

On Sui Jianguo's *Planting Trace* Series

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Sui Jianguo's artistic creations can be roughly divided into three main periods. In the first period, from 1989 to 1997, represented by early works such as *Earthly Force* (1994), the artist engaged in avant-garde artistic exploration. The second period began in 1997 and ended in 2008. In this period, Sui Jianguo established the trademark artistic language of Chinese contemporary sculpture. Works from this period, such as the *Legacy Mantle* (1997), *Clothes Vein Study* (2000), and *Made in China* (1999) series, became landmark works in Chinese contemporary art history, entered into the public sphere, and became internationally influential. With the 2008 work *Blind Portrait*, Sui Jianguo's artistic creations entered into a new period, and created a conundrum for art criticism. How to understand and define Sui Jianguo's recent works? Furthermore, how to establish points of reference between his early and more recent works, and thus sort through his creative system and its significance?

In 2019, the Beijing Minsheng Art Museum held the large-scale solo exhibition "Echo of System: Sui Jianguo 1997–2019," presenting more than 200 artworks spanning 22 years and multiple mediums including sculpture, installation, and video. This exhibition also presented exploratory works from the *Planting Trace* and *the face of 3D* series, which utilize high-definition 3D scanning and 3D printing. When directed at these works, the past methods of interpreting Sui Jianguo's art and Chinese contemporary sculpture become useless, whether it is social analysis or genealogy, because these works do not provide any images to serve as clues.

The first impression given by these works is of depersonalization, of non-expression; the cool gray technological tone adds to this sense. Drawing from a basic understanding and experience of sculpture as an art form, the viewer can see that these sculptures have no clear sculpting technique. In other words, this is not the product of sculpture. In fact, the shapes of these sculptures challenge the traditional definitions of sculpture. They have sharp edges, hollow volumes, non-geometric forms, surfaces crisscrossed with textures, and in some works, progressions of similar units. Simply put, these sculptures do not appear to belong to any known class of sculptural form, which makes the interpretation of these sculptures a pressing, essential matter.

According to the description in that exhibition, the *Planting Trace* series of works comes from the artist's act of squeezing clay. The artist uses 3D scanning technology to transform the results of this action, giving him "lumps of clay" that are magnified dozens of times, which he then produces in resin using a 3D printer. This process not only reproduces the volume of the clay, it also precisely recreates the contours of the artist's handprints and the traces of his movements on the surface, to powerful visual effect. The sharp edges and recessed volumes of these

“clumps of clay” are the void left by the retreat of the artist’s hands. This void is of great significance. From the phenomenological perspective, “Perceptual existence involves an interplay of presence and absence. When we perceive an object, we always perceive more than what is intuitively presented.” This led art critic Rosalind Krauss, heavily influenced by phenomenology, to hold that the formal analysis of the work of art should “involve relating internal structure to surface, decoding the shapes made visible by edges and planes, or responding to the composition of mass and void.”¹ We could say that the key to fully understanding these sculptures rests not just in the volumes and traces they present, but more importantly, in the composition of their absences, in the methods and motivations behind the creation of these volumes, traces and absences. Interpretation of the significance of these sculptures must therefore begin with the creative methods behind them.



Planting Trace #3 (left), 3D printed photosensitive resin and steel scaffold, 6 meters tall, 2019

1. The Primal State

¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 1981, The MIT Press.

