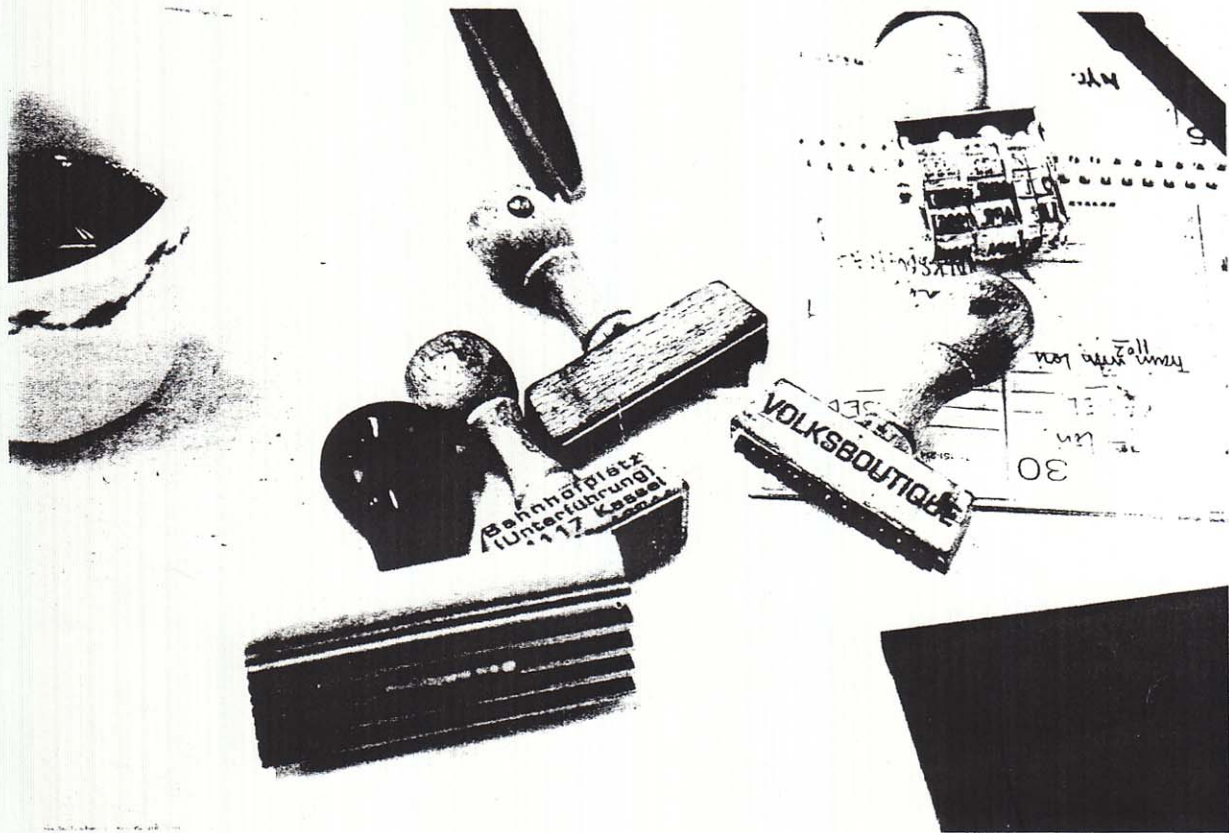


Kaplan, Janet A. "Christine Hill's  
Volksboutique." *Art Journal*  
(summer 1998): 38-45.



**Interview with Janet A. Kaplan,  
text by Matthias Harder,  
photographs by Jens Liebchen**

## **Christine Hill's Volksboutique**

In 1996–97, the North American artist Christine Hill created a used clothing store installation that she titled *Volksboutique* on a side street in the old Mitte neighborhood of the former East Berlin, where she had been living for sev-

eral years. In 1997 she was invited to bring the project to documenta X, where, for the one hundred days of the exhibition, it was installed in a vacant storefront in an underground passageway in the center of Kassel. The following interview about the project was conducted at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York, in the autumn of 1997, as Hill was beginning a year-long residency there. The text that precedes the interview, by the German writer Matthias Harder, situates the *Volksboutique* project in its German context. The

photographs that accompany the text are by the German photographer Jens Liebchen, who sought to document his impressions of both projects.

