




Six Reflections / Six Snapshots from Hong Kong and Cambodia

By Lisa Kraus



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This writing—part scrapbook, part travel diary—was compiled by Lisa Kraus at the request of Dance Advance. Supplemental video documentation was provided by Tobin Rothlein; photographs are by Ms. Kraus or Roko Kawai.

Lisa Kraus participated in a field trip with fellow Philadelphia dance artists Kun-Yang Lin, Amanda Miller, and Tobin Rothlein, February 20–March 1, 2009. For the Cambodia portion of the trip they were joined by Roko Kawai, a dance colleague who was in Cambodia conducting research as part of a fellowship from the Leeway Foundation.

In Cambodia, the Philadelphians visited the Angkor temple complex at Siem Reap, and the Khmer Arts Ensemble in Phnom Penh, and then they traveled (without Ms. Kawai) to Hong Kong for the 2009 Hong Kong Arts Festival. In addition to encountering historic sites, activities for the group included discussions on dance and culture, meetings with artists, and attending performances and workshop presentations.

This professional development program was facilitated with the cooperation of the Khmer Arts Ensemble (Cambodia) and Zuni Icosahedron (Hong Kong) and sponsored by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage through Dance Advance.



1 Danny Yung in Hong Kong February 25-26, 2009

How can traditional forms be expanded to incorporate contemporary developments and sensibilities?

As *Tears of Barren Hill* opens, Danny Yung's direction keeps Peking Opera singer Shi Xiaomei seated and still for a long, long while. We see only the side of her face with its drawn-on spit curl. A rustle of silk is gathered around her legs. Yung's staging has the sparseness of a Robert Wilson epic, and likewise features chairs for sitting on and demarcating space. Yung layers cultures: a man in Western shirt and tie swirls fabric in his hands, echoing Chinese sleeve dances. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* meet Peking Opera-style singing where the voice wavers around its note. The piano version of *Goldberg* is played as a seated male dancer gestures only with his hands, unfurling traditional gestures in tandem with the cadences and stretched silences in the music.

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Scene from *Tears of Barren Hill*, choreographed by Danny Yung, libretto by Chen Ko-hua.
Photograph by Ah Ying. *Tears of Barren Hill* was co-commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Festival and Zuni Icosahedron in 2008.

1 Danny Yung in Hong Kong February 25-26, 2009

Is this recording the second made by Glenn Gould, when he was nearing the end of his life? As a technically astonishing youth, his recording of *Goldberg* thrust him to stardom. He rerecorded the work as a reclusive fifty year old, lingering and pausing throughout with a sense of bittersweet recollection. Yes, we were told later, the recording was the Gould, slowed down even further. A masterstroke! A mature artist recognizes the essential in the work of another mature artist, drawing it out even further.

Although I knew the music, I did not know how the other forms in *Barren Hill* were being turned on their heads. An audience's ability to perceive and appreciate an artist's choices is hugely influenced by contextualizing—do they know the conventions of the art form? Are they familiar with how roles are usually played, by which gender, with what physical language? What constitutes virtuosity? What is an extension of convention, and what is faithful rendering? What are the values implicit?

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Scene from *Tears of Barren Hill*, choreographed by Danny Yung, libretto by Chen Ko-hua.
Photograph by Ah Ying. *Tears of Barren Hill* was co-commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Festival and Zuni Icosahedron in 2008.