The beginnings of the *Planting Trace* series can be traced back to the *Blind Portrait* series Sui Jianguo began in 2008. In *Blind Portrait*, Sui would close his eyes while shaping clay. The artist says that this act began as a rebellion against art that puts reason and concepts above all else, and was an attempt to block out existing artistic knowledge and experience. But from the beginning, he was employing a simple conceptualist technique—the use of “blind squeezing” to create a lump of clay with no meaning, which he would then magnify using classical sculpture magnification techniques, in hopes of reaching an absurd outcome. There are two elements to this creative method, the first being the closing of the eyes. The closing of the eyes implies the yielding of vision to touch. Vision, represented by the eyes, is generally assigned more perceptual function than touch. Plato's core idea, “*eidos*,” is rooted in the verb “to see” (*ide*).² The closing of the eyes becomes a means of blocking the “eyes of the soul.” The second element is “squeezing clay.” His choice of clay as material was inspired by the late work of Auguste Rodin. Sui Jianguo believes that in Rodin's late works, clay itself became an end. Rodin's goal was not the human figure, but the shaping of clay itself. Squeezing clay is a very pure method for the sculptor, a return to the ontology of sculpture and its fundamental relationship with clay as material, and so “squeezing clay with closed eyes” marks the beginning of a new exploration for Sui Jianguo. In the process of squeezing the clay, Sui experiences a dialogue with Rodin. We can see Rodin's artistic influence in the forms of the *Blind Portrait* series. For example, the traces of the squeezing or pressing hands retained by the surface sculpture can be seen as a continuation of the block modeling method, rather than just the pure, subconscious movement of the hands. Furthermore, these sculptures have a form similar to a statue on a pedestal, which is the reason the series was later named *Blind Portrait*—these works have certainly carried on and paid tribute, in a new form, to the monumentality at the core of figure sculpture, rather than just being “meaningless lumps of clay.” These sculptures express the serendipity and absurdity of existence in the existentialist philosophical sense.

² Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1997, Hackett Publishing Co.



Blind Portrait, clay, 5 meters tall, 2008

The results seen in *Blind Portrait* perhaps come from the artist's habitual ability to control form. Though the artist's eyes have been blindfolded, years of training in sculpture are at work in the form of muscle memory, with the hands taking over the role of the "mind's eye." In this way, as he squeezes the clay, he is able to purely perceive the field of the body and motion, allowing him to further extricate himself from form and technique, and focus on the action and reaction between hands and clay. "Squeezing clay" would become his working method and goal over the decade to follow. He gradually realized that the presence of the body and its actions are fundamental traits of sculpture. In the artist's words, "Since I began making the *Blind Portrait* series in 2008, I have placed the actions of the body at the core of my works. As my practical experience in this regard has grown, I have come to more deeply understand that in the artist's day-to-day work, the body and its repetitive actions are just as important as the completed artworks. The artistic medium is the field of the artist's action and movements, and the completed work is the proof of the presence of the artist's body and actions."³

³ Interview with the artist on January 1st 2022.

Around 2010, the artist engaged in various explorations in this field of body and action. These explorations appeared in concentrated form in the video work *Physical Trace*. With sweeping movements, he applies the actions of his body and limbs to a roughly 60-centimeter lump of clay: punching and kicking it, dropping it from heights, throwing it against the walls and the floor, striking it with hard objects. We can see that the interactions between his body, his actions, and the lump of clay are fierce, even violent. The reaction of the lump of clay, and its outcome, form into the central field that is signified by all of the bodily actions. In this period, Sui Jianguo's artistic explorations bear certain similarities to Action Painting. Action Painting emerged in America in the 1940s. The term was coined by Harold Rosenberg.⁴ Its representative artist Jackson Pollock freed painting from the limitations of the hand, wrist and elbow, creating his works by moving around all sides of the canvas, and by dripping paint onto the picture. The canvas became a record of his body's unconscious actions. Japanese Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga placed the body directly on the canvas, discarding the brush to paint freely with his hands and feet. Action Painting and Gutai were random and extemporaneous as they used the interactions of the body and materials to break through existing limits of convention and reasoning, which fits with Sui Jianguo's original intent, which was to liberate the art of sculpture from the conceptual shackles of form, technique and concept.

