

Sharon Paulger

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s.paulger0820201@arts.ac.uk

HOW TO LIVE LIFE : Comparing how artists Roman Opalka and Tehching Hsieh, address themes of mortality, passing time, futility and nothingness with reference to Georges Perec's *Life a User's Manual*.

ABSTRACT

In this research I look at artists who blur the boundaries of art and life and use art to document the passage of their life's time. The artists explored employ themes of futility, nonsense and nothingness in order to depict meaninglessness.

Firstly, I look at Percival Bartlebooth and his life plan to *leave no mark on the world*, as described by Georges Perec in *Life a User's Manual*.

I then look at the relationship between Bartlebooth and his creator Perec. This is done in the context of conceptual art and Perec's membership of the Oulipo group.

The use of constraints and durational work that can be found in Bartlebooth and Perec are then explored in the realised works of painter Roman Opalka and performance artist Tehching Hsieh

I follow this by looking at the works of Opalka and Hsieh in relation to the three guiding principles that were the base of Bartlebooth's life plan; Moral (not spectacular, difficult but not impossible, controlled from start to finish), Logical (marking time and space as abstract co-ordinates), Aesthetic (useless, end up as nothing).

In conclusion I look at what can be gained from nonsense and wasting time.

KEY WORDS - FUTILE, DURATION, NOTHING, TIME, CONSTRAINTS

INTRODUCTION

When I was diagnosed with a life limiting illness, I asked myself 'What should I do?'

In Georges Perec's *Life a User Manual*, Percival Bartlebooth was younger and healthier than me when he asked himself the same question.

We both decided to do art.

My decision was influenced by experience of working in an Arts for Health environment and believing that doing art would be beneficial to my mental and physical wellbeing.

We don't really know why Bartlebooth chose art. All we are told is that he wanted to do 'nothing' and 'leave no mark on the world'. I admire Bartlebooth's absence of ego and share his lack of concern for legacy.

In this paper I investigate artists that I connect with Bartlebooth through themes of mortality, time passing, futility and nothingness to see if art has helped them find fulfilment in a meaningless world.

I have selected three artists to write about; Georges Perec, Roman Opalka and Tehching Hsieh.

PERCIVAL BARTLEBOOTH (1900 – 1975)

Privileged and with no need to earn a living, Bartlebooth was in his early twenties when he asked himself what he should do with his life time. He decided to do 'nothing', resolving that 'his whole life would be organised around a single project, an arbitrarily constrained programme with no purpose outside its own completion.' (Perec, 1987)

He went on to develop an elaborate and ambitious set of constraints by which he could live his life. He based his constraints on three principles; Moral (not spectacular, difficult but not impossible, controlled from start to finish), Logical (marking time and space as abstract co-ordinates), Aesthetic (useless, end up as nothing).

The constraints he settled on were:-

1925 -1935 (10 years) he would learn to paint water colours.

1935 – 1955 (20 years) he would travel the world, painting 500 watercolours of seaports (one each fortnight) all of identical format (65cm x 50cm). When each view was done, he would send it to a specialist who would glue it on to a wooden board and cut it into a jigsaw puzzle of 750 pieces.

1955- 1975 (20 years) he would return to France and reassemble the jigsaws, one puzzle a fortnight in order. When each puzzle was completed it would be sent to an art restorer to 'retexturise' the painting, remove the backing and send it back to the place it had been painted. Once returned the painting would be soaked in a detergent solution which would remove the painting and it would return to being a blank sheet of paper.

'Thus no trace would remain of an operation which would have been, throughout a period of fifty years, the sole motivation and unique activity of its author.' (Perec, 1987)

Bartlebooth would be 75 at the completion of the project.

Bartlebooth's 'meaningless' plan embodies Albert Camus's Philosophy of the Absurd. Camus believed the human condition was meaningless and that through our acceptance of this we gain freedom. Camus believed that the true value in art was in the creators and recipients' understanding of the absurd.

As planned, Bartlebooth spent 1925-35 fastidiously learning to paint. Having no previous interest or experience of art and having never even held a paint brush, his teacher Serge Valene enquired why he wanted to learn to paint, to which Bartlebooth replied 'It's not watercolours I'm interested in, but what I plan to do with them.' (Perec, 1987)

Having mastered watercolour painting, sticking to his plan, Bartlebooth then spent the next 20 years travelling the world painting seascapes. He returned to France in 1954 having completed this stage of the project.

