

## **The Breaking Boundaries of Mr. Hsieh**

In the mist of Manhattan fervent cultural atmosphere at the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s, in the mist of an artistic exuberance dictated by art celebrities, in all that glamor worked Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese immigrant who illegally jumped off a boat and settled in the metropolis. In this Epicurean obscurity the Taiwanese artist “happily” conceived a cycle of five one year long performances to be executed one after the other starting in 1978 when he caged himself in his apartment. In 1979, and for a whole year, he was photographing himself punching a card every hour on the hour and in 1980 he lived a whole year without getting under a roof. In 1981 he lived tied up to a woman but this performance failed and as for 1982 he decided not to talk about art for the coming 13 years. After which his work was finally recognized and latter exhibited at the MoMA.

In his solo exhibition presented in the top most floor of the museum in the spring of 2009, a print out of all the photographs captured during his second performance can be seen linearly arranged throughout the perimeter of the space. The face of the artist who, according to his rules, had to photograph himself every hour and on the hour, looks increasingly weary considering that for a whole year his sleep was thus interrupted. Nothing other than this self inflicted torture readable on his face can be detected from this passage of time. Some documents also reveal the time in which Mr. Hsieh missed to stamp and photograph, likely overtaken by exhaustion. Mr. Hsieh performances are often viewed as some sort of masochism, an extreme art practice like that of the Viennese Actionism such as Otto Mühl and all the movement characterizing the body art of the 70s. The audience generally fails to view Mr. Hsieh as an outsider, a neglected immigrant who was far from being accepted from the cultural establishment in New York. Under this neglect, Dostoievsky already showed in his masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*, how is main character, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, felt unable to accomplish an heroic action and lacking any prospects, resolved to kill an old Jewish usurer. This Raskolnikov effect is increasingly characterizing the many emancipated individuals of our contemporary society who often conclude to perform a terrorist action.

Mr. Hsieh actions may be viewed under this lens, a neglected individual with aspirations who resolves to overcome his Kafka-like existence through a meditative suspension rather than a violent intervention. The Buddhist and Daoistic components of this endurance of reality are clear as clear it was probably Mr. Hsieh understanding that, among all art performers, he was going to be the first to attempt such an extreme quest

and thus immediately reach the Olympus of cultural celebrities bypassing the often pretentious escalation of the cultural establishment. Even the superstar, Marina Abramovic, didn't fail to proclaim Mr. Hsieh a master of performance art. As these actions may be carried by artists outside the art establishment, thus providing a more authentic scenario to empower the life as art, art as life paradigm, we soon understand the importance of documentation as an evidence of the action. Prior the beginning of each performance, Mr. Hsieh signed a printed statement listing the rules he was going to follow in the coming year. Looking at another room of the Moma exhibition, visitors discover that while living one year without going under a roof, Mr. Hsieh traced on a map of Manhattan each of his movements. The documentation is everything that is left and this very fact transforms it into a holly reliquary just as the piece of the fabric of the most worn out rag of whatever Saint. Under all these premises we may also change our analytical lens and start reading Mr. Hsieh work considering his strong use of constraints. Raymond Queneau, one of the founders of *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (O.U.L.I.P.O.), a literary avant-garde of the 60s, writes in essay about "What is Art?" written in 1938: "The classic writer who composes his tragedy by observing a certain number of rules that he knows is freer than the poet who writes whatever comes into his head, and who is a slave to other rules that he doesn't see". In a society with what another writer like James Joyce defined as an ocean of potentials, constraints can be seen as a way of defining a direction which would be otherwise kept open among all the possibilities. In this manner, one could see how Mr. Hsieh was able to generate a composition where time can be seen as a stanza and the performative rules as the rhythmical metrics. This can again be related to the artist cultural background well rooted in the Chinese culture of Southern Taiwan.

There may be other lenses from which to review Mr. Hsieh's conceptual and performative work of self-constraintment, there may be other more contemporary artists he could relate too as Andrea Zittel, yet again one may evaluate these performative actions through their actual statements and their ambition to embark something without any precession, something which the very progression of society and its technologies keep on expanding without any consideration for any hermetic cultural discourse. As Mr. Hsieh's work might as well have been forgotten and not credited by the art world if it wasn't for the curator Alexandra Munroe and the thick MIT Press anthology *Out of Now*, celebrating his lifework, there are several other cases of uncelebrated cultural achievements of individuals outside the establishment, who were really able to merge their lives with their art. The 57 years long work of a Polish woman by the name of Janina Turek is another example. Again a neglected woman trying to transcend the misery of ordinary life creating strict rituals of self-awareness, what the

above mentioned Anrdea Zittel, in her few weeks long experiments calls life-structures.

This life actions dictated by these courageous concepts take the old form of a novel by the Sicilian author Giuseppe Verga, a passage by Émile Zola, or a post-war film by Roberto Rossellini. The raw and real facts are presented to the imagination of the reader, they become authentic documents of our unmasked human nature. The difference now is that really in the first case the characters were forced to conduct such a penitent life while for Mr. Hsieh and Mrs. Turek nature is less harsh, it allows them to reflect in first person upon their own conditions and to document it as Doctor Zhivago does, seating in a remote winter cabin after the October Revolution and after spending the summer cultivating the land. In this instance Boris Pasternak, the author, is able to express through Doctor Zhivago's reflections in his journal, that it is the very condition of non-heroes and housewives making life so worth telling.