1 THOUGHT OF DURATION

The problem is how to make time explicit as it comes into being and makes itself evident, time at all times underlying the notion of time, not as an object of our knowledge, but as a dimension of our being.

Merleau-Ponty

Hsieh's work shares with many artists of his generation a strong interest in the interrogation and destabilization of subjectivity, an assault on the orders of the visible through a creative investment in the phenomenological dynamics of being and relation. However, it sets off on a quite distinct trajectory: into an extended investigation of the nature of temporality and lived experience. Other artists had made similar temporally inclusive gestures: in particular the works of conceptual artists Hanne Darboven and On Kawara quickly spring to mind. Darboven's pieces from the late nineteen-sixties take the form of large hand-drawn works often involving elaborate numerical equations or systematic textual writings. As such, they are evidently engaged with laborious and repetitive processes of inscription that admit an extended temporal dimension into the creation of the work and its reception. As Bryony Fer has noted, Darboven's use of seriality is somewhat distinct from the cool analytic emphasis in Conceptual Art on system, often deployed to critique orders of rationalization and mechanization. Darboven's tracts can be seen as evocations of highly subjective and embodied passages through systems of logic which strongly evoke lived duration and generate a slowdown within the time of their reception. Similarly, On Kawara's Date Paintings, which form part of the TODAY series stretching from 1966 to the present, also act as an index of time. These meticulous paintings, fully realized within the single date on which they are "inscribed," are part of an open series proceeding with an irregular frequency throughout the artist's life. The graphic simplicity of each canvas—white date set against a monochrome field—is counterpointed by the painting being boxed with a newspaper clipping from the day, "found" wherever On Kawara is residing, and often by a diaristic subtitle admitting the artist's personal voice. In On Kawara's work, variability is posed in the context of a certain systematic conviction; occasional realization and variations of typography and color field are set against the persistence of a slowly accumulating history. Both Darboven's and On Kawara's work, taking place within the wake of Jackson Pollock's opening of painting to the energetics of action and process, are concerned with the presencing and marking of time within the handcrafted visual object. In both oeuvres the labor of the artist becomes an evident subject as the time of the work's realization is strongly marked within the time of its reception. However, for Hsieh the artwork is not just the index of a preceding and largely unseen duration, it is the lived duration itself, a lived time that includes numerous indexical forms and varying degrees of visibility. Moreover, Hsieh's labor deploys the artistic subject's entire corporeal being, more thoroughly displacing the status of the artwork as instrumental, as a product of dexterous digital craft.

Hsieh's course away from an aesthetics of explicit risk, from the painful testing of bodily limits characteristic of his earliest performances and common in a range of contemporaneous Body Art practices, can be seen as one which seeks to move beyond the frame of the rupturing event, the traumatic instance of performance, and into another order of temporality: duration. Here, the testing of corporeal limits is turned more extensively toward the practice of living, its existential nature and ethical dilemmas. Long durations had arisen in the work of Aconci in the late nineteen-sixties and
early seventies, if often intermittently, with longer continuous durations sometimes appearing in the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Abramović and Ulay. Abramović, for instance, had begun to extend the durations of her physically challenging performance works beyond the frame of the short sharp shock so characteristic of work in the early seventies. One of her relation works with Ulay, _Relation in Time_ (1977), figured the couple with their hair tightly bound together and took the form of an intersubjective unbraidable of two intimate bodies, performed over a seventeen-hour duration. In the early eighties the couple performed numerous renditions of the work _Nightsea Crossing_ (1981-86) in which they sat opposite each other and in the presence of objects for daylong durations over periods between a day and sixteen days. Ulay and Abramović’s final collaborative performance, _The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk_ (1988), took place over a duration of ninety days: they walked separately from either end of the Great Wall of China until they met, symbolically closing their relationship.22 Hsieh’s conception and enactment of yearlong works not only multiplied the terms of duration’s extension (and in so doing the human stakes in such endeavors), but also brought his work into direct correspondence with the socially and culturally accepted measure of a life. In this context the durational measure carries a symbolic weight, which ties it into ritualistic homage and common human accounting. Hsieh often mentions that this choice of a year was one that attuned the work to the earth’s orbit of the sun, reminding us of the reliance of the cultural measure on a cosmic order. This invocation of an underlying temporal force whose power the human measure barely marks is an opening to the indefinite that is reiterated in the work itself. Moreover, Hsieh’s enactment of a series of yearlong works would have begun to suggest (however implicitly) an open continuum and the potential giving over of the artist’s entire life to such endeavors.

