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CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers

October 2009. Vol. 13, No. 4.

Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy

Arts & Administration Program, University of

Oregon

ISSN 1541-938X

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Creating & Performing *Pinang & Ayu: A Love Story* A Lesbian Shadow-Puppet Performance

[**Summer Melody Pennell**](#)

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

I fell in love with *wayang kulit* (Indonesian shadow-puppet theater) in Jan Mrázek's art history class in 2003. This love led to my own performance, 6 years later, as a graduate student at the University of Oregon. On May 7th, 2009 I performed *Pinang and Ayu: A Love Story*, for my Folklore MA. The performance was largely collaborative, as I was working with Gamelan Sari Pandhawa of Eugene, OR, and I owe director Qehn considerable thanks for his guidance. The creative and learning processes, and of course the performance itself, were unforgettable experiences.

Wayang Kulit is an honored art form in Indonesia. The *dhalang* (puppeteer) sits behind a screen while manipulating and performing the voices for all the puppets. The show is accompanied by a *gamelan* (an Indonesian orchestra, consisting mainly of bronze percussive instruments). The stories portrayed are typically based on Hindu religious tales and are adapted by the *dhalang* to include commentary on local issues. While my goals included honoring and sharing this art form with an American audience, my performance went beyond the normal boundaries of the genre by focusing on lesbian sexuality. This project enabled me to creatively express my own political beliefs. I was also able to reflect on the lives

of lesbian women in Indonesia and the U.S., particularly their relationship to their fellow citizens and the government.



Though I have seen and read about *wayang kulit* performances that include commentary on religion, the government, and the environment, to my knowledge queer sexuality remains unexplored. This is most likely due to the taboo nature of the subject in Indonesia, where gay rights are nonexistent. Since 2000, an increasingly conservative Islamic government has created regional laws that equate homosexuality with prostitution (Blackwood, 2007). The fear of arrest and violence is prevalent in Indonesian queer communities, as I learned in Bali in 2008 when I met with a few lesbians and transwomen. Their stories further drove me to create a queer *wayang kulit*.

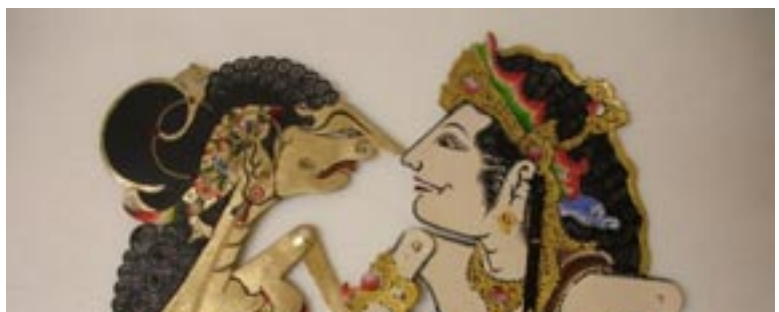
Although it may seem controversial to some scholars that I am an American using an Indonesian art form to talk about lesbian sexuality, by using *wayang kulit* I could ground the issue in a culturally specific context. I wanted to include Indonesian queer identities in the contemporary world of *wayang kulit*, which serves as a type of national narrative due to its popularity. As Robert Cover (1982) states, “[n]o set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning” (p. 4). These are part of a “*nomos-*

normative universe” (ibid). The body and the way society views it are a part of the *nomos*, as the body is “constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). In Indonesia, this *nomos* and the public body is generally Muslim and heteronormative. Though I’m not under the illusion that my project had any effect on the Indonesian *nomos*, this was my small way of introducing a new narrative. Performance can have the power to spur political action, and since I believe in the feminist mantra that “the personal is political” (Forte, 1990, p. 253), I hope that some who saw *Pinang & Ayu* were inspired to join the fight for queer rights on an international level.

