

Tovey, Emma-Louise. "Superstuck," *Sleek*, Summer 2012.



THE TRIP

SLEEK 34

## SUPERSTUCK Tehching Hsieh's journeys into imprisonment question the meanings of freedom and movement, stasis and entrapment

Text: Emma-Louise Tovey



TEHCHING HSIEH'S GREATEST DISCOVERY was that freedom was an irony. He had come illegally to America in 1974 because he had heard of an environment where he could practice his art freely, but had found the illegal immigrant life a hardscrabble existence. He was living hand-to-mouth, washing dishes for a living, feeling the shackles of survival clamping him down. So Hsieh literally locked himself up and became his own prison guard. He built a wooden cage in a small Tribeca loft and stayed inside it for one year. He didn't read, he didn't talk, or watch television, or listen to music, or do much of anything. His only freedom was the places his mind could take him to.

"It doesn't matter what I was thinking about," he says while relaxing on a spring Saturday in the Brooklyn home he shares with his wife, his voice still thick with his native Mandarin. "I had to continue thinking, otherwise I would lose control of myself and the ability to handle the whole situation... as an illegal immigrant living at the bottom of the society, I had to face my reality, to be sincere to life and to art. It's more for essence of being: once you feel strong and you define your art form, then you can spread it in a strong way. I came to New York for freedom, to create art. 'Cage Piece' is my way to understanding

the meaning of freedom. I stayed in the cage, but I had freethinking. It is a transformation, through art."

"Cage Piece", from 1978 - 1979 was the beginning of Hsieh's devotion to turning his entire life into an artwork. He drew hashmarks on the wall to mark each day, and his friend Cheng brought him a meagre meal and removed his waste. "I concentrated on thinking about art. Everything I thought about art was about this: how to survive? I thought mostly about my past, sometimes about the outside world, or when Cheng would deliver my meal. Whatever I was thinking, what is important to me is that people can see that in this special period of time, one year, the artist's thinking process becomes a piece of art."

After "Cage Piece," Hsieh's life was a constant process of translating the basic human needs of life into art, sometimes at the expense of his own sanity and health. "I burnt my energy as a young person to do the pieces," he says. His voice is punctuated with something that is not quite nostalgia and not quite regret. When he trips on his words, he pauses and his wife explains the questions to him in Chinese. "Without being fully recovered, I had to start the next piece, and there was risk of not being recovered, or being able to return to



normal life [after] the very different ways of living in the work."

Hsieh had begun his career in Taiwan not exactly knowing where he was going with performance, but the seeds of his gruelling life-works were there: his 1973 "Jump Piece" consisted of Hsieh jumping off a roof and filming it – a sort of parallel to Chris Burden's "danger pieces" and Bas Jan Ader's "Fall" works. But he didn't know about these works – in fact, he didn't quite know what avant garde art was until he literally jumped off a boat and swam to the shores of Manhattan. "I came to New York as it was the art centre of the world," says Hsieh. "I didn't know much about conceptual art. As I was an illegal immigrant, I used the pseudonym Sam Hsieh to hide myself."

Hsieh's flyers (*overleaf*) are beautiful reminders of his era of the late Seventies and early Eighties. They are minimal invitations to view "Sam Hsieh" do perilous things, mostly simply titled "One Year Performance." The front of the flyer would contain a calendar, on which certain dates were circled, denoting when the piece was "open to the public." Not that many people came. Hsieh remained a semi-secret art world anomaly until 2009, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave Hsieh's "Cage Piece" an official re-assessment: "Why was Tehching left out?" Alexandra Munroe, senior curator of Asian art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, said in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2009, "because he was Chinese."

After "Cage Piece," Hsieh entered what was perhaps his most impressive performance in terms of physical and mental endurance. Over one year from April 11 1980 to April 11 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock once an hour for an entire year, mostly depriving himself of sleep. On a breakdown of the piece, which is one of the few documents that remain, Hsieh explains why he missed 133 of the 8,760 required punches: 94 because he was sleeping, 29 because he was late, and 10 because he was early. The worst months were in the middle, but in the final two Hsieh only missed nine punches. "I tried to have a better ending," Hsieh says matter-of-factly.