This notion of a life sentence traced within the limits of art was already being explored to some extent in the diaristic work of On Kawara. In 1965 Opalka pledged to spend the rest of his life on a single work, 1965בית - אינ, in which he would paint increasing numbers sequentially across serial canvases of predetermined uniform dimensions. Opalka has continued this monumental and elemental work to date. In the resulting paintings, the softly striated white numbers appear at a distance as an organic waveform, due to Opalka’s use of the duration of a brushstroke: the paint is loaded onto the brush and the stroke is continued until the paint reserve is almost exhausted. The brush is then re-dipped. These multiple, gestural, micro-durations of art matter, waning between appearance and disappearance, take their place against the accumulating magnitude of the work. Opalka’s project was adjusted in 1968 when his backgrounds shifted from black to grey, and again in 1972 with the addition of one percent whitening of his background per painting, so that the always-increasing count is set to blend into the context of its “inscription.” Opalka also creates other indexes of his labor: photographic portraits of his face on finishing each canvas and mesmeric sound recordings of his voice reciting the numbers of each canvas, or “detail” as he wryly terms them.

In Opalka’s painterly work number is transformed beyond its graphic determination into a sublime sea of shifted iterations. Whilst it is still framed as an indexical project rather than as a work of performance, it is perhaps the most powerful evocation of lived duration in conceptual work as a result of its consuming continuity. The addition of the existential traces of image and voice humanize and enrich what otherwise might appear as an invisible subjection to a narrowly rationalized and planar order. The work nonetheless tends, as Christine Savinel remarks, toward “unity”:

_The assignment is meant to be total, involving the whole subject, all subjects: the artist’s ego, the painter himself, compelled because of a choice supposedly free at the origin, to pursue the program thus imposed exclusively and rigorously; and the subject represented, committed as well, by reflection. […] They are inseparable since this counting corresponds to the flow of Opalka’s life itself, and since the painter has chosen his own vital mortal countdown, as subject._23

Savinel’s statement is useful in terms of locating Opalka’s project within the finite span of his life, a tie to a corporeal singularity that is sometimes lost when considering its titling with a lemniscate, or when standing (as Opalka has done on a daily basis) to face the work’s sublime aesthetic. This standing to account and to record does at least push Opalka’s life out of the shadows in which Darboven and On Kawara linger, lending his oeuvre a certain testimonial weight.24 Hsieh’s work in comparison to Opalka’s is altogether more visceral in its use of embodiment, and his subjecthood is more visibly implicated. It is also less abstract and absolute in its choice of varying “ethical” frameworks or systems by which to conduct a living artistic practice.
These multiple interests in duration can be seen as both a reflection of and an address to wider cultural forces. They can also be placed in relation to previous formulations of temporality within the visual arts and in a dialogue with earlier philosophical precedents. In her study of the figurations of temporality in the art and art criticism of the nineteen-sixties, Pamela M. Lee traces the recurrence of what she terms "chronophobia," an obsessive "uneasiness with time and its measure" throughout the period. For Lee, manifestations of duration in the work of artists such as Andy Warhol and On Kawara presage an unsettling sense of infinity. These examples of durational aesthetics are fairly inchoate at this historical point. Lee's reading of their forces and affects is particularly informed by the internal dialogue of art practice and art history, especially by a re-reading of Michael Fried's controversial and extensively discussed essay "Art and Objecthood." Fried's polemical attack on Minimalist Art, whilst focusing its ire on minimalism's "theatricality" as a form of corruption of principles of formal purity and a manifestation of inter-medial and interactive perversion, reserved its most profound objection for the phenomenon of duration. As Lee carefully assesses, duration is anathema to what Fried sees as the pinnacle of modernist art's power, autonomy and self-criticality: its presentness. Fried's admiration is bestowed on an art for which, one could stress, "at every moment the work is wholly manifest." It's privileged, jolting affect would then be one of "instantaneous" depth and meaning. Fried's exaltation of "the instant" takes its place within a set of associated predominant temporal models—"the moment" and "the event" are equally paradigmatic—which can be seen as infrastructural terms of Modernity.