The Script

As an ethnographer of performance, a *wayang kulit* enthusiast, and a member of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa, I wanted to show my American audience as “true” of a portrayal as possible in form and structure, even though I was simultaneously pushing the boundaries with the content. I also had to consider that not only would the audience be unfamiliar with the genre, but also with Indonesian queer culture. Thus, while I used the play to comment on the lives of lesbians in Indonesia, the jokes, stereotypical lesbian references (softball and mullets), and most political commentary (Obama’s lack of support for same-sex marriage) were American. I used the Javanese folktale *Princess Pinang Masak* as a basis for the plot because it has a strong female main character and was easily adapted to include a lesbian storyline. Since *wayang kulit* is highly codified, an audience familiar with the codes of puppet movement and story structure can easily interpret it and notice breaks from convention (Schecher, 2002, p. 183). However, since I knew there would be few, if any, Indonesians in the audience, I could not rely on manipulating these conventions as a plot device. Still, since the folktale included elements similar to those in Western fairy tales, such as a Princess and a Sultan who desires her, I decided to rely on the manipulation of the audiences’ understandings of these meanings to “[...] ‘destabilize’ the codified forms [...]” (Schechner, 2002, p. 189). Any Western audience member would understand that it is a break from the heteronormativity prevalent in folk and fairy tales to make the main characters lesbians. The Princess had a wife and led her army to fight for their relationship and freedom. While Pinang was helped once by Hanoman, the male monkey god, the women primarily helped themselves; they were each other’s Prince(ss) Charming.

It was important to me to create something for a queer audience, especially since there is very little in the entertainment industry created for us, and even less for lesbians (Fouts & Inch, 2005).



While most of my queer messages were obvious, the part of the prologue that reads “after a brief, passionate courtship of a few days, [Pinang & Ayu] moved in together” was immediately recognized by the queer and queer-friendly audience members as a play on the popular U-Haul joke that is well-known in American lesbian culture. (What does a lesbian bring on a second date? A U-Haul.) I wanted the heterosexual audience members to understand the show, but they were not first in my mind while writing the script.



The final narration states that “all the happy homos lived under a protective spell, where they will remain until homosexuality is no longer hated and feared, and the narrow-minded ones can see past the curse of hatred within themselves.” I chose to end the story in this way, with the queer people under a permanent spell of disguise, as an adaptation of the original tale in which Pinang prays on her death bed that no woman will be as beautiful as her and so won’t suffer as she did. I could have instead chosen to make the whole society enlightened and accepting, but this utopian view does not reflect the situation in Indonesia or the U.S., and I wanted to give a lasting impression of the need for social change. In Indonesia especially, queer people live their lives primarily underground; this ending, though bittersweet, reflects this reality. Though this performance was largely a celebration of lesbian identities and of lesbians’ perseverance through adversity, ending it without acknowledging the continued struggle for rights and acceptance would have seemed false and even disrespectful of my Indonesian acquaintances.

Performing

The performance went well, and I estimate around 150 people attended. The large number of queer people in attendance was likely due to my targeted advertising, and the fact that the fliers all labeled it



as a *wayang kulit* with a “lesbian twist.” Since I was sitting behind a screen during the



performance, I was not aware of the audience visually, but I felt their presence and positive energy. I wanted to please them and enjoyed interacting with them: exaggerating the voices according to their responses, pausing for their laughter.

My position as a lesbian and a member of the queer community gave weight, perhaps even a layer of authenticity, to the performance. I embodied this identity visually, by wearing a rainbow sash and styling my hair in a faux hawk; signs that would immediately read as lesbian to the audience and would clearly identify me as “family” to the queer attendees. As Schechner has said, “the audience is not an either/or stagnant lump” (quoted in Finnegan, p. 99), and individuals interact and respond in their own ways, and for their own purposes, to performances. From talking with some of the audience members afterwards, I learned that some were happy to see *wayang kulit* for the first time, some were happy to see lesbian identities represented, and some of these experiences overlapped.

Reflection

At times, working on this project made me hyper-sensitive as I worried about how it would be perceived by the audience and all other parties involved. As Schechner (1985) states, “performers- and sometimes spectators too- are changed by the activity of performing” (p. 4). The experience of creating and performing a *wayang kulit* has enhanced my understanding and respect of the genre, Indonesian culture, and the way performance can be used as a vehicle for social commentary and political activism. *Pinang and Ayu: A Love Story* was not just a love story about two women, but also an expression of my love for Indonesia, *wayang kulit*, and the global queer community at large.



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Summer Pennell has an M.A. in Folklore from the University of Oregon, where she also studied with the Arts Administration and Anthropology departments. For *Pinang & Ayu: A Love Story*, she received the Bruce M. Abrams Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Graduate Essay Award. She is currently teaching high school English and observing the local folklore in Windsor, North Carolina.

