

CLEVELAND

CHRISTINE HILL

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In late February, artist Christine Hill moved to Cleveland for five weeks to carry out a project that involved organizing and shooting a pilot for a television show. Toward this end, she studied the history of Cleveland, constructed a set, sought out local talent, and, on March 28, taped *Pilot (Cleveland)*, a single complete episode from an imaginary late-night TV talk show, before a live audience. Behind her desk was a photo backdrop of downtown Cleveland. With the help of her "sidekick" Dave Herman, she used flash cards to tell jokes about the rivalry between Cleveland and New York City. The exhibition included the one-hour-eighteen-minute video of that show; the stage and backstage area where the production was prepared, which fills most of the large gallery; and displays of earlier performances and exhibitions elsewhere of Volksboutique, the arts organization Hill created in the early '90s.

In her video, after being introduced like a typical talk-show host, Hill jokes in her monologue about local laws. Cleveland prohibits women from wearing patent-leather shoes, she says, because they could show reflections of underwear. Then the camera focuses on her patent-leather shoes. It is illegal, she reports, to leave chewing gum in public places. The camera displays a pack of gum. With the help of the doorman from the Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland, Hill brings out guests. Jane Scott, identified, at age eighty-four, as the "oldest rock critic," talks about her career. A stout man wearing a Homer Simpson T-shirt does a Clint Eastwood impersonation. And a woman removes furry pink fake handcuffs and inserts her hand entirely into her mouth. Hill and Herman display cheesy memorabilia from Cleveland's showcase Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and Herman introduces a film he has made with local third-graders re-creating the story of the pioneers who founded the city. Finally, those children appear onstage, and, as eight unicyclists invade the studio, Herman breaks a piñata in the shape of a guitar. The kids scramble to retrieve the falling candy, while the band plays.

Hill goes through the motions of being a professional talk-show host very seriously. When things don't quite work, she soldiers on. If the audience doesn't laugh loudly, she looks disappointed. But her jokes are not really funny and her "dumb stories" not dumb enough to be genuinely amusing. The house band is amateurish, the guests silly, and Hill's anecdotes about Cleveland "firsts" jejeune. As we learn from the questionnaires used to identify local talent, the rehearsal schedules, and the photographs on display, elaborate negotiations and a surprising number of skilled people were required to put together this absurd show.

At first, Hill's conception seemed merely trite. But after extended viewing, her video turned out to be oddly compelling. Neither entirely serious nor obviously ironic, she takes intrinsically slight materials and plays with them without condescension. Real talk shows are so transparently fake that any attempt to parody them or to offer a political critique would be impossibly heavy-handed. Avoiding that trap, Hill's banal simulacrum is not bad enough to be camp. By seeming guileless, she gets the viewer to take her deadpan role seriously. The one false note was, in fact, a quotation from Walter Benjamin on one of the posters at the entrance to the show. You don't need any theorizing to understand Hill's oddly generous performance. Think, rather, of the scene near the end of Kafka's *Amerika*, when his hero arrives at the Nature Theater of Oklahoma to find a placard: EVERYONE IS WELCOME.

—David Carrier



Christine Hill, *Pilot (Cleveland)*, 2003, production still.
Dave Herman and Christine Hill.