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Tehching Hsieh's Art of Passing Time

VENICE — One of the most energizing and provocative contributions to the 2017 Venice Biennale is situated in a former prison, Palazzo delle Prigioni. Within the 16th- and 17th-century quarters of this palazzo, one can find the provisional Taiwan Pavilion, where *Tehching Hsieh: Doing Time* is currently on view. Despite the artist's celebrated international reputation — which has grown steadily since he illegally jumped ship from an oil tanker anchored near Philadelphia in 1974 — the exhibition, commissioned by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, represents Hsieh's first major, official recognition by his homeland. The Palazzo Prigioni is filled with documentation of two of the artist's landmark performances, including photographs, notes (both typed and handwritten), maps, sketches, clothing, a rucksack, films, and video.

Hsieh's first durational piece, "One Year Performance 1978–1979" (Cage Piece), was spent in a cage the artist built for himself in his ground-level studio on Hudson Street. There, he essentially did nothing for a year — no reading, no writing, no television. He simply focused on "passing time," in his words, or, as the title of the current exhibition states, "doing time," in the sense of allowing himself to be imprisoned in a self-made cage. As an artist, his medium was time; therefore, his work was to do time, or to perform it. Presumably, he felt the inevitable effects of this practice — whether emotional, psychological, or biological — but insofar as possible, they were not outwardly expressed.

Unlike most production-oriented artists who make objects in their studios, one might say that Hsieh neither works nor makes work. Rather, he performs his conceptual projects in a manner that highlights the presence of everyday or routine time. This idea can be seen in the two pieces chosen by the curator Adrian Heathfield for the Taiwan Pavilion: "One Year Performance 1980–1981" (Time-Clock Piece), wherein the artist punched a factory time clock every hour, on the hour, for a year (he missed 133 times out of 8,760 possible punches); and "One Year Performance 1981–1982" (Outdoor Piece), in which the artist lived entirely outdoors in Lower Manhattan for a year, including through one of the most severe winters in recorded history. The fact that the artist performed these pieces consecutively is a crucial aspect of their sustained impact.

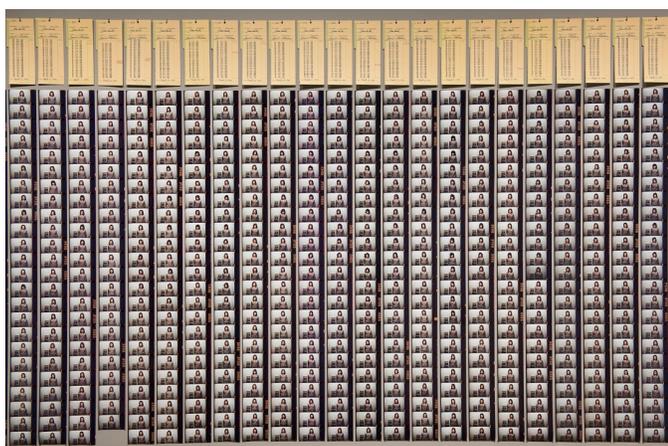


Tehching Hsieh, "One Year Performance 1981–1982," installation view at 2017 Venice Biennale (photo © Hugo Glendinning, courtesy Taipei Fine Arts Museum)

While there's little doubt that Marxism has played an important role in the recent history of East Asia, two of the three catalogue essays for the Taiwan Pavilion seem to overstate the case relative to Hsieh's position. The

representation of his body in ideological (Marxist) terms may have theoretical relevance, but at the same time, it deters us from confronting the more challenging, experiential dimensions of his art. For example, there's little doubt that punching a time clock once an hour or the task of finding a vacant lot in which to defecate could become daily obsessions. While the first is a self-inflicted task, requiring the artist to register the time every hour *for an entire year*, the second is based on a system of natural necessity. Both tasks had an effect on the artist's physical body. In addition, one might consider Hsieh's psychological conflict and trepidation about living outside illegally in a foreign country, without a visa or legal papers of any kind. (He received a Green Card in 1988 and became an American citizen in 1994.)

These omnipresent mind/body concerns over the course of two of Hsieh's most austere and arduous performances were integral to the art/life paradigm that he struggled to actualize in a most extreme way. Although coming from a different perspective, the Zen-inspired avant-garde composer John Cage was known for teaching this concept at the New School for Social Research in the mid-1950s: it essentially brought art into life and life into art. The paradigm may have been a criterion, conscious or unconscious, for Heathfield's decision to show these two *One Year Performances* (out of five) together in Venice.



Tehching Hsieh, "One Year Performance 1980-1981," installation view at the 2017 Venice Biennale (photo © Hugo Glendinning, courtesy Taipei Fine Arts Museum)

Viewing the show, it also becomes clear how forcefully Hsieh was challenging the notion of work, whether the routine, everyday kind or the sort of work exhibited by artists. It's difficult to employ the term when referring to his performances, largely because nothing is made or accomplished in them. There is no real artwork available, other than documents that point back to Hsieh's primary interest, passing time, as shown in the systemically generated photographs of "Time Clock Piece" and the more casual photographs of "Outdoor Piece," which show the artist resting and, in some cases, eating. In a recent meeting with the artist at his Brooklyn studio, Hsieh explained that "passing time is evidence we are still in life. You cannot stop time. Everyone passes time, whether a king or a homeless person. To understand this means we are all equal."

In contrast to what some writers have claimed, Hsieh also insisted that his performances were never intended as autobiographical. Rather, he says he was interested in exploring the conditions of everyday urban society that make it difficult for some people to survive. Hsieh believes that reflecting on these conditions over the past decades has helped him seek what he calls "a philosophical attitude toward living." The physiological challenges that were a constant, ongoing reality at one time have, in recent years, become systemic thoughts about what he was actually doing. This became clear when Hsieh showed me a carefully rendered, industrial-style drawing, the kind of lean, aerial view that architects would produce for a building or renovation project. For the artist, the drawing represents a significant concept, namely that "the quantity of one's time is equal to the quantity of space." His aspiration is to eventually build a corridor-like space in which the five *One Year Performances* would be converted into a series of five side-by-side cubic compartments, with an extended longitudinal room representing the piece that followed them, "Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999" (Thirteen Year Plan).

"Thirteen Year Plan" mandated that the artist would make art, but not display it. The piece was, essentially, a work of art in which Hsieh attempted to make his own disappearance. His idea was never fulfilled exactly in the

way he meant it, but one wonders if this desire to disappear was what he meant when he talked about bringing art and life together at the outset of his *One Year Performances*.



Tehching Hsieh, "One Year Performance 1981–1982," installation view at 2017 Venice Biennale

Between 1974 and 1978 (the year in which "Cage Piece" began), Hsieh thought a good deal about his art/life paradigm. Much of this was done while mopping the floor of a Soho restaurant during off hours, which gave him a little money and some time to reflect on what he was going to do. The image of an unknown, undocumented Hsieh meditating on his artistic philosophy while cleaning a restaurant floor suggests a Zen monk who sweeps fallen leaves off the stone steps of a temple as a means of getting into a mood of contemplation. I have often wondered whether the "Cage Piece" that resulted was an indirect homage to John Cage and his work with a similar art/life paradigm. Perhaps the concept of disappearing during the "Thirteen Year Plan" was Hsieh's manner of entering into his art, without losing contact with time while he was in it.

Tehching Hsieh: *Doing Time continues at Palazzo delle Prigioni (Castello 4209, San Marco, Venice) through November 26.*