
Sui Jianguo: Touch, Empty Space, and Realizing One's Own Nature

By David Brubaker

Sui Jianguo creates artworks about contemporary intertwinings: modern science and its technologies, postmodern ironies of consumerism and data collection, and the tradition of Daoist aesthetics from Laozi and Zhuangzi to Chan Buddhism. In two series, *Planting Trace* (2014-18) and *Garden in Data Cloud* (2018-21), Sui begins with looking at the boundless empty space between his fingers which he calls “that empty space” (*na ge kong* 那个空).¹ He then uses his own sense of touch, while blindfolded at times, to pinch clay so that such empty space intertwines with clay. The most vivid results in clay are scanned into digital files and enlarged by 3-D digital printing into public sculptures. Sui describes his project clearly and with terms from the tradition of Daoist aesthetics. Guided by his own art practice, he creates monuments in resin so that each individual human observer can realize a human naturalness that includes a display of empty space right before one's own eyes. In making art about direct acquaintance with stabilizing bodily senses such as touch and looking, he moves beyond modern and postmodern discomforts to a more harmonizing 21st century message. It is still possible to realize roots that establish the irreplaceable uniqueness of each human being, even as systems of scientific understanding and digital information continue to grow. His contemporary art from China suggests that there is still a chance for human individuals to connect cultures of technology with a Daoist inspired realization of one's own naturalness in order to cultivate a more life-affirming present.

My aim here is to affirm Sui Jianguo's original project in making the artworks of *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud*. They help human individuals to open up to an aesthetic appreciation of natural life. There is much to be gained by affirming Sui's

project and its success. In the tradition of Daoist aesthetics, which Sui frequently references, looking by eye is a way to realize that one's own essential nature includes one's own specific senses of elemental embodiment. These roots are forgotten when attention shifts to the task of perceptual discrimination of particular physical things. Thus Sui's art is an antidote to the alienation that arises whenever one favors the use of modern systems of knowledge that treat individual human beings as physical events determined by external conditions. His artworks help each individual realize an elemental display of empty space – a specific sample of human uniqueness in the immediate present. His aesthetic approach offers a model to cultural theorists who ask how artists are to show what it is like to live in the present alongside yet apart from one another.² The task here is to develop an interpretation that explains Sui's original project with *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud*. Both are important contributions to global culture at this historical moment.

However, there are two obstacles in the way of generating an interpretation that upholds Sui project. One challenge comes from curators and art historians of contemporary Chinese art who use factual discourses about material systems and physical stuff to interpret Sui's artworks in ways that do not fully accommodate his statements. Another comes from analytical philosophers who restrict descriptions of the human individual's encounter with nature in ways that exclude using Daoist language to explain what artworks are about.

In art history, for example, both Jeff Kelly and Betti-Sue Hertz note in scholarly essays that Sui's work creates references to Buddhist art and aesthetics. But they shift to interpretations of his work that conflict with the thesis that Sui's project is harmonizing. One challenging instance of this shift occurs when Betti-Sue Hertz turns to consider the art historical implications of Sui's use of 3-D digital printing. Her claim is that Sui's project of emphasizing existential questions of human individuality

collapses after clay models are digitally enlarged into resin. In short, her remarks imply that achieving an artwork that shows the uniqueness of touch or an apparent empty space specific to one's own eyes is *incompatible* with an artwork that is experienced as a product of digital printing. The same obstacle for Sui's project arises when art historians use the frameworks of material culture or Material Art to interpret contemporary Chinese art. Some art historians advocate using material culture or physical stuff, including systems of 3-D digital processing, as a fundamental criterion for art historical interpretation. However, if art histories about material culture and physical stuff cancel out or sideline the use of Daoist aesthetics as a springboard for interpretation, then the historical emergence of Sui's artworks – which connect the realities of material culture to aesthetic realization of one's own specific embodiment -- will go unmentioned in 21st century histories of contemporary art.

In circles of philosophy, the challenge is that Sui creates art about a basic human encounter with natural life that analytical philosophers tend to reject as meaningless, unspeakable, or harmful. Traditions of Daoist aesthetics do require suspension of utility (*gongli xuanzhi* 功利懸置) and cultivation of an aesthetic attitude (*shenmei taidu* 審美態度).³ This suggests at least some features in common with what philosophers in Euro-American traditions refer to as the *aesthetic attitude* of disinterest in perceptual experience of particular natural objects or artworks. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, giving a rest to perceptual discrimination of outside things is often a procedural step for facilitating a personal awareness of one's own display of empty space specific to one's own eyes. Sui uses a blindfold to take such a step. But in analytical philosophy, Arthur Danto claims that interruption of perceptual experience of objects leaves a beholder with an encounter of actual life that is merely an “aesthetic blur”; his analytical presupposition is that artworks are about causal connections and that there is no philosophical defense for saying that art is about such an encounter with a unique display for which there is no cognitive

response.⁴ Moreover, Danto's theory of art is based on a premise of *indiscernibility* that stands in the way of affirming Sui's project. Danto begins with the fundamental premise that looking by eye reveals nothing sensible that enables a human viewer to notice a difference between an ordinary object and a work of art.⁵ I agree that Danto's theory succeeds in explaining how a spectator observes *Garden in Data Cloud* and then perceives it as a physical effect of material processing. But given his premise of *indiscernibility*, there is no way within his theory to describe how the very same spectator can switch to looking for oneself by eye at the same artwork and observe it instead as one's own display of empty space and impossible to perceive as an ordinary external thing.