In 1955 he started the last and final phase of his great plan by beginning to reassemble the jigsaws, one every fortnight. The jigsaws were harder to do than the artist had anticipated. Unlike a painting, which he could decide when it was complete, a jigsaw is only completed when the last piece is in place. Bartlebooth slowly got behind with his task. His increasing frailty and failing eyesight put his project at risk. Then in 1973 the project was put at further risk when art dealer and critic Beyssandre heard about Bartlebooth's project. Beyssandre decided that 'those very works which the author wished to destroy would be the most precious jewels in the rarest collection in the world' (Perec, 1987) and contacted Bartlebooth offering him ten million dollars to buy the paintings that remained.

When Bartlebooth refused repeated offers Beyssandre declared 'Bartlebooth might think art consisted of destroying the works he had brought in to being, but he, Beyssandre, thought that art consisted of saving one or more of those works at any price, and he defied the stubborn Englishman to stop him doing so.' (Perec, 1987).

Beyssandre's desperation to acquire the artworks alarmed Bartlebooth. For 19 years Bartlebooth had kept faith to his plan of having the images erased in the places they were painted but he could no longer trust this method and deciding he had no choice but to put the completed puzzles straight into the incinerator. Unfortunately, this decision was unnecessary as, having lost his sight completely, he never completed another puzzle. He died in June 1975 whilst doing puzzle 439.

Percival Bartlebooth is a fictional character in George Perec's *La Vie Mode D'Emploi (Life A User's Manual)*, which was published in 1978.

Most reviews of the book describe Bartlebooth's project as a failure because he didn't manage to complete it and ignore what he had succeeded in doing. Bartlebooth had found purpose and a way to use up his life's time.

GEORGES PEREC (1936 – 82)

Writer and archivist, Georges Perec was a member of the experimental literature group Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature). Founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau, Oulipo was a group of mainly French writers and mathematicians who used constraints as a way to trigger ideas and inspiration to generate writing. Queneau had been part of the surrealism movement and Oulipo was his move away from the writing of the unconscious to a belief that structure and constraints were required for expression of the true self.

Constraints might seem contradictory to creativity but Richard Beard helps us to understand how they work when he says 'if I ask you to write a story . . . you might find it impossible. But if I ask you to empty your pockets on the table and write a story that includes every object on the table, it's suddenly much easier'. (Freeman, 2004)

Oulipo is seen to be part of the 1960's avant-garde which encouraged artists to work across boundaries of art forms. Perec was a leading member of the Oulipo group and *Life A User's Manual* is considered Perec's pinnacle work.

The primary constraint Perec used for the writing of *Life A User's Manual* was based on the Knights Tour, a sequence of chess moves where the knight visits each square exactly once. Each square of the board represented a room in an apartment block, which is illustrated in the book, and each move represents a new chapter. Perec also used a second constraint by overlaying the building plan with a complex Latin Square filled with the items from forty-two lists of ten objects each of which Perec included in the corresponding chapters.

