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Angelaki
Journal of the Theoretical Humanities

ISSN: 0969-725X (Print) 1469-2899 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cang20

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To cite this article: Kam Shapiro (2013) CONFOUNDING SOLIDARITY *singular, universal and particular subjects in the artworks of tehching hsieh and the politics of the new left*, Angelaki, 18:4, 195-210, DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2013.869020

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2013.869020

Routledge
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ANGELAKI
journal of the theoretical humanities
volume 18 number 4 december 2013

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CONFOUNDING SOLIDARITY

singular, universal and particular subjects in the artworks of tehching hsieh and the politics of the new left

This essay takes the performance artworks of Tehching Hsieh as instructive allegories for a global ethics along the lines currently being theorized by a variety of left academics. Seeking a way out of the deadlock between a homogenizing imperialism and a fragmentary multiculturalism, a variety of authors (including Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri) have identified universalism with a singularity that escapes the predicates of identity. What we all have in common, they argue, is a potentially liberating estrangement. In turn, they seek to place universal estrangement in the service of liberation for marginalized groups. Hsieh's projects, I argue, can also be situated in a complex juncture of the singular, the universal and the particular. Through them, we encounter the singularity of ourselves through the palpable absence of another, but only insofar as the particularities of this other life confound our fantasies of recognition. By linking this confounding effect to contemporary modes of oppression, Hsieh's artworks make for common cause with the thinkers listed here. At the same time, they illustrate some of the challenges facing attempts to treat particular struggles as embodiments of universal conflicts.

tehching hsieh: you can't imagine

In 1974 Tehching Hsieh came to the United States as a seaman in the Taiwanese equivalent of the merchant marine, jumped ship – not literally – in Philadelphia and took a cab to New York. Four years after his arrival, he embarked upon a series of six art performances, a designation rendered problematic primarily because of their duration, which totaled twenty-two years. The first five spanned one year each. From 1978 to 1979, Hsieh confined himself to a cage inside his apartment. A friend brought food and water and disposed of his waste. Throughout, he did not speak with this friend or anyone else, and had no access to media, including books, radio or television.[1] The following year, he released himself from his incarceration and went to work, so to speak, punching a time clock once per hour, to the minute, from 1980 to 1981.[2] Next, he spent a year (1981–82) outdoors in New York, without any shelter apart from his clothes and a sleeping bag.[3] From 1983 to 1984 he was tied to another artist, Linda Montano, by an eight-foot rope. They were not allowed to touch or to be in different rooms from each other. They

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/13/040195-16 © 2014 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2013.869020

made tapes of their conversations and then permanently sealed them. For his penultimate project, he spent a year without making or participating in art in any way (including talking about it), from 1985 to 1986. His last work was kept secret for its duration, from 1987 to 2000. At the end of these thirteen years, on the first day of the new millennium, he revealed their content in the guise of a simple placard placed on an easel, reading "I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec. 31, 1999."[4] By his own account, he has not made any art since. He remains alive. Life, he has said, "is made up of actions" (Bajo and Carey).[5]

Hsieh's artworks, if one can call them that, are at once compelling and confounding. One cannot help but wonder at his feats of endurance, even as they defy our attempts to imagine what it would be like to be so terribly deprived of stimulation, rest, comfort, privacy, mobility or contact. How could anyone stand it? One might also ask, what was his point? Hsieh's documents for his projects solicit these speculations without providing clear answers. Throughout, he meticulously refuses both discursive and emotional expression, and at times explicitly thematizes psychological opacity. His works have even been described as "antipsychological" (see Ward). In his quotidian occupations, his gaze, his spare records of passing hours and days, he piles on the absence of subjective expression. The environments for the "Cage Piece" and the "Time Clock Piece" are strictly depersonalized. In each, he wears a uniform with a number or a logo on it. Like the gatekeeper in Kafka's oft-cited tale, "Before the Law," the sealed tapes from the rope piece at once invite and block access to a psychic or intersubjective relationship.

This blocking of subjectivity is manifest in the documentation of the first four projects, which simply mark his presence in time and space with a series of daily or hourly portraits (cage, work ethic), scratches on a wall (cage), punches of the clock and maps of his daily movements about the city (outdoors). There is nothing for the year without art. The amateurish placard announcing the conclusion of the final project raises this minimalism to an embarrassing extreme (as indicated by the awkward silence immediately following its public unveiling). There is neither monologue nor dialogue in the cage or the punch card years, and the few exceptions from his year outdoors – when he responds briefly after being addressed on camera – come as surprises. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, Hsieh's refusal of personal or psychological expression comes across in his portraits. His posture is disciplined and perfunctory, like his actions. He maintains an expressionless gaze throughout (though his eyes soften a bit after months in the cage, and he appears sleepy after months at the punch-clock).

In addition to documenting the duration and repetition of his actions, Hsieh's photographs also show they are performed by an organic individual subject to the biological processes of growth and degeneration. Hsieh shaves his head at the beginning of each project and then lets it grow out. However, this biological life intersecting with mechanistic processes remains impersonal, devoid of style. His projects consist for the most part of mundane behaviors remarkable only for their duration and strict repetition. His mature work can therefore be distinguished from the corporeal histrionics of his early experiments and those of the other performance or "body" artists, such as Chris Burden, Marina Abromovic, Valie Export and Cheri Gaulke, whose works stage spectacles of pain, nonconformity and disfigurement.[6]

None of this is to deny that the documentation of Hsieh's works might provoke powerful experiences in their audience, though it is not clear if they have resonated with a broad public following his long-belated 2009 retrospective at MOMA New York. In the short film composed of his portraits in "Time Clock Piece," Hsieh's hair whips back and forth as it grows, and the force of time becomes palpable, even moving. As Adrian Heathfield describes it: "[…] he is trembling and mutating in the grip of a relentless, machinic condensation of time" (Heathfield and Hsieh 32; cf. 36). Yet it can also seem as if Hsieh is being buffeted from the *inside*, agitated by affects that never

become identifiable emotions. We know, in either case, that his movement is a projection, both literally and figuratively, since the film is made up of still shots, each taken at least an hour apart. The singular life inhabiting these uniforms, the difference between its vitality and the still, coded pictures is something that must be imagined, as it cannot register. In real time, and in his otherwise officious, minimal documents, as we have seen, even this imagined vitality is subdued through Hsieh's strictly disciplined performances. Rather than leaving his mark by somehow inscribing inner experience on outer surfaces, Hsieh instead marks something absent. In a similar vein, he describes his "No art piece" as "showing" a lack of creativity (336). In any case, the display of his projects necessarily compresses them into a temporality quite at odds with that of the originals, which were not discrete "happenings."

framing hsieh's projects: singular, universal or particular?

