

Sui Jianguo  
Materiality Beyond Human Sensibility  
Lecture CAFA 3/16/2023

One of the most important processes that occurs when we experience sculpture is the adjustment it brings to the way we understand the world around us. The sculpture itself may not in fact deliver a meaning nor a narrative, but our experience of it brings new perceptions and understanding to us. We are given the opportunity to find new meaning. The sculpture, a physical and material presence, may not be expressing anything specifically, but our experience of it brings an awareness of the world "to" expression. This may compel us to find new meaning to our experience of the world, as we perceive it.



*Sui Jianguo 3D Face 2019*

My approach to Sui Jianguo's sculptural practice focuses upon materiality, and our relationship to the substance of the world. The title of this lecture is "Materiality Beyond Human Sensibility". I will discuss Sui Jianguo's work to build a theory of understanding that extends meaning of it extrinsic to the philosophic and critical formulations that have typically underwritten aesthetic enquiry and set the conditions for our perception of it.



*Sui Jianguo Garden in the Data Cloud 2021*

Recent work of Sui Jianguo presents new sculptural form derived from within quantum space. '3D Face' and 'Cloud Garden' are good examples. As with all important developments in the visual arts,

particularly in the recent history of modernism, significant and new forms are produced simultaneous to changes in how we understand 'time and space'. Forms have correlation to shifts in space time perception. It is possible to site Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Earth Art, and recently with Encryption Art as examples responsive to redefinitions of space and time.

Sui Jianguo has utilized scanning and digital production processes that give intention and form to what we may describe as "object to object" relationships, as opposed to "subject to object" relations, and that gives rise to form that may be described as "pan-psychic". These new works by Sui Jianguo have opened the possibility of a new set of spatio-temporal characteristics derived from a data space, a quantum space.



*Sui Jianguo Garden in the Data Cloud (detail) 2021*

My understanding of Sui Jianguo's sculpture is in response to two major questions that arose in the course of researching his work, and that these questions opened a space of understanding that is "beyond" or extrinsic to typical philosophic constructions of "Human Sensibility", and therefore how we conceive of "Materiality"

The first question is: What do we find when we discard or look beyond phenomenology?"

And equally important, "How is digital space to be defined in terms of its quantum characteristics, and can this be inscribed into a physical form?"

In asking these questions we are reminded of the need for renovation in the terms and conditions we use to describe art practice, and with this, comes the usefulness in exploring various other fields of knowledge to determine relevant frameworks for producing new and different forms of critical thought. This is how we gain proximity to new things, however please consider that this often forces an irregular shape to thought, or produces thought that is difficult to have as it is incompatible with known types of cognition.

Technology is normally framed alongside reproducibility, mass production and the nature of the consumer object. Technology, in the case of Sui Jianguo's work is remarkable for its singularity, and the manifestation of the quantum field.

Quantum physics and its philosophic challenges have been under accounted for in the visual arts. Sui Jianguo's work is open to the facts of physics and has found a figuration to form which is a manifestation of the spatial and temporal characteristics of the quantum.

For this lecture I will elaborate on two frames of reference that I want to bring to Sui Jianguo's practice.

They are:

1. *Process / Procedures and New Materialism*

I will discuss the Art Historic model of *Process and Procedures* in terms of "new materialism".

This will serve as a description of the 'presence' characteristics of '3D Face' and 'Cloud Garden'.

The expanded forms of process utilized by Sui are discussed also in terms of new materialism.



*Sui Jianguo Garden in the Data Cloud 2021*

## 2. *New Object Relations*

New spatio-temporal forms establish a new presence and occupation of space. New object relations, new materialism and panpsychism are perceptual and historic re-organizations of the object, (the world), and thus our capacity to connect and empathize with it.