There are some signs of innovation in analytical circles. Mary Wiseman writes now about the new contemporary Chinese art: "The call is to 'look at this,' where the 'this-ness' of the subject is what the viewer is to appreciate and wonder at, confronting it directly through its material, bypassing language."⁶ This is an exciting development that raises some hope for global growth of a second philosophical language needed to describe what Sui's art of touch and elemental visible space is about. But this potential for an innovative and refreshing advance also comes to a halt because Wiseman describes the level that bypasses language with the language of things and physical events: "What is outside language is the material world of space and time with its quarks and black holes...and neutrons; earth, air, fire and water...".⁷ In short, she uses the English term "this-ness" to refer to physical objects of natural science; she does not use it with the same meaning as the terms "empty space" (*xu kong* 虚空) and "suchness" (*zhen ru* 真如) in traditional Chinese aesthetics. This reinstalls the questionable analytical presupposition that perceptual experiences -- of particular things, ordinary objects, earthy materials such as clay, or processed resin -- are the individual human observer's most basic level of encounter with nature and artworks. As a result, all references to a specific token of apparent empty space (a display not perceptible as object or physical stuff) are excluded from

Wiseman's account of contemporary Chinese art. Sui Jianguo's subject – looking at empty space -- is still forgotten, covered over, or obscured.

To overcome these two obstacles and find language that supports Sui's original project, I present four steps. First, I sketch some of the art historical interpretations that conflict with Sui's original project of *Planting Trace* as he describes it. In particular, I analyze Betti-Sue Hertz's claim that Sui's project fails. My reply is this: Sui's project can be affirmed as successful, but only after the introduction of language for a second mode of observation that includes looking at what Sui himself refers to as "that empty space." In section two, I examine Sui's words to clarify the meaning and use of his term "that empty space." I find that he does talk of a second mode of observation when he describes his method of pinching empty space into lumps of clay. Briefly put, his remarks imply that each human beholder has two ways of observing a display of nature or art. One way is through perceptual experiences of particular physical things, gestures, structures, or processes. The other is by looking aesthetically and realizing for oneself that the specific appearance of empty space in one's own eyes is an element of one's own incomparable embodiment. Third, by applying this double-aspect account of observation, I respond to and remove the first obstacle raised by Hertz. I describe how a museum visitor can begin by perceiving *Garden in Data Cloud* as physical sign of data collection; and I then describe how the same visitor can look at the same artwork as a display of a specific empty space in one's own eyes – not as a physical material or event. Each museum visitor who looks at *Planting Trace* can switch between two modes of observation, just as Sui does as he first perceives his hand as a physical object and then switches to looking at it as an appearance in a boundless visible empty space that he does not experience as a physical object or event. Fourth, I interpret Sui's remarks about the observation of empty space as connected to the tradition of Daoist thoughts about awakening to one's own naturalness and thus also to passages by Hui Neng (638-713) in the *Platform Sutra* about realization of one's own nature. The second mode of observation (or

looking at empty space as a display in one's own eyes) is accessible to individuals in audiences globally and useful for describing the contemporary value of Sui's artworks, because some features of Daoist aesthetics now have promising approximations in Europe, as the writings of 1960-61 by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) indicate. Therefore, the aesthetics of looking for oneself at empty space is firmly established, and this removes the second obstacle posed by analytical philosophy.

The final thought is that Sui Jianguo's artworks are relevant to individuals everywhere in situations of modernity. Realizing one's own nature and its roots in touch and looking at empty space leads to wisdom, empathy, and a reduction of self-alienation. The individual human beholder has available a level of observation for appreciating artworks that is more basic than perceptual experience of materials and physical things.

Challenges: Ironies, Dystopias, and Material Art

Art historians construct valuable stories about Sui Jianguo's artworks. Three outstanding interpretations – by Jeff Kelley, Betti-Sue Hertz, and Wu Hung – make statements that connect Sui's contemporary artworks to Chinese cultural traditions. Kelly and Hertz are explicit in connecting Sui's artworks to Buddhist practices and thoughts. Wu Hung's recent interpretation includes a quotation from Sui who refers to the period of making *Earthly Force* (1990-94) as follows: “gradually and silently my experiences entered stone, while in the same process stone became part of myself.”⁸ Reading this, an alert art observer can easily construct a reference to traditions of Daoist aesthetics and descriptions of awakening (悟) to the thought (念) that the multitude of outside things (萬物) and one's own root nature (自本性) are one and not two (不二). But after raising such intriguing avenues and references to traditional Chinese culture, all three privilege the language of factual events, material processes, and physical stuff in ways that negate, cancel out, or silence Sui's original

subject and project initiated in 2017 — the showing of empty space so that each human individual can realize one’s own naturalness. This challenging problem crystallizes in Hertz’s analysis of *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* where she floats the argument that Sui’s project collapses due to his use of 3-D digital printing. One lesson is this: art histories that rely exclusively on languages for physical objects and material processes do not provide the language needed to affirm what Sui Jianguo himself says his pinches of empty space in clay and resin are about.