This work of endurance led to his third "One Year Performance," which is commonly called "Outdoor Piece," (September 26 1981 to September 26 1982). In his statement, Hsieh explains, "I shall stay OUTDOORS for one year, never go inside. I shall not go in to [sic] a building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent. I shall have a sleeping bag." Again, Hsieh found obstructions in the process of turning life into art. "When you stay outside for a long time, like one year, incidents happen," he muses. "I sat in front of a warehouse drinking coffee and the owner didn't like it. He threw away my backpack (I had a camera in it), then he tried to hit me with a metal stick. I took out from my backpack a pair of Nunchaku to fight back. He called the police to catch me." The police came and put him in jail for 15 hours. Thankfully, he wasn't sent to the immigration department, something that he doesn't understand to this day. "When I was in jail, I thought I'd screwed it all up and might be deported. But I went back to streets continuing this piece. I wasn't kicked out of the country; I was lucky."

Hsieh's subsequent pieces continued to explore endurance and freedom. In "Rope Piece," (July 4 1983 to July 4 1984) Hsieh invited fellow performance artist Linda Montano to tie herself to Hsieh for one year. They didn't always get along. In fact, both sides seem to delicately avoid the subject of what that year was actually like. "Peaceful moments were the best we could hope for the piece," says Hsieh.

"That's a closed chapter of my life," says Montano when I rang to ask her about the piece.

Hsieh, in fact, did learn one thing through "Rope Piece": that he needed to operate from the art world within which he had begun to operate. His next piece was a "No Art Piece," 1985 – 1986, in which he did not even think about art for an entire year. Marcia Tucker, a former curator at the Whitney and the New Museum, in her book "A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World", said, "I mailed him a check for his participation in the New Museum exhibition 'Choices', in which we had included several posters marking the beginning, middle, and end of each of Tehching's one-year performances – and he didn't open the envelope until his non-art year was over."

The "No Art Piece" led naturally into Hsieh's final work, "Earth (or 13 Year Plan)." Hsieh would disappear for 13 years, ending his career at the turn of the millennium, and create as much art as he could. The one stipulation is that he would never show this work. "By not show-

ing it," Marcia Tucker writes in "A Short Life of Trouble", "he would be able to attain a certain degree of freedom—no grants, no shows, no 'success.' It meant that he would be able to work entirely on his own terms and not feel that the art world owed him something."

It is in the "13 Year Plan" (1986 to 1999) that Hsieh encountered his greatest artistic challenge. "There was a piece, 'Disappearance,' inside '13 Year Plan,' that was unfinished. I planned to do the piece from 1991 to 1999, yet I stopped doing it after a half year of living in Seattle being away from the world I was familiar with." When he returned, he completed "13 Year Plan," threw a closing viewing, and promptly quit making art for public view.

He has just returned from Taiwan, where he spoke about his 2009 book co-authored by Adrian Heathfield, "Out Of Now", which was recently translated into Chinese. "It's just the beginning for communicating with my own people," says Hsieh.

It says a lot about contemporary art practice that even his homeland is starting to recognize his extremely ahead-of-its-time work. Hsieh's legacy has begun to take hold. "Actually, Hsieh's work is very rational – as well as manifesting tremendous emotional knowledge of the stakes of living," says Adrian Heathfield. "It's just he pushes the logic of his work to the nth degree. I think his works have come, at last, into a new legibility in part because he is being discussed and shown a lot now, but in part because the world has caught up with his sensibility."

Hsieh's work, more than anything, is about the freedom of realizing that time controls the universe, and that there is only so much a man can do. "My work is about time itself," says Hsieh, "not about any specific period of time. I hope my work could be timeless."