## 1. *Process / Procedure and New Materialism*



*Sui Jianguo Blind Portraits 2008-now*

In regards to *the Blind Portraits series in 2008*, Sui Jianguo commented: *I placed my body and its actions at the core of my Art works as my practices accumulated, I increasingly came to recognize that in the day to day work, the artist's body and repetitive sculptural actions (behaviors) were themselves equal in importance to the completed sculpture. The medium of Sculpture is the field of the sculptor's behaviors and actions, and the final sculptural work is the testament to the presence of the sculptor's body and sculptural behaviors (actions)*



*Sui Jianguo Blind Portrait (single) 2010*

Sui Jianguo's statement, correlating action and behavior, with the object is artistic process in a pure form. It is a foregrounding of the organic and variable qualities of it. His description of

process, and its relationship to the sculptural object is distinctively unlike in character to the defining concept of artistic process often set in contemporary sculptural practice. This definition was largely established by the ground breaking exhibition of 1969 at the Whitney Museum in New York entitled "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials."



*Catalogue: Anti-Illusion Procedures/Material*

The exhibition featured Richard Serra's "Casting," Keith Sonnier's "Double Loop," Barry LaVa's "Scatter Works," and Eva Hesse's "Expanded Expansion," among other important process works that have come to epitomize the phenomenal basis of sculpture, and the emergence of the contingent object.





*Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials Sonnier La Va Hesse*

I draw distinction in Sui Jianguo's process – it is different from works associated with "procedures/materials" paradigm, which are unified by a specific conception of process. They are a type of residue, a trace of material that is the remnant of activity: the "informe", or the coming to form, or an entropic denaturing of form. The process works aligned to "procedures/materials" have an immediacy and a temporality that is of a different register than Sui Jianguo's integration of body and behavior that generates a material outcome.



*Richard Serra's Castings*

Of fundamental importance in this difference is the importance of site specificity in works associated with "procedures/materials." As clearly demonstrated by Richard Serra's "Castings," the work is produced through an interaction of the action of the artist, the site, and the deployment of material. In Serra's case the architectural site, the meeting of wall and floor, is the morhic structure that acts as the resistant force containing the unruly matter.



*Richard Serra's Castings Action*

This speaks to the performative aspect of process: the site of production is also the site of reception, and the artist's actions, become framed as a performance event taking place in something like the suspension of the promethium stage, the gallery space. Think about the iconic images of Richard Serra throwing molten lead. These images are better known than the actual physical work and have become the representation of this specific concept of process. The fact that material, performance and site are conditions of the work makes it difficult to find an autonomy or singularity in the sculptural object itself. In Richard Serra's case everything is dependent on everything else, and so true understanding of the

sculptural object is lessened due to its indivisibility from the conditions through which it may be known or verified.



*Phillippe Perrano*

The significance of processes and procedures, epitomized by “Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials” show of 1969, re-entered contemporary art discourse of the mid 1990’s as Relational Aesthetics. Although outwardly different, both foregrounded shifting temporalities as central to process and procedures thinking, in that the process an artist undergoes is in fact organized by specific conceptions of space and time in procedures artwork. Similarly, much art associated with relational aesthetics sets up platforms for heightened social connection, or inter relationship, which is organized temporally as a process. Relational aesthetics gave the object an operation, it made it contingent and procedural and

indeed subordinated it to the set of social relations that were programmed around it. This further highlighted the contingent nature of the object, and our relationship to it.



*Sui Jianguo Blind Portraits 2008-2014*

Zhao Yan's essay on Sui Jianguo provides a useful identification of an impacting of procedural and contingent definitions of the object on Sui Jianguo's work:

*In the technological world we live in, the occurrence, operation and propagation of things are procedural, and we are constantly being educated and persuaded to understand the world in this procedural way. Therefore, the confusion about contingency and procedure is actually based on a contradiction between the perception of the body and the current representation of the technological world. Sui Jianguo's contingency is set in his blind clay sculpture..... In addition to the escape from personal*

*experience, there is also a potential context—the current increasingly procedural technological world. (10)*

