

## **Time and isolation as performance art: A note**

**Ian O'Donnell, University College Dublin**

*In a series of five year-long works the Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh captured critical aspects of the prisoner's experience including the meaning of time, the rigours of solitary confinement, the impact of homelessness and the pressures of inescapable company. These were performed in unambiguously stark, and deeply personal, terms. In a way these pieces of art might be considered partial prison parables which point to, but do not explicate, lessons from which anyone deprived of their liberty might learn.*

The Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh has made a substantial, if somewhat inscrutable, contribution to our understanding of the lived experience of time. In a series of five year-long works created between September 1978 and July 1986, he extended and patrolled the boundaries of temporal experience, forcing himself to become, in an unprecedented way, what Adrian Heathfield has described as 'a sentient witness of time' (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 11).

The first of these works – *Cage Piece* – involved separate and silent confinement in a small cell that had been constructed in the corner of the artist's studio. Measuring 11½ feet long, 9 feet wide and 8 feet high, the cell was sparsely furnished. There was a wash basin (but no toilet), a single bunk with a thin mattress, pillow and blanket, and a bucket for bodily waste. There was no table, chair, shelf or cupboard. There was no access to an exercise area. Two of the walls were of solid construction with the other two, as well as the ceiling, being barred. All were unadorned. Before entering the cell Hsieh shaved his head and donned clothing akin to a prison uniform. 'Sam Hsieh' was printed on his shirt along with a series of numbers, again suggesting coercive confinement.

The numbers on the shirt represented the first (93078) and last (92979) days of his voluntary incarceration and were also stamped on the mattress. (The reason for not using his correct

name was that he was an illegal immigrant at the time and did not wish to draw attention to this status.) Hsieh was sealed into this cell on 30 September 1978 and emerged 365 days later, not having spoken to anyone, not having read or written anything (apart from marking the passage of each day with a scratch on the wall), without listening to the radio or watching television, with no work to do and no opportunity to go outside. A friend brought him food each day, photographed him and took away refuse, always in silence. On one or two days each month (nineteen times in total) the studio was opened to the public and attracted a curious few. If anyone entered to view the work in progress Hsieh took care not to communicate with them, even to the extent of avoiding eye contact. He described how on one occasion an old lady came to the studio, looked around, held the bars and in perplexity asked ‘Where is the work?’ She went away no better informed as Hsieh, true to form, declined to respond (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 327).

This is an extraordinary degree of social isolation and idleness, anticipating and exceeding what supermax imprisonment would later offer, and while Hsieh does not reveal much about what he expected or how he felt and is reticent to discuss, let alone impose, a set of meanings on his artistic endeavours, we do know that he was utterly determined to complete the work, because he felt it would be an important artistic statement, but only if it was fully articulated: ‘I knew it wouldn’t be easily finished ... I just wanted to say what art could be. Art is one way to live, an energy or power that gives you a way to be’ (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 328). As Samuel Beckett put it in an essay about Proust, ‘art is the apotheosis of solitude’ (cited in Svendsen, 2005: 95).

By connecting himself to a larger context, Hsieh’s situation remained meaningful and his resolve was stiffened. This allowed him to exhibit a striking singularity of purpose and an unwavering artistic sensibility. While there are some clear parallels with the kind of self-sacrifice that adherents of some religions undertake in a search for spiritual fulfilment or enlightenment, Tsieh was keen to distance himself from any suggestion that he was in any way influenced by such notions: ‘I did it for art. Not religion. I do it only for art’ (cited in Etchells, 2009: 359). Another reason that Hsieh coped with such extraordinary hardships was that he saw his experiences as ‘art time, not lived time’ (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 334). This imbued them with a different set of expectations and aspirations. When asked how he survived his *Cage Piece* Hsieh said he ‘spent the time staying alive and

thinking about his art' (Smith, 2009). His energies were concentrated simply on being, on allowing time to pass rather than trying to pass time. Like many prisoners, Hsieh did his time, largely unnoticed and unremembered, his performances attracting little interest then or since, although he latterly achieved a degree of recognition in a large and lavishly illustrated book (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009) and his work was brought to a wider audience with an exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art (Smith, 2009).

Struck by the breathtaking ambition of his art and his fearlessness in executing it, while simultaneously wondering about how to sift through its different layers of meaning and its relevance to other audiences, I asked Tehching Hsieh the question, 'If you were to give a single piece of advice to a prisoner embarking on a life sentence who felt overwhelmed by the immensity of time stretching ahead of him, what would it be?' His reply captured the essence of his art, blurring the boundaries between prison and the outside world, while emphasising the human capacity to surmount the particularities of place – time passes wherever we find ourselves – and the importance of finding freedom in a life of the mind. As he put it: 'Life is a life sentence, life is passing time, life is freethinking' (personal communication, 20 June 2011). This also reflects the purity of his endeavour which is about 'passing time, not how to pass time' (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 336). A more focused set of enquiries about how he felt during *Cage Piece* resulted in a highly informative exchange, which is reproduced next.

