

Sui Jianguo conscientious observer

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On Christmas Day 2006, Sui Jianguo dipped a small metal rod in a can of blue enamel paint, setting it aside with no particular intention. Repeating the act the next day, the ongoing work *Presence* was begun. One registers the artist's progress infinitesimally—not in the literally quotidian act, but rather in the two and a half millimeters in diameter of the work's weekly expansion, which is planned to end only with the artist's life. *Presence* is more than an unfolding allegory of artistic industry, the artist's daily return to the studio, methodically manufacturing the monuments that mark his life. It is one of artistic development itself, and of the expansion of the artist's sculptural practice towards a new temporal logic, a conceptual move that has increasingly preoccupied Sui Jianguo in recent years.

Presence is not Sui Jianguo's first foray into monumentalizing his passage. Yet for an artist of his character and demeanor, the customary thrust of sculptural monumentalism, both celebratory and declarative, is suspect. Even in the best of circumstances, the fate of any monument – fixed to a specific location, inaugurated at a specific time – is given over to the vagaries of history, to the flux of readings and revisions, and to the weathering of centuries to come that may eventually efface all memory of a once-apparent logic. And Sui Jianguo has certainly experienced the fading grandeur of once-monumental icons... One might better characterize Sui's aesthetic stance as 'anti-monumentalist,' however gargantuan the scale of his works and despite the fact that his position as Chair of the Sculpture Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing puts him quite visibly at the very pinnacle of his profession in contemporary China. Conditioned by the vicissitudes of his own historical experience, Sui Jianguo maintains the distance of a skeptic, a conscientious observer. In that chosen role, he witnesses and reflects the changing face of his era, day by day, as the debris of progress past piles up before him.

Presence is related to a project that gradually took form between 1989 and 1992 but that wouldn't achieve any sort of realization until 2007. In 1989 Sui bicycled from Beijing to the famous Thirteen Ming Tombs. Within tombs usually closed to the public, Sui discovered numerous broken stone steles, the fragments of some of which had been made whole, reconstituted to their original states. Sui subsequently embarked upon a series of *Interstructure* works that appear to repair large broken stones with metallic staples. These works would soon metamorphose into the grand *Earthly Force* works (1992-1994), large boulders whose surfaces are imprisoned by meticulously embedded welded webs of rebar, which are among the most powerful statements of the artist's early career. But the broken tomb steles also inspired a never-realized *Annual Monument* project (1992), which exists in drawings and models of plaster and lead; the artist planned to erect a field of *Interstructure* columns, adding one annually over the course of his lifetime. Unfortunately, an appropriate custodian and supporter for the long-term project was never secured.

Fifteen years later, however, the idea took shape on the outskirts of Shanghai, where the artist planted the first of his annual monuments, now in the form of 120 cm rust-colored cast-iron cubes. 17° (true deviation) (2007-ongoing) takes its title from the deviation between the physical layout of the large, mixed-use architectural development the cubes will annually populate and the evolving grid of cubes itself, mapped over many acres according to the natural laws of the compass. As both public art project and personal

monument, 17° finds a formal precedent in the land art of artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and James Turrell. Sited in a contemporary suburban development, however, rather than in the vast emptiness of the American West, 17° is not a hallowed pilgrimage site for the art cognoscenti, but a simple marker of the passing of time and the expanse of space for the everyday inhabitants who populate the development. In this it differs, too, from the cor-ten steel works of Richard Serra, to which 17° also bears a genealogical relationship. Sui's grid is porous, with the planned annual marker points separated by 100 meters. And while some of the weighty cubes are sited in interior spaces and will assert themselves against the existing architecture and its inhabitants, theirs is not a forceful or pugnacious presence, but rather a mapping of natural orders, the earth's magnetic field no less than individual mortality.