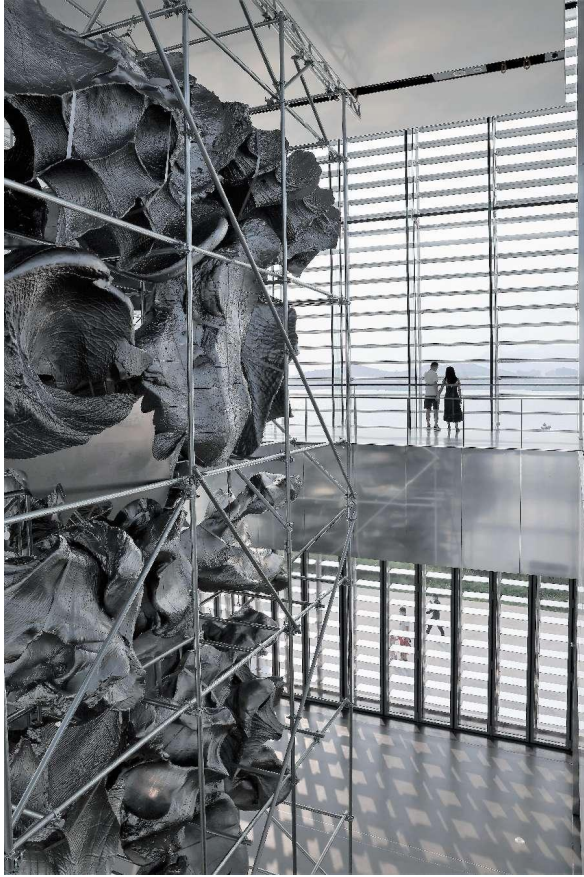
Sui Jianguo's notion of process is different than either the "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials" conditioning AND the "procedural /contingencies /programmable schema" of relational aesthetics. It follows that the status of the object is altered through its inherent level of intelligibility: "the day to day work, the artist's body and repetitive sculptural actions (behaviors)" is not a performative or event based process. It is generative, purely tactile, bio mechanical and invisible to the artist and viewer alike (consider Sui Jianguo's blind sculptures). This process occurs in a space that is removed from the site of the sculpture's reception.

Sui Jianguo's sculptures are obviously the result of a behavioral process, as a causal fore-runner to the object, and not an essential condition through which we come to know the sculptural object. The energies of process are folded into the object—it is the sculpture itself, autonomous and obdurate, *"To close my eyes and work is not only abandoning the previous art, etc., but also changing my relationship with the world, blurring and inverting the subject-object relationship that we are used to. Of course, once you change, keeping your eyes open is no longer the original vision."* For the audience, Sui Jianguo determines that *"The best result is that they may also change the perceptual mechanism, and change their vision of the world. What I call the new perceptual mechanism refers to this"* (11).



*Sui Jianguo 3D Face 2019*

Sui Jianguo's "blurring and inverting the subject-object relationship," coupled with his identification of a "change in the perceptual mechanism (of the viewer) and the change in their vision of the world" (12), as an opening up of the understanding of the sculpture as a potential multiverse, that is an extension beyond the simplification of things that reductionist tendencies induce. Reductionism is the tendency to atomize the world to component parts, to reduce experience down to phenomenological effects. Sui Jianguo's sculptures may be understood as a genuine and substantial reality, that is more deeply 'in' its self-possessed object-ness, or materiality than any theoretical or practical encounter that may be constructed with a form of reality derived from reductionist thinking. This may be termed as a "field of effects", and contrasted with the true nature of the object.



*Sui Jianguo Cloud Garden 2021*

To give this idea definition, I am drawn to a well-known contemplation of the true nature of things derived from science, where the promotion of the quantum nature of things supersedes an understanding derived from the *field of effects* emanating and created in the world. The tension produced between these two frameworks produces the occurrence of a third space for the object to exist, where that object is more real than any theoretical framework can produce. The physicist A.S. Eddington presented a story of two tables as a metaphor for his idea: the first is the familiar table of everyday life; the second story of the same table is the quantum table as understood by physicists.

