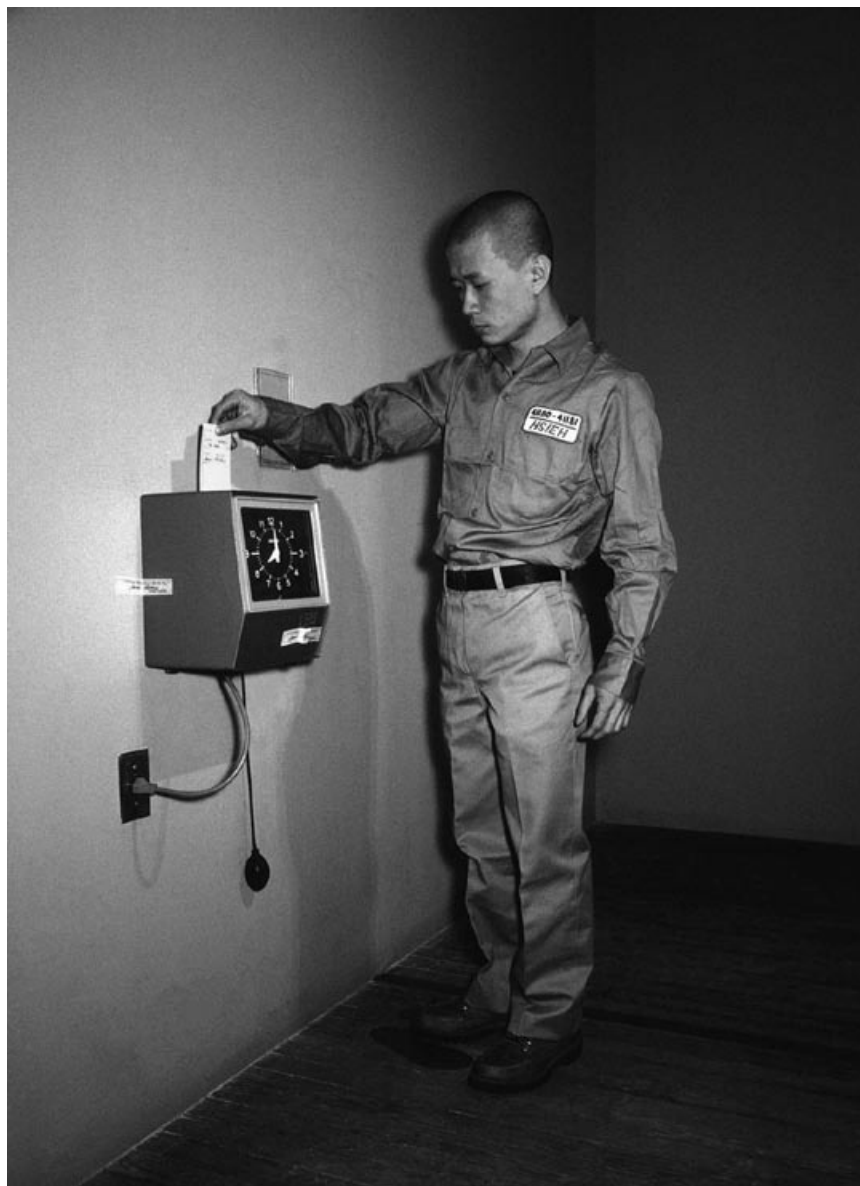




the untimely

tehching hsieh's out of now



LEE WENG CHOY

Declarations—are they not, by definition, immodest acts? They make grand claims, have lofty ambitions. A poorer cousin is the generalisation, which presumes to have surveyed and appraised. If the latter lacks the gravitas of the former, the two nonetheless have in common an audacity: they both insist on knowing. In contrast, art criticism takes a more modest stance. Sure, its writers, in moments of passion or provocation, make all manner of declarations and generalisations. So its modesty is not to be found in its reach, but its grasp. Criticism may over-stretch here and there—after all, it means to test—but good criticism handles its objects with care and a sense of proportion. At least that’s my own contention. Its *raison d’être* is to make judgements about art, but the function of these judgements is less to attain certainty than to entertain doubt, less to rank than make possible a nuanced understanding of art and argument.