1 Danny Yung in Hong Kong February 25-26, 2009

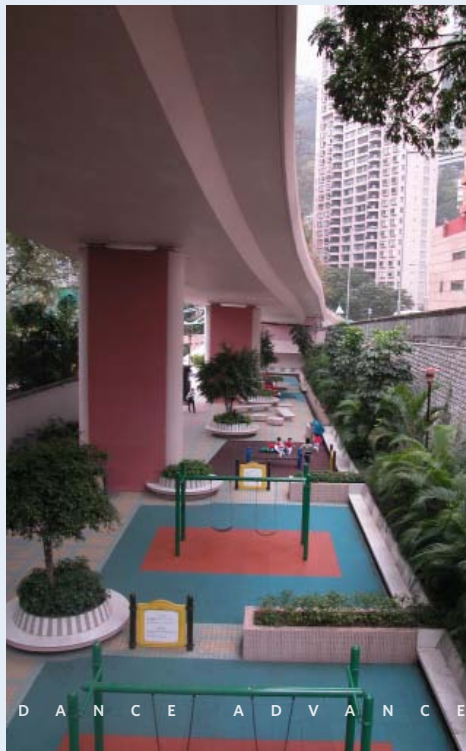
Seeing Ramayana epics performed in Bali in 1985 I saw whole audiences whooping and hollering at particular renderings of characters. The audience knows the stories as we know iconic film plots; they are up for remakes, or as with ballet performances, for savoring the subtle differences in different casts. The more levels on which you connect to it, the more delight you feel.

I am familiar with just one half of Yung's palette. The best fun would be for someone conversant in Peking Opera, knowing the 1929 play in its original form, to see how Yung stripped it down to bare skeleton.

Hong Kong, where Yung works as artistic director of [Zuni Icosahedron](#), is a miasmic mix—west and east, water and land, high and low, obvious and obfuscated. It seems a city of secrets, of gardens tucked into hillsides.

And so Yung's art seems to feed on this dynamism, and on nourishment from his many years of study and making theater in the US.

5 Six Reflections / Six Snapshots from Hong Kong and Cambodia By Lisa Kraus



Photos by Lisa Kraus.

How do we move forward from a painful past?

How can art serve reconciliation and healing?

Thavarak, a classically trained dance artist, was introduced to us by Toni Shapiro Phim, director of archival projects with the Khmer Arts Academy in Phnom Penh, just hours after our arrival at the airport. Thavarak shared his monkey dance with us. He has trained in it since he was fifteen but, as the son of female Cambodian dancer Rose Kong who danced it in the palace before all the political troubles, he saw the dance and mimicked it from the time he was a young boy. He demonstrates the variations between the “natural” monkey—a kind of earthbound, cavalier one—and two more refined and restrained variations, one originating from the court and one from the village of Bati. These two are more upright, less frenetic. He shows an array of walks and crawls (four-legged, three-legged, sideways) and

ways of scratching. Different ways of “laughing” (with hands opening out in a kind of circling fan before the face), crying, a lexicon of expressions, are all strung together in a quick-shifting patter of activity.

To learn, Thavarak’s teacher sent him out to watch monkeys. The effect is that he appears now to *be* a monkey, not a dancer representing one.

There are many things you can learn from a book or a videotape. I don’t think dancing is one of them. We get the genuine lessons of dance through kinetic transfers—real, not virtual, exchanges in a space with a teacher dancing with us or directing our dancing through their touch. The Tibetan Buddhist teachers I have studied with call this live transmission an ear-whispered lineage, where the teaching comes on the actual breath of the teacher.

2 Phnom Penh February 23, 2009

These are my favorite photographs: Penh Yom, a master teaching artist at Khmer Arts Academy who danced in the Cambodian court before the Khmer Rouge régime, gives instruction with her hands: all shapes must be just so. In the manner of an Alexander teacher or bodywork practitioner, the way she holds her own body is crucial to the transmission. This teaching comes in the form of a duet. Her back is held long, with an exaggerated lumbar curve.

She helps the dancer find pathways that then become second nature in deep muscle memory. In time, as the dancer grows older she may take on the role of teaching the next generation herself.

About ninety percent of artists perished under the Khmer Rouge. The ones who are left feel a weighty responsibility to transmit faithfully what they remember of their tradition and what they have been able to piece together collectively with the other artists who remain.



Photos by Lisa Kraus.

