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Artist Explores Essence of the Daily Grind By Punching In Once an Hour for a Year

By KATHLEEN A. HUGHES

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NEW YORK—Don't tell Sam Hsieh about the nine-to-five grind. For a year he punched a time clock not just twice a day, but every hour on the hour, day and night.

"I wanted to express the artist's life and work," explains Mr. Hsieh, a 30-year-old immigrant from Taiwan who considers himself a "performance" artist. "One year is my symbol for life. Punching a time clock is my symbol for work. Most working people do the same boring things over and over again."

At the end of Mr. Hsieh's year-long "performance," about 70 people gathered in his Manhattan loft to watch him "punch in" for the final time. (The performance lasted from April 11, 1980, at 5 p.m. until April 11, 1981, at 6 p.m.) Dressed in a gray worker's uniform with his name sewn above the pocket, the five-foot-two Mr. Hsieh appeared in the time-clock room at 5:59:30. He stood solemnly for 30 seconds, took four steps forward and punched in.

The applause and cheering seemed to embarrass Mr. Hsieh. He turned to his guests, grinned shyly and said, "Thank you. I like to show my film now."

Mr. Hsieh had made the film of himself by exposing one 16mm. frame after each punch of the clock. To dramatize the time lapse of one year, he shaved his head before punching in the first time.

The film shows the hands of the time clock whirling around while Mr. Hsieh's hair grows out in six minutes from stubble to shoulder length. Because he didn't stand in exactly the same place for each frame, he appears to be having convulsions.

The guests liked the film so much that Mr. Hsieh showed it again. Then people milled around the loft, sipping wine and examining the time clock and the 12 black notebooks holding 366 time cards sealed in plastic. To establish that the clock hadn't been tampered with, delicate paper seals had been glued to it and signed and dated by a witness. The witness also had signed each of the time cards.

A chart posted in the time-clock room indicated that Mr. Hsieh missed 131 punch-ins (about 1.5% of the 8,760-hour total) due to tardiness, earliness or sleeping. To count, a punch-in had to be exactly on the hour.

"I felt bad about the times I missed," said Mr. Hsieh, who had taken certain precautions to avoid oversleeping. His first plan, to use 12 alarm clocks lined up in a row, was jettisoned when he decided he couldn't trust their accuracy. Instead, every night he placed a wristwatch with a built-in alarm in front of a microphone attached to a loudspeaker. Mr. Hsieh said he never slept in the time-clock room because "it symbolizes work."

In his free time during the day, Mr.

loudspeaker and an extra alarm. The total number of punch-ins missed for the month dropped to three from 21.

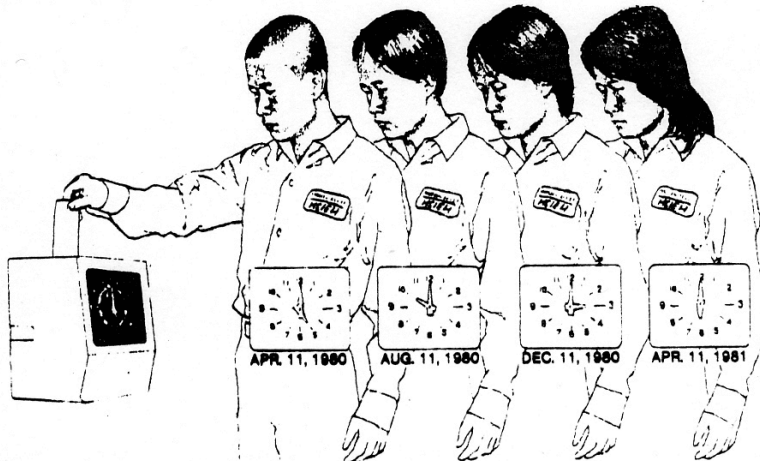
Besides tolerating an ever-increasing sense of fatigue, Mr. Hsieh put up with frequent bad dreams—dreams he says were being interrupted constantly. "I dreamed I wanted to stop punching the time clock and stop being an artist."

Despite the hardships he endured, Mr. Hsieh insists that his art "isn't masochistic, just difficult." In the history of art, he says, "there has always been a cycle of creation and destruction. The artist always creates and destroys order in search of a new ideal. Artists who rebel against the old order often must suffer."

Few of the people who gathered for the

final time-clock performance seemed to doubt its value as art. "Of course it's art," said John Sliskin, a psychology-research assistant at Bellevue Hospital. "It's a distortion of reality." Lydia Maruszko, an economist, said she admires Mr. Hsieh's persistence. "It forces you to think about the daily grind of working," she said, "about the amount of time that flies by."

Leo Castelli, a New York art gallery owner, said he respects Mr. Hsieh, who is "obviously very serious



Hsieh jogged, shopped, met friends and put up posters inviting the public to watch him punch in, one day a month. A beep from his wristwatch always told him when it was time to return home to punch in.

The clock Mr. Hsieh used for punching in, which he purchased for \$360, ran smoothly except for the time his roommate forgot about the "performance" and inadvertently turned off the household's electricity for five minutes. From then on, the time clock stayed five minutes behind Eastern Standard Time.

Although he was sleeping 10 to 13 hours a day, Mr. Hsieh grew increasingly tired as the year wore on. "December was a particularly bad month," he said. "One night I slept through three hours straight." That was the longest uninterrupted period of sleep he had during the year.

In January, Mr. Hsieh bought another

about what he's doing and very committed." But Mr. Castelli isn't sure that Mr. Hsieh's performance can be considered avant-garde. Performance art (expressing ideas by using the body rather than by creating an object) became a legitimate art form in New York in the 1960s, he says, as exemplified by such people as Chris Burden, who had himself shot in the arm.

The clock-punching effort wasn't Mr. Hsieh's first attempt at performance art. His other undertakings have included "Year in a Cage," in which he locked himself in a cage for a year and didn't speak, read or write.