By this account, criticism should be an important activity in modern society; however, these days, one cannot be assured. Survival is not in question—art writing abounds—but what of its resonance? The task of contemporary criticism, to state the obvious, is largely concerned with writing about *new* art. A generation ago, this purpose would have been affirmed with missionary zeal. Now, there are doubts about what’s new—does this work really signal a departure or is it merely a sign of more of the same? And yet the new, notwithstanding its loss of authority, remains the default centre of our attentions. In an age when biennale-type exhibitions have become the dominant platform for contemporary practice, when the very word “biennale”, rightly or wrongly, has become synonymous with “spectacle”, when “globalisation” is impossible to pronounce without irony and hyperbole is the metabolism of communications, how can one privilege an approach to art that aims to keep things in perspective?

All this may seem removed from the career of Tehching Hsieh—that Tehching Hsieh, acclaimed for a series of one-year performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York, and for a thirteen-year plan, which finished at the turn of the twentieth-century, and was his last work. (How many artists are notable also for having stopped making art at the peak of their careers?) The thesis I wish to pursue here is that Hsieh’s oeuvre is both an exceptional and exemplary test case for criticism today. By thinking (again) about Hsieh, one can better understand how a practice can at once stand apart and be representative of a moment in art history, as well as clarify the specific conditions of criticism for our present time.

The occasion for these reflections is a new monograph by Adrian Heathfield and the artist, entitled *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*.¹ It’s a timely occasion; the dearth of publications on Hsieh represents a truly egregious gap in art world scholarship. The large format book consists of the following: an essay by Heathfield, which introduces key themes in Hsieh’s work, from “conceptualism” to “duration”, then discusses each performance in concise chapters; comprehensive photo documentation of Hsieh’s oeuvre; an interview of the artist by Heathfield; a letters section, which includes contributions by theorists Peggy Phelan and Carol Becker, artists Marina Abramović and Tim Etchells, and others; and a thorough bibliography. My approach to reading this remarkable opus—and what I have to say here must be qualified as only a preliminary encounter—will be framed by three topics of investigation: the concept of lifeworks; the question of judgement; and the horizon of the end of art.

Hsieh’s ‘mature’ work comprises only six pieces,² although it could also be argued that together they constitute a single action spanning twenty years. The artist began his first *One Year Performance* with a self-imposed contract, signed and dated: “STATEMENT—I, Sam Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece, to begin on September 30, 1978. I shall seal myself in my studio, in solitary confinement inside a cell-room measuring 11’ 6” X 9’ X 8’. I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television, until I unseal myself on September 29, 1979. I shall have food every day. My friend, Cheng Wei Kuong, will facilitate this piece by taking charge of my food, clothing and refuse” (page 66). In the beginning Hsieh used the name Sam, instead of Tehching. All subsequent pieces would also inaugurate with such statements, and with the exception of the last two, each performance would be meticulously documented on a daily basis, occasionally with items verified and signed by witnesses. And though he had contact with a number of fellow artists, writers and art professionals, all his work took place outside the system of galleries and art world institutions, and until 1988, he lived as an illegal immigrant in the USA.



The next piece began 11 April, 1980. In this second *One Year Performance*, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour on the hour, twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. Each time he punched in, a single frame of a film was taken, thus compressing a whole day—at twenty-four frames per second—into a single second of film, and a whole year into roughly six minutes. For his third performance, which started 26 September, 1981, Hsieh lived on the streets of New York for one year, always being “outdoors”, never seeking shelter of any kind. Then on 4 July, 1983, he and Linda Montano began living tied together by an eight-foot rope, never separating, but never touching. For his fifth and final *One Year Performance*, from 1 July, 1985, till the next July, Hsieh lived completely withdrawn from the art world. On 31 December, 1986, Hsieh began his Thirteen Years’ Plan. He stated: “I will make ART during this time. I will not show it PUBLICLY” (page 300). On 31 December, 1999, Hsieh ended his last performance, and on 1 January, 2000, he made a public report, saying simply, “I kept myself alive” (page 315).

