

*Tehching Hsieh. A question of time*

For twelve months, since April 11, 1980, Tehching Hsieh hasn't been able to sleep for a whole night without interruptions. To be precise, he hasn't even been able to sleep for two hours running. Every 60 minutes the sound signal produced by his watch connected to a loudspeaker woke him up, and reminded him of the task he had self-imposed—that of clocking in at every single hour, 24 times a day, throughout a whole year. Be it day or night, at every hour Hsieh, wearing work, prison-like clothes, went to a grey-walled room in his loft in Manhattan and stamped a time card in a sign-in machine. A few seconds later, a 16 mm camera captured a picture of his tense face next to the machine. A witness was responsible for examining and signing every day card, in order to assure that it had been regularly stamped 24 times. Moreover, at the end of the twelve months the witness confirmed that the 16 mm film was not falsified. Projected as a motion picture, it condenses a whole year into six minutes. The artist's hair, which is shaved at the beginning of the video, reaches his shoulders at the end of it. In order to complete the film, Hsieh had to undergo extreme psychophysical stress and to reorganize his own life meticulously around the passing of the hours: for instance, he could not move away from his loft for longer than 60 minutes.

In Taiwan, his native country, Tehching Hsieh had been a painter, but he soon got bored of the limited potential of this practice and decided to try new ways. In 1973 he let someone take a picture of himself while jumping from the second floor. He hadn't heard of Yves Klein and his *Saut Dans Le Vide*, and he didn't know the English expression "performance art." What he wanted—he declared 20 years later—was to be "a serious artist." He knew he couldn't reach his aim in Taiwan, so he signed on as a sailor on a cargo boat bound for the U.S. He was put ashore in Philadelphia in 1974, he took a cab to New York City, and then he left no more traces of himself and became an illegal alien.

New York began to notice him between 1978 and 1979, when he made the first of his five *One Year Performances* (which he conceived to be one-year-long because "one year is the largest single unit of how we count time. It takes the earth a year to move around the sun. Three years, four years, is something else. It is about being human, how we explain time, how we measure our existence"). On September 30 of 1978, Hsieh entered a room he had built in his loft, a wooden box with a wall of iron bars measuring about 3,5x2,7 m. He stayed in there until September 29 of 1979, in solitude, without reading or writing (apart from the signs he marked on the walls to count the days), without watching TV or listening to music, without talking at all. A friend was responsible for taking him some food and clean clothes and for picking up his waste; visitors were admitted only within rigid visiting hours, and on condition that they didn't say a word. The moderate amount necessary to finance the project came from the sublet of the loft. At the close of that voluntary imprisonment, the impact of the external world, of the crowd in the streets of Manhattan, was extremely violent. The artist says that it felt just like an aggression.

The New York art community was now intrigued by Tehching Hsieh. At the expiring of *Time Piece*, his second *One Year Performance* (that of the clock-in machine), a little throng gathered in his loft in order to look at him stamping a card for the very last time. In the room nearby, the cage where he had lived the previous year was still visible. The sound of the machine stamping the last card was received with a burst of applause, to which he replied with a few bows. After the little ceremony, Jon Siskin from the magazine *High Performance* asked him whether any artist had influenced him in the conceiving and carrying out of *Time Piece*: Hsieh answered "Sisyphus."

The third *One Year Performance* started at 2 p.m. of September 26, 1981. As in the previous ones, the rules to follow had been committed to a lapidary statement: "I shall stay OUTDOORS 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." Throughout a year Hsieh wandered about as a voluntary homeless man. He

faced the winter of 1981-82, one of the coldest of the century, by lighting fires to get warm and sleeping on cardboard sheets placed close to the wall or between two parked cars, where he could be sheltered from the wind without needing to enter a building. On a map he wrote notes of the places where he slept and ate; he kept in touch with his friends through public phones; at times, he put posters up on the walls in order to inform the public about when and where it would have been possible to meet him. Despite all his efforts, a violation of the regulations occurred when he was arrested in consequence of a fight and forced to spend a few hours at a police station.

One could suppose that, after a whole year spent outdoors, having a roof overhead again is of great relief; or that, on the contrary, it induces an attack of claustrophobia and makes any room feel like a prison. In the case of Hsieh, it seems that none of these hypotheses is correct: "I felt depressing after I finished *Outdoor Piece*, and I felt the same after the other pieces, because of emptiness as well as having to come back to normal life and dealing with the reality." Wasn't the experience of being homeless throughout a year "real" enough? Can the daily routine be even harder than a whole, freezing winter spent with no shelter at all? These are some of the many questions left unanswered by this enigmatic artist.

His fourth *One Year Performance* was the only one that involved another person, the performance artist Linda Montano. Throughout a year since July 4 of 1984, they remained tied by the waist to each other with a 2,5 meters long rope. Two witnesses (among them, the avant-garde composer Pauline Oliveros) sealed the knots with lead, and one year later they attested that the knots hadn't been tampered with. Hsieh and Montano didn't know each other before the performance, and yet from its start on they had to share every single activity, including the most basic and private ones—or at least to do everything while being few tens of centimeters apart from each other. But this closeness didn't provide the physical contact: "We will never touch each other," said the statement signed by both. Siamese twins and physically bound together for the space of one year, but not as friends or lovers. Proximity does not necessarily mean intimacy, neither physical nor psychological.

