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OUT OF NOW

THE LIFEWORKS OF TEHCHING HSIEH

ADRIAN HEATHFIELD TEHCHING HSIEH

LIVE ART DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
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LETTERS



HOLTZMAN & SILVERMAN

January 30, 1984

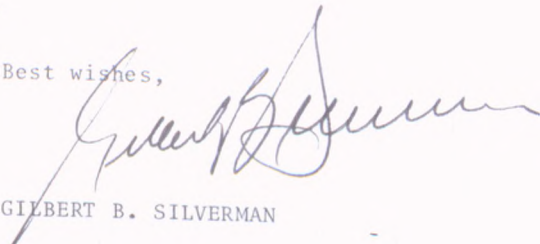
Tehching Hsieh
111 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10013

Dear Mr. Hsieh,

Thank you also so very much for the information you sent to me on your work. I have been reading about you and your work for some years now. I don't totally understand exactly what you are doing but I do think its very important.

Keep on with your good work.

Best wishes,



GILBERT B. SILVERMAN

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LETTERS
WHEN
TIME
BECOMES
FORM
MARINA
ABRAMOVIĆ

So I just want to say what art could be.
Art is one way to live, an energy or power
that gives you a way to be.

Tehching Hsieh

I was in Yugoslavia at the time; I started to get small posters and cards from Tehching informing me about different pieces he was doing. The duration of all his pieces was one year.

I met Tehching in the nineteen-eighties during the "Rope Piece." I was there on the day when he and Linda Montano ceremonially cut the cord between them after one year of being tied together. It was in a small apartment, quite dark, with about forty people present. I remember talking more to Linda and trying to make conversation with Tehching but I gave up, thinking he was either too shy to speak, or didn't speak English.

The "Rope Piece" is so different from my work with Ulay, even if visually it could have a similarity because of the relations we make with architecture and environments; relations in space and interruptions in space. In our case it was a love relation and we lived together and worked together. But with Tehching and Linda there was no love. I was really puzzled by scratches above their two separate beds where they slept. Later on, I heard that they didn't get along and in frustration they scratched the walls with their nails. They had made this promise and they are both very fatalistic in their work so they didn't want to break it. There is a mirror image here of life: sometimes you are related to people and you cannot escape them. This piece made me think for a long time what it really means to be tied together with someone for one year who you don't have a relationship with.

To me the "Time Clock Piece" is the most demanding piece he made because of the time frame. Just one hour, but every hour, on the hour, for a year you have to punch the clock. You can't go farther than one hour from the location, you can't sleep more than one hour. There is an incredible restrained geometry around this piece, and a discipline, which is just phenomenal to me.

In workshops with students I ask them just to open the door and close the door, as slowly as possible. You don't go in and you don't go out, you just do this for one hour, for two hours or for five hours. Then the door stops being the door and becomes something else.

I want to make a parallel with Roman Opalka. I was fascinated with him in the beginning when I learned that Opalka had bought enough paint to continue the work of painting growing numbers to the end of his life. If he finished the paint before that he would stop painting. This was one condition; the second was the size of the canvas. He had two sizes of frame: one size was exactly the size that could go out of his studio door. The other size was "travelling size": the length between his armpit and his hand. Every morning he woke and took a photograph of himself and then he would start painting. The painting is very determined; the canvas is always grey. He takes the brush, puts it in the white color and starts painting numbers. When the paint gets transparent toward the end of the stroke then again he will put the brush into new paint. So you have this strange feeling of disappearance. But his numbers are now into millions. On the other side we have Tehching, who makes five *One Year Performances* with incredible discipline and control. After these performances he decides that he is just going to do life. But Opalka is not "doing life"; he is painting, getting older and older and his paintings are getting more and more expensive.

Why don't I trust Opalka? I can't compete with Tehching in any way, but I have had my share of long durational performances, and I know that when you are working in this way, psychological and physical change takes place. You are affected by duration: your perception and your reality become different. So, if it is done truly, in the way that Tehching did it, transformation takes place; there is a natural decision to change or to end. Not letting change happen, that's when you risk becoming repetitive. Opalka has become iconic. Even if you change in the process, as he possibly is changing, the pressure of the market and the pressure of his original idea mean that he cannot stop his repetitive routine. The whole thing loses its quality of strength. This is why the work of Tehching is so believable.

In the old Tibetan Buddhist tradition the disciples make little Buddhas pressed in clay with moulds. They are given a big pile of clay and they have to sit there. It takes about three months to make a million of these little Buddhas. It is a repetitive action and also a meditation. But what happens with this kind of repetition is that you start to get attached to the result: your ego goes up because you can say: "Look, I have made half a million. I have achieved something." So after their training of three months they do another three-month training, the same mode but sitting in the **running river, where you don't have a result and you can't build this attachment because the result isn't visible.**

In art we have the great example of Walter De Maria who wrote a small text in 1960 in which he talks about the actions that are useless being the most important actions in art today.¹ The idea of spending time and not making a result, this is really essential and it is so difficult to talk about. It is like a soft matter that we can't explain. Something else takes place.

When I came to live in New York, I really wanted to meet Tehching and talk about his experiences. He invited me to come to Brooklyn. As I expected, his house was completely empty. We sat in a large room at a wooden table with four chairs and drank a glass of water. What was wonderful for me was the **simplicity and honesty in his actions and his words, without any pretension.** When I asked him what he was doing now, he simply replied: "I am doing life."

Recently, I read the interview with Adrian Heathfield, from which I learned what Tehching really thinks about his performances and his work in general. The most surprising thing for me is that he doesn't interact with the audience. He even avoids looking at them straight in the eyes. He doesn't need them to be there while he's doing the work. But on the other hand, it's so important for him to have very precise documentation, taken every minute or every hour of the work to prove to the absent audience that he is really doing it. So in an indirect way audience is incredibly important to him. He needs this proof. With my work it is important that the audience is live, so my proof is evident. But his proof is the proof of afterward.

To me Tehching's "Thirteen Year Plan" is also logical. He has made more credibility than any living artist I know. And so on that trust you have to trust the rest of it, take a step farther, and trust him in this next voyage he is taking. It's like Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree*. It is a sculpture with a glass of water on a shelf. It is really about trust. If the artist has told you it is an oak tree, it is absolutely an oak tree. So if Tehching tells me he is doing art but not showing it publicly, I trust him.

Tehching has said: "I am not like many contemporary artists who are intensely attached to the present." But at the same time, I think his work aspires to be timeless.

He also said that what determines his work is strong will. For me strong will is also important. **But what he achieved in five yearlong performances is more than any other performance artist ever managed to do.** If I talk about performance art, I start with him. He has become a legend. Sometimes the spoken word is stronger than the written, than the narrated history.

¹ Walter de Maria, "Meaningless Work" [1960], in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 5-6.

LETTERS

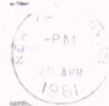
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LETTERS

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Staff Reporter

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SAM HSIEH:

YOU ARE BRINGING SHAME AND
DISCREDIT TO THE CHINESE PEOPLE.

GO HOME TO TAIWAN!

YOU ARE NOT APPRECIATED
HERE— ESPECIALLY NOT
BY THE ORIENTALS.

WE - WHO UTILIZE OUR
EDUCATION AND INTELLIGENCE
TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER
PLACE TO LIVE IN ARE
HORRIFIED BY YOUR STUPIDITY
AND PUBLICITY SEEKING FOR
A CRASS SELF DISPLAY.

ARTIST? UGH!