LIFEWORKS

Tehching Hsieh’s declarations are deceptively straightforward. They are, as Heathfield notes, each “a kind of Duchampian speech act” (page 16). Each piece is framed by setting limits—rather severe ones—and *living precisely* within these limits. Here is a person who, in the name of art, says that he will punch a time clock every hour on the hour for an entire year, and then actually does it.³ Yet each binding assertion belies its complexity as a program of action and statement of purpose. To contemplate Hsieh’s work is to examine the tension between a clarity of conceptualisation and the sheer messiness of life which fills the spaces demarcated by the artist’s propositions. What claims do these declarations make? What ambitions or aspirations motivate them? But before any of these considerations, what presses immediately upon the audiences of Hsieh’s performances is the question of how does one exist under such conditions? One wonders, for instance, what it is like to live an entire year without ever getting a continuous night’s sleep. In a talk the artist gave at The Substation in Singapore in 2001, Hsieh admitted that during his first *One Year Performance*, known as the “Cage Piece”, he hit the proverbial wall at around three months, feeling at that moment that he had exhausted every thought he could have. But then, like a marathon runner, he found a way to continue. Heathfield: “At the very least we might say that Hsieh’s re-framing of life through a statement, within the orders of harsh and self-imposed concepts, shows life itself as a highly mutable practice, tests out its elemental co-ordinates in order to define what is constitutive of or excessive to life, and holds out the prospect of art as a powerfully transformative way of being” (page 38).

Heathfield contends that even though Hsieh’s work had much in common with the prevailing currents of conceptualism circa the 1970s, he does not privilege language and thought in his practice in the way that conceptual artists did. “Hsieh’s works whilst wilful and propositional in nature, involved the artist in highly invested and disciplined physical human processes” (page 16). Duration is central to Hsieh’s work. “Hsieh’s work shares with many artists of his generation a strong interest in the interrogation and destabilisation of subjectivity”, and as examples, Heathfield discusses Hanne Darboven and On Kawara. However, unlike Kawara and his date paintings, for Hsieh “the artwork is not just the *index* of a preceding and largely unseen duration, it *is* the lived duration itself” (page 17).

While not exactly commonplace, by the late 1970s, a number of significant durational performances had taken place in New York, such as Vitto Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1971), and Joseph Beuys’ *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), but no-one had attempted year-long pieces like Hsieh’s. His works were, as Heathfield emphasises, “unparalleled in terms of their use of physical difficulty over extreme durations and in their absolute conception and enactment of art and life as simultaneous processes” (page 11). It might be natural then, to couch Hsieh’s story as one of the triumph of the will. Modesty does not seem the right word to describe his practice—“determined” would be a much more obvious choice—but if by “modesty” one means a sense of humility and simplicity, a tendency towards introspection and self-effacement, then the word is both apropos and profoundly ironic. Closer examination suggests Hsieh’s performances are as much about self-erasure as they are about self-affirmation and willpower. For instance, for his final *One Year Performance*, his statement reads (in all caps): “I, Tehching Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance. I ■■■ not do art, not talk art, not see art, not read art, not go to art gallery and art museum for one year. I ■■■ just go in life” (page 296). Note how the word “will” has been blacked out in the sentences.

Speaking of Beuys, when Hsieh was in the midst of doing his *One Year Performances*, Beuys was perhaps the most influential performance art personality. He took on the role of a shamanistic public figure, and famously advocated the inseparability of life from art in his utopian formulation of “social sculpture”.⁴ In contrast, in his interview with Heathfield, Hsieh posits a less expansive purview for art: “I don’t think that art can change the world. But at least art can help us unveil life” (page 330). Although in his own practice, this unveiling reveals very little. Heathfield gives the following interpretation of the “Cage Piece”: “On the surface [the performance] might look like a Modernist rendition of the exceptional individual artist as a deep and infinite resource for art, however Hsieh’s work here is not directed toward self-expression, but in fact

the opposite: the refusal of expression and of exteriorisation of any kind of insight that is found within the artist... If the work of art is proposed here as a labour of thought, then this labour is condemned to silence and to a bare visibility in impoverished chronographic forms” (page 26). All that is revealed are the documents, which don’t yield much, not directly. They merely mark the passing of time. Indeed, Hsieh maintained throughout a very fine balance between thought and silence, visibility and invisibility. For instance, during this first *One Year Performance* he set aside several days when audiences could visit and view him, in his cage in his studio, and yet, to maintain the integrity of his action and solitude, he completely ignored his visitors. We imagine him deep in reflection, but what he is thinking, we do not, will not know.