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The Bailout Biennial (January 15 until April 15, 2009)

[elin o'Hara slavick](#) (Curator) and [María DeGuzmán](#) (Artist)

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

[Sample Slide Show of biennial works](#) (opens in a pop-up window and requires Flash Player ([Flash download here](#)))

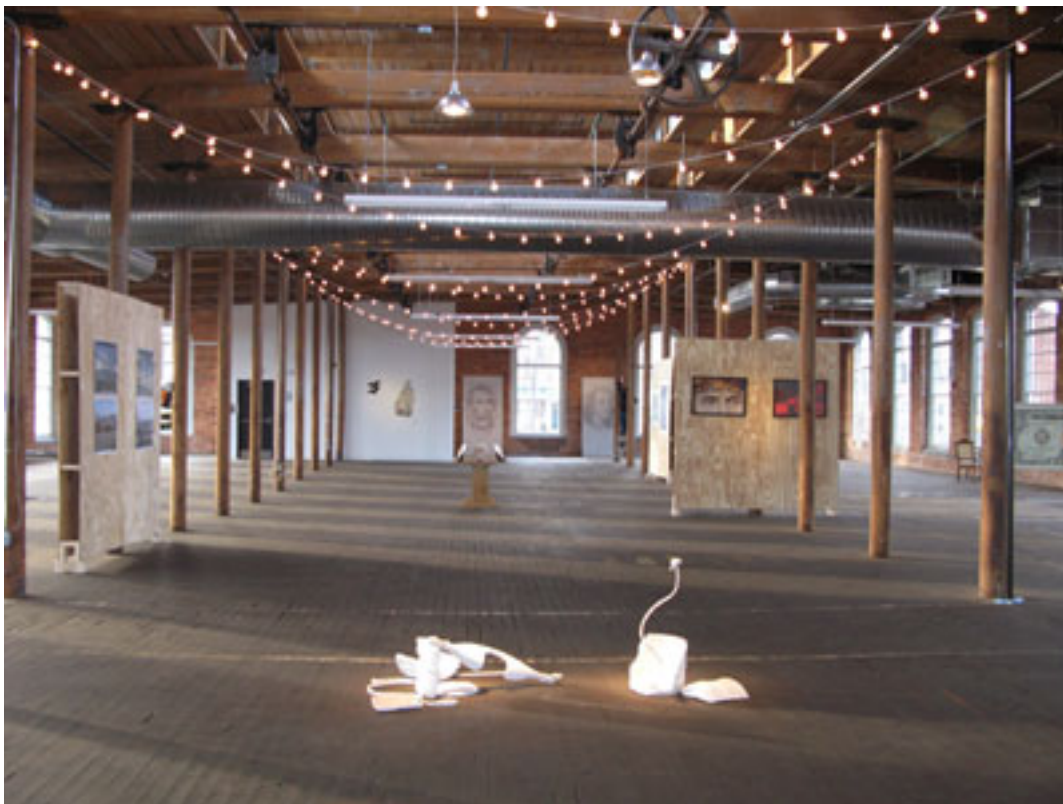
How can and do we respond to the economic, political, and social world around us as artists at a time of heightened frenzy and pending doom? Can art shed some light on the current situation or poke some holes in the dull screen of it all?

Can we make beauty out of nothing, humor out of tragedy, critical understanding out of superficial materials, a sense of wonder, purpose, or awe out of crumbs? Can these works compel viewers to action in order to begin a shift towards a new and different economy of desire, cooperation, and possibilities?

We responded to these questions during early 2009 by organizing a spontaneous "biennial" about the "bail out, economic scandal or meltdown," which, at the time, was all you heard about. The whole exhibition was conceived and produced in less than 3 months. Generally, there is no possible way that a show like this could happen at a regular institution - gallery/museum - unless they canceled a show because institutions schedule exhibitions years in advance. Most institutions also do not encourage spontaneous responses to socio-economic and political strife.

Nor do they allow for site-responsive or site-specific installations. Golden Belt (http://www.goldenbeltarts.com/space_galleries.shtml), thanks to the visionary and energetic Nancy Kitterman who oversees all exhibitions in the many spaces, provided a space for current and critical issues to be addressed.

There should be more spaces and opportunities such as this one – exhibitions inspired and informed by current events and by the space and environment themselves, in this case, an old tobacco pouch making factory that is empty, hollow, ghostly, post-industrial, cleansed,



erased, and thoroughly post-modern. Bailout Biennial was housed on the 3rd floor of Golden Belt's Building #2, a big empty space with high ceilings and tall windows surrounding the room, oily wood floors, and brick walls, clearstory windows, and a view of the trains chugging pass. Golden Belt is located in downtown Durham, North Carolina, a post-industrial city that is struggling to revitalize itself in the midst of a global economic meltdown.

