

Tehching Hsieh / One Year Performance 1981-1982
by Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo, 1982
New York City

*"I am like the man who carries around a brick, to
show to the world, how was his house"*

Bertolt Brecht

The Shine of Absence

In a world that is a bombardment of novelties at its best or at its worst a nest of pure nationalism and patriotic illustrations, the consistency of expression in the art of Tehching Hsieh, an illegal alien, intellectual refugee (Chinese-Taiwanese-American) and in a very particular way a visual poet, demonstrates that mental art as transcribed by physical extremes is beyond our capacity of accomplishment, that the coexistence between the border of body and mind is an intense relationship with discipline, and that political ideas expressed through individual personal experience can be easily understood to apply to a collective situation.

Hsieh's art, hovering as it does on the margin of the art world, mirrors his own life experiences of functioning on the fringes of illegality. Arriving from Taiwan in 1974, he requires four years of cultural shock as an immigrant artist before he can absorb those experiences and translate them into art. One of the tendencies of the immigrant/exile is the tendency to hide, the initial desire to be anonymous. By first assuming the name Sam Hsieh, the artist can't help but invoke for us the memory of Uncle Sam, a national, mythical figure, an image so reproduced as to be invisible. It is ironic then, that halfway through ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1981-1982, where he has been the most anonymous, living outdoors among the millions of people in New York City, he reaffirms his original Chinese name, Tehching, and the cultural position of his origin. Living immigration to its ultimate consequences as a refugee, he literally carries his home on his back, a procession of behavior through the hidden landscape of the city. With the signature of his presence, the artist is a silent signal for people who out of necessity live in the streets, living acute physical endurance.

The extremes are always more dramatic. By forcing his body in all his pieces, he reaches a kind of mental levitation and private signals within art, that in this case is within himself, an encounter with the exterior that is his interior. Body resistance + mind resistance = endurance. The discipline which is essential to the accomplishment of his work becomes the pure form of its execution and his own survival. Paradoxically, by transferring a metaphysical idea into its ultimate, exaggerated physical action, the artist gives visual meaning to his mental poetics, incommunicado with communication.

INSIDE SILENCE

In the beginning of each year long performance (there have been three since 1978) the artist mailed out a typed declaration, a statement (silent poetry, a literature without language) that detailed his plans for the year, listing the limitations on his actions and his assumed

responsibilities. The statement is an announcement of the piece before its accomplishment, the poetic beginning, before the actual physical beginning. The intention of the text is an equivalent of the coming action, it doubles the performance as the performance doubles the life of the artist. In the absence of the artist, the statement functions as the artist's speech or rather lack of speech. His incapacity for language creates a private language within himself, his own silence. This silence has speech through the text, communicating an explanation like the instant message offered through the presentation of a hand signal card by a deaf mute. Hsieh offered his message with the same gesture, making it physically available by displaying it on his backpack.

Hsieh documented this performance with photographs, posters, daily maps and a film. He took his own photographs by setting up a camera on a tripod. The camera in this case was used as a typewriter. The artist, as photographer and model, took notes with the images, using them to act as recorded instances of his (and our) memory, icons of a present past that is his work.

In the same way that the images offer an apocalyptic view of the world, they show us the survivor hero who managed to endure the penalties of his circumstances. He paid for his actions with his body on which we can read both the signs of resistance and deterioration and passage of time through the world's changing theater of seasons and the bodies physical manifestations—hair growing longer, skin cracking from the cold, etc.

The posters too served the artists need for audience communication. Public letters (pasted up overnight throughout the entire downtown neighborhood) announced the season's change, and offered us an invitation to be present at a specified date and place for a meeting with the artist.

To serve his memory, the artist recorded his daily activities on a detailed street map of New York City. With short, cryptic notes indicating where he slept, where he ate, how much he spent, etc., the artist gives us only bare statistics, apparently trying to deny the lyrical aspect of his existence.