Hsieh’s work presents an epistemological problem. Not only because audiences cannot view the performances in their entirety (Linda Montano, his co-performer in the “Rope Piece”, is the exception; then there is Cheng Wei Kuong, Hsieh’s friend who looked after him daily in the “Cage Piece”).⁵ Like many others who write about the artist, Heathfield came to know of the work after the fact, through documentation and discourse, and “was not there to experience Hsieh’s acts”; but as he explains, “in any case the things that Hsieh did in the name of art existed at the edge of public visibility. To speak of these acts here and now in writing requires a tentative voice, because the acts themselves concern the limits of the sayable and legible” (page 11).

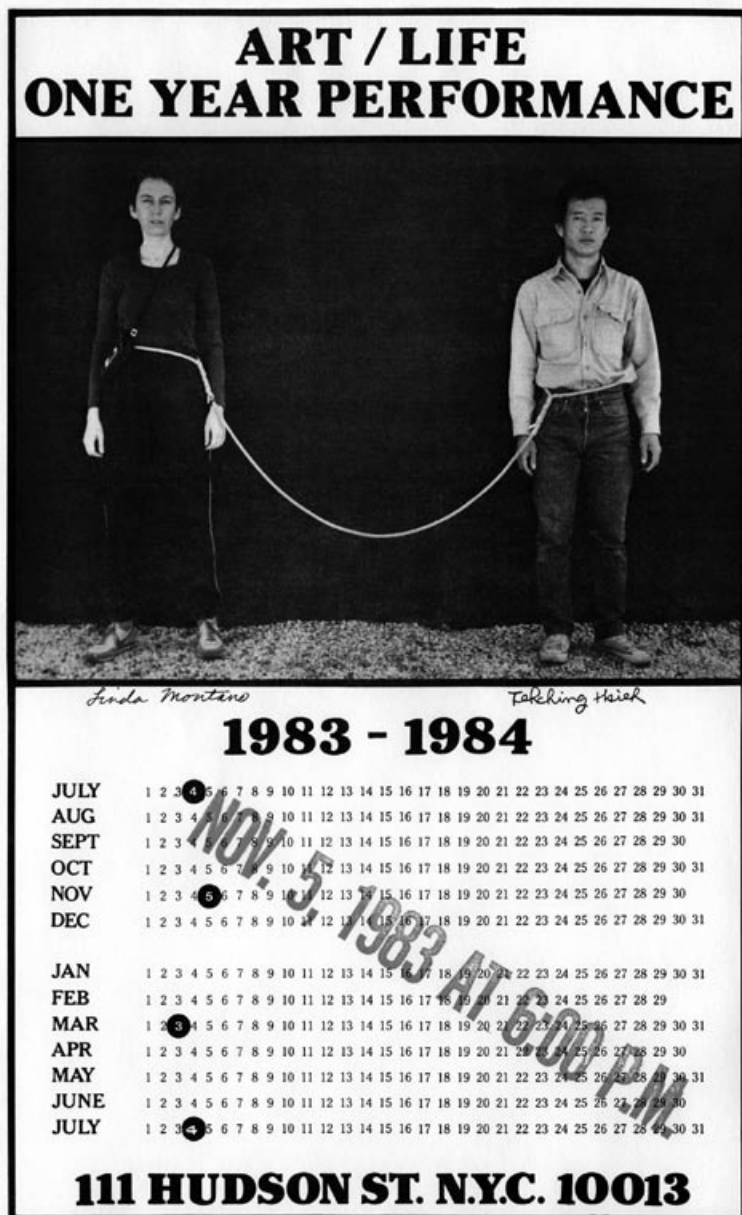
One way to grasp the concept of “lifeworks” is to consider that the material of Hsieh’s art is not quite “life”, but “time”. If the work is about the inseparability of art and life, it is also about their irreconcilability. Hsieh: “It doesn’t really matter how I spend time: time is still passing. Wasting time is my basic attitude to life; it is a gesture of dealing with the absurdity between life and time... To me these pieces are more about time. My art certainly has a life quality. But I don’t really blur art and life. The gap between each *One Year Performance* is life time. But the pieces themselves are art time, not lived time. This is important. Each piece is very clearly a piece of art, but this art has a life quality: that is its rhythm. The time of the performances is art time, and my life has to follow art... All the pieces consumed my life, but each consumed me in a different way... and some still continue to affect me” (page 334).