Sui did not stop there, however. For him, the presence of the body and action revealed by Action Painting has not escaped the realm of Expressionism. This physical action still emphasizes the artist as subject. It is a means of emotional expression. The immediate presence of body and action he was seeking does not emphasize the active expression of the artist, but a kind of "natural" state, a pure "presence," rather than its action or function. Simply put, "natural" means naturally occurring without interference from artificial outside forces, akin to the concept of "self-nature" in Zen Buddhism. We could call it "natural self." The *Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra* writes, "Self-nature is originally complete in itself."⁵ In order to achieve this state, after *Blind Portrait*, Sui Jianguo adjusted his creative direction. He changed his approach to clay, treating it as an end instead of a means. In turn, his hand was restored from tool to instinct. Specifically, the artist devised a series of measures to reduce the subject's conscious control over the material, measures including reducing the mass of the clay to a palm-sized lump, and simplifying the act of "squeezing" into a one-handed or two-handed squeeze and then immediately letting go of the clay, and mechanically repeating these actions. By the time of the "Trace" exhibition at Pace Beijing, he had accumulated a total of 1,435 drafts of this "squeezed clay." He soon realized that in these sculptural creations, the lump of clay as the field of the body and action is not subject to limitations of dimensions. Even when reduced to the smallest size, the meaning is still there. Second, he sensed that "the smaller the lump of clay, the greater the sense of freedom." When the lump of clay becomes small enough to clasp in the hand, the clay seems as if it has become a part of the body. When describing this perceptual

⁴ Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition Of The New, The Tradition Of The New*, 1994, Da Capo Press.

⁵ Joseph Adler, Oxford, *The Yijing: A Guide*, 2022, University Press.

experience, Sui likened the hand wrapped around the clay to an intestine wrapped around food, with the movements of the hands like the contractions of the intestine: "Its nerves control its movements, a completely automatic process." The vision of the eyes, and the neural control awareness it represents, lose their function in this process, because the lump of clay has been completely enveloped by the hands, and is no longer seen. Conscious shaping is transformed into touching and squeezing, drawing closer to instinct: modern child behavior research has shown that humans have the ability to squeeze even in infancy. This almost instinctual activity turns the relationship between artist and material, and the physical world that material represents, on its head. Just as the artist is ridding himself of any goal orientation, the artistic material is being stripped of its status as a tool. The artist is no longer the absolute subject, and the lump of clay takes shape under the force of the hand against the clay and the clay's counterforce against the hand. The resulting artworks can no longer be placed in the realm of abstract sculpture in the general sense, as their creative mechanism is entirely different. One could say that though his explorations in the "closed-eye squeezing of clay," Sui has effected a transformation of his definition and mode of artistic creation.

How to describe and understand this new artistic creative act or mechanism? The author believes that once Sui Jianguo closed his "mind's eye," and focused his consciousness on the interaction between his body and matter, he entered a hybrid state of physicality and preconsciousness. This state is like the artist's "double." The "double" is different in many ways from the artist's subject. Specifically, the artist's subject is an educated, highly rational person, but his double is the opposite, having employed certain methods and steps, using mechanistic repetition and training to remove these advantages. That is to say, it is no easy task to arrive at this double. One must first have a set of training techniques and steps. With the case described above, the artist arrived here by feeling his way through this "closed-eye squeezing." Second, when the double is trained into being, it seems to no longer be subject to the control of the conscious mind, but instead has its own mode of behavior, something more akin to muscle memory or instinct, its actions aimless, meaningless, its outcome and meaning arising from the concept and design of the overall act of artistic creation. This use of the term double to describe Sui's creative behavior or mechanism is in order to distinguish it from what art history usually refers to as subconscious, such as Surrealism, Happenings, or Automatism, which all use the subconscious as their creative foundation. The distinction is obvious. These schools of art rely on a dream state or spontaneity, while Sui's double is lucid, and repeatable. It does not rely on inspiration or any other mysterious elements, but is instead disenchanting. In his typical exacting way, he devised a rigorous training mechanism that he carried out over a long period of time (daily for ten years) before arriving at this "double" state. The temporal overlay that takes place over the extremely long duration of this repetitive action gives rise to a unique experience, where the artist in the act of creation "encounters" himself from points in the past. In this sense, the artist in the present moment is only one of Sui's selves, incomplete, only becoming a complete self in the act of creation, when he can merge back together with the various "doubles" across the flow of time. This complete self is the "primal self." In Sui's words, "It was only after ten years of repetitive squeezing that I realized there was a 'primal self' at work." In other words, this "doubling" has opened up a primal space and time. The primal state that the "double"

