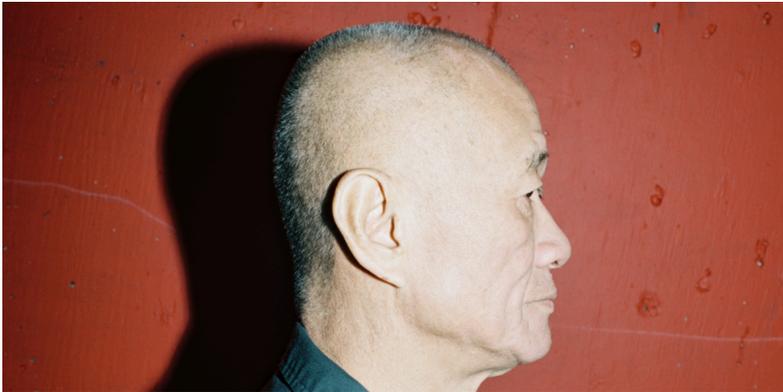


Stone, Byrony. "Performance art's "Master" Tehching Hsieh on the importance of isolation," *Its Nice That*, January 18, 2018

It's Nice That

Performance art's "master" Tehching Hsieh on the importance of isolation



*As for so many artists before him, recognition came late to Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh. 30 years stretched between Hsieh's first performance in his Tribeca studio to the artist's inclusion in the 2009 Guggenheim exhibition "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989". Now, the elusive artist is in higher demand than ever, last year filling the Taiwan Pavilion at Venice Biennale with "Doing Time", an exhibition which took a backwards look at his work. When the Live Art Development Agency presented "Outside Again", a film directed by Adrian Heathfield and Hugo Glendinning about the artist's legacy, *It's Nice That* took the rare opportunity to sit down with Tehching at LADA's new home in the Garratt Centre, Bethnal Green in an attempt to find out why the artist gave over his life to art.*

"I feel that isolation is very good for artistic thinking," performance artist Tehching Hsieh announces slowly, his tongue bearing the weight of every syllable. "All humans exist in time."

If anyone is qualified to serve up stark statements on the subject of isolation it is Hsieh. Born in 1950 in Nan-Chou, Pingtung Country, Taiwan, in his early 20s Tehching Hsieh headed west aboard an oil tanker. When it docked in Philadelphia, the sailor jumped ship. An illegal immigrant in America, Hsieh found his way to New York where he worked undocumented for four years as a cleaner and pot washer. Then, in 1978, from his Tribeca apartment he began a string of six durational performance art pieces which measured the months, weeks, days, minutes and seconds of his daily existence for the next 22 years.

The first was *One Year Performance 1978-1979*. Nicknamed "Cage Piece", the artwork saw Hsieh sealed, in the presence of a lawyer, inside a 11.5 x 9 x 8 foot wooden cage furnished with a single bed, bucket, wash basin and lights. He shaved his head, pulled on a prison-style uniform and lived in the cell for a whole year, without writing, reading, talking, watching TV or listening to the radio, and only his thoughts for company.

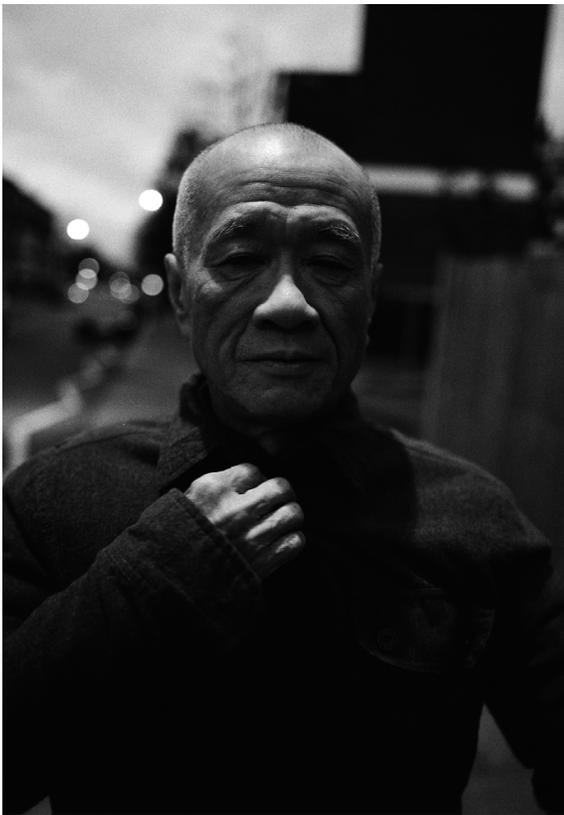
The following year, Hsieh undertook *One Year Performance Piece 1980-1*, "Time Clock Piece", a second year-long "lifework" through which the artist tied himself geographically and temporally to a time clock with the rule that he must punch into a workers time clock in his studio every hour, on the hour, at which point a photograph would be taken to document the action.

