In the book of Acts we read:

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Acts provides more than a shift from the life of Jesus to the ministry of the earliest Christian churches. It articulates a loss that redefines life within time. The disciples are promised Holy Spirit power to radiate without boundary in the world. Yet Jesus has left. Christianity has evolved without Jesus of Nazareth ever since.

The Christianizing of time as evidenced by the liturgical calendar and the Christian Era or Common Era (a worldwide chronological standard) is arguably the most ubiquitous adaptation of Christian faith following the departure of Jesus. Yet ironically, Christianized time reiterates the loss of Jesus in celebrations such as Ascension Day. Christianized time also emblemizes Western hegemony and colonial boundary-making of extraordinary scale. In order to rethink Jesus being gone and to indicate alternative and postcolonial approaches to time, retracing the roots of liturgical and Common Era time becomes necessary. The argument below revisits the history of Christianized time and offers Michel de Certeau's
description of Christian divergence in “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?” and Tehching Hsieh’s artistic interpretations of time in his One Year Performances as resources for imagining new futures that follow a Jesus lifted to heaven.

ASSIGNING A DAY FOR THE ASCENSION

Scholars have determined that it took approximately four centuries for Christian churches to craft an appropriate ritual response to the ascension of Jesus. Even purported “first evidence” like Gregory of Nyssa’s In ascensionem Christi (388 CE) makes no reference to the Acts account. Rather, as Elias Moutsopoulos critically points out, “the entire homily consists of a brief commentary on Psalms 22 and 23, the content of which can be placed in direct relationship with the event of the ascension inasmuch as they refer to the return of Christ to the Father.” Not until after the end of the fourth century do most Latin Christian congregations reach a kind of consensus in deciding when to observe ascension. The fortieth day after Easter day would become commonly known as “Ascension Thursday.”

In the liturgical calendar, the Easter season does not, however, come to fullness until Pentecost. Pentecost, derived from ancient Greek for “fiftieth,” magnifies the promise of the Spirit from Jesus to his disciples and became set in liturgical practice as a feast ten days after Ascension. The fifty-day span from Easter forward that Ascension and Pentecost punctuate grew out of a Jewish precedent to celebrate the giving of the Law from God to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai on the fiftieth day after the Passover. The Greek term “Pentecost” was derived from Shavuot, or the feast of “weeks,” referring to the seven weeks that follow Passover. Taken together, Ascension Day and Pentecost sealed a historical fifty-day Easter season.

By the end of the second century, Easter itself began to take shape as a three-day series of rejoicing for Alexandrian churches (Egypt). The triduum compelled Christians to remember and to live into the significance of the Passion narrative—the crucifixion on Good Friday (the death of Jesus), the tomb on Holy Saturday (the burial of Jesus and descent into hell), and the resurrection on Easter Sunday (the life of Jesus after death). Celebrating Easter within the triduum sequence became a standard practice but shifted in later centuries to unfold from Maundy Thursday to Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Accompanying the recalculation in observing the triduum was an expansion backward as Holy Week, or the Great Week as it was known in Eastern Churches, came to introduce the triduum. Holy Week began with Palm Sunday, a day that recalled the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem. Forty days prior to the Easter week, Christians began to observe Lent, a period of fasting and self-sacrifice to help the faithful grasp the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus’s life.

Far more detail surrounds how the days and seasons revolving around the pasch, the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus formed liturgical celebrations. The historical lines of development are not as neat as they have been sketched here. For example, although the current argument suggests that liturgical time is a colonial imposition, one could present a historical objection by pointing toward the North African roots of Christian feasts as they have been detailed above. North Africa certainly initiates many of the earliest Christian practices. Yet the standardization of those rites results from the directives of Roman empire. Critical here is to recognize that as liturgical practices evolved and became formalized, both the approach toward Easter and the liturgical celebrations following that day expanded in their ceremony and in public observation. Those expansions eventually synchronized with Common Era time which gradually came to designate and standardize the years around the world.

CALCULATING THE COMMON ERA

Like the liturgical celebrations that mark particular events in the life of Jesus, the Common Era, historically known as the “Christian era” or by its Latin reference, Anno Domini Natae Jesu Christi, is itself a manmade innovation based upon computations derived from theological speculation. A monk, Dionysius Exiguus (Denys the Little, AD 470–544), born in Scythia, what is now Dobruja, a territory shared by Romania and Bulgaria, worked in Rome from approximately 500–540 of what we now call Common Era time. He possessed a deep knowledge of Latin, Greek, and the Christian scriptures and, most notably, introduced time tables with calculations based upon unverifiable dates for the birth of Jesus and Easter that would eventuate in Common Era time. Dionysius never conceived that his way of enumerating years from the Incarnation forward would have a use beyond developing tables to determine occurrences of Easter. Yet his innovation has provided chronological uniformity for organizing history and the present as we now understand them.