In all of these works – Presence, Annual Monument, and 17° (True Deviation) – Sui Jianguo is profoundly concerned with time's passage. The literally terminal compositional logic of each work – open-ended, expanding indefinitely, though certain to be finite – moves his sculptural practice into the fourth dimension. Chance plays an obvious role in the final outcome, but as the seasons change, the artist's method is unwavering and resolute. In this manner, the artist asserts his individual resolve amidst and against the capriciousness of historical circumstance. Reading this extended body of work more psychoanalytically, one might argue that such compulsive, programmatic repetition is a form of self-definition against the trauma of extraordinary historical experience.

Sui Jianguo did not set out to be an artist. In 1972, at the age of 16 during the Cultural Revolution, Sui was assigned to a factory position in his native Shandong Province. An injury that put him out of commission for several months led to his frequenting a local park where retired people congregated. Chang Tsong-zung recounts the story of Sui's turn to art as follows:

“Passing the days Sui Jianguo came to realize he was having a glimpse of his own future.... Returning to work at the factory, Sui began a personal search for a cultural mission; he eventually sought out the traditional ink painter Liu Donglun and asked to be his student. Master Liu advised Sui that the factory's propaganda department offered good prospects for a factory worker and aspiring artist, but working there would involve training in Social Realist technique: training in classical landscape technique would do nothing for his career. But Sui Jianguo was not seeking to advance himself in the socialist factory hierarchy; he wanted to learn something that would sustain him personally throughout his life. Master Liu accepted and Sui Jianguo started to copy old master paintings from poorly printed black and white illustrations. Beginning with the works of Song dynasty masters, he slowly worked his way through Chinese painting history by copying pictures in sequence, executing hundreds of ink paintings over several years. In 1977 Sui Jianguo joined an evening art course for factory workers at the local Workers' Cultural Palace and began training in the Western academic style: charcoal drawings, life studies, plaster cast sculptures, etc. During this time he discovered a passion for sculpture which has informed everything he has done since.”

Sui studied at the Workers' Cultural Palace in Shandong for several years, then at the Shandong Art Academy from 1980-84. In 1986 he entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts, from which he graduated with a master's degree in 1989, and he began his own teaching career at the Academy the same year. 1989 was, by any measure, a traumatic year for the Chinese people. The tragic events of June 4th at Tiananmen Square dashed the hopes of a generation and left a deep, lasting wound in the collective psyche. Sui Jianguo was among those participating in the ill-fated student movement.

While the artist had previously toyed with figurative works – small clay models of a stick figure appearance, more finished small human figures posed on various plinths, and vaguely referential animal forms in ceramics – his practice of 1989 is dominated by figural concerns, and specifically by the production of abstract, faceless heads that share across diverse media a fragile, damaged appearance. A series of Unborn Bust Portraits (individually untitled), fabricated in white plaster, gauze, and wire mesh was begun in 1988 and continued the following year. Here, Sui is concerned with the volumetric modeling of the ghostly, head-like forms and the variety of their rough surface details. Gauze bandages are wrapped around many of the forms and embedded within the white plaster, as though holding together what has been broken; the wire mesh armatures are clearly visible in many of these works, where large strips of the plaster flesh have been removed or where what was once seemingly whole appears to have been split like a large melon. In a related series of Bust Portraits all dating from 1989, Sui makes deep, precise gouges into somewhat larger, roughly cylindrical volumes of unfinished wood. Equally resonant are a number of terracotta-colored forms of the same vintage, also fabricated in plaster, which seem to have been smashed to shards and then pieced back together. The abstraction of these compositions all but surpasses representational reference; taken in the context of his concurrent production, however, the filial relationship is unquestionable: these, too, are figural busts.

Most chilling among this varied body of work, however, is a dark Untitled sculpture that realistically bodies forth a human head. Its eyes blindfolded by bandages, its mouth agape in a silent scream, this vision of angst was made prior to Sui Jianguo's participation in a protest march to block military troops during the student uprising. It would, of course, be interesting to know the exact chronology of this extended body of striking work—what march this particular face commemorated in advance, which among these series in different media came first, how and exactly when they evolved in relation to one another and to the events unfolding in China's dark moment on the historical stage. But we needn't know these details to appreciate the raw power of Sui's artistic expression and the poignancy of experience to which the works testify. And one would need to venture to the New York studio of painter Chen Danqing (an expatriate since 1982) to find in the production of the Chinese avant-garde a similarly direct confrontation and acknowledgement of the tragedy, Chen's in the form of contemporary history paintings constructed from afar and over several years from images disseminated internationally by the mass media.

