

A CONVERSATION WITH HSIEH TEHCHING, FROM *THE BLACK COVER BOOK*

XU BING: There were a lot of reports in the papers about your activities at the time; it seems you garnered a lot of attention.

HSIEH TEHCHING: That was the biggest event of that year.

XU: Which year?

HSIEH: '83 to '84.

XU: These people forget easily. It's only been nine years . . .

HSIEH: I didn't show any more work after that, so there's no need to get worked up about them forgetting. Much art is only remembered because it is constantly repeated and re-presented.

AI WEIWEI: Art is no longer the sort of thing that grabs people's attention. The Gulf War was forgotten within a year, just like a child who went out to play a videogame. The fact that art no longer incites widespread interest is often a problem only for the artists themselves.

HSIEH: In fact, this society doesn't allow us to become participants. We don't need to acquire fame, we don't need to depend on that kind of experience to know what this is all about, and we don't need to take unnecessary paths. One doesn't have to go down the route of experience. For many things, wisdom can help compress time and enable us to jump right into the real problem, giving us a head start. The reason I'm saying all this is because I've already had this kind of experience. This experience helps me make some conceptual choices so that I don't have too much interference in that regard. That's the advantage of

experience. But even better would be to not need such experience, to resolve problems on the level of wisdom.

AI: That's a question of where you stand. When your perspective is broad enough, you can eliminate many nonessential problems. Otherwise, you will end up making a lot of unnecessary effort.

HSIEH: As for the problem of whether or not we should intervene in the Western system: my point of view is that we shouldn't even bother to intervene. One can get to the heart of the matter without having to enter into all of that. Where art is concerned, it's not necessary to enter into any *system* [original in English—J.S.]. This isn't to say that we've lost awareness and vigilance, nor the ability to perceive and comprehend what's going on in the world today. Of course the more broadly that you understand things in the world, the better everything is, but the best is to be able to go just a little bit farther without participating in any system. That little bit is really it.

AI: "Systems" are usually man-made, the product of a specific environment, and they don't touch the essential problem. But the problems that we're looking for are essential. What kind of a process is this? What kind of situation? A less-than-ideal "system" will weaken these essential questions, transforming the people who get caught up inside into victims. That's the reason why a system breaks down. Even a massive dynastic empire could fall apart due to the irrationality of the "system."

The value of an artist, of an individual, lies in independent ideas and the independent actions produced by those ideas. The force and effect of independent thought enable the individual to exit from the average "system." This isn't something that is easy to do, and it's built upon the foundations of a critical knowledge about that system.

XU: In fact, everyone must belong to a system. The only difference is between "choice" and "choicelessness." Coming from Taiwan to the United States means intervening in an international avant-garde cultural "system." That's a type of choice.

HSIEH: Hard to say. That might not be the case. We come to America in order to absorb something essential from the West. People invariably need a place in which they can survive, it's just a question of where is most convenient. It's no big deal. You don't necessarily have to be in New York. Wisconsin or any other place would be okay. As long as you can really do it, and it gives you some liberty and leeway to do things, you don't have to be in New York.

AI: To set your status at "zero," a situation in which you don't have to

do anything, in which the effort required for survival or to do other things is minimal, and in which the limitations and influences coming from the surrounding environment are less. Just like being in a vacuum or maintaining a constant temperature in a laboratory . . . a standard condition. Standard conditions are a problem common to all people rather than a problem that applies to a specific time and a specific surrounding, as in most political movements and cultural fashions.

HSIEH: In the end we have to come back to ourselves and walk the road that we haven't yet taken. Virtually none of this can be answered by the outside world; even talking like this here is virtually inaudible in a milieu like New York. Unless you have sufficient judgment, there's no prefab thing here that you can just pick up and use. That's not to say that you can "get it" by just going a few more times to the galleries and exhibitions. The living environment here has many things that can help us train our sense of judgment. There are certain legendary aspects to this, but in the end you can't stray from explorations of the essence of the universe. Western artists face the same problems; they're not ours alone.

AI: The cultural situation today has changed quite a bit. The modernist movement began and developed during the height of capitalism after the Industrial Revolution; its main background was capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Today we're facing the "information revolution" of late capitalism; the cultural structure follows the new structure of the world economy and the "new order" has changed. The new economy and informational mode have broken through the previous cultural monopoly, enabling the liberation of a new, global, pluralist culture that arises from the local aristocracy. And today's art hasn't yet given expression to this final revolution.

