

A Secret Anti-modernist: Sui Jianguo and His Retirement Project

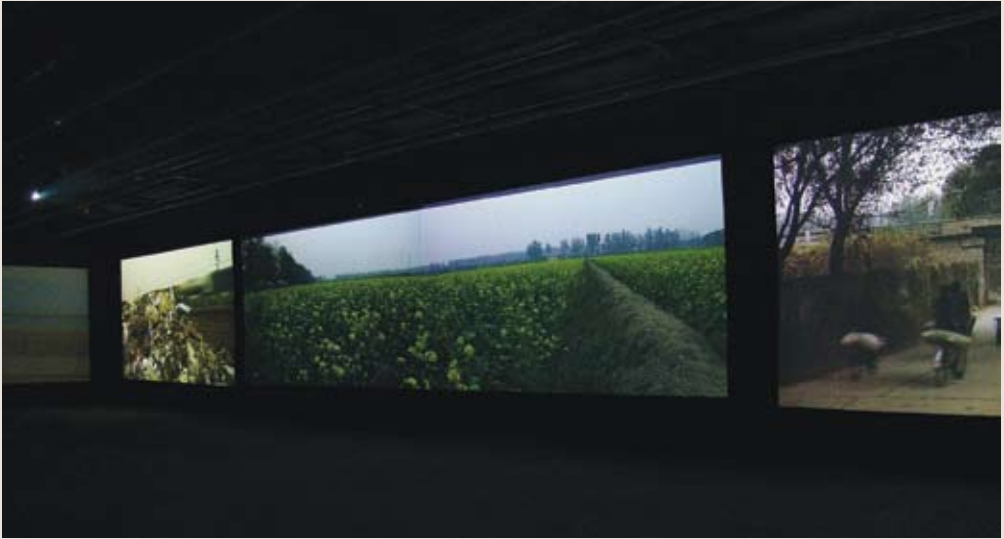
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Sui Jianguo, *Speeding Up—140 kph*, 2007, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Sculptor Sui Jianguo's latest exhibition, held in March 2007 in Beijing, presents a video installation titled *Speeding Up*. A large set of spinning mechanical arms charging around an axis at breakneck speed—140 km an hour, to be exact—forces the audience towards the walls of the exhibition hall where twelve equally spaced videos show synchronized documentary films of a train passing by at regular intervals. The exhilaration of speed as the arms spin around in a circle, essentially going nowhere, shocks the visitor and injects a feeling of adrenalin in the hall. The film was shot at a village near Beijing where test runs for Chinese trains are made in a very large circular loop, which completely encircles the village. When a test run is on, twelve gates crossing the tracks to the village are synchronized to shut and open at regular intervals to allow traffic through. Speed driven by mechanical power, an iconic symbol of the industrial age, is represented in this installation as a blind power lost in its own might. As a laboratory experiment, the only purpose speed serves is to measure time. But Sui Jianguo reminds us that speed is more than a measuring rod; it actively enforces a regularity of time by delivering the train at appointed intervals at the evenly distributed gates.

Currently, the artist is also continuing work on two long-term projects—projects unto death, to put it in macabre terms. For the project *Shape of Time*, which commenced on December 25, 2006, Sui Jianguo has been dipping a wire, twice daily, into a tin of enamel paint. As the paint dries the new coatings from the next day add a thin new skin to the original drop, adding two and a half millimetres each week to its diameter. Slowly the drop grows, from drop to pellet, from pellet to



Sui Jianguo, *Speeding Up—140 kph*, 2007, twelve-screen video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

ball. Eventually, in twenty years' time, Sui Jianguo explains, it will grow to such a size that he will need to perform the dip with a crane—assuming, of course, he lives that long. The enamel ball, or cannon, will represent the artist's cumulative labour from 2007 until his last day on earth and will become a testament to his industry.

The other long-term project, *Untitled*, was first conceived in 1992, but Sui has only recently been given the opportunity to realize it. The project has its roots in 1989, when Sui began work on a series of stone sculptures involving breakage and mending. One of these works is a standing plinth broken into many sections and mended with metal pins that work along the same principle as the stapler—a technique traditionally used in China to mend broken ceramic bowls. The artist proposes to erect one such column each year until his death, with the stipulation that the collection be kept together indefinitely. The collection will then become a testament and monument to his life. Unlike other monumental sculptures of the Communist era, this large closed-ended work is not a vision of the future being given a physical shape by the monument, but rather a work that starts with the painful consciousness of mortality, marking the passage of time, and is rooted in the metaphor of mending a broken wholeness.

