

Tehching Hsieh, the Storyteller 謝德慶，說故事的人

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Abstract

In March 2012, Tehching Hsieh came to Taiwan, the country of his birth, for a lecture tour on the occasion of the launch of the Chinese translation of his book, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*. Since leaving Taiwan in the mid-1970s to live and practice art in New York, Tehching has returned many times to his homeland, and has spoken there with artist friends and scholars, but this was the first time he spoke in public about his life and work. Joining Tehching on his lecture tour was Adrian Heathfield, the co-author of the book, Jow Jiun Gong, the book's translator, and Weng Choy Lee. The group first spoke at the Taipei Fine Art Museum, then went south to Tainan National University of the Arts, and finally returned to capital, to speak at the Taipei University of the Arts. In this short article, Lee offers some preliminary observations and reflections on his experiences accompanying Hsieh in Taiwan, and speaks on such topics as: accessing Tehching Hsieh's work through narrative; the spare economy of Hsieh's gestures and documents; the function of the document in his work; and the difficulty of placing Tehching Hsieh.

Keywords: storytelling, document, absence

摘要

2012年3月，謝德慶來到了出生地臺灣，趁著《現在之外—謝德慶的生命作品》一書中文翻譯出版發行的機會，進行巡迴講座。自1970年代中期離開臺灣，移居紐約生活與創作藝術，謝德慶曾多次返迴家鄉，與藝術家朋友和學者交流話語，但至今為止，這是他第一次公開演講，談論他的生活與作品。與他共同進行巡迴講座的有該書的共同作者亞德里安·希斯菲爾德、翻譯者龔卓軍與李永財。這個團體首先在臺北市立美術館進行講演，然後是臺南藝術大學，最後回到首都，在臺北藝術大學講演。這一篇短文，李永財對他跟隨謝德慶在臺灣的經驗提出初步的觀察與反省，討論如下的主題：透過敘事來了解謝德慶的作品、謝德慶手勢與文件檔案中的耗費經濟、他作品中文件檔案的作用，與標定謝德慶位置的困難。

關鍵詞：說故事、文件檔案、缺席

專題：行為表演轉向與當代藝術

In March of 2012, Tehching Hsieh came to Taiwan to launch the Chinese edition of his book, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, as well as to do a lecture tour around the country.¹ Since leaving his homeland in 1974 to live and work in New York, Hsieh has returned regularly to see family and friends. On a few visits, he has met with individuals or small gatherings of scholars, artists and students in a, so to speak, professional capacity. This occasion, however, marked the first time he has spoken in public in the country of his birth. Joining Tehching was Adrian Heathfield, the co-author of the book, and Jow-Jiun Gong, the translator; I had the privilege of being part of this contingent of speakers. What I'd like to offer in this short article are a few observations and reflections on the experience of being on tour with Tehching in Taiwan.

We started at the Taipei Fine Art Museum, then went south to Tainan National University of the Arts, and finally returned to the capital, to speak at the Taipei University of the Arts. The format for the events was as follows: Hsieh spoke first, showing images and clips of his “lifeworks” (a term that he and Heathfield chose to better describe the scope and nature of his durational art practice); this was followed by a presentation from Heathfield, and then from me. Each session included discussions with the audience, which invariably turned out to be extensive, lively and productive. Gong was the moderator throughout, and also contributed as a fourth speaker/commentator. The events took place in Chinese, with simultaneous translations in English for Adrian and me. There were two modifications to this format. In Tainan, the event was split in two: in the evening Hsieh spoke, and afterwards, a number of graduate students made presentations on Hsieh's art and its significance for Taiwan; the next day, Adrian and I spoke, again complemented by student presentations and discussion sessions. At Taipei University of the Arts, rather than speak sequentially, as we had done, the four of us decided to improvise and break up Tehching's presentation — going back and forth between Hsieh's narrative sequence and commentary by either Adrian or myself.

I learned about Hsieh in the early-1990s, through a friend, Ray Langenbach, an artist and academic, who told me about his work, and showed me the six-minute film document of the Time Clock Piece of 1980-81. On certain days during some of his One-Year Performances, audiences could visit Hsieh and observe (although during the Cage Piece of 1978-79, Hsieh specifically did not engage with anyone, since cutting himself off from social contact was one of the very premises of the performance itself). Ray himself had visited Tehching during the Time Clock Piece. In 2000, when I became the artistic co-director of The Substation arts centre, at the top of my wish list was to bring Tehching to

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

Singapore to give a talk. Fortunately, Ray had kept in touch with him over the years, and he made an introduction. I wrote to Hsieh, and he said yes to the invitation!