In Heathfield's extended reflection on Hsieh's lifeworks, published in the volume accompanying the latter's recent retrospective, he identifies singularity and its occlusion as primary themes. Hsieh's projects, he suggests, deal with lived time and its "marks on material things […] how singular lives and times remain" (11). They testify to "[…] that bare life that paces inside the pathways of every singular life" (45). The sealing of Hsieh and Montano's taped conversations, by blocking insight into their intersubjective relationship "[…] thereby preserves something of its singularity" (53). Referring again to the rope piece, he adds: "The ethical facing which relational art may enact carries an inassimilable singularity" (54). Heathfield links the absence of singularity in Hsieh's impersonal documents to the impossibility of capturing the phenomenology of duration in the visible measures of calendar or clock time (see 21–22, 27). To extract the year without art from the rest would isolate it from the "flow of the singular life in which it took its time and place" (56). It becomes clear that if singularity cannot be assimilated, it is nonetheless conspicuous, a paradox Heathfield readily affirms. Hsieh's final work is thus "an immense act of self affirmation and self erasure." The cursory, minimalist quality of Hsieh's documents also leaves them "[…] heavily marked with loss" (16; cf. 56).

Once singularity is on display and loss is marked its resistance to assimilation is compromised. As one can glean from the quotations above, Heathfield readily conjoins Hsieh's works with a hodgepodge of philosophical notions drawn from Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, Cixous, Nancy, Merleau-Ponty, Agamben and Bergson (all of whom appear in a series of epigraphs). Singularity thus becomes a common theme among various philosophies of difference. If they are read as struggles with singularity, Hsieh's projects are also (thereby) read as allegories for "universal" experiences of isolation, labor, alienation, exposure and invisibility. They speak to "solitude, time, home and human relationships" (Baird) or even "time itself" (Alexandra Munroe qtd in Sontag). Hsieh himself has also made the claim that his works deal with "universal circumstances of human beings instead of pointing to issues" (Heathfield and Hsieh 330).

Despite Hsieh's disavowal of "issues," however, his projects easily lend themselves to political readings, especially along Marxist lines. His "Time Clock Piece," for example, can be read as a metaphor for alienated labor, in which the value of human activity is reduced to labor-time and disconnected from any particular product or use value. The documentation of the performance also echoes the history of stop-motion photography, used by the Gilbreths to enhance Taylorist factory discipline. Along these lines, the rope piece might be taken to indicate not human relationships per se but a compulsory, alienated cooperation with other workers, in this case another artist. In turn, the alternative to wage-labor is unemployment, which leaves one either criminalized (as in the Cage Piece) or homeless (Outdoor Piece). This line of interpretation has been followed

primarily by Hsieh's more dismissive critics, such as the authors of an early assessment in the *Wall Street Journal*, who "[…] take Mr. Hsieh's art to be an avant-garde gesture informed by a 19th century idea" (Maddocks). Another recent commentator describes his "Time Clock Piece" as "[…] straight out of Marxism 101 (qtd in Sontag). No wonder Hsieh's admirers have been so eager to rescue his projects from such ideologically overcoded struggles. Still, they recognize the echoes in Hsieh's work of his political and economic situation. Indeed, in an earlier project, Hsieh documented his own wage-labor as a restaurant cleaner (see Heathfield and Hsieh 324). As Frazier Ward notes, Hsieh's use of uniforms, numbers and bureaucratic documents may evoke his status as an unemployed illegal immigrant.

In this vein, one might identify the blocked subjectivity that Hsieh enacts with the under-representation of the lives of immigrants, prisoners, sweatshop workers, or the homeless more generally. Ward is skeptical of this move:

> Certainly the evidence continues neither to tell us what the experience or Hsieh was "really like," nor why Hsieh did it. Now, we might read this representational shortfall as a metaphor for the misunderstanding of the plight of those who are socially marginalized, whether illegal aliens, the poor or the homeless. (Ward 14)

Heathfield similarly argues that Hsieh's rope piece involves an ambiguous estrangement that, while marked by the features of gender and ethnicity, is "by no means reducible to [them]" (Heathfield and Hsieh 52). I am inclined to agree with both of these qualifications, insofar as the subject of Hsieh's projects remains elusive. While Hsieh's projects are in a sense "about" certain experiences, the experiences in question have an indirect relationship with those of the projects themselves. At times, Hsieh says he was communicating something he felt beforehand: "I was a prisoner in my studio and felt very isolated [… the cage] was a way of making a form for how I felt" (qtd in Ward 9; cf. Heathfield and Hsieh 319). Of his earlier projects, he has said

> […] the reason why my work concentrated on pain and risk was more related to my inner struggle. You certainly can interpret this through a sociological view or other perspectives. But I didn't think of it that way while I was doing it. (Heathfield and Hsieh 324)

Hsieh tells Heathfield that his "Cage Piece" was about freedom of thinking, not imprisonment or Zen retreat (328). Again, while Hsieh suggests that his work embodies inner experiences, he also repeatedly claims they are not autobiographical (326). Nothing could be more generic, after all, than pain or a feeling of "isolation." For the most part, Hsieh describes his projects in existential terms. "The rope piece, he says, was not about him and Montana but about 'people'" (Carr 5).