To appreciate these unusual projects, especially coming from a representative of official art education (Sui Jianguo is currently the head of the Central Art Academy's sculpture department), we have to go back to the artist's beginnings. In 1972, at the age of sixteen, Sui Jianguo was assigned to work in a factory in his native Shandong province. Coming from a family of intellectuals, Sui's status during the Cultural Revolution was a lowly one, and getting assigned to a factory was the best he could hope for. In 1973 he sustained an arm injury in a workers' sports' match and had several weeks off to recover. Idling in the neighbourhood, he spent time at a local park where retired people passed the day; some came with birds, some played chess, others played music or told stories, and the better educated among them had very interesting stories to offer. Passing the days, Sui Jianguo came to realise that he was having a glimpse of his own future. And it also occurred to him that being able to bring interesting experiences to his neighbours in retirement would be his ultimate achievement. Returning to work at the factory, he began a personal search for a cultural mission and 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



Sui Jianguo, *Shape of Time*, 2006 until the artist's death, paint. Courtesy of the artist.

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 this and Sui Jianguo started to copy old master paintings from poorly printed black-and-white illustrations. Beginning with the works of the 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 that has informed everything he has done since.

Achieving official success as an artist must seem an ironic twist of fate to one such as Sui Jianguo, who had difficulty finding a comfortable position within the structure of state ideology. Having awakened early to the precariousness of happiness and the insignificance of worldly success in the face of life's brevity, Sui Jianguo does not take to the grand visions that have continued to mesmerise China even after the brutal lesson of Mao's revolution. The future, hijacked by ideology and held for ransom by the myth of modernity, becomes an ever unattainable moving target of happiness. The promise of the revolution has changed over the years, turning into other visions of the future that remain committed to rejecting China's past. Sui Jianguo's recent projects address directly the issue of the passage of time, using the artist's own mortality as a fulcrum to rein in the hollowness of ideological promises. With the enforced regularity of time, as in *Speeding Up*, even the absurdity of speed is made graspable. The train, champion of the Industrial Revolution, is condemned to impotent acceleration, just as the failed Communist revolution has turned into a senseless emblem of prowess, recalling not its original ideals but only its singularity as a blind force in history. Sui Jianguo tries to reclaim a sense of purpose in life by taking a personal position on the future. His art projects are not symbols pointing towards a hallowed vision, but markers checking off time past. Neither *Shape of Time* nor the *Untitled* column project has a predetermined



final form, yet, without loss of meaning, each is prepared to terminate as fate will have it. By planning projects unto the ultimate end, Sui Jianguo puts a damper upon the hubris of a glorified future.

Over a course of three decades, Sui Jianguo's career has covered the complete terrain of Chinese modern sculptural art, and his works constitute a continuous enquiry into how this art may be used to respond to current issues and still remain significant as personal statements. Like other academic sculptors, Sui has participated in numerous projects such as public monuments, facades, and commemorative statues. The tension between public ideological statement and private expression, the language of sculpture and its uses in both artistic and mundane spheres, are issues that constantly have challenged the artist and informed his art. He works within the official tradition of monumentality and historical vision to dispute the tradition's own premises, turning sculpture into an artistic practice for reflecting on China's modernity as a whole. Themes about permanence and idealism, icons of power and their complicit role in cultural conversion, and radical modernity versus the finite body as the site of experience all gradually grew out of the artist's long engagement with the art of sculpture.

Going back to Sui's early career, after several years of dedicated study at the Workers' Cultural Palace in Shandong, in 1980 the artist was accepted to the Shandong Art Academy, where he remained for four years. This period of his training coincided with the formative years of the so-called '85 New Wave Movement, in which the liberation of the individual and formalist explorations were the main concerns of artists. Sui Jianguo had already developed into a talented sculptor sensitive to the human form; at the same time he was also interested in diverse materials including ceramics, which led to stylised studies of historic and mythical forms such as the *Three-Legged Bird*, a symbolic creature of the sun. In 1986 he entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing as a graduate student and became increasingly interested in formalist issues. One of his earliest works that reflected an interest in the element of time and the sculptural process is a



Sui Jianguo, *Three-Legged Bird*, 1985, ceramic, 20 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Untitled*, 1987, plaster of Paris, 40 x 30 x 30 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

square cube of plaster with one corner eroded by a constant stream of flowing water (*Untitled*, 1986). He also began to look below the surface of the sculptured form to seek the inner core of the figure, by literally opening up the “shell” of sculpted busts (*Unborn Bust Portraits*, 1988–89) or making broad cuts into raw blocks (*Bust Portraits*, 1989). In the face of the student movement and the siege of Tian’anmen Square in the summer of 1989, Sui began to infuse his figurative works with a tragic heroic strength, and the *Untitled* bust with plastered bandages (1989) was made before he went on one protest march not knowing if he would return safely. These works are powerful not just because of their expressiveness; they are powerful perhaps also because they bring forth an underlying concern with destiny that has always haunted the artist. Through a radical act of rebellion the artist both acknowledges the power of the status quo and claims his own position within the structure of its evolving ideology.