### **In conversation with Tehching Hsieh**

Q: My first question relates to temporal orientation. Many people who experience long periods of solitariness immerse themselves in the present and blank out the past and future. You have observed that you thought mostly about your past and I wonder if you arrived at a point when you feared that the reservoir of memories would run dry?

A: I did the piece by my free choice, not by outer force. This is different from being imprisoned. For focusing on passing time in this piece, isolation is much needed ... When I was in the cage, there was little stimulation from outside, everything was toward inside, I could only pass time by thinking. I thought about everything I could, the past, the present, and the future, but only my past carried lots of memories as the best source, there was not much new coming in at the present. My memories were exhausted after the first

three months, the time became harder to pass, but I had to keep thinking in order to have control of my mind.

Q: Solitary confinement is often accompanied by disturbed sleep, anxiety, difficulties concentrating, depression, perceptual distortions and hallucinations. Did you ever experience such challenges and if so how did you respond?

A: My sleep and appetite were fine; I don't think I had hallucinations, but this is subjective. Can one identify it when hallucination happens? I had depression, I accepted it as natural in this situation, but I didn't allow it to get worse.

Q: At what point did you decide to mark off each day on the wall and what effect did this act have? Was this done at the same time each day?

A: I didn't think of scratching marks on the wall until I went into the cage the first day. I realised that it was very important to know how many days I had passed, and how many more to go. Knowing the time will keep my mind clear and help me survive in the cage. I had no watch, but I could feel the rhythm of the day by sounds from outside, or by the time my friend delivered food to me. I tried to scratch the mark in the wall at the same time each day. But there were also times I wanted to pass time faster so I scratched the mark earlier, and that made the following day become longer and made me suffer more.

Q: Finally, what were your expectations before you entered the cage? Did you have any preconceptions about how you would feel or any ideas about what might be the consequences of such extreme isolation? How much longer could you have endured?

A: Being an illegal immigrant for four years before starting this piece, my life was already isolated. Although the work was much more extreme than my life, I was thoroughly ready for the commitment, I wanted to use art to transform my plight, the transaction was smooth. I was confident before going inside the cage. After I came out, I was very frangible and found it hard to adjust myself to the reality. The first month after I finished this piece, I stayed indoors most of the time, and had difficulties balancing my body while walking. I went back to the bed inside the cage to sleep at night. I felt peaceful in the

cage. I probably could stay inside two or three more months, but it was possible that I [would have arrived at] a state of mind where control was lost.

(Personal communications, 15, 17, 19, 20 July 2011)

The image of Tehching Hsieh returning to his prison cell to sleep at night is poignantly evocative of the power of institutionalisation. After a year of non-existence in his cage, which one would expect could have only aversive connotations, this is the place where the artist seeks refuge and peace.

Hsieh ran out of material to think about a quarter of the way through his *Cage Piece* and, as he communicated with no-one, and had nothing to read, view or listen to, there was little in the way of sensory or intellectual replenishment. From this point onward he clung onto his sanity with grim determination: 'My memories were exhausted after the first three months, the time became harder to pass, but I had to keep thinking in order to have control of my mind.' This is a man of unusual discipline and dedication to his art and, if the past was no longer fecund for him after three months, it would seem reasonable to suggest this as a possible outer boundary for anyone else who finds themselves in circumstances of extreme solitariness.

The second year-long piece of work – *Time Clock Piece* – was even more brutal in its demands. Starting at 7 p.m. on 11 April 1980 and continuing on the hour, every hour, twenty-four hours a day, until 6 p.m. on 11 April 1981, Hsieh punched a card in a time clock that had been installed in his studio. Each time he stamped his card he posed for a photograph in front of a camera that he had fixed to the ceiling. Of a possible 8,760 punch-ins, Hsieh missed only 133. On 94 occasions he slept through an hour, on 29 he was late (sometimes only by a minute or two), and in the remainder he was early (always by just one minute). As with *Cage Piece* the performance was open to the public on occasional days (fourteen in total) but not surprisingly, given the uneventful nature of the proceedings, very few people took advantage of these viewings. There are echoes here of the pointless labour that sometimes accompanied imprisonment, such as the crank, shot drill or the treadwheel. Hsieh is a worker, dressed in overalls, and faithfully clocking in, but 'producing' nothing. He is the apparently docile wage-slave who subverts the system by directing all of his energy towards the conversion of time and labour into nothing of commercial value. While it is absurd to imagine that many

nineteenth-century prisoners saw themselves as performance artists, had they managed to reinterpret their confinement, the associated burdens may have been easier to bear. What Hsieh shows is that by taking control of the meaning ascribed to a task, a measure of mastery over it can follow. By perpetually teetering on the brink of exhaustion he highlights the absurdity of a submission to clock time that others take for granted.

The psychological toll that this amount of broken sleep must have taken goes unacknowledged by Hsieh, but it would be surprising if it was not substantial. It is almost as if the artist had decided to go head to head with time, to engage in close combat with the hours by punching each one as soon as it appeared, and then preparing himself for the next encounter. The self-imposed constraints of the task meant that he could not stray far from the time clock, which was fixed to the wall of his studio, for rest or refreshment. He had brought time into his workplace, imposed a rigid schedule on himself, and like a boxer facing 8,760 rounds with an indefatigable opponent, knew that the best he could hope for was a valiant defeat. Hsieh shaved his head before battle commenced and on the final day of the performance his hair was shoulder length. This physical transformation contrasted with the ceaseless but unchanging motion of the hands around the face of the clock.

