

## Imprisonment and Struggle - Introduction to Exhibition of Sui Jianguo's Work, Restrained Power

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As the opening exhibition of the Singapore Museum of Contemporary Art, Sui Jianguo's large-scale installation, *Restrained Power*, will open in Dempsey Hill, Singapore, on January 14, 2012. This piece of work, weighing in at eight tons, consists of a metal container – 15 meters in length, 2.5 meters in height, and 2.5 meters in width – and an iron ball (5 mm thick and 2 meters in diameter) as well as a related power unit. On display, the huge metal container occupies a considerable proportion of the museum space. The ball inside the iron container, driven by the power unit, rolls about, colliding with the container and making a deafening sound. Viewers only see a huge metal container, without being able to see what makes the sound and how; they just hear the continuous crash every 27 seconds as the metal container pollutes the air with a thunderous noise. The impression given by the metal container is of an iron curtain or black box, strong and cold. Whatever is in the container, it must be driven by some kind of power; this unknown inner power can be experienced from outside the installation through the deafening noise it generates. Therefore the container and the power inside the container form a relationship of constraint and collision. The title of the work is *Restrained Power*; in my feeling, this is a metaphorical installation: imprisonment and struggle; it is Sui Jianguo's expression of his inner feelings, certainly, it could be read also as an implied meaning of a living environment.

If we study Sui Jianguo's oeuvre, we will find that most of his works have a feeling of imprisonment, confrontation and conflict. In 1998, I wrote an essay for Sui Jianguo, entitled *Imprisoned Soul*, and in 2004, I interviewed Sui Jianguo and I asked him about this problem. He answered, 'Perhaps, it relates to my personality. Although I have a relatively peaceful life and find it easy to interact with others, in fact my heart is more introverted, being more used to reflecting on myself. I feel that such a personality makes me feel all sorts of constraints and I believe in fate from the bottom of my heart. Perhaps one's personality can also determine his artistry'. As an old friend, I can understand and appreciate Sui Jianguo's feelings: the more powerful the introspective ability, the more sensitivity to outside pressures, and the stronger the inner conflict. Moreover, the relationship of imprisonment and struggle formed by all external pressures and inner reflections is not abstract, and can be associated with some events and psychological states; so, despite Sui Jianguo's seemingly varied work, as a kind of keynote, imprisonment and struggle have still indistinctly run through the theme of his works for more than twenty years.

I

In his adolescence, Sui Jianguo had the opportunity to study traditional Chinese ink painting. In 1980-1986, while he studied and taught at Shandong Academy of Art, Sui was inspired by Chuang Tzu's concept of everything is oneness (*wan wu qi yi*), and his main direction at that time was using corresponding materials to create his work. In 1986, Sui Jianguo joined the Department of Sculpture in the Central Academy of Fine Arts to study the approach of realism. It is this approach that became Sui's primary focus. However, his studies in the CAFA coincided with a time when waves of cultural criticism and modern art movements were springing up like a rising wind and scudding clouds. This encouraged Sui Jianguo's inner conflict – contradiction between the approach of realism which he had only just grasped and the artistic concepts he had experienced at Shandong – now

confronted with the pressure of modernism, and this urged him to create Balancer using his spare time in 1987 – 1988 in order to balance his mental imbalance. He utilized plaster, cement, wood, newspapers, and wire gauze, 'to make a shape with wire gauze, insert damaged tables and chairs, then paste newspapers dipped in plaster into something, like a caput with cracks, and construct chairs and plaster to form a structure with a sense of equilibrium. So I called this work Balance or Balancer'.