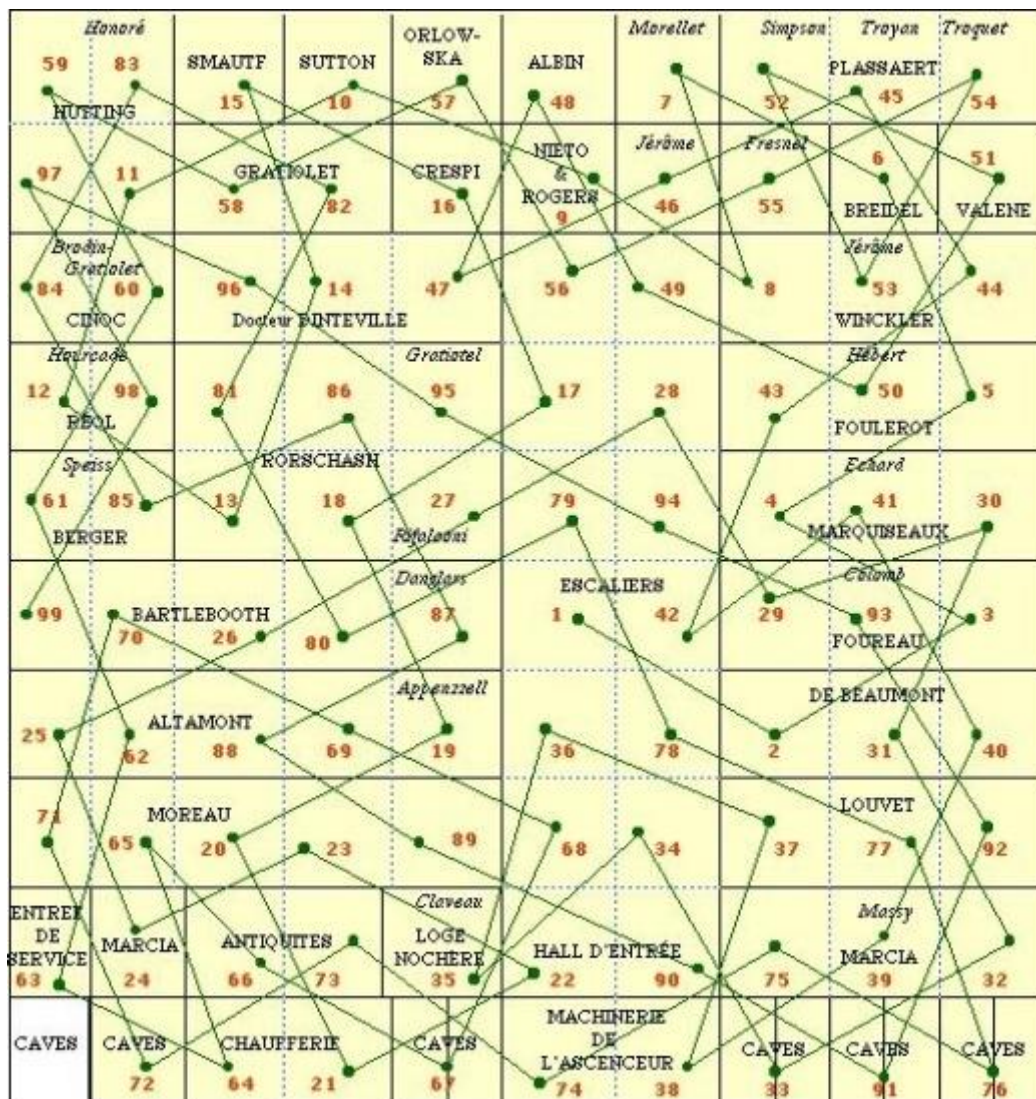


Figure 1

The result is a rich tapestry of 500 pages dense with stories told through a description of a French apartment building, its residents and its contents. Bartlebooth is a resident of the building and although Bartlebooth is considered the main character of the book, he only features on 83 of the 500 pages of the book. Bartlebooth's story is concise in contrast to the detailed lists and descriptions of people and places and the many puzzles which fill the book. Bartlebooth's endeavour to leave nothing is submerged in a house full of everything.

In *Life A User's Manual* 'Perec approaches nihilism as a positive, creative force of being. *Life* accepts our essential nothingness but, at the same time, revels in the process that takes place between birth and death.' (Malik, 2021)

In her paper *Georges Perec and the Avant-garde in the Visual Arts*, Tania Ørum suggests that Bartlebooth is Perec's model of an 1960's avant-garde visual artist 'except perhaps for the fact that Bartlebooth's project seems to be an entirely private one – whereas the minimal requirement for any kind of art is that it should be recorded, written down or otherwise preserved in however reduced a form.' (Ørum, 2006)

Bartlebooth's project isn't an entirely private one as it is written down by Perec. Accepting the idea that conceptual art can exist solely as an idea and doesn't have to be in the physical realm the Bartlebooth project is an artwork by Perec. Another example of art as a written idea can be seen, twenty-six years later, when writer, artist and Oulipo associate Edouard Leve published *Works*, a book of 533 ideas for art projects which were never to be realised.