Next, Hsieh spent 12 months roaming the streets of a then considerably more dangerous New York on the self-inflicted proviso that he must endure a year without entering shelter of any sort in *One Year Performance, 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)*. A subsequent year-long feat of endurance physically held Hsieh to fellow performance artist Linda Montero in *Art/Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984 (Rope Piece)*, when the pair tied themselves together with an eight foot-long piece of rope which forced them to spend every waking — and sleeping — moment of 52 weeks together. Paradoxically, painfully, the artists ruled against any form of physical contact with one another during the 365 days.

For Hsieh's fifth piece, *One Year Performance 1985-1986 (No Art Piece)* the artist banned himself from creating art, talking about it, researching it or even entering any kind of art establishment, and his sixth and final "lifework", *Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999 (Thirteen Year Plan)* was not one but 13 years long, a "13 year plan" in which the artist dedicated himself to making art but not exhibiting it.

For 14 years, in legal terms, Tehching Hsieh did not exist. He was ignored not only by the U.S. Government but by New York's elitist, exclusive art world which had no space for a Taiwanese male performance artist, much less one who barely spoke English. "Nobody showed my work," he tells me. These days, Tehching is a passport carrying American citizen, and in the last few years, the man who didn't go to bed for a year has become something of an art world celebrity, the subject of a glut of interviews which make concrete his legacy as a "master performance artist", a title bestowed on him by Marina Abramovic, the discipline's reigning queen. Far from an outsider, Hsieh is now celebrated by the same institutions which tactically ignored him for the 30 years that stretched between his first performance to his 2009 Guggenheim exhibition. The photographs, legal contracts and maps which painstakingly document his work have occupied space at MoMA, the Tate, Guggenheim and the Taiwanese Pavilion at Venice Biennale. At last, an audience began to connect to the brutally lonely work of the single-minded artist.

"I feel that isolation is very good for artistic thinking,"



If social media reveals anything about our collective condition, it's that loneliness is endemic. We are more alone than ever, a generation of sad people artificially connected to other sad people by a glistening web of digital threads. We have more "friends" than ever, pockets filled with thousands of "followers": one tweet or Instagram story validates our existence, comments affirm that yes, we're still alive.

Loneliness is perhaps one reason for Tehching Hsieh's latent success. Not that the artist cares. "The audience is secondary," Hsieh points out, before qualifying. "If I didn't document my work, you would not be here today to interview me." If his art wasn't made for others, who was it made for? "I don't want to say my work is therapy,"

he returns. A master of endurance, over the course of a 40 minute-long conversation, Hsieh reveals himself to me as a master of a second skill, obfuscation, an expert in politely refusing to fence his work with a singular meaning. "If I say one thing you cannot just follow it, you have to go in the opposite direction to get the whole picture," he explains, sensing my frustration. "American people say 'Catch 22': you can never win, so it's important and not important – that's my answer."

Still, "therapy" hangs between us, a word cast into being by him, not me. If Hsieh's work was therapy it would be a masterclass in immersion therapy, each year long lifework requiring the artist to travel deep into the gaping darkness of isolation: from society, from autonomy, from privacy, from art and the art world which ignored him anyway.