Let's substitute "sculpture" for table as we get into this analysis:



For Eddington, (the physicist who provided the evidence for Einstein's theory of relativity), the latter table—the quantum table—is more real than the former, which, although visible and tangible, is essentially a *"strange compound of external nature, mental imagery and inherited prejudice"* (13). You might be able to eat your meal off the first table, but that would prove nothing to those who subscribe to the dialectical and relentless logic of modern science as it was underwritten by philosopher Kant. It is clear the scientist proceeds to reduce the table downwardly, to tiny particles that are not knowable to the eye, and that are in fact invisible. By contrast, the humanist reduces it in an upward motion to a series of effects on people and other things. To put it in straight forward terms, both of Eddington's versions of the table, may be seen as elaborate hoaxes. They confuse and emmesh the table with its internal structures, (reduction to components) and external environments (phenomenological effects). The real table is in fact a third table existing somewhere between these two ideations of the table.

Sui Jianguo's sculpture is a physical speculation that extends our conception of the real. Our accommodation of it offers a speculative alternative to the normative rendering of the real. This established determination of the here and now is given coherence in our thought structures by the dominant strains of 20th-century phenomenology as underwritten by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.



*James Turrell and Robert Irwin Anacote Chamber*

In essence, we have become bound up by the claim that things are only real insofar as they are sensible to a human subject. Any attempt hither to this moment that asserts a reality beyond anthropocentrism, that excludes a priori conceptions, is largely inconceivable. It is so deeply counter intuitive that its impossibility makes it almost a psychotic conception.



*Sui Jianguo Cloud Garden (Detail) 2021*



*Sui Jianguo Garden in the Data Cloud 2021*

Yet, in "3D Face", and "Cloud Heaven" is a radical and imaginative new form of realism – "3D Face" – it is reflecting light and simultaneously addressing itself without any form of correlation. Its radical nature suggested a speculative reality in which things do exist beyond the purview of human conception. The difficult and inaccessible nature of this idea has confirmed a long held suspicion that we had reduced away everything that actually mattered the most about the object.

Both sculptures produce recognition of a new type of 'materialism'. This new materialism arose from an interaction of two objects: a 3D scanner and some clay blindly pressured by hand, and then produced by a third object, a 3D Printer. There was no perceiving anthropomorphic subject, only algorithms interrelating. The lack of a convenient description reinforces the profound newness. The term "*panpsychism*" takes us close: The thought that nothing is intrinsically less real, vital, or important than any other thing is an ecological viewpoint of existence that rejects ideas of human specialness as being simple-minded or arrogant. The distinct possibility that the world is not the world only in manifest form to humans, but instead forces us to conceive of a reality that is beyond our thinking, that is not nonsense nor a delusion, but is in fact obligatory. And now this possibility is presented in sculptural form, through Sui Jianguo's work, somehow still retaining its physical and material presence.

## *2. New Object Relations*

The western aesthetic tradition has tracked us to a moment where it may be argued that critical discussions of sculpture have missed the point altogether, and in fact erased the object itself.

Traditionally our approach to the sculptural object has become ideated either as a reduction down to its isolated constituent parts, deconstructed to somehow reveal a truer version of itself in atomistic fashion, or extrapolated outwardly and understood in terms of its phenomenal and sociological effects.

(Eddington's table) Each approach engages in forms of reductionism, even though they reduce the object in opposite directions, and each trajectory confuses the sculptural object with its significant internal, and visible external environments. Such reductions attempt to convert the sculpture into the conditions through which we know it or attempt to verify it.

