

## SILENCE

Wu Hong

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The creation of *Earthly Force* (1990–92)—a group of heavy stone boulders, each embraced by an iron net (pl. 7)—is also related to an artist's reaction to the tragedy of the June Fourth Movement. But as Sui Jianguo recalled later, in this case the reaction occurred mainly in the aesthetic realm and resulted in a work whose political message, if there is any, is quite subtle when compared with Song Dong's *Breathing* or MoYi's *Made by the Police Department*:

Until 1989 I was studying in the master's program of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and made the sculptures in the *Balancer* series and the *Hygiene* series. The second series is so called because all those egg-shaped heads in it are white (fig. 7.1). Sculptors have always used white plaster as an intermediary material, but I used plaster, along with paper pulp and cotton bandages applied on metal meshes, as the final material of these heads. My pursuit for a radical art style during that period became increasingly violent. I had a plan of making thirty to forty such heads, installing them on sticks as tall as real people and arranging them into a military formation. But that was around the time of the June Fourth Movement; this plan could not be realized [because of its possible political implications].

So like everyone else I was quite hotheaded during the '85 Art New Wave but was also rather superficial. After the June Fourth I calmed down and became more serious, and I hoped to find a new way of making sculpture that would help me develop a more solid and down-to-earth style and eliminate personal sentiment. I made a breakthrough almost by accident: after graduating from the master's program I stayed on to teach in the Central Academy. My first teaching assignment, in the fall of 1989, was to lead students to carve stone in a mountain area. Once I began to carve stone I instantly felt the endurance and reserved strength of this material. This was exactly the kind of feeling I was looking for at that moment.<sup>1</sup>

In another interview Sui Jianguo tries to describe his feeling at this moment more precisely:

At that time I was quite depressed but also unusually sensitive. From early morning I started to silently carve stone. A whole day flew by, and before I raised my head the sun had already set. I worked like this for twenty days; the stone material in my hand began to gain shape. I think that it was actually a process of exchange: gradually and silently my experiences entered stone, while in the same process stone became part of myself.<sup>2</sup>

This was the beginning of a large group of stone works that took Sui Jianguo several years to accomplish. These works represent a radical departure from the sculpture he created prior to the June Fourth Movement. The earlier *Hygiene* series (1989) (fig. 7.1), for example, employs unconventional materials and pursues abstract shapes, but it still basically follows the tradition of representational art, and a figure wrapped in bandages was a sculptural rendering of a popular image in the '85 Art New Wave (see fig. 1.2). But his post-1989 stone carvings testify to an entirely "different perspective in thinking and making sculpture."<sup>3</sup> In making these works not only did Sui Jianguo abandon representational forms, he approached stone as a substance with its own life and spirit. Sui attributed this approach to a revival of his attraction to Zen and traditional Chinese philosophy—ideas that

had had a strong impact on him during his college years. These ideas once again dominated his thinking after the June Fourth Movement. The art critic Ma Qinzong has suggested yet another reason for Sui's new sculptures. In Ma's view Sui Jianguo was a "slow starter." Many experimental artists of his generation had quickly made their names in the 1980s "avant-garde" movement. But Sui was slow in following popular trends, and this helped him avoid imitating fashionable Western art styles.<sup>4</sup> His delayed artistic maturity seems to attest to a classical Chinese motto: "A grand vessel takes time to make (da qi wan cheng)!"

Sui Jianguo grew up in an ordinary working-class family in the old colonial city of Qingdao (known to many Westerners as Tsingtao). During the Cultural Revolution he was a teenager. Like MoYi, he left school after the second year of junior high school and never entered high school. His mother retired from a textile factory and one of her children was allowed to take her place. So Sui Jianguo, who was then sixteen and weighed less than 100 pounds, became a full-time worker for the next seven years in a state-owned factory. His art education began with lessons at night school. As his interest in art grew, he volunteered to run the local Cultural House, organizing spare-time education and art programs for factory workers and local residents. He also used this opportunity to learn from professional artists who were invited to teach in the programs. (His first sculpture teacher was Yu Fan's father. Yu, who will be introduced in the following essay, became Sui's student and collaborator ten years later.) Although he never received a high-school education, Sui Jianguo was able to pass the entrance exam of the Shandong Provincial Academy of Fine Arts in 1980. The parallels between him and MoYi thus ended: entering the academy meant that he had finally left amateur status behind and was on the way to becoming a professional artist.

While in the academy, Sui Jianguo became a passionate follower of the "Searching for Roots" (xun gen) movement, a nationwide intellectual trend in the early and mid-eighties. Although his major was sculpture, he spent many hours copying traditional Chinese paintings. He was also fascinated by Zen, Taoism, and other types of Asian mysticism. But he abandoned such pursuits, at least for a while, after he entered the master's program in Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1986. The late eighties was a period of social uncertainty and revolution, and Beijing was the center of all the most important events and debates. In art, the ideal of avant-gardism spread like brush fire, challenging every experimental artist to make his or her personal mark on art history. The silent spiritual practice of Zen and the Taoist doctrine of "non-action" seemed pale and incompatible with the times. Sui Jianguo's balancer (1988) and Hygiene series made during this period did not reflect Taoist ideas but were imbued with the radicalism of the contemporary social and artistic upheaval. But when he reflects upon this period, Sui feels that the most important thing he learned in the late eighties was still the classical tradition of Western sculpture, which gave him "a clear sense of form" and "a desire for perfection."<sup>5</sup>

This brief review of Sui Jianguo's life and education leads us back to the new sculpture he developed after 1989. We can see now that this development was far from accidental. Essential elements of these new works can be found in his interest in Taoist mysticism and naturalism,<sup>6</sup> in his desire for formal and technical perfection, and in a tendency toward asceticism that he had acquired from his early experiences as a factory laborer. These elements were fused together during his self-exile after the tragedy of the June Fourth Movement: day after day he silently worked with stone, and in this process, as cited earlier, he felt that his experiences gradually merged with his sculptural material.

