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ART & MONEY

By Nancy Ann Jeffrey and Robert Cwiklik

Lost in Manhattan

"TOURGUIDE?," a new exhibition at a trendy gallery in New York, raises the question: Is it art, or is it a tourist trap? "Tourguide?" at Deitch Projects in SoHo is a guided tour that's proud to offer little guidance. Its leader, Christine Hill, escorts people to unusual tourist sites but doesn't explain much about them, preferring to let participants "figure out what the coherence is" for themselves. It costs \$12.

But "Tourguide?," as its peculiar question mark suggests, has an agenda beyond sightseeing. While other tours shepherd people to museums to view art, "Tourguide?" claims to be a work of

art by Ms. Hill, a 30-year-old performance artist. Ms. Hill doesn't "perform" in the song-and-dance or poetry-reading sense. But just as Marcel Duchamp put a urinal in a gallery and transformed it into art, the sites Ms. Hill selects for her itinerary become "found art," says Jeffrey Deitch, an influential New York art dealer who co-sponsors the tour.

One site on Ms. Hill's itinerary is Lieut. Joseph Petrosino Park, a tiny patch of blacktop liberally dotted with pigeon droppings; she says "there's a plaque on it" that explains the policeman and his exploits.

Indeed, Ms. Hill's itinerary shuns tourist landmarks but includes quirky downtown shops, ethnic markets and, in what may be a first for organized sightseeing, a functioning city jail. But Ms. Hill says the tour can't succeed unless participants chime in with their own observations, and the "Tourguide?" brochure puts them on notice that "Responsibility for the quality and content of the experience is shared"—though it's only free for the artist.

"Honestly, for twelve bucks, it wasn't worth it," says 27-year-old Betsy Budd, an elementary-school art teacher who recently moved to Manhattan from Charlotte, N.C., and took the tour with a friend. "We were expecting to see more interesting sights," she says. Did Ms.



Tourists get an unexpected view of New York City in "Tourguide?"

Budd realize this was performance art? "Not really," she says.

Confusion over what is art and what is not is one of the most important themes of contemporary culture, says art dealer Mr. Deitch, adding that Ms. Hill's tour "plays into this confusion."

"Tourguide?" is the first performance project of the Public Art Fund, a local nonprofit group that has commissioned sculptures for the city's public spaces for over 20 years. There was "a lot of debate" about whether to get involved with performance art, says Tom Eccles, the fund's director, who declines to disclose the size of the funding. "The project is in evolution right now," he says, "so part of it is a leap of faith."

Ms. Hill admits that "Tourguide?," which will run through Sept. 30, is still ironing out kinks. Tours run seven times a week between Thursday and Saturday, but turnout has sometimes been sparse. Still, not everyone's a critic. Beto Mettig, a 31-year-old actor from Brazil, gives "Tourguide?" a thumbs up. "I like it," he says. Traditional tours, with their profusion of facts, "make me feel a little stupid," he says.

The tour isn't Ms. Hill's first foray into commerce for art's sake. She has done performance pieces functioning as a masseuse, a shoeshine woman and the proprietor of a second-hand clothing store in Kassel, Germany.

So is "Tourguide?" a work of art or a summer job? Ms. Budd, who found parts of the tour "interesting and unique," says that if her husband had paid \$12 for it "he would have been ticked."