Hsieh now lives a life where art is still a central part of his life, but he doesn't engage in it. Instead, he has gone from challenging artist to viewer. "I go to art openings occasionally," he says, "but I like to stay home." [www.tehchinghsieh.com](http://www.tehchinghsieh.com)



Left page: TEHCHING HSIEH, LINDA MONTANO, *Life/Art One Year Performance*, 1983-1984. Life Image. © Tehching Hsieh Linda Montano 1984. This page: Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance*, 1978-1979. Life image. Photograph by Cheng Wei Kuong. © Tehching Hsieh 1979. Courtesy the artists and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York



ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE  
by **SAM HSIEH**



1978

SEPT	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
OCT	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
NOV	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
DEC	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

1979

JAN	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
FEB	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28
MAR	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
APR	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
MAY	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
JUNE	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
JULY	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
AUG	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
SEPT	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

\* Opening performance on September 26, 1978 at 6:00 p.m.  
 \* Closing performance September 28, 1979 at 6:00 p.m.  
 \* Open to public on dates circled from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. 111 HUDSON ST. 2FL. N.Y.C. 10013

ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE  
by **TEHCHING HSIEH**



26 Sept 1981 - 26 Sept 1982

MAR. 20 1982  
 FALL  
 WINTER  
 SPRING  
 SUMMER 2:00 P.M.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE  
 SOUTH ST. UNDER BRIDGE

September 30, 1978

STATEMENT

I, Sam Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece, to begin on September 30, 1978.

I shall seal myself in my studio, in solitary confinement inside a cell-room measuring 11'6" X 9' X 8".

I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television, until I unseal myself on September 29, 1979.

I shall have food every day.

My friend, Cheng Wei Kuang, will facilitate this piece by taking charge of my food, clothing and refuse.

*Sam Hsieh*  
 Sam Hsieh

111 Hudson Street, 2nd/Fl. New York 10013

September 26, 1981

STATEMENT

I, Tehching Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece.

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.

The performance shall begin on September 26, 1981 at 1 P.M. and continue until September 26, 1982 at 2 P.M.

*Tehching Hsieh*  
 Tehching Hsieh

New York City

Poster and statement, above left: TEHCHING HSIEH, One Year Performance, 1978-1979. © Tehching Hsieh 1979. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Poster and statement, above right: One Year Performance, 1981-1982. © Tehching Hsieh 1982. Courtesy the artist, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Detroit, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

**ART / LIFE  
ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE**

*Linda Montano* *Tehching Hsieh*

**1983 - 1984**

JULY	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
AUG	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
SEPT	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
OCT	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
NOV	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
DEC	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
JAN	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
FEB	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28
MAR	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
APR	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
MAY	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
JUNE	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
JULY	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

**111 HUDSON ST. N.Y.C. 10013**

**TEHCHING HSIEH**  
DEC 31 1986 - 1999 DEC 31

**1986 1987 1988 1989**  
**1990 1991 1992 1993**  
**1994 1995 1996 1997**  
**1998 1999**

**EARTH**

July 4, 1983

STATEMENT

We, Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance.

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 during the year.

The performance will begin on July 4, 1983 at 6 P.M. and continue until July 4, 1984 at 6 P.M.

*Linda Montano*  
Linda Montano

*Tehching Hsieh*  
Tehching Hsieh

111 Hudson Street, 2nd/FI. New York 10013

December 31, 1986

STATEMENT

I, Tehching Hsieh, have a 13 years' plan  
I will make ART during this time.  
I will not show it PUBLICLY.  
This plan will begin on my 34th birthday December 31, 1986  
and continue until my 47th birthday December 31, 1999

*Tehching Hsieh*  
Tehching Hsieh

**EARTH**

Poster and statement, above left: TEHCHING HSIEH, LINDA MONTANO, *Life/Art One Year Performance, 1983-1984*. © Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano 1984. Courtesy the artists and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Poster and statement, above right: *Tehching Hsieh, 1986-1999*. © Tehching Hsieh 2000. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.