After the military crackdown at Tian’anmen in 1989, Sui Jianguo’s art changed, as did the art of many of his generation. What went quietly missing was his work in figurative portraiture. Instead, the artist turned to seemingly formalist studies under the *Structure* series (1990–92).

In one of the series’ first pieces, he opens up the interior of the sculptural mass and links the split halves with chains. This work can be seen as the prelude to Sui’s powerful series of broken stones mended with metal staples or nets. The artist clearly is creating a metaphor of healing and restoration, while images of bondage and manipulation also are called forth from the mending process. A stone in an iron cage was the first attempt to show a repressed psyche (*Untitled*, 1990). In another work, the iron bars contracted and actually became implanted into the “flesh” of the stone (*Earthy Form*, 1991). The descriptiveness of Sui’s earlier works in portraiture is here replaced by a more general metaphorical depiction of the psychological state. Manipulation and control are enacted upon the sculptural substance directly, turning the viewer into an accomplice of the artist. In 1996 Sui Jianguo created *Execution* (1996), in which hundreds of nails were hammered into a thick rubber skin, bringing to visceral sensation the silent terror of punishment and its presence in mundane circumstances. In turning away from the figurative in his depictions of repression and manipulation, the artist brings to light the general condition of existence: it is no longer a matter of identifying the oppressor and the oppressed, but rather of recognition of a predicament common to both that we must come to terms with. The anonymous collectivist power of the *Earthy Form* boulders is less of an indictment than a statement, a reminder of what it is that gives us “form” in the first place. Issues about “form” reflect on the question of “identity,” which Sui Jianguo directly addresses when he deals with the physique of the modern Chinese body in relation to cultural politics. Cultural politics is also an issue that is highlighted by non-figurative

art: does not every recognizable sculpted form carry a certain ideological disposition? Is not the question of identity, whether national or cultural, embedded in culturally endorsed forms?

In 1997, Sui Jianguo again returned to working with figurative forms. In April of that year he modelled the first work in his *Legacy Mantle* series out of foam rubber (a sculpture in the shape of a stiff jacket without the person, cast in aluminium, 1997). The artist has said that he wanted to find an icon to symbolize Chinese modern history, and the jacket (mistakenly nicknamed “Mao jacket”) designed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan) seemed to him most suitable. The surface corrosion of this piece suggests excavated damage and the passage of time. Later, he modified all subsequent pieces of this series to show the icon in pristine condition, perhaps to suggest the untarnished currency of the icon. Following this work came the *Study of Clothes’ Veins* series in 1998, which puts the “Zhongshan jacket” on famous classical Western nude statues. Chinese modernity may without equivocation be claimed to have exerted the most brutal and thorough destruction of cultural and political heritage in Chinese history, and the radical shift in values and paradigms are primarily based on an interpretation and imitation of the modern West. As an icon of power the Zhongshan jacket represents both the faceless parental figure who asserts modern values as well as the apparel that physically conditions the modern Chinese. In the context of the artist’s previous bandaged bust, *Untitled* (1989), and the *Earthy Force* boulders (1992), the *Legacy Mantle* (first piece made in 1997) can be read as a later development of the image of restriction, although here the implication is more cultural and political than psychological. The Zhongshan jacket as designed by Sun Yat-sen, the “Father of China’s Republic,” was based on a modern (nineteenth-century) Japanese outfit copied from Prussia. Inspired by the West twice removed, the design still contains symbolic values intended by Dr. Sun: the five buttons symbolise the five civil powers, the four pockets the four cardinal virtues and so on. The traditional Chinese jacket, on the other hand, values a comfortable fit, emphasising a relaxed drop of the shoulders and



