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A Year in a Cage: A Life Shrunk to Expand Art



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh, at the Museum of Modern Art, displays a wooden cage like one in which the artist spent a year, doing nothing.

Art takes total commitment, but few artists maintain it around the clock. An exception is the Taiwanese-born performance artist Tehching Hsieh (pronounced dur-ching shay), specifically, the five, grueling one-year pieces he executed, mostly in New York, from 1978 to 1986. Their subject and material was time itself.

The Museum of Modern Art is devoting a small, gripping exhibition to the documentation of "Cage Piece" (1978-79), the first of Mr. Hsieh's One Year Performances. It entailed spending a year in near-solitary confinement in a cell-like cage doing absolutely nothing. The show makes an altogether apt debut for the Modern's new series of project exhibitions devoted to performance art. Few pieces communicate the medium's potential and its demands in such a basic, resonant way.

All of Mr. Hsieh's One Year Performances were 24/7 artworks. This sounds easy enough. Ever since Marcel Duchamp's urinal, countless artists have claimed that their lives are their art. It's a tired genre.

The catch is that for each piece Mr. Hsieh also established very particular living conditions that required absolute focus, discipline and dedication. These conditions give each piece a stripped down, shocking clarity — a single, obdurate form.

This form was extreme deprivation. For "Cage Piece" Mr. Hsieh deprived himself of nearly all contact with the world. In the next four pieces he eliminated, in succession, concentration, shelter, privacy and finally art itself. In each case he altered the nature of time radically for himself and, retrospectively, us.

For “Cage Piece” Mr. Hsieh built a cage from pine dowels and two-by-fours in a corner of his TriBeCa studio, furnishing it with a bed, a blanket, a sink (no toilet) and a pail, as well as some personal hygiene items. He entered the cell on Sept. 30, 1978. Robert Projansky, his lawyer, locked the door and affixed it and each dowel with paper seals that he signed. Every day a friend delivered food and dealt with the artist’s refuse. And each day the friend took a photograph of Mr. Hsieh, who had shaved his head at the beginning.

For the next year Mr. Hsieh was mostly alone with his thoughts: no talking, reading or writing; no radio or television. On designated days once or twice a month his loft was open to the public from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; people could visit it like a gallery and see the work in progress. On Sept. 29, 1979, Mr. Projansky returned, verified that none of the seals had been broken, and Mr. Hsieh left his cell.



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Tehching Hsieh on Day 1, left, and Day 365, locked up for art.

At the Modern the small black-and-white daily photographs of the artist are displayed in a single line wrapping around the walls, measuring the days in lengthening hair. Giving each image a cursory look seems to take forever. The cage itself is on display in a shadowy interior gallery, complete with bed, sink and pail. It is like the jail cell in an American western, only dainty.

There’s the temptation to see Mr. Hsieh as a political prisoner (all those mug shots) or as a fanatical devotee of some religion. But mainly his work fits squarely within performance art’s peculiar and extreme explorations of the human condition.

His One Year pieces have the shock value of Chris Burden’s early daredevil performances, those brief, sensational actions that included having himself shot in the arm and crucified atop a Volkswagen. These works were performed in private and publicized after the fact. Whether conveyed by photographs, videos, statements or simple word of mouth, they made unforgettable impressions.

Still, the extended duration of Mr. Hsieh's pieces aligns him with more peace-loving meditative artists who measure time through calm, unvarying repetition. Examples include Hanne Darboven's journal-like scrawls; Roman Opalka's gray number paintings; Jonathan Borofsky's 1969-70 "Counting from 1 to 2,740,321," a waist-high stack of typing paper covered with handwritten numbers held down by a large plastic ruby; and just about anything by On Kawara, best known for his date paintings. It is the compression of these two strains that gives Mr. Hsieh's work its impact. You comprehend their extent in an instant; thinking them through makes them expand in your mind.

What's most tangible about the "Cage Piece" is the almost palpable immensity and emptiness of time, nothing but time, of life as the filling of time. Mr. Hsieh carved a notch for each day in the wall. (He didn't consider it writing.) He said he spent the time staying alive and thinking about his art.

His subsequent One Year Performances had their own demands, but they also stand as extreme reactions to the hardships of "Cage Piece." Mr. Hsieh's second yearlong piece required him to punch a time-clock in his studio every hour — or 8,760 times — dividing time into increments, destroying concentration with the constant interruption. (The piece, a combination of time cards and photographs, is on view at the Guggenheim in "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989.") His third piece was a year spent living entirely outdoors, mostly in downtown New York, filling his time with the basic act of surviving and charting his movements.

His fourth piece was a year devoid of privacy or solitude, spent tied by an eight-foot rope to another person whom he never touched (the performance artist Linda Montano). Finally Mr. Hsieh spent a fifth year without making, looking at, talking or reading about art. This piece seems most abstract and hardest to detect or document. Tellingly, he found that the easiest way to execute it was to leave New York.

In the One Year Performances, especially the first four, Mr. Hsieh did not make his life his art. Instead, with Classical precision and unquestionable monstrosity, he expanded his art until it fully occupied, consumed and suspended his life.

"Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh" is at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, (212) 708-9400, moma.org, through May 18.