Lee, elaborating Robert Smithson's retort, sees Fried's shuddering at endlessness as a manifestation of the fear of death and traces these articulations in relation to immanent systemic and technological transformations of contemporary art and culture, which for Lee open a perspective on infinity. However, this association between a durational aesthetic and a sense of endlessness, which Lee affirms and pursues, is perhaps less secure when one considers duration in art in relation to the performing (and spectating) body, as one surely must in the nineteen-seventies. Such durational works, as manifestations of corporeity, bring to the fore of the observer's attention something resolutely material and fleshy, approaching, receding and continuing, whilst always being imbued with a sense of mortality and finitude. Moreover, endlessness can be seen as a culturally and ideologically manipulated phenomenon, when linked to and produced by technologies of Modernity and capital that have vested interests in the mythological maintenance of their own structures as flexible forms of permanence.

While oblivious to the somewhat hermetic machinations of art historical discourse, Hsieh could not have avoided the prevailing social organization of time and its attendant cultural expressions. By the late nineteen-seventies, the allied organizing kinetic logics of capitalized temporality—regulation and acceleration—were firmly embedded in the Western social and cultural milieu, and it is with these forces that durational aesthetics can be seen as being phenomenologically and discursively engaged. Temporal regulation is inherent within the very fabric of "clock time," and once time was gripped by the discursive powers of the Enlightenment and then by industrialization in the nineteenth century, there was a concerted attempt to master social time by subjecting it to a definitive, universal and homogenizing measure. This rationalization was enhanced in the advanced capitalist societies of the twentieth century, by the strict division of work and leisure time (their cultural marking as productive and non-productive time) and by the increasing contraction and manipulation of the latter. As Mary Ann Doane remarks in her study of temporality and early cinema, in Modernity "resolute linearity, efficiency and economy" are applied to "the labor of the human body" in order to exclude wasted time and thus wasted value. Technical innovation is inherently implicated in this harnessing and capture of time's value, from the invention of electric light (the hours of darkness are illuminated and thus become workable/exploitable), to the invention of photography and cinema (which press into commodification and circulation previously unseen temporalities), with both media becoming powerful vehicles for the cultural definition and narration of time. Cinema in particular becomes a far-reaching cultural medium for the shaping of temporality within linear and progressive meta-narratives. For Doane, the interesting question here, especially in relation to early cinema, is how such technologies operate on phenomena of chance, contingency, duration and events in order to constitute a particular rendition of time.
In the cultural logics of late-capitalism, time itself is a commodity that must be exploited to its maximum potential. As Jean-François Lyotard noted: "Money is nothing other than time placed in reserve, available." This "capital time" was very evident to artists in the nineteen-sixties and seventies for whom the exploration and use of unregulated temporalities (chance operations, contingent forms and improvisations) was a means to assert "inassimilable" values. The technologies of communication and exchange that began to shape human interactions in capitalized democracies also operated through the most economical and productive means. The contraction of physical space (and of the size of tools) that characterized technological development was accompanied by an increase in speed. If an "object" of exchange could traverse space more quickly, then more exchange was possible. The contemporary milieu of global capitalism is organized around such crossings and contractions of space; in order to link its diverse international agents and institutions the system must bridge the discrete temporalities of global subjects, pressing work life and then social life toward worldwide simultaneity. In this extension toward simultaneity, there is an increased sense for individual subjects of the dissolution of personal or private temporality into the structure of a regulated "open" public temporality. Hence the common contemporary complaint of having no time—no time that is not already consumed by some connective imperative. Velocity has the primary value in late capitalist technological operations and communication itself is increasingly subject to acceleration. The time and the pace of technologies become habituated, through labor and use, as human time, and they are assimilated into a subject's ways of being and physical rhythms. As such, acceleration can be seen as a disciplinary operation whose very object is to be forgotten as an exterior order of time, to hide its active conditioning of the subject.

