Connection

a site-specific ceramic mural for the Exhibitions Program at Philadelphia International Airport

a city-wide collaboration among Philadelphia youth, pediatric hospital patients and artist Dit Wah Deng

March 2002 – March 2003

a project of COSACOSA art at large, Inc.
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To understand the role of art in a society is to understand the society itself. The ancient Greeks believed the Muses—the arts—were born of Mnemosyne, literally Memory. Art caused humankind to remember its connection to the eternal and each individual to acknowledge his or her relationship to a larger community. By contrast, in our culture, we tend to view art as a commodity or as an entertainment, something to be possessed or consumed. The rise of humanistic psychology in the mid-twentieth century further marginalized our perception of art and art-making. The work of Abraham Maslow and other theorists placed the creative experience in the exclusive domain of a “self-actualized” elite. According to Maslow, the rest of us—preoccupied as we are with finding food, shelter, safety, love and recognition—never are free to seek or receive aesthetic enlightenment. Still other intellectuals continue to exacerbate our cultural divisions with futile attempts to define creative worth or “high art.” Such models run counter to art’s original, inclusive nature—as a gathering, healing and empowering force for and within a shared community.

By recapturing this essential role for art in our society, we can rediscover, reform and redefine our community and cultural identities. We can recognize our connectedness and the strength in our diversity. We can restore and revitalize our neighborhoods. We can enable every citizen to bring forth a creative voice that realizes and renews art’s ancient passage of positive change and growth.

We can recover our Muse.

COSACOSA works with Philadelphia residents to create collaborative and interactive public art. During the past year, our Connection project explored themes common to all of our human experience, transcending the bounds of culture and community. Connection is site-specific to the connecting walkway between Philadelphia International Airport Terminals C and D. The 80’ by 5’ ceramic mural joins the two terminals both physically and metaphorically. The lower, outside corners of the piece contain outstretched human hands, avian in form, objects of flight. Issuing from the hands against a deep blue sky is a macrocosmic arc joining the full expanse of the exhibition space—filled with small, detailed sculptures by young COSACOSA artists.

COSACOSA brought together young people city-wide—pediatric hospital patients with neighborhood youth—to describe needs, ideas, hopes and desires that they believed were shared by people all over the world. Our young participants then created the over 1,200 miniature Connection sculptures based on their discussions. The children were remarkably intuitive and intuitive in defining how we are all connected. Their artwork provides a visual laundry list of needs virtually sourced from one of Maslow’s charts—family, friends, love, honor, refuge, food, clothing, and compensation all find representation.

Sports, television, and cell phones recall our modern obsessions. Images of the environment, intercultural unity, and world peace attest to the major concerns of our youth. Connection participants also created hundreds of ceramic stars—colorfully painted on the outside, with secret wishes for themselves and for their world written on the side affixed to the finished installation.

At the airport, Connection reminds the travelling public of the ties that bind us, no matter who we are, whence we come, or where we go. For the project’s young artists, the fullness of human experience now is bound inextricably to the rise and acknowledgment of their own shared community. Art makes the connection.

Interdisciplinary artist Kimberly Niemela is Founder and Director of COSACOSA art at large, Inc.
Connection Artists

Dit Wah Deng, Lead Artist

 Fate, the arbiter of unexpected connections, inspires the work of interdisciplinary artist Dit Wah Deng. From grand scale, site-specific installations to detailed, mixed-media miniatures, Deng’s work explores intercultural commonalities and the often unseen congruities that exist among art, nature, and human nature.

Born in mainland China, Deng fled with his family to the then-Portuguese colony of Macao during the Cultural Revolution. Trained in Hong Kong, Deng completed apprenticeships in sculpture, fiber art and architectural engineering before arriving in Philadelphia. This unusual and broad experience of multiple cultures, environments, and disciplines informs Deng’s art. Destiny, he reminds the viewer, is always at work, an inscrutable and harmonious force; change is constant. Incessant adaptability — the will to shape a peaceable co-existence among different people and places — becomes the preeminent responsibility of the artist, as well as of the community he serves.

Most of Deng’s work is collaborative and community-based. Over the last decade, he has developed numerous projects in Philadelphia neighborhoods investigating traditional cultural expressions and healing practices. Deng previously led International Appropriations/Cultural Assumptions, a year-long project creating a visual nexus of common cultural artifacts between Chinatown and the Italian Market along Ninth Street. His recent public works also include a gigantic operational sun clock created with patients at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children, the symbol of COSACOSA’s Healing Art Project.

Multidisciplinary works by Dit Wah Deng (below, from left):
The Eternal Smile, ceramic, 10”x14”, 2002.
Flying Leonardo (detail), mixed media on wood, 4’x5’, 1995.
Sun Clock, steel, wood, acrylic resin, oils, 9’x9’, 1998.

Betsy Leschinsky, Associate Artist, is a ceramicist and fiber artist expert in adapting art-making techniques for individuals with special needs. She has been artist in residence at organizations nationwide including Design Tech and the San Francisco Fabrics Workshop. She also has taught in variety of locales, from hospitals to homeless shelters, and at numerous schools, including locally at The Shipley School.

Andres Chamorro, Associate Artist, is a ceramicist and sculptor with vast experience in creating interdisciplinary workshops for children. Using ceramics, painting, and crafts, he designs and delivers theatrical puppet shows and public art projects to raise awareness and modify behaviors on a wide range of topics, including health issues (e.g., AIDS, asthma, cancer, lead poisoning, smoking) and environmental concerns.

