

Motion/Tension

Wu Hung (Curator)

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Two enormous iron balls—one 3.5 meters high, the other 2.4 meters high-- slowly move while rotating in the middle of the exhibition hall. The balls are like two moving walls which constantly reconfigure their distance from the audience. Their silent movement intensifies the impression of physical strength as the audience retreats to a safe niche under the surrounding scaffolding.

Waves of deafening sound come from a steel pipe spiraling over the scaffolding, within which a set of invisible iron balls circulate endlessly around the exhibition space. Suddenly the pipe goes through the wall and outside the building; a few moments later the sound returns, signaling the balls' ceaseless journey.

This exhibition displays Sui Jianguo's newest art project, which reexamines two essential interactions inherent to the art of sculpture and pushes both to the extreme. The first interaction is between a work and the audience, or between the object and subject of artistic appreciation. The conventional relationship between object and subject, however, is reversed in this exhibition: the work becomes the aggressor while the viewer is placed in a defensive position. Viewing entails constant readjustment to the invasive pressure generated by the work. In the process viewers are forced to face their own hidden fears and anxieties.

The second interaction is between the work and the architectural space, or between the focus and context of a sculptural project. But a simple polarity between work and space is rejected in this exhibition, which instead problematizes this polarity in two ways. On the one hand, when the pipe goes through the wall it also breaks down the conventional separation between the interior and the exterior, thereby redefining the exhibition's architectural space. On the other hand, the two sets of iron balls transform the static exhibition hall into a dynamic structure; their changing position and acoustic properties constantly reconfigure the spatial relationship between the work and the audience.

Here "motion"---the central concept of the project---has multiple meanings. What is set in motion is something both physical and sonic, subjective and objective, sculptural and architectural. The breakdown of these conceptual categories urges us to reconsider the definition of work, space, and the viewer, as well as the relationships between them. The experimental nature of this exhibition lies precisely in the way it occasions such breakdown and radical rethinking. Viewed from a sociological perspective, Motion/Tension is like an abstraction of a huge construction site, compressing its intensity, noise, and sense of danger in a compact form. It can thus also be considered a metaphor of contemporary China in the process of rapid development and transformation.