Jeff Kelley constructs opposing interpretations for Sui Jianguo’s artworks in the exhibition *Sui Jianguo: The Sleep of Reason*. Kelley describes *Jurassic Age* (2004), a caged T-Rex, enlarged into bronze from a toy dinosaur by digital scanning and printing. He offers a postmodern reading: a popular consumer item, imprinted with “MADE IN CHINA,” is supersized. Kelly claims that the enlarged work refers to dragons of traditional Chinese culture – celestial beings associated with wisdom. So there is some humor in the impossible comparison of wise creatures that refresh earthy life to dinosaurs of consumerism. Are these dinosaurs about to shape-shift into wise dragons? Or is wisdom boxed into consumer culture?⁹ This contrast moves sharply into nightmarish thoughts of dystopias, when Kelly interprets Sui Jianguo’s *Sleeping Mao* (2005). For this art installation, Sui commissioned a sculptor in Yan-an to make a clay figure which was then cast in fiberglass and painted. The figure resembles Mao Zedong and rests beneath a decorative blanket with a blue batik pattern of traditional culture. Below the figure is a bed of 20,000 plastic toy dinosaurs grouped by color, texture and gesture to suggest animate individual creatures moving in a landscape of mountains and waters. The hint of natural beauty suggests harmony with nature. Indeed, Kelly does explicitly compare this scene of dinosaurs to a 19th century painting of the *parinirvana* of the Buddha, where the theme is a gathering of sentient individuals (humans, tigers, deer, and birds) and the cultivation of enlightenment. But Kelly then shifts his storyline: *Sleeping Mao* is to be interpreted instead by comparison to Francisco Goya’s etching “The Sleep of Reason Produces

Monsters,” from the series *Caprichos* (1798). So, at first, Kelly notices a dreamy hint of individual sentient beings moving together to cultivate enlightenment or dragon-like wisdom. But his ultimate suggestion is that Sui’s installation is about hysteria, dystopian destruction, and cataclysm – a natural state of war of all against all – where wisdom fades.¹⁰

Betti-Sue Hertz constructs a similar shift in her interpretation of *Planting Trace* (2017), *Garden in Data Cloud* (2018).¹¹ Hertz makes two points: first, the *Planting Trace* series is about the physical space between Sui’s fingers, and his project is to show this in some way by pinching or mashing a lump of clay in his own hands; and second, she also connects Sui’s originating touch and his exploration to Buddhist practice: “His work evokes an enlightened contemporary Buddhism, a spiritual awakening anchored in the present-ness of the body.”¹² However, she is explicit about remaining unconvinced that works such as *Planting Trace* enable a beholder to learn about Sui’s inner life. In part, this is agreeable: a beholder’s experience of material resin processed by 3-D digital printing is no substitute for Sui’s own touch or his own specific display of empty space. But Hertz goes much further when she claims that Sui’s uses 3-D digital scanning and printing causes his original project of 2017 to buckle and collapse. She writes:

Sui humbly began this journey with a sense of wonder and the hope that one person’s engagement with matter could reveal the power of the individual human body as a maker of things in concert with technology. At the end of Sui’s extraordinary run, he was forced to grapple with the problematic uses of dehumanizing technologies. He astutely came to the conclusion that the original project was buckling under the pressure of these new realities.¹³

This passage implies an argument: Sui’s uses 3-D digital technologies, so his original project buckles. The implicit thought is that any attempt to show human uniqueness is overshadowed when the museum viewer perceives the colossal fingerprints and thinks instead of the power of digital technologies to mechanically reproduce Sui’s identifying features. This argument must be countered in some way if Sui’s original

project of showing empty space is to be affirmed – and my aim here is to affirm it. For me, the problem cannot be swept away by challenging the truth of Hertz’s premise. I do indeed doubt the premise that all uses of technological systems of data collection are always dehumanizing; medical applications suggest that some do sometimes improve human life. But the challenge here is wider and more fundamental than that.

The problem is this. It is true that a human visitor to the TAG museum observes *Garden in Data Cloud/40 Moments* (2021) and perceives it an installation of digitally processed physical effects enlarged from clay material pinched by Sui. That cannot be denied. It is also correct, in Daoist aesthetics, that perceiving an artwork as a digitally printed material effect – a physical, outside thing – cannot be the basis for realizing the wisdom of one’s own nature and genuine embodiment. So how then does that same visitor observe that very same artwork in a different way and instead look by eye at it as a display of empty space and as a showing of an elemental root within one’s own eyes for the realization of one’s own essential nature? Wang Lijun describes the conundrum: “The accuracy and sophistication from mechanical reproduction not only provides unprecedented sensational shock, but also throws in a tinge of loss, as if subjectivity was lost at once.”¹⁴

This problem is compounded when material or “physical stuff” is a fundamental criterion for art historical interpretation and art criticism of contemporary Chinese artworks. As Wu Hung explains, the discipline of Material Art uses material culture as a criterion for connecting contemporary Chinese art to Chinese cultural traditions. He suggests that this is a more original approach than the familiar practice of using literati painting (which relies on Daoist principles for its philosophy of nature) as a criterion for connecting the two. Continuing, Wu Hung notes that the discipline of Material Art is flexible enough to include under the categories of “material culture” and “physical stuff” works by artists who transform and process the materials they have chosen.¹⁵ Thus Sui Jianguo’s artworks of *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* do qualify as cases within the discipline of Material Art, because it is surely the

case that Sui chooses the natural substance clay and then enlarges it by a material processes into artworks that are signs for cultural values. But the art historical discipline of Material Art restricts language for natural substances to physical stuff, so it does not provide the sort of language needed to explain what Sui Jianguo's original project is about and how it succeeds. In effect, art critical language is restricted by disciplinary method to statements about physical events and material systems, just as it is in the case of the interpretation constructed by Hertz.