ROMAN OPALKA (1931 – 2011)

In 1965, French born Polish painter Roman Opalka chose to dedicate the rest of his life to one project, *Opalka: 1965/1-∞ (one to infinity)*. For this work the artist set himself the task of spending the rest of his life painting the progression of numbers from 1 to infinity.

He painted the numbers on to canvases which were his height (195cm) by the width of the studio door (135 cm). Using a fine paintbrush he would start in the top left corner and finish at the bottom right, with 20,000-30,000 digits on each canvas. He referred to each canvas he painted as 'detail'. He would paint about 400 consecutive numbers each day.

Opalka describes his project as showing time, rather than telling time.

'The fundamental basis of my work, to which I have dedicated my life, manifests itself in a process of recording a progression that both documents time and also defines it.' (Roman Opalka - Official Website, 2021)

You only really get a feeling of the scale of his endeavour when you see Opalka's hand holding the small paintbrush. The numbers are tiny and run into each other. It is hard to imagine how the artist kept track, especially considering the repetition of digits for big numbers.

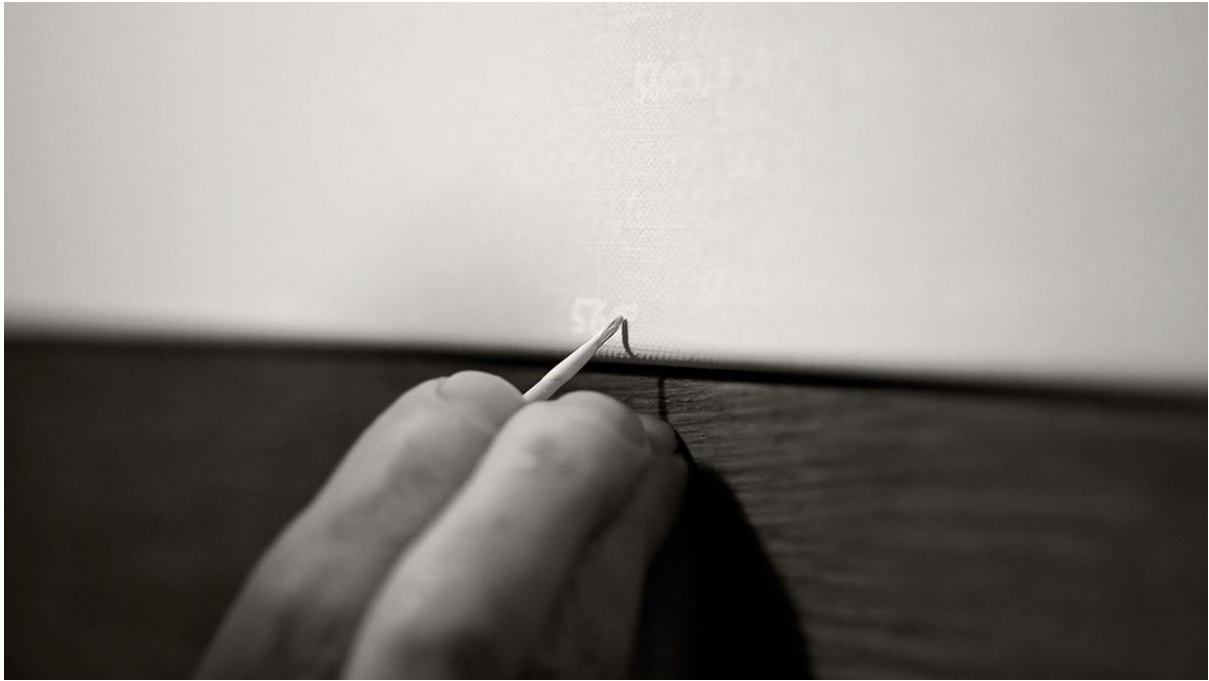


Figure 2

In 1968 Opalka introduced two new aspects of the project, photographing himself and recording himself saying the numbers as he painted.

He photographed himself each day in the same pose, wearing similar white clothes and with similar haircut. With the aesthetic of a mugshot these photos could suggest Opalka was imprisoned by his art.