—Janet A. Kaplan

*Volksboutique* business cards are stamped by the artist herself; lately there is a new telephone number. Christine Hill needs to use three stamps to produce one card. After stamping each card, the stamps are placed next to a calendar and a coffee cup on the table, a provisional still life. Then the piece of paper is finally cut and laminated.

Such mundane activities are integral to the *Volksboutique*, a work conceived in mid-1995 but first realized in September 1996 as a studio/workshop in Berlin. The name reveals the roots of the concept: the *Volksbühne*, an internationally renowned “experimental” theater, is a mere stone’s throw away. Hill operates her shop/atelier out of a back room on Invalidenstrasse in eastern Berlin, where the communist government once orchestrated a network of *Volkseigenen Betriebe* or VEBs (“the people’s own”: East German communist-speak for state-owned companies; laden with populist ideological connotations, the term was used by the Nazis and, after World War II, by the East German communist dictatorship). The VEBs manufactured everything the people “needed.” In this regard the *Volksboutique* offers second-hand clothing at affordable prices. Yet the more banal the idea initially appears, the more pronounced the artistic dimension of the work becomes. Communication between the artist and her public is the crucial element. The critic Kim Levin remarked: “In the aftermath of Joseph Beuys and his calls for social sculpture, Christine Hill’s work spills awkwardly into the social structure of life.”

In 1997 Catherine David invited Hill to open a branch of the *Volksboutique* in Kassel’s central city for the duration of the one hundred days of documenta X. For two days a week from June to September, used clothing, all from donations, was sold in the pedestrian underpass by Kassel’s historic main station. The essential distinction between Berlin and Kassel

Stamps, ink pad, and  
other objects on Hill’s  
desk in the *Volksboutique*—  
Berlin

lies in the customer interface. While about twenty people actually enter the Berlin space each day initiating conversation, Hill's second-hand shop at documenta receives hundreds of cultural tourists on any given day. In Kassel, unlike Berlin, she did not price the clothing; customers interested in buying were thus forced to ask, thereby fostering dialogue with the documenta visitors.



Preparing cards for  
documenta X, Kassel

The Berlin photographer Jens Liebchen documented some of the scenes and situations inside and outside of the *Volksboutique*. The artist is seen lugging the clothes, box by box from the main shop on her way to Kassel. Her exertion is evident. She arranges the selection of clothes, advises customers, and packs a sweater under the skeptical gaze of the buyer. The protagonist of the project herself stands (or more often sits) at the table, which doubles as a sales counter. She also takes care of all other business responsibilities. This is part of the concept. A curious scene unfolds in one of Liebchen's images. Five middle-aged women stand at the shop window outside, peering into the *Volksboutique* where the photographer is positioned. Four of them appear confused and irritated. The middle woman looks directly toward the camera, ostensibly interested in what is occurring inside. With this image Liebchen succeeds in confounding the spatiality, removing any clear border between inside and outside. Only the reflection in the glass in the center of the images reveals that the women are located outside the shop. In Liebchen's other images, the trying on and the sale of clothes become central themes. The photographer thus becomes a participant in the installation, in an interactive

system, in which each visitor/customer can change the parameters.

—Matthias Harder/translated by Jackson Bond

**Kaplan:** What do people need to know about *Volksboutique* to understand these photographs?

**Hill:** The way *Volksboutique* in Berlin ran was that people donated clothing they no longer wanted to wear to the shop, and I then sold it to people who thought they could still get some use out of it. It was a montage of lots of objects that became really remarkable when they are all placed together—clothing from other people, people themselves, chairs, stamps, everything. *Volksboutique* takes two words—*volks* (the people) and *boutique*—that don't necessarily fit together as a concept and makes them into something else: a pasted-together shop, full of found objects, selling used clothing of variable tastes. The economy in the way it was run meant that the selection was odd. It wasn't the chicest shop; it certainly didn't have location on its side, but it still had this sort of "cult" air to it that I both appreciate and tried hard to





Hill in front of the *Volksboutique*-Berlin, carrying a cardboard box filled with clothing to be transported to documenta X.

instigate. It was all about being self-made from the way the space came together, to how the clothing was assembled, to the manner in which it was run, the marketing, and the advertising. It had to do with making something out of what's at your disposal. To me this is very tied into what was going on in Berlin at the time.

