

The Body and its Trace

(Works by Korakrit Arunanondchai, Dolorosa Sinaga, Holly Zausner and Bruce Nauman)

Welcome to *The Gift*, an exhibition that is part of a multi-venue curatorial project titled *Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories*. This project traces stories, counter-histories and absent narratives, and how these are interwoven in nation building and identity formation. Our exhibition takes a closer look at the nature of relations, affinities and influences through the concept of the gift — in its gesture of giving and returning, as well as how this act is performed and remembered.

Hello. My name is Selene Yap, and I am an Assistant Curator at the Singapore Art Museum. Today, I'll be taking you on a tour of a selection of artworks and objects within the exhibition, and delving deeper into their concepts and connections.

As you enter the main gallery, you'll notice a pair of paintings by Thai artist Korakrit Arunanondchai, titled *Painting with History* along the left wall. The paintings, created using burnt denim, playfully deconstruct the binary of "high" and "low" art. Made after a controversial body painting performance by go-go dancer Duangjai Jansaonoi on the television show *Thailand's Got Talent*, Arunanondchai's "denim paintings" elevate a material often associated with popular and consumer culture, and uses it to address art historical definitions on painting. The canvases were ignited and photographed, then the images of the flames were subsequently used to replace the charred portions of the canvas. Like Duangjai's use of the body as a brush, Arunanondchai's use of denim as surface for painting brings the question of aesthetic into the public arena. Where is the line that separates high and low forms of art, and what is the criteria that we judge one or the other by?

We now turn our attention to the plinth to the right of the paintings. It displays a photo of an exhibition of German artist Käthe Kollwitz that was held at the old National Museum Art Gallery in 1991, and a sculpture by the artist Dolorosa Sinaga. Kollwitz was born in 1867, during a period when women had little access to formal art training. Kollwitz's artistic practice is significant for its reflection of events that marked the first half of the 20th century, including the First World War. Her works often focus on the resilience and tenacity of working-class subjects, offering a sensitive portrayal of individual subjects who in turn represent the many people affected by these events.

One artist who was very much influenced by Käthe Kollwitz is Indonesian sculptor Dolorosa Sinaga. Many of Sinaga's works examine the female condition and the body in relation to movements, both physical and political. In particular, the sculpture that you see here, titled *Solidarity*, is a response to the May 1998 Riots in Jakarta which highlighted the atrocities enacted upon women under the New Order regime. The sculpture depicts seven female figures standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their hands interlinked, a single fist raised in mid-air. The expressions of the women convey a profoundly unspeakable tragedy: their faces are raised to the sky with their mouths open, shouting in anguish, while their long, lean, and fragile bodies press tightly against each other, forming a wall of resistance. Sinaga's use of figuration and gesture as the embodiment of human agency against the state, society and nature finds affinity in the works of Käthe Kollwitz.

Keeping with the same theme, we turn our attention to the large video projection on the right side of the gallery. This work by American artist Holly Zausner, titled *Second Breath*, is the second in a trilogy of performative films created in the 2000s. Having spent a significant number of years living in Berlin, Zausner started to make films of performances involving large sculptures built out of cut-up mattresses stuffed into silicon rubber or knitted yarn. In each sequence, you see the artist navigating Berlin physically — embracing, dancing, and wrestling with these sprawling sculptures — in historical buildings and landmarks like Potsdamer Platz, the Tiergarten, the Neue Nationalgalerie and the now demolished Palast der Republik. Performing with these powerful historical settings as her backdrop, her engagement with these historical narratives plays out through her dramaturgy and interaction with the sculptures.

The work on the adjacent wall by Bruce Nauman, titled *Body Pressure*, continues with the subject of the body. Nauman is known for works that use movements and gestures as a way of approaching the performing body. Coinciding with the political climate of the 1960s, Nauman's incorporation of everyday movements and noise into his performance marked a shift towards a heightened self-awareness of the body as an object of study. On the wall, you will see a pink poster with instructions that a viewer can follow. These instructions have also been printed onto sheets which you are welcome to take with you. Nauman's display and execution of the instructions draws on the space of real life, allowing the actions to be authored entirely by the viewer. The performance changes constantly, depending on each viewer's subjective interpretation of the text and the intensity of their actions. The work can be read as one that identifies the relationship between the realm of human action and larger institutional forces, not unlike the larger, broader "History" that Zausner was trying to engage with in her filmic performance.

In making room to rethink relationships between bodies, subjectivities, politics, place, and movement, what emerges through these works is the ways in which our body's own gravity gives shape to experience. Filled with all its strains and liveliness, the body functions as an open and dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as of resistance and becoming.

Written and read by Selene Yap