JUDGEMENT

Heathfield observes that “Hsieh’s work has found itself in a peculiar place—neither here nor there—within the art market, art institutions and their circuits of exhibition, and within art and performance criticism and theory. His work and its artefacts have remained largely uncollected and only scarcely displayed. In art discourse he is rarely discussed...” (page 12). Although recently the “recipient of renewed interest as a result of the surge in attention toward Asian art practices and in particular Chinese Body art” (page 13), Hsieh has always disavowed the identification as an ethnic Chinese artist. And this contributes partly to his continued absence from the mainstream literature. Heathfield asks, “In what ways, then, is Hsieh’s work troubling to structures of intelligibility within current economies of display, critical languages and paradigms?” (page 13).

One imagines that Hsieh would prefer to be seen, not in terms of any positive identity, such as Taiwanese-American or New Yorker, but in purely negative terms, as an outsider through and through. It was this outsider status that provided him a place from which to perform his self-effacing works, and from a universal rather than any particular position. “I wouldn’t say my work is autobiographical. My illegal experiences in the States did make me consider those who live at the bottom of society. I intended to transform this consideration into a philosophical approach. A person living at the bottom might show his pains and his resentments politically. But as an artist, he should have the ability to transform basic living conditions into art works in which to ponder life, art and being” (page 326). Furthermore, “I am inclined to observe the universal circumstances of human beings instead of pointing to issues. My understanding is the more I give a critical commentary on political powers, the less powerful my art will become” (page 330).

These days, Hsieh presents himself as an artist who has stopped making art, but still has some unfinished business to do. His increasing visibility as an artist who just goes on in life, presents a challenge to the art critic and historian. Heathfield, reflecting on the process of writing *Out of Now*, talks about it as “something of a restorative act... it brings his lifeworks back into the present, calling them to mind”, but he is also cautious not to locate “Hsieh in a place of absolute alterity”, to romanticise him as truly resistant to the “voraciousness of art institutions, markets and discourses...” (page 12). The year 2009 not only saw the publication of Heathfield’s book, but also two well-received exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York—reconstructions of Hsieh’s studio, along with various documentation from the first two *One Year Performances*.⁶ One speculates that these are signs of the work finally getting the attention it deserves, with more exhibition and discussion to follow. However, Hsieh is not just hanging around to ensure his legacy is celebrated. If anyone has any doubts about Hsieh’s selflessness in this regard, let’s recall his final *One Year Performance* and his *Thirteen Year Plan*. (Again, this is not to idealise Hsieh as the ego-free artist-saint, but to argue for the integrity of the work.)⁷



THE END OF ART

"For me, time is a notion of boundlessness, it is not only related to the present" (page 324).

"During the first four years of living in New York, instead of being a practising artist, I was a thinking artist—a frustrated person who stayed in the studio thinking about life and art" (page 324).

"My view of life is: whatever you do, living is nothing but consuming time until you die. If the first four pieces are 'working hard to waste time', the last two pieces are simply 'wasting time'" (page 335).

For the philosopher Arthur Danto, what exemplifies contemporary art is its radical plurality—anything can be, and does, get used as art: a found object, an iconic media image, or even time itself. If art is *now* no longer framed by any grand narrative or any particular direction, then a certain history of art has come to an *end*. Tempting as it may be, I'm not nominating Tehching Hsieh as the poster boy for Danto's "End of Art".⁸ Rather, my point is that Hsieh is neither the exception that proves the rule, nor the counter-example that disproves Danto's thesis. The alternative to the radical plurality of today's art is not to be found in identifying, from the recent past, heroic figures and their absolute alterity. The challenge of thinking again about Hsieh's work is a far more nuanced one. Hsieh is, to cite Heathfield, an untimely figure, "caught in a time unlike anyone else's time" (page 12). I have insinuated that Hsieh, while no longer, strictly speaking, a practising artist, is still very much a presence to be reckoned with today. His oeuvre is happily making its way into the canons of art history, as it should. But the question I would like to ask is whether his art has now become part of the past. And if so, how do we learn from this particular past, or the past in general. Is the past a mirror or prologue to the present, or is it like another country? Do we see in it ourselves, or do we learn from its otherness? I would suggest that Hsieh is indeed our contemporary. But in ways we have yet to come to grips with.