2 Phnom Penh February 23, 2009

We arrive in the temple-like theater that is used by the Khmer Arts Academy early in the morning, and from the first moment I witness the dancers' practice I melt. The dancing is sublime, knowing, and serene. The detail and demeanor in each dancer is exquisite. At once I am reconnected to the reverence I felt for Indonesian dancers on a study trip to Java and Bali (and subsequent study of Javanese court dance) over twenty years ago. Coming to Cambodia reawakens my feeling for the preciousness of this kind of dance. These young women, giggly at dinner the night before, fully embody their sacred tradition today.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, artistic director of the Khmer Arts Ensemble, writes about the Cambodian dancers' ideal of being possessed while dancing, being taken over by the spirits of former teachers in a way that charges the dancing with transcendence. Offstage the young women of Shapiro's group may be shy, or chat about the TV program *Dancing with the*



Photo by Lisa Kraus.

2 Phnom Penh February 23, 2009

Stars. But onstage they transform into the heavenly dancers who intercede between earth and heaven, the *apsaras*. They move like silk, or smoke; they recede as personalities and become perfect archetypes. They are emblems of pure beauty who possess a resolute warrior spirit.

Shapiro's mission is to both preserve and extend the traditional postures, dynamics, roles, and costuming of Cambodian dance. She encounters resistance for making what Westerners would perceive as subtle alterations. She is fully invested in the tension between preservation and experimentation, questioning how best to ensure the ongoing health of classical Cambodian dance, which is her foundation, while allowing it ventilation and development.



Photo by Roko Kawai.

3 In Cambodia February 22-26, 2009

Anytime I see middle-aged Cambodians walking on a dusty road, I wonder what happened to them during the time of the Khmer Rouge when two million perished. The driver of our van apparently lived in a small village. He was some distance away when away he saw American B-52s zooming in to drop bombs. His mother was killed in one of the blasts. I want to express my regret but we share no language. Our group travels as wealthy cultural tourists, eating well and staying in a nice hotel. There are so many stories we will never hear.



3 In Cambodia February 22-26, 2009

Both of these photos were taken at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh, the site of the notorious prison used by the Khmer Rouge. The photo illustration instructs visitors to observe respectful behavior while visiting a place steeped in tragic and horrific history.

Editor's note: Former Philadelphia dance artist Roko Kawai was in Cambodia at the same time as the group sponsored by Dance Advance which included Lisa Kraus. For several days Ms. Kawai joined her colleagues on their visit to the Angkor Wat complex and at sessions at the Khmer Arts Academy in Phnom Penh. Photographs by Ms. Kawai from her extended stay in Cambodia are included here as a way to amplify the textual ruminations by Ms. Kraus.



Photos by Roko Kawai.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

*What does it mean to see and make art
from a Buddhist perspective?*

Even though I have been a practicing Buddhist for over thirty years, until this trip I had never been to a predominantly Buddhist country or to a great monument like Angkor Wat. The standing Buddhas, even the very huge ones, are draped with saffron-colored silk. People come to spend time before them, seemingly not so much in formal meditation as in a kind of devotional *kaffeeklatsch*. An attendant sees to the offerings and has incense at the ready for anyone who wants to light and offer it.



D A N C E A D V A N C E



D A N C E A D V A N C E

Photos by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

Offering to what? Buddha is not a “god” but a symbol: through his own enlightenment, Buddha exemplifies the freedom from suffering we all can attain. In making offerings, the spirit behind it is the point, expressing egoless generosity, devotion, and the aspiration to attain enlightenment to benefit others.

It helps that the traditional greeting here is a bow, with hands joined before the heart. That gesture feels like the best way to signal deep respect.



D A N C E A D V A N C E



D A N C E A D V A N C E

Left photo by Roko Kawai. Right photo by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

Images of the Buddha convey a deep serenity. Rather than showing his whole body, many of the sculptures we saw were monumental faces. At Bayon temple complex there are so many on stone towers, a face on each side. Buddha's face communicates the essence of enlightenment: broad and relaxed with a half smile, in complete repose. In a culture where few could read, sculptures could convey the essence of the Buddha's teaching. Some Buddha faces speak to me, others do not. Those at Bayon do, absolutely.



Photo by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

The beauty of the lotus is nourished by the decayed detritus at the bottom of its pond. Because its nourishment comes from sending its roots way down into the muck, this flower holds a special place in Buddhist iconography, symbolizing how our “garbage”—our neuroses and difficulties—are the basis of spiritual development. Cambodia’s immense recent suffering constitutes the ground on which its present is built, and the fact that the arts community in particular suffered such loss infuses the work of the present day with deep sense of mission and importance. Only one in ten arts practitioners survived the Pol Pot era.



