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Performance Artist at Work; The Aesthetic Darwin

By PETER MONAGHAN

Performance artists may appear to be an odd lot.

Since the blossoming of the form in the 1970s, one performance artist has attained a certain renown by having himself shot from close range (Chris Burden), another by implanting a microchip in his ankle (Vito Acconci), and a third by grafting an ear made of human cartilage into his forearm (Stelarc). All three have undergone stints in academe.

Yet none of those curious undertakings has been as striking as the "lifeworks" of Tehching Hsieh (pronounced dur-ching shay), judging by Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh (MIT Press). After coming to the United States from Taiwan in 1974 as a young man, Hsieh spent the years 1978 to 1986 mounting a series of five one-year performances, each with its own bracing restrictions. He spent a year locked inside a cell, communicating with no one — not even reading, writing, or listening to a radio. Next he lived in one room for a year, punching a worker's time clock every hour, on the hour. Then he wandered lower Manhattan without shelter for a year and kept a precise record of where he ate, slept, and defecated. For his fourth 12-month stint, he tied himself with a short length of rope to a fellow artist whom he could not touch.

Finally, Hsieh spent a year in complete isolation from artistic activities or influences — an ironic stipulation, given that the abstention was itself an artwork, of a kind.

In 1986 Hsieh began his final performance piece, "Thirteen Year Plan," to make art but not show it publicly. He emerged at the end of 1999 to announce simply, with letters cut from magazines and pasted onto a sheet of paper as in a ransom note, that during that time "I kept myself alive."

"These works were unparalleled in terms of their use of physical difficulty over extreme durations and in their absolute conception of art and life as simultaneous processes," writes Adrian Heathfield in Out of Now. Heathfield, a professor of visual and performance

culture at Roehampton University, in London, compiled the large-format book in collaboration with Hsieh. It includes thousands of photographs that document Hsieh's works, along with critical essays by Heathfield, an interview, and appreciations by art critics and artists.

For Heathfield, Hsieh's works were "a singular exploration of the boundaries, meanings, and capacities of art." Yet, although they attracted a cult following in New York and Taiwanese performance-art circles, they took place out of view of the art world, which barely mentioned them.

Heathfield outlines Hsieh's elemental themes: "How time is lived and felt in a body; how it leaves its mark in material things; how the past lives in the present; how singular lives and times remain." He also grapples with the ironies and puzzles of Hsieh's art, noting that through his durational performances, Hsieh was "caught in a time unlike anyone else's time ... an outsider, an untimely figure."

Speaking from his office in London, Heathfield also portrays Hsieh's forbidding works as having something to say about the present moment: "That has to do with the way they use slow time and long time, and this particular moment when everything has got to such an accelerated and hyped speed."

The art world has finally clocked in. In recent months, the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art have documented Hsieh's works. MoMA re-created the cell of Hsieh's first one-year work, "Cage Piece," right down to the last two tea bags he used on the installation's final day.

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Edgar Degas's "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" first appeared in public in 1881, her head held high as she stepped askew in her ballet shoes. Almost immediately various French critics assailed the sculptor for creating a "bestial" girl who had a "vicious muzzle" and resembled "a monkey, an Aztec, an abortion."

This was all coded language. The critics were charging that Degas, gulled by the outlandish theories of Charles Darwin, had sculpted a ballerina with the simian features of our supposed forebears.

Indeed, Degas had been alert to the theories of Darwin and his fellow evolutionists. So had other artists. The primordial erosions and eruptions of Claude Monet's landscapes and seascapes took their lead from Darwinian understandings of the geological formation of the earth. Paul Cézanne's evocations of primitive human competitiveness — a pyramid of skulls, a satyr-taut youth

bearing away a ripe-fleshed maiden — drew from his conversations with the leading Darwinist paleontologist Antoine-Fortuné Marion.

Darwin's theories reflected an emerging spirit of free inquiry into rational man's relationship with the natural world, writes Richard Kendall in his contribution to a collection of essays, Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts (Yale University Press): "It was here that Darwin's path intersected with that of the Impressionists, strengthening their identification with the increasingly secular, science-based culture around them."

Authors in the large-format, extensively illustrated book argue that critics have paid little attention to Darwin's interactions with the creative arts. Now, 200 years after his birth, the book seeks to remedy that shortcoming.

Diana Donald, the former head of the department of history of art and design at Manchester Metropolitan University, edited the collection with Jane Munro, the senior assistant keeper of paintings, drawings, and prints at the University of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum. They and nine other authors make the case that Darwin's revolutionary theories not only greatly influenced the visual art of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but were also influenced by it.

While he professed himself "an ignoramus" when it came to art history and appreciation, Darwin had familiarized himself with the Old Masters, and with newer artists. On frequent visits to museums and galleries, he discovered works that resonated with the way he saw life on earth — conflict among species, natural selection, survival of the fittest. He found confirmation in such favorite images as James Audubon's engravings of interacting birds, Edwin Landseer's 1853 canvas of dying stags, and various portrayals of struggling and downtrodden citizens of his own time.

Donald writes that the merger of Darwin's scientific and aesthetic sensibilities was nowhere more apparent than in his theory of beauty, which was itself inspired by evolution. In contrast to artists like J.M.W. Turner and his contemporaries, who had considered beauty to reside within phenomena that God had created for man to behold, Darwin saw nature's complex structures as beautiful because of their naturally selected form and function. Through that lens, he could take aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and inspiration from works of art.

Donald points out that just as the consciousness of artists of the day shifted gradually under the influence of ideas like Darwin's, the

theorist's ideas evolved out of an ooze of earlier, inadequate notions: "Depictions of animal life were transformed by a new consciousness of scientific theory, but, as in the case of landscape, this gradual transformation took place from within the inherited conventions of the genre, just as Darwin himself evolved his theories on the basis of received ideas and images."

Yale published Endless Forms in association with two museums presenting an exhibition of the same name this year. The Yale Center for British Art has just ended its showing of the work; the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge will stage it from June 16 to October 4.

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