But what is it about people? How is Hsieh's experience or that of people in general linked to the lives of the wage-laborer, the incarcerated, or the homeless? Is there some way to avow the historical and political situation of Hsieh's projects without "reducing" them to sociology or didacticism and so losing sight of their singular-universal dimensions? Here we first need to move past the trivial insight that all prisoners, homeless, etc. are people, and that we share this much in common. The political ineffectiveness of such gestures is captured by Carl Schmitt's term "indifferent equality" (*gleichgültige Gleichheit*), and forms the basis of Hannah Arendt's critique of human rights as a basis for protecting vulnerable minorities (when – like Hsieh – they are deprived of participatory, visible citizenship) (Schmitt 17; Arendt, *Origins*). Next, we need to avoid the even worse mistake of affirming the experiences that Hsieh endures as more "authentically" human, as if by living in a cage or without shelter we feel more intensely some elemental humanity that we otherwise dull with housing and literacy.[7] But surely we are not invited to romanticize the homeless qua homeless, or Hsieh as a political exile.[8] For one, Hsieh was never really a likely candidate

for incarceration, exploitation or homelessness. He had money from home, he was a known artist, and he now owns a building in Brooklyn. More to the point, both of these approaches, I think, run aground against the opacity so conspicuously on display in Hsieh's projects. His work calls out our desire for identification and sympathy only to block them. Rather than bringing us closer to others with whom we share a common humanity, Hsieh presents us with the failure of our attempts at identification or empathy. He refuses psychological interiority by subtracting its familiar signs. We cannot get beneath the surface of his generic, indifferent performances. Nor can we repeat them, unless we give up the rest of our lives (Heathfield reproduced some hours of his yearlong outdoor trek before giving in, readily acknowledging his limited powers). Enduring his abject hardships by choice, Hsieh is not even a sympathetic victim. With his final two projects, even the mark of his absence disappears; his invisibility becomes increasingly unnoticed, until it is no longer a project. When he ends his performances, Hsieh simply returns to what he calls "life," offering little purchase for attempts to find a (didactic) lesson on the "good life" from the oppressive modes of being he has lived. There is no way of life in which our difference in common might find its true expression, no counter-particular, if you will, no proper labor, housing or social form, but only our singular-universal predicament.

If Hsieh is not didactic, however, he is not only ironic but also critical. His performances alter our sense of relationship between the singular and the particular in relation to specific ways of being. What do his projects say about the incarcerated, homeless, or illegal immigrants? First, his works suggest that if we are to encounter subjects as "more" than their positive function in an economic, political, or racial system, we have to relieve them of solitary confinement, sweatshop labor and homelessness. That is, there must be time and resources for collective assembly, leisure and co-habitation (hardly a new insight, but still a worthy struggle). And what then? Here, the year with the rope seems an apt allegory. Once we are tied together in collective struggle that is concrete and collective – rather than segregated by tax districts or enclosed in gated communities and media enclaves – we will struggle with divergent aims, desires, or self-understandings. We will be unable to be wholly spontaneous. We will feel strange, sometimes unpleasant others tugging on us, cooperating or ruining our plans as we cooperate or ruin theirs. Then we are less tempted to presume we can either become the same or keep our places; that we can assimilate others or do without them. It is then not enough to recognize the limits of mutual understanding. Instead, we are compelled to innovate, to find ways to act in concert. In interviews, Hsieh and Montano describe the evolution of their partnership, which began with talking, moved on to tugging and withholding (he wouldn't go out to walk her dog, she wouldn't go to Chinatown for food he liked), and ended up with mutual accommodation despite ongoing differences.

a politics without imagination?

It is tempting to say that, rather than express a personal or common experience, Hsieh's projects indicate a universal that cannot be represented, namely the singular life of every subject, all of which are, like him, absent from the recognizable social roles and tasks he enacts. And yet certain roles, particular situations and tasks nonetheless seem to make this absence especially conspicuous. Hsieh's projects thus link a series of negations or blockages that traverse the singular, the universal and the particular. In this vein, one can align Hsieh's art with attempts on the part of a variety of post-Marxist authors, including Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to derive political imperatives from universal singularity. Each juxtaposes the notion of universal singularity against what they see as the flip sides of global capitalism, namely imperialism and multiculturalism. Like state capital before it, global capital combines abstract universalism (free markets and human rights, imposed by force

if necessary) with the concrete differentiations and hierarchies of civil society. Multiculturalism, in the form of ethnic, racial, gender and sexual differences, effectively reifies those differences and hierarchies, dividing those engaged in an unequal but cooperative system of production and consumption into groups or "lifestyles" while also providing avenues for commodification (see Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 210; Badiou, *St. Paul* 7–8). As Badiou puts it, "The semblance of non-equivalence is required so that equivalence itself can constitute a process" (10). If equivalence were properly recognized, presumably, we would discover a common substrate beneath religious, racial, gender and national conflicts. However, most of these authors refuse the classical Marxist view according to which all of these differences and conflicts are mere expressions of class struggle. In turn, they reject the dream of eliminating conflict altogether by identifying a supposedly non-contradictory mode of social organization, with all the potentially totalitarian consequences of such a dream. They wish to enable collective mobilization against a global political economy by which all are determined without demanding a sacrifice of manifold differences, to forge a solidarity without imposing an identity.