enters is entirely different from the everyday state. One could say that the “double” is a form of primal body. As Sui Jianguo says, “The primal state is the state of ‘squeezing clay.’ When the squeezing is done, I return to worldly time. When we use our hands to do things, it is the worldly body acting in worldly time, but when we are not using our hands, or when we don't pay attention to where they are, the hands automatically enter into their primal state. When I closed my eyes and squeezed the clay in 2008, it led to primal hands, which operate in a primal state, in primal time.” The worldly body is the instrumentalized body. For example, the worldly hands in the everyday are tools for performing specific tasks, but the primal body is deinstrumentalized. Since sculptural creation is generally an act of goal-oriented shaping by instrumentalized hands, it belongs to action of a worldly body (hand) in worldly time. This act of “closed-eye squeezing,” and the set of creative actions or mechanisms that arises from it, turns the secular hands doing the sculpting into primal hands, and the artist goes from a worldly state to a primal state.



Physical Trace, video still, 2013

Looking back over this text, this series of creations stretching back to 2008 began as an act of rebellion or transformation, and it resulted not only in liberation from the sculptural dogmas and concepts of art history, but also in liberation from the artist's existing works, and from the social reality flooded with readymades. Squeezing with closed eyes is a shift, a departure. In this way, the artist arrives at an origin point: supposing he is the first person in the world, and the first sculptor in humanity, what would he do? This is the meaning of primal state. In the primal state, one could say that each creation in the *Planting Trace* series is a record of the first time a human hand squeezes a lump of clay, and symbolizes the first connection between the body and the physical world. *Planting Trace* is a product of a primal hand operating in primal time, not just

in terms of the artist as an individual, but in terms of human history. In this sense, therefore, the primal hand is not simply the artist's hand; it is a virtual hand the artist has sought out, an abstract genesis hand representing the true nature of life carrying out the act of squeezing.

2. The Emptiness of the Hand

If the shaping (squeezing) of *Planting Trace* is done instinctively by a primal hand in a primal state, then what is the lump of clay being grasped? The author believes that these lumps of clay give form to the emptiness of the primal hand. They are the embodiment of space, the "emptiness of the hand." Yin Jinan proposed this concept in the essay "Xie Kong," in which he wrote, "Am I saying that modeling a clay solid, the manipulating movements of one's hands are equivalent to the work of other sculptors? Or am I thinking instead that the two entities of hand and clay coming together in the soft clay describe the empty space inside of the clasped hands, represent the void within, and use a solid to *xie kong*—to describe the emptiness?" This is what sets it apart from the work of other sculptors. First, only the primal hand has this "emptiness of the hand." That is because the worldly hand is always carrying out various specific functions, and clutching various objects that fill the emptiness in the hand, and keep the worldly hand from falling idle, so we never notice the presence of emptiness in the hand. Second, "The nature of human vision is such that it can only see specific, materialized things. It is blind to non-materialized space, unable to perceive it." As Sui Jianguo has said, "People cannot see space itself. They need a material form that can manifest or embody space. In this way, this lump of clay or this piece of plaster is an incarnation of space." Simply put, space is hard to perceive without materialized form. By filling the space inside artist's hands, that space is given figurative expression. The shape of the lump of clay is the shape of the hand's emptiness.

Sui Jianguo's way of embodying the "emptiness of the hand" is filled with a sculptor's wisdom, using the thinking of positive and negative molds to effect a transition from emptiness to substance. In sculpture, especially in bronze sculpture, molds are the tools used to copy and cast the artist's clay model. In Western sculpture history, the mold is generally a negative imprint, while the wax or the bronze cast from it is the positive image. Chinese philosophical thinking on Yin and Yang goes back to ancient times, and ancient Chinese bronze was cast with both positive and negative molds⁶. In the *Planting Trace* series, if we understand the hand as the positive mold (the convex, positive shape), then the clay is the negative mold (the concave, negative shape). If we view the lump of clay as the positive mold, then the hands are the negative mold. Each is both cause and effect of the other as they complete the "transition" or "transfer" from emptiness to substance: in the process of squeezing, the hand is substance, while the lump of clay signifies the emptiness (the space) of the hand. After squeezing, the resulting lump of clay becomes a solid sculpture, while the hand retreats and disappears, becoming the emptiness (the void) referred to at the beginning of this essay. In this series of relationships, emptiness and substance form an interdependent whole, like a "figure and background" relationship formed by