(Image on right: Installation View, foreground piece: Andrew Johnson, *The Last Drop*, Cast marble, Variable dimensions in arrangement of to-scale rope, bucket and yoke components)

The exhibition was free. Unlike most biennials, this one was put together quickly, had no budget, and required plywood sheets to be screwed into the existing wooden pillars to make walls for all the art. All shipping and insurance costs were generously covered by the artists. Golden Belt donated the design and production of the exhibition card, labor for press releases, and the installation of the plywood walls. The curators, Golden Belt employees, and some of the artists installed and de-installed the show.

I asked Jeff Waites, with whom I co-organized 3 LOOM shows (1) installed in an old textile mill in Pittsboro, North Carolina, to join me in co-curating this Bailout Biennial project. Waites now lives in Maine so we did everything through email: calling for submissions that addressed the current economic crisis or scandal, the 700 billion+ dollar bailout, capitalism, global economy, post-industrialism, greed and profit; considering the submissions; and deciding to include everyone who submitted because we liked everything and it felt in keeping with the no budget, democratic, sarcastic tone of the show. Biennials are usually blockbuster affairs with multi-million dollar budgets, superstar artists, pavilions, corporate sponsors, major curators, etc. This one may never happen again (or maybe it will). At the core of this project was a group of people working together to change things, to address critical issues and conditions through a collective, spontaneous, and sincere voice.

Here are some comments by participating artists:

The show brought creative reactions to the turbulent economic landscape into the public sphere. I felt empowered to be participating in a politically oriented show of this nature and am looking forward to like-minded efforts. – Michael Itkoff

The show seemed to be accessible in a unique way. The Arts are so slow at times but this show responded in a way that was quick and precise. It appears that visitors, newspapers and media outlets were attracted to the content of the show.

In the *Parallax View*, Slavoj Zizek uses this anecdote to illustrate one of Hegel's famous formulas. '... When I am confronted with a mysterious religious ritual from some 'primitive' culture, my first experience



is that of a mystery which is impossible to penetrate ('If only I possessed enough information to unravel the secret meaning of what I am



now observing!') (2) I think most people can identify with this sequence especially as it applies to Art. This is often the very same experience visitors have at a gallery or museum. 'If I only possessed enough information to unravel the secret meaning of what I am viewing.' To be sure, there were discoveries to be made. Exploding the veil of secrecy surrounding Contemporary Art was exactly what the show did. People could go to the Bailout Biennial with a clear concept of what the work was actually about. The work encouraged viewers to talk about, participate in, and laugh at and with the show. Also, I was drawn to the idea for the Bailout Biennial because anything slavick is involved in is bound to be important and antagonistic. I really mean this but understand the conflicts of including it in an article slavick is writing.– Joshua Bienko

(see endnotes for more artist comments (3))

Bienko's pieces were the most controversial works in the show and, upon hanging them, we were asked to cover the windows by the adjacent Durham Neighborhood Development Offices. We promptly wallpapered the windows with a free giveaway piece by Paul Valadez, Xerox copies of "1,000,000,000 Bail Out Bonds." Bienko's works were large digital prints of: a topless woman with unbelievably, painfully enormous breasts (unmanipulated by the artist) posing on her knees on a couch, with the texts "GM" in the upper right corner and "The Best Coverage in America" across the bottom; a bald man looking down at his cyborgian biceps (again, undoctored by the artist) with the texts "AIG" across his chest and "The Strength To Be There" across the bottom; and a diptych of the twin towers burning and the statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled down with the clothing store's signature "GAP" placed squarely in the center.

DeGuzmán's



piece, ***Abe's Beauty*** (2008, inkjet print, 20" x 24"), was made by photographing the eyes of Abraham Lincoln on a U.S. \$5 bill, and a nugget of fool's gold. DeGuzmán writes,



This image emerges for me in the context of living in the early 21st century of global capitalism, in the United States of America, and in North Carolina. The latter's "prosperity" was based on slave labor chiefly devoted to the production of tobacco. North Carolina was once part of the Confederacy (it provided more troops to the Confederacy than any other state). Today it is a "right to work" anti-labor union state with a relatively low per capita income. Although the 13th Amendment (passed by Congress before Lincoln's assassination in 1865) abolished the legal institution of slavery, many aspects of North Carolina's history and current labor laws and practices remind us quite openly that "slavery" and "servitude" are with us still in contemporary and perhaps more covert forms not only in North Carolina itself, but in the United States, and embedded within the "global economy" characterized by welfare for corporations and bailouts for Wall Street at the expense of the financial security, health, and civil and human rights of the average person both here and elsewhere. What do the eyes of Abe Lincoln, looking out from the \$5 bill, see? On that bill those miniature eyes in a miniature face might escape notice. On this wall they meet the gaze of the observer.