By describing universalism in terms of singularity, these authors can connect subjects across their different positions without subsuming all to a common set of values (or an overlapping consensus). Inasmuch as all subjects are singular, they suggest, all share a common difference, not only from one another's culture but also from their own, and the positions they happen to occupy in it. Hence, the latter are contestable not only one against another – in the form of class, gender, or race war – but as a whole, from a non-position outside all of them. A major benefit of these arguments is that they avoid what might be called the post-ethno-centrism of thinkers such as Alan Bloom, Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, who imagine that only Westerners are estranged from their cultural norms, or that this estrangement necessarily makes them especially "critical" (Bloom at least avoids the latter mistake; see Bloom 36–37). Žižek argues, to the contrary, that the reading of multiculturalism as Eurocentric conceals the genuine "rootlessness" of the subject, the void of the universal (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 217). Only, what sort of ethics or politics is supposed to issue from our mutual estrangement and non-position? How do we gather around it, forging solidarity across different positions, interests and values? What political order adequately represents a universal negation of positive groups and relations? Can such a politics only proceed by negation?

While their responses to this challenge vary, all of these authors attempt to bring universal singularity back in contact with the particular. Their basic strategy can be summarized as follows: the irreducibility of singular lives to any particular appearance or social category comprises a universal (negative) relationship to representation that can be represented by a particular group or position that is conspicuously excessive or negated in relation to privileged modes of citizenship, nationality, etc. By adopting this approach, these thinkers align a universal estrangement of all subjects with the particular estrangement of certain races, classes, sexualities, what have you, that fall "outside" official representation, the functional self-understanding of the global capitalist system and its multicultural differences and relations. Despite these commonalities, however, these authors derive rather different ethical and political injunctions from the idea of a "universal singular." Their differences originate in a shared concern: once the particular finds its way back into the universal singularity, equidistance threatens to give way to a new hierarchy, in which the most abject subject is closest to the universal-singular de-subjectification. Each of these authors clearly wishes to avoid the sad spectacle of a struggle among the oppressed to privilege their victimization over that of others, refusing mutual transformations that jeopardize their privileged status and any corresponding rights it confers. The challenge they face is therefore to privilege a particular site of the universal singularity without thereby closing off the open-ended, creative

and critical dimensions of universal singularity. I will focus on two contrasting attempts to negotiate this *aporia* here, represented by Slavoj Žižek on the one hand, and Alain Badiou and the collective known as "*Malgré Tout*" on the other.

Žižek's formulation of universal singularity combines psychoanalytic theory with Hegelian-Marxist dialectics. Following Lacan, Žižek treats all symbolic identifications with given social positions as different "solutions" to a universal problem or "kernel" of unstructured desire. Thus, while "man" and "woman" comprise a heterosexual matrix in which both are mutually exclusionary and hierarchically arranged, the matrix itself is a "solution" to another subject that is not repressed (since it was never occupied as such) but foreclosed. That is, the alternative to these positions is not another positive position (a genuine, liberated sex) but a radical negation, a lack of social position. Hence, these positions are not simply imposed on our otherwise authentic or natural way of being. Instead, we are driven to them as defensive formations against a radical negativity, a psychic disorientation. No given identity can properly represent our pre-symbolic nature; none is adequate to this lack, or "kernel." All are means of escape from a traumatic loss of bearings. This trauma is also figured as *jouissance*, or enjoyment, understood as an excitement without a defined organ or object of satisfaction. Yet each identity is also invested with the intensity of this *jouissance*, or the drive to escape its formless urgency, which we graft to the positive attributes of our identity in order to make them our own. The thrill of belonging, in short, is an intense relief from existential angst. Hence the familiar adolescent vacillation between sullen anomie and hyperbolic attachment. Nor it is only the young who make a show of being perversely "into" something, compensating for the inability to remake their world by turning quotidian objects into signs of personal identity. At a larger scale, Lauren Berlant describes "national sentimentality" as a means of escape from social conflict and ambiguity (Berlant). As we have seen, Hsieh's work refuses both the sentimental and the personal (just imagine asking what he is "into").

It remains to identify the properly "excessive" or marginalized position that embodies the insufficiency of every positive order. For this operation, Žižek grafts Lacan to Marx, linking the universal singular to the role of the proletariat, a social class that represents the failure of the system as a whole, its hollow ground. He writes:

> The leftist political gesture *par excellence* (in contrast to the rightist slogan "to each his or her own place") is thus to question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no "proper place" within it (say, illegal immigrants or the homeless in our societies). (*Ticklish Subject* 224; cf. 188)

The proletariat, a class of non-owners, was foreclosed by a bourgeois individualist system that recognized only the equal autonomy of individual owners. As Marx argued, the bourgeois revolution released individuals from hierarchical feudal relations only in the abstract. As members, or potential members, of the universal sphere of politics, all were equal, while in "civil society" they remained confined to their positions within a differentiated system of reproduction. Political revolutions, then, involve not simply a demand for one's "share" as part of a system but a demand for the reform or transformation of society as a whole, in the name of a "part with no part," in Jacques Rancière's terms.

Which group stands in for universal non-identity may vary by time and place – for Rancière the proletariat repeats the logic of the Greek *demos*, for Hardt and Negri it is the "poor" – but what they stand in for, or rather indicate by their lack of "standing," is a structural gap at work in every subject (Rancière, *Disagreement* 38; cf. Rancière, "Ten Theses" par. 12; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 133). Thus Rancière writes: "The wrong exposed by the suffering proletariat of the 1830s has the same logical structure as the *blaberon* implied in the unprincipled freedom of the Athenian

demos, which had the audacity to identify itself with the whole of the community." In *Disagreement*, Rancière then distinguishes the two gestures. Whereas the *demos* signifies the "immediate unity" of part and whole, the proletariat "subjectifies the part of those who have no part that makes the whole different from itself" (38). This distinction is clouded elsewhere, however. In "Ten Theses," Rancière writes:

> The "power of the *demos*" means that those who rule are those who have no specificity in common, apart from their having no qualification for governing. Before being the name of a community, *demos* is the name of a part of the community: namely, the poor. The "poor," however, does not designate an economically disadvantaged part of the population; it simply designates the category of peoples who do not count […]. (Thesis 4, par. 12; cf. *Disagreement* 13–14)

Hardt and Negri similarly universalize the poor. The poor, they write, are the "common expression of all creative social activity" (*Multitude* 133). Hence, "we are all poors" (136).