How can this first obstacle be removed and Sui's project affirmed? Fortunately, the criterion for the success of Sui's project is not whether *Garden in Data Cloud* can substitute for Sui's utterly unique original elements of sense (touch and apparent empty space displayed by eye). It cannot. Nonetheless, the first obstacle can be removed. What must be found is language for a second mode of first-person observation by eye that is able to create a contrast between perceptual experiences of things and looking at empty space (an appearance bypassed by languages for things) that is nonetheless observable and specific to a realization of one's own uniqueness as a human individual. What such a second mode of observation is like can be studied by examining Sui's own remarks. In that way, any beholder can learn to construct the thought of such a second mode of observation.

While this a small sample of scholarly literature on Sui Jianguo's art, it establishes that even outstanding interpretations of Sui Jianguo's artworks have not yet succeeded in finding language for telling a more complete story of how his contemporary artworks are original, innovative, and momentous for global art and philosophy. The first step towards removing the first obstacle is to examine Sui's remarks about his own observations and methods.

2. *Planting Trace: Touches of Empty Space in Mud*

Sui Jianguo's remarks and practice provide a model for the ability of any art observer to switch between two modes of observation for the same artwork. Any individual human beholder – Sui or a museum visitor -- can downplay observation of physical properties (e.g. such as one's own hand as an external object) and play up aesthetic awareness of a boundless, vivid display of empty space. Sui Jianguo develops a method for displaying in clay what he calls "that empty space"; it requires switching from perceptual experience of physical actions to a second way of appreciating his own art practice. The step by step development of his interest in this second mode of observation is clear from the blindfold series – *Blind Portrait* (2008), *Blinder* (2011-13), *Planting Trace* (2014-2018), and *Garden in Data Cloud* (2018-2021).

Sui begins with that empty space which he looks at by eye. How can he as a sculptor show it in clay to anyone else? By 2017, that is his project. Sui innovates: he even experiments at times with a blindfold over his eyes so that he can give cognitive perception and instrumental reason a rest. As he puts it, “As you forget your hand and all intentions of using it to grasp an object, your hand has its own way. That is why I have to cover my eyes.”¹⁶ The blindfold helps to set the fingers of his hand free from being used exclusively by instrumental reason to make definite shapes or forms of recognizable things. The result in clay is a display of empty space that is ordinarily overlooked when artists aim instead to create recognizable portraits, expressive forms, specific objects, or the optical appearance of space as a measurable distance between real objects. Sui’s progress is evident: the lumps in *Blind Portrait* become more indeterminate in *Blinder*; and he succeeds with *Planting Trace* in playing up empty space as a unique appearance so it is finally equal in importance to materials and structure. His addition of the indexical term “that“ (*na ge* 那个) to coin the term “that empty space” (*na ge kong* 那个空) is instructive. The empty space created by his pinching appears to him as specific, visible, and relatively stable. It is *not* an absolute nothingness. While his fingers have their own way by inner touch, his hand is also an appearance within an empty space that is visible for his eyes: hand and empty space go together when he looks at natural life. But looking at the uniqueness of the appearance of empty space is forgotten as soon as intellect intervenes for the purpose of perceiving a particular object of interest: “When we just take advantage of help from the pinched lump of mud, we realize the existence of ‘that empty space’.”¹⁷ The pinch may be described as leaving fingerfulls of *apparent* empty space.¹⁸

Sui Jianguo does explicitly connect what he calls “that empty space” to a realization of one’s own specific embodiment. In looking at empty space, Sui realizes an elemental embodiment that differs from experiencing his own body as external physical parts and functions. In conversation about *Planting Trace – Constellation 1* (fig. 1) and *Garden in Data Cloud* (fig. 2), Sui states that the pinch of his fingers left

in mud or plaster is “‘that empty space of the *Dao* body” (*na ge kong de dao shen* 那个空的道身).¹⁹ The pinch in clay that shows empty space is about an embodiment of his own that is visible right in Sui’s own eyes before concepts and the discrimination of particular things. This is exploration of his own body through touch and his own eyes. But this exploration by touch and looking is not a conventional cognitive monitoring of his physical body and its effects; for it is the habit of perceiving his own embodiment in terms of physical systems and actions that he tries to interrupt by experimenting with a blindfold.



Fig. 1. Sui Jianguo, *Planting Trace – Constellation I*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Finally, Sui connects his own exploration of empty space to a realization that his natural embodiment has roots in his own senses. One implication of the passage quoted below is that he does regard his own senses – such as touch within his own fingers and the display of boundless empty space within his own eyes – as inseparable from his own singular and specific nature:

The specific human individual’s special bodily nature is established on his (or her) flesh body getting along with the first nature of one’s own personal sense organs and the relationship cannot be one of separation. The sense organs (including mind and heart) grounded in the flesh body are concrete bodily human nature – that root of one’s own nature, although naturally the flesh body eventually no matter what passes away. The unique individual’s limited nature is a prerequisite for the limitless

nature of the whole universe and also for the ability of countless individuals in existence to become visible.²⁰ .

