

*How have artists engaged the topic and concept of time? Using three chosen artworks, elaborate how artists have approached this topic.*

Tai Hao Feng

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## **Introduction**

What is time? In Norbert Elias' book "Time: An Essay", he argues that time is an achievement of human synthesis which can be understood only in connection with certain processes of social development. Consumer time, usually viewed as an objective and mechanical measurement, is naturally divided into seconds, minutes, and hours. However, many modern artists challenge this conception through performance, sculptural, and video artworks. They reveal that time, through art, does not need to conform to consumer ways. Through textual analysis of the works by Tehching Hsieh, Joseph Beuys, and Bill Viola, this paper investigates the use of time as a social construct, emerging through relationships, cooperation, and collective experience. Tehching Hsieh's Rope Piece performed in 1983 to 1984 transforms duration into a negotiation of coexistence between two bodies, Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks made in 1982 to 1987 extends time into an ecological process sustained through community participation, and Bill Viola's The Raft in 2004 slows down time to expose shared human vulnerability and empathy. Each artist redefines time as relational instead of a mechanical one. Through cooperation and interdependence, time is depicted as a way to shape, bind, and transform human connection.

## **Rope Piece, 1983-1984**

One Year Performance 1983 to 1984, also known as Rope Piece [Annex A], was a performance by Tehching Hsieh and the artist Linda Montano. The two spent an entire year bound together by an eight-foot rope tied around their waists. The rules of the artwork stipulated that they would not touch each other. The work exists today as legal documentation [Annex A.1] attesting to Hsieh and Montano's participation in the performance, and a series of photographs [Annex A.2] as a record of the artists' time together and their exchanges (Mplus 2).

## **Time As a Social Process I**

Tehching Hsieh's Rope Piece in 1983 to 1984 engaged time as relational. It is formed from the awareness that does not exist in consumer time. Duration, in this work, reflects Henri Bergson's argument in *Time and Free Will*, that it is a continuous flow of consciousness that cannot be broken into measurable units (Bergson 75-77). Bergson's distinction between the thought of time and its experience is powerfully operative in Hsieh's work. For the spectator, an aesthetics of duration is marked by an engagement with phenomenological time, with time as it is felt as a force and product of relational and intersubjective exchange (Heathfield and Hsieh 22). This idea is also supported by Amelia Jones' argument in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* that time in body-based performances emerges through the exchange between bodies (Jones 38), elaborating that time unfolds between subjects. The piece is thus measured through the ongoing act of coexisting. Through his action, time is based on the individual needs and on the requirement to negotiate them with other people. It is not mechanical but a temporal and social process. Without the use of social processes, this action simply cannot be fulfilled. The constant witness of another was instrumental to the performance (Huang 14). It must be coordinated with someone else. Likewise, the artwork's effect cannot be fulfilled without another. This effect mirrors Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, in which the artwork's meaning emerges through human interaction instead of an isolated object (Bourriaud 113). Hsieh was craving an experience that could force him to confront all of his weaknesses and insecurities within human relationships, and communication (Knapp 4). This piece was hence ideated through the concept of human beings and their struggles in life with each other (Grey 11).

## **Time As a Cage**

Throughout the making of the work, time unfolds through social interactions instead of isolation. As time went on, the two artists began to lose their socially expected behaviour, their facade, their ego, and started acting more like animals. Initially, they were verbal and



talking about six hours a day. Then, they started pulling on each other, yanking on the rope. They grew tired of the talks but yanking led to anger. They started getting less physical with each other. They used gestures, grunted, and made moaning sounds to signal whenever one of them wanted to go somewhere. Communication regressed from verbal to nonverbal (Grey 58-59). The binding between them breaks down their individual time and transforms it into mutual timing. Duration is then constituted here by the giving over of one's time to the time of another. Each cannot choose the time of their agency since it is dependent on the other's time. They live therefore in a time frequented by the phenomena of waiting, deferral, and attending to the other (Heathfield and Hsieh 49). This reflects Hsieh's idea that individuality is suppressed because of togetherness; We become one another's cage. It is noted that Montano would have killed Hsieh a thousand times if it hadn't been the rule not to touch. Twice he threw pieces of furniture to the floor very near her. Neither struck the other (McEvilley 6). Time, in this instance, is based on this theme of being caged while the rope acts as a metaphor for relationships. Although relationships connect individuals, we as individuals want to be independent. We want to feel freedom but it is impossible.