**Kaplan:** Do you see it as based in an East German aesthetic?

**Hill:** East Germany was a very "scrappy" place, and that made the *Volksboutique*. The location was obscure. It wasn't clearly visible. It was open regularly, but not often, so people who came by had heard about it through various channels and were happy to find it. The "inefficiency" had some sort of logic. Anytime someone entered the shop, I would walk in and explain to them what was going on. I would get into very long conversations with people discussing everything from Berlin and the state of the neighborhood, to art and clothing. Or they would browse quickly and leave. It was very obviously something other than a commercial endeavor. To

me, in part, it was a very nostalgic thing about the East, about Mitte (the Berlin neighborhood where I had lived), which is now being overrun by trendy stores and restaurants. It was something about trying to maintain some dignity.

**Kaplan:** What was the source of your clothes?

**Hill:** I put ads in the paper saying *Volksboutique* needs donations. People would call, and I would explain. These were people who were going to throw them out anyway. So I would meet them, pick up the clothing, and bring it to the store. I resold things very cheaply.



Hill filling up coat  
stands in Volksboutique  
Franchise-Kassel

**Kaplan:** Did the people donating know the context in which the clothing was going to be used?

**Hill:** Sure. I was straight up with the people who were donating and offered a small commission. But being a low-budget operation, this wasn't a huge sum. The idea was to try to make a small profit from my labor, the investment of going to get the clothing and the effort to remarket it. When I first moved to Berlin, I took advantage of the clothing lying around on the street. After the reunification, Red Cross boxes were overflowing. People left bags out in what was called *Spermull*, allowing others to take it. I went to resell it in the West. This was my income. People threw out ironed, folded stuff—very meticulous. They were abandoning the life they had for a new one, and I was constructing something—also my new life—out of this.

**Kaplan:** Did customers know Volksboutique was an art project?

**Hill:** Yes. But the Volksboutique was not set up to cater to the Berlin art calendar. The opening and the shop hours were independent of any art openings. I was interested in balancing the art and the nonart aspects. Catherine David, the artistic director of documenta X, beat me to the punch of introducing it to the art world by presenting it at documenta. It is important to stress that Volksboutique Franchise-Kassel was not some clever way of fitting



in with Catherine David's thesis. The shop had existed in real space, in a real city. I was exhibiting a "franchise" of this. The things that *Volksboutique* set out to accomplish were then extended to Kassel. It is a piece that works with the place it is in and attempts to liven it up for a set amount of time and to make sense of the objects found there. For David, the fact that the shop was open and operating in Berlin added considerably to her interest, I think. The franchise was located in an abandoned dry cleaners in an underpass in Kassel. All the glass was broken. It was very dismal. Now, post-documenta, it is being filled in with concrete. So, I am very satisfied that in the middle, the *Volksboutique* happened there.

A problem in Kassel is that it was packaged as "a piece about conversation." That is part of the content, but not the summation. This was difficult, because with this concrete description, people expected a performance and a staged event. But it wasn't a theater piece; it wasn't that I was delivering some "schtick" to everyone, regardless of the situation or person. The Kassel Franchise had a serious voyeuristic aspect to it. People could view it through a plate-glass shop window. People would pass by when there was not much business, and I would be reading the paper. I would hear from outside, "Well, are we supposed to watch this girl read the paper, or what?" There was the idea about putting a great deal of responsibility on the viewer. The conversational nuances were important. People would be dickering over whether it was art or a shop, or would be having their private conversations in the "anonymous" atmosphere of the shop. This did make the piece live. Teenage girls would come in and almost audibly sigh, "Ah, finally something we get." Or they would throw themselves exhaustedly on the couch. They seemed at ease, free to just converse. It was important that I be there kind of steering, but on the other hand, I did



Hill showing postcards in  
*Volksboutique Franchise*-  
Kassel

not have anything to push. I was trying to get people out of being a kind of museum sheep where they just graze through the space and nibble on the artwork. I wanted to make them consider where they were and what they were seeing.

