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Stitching It Together: A Report On The Live Tradition Festival

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stitching it together

:: PALLABI CHAKRAVARTY

Art, life, and work are intertwined together. Organized by the Asian Arts Initiative, the Live Traditions Contemporary Issues Festival, held at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia on May 6 and 7, 2005, affirmed this once again for the communities of artists, activists, scholars, and audiences who were present.

The Asian Arts Initiative came together ten years ago (this event was their tenth anniversary celebration) under the leadership of Gayle Isa, a Swarthmore College graduate, to represent the artistic voices of the Asian American community in Philadelphia. A mission driven organization from its inception, the Initiative was interested in developing a socially-engaged artistic community of Asian Americans in Philadelphia to experience art and culture in political and aesthetic terms.

The Asian American and the immigrant Asian communities in Philadelphia and in the U.S. are so diverse that the category symbolizes "otherness" rather than any cultural trait. The label "Asian American" homogenizes diverse groups for promoting the ideology of multiculturalism as a racialized identity marker. However, a grassroots community organization like the Initiative with its unrelenting devotion to building community through artistic practices embraces difference by recognizing the cultural specificities of the Asian groups. Through arts education, performance showcases, festivals, and community events, it celebrates and questions the notion of "Asianess" in contemporary American life. The Live Tradition Festival was a move to highlight the diverse traditions of Asian Art forms that have been taking root in North American soil and transforming its cultural landscape. The festival created a space for Asian American artists and artists of Asian origins working in various parts of the U.S. to engage in dialogue in the spirit of exchange, community building, and learning from each other. I was humbled and honored to be the curator of such an important civic event in Philadelphia.

On the first evening, the showcase came together like a patchwork quilt where classical and contemporary dance, piano, taiko and p'ungmul drumming, and spoken word were knitted together to create a montage of colors. The contemporary Indian dancers from California were as varied as the Korean dancer and drummers from Philadelphia. The young Japanese American Taiko drummers from Los Angeles were as joyful as the Chinese American composer from San

Francisco. The Chinese classical dancer in sparkling white from Philadelphia was as rooted in aesthetic emotion as the Indian dancer from Minnesota in scarlet hues. I was as committed as the rest to create my own category of performance work that was not to be narrowly confined by any imposed definitions of culture and tradition.

The second day began with a keynote by the renowned dance critic and writer Dr. Sunil Kothari. His keynote ("going beyond binaries") addressed the interplay of tradition and modernity in the context of Indian dance. The artist's talkback panels were interspersed with performances. As the audience members and artists moved between various spaces of the Painted Bride Art Center—moving from the cafeteria to the art gallery and back, we were reminded of the "situatedness" of any perspective, whether it be artistic, scholarly, or any other. The combative power of the spoken word performer, the gentle agony embodied by the contemporary dancer, and the youthful exuberance of the p'ungmul drummers were performances that contextualized their own location. Moderators specializing in Asian American identity issues fielded questions from the audience and mediated the talkbacks. The predominant topics seemed to center on issues of funding, visibility, acceptance and marginalization within the black and white construction of racial politics in America.

I see the festival as a watershed moment. The Asian Arts Initiative has created a platform for Asian American and Asian artists living in America to begin a dialogue, support one another, and join hands to make a difference through a unique and unprecedented event. The forum created a common ground for artists with a progressive approach to art, tradition, and community building. Despite the marginal position of Asian American performers, the lack of funding, and the general indifference of the media, we had a very good response from the local community. The consensus was that we did not need to freeze or museumize tradition to respect cultural difference; we needed to engage tradition to innovate a more just future. We as a group seemed not merely interested in working with the Asian forms as handed down to us but were searching for a language of social justice. By embodying tradition, the hope was to strive for an ethical culture for the present that does not suffocate new ideas due to bigotry, parochialness, and religious fundamentalism. Has the festival made a difference in the social fabric of Philadelphia? Can this be the rumbling beginnings of a sustainable movement?