Before the innovation of Dionysius’s standardized numbering of years, ancient cultures like the Romans and Athenians used the names of chief magistrates to mark time. For example, in the Latin-speaking world of 455, Prosper of Aquitania wrote the closest analogue to a Christian era, an Easter time table that counted time forward from the Passion. In Prosper’s timetable, the consuls Fufius Geminus and Rubellius Geminus provided the title for year one. Based upon the calculations of Prosper and his followers like Victorinus of Aquitania, March 25 in the consuls-ship of the two Gemini AD 29 served as the traditional date in the Roman church for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Dionysius completed his Easter table in the sixth century AD. Using calculations from Alexandria of Egypt, Dionysius generated a list of Easter
dates for five 19-year cycles totaling 95 years. In Egypt, the years had been numbered according to the reign of Roman Emperor Diocletian from year 153 until year 247. With a note in the preface to his Easter table, Dionysius explains that six years still remained within the Alexandrian regnal years, and Dionysius decided not to begin his table from 248. Rather, he deduced a date for the Incarnation of Christ based upon calculations that still remain a mystery and for which Dionysius himself provides no hints. He chose to begin at 532, and historians like Aiden A. Mosshammer believe that he completed his work in 525, given the six years that still remained on the Diocletian calendar.

The Easter timetable of Dionysius emerged as the preferred chronological system in both popular and official use. It rose to popularity over options like the Easter table begun by Prosper and later extended by Victorius. It outshone older methods in the Latin-speaking world. The late seventh- and early eighth-century monk, St. Bede, gave the Dionysian timetable significant durability, too, as he lengthened the Dionysian table for a span of 532 years from 532–1063. In some writings (HE [Ecclesiastical History of the English People], 1.2–3), Bede also counted years backward using the Dionysian Easter table. For example, he dated the year that Julius Caesar was consul with Bibulus as the sixth year before the Incarnation.

Julius Caesar, in his office as Pontifex Maximus, regulated the calendar as it fell out of synch with the seasons by his time. Caesar reformed the Roman calendar to match a solar year of 365.25 days. He added an extra 67 days between November and December of 46 BC in order to correct any asynchronization beginning with January 45 BC. No one knows how Caesar determined the correct number of days to add, or intercalate. After Caesar’s intercalation, synchronizing the Dionysian calendar with the seasons required only the addition of an extra day every four years. Today’s Western calendar corresponds precisely with the Roman calendar, and its adjustments, except for the fact that the months Quinqueii and Sexstilis have subsequently been renamed for Julius Caesar and Augustus.

Fast forwarding out of antiquity to show the effect of the Dionysian timetable upon later historiography and current understandings of time, even where the designation is omitted, every year is inscribed by Common Era time or with reference to Anno Domini Nostri Jesu Christi. The Common Era birthed by the Dionysian Easter Table and established through Roman Empire has made counting annual time an innate allusion to the heart and soul of Christianity—the Pasch and the Incarnation. Therefore, the wide acceptance of Common Era time could be seen as a surrendering to colonial chronology of high sophistication and subtle but pervasive institutionalization by a dominating Christianized establishment. Allowing particular liturgical feasts such as Ascension Day, Lent or Holy Week, Easter, and more publicly familiar days like Christmas to recede from view for the moment and admitting the moveability and variance of liturgical celebrations across traditions as seen in Western and Eastern ecclesiastical practices, the broader scope of Christian Era time still suggests a liturgically based colonial move of universal scale.

 Imagining Other Observances of Christianized Time

In his lecture, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?” delivered on May 16, 1971, at St. Louis University, critical theorist Michel de Certeau reflects upon the absence of Jesus and its relationship to developing Christian thoughts and actions within an epoch of Common Era time, what he describes as an epistemological situation and what I refer to as late modernity or the current era. For Certeau, Christian thoughts and experiences always refer to a single event, “Jesus Christ.” According to Certeau, the event of Jesus Christ encompasses all of the biblical accounts that communicate narratives about Jesus, and therefore by extension, specific understandings about Jesus like the Incarnation, earthly ministry, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and eschaton, or second coming. But the event of Jesus Christ also comprises the presence and absence of Jesus outside of sacred texts, and within and outside Christian communities.

