

# LG WILLIAMS

December 20, 2022

Director Michael Berry  
Center for Chinese Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles  
11381 Bunche Hall  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1487

Dear Director / Professor Michael Berry,

My name is LG Williams, and I am an artist from Los Angeles. I am writing to thank you for sharing the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies lecture featuring yourself and now-famous ex-Taiwanese happening/performance artist Tehching Hsieh (*The Path of Performance: In Conversation with Tehching Hsieh*). This online exchange confirmed my longstanding suspicion about the artist, which I've held for quite some time.

By typical standards, local boys growing up in The Ozarks do not become fascinated with Chinese Art – but here I am. Later in life, too, when I was teaching Studio Art and Art Appreciation at UC Davis and UC Berkeley, I had the fortunate pleasure of attending many lectures by Professor James Cahill on Chinese Art. How lucky I was. And, to this day, I frequently revisit Cahill's unrivaled 26 audio-visual lectures, *A Pure and Remote View: Lectures on Chinese Art History*, still available to view on YouTube.

Honestly, I can't believe more esteemed scholars haven't followed Cahill's great example after retirement. But, then again, there is only one Cahill.

Thirty-four minutes into the video exchange, Hsieh describes his "Christian" Mom's photograph as an "icon" – Byzantine, I'm assuming. Then, in the following picture, the artist summons Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, featuring Mommy *and* the artist. Then Hsieh mentions Abstract Art and, of course, Pollock. Happenings and Performance [Art] are evoked now and again too.

As with many famous 'contemporary immigrant artists' now practicing Contemporary Art in the US, Hsieh's aesthetic attention is almost exclusively directed to the West. But why all this attention and emphasis upon western contemporary post-war Art?

I ask this question because I just spent six long years, from 2008-2016, creating two large paintings examining and expanding upon Chinese Ink Brush paintings – of course,

from a Western/Los Angeles perspective. After all, I thought, California faces the East, The East is our future, and masterpieces of Chinese Art, especially Ink Brush paintings, are mind-blowing.



LG Williams and The Estate of LG Williams  
2015-16, SoCal MidRise #2  
96 x 96", Mixed Media on Canvas

I suspect the fairly-common artistic dismissals and erasures mentioned above are painful, misguided mistakes.

Why are foreign masterpieces not held in greater esteem in Contemporary Art discussions in the U.S.? And how can any immigrant artist throw such a magnificent tradition away just because they've arrived in Philadelphia, Manhattan, or Los Angeles?

Indeed, Taiwan's National Palace Museum seems to be a living miracle-monument if you accept Adam Brookes's narrative in *Fragile Cargo: The World War II Race to Save the Treasures of China's Forbidden City* (2022).

Be that as it may, the two paintings I mentioned above were completed (yes, that's right: two pictures took me six years to make) and finally exhibited at The Laguna Art Museum from December 2016 thru January 2017. I consider this lengthy undertaking a supreme visual art accomplishment – without equal amongst my peers.

What struck me most about your fascinating online interview with Hsieh is how little – zero, in fact – imagination, interest, and curiosity Hsieh had for his artwork or his adopted artistic genre. Actually, these notions physically repulsed him.

As a result of your conversation, I am confident this artist is just another unaware artist comfortably numb. Unaware in that this artist accepted – hook, line, and sinker – the most prevalent Art-con of our age: the replacement of all mystery, complexity, and wonder of Art for an easily reproducible / recognizable formula.

Thank you, this published interview confirmed my suspicion. And, thank you, too, for a new observation that came to me while watching your archived exchange.

This latest observation arose when I witnessed the elite western art historian from an elite western institution mentioning Hsieh's injurious *Jump* (1973) with a straight face.

As everyone in the contemporary art world knows, the most infamous *Leap* in the history of Post-War Art occurred in France in 1960. Not surprisingly, this landmark *Leap* was produced and staged exclusively for an unquestioning and unaware audience.

Therefore, with some justification, one might assume that the two broken ankles the young Hsieh received from his *Jump* into plagiarism might have been a fair and just warning from *The Art Fates* – a generosity for which Hsieh ultimately failed to appreciate.

And here's the rub: at this moment, the straight face revealed the deep connection between the unaware, unlearned, aspirational artist and the aware, learned, and fully compromised art 'authority' together, making and establishing today's abhorrent jerry-rigged visual arts culture industry.

By the way, I would have loved to know why Hsieh, who reportedly made his living washing dishes in restaurants between 1974-78, didn't anticipate Julian Schnabel's (another now-famous New York City dishwasher) plate paintings – which first appeared in 1978?

Hsieh's disinterested attitude is crucial and especially compelling. Compelling, in large part, because the artist openly confessed to giving up "Abstract" Art for "Happenings" or "Performance" quickly in his youth to appear current or up-to-date with contemporary Western artistic fashions and practices. Something akin to, "OK, now I've got the message: why don't I just do some extreme actions for a year (like...sit in a cell), so I can do some extreme actions for a year (like...sit in a cell)?"