As Žižek explains, the leftist "gesture of subjectivization" does not properly belong to any particular social position (*Ticklish Subject* 225). If he frequently equates certain objective positions with the universal, these are simply his own gestures. For example, he argues that "queer" represents not only another sexual position in a taxonomy of straight male, gay female, etc. but also the insufficiency of such designations generally, and hence the chance for all to be queered. He writes: "The universal dimension 'shines through' the symptomatic displaced element which belongs to the Whole without being properly its part" (ibid.). Hence, queer becomes an adjective (or, with apologies, an *ab*jective), allowing one to "queer race," as the title of a recent book suggests (see Barnard). In a similar way, "punk rock" has at various times stood for nonconformity, and opened to any "marginal" individual, anyone who didn't "fit in," while at other times it has designated a codified style distinguished from that of other, differently privileged or despised minorities. For Marx, of course, the industrial working class was not simply one position among others, but the only genuine source of revolutionary self-realization. By refusing such a "positive" representation of the Real (negativity or *jouissance*) we could say, perhaps a bit generously, that Žižek queers the proletariat, making them stand for an open-ended revolutionary politics.

Beside the queer and the proletariat, Žižek posits another figure within the positive dispersion of positions that simultaneously represents what, in each, falls outside them, namely Christ (Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*). Like the Real, God is equidistant from all worldly individuals, all of whom share a non-participation in the transcendent. Indeed, one could argue that this equidistance, which came to replace hierarchies of emanation in Nicholas of Cusa's notion of the "coincidentia oppositorum" (coincidence or combination of opposites), is a metaphysical precondition of the "individual" as such (see Cassirer). On this reading, Christ makes present the remoteness of a divine perspective from which all become equivalent, thus situating the negativity of God in the positive reality of man.

Žižek is not the only theorist on the left to identify the universal singular with Christ. For Alain Badiou, Paul's polemics against the law serve just this purpose. Rather than the Lacanian "Real," Badiou identifies the universal singularity of individuals with what he calls the "event," the paradigm for which is the "Christ-event" as described by Paul (Badiou, *St. Paul*). Christ appears as an "event" inasmuch as his appearance neither fits into a place in the world (it could not be assigned a place by Greek "wisdom" regarding a natural order) nor created the basis for a new set of orthodox positions and hierarchies (it is not a Jewish "sign" whose meaning can be deciphered). The event is non-integrated and signals nothing (41–42). It is singular in its radical novelty, which is wholly unpredictable and "unconditioned" (18). It is universal inasmuch as it "filiates" all of humanity, liking every subject to the miraculous power of God's grace. Everyone can be a "beginning," the site of an event, or as Badiou puts it, "every subject is charismatic" (77). Thus, for Badiou, the universal singularity of

the event liberates every subject from given norms and identities. We share, again, not something positive or similar but a common transcendence of every particularity. Or, rather, we share the potential for this transcendence. We can all become otherwise by an act, and it is by virtue of this potentiality for becoming-otherwise (together) that all share in a universal singularity.

All that remains is to identify this potential with a particular subject, to find a latter-day Christ. Like Žižek, Badiou identifies the Christ-event with those who take up or "declare" a "truth" at odds with their social or legal position. In the manifesto of the *Malgré Tout* Collective, of which he and Balibar are members, this declaration is associated with the anti-assimilationism of post-liberal feminism and black power movements, which signify something other than a demand for the status of white men. Instead, they signify a rejection of white or patriarchal power and its corollary laws and institutions. Hence,

> In this way, whoever takes a commitment to the black cause does so not as simple external or humanist solidarity, but as a true commitment that implies questioning a situation in which he or she is also implicated. This struggle is, therefore, concrete and universal for the same reason that it is not negotiable through any available administrative or legal mechanism. ("Manifesto" par. 5)

Read this way, Žižek and Badiou converge around what might awkwardly be called the singular-universal-particular.

However, they differently characterize the process by which one affiliates the particular struggles of a given group with a universal singularity, each struggling with the tension between local solidarity and open-ended struggle outlined above. Broadly speaking, one could say Žižek brings the universal closer to the particular – promoting solidarity by joining a series of particular struggles in the name of universal emancipation – whereas Badiou et al. bring it closer to the singular, promoting a proliferation of new, singular movements. Relatedly, Žižek is less averse to legal and institutional mechanisms, less afraid of identifying the singular-universal with a programmatic politics. Indeed, describing his departure from Badiou et al., he writes: "One is tempted to claim that Leninist politics is the true counterpoint to this Kantian marginalist leftist attitude which insists on its own inherent impossibility" (*Ticklish Subject* 236)

As Žižek points out, the authors of the *Malgré Tout* manifesto take to an extreme their reservations concerning a "positive" politics. In Badiou's terms, one remains faithful to the "evental" character of an event by disavowing all laws and institutions, as noted above. So characterized, his notion of the truth-event recalls the Christian "good works" that Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*, which cease to be good when they become public, tangible, worldly and so are corrupted if they are even remembered (see Arendt, *Human Condition* 76). Žižek compares such positions with the radical student movements in 1968, citing Lacan's criticism of their hysterical "provocation" which called down an authoritarian reaction by refusing to posit any positive goals. He recently admonished Occupy Wall Street in similar, albeit more gentle, terms (see Žižek, Web n. pag.). He writes:

> What a true Leninist and a political conservative have in common is the fact that they reject what one would call liberal leftist "irresponsibility" (advocating grand projects of solidarity, freedom, and so on, yet ducking out when one has to pay the political price for them in the guise of concrete and often "cruel" political measures). (Ibid.)