HSIEH: The art that's showing in New York these days doesn't have any impact on people. There's nothing in it that makes you see the future.

XU: Which is to say that it's superfluous.

AI: But this isn't necessarily true. New consciousness and forms of expression will appear. Avant-garde art has already lost its avant-garde quality and fallen behind the times. In the early stages of the avant-garde, it was directly connected to the current situation and humanity's future. Today's artists, by contrast, have already lost this fundamental concern.

HSIEH: That was at the height of it all, whereas now we're in a state of decline. Postmodernism is barely discernible and doesn't have any

AI: Duchamp was like that.

HSIEH: In fact, from the perspective of the entire era, there hasn't been any progress in the fifty or sixty years after him. If Duchamp was already able to do that, other artists might as well just give up. Nothing left to do, but you have to do something; now that's the problem that should be explored, not those red herrings.

XU: Let's put it this way: Duchamp was just a guy with a gun. He was the first to use a gun. Before him, there were only bows and arrows. Those who come after him are just competing on marksmanship. Other domains outside of art are already using long-range guided missiles. Guns aren't a suitable weapon for this battlefield. Perhaps it's the nature of fighting that has changed, but all the people rushing ahead with their guns simply don't know it yet.

AI: Duchamp predicted future developments. It was because he predicted this that he was able to do what he did.

HSIEH: He was a marginal figure, but we are even more marginal than he. We shouldn't play at the West's game, but we have to understand it, that's the only way to destroy it. Our marginality is more natural.

AI: It's always when a terminal disease appears and general medicine doesn't work anymore that people start looking for alternatives. At that moment a shift of approach naturally appears.

XU: That's the reason for cultural hybridity: it's because the West itself has developed a problem. Otherwise the problem of marginality would never arise. The West emphasizes the immigration problem because its system has a problem.

AI: Many contemporary problems cannot be solved by the use of traditional clues and methods. Your position and your choices determine the angle from which you see the world, and what you see from that angle becomes, in effect, the world. Modern artists use a single point provided by the West to look at landscape: what does the world look like? That which we see first is the philosophy, science, and culture of the West; inevitably there's something one-sided about that.

Now that we've been playing at this for some time, and now that we're starting to look for the motivation behind the game, it's become a big problem. This game is neither natural nor perfect. We often have no choice but to modify it. We occasionally even have to add rules in order to keep on playing.

XU: Which basically amounts to saying that everybody is playing

this game. Humanity has set out the rules concerning the scope of this game, and a certain group of people has to play it. It's only because humanity deems the game very important that there are so many museums and galleries, so many professional artists and so-called cultural figures. Everybody is playing with great interest, yet finally discovers that in spite of the fact that nobody's ever really understood the game, there is still a need to have some people appear to keep on playing. But nobody is willing anymore to pay attention to a group of people who play without "making any dough."

AI: The only way is to solve your own problems. Nobody else is getting out of bed, but you still have to get out of bed. The decisive issue here isn't related to what other people are up to. Self-satisfaction is the original motivation for this game.

XU: That's still a pretty negative motivation, some old literati thing. This era is the era of too many things. It has already been infected by AIDS. Time is running out and one shouldn't bother to play useless games. We need instead to think of new approaches, make new experiments, not close ourselves off.

HSIEH: We are hermits with space technology. We don't have to get involved with so much of what happens in the outside world. You only need apply yourself to your own task with focus. That's the only way to go any farther.

AI: Whenever we emphasize social participation, the positive effect that art has on society, and what art has done for humanity, we have to take into account exactly what we're participating in and how. Modern art has already lost the effect that it should have upon the spiritual development of humanity and become instead a reactionary force.

XU: It's already gotten pretty discombobulated. The terminal disease is incurable, and has been covered by smoke and mirrors, completely unrelated to society and its sticking point.

HSIEH: Sometimes saying things like that only frames art in a completely inappropriate way. You're talking about the social in art, but without the artistic the social wouldn't have any force. That kind of social quality is unreliable. Beuys placed great value on the social side of art; he planted trees and was concerned about environmental problems. But when it came to talking about environmental protection, he couldn't hold a candle to those people really focused on that issue. The environmental and humanist spirit inside his grasp of the artistic merely enriched his art. That's really what the social means. But if it's a matter of saying that

the social and the artistic should find a balance between the two, I could do without that. Art itself is so contrived. Humanity would survive without art. Art only appears after humanity has satisfied material life. Humanity thirsts for spirit, something that is creative and spiritual. For instance, in terms of an era, does the Soviet Union currently need art? Many places don't need art.