The next performance was a gruelling year spent voluntarily homeless in downtown New York (*Outdoor Piece*), where apart from a few hours under arrest in police custody, Hsieh did not enter any building, subway, train, car or tent, surviving on his wits, sleeping rough and making do with what he could carry in a backpack. Then he spent a year bound by an 8-foot length of rope to another artist, Linda Montano, a former novice nun, who he barely knew in advance and with whom he found it difficult to get on. While *Rope Piece* brought their bodies into close proximity they were prohibited from touching and each spent a tense year orbiting the other. Despite ‘differences, antagonisms and violent disagreements’ they brought their artistic collaboration to a successful conclusion (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009: 52). The final piece (*No Art Piece*) was a year during which Hsieh pledged to have nothing whatsoever to do with art. This involved not talking or reading about art, not visiting galleries or museums, and not doing art (<http://www.one-yearperformance.com/>; site accessed 18 September 2013).

This piece concluded on 1 July 1986 and was followed by thirteen years when Hsieh committed himself to making art but not showing it to anyone. This elongated piece finished on 31 December 1999, the eve of a new millennium and the artist's forty-ninth birthday. It culminated with Hsieh releasing a statement, made from letters cut out of magazines and pasted to a page. This read: 'I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec 31, 1999'. Those who wished for more were to be disappointed, although if they had followed Hsieh's work they could hardly have been surprised.

While a discussion of the art of Tehching Hsieh might appear somewhat anomalous in a criminology journal, it is suggested that the rigours of his approach, the severity of the demands he made upon himself, and the exploration of themes that are central to the prison experience such as the meaning of time, the effects of enforced solitariness and the pressures of inescapable company, make it appropriate to devote some space to what he created, even if its messages must remain somewhat opaque and the search for a complete understanding somewhat futile. (Perhaps yearning to learn more is the very point of the art and a measure of the work's success is the demand it makes on the viewer to attempt to unravel its mysteries, to unpack its assumptions and implications, and to make sense of their own visceral and intellectual responses to it, for it certainly evokes both.)

Each of the five year-long pieces captures an important dimension of the prisoner's experience and sets it out in unambiguously stark terms. In a way they might be considered partial prison parables which point to, but do not explicate, lessons from which anyone deprived of their liberty might learn. In *Outdoor Piece* Hsieh, like so many prisoners, experienced the multiple pains of homelessness, poverty and the violence of life on the streets. These were exacerbated by the anxiety that accompanied his status as an illegal immigrant, which pushed him ever further towards the margins. In *Cage Piece* he imposed upon himself a regime of solitariness beyond that which any prisoner was likely to encounter. (Some prison regimes come close but the isolation is relieved – however imperfectly and spasmodically – by brusque encounters with guards, occasional family and professional visits, correspondence, exercise periods and meetings with counsellors, doctors and educators.) In *Clock Piece* he challenged the tyranny of time and the life-sapping effect of the schedule. In *Rope Piece* he forced himself to live in close proximity to a virtual stranger who, it turned out, he could not abide. Even in the most overcrowded penal institution, there are few who must spend every moment of every day so closely intertwined

with another. In *No Art Piece* Hsieh is denied the opportunity of doing what he enjoys. His self-definition as an artist and all of the supporting activities are pulled away suddenly. This is just like the abrupt redefinition, and even negation, of self that imprisonment entails.

Hsieh's pieces show an ability to endure circumstances which are common to many prisoners such as homelessness, poverty, loneliness, forced intimacy, isolation and exhaustion. The sheer fact that he has faced such privations for so long and then sought more of the same offers a grim message of hope to those who find themselves involuntarily deprived of their liberty, accommodated with people they dislike, stripped of much of their sense of self, and subjected to a temporal regime that is not of their design. If he can go through all this and find a way of letting time pass without eroding too much of his core identity, then why could a prisoner not learn to do likewise?

Of course living on the street for a year no doubt feels different in some respects if it is a manifestation of art rather than of social or racial inequality. However, the lesson is that the power to define one's circumstances resides with the individual, and, if used wisely, even the most adverse environment can be tamed. There are echoes here of the 'tragic optimists' who Viktor Frankl (2004) described as finding meaning, and retaining their humanity, even in the utter degradation of the concentration camp.

While we are given no more than occasional glimpses into Hsieh's internal thought processes, and he is silent on his hopes, fears and emotions more generally, preferring to allow the works to speak for themselves, one message is resoundingly clear. This is the capacity of the individual to bear witness to time, stripped to its bare essentials, and to emerge fortified, even if never victorious.

By becoming a 'sentient witness of time', to use Heathfield's description, time's grip on life, while it can never be released, is loosened somewhat. Hsieh's art makes a series of profound existential statements, sometimes whispered, sometimes barely audible, always multivalent, that cumulatively speak of the human capacity to be free, no matter how tightly constrained one is in terms of time, space or activity.



## References

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