The fifth and last *One Year Performance* (July 1985 - July 1986), because of the nature of the rule on which it was based, is practically not documented at all. The statement merely provided that Hsieh couldn't create or enjoy art for a whole year: "I shall not do art, not talk art, not see art, not read art, not go to art galleries and art museums. / I shall just go in life." Simple to say but difficult to execute (Maurizio Cattelan planned something similar, i.e. his *Fondazione Oblomov*, but he couldn't even dream of putting it in practice on his own) and impossible to document. An entirely personal performance based on the paradox of making art without making it, and even better through a systematic rejection of it and of everything that has to do with it.

This is the most eccentric among the *One Year Performances*, and it is even disappointing at a superficial level. The physical and mental strain that endowed the previous ones with an "agonistic" quality is lacking here: no deprivation of sleep, no adventures as an urban wanderer, no rope binding. The rule is invisible, as well as the outcome. And this is exactly why his fifth and last performance is important—because it puts the previous ones in the right perspective. Marina Abramovic declared that she considers Hsieh "a master," but he stressed the difference between his own performances and the Serbian artist's, made in collaboration with Ulay. At the core of the latter ones were the danger and the psychophysical endurance conceived as a privileged means of perception and self-expression. In Hsieh's opinion, the fulcrum of the *One Year Performances* was different: it's not the rules on which they are based, even if they provided a hard test. The endurance was just a means to reach another aim, i.e. the perception of time in itself, as pure quantity and essential dimension of life: "It doesn't matter what I do, I pass time."

Clearly, if the content of the performance is not decisive, it doesn't mean that it is irrelevant. Each of the *One Year Performances* concerns a specific subject and raises specific matters and questions.

The time distinctive of the *Time Piece* is that of alienation; it is indifferent to the biological rhythms of our body as is the capitalist economy (of which it makes a sinister parody). In the performance with Linda Montano, on the contrary, time is based on the individual needs and on the requirement to negotiate them with other people's; it is not mechanical like that of *Time Piece*, but rather—even if in a reduced form—it is social. Moreover, the *Outdoor Piece* is founded on a primordial concept of time, in which this last is mainly absorbed by the struggle for survival, and the breaks from it are devoted to idleness and contemplation; it is a time which is unknown to those who live an ordinary life in the contemporary Western society, but is still relevant for those who live on the fringe of it, like the homeless, or out of it. And these examples are restricted to the sole perspective on time. Many other issues are at stake—the meaning and the importance of intimacy, mobility, interpersonal communication, and so on.

Despite this, Hsieh's words ("It doesn't matter what I do, I pass time") suggest a deeper reading of his work, framed in a more general perspective. We might call this perspective "transcendental," using the term which Kant applied not to the contents but to the universal forms of human experience, the first and most important of which, for the German philosopher, was exactly time. From this point of view, Hsieh is definitely different from the radical body art. If anything, we could compare him to such artists like Roman Opalka and On Kawara, who were obsessed by a perception of time as absolute and emptied of every content. Kawara particularly is very close to Hsieh, and it's not chance that they're both Asian. Perhaps he's grown up in a culture which is traditionally less materialistic than the Western one, which considers void as a basic element and suggests a different way of plunging in the flood of time and giving in to it. (For once, we're not going to use the word "zen.") But this is just a conjecture. Now Tehching Hsieh doesn't work as an artist any longer, neither in the sublimated and intangible form of the fifth *One Year Performance*. He gives some lectures, and he even takes part in a few shows, but he always and only exhibits documents of his old work. Among them is also the minimal documentation of his sixth performance, the one after which he retired from his artistic practice, convinced that his journey had come to an end. It is not part of the series of the *One Year Performances*, since it went on for no less than thirteen years. Hsieh officially started it on December 31 of 1986, and he told that he'd have made public its content only the day after its conclusion, whose date he fixed on December 31 of 1999. A few years after the end of the performance, during an interview he tried to explain how difficult it had been to take a step beyond the previous five works, and to create a new one; every performance, in his view, had been a leg of the logically necessary development of his thinking—from the exhausting routing of the *Time Piece* until the invisible discipline of the fifth action. And after this one, what else could have been done? On January 1 of 2000, in the presence of some witnesses, Hsieh read a document saying "I, TEHCHING HSIEH, SURVIVED." A Russian poet wrote: "Who has the courage to say, 'See you soon!' across an abyss of two or three days?" Well, Hsieh's wager with fate was infinitely more reckless: he had the courage to say 'See you soon!' across the abyss of thirteen years. To keep alive until the start of the new century and millennium—here was the rule, both easy and hard to follow, on which the last performance was based. In the light of it, we see that Hsieh's work is as much about the discipline and the power of the will over the body and the senses as it is about the limits of this discipline and will; it is about the power of chance and the ability to accept it; and finally and above all, it is about time and life considered in an abstract, purified way. In comparison with the lapidariness of a sentence like "I SURVIVED," every partial content, every fortunate or unfortunate occurrence, gets put into proportion, becomes smaller, and then disappears. Only the essence is left, rarefied like air at high altitude. An air that is hardly breathable and makes you giddy.

Simone Menegoi, *translated by Cristina Travaglini* (copyright: the author and Mousse Magazine, 2007)