The dramatic Untitled head was an anomaly in the artist's work, and after Tiananmen Square, Sui Jianguo retreated from figuration for several years. With the portrait busts of 1989 in mind, however, the Interstructure and Earthly Forces series that followed make a great deal more sense as artistic registrations of the pressures felt within contemporary Chinese society than as mere formal explorations with unusual materials. Weighty forms and laborious processes of enclosing, constricting, repairing and mending dominate Sui's practice of the early 1990's, as though the artist were working through the implications of his generation's experience and exerting control over form in lieu of the disempowerment within the public sphere. Among the first works in this new vein, and a harbinger of the series that immediately followed, was Untitled (1990), in which the artist imprisoned a small boulder in a tight-fitting rebar box. Other conceptually similar works would also follow, in which Sui deployed steel plates, stones, bricks, concrete, traditional bird cages, and discarded furniture (which the artist first used in the mid to late 1980's) in a variety of compositional combinations. A melancholy sensibility lingers over the majority of these works despite their often fanciful material juxtapositions.

With Execution (1996), Sui Jianguo both develops and concludes the dense body of work that had occupied him for many years. For the industrial materials of concrete, brick, steel and rebar, Sui substitutes rubber and nails,

and in place of the compositional clarity of stones imprisoned or repaired, he emphasizes the process of fabrication itself. Execution consists of hundreds of thousands of nails densely hammered or shot with a nail gun into thick rubber skins. The resulting work – of which there are several unique variations, all of which may be hung, rolled, or laid flat – has the appearance of leather from a distance and of a carpet at closer range. When one is close enough to touch its prickly, rusted surface, Execution evokes the torturous venting of pent-up aggression—an unusual exercise in futility, though one of strangely affecting beauty. The title of the work was initially translated by Wu Hung as “Thunderbolt” (from the Chinese (殛, Ji), which surely captures the explosive violence to which the resilient rubber has been subjected. However, “Execution” better reflects the powerful authority to which the artist refers, that of putting to death. The repetitive formal ‘execution’ of the work, with its hundreds of thousands of constituent parts, is thus no less open to metaphorical readings than the images and emotions bodied forth in the Interstructure and Earthly Forces series. A cathartic exhaustion of the laborious processes and emotional disquiet that had characterized the artist’s practice, Execution is an eloquent coda to Sui Jianguo’s early career.

The subsequent shift in Sui Jianguo’s work isn’t measured so much by his return to representational forms, his move to different sculptural materials (aluminum, bronze, and fiberglass prominent among them), nor even by the momentous appearance of the Mao jacket in the Legacy Mantle series begun in April 1997. All of these were of unquestionable importance, but what they together enabled was the emergence of a more restrained, contemplative artistic voice and an emotional detachment that renders the artist’s later work as conceptually precise as it is deliberately ambiguous. It is not that Sui Jianguo disengages; rather he replaces subjective response and personal reflections with a more ambitious and capacious critical analysis of contemporary experience and its manifold transformations.

The first of the Legacy Mantle works was fabricated in foam rubber and cast in aluminum; it is a diminutive sculpture, the surface of which seems corroded and in a state of decay, like an excavated relic, damaged but still in tact. Sui wanted to find an icon to symbolize modern Chinese history, and the jacket designed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen (later erroneously popularized as the “Mao jacket”) certainly fit the bill. In the artist’s view, Mao’s legacy is a mantle that covers contemporary China, an ever-present cloak worn in some measure by all. This first of the Legacy Mantle sculptures was, however, overtly revealing: Mao’s still-monumental presence figured as absence and reduced to tatters on a Lilliputian scale. It is an anomaly in a series that is otherwise fabricated with machine-tooled perfection.