Sui Jianguo's sculptural work is typically assessed in relation to the impacts of phenomenology. Husserl, and his student Martin Heidegger are the originating Phenomenologists, their work is seen to be the beginning of the continental tradition of philosophy. The bulk of critical writing on Sui Jianguo's practice is in most cases derived from a correlation with a sensorial investigation of Sui Jianguo's art works. These observations are truly important, but they do reproduce an orthodoxy of thought and a historic relationship of the "object" to perception in the world. We may invert this orthodoxy and it provides an opening or an insight that reveals a reducing away from the most challenging aspects of the works themselves. Phenomenological conditioning expands the cognitive and experiential interplay with our world, and this processing of thought enhances a certain set of critical formations pertaining to time, space and the sensorium, or the field of data collected by our senses. With a wider awareness of what an object may in fact be, however, philosophically and in material terms, the aesthetic framework of phenomenology as it is applied in recent contemporary sculpture, is in my view ends up rarifying and enclosing the consideration of the object. This is an unresolved tension in the critical understanding of contemporary art. My theory is developed in response to Sui Jianguo's works, and is a moving away from this tension and determines an understanding that has always been present, but reduced away from us by the traditional structures of phenomenological thought.



*Donald Judd Box*

Minimalist artist Donald Judd, a philosophy scholar focused on the empiricist Hume, equated material specificity as pre-requisite for the art object. Judd sought to remove metaphor, relational composition, and all other vestiges of anthropomorphism in favor of singularity, repetition and sequence as ideated structures extrinsic to the body, and therefore qualifiers of the object as a pure form of thought. The work is indivisible—it cannot be reduced to a series of parts but is always constituted as a wholeness. This became a gearing towards the establishment of a new concept for the object—intact in its ‘there-ness’. Judd’s work, all right angles, all rational structures, (and with correlatives in writing) points to the possibility of viewing something purely in terms of its object-ness, not divided into parts

and not sociologically reduced, but as it is. However, Judd's writing and what he programmed into his work was operating through an a priori structure, or a predetermined structure, that was necessary to define it, and to create a continuity with Clement Greenberg's essentialist version of Modernism. Judd's continuity was still structured in relation to apriori structures, or "philosophies of access," that is pre-determined mental structures that generate the correct form of "data" or "experience" around the work.



*Donald Judd Single Stack*

This performed a reduction of the object as something determined by pre-set categorization. It was an attempt to place idea outside of the mind, to induce the idea of the art object as pure cognate, almost a form of AI, the mental energy of the viewer required to "activate" the work being significant, and indeed apart from the object itself.

Judd's lasting contribution was to eliminate metaphor, and establish the object as the primary and most accurate form of artistic expression. Inadvertently, the notion that the artwork was in fact centered in the mind of the viewer soon prevailed. Crowded out by philosophies of access, co-relationism and the reductive tendencies of phenomenology and atomization, the object itself disappeared.



*Sui Jianguo Still from Video 2013*

Sui Jianguo's work is positioned differently, away from the orthodoxy of gesture and phenomenology as presented in the majority of texts on his practices that focus predominantly on process. Central to my argument is the proposition that phenomenological orthodoxy takes over true meaning. A more accurate and expansive understanding of the sculpture itself is formed and articulated in its materiality. The philosophic traditions that underwrite aesthetic inquiry are still prevalent today. They have largely



erased the mute obdurateness and contradictory capacities of a physical thing by focusing upon the reducibility of an object to its effects and its components that have traditionally served as a form of verifiability.



*Sui Jianguo 3D Face 2019*

With the induction of advanced science we discover significant cultural alteration. Perceptions and technological instruments change the world for us. Artists typically respond with a fundamental and compulsive change, that is responsive to more fundamental change occurring on a level of perception that requires a platform or mediating energy to define it.



*Sui Jianguo 3D Face (Detail) 2019*

The latent newness that Sui Jianguo produces a speculative reality, where things do exist beyond the purview of human conception. They are new objects of radical and imaginative realism. They are generated by algorithmic to algorithmic processes, A human gesture transformed to data through 3D scanning, and then, rendered using 3D printing. Physical process is transformed into data, emerging from a quantum spatio-temporal field. Sui Jianguo's sculptures, produce their own latency and determine their own physics. They are "beyond" or extrinsic to typical philosophic constructions of "Human Sensibility", and have produced a new "Materiality".