This passage suggests two ways to thinking about one's individual body: it is a physical thing perceived by oneself and others; and it is one's own eyes that show a display visible only to oneself. One's own eyes enable countless physical things to become visible for oneself. So, when Sui looks at empty space, he is observing that a singular display restricted to his own eyes is a concrete foundation that gives visible existence to all of the interrelated things that he perceives in the universe. The senses are no longer thought of only in the 20th century way, namely as operative systems for cognition or affect. Instead, they are specific examples of human individuality utterly unique to each human observer that provide an embodied basis for cultivating a global community.



Fig. 2. Sui Jianguo, *Garden in Data Cloud*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

To appreciate the originality of *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud*, it is helpful to make two comparisons with Alberto Giacometti's writings and artworks. First, Giacometti also downplays familiar signs of material things, so that his sculpture is about an appearance of space as an enveloping whole. He attempts to reveal this enveloping space *as human* by including figures as they might appear while moving in a direction and at a distance. Of the male figures in *City Square*

(1948), Giacometti says that each “goes in a direction of which the others know nothing...A woman who stands still, and four men who walk around more or less in relation to her.”²¹ As Angela Schneider points out in analyzing *The Glade* (1950), the individual standing figures appear in different sizes, so that they “are thus perceived by the spectator to be standing at various distances.”²² As a result, by using the idea that I propose here, namely that there are two modes of observation, it can be said that Giacometti’s aim of emphasizing the vitality and wholeness of apparent space, *as one actually observes it*, conflicts with his own favoring of perception as a mode of observation for movement and distance. The more he tries to sculpt the look of space and not forms of material, the more his human figures shrink and crumble. When he reintroduces human figures as they look when perceived at a distance, he is unable to show empty space. By contrast, Sui does all he can so that a viewer is prevented from looking at *Planting Trace–Constellation I* (2018) in terms of particular sizes, distances, or shapes in relation to each other; the empty space left from his pinching opens out without boundary to the sky (fig. 1). This is not art merely about the appearance of physical space as large or small, above or below, long or short. His work is original because it is also about a fundamental apparent empty space only partially explored by August Rodin, Medardo Rosso, and Giacometti. In actual practice, the human observer does not realize an irresolvable contradiction between art and life when looking at *Planting Trace*. On the contrary, this work displays a *sample* of the empty space of one’s own specific life embodiment right in one’s own eyes.

Second, the two artists have different thoughts about the living element of *an individual person*. Giacometti writes that the only living element of a person is the gaze.²³ Given the evidence of *City Square*, his gaze seems to be defined by focusing on objects that are outward and external. This leads him to treat visible space as existing outside himself. Sui’s realization of himself as a living human individual differs: it comes from noticing his own senses, namely, the touch within his fingers

and the empty space noticed within his own eyes. The gaze of perception that turns nature into objects is what Sui temporarily sets aside with the blindfold.

Garden in Data Cloud: Digital Printing and the Beholder's Display

To help others realize a display of empty space in their own respective cases, Sui uses 3-D digital printing to enlarge the squeezings left in clay into public sculpture. The result is a super-sizing of the material support (the structure of clay) into resin. The change in scale also monumentalizes the openness of unbounded space that Sui calls “that empty.” The marvel is that Sui uses material clay and then digital technologies to make art on the subject of a display of space within his own eyes.



Fig. 3. Garden in the Data Cloud/40 Moments (2021).

Each visitor to the TAG museum can easily perceive the installation *Garden in Data Clouds/40Moments* (2021) as a physical effect of material systems of digital processing (fig. 3). This produces the problem raised by Betti-Sue Hertz and Wang Lijin. As they note, a visitor can easily construct a story from the super-sized fingerprints about systems of data collection and worries that human uniqueness is now conferred by material systems. So the challenge raised by Hertz requires a

response if Sui Jianguo's remarks about his method and practice are to be accommodated. How does the same beholder observe this very same artwork in a second way -- as a specific display of empty space that reveals the uniqueness of one's own individuality? Sui's own practice suggests that there is a second mode of observation that reveals a deeper level of embodiment than that described in stories about physical objects and systems. But how does a visitor make the switch?



Fig. 4. *Garden in the Data Cloud/40 Moments* (2021). Detail.

There are numerous cues that encourage a human observer who first perceives *Garden in Data Cloud/40 Moments* as an automatically enlarged artifact to switch over to looking at it as a display about one's own utterly unique embodiment that is not an event or object. The art-oriented location of a museum authorizes the beholder to activate the second mode of observation. In addition, the visitor reads Sui's words, perceives physical traces of his individual touch, and watches one video of the artist looking at a display of his fingers in boundless empty space and then another video in which his own fingers have their way with clay. The scrambling of thoughts - uniqueness, interiority, one's own senses, and looking by eye for oneself - untethers the first mode of observation where space is perceived as a measurable distance. The visitor arrives at a thought: the specific empty space of embodiment that Sui hopes to show does have a visible analogue - it is the empty space that appears like water in the wells of the pinches left in resin right before the *visitor's own eyes*. Looking at the same artwork, and noticing the enveloping empty space that is formless, the visitor

watches the visible space change -- from outside world of things to the empty space that is a root of the visitor's own sense of sight.

