

## Sui Jianguo's Way of Moulding the Blank: The Void as a Gift

By Xia Kejun

隋建国的塑白之道：空白作为礼物

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(trans.by Dr. A. Dimitra)

The hand is not on the hand. The hand of the hand opens and closes when the palm “grasps the blank space(void).” The thing is not an object, but a mass of clay that remains unnamed. Back to the moment when Nüwa created humans, with her kneading, the clay mass came onto the palm between its opening and closing. It is this action that opens up existence, opens up one world after the other, and is the very beginning of life.

Sui Jianguo's “sculpture” involves neither carving nor moulding, but rather the act of grasping the blank space and moulding the blank space. It is a return to the moment when creation first happened on the palm of a human hand—a return to that first spasm of life, to the primitive impulse of the palm to grasp a world. The opening and closing of the palm is not intended to mould a specific object, but to make a nameless clump of clay that, in a single moment of contact, allows the emergence of a world bearing the biological imprint of an individual palm, and allows an infinitely expanding field to be opened. This is why Sui Jianguo scanned the hand-held objects, stored them in the cloud with virtual data technology, and printed them out in 3D.

The art of Sui Jianguo is “The Way of Moulding the Blank Space.” From catching the blank space to Enlarging-Blank space, to Exposing-Blank Space, through the unfoldings for three times, the artist responds to the traditional Chinese way of the blank space, and using contemporary virtual technology, his work becomes the “Art in general” with a contemporary display field. We might even call Sui Jianguo's sculpture *Art of Plastic Blank*. It is the art of moulding the blank space, and it relates both to the plasticity of sculpture and to Eastern philosophy or wisdom of sculpture.

This is the wisdom of the blank and the art of giving nothingness. Sui Jianguo likes to tell stories about the blank. It is said that a famous foreign collector had a masterpiece by Bada Shanren 八大山人 (d. 1705), but when he wanted to hang it on a wall in his house, he found that it was too large and had a framer cut out a large portion of the empty white space on the picture. When a Chinese artist visited him and saw the work in its smaller size, he said that when Bada Shanren painted the fish or the bird below that blank space, he had already taken into account the blank—this seemingly superfluous blank space had determined the size and shape of the fish. Once the so-called “left over blank” was cut out, the work was no longer the same. This work, if worth \$10 million, would now be reduced by \$2 million.

Sui Jianguo had an epiphany from this story. By retrieving that blank and framing it if possible, it becomes a separate work—the void becomes a gift. But can the void be offered as a gift? This is the philosophy of blankness(voidness), this is the beginning of art in general, this is the principle of revitalising the blank space in Chinese art, allowing the seemingly useless and superfluous blankness to shape things, to shape space, and even merely allowing blankness to produce and expand itself.

This wisdom of enlarging blankness is the manifestation of the innate nature of life. Again, such art is not the making of an object or a sculpture. The moment when the palm opens and closes, a blank(void) world emerges, the reality of the sacredness of life, the enlargement of blankness, and the opening of blankness itself. This is no longer the art of sculpting, but Art in general (just as the idea of Thierry de

duve).

All modern art is not a traditionally classified special art, but Art in general. An artwork directly conveys Art itself, a conceptual requirement brought to art since Duchamp. Pollock's dripping technique introduced the generality of painting, which then triggered Fontana's general technique of scratching the canvas and Simon Hantai's folding of the canvas. The generality of art is undoubtedly a testimony to the intrinsicness of "everyone is an artist." A random action, which seems to be available to everyone, is subject to an instantaneous epiphany and lasting presentation by an artist, not just once, but to make this seemingly meaningless action, after the first discovery, a general artistic event.

This is the philosophical imperative—art itself is an outpouring that conveys a world, not a certain skill or style, a certain language or spirit of the times, but the very essence of the world that is generated along with humanity. Sui Jianguo's hand-moulding brings forth that "something" which is both an unnameable work (you can give it the shape you want) and general art (it is an open field created by individual life).