Sui Jianguo, *Bust Portrait*, 1989, wood, 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Untitled Bust With Plastered Bandages*, plaster of Paris, 40 x 25 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Structure Series*, 1991, granite and steel, 83 x 60 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Untitled*, 1990, stone and iron, 40 x 40 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Earthly Force*, 1992-94, stone and welded steel, 60 x 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Execution*, 1996, rubber and iron nails, 150 x 500 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

subtle withdrawal of the chest. This new jacket, essentially Western, is made with lifted shoulders and a thrusting stance expected of the soldier: it is designed for standing to attention rather than for carefree movement of the limbs. After Mao's revolution it is impossible not to associate this jacket with the Communist leader, or with the form of Communism and ideological institution that carry forward the legacy of reform. Sui Jianguo's sculptural icon monumentalises the symbolic jacket, showing its staying power even as it is left without a carnal human occupant. The "Father of the Nation's" legacy has been passed on to the "Great Leader," finally to become the outfit of the absent father who is yet ubiquitous and cannot be removed.

What exactly is the "modern Chinese body" introduced by Chinese reformers and revolutionaries? Social realism and the Chinese art academies give us clear and vivid illustrations: the ideal Chinese modern body is a European Renaissance body with a Chinese face. As a teacher in an official art academy, Sui Jianguo constantly has to refer his students to examples of famous Western sculpture, which implicitly constitute ideal models of human physical beauty. As a foundation course in art, students are taught to analyse and draw the human body in the style of Western classical academic art, which inevitably refers back to the Greco-Roman tradition and the Renaissance. In *Study of Clothes' Veins* (1998), Sui Jianguo reproduces the plaster cast models used in class, intentionally retaining the effects of the study pieces but adding to the nude bodies the Zhongshan jacket of modern China. The work becomes a statement about the modern Chinese body as a colonised body two levels removed from its origin, first through the adoption of the European jacket and second through its re-colonization as the ideal Western body.



Sui Jianguo, *Legacy Mantle*, 1997, painted fibreglass, 320 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

By going to the root of the premise of Social Realism via the human body, Sui Jianguo exposes the myth of Chinese modernity. As a reference for the imagination, the artistic monument gives shape to ideology and becomes the object of desire, the physical shape of a perfect future and the symbol of authority. While the revolutionary monument gives substance to a concept, Sui Jianguo finds that even as the monument is dismantled it continues to haunt us and continues to constitute the source of meaning for China. In 2003 and 2004 he made several works that refer directly to monuments of Mao Zedong. *Study of Base Plinth* is simply a six-metre-tall plinth with an iron-runged ladder on the side; it is the kind of plinth large public statues stand on, but there is no statue here. As the viewer climbs to the top there lay the remains of a pair of shoes, made to look as though a previous marble statue has been rudely removed. Another work, titled *Study of Clothes' Veins: Right Arm*, is simply the stretched arm broken off from a very large statue (of a size suitable for the *Study of Base Plinth*), an arm from the statue of a leader waving to the crowds that is familiar to every Chinese. This is of course a satire of the material contingency of the monument, but it also points to the absence that continues to operate and support the ethos of modern China: the hollow that sucks everyone forward to seek fulfilment in order to fill the void left by the fallen monument.

The magic of the monument rests upon ideology's claim on history, which establishes a closure on the future to secure its meaning; the fate of China's modern monuments therefore coincides with the changing vision of the state. Since 1992, after Deng Xiaoping demonstrated his determination to make the market economy a new guiding principle for the government, a new fever for public sculpture flared up across the nation, and countless "modern" and so-called "abstract" sculptures emerged to replace the demolished Socialist statues. From the mid 1990s onwards, commissions for public statues accelerated, and every town and municipal district seemed to find the budget for a monument, making public art the most rewarding occupation for anyone with a title in



Sui Jianguo, *Study of Clothes' Veins*, 1998, painted fibreglass. Courtesy of the artist.



Sui Jianguo, *Study of Base Plinth*, wood and fibreglass, 600 x 450 x 450 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

art. Today many of these ugly edifices are already starting to be removed, but replacements continue to pour in. It is amazing how new public monuments can be so hideous; when Socialist statues suddenly appeared en masse in the 1950s, it must have also been a shock to the prevailing sensibility. But social realism at least had a coherent aesthetic, a consistent rhetoric. The new type of state-initiated capitalism has no ideological premise. It is “experimental,” for lack of a better description; Deng called the change in government’s economic policy “crossing the river stone by stone,” and the unprincipled “experimental” spirit is reflected in the artistic chaos erected in its glory. But the enthusiasm for monuments points to the spirit of a master narrative at work—exactly the continuation of the previous heroic project of modernity, and similarly uncritical of its debts to past history. In 1999 Sui Jianguo returned to the theme of the monument and cited mass commercial objects in his art. He chose the toy dinosaur with the embossed legend “Made In China” as the icon of the era (*Made in China*, 1999) and reproduced faithfully the once-ubiquitous fibreglass panda bear trash bin.