Sui Jianguo has fleshed out his full-bodied but empty, self-supporting Mao jacket in a variety of sizes, materials, and surface colorations – from large, drab painted fiberglass and aluminum works to brownish bronzes to eye-popping fiberglass confections to smaller almost collapsible works in grey rubber. Sui’s Legacy Mantle has become an icon of Chinese contemporary art, perhaps the icon in the medium of sculpture. There is, however, more to Sui’s work with the historic garment than initially meets the eye. Sui’s jackets are obviously hollow, like much of the rhetoric of the Maoist past. But the sculptures neither redeem nor pay tribute to this ambivalent historical legacy. Instead, there is a pronounced ambiguity – indeed, a strategic double entendre – in Sui’s matter-of-fact jackets. They offer a reading of history that is at once respectfully referential and critically observant: respectful in that the self-sustaining, iconic form might easily serve its commemorative function as an appropriate public monument; critical in that the form embodies the emptiness and failure of the same rigidly conformist collectivism that it might also be read as commemorating. This ambiguity is the genius of Legacy Mantle as a work of art—and indicative of the position Sui Jianguo consistently takes in his later work.

This ambiguity is maintained in the artist's next body of work with the Mao jacket, begun in 1998, the so-called Clothes Vein Studies or Clothes Drapery Studies. Here, the artist revisits masterpieces of Western sculpture – Myron's Discobolus or Michelangelo's Slaves, for example– and literally recasts them in the quintessential garb of twentieth century China. Just as Sui deployed a variety of materials to meaningful ends in the concurrent Legacy Mantle works – large, somber bronzes evoking the reverence for Mao many millions of Chinese continue to maintain, in contrast to the candy-colored fiberglass multiples that suggest both the selling out of history and the manufacturing prowess that has fueled China's break-neck economic development – so the materials of the Clothes Vein Studies are essential to their meaning.

Bronze and plaster are the principal media for Sui's Clothes Vein Studies, while the original Western works (or, in the case of Myron, existing Roman copies of a lost 5th century B.C. Greek bronze) are made of marble. Sui's Clothes Vein works tend to come in pairs, with the bronze and plaster appearing virtually identical because the bronze is painted a chalky white. It isn't clear upon initial observation what medium Sui has used, and it is only the added Mao suits that identify these works as of contemporary Chinese origin. The obvious masterpiece citations, the trompe l'oeil surfaces, and the addition of Chinese vestments are more than a game of wit. The Clothes Vein Studies make manifest the complexities of the encounter between Western and Eastern culture that characterize modern China and that problematize traditional conceptions of "authentic" identity. For even the historical "Mao suit" is itself a Western derivative, imported via Prussia and Japan in the 19th century.

Of course, the selective importation of Western ideas and values has a long history in Chinese modernity, and Western ideas and techniques played an important if often contentious role in China's art academies throughout the twentieth century. As the Chair of the Sculpture Department at China's most prestigious art academy, Sui Jianguo is acutely aware of the historical debate. And like students around the world, those in Sui's department continue to study famous examples of Western sculpture as foundational training. Foundation courses in fine art teach students to analyze, draw and model the human body from canonical examples of classical art from the Greco-Roman tradition and its revival in the Renaissance. Historically, academy students begin with nude figure studies, attempting to perfect the sculptural modeling of the human form on a two dimensional plane; the creases and folds of hanging cloth add complexity to the novice draftsman's exercise. Even in their title, Sui's Clothes Vein Studies make overt reference to this academic tradition. And the successive generations of sculptural production the works reference lends them a pronounced autobiographical dimension: Antiquity and the Renaissance preceding the present; lost bronzes preceding later marble copies; contemporary plasters preceding bronze casts in the method of fabrication; the work of the teacher preceding that of student. Amidst this fascinating pile-up of historical references and forms, one feels the ambiguous position of contemporary China as it adopts essentially Western models and yet re-models them with Chinese characteristics. And one cannot be sure whether any of the ideological positions the Clothes Vein Studies reference are, so to speak, set in stone. Neither overtly critical of the Western-styled academic system of which the artist himself is a part, nor entirely at ease with the colonization of the mind by ill-fitting ideological prototypes from afar, Sui's position is rather that of an authoritative witness to the complexity of his era.

