



## Christine Hill, Tourguide?

by Robert Ayers

New York City continues, as we are all aware, to be a weird and wonderful town, full of the harshest, most absurd contrasts. This is as true in the arts as anywhere else – even in performance art. So early this summer, while the Lincoln Center Festival was presenting Robert Wilson's *The Days Before Death, Destruction, and Detroit III* on a scale that is only sustainable within the commercial arts structures of the United States, I sought out – and felt a good deal more sympathy for – a piece of performance that had a participating audience of twelve, a single artist and, for backdrop, soundtrack, and to some extent subject matter, a few square blocks of Soho and Tribeca.

Having worked in Berlin for six years until last October, Christine Hill is a relatively recently repatriated American. She finds herself in a city which never sleeps because it has become addicted to the long-running soap opera that is its own street life – all those restaurants and bars where every waiter is, infamously, an actor, all those street corners that have become a stage, with every passer-by a performer or spectator. It is a city in which life and art are daily muddled one with the other – more here than in most other places on the planet. The device that she has chosen for her performance, the medium that declares her reappropriation of, and reabsorption

by, this place and its many meanings, is the walking tour. Walking tours are everywhere in New York City of course, but that question mark at the end of her title is the simple clue. This is a piece that dares to wander so close to the ordinary that it achieves not merely the subtlest, most poignant inflection of whatever the ordinary *is* in New York, but also forces us to think again about why we imagined it was ordinary in the first place.

Christine Hill is an artist trained in improvisational theatre. Maybe this is where she gets her disconcerting bare-faced courage from, whether that be expressed in leading us into the lobby of the local police station to point out the sandbox where loaded weapons are deposited (we were politely but forcefully asked to leave), in striking up a conversation with a motorcyclist pulled up at a red light whose T-shirt exactly matched the sage green of his petrol tank (he didn't always ride colour-coordinated), or – more significantly – in making this seemingly harmless, gentle, rather innocuous little walking tour the vehicle for a sharp and enduring lesson in New York City's political, economic, and moral inequities. You would not have found any of that in the Wilson piece (although it might have been obvious from observing its audience, I suppose). Moreover, Christine Hill offers her lesson for an hour-and-a-half twice each weekday, and three times on Saturdays. She has my deep respect.

Christine Hill, *Tourguide?* took place at various locations, including 76 Grand Street, New York, 19 June – 30 September

above:  
CHRISTINE HILL,  
*Tourguide?*, 1999,  
performance.  
Photo: Brent Stirton.  
Courtesy: Public Art Fund,  
New York

opposite:  
OTTO BERCHAM,  
*Glass Ceiling*, 1999,  
glass fixed over building.  
c. 50 x 50 m.  
Photo: Daria Scagliola and  
Stijn Brakkee.  
Courtesy: Centraal  
Museum, Utrecht