

The Year of the Rope: An Interview with Linda Montano & Tehching Hsieh

By Alex and Allyson Grey

No two artists are more central to a discussion of the Life/Art Experiment than Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh. For years, on opposite coasts, they had each cordoned off whole sections of their daily lives and called them art. When we heard that they were working together on a one-year piece, it seemed like a natural. When we heard they had vowed to spend a whole year in New York City tied to each other with a piece of rope, it seemed perfect—yet hardly possible. Alex and Allyson Grey were artists married to each other, and just as obsessively concerned with coupling at the intersection of art and life. In June 1984, while the Hsieh/Montano piece was still in progress, *High Performance* asked the four artists to meet for a conversation about it. —Eds.

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STATEMENT

We, LINDA MONTANO and TEHCHING HSIEH, plan to do a one year performance.

We will stay together for one year and never be alone. We will be in the same room at the same time, when we are inside. We will be tied together at the waist with an 8 foot rope. We will never touch each other during the year.

The performance will begin on July 4, 1983, at 6 p.m., and continue until July 4, 1984, at 6 p. m.

—Linda Montano

—Tehching Hsieh

With masterful simplicity of means, Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano created a year-long art epic. Each of the artists' past works had strangely prepared them for the endurance of the rope. The rope provided an extended and controlled shock to the patterns of their lives. Not separate, yet not a "couple," the two artists' work took on layer after layer of meaning. The reality of the rope became the symbol of relationship...the difficulty of relationships...the inescapability of interdependence... The rope made visible the psychic bond that exists between any two people in close relationship and told the truth that we are each alone yet connected.



Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh. New York City, 1984, Photo: Alex and Allyson Grey

One of the most highly publicized works of performance art, it retains an impenetrable privacy. No one will ever know "what it was like" but the artists themselves. Those who have seen or heard of Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano's art/life performance will long remember it.

Alex and Allyson Grey: When did you first meet and what inspired your collaboration?

Linda Montano: I was living in a Zen Center in upstate New York. During a trip to the city I saw one of Tehching's posters and literally heard a voice in my head that said, "Do a one-year piece with

him." I was free to do that, so I asked Martha Wilson [of the New York art space Franklin Furnace] for his number, called him, and we met at Printed Matter where we talked intensely for two hours. He said that he was looking for a person to work with...I was looking for him...so we continued negotiating, talking and working from January to July when we started the piece.

A&AG (to Tehching Hsieh): So you were looking for somebody to work with before you met Linda?

TH: Yes. I [had an] idea about this piece and I needed to find somebody for collaboration. After I met Linda, she told me that she had done a piece handcuffed with Tom Marioni for three days. Somehow I feel very good about collaboration because Linda had done something similar before.

A&AG: What inspired your idea for the piece?

TH: You know, I've done three performances before connecting art and life together. I like to create art about life from different angles. Most of my work is about struggle in life. Like in *The Cage* my life inside felt isolated—that's a kind of struggle. And in [the] *Punch Time Clock* piece I [did] the same thing over and over, like a mechanical man, and that's a kind of struggle. When I lived outdoors it was about struggle with the outside world.

I got the idea for this piece because there are problems about communication with people. I feel this is always my struggle. So I wanted to do one piece about human beings and their struggle in life with each other. I find being tied together is a very clear idea, because I feel that to survive we're all tied up. We cannot go in life alone, without people. Because everybody is individual we each have our own idea of something we want to do. But we're together. So we become each other's cage. We struggle because everybody wants to feel freedom. We don't touch, and this helps us to be conscious that this relationship connects individuals, but the individuals are independent. We are not a couple, but two separate people. So this piece to me is a symbol of life and human struggle. And why one year's time? Because then this has real experience of time and life. To do work one week or two weeks, I feel that it may become like just doing a performance. But I do it one year and then the piece becomes art and life—it's real connection and that has more power. Also a year is a symbol of things happening over and over.