But if selective importation of Western prototypes characterized the flow of ideas and information for 20th century China, the 21st century – "China's century" according to many prognosticators – is one of Chinese exports. Sui's Made in China series, begun in 1999, directly addresses this radical economic transformation, monumentalizing the commercial objects of China's high-octane economy. The toy dinosaur embossed with the 'Made in China' logo on its belly is the artist's icon for the present moment. As with the jackets, so with the

creatures: Sui has made them in a variety of sizes, colors, and materials. But again the artist toys with the deception of surface appearances and the facts of material reality. A two-meter Tyrannosaurus of 2005 appears to be cast in brilliant gold but is actually fabricated in fiberglass, over-painted with gold leaf; other large dinosaurs fabricated in marble are painted so as to appear of shiny industrial fiberglass; and the small works that seem of cheap plastic are only for the most herculean tots to toy with as they're actually made of solid lead. Sui's deceptions may critique the disconnections between the appearances and the realities of the export economy, but they also seem to comment on the art economy itself. That an artist of Sui Jianguo's stature—one deeply engaged with cultural history, its present manifestations, and the global sculptural legacy—issues a series of monumental commercial toys with an unmistakable 'Made in China' logo speaks volumes about the globe's current addiction to Chinese products, of which contemporary art is just one tiny facet. In subsequent works, Sui would dispense with the product itself and simply render the words "Made in China" (in neon or in site-specific wall-drawings) as sufficient to his purpose. Sui's Made in China works are, in essence, a sardonic conceptual maneuver, a seeming foreclosure of artistic originality in the face of an insatiable worldwide demand for the Chinese readymade.

Sui Jianguo simultaneously elaborates related ideas in different ongoing series over many years, and it is useful here, in the context of China's fever-pitched economic development and his Made in China works, to revisit what I have previously characterized as the artist's 'anti-monumentalism.' If the Made in China works are a tongue-in-cheek tribute to China's economic power on the world stage, *Study of Base Plinth* (2003) and *Study of Clothes Veins: Right Arm* (2004) suggest more directly the decrepitude of China's modern heritage. In each, a once-monumental commemoration of the past's authoritative vision of a more perfect future has been broken to pieces, the remains surviving in poignant though justifiable dereliction. *Study of Base Plinth* is a six-meter high plinth, which the viewer may climb by an iron-wrung ladder welded into its side; atop the giant plinth only a pair of shoes remains of what one imagines was once a giant monument. *Study of Clothes Veins: Right Arm* is the out-stretched, waving arm of a similarly gigantic statue; severed from its supporting body and visionary head, the grandiose arm's gesticulation is meaningless. Referencing both the *Legacy Mantle* and *Clothes Veins* series and harkening back to the brokenness that pervades the artist's early work, these anti-monumental, almost Surreal visions are a requiem for recent Chinese history amidst the onslaught of no less fervent ideological convictions in the post-Deng Xiaoping era.

The world's changing perception of China and, in parallel, Sui Jianguo's perception of China's changing position in the world has informed his work of the present decade. What has become of the masses once so inspired by the muted monuments of Sui's youth? And what vision for the future guides their ideological formation today? Pondering these issues, the artist maintains his stance of conscientious observer in two revealing installation-based works of recent vintage, *Horizontal Movement Fifty Meters* (2006) and *Speeding Up or Acceleration* (2006-2007). Although *Horizontal Movement* exists as a triptych video work, it was originally a performance en masse of some fifty laborers. In the fall of 2006, Sui was invited to present his work in a newly-opened art space in Beijing, and rather than presenting objects of his manufacture, he hired many dozens of men to move a new BMW from a parking lot down a red carpet and into the new showroom, the car suspended on a platform the men carried with ropes over their backs. The meaning of the work resides not just in the recent transformation of China into a marketplace for high-value products, but in the artist's own historical experience of the very displacement and re-entry the performance enacts. For Sui Jianguo's studio was once next door to the very art gallery his work inaugurates, and the workers who transported the BMW were the same men who once worked in the factory that previously occupied the space now inhabited by the art