Living outdoors, the artist exposed every aspect of his private life, allowing himself no privacy except for in his mind. While in the performance he consciously or unconsciously escaped the routine of the piece by thinking things from his other life—a silent discourse with himself that allowed only escape through the head but not from the body.

ONE YEAR IS EARTH AROUND THE SUN, ONE CIRCLE. IT IS THE SYMBOL FOR THE
FOUR SEASONS, OVER AND OVER AGAIN.
TEHCHING HSIEH

Each of the three pieces are performed over a period of one year. For the artist there is no distinction between his art and his life. To do the piece for one week is a performance, to do it for one year is his life. "Life is the performance of your life," always performing, always watching himself, his own voyeur. The paradox is that his art and his life are both represented and denied, simultaneously stated and retracted. The process of his art collapses into the process of his life, a fiction of autobiography. His art performance is a tracing of his life performance, mapping one set of circumstances over another. There is a total transparency of the sign that is filled by the reality of the artist's life. A contradictory mode of appearance- do we see Hsieh's art through his living through his life or his life by the creation of his art. It is hard for us to distinguish one from the artist and for the artist, too, who has done three year-long performances within the space of four years. He is living his life while acting his performance. When we experience the piece, we see the artist not as himself but as the other. We are separated from a direct experience of the

work because we are also experiencing it as his life. Since most of the time the artist remains anonymous in his activity, the presence of the viewer is not crucial to the performance.

The parallel of the space between art and life is framed by acts against natural behavior and need—not to seek shelter when outside, to interrupt sleep by an hourly punching of a time clock, not to speak to anyone and to be confined to one space for a year. Since he minimizes the use of words to explain what he is doing, the artist uses an exaggeration of the action to allow us an access to the meaning of the year's narrative. Desire and will of the artist overcomes the interrupting of commodities and the limiting of freedom. Freedom with limitation, one that is an illusion like the other liberties inside certain rules.

TIME FRAME

In his first performance, Tehching Hsieh spent one year inside a cage/cell that he built out of wood in his studio. He did not speak to anyone, read, write, listen to the radio or watch T.V. His physical needs were taken care of by a friend who came once a day to bring food. In his second piece, he punched a time clock every hour on the hour for one year. In this his third piece, he stayed outside never going inside (except once, when arrested on an assault charge that was later dismissed in court). The common names for these works, the ones used in conversation or in articles are Cage Piece, Time Clock Piece, Outdoor Piece; but these are not correct, not the artist's exact titles. When we look at the printed posters, his letters to the public in which he communicates information, the pieces are referred to as ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1978-1979, ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1980-1981, ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1981-1982. The title anchors the meaning, framing it within time. The profundity of meaning is located within the space of one year. Whatever occurs during that allotted time becomes part of the work, securing the meaning of the work within the confines of time. Hsieh's day to day experience is a run with and against time. His measurements are different than ours because his time is art time and our time is life time. In the first piece, the passage of time was indicated by the gesture of marking a scratch in the wall, the equivalent of one day. But it was Hsieh's day with no clues of real time from watches, sunrises or sunsets. In the second piece time was broken down into hours, each documented by a photograph taken at the moment of punching the clock. In the third piece, time is divided into the seasons, his survival very much dependent on conditions of weather.

It is a personal history of time. How an artist organizes his schedule on how to pass time. Much of time is boring but this too is part of the statement of the work. For the artist, completing his one year performance is not a contest, not a matter of can he do it or not. Before Hsieh begins the piece, he knows that he can manage it physically. There is always the possibilities of unforeseen dangers (natural violence—the weather, artificial violence—from people) but he tries to prepare himself for it. It is still an honor for him to be able to complete the work as planned but it is not a jubilant triumph over the difficulties of the work, not a significant act of survival, but rather just a matter of having seen it through.

Text for the exhibition at Exit Art NY

TEHCHING HSIEH: ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1981-1982

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