There are multiple generalities. First, in the moment when the palm opens and closes to create—this is the generality of the DNA imprint of the human palm. This imprint is not just the texture of the individual, but the biological generality of the age-old transmission of human nature. It is the innate nature of life, the "innate generality of life" that has always existed but is also shown for the first time. The individual's innate imprint of existence is witnessed. Secondly, this is also a manifestation of the blank itself, an opening of the world, a response to the world's call, so that things are given the breath and tension of the blank(void) in its opening and closing. This nameless thing is manifested together with the blank space field, and remains the manifestation of this blank space. This is the "generalization of the blank space." Thirdly, there is the "generalization of virtual technology." The objects are stored in the virtual cloud as a digital existence and can be printed out multiple times. What is exhibited is only the fragility of this material and its dialogue with space, far removed from the eternal demand of ancient sculpture to transcend time.

Why does Sui Jianguo seize this opportunity to make his hand-moulding movements a testament to art in general? There is a very complicated background and a long exploratory processes behind his art, which reflects the authenticity of the artist's self-reflection and questioning. Here, we can only put up ten "fingers" and simply count them .

- (1) Sui Jianguo's *Mao Suits*, those emptied human bodies opened up the possibilities of void.
- (2) Seeing the traces of Rodin's handprints on his late works, we realize that an artist's handprints may be the final testimony of his whole life's art.
- (3) In 2005, Sui saw an interesting American artist in New York who enlarged his palm to create an object. When Sui returned to China, he started moulding clay himself, but was still unsure about this process.
- (4) In 2008, he started to mould clay with his eyes closed. His hands started to open, but the object was still there and would resemble a portrait; there was still a process of objectification.
- (5) Before his *Blind Portraits*, at the age of fifty, facing the anxiety of time and death, he created the series *Shape of Time* which fully affirmed the episodic nature of the material itself. The subsequent series, *Gravity Field*, where the bubble-like material is allowed to flow and fall by itself, also embodies general art.
- (6) Sui then returned to the hand itself, to blind moulding, a one-time movement. This was the Chinese

art of free-hand brushwork, a one-time direct expression of feeling, infinite in a single grip, echoing the original life force which allows the world to emerge.

(7) His work was then no longer in dialogue with Rodin. It was a contemplation on Giacometti's artistic expression, which is a complete return to the “physical body,” compressing all conscious activities completely to the moment of breathing. It was in this way too that Giacometti remained faithful to the authenticity of his vision, albeit a morbid one, that is, the appearance of things seen on the retina and the emptiness in the appearance of things. This is not how art history describes art, and it is not just the moulding of an object. It is seeing the object as an endless manifestation in the field, an inexhaustible manifestation of the object together with the field, and therefore in a process of endless remoulding.

(8) Sui's moulding is the manifestation of the sacredness of the living flesh, the incarnation of the flesh, and the birth of a life, which itself only gains the confirmation of the self. His art is distinguished from blind carvings made by other artists, in that they are in the field of special art, and not in that of general art.

(9) The pandemic of 2020, the mass loss of life, has made the artist more thoroughly aware of the innate nature of life and the sanctity of existence, of the fact that Life is fragile, but needs to witness its own infinite sanctity and continuity in a one-time, brief, individual life. In Sui's work, this life manifests as the amplification of biological genes in the void, and the storage in virtual space that allows multiple replications. In this art, biological and technological replication overlap.

(10) Finally, there is the affirmation of the generality of art. The hand-moulded thing is only a “substitute” or a “superfluous thing.” As with Giacometti's sculptural objects, there is constant moulding or depicting of an object, not for that object, but to present the infinite and complex relationship between the object and space. This object is just a substitute. Therefore, art is no longer merely the production of a work, but the production of art itself, of general art. This art bears witness to the divine innate nature of human life, and is a more explicit, artistic confirmation of the “incarnation of the Word.”

This is the time when Chinese art and Chinese culture need to draw on and contribute their own original principles. Sui Jianguo's “art of plastic blank” gives contemporary art more “space” (an almost invisible playground, a *Spiel-Raum*). The instinctual traces of individual biological prints; the magnification of virtual space; the printing of 3D photosensitive materials; The reorganisation and placement of forms in the display of space; the multi-dimensional combination of physical life and the virtual world; the virtual and real display space; the openness of the “garden in the data clouds”; all inspire us to reflect on the logic of moulding and quantitative thinking of Chinese people. In Sui Jianguo's art we witness the sacred existence of an individual, physical life with individual marks and an open field. At the same time, Sui's works open up an unlimited field, a poetic imaginary utopia. In this way, his art is an expression of the spirit of modernity in contemporary Chinese culture and its unique and indigenous principles of artistic creation.

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