XU: Art is needed at all times and in all places; the problem is that what we think of as art isn't needed anymore. In fact, that kind of art has already migrated to other things, to rock music, television, or advertising, while we're still doing things from the past.

AI: The soul has left the body. . . .

XU: Art should reconsider the question of the artist's responsibility.

HSIEH: What I'm saying is that given that you've decided to be an artist, you ought to be clear about things when it comes to the artistic. If you don't think even that can be claimed, you're little more than a social worker. You're unclear about what your proper job is. The right way is to resolve these problems within the realm of art. But if you separate the two, that doesn't work, you [still] have to resolve all these questions in terms of artistic creation.

XU: The key reason why modern artists don't have any strength when it comes to art is because art has already become hollow. Art is disconnected from society, disconnected from humanity's problems. This disconnect saps energy from the exploration of art itself. The millstone turns continuously in order to grind out flour, but if the flour doesn't need to be ground, there's no point in turning the millstone.

HSIEH: When the whole age is messed up, that's what happens. Why is the commercial aspect of modern art so strong? Because America is experiencing a commercialized age, an age without ideals where commercialism is its most pronounced characteristic. Art has become a slave to commerce. This age needs people with ideals, not just artists; people with ideals are needed in every field, at every level.

XU: The reason why people think art is meaningless and boring is because they are not yet used to a lifestyle without ideals.

HSIEH: We inevitably need a standard.

XU: You'd be hard-pressed to say that this age doesn't have any ideals.

AI: You can't say that there aren't any, but there has been an enormous change. Because of universal material pursuits and human alien-

ation from modern technology and science in this age, the individual has become increasingly inconsequential to society. Spiritual pursuits have thus sustained the greatest threat. The emergence of new things in every field every hour and every minute, as well as the restlessness and tension that comes from this, have combined to give people fewer and fewer opportunities to think and to find a reasonable spiritual position. But people cannot do without the pursuit of spiritual values. Whether it's in terms of a simple form or an entire religion, new spiritual values that represent a new era will certainly emerge. We have never been worried that the earth will lose its gravity and everything will float in midair. The previous values clearly are not suited to the new age, and they obstruct the emergence of new values. If you want to do something interesting, you necessarily have to negate the outworn modes from yesteryear.

XU: I think that “degeneracy” is just a manmade standard. The world might well continue to “degenerate,” to lose more and more of its ideals, becoming more materialistic and more pragmatic. In fact, that might be a true result of humanity, and you can't control it, you can only adapt to it. If you don't adapt, you will be abandoned, your stuff would be old.

HSIEH: That's not how it is. Even the worst artist reflects their times. There's no such thing as “only great artists reflect the times.” And we're talking about a particular rule of the game, a question of a representative nature. No artist from any era can separate himself in his work from the so-called spirit of the times or certain aspects of the age.

XU: There's a question here about the level of good or bad.

HSIEH: Good or bad goes back to what I was saying about the problem of the essential.

XU: Is it generally thought that a good artist, such as Andy Warhol, goes against his age? Or is [the good] artist someone who adapts to the age? Actually, Warhol was going up against what was understood to be art, but with regard to the age he was adaptive.

HSIEH: He was critical, that was his most remarkable point. He was a great master who was true to his society and his age, but he caused a number of aftereffects. Many acolytes who followed him wanted to go down the same route. The people influenced by him were terrible. He wasn't a good model at all. Artists are inseparably linked to moral questions, and to judgments on moral values. Neither Andy nor

anybody else can escape from this problem. If people don't have to bawl their eyes out when another person dies, that's because death conforms to nature. Crying and feeling sad won't change anything. An amoral action might be the most moral if it gives morality a new definition. Artists are always putting forth new meaning.

XU: Humanity will always face the problem of putting forth new morals. You feel that Nietzsche's greatness lies in the fact that he criticized the old while proposing the new.¹ And after him, the mission of criticizing Nietzsche-as-the-old-concept-of-morality and raising even newer concepts of morality has to be taken up by somebody else in turn. That's the mission of new artists—not to use Nietzsche's concept of morality in order to finish up the things that we have to do now.

AI: Every age harbors a belief in the logic of the simple and unrefined.

XU: Artists of any age must participate in and be concerned about this kind of fundamental morality. But you have to ask in what way do the issues of responsibility that exist for today's artists differ from those a century ago? Otherwise there is no need to be a modern artist.