Photo by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

Instead of the puritan concept of dance as the devil's work, dance in Southeast Asia provides a means of communicating with the divine. The airport in Bangkok features this monumental sculpture depicting the moment when dance was born: as gods and demons held a tug-of-war with a *naga* (a powerful serpent), they churned a milky sea which spawned thousands of exquisite *apsaras* (dancing goddesses). These became the model for earthly dancers whose role was to intercede between heaven and earth. Dancers in Cambodia were always linked to the king and his court and were used as emblems of power by successive governments.



Photo by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

The tug-of-war and *apsaras* at Angkor Wat: because the actual wall friezes were undergoing refurbishment, these life-sized photo panels were on display instead.



I was asked by Bill Bissell to take this photograph of a Bayon temple wall frieze. At first I could hardly see what was represented there: two *apsaras*, after 800 years of rain and wind. They are just traces now, emblems of impermanence.

Photos by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

At high mountain passes or at the entrance to settlements, Buddhist travelers in Tibet and Nepal pile stones that they've picked up along the road in cairns, which are often inscribed with prayers. These cairns appear just outside of the innermost, highest temple at Angkor Wat.



Photo by Lisa Kraus.

4 Through a Buddhist Lens February 22, 2009

My husband sent an email asking me to make an offering at a temple one day. For practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism certain calendar days are auspicious, increasing the merit of any good deeds many-fold. I went off in search of a temple in Phnom Penh near where we were staying. It sat within a walled area with small streets. Behind the big temple with its gold roof ornaments I heard chanting and slipped into the back of a tiny shrine room where nuns of all ages practiced together, a scraggly cat slipping in and out. I sat behind them on the tile floor; they sounded as if they had been doing this same chant forever. The room had a settled, accommodating quality, as if these women had seen everything and would go on no matter what. I didn't take any pictures.

Slipping back out to meet up with our group and running a little late, I passed this monk and handed him some money. I asked him to give it to his temple, pointing to the golden roof just beyond the fence. Who knows what he made of that? My husband said it didn't matter.

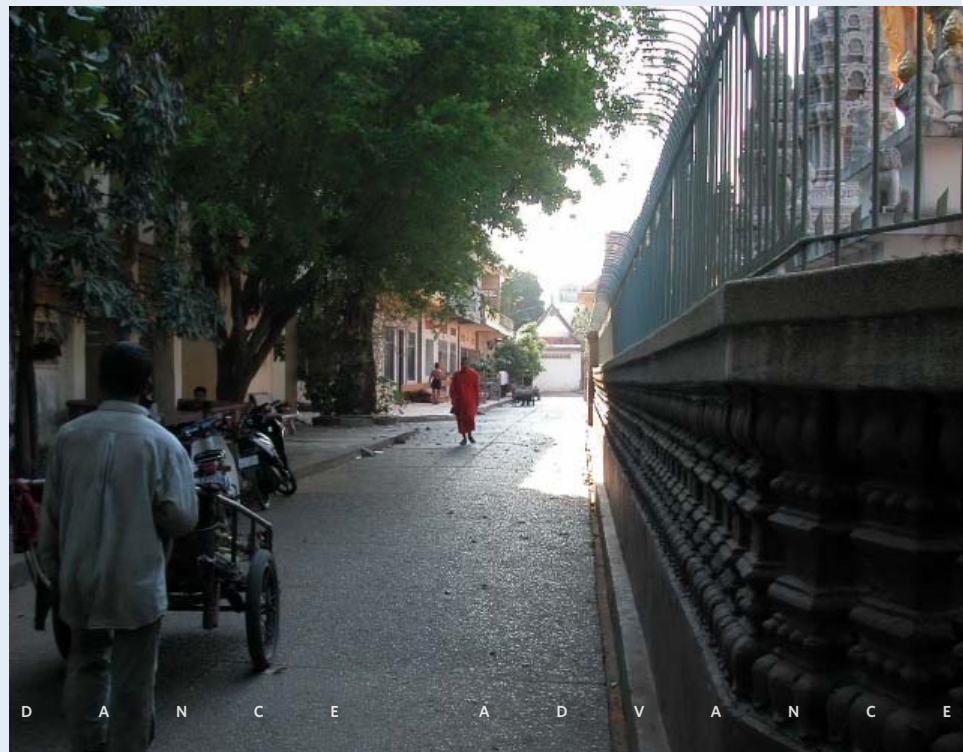


Photo by Lisa Kraus.