This objective and universal, regulated and homogenized ordering of temporality has frequently been distinguished in cultural and philosophical studies from subjective and experiential understandings of time. For the philosopher Bergson, whose influential work on duration spanned the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, the determinist scientific conception of time, of which "clock time" is an exemplary form, does not reflect and can only distort what he perceived as the inner experience of time. For Bergson, this experience is resolutely inaccessible through thought and language, since it is composed of sensations, emotions and prehensions, of qualities (not quantities) in a constant and indivisible state of flux. In his early work on the subject, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson sought to articulate these experiences of duration as concrete, material and embodied phenomena. He termed this experience "Real" or "Pure Duration":

> Pure Duration is the form taken by the succession of our inner states of consciousness when our self lets itself live, when it abstains from establishing a separation between the present state and anterior states. In Bergson's thesis, though time is progressive, the past survives in the present and is only separated from it by thought. Immediate experience is a flowing form of radical heterogeneity, no sensation ever being the same as a previous sensation; duration is a continuous movement of differentiation. It is this radical heterogeneity with which consciousness wrestles and upon which thought operates. For Bergson, the principal difficulty in the understanding and representation of duration was its suppression by space. He argued that all notions of temporality, as products of a reflective consciousness, could not deliver the lived experience of duration, since they themselves were always already spatializations (and thus reductions or containments) of its force. Bergson stated that duration was not only brutalized by its rendition into number, but was radically inaccessible to language itself:

> The rough and ready word *le mot brut*, which stores up the stable, common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms, or at least covers over, the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness. Moreover, to think duration was already to have ordered it through thought, to have attempted to make time an object or a thing, and thus to impose upon its complex flow a solidification, a stilling cut, a spatialization. As Suzanne Guerlac notes, the critical effect of Bergson's conception of the operations of the intellect (an effect it shares with later phenomenological writing) is that it "re-situates intelligence as a limited part of the process of life." As we shall see, the use of duration in works of performance brings to the front of aesthetic perception and understanding not only the sensorial dynamics of temporality as they are manifested in human presence but the radical heterogeneity of durations. As Fer has noted, one unfortunate effect of Fried's opposition to duration was to lock it in an absolute opposition to presentness and to reduce its heterogeneities "to a singular and monolithic sense of duration."
It is these irreducible and non-representable phenomena of duration that can be seen as being variously deployed in works of aesthetic duration, and in particular works such as Hsieh's, which move through lived duration as their material and content. Such works draw attention to the spatio-temporal limits of the artwork and privilege the making and unmaking of its meaning as a temporal matter. Durational aesthetics often establish a temporal measure against which the work can be interpreted, and deploy an alteration of its (culturally) ascribed terms. This may take many forms: counterpoint with cultural measure or tradition through the counter-scheduling or intervention of the work within temporally institutionalized contexts; proliferation, contraction or extension of the "proper" time of the work; variations or discordances in its conventional rhythm, punctuality and speed. The term "durational" is often used then to indicate an art work that draws attention to its temporal constraint as a constitutive element of its meaning. The meaning of the word duration itself, evolving from the Latin *duratus* [to last], is bound into the notion of persistence, of remaining through time, and is separable from but shadowed by the term endurance, often associated with suffering. "Endurance art" was frequently deployed as a nomination in relation to early Performance Art and Body Art, with its use of the body in *extremis*, but appears somewhat overloaded if applied to Hsieh's work, as it assumes the experience of pain as a primary focus. Extended durational works are often associated in popular and critical reception with the notion of endurance—as a sustained living-through pain—and with a certain heroics. The model emerges from other human performances such as sport. In this respect duration would seem to be confirming through a kind of living martyrdom the triumph of the subject who endures and a narrative whose logical outcome is self-affirmation and the (eventual) productivity of hard labor. Sacrifice, it would seem, should always lead to gain. However, this kind of narration of aesthetic duration (recuperating it into an economic model) is quite antithetical to the excessive affects it frequently produces; one might argue these narratives are in fact generated through the anxiety that the experience of duration engenders. Aesthetic duration is a wasteful form of labor; it saves nothing, and as such it is often deployed as a means to disturb or suspend narrative resolutions and consolidated identities.