### **Time As Interdependence**

The work also transforms the concept of time as a means of interdependence. Because of the absolute requirements that the artists have to coordinate with each other, the idea of individuality is dissolved into a collective rhythm. While they slowly regressed to using grunts and gestures, they still needed the constant dependence on each other's approval to fulfill their moment-to-moment needs and impulses. For example, for one person to go to the bathroom, to get a drink of water, to look out the window, both had to walk. The arrangement presupposed a certain good will on both sides (McEvilley 6). The present constantly changing and reforming itself also aligns with Peggy Phelan's argument in *Unmarked*, in which Hsieh's performance exists only in the presentness of its disappearance (Phelan 146), elaborating into the lived temporal nature of *Rope Piece*. Furthermore, each moment of negotiation and interdependence exists only once, exemplifying Phelan's philosophy of performance, showing that Hsieh's work unfolds interdependent time as irretrievable. However, nearing the end of the work, they started to act normally again. Through this, time is also shown to be a mediator for relationships. Montano used the experience to form a bond with Hsieh that shattered social norms, stating that there are no words or archetypes that fit the bond they share. Similarly, Hsieh concluded that he felt comfortable with Montano (Knapp 7-8). Hsieh and Montano were left with such a deep bond, it transcended the physical. On a philosophical level, Hsieh said their piece also didn't end when they untied the rope (Knapp 17). They will always remain bonded, even if psychologically. This work is

thus a piece of rare honesty, forcing both the artists to show radical vulnerability. Tied this way, it is impossible to hide any negative or weak side of oneself (Places 41). Hence, Hsieh's Rope Piece showcases time not in a mechanical or objective way but as a social process. He started this with an idea to combat his struggle with human communication and ended with a longtime relationship. He exposes how human time is always relational, built upon by coexistence, negotiation, and adaptation. In this way, time has the ability to build, mediate, and destroy relationships. Time, complemented with relationships, also exemplifies the feeling of being caged. This action is exacerbated by Hsieh's deliberate move to make it one year long. He blends art and life together. This way, it is a real connection and that delivers more power (Grey 11). This action, through relational time, is a symbol of life and human struggle.

## **7000 Oaks, 1982-1987**

Joseph Beuys's project 7000 Eichen, 7000 Oaks, began in 1982 at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany [Annex B]. Beuys invited the citizens of Kassel [Annex B.1] to plant 7000 trees throughout the city as part of his 7000 Eichen plan (NSW 2), each paired with a columnar basalt stone approximately four feet high and positioned above ground, throughout the greater city of Kassel [Annex B.2]. It took five years to complete; The last tree was planted at the opening of Documenta 8 in 1987 (Dia 1).

### **Time As a Social Process II**

Similar to Hsieh's Rope Piece, Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks in 1982 to 1987 measures time as relational, as well as ecological. Mirroring Bergson's philosophy that time is a lived and shared flow of consciousness instead of a mechanical and objective one, this work engages time as a social process, like Hsieh's, but on a more collective and ecological level. This kind of measurement does not follow the standard consumer time, rather it follows the timing and speed of the trees' growth. It is cultivated, a slow process that extends even beyond Beuys' life.

### **Time As a Community**

The artwork converts time from an individual to a collective experience. Like Hsieh's Rope Piece, 7000 Oaks can only exist through the cooperation of others. It is exemplified even more by the need to seek government approval, funding, and social coordination. As Claire Bishop argues in *Artificial Hells*, socially-engaging art that is produced from participatory time is a collective labour, which can only be developed through sustained civic involvement (Bishop 13). This makes the artwork's temporality a social process, unfolding only through cooperation. Moreover, Beuys' concept of *Soziale Plastik*, Social Sculpture, posits that society itself can be shaped as an artwork through human action and cooperation (Tate 1-2). Like Hsieh's Rope Piece, Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* is brought forth through Beuys' concept. This work connects social sculpture to a lived and temporal process, a continuous shaping of social relations rather than a fixed artwork; 7000 Oaks stems from this concept, it was a way to engage the community and government together. Despite the initial backlash from the public, residents, city planners, gardeners, and environmentalists eventually helped to pick locations for the saplings and to plant them. Areas slated to become car parks suddenly became homes to young trees and communal spaces (Jacobs 3). Additionally, they were responsible for removing one stone for each tree planted, gradually transforming the landscape (Kolapse 6). This brought people together, from the

start of the project to even after the project ended. Time, hence, is depicted as a community builder.