HSIEH: The previous age had its own reality. When we weigh up how they handled things, we can't stray from that reality. Only if you understand that era can you understand its artists' situation and the reasons why they did what they did. Of course we now say that we are more advanced than previous eras, but looking at various facts, humanity has not progressed. Humanity is still very primitive, very temporary. Throughout history, the views of many wise ones were more accurate than ours. We fall within their calculations, and we are not their equals.

XU: Once again a problem of responsibility. Some people are concerned with the question of humanity's fundamental morality. I prefer to face current problems.

HSIEH: If morality is worth talking about, then what we have here is "participation" versus "nonparticipation." I would take into account my abilities. Each of us has many limitations. If something affects your creative process, you will feel threatened. This is the problem that I've been talking about the whole time. My morality is very simple: my morality consists in not burying myself when I say that I want to live. If I say that I want to do something, the only way to produce anything

1 Nietzsche's books were notably important among Hsieh's reading.

is for me to be true to whatever that is. I want to be a creative person. If something goes against my nature, my system will be influenced. My system will get stuck. So I'd have to eliminate the breakdown in my machine. This is a personal standard, and I don't need to explain anything, as it's my decision. There was a side to Andy Warhol that was true to himself. It's a question of being rigorous.

XU: On that point, our generation is highly principled.

AI: That might become a burden and an obstacle.

HSIEH: We are the last generation of people in this kind of creative mode.

AI: The winds are changing. This isn't just a question of simple negation. A sober knowledge of the past and the future is necessary in order to effectively revise and subvert them.

XU: This possibility exists. Critique in the true sense is always a critique aimed at the self.

AI: Human consciousness makes progress through critique and negation of the past. If you just go with the flow, art and artists needn't exist.

XU: What makes us stand out is our ability to express ourselves so well through any means; whatever the times demand of us, we can live up to the requirements.

AI: Adjusting and adaptation are among the most important abilities humans possess. It's always been this way. But today everything moves at such a fast pace that only those who possess these skills can subsist. This is a distinctive trait of modern man.

XU: Our vitality is obtained through this fine-tuning.

HSIEH: In my work, I'm not very rational. Many holes may appear; I might have only a vague concept.

XU: Your works were produced on the basis of a critique of what you had done before. During that period, you were only able to get "ideas" because your thinking was dialed in to a level that surpassed the average person's thoughts and surpassed even the level of your previous performance [art]. Although your ideas appeared contingent, they were in fact inevitable.

HSIEH: That was a contingency within the realm of what I could rationally control.

AI: Sometimes the best choices that you can make are those made after you've abandoned your old approach and are on the road of no return, without any cards left to draw. Inner nature is hard to change!

The feeling of crisis and of being forced into something is especially strong in Tehching's work. Most people have a choice. They can do either this or that. That's when necessity is lost.

HSIEH: You mean that this wasn't my choice.

AI: You had no choice but to choose that way.

HSIEH: You mean it wasn't a free choice.

AI: Something you had to choose.

XU: If you hadn't chosen, you wouldn't have been able to go on living. In fact, that is a way to solve the problem, [because] it's worth doing. So much art today is impotent because it doesn't matter whether it's done or not. It's because art doesn't reach the level of the "must be done" that there are so many uninteresting things being produced.

HSIEH: The main reason for my work is because I'm personally fed up with living. I can't just do nothing. I hope that I can discover something new that might make me feel glad. As an artist, doing what you "want" to do, there are things that will move you. The power of being moved will compel you to achieve what you had in mind, and long for the ability to communicate that to others. There are so many things that I have no interest in doing, yet I'm not satisfied with the status quo. I'm still looking for a new turning point. I don't place much stock in success and failure. Even though I might lose, I can still control my destiny. In the infinite exploration of creative work, there are still things that exhilarate me.

Within the sphere over which I have control, I've opted for a healthy way of living that allows me to undertake limitless challenges. As a free man, no matter how bad the circumstances, critique lends us power. The way ahead is definitely one that is open.

Even without all this, you're not faced with certain death. Are you finished just because you've been locked up in prison? What you have to respond to is yourself, your own way. Regardless of whatever form, whatever "ism" you adopt, this is the question that you essentially have to answer. Otherwise, we could only talk about things that are limited, such as whether or not you've been accepted by the West and other unimportant questions.

AI: Emphasizing morality, looking at life's primal value from an aesthetic perspective, repeatedly emphasizing these values. . . .

HSIEH: Answering your own questions gets you closer to the fundamental question.

TRANSLATED BY JON SOLOMON