

The Gift of Entanglement

(Works by Joseph Beuys, Donna Ong, gifts from Siam, photos of Koh Nguang How and Charles Wilp, and Tarim Basin books)

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 June Yap, and I am Curatorial Director at the Singapore Art Museum. Today, I'll be taking you on a tour of selected artworks and objects within the exhibition, and delving into the topic of historical entanglement.

Let me start at the beginning.

On entering the gallery, you will notice on your right an intriguing sculptural work hung on the wall, in the form of a rod or staff. Titled *Energiestab*, or “energy staff”, this lengthy artwork was created by influential German artist Joseph Beuys. It highlights materials that the artist often used in his practice, including copper and felt, a material which Beuys used to develop an expanded sculptural method. He also used it to express a feeling of closeness and connection with the Crimean Tatars, whom he claimed saved him when he was shot down in a plane in 1944. This felt connection would be an enduring one for Beuys, and this exhibition highlights the effects from such acts of giving — in this case, the giving of warmth and care.

The subject of the gift is a fascinating one. It appears to be a simple act, but is in fact complicated in its subtleties, interpretation and reciprocation. Can any of us say that we have never worried over getting someone the right gift or, upon receiving a gift, felt pressured by the feeling of indebtedness, or the obligation to return the gesture? Yet, this generosity and its reciprocation is not something that is inherent in the material of the gift. Rather, it is the relationship and connection produced by the exchange that creates these effects, and binds the giver and receiver.

An artwork that demonstrates this delicate relationship is the work of Singapore artist Donna Ong. This is in the form of an enclosure of cupboards on the right as you move into the main gallery space.

At the entry point of the cupboards, we first observe what appears to be a presence, where someone is watching over the space within. Stepping inside this ring of cupboards, you discover mysterious boxes with names, places of origin and destination. These boxes are meant to recall the Friendship Doll Project from 1927. The project involved an exchange of gifts in the form of American blue-eyed dolls that was reciprocated in the gift of Japanese kimono-clad ones. The project was an attempt to extend a gesture of affection between America and Japan. And it did, but not for long. After World War II, the relationship between the two nations soured, and the dolls bore the brunt of this falling out. They were hidden away, and many were even destroyed. However, in this work a somewhat happier outcome is offered. Introduced by the artist is a caretaker — which is also the title of Ong's work — who presides over the memory of this relationship and recognises its initial peaceful intent. Even the dolls seem to have been given some favourable closure as they are seen within the artwork as finally meeting.

As we exit Donna Ong's installation and move towards the centre of the gallery, a small object beckons. It is a postcard featuring a gift from Siamese royal, King Chulalongkorn, after his visit to Singapore in 1871. Today, this bronze elephant statue stands in front of The Arts House. In its production as a postcard, it is clear that this gift was a significant one and made for quite a memorable sight for visitors in Singapore at the time. It certainly was a momentous trip for the young king, as it was his first journey abroad in the role of a monarch. The King was received in Singapore with much pomp and ceremony and, in turn, offered this specially-crafted gift after his visit. A similar elephant statue was also gifted to Java, as the King travelled there following his trip to Singapore. Made of bronze, these are gifts with great longevity, and act as a lasting reminder of time as it pertains to gifts and their entanglements.

In the course of time, a gift — or even an event — could be perceived as positive and fortunate one moment, and then unwelcome the next. This is not unexpected as the past can be revisited and its course of actions and circumstances re-interpreted and re-evaluated, both giving meaning to the past, as well as the present. For example, the distance of time allows for a more neutral reading of the Friendship Doll Project. It can also help us to focus more on the generosity of the bronze statues, especially when you consider the historical importance of elephants within Siamese culture and its association with royalty.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of historical events and their narratives can also produce interesting scenarios. Next to the postcard and image of the royal Siamese gifts are photos captured by Koh Nguang How of two events that were held concurrently at the old National Museum Art Gallery. The first, *A Sculpture Seminar*, was meant to be a precursor to the *National Sculpture Exhibition* scheduled for the end of the same year, while the second was an exhibition of Joseph Beuys. In Koh's photo, a group at the first event is seen to be involved in an intense discussion, while a poster of the late Beuys is spotted at the far end of the room, almost appearing to be involved in the same dialogue. The effect produced by this convergence in time is a curious one indeed.

Of course, this recollection of Beuys's exhibition is also meant to give some perspective to the space he occupies within the present exhibition, *The Gift*. How do you think Beuys was received back in 1991? What do you think of his artwork now and what narratives might we write of these today?

While the entanglements created by gifts are mostly in their bond between giver and receiver, the entanglements of time go further. Artefacts and artworks do not merely transport us back to the time of their creation or to aesthetic concerns and conversations from the past, they also open up the possibility of renewing the past through contemporary readings and new relationships, even to time itself.

Circling the island of plinths to the right, you will spot a display case with photographs of Joseph Beuys, taken by advertising designer Charles Wilp during a 1974 trip to Kenya. The images show a spritely Beuys using his finger and an improvised stick as an 'energy rod' to freely sketch figures and symbols in the sand. These figures can be read as a direct reference to Beuys' nomadic and shamanistic interests. However, if we take it one step further, on an entangled timeline they could also be read in relation to the explorations of the Tarim Basin in Central Asia. These explorations are chronicled in the books in the display case next to the photos.

In the 19th and early 20th century, intrepid archaeologists and explorers from both East and West went on gruelling expeditions to this desert of 'moving sands' to rediscover the past and its hidden treasures. Within these historical accounts are tales of their adventures, as well as proof of their ambition to find the unknown. Yet, this desire and compulsion to connect with the unknown is not a new one. Just like Beuys did when he championed the nomadic spirit — which he related to creative energies — these explorers were driven by imagination as much as by need and sheer determination.

For Beuys, possibilities lay in the crossing of these boundaries. He considered Eurasia a key representation of this. Its sprawling steppes are where expeditions attempted to connect with the past and chart prosperous futures, as well as where Beuys discovered new forms of expression.

As for ourselves, as we observe these connections in history, its characters, and what lies between these images and objects, we too might find ourselves similarly entwined. And as these relations and affinities increase, the boundaries between them dissolve and disappear, perhaps resulting in a transcendence of both time and space.

On that note, thank you for tuning in to this audio tour. For the rest of your time here, please feel free to wander through the exhibition, and maybe you will find new ways to become entangled with these artworks.

Written and read by Dr. June Yap