Images of Connection artists at work surround the completed piece.
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clay, wood, and acrylic resin; 80’ x 5’; 2002-2003.
Philadelphia International Airport, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Connected Youth
Young People’s Essays on how we all can make a “Connection”

We asked our project participants to describe ideas, needs and desires that can “connect” different kinds of people – from family members, friends and kids in their neighborhoods to kids on the other side of the city – or even on the other side of the world! Here are some of their responses:

Connecting People

by Genise Watson, Grade 4

Introduction
Connecting people is a part of life. Many things connect people and bring them together. Jobs, music, and family traditions bring people together all around the world.

Different Jobs
People around the world have all different kinds of jobs. Jobs generate a world economy and keep things busy. People pay taxes, too, to help their country raise lots of money. This money can be used to pay for low income housing, education, and medical care for others. Jobs bring people together from all parts of the world.

Got the Music?

Everyone loves music, and people love different kinds of music. They might like to dance together to different types of music. Some people create their own music. Music allows people to relax and have fun.

Family Love
Families feed you, love you, and take care of you. They teach you the things you need to know, like responsibility. Families teach you what you need to do when you are grown up. Families and family love are special connections shared by people all around the world.

Creating A Connection

by Lee Fogel, Grade 8

Connections are feelings shared among people. We can be bound together by all different types of emotions – sadness, happiness, anger, or fear.

Whatever, wherever there is a tragic event, people of different backgrounds, religions, or races all share a common sadness and empathize with those who are suffering. People who are, at first take, very different from each other, all feel the need to help to make things right and are suddenly willing to work side by side.

Happy events, such as holiday celebrations or a city’s home team winning also bring people together. Individuals with different backgrounds and political views will come together as one to celebrate, sometimes even hugging total strangers that happen to be standing nearby!

We Feel, We Heal

by Adam Martínez Abad, Grade 8

Anger is unique in that it can be used to unite us for a bad cause or for a good one. Anger makes us act out instead of working it out. When we’re angry we see only our differences. We’re really afraid of the unknown, and our fear disconnects us from each other. Fear can possess us and bind us, but it can’t move us forward.

But anger, without rage or fear, can also move us forward. We can be aroused with anger at injustices in the world and be called to action to try to make the world a fairer place.

Our emotions hold an amazing amount of power. We need to use that power for good. Let’s connect our positive feelings and thoughts together to make the world a better place for us to live. Peace in our city. Peace on earth.

Humans create buildings and bridges, music, computers, and art. We create ideas. We create cultures and civilizations. With hands and hearts, we create food and tears and snowmen and musical notes. We mold precise replicas of what we envision, as well as indistinguishable globs of clay.

We create, and we are connected.
Art creates cultural change.

Founded in 1990, COSACOSA art at large, Inc. creates new art specific to Philadelphia neighborhoods and public spaces. Through collaborative art workshops, neighborhood-based artist residencies, and media projects, we enable dialogues among our city’s disparate cultures and communities. COSACOSA projects assure a sense of equality among people of diverse backgrounds and differing abilities, while building their participation in their local communities as well as in society-at-large.

interaction

COSACOSA art workshops engage people of differing backgrounds to create a common project. Each workshop identifies a community theme to explore through one of many possible artistic disciplines, from painting to theatre, from quilt-making to ceramics. COSACOSA has brought together thousands of citizens from over thirty Philadelphia neighborhoods to learn about art, about each other, and about how to work together. As our participants grow in understanding and cooperative skills, their community -- our city -- grows with them.

interpretation

COSACOSA artist commissions and media projects expand upon ideas evolved in our public workshops. Again, our approach is multi-disciplinary -- from tile mosaics for a school to interactive sculpture for a hospital, from audio work examining changing city neighborhoods to theatrical journeys through Philadelphia’s public monuments filmed for the Smithsonian Institution. COSACOSA interpretive projects provoke accessible, insightful dialogues, while building collaborative forums in which to address the common and uncommon challenges of living together.

COSACOSA continues to design and apply new models to deliver innovative and interactive “dialogues through art” directly into Philadelphia neighborhoods. For more information about COSACOSA, and to learn how to participate in our programs, please visit our website at www.cosacosaya.org.

Exhibitions Program at Philadelphia International Airport

In July 1998, Philadelphia International Airport established an Exhibitions Program. The purpose of this visual arts initiative is to humanize the airport environment, provide visibility for Philadelphia’s unique cultural life, and to enhance and enrich the experience of the traveling public at Philadelphia International Airport.

The Exhibitions Program is responsible for organizing and presenting rotating exhibitions that are located throughout the airport facility. The exhibitions change throughout the year to provide a variety of educational and cultural programs to the visiting public. There are only a few airports in the world that showcase temporary exhibitions. This forum for presenting visual art is progressive and attests to the airport’s commitment in supporting arts and culture.

The Exhibitions Program at Philadelphia International Airport provides millions of visitors from a global community access to a wide variety of art forms including fine arts, crafts, design, and photography by artists from Philadelphia and around the world. For more information about the Exhibitions Program at Philadelphia International Airport, please visit our website at www.phl.org.

Connection Staff

Kimberly Niemela  Director
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  Lee Fogel
  Roslyn Don  Volunteer Coordinators
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COSACOSA
Art creates cultural change

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