He places such cruel measures – a journalist who fakes footage to ease a revolutionary seizure of power in Nicaragua, an American family who helps cover up the killing of a right-wing acquaintance who threatens the families of the anti-Nazi fugitives they are harboring – under the sign of a "leftist suspension of the law" or "political suspension of the Ethical." Žižek's invocation of responsibility recalls Weber's repudiation of principled ethics that are "politically guilty," – that is, which disregard practical consequences – in

his famous lecture "Politics as a Vocation." Thus, Žižek opposes an ethics that is politically guilty with a politics that is ethically guilty, that is, which violates universal ethical principles in the name of a "true Universality to come" (see Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 222–23).

Žižek allows that by chaining a critical claim to the responsibilities of programmatic politics he makes himself a strange bedfellow of conservatives such as Harvey Mansfield. Describing conservative revolution much as Žižek describes the prototypical political gesture, Mansfield writes:

> What did Achilles do when his ruler Agamemnon stole his slave-girl? He raised the stakes […] Achilles elevated a civil complaint concerning a private wrong to a demand for a change of regime, a revolution in politics […] To complain of an injustice is an implicit claim to rule. (Mansfield n. pag.)

Of course, it is precisely this occupation of power in the name of the true that the singular-universal was meant to avoid, inasmuch as it can never be properly represented or instituted. Žižek insists that by "enduring conversion from subversion to new positive order" we do not collapse the radical negativity driving change, but merely give it "ontological support" (*Ticklish Subject* 238). Still, it is by no means clear, at least to me, that one can thereby distinguish this approach from "the direct attempt to actualize the abstract negativity […] that leads to 'terror'" (ibid.). How do we avoid what he calls the "Stalinist mistake" of positivizing Being, treating a particular struggle as the final solution and so justifying all measures in its name? What makes ontology indirect, exactly? It is not clear that Žižek can maintain this crucial distinction. Indeed, he vacillates, sometimes distinguishing "substantial identities" from "hybridity" (understood, again, as a stance rather than an objective condition), sometimes embracing a post-critical militancy in which we refuse to "give way" on our desire (ibid. 220–21; cf. 382, 386).

In an exchange with Badiou, Balibar argues that one cannot avoid the risk of a collapse between critical and programmatic universalisms. He writes:

> Universalistic ideologies are not the only ideologies that can become absolutes, but they certainly are those whose realization involves a possibility of radical intolerance or internal violence. This is not the risk that one should avoid running, because in fact it is inevitable, but it is the risk that has to be known, and that imposes unlimited responsibility upon the bearers, speakers and agents of universalism. (Balibar n. pag.)

Only, what does such responsibility demand? As presented in a book of the same name, Badiou proposes an uncompromising "ethics" that is decidedly irresponsible, even reckless.[9] However, the manifesto of the *Malgré Tout* Collective, of which he is a member, seems decidedly more risk averse. The collective resolutely rejects Žižek's Leninism in favor of a politics that more closely resembles that of Georges Sorel, emphasizing action over institution, now over the future, freedom over success (see Shapiro 306–07). Freedom and the now lie in subversion "without guarantees," or what they call "restricted" action. They write: "Restricted action is political practice without messianic promise. It is, in situation, a wager without guarantees on the rupture of the *status quo*. This absence of guarantees is what separates it from any type of vanguardism" ("Manifesto" par. 2). Like Sorel, who distinguished political myths that mobilize spontaneous mass action from utopian programs which can be administered by leaders, they repudiate not so much messianism per se as a vision of ends that might give rise to a politics of means:

> The promise of a better world can no longer legitimate political action. Or, to put it differently, the end does not justify the means. We cannot continue to eat the cannibals in order to put an end to cannibalism. From the moment that a restricted action becomes a global action, it cannot help but think in terms of an army of the good and, consequently, in terms of a good barbarism. (Ibid.)

Restricted action is based not on knowledge of final consequences but instead on faith in

universalizing effects. The universal they have in mind is "concrete." It is also plural. They write:

> the mass media's concern with the world not only puts us in a position of impotence in the face of its spectacle, but it also anesthetizes us and prevents us from acting right where we can do it: namely, in our situation […] the "world" as a totality of facts is a media illusion. There is only a multiplicity of situations, each of which relates to a problem, to a concrete universal that radically distinguishes itself from the "world" as arbitrary totality. (Ibid. par. 3)

The collective rejects the Marxist attempt to identify a single locus of determination for a plurality of "problems," namely its attempt to read racism, sexism, etc. as symptoms of class conflict. They write: "The working class situation is therefore a concrete universal that a certain Left has turned into an abstract one, to the detriment of workers' struggles and other struggles" (ibid. par. 4).

Thus, the authors refigure Žižek's leftist gesture par excellence, treating situations not as "symptoms" requiring a confrontation with some larger totality but as sites of direct, local action whose effects are always-already universal in concrete terms. The struggle described in this manifesto is singular inasmuch as it exceeds a given situation in which it arises and makes claims against it. It is universal in that anyone can become a site of such innovation. However, it is also universal in another, restricted way. Inasmuch as the event occurs within a situation, a given perspective in a system of relations, it alters that system as a whole (in which many different groups and positions are concretely implicated). Similarly, feminists have shown how gender politics is linked to the heterosexual family matrix that serves as a support for capitalism (see Mackinnon). While acknowledging these connections, Žižek claims he no longer believes that local action can avoid being reassimilated by the global system of commodification (see *Ticklish Subject* 225).

As we have seen, sharply different strategies follow from these conceptual distinctions. The authors of the *Malgré Tout* manifesto do not invite solidarity with a given group whose struggle is identified with that of all individuals. While all singular individuals find an expression in feminism or black power, they do so not by working for the same ends or forming a "party." Instead, they join the struggle by becoming another "minority":

> Thus, the point is not to be in solidarity with a minority or to intervene wherever it manifests itself, but to have the courage to become a minority or to betray what the majority, as a norm, expects from us. To become a minority is to become unpredictable: to create a political subject who is displaced *vis-à-vis* all the possibilities that a situation proposes. This free act is the only legitimate one, the only foundation that can be claimed by restricted political action. ("Manifesto" par. 6)

They conclude by advocating a pluralism of minority practices, adopting terms closer to those of J.S. Mill than Marx or Lenin:

> The challenge of our time is to think of and invent a new liberating praxis. A praxis that implies the formation of a myriad of concrete minority organizations and experiences, not as a means of achieving majority status at some point in the future, but as a way to invent and create a life and a politics based on freedom. (Ibid. par. 10)

In Rancière's terms, one might say that the authors of the manifesto advocate the emergent "appearance" over the consolidated "visibility" of the oppressed (see Rancière, *Disagreement* 104).