Hsieh's attitude differs significantly, for example, from one of the greatest Egyptian Desert Fathers of the late 4th century, Abba St. Moses, who reportedly "sat in thy cell so thy cell will teach thee all." In other words, Hsieh appears to have just accepted western Happenings / Performances at face value because they were now popular amongst the presumed avant-garde of the West. That's all, folks.

More recently, Albert Woodfox spent nearly 44 years in solitary confinement while incarcerated at the Louisiana State Penitentiary – possibly more time than any other prisoner in American history. Woodfox was placed in solitary confinement in 1972 after being accused of murdering a 23-year-old corrections officer.

According to The New York Times, "Woodfox's punishment defied imagination, not only for its monotony – he was alone 23 hours a day in a tiny cell – but also for its agonies and humiliations...harsh conditions, sexual slavery, gassing, beatings, strip-searches all given with regular frequency. His confinement went 'so far beyond the pale' that there seemed not to be anything even remotely comparable in the annals of American jurisprudence."

In other words, Woodfox had no daily visits from loft mates to deliver tasty food or regular gallery openings attended by inquisitive gallery visitors once or twice a month from 11 am to 5 pm.

By his admission, Hsieh didn't learn anything from being in a cage for a year – for *Art*. However, the artist could categorically state that he was released from a cage because he had some documentary photographs and so-called "legal" signatures that attest to his release. Once again, reproduction and representation trumps revelation.

Ascetic Extremism has a long history – legions of ascetic superstars and heroes – of which I know nothing. Yet I do have a hunch, despite having grown up in a small, rural, remote town too, that extreme actions must have a rich tradition – long before *Jackass* (T.V. Series 2000–2007), Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971), or Klein's *Leap Into The Void* (1960).

By the way, my favorite Modernist Artistic Extremist action is Emmy Henning's expansive, behind-the-scenes sexual escapades that brought all the people into *The Cabaret Voltaire* in the first place. Her guile and ingenuity radically changed the very course of Art forever.

Without Henning, there is no Duchamp. No Duchamp, no Contemporary Art as we know it. Period.

With this last ribald factoid in mind, I suspect the Average American Joe would think it pretty fucking unacceptable – if not downright whacked out – that Hsieh didn't tap that totally acceptable piece of ass, Linda Montano, hundreds of times while being tied together from 1983-1984.

Parenthetically, in this regard, one can only imagine what Hsieh's father, with fifteen children under his belt, thought of his son's stupidity.

No sex, no reading, no learning, no art? Is Hsieh OK? I think not. Dude has some screws loose.

Professor Peter Brown first brought my attention to Asceticism and Society in Art, particularly during the Late Antique. Often, I've gone gaga over Brown's accounts of Simeon Stylites (c. 390 – 459), the remarkable Syrian Christian ascetic who achieved both notability and fame by living 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo in modern Syria.

Let's call Stylites's extremist actions for what they were: *Extreme Art at its best*.

Here, on this point, please let me offer another artistic aside: as an artist, I would never want to be 1/44th or 1/37th of everyone's significant and challenging former accomplishments, period. Ignorance in Art should not excuse anyone.

Hsieh's willful artistic blind-sightedness – why don't we call it what it is – his smug 'creative' *alibi* – is all the more galling because back in 2008, when MIT Press published *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, the artist told the New York Times, "Because of this book I can die tomorrow." I suspect this artist can only appreciate a book (or accomplishment) if it appears with his name. If this is the defining prerequisite for artistic infamy today, lol, well, then I should be able to die happily hundreds of times over.

That is not to say being a homeless artist is a walk in the park – for a night, week, year, or decade. Here, too, I must also confess that I have had my fair share of trials and tribulations being a homeless artist for long periods. Years, in fact. This *lifestyle* is no lifestyle. Being homeless is no pleasure or fun for anyone, artist or otherwise. Neither

would I imagine it was fun for Hsieh during his year spent on the streets.

But take it from me: one's perspective on homelessness radically alters when you *are* homeless rather than acting as an aspirational homeless artist counting to 365 or Director of this or that highly funded elite university institution. As a result, the subtly staged artifice and pantomime in Hsieh's carefully crafted 'homeless' art-documentary video stands visibly hollow to any actual homeless artist or person.

Pay close attention, for example, to how Hsieh pays for his food during the scene of the artist at the take-out window: he had plenty of money at the ready to exchange for food then and – one can only presume – for the entire year-long 'Art' project. The camera caught Hsieh's artificial lifestyle trumping aesthetics.

All in all, your 2-hour posted video exchange provided me with ample opportunities to review the significant pitfalls of our current artistic heritage (both artistic and authoritative).

Hsieh is an unlearned artist boldly – and unreflectively – championing his 'Contemporary Art.' The type of 'Artist' who, in the end, only wanted a book with his name on the cover. A book with text written by 'authorities' (specifically, 'sorely compromised authorities') that Hsieh doesn't know about – or wouldn't even care to read – or wouldn't concern himself with...other than to show his mother or use as a tombstone. A book with empty pages and photographs bounded without culture – Western or Eastern – with no extra knowledge, new experience, or curiosity. Fake it until you make it.

After all, isn't this today the surest way for every artist, art historian, or art critic to feel self-satisfied after we all have abandoned ship, too?

Best Regards,



LG Williams