Emptiness: Towards a New Possibility of Sculpture

—— Jianguo Sui's '*Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants*'

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> Nothing is as patient as paper
> Like a sheet can lie waiting
> For thoughts written down
> Emptiness begging for making sense
> Sentences, words, letters
> There is something else that can keep
> Fingers, eyes hooked
> I put my hand down, skin onto paper
> I feel quietness
>
> Let's just keep it
> Like this, this calm
> A deep slumber, free from language
> No expression today
> No layout
> No comma
> Semicolon
> No full stop

—— Original poem taken at the National Museum in Oslo, Norway,[1] translated by the author

The art form of sculpture distinguishes itself from the two-dimensionality of painting, the invisibility of music, and the temporal progression of poetry. As a spacial three-dimensional art, sculpture strikes us with its material concreteness which is both visible and touchable. Playing against this conventional understanding of the art form of sculpture, Sui has provocatively named his exhibition 'Sculpting Emptiness' which took place in Guangzhou, China, August 2021. How is it possible

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[1] I am grateful to Mr. Henry Ruoshui Zhang , a PhD candidate in the Department of French Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, for providing the text and photos. The meaning of the poem fits the intention of this paper, so I use it as a caption.

for the concrete art form of sculpture to represent its seeming opposite, emptiness? And in what way does Sui understand the notion of emptiness?

The discursive 'I' in the following essay can represent a common viewer, a meditator, a questioner, and an interpreter, and they are all oriented around the questions posed above. Consequently, the perspectives in the essay is multivalent, fluid, interpenetrating, and multi-dimensional.

1. Spacial-temporal Existence as a Trace

After viewing a series of diverse and enigmatic works, one finally arrives at Sui's colossal sculpture that is produced by 3D printing at the end of the exhibition. Sui calls this work '*Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants*'. This enigmatic work perplexes us as it provokes curiosity. When one thinks of a 'garden', one usually thinks of grass, trees, or flowers. But Sui's version of a garden is a completely unexpected one:
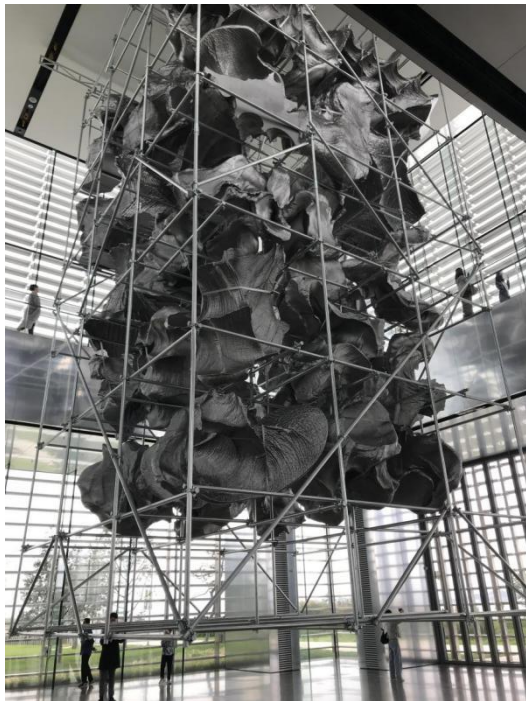

Figure1-1 Garden in Data Cloud, Elevation View   Figure1-2 Garden in Data Cloud, Overhead View

Figure1 Jianguo Sui   Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants [2]

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[2] The figures or photos quoted in this article are all provided by the artist, otherwise noted.