For Certeau, those who risk Christian thoughts and actions do so in a paradoxical relationship to the event of Jesus Christ: their practices of faith move from the event of Jesus Christ and toward it with a God-given permission. The permission consists in a ubiquitous allowance for innumerable communities and individuals to think about and practice Christianity with divergence from an origin (like the Incarnation) and toward a telos (like the kingdom of God brought to fullness in our world). In perpetual and plural modes of diverging and approaching, private and public narratives, rituals, proclamations, and embodiments of the Jesus event come to expression with reference to the vanishing points of beginning and end that indicate and frame the mystery that Jesus is who he said he was.

Certeau’s argumentation provides a theoretical outlook for reassessing the ways in which congregations and the world have become bound by liturgical time and the Christian era. Within Certeau’s line of thought, the error of the Dionysian timetable is not that we have no precise evidence for how Dionysius tabulated a date for the Incarnation that then made it possible to calculate regular occurrences of the Pasch. Rather, innovators like Dionysius exemplify the kinds of divergence and approach associated with Christian faith. The problem is that his form of divergence and approach has become normalized for the entire world.
Innovators of time still exist today. One striking postcolonial example that has connection to and extends the kind of variant thought and practice that Certeau articulates is the artwork of Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh.

**ONE YEAR PERFORMANCES**

Born into Common Era time on December 31, 1950, in Nan-Chou (南洲), Taiwan (台灣), Hsieh was a 1967 high school dropout who began his artistic forays with painting. He served three years of conscripted service in the Taiwanese military and used training as a seaman to enter Philadelphia on July 1974 as an illegal immigrant. His father, an atheist "and like an emperor," died from cancer two years after Hsieh moved to New York. His mother, Su-Chiung Hung, a devout Christian, made only one request of her son: "Don't be a criminal." In a retrospective interview, Hsieh stated that her influence foundationized his entire artistic oeuvre and way of being—"I use her power to live and do art."

Between September 1978 and July 1986, Hsieh completed five year-long performance artworks as an illegal immigrant in New York. From September 30, 1978, to September 29, 1979, he lived continuously in a cell constructed out of dowel rods and two-by-fours inside his apartment. A friend brought food and water and removed his waste. From April 11, 1980, to April 11, 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour on the hour inside his studio. From September 26, 1981, to September 26, 1982, he committed to living outside on the streets of New York for an entire year. (He succeeded with the exception of being forced into jail for disorderly conduct for 15 hours.)

From July 4, 1983, to July 4, 1984, he made a pact with fellow artist Linda Montano that the two would be tied together with rope for one calendar year without touching. Finally, from July 1, 1985, to July 1, 1986, Hsieh vowed not to do art and instead to "just go in life." He then finished his oeuvre by commiting to make art but not show it publicly for 13 years, from December 31, 1986, to December 31, 1999. The last piece started with his birthday in the eighties and ended with his birthday at the turn of the new millennium. Hsieh explained that he "was using thirteen years to reach the time frame of a century." Disentangling his work from any need for an audience to view his art, the final piece infused deep paradox and transience into understanding exactly what being an artist is and what making art entails.

In the *One Year Performances*, Hsieh fills the timing of a year with daring synchronizations of art and life that become unequivocally palpable. All this despite the fact that we only know about the pieces through documentary evidence and the relevant archives that make his art legible to publics today. His *One Year Performances* occurred without the support of any gallery, benefactor, foundation, or significant community of fellow artists. Simply put, they were unsanctioned and unsupported. Hsieh accomplished his artistic feats with a Nietzschean resoluteness and without much fanfare.

Today, even a casual glance at the documentation of Hsieh's works can stun a viewer. The mix of self-discipline, self-containment, self-abandon, and utter reliance upon others and his environment galvanized in the conception and implementation of his performance art pieces is extraordinary and staggering in scale. In every piece, time becomes a canvas of finitude upon which isolation, regime, exile, partnership, effacement, and farewell receive magnification through imaginatively contained actions and expenontional artistic exploration from within remarkably difficult strictures. Somehow, despite his status as a foreigner (he was literally an "illegal alien"), and the absurd parameters for his performances, his pieces connect with the ordinary experiences of everyday folks living in Common Era time. When liturgically examined, Hsieh's portfolio raises generative questions about how repetition, self-erasure, and revelation can reconstruct what it means to live according to liturgical cycles and the seemingly inescapable developments from them such as Common Era time.