The implications of this shift in observation are momentous: there *is* after all empty space belonging to aesthetic appreciation (and readily observable by sense of sight to each living human viewer) that enables one to differentiate a work of art from an external object or physical event. Sui's subject is aesthetic appreciation of one's own sense of sight as a display of one's own embodiment – that is what his art is about. The appearance of empty space becomes primary and perception of the materials of clay and resin secondary. The assembled installation of *Garden in Data Cloud/40* is about using digital information systems to enlarge fingerprints from clay touched by Sui's physical fingers (fig. 4). But this art installation is also about the museum visitor's own embodiment which can never be identified with physical features and data points. Only the empty space unique to the beholder's own eyes can germinate the seeds that Sui provides. Sui's project succeeds if the viewer is open to cultivating one's own interior embodiment.

One lesson from the two series -- *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* -- is this: There is an observable sample of one root of human individuality that is a source for thoughts about the intrinsic worth of an individual human life. Each person is able to have a look. One's own specificity and existence as a living human being do not depend on being known as an object that is seen by another person. Only you can look and check to determine whether this sculpture is crafted in a way that enables you to realize the elemental embodiment shown by the empty space belonging to your own sense of sight.

In this way, Sui Jianguo's artworks combine physical processes of science and

technology with an aesthetic awareness of a uniqueness of embodiment rooted in one's own senses. The next step is to confirm that Sui's language and thoughts are firmly connected to a specific selection of principles already in traditional Chinese aesthetics. My point is that Sui's contemporary art is innovative, because it *is* influenced by Daoist traditions of aesthetics. It is important to establish this clearly so that the new art from China is not globalized into conventional 20th century frameworks of art historical interpretation that fail to accept it on its own terms. The new contemporary art from China is not received in its originality and in its own terms if art historians restrict their interpretations to statements about materials, physical stuff, or the worlds of space-times.

Gate of the Eyes: Empty Space and Things Are One

Daoist thoughts about the individual human being's awakening to the mystery of one's own naturalness have long been absorbed into Buddhist and Confucian traditions of philosophy.²⁴ Sui sometimes refers to terms of Buddhist aesthetics to describe his method of creating artworks that show what he calls "that empty space." So one way to confirm that his project of making contemporary art is connected to Chinese cultural traditions is to compare his remarks with the language used in Chan Buddhist texts such as the classic *Platform Sutra* of Hui Neng. Careful investigation suggests that Sui Jianguo's remarks do overlap in some key respects with Hui Neng's descriptions about each individual person's capacity to realize the wisdom of one's own essential nature. The technique of blindfolding matches the practice of *no-thought* (*wu nian* 無念) described by Hui Neng. Sui's descriptions of looking at empty space correspond closely to Hui Neng's use of an analogy – about sun, moon, clouds, and visible things – to describe the role of the senses in realizing one's own nature. On my interpretation of Hui Neng's text, realizing one's own nature is partly rooted in noticing what is literally visible for oneself.

In Hui Neng's descriptions, the term "no-thought" (*wu nian* 無念) refers to a technique for clearing away obstacles that hinder a capacity to realize one's own nature (*zi xing* 自性) and to engage the heart and clear its root (*ben xing* 本心). The technique is described in this way: "Just cleaning the root heart [*ben xin* 本心], send the six consciousnesses through the six gates [*liu men* 六門], without falling into and mingling [*wu ran wu za* 無染無雜] with the six dusts, coming and going through naturally, opening up use without stagnation."²⁵ The six gates referred to here include the five familiar elemental gates of the bodily senses. The suggestion is clear: by giving a rest to thoughts about sense-objects and perceptions of particular things, one is able to notice an even more basic level of elemental embodiment that is grounded in one's own senses. For example, touch within one's own fingers (without regard to grasping any external thing) and the display of one's own eyes (without the distraction of experiencing particulars): both are gates. The result is calmness but not yet realization of one's own nature and wisdom.

There is a second passage in the *Platform Sutra* that connects realization of one's own essential nature more explicitly to the observation of specific samples of the senses that are uniquely one's own. Hui Neng creates an analogy that begins with a story about sun, moon, clouds, and the ground below: "While sun and moon are constantly bright, floating clouds cover them and both above and below are dark. Suddenly, encountering a breeze [*yu feng* 遇風], the clouds scatter [*yun san* 云散], above and below are entirely bright, and all [*jie* 皆] phenomena of nature on earth [*wan xiang* 萬象] become visible [*xian* 現]."²⁶ Completing the analogy, Hui Neng points out that the technique called "no-thought" disengages thought from the usual job of perceiving particular things, and the result is that the many things (which are always present) become visible (*jie xian* 皆現). Usually, the visible aspect of the display of things is overlooked or forgotten when one concentrates on clear and

distinct conceptualizations during perceptual focus and discrimination. Hui Neng adds: “when the concern is looking at outside conditions [*wan kan jing* 外着境]), rash thoughts [*wang nian* 妄念] temporarily cover [*gai fu* 蓋覆] one’s own nature [*zi xing* 自性], [it is] not able to shine.”²⁷ It is one’s own nature that is said here to be covered over. How so? By forgetting or taking for granted the visible aspect of the many perceptible things that one perceives, one is in danger of forgetting that physical things always appear *in* one’s own eyes, or in one’s own nature and the bundle of senses, heart, and thinking.