This impulse to talk about how one comes to know of Hsieh seems typical. Co-author Adrian Heathfield doesn't indulge in this kind of autobiographical sharing in *Out of Now*, but at one point during the Taiwan tour, Adrian talked about how he went from hearing rumours about this guy and his year long performances to becoming collaborators on a book project with Hsieh. My point here is that storytelling by Tehching's supporters and fans has played an instrumental role in the dissemination of the work. And, as it is with storytelling, sometimes the one story (concentrically) frames another, which may in turn frame yet another story. The model that applies here is certainly not your straightforward linear narrative. As Adrian notes: "Who gets to tell the story of an artist's work, from what place and how do they speak? ... What relation is being convened between criticism, fiction and reality; between documents and the lives and events they depict? ... These dilemmas of re-presentation are the traditional terms of trade in biography, the art monograph, and history itself, but the scale, nature and affects of the lifeworks of Hsieh give these questions a particular intensity."² With the publication of *Out of Now* in 2009, and with exhibitions of Hsieh's documents and artifacts at the Guggenheim and at MoMA that same year, as well as subsequent exhibitions in biennales in Liverpool and in Gwangju, Tehching's work in the last few years has deservedly received more critical attention and mainstream exposure. Although as Adrian reports in the book, at the time of writing in 2008, Tehching's work "remained largely uncollected and only scarcely displayed. In art discourse he is rarely discussed: in the many books addressing Conceptual Art and later conceptualist work his oeuvre goes wholly unmentioned ... Despite this deficit, for many contemporary artists, particularly those with an interest in performance, Hsieh is something of a cult figure, information on his work circulating mainly through his self-produced DVD and extensively through oral legend."³

One can imagine the sorts of the anecdotes about Hsieh that have been floating around since the 1980s. Despite the substantial differences, what oral legend and scholarship have in common is that both function to create access to this body of work through the means of storytelling. One can watch the six-minute film of him standing beside a punch clock, where every frame indicates an hour of a day, watching as his hair grows from shaved bald to shoulder length, or one can look at photos of him: lying in bed in a cage in his studio; or out and about in Manhattan during one of the coldest

2. Heathfield, *Out of Now*, 12.

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winters on record. These images are compelling, and yet they also seem as if in waiting — ready to be animated by context, elaboration and interpretation. If not by Hsieh himself — and since the publication of *Out of Now*, he has been speaking in public more often — then by someone like Heathfield or some other writer or scholar who has followed Hsieh's work over the years. Indeed, the texts from *Out of Now* could be read as a collaboration between Adrian the writer and Tehching the storyteller.

So, in the fall of 2001, Tehching came to Singapore to give a talk at The Substation. Tehching would be the first to admit that he is far from fluent in English, nonetheless, he is a very charismatic and effective speaker. In 2010, I would again hear Hsieh tell his story in Hong Kong, at the Asia Art Archive. It was no surprise to notice that his presentation had evolved since I last heard it in Singapore. In Taiwan, I noticed other adjustments as well: for instance, at the onset of his lecture, he made a reference to his mother, as he did in Hong Kong, showing a portrait of her when she was young. In Taiwan, Tehching followed that photo with a more recent one of himself lying on a couch, as his mother, leaning forward in her chair, is pointing at him. The next slide he showed was of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* from the Sistine Chapel, where God reaches out to Adam with his pointed hand. Over the years, Tehching may have injected a few more jokes into his presentation, but as I recall hearing him over a decade ago, there was always a sense of humour and a lightness of being in his story.

Beyond his abilities as a storyteller, there is the question of how Hsieh creates access to, and knowledge of, his art through his narrative. In Taiwan, it was interesting to see him speak in Chinese rather than in English; obviously, he is much more at ease with the former. While I don't understand Chinese, when it came to watching his presentations, I didn't feel my dependence on translation detracted too much from the experience. Being well familiar with the material may explain it, but more than that, his storytelling had always struck me with an apparent transparency. Hearing Hsieh speak seems like the best way to access his art; it is as if he is revealing its contents. The propositions he offers may seem so simple: "I, Tehching Hsieh, have a thirteen years' plan. / I will make ART during this time. / I will not show it PUBLICLY."⁴ But if you are fascinated by this proposition, you realise that what's at stake is far from simple, and you want to hear the story behind it. Just as with his statements, Hsieh's presentations are crafted with a lot of care, and his casual, plain spoken manner belies the complexity of narrative structure and the nuance of his story. You learn, for instance, about the development

4. Tehching Hsieh, from his Statement for "Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999", December 31, 1986.

from one performance to the next, or what the intervals between them signify. As he explained in *Out of Now*: “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.”⁵ Yet, as with any narrative, Tehching’s is an imperfect representation; his stories are ineluctably incomplete depictions of what happened. As listeners, we already know that. We know that no artist is the definitive authority on the interpretation of his or her own art. That our memories can be deceiving. We may not desire anything like the “Truth” from Tehching, but surely I am not alone among admirers of his work in wanting to hear more and more details about his lifeworks.

