Tovey, Emma-Louise. "Superstuck," Sleek, Summer 2012.
normal life after the very different ways of living in the work.”

Hsieh had begun his career in Taiwan not exactly knowing where he was going with performance, but the seeds of his grueling life-works were there: his 1973 “Jump Piece” consisted of Hsieh jumping off a roof and filming it—a sort of parallel to Chris Burden’s “danger pieces” and Bas Jan Ader’s “Fall” works. But he didn’t know about these works—in fact, he didn’t quite know what avant garde art was until he literally jumped off a boat and swam to the shores of Manhattan. “I came to New York as it was the art center of the world,” says Hsieh. “I didn’t know much about conceptual art. As I was an illegal immigrant, I used the pseudonym Sam Hsieh to hide myself.”

Hsieh’s flyers (overleaf) are beautiful reminders of his era of the late Seventies and early Eighties. They are minimal invitations to view “Sam Hsieh” do perilous things, mostly simply titled “One Year Performance.” The front of the flyer would contain a calendar, on which certain dates were circled, denoting when the piece was “open to the public.” Not that many people came. Hsieh remained a semi-secret art world anomaly until 2009, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave Hsieh’s “Cage Piece” an official re-assessment: “Why was Tehching left out?” Alexandra Munroe, senior curator of Asian art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, said in an interview with The New York Times in 2009, “because he was Chinese.”

After “Cage Piece,” Hsieh entered what was perhaps his most impressive performance in terms of physical and mental endurance. Over one year from April 11 1980 to April 11 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock once an hour for an entire year, mostly depriving himself of sleep. On a breakdown of the piece, which is one of the few documents that remain, Hsieh explains why he missed 133 of the 8,760 required punch cards because he was sleeping, 29 because he was ill, and 10 because he was early. The worst months were in the middle, but in the final two Hsieh only missed nine punches. “I tried to have a better ending,” Hsieh says matter-of-factly.

This work of endurance led to his third “One Year Performance,” which is commonly called “Outdoor Piece,” (September 26 1981 to September 26 1982). In his statement, Hsieh explains, “I shall stay OUTDOORS for one. I shall not go in to [sic] building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent. I shall have a sleeping bag.” Again, Hsieh found obstructions in the process of turning life into art. “When you stay outside for a long time, like one year, incidents happen,” he muses. “I sat in front of a warehouse drinking coffee and the owner didn’t like it. He threw away my backpack (I had a camera in it), then he tried to hit me with a metal stick. I took out from my backpack a pair of Nunchaku to fight back. He called the police to catch me.” The police came and put him in jail for 15 hours. Thankfully, he wasn’t sent to the immigration department, something that he doesn’t understand to this day. “When I was in jail, I thought I’d screwed it all up and might be deported. But I went back to streets continuing this piece. I wasn’t kicked out of the country; I was lucky.”

Hsieh’s subsequent pieces continued to explore endurance and freedom. In “Rope Piece,” (July 4 1983 to July 4 1984) Hsieh invited fellow performance artist Linda Montano to tie herself to Hsieh for one year. They didn’t always get along. In fact, both sides seem to delicately avoid the subject of what that year was actually like. “Peaceful moments were the best we could hope for the piece,” says Hsieh.

“That’s a closed chapter of my life,” says Montano when I rang to ask her about the piece.

Hsieh, in fact, did learn one thing through “Rope Piece”: that he needed to recoil from the art world within which he had begun to operate. His next piece was a “No Art Piece,” 1985–1986, in which he did not even think about art for an entire year. Marcia Tucker, a former curator at the Whitney and the New Museum, in her book “A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World”, said, “I mailed him a check for his participation in the New Museum exhibition ‘Choices’, in which we had included several posters marking the beginning, middle, and end of each of Tehching’s one-year performances – and he didn’t open the envelope until his art-year was over.”

The “No Art Piece” led naturally into Hsieh’s final work, “Earth (or 13 Year Plan).” Hsieh would disappear for 13 years, ending his career at the turn of the millennium, and create as much art as he could. The one stipulation is that he would never show this work. “By not show-
ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE
by SAM HSIEH

1978

SEPT  
OCT  
NOV  
DEC  

1979

JAN  
FEB  
MAR  
APR  
MAY  
JUNE  
JULY  
AUG  
SEPT  

Opening performance on September 29, 1979 at 8:00 p.m.
Closing performance on October 30, 1979 at 6:00 p.m.

STATEMENT

September 30, 1979

I, Sam Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece,
to begin on September 30, 1979.

I shall seal myself in my studio, in solitary confinement
inside a cell-like room measuring 11’ x 8’ x 8’.

I shall not converse, read, write, listen to the radio or
watch television, until I seal myself on September 29, 1979.

I shall have food every day.

My friend, Cheng Wei Young, will facilitate this piece
by taking charge of my food, clothing and refuse.

Sam Hsieh

111 Hudson Street, Suite 1F1 - New York 10013

ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE
by TEHCHING HSIEH

26 Sept 1981 - 26 Sept 1982

FALL

WINTER

SPRING

SUMMER

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

SOUTH ST. UNDER BRIDGE

STATEMENT

September 26, 1981

I, Tecching Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece.

I shall stay INSIDE for one year, never go inside.

I shall not go in to a building, subway, train, car,
airplane, ship, cave, tent.

I shall have a sleeping bag.

The performance shall begin on September 26, 1981 at
2 P.M. and conclude until September 26, 1982 at 2 P.M.

Tehching Hsieh

New York City