So with no-thought, the individual person is able to notice the world of things *as visible*, or as displayed in one’s own bodily sense of the eyes that is inseparable from one’s own essential nature. Because realization of one’s own nature includes noticing each of the five senses, it is correct in a way to say that one’s own nature is able to contain or show all shapes, forms, and sizes of myriad things (stars, mountains, waters, grasses). Even with the technique called “no-thought,” one still realizes that one’s own essential nature is inseparable from immediate life in nature. The wisdom of one’s own nature is not conferred from the sky; wisdom arises by cultivating a relation between thinking and awareness of the bodily senses forgotten during visual perceptions. Realization of one’s own nature is not a metaphysical departure into pure will, reason, intellect, or some remarkable epistemology. Instead, one realizes or awakens to wisdom by viewing one’s own nature: “in each thought view [one’s own] nature [*nian nian jian xing* 念念见性], continually remaining calm (*chang xing ping zhi* 常行平直), arriving in a flash, then seeing [*bian du* 便睹] Amitabha.”²⁸ Hui Neng then asks his listeners: “Shall Hui Neng move the west land to all of you in an instant, then showing it in front of your own eyes [*mu qian bian jian* 目前便见], each respectively willing to have a look?”²⁹ He advises each person to seek wisdom from cultivating one’s own nature and not from outside. With an awareness of one’s own two eyes and their inclusion in one’s own original nature, each person can arrive at

wisdom in an instant. So Sui's remarks about looking at what he calls “那个空” and one's own personal sense organs do overlap with Hui Neng's text about realizing one's own essential nature – this is for scholars to explore.

If the language of aesthetics for observing and realizing one's own nature cannot be translated and understood in terms of material events or space-times, then can it be received and cultivated by human individuals everywhere? Can aesthetic realization of one's own embodiment -- described by Sui Jianguo and outlined in texts from Hui Neng – be the basis for interpreting and globalizing the contributions of new contemporary artworks from China? I affirm here that it can be. Some key features of Daoist thoughts concerning awakening to one's own nature have approximate counterparts sufficient for constructive intercultural dialogue. Consider Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work of 1960-61 and *The Visible and the Invisible*. He writes of an atmospheric element of the visible that differs from the gaze of the perception of objects; and he describes feeling himself as both touched and touching. Such remarks suggest two-modes of observation. The coming-to-be of the visible suggested in Hui Neng's story about sunlight and a break in the clouds resonates in Merleau-Ponty's language: “*Pour la première fois, le voyant que je suis m'est vraiment visible; pour la première fois, je m'apparais retourné jusqu'au fond sous mes propres yeux.*”³⁰

The foregoing results suggest that Daoist and Chan Buddhist accounts of awakening to one's own nature do have some specific features that are also present in what is called “traditional aesthetics” in current Euro-American circles of philosophy. For example, no-thought (*wu nian* 无念) in the tradition of Chinese aesthetics does call for a clarity of thinking that is not disturbed by perceptions of things. But no-thought is not equivalent to the aesthetic attitude of eighteenth century European philosophy, where disinterestedness in the existence of natural objects is treated as the human individual's complete withdrawal from the five senses. On the contrary, no-thought brings the human individual closer to the sensuous roots of one's own natural life. Since this language for aesthetic cultivation of one's own nature and specific senses of

embodiment can be applied to such artworks as *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud*, the proper conclusion is that Sui's art helps each beholder to cultivate wisdom of one's own nature and embodiment.

It also follows that some cases of contemporary Chinese art provide the human observer with compelling counterexamples to 20th century theories of art that reject all aesthetic approaches to art and nature appreciation that are not object-oriented. Many individual works in *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* serve as counterexamples to the claim that aesthetic awareness of natural environments and artworks is equivalent to perceptual experience of things and the construction of ways to understand them. Sui's art since 2017 also provides counterexamples to the doctrine that looking by eye for oneself reveals no way to differentiate artworks from ordinary things and materials.³¹ This is enough to remove the second obstacle, the one posed by analytical philosophy. It follows that traditional Chinese aesthetics does provide language for describing how Sui Jianguo makes valuable art about what it is to be human and how corrections can be made in paths of modernization.

Global Opening: Contemporary Art and Aesthetics of Dao

Sui Jianguo's contemporary art puts to rest the thesis that the path of contemporary Chinese artists to originality and global acceptance is by dropping or downplaying traditional Chinese philosophy. On the contrary, one obstacle to globalizing the new contemporary art from China is adherence in circles of art history and philosophy to object-oriented theories that privilege the language of events, perceptions of real things, or facts about the world. The artworks of *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* offer a deeper solution for the task of creating work that is contemporary and Chinese, because Sui realizes that making art that shows "that empty space" may help individual museum visitors in many different cultures to cultivate an embodiment in nature that offers roots for a thought of what it is to be human in actual life. These contemporary artworks provide beholders around the

world a chance to realize a display of empty space in their own respective cases.

One lesson here is that *Planting Trace* and *Garden in Data Cloud* contribute to a more open and inclusive global culture; for they help forge an authentic relationship with China's ongoing traditions of Daoist aesthetics. Sui Jianguo's approach is contemporary because his innovative methods introduce new materials and because he does not merely repeat old ways of modeling that aim at realism, expressionism, or abstraction. He helps to establish that looking for oneself does provide a way to notice a difference between artworks (and the display of one's own life) and perceptions of ordinary things. This is contemporary art about a contact with actual life that is more basic than analytical theories of art can describe. Recent art histories and philosophies of contemporary Chinese art may not include language about the way in which each person can look in actual practice for oneself at an apparent display utterly unique to one's own eyes. Yet it is *that* space of your own which Sui's art is primarily about. Thus his artworks serve as an antidote to thoughts that there is nothing more for each individual in embodied life than the proliferation of perceptions that encourage social division or else the grasping and consumption of material things.