At the end of their interview, Adrian Heathfield asks Hsieh, "Will you make art again?" Tehching replies: "I haven't finished my art, but I will not do art any more... People may ask me if the things I'm doing right now, like making this book or participating in exhibitions, are making art. For me by doing these things I'm dealing with my reality, not doing art, but I will do things with the same attitude I had to art. The only thing I'm sure about is that I'm still in the process of passing time, as I always am. Life becomes open and uncertain once again" (page 338).

Notes

¹ Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, Cambridge: MIT Press, and London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009

² Hsieh considers his earlier performances and his paintings done in Taiwan as separate from his later works in New York. See *Out of Now*: 324: "My earlier pieces were experimental. They are not mature." Subsequent page references to the book are cited within the text

³ Hsieh failed to be perfect with the "Time Piece". He overslept on a few occasions, roughly 1.5 percent. "I don't think if I punched the time clock 100% it would make the work perfect. But of course, the rules could not be broken too often; otherwise the work would collapse. A little bit of damage is good for the system": 328

⁴ See for instance, Gene Ray, (ed.) *Joseph Beuys, Mapping the Legacy*, New York: Distributed Art Publishers/Ringling Museum 2001. The volume contains essays by Lukas Beckmann, Benjamin Buchloh, Mel Chin, Pamela Kort, Kim Levin, Peter Nisbet, Gene Ray, Max Reithmann and Joan Rothfuss. Buchloh's contribution includes a reprint of his "Twilight of the Idols" essay (*Artforum* Vol 5 No18, January 1980), which was highly critical of the artist, and a newer article, 'Reconsidering Joseph Beuys, Once Again', which revises his position

⁵ In discussing Hsieh's "Cage Piece", Heathfield underlines the crucial bond between Hsieh and Cheng Wei Kuong: "the whole duration is itself built on the shadow duration of Cheng's careful attendance": 29. Cheng is also a silent figure, but perhaps audiences can relate especially to him, because he projects a deep, albeit quiet, sympathy and care for Hsieh. And speaking of acts of sympathy, one of the highlights of Heathfield's essay on Hsieh is when he attempts to walk in Tehching's footsteps, in a recreation of a day in the life of the artist's third *One Year Performance*, the "Outdoor Piece"

⁶ Documentation of Tehching Hsieh's first *One Year Performance* was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 21 January–18 May 2009, as part of MoMA's Performance Exhibition Series. Documentation of Tehching Hsieh's second *One Year Performance* was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, as part of the exhibition *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, 30 January–19 April 2009

⁷ In the Heathfield interview, Hsieh talks about being all too human in his relationship with Montano during their *One Year Performance*. "We fought frequently. We had a difficult time, indeed. As artists we made a powerful piece, but as human beings we were failed collaborators": 335

⁸ See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 and *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*, Amsterdam: G&B Arts International, 1998

If the first four could be considered performances in the philosophy of art, then the last two are performances in art history. While lacking the "how-did-he endure-that?" aspect of the preceding *One Year Performances*, the fifth performance arguably completes the series. It looks back on the previous four, and is a form of self-reflection as self-erasure. Hsieh stops making art, having any contact with art, or even thinking about it. As Heathfield observes: "Just as he was acquiring a significant artistic profile, Hsieh cut himself out of the picture: he became an artist *without* art. He also cut himself off. In the "Rope Piece" Hsieh and Montano had explored art as sociability, but this *One Year Performance* was an absolute withdrawal from the sociability of art and artists" (page 55). Heathfield rightfully trusts that "Hsieh lived out the year and performed the task, without documentation, verification or witness. His word, in this context, is good enough for me" (page 56). Negation has a rich history in modern art, of course. But, as Hsieh proffers in the interview, "This 'No Art Piece' would have happened sooner or later, although it happened too quickly to be accepted by the art world" (page 336). He didn't wait for acceptance; instead, he embarked on his *Thirteen Year Plan*, which further consolidated Hsieh's act of self-reflection and self-negation: "from the fifth piece there was no way back. I could only go ahead. I knew that if I wanted to do art again there was only one opportunity: it had to have no public" (page 336).

Page 284: Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1980–1981*, (the First Five Hours of Images and the Last Five Hours of Images in the Year)

Page 285: Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1980–1981*, (Punching the Time Clock)

Page 286: Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1981–1982*, (Life Image)

Above: Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano, *Art/Life One Year Performance 1983–1984*, (Poster)

Photos courtesy the artists