Initially he painted white on black but in 1972 he decided to make each canvas 1% whiter. Through doing this the writing would grow less distinguishable.

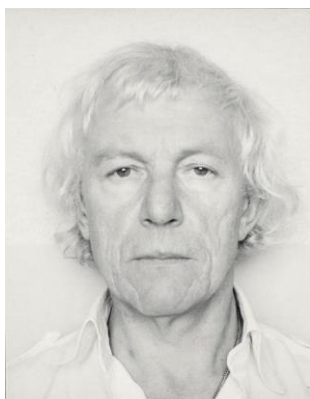


Figure 3

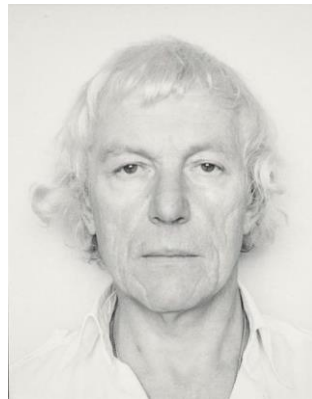


Figure 4

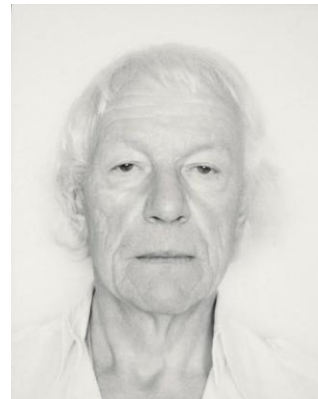


Figure 5

When shown in succession the photographs document the gradual ageing of the artist and the passing of his life-time. Just as the numbers disappear the artist also fades. 'Time as we live it and as we create it embodies our progressive disappearance; we are at the same time alive and in the face of death—that is the mystery of all living beings.' (Roman Opałka - Official Website, 2021)



Figure 6

The video recordings of the artist counting evoke the Sisyphean nature of his task. The artist dressed in white appears lonely in front of the white canvas, calling out ridiculously big numbers whilst painting with slow progression. You can see how far he still has to go to reach the bottom of the canvas, and we know that when he reaches the bottom he has to start over again.

Opalka spent the last three years of his life painting white on white. When Opalka died in 2011 he had painted 222 canvases. The last number he painted was 5,607,249.

Opalka described his work as nonsensical 'The sense in my work has a really strong dimension of nonsense. In French we call it *le sens du non-sens* [the meaning of non-meaning]. That means the sense of nonsense, this strength or power. Never has a work demonstrated this nonsense so heavily.' (Jongh and Gold, 2014)

Opalka's work shares a lot in common with Bartlebooth's project but examining against Bartlebooth's three guiding principles there are some significant differences.

Moral – Perec set out that Bartlebooth's project should not be heroic or spectacular whereas Opalka wants to create something great. In his interview for *Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence*, Opalka says. 'My work is the only possible example that we can interpret as an Avant Garde art. After Opalka it is no longer possible' (Jongh and Gold, 2014).

Logical – Opalka's project is set to exclude chance. When Perec prescribed that in Bartlebooth's project 'events would come to be inscribed with an inevitable recurrence, inexorably occurring in their place' (Perec, 1987), he could have been describing Opalka's project.

Aesthetic – The disappearing white on white numbers of Opalka's paintings mirrors the self-dissolving plan Perec set for Bartlebooth. The paintings have the aesthetic of nothingness but are finite objects. Opalka's aim was not to leave no trace. In the essay *Opalka or the Ethics of Assniation*, Savinel writes 'In his project, the purpose will not be the evocation of a long lost time, but to leave a trace of this instant of art-in -life.' (Savinell et al., 1996)

TEHCHING HSIEH (1950 -)

For his first performative action, *Jump Piece* (1973), Tehching Hsieh jumped out of a second floor window onto a concrete ground and broke both his ankles.