Take, for example, the dedication to repetition that Hsieh undertakes in *Time Clock*. *Time Clock* happens in a particular place: Hsieh's apartment in New York City—111 Hudson St. 2FL, 10013, during a specific appointment of time from 7:00 pm, April 11, 1980, to 6:00 pm, April 11, 1981. The content of the work, like good liturgical practice, fortifies its communication of meaning through repetition. In a letter commencing his "one year performance," Hsieh writes, "I shall punch a Time Clock in my studio every hour on the hour for one year." How do we know Hsieh made good on his promise? Besides the copious 366 punch cards that still exist, there is also the attorney-verified statement of witness, the sheet of tabulation that records 8,760 card punches, and the mercilessly matching frame-by-frame series of photographs from a 16mm movie camera documenting each instance of marking time, scrupulously assembled in the retrospective *Out of Now* by Adrian Heathfield and Hsieh in order to provide a testament to monumental twentieth-century art as well as ample, jaw-dropping evidence that Hsieh did what he set out to do.

*Time Clock* provides an interpretive frame for thinking about the liturgical cycle not because liturgy shares affinities with performance art. Rather, liturgical time itself constitutes a banality within life. Whereas "higher times" once re-ordered the world's time, that reordering has begun to lose its radiance. Recurring feasts feel tired or have become dimmed by late capitalism and humanistic allergies to Christianity. Could modifying the frequency and the manner by which dates of the Christian year are observed regularize faithfulness in a way that breaks through the secular erosion that has undone designated dates of liturgical time and
made more enticing the easier path of inattention to deeper liturgical meaning? Yes, Christmas and Easter every day might make it easier to live like people of radical charity and the resurrection (or lead to more stress and anxiety). But what about daily observance of the event to which Ascension Day refers? What might it mean for congregations and other communities of faith to embrace as a daily practice the acknowledgment that Jesus is gone, not the regularization of Ascension Day per se, but rather the incomprehensible event to which it refers? How could a constant reference to something so obvious and mundane as the physical absence of Jesus become miraculous again for ordering time within or at least with respect to Christian faith?

Works like *Keeping God’s Silence*, by Rachel Muers, and *How (Not) to Speak of God*, by Peter Rollins, have explored what it might mean to develop taciturn ethical and ecclesial practices in order to elevate reverence and faithfulness toward God. But is there a place for articulating the absence of God? Instead of remaining silent about who God is, how might people of faith express the absence of God as an exercise of faith? Are there models that maneuver outside but also within the Western theological framework to help us think about how the articulation of God’s absence might take shape? The “Atheism for Lent” project, where participants undertake 40 days of reflection upon the deepest critiques of Christianity, approaches what is being described here. Except the “Atheism for Lent” project still upholds the structure of the liturgical calendar, proceeds with an apologetic undercurrent, and uses theological jargon that a Hsieh-inspired acknowledgment of a physically absent Jesus would resist.

One way toward ritualizing emptiness of infinite magnitude with reference to Hsieh is to begin with experimentation in self-erasure. While erasing the self ritualistically might seem futile and disempowering, Hsieh exemplifies how making a ceremony out of nothingness can in fact lead to a reinvention of how one lives within a given time. For the contract of self-imposed rules that regulated his final *One Year Performance*, Hsieh typed, “I, TECHCHING HSIEH, PLAN TO DO A ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE. I [BLACK SQUARE] NOT DO ART, NOT TALK ART, NOT READ ART, NOT GO TO ART GALLERY AND ART MUSEUM FOR ONE YEAR. I JUST GO IN LIFE. THE PERFORMANCE BEGIN ON JULY 1, 1985 AND CONTINUE UNTIL JULY 1, 1986.” Just after his yearlong “No Art” piece, he composes the following rules for his last artwork to date: “I, Teching Hsieh, have a 13 years’ plan I will make ART during this time. I will not show it PUBLICLY. This plan will begin on my 36th birthday December 31, 1986 continue until my 49th birthday December 31, 1999.” Like the other *One Year Performances*, Hsieh keeps his word and lives with abandon into artistic invisibility.