5 Same As It Ever Was February 22, 2009

How do we keep traditional artistic practice robust while allowing room for change and growth?

On the edge of the Angkor Wat complex, we came upon this group of young men practicing a martial art that includes high jumps with no preparation. They just spring out of the ground, thrusting one leg back and the other forward. We caught the tail end of their practice so I missed getting a photo of them doing this, but saw later that I had caught just such images in the reliefs on the walls of Angkor Wat.



Top left photo by Roko Kawai. Other photos by Lisa Kraus.

5 Same As It Ever Was February 22, 2009

It was late in the afternoon; perhaps this was the end of these men's work day. They meet daily in this spot—a dirt road that ends at the path around the temples. I thought of people where I live paying \$1000 a year to practice an imported Asian form in a clean dojo and these guys practicing in the dusty heat what has likely been passed down on this ground since way before Angkor Wat was built.



Photos by Lisa Kraus.

6 Forward Motion at the Crossroads

Who decides about change and growth?

Phnom Penh traffic patterns contain lessons about the Cambodian outlook. In streets flooded with humanity, most on scooters and on each of those often many souls—i.e., a family of seven perched on one—and there are no stoplights. There may be a traffic guard orchestrating some measure of control, or not. Traffic flows, sometimes very slowly, with continual merging and diverging. Traffic circles often have a standing Buddha at their center, so this seething humanity is revolving around the Enlightened One. If you need to enter a busy road the policy is to continually creep forward, eventually cutting off others in your path. This resolute forward motion seemingly doesn't countenance fear or the possibility of being stuck.

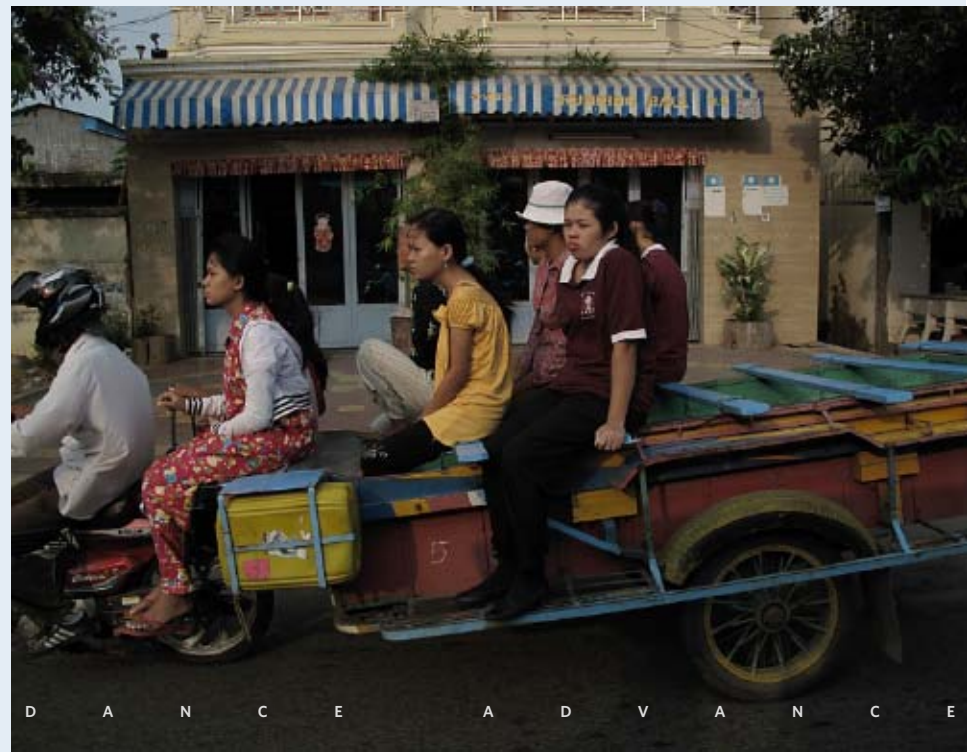


Photos by Roko Kawai.