3D Printings
600cm X 600cm X 1200cm
Hanging off the ground at 150cm
TAG Art Museum, Qing Dao, 2021

We have here encountered a 'garden' that far exceeds its everyday concept. The 'garden' is elevated from the ground at 1.5m, suspended in mid-air while it imposes itself to the viewer from above, as if it was in the clouds. The material Sui employed for the 3D printing gives the artwork a metallic radiance. Under the lighting of the exhibition, the artwork reflects a myriad shades of gray. The various components of the artwork are fixed together by steel rods. As it seems, this way of assemblage does not intend to conceal the marks of assemblage but rather to expose them, which emphasizes the artwork's quality of being casual, fragmentary, and in-process. Each component of the artwork seems to resist a clear definitive form, as each is tattooed with rich and chaotic patterns, which are Sui's magnified fingerprints and the mark of Sui's hands-on molding of the original clay model. This 'garden' as such confronts us, attracts us, and challenges our understanding.

Figure 2-1   Figure 2-2

Figure 2 Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants (Partial)

The presentation of artworks and our viewing of them is a game of invitation. Interestingly, the formal acceptance of this invitation is made when the eyes are

placed on it, and the protagonist who accepts and completes the invitation is not our physical body, but the imagination that inhabits it. The work invites the imagination to enter with its external materials, images, shapes and all other means to complete the implicit construction of some meaning or value in the shadows, and Garden in Data Cloud is no exception. In our postmodern era of aesthetics, sculpture is liberated from the classical necessity for it to represent an image to mimic a real-life thing, so it can 'just' be a concrete object,[3] but it does not give the viewer any clues or even hints to guide the imagination to draw an image of the garden. All the messages of the exhibition declare that this reality called "garden", realized by means of modern technology, points to a concept of "emptiness" - here, let's consider it as a concept. The Garden in Data Cloud changes the way we see and understand by its very existence: by being confronted with a suspended space, based on the artist's handwriting.[4] In this work, which is printed with modern digital technology and assembled in huge size, we have to accept and understand a certain setting called "emptiness". The traces of the artist's hands on top of those undefinable blocks are all we can see: in space and time, in the form of traces. In the face of such an invitation, our gaze as viewers is somewhat at a loss - it is impossible to complete the construction of meaning, either analytical or narrative, within our reach. The question is, how to dissolve the tension between such a huge reality and the abstract and concealed emptiness, and how to reach a harmony to finally complete the writing of emptiness with reality?

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[3] Antony Gormley & Martin Gayford, *Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2020) p10.

[4] The notion of "handwriting" here refers to the artist's earlier collection of sculptural work, named 'Handwriting'. The artist has been experimenting with blind-folded squeezing since 2008, and has written a series of essays on his understanding of this art, focusing particularly on the reason why he chose to "see" the clay with his hands. For more details, see Jianguo Sui's 'The Incarnation of Dao -- An Additional Essay' (2019), 'From Portraits of the Blind to Garden in Data Cloud' (2020/21), and 'From Conception to No Thought -- An Interview with 33 Art Space Guangzhou' (2021).

2. Withdraw your gaze, and Blind-folded Tactility

Figure 3 Wangchuan Villa, Rubbing
Ming(1368-1644) ,
University of Chicago, East Asian Library

The notion of emptiness（空）should be familiar to a Chinese viewer, because the aesthetics of emptiness has always been important in Chinese art forms, such as Wang Wei's poetry, by whom the landscape paintings of literati initiated:

"空山不见人，但闻人语响。返景？入深林，复照青苔上。"

Empty mountain, no man is seen.

Only heard are echoes of men's talk.

Reflected light enters the deep wood.

And shines again on blue-green moss.

This poem, *Deer Enclosure*[5], is perhaps the most representative of Wang Wei's aesthetics of emptiness. Although the poem contains only a few words, these words resonate to create a depth-less atmosphere of emptiness. The poem portrays nothing. In the quietude it conveys, the sound of talking is distant and vague, just like ripples on water which oscillates between thingness and nothingness. The empty canyon reflects only some vague interplay of shadow and light, but it nevertheless stirs our

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[5] See（Tang dynasty）Wang Wei 王维, *Wang youcheng ji jianzhu* 王右丞集笺注（Shanghai： Shanghai guji chubanshe，1984）p243.