Hsieh seeks invisibility in order to display “lack of creativity.” But perhaps his self-imposed schedule of disappearance actually creates spaces for other interpreters and other artists even though his works were (only) esoterically known at the time. By parallel, how could liturgical display incorporate intentional moves of self-erasure in order to make room for others and perhaps even for the Jesus who is physically absent and who is coming back someday and somehow, as many Christians believe? Recurring to Lent, the season of self-sacrifice marks a time of self-resignation. Yet are there other possibilities that challenge the banality and constraints of the liturgical cycle and of Common Era time in order to experience once again theological virtue?

Ironically, even though Hsieh strictly adheres to the rules of his *No Art* pieces, his plan to completely disappear ends up thwarted. The art market eventually absorbs Hsieh’s outsider status and exiles his portfolio out of obscurity and into critical acclaim. His disappearance within the Common Era impregnates his artwork with lasting significance. Though Hsieh still remains somewhat of a cult figure, his pieces have reached an authoritative status, not as ones that define any particular method or Taiwanese aesthetic to contemporary art. Rather, his works participate in what Certeau calls authority in the plural. The work of Hsieh subverts Common Era time by producing fictional situations that redefine through disciplined, chronological documentation unexpected realizations about living. In Hsieh’s own words, the pieces each have “a truth in essence.” Whatever that truth is specifically, it makes life “open and uncertain once again” to use Hsieh’s phrasing again. According to Acts, the future also remains open and unknowable, but it is also filled with an indescribable promise as the disciples, on the one hand, cannot “know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority”; on the other hand, they have been entrusted to proceed anyway as witnesses empowered by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps a similar power flickers in Hsieh’s artwork, which might not seem so far-fetched, given his own admission that his mother’s power enabled him to live and to do art. Whatever the case may be, Hsieh models a different way of living within the bounds of Common Era time, but he also shows much more, even if only by analogy. Hsieh vivifies ordinary life by giving banal behaviors within it an aesthetic velocity that moves our understandings of time to a place of critical thinking. He compels his viewers to ask questions, even if only inwardly and inchoately, about what it means to live as one who is incarcerated, bound to another, enslaved to tracking the hours, not only on the outside but at the bottom of society as well, and in the process, relinquishing the self. The kind of questioning that his artwork provokes has a reach further than the radiance of his will, the realm of aesthetics, and the confines of Christianized time. How do we live within the time whose measurement coincides with a seemingly ubiquitous colonial advance? What does it mean to live beyond the temporal borders we have accepted for now and into a time where Jesus
is long gone? Hsieh's artwork answers the first question, even if ineptly, and shows us enough material to develop a response to the second one.

NOTES

5. Martin Connell, Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year, vol. 2: Sunday, Lent, the Three Days, The Easter Season, Ordinary Time (New York: Continuum), 167. Connell succinctly notes elsewhere that although ascension was traditionally celebrated during the fifty days of the Easter season, “it was at first variously positioned in different geographical regions: at the midpoint of the span (on the twenty-fifth day, Mid-Pentecost) at the end (on the fiftieth day, Pentecost) and, increasingly in the late fourth century, on the fortieth day. See Martin Connell, “Ascension Day,” in The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship, ed. Paul Bradshaw (Louisville, KY: WJK 2002), 29-30.
6. The summary here of how Ascension Day and Pentecost developed as liturgical feasts is very short. For more historical detail, such as firsthand sources from figures early Christian church history, and discussion of whether Pentecost historically referred to a span of days or a particular day, see Connell, Eternity Today, 166-178. See also Patrick Regan, O.S.B. “The Fifty Days and the Fiftieth Day” in Between Memory and Hope, ed. Johnson, 223-246.
7. For an argument that challenges the claim that Lent grew backwards from Holy Week, and that it in fact arrived in Byzantine ecclesial practice as a singular observance with its own form of closure, see Thomas J. Talley, “The Origins of Lent at Alexandria” in Between Memory and Hope, ed. Johnson, 183-206.
8. See, for example, Paul Bradshaw, “The Origins of Easter” in Between Memory and Hope, 123, and in the same volume in an essay titled, “The Origin of Lent at Alexandria,” Talley discusses the forgotten but palimpsest-like influence of Alexandrian liturgical celebrations in the Byzantine celebration of the Saturday of Lazarus, emphasizing, “So liturgical tradition harbors our history, even when we have lost sight of it” (205-206).
10. For a fuller explanation of regnal year counting, see “The Eponymous Year” in ibid., 11-14.
11. Consuls, the highest publicly elected officials in Roman culture, were elected in pairs.