

SEANKELLY

Delaney, Brigid. "Tehching Hsieh, extreme performance artist: 'I give you clues to the crime'," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017.



Tehching Hsieh has confined himself to a single room for a year, punched an office timecard every hour for a year, and been tied to another artist for a year. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning

"My impression of the Venice Biennale is that it is the Olympic Games of the arts," says Tehching Hsieh. "I'm in the category of marathon."

If any artist knows about endurance it is Hsieh, a Taiwanese artist who has created some of the most extreme performance art ever made. His work, mostly made in obscurity in a series of challenging one-year performances, was a precursor to the likes of Marina Abramović who acknowledges him as "the master".

Recognition has come relatively late for Hsieh, who at 66 years old describes himself as "semi-retired". Thirty years after his first year-long performance piece, his work was exhibited in 2009 in the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art, and in 2014 he held an exhibition at Carriageworks in Sydney. In his most extensive retrospective yet, at this year's 57th Venice Biennale, he is representing his home country Taiwan in a pavilion that records some of his most fascinating and thought-provoking works via an archive of documents, contracts, photographs and maps.

"My performance artwork is time-based," Hsieh tells Guardian Australia in conversation in Taipei. "Once time passes – they all disappear. All that's left are the records; and that's all you see in this show, an archive."

His Venice pavilion is entitled *Doing Time* and is a presentation of a selection of Hsieh's time-based performance art, never before exhibited together. The New York Times named it one of the top 10 works to see this year at Venice. Along with some other work, the Biennale showcases two of his one-year pieces *Outdoor Piece* and *Time Clock Piece*, or rather evidence of them, since the work existed only in the moment it was performed.



Tehching Hsieh's One Year Performance (1981-1982)

So we see photographs of Hsieh punching on to a time clock in Time Clock Piece and maps of places in Manhattan where he slept, washed, defecated and ate outside for a year in Outdoor Piece. Hsieh's notable works include durational performance art pieces that are strongly rule-based and involve contracts signed and witnessed, with the conditions certified by a lawyer. They are also – in this current age of distraction and endless stream of information and entertainment and our desire for comfort – scarcely believable. Why would someone put them through such intentional pain and discomfort?

"I don't want to say 'my work is about that' because then it won't be about another thing," Hsieh says. "It needs to be open. I want for people to feel like this is a universal conversation. My work always touches on time and life."

Hsieh first came to the United States in 1974 from Taiwan – jumping ship in Philadelphia and making his way to New York, where he intended to be an artist. Already Hsieh had been making art in Taiwan, including a work in 1973 where he jumped off the second floor of a building, shattering both ankles. But breaking into the New York art scene would take years.

"I left Taiwan for the US. I was a sailor," Hsieh says. "I was an illegal immigrant for 14 years until I was granted amnesty. When I got to New York, I took two years to find Soho. I'm illegal and I'm afraid to take subway. I only know Washington Square and I only know people doing portrait in the street – I don't know this art scene."

Instead he worked in a restaurant and in 1978 began his first major piece of work in the US. In One Year Performance 1978–1979 (Cage Piece), Hsieh spent a year confined to a cell-like room, where a friend brought him food, clothing and removed his waste. Over the year, he vowed not to converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television. He wrote to several influential critics and artists to inform them he was doing the work and held a series of open viewings where people could come at predetermined days to see it – but at the time, the work did not cause a big splash.

This exercise in extreme boredom was recorded via a series of photographs that show Hsieh with a shaved head at the start of the year, wearing prison-style garments embroidered with his name. Gradually his hair grew long and unkempt and the photographs show us a sliver of the boredom Hsieh must have experienced: he marks notches in the walls, he sits with his head in his hands, he looks blankly at the camera.



Tehching Hsieh's Doing Time exhibition. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning

In the work there is no talk or hint of transcendence through lack of stimulation and inactivity. Instead there is just grinding boredom – the lethal sort that drives people mad.

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Hsieh then followed this work up with *One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, where he punched an office timecard every hour, denying himself any real sleep or significant activity.

He says of that work: “I was thinking about wasting time. Before I had a studio but I didn’t know what to create. I was just wasting time, thinking, for years. Then I turned wasting time into art. So I can say I come here to waste my time and I enjoy it. I’m not doing object-style art but I like thinking. I’m working hard but I’m doing almost nothing. That’s the way I like it.”

From 1981 to 1982, Hsieh undertook what must be one of the most extreme pieces of performance art ever performed. For *One Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)*, including one of the coldest winters on record, he avoided any kind of shelter and lived on the streets of New York with a sleeping bag.

Reflecting back on that experience, Hsieh says the most stressful part of the experience was not being clean. “‘You are dirty’ – people stay away – kids laugh at you. I am a clean person. That is peace to me.”

Adrian Heathfield is co-author with Hsieh of the monograph *Out of Now*, about Hsieh’s legacy as a seminal early figure in the evolution of durational performance art. “There are some really beautiful photos of the *Outdoor Piece* – some of which are exhibited in Venice,” Heathfield says. “And they show Hsieh’s physical condition – he is covered in dirt, he is really filthy. Sometimes he gets a wash. When you are making the outdoor piece, you are making yourself very vulnerable. He was in a very vulnerable condition.”

The only time Hsieh went inside all year was when he was arrested for vagrancy. Arraigned to appear at court, Hsieh came before a sympathetic judge who had read about the artwork in the *Wall Street Journal*, and immediately released him back on the street.

At the conclusion of the work, you would think Hsieh would be keen to take a break, but he embarked on another difficult one-year project. From 1983 to 1984, he and another artist Linda Montano lived in enforced proximity by keeping an eight-foot rope tied round their waists at all times. The two artists signed a manifesto for the one-year performance stating:

We will stay together for one year and never be alone

We will be in the same room, at the same time, when we are inside

We will be tied together at waist with an 8-foot rope

We will never touch each other

In *Out of Now* the performance is documented by a series of time-stamped photographs that show the pair over the course of the year (you can see the seasons change, as well as hair styles) roped together. There they are – cooking, sitting around with friends, walking down a Manhattan street. But the performance stirs the imagination; did they fight? What happened if they wanted to have sex with someone? Did they love or hate each other by the end of the year? And are they still in touch?

“That piece came with a job, and a challenge to deal with society,” says Hsieh. “The job just pays one person and we share half. She had to take train at 5 o’clock in the morning and teach there and I went too and we shared half [the money].”

Then, Hsieh spent a year without having anything to do with art, which he followed by a work called Thirteen Year Plan – 13 years of making art that would never be shown. After 31 December 1999 he pledged never to make art again.

With the Outdoor Piece, Heathfield also believes that work to be prescient. “We are increasingly being cast out of our securities outside our dwellings. We are people constantly on the move, refugees, and this involves us in a new struggle to survive, we have to form a new relationship with nature.”



Tehching Hsieh, One Year Performance 1981-1982

The reason Hsieh took so long to find a substantial audience and critical acclaim is partly due to ignorance and racism, believes Heathfield.

“Everyone knew Hsieh’s work was very important but no one was writing about it. It was just one photo here or there. It’s because it was hard work to understand the cultural other – and people were not prepared to do that work. The reason for his exclusion into history at the time is that they [artists of colour] are not written into history because they are not white.”

And now, all we have is the archives. Hsieh says: “Since 2000 I said I would not create any new artworks. I’m a sub artist. I’m a witness to a past crime scene and I can give you clues to this crime scene.”