Traditions of Daoist aesthetics offer two modes of first-person observation: perception of myriad outside, physical things; and looking aesthetically by eye at a specific, inalienable sample of one's own utterly unique embodiment. Both of these are relative to the same display of visible empty space that belongs to one of the five senses and that is included as an essential root of one's own essential nature. Sui Jianguo's achievement is to create works of art that give each viewer a chance to refresh one's own contact with a visible element that is not matter but nonetheless a root for thinking about countless others who have such elemental samples of their own. As a result, with his artworks about "that empty space," Sui helps each person realize a specific embodiment which gives each a realization of both being in a different relation to actual life than others and also being inseparable from the existence of

others.

¹ Sui Jianguo. Text message to author. 2021-05-31.

² Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, eds. T. Smith *et al.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 8-9

³ Chen Wangheng, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, trans. Feng Su, ed. Gerald Cipriani (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 119.

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981), pp. 174-175.

⁵ For Arthur Danto's theory of art and its application contemporary Chinese art, see Mary Wiseman, *A Grand Materialism in the New Art From China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. xv-xvi, 125-149. For the doctrine of the indiscernibility of artworks and ordinary things, see p. 131. See also Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 145, 149, where Danto restates his principle of indiscernibility and his definition of art.

⁶ Mary Wiseman, *A Grand Materialism in the New Art From China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), p. xvi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁸ See Wu Hung, "Material Art from China, An Introduction," in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds. Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: Smart Museum, 2019), p. 194.

⁹ Jeff Kelley, "Sui Jianguo: The Sleep of Reason," *Sui Jianguo: The Sleep of Reason* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2004), p. 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-61, 62-64.

¹¹ [https://www.suijianguo-2.0-sculpture-is-the-art-of-material-and-philosophy-video-planting Place \(at studio, 2013\)](https://www.suijianguo-2.0-sculpture-is-the-art-of-material-and-philosophy-video-planting-place-at-studio-2013)

¹² Betti-Sue Hertz, "Sui Jianguo's Blind Series: The Original Model, the Final Original, the Copy, the Imprint, and the Multiple." <http://www.suijianguo-2.0-reviews>. Accessed 2021-06-08.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wang Lijun, "Sui Jianguo: 'Physical Trace' – I am Going Home!", trans. Fiona He 2017. <http://www.suijianguo-2.0-reviews>. Accessed 2021-06-08.

¹⁵ Wu Hung, "Material Art from China, An Introduction," pp. 37-38.

¹⁶ Sui Jianguo. Text message to author. 2021-05-31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: "我们只是借助那块被捏的泥,才意识到'那个空'的存在。" Translations of text messages by the author.

¹⁸ By the English term "apparent space," I mean the appearance of space that is private to the eyes of the individual human observer—not the space of science, which is called "physical." For this difference, see Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 29.

¹⁹ Sui Jianguo. Text message to author. 2021-05-31: "按照佛教的说法,手捏泥团或石膏——是'那个空'的道身..."

²⁰ *Ibid.*: "一个具体的人类个体的特殊性,建立在他(她)的肉身与自己感官的先天不可分离的关系上。感官(包括头脑、心)基于肉身,是具体人性——自性之根,虽然肉身最终还是会归于消逝。独一无二的个体的有限性是整个宇宙无限性的条件,也是无数个体存在的一个具体体现。"

²¹ Quoted in Angela Schneider, "As if from Afar: Constants in the Work of Alberto Giacometti," in *Giacometti*, ed. Angela Schneider (Munich: Prestel, 2008), pp. 74.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁴ Chen Wangheng, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, p. 18.

²⁵ Hui Neng, *Platform Sutra*, editor and annotator [译注] Shang Rong [尚荣] (Beijing: Zhong Hua Publishing House, 2021), p. 17: "但净 本心,使六识出六门,于六尘中无染无杂,来去自由,通用无滞。" English translations by the author.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 109: “日日常明，为浮云盖覆，上明下暗。忽遇风吹云散，上下俱明，万象皆现。”

²⁷ Ibid., p. 109: “于外着境，被妄念浮云盖覆自性，不得明朗”] p#?

²⁸ Ibid., p. 109: 念念见性，常行平直，到如弹指，便睹弥陀。”

²⁹ Ibid., p.74: 慧能与诸人移西方于刹那间，目前便见，各愿见否？”

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 186. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.143: “For the first time the seeing that I am is for me visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes.”

³¹ For a valuable contribution to debate on Danto’s principle of indiscernibility and its suitability for interpreting Zen aesthetics and works of art, see Peng Feng (2021), “Arthur Danto as a Zen Master: an interpretation of Danto’s philosophy of art from a Zen perspective,” *Asian Philosophy*, 31:1, 33-47, DOI: 10.1080/09552367.2021.1869373. Accepting Danto’s indiscernibility method, Peng Feng claims that the stage of realization – expressed in Qing Yuan’s line “见山不是山、见水不是水” (see mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters) should be read metaphorically as “interpret” and not literally as “see” or “view.” However, I do not accept Danto’s indiscernibility method for use and conclude instead that Qin Yuan’s use of 见(*jian*) should be read more literally as “looking” (and not metaphorically), just as Hui Neng’s remark about one’s own nature “shown in front of your eyes” (目前便见) should be read literally.