Žižek simply rejects the idea that a party is any more or less a "politics based on freedom" than that of the original struggle it joins, that is, as long as one doesn't mistake the resulting positive program for authentic Being. This would be the mistake of "fantasy," which obscures the kernel of excess/negation at the heart of a symbolic order, filling it with structured desire (see Žižek, *Sublime Object* 33, 45). Understood properly, beyond fantasy, an oppositional, programmatic politics also involves a wager and a risk without guarantees (see Dean 200–03). The party is merely an "ontological support," again, for

something that cannot be properly ontologized. However, if no party is an expression of the Real, even Stalin's party, what good does it do to know this? Will reading Žižek prevent us from making Stalin's mistake? This is not a trivial or facetious question. One could plausibly argue that his prolific writings perform this function, drawing our attention to political struggles of various kinds without allowing any one to become the solution to all the others. By shifting their privileged objects, his polemics may work to qualify each other. As his examples proliferate, however, particular struggles can also lose their urgency and specificity, becoming so many instances of a general logic of Desire or the Subject, in which case psychoanalysis becomes less a critical practice than a theory about practices in general, as if one could capture the force of abjection in a graph. Badiou's exhortations on behalf of the radical event have a similar quality. His exclamation points only highlight the performative weakness of his grandiose polemics. In this respect, the rigorous minimalism of Hsieh's artworks makes for a stark contrast. Indeed, as I shall argue further below, their peculiar form and its corresponding effects set them apart from the philosophical discourses whose themes they share.

inconclusion

How can you identify a particular struggle with universal singularity and still retain the latter's negative, critical value? How does one act in concert with others without adopting signs, distinctions and norms that define us, and, once we do, how can we avoid closing the door to new minorities and grievances? How can one form around a common goal and still remain open to modification or action on the part of others? The answers that these authors provide seem to break down along the following lines: either (a) there is no way to prevent openness in any case, since all positive order is built on a fundamental gap, so join the struggles of the marginalized as a means to a universal emancipation forever re-defined, or (b) we can only keep struggle open and free if we give it no positive support, forever renewing the event and refusing any position the status of the universal.

Confronting the conflicting imperatives of a politics of ethical passion and political responsibility, Weber called for a "sense of proportion" (Weber 115). But what would this mean? How can one mediate the different approaches that new left thinkers take to the fraught configuration of universal singular and particular? We can hardly do without what Žižek calls "ontological supports" for our difference in common. To transform our shared dislocation into a place from which to challenge economic, racial, sexual hierarchies or exclusions, we must join a particular struggle. Once we do so, however, we run the risk of transforming differences into identities and replacing one hierarchy or exclusion with another, as Badiou and Balibar rightly recognize. I further agree with Žižek that we need not presume that all positions, or all laws and institutions, are closed to creative modification. However, this is why we supplement the gesture that identifies a site of the universal-singular, a site of struggle, with another, a second gesture that attempts to keep a given struggle open to further modification. This second gesture comprises what William Connolly calls a politics of "disturbance," which for him does not replace but instead supplements a politics of collaboration (see Connolly). Without the first gesture, linking universal singularity to a particular struggle around which we may gather or from which we may risk our own new demands, we are left with an irresponsible ethics. Without a second, critical gesture we are left with an artless politics.[10]

Hsieh's artworks, we have seen, make both gestures, providing one response to the challenge outlined above, namely that of privileging a particular site of the universal singularity without thereby eclipsing the critical force of the gap between them. In his cage, time-clock and outdoor projects he exemplifies singularity not in a mode of being proper to it but instead in a particular place, where singularity is blocked, joining this universal predicament with the particular predicaments of the incarcerated, the laborer, and the homeless. He thus links us with others through a sense of difference in

common while at the same time making palpable a failure of both symbolic and sentimental identification, and so evokes in us a solidarity that does not found but rather confounds. So described, the thematics of these artworks align more closely with those articulated by the *Malgré Tout* than by Žižek. Indeed, Hsieh has been described in some of the same terms that Badiou adopts, namely as a charismatic figure who embodies radical alterity or even lives a life of "grace," and who affiliates all of us, inasmuch as all are charismatic (Badiou) and life is made up of actions (Hsieh).[11] However, as I suggested above, the "rope" project suggests that something not entirely graceful follows from an awareness of our mutual estrangement. If solidarity with the struggles of the homeless, the immigrant and the incarcerated requires mutual transformation, such transformation will be very demanding. Our collaborations with others who share differences in common, it suggests, involve an indefinite struggle that requires not only invention but also dependence and compromise, discipline and sacrifice. Whatever grace Hsieh might promise, he hardly makes it look easy.

Hsieh's artworks can thus be read as allegories for the ethical and political configuration of the singular, universal and particular. However, while they lend themselves to allegorical readings of this sort, they also communicate more than a set of conceptual insights. They not only inform but also affect us, generating a sense of mutual estrangement while connecting us in uncomfortable ways to those with whom we share a common material world. It is their distinct form and its capacities to move us that distinguish his projects as works of art. More specifically, it distinguishes them as art that works at the level of affect rather than representation or argument. This is not to say that it is opposed to either. Rather, as Jill Bennett explains, affective "art is not conceptual in itself but rather the embodiment of a sensation that stimulates thought" (Bennett 8). As she argues, affects extend beyond the individual psyche; they register the singular relations with others and the world that define experience (see ibid. 11). In particular, she highlights works that convey what Dominick LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement" (qtd in Bennett 8). Like these works, Hsieh "invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation" rather than serving as a basis for identification (ibid. 12). An awareness of this sort, as I argued above, is imparted by those affects that seem to buffet Hsieh from within in the film of his clock piece.