In June 1989, the student democracy movement occurred in Tiananmen Square. In July, Sui Jianguo graduated from CAFA, received a Master's degree, and stayed on to teach. Recalling that time, Sui Jianguo said, 'after June 4, the mood suddenly changed completely: dull, depressed. I guess everyone had some thinking and reflecting to do at that time. After September, I always said in the class, that I wished I could go to the countryside with students. Then when I saw the imprints of tank tracks on Chang'an Avenue in Beijing, I felt so miserable. I just went into the mountains with students. When you really hit a rock, you will find that the stone is so stubborn, unlike mud, which can be manipulated as you will it. You must take a lot of time and effort to change a rock's shape a bit, just a little bit. I think that it is related to my mood at that time, and I wished to consume myself with hard work. Meanwhile, I thought maybe I could find a way to escape from the types of things I had originally done for realism. In fact, the reasoning then was to find a way to create from everyday, from traditions, such as the clamps used for mending pottery and chains'. So Structure Series then is a combination of metal and stones, to construct hard stone with the traditional claws used for mending pottery, but this work still shows a pure and elegant feeling of form. What made Sui Jianguo well-known and brought him prestige in the art world was the series Earthly Force created in 1992-1994. The re-bar reinforcement, embedded and wrapped firmly around the hard stone like a net, allowed Sui Jianguo to comprehend a real contest of force, and he found a spiritual feeling of obsession with these hard materials.

Sui Jianguo's unspeakable sense of imprisonment and struggle was expressed firstly by the confrontation between two hard materials; in 1994, he created Closed Memory, in which a stone was closed in a box welded by steel plate, giving a sense of closure and heaviness with the strong, thick steel plate and robust welding. Another example is his work Space of Memory, created during almost the same period: it is an installation-like work, a wall made of old hand-milled railway sleepers; when the impression of these old railway sleepers, which were laid flat, had been transferred into a compelling visual image erected in front of people, the objects, so full of rich life experience became a code of feeling – 'an image recording countless milling' and attracted a lot of attention. It was as if this life experience of saw-milling, itself, became a wall blocking Sui Jianguo. In 1995, Sui created the Deposition of Memory in India, which was a birdcage full of stones. This was the first time that Sui Jianguo used light materials in his creation, but the contrast between the light birdcage and heavy stones still gave a sense of being weighed down. Sui Jianguo entitled all works of this period as Memory; from railway sleepers to birdcage, he was taking advantage of the implications of the readymade, which was perhaps relevant to memory. In 1996, Sui Jianguo created Kill, in which tens of thousands of nails were hammered into an industrial rubber conveyor belt, thus creating something which looked like a soft cushion or a carpet from a distance. Sui Jianguo's inspiration for this work stemmed from his reflections on sadness: his mother had just died, so he was immersed in grief. He said that at this time he thought of some world events, where many people died, but one can quickly forget everything; he reflected on the reason for this amnesia, such as people's tolerance, in this case, tolerance has become a force by which people hurt themselves. He said that he had an impulse to hammer nails into something, so he called his work Kill (ji), because the emperor who killed his subjects had been called Kill. He chose flexible rubber, searching for a sense in which the damaged objects are changed into a damaging power, that is, with nails hammered into the rubber, it produced a sense of soft carpet but with a harmful feeling. Thus Sui Jianguo found a way of expression which could embody contradictory feelings. In Clues on Development My

Artistic Practice, Sui Jianguo said, 'with the completion of Kill in 1996, the psychological pain and remorse in my heart was clearly unfolded.' In my opinion, during the decade from 1987 to 1996, the cultural contradiction, that is, the contradiction between traditional Chinese cultural values he accepted in his early years and western concepts of realism he took up in CAFA, formed the deepest inner conflict in Sui's heart, along with outside pressures, such as cultural movements, political events, and his mother's death which all interwove; all of these contradictions were abrogated through those works full of violence, such as clamping, wrapping, imprisoning, sealing, nailing.