Hsieh said 'I stopped painting in 1973. I had no idea where I should go. The whole environment in Taiwan was very oppressive; there was little chance to catch exciting avant-garde art from the Western world. I did hear of something called Happenings and Conceptual Art. Only the names that's all. I didn't know any more than that.' (Hsieh and Heathfield, 2015)

Hsieh moved to New York in 1974 where he lived as an illegal immigrant for 14 years. It was over the course of this time that he embarked on a series of extreme durational performance pieces. Between 1978 to 1986, Hsieh carried out five consecutive one year performances where he: 1. was locked in a cage, 2. punched a time clock every hour, 3. lived outside, 4. was tied to Linda Montano with an 8ft rope, 5. unaffiliated himself from art.

Hsieh said 'One year is the time frame that the earth revolves around the sun, it is also a measurement used in calculating our life. My One Year Performances think about life from different perspectives, and all my works can be reflected by these words: life is a life sentence, life is passing time, life is free thinking.' (Oralkan, 2020)

Time served is very evident in the documentation *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*. Each time he punched the time clock he took a single picture of himself with a movie camera. The 8760 hours of the year become a 6-minute film. Not only do you see the clock hands whizzing round but also Hsieh shaved his head at the beginning of the project to help illustrate the time process as we see it grow back at an alarming rate. This film gives a very different perspective of the speed of time you get from Opalka's gradual ageing portraits.



Figure 7

A thread of deprivation runs through Hsieh's *One Year Performances* which can easily be associated with Hsieh's status as an illegal immigrant. Hsieh gave these projects a legal framework when he put the constraints of the works into legal styled documents which he signed. For his *Time Clock Piece* he also got the Director of the Foundation for the Community of Artists to verify the timecards to avoid any suspicion of his cheating.

Hsieh's work appears to blur art and life but he is very clear that for him there is Art Time and Life Time. He also says 'It doesn't really matter how I spend time: time is still passing. Wasting time is my basic attitude to life; it is a gesture of dealing with the absurdity between life and time' (Hsieh and Heathfield, 2015).

In 1986 Hsieh began his longest project, *Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999 (Thirteen Year Plan)*. Hsieh declared that he would make art but not show it publicly. This plan began on his 36th birthday, 31 December 1986, and lasted until his 49th birthday, 31 December 1999. At the end, on 1 January 2000 he issued his concluding report, made from cut out letters pasted onto a single sheet of paper saying, 'I kept myself alive. I passed the December 31st, 1999.' (Fig.9)

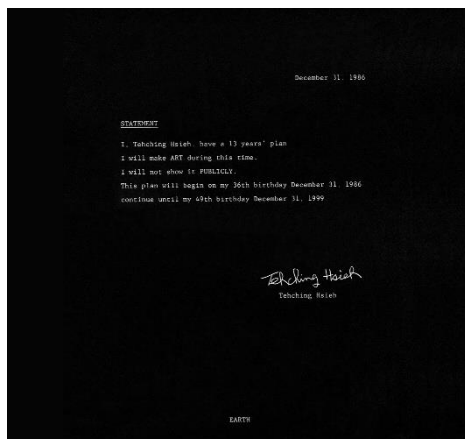


Figure 8

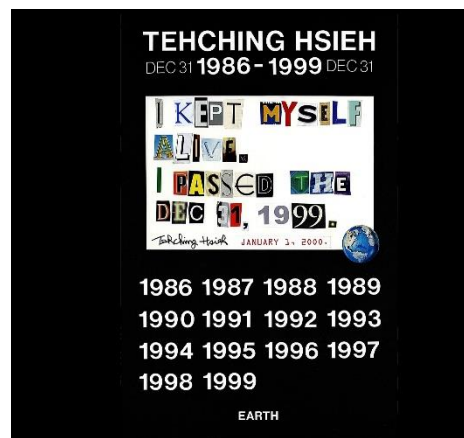


Figure 9

In an interview in 2017 Hsieh said 'Before I had a studio but I didn't know what to create. I was just wasting time, thinking, for years. Then I turned wasting time into art. So I can say I come here to waste my time and I enjoy it. I'm not doing object-style art but I like thinking. I'm working hard but I'm doing almost nothing. That's the way I like it.' (Delaney, 2017)

With Hsieh's work we are looking at a progression of projects which share Bartlebooth's principles in varying levels.