⁶ Wu Laiming, *Precious Treasure-Ancient Bronze Casting Technique*, 2008, Cultural Relics Press.

a positive and negative shape. According to the rules of organization as described by gestalt psychology, a person's perceptual field is divided into figure and background. The “figure” is a gestalt, an object that stands out, the thing that we perceive. The background, on the other hand, is an undifferentiated thing that offsets the figure. This structure can change within the field of perception. When people's attention falls on different objects in the environment, the objects successively become figures, then background, producing the phenomenon of interchange between figure and background. Emptiness and substance cannot be taken separately. They are always mutually dependent, mutually transferring, and in this dependence and transference, they complement each other to form complete meaning and interpretation.

Sui Jianguo's use of this “emptiness–substance transference” to depict the emptiness of the hand in sculpture is unique in art history. Western sculpture was quite late in discovering emptiness. In the traditional Western conception, a sculpture is a three-dimensional solid surrounded by space. In British sculptor Henry Moore's classic works from the early 20th century, openings and apertures turned space into a part of sculpture, smashing this old definition.⁷ The emptiness discussed here is closer to the concept of “negative space” in contemporary sculpture history. In the 1960s, negative space appeared in many works by Minimalist sculptors such as Richard Serra, but this was not the main focus of their art. Bruce Nauman discovered the negative space beneath a chair.⁸ He cast this space into a cement block resembling a toy castle, but he was not interested in this transformation from emptiness to substance. It was Rachel Whiteread who truly employed and developed the concept of negative space by “pouring” casts of the spaces around or within objects to present them to the viewer, bestowing negative space with solidified material form. In her works, she pours casts of the inner structures of domestic spaces from closets, fireplaces, and bathtubs to entire rooms. These objects are tightly linked to individual living experience. Mono-ha, a school of art that arose in Japan in the late 1960s, brought Eastern philosophical concepts to the expression of space. Nobuo Sekine's *Phase—Mother Earth* presents the positive and negative as one. He dug a deep, cylindrical hole in the ground, and then compressed the removed soil into a giant cylinder towering over the ground, mirroring the deep pit next to it, positive to negative.

Sui Jianguo's “emptiness of the hand” is different from the expressive methods of all of the artists described above. First, this space is corporeal. It comes from the artist's hand, in symbiosis and coexistence with the artist's body. Second, this space is moving, not static. In the process of capturing space, the process of squeezing the clay, his hand is in motion, and leaves traces of movement in the clay. Third, this space has a temporal aspect, constantly changing and emerging over time, rather than being readymade. This makes it similar in some ways to Whiteread's negative space in terms of the expression of individual experience, but there are also differences. Whiteread's negative space is readymade space that is relatively static. While sharing Eastern philosophical roots with Mono-ha, Sui Jianguo has his differences with them as

⁷ Claude Allemand-Cosneau ed., Henry Moore: From the Inside Out, 2019, Prestel Publisher.

⁸ Bruce Nauman, Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews, 2005, MIT Press.