Long durations such as those of Hsieh's lifeworks can be contrasted with the temporality of eventhood ascribed to much performance work (though they of course could never be free from its force). Extended duration lacks the distinction that separates the event from the mundane, the everyday: the bracketing off and casting out of experiences into the domain of the "uneventful" through which the event, as heightened experience, must necessarily be constituted. Resisting time's spatialization in cultural measure, duration deals in the confusion of temporal distinctions—between past, present and future—drawing the spectator into the thick braids of paradoxical times. Bergson's distinction between the thought of time and its experience is powerfully operative here. 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 inter-subjective exchange. Crucially, aesthetic duration is a kind of entanglement (the very affect Fried found so distasteful in Minimalism: its inability to leave the spectator alone). As Mieke Bal notes, the quality of the visual object subject to duration is a kind of "stickyness": such works stick around—they persist in time—and stick to their spectators, conditioning a tactile attentiveness.

One might say, then, that duration nearly always involves the collapse of objective measure. Whether it is short or long in "clock time," its passage will be marked by a sense of the warping of time, an opening of regularity to other phenomena or inchoate orders. Duration will often be accompanied by the spatial senses of expansion, suspension or collapse or by reverential, chaotic or cosmic phenomena, as notions of temporal distinction are undone. Time arises in the experience of duration, as Bergson suggests, in its indivisibility and its incapacity to become an object of thought, analysis or representation. Durational works may often manifest, prompt or even integrate a discourse on those necessarily failed forms of thought, memory, knowledge and representation that attempt duration's resolution, stilling or fixing. As we will see in Hsieh's work, such a gesture is brought to bear on a range of documentary and archival mechanisms. Taking these affects into account, aesthetic duration might then be better defined—the way in which it will be used throughout this text—as a *sense passage in which corporeal attention is drawn to (a) time reforming*. Duration, as perturbation, has the force to question the notions and senses of passage, succession and continuity, the integrities of the moment to moment, that form the grammatical structure of commonsense understandings of time and hence its wider cultural rationalization. Taking time itself as a subject and a malleable phenomenon, the experience of durational aesthetics often makes us aware that time is in part a product of structures of thought; moreover, that our perceptions and understandings of time are a cultural construct, and as such open to revision.
In particular Hsieh’s lifeworks can be read through what Lee acutely identifies in the closing passages of Chromophobia as an “ethics of slowness,” a laborious commitment in a cultural context of acceleration to a different pace and understanding of creative generation. For if speed is the principal order of energetics in an advanced capitalist economy, stalling the instantaneity of relations between artistic intention and effect, act and representation, the passages of the work and thus of its reception, becomes a primary means through which to question the values that are embedded and concealed within such passages. In Hsieh’s work we will also see a use of acceleration to excess, which produces a similar perturbation. The social powers that order and maintain cultural knowledges and experiences of time inevitably try to hide and naturalize their force, to make invisible their operations upon the social body. The accelerated temporality of late-capitalism, for instance, is now deeply inscribed in Western social practices and relations, the entire cultural-technical milieu and in the very being of subjects. De-naturalizing and de-habitualizing perceptions of time, durational aesthetics are a vital means through which the nature and values of these powers may be opened up, their regulatory grip loosened. In their attention to and playful subversion of the orders of time, durational aesthetics give access to other temporalities: to times that will not submit to Western culture’s linear, progressive meta-narratives, its orders of commodification; to the times of excluded or marginalized identities and lives; to times as they are felt in diverse bodies. Time, then, as plenitude: heterogeneous, informal and multi-faceted.