The translation of this poem is from Pauline Yu, *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translation and Commentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) p202.

imagination and our desire to probe deeper into its depth-less blandness. The well-known art form of Chinese landscape painting also employs this aesthetics of emptiness. It uses the paint brush to empty our internal world, thus enabling the viewer to swim and play in her world of imagination. Chinese philosophy and Buddhist thought, as well, have been deeply preoccupied with theorising the meaning of emptiness or nothingness.[6] Despite its variety, the notion of emptiness as portrayed across these genres have a common feature: that they all manifest a kind of temptation, that is produced by the infinitely unresolved tension between emptiness and the desire to fill its lack.

Figure 4   Anish Kapoor
Adam, 1989
Sandstone and pigment
236cm X 119cm X 102cm
Tate

In addition to poetry and painting, the art form of sculpture—which emphasizes material concreteness—has also been used to explore the concept of emptiness. Anish Kapoor's 1989 work, 'Adam', for example, features a 2m tall rock with a hollow

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[6] For further explanation of the Buddhist concept of 'Emptiness', see Fang Litian 方立天 'Fojiao kong yi shuping 佛教空义述评' in *Fang Litian Wenji Disijuan · Fojiao Zhexue* 方立天文集第四卷·佛教哲学 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2012), pp. 302-31. See also Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2nd Edition) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2021) pp. 283-317. For further details of the Daoist concept of 'Nothingness' see Zheng Kai 郑开, *Daojia Xing'ershang xue Yanjiu* 道家形而上学研究 （Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2018) pp. 6-16. Some of the significant studies on the concepts of "Voidness", "No-form" and "Emptiness" in traditional Chinese thought, from the aesthetic or art historical perspective, include but not only the following: François Cheng, *L'Ecriture poétique chinoise Suivi de Une anthologie des poèmes des Tang* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), and his *Vide et Plein. Le langage pictural chinois* (Paris: Seuil, 2021); François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Lee Ufan, *Yubai de yishu* 余白的艺术, Hong Xin 洪欣 and Zhang Shan-shan 章珊珊, trans (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2021).

middle section. Kapoor uses this design to present an infinite abyss in the midst of a finite concrete form.[7]

Centuries earlier, Chinese Daoist religion has employed this same design to represent infinite. Daoists believe that in the body of immense mountains, we could find a portal to heaven. This portal is called Dongtian 洞天, meaning literally 'grotto heaven'. Dongtian is an non-empirical emptiness, but it is also what Daoists believe in. The Daoist belief in Dongtian reflects a seemingly archetypal aesthetics that uses finite emptiness to represent infinite transcendence. Alberto Giacometti, on the other hand, presents an art that magnifies the distance between space and the body. By juxtaposing the infinity of space and the finitude of the human flesh, Giacometti evokes a sense of emptiness which, for him, describes the human fate of extreme loneliness.[8] These forms of emptiness—which are constructed by stressing the tension between materiality and nothingness, by ephemeralising internal space, by leaving out the essence content, or by magnifying the distance between space and the body—however do not seem to help elucidate the particular kind of emptiness in Sui's 'Garden in Data Cloud'.

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[7] Antony Gormley & Martin Gayford, *Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now*, pp.128-48.
[8] Jean Paul Sartre, "The Search for Absolute," see Kristine Stiles & Peter Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press,2012) pp. 211-5. And Wede Kaskin ed., *Remarks on Art by Jean Paul Sartre* (CHN Version) Ouyang Youquan & Feng Liming trans (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010) pp.62-81.

