

CFP: What is the Contemporary? (St Andrews, 1-3 Sep 14)

Paper Proposal

Adjusting Temporality in Art History: Contemporaneity, Globalism, and Identity in Contemporary Taiwanese Art

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This paper project arises from dissatisfaction with art history's existing interpretive framework and modes of writing. This framework often approaches contemporary art outside of the West or by non-western artists as either exclusively in a domestic context or as a straightforward manifestation of globalization. The domestic approach usually follows the tradition of historical narratives defined by nations and cultures. The second approach privileges an ahistorical, global, and often hegemonic perspective that perpetuates the Euroamerican point of view and silences local voices. Neither one does justice to the work.

One of the ways to deconstruct the global/local dichotomy, I propose, is by exploring the concept of contemporaneity. This paper will focus on Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh for his work serves as an instructive case in discussing this concept. Many critics have commented that his *One Year Performances* opened up the theorization of time and duration in performance art.¹ By singling out and repeating one

¹ From 1978 to 1979 in New York City, Tehching Hsieh performed the first work of his *One Year Performance* series: *Cage Piece* (1978-1979). For a whole year Hsieh locked himself in a cage inside his studio. He did not converse, read, write, listen to the radio, or watch television. A friend took charge of his food, clothing, and waste. Between 1979 and 1986, he completed four more *One Year Performances*: *Time-Clock Piece* (1980-1981) which we have already seen; *Outdoor Piece* (1981-1982), in which he stayed outdoors for a year, disrupted only by being arrested and taken into a police station for fifteen hours because of an alleged assault charge, which was later dismissed; *Rope Piece* (1983-1984), in which he

element in life, *One Year Performances* keep time and being in the world in the present tense. As a result of this theme, existing interpretations of Hsieh's work tend to be philosophical rather than art historical. It is my contention that the concept of time that Hsieh's work attempts to recalibrate is not only physical or perceptual time but, more importantly I believe, time in art history.

The dominant teleological narrative of Euroamerican modernism has created a time gap between the development of art in the West and in the rest of the world. Taiwan is always already a latecomer to modernism and therefore, according to this narrative, Taiwanese artists can never be original.

Studying Hsieh's life and work offers an important critique of existing art historical writing—writing that has been dominated by the Euroamerican perspective. Hsieh's work invites us to go beyond the teleological, linear narrative of modernism, a narrative that creates time differences in the art from different areas of the world. Hsieh's work exemplifies the pursuit of contemporaneity and the shift from modern art to contemporary art from a Taiwanese perspective.

Terry Smith defines contemporaneity as consisting “in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.”² Through

spent an entire year tied by an eight-foot rope to female artist Linda Montano, without ever touching each other the whole time; and *No Art Piece* (1985-1986), the last piece in the series, in which he pledged not to make art, talk about art, read about art, or go to galleries or museums: instead, he committed to just live life for a year.

² Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 9.

studying the artistic strategies that Hsieh employed to become contemporary and to achieve contemporaneity in the global art world, I aim at proposing a way to adjust the temporalities for art history.