

20 December 2022



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Tehching Hsieh: Bureaucrat of Endurance, Token of Extremes

In 1960, Yves Klein staged his famous "*Leap into the Void*," a photomontage that dramatized risk while interrogating representation and the promotion of art itself. Thirteen years later in Taiwan, Tehching Hsieh jumped from a window, shattered both ankles, and declared it art. This wasn't a coincidence—it was imitation. What in Klein was provocation, in Hsieh was derivative repetition—propped up afterwards by institutions eager to pawn off identity as imagination. He wasn't too young; he was already too late. His conversation with UCLA's Michael Berry (*The Path of Performance: In Conversation with Tehching Hsieh*, YouTube, streamed live June 10, 2022) only confirmed my suspicion.

Even if we suspend disbelief, Hsieh's wholesale adoption of performance was already stale—exactly the second-hand radicalism expected from an artist who had just jumped ship. This pattern of abdication was baked into performance art from the start—Allan Kaprow himself fled painting when faced with its demands. By the early 1970s, performance art had evolved through Futurism and Dada, Gutai, Klein and Kaprow's happenings, Fluxus, and Viennese Actionism, to reach the radical body art of Burden, Acconci, and Schneemann. It was no longer fresh—it had become institutionalized, theorized, and canonized.

So what does it mean when Hsieh, in 1973, shatters his ankles in a 'Jump' as if he had just discovered the genre? It means he was already artistically crippled, belated from the start—broken in body

and behind in contemporary art, unless one insists on treating his immigrant status as an artistic crutch.

What Klein staged in 1960 as conceptual risk, Chris Burden—only 25—pushed into real danger in 1971, the most astounding year in performance art: first locking himself in a locker for five days, then arranging to be shot with live ammunition. Hsieh—just 23—followed in 1973 as a belated imitation. It was derivation posing as innovation, déjà vu masquerading as risk, plagiarism hobbling along as revelation. The broken ankles, if anything, were a fair warning from the art fates—a generosity he failed to appreciate.

Let's be clear: Hsieh wasn't just late to performance—he was late to contemporary painting, too. Pollock broke painting under the weight of originality and died for it. Kaprow stared into that abyss and bolted for "happenings," mistaking retreat for revolution. Fast-forward two decades, and Hsieh pulls the same trick: he bails on painting not because he lost a fight with abstraction, but because it's easier to sit in a cage or punch a time clock than face the terror of the blank canvas.

Pollock died for painting; Kaprow ran; Hsieh followed—late to painting, late to performance, mistaking catch-up for courage. Imagination was absent; all that remained was repetition, paperwork, and the institutions eager to dignify it. What makes this hollowness galling is the way institutions have colluded to legitimize it.

The real comedy began when Michael Berry, Professor of Contemporary Chinese Cultural

Studies, discussed Hsieh's *Jump* with a straight face. Here, authority treated obvious plagiarism as if it were original art. This is the art world's magic trick: an artist's ignorance, combined with institutional complicity, equals the inflation of mediocrity. Institutions don't just excuse lack of originality—they fetishize it, especially when cloaked in the costumes of race or struggle. Identity becomes a hall pass—a shortcut to gravitas. They don't want innovation; they want notarized struggle for their progressive mythmaking. What passes for inclusion is just another way to sidestep genuine artistic risk.

Even the New York Times joined the charade in 2009, noting that Hsieh "had not yet learned of Yves Klein or seen Leap into the Void" when he "tried a version of it for real"—as if all young men long to break their ankles from great heights. Mainstream media acknowledged the obvious while perpetuating the untenable excuse. This is not ignorance; it is institutional cowardice disguised as neutrality.

Like so many immigrant artists who arrive in Manhattan or Los Angeles, Hsieh discarded his cultural inheritance to mimic Western avant-garde gestures. This abandonment carries particular irony given his background. In traditional Chinese painting education, copying the masters was not a failure, but a discipline—students proved their worth through the interpretive reproduction of Guo Xi or Shitao, thereby inheriting the lineage while developing their technique. Hsieh moved from painting to performance, not from discovery but capitulation.

