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Tehching Hsieh: a man of his time



An image from One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock). Picture: Michael Shen. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York Source: Supplied

WHEN Taiwan-born New York-based artist Tehching Hsieh was about 18, he encountered Albert Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and something stuck with him. "It was rooted in my head," he says. "I was aware of the absurdity of Sisyphus's burden. And his happiness."

There is a very real suggestion of the Sisyphian in the immense undertakings to which Hsieh — the performance artist whom Marina Abramovic has dubbed "the master" — has submitted himself in the name of art. In a series of "performances" — the term seems inadequate — in the late 1970s and 80s, Hsieh spent a year confined to a cage in his studio, a year without shelter on the streets of New York City, and a year tethered to another artist at the waist by 2.4m rope. Hsieh has not just devoted his life to his art, he has, in a very real sense, turned his life into the raw material of his performance.

Considering the profound intensity of his work, the 64-year-old man welcoming me into his spacious apartment above a 99c store in Brooklyn appears remarkably light-hearted. Hsieh, apologetic about his hesitant English, has a Peanuts comic strip on his computer screen. "Life is tough," says the artist, who this month will visit Australia for the first time to re-create one of his famous works at Sydney's Carriageworks. "But we must all laugh in life."

Life in this city was particularly difficult for Hsieh in the beginning. He was just 24 in 1974 when, while working on a Mobil oil tanker in the Delaware River, Philadelphia, he jumped ship, swam to shore and took a \$250 cab ride to New York to start a new life. He had arrived to pursue his dream of being an artist, but spent the next four years washing dishes and mopping up Chinese restaurants.

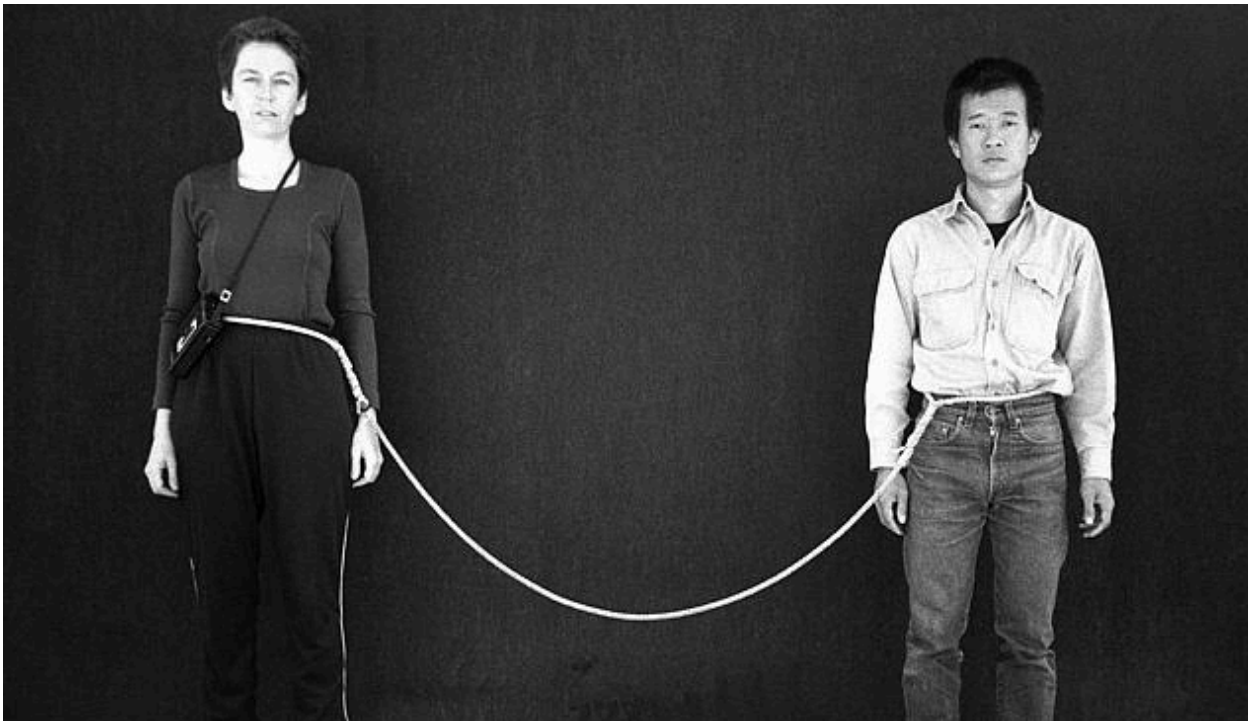
Finally, Hsieh found "my rock to roll up the mountain" — the idea that would become his first performance piece. He tracked down the addresses of prominent artists and critics and, calling himself Sam, sent along his artist's statement: "I, Sam Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece, to begin on

September 30, 1978. I shall seal myself in my studio, in solitary confinement inside a cell-room measuring 11'6" x 9' x 8'. I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television, until I unseal myself on September 29, 1979."