II

In 1997, Sui Jianguo embarked on a new series Legacy, and I take this series as a turning point in Sui's career. From a visual point of view, Sui Jianguo made the tunic suit ("Mao suit") into a hard shell, giving a sense of restraint, reminiscent of the psychological shadow still cast on today's populace by previous revolutionary periods. On the feeling of restraint, although the shell-like Legacy has a certain relationship with previous works, it is no longer strongly confrontational, but an empty shell. In a sense, Sui Jianguo released his previous, powerful conflicts, abruptly. So, the creation of Legacy was the process by which Sui Jianguo resolved his contradictions, and shed the shell of traditional realism; this work had significance then as Sui Jianguo found common ground between traditional realistic aesthetics and the contemporary art approach. Sui Jianguo said that when he embarked on the creation of Legacy, he still infused some of the personal qualities with which he was accustomed, such as heavy, hand shaping, into the work; and finally he realized that the tunic suit is no longer specific, to be put on by someone. When an artist uses it as a materialized body to express a kind of complex or simple personal feeling, the tunic suit becomes a certain container of 'concept', whereby it takes history and reality into it, along with everyone's psychological shadows. At this time Sui Jianguo managed to free himself from the cultural contradictions in his heart, to make the past a shell to contain new ideas he had just obtained. As Sui Jianguo had said in Clues on Development My Artistic Practice, 'this process reminded me, when I utilized the traditional realistic language, once I am no longer obsessed with their own personality, no longer stick to the superficial pursuit of art, give up self-expression, but simply, selflessly, even mechanically recreate those selective things, so I can reach a self-gratifying way. In my intuitive sense, it is access to a realm I have longed for since my early years in some sense, that is 'self-denying' (wu wo) and 'everything is oneness' (wan wu qi yi) in Zen and Chuang Tzu'.

Since then, Sui Jianguo created a series of works in a relaxed and humorous way, such as the series Study on the Folding of Clothes in which he put clothes on the plaster models used as training tools in the study of realism in CAFA, such as The Dying Slave, The Rebellious Slave and Disco bolos, then he tried to avoid personal feeling, and faithfully reproduced these clothed models. In the series Made in China and Jurassic era, he enlarged a small plastic toy Dinosaur made in China into a sculpture of 3.2 meters in height, 4.2 meters in length and 2 meters in width, or arranged readymade things into a map of China. In Chinese Garden series, he piled the panda tat that is found everywhere in Chinese gardens into a pagoda. He appropriated and amplified some snobbish God of Longevity or Pegasus from popular culture. Sui Jianguo said that experiments in these series took and utilized skills of realistic sculpture from a new perspective. In my opinion, Sui Jianguo had struggled from the hard shell of Legacy, in a relaxed, humorous, joking and ironic gesture, in a way mixed with Dada, readymade and Pop, appropriated and reproduced classical specimens in social culture, especially the popular culture. In this process, classical plaster models relied on by proponents of the realistic approach had been satirized, meanwhile the realistic approach itself became a means of appropriating and amplifying the classical cultural specimens. Among works of this period, only the enlarged dinosaur in Jurassic Era was still confined in a huge solid iron cage.

October 15, 2006, it is Sui Jianguo's fiftieth birthday. Sensitivity and anxiety about time almost becomes a knot for anyone at an age of understanding Mandate of Heaven. Two months later, Sui Jianguo made *The Shape of Time*; he dipped a thin steel wire in automotive spray-paint, after the paint was dried, he dipped it again the next day ... from December 25, 2006 to July 25, 2010, he dipped every day, it took three years and seven months. As time went by, the shape on the steel wire formed by paint constantly increased ... Since then, the factors of time and space have become the focus of Sui Jianguo's experiments. In *Speeding Up* he used twelve cameras at the same time to shoot the circular railway in Beijing, then videos were projected on enclosure walls within an exhibition site with twelve projectors, so that the train ran along the screen ... the length of time the train appeared on each screen was just a few seconds; before it appeared again in another screen, it simply ran along the track between two cameras. A 9 km section of the circular railway was reproduced in a small exhibition space, allowing the audience, surrounded by images of the speeding train, to experience the speed of modernization, and a feeling stronger than 'time passed' as Confucius said. If anxiety is a common problem for modern man, it must be related to the rapid rhythms of modern life. 17.5° *True Deviation* is a public landscape work with an annual cycle to be established year after year. This project has been ongoing since 2007 in New Pujiang Town, Shanghai. It was based on the location of the town and took existed municipal buildings and the road system as reference coordinates. The re-planned and re-designed grid coordinates were established with a deviation of 17.5 degrees, at this point an iron column was set up – it was 120 cm in length, and the criteria for the height was the Wu Song Elevation of 670 cm. In each intersection of the grid, all columns form a matrix, and one column will be set up in this matrix each year. It will take as its completion date the point at which the artist is incapable of continuing. In September, Sui set up the fifth column. This work looks like a forest of sundial style monuments, with the changing of seasons, sunrise and sunset, its shadow in continually altering. The sculpture experiences weathering and deposits of rusty growth appear, in a rapidly changing modern city, this clearly demonstrates to people the ruthlessness of time.