Not only does a heroic president look out at us, or just over our shoulder, we are able to look back at him – his head on smoldering fire from the tricky glow of fool's gold. We recognize this image of Lincoln as coming from the five-dollar bill, but here he takes on otherworldly dimensions. The top of his head gives way an

endless landscape of fool's gold, a ground of cheap currency, a crown of foolishness. DeGuzmán is not mocking Lincoln, but the very foundation upon which our "democracy" functions; a foundation built by slaves for masters; strengthened by wars for the rich but fought by the poor; sustained by greed, profit, and crime in the name of the "free market."



Julie Thomson contributed one of the most popular and talked about pieces in the show – a voting booth that asked "How much am I paying?" and offered an answer by way of a small lapel pin with the current amount of the bailout per taxpayer, \$2,296.84 (4).

What most astounded us was the response to the show. Over 750 people attended the opening and there was a steady stream of visitors to the exhibition throughout the 2-½ month show. In North Carolina this is rare. Usually only the major institutions, like the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, the Mint Museum in Charlotte, the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, or the "more established" (5) spaces like LUMP Projects in Raleigh or the Elsewhere Museum in Greensboro, can guarantee such a turn-out. But once in a while these alternative, no-budget shows strike a chord in the population and take off. Many people said they felt as if they were in New York City or Los Angeles because the

work was so good and eclectic, challenging and critical, important and unlike what they are used to seeing in North Carolina. *The Nation* featured the Biennial on their website and every local newspaper in Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh covered the show. Some even covered it more than once. The local NPR station featured the Biennial on *The State of Things* with a 20 minute conversation between elin o'Hara slavick, Jeff Waites, and the show's host, Frank Stasio.

We had many conversations with people—curators, students, colleagues, artists, and local residents—often discussing how shows like this do not happen more frequently. More often than not, exhibitions held in traditional galleries and museums feel dry, too planned and predictable, isolated from the environments and geo-political spaces in which they take place. What was repeated often was the shock that this show was done for next to nothing. Even at Golden Belt, another show like this may not be possible because the owner is anxious to lease the empty space, potentially breaking up the expansive interior into smaller block-like rooms. (6) It all comes down to the market driven profit motive that was the underlying theme of the Biennial.

It is rare for anti-capitalist or anti-art-market work to "succeed" within the very structure and form that it is criticizing. Of course, there are stellar exceptions to this market-driven rule: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Hans Haacke, Alfredo Jaar and Sue Coe, to name a few. But even these artists, who challenge and criticize the status quo



brilliantly, both formally and conceptually, from capitalism and war to homophobia and the American meat industry, would most likely not loan their work to such a fly-by-night exhibition as the Bailout Biennial. Their work travels within the relatively closed-circuit systems of value within the art market.

We can only hope that shows like this one light a spark in others. In fact, two other exhibitions are happening in Raleigh, North Carolina. One is in an old waterworks plant and the other in an old furniture factory. The organizers of both shows consulted with us and have followed our basic model. We would like to note that Golden Belt is not entirely outside of the gallery system. The "compound" houses two other galleries, artist lofts, and studios. The shows housed in an old

waterworks plant and furniture factory, or in a textile mill are really functioning outside of the box and often push us to experience art in a site-specific, or at least, site-responsive way. Owners of closed-down businesses are often willing to lend their spaces to artists for free because it provides the owners with free advertising, generating an interest in the space so that it may be leased or re-opened. Once leased, the space is usually no longer available for exhibitions. However, abandoned or empty spaces are not hard to locate, especially in these economic times (7).

When the system is failing or the ship sinking, sometimes it is wise get off the grid or swim to an alternative shore. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the country at which humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias" (8). "Utopia" has been taken to mean either "no place" or a "perfect place." The organizers and artists of the Bailout Biennial are more persuaded by the idea and practice of "Utopia" as a place either temporarily or more permanently transformed into an interactive and collective space of intellectual and political possibilities.