From the time the performance began in his Tribeca studio to a year later — apart from a friend arriving to deliver his meals, collect his refuse and take his picture — Hsieh was left alone with his thoughts. "I thought about anything I could but mostly it was about art," Hsieh says. "I thought, sat, and walked around in the cage, waited for my meals and ate my meals, scratched one mark in the wall, then the next day everything was started over again. You had to pass one day at a time to survive."

Despite the initial self-promotion and some 19 days when the studio was open for spectators, there were few visitors. In the midst of New York's buzzing downtown art scene, little notice was taken of what was quietly unfolding in the artist's studio.

At the artwork's conclusion, Hsieh was inspired to redouble his efforts. Only six months after emerging from self-imposed incarceration, he embarked on another yearlong performance that would make the monotony of his first ordeal seem like a walk in the park. From April 11, 1980, to April 11, 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour, on the hour — 8627 times in 366 days. The punishing schedule meant he couldn't sleep or leave his studio for anywhere near as much as an hour for an entire year. More explicitly than in his first performance piece, Hsieh became a captive of time itself.



Roped to Linda Montano for Art/Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York Source: Supplied

From this month, Carriageworks will display what Hsieh describes as "the tip of the iceberg" of that performance: artefacts and documentation including Hsieh's worker's uniform, 366 telltale time cards and a film comprised of the 8627 hourly photographs, in which Hsieh's shaved baldness sprouts a head of hair that eventually extends past his shoulders.

"It's an immensely powerful statement," says Nina Miall, curator of the Carriageworks exhibition. "At a glance, the viewer can take in the full magnitude of the artistic endeavour: the physical and psychological stamina it required, the immense toll it took on the artist, his absolute commitment to completing the task."

There's no doubt Hsieh endured great strain for the piece. His only escape was symbolic: in his sleep, he says, he fantasised about not being an artist. "The pain had many layers."

But Hsieh rejects the term "endurance", likewise any suggestion his work reveals a preoccupation with suffering. To him, the suffering was a necessary but incidental by-product of his larger interrogation of the passage of time, his exploration of his own oft-repeated philosophy: "Life is consuming time until die." Hsieh devoted whole years to his performances because, as he explains, that amount of time forces us, the viewer, "to think what life means".

After Time Clock, Hsieh completed three further one-year performance pieces. But in 2000, he vowed to stop making art entirely.

It was only after that — as recently as five years ago and some 30 years after the Cage Piece — that New York finally caught up with Hsieh, with showings at the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art. International exhibitions soon followed. At the time of our meeting, he is busy working on a floorplan for a career-spanning retrospective.

Even so, despite looking forward to his first Australian visit, Hsieh says he has never been bothered by any perceived lack of recognition. Nor is he especially moved now to find himself in the belated embrace of the art community. "If you have faith in the work you do, doing art itself is the reward," he says. "You cannot control how the work is received or responded. If it gets attention or not, you have to spend time in the way you feel is worthy. I'm still doing what I have been doing all my life: passing time."

LIFE, PERFORMED

One Year Performance 1978-1979 (Cage Piece)

Between September 29, 1978, and September 30, 1979, the artist locked himself in a 11'6" × 9' × 8' wooden cage. With only a basin, a bucket and a bed at his disposal, he was not allowed to talk, read, write, or listen to radio or TV. A friend came daily to deliver food, remove waste and take a photograph.

One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)

Between April 11, 1980, and April 11, 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour on the hour. The project meant he never slept longer than the time between each punch. Each time he punched the clock, he took a single picture of himself, which has been turned into a six-minute film.

One Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)

Between September 26, 1981, and September 26, 1982, Hsieh spent an entire year in the outdoors. He did not permit himself to enter buildings or find shelter. He lived around various part of New York City with only a backpack and a sleeping bag.

Art/Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984 (Rope Piece)

Fellow artist Linda Montano and Hsieh spent a year between July 4, 1983, and July 4, 1984, tethered to each other with a 2.4m-long rope. To complicate matters, they had to stay in the same room but were not permitted to touch each other until the end of the one-year period.

One Year Performance 1985-1986 (No Art Piece)

For 12 months, Hsieh vowed to make no art, speak no art, see no art, and read no art. He also did not enter any public art institutions.

Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999 (Thirteen Year Plan)

Between 1986 and 1999, Hsieh vowed he "Will make Art during this time. Will not show it publicly." The vow of artistic abstinence lasted until his 49th birthday

Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance, 1980-1981, will be profiled at Carriageworks, Sydney, from April 29 to July 6.