well. Sui's interest in the emptiness of the hand is influenced by Alberto Giacometti. Giacometti once said that sculpture is based on emptiness, and Sui Jianguo feels that this is similar to his experience of grasping emptiness. It is a philosophical experience.⁹ In this sense, the "emptiness" in the emptiness of the hand is not just space, but also the void. Its focus is on a form of life experience. In Giacometti's sculpture *Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void)* (1934), Giacometti depicted a female figure sitting in a chair, her hands not quite coming together in front of her chest, but instead seeming to clutch a void, resembling the primal state in the above discussion about the "primal hand." This sculpture's pose of "hands holding the void" may have inspired Sui Jianguo. As he says, "At the time, I was obsessed with the magnified contours of the handprints left on the clay. Then, in 2019, after a series of exhibitions, I collected my thoughts, and felt that there had to be something else there. The clay that I grasped was actually a piece of emptiness in my hands, and that is when I understood how Giacometti came about this." Thus, Sui did not invent the "emptiness of the hand," but instead rediscovered it and brought it back into the world through sculptures. The "emptiness of the hand" resides in everyone's hands, but it is concealed by the everyday state of existence, and the limits of our ability to perceive non-material space. People are more focused on solid matter, while the "emptiness of the hand" is forgotten and overlooked. Relative to the instrumentalized/functionalized everyday state, for Sui, the "emptiness of the hand" implies a non-instrumentalized primal state, a state that can only be reached when the hand is clutching "emptiness," rather than a tool. Through the *Planting Trace* series, Sui Jianguo has not only catalyzed people's perception of the "emptiness of the hand," he has transformed it into a substantive presence, and magnified it to an unignorable size. What could not be seen before can now be seen. If given the chance, Sui Jianguo could conceivably place a lump of clay into the hands of Giacometti's *Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void)*, extract the space enclosed within, and magnify it into a sculpture, then this sculpture will realize the transition of Giacometti's emptiness into substance, the two works forming a loop of Yin and Yang, each work interpreting the other.

⁹ Alberto Giacometti, *Alberto Giacometti: Works, Writings, Interviews*, 2007, Ediciones Polígrafa Press.



Alberto Giacometti, *Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void)*, plaster, 1934



Physical Trace, video still, 2013

This raises a question: is the “emptiness of the hand” a space internal to the body, or external to it? Sui Jianguo's answer to this is that when he is closing his eyes and squeezing clay, the emptiness of his hand is within the body, because the hand has enveloped the clay, but when the hand is opened, this space is released and exposed to the outside. The author holds that phenomenology provides a very good answer to this question. Divisions between inside and outside are just what phenomenology aims to smash. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty said, “The world is entirely on the inside, and I am entirely outside of myself.” The emptiness of the hand is precisely this kind of awareness. This space in the palm of the hand connects inside and outside, and implies that human existence is no longer isolated, but is now open to the void around it. The experience of creating these sculptures lies on a boundary. The importance of the emptiness of the hand rests not only in “emptiness,” but in the generation of meaning through the process of transition between emptiness and substance, this interchange between in and out. Emptiness needs substance for interpretation, and substance needs emptiness to open and to gain new knowledge.

3. Public Space

In the progression from lump of clay to artwork, there is one more important step, which is to determine the way in which that lump of clay will be presented, which provides the key conditions for perceiving the “primal state” and “emptiness of the hand” discussed above. In the *Planting Trace* series, Sui Jianguo uses precision 3D scanning technology to turn the lump of clay into a digital spatial existence, and then selects a method and material in which to realize the completed work. The *Planting Trace* artworks currently on view are greatly magnified 3D prints using photosensitive resin. Sui Jianguo also uses other technologies and materials, including combinations of 3D technology and NFTs, and his recent use of a robotic arm to carve directly into stone. All of these technologies touch on three key elements: virtualization, magnification, and spatial transformation. Together, they determine the way the viewer experiences these sculptures. Below, Sui Jianguo's 3D printed artworks will stand as an example of how the artist manipulates the viewer's perception of space, allowing them not only to experience the “emptiness of the hand,” but to progress from the “emptiness of the hand” to an experience of the “primal state.” As Yin Jinan has said, “‘*Xie Kong*’—materializing invisible spatial states using clay, and then using 3D printing technologies to create a final form using materials that replace the clay, achieves the ultimate simulation of a state of artistic emptiness.”