As a 'method', Sui Jianguo is not really pursuing a purity of time factor in his work. Although *The Shape of Time* has certain purity, Sui Jianguo really wants to express his inner anxiety about time, so after he completed *Motion and Tension* in 2009, works with the typical Sui Jianguo sense appeared. The transformation from *The Shape of Time* to *Motion and Tension* is one from looking for method to expressing feeling, as was the transformation from *Structure* series to *Earth Force*. *Motion and Tension*, exhibited at Today Art Museum in September 2009, was the first piece of this series; it was based on the unique space in the 1st hall of TAM, and consisted of a customized huge steel frame with a track of pipelines around the walls on which steel balls ran, making loud noises which resonated around the hall. Meanwhile, two steel balls, 230 cm and 360 cm in diameter respectively, rolled along the ground, and created a threatening force which confronted viewers. During the exhibition, viewers experienced the loud noises around the walls and the converging attack and extrusion of two balls. Such 'audience participation', with compulsions and violence, let viewers experience a sense of existing in daily life – they are exhausted, thrown about and coerced by the social machine.

In *Clues on Development My Artistic Practice*, Sui Jianguo said, 'In every work of mine, one can identify the factors of social background. But I still try to find a self-supporting approach to endow a certain form of life from the world I have experienced. I know that this goal is still far away. Actually, I wonder if it is a too illusory a goal in the real and complex context of today's China and the world.' Perhaps the artist will take his entire lifetime searching for an 'approach' suited to expressing himself, just as during the decade from 1987 to 1996, Sui Jianguo's inner conflict about cultural value, the impact of social and political events, and psychological pressure

experienced when his mother died, all helped him to find a strong and violent approach, such as clamping, wrapping, imprisoning, sealing and hammering. During the second decade from 1997 to 2006, Sui Jianguo seemed to escape from the shell of Legacy; it made him confront educational background and the reality of popular culture with an easy and humorous gesture, to find an approach of appropriation, irony and readymade products. After he reached the age of understanding Mandate of Heaven, his sensitivity and anxiety about the passage of time stood out with an approach of time and space in his works. It is said that a leopard never changes his spots. Sui Jianguo's personality of introversion, introspection and anxiety led him to create Motion and Tension which has obvious factors of time. However, confrontation, imprisonment and struggle have become the most soul-stirring factors in his works. Even in those humorous series of works, a strong iron cage has been amplified to a fearful scale and one can feel the consistency of expression. Therefore, when we are confronted with this Restrained Power in the Singapore Museum of Contemporary Art, it is easy to understand Sui's personality and his works; Restrained Power no longer has the implication of a political iron curtain, because everyone has such inner, personal experiences of imprisonment and struggle.

Note: Wusong Elevation is an elevation system established by measured datum plane determined through lowest tidal datum in tide station of Wusongkou, Shanghai during 1881 to 1900, known as Wusong Elevation System. Origin of this system is zero height coordinate in the front of International Building in Shanghai.