LM: I think that's what interested me in Tehching's work; having similar interests—merging art and life. For many years I have been framing my life and calling it art, so that everything—washing dishes, making love, walking, shopping, holding children—is seen as art. Formerly, I would separate out activities—run to the studio and that was my "creative time." Gradually I found this separation unnecessary and felt that it was important for me to be attentive all of the time—not to waste a second. That became the Art/Life task that I have given myself until I die.

I made many pieces from 1969 on that experimented with this idea of allowing my life to be a work of art. I lived with different people and called that art. I wrote the *Living Art Manifesto* in 1975, and later turned my home into a museum so that everything I did there would be framed as art. I lived in galleries. I was sealed in a room for five days as five different people. All of it was an attempt to make every minute count. I knew that by working with Tehching I would experience his time frame, one year, and that kind of art rigor interested me.

A&AG (to LM): Tehching has talked about what the piece symbolizes to him. What does the piece mean to you?

LM: By being tied with a rope and not touching, I am forced to remain alert and attentive because I am doing something different from what I ordinarily do. That way I break down habitual patterns because the task of being tied is so difficult and absorbing that I can only do just that. Supposedly

there are seven stimuli that can simultaneously grab our attention every second. This piece demands that the mind pay attention to one idea, not seven, and because being tied is potentially dangerous, the mind gets focused or else our lives are threatened.

Besides training the mind, the piece raises so many emotions to the surface that the soap-opera quality eventually gets boring. I feel as if I've dredged up ancient rages and frustrations this year and, although I'm glad that I went through with them, I now feel that holding any emotional state for too long is actually an obsolete strategy. On the other hand, because I believe that everything we do is art—fighting, eating, sleeping—then even the negativities are raised to the dignity of art. As a result I now feel much more comfortable with the negative. It's all part of the same picture.

A&AG: What is a typical day like?

LM: We have this pattern. We go to bed around midnight, Tehching sleeps in the morning. I get up earlier, meditate, exercise, watch TV. Then he gets up. Sometimes we run. Three times a day we walk Betty, my dog. We take one picture every day and turn on the tape recorder whenever one of us is talking. Each month we switch off being responsible for either the camera or the tape recorder. If we aren't doing carpentry, teaching or part-time gallery work, then we go to our desks and sit back-to-back for about five hours.

A&AG (to TH): What do you do at your desks during the day?

TH: Thinking.

LM: We think about what we want to do and then we talk until we come to a consensus. So it takes many hours of sitting before we can do one thing.

A&AG: You both seem to have different ways of thinking about the piece.

TH: Yes, because we are two individual human beings and two individual artists tied together for 24 hours a day and so individualism is very natural to this piece. It's interesting to me because if we want to be good human beings and good artists at the same time, that's one kind of clash and struggle. Also if we want a relationship and independence at the same time, that creates a double struggle.

The piece has other levels that make us feel more individual—there are cultural issues, men/women issues, ego issues. Sometimes we imagine that this piece is like Russia with America. How complicated the play of power.

LM: This piece raises many questions. Like, how do two humans survive in such close physical proximity? A Russian journalist wanted to do an interview with us because she said that Soviet scientists were interested in exercises that their astronauts could do to prepare themselves for spending extended periods of time in space capsules. In many ways, the piece is valuable because I feel that it is necessary to learn new survival skills and to look at emotional conditioning and responses that are obsolete.

A&AG: Waiting must be a big part of the piece.

LM: We usually do a very simple thing, efficiently, so that we don't have to bother each other. Having 15 minutes in the bathroom is a luxury. If we are fighting then we do only the basic things like eating and going to the bathroom, and those things are done quickly.

A&AG: The piece obviously has negative and positive qualities.

TH: Most artists who collaborate want to try to be one. But we both have very different ways to work and have different ideas. For survival we have to work things out. This brings out a lot of negativity and fighting. It is part of [the] piece, so I don't feel too negative. The positive, we don't have to worry about. We just enjoy it.