After having spent a concentrated and intense period in Taiwan listening to him repeat his presentation in succession, as well as hearing Adrian’s lectures, Jow-Juin’s commentary, and not least of all participating in the many long discussions, as I now reflect on Tehching Hsieh the storyteller, it is evident to me that his narrative is much more opaque than I had previously assumed. As more was revealed, whether by Tehching or Adrian, as these details brought me seemingly closer to a fuller appreciation of his life’s works, as I got to know the man better, at the same time, I felt I was also being pulled in another direction. I came to see the work more philosophically and less biographically. Tehching’s storytelling is not, I would argue, a form of autobiography. Instead, the narrative functions to bring us to a peculiar place, a place that the artist has endeavoured in his eighteen years of “lifework” to inhabit. This is a place where one can ponder the passing of time with a new and unfamiliar perspective — the “out of now” of his book’s title. Hsieh and Heathfield decided on that phrase in part because it has a contradictory double meaning: the “out of” signifies a coming “out of” or “from” the moment of the present, but at the same time, it also signifies being “out of” or “separate from” this present. (Incidentally, Gong explained in Taiwan that he couldn’t find a comparable phrase in Chinese with this same ambiguity.)

Of course, the other best means for the transmission of Hsieh’s lifeworks are the documents and artifacts, such as the printed statements for each performance, the punch cards from the Time Clock Piece which were verified by a notary public, the uniforms that he wore, or the wooden structure of the Cage Piece. At Taipei University of the Arts, as mentioned above, we departed from our usual format, and instead Tehching was to speak for a while, then Adrian, back to Tehching, then me, and so on. After I had spoken, a woman from the audience made a request. She said that in Taiwan they have two movie channels, HBO and Star Movies, and she said, you know why Taiwanese

5. Hsieh, *Out of Now*, 334.

prefer HBO, because it doesn't have commercial interruptions. She asked that Adrian and I stop interrupting the "movie" — and let Tehching continue on with his presentation. Unfortunately, she didn't stick around after the lunch break, and I did not get to find out her name, nor did I get a chance to hear her own response to the way I addressed her comments when we reconvened after lunch. For me, her request touched upon a very important issue at the heart of Hsieh's documents, artifacts, and even his storytelling. Consider what comes closest to being like a movie among Hsieh's documents, the six-minute film of his *Time Clock Piece*. But watching that film — and it is arguably a very long six minutes — does not even begin to provide the viewer with an experience of the durational quality of the actual *One-Year Performance*.

When one watches a movie, it is the thing itself — the story constructed of sound and images — that the viewer experiences. It may be based on a "true story", for example, about the triumph of the will of some famous underdog athlete, but while the movie points to realities outside its own world, great subject matter does not necessarily endow it with great substance; the art of the film is the film as a form and object in and of itself. With Hsieh, however, the document, the artifact, or the narrative, these are not even a part of the performance. Rather, what these objects and statements and stories do is that they point to the art. Even if one were present at a performance of his, it's debatable whether one could adequately witness it, and because of the scale of its duration (a few hours' observation of a year-long, let alone thirteen-year-long, piece fails to encapsulate it) and also, most importantly, because Tehching's artistic medium was less his body than his life — or, rather, that abstract but essential quality of life itself: the passing of time.

As noted, these are but a few remarks on what I learned from being on tour with Tehching. There are many other issues that I have been thinking about since that trip — for instance, the reception of Hsieh's oeuvre in Taiwan — but I will have to save those observations for another essay. This trip was one of the high points in my life in the arts. Ever since I heard of Hsieh, I have greatly admired his work, and it is something special to experience one's appreciation of an oeuvre reach a whole other level. I have heard Tehching tell his story more than a few times now, and am looking forward to hearing him tell it again.

Biography:

Lee Weng Choy is an art critic. From 2000 to 2009, he was the Artistic Co-Director of The Substation arts centre in Singapore, and in 2010, was Director of Projects, Research & Publications, Osage Art Foundation, Hong Kong. Lee serves on the academic advisory board of the Asia Art Archive, and is president of the Singapore Section of the International Association of Art Critics. He has lectured on art theory and cultural policy — at Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sotheby's Institute of Art, Singapore, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His essays have appeared in various publications including: *After the Event: New Perspectives on Art History*; *Broadsheet*; *Forum On Contemporary Art & Society*; *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*; *Theory in Contemporary Art* since 1985; *Third Text*; and *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*.