

Changing The Subject: The Sculpture Of Sui Jianguo

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Sculpture matters to Sui Jianguo and he has invested a great deal of his prodigious intellectual and physical energy in advancing his understanding both of what it means to make sculpture and of what the subject is – in political, social, cultural, economic and experiential terms. He has been willing to periodically upend all that he has learnt and to operate with new sets of principles, although carrying forward into changed circumstances his accumulated technical knowledge. He doesn't pretend to start again as a beginner. His approach has been determinedly materialistic combined with a quite remarkable transparency or lack of ego in his subjectivity both at a compositional and at a mark making level (as if he were a kind of pure transmitter of the task). The rich consequence is that expressiveness does not get in the way of expression. Psychology is not excluded and biographic circumstances may prompt changes but do not determine the result. "The so called biographical aspect prompts the psychological intent of the art work" as Sui Jianguo put it in an interview with Liu Ding (1).

In 2008 Sui Jianguo began the process that led to the monumental work *Blind Portrait* and which, together with the accompanying *Object 1* and *Object 2*, similarly produced, formed his 2008 exhibition *Revealing Traces* at JoyArt in Beijing. This exhibition initiated a group of sculptures where the imprint of a physical action – its trace – is integral to the completed sculpture. The production of that trace has been constrained in various ways – most obviously by the use of a blindfold, but also by which part of his body the artist uses in modelling the initial form. One consequence of the constraint is the muffling of, or detachment from, subjectivity in the process. Not being able to see what you are doing makes things difficult and makes it hard to express yourself, on the one hand, but equally hard to be objective on the other. It is these 'blind' works that I want to focus on. Since sight is such a dominant sense, its absence, whether actual or metaphorical, engenders multiple different possibilities for meaning, many of which hinge on questions of subjectivity and of the absence of intent. To take an example from somewhere else to illustrate the point, during the 2012 Olympics in London, there was considerable surprise, and some consternation, when it was revealed in the press that Im Dong Hyun, a champion archer on the South Korean team was severely visually impaired (functionally blind some said, though Im Dong denies this, saying that if that were the case he would be compelled to take part in the Paralympics). The British women's team captain eloquently corrected the misapprehension, seeing clearly is not so important, she said. In fact seeing the target too clearly can cause the muscles to tense and for the archer to over-aim, trying to direct the arrow towards a precise spot on the target, disrupting the action and interfering with a smooth release. Im Dong Hyun only knows where he wants the arrow to go and releases it in a smooth unforced action – as he says 'For me, seeing the target and not seeing the target doesn't make any difference'. A parallel phenomenon is well known in control systems engineering (and was first corrected by the governors on steam engines) - if a performance target is too accurately or precisely defined, the apparatus will oscillate with potentially disastrous rapidity around the control – off/on/off/on etc, - a feedback loop. The behavior, known as hunting, can cause errors to amplify and the system to self-destruct. The engineering solution is to damp the system, reducing oscillation and returning the system to equilibrium in the most efficient way. Im Dong Hyuns disability damps his performance, creating a smoother action and more predictable set of outcomes. Or, to take another extended example, in clinical research, the gold standard for drugs testing is the double blind trial, whereby neither physician know whether or not what is being administered is the drug under test or a placebo, nor indeed the dosage. The purpose of such testing is to remove, as far as possible, subjective bias from the test results. In many ways this is equivalent to the blindfolded figure of justice, the representation of judicial impartiality and of equality before the law. In both of

these examples, a part of the message seems to be that subjectivity interferes with performance. Seers and prophets are often also blind, whether in fact or as a consequence of induced trance. Blindness is understood to absent their subjectivity from entrapment in the present and to permit the emergence of foresight.