LM: There are many people in worse conditions than we are—the person tied to a bad job or a bad place or a bad marriage. This piece is about the realities of life. They aren't always easy. Often we would just have to sit it out, sometimes for three weeks, until the "cloud of unknowing" passed.

TH: Some people think I am choosing to suffer—I don't think that I want to bring more suffering to myself, but the work is difficult and in some ways that brings suffering. As an artist I have a lot of pleasure [doing] my work. If I don't get any pleasure out of doing difficult work then I don't have to do it. I don't think I want [to] suffer for no reason. I am not masochistic.

LM: Artists choose forms that fit their internal image bank. Tehching has his own reasons for his images. Mine come from the ascetic, Catholic/spiritual world. I believe that if life is hard and I choose to do something harder, then I can homeopathically balance the two difficulties. Snake venom is used to cure snake bites!

A&AG: How do you feel about not having sex for a year?

LM: Actually, I'm beginning to reevaluate guilt, and lately have been more willing to sacrifice, not because I'm guilty but because it's an essential attitude. I also realize that not having sex is as interesting as having it. Besides, touch is highly overrated. In the past, I've often grasped without energy, charge or significance and called that touch.

TH: We do not touch. We are sacrificing sex, not denying it. We could, in theory, have sex with other people. But that would just be a way to try to escape. It is not right for the piece.

LM: Once you give the mind a command, then you watch the body carry out the process. When I went into the convent for two years, I informed myself that I would not have sex and noticed that the energy went to other things. This year I have a chance to experiment with desire. Am I turned on? To whom? When? How much? Also, since the body isn't touched, the mind is pushed into the astral.

I believe that in the next 200 years, we will all be in outer space so why not practice outer-space sex now by letting astral bodies merge.

A&AG: So you are using this piece as a kind of training?

LM: Yes. One thing that interests me very much about this piece is that a work of art can be used to practice remaining conscious.

A&AG: Is that part of your understanding of the piece, Tehching—training your awareness?

TH: Yes, but it is secondary. The piece becomes a mirror showing me my weakness, my limitations, my potentials, and trains my will.

LM: Some artists choose difficult work. Other people do it in a celebratory way—Dionysian ecstasy, to get free enough to be themselves and to be in the moment. It's really a matter of choosing the style that goes with our inclinations and then hopefully changing directions if the style isn't working, or if those old hindrances aren't there any more. Then we can do something else. Maybe end up on a mountain, gardening.

A&AG: Linda mentioned before that the piece is "potentially dangerous." How so?

TH: I do not feel that the piece is dangerous. I have to know my limitations in a piece. So I do a rehearsal for a week to see what happens. That's just technical kind of help. But I don't want to do a piece that I feel is too risky—30% risk is okay. Accidents are possible in this piece, so we have to be very careful.

LM: For Tehching this is not such a big issue. For me it is, because I'm not used to taking large physical risks. Actually we were very lucky and only two dangerous things happened. Once Tehching got into an elevator...I was outside and the door closed. He pushed the "door open" button before the elevator went down, but for days I had images and nightmares of being smashed against the elevator door or else cut in half by the rope.

Another time we were walking in Chinatown when a woman ran between us into the rope and almost tripped. So in that instance, the rope was dangerous for someone else. Riding bikes, one in back of the other, was more liberating than dangerous, but we had to be careful.

A&AG: How does this piece go along with your spiritual outlook on life?

LM: I come from a very strict, religious tradition and have been disciplined most of my life. I continue with discipline, but now I am using the artist's way to be spiritual.

TH: I have no interest in the spiritual but I am in some ways like a monk who is dedicated in a serious way. My dedication is to my art work. I am interested in the philosophical and in life experience. I try to make sense of who I am and what I am doing in my life without God. If I say I don't believe in God maybe it means that I am trying to find my own belief.