There is nothing stylistically or conceptually original about these new works: Pop artists have worked the idea of using mass commercial objects to death. By turning away from personal



Sui Jianguo, *Study of Clothes' Veins—Right Arm*, 2003, fibreglass and resin, 700 x 230 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

expression and original forms, Sui Jianguo makes it clear that he has lost faith in the idea of the original genius of art, and he positions himself as artist as the provider of context and as interpreter through citation. The monument is no longer the visualisation of an ideal, nor does it glorify the hero beyond this mortal life. Sui Jianguo has made these sculptures in the context of China's public monuments to draw our attention to the mundane and to confront the absurdity of the present cultural demise of China. Without people taking notice of the change, Sui Jianguo shows that the national Chinese dragon has quietly undergone a transformation into the dinosaur-dragon, prompted by exports to the Western toy market. Likewise the panda bear, happily exploited as the mascot of good will, is unthinkingly used to contain rubbish in public places (*Wasted Beauty*, 2003). He shows us how the great vision of modernity is actually realised in the daily context of China here and now.

In the same spirit, when Sui was invited to participate in an exhibition in Guilin in 2000, he simply borrowed a bronze sculpture of a man speaking into his cell phone from another artist and placed it in the Guilin River (*Man Crossing River*, 2000). It is the context that gives the work special meaning. The urban man absorbed in an urban style of communication, oblivious to the beautiful



Sui Jianguo, *Wasted Beauty*, 2003, painted fibreglass, 150 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

landscape of Guilin, represents the new relationship to timeless nature. Bringing together the image of the Zhongshan jacket and classical Western art in a new work, in 2004 the artist made a series of six life-sized portraits in parody of the famous classical Greek statue *Discobolus* by Myron. The six portraits are of five renowned Beijing property developers plus the artist himself, and they are destined for display in a new urban development project. This is the new public monument of the modern Chinese, idealized in a colonized physical beauty, half a century after the Revolution.



Sui Jianguo, *Made in China*, 1999, painted fibreglass, 320 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

“Where does one stand today in the context of China’s ideological ethos?” the artist seems to ask, and “How do the workers and the masses fit in?” In November 2006, Sui Jianguo was asked to contribute to the inaugural exhibition of a new art space, and he proposed the performance project *Horizontal Movement—50 Metres*. He hired a group of labourers to move a sedan car manually across fifty metres, from the parking lot into the art gallery. Here the artist revisits the idea of art as collective labour and celebrates the ingenuity of solving a technical problem that serves no end but symbolic performance. In China countless monuments have been made in the past half century to celebrate anonymous workers and soldiers furthering certain glorious causes; few remain standing, and fewer have been made in recent years. Sui Jianguo revives this memory, yet he cannot name a visionary cause that motivates such labour. Instead the artist brings alive the contingency of the moment, putting back



Sui Jianguo, *Man Crossing River*, 2000, bronze. Courtesy of the artist.

into artwork an essential mystery that escapes the monument, which is attention to the finite and the living moment.

Sui Jianguo now says he is increasingly drawn to themes dealing with time. Having spent all these decades with sculptural monuments, he appears thoroughly disillusioned by the hollowness of the grand gesture. His own projects clearly repudiate claims to historical destiny; in reverting to the uncertainty of the working process, the artist gives priority to the contingency of the moment. It is the meaning of “living,” not the meaning of “life,” that confronts a person every day; it is by the continuous effort of taking stock of time past, reordering and rediscovering memory, that life is made meaningful. As a sculptor who has arrived at the pinnacle of the official art establishment,



Sui Jianguo, *Horizontal Movement—50 Metres*, 2006, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

Sui Jianguo has certainly taken constant stock of his role, questioning himself along the way, and has contemplated the ethos of modernity with both seriousness and with an open mind. Perhaps a suspicion of sculptural form of every kind is at play in the artist’s movement toward temporal processes; he probably realizes that the proliferation of meaning generated by any form of signification will always extend beyond his own access to it. By focusing on process rather than outcome, he maintains a personal relationship with the work. What is most impressive about Sui Jianguo’s career is that he has set his own goals, while considering the public uses of history. He thus casts aside anxiety about the purpose of life to focus on the journey itself. He is free from the grip of modernity’s false freedom as he devotes himself to his own projects, and he remains open to life’s vicissitudes.