In this respect, the encounter with difference proper to Hsieh's work can also be distinguished from the "relational antagonism" that Claire Bishop ascribes to the participatory art of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra (Bishop, "Antagonism"). Like their projects, Hsieh's artworks provoke estrangement rather than belonging, a sense of unease rather than an easy familiarity (ibid. 70). Yet the estrangement in Hsieh's case is not as easily associated with "pointed racial and economic nonidentification" (ibid. 79). In this respect, his projects are even further removed from identity politics or "ethical" didacticism (see Bishop, "Social Turn" 181). As we have seen, Hsieh's projects pose a problem not only of particular symbolic and material exclusions but also of a universal inhabiting at once indicated and confounded. His non-identification is less clearly pointed, but not therefore pointless. The unease it generates for the viewer of his documents is less easily mapped onto discursive and political distinctions, but it nonetheless evokes them. Following Bennett's cue, we might say that the blocked singularity in Hsieh's artworks does not subtract class, racial or economic unease from a universal singularity so much as it adds a curious sort of empathy, one that unsettles particularity and cuts across social conflicts without resolving them. Inasmuch as this unsettlement is a properly "aesthetic" effect *à la* Bennett, we might even say that Hsieh's works combine the aesthetic and the political in such a way that it complicates both, an effect Bishop attributes to the "best" collaborative art, but in a different manner and with different techniques (Bishop, "Social Turn" 181–82).[12] Indeed, their formal properties are a crucial source of their confounding effects. While his arduous projects move beyond the contemplative space of the gallery, they also preclude direct participation (or even imitation, as Heathfield found).

To be sure, both political philosophy and art work on our dispositions as well as our ideas. Nonetheless, it could be said that Hsieh's artworks give the configuration of singular-universal-particular a distinct aesthetic purchase, imparting a combined sense of estrangement and affinity. They might be said to form in us what Michael Warner calls a "pool of queer sentiment," that is, a disposition toward new ways of being together that "[…] can be largely independent of queer sexual practice and therefore an opportunity for translation work" (222). For anecdotal evidence of this effect, consider the response by Judge Martin Erdmann, who agreed to allow Hsieh to remain outside while discussing his case with his lawyer, following his arrest during the "outdoors" piece: "I didn't see any reason to bring him indoors […] These days anything is art. Staying outside may be art. I'm getting old and nothing surprises me" (qtd in Hughes). As the judge suggests, any activity can become the site of a critical gesture signaling a universal fund of creativity. In this case, moreover, the gesture had effects, producing a not-insignificant adjustment of juridical practice. None of this is to say, certainly, that Hsieh somehow solves the problems posed by left thinkers concerning what I have called the "singular-universal-particular."

On the contrary, his artworks exemplify a corresponding aesthetics, one that makes of this intersection a problem we share with others.

notes

Several people contributed ideas and suggestions to this essay. I especially acknowledge the following individuals: Adam Lerner, who introduced me to Hsieh's projects and encouraged me to engage with them; Isabella Winkler, for her generous readings of several drafts; and an anonymous reviewer whose detailed comments and questions helped me to refine my argument.

1 Eighteen visits were allowed during the cage piece, but no talking was allowed (Bajo and Carey).

2 As documented, he missed 133 punches (out of 8760) by sleeping through, punching early or late.

3 The one exception occurred when he was forcibly brought inside a police station for some fifteen hours when he was arrested following a scuffle.

4 During this time, he apparently tried to "disappear" into anonymity, moving to Seattle and working as a laborer for a time before giving it up and returning to New York, where he sold some early paintings and bought his studio in Brooklyn (see Heathfield and Hsieh 338; cf. Sontag).

5 More recently he has made slightly different, albeit still cryptic, remarks: "To this day, he said, "wasting time is my concept of life," clarifying: "Living is nothing but consuming time until you die" (qtd in Sontag). Sontag concludes by contrasting Munroe's admittedly bombastic claim that Hsieh has "transcended" art with his own speculation that "I am not so creative. I don't have many good ideas."

6 Prior to these performances, Hsieh had been a painter in Taiwan, and dabbled with performance art, leaping off a second story, jumping into horse manure, and eating rice until throwing up (see Sontag).

7 Hsieh admits that his experience is conditioned by his history and legal status. However, he suggests, "A person living at the bottom might show his pains and his resentments politically. But as an artist, he should have the ability to transform basic living conditions into art works in which to ponder life, art and being" (Heathfield and Hsieh 326).

8 Steven Shaviro flirts with this temptation. He writes:

> Work time now coincided with inner, subjective time. Hsieh's life was transformed. He grew intimate with time. He felt it weighing down upon his body, at every instant, in every motion he made. His life was all work, but this work was entirely his own. There was no difference between what he did, and who he was. Isn't that a rare state of grace? (N. pag.)

9 I am thinking here of his example of the doctor who refuses triage and treats the first patient he encounters using every available technique regardless of cost (and of consequence for other patients, medical institutions, etc.) (see Badiou, *Ethics* 15).

10 It is worth noting that after he returned to "life," Hsieh sold his earlier paintings, bought a building with the proceeds, and created a space for visiting foreign artists (see Bajo and Carey).

11 For Badiou, charisma or "the gift of grace" is identified with a universal capacity for singular action (that is, action without antecedent) (see Badiou, *St. Paul*. 77–78).

12 Here one could also consider analogies between Hsieh's blocked singularity and the subjective emotional "opacity" that Bishop finds exhibited in Artur Zmijewski's "Singing Lesson" (Bishop, "Social Turn" 182).

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