

SEAN KELLY

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Tehching Hsieh: the man who didn't go to bed for a year

The performance artist made himself punch a clock every hour for a year, in a work now recognised as seminal



Tehching Hsieh with One Year Performance 1980-1981 at Carriageworks, Sydney. Photograph: Anna Kucera/The Guardian.

Tehching Hsieh gazes down from four walls, his unsmiling features captured in 8,627 mugshots taken in the Manhattan studio where he spent 12 months punching a time clock every hour, on the hour, 24 hours a day.

The photographs chronicle a period during which the Taiwanese-born performance artist subjected himself to an extraordinary ordeal of sleep deprivation in a relentless quest to investigate the nature of time and methodically observe time's passing.

One Year Performance 1980-1981, which opened at Sydney's Carriageworks on Tuesday, displays the documentary evidence of that work: 365 punch cards, 365 film strips, showing an increasingly long-haired and bleary-eyed Hsieh, the plain grey uniform he wore, a 16mm movie he made, compressing the year into six minutes, witness statements attesting to his strict routine and the time clock.



The Time Piece uniform. Photograph: Anna Kucera/The Guardian.

The work was one of five that Hsieh, now 65, created in the late 1970s and early 1980s; works which, while known and appreciated in the niche world of performance art, have only achieved wider recognition over the past five years.

Thanks to exhibitions in 2009 at MoMA and the Guggenheim museum, both in New York, and the publication of a monograph, *Out of Now*, co-authored with Adrian Heathfield, he has been belatedly acknowledged as a seminal early figure in the evolution of durational performance art.

For Hsieh, *Time Clock Piece*— as the work documented in the *Carriageworks* installation is informally known — recalls the labours of Sisyphus, who, in Greek mythology, was forced to roll a rock repeatedly up a mountain, only to watch it fall down again.

And while it may seem to convey a message about the tedium and conformity of industrial labour, he tells *Guardian Australia* he is “not a political artist, although people are at liberty to interpret my work from a political standpoint ... I’m interested in the universal circumstances of human life”.

Time is the common thread running through the five one-year performances, all of which involved extreme physical and psychological challenges. For *Cage Piece*, Hsieh spent 12 months in near-solitary confinement in a cage he built in his studio, furnished only with a bed, a blanket, a sink and a pail, banned (by himself) from talking, reading, writing, listening to the radio or watching TV.

Time Clock Piece, his second work, was followed by *Outdoor Piece*, in which he spent a year living entirely outdoors, sleeping rough, and *Rope Piece*, where he was tethered to another performance artist, Linda Montano, by a 2.5-metre (8 feet) rope for 12 months. Then came *No Art*, a year-long stint during which he forbade himself to create, view, talk about or read about art.

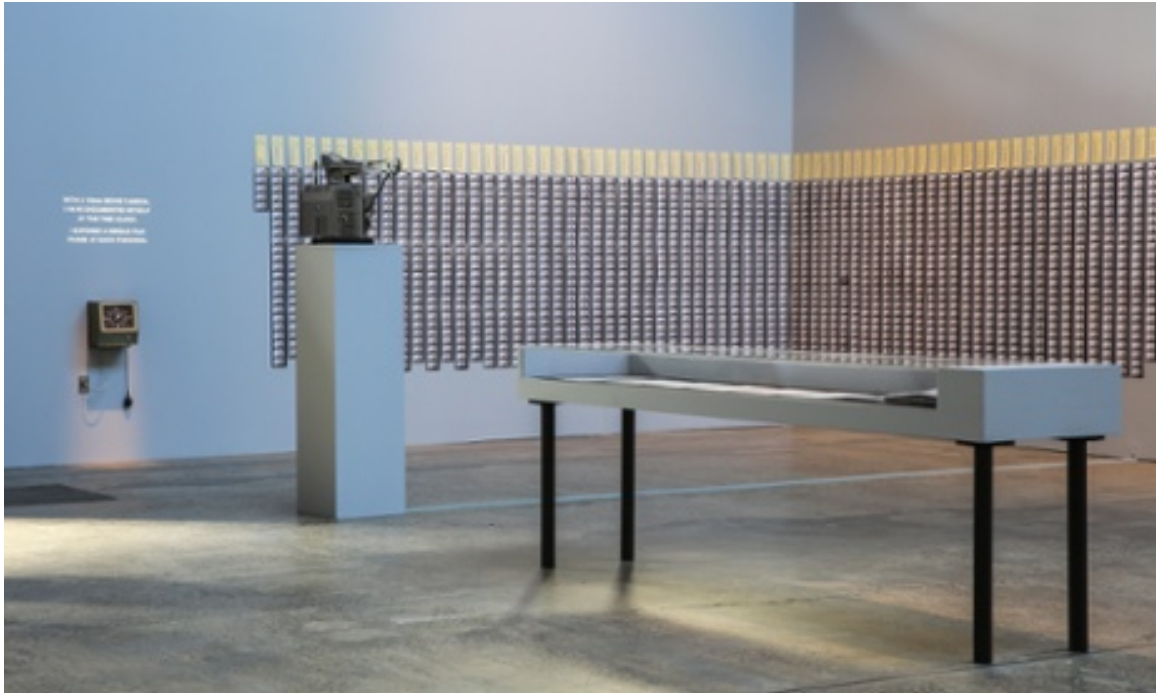


Tehching Hsieh's Rope Piece, in which he was bound to a fellow artist for a year. Photograph: Anna Kucera/The Guardian.

All have been intensely personal projects, probing questions of existence and the human condition. For *Time Clock*, Hsieh — who was an illegal immigrant during his first 14 years in the US, jumping ship in 1974 from an oil tanker in Philadelphia — set himself the task of never sleeping or leaving his studio for more than 59 minutes. “It was like being in limbo, just waiting for the next punch,” he recalls.

Shaving his head at the outset, and photographing himself each time he punched the clock, he missed just 133 clock-ins, mostly because of sleeping through, despite arming himself with an especially loud alarm clock. The single frames he shot with a movie camera later became the film, in which each day is compressed into one second.

Time Clock, which runs until 6 July, is Hsieh’s most rigorously documented work. The serial imagery is peculiarly compelling, as is the time-lapse film, beamed on to a wall in a continuous loop.



The Time Piece show, with the clock Hsieh punched every hour on the left. Photograph: Anna Kucera/The Guardian.

For Nina Miall, who curated the exhibition, which is Hsieh's first solo show in Australia, it demonstrates his "unflagging commitment" to his art, as well as his remarkable self-discipline and "single-minded focus on completing the task". (He demonstrated those qualities early in his career, when he jumped out of a second-floor window and broke both ankles.)

More recently, his work has continued to take unusual turns. Between 1986 and 1999, he undertook a "13-year plan" during which he created art but did not show it. (Even now, he declines to explain the content.) Then, in 2000, he stopped altogether, a move that has helped to contribute to his somewhat mythical status.

"I don't do art any more," Hsieh explains. "I no longer feel creative. I don't want to do what the art world expects me to do. This is my exit. This is my freedom."