The idea that stone is a living material led him to embrace conceptual art—a shift exemplified by his Sealed Memory (1989)—a metal case containing a piece of unseen stone. But the desire for a more explicit engagement

between the container and the contained prompted him to create a group of different works in 1990. Each sculpture in this group has an iron cage (which he made by welding together heavy bars) containing one or more pieces of unpolished stone (fig. 7.2). A major breakthrough in this series of experiments, however, only arrived when he finally eliminated the separation between the container and the contained. He describes this progress as the "shrinking" of the iron cage onto the surface of a stone: it now both "embraces a stone boulder and is shaped by it." This concept is best realized in *Earthly Force* (1990—92), an installation of twenty huge boulders, each inlaid with a network of iron bars and weighing about 100 kilograms (or approximately 220 pounds). (Only twelve boulders are shown in the present exhibition.) This work took him two years to create. When it was first exhibited in 1992 in Beijing, it became an instant classic in contemporary Chinese sculpture.

Two important features of Sui Jianguo's experiment are multiplication and self-reversal. Through multiplication, a single sculptural form takes over a large space and forms a monumental complex. His creation of *Earthly Force* followed this logic and was related to one of his earlier plans to remake a modern *Forest of Steles* (Bei lin).<sup>7</sup> His most recent work, a tribute to modern Chinese history called *The Shadow of the Century* (1997) consists of ten identical metal "Mao jackets." On the other hand, self-inversion creates intertextuality among his various projects. *Earthly Force* has at least two "reversals." The first, *Structure No. 9* (1990), is a much smaller stone boulder without metal work obstructing its natural surface. Instead, Sui Jianguo cut the boulder open to expose its interior (fig. 7.3). The work seems especially sinister if one connects it to a traditional Chinese myth about jade: this most beautiful stone can only be found inside an ordinary-looking stone boulder. But instead of finding jade, Sui Jianguo found iron chains in his stone.

*Earthly Force* can also be paired with his 1996 installation *Thunderbolt* (1995), whose centerpiece is a fifteen-meter-long (about 49 feet) rubber sheet bearing 300,000 nails (fig. 7.4). Like *Earthly Force*, this work is about abuse and resistance, and it likewise contrasts and negotiates two kinds of objects and materials. But here the strength lies in the rubber's pliability and toughness. As Sui Jianguo has commented on this work,

It surprised me that even a small piece of rubber can bear a great many nails without altering its shape and qualities. What is more, by incorporating so many nails into its own body, the rubber sheet has changed from a passive and receptive object to an active and aggressive object. This makes me think about our nation and myself. For all this time in this century—since the establishment of the PRC, the opening up after the Cultural Revolution, and the June Fourth Movement—the Chinese people have shown great strength of endurance. But pliability also means alienation; we all have this ability to survive.<sup>8</sup>

This statement seems to show Sui Jianguo's changing attitude toward social and political engagement: he has emerged from self-exile and speaks openly about the social implications of his work. A brief comparison between Sui Jianguo and Xu Bing may illustrate different choices made by two talented Chinese experimental artists with similar backgrounds. Both Sui Jianguo and Xu Bing received MFAs from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and upon graduation became teachers in that school. In searching for their artistic languages, both of them rejected orthodox academic styles as well as a straightforward imitation of Western modern art. In the late eighties and early nineties, they both positioned themselves at the periphery of academic art and also kept a distance from the "avant-garde" movement. Both of them had profound interest in ancient Chinese cultural traditions and forged their styles based on these traditions. Both favored metaphors and developed symbolic languages in their art. Both were perfectionists and emphasized technical training, and their work often involved extensive labor. In 1990, while Sui Jianguo was silently carving stone, Xu Bing made rubbings from the Great Wall (see pl. 1). But the subsequent development of these two artists followed different paths. Xu Bing emigrated to the United States in

1990 and has been interacting with the Chinese art world from an outside position. But Sui Jianguo has remained inside. As I will discuss in the following essay, recent projects developed by him and his collaborators have become increasingly engaged in social issues, often serving as critical commentary on contemporary events.

1 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by LiuXiaochun (November 10, 1996, Beijing). *Meishu wenxian* (Art literature) no. 8 (1997), 4-8, quotation from 4.

2 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by the author, May 14, 1998, Beijing. Unpublished record.

3 Sui Jianguo's words, in the interview conducted by Liu Xiaochun, 4.

4 Ma Qinzhong, "Kaituo Zhongguo dangdai diaosu di wenhua yujing: Guanyu Sui Jianguo zuopin di fenxi baogao" (Broaden the cultural language of contemporary Chinese sculpture: an analysis of Sui Jianguo's works), *Yishu jie* [*Artlife*], no. 49 (July and August 1997), 4-21, especially, 6.

5 According to interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by the author, May14, 1998, Beijing.

6 In his conversation with Liu Xiaochun, Sui Jianguo stated that he derived the idea for the "formlessness" of his stone from Taoism, and he cited Taoist theories that a "great image" transcends shape, 4.

7 He told me that he made this plan in the early nineties and made a sketch for it. But the plan was finally abandoned because he could not raise enough funds -his budget for a single "stele" was RMB 50,000 (about US \$6,000).

8 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by Liu Xiaochun, 8.