### **Time As an Ecological Growth**

Beuys also aligns artistic time with ecological time. This operates on a vastly different scale than consumer time, which is the nature of his sculptures, they are not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change (Beuys and Harlan 24). In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson continues to argue that duration is inseparable from processes of transformation (Bergson 139), aligning closely with the work. His art is a process of transformation. For example, an oak tree grows slowly and its life can span for centuries. Once the tree grows tall, the planter will be long gone (Jacobs 7). Beuys passed away in 1986, one year before the last tree was planted. However, the project did not end there. His son, Wenzel Beuys, planted the final tree in 1987, officially marking the completion of the Kassel project (Kolapse 8). Only through collective patience and long-term supervision can the work prosper. The work's temporal structure hence rejects consumer time's idea of immediacy and instead embraces ecological time, reflecting Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects*, as each oak sapling paired with a basalt stone links present action to future ecological transformation, exceeding human temporal scales (Morton 1-2). Even though the participants planted the saplings, the "hyperobjects", they will not be able to fully perceive the project that will unfold through a century or a millennia. Beuys' 7000 Oaks operates within this deep-time framework as the artwork continues to grow, change, and reorganise the urban ecosystem long after its human initiators are gone. This challenges society to think deeper and further than adapting to the normal human time. Furthermore, in *Politics of Nature* by Bruno Latour, he discusses the actor-network theory which highlights the interdependence of humans and ecology to produce the artwork across time (Latour 80); We need the trees just as much as the trees need us and the work unfolds through this ecological co-agency. It forms the kind of ecological collective Latour describes. This work therefore embodies the theme of growth, regeneration, and trans-generational cooperation through the use of ecological time as a social process.

## **The Raft, 2004**

In Bill Viola's *The Raft* made in 2004, viewers watch an approximately 10-minutes long video featuring a group of men and women from various ethnic and economic backgrounds gathering as if waiting for a train or bus to arrive [Annex C]. As is characteristic of urban settings, each individual maintains a psychological distance. Suddenly, the group is struck by a massive onslaught of water [Annex C.1]. People huddle and struggle and succumb to the explosive force of the water [Annex C.2]. Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the deluge subsides and people begin to regain their composure. As they do, they reach out to others, comforting them [Annex C.3] (Nelson-Atkins 2-3).

## **Time As a Social Process III**

*The Raft* made by Bill Viola in 2004 uses members of the public as well. There is a social component to the artwork. The social process emerged through human relations and shared experiences. As opposed to consumer time, *The Raft* presents time as lived, emotional, and relational. When the water hits, Viola slows down the video to near stillness. In that moment, viewers can scrutinise what the subjects are doing. Some try to help others, some are shielding themselves, and some are suspended mid-air. Time is almost frozen. He transforms an instant of violence into an extended moment of human interdependence. *The Raft* arouses a visceral experience of human calamity and shared humanity, provoking a consideration of the range of responses to crisis (Espinosa 1). Time, in this instance, becomes socially thickened. Similar to Beuys' *7000 Oaks*, the concept of community and cooperation is exhibited here. Even though each individual experiences the water's impact differently, they are all caught in one shared temporal event. The variety of the subjects' clothes also end up wet and unwearable by the end of the video, dissolving any kind of hierarchy or status. Through this, time is depicted as a way to bind people together via shared vulnerability and interdependence, similar to Hsieh's *Rope Piece*. Moreover, Viola has said that in this world of unstable and often unseen powers, an attack can come at any time for seemingly no reason. For him, it is important that everyone in *The Raft* survives, a statement of the resilience of humanity (Chazen Museum of Art 1). This resilience of humanity is shown through unity despite the diversity of races, gender, and age. We are all in this together and when we get knocked down, overcoming such hardships is likewise easier in solidarity (Point of Resistance 2).

## **Time As a Way to Scrutinise**

Unlike Hsieh's and Beuys' work though, the work is played in extreme slow motion to allow viewers to meticulously view the temporal differences between each person's reaction. The viewers are then able to discern facial expressions and bodily gestures and apprehend subtleties of emotion that would go unnoticed in real time (Nelson-Atkins 6). He forces the viewers to see directly what we could not or did not want to see, to look below the surface, to penetrate the image and risk entering unknown territory (Mun-Delsalle 1). This notion of slowing down time to reveal also aligns with Laura Mulvey's concept of "delayed cinema", in which Viola's act of almost freezing time reveals the significance of the subjects' poses. It allows the viewer to denaturalise the human body with new intensity (Mulvey 163).