When Sui, blindfolded, and with perhaps other constraints on his capacities, starts with the clay, although he has a quantity in mind, and an attitude, 'being blind' takes away something of his skill and knowledge. Blind Portrait, as a title, has many different kinds of meaning. The first is a description of the process – the artist is blind but is making a portrait, so what we see is a portrait of an unseen person. Paradoxically, it is very unclear where the face is in this work; it is up to the viewer to locate it, to bring a face to the portrait we see. However the portrait itself can be blind, we can see it but it cannot see us. A portrait also implies someone or something particular – the work is a portrait, a record or trace, of a blind action. The first model, produced by Sui Jianguo, becomes subject to a process of mechanical enlargement. First, a mould is made of that original which permits an identical cast, a copy, to be made. This copy is then sliced to provide sectional information and particular surface points are identified from which a network of point measurements is taken. With this body of data a scaled up form is produced by applying plastic clay over a skeletal wooden armature. Clay for this process allows for a very faithful transcription of the original surface. A piece-mould is then made from this enlarged positive from which a second, wax, positive, in parts, is cast. These wax parts are then invested, burnt out and molten bronze is poured into the ensuing gap. The final step is the cleaning up and reassembly by welding of these bronze parts, surface treatment and patination. This is a very traditional and highly crafted process involving a great deal of skilled and often arduous work. Sui Jianguo refers to it as a system – the enlarger - and suggests that it is the productive labour involved that mediates the transition of the blindly produced (but skilfully executed) original from the private to the public realm and is the means or channel by which the artwork enters the distributive system of the art world. Enlargement is a manifestation of power and is thus an economic activity embedded within the cultural context. How capital and profit are distributed and gained – these are the goals of this 'enlarger'. (2)

In 2009, Sui Jianguo made the extraordinary installation Motion/Tension at the Today Art Museum in Beijing. Two huge steel balls, one slightly smaller than the other but both threateningly large (a kind of couple or pair) rolled around the gallery space, seemingly under their own volition, occasionally crashing into each other and with no concern for the viewers sheltering under the scaffolding arcade running round the tall atrium gallery and which blocked the path of the juggernauts. At the same time smaller solid steel balls were raised up a vertical lift and dropped into a hopper feeding into a steel pipe running round the gallery space. The pipe even exited the building at one point coming back in at a different location, the outlet of this pipe deposited the ball at the beginning of the vertical lift so that its journey could begin again. On their descent the balls rattled, clattered and banged loudly through the pipe, making the space seem to shudder from this audio onslaught. At the same time the space itself was continuously reconfigured by the blind stumblings of the giant balls on the floor. There was a radical inversion of object/subject relations involved, the audience, normally itinerant in relation to sculpture, shifting individual perspective and viewpoint, was defensive, getting out of the way, subject to circumstance and sensorially bombarded. As a viewer you were on guard and aware of something unseen, the surrounding space, being continually manifested and reconfigured, The apparently fixed boundaries, the gallery walls, were buffeted by the clanging balls as they noisily made their repeated descents from top to bottom. It was as if the sculptures were themselves continually constructing and deconstructing their own meanings. Just as Blind Portrait jolts us into seeing, so Motion/Tension jolted us into awareness of ourselves and of our own physical being.

There is a superficial similarity between the Blind Trace works of Sui Jianguo and Chinese scholars rocks. My understanding of these marvellous objects is that they are untouched (in theory) and that natural forces do the work on them – water, wind, sun, frost etc. -. what the human agency adds is recognition. [It's a bit less clear with regard to the bottom, which I think is sometimes modified or made flat so that the rock stands, either on a

purpose made base or table or outside (as in the garden of the Forbidden Palace)]. So there is no intentionality involved in the making, it's a question of, at first, being able to see them – they are wild in a very pure sense. However what is implied in this recognition is that of a particular rock's capacity to capture imagination, both to represent nature and to be a microcosm through which the world emerges. And perhaps this is the point, where the superficial similarity becomes something deeper, that the Blind Trace works of Sui Jianguo are a microcosm through which a world emerges.

I think it is not actually made by me alone, but is the fruit of my collaboration with God. Why (do) I think so? I had a lot of training about sculpture and I also teach the undergraduate and postgraduate students every day, therefore to shape a person, an object or something abstract is very easy. Nevertheless all these things are not what I want. I am wondering whether they can be automatically transformed into sculptures. Maybe I need to forget all (the) things I have learned. (3)

(1)Sui Juan Guo, interview with Liu Ding, in *Revealing Traces* published by Joyart Beijing p.42

(2) Ibid p.46

(3)Sui Jianguo quoted in *Trackart* (details to follow).