ARTISTS featured in the Bailout Biennial: Lauren Adams, Becca Albee, Joshua Bienko, Clare Britt, Ann Chwatsky, María DeGuzmán, Severn Eaton, Lorena Endara, Paul Evans, Peter Eversoll, Cathryn Griffin, Michael Itkoff, Andrew Johnson, Geoffrey Owen Miller, Susan Mullally, Shaw Osha, Conor Peterson, elin o'Hara slavick, Susanne Slavick, Hiroshi Sunairi, David Tinapple, Julie Thomson, Paul Valadez, Stacy Waddell, Jeff Waites, and Karen Frimkess Wolff.

1. Links to reviews of and information about the LOOM shows:

<http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A16877>

- <http://www.orangeculturalarts.org/Articles/LoomArtShow.html> [[Back to Article](#)]

2. Zizek, S. (2006). *The parallax view*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [[Back to Article](#)]

3. More artist comments:

I felt guilty and sort of ashamed to submit the TOO BIG TO FAIL POSTERS. Not six months into my Assistant Professorship (at a school well known for its conservative agenda) and I was already looking up 'World's Biggest Boobs' on my University computer. Embedded however, in the topical (or perhaps NO-TOP-ical) images is a comical slight of hand. I wanted to make visible the idea of being 'Too Big To Fail.' Searching for the images helped me make sense of something that failed precisely because it seemed it couldn't. The girl isn't sexy, the man isn't strong. People ask me if the photo of the woman was doctored. Neither of the images has been anatomically manipulated. The only photograph in the TOO BIG TO FAIL series that is historically questionable is, of course, the documentation of the Saddam Hussein statue falling. - Bienko

I found the Bailout Biennial very compelling from a few states away. From my vantage point, the show created much more dialogue, and participation, in circles outside those prescribed for art events. A participatory democracy is of giant importance to me, as I have never learned about anything without having the results be personally significant. I would be interested in seeing 'imposed majorities' explored those issues focused on by media to create a sense, and then reality, of their being important to the viewers. Tail wag the dog occurrences, or better yet, means by which this occurs. I have been amazed to see the healthcare reform de-tracked so quickly by so few. Especially since their methods are so crude and their intentions seemly transparent. – Geoffrey Owen Miller

The bailout show allowed for an open dialogue to take place. From the original call for entries, to the inclusion of work from highly accomplished artists, to those who are just initiating their visual voice, the show really felt like a dialogue; a conversation among the artists in the show, the curators, the space, and the audience. With this spirit, it is no surprise that many pieces in the show requested interaction with the viewer, allowing the viewer to also have a voice in the exhibition. I was fortunate enough to see the show in person and left feeling invigorated and inspired. –Becca Albee

The Bailout Biennial offered an immediate venue for my response

as an artist to the current global mess. Slavick continues to bring together artists from all over the globe to make personal work that addresses issues that compel us all to confront and act. The exhibition site was a conceptual space as well, representing the change in industry, fortunes, and jobs. – Susan Mullally [[Back to Article](#)]

4. Thomson received 130 responses. They can be found at: <http://howmuchamipaying.blogspot.com/2008/12/what-does-229684-mean-in-your-life.html#comments>. [[Back to Article](#)]

5. I put *more established* in quotes because while LUMP and Elsewhere are "established" in that they continue mounting exhibitions and scheduling events and have been around for a while, they both operate on miniscule budgets and are non-profit labors of love and volunteerism. [[Back to Article](#)]

6. As of this writing, the exhibition space is now leased to a business called The Cotton Room. The Cotton Room will be rented out for events. [[Back to Article](#)]

7. The question of artists gentrifying poor neighborhoods (through building takeovers and the opening of studios and galleries) so that the poor can no longer afford to live there is an important one not addressed in this essay, but one we would like to flag as a topic for consideration in as much as all efforts claiming to be progressive must consider the ways in which their projects may be contained, co-opted, contradicted, and/or limited by ideological and market forces. [[Back to Article](#)]

8. To read the full essay, go to: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/index.htm>. [[Back to Article](#)]

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ellen o'Hara slavick has been a professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill since 1994. slavick's creates mixed-media work from photography and sculpture to embroidery and 'zines. She has explored a variety of issues in her art, often exploring how art can transform society through her art projects, teaching and activism. Learn more about her work at c.edu/~eoslavic. Comments about this article can be addressed to her at eoslavic@email.unc.edu.

María DeGuzmán is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and director of Latina/o studies there. Her interests include visual studies and the construction of identity, narrative, photography, gender, and performance.

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