## **Time As Empathy**

The slowed down time also reflects the extensive duration of Beuys' 7000 Oaks. In Viola's case, the viewer has to abandon their own consumer time and align with the slow, collective time of the subjects in the work. He uses time as an instrument to enhance perception and to generate a state of semi-hypnosis in the viewer as well. His works are a gateway for spectators to explore their inner self (Dantas 2). Throughout the video, the viewer is able to feel the helplessness of disaster but also the hope and community that can emerge in its wake (Lautamo 6). Moreover, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the notion of time registered through the body (Merleau-Ponty 445), which in this case, the viewer's body. To elaborate, Viola's manipulation of time forces the viewer to feel suspended along with the subjects, compelling them to be "embodied viewers", as Vivian Sobchack calls in her book *The Address of the Eye*. The viewers then feel time through their own bodily awareness (Sobchack 135), pushing them to empathise with the subjects in the video. Additionally, he slows down time to break down the objective and goal-oriented factor of consumer time as a way for viewers to understand the themes of his work as a whole. Hence, Viola utilises slowed time to critique the perception of consumer time. The slowed down time acts as a way to help viewers scrutinise and empathise with the subjects in the video. Time, therefore, is depicted as a way to bring people together, similar to Hsieh's and Beuys' works. Viola turns time into a social fabric, woven from human vulnerability, connection, and endurance.

## **Conclusion**

Immigrating from Taiwan to the US, Tehching Hsieh has specialised in year-long vow works: A year in a cell, a year punching a time clock every hour, a year out of doors in Manhattan (McEvelley 1). Hsieh took his art to the limits of what is mentally and physically possible through his one-year performances. He lived in relative obscurity for the majority of his career, and very humbly declares his art practice as just a means of “passing time.” One year is the measurement used in calculating human life. Through his performances, he aims to blend life and art together and to think about life from different perspectives, and all his works can be reflected by these words: Life is a life sentence, life is passing time, life is free thinking (Oralkan 3-10).

After serving in Crimea during World War II, German artist Joseph Beuys claimed to have been rescued from a plane crash by nomadic Tatar tribesmen who nursed him back to health by wrapping him in pungent animal fats and tent felts. Using this semi-mythic narrative of artistic awakening, Beuys subsequently became absorbed by the restorative and sculptural qualities of such materials. Beuys later developed the concept of ‘social sculpture’, focusing on universal art education, environmentalism and the nature of the multiple as an affordable and easily disseminated artwork (Henry Moore Foundation 3-4).

Bill Viola’s videos use a combination of slow motion and faux-Renaissance stylization of the human body to broach themes of universal humanism and soft spirituality (Chayka 3) and generate absorbing, thought-provoking effects (Jebb 5). He defines his art as “sculpting time”, where time is the basic material of film and videos. Believing that art is a spiritual exercise, Viola proposes a new way of seeing while painfully aware of the brevity of life, his digital images give insight into these fundamental questions of human existence and demonstrate the universality of his work. His engagement in the exploration of human beings’ multiple dimensions is expressed through a mastery of the possibilities of technology. His videos are always conceived as inner metaphysical experiences for him and for the viewer. Often recounting his near-death experience as a child when he almost drowned in a lake, he uses water as his subject to represent life, death, reflection, and refraction (Mun-Delsalle 1-9).

In conclusion, the works by Tehching Hsieh, Joseph Beuys, and Bill Viola showcase a rejection of the consumer idea of time. Through extending the duration of art, they utilise performance, sculpture, and video to critique how one sees time. By changing one’s mindset, they can experience the reality of social processes and stop seeing time in a

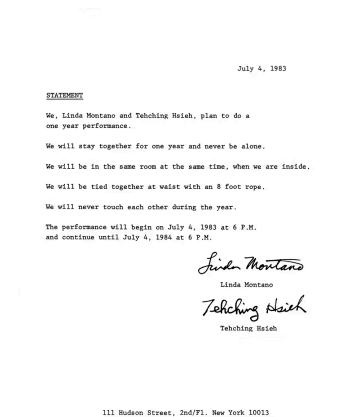
superficial way. These three works shown successfully exemplify the significance of collaboration, empathy, and interdependence. Through them, time is made social. Without a second collaborator, the works, and hence time, cannot proceed. One should cooperate with others more, engage with the community more, extend a helping hand with others more. Because if they do not, time is essentially stopped.



## Appendix



Annex A: Tehching Hsieh - Rope Piece, 1983-1984



Annex A.1: Rope Piece Statement



Annex A.2: Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano



Annex B: Joseph Beuys - 7000 Oaks, 1982-1987



Annex B.1: Civilians planting alongside Beuys



Annex B.2: One of the 7000 trees paired with a columnar basalt stone



Annex C: Diverse men and women gathering as if waiting for a train or bus to arrive



Annex C.1: The group about to be struck by water



Annex C.2: The group succumbing to the water



Annex C.3: The group regaining composure. Some try to help others.

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