**Kaplan:** One of the references made about this work is the Beuysian idea of social sculpture and of operating in the space between art and life. Is that a reference for you?

**Hill:** Sure. It is obviously "my fault" that all of this work is being perceived as art, because I have chosen to call it that. I like the fact that the concept of art



Hill watching clients  
in *Volksboutique*  
Franchise-Kassel

is a wonderful qualifier of something. It is also a term that needs to be redefined because the way people think about art excludes far too many "art" practices. I am trying to work with the idea that something can function in a real context as well as in an art context. I want my art to have some basis in a real thing, beyond being simply a figment of my imagination. I want to illustrate to people, with the *Volksboutique*, that art becomes art in the way it is perceived and considered.

**Kaplan:** What do you see as your connection to other artists who have used the referent of shopping in their work?

**Hill:** Of course I feel connections, but there hasn't been a recent project that has really reminded me of *Volksboutique*. The store is not a new idea. It goes back to Fluxus. Artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, Allan Kaprow, and Vito Acconci have shaped my thoughts. I am not trying to break new ground in terms of the venue I have set up. But the content of the piece is different. If you are looking for a form, the shop space is a perfect idea container. It is something you can invite people into.





Hill selling clothes  
in Volksboutique  
Franchise-Kassel



**Kaplan:** What is your response to the photographs Jens Liebchen produced?

**Hill:** It is hard to document a piece that ran for a year with a series of photographs. I like that Jens managed to convey a sense of the labor. It was an effort to maintain the store. He also managed to capture how I figure into the piece, as I set myself up in a public role which can be unforgiving. I put myself on display, especially at documenta, to be scrutinized. I was being stared at the entire time, by my own design. The role was to put myself in the position of bearing the responsibility for my work.

There are some interesting moments of nervous laughter which Jens got. He also got a great portrait of the handmade quality—like the pictures of the stamps.

It is interesting to me that no matter how piecemeal the *Volksboutique* and the franchise in Kassel were, they photographed beautifully. It was like a film set. Trying to document the entire thought process, not to mention the considerable daily events that happened, is rough. You cannot present a single picture and say, "This is it." It is hard to condense, or rather reduce. I find the best documentation of the piece is the people who were there. What remains is hearsay, and people walking around in *Volksboutique* clothing.

Spectators outside  
*Volksboutique* Franchise-  
Kassel





## ON EDGE

Christine Hill Leads Tours  
of the Everyday

Carr, C. "Art et (Cottage)  
Industrie." *Village Voice*,  
July 6, 1999, 61.

# Art et (Cottage) Industrie



The art in Hill's enterprise comes in setting up, determining what persona will make it all work, and interacting with customers or fans.

BY C. CARR

It was art, but you'd never know it. Christine Hill had barely opened her tour-guide office at the front of Deitch Projects before someone came in wanting tickets to Denver. "An effective installation," she concluded, though she expects to keep hearing lines like "Why is this art?"

Hill's work really blurs the art/life line because it's about creating something that is life. She has worked in the past as a masseuse, waitress, shopkeeper, and lead singer in a rock band—activities she designated as art while they also provided her income. Now, with *Tourguide?*, sponsored by the Public Art Fund, she will act as a real guide, leading tourists (and the rest of us) to unconventional local attractions. The trips promise to be both more mundane and more cosmic than any vacation in Colorado.

On June 19, the day of the inaugural tour, a couple of people sat filling out forms in Hill's tiny storefront. Someone had told her the place looked like an office in East Germany. "Which is completely what I'm going for," the artist an-

nounced happily. She'd been living in East Berlin for most of the decade, having moved there right after art school because "it seemed as close to uncharted territory as I could get." She knew one other American there and did not speak the language.