Moral - In his *Thirteen Year Plan* Hsieh plans to make work and not show it, just like Bartlebooth. Hsieh's project is even less spectacular and simpler than Bartlebooth's, but in this it also lacks the difficulty required of Bartlebooth. The element of difficulty is very apparent in Hsieh's earlier one year projects where the constraints governed the life of the artist. Hsieh's earlier work also provided few opportunities for an audience and relied mainly on documentation to evidence the work.

Logical - The *Thirteen Year Plan* is Logical in that it has fixed co-ordinates, albeit just two co-ordinates, the start and finish. Unlike Hsieh's previous performances this project has no

repeated actions. The Thirteen Year Plan appears to be a single action. Hsieh's one year projects were more structured and for instance, *The Time Clock Piece* had a gruelling programme of hourly actions.

Aesthetic - The aesthetic Hsieh's uses is documentation and record keeping that is similar to governmental or institutional records. Through his projects he has created a vast archive which contradicts Bartlebooth's requirement to leave no trace. Some of Hsieh's documentation has been destroyed such as the recordings from *The Rope Piece*. When asked by Adrian Heathfield what he made during his *Thirteen Year Plan* Hsieh said 'I made a statement: "I kept myself alive"; this is the best I can say because I hadn't finished the artwork I was doing. If you are asking me what work I was making, I can tell you I tried to disappear. I only did half a year and I didn't finish this plan.' (Hsieh and Heathfield, 2015). The struggle to make himself invisible in a project that was not public visible was a struggle for Hsieh and he gave up realising it wasn't the best response to life or art. The final report for his Thirteen Year Plan is in the style of a ransom note which fits nicely with his desire to disappear.

After this Hsieh stopped doing art saying he no longer wants to do what the art world expects and that this is his freedom.

CONCLUSION

If Bartlebooth was real and he had succeeded in leaving no trace we would not know about what he had achieved. Through Perec's embedding the story in *Life a User's Manual* is the only way Perec could make and share the project.

The aim of the research was to find artists who had realised work that came close to the perfection of Bartlebooth's project.

Opalka and Hsieh are happy to embrace the absurd and are not concerned to make it anything more. The use of constraints gave them freedom and also helped to illustrate the passing of time.

Opalka's work has an element of ego and is concerned with legacy. Dedicating his life to one single project Opalka's work seems to relieve him of the need to think whilst also keeping his mind occupied with counting.

Hsieh's progression of projects helped him to resolve that wasting his time thinking is OK. His art time gave him a purpose to waste time and once he had concluded it was OK to waste time he no longer needs to do art time and can just do life time.

The research finds validation in wasting time and making nonsense.

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IMAGES

Fig. 1 Diagram of the constraint Georges Perec used for writing *Life a User's Manual*, *Life A User's Manual*

<https://messybooker.wordpress.com/2018/12/27/life-a-users-manual-georges-perec-translated-by-david-bellos-2/> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 2 Roman Opalka working on the second to last, *Détail* painting in his studio, Le Bois Mauclair, February 14, 2011. Photo: Vincent Lespinasse.

<https://wsimag.com/art/10956-roman-opalka-painting> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 3 Opalka: 1965/1-∞, Detail – Photo 3685005,

<https://www.levygorvy.com/exhibitions/roman-opalka-painting/> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 4 Opalka: 1965/1-∞, Detail – Photo 4398226

<https://www.levygorvy.com/exhibitions/roman-opalka-painting/> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 5 Opalka: 1965/1-∞, Detail – Photo 5055607

<https://www.levygorvy.com/exhibitions/roman-opalka-painting/> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 6 Roman Opalka – visualization of time. (2008), Video still.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqRg75O4XUI&t=30s> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 7 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)* (detail), 1980–81, 16mm film frames documenting the performance, installed at Carriageworks, Sydney, 2014. Photo, Michael Young

forArtAsiaPacific. <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/LifeasPerformanceArtTehchingHsieh> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 8 Tehching Hsieh, 1986-19991 (Thirteen Year Plan – Statement)

<https://www.tehchingsieh.net/thirteenyearplan1986-1999> [Accessed 03 November 2021]

Fig. 9 Tehching Hsieh, 1986-19991 (Thirteen Year Plan – Image)

<https://www.tehchingsieh.net/thirteenyearplan1986-1999> [Accessed 03 November 2021]