I know something of that inheritance. From 2008 to 2016, I spent six years producing two large canvases that engaged Chinese ink brush painting from a Western perspective—a project exhibited at the Laguna Art Museum. Long before that, I studied Chinese literati traditions directly: I viewed masterpieces with the legendary C.C. Wang at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and attended James Cahill's lectures at UC Berkeley. California faces East; the East is the future. To abandon Guo Xi, Ma Yuan, Shitao—to discard such traditions—is not development but cowardice.

In Chinese painting, copying isn't failure—it's discipline. Mastery means renewing tradition through interpretation, not mere imitation. He abandoned that dignity, arriving in New York as a copyist in a culture where imitation holds no honor. Institutions excused and elevated this,

reframing lack of originality as immigrant struggle or endurance. This isn't profundity—it's hypocrisy dressed as myth, made worse when his hardships are compared to authentic extremity.

The contrast between true ascetic extremism and Hsieh's cosplay is devastating. Hardship, after all, is not unique to him. Every immigrant, every young artist knows deprivation, menial work, and marginalization. But hardship alone is not art. The difference lies in imagination—in transforming difficulty into something beyond itself. Hsieh, lacking that training in imagination, defaulted to mimicry: recycling the ready-made script of confinement, homelessness, endurance. Not asceticism, but the mimicry of asceticism.

Consider Albert Woodfox, who survived forty-three years in solitary confinement at Angola Prison. His ordeal was systematic and sanctioned brutality: strip-searches, tear gassings, beatings, and the grinding psychological torture of solitary confinement—conditions the United Nations condemned as tantamount to torture. Woodfox endured this not by choice but under the violence of an unjust system. His confinement was punishment, not performance—a chasm Hsieh never bridged, no matter how much absurdist paperwork it produced.

Hsieh's 'cage year' falls short under comparison: food was delivered, visitors were admitted, and paperwork was processed. *Sit in thy cell*, said the Desert Fathers, *and thy cell will teach thee all*—Hsieh's taught him only how to notarize boredom. In his subsequent 'outdoor' piece, the logic was the same: in footage, he buys take-out food with cash—never in short supply. This wasn't homelessness; it was pantomime. Take it from me: I lived years homeless, not a staged year. The difference is absolute. For the real thing, Hsieh's artifice is unwatchable. The low point of his endurance cosplay was the year-long rope binding with Linda Montano.

With Linda Montano, he spent a year bound by eight feet of rope—by his own account, nothing but irritation and logistical headaches. Let's be blunt: tied to Montano for a year and not once taking advantage of the putti? I bet he had a headache! That wasn't asceticism, it was celibacy cosplay. The average American Joe would call it unacceptable—if not downright insane. Even Hsieh's father, who sired fifteen children, must have shaken his head. Duration was mistaken for depth, constraint for meaning.

More revealing still is Emmy Hennings, the indispensable but overlooked mother of radical modern art. A sex worker, she brought her expertise directly into the Cabaret Voltaire. While Hugo Ball recited his sound poems onstage, she sustained the movement offstage, ensuring there was an audience at all, event after event. Her "performances" were not ancillary—they were essential. Yes, it was a woman who launched the contemporary avant-garde: Emmy Hennings, through her presence, her labor, and her unflinching sextremity. Without Hennings, no Dada. No Dada, no Duchamp. Without Duchamp, no contemporary art as we know it.

Without Hennings, no Dada. No Dada, no Duchamp. Without Duchamp, no contemporary art as we know it. But without Tehching Hsieh? The world would lose nothing but notarized boredom—bureaucratic ennui dressed as avant-garde. The ultimate confirmation of his bureaucratic approach to art came with his own assessment of his legacy.

The crowning absurdity was MIT Press's 2008 publication of *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*. Hsieh told the *New York Times*: "Because of this book, I can die tomorrow." Not because of an artwork, but because of a book with his name on the cover. This is terminal narcissism—or worse, terminal delusion: the essence of contemporary artistic practice: accomplishment measured not in work, but in institutional validation.

Hsieh leaves us not with art but with the illusion of industrious activity—photographs, signatures, notarizations, the perfect mirror of museums' bureaucratic processes. He is another example of identity art, a pretender on parade who embodies the terminal condition of our virtue-signaling culture industry. Fake it until they make you.

Editors Note: This essay is adapted from a letter that first appeared on December 20, 2022

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Source: www.lgwilliams.com