

—REVIEW—

Alicia Frankovich and Tehching Hsieh

Well-matched in Brooklyn

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Alicia Frankovich, *Bisons*, 2010–, performance documentation; performance piece by Alicia Frankovich performed with Tehching Hsieh, International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York, 26 July 2016; image courtesy the artist

The Brooklyn space is hot and filled with people. Two artists – Alicia Frankovich, from Auckland via Melbourne and Berlin, and Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese-born New Yorker – have just spoken about their works, hosted by the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP).¹ At the conclusion of their slide shows they stand up and look as if they are about to shake hands. Instead, they bend and charge one another. Shoulders interlocking, arms by their sides, they push against each other's body, moving barely centimetres back and forth across the floor.

This is Frankovich's ongoing performance piece *Bisons*. First staged in 2010, and loosely based on the rugby scrum (true to Frankovich's New Zealand origins) where players pack in together and try to gain possession of the ball by pushing collectively against the other team, the piece relies on cooperative combat. If the wrestlers are well-matched they will remain on the spot, attaining a kind of stasis. If one of them is stronger, they gain the upper hand and the piece will quickly dissolve.

Frankovich's only instruction to Hsieh before performing was that he try his hardest to win. And he did: I could see the strength and determination of his wiry musculature as they pushed against each other. At 65, his body is petite yet strong. What's more, he seemed buoyed by the experience of wrestling.

The two artists were born decades apart – in 1950 and 1980 respectively – and have distinct practices. While Frankovich is an early career artist, Hsieh first established a name for himself in the 1980s and will represent Taiwan at the Venice Biennale in 2017. He came to America in 1974 and stayed as an illegal immigrant until he was granted amnesty in 1988. It was in the late 1970s that he began to make his legendary one-year performances that ranged from punching a time clock on and every hour, tying himself to a fellow artist by rope, to living outdoors for 12 months. After an intense period of endurance performances, he stopped making art.²

Frankovich's practice is born out of a different era and cultural context. Influenced by her early training in gymnastics, she never strays far from the question of performance as labour. Accordingly, her works are usually performed by others. Where Hsieh was always the subject of his works, Frankovich can barely be seen. The artist is *not* present; she is a director, an employer and a choreographer. Her recent works focus on everyday leisure activities that are not typically remunerated; runners arrive in a room sweating and puffing while others do yoga, work on laptops or eat mandarins. By placing such activities at the centre of her performances, she complicates our understanding of labour and the kinds of tasks for which we are paid. Frankovich has not performed in any of her pieces of the past six years; *Bisons* was the last she devised for herself to perform.

In the first iteration of *Bisons*, staged in Stuttgart, Frankovich wrestled three audience members in turn; none of her opponents had time to prepare. While Frankovich and Hsieh did not rehearse the piece for its Brooklyn iteration, they did prepare for the performance: 'We locked heads at Tehching's dumpling

house after chicken dumplings,' she told the ISCP audience. (Yes, Hsieh now runs a dumpling house in Brooklyn.) Despite stepping fresh into the work, Hsieh is no ordinary performance participant, and when performed by him, *Bisons* took on a different cadence.

While Hsieh no longer makes work, his one-year art projects were among the most physically and psychologically demanding pieces in the history of performance art. When an ISCP audience member asked whether his pieces could be re-performed by other artists, he responded that it would simply not be the same work. The works reside in his body.

It was fitting, then, that Hsieh and Frankovich would perform this piece, the last in which Frankovich would participate directly, together. The presence of these two artists inevitably pulled the changing nature of performance art into focus. Where Hsieh limits his performances to his own body, Frankovich emphasises delegation. This reflects a broader arc in contemporary performance; just as painters and sculptors moved away from the necessity of making their works with their own hands in the late twentieth century, more recent performance artists have embraced the model of delegation, scoring and scripting commonly found in music, theatre and dance.³ Indeed, since Hsieh's one-year art projects, contemporary art has taken a 'social turn', manifest in the outsourcing of performance to non-professionals – what performance theorist Claire Bishop has called 'delegated performance', which is 'no longer attached to the single performer but instead to the collective body of a social group'.⁴

With this historical shift in mind, Hsieh and Frankovich come to represent distinct approaches to performance as art. As such it was hard not to read *Bisons* as a metaphorical enactment: a wrestling between young and old; a struggle between generations; and a playing out of the anxiety of influence. But this was not quite that. These two artists, an odd pairing, were nonetheless well-matched. Their momentary performance may have been a metaphor for a broader tension between times and methodologies. However, it remained a productive good-natured sparring, undertaken with humour and respect.

1. Part of an ongoing discussion series at ISCP pairing artists living and working in Brooklyn, the event was promoted thus: 'On July 26th, Tehching Hsieh and Alicia Frankovich will discuss their work, time and the body in performance.' See <http://iscp-nyc.org/event/36582>, accessed 5 September 2016.

2. See Kon Gouriotis, 'Tehching Hsieh: An "untimely" contemporary', in *Art Monthly Australasia*, no. 271, July 2014, pp. 18–23.

3. This is not exactly new: performance has so often been scripted – think of plays, orchestral scores and other rituals. However, the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s cast itself as indelibly linked to the artist's body.

4. Claire Bishop, 'Delegated performance: Outsourcing authenticity', in *October*, no. 140, Spring 2012, p. 91.



Alicia Frankovich, *World is a Home Planet*, 2016; performance documentation;
image courtesy the artist; photo: Luis Artemio De Los Santos



Brooklyn Commons: Tehching Hsieh and Alicia Frankovich, performance presentation, ISCP, New York, 26 July 2016;
image courtesy ISCP, New York