

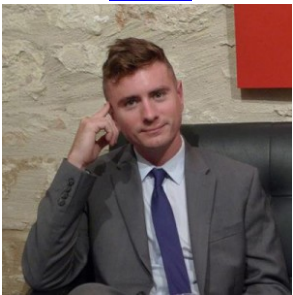
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Interview with Co-Lab Projects Director Sean Gaulager

Posted on [November 27, 2012](#) by [Thao Votang](#)

Edition: [Austin](#)



Co-Lab Projects
Director Sean Gaulager

2012 has been a big year for [Co-Lab Projects](#). With an additional downtown space and a larger organized team, Sean Gaulager, director of Co-Lab Projects, has been checking off a numerous “to-do’s”. For those who don’t know very much about the organization or Gaulager and those who just want to know more, read on:

How many years have you been involved with Co-Lab? How long has Co-Lab been in existence?

I have been with Co-Lab since day one, as founder and primary proprietor. I came up with the name and mission for the project. Co-Lab was conceived and opened in July of 2008 with its first show opening on July 6th.

What is your background, i.e., how did you find yourself working in the arts?

I started working in the arts right after high school by taking on a glass working apprenticeship and becoming self-employed in that field shortly thereafter. A search for new space led me into arts administration when we rented a huge warehouse, built studios and a gallery and started curating exhibitions. This practice and learning through direct experience was amplified while working under Xochi Solis as Assistant Director of Volitant Gallery, a short lived blue chip commercial space on 4th and Congress. After the inevitable closure of that space, I reconsidered how to exhibit and perpetuate contemporary art in Austin in a sustainable manner and thus Co-Lab was born.

Do you make art as well as curate and direct? How do you balance the two? Do you plan to keep up your personal artistic practice?

My interest in art making is really the foundation for my administrative and curatorial practice. Co-Lab very much started and is arguably still an artistic project of mine (although now it is beginning to resemble an organization or young institution). I won't lie though, my personal artistic practice has suffered a severe blow due to the overwhelming demands of starting and maintaining a nonprofit. I do hope to continue making more solo works of art in the (hopefully) near future as Co-Lab Projects becomes more self sufficient.

What has your experience of EAST been? How do you usually approach the weekend. Has that changed over the years?

My experience of EAST is a limited one, having participated in the tour at one space or another over the last 9 years I've never actually been on the tour. I've gone to some of the events and escaped to hit up the hub for a few minutes but mostly I feel like I should be at my spot talking to people and answering questions. So basically my experience of EAST is very inward looking.

Typically during the day we have very few visitors but experience great turn outs for our openings and other events. It certainly seems like, increasingly, less people are making it out during the day, less families, less older folk, less people on bikes. I think maybe it's reached a critical mass and is too large for people to handle so they default to the studio complexes where they can see numerous artists in one location.

In the past we would host two exhibitions over the two weekends and have daily programming throughout the week. But with dwindling numbers, this seems exhaustive. Our approach from here on out will be to wrap up our programming year with a look back at the artists that exhibited with us that cycle and select works for a group show that then culminates with the release of our yearly Catalog/DVD. This allows the EAST going public to get what they want (lots of artists work in one place) and gives us a consistent event we can do yearly — "Conspectus : Two Thousand such and such".

You recently got your 501(c)(3) status. What made you decide to go this route?

Co-Lab was always intended to be a nonprofit and operated as such from the get-go, offering free exhibitions in a non-commercial setting as more of a throwback to the 'happenings' of the 60's and 70's. For a long time I did this on my own, which was crazy but allowed the ideas I had for the project to grow firm roots. After many years and loads of help from friends in unofficial capacities the right people showed up and slapped me around, asking "what the hell are you doing here?" and began forming plans to really make this project last by building an organization around it. We are now in the throngs of doing just that and despite some growing pains it is shaping up quite nicely.

You have a larger team than before working with you now. How has that changed the way you approach operations? Do you find it easier, harder or something else?

Yes, yes, and yes. It has and will continue to change my approach to this job, it may actually allow me to properly do my job. It is easier and harder all at the same time. I am perpetually letting go of so many things that became intrinsic to my existence because I performed them routinely for so many years. With more people comes more organization, more accountability from both myself and everyone involved, and more projects, more ideas, more expansion. It's lightened my load and thrown more on my shoulders simultaneously, and I imagine that will always be the case, but goddamn it's awesome. The team that's come together is the best group of artists and professionals I've ever had the privilege to work with, and I could not be more grateful for everyone's hard work.

What makes Co-Lab different from other visual art nonprofits in Austin? How does this work to your advantage or disadvantage?

First of all we are small and unpaid, from the bottom up all administrators, advisers, directors and interns alike put in their time and energy because we believe in making this something. This is also problematic because we all have to survive while doing this, so it's constantly a juggling act. It's an advantage because we have no restrictions, no bureaucracy, no one to answer to except ourselves. That really opens up the possibilities and allows us to imagine new models in which to make and produce art. We have written into our charter/bylaws that the board of Co-Lab Projects nonprofit is always to be a working board, meaning that to have a vote you must work — not just be able to write a check or have an opinion. We believe this will keep the direction and integrity of the organization pure and allows for zero separation from decision makers and those who carry out those tasks.

Co-Lab has been in Austin for a number of years and seen a lot of things change. What do you think of the visual arts community and climate these days?

Co-Lab has been here a while and personally I've been working in arts admin for almost 10 years and the changes I've seen are measurable and notable. There are a lot of skeptics as to the future of visual arts here and rightfully so, there are innumerable challenges to establishing a well funded art scene in a developing city. However, in the time I've been working, collaborating and basically surviving here I can honestly say that overall things are getting better. More funding from the city, more collectors, more advocacy, more enthusiasm and new talent. I see a wealth of visual culture and a growing demographic of the wealthy on the precipice of supporting it. But really and most importantly we are having a fucking great time doing it.

What are your hopes for the gallery space in the next year? In five years?

Well, for the space itself, I hope we can figure out a way to make it a permanent home for both the organization and myself. In the last year we really pulled this property together, in large part thanks to Chris Whiteburch. In the next year and 5 years we hope to continue making this a vibrant space in which we can nurture community involvement in the arts. Organizationally in the next year, we want to get our education program off the ground and by that I mean get our movable gallery space on a trailer to begin series of off-site exhibitions, programs and education.

In 5 years, I hope that Co-Lab Projects has become a sustainable endeavor that can not only provide space and administrative production of exhibitions but deliver stipends to each artist to assist with travel, lodging, and production costs; to have an established residency program for out of town artists building a dialog between Austin and other art markets; continuing to umbrella and provide resources to individuals to have administrative and educational programs they want to add to Co-Lab; and last but not least, be able to pay ourselves for the work we so passionately put in on a daily basis.



About Thao Votang

Thao Votang received her bachelor of art in art history from The University of Texas at Austin and her master of liberal arts from St. Edward's University. She writes fiction and is associate director of [Tiny Park](#) where she handles public affairs. Find her on Twitter [@votang](#) and [@tinyparkgallery](#) or read her [blog](#).

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