Figure 5 [Ming] Dai Jin
Searching for the Dao in the Grotto
Heaven
Silk
210.5cm X 83cm
The Palace Museum, Beijing

Figure 6 Albert Giacometti
Place, 1947-48
Bronze
21cm X 63.5cm X 44cm
Kunstmuseum Basel

Sui's sculpture communicates only this information: the mark of hand on pieces of clay. We are told, additionally, that the artist left these marks while he is blind-folded. Our bipedal evolution has liberated not only our hands but also our vision. We can lift our gaze from the ground and look around us or up into the sky, and from there construct our understanding of the world. Sui has invented a creative process that deliberately renounces this evolutionary privilege, so that he could give all of his creative energy to tactility. Whereas Giacometti has made 'Emptiness in the Palms', Sui aims to produce emptiness *with* his hand：According to Giacometti's the understanding of emptiness, emptiness is absolutely incompatible with materiality, as emptiness designates the very negation of materiality. The artwork of Sui, however, suggests a different understanding of emptiness which can co-exist with (and as) materiality. In particular, for Sui, emptiness no long appears in the immaterial realm of imagination, but appears as the very transpiration of a material form that does not aim to arrive at any specific teleos. Vision allows us to perceive the skin of things without grasping their depth. Put another way, the kind of depth that could be possibly grasped by vision is always in withdrawal. Our tactile sense—particularly our hands—in contrast, could use physical strength to penetrate an object and feel its inside. After learning about Sui's creative process, I tried to close my eyes and relinquish my visual dependence in my construction of my subjective world, so I can devote my attention to the tactile sensation of my hands on clay. I feel a lump of moist, soft, and sturdy clay that seems to guide the movement of my hands in some mystical way. I feel only the clay in its togetherness with my hands. In an instant, my explicit consciousness of 'imagination' or 'rationality' or 'emotion' or even the 'ego' all vanished in my hands' communion with the clay. Presently, my fingers seem to produce a certain shape. But there is none. When I opened my eyes and looked at my hands, the clay's process of forming stopped. There is no object, only the trace and the 40 instants in which the trace is in the making.

Figure7   The Artist, Jianguo Sui

Blind-folded Molding, taken at the artist's studio

2009

Figure 8   Jianguo Sui

Handwriting of Blind-folded Molding

Video Screen-shot, 2013

3. Fragmented Space and Extendable Time

After producing a number clay work which retain the mark of his touch, Sui selected 40 of them and used digital technology to magnify and combine them, resulting eventually in the complex and colossal artwork that we see in the exhibition. Sculpture's relationship with time and space has been a recurring issue in art history. On the one hand, sculpture is spacial and static; on the other hand, it records a moment in time. This common view, of course, has been constantly challenged by sculptors,[9] and Sui's work seems to represent a particular way to challenge this common view.

In an interview that took place before the exhibition, a member of audience asked Sui: Could you tell us a bit about your selection process? Why have you chosen these particular 40 blocks of clay? Sui told the audience that he had no standard for selection—he made his selection only on the basis of their formal difference in relation to each other.[10] But what does difference meaning here? How do we distinguish the difference between hand prints? Rather than clarifying the standard of difference, these questions seem to exacerbate the issue to the point of extinguishing the very idea of difference, leaving us hopelessly with a sense of absolute contingency and indeterminacy. This exacerbation of the possibility of clear standard is however productive. It seems to suggest that there is no coherent logic behind the selection of the clay work—that is, these units of clay are not necessarily related to each other and that there is no comprehensive narrative that would give clear meaning to their existence and their relation with each other.

As a viewer, I am confounded by my inability to find the 'right' view point for looking at this artwork—any angle seems to be good (or bad) as any other. The

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[9] On the representation or destruction of time and space by sculpture, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981) pp. 7-69.
[10] The content is from a lecture given by Jianguo Sui at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts on October 9th 2021, entitled 'The Incarnation of Dao'.

artwork seems to resist the linear logic of a beginning and an end. Instead, it forces us to view the artwork rhizomatically. For the postmodern French philosopher Guile Deleuze, a rhizome is 'a nonlinear network that connects any point to any other point without a single overarching thematic'.[11] Sui's rhizomatic arrangement of the clay units, accordingly, seems to communicate a non-linear and, therefore, non-temporal notion of spatial materiality. All is manifested on the surface.