Entering the exhibition space for the *Planting Trace* series, and facing these giant sculptures towering over the ground, or the suspended assemblage *The Garden of Data Cloud*, the first impression is of monumental scale and a science fiction spectacle. This is the direct perception that emerges from the 3D printed photosensitive resin. This modern material has three characteristics. First is its high-fidelity reproduction of the surface and volume of the clay; second is that the spatial dimensions can be edited and magnified as if manipulating digital information; third is its cold, gray appearance and seemingly fragile hollow structure. Because of these traits, though Sui originally used traditional bronze casting, as he had in the *Blind Portrait* series, it “didn't feel right,” so he chose 3D printing technology and materials. Some critics believe that Sui has submitted to modern technology and the logic of industrial production, while giving up his critical humanism. The author believes this is a misapprehension. In the author's eyes, the technological appearance of the 3D printing helps to dispel the intimacy of the handprints and the flesh, while heightening the virtuality and universality of the artworks, which is essential to the construction of public space. The difference between technical methods and materials, and the corporeal body, achieve the greatest defamiliarization effect. The defamiliarizing touch causes people to think about these sculpture works as unfamiliar objects seen for the first time, and ask the question “what is this?”, an opening for effectively catalyzing audience participation. Throughout Sui's artistic career, he has been adept at the use of materials to produce a sense of the unfamiliar and the alien, thereby awakening the dulled perceptions of the viewer. Driven by the sense of the unfamiliar, the viewer carefully takes in these artworks, and will inevitably discover the contours covering the artwork surface. When they realize that these contours are the handprints that everyone has, these handprints act as

an index. The index is a concept in semiotics. In Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics¹⁰, signs are divided into three categories: icon, index, and symbol. The index is an indicative sign. In everyday life, people are accustomed to the existence of handprints. They are also widely collected, forming massive data sets in the cloud, valued for their use in identification and social surveillance. Meanwhile, the abnormal revelation of the artist's handprints decouples them from a specific person, via defamiliarization, to stand as a universal biological trait shared by all humans, an index indicating the existence of the body, not just the artist's individual body or any specific body, but as the general human body. In this way, these works with their technological appearance are linked to the human body. This is the first step in activating the viewer's spatial perception, indicating a line of thinking about what profound meaning these giant corporeal presences may contain.

Furthermore, the handprints on the surface of these sculptures are not static, but are traces of the body's movement. Aside from the obvious handprint lines, we also see cracked edges and grains from the compression of the clay or plaster. In Sui's telling, each of these sculptures possesses a unique "birth certificate": "Every single trace of handprints, pressing, and tearing, is absolutely essential to each 'that emptiness' that arises from my hands. That is because only these details can prove that this is a piece of clay that I squeezed at one moment, with one particular type of force. They are the exhaustive details of the convergence of time and space that converge in 'that emptiness.' They are its 'birth certificate.'" Here, the "birth certificate," being the handprints and traces of squeezing and tearing, are also, in essence, an index—an index to the emptiness of the hand. It marks out and guides the viewer to probe the process of its emergence, bringing the viewer back to that setting where the emptiness of the hand was created, that primal time and primal state described above. This is the second step in activating the viewer's sense of space. Interestingly, the artist's expression of the primal state is presented through technological means; it could be remote antiquity, or it could be the future. This is a blurring and stacking of time, deftly inserted between human and non-human. This is a place that bears comparison to Mono-ha. The generation of meaning in Mono-ha art is dependent on its surrounding environment or exhibition space. When these works are moved, their surroundings are changed, and their original meaning changes in turn. For instance, leading Mono-ha figure Lee Ufan believes that the focus of his work is not on the creation of an object, but more importantly on the connections between the object and its surroundings. Thus, "It is not that this artwork has some special meaning. It is more about placing the artwork in different spaces and environments, and constantly seeking out its different meanings in these spaces and environments. Sui differs here in that the works in the *Planting Trace* series "bring their own" environment, or their own inner space. Due to their index traits, no matter where you place these works, whether in an exhibition space or outdoors, they will always use index methods to bring the viewer into the specific spatial setting of their creation.

¹⁰ Nathan Houser ed., *The Essential Peirce, Volume 1: Selected Philosophical Writings (1867–1893)*, 1992, Indiana University Press.



