

Creativity flourishes in tough times

Despite the economic climate, 2009 wasn't a blue year for the Austin arts community

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Despite recessionary contractions, the arts in Austin continued to percolate this past year. Here then, are the top nine and then some arts happenings of 2009:

1. 'The Trash Project.' On a rain-slicked defunct airport tarmac, choreographer Allison Orr marshalled trucks and drivers from Austin's Solid Waste Services Department to create an utterly original, emotionally resonant dance that celebrated everyday work.
2. Teresita Fernandez's 'Stacked Waters,' Blanton Museum of Art. A gift from donors Jeanne and Michael Klein, Fernandez's smart artistic transformation of the Blanton's cavernous atrium alters the act of museum-going.
3. Fusebox Festival. Everything about this increasingly international bonanza of performance-based art just keeps getting more thrilling, more edgy and more entertaining. Could this become the South by Southwest of the arts? Maybe.
4. Texas Biennial 2009. This Austin-born, artist-organized every-other-year gathering of fresh Lone Star art proves that not only is the DIY spirit here alive and well, it can suggest the way forward.
5. 'The 24 Hour Rome Project,' Arthouse. Staging the building and destruction of the Roman Empire in miniature — and in 24 hours — made for a perfect way for the Congress Avenue contemporary arts center to close for a much-anticipated yearlong renovation.
6. Original and authentic Austin-made theater: 'I've Never Been So Happy,' the Rude Mechanicals; 'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery,' Vortex/Tutto Theater Company; 'House of Several Stories,' John Boulanger; 'The Bird' and 'The Bee,' Capital T Theatre/Frontera Fest.
7. Solo art showings: Beili Liu at D Berman Gallery, Erin Curtis at Women & Their Work, Sterling Allen at Art Palace and Artpace, Lee Baxter Davis at Texas Biennial, Jade Walker at the Austin Museum of Art, Pablo Vargas Lugo at the Blanton. Jill Pangallo at Texas Biennial.
8. Two brilliant — and brilliantly different — solo piano concerts. Michelle Schumann illuminated John Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano. Anton Nel treated at the Long Center. Because sometimes it takes only one musician on a stage to create a transformative experience.
9. 'Dialogue of the Carmelites,' Austin Lyric Opera. Poulenc's wrenching, modern opera about

18th-century France wrestles with deep psychological and spiritual concerns. But as this Austin Lyric Opera production proved, it's really all about the singing.

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