

**CHRISTINE HILL TAPES
HER OWN TV PILOT, FOR
ART'S SAKE**
ON EDGE/BY C. CARR

The Avant Late Show



HILL ON THE "SET" OF PILOT: "I ALWAYS THINK THAT IF YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING AVANT-GARDE, IT DOESN'T MEAN A DEPARTURE FROM THE NORM."

Christine Hill's new project straddles a line so fine that skeptical viewers seem about equally divided between those who can't believe it's art and those who can't believe it's life.

In the past, Hill has worked as a masseuse, waitress, shopkeeper, tour guide, and lead singer in a rock band—activities she designated as art, while at the same time they provided her income. Life in the low-tech service professions requires little or no training, and Hill is now about to claim one of the more glamorous professions available in that category: Talk Show Host.

In *Pilot*, she's inventing and taping the pilot episode of her own late-night television talk show. Not an homage, not a parody, not a deconstruction (like *Larry Sanders*), it will be as close as she can get to the real thing. While she hopes to tour *Pilot* in art spaces around the country, creating a new show in every port, she would not be averse to a late-night network slot.

Just inside the door at Ronald Feldman Gallery, 10 posters explain the piece. But, of course, no one reads anymore. Hill finds that confused people wander into the front room, where a crew hammers away on the set, and where she's helpfully tacked up signs around the mostly empty space labeled "band pit," "lighting grid," and so on. Some ask why the work isn't done yet. (Because she wants them to see it progress.) Some turn and walk right out. It doesn't look like art. It's a mess.

But if they wander into the second room, they'll probably find the host at work at her desk and the sidekick at his, next to an extremely green greenroom, and a conference table for the show's writers. Here, too, confusion can reign. One Saturday during the Downtown Arts Festival, dozens of people crammed into

the back room while Hill met with her writers. She could hear a woman in the back saying, "Who are these actors? They're not really the writers for the show. They're just pretending."

I notice a Polaroid labeled "couch consideration" on Hill's worktable. "We're having some issues with the couch," she explains. "Stiffness issues. The guest *cannot sink*."

She's analyzed all the banal tropes of these shows, watched for hundreds of hours, and even found their pilots, if possible, at the Museum of Television and Radio. The host's desk is always bare, but it has pencils. "You're never supposed to see the host's legs," she says. "It's an interesting dynamic, because the guest is on full display." As in most television shows, the dominant color will be somewhere in the blue range. And behind her, they'll put up the usual phony cityscape. "Most backdrops try to give you the impression that you're in the thick of it. It was hard to decide if we were supposed to be groundbreaking there." She decided no.

"I always think that if you want to do something avant-garde or subversive, it doesn't mean a departure from the norm, from the mainstream," says Hill. "It means taking what you recognize from the norm and fixing it, personalizing it. There's no sense in bastardizing it so much that it's unrecognizable, because then you're not doing it. You're doing something else."

She will not mess with the form, ever. For Hill, the art comes in tailoring a persona to the job, creating a workspace for herself, and then interacting with fans or customers. She began her career in Germany, moving there in 1991 right out of art school. Performing with her band Bindemittel for three years, she says, she adapted her look so that when she got off the tour bus, people would think "rock band." But once the group cut a record, Hill lost interest and quit. She has a horror of getting trapped into one kind of artmaking.

The piece that brought her the most attention in Europe was *Volksboutique*, a secondhand clothing store she ran out of her Berlin studio from 1996 to '97. For that, she took on a "Heidi shopkeeper look," wearing braids curled into a bun, trying to look approachable and traditional. Last summer, relatively new to New York, she ran walking tours out of a tiny office at Deitch Projects, and sought to present herself as "accessible, friendly, comfortable-shoe wearing."

The job of talk show host has intrigued Hill ever since she first saw the *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* show in 1997. She lived in Germany without a television but happened to see the show one night in a Frankfurt hotel room. As she described it last year: "I really felt like he was either calling, 'Come on back. This is a job for you,' or somehow mocking me: 'I have this great job. You can't do it.' So I just kind of started this obsession, this desire to be informed about what he's doing, how he's managing to redefine the genre of television while pretty much sticking within the parameters. I very much like the manner in which his persona carries along, and he seems to roll with the punches exceptionally well." She much prefers him to both Leno ("insipid") and Letterman ("a genius but he's gotten very fat and happy").

During the tour-guide piece, she met one of O'Brien's writers, and has since been backstage at his show five or six times. She's fascinated by the process: "Where do people stand? How does the teleprompter work? Who just walked by with a clipboard and what does she do?" And she's fascinated by the performance itself: "a brilliant sculpture." Because many people in the audience watch the monitor throughout the taping instead of the stage, while Conan focuses on the camera.

Her own approach to doing a talk show is all about setting up an infrastructure, when it's easy to imagine other would-be hosts going from comedy club to comedy club, honing their bits. Hill, who's been studying improv with the Upright Citizens Brigade for a little over a year, feels completely confident about performing: "I don't think the monologue or even the fact of appearing as host is at all a departure for me." Meanwhile, she's creating a meticulous calendar, hanging everyone's clipboard (and All-Access pass) on the wall in a grid, making calls about bleacher rentals for the taping, deciding about couches. The evening's been mapped: monologue and intro, six minutes and 52 seconds; walk to desk, four seconds. Et cetera.

She hopes to hire a band from among those she's encountered in the subways. She has a sidekick, artist Dave Herman, and he's created a video remote about Teddy Roosevelt—historical, yes, but humorous. They'll do a couple of comic sketches together, and Hill plans on two or three guests. She decided against celebrities. Instead, she's really hoping to get, for example, a perfume sprayer from Bergdorf Goodman. "People whose job it is to spray you," she clarifies. "That's *exactly* the kind of thing I'm interested in. Because there's this whole persona involved. You can't be reclusive and be a perfume sprayer at Bergdorf. It's so haughty—at the same time, kind of affronting. This person who advises you on your smell. I think that's fascinating." □

The completed tape will be on view, along with the set and workspace, through October 14 at the Feldman Gallery, 31 Mercer Street.