Planting Trace #2, 3D printed photosensitive resin and steel scaffold, 6 meters tall, 2019

Third, magnification plays an irreplaceable role here. Without magnification, the lumps of clay would be unable to influence the space around them. As Sui says, “When people see this lump of clay or this piece of plaster, they think they are seeing the clay or plaster itself. They do not think they are seeing the space that takes form through the movements of my hands.” That is because before magnification, the lump of clay is on a scale that can still be grasped by the hand. This is a scale to which people are accustomed, and which they believe can be taken in at a glance, and which doesn't contain unknown elements. These lumps of clay are thus unable to

move people to perceive the space with their bodies. The body, furthermore, plays a key role in perception. A completely disembodied perception will have no spatial coordinates. As Merleau-Ponty said, "Perceptual exploration, rather than being a question of an immobile intake of information, is a bodily activity." The magnification of the lump of clay not only magnifies the volume of the sculpture, it also magnifies the space in which it resides, as well as the viewer's perception of space. It also implies that the "emptiness of the hand" has also been magnified multiple times, just as the proportional mass of the viewer has been reduced. Only when the emptiness of the hand has been magnified to a size that can contain the body does the viewer gradually realize that these sculptures are the embodiment of the hand's emptiness. Now, it is as if the viewer has entered into the palm of the primal hand, on the same level as the emptiness of the hand. One by one, the boundaries between inside and outside, between the surface appearance of emptiness and substance, and the limits of space and time, are all broken down. The viewer becomes one who is present at the scene of the closed-eye grasping of the clay, seeing and witnessing the moment the hand's emptiness takes form, that glorious moment of the first connection between the primal hand and matter. What has been concealed is now finally revealed.

Conclusion

Sui Jianguo is lauded as "China's first and most far-reaching conceptualist sculptor." Once again, his works stand at the bleeding edge of the times, giving us a new understanding of sculpture. Though Sui Jianguo has shifted his creative methods in recent years, and explored unknown paths, he remains within his own artistic thread. What, then, is the inner continuity with his previous works? First, the author hopes to return to the most direct perception of the artwork, because no theoretical abstraction can ever fully replace or probe the experience of the artwork. Both the *Blind Portrait* and *Planting Trace* series are in essence giant traces. Between these recent and early works, the artist has continued his obsession with giant traces. What things can actually leave giant traces? Only things greater than the individual: the political, the cultural, the historical, the natural. For example, in *Earthy Force*, industrial rebar was welded onto natural stone. Sui Jianguo has said, "While the rebar is enveloping the stone, it must also adapt to its shape. As the stone is being bound, it is also forcing the rebar to submit to its form... The advantage each once had over the other is laid to waste." *Earthy Force* is a close-quarters battle between non-natural forces and natural human forces. Though the step of making the "trace of the touch" is carried out by the artist, he is actually expressing and responding to a collective awareness that transcends the individual.

The author believes that Sui Jianguo's art has always been reshaping public space. He has always been attempting to answer the question of how art can create connections with others and with the world. He belongs to the category of public sphere artist, rather than private sphere artist. Heeding the call of his era, he is not interested in purely private expression. In his early works, he transformed the scarred psyche following 1989 from an individual imprint into a collective

redemption. Such classics as *Clothes Vein Study* and *Made in China* adopted Pop art's use of public images, treating these images as public visual signs that touch nerves in the public memory through artistic dislocation techniques. In the years that followed, Sui Jianguo found even greater things. This time, it is the primal life force leaving traces in the clay, which the artist transforms into giant sculptures. Like Sui's earlier works, these sculptures are decoupled from individual impressions to reshape a public space. These giant traces could belong to any one viewer, and are profoundly connected to the individual, but they are also public, possessing monumentality and universality. In his three-decade creative trajectory stretching back into the 1980s. Sui has never fully Westernized, nor has he become an Orientalist. Instead, he has continually pressed forward, rooted in the foundation of his own practice, feeling his way all the way back to the origins of sculpture. His artistic language and creative concepts stand alone on the international stage, but can be understood by different cultural backgrounds, providing a fine example for the future development of Chinese contemporary art.

May 2022, Beijing