two weeks to installations now, so they can have an opening and a closing reception. But performances and video screenings and things more like, ah, happenings – those are still a single weekend.

AC: *Is it exclusively local artists?*

SG: Not at all. I've had some shows by people from out of town, out of state, and I'm starting to get more. I've got an artists' group coming in from New Orleans in February. I've had a couple artists from New York who had connections to Austin and were coming down here and wanted to do a show. I've had some traveling shows come through. So it's not exclusive by any means.

AC: *Are there people you've tracked down in order to ask them to do an installation here?*

SG: There are people whose work I've admired for some time, but it's not that I track them down or pursue them It's more of a casual thing. Like, I'm at an opening or a party and I see somebody who hasn't shown here – maybe we've talked about it briefly in the past – and I mention it to them again, make sure they know that they're welcome and the calendar is open to them. But I can't think of a *specific* person right now that I'm, like, courting.

AC: *What are your preferences in artwork?*

SG: I actually wanted this space to be more of a performance space. When I originally started the project – well, when we originally started it, because there were other founders in the beginning – that was the idea. I mean, I love installations, I love seeing people come in here for a week and build something that's amazing. I love to watch that happen, as opposed to a typical load-in and load-out situation. But I also like the simplicity of a raw space, just a white cube that people can use on a weekly basis to come in and do a performative thing for half an hour or an hour or however long, have a party around it, and then it's done – it's ephemeral, it's gone. There's something about that that's always drawn me to performance.

AC: *And what about your own art? You create all sorts of stuff, right?*

SG: I wouldn't say I create *all* sorts of stuff. I create things upon occasion. I haven't made any work in a while, and I think part of the reason – and this is an ongoing excuse for me, and I need to remedy this – is that I don't own my own video camera, and, predominantly, for the last couple of years, I've been really interested in doing video art. I've made some pieces, not really knowing what I was doing, because I haven't had enough time or the access to equipment to crank out a body of work, to figure out what's good and what's bad and what my thing is. But, in some ways, Co-Lab is my own art project, too. It's an ongoing thing, and I'm always having to adapt and learn new skills to create this place and make the environment as enjoyable outside the context of the environment that's being created inside. Taking the yard, the building, and making it accessible and usable for artists and for the general public, making it a good forum for people to hang out and enjoy art and talk about things, you know? But something about that sounds kind of ridiculous to say: that Co-Lab is my *art project*.

AC: *Well, but how long do you plan on continuing this?*

SG: As long as I can. [laughs] But, yeah – maybe buy this property, build a house on it: I'm gonna make a home here, if I can.

Next at Co-Lab: Lindsay Palmer's "A Case for Tragic Optimism or Tales From the Keeper of Knowledge," in which the artist's structures of mud and leaves and recycled commercial flotsam make use of her sustainable-architecture skills. Jan. 22-29.