What is 'surface' then? As it seems, all fixed forms have been dissolved, leaving them nothing more than as the mark of a certain instant. Such an instant may seem to be infinitesimal, but Sui utilizes 3D printing technology to extend, magnify, and demonstrate it. Time as chronos is normally treated as a tool for defining and recording changes. While continental philosophers after Heidegger and Bergson emphasize the continuous and transient quality of time, time as chronos is static. Of course, we have seen many attempts to challenge the understanding of time as chronos, which are done most penetratingly by art and religion.[12] In its extension and magnification of instants, 'Garden in Data Cloud' represents yet another approach to

Figure 9　Jianguo Sui

　　Garden in Data Cloud ·Handwriting 5

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[11] Deleuze Gilles, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[12] In the sculptures mentioned in the article--for example, Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, and the subsequent development of Futurism, Constructivism and even Minimalism--artists have persistently attempted to challenge and disrupt the experiential time as constructed and expressed in traditional old sculptural creations. The destruction and deconstruction of the temporality of secular experience in the sacred narrative of religion is one of the necessary conditions for religion to establish transcendence and sacredness. Only by transcending the temporalities of secular experience is religious transcendence possible.

this ongoing challenging of time as chronos. In his work, the perception of time becomes devoid of the body and the self. Time is formed through the interaction between the hand and the clay, which form is subsequently extended and magnified. The omnipresent and anxiety-inducing time becomes fixed in an artistic form which can be subsequently extended and even played with. When this 'mark of time' becomes the object of 3D printing, we almost depart from the realm of time----

Consequently, a series of objects--which are changeable, extended, magnified, and has no internal structure—appear together in front of our eyes. They are so colossal; yet also empty.

Figure 10 Jianguo Sui
Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants (Partial)
Photosensitive resin print with a steel frame
Height 6m
Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing
The Exhibition Site, 2019

Figure 11   Jianguo Sui
Garden in Data Cloud: Forty Instants
The Assembly Site
TAG Art Museum, Qingdao, 2021

Figure 12   Jianguo Sui

                        A plaster prototype of blind molding

                        Photo, 2014

Figure 13   Jianguo Sui

                        Handwriting·Constellation1#

                        Bronze

                        51cm x 20cm x 31cm, 2014

To this day, Sui's aim as an artist has not been to simply expand on the number and variety of his sculpture corpus, but to explore a new possibility of the art form of sculpture. His art, as in the case of 'Garden in Data Cloud', has no internal structure, no surface, no continuity, no hidden meaning, and no correct view point. As such they defy conceptuality by the enigma of their undeniable material existence. The viewer is confounded by the fact that, standing before this enormous existence, they grasp no meaning. Insofar as traditional criticism is obsessed with interpreting the final definitive meaning of an artwork, Sui directly challenges and interrupts this traditional mode of artistic appreciation. The concrete materiality of sculpture harbours the potential to express the seeming opposite of its artistic medium: emptiness. Sui demonstrates how this potential can be actualised as he presents us with a colossal object that is essentially without meaning. While this paradox of 'concrete meaninglessness' may initially disturb the rational part of our mind, it could also liberate us from the tyranny of meaning, so we could enjoy what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the 'freedom of existence'.[13] Sui artwork shows that concreteness and emptiness are not opposites but interdependent. In a similar way, his artwork is also fused with meditation, reverence, pain, joy, satire, provocation, and enlightenment. The Garden in Data Cloud is sown with seeds of meaning. We are suspended in a moment before we could hear the sound of the first seed breaking through the soil. But we hear none. There is nothing. Quiet. Not the quiet of death, but a quiet that is full of vitality.

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[13] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Freedom of Existence*, Bridge McDonald trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) pp. 81--96.

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