6 Forward Motion at the Crossroads

In 1985 in Bali I watched in a *banyar* (like a farmers' grange hall in the US) as the whole village enjoyed a group of young men's forays into hip-hop. It disturbed me that this might be a corrupting influence. Of course it's suspicious in a neocolonialist way that regarding another culture I am conservative while in my own I am forward-thinking. Elders assured me that Bali has been subject to outside influences for millennia. One of the strengths of the culture is that it knows what to incorporate and what to slough off. Anything could be tried. If it's not compelling it's given little further attention and simply fades out. There's a collective discriminating awareness that encourages trust. The worthy new brings freshness to the old.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen teacher whose own traditions underwent adaptations as he carried them from East to West, said that Buddhist teaching is like a recipe for fresh bread: each person must bake it herself. Though the recipe is ancient, freshly made bread tastes delicious, every time.



D A N C E A D V A N C E

Photo by Roko Kawai.

Videos:

All videos by Tobin Rothlein.



Lisa Kraus teaching dancers of Khmer Arts Ensemble, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Wednesday, February 25, 2009



Amanda Miller teaching dancers of Khmer Arts Ensemble, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Tuesday, February 24, 2009



Kun-Yang Lin teaching dancers of Khmer Arts Ensemble, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Wednesday, February 25, 2009



Sophiline Cheam Shapiro teaching dancers of Khmer Arts Ensemble, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Tuesday, February 24, 2009

Biography of Lisa Kraus

Lisa Kraus is a choreographer, teacher, writer, and presenter whose career has included dancing as a member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, choreographing and performing extensively with her own company and as an independent, teaching at universities and arts centers and the Paris Opera Ballet, and writing reviews, features and essays on dance for internet and print publication. She has trained in many forms and aesthetics including Graham technique, Indonesian dance, and the work of Judson Church experimentalists.

Ms. Kraus has created over 35 performance works, several with her former New York-based company featuring John Jasperse, Sasha Waltz and Meg Stuart, presented by venues across the U.S., Europe, and Australia, including Dance Theater Workshop, the Kitchen, Danspace and PS 122 in New York, the Painted Bride and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, LACE in Los Angeles,

Sushi in San Diego, the Place in London, La Fabricca in Barcelona and the Dance Exchange in Sydney. Awarded Choreographer's Fellowships by the National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, the Independence Foundation and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, she has also received support from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage through Dance Advance, the Jerome Foundation, Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, Meet-the-Composer, the Leeway Foundation and the Swarthmore Project. Since 2003 Ms. Kraus has developed projects over multi-year timeframes, morphing dances into lectures or video projects and placing them in a variety of distinctive venues and before a range of audiences. Her current project *Red Thread* is inspired by a model of women's quilting circles and is being created in partnership with two long-time colleagues: Eva Karczag and Guggenheim Fellow Vicky Shick.

Lisa Kraus began writing to chronicle her teaching of Trisha Brown's *Glacial Decoy* to the Paris Opera Ballet in 2003. Since then she has contributed frequently to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and to *Dance Magazine* as a critic and commentator. Recent writings have also appeared in *Dance Research Journal*, the *Contact Quarterly*, *Pointe*, and the *Dance Insider* and on her weblogs [Writing My Dance Life](#) and [Red Thread](#).

As coordinator of the [Performing Arts Series](#) at Bryn Mawr College she has been instrumental in bringing a range of artists and groups to Philadelphia, including Lucy Guerin Inc., Pandit Chitresh Das and Jason Samuels Smith, the Khmer Arts Ensemble, and Yin Mei. Ms. Kraus currently teaches at Temple University.



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