A&AG: What are some of the influences on your work?

TH: New York art, Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, existentialism—that influences me. Also, I am oriental. I grew up in Taiwan, and I have an oriental kind of technique and oriental kind of experience, that influences me too. Also, my mother influenced me—she is a very dedicated person.

LM: My influences have been—my grandmother, who took out her false teeth at most family gatherings and sang, "If I Had the Wings of an Angel"; my mother, who is a painter; Lily Tomlin; Marcel Duchamp; Eva Hesse, and St. Theresa of Avila.

I am also interested in using art therapeutically, probably because when I was 20 I was anorexic (82 lbs.) and it's only because I immersed myself in "art" that I came out of that experience intact. So for that reason, I will always be aware of the psychological/sociological effects of the creative process.

A&AG: Now that you've been tied together for almost a year, how do you feel about each other?

TH: I think Linda is the most honest person I've known in my life and I feel very comfortable to talk—to share my personality with her. That's enough. I feel that's pretty good. We had a lot of fights and I don't feel that is negative. Anybody who was tied this way, even if they were a nice couple, I'm sure they would fight, too. This piece is about being like an animal, naked. We cannot hide our negative sides. We cannot be shy. It's more than just honesty—we show our weakness.

LM: Tehching is my friend, confidant, lover, son, opponent, husband, brother, playmate, sparring partner, mother, father, etc. The list goes on and on. There isn't one word or one archetype that fits. I feel very deeply for him.

A&AG: Talk more about how your relationship progressed through this piece and how you will face your separation.

LM: We developed four ways of communicating. In the first phase we were verbal, talking about six hours a day. Phase two—we started pulling on each other, yanking on the rope. We had talked ourselves out, but yanking led to anger. In phase three we were less physical with each other and used gestures, so we would point when we wanted to go to the bathroom or point to the kitchen when we wanted to eat. Phase four—we grunted, and made audible, moaning sounds when we needed to go somewhere...that was a signal for the other to get up and follow the initiator. Communication went from verbal to nonverbal. It regressed beautifully.

It was also interesting to watch the overall energy of the piece. Eighty days before the end of the piece, we started to act like normal people. It was almost as if we surfaced from a submarine. Before that we were limited to doing just the piece.

TH: Our communication was mostly about this piece. Like, I have to ask Linda if I want a glass of water. It takes up all of our energy.

A&AG: Your piece has been on the newswire. You've had a tremendous amount of media attention nationally. How do you feel about the publicity?

TH: I have positive and negative feelings. Negative is that I don't really like that kind of publicity. But I would like for people to know. The problem is that they are more interested in the life issues and don't understand art. That bothers me. But I feel positive that people who know about it feel something even if they don't know about art. For example, mothers with young children often say to us, "You know, I've been tied to my baby for two years." That means she understands in some way.

LM: Pregnant women also respond because we are making the umbilical cord visible. We also get responses from policemen, feminists, religious people, S & M practitioners, people walking dogs...the image evokes many projections.

Actually the publicity has won over my father...He is a businessman and read about it in the *Wall Street Journal*, so now he's much more supportive of my work.

And being deluged by the media has helped me come to a new understanding of documentation. It seems that the primary document is the change inside the performer and audience. The results are felt and cannot always be photographed or expressed.

A&AG: How does it feel to have the piece nearing an end?

LM: We're so much easier on each other now that it's almost over, and there is a nostalgia that we couldn't have been this way earlier. But I've learned a good lesson...to give 100% all the time.

Usually in relationships I have thought, "I'll open up tomorrow," or "I'll communicate tomorrow."
Now I realize that life is short, and it's ridiculous to waste time.

I also feel a sadness that Tehching and I won't be doing an 80-year piece together...maybe we'll do it from a distance.

TH: On a philosophical level, I feel that the piece is not nearing an end. It's just that we are tied to each other psychologically. When we die it ends. Until then we are all tied up.

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