gallery. Displaced to the suburbs by rising rents in the artists' enclave of old, the workers return to the newly pristine site of their former employ bearing the weight of a new economic regime that has profoundly impacted their own lives. Horizontal Movement reflects macro-economic transformations from an autobiographical perspective, documenting the transformations of a people, individually as well as collectively. As such, it is a passing monument to the common man who must make way for the 'progress' of modernity, even as he is displaced or left by the wayside.

Speeding Up or Acceleration (2006-2007) provides a less personal though equally incisive reflection on China's metamorphosis. It is utterly remarkable how quickly things have changed in Sui Jianguo's homeland and no less remarkable how little security or consensus there is about future directions. In China's frenzied rush to progress and its progressive capitulation to capitalism's indefatigable advance, the collectivist values that – in theory, at least – once provided meaning and a coherent goal for the future have been all but abandoned. If Speeding Up does not directly allude to this state of affairs, it is certainly an apt metaphor for them. The work was originally presented in March 2007 at Arario Gallery in Beijing as a synchronized 12-channel film installation that documents the movement of a test train. The track upon which the train runs encircles a village of six square kilometers on the outskirts of Beijing, and Sui selected twelve sites around the perimeter of the village to capture the train's movement. In Sui's work, the train runs periodically across the successive screens in a perpetual loop; a frightening machine positioned at the entrance to the gallery spun a rotor at the train's velocity, 200 kilometers per hour. In real life, the empty test train continues to go round and round, faster and faster as technology advances, with no destination but the future, no purpose other than progress. It is like a giant found earth drawing infinitely repeating itself as it clocks the nation's development. The artist's takes his usual position as impartial witness to the passing revolutions.

The revolutions have changed over the course of Sui Jianguo's career, and one measures their succession in the evolution of his work. But while this evolution is pronounced, Sui's course has been steady; what is most consistent is his commitment to reveal things as they are, with restrained but powerful authority. This is no small achievement given the complexity of his position as both academic linchpin and leading member of the avant garde. These positions rarely speak with the same freedom; indeed, they often speak entirely different languages. But in the rich ambiguity of Sui Jianguo's oeuvre, one finds a wide and solid middle ground that invites multiple interpretations; this puts the artist at a strategic remove from unnecessary controversy, a position from which he is better able to give form to his conscience. Sui Jianguo's deep engagement with cultural history, the sculptural tradition, and the diverse materials of his *métier* have steadily anchored his practice amidst the sea changes of contemporary experience. Yet he has been no less engaged by those transformations, critically observing them as neither apologist nor antagonist, but rather as humble witness. In marking his own passage, Sui Jianguo builds for posterity appropriate monuments for the present era—with full awareness that they, too, will some day pass away.

NOTES:

Few of these works survive. Those that do (c. 1975-76) show the artist methodically mapping works of the past with a grid system to reproduce them on presentation scrolls in his own hand.

Chang Tsong-zung, "A Secret Anti-Modernist: Sui Jianguo and His Retirement Project," unpublished English manuscript, May 2007 (published in Chinese as "一个秘密的反现代主义者—隋建国与他的退休计划," 点穴: 隋建国的艺术. 岭南美术出版社, 2007年9月第一版, 31-40).

Sui's sculptures deriving from masterpieces of the Renaissance and Antiquity have often been called "clothed vein studies" in the literature, and I follow this convention here. However, "drapery study" is the common term in English for the academic modeling exercise to which Sui explicitly refers.

Cf. endnote ii.

Indeed, Sui's *New Discobolus, Self-portrait* (2003) shows the artist himself in Myron's famous pose; Sui's likeness, clothed in contemporary dress, is fabricated in fiberglass and painted in life-like detail. The self-portrait is one of six conceptually similar works, each of which is based upon a real-life figure; the five others are Beijing property developers.