If anything in this storefront created a not-too-post-Soviet ambience, it was the '50s wallpaper Hill had found, a brown snowflake pattern—hideous but homey. She'd also posted a THINK sign behind her desk, covered the chairs for clients with American flag bunting, filled shelves with phone books and Michelin guides, and hung Ziploc bags on the wall, each one holding a Manhattan "souvenir" like Pepsi-AC or Chap Stick. All were for sale at about list price, though she thought of them as "artsy multiples."

The souvenirs bring up just one of the questions inherent in Hill's work: does an ordinary object become more valuable if it's designated as art? That's usually how it works. As if the artist were an alchemist. Hill thinks of drawing and painting as "apprentice skills," and she is out to create situations, not objects. But then a walk down the street becomes art. And *Tourguide?* re-

minds me of that classic Situationist activity they called the *dérive*—the drift, the journey with no goal. This tiny avant-garde movement so important in '60s Paris, the Situationist International, regarded the *dérive* as a way of introducing disorientation and discovery into everyday life. But this is the '90s, and Hill talks more about improvisational theater and "my fascination with Conan O'Brien." He's someone who can think on his feet, she says. And she wants her tour to instigate some kind of group interaction, to become a sort of moving improv.

Hill's piece is going to evolve over the course of the summer, and she hopes eventually to include sites unimaginable on other tours, like sweatshops and private residences. But on day one, there are only three of us, and we set off to look at the Rachel Whiteread sculpture high above Grand and West Broadway. As we walk past the Soho Grand, Hill says she'll start going in there once the group is bigger. She'd been dissed at the Grand, which refused to display her brochures. ("We do not have the sort of clientele that goes on walking tours.")

Hill has taken every tour in town. Thirteen of them, anyway. She also applied for a job at "one of those double-decker places" and went through the initiation process. Soon she'll take a test at the Department of Consumer Affairs to get certified as a guide. "I don't intend to start telling people how many miles of subway there are, but I like the idea of getting certified."

"I can cloak it as art. Or I can say, I'm a tour guide. I'm opening a business." It's a practical approach to the usual alienation surrounding every artist with a day job. "I'm just trying to promote some kind of meshing so that you feel that whatever you're doing is worth it. So you're not just killing time until you get to something else." Hill's best-known project in Berlin was *Volksboutique*, a secondhand clothing store she ran out of her studio for a year. The art in her cottage industries comes in setting up, determining what persona will make it all work, and interacting with customers or fans. Her band, *Bidemittel*, broke up after touring and making a record—after achieving success, in other words—because at that point it became institutionalized and just a job.

While artists have been framing everyday activities or objects as art for decades, it's another thing to run a business as an art form, and

it has profound implications. In 1995, Hill created a piece called "Vendible" for a group show in London. She filled a vending machine that usually held candy and chips with ordinary objects relevant to her work in Berlin. She had had a job shining shoes, so she included shoe cream along with airmail envelopes, maps of Berlin—everything in plastic bags with a document that "souvenired it," as she puts it. Other artists in the show included Gilbert & George and Douglas Gordon. Each had received £300 "to realize the work" and she'd used her money to buy the contents of the machine.

She had, of course, priced everything so she'd make a profit. But when the Serpentine Gallery sent her the money, they first deducted their £300, "saying that it wasn't the idea to be commercial." But Hill's work is less "commercial" than radical. In the post-Duchampian tradition, she challenges the whole idea of the unique object. Gilbert & George, for example, will not be returning their £300 if they sell their painting. This goes to the very foundation of art-world economics. Artists are supposed to take ordinary materials—wood, canvas, stone—and transform them into something valuable by their touch.

Just so the walking tour. One usually visits the oldest, the tallest, the battlements, the boyhood homes. Instead, we walked into the New York City Rescue Mission on lower Lafayette. We'd already perused the Canal Street bins and Hill's favorite 99-cent store.

"What can I do for you folks?" asked an old man seated behind the desk at the Mission.

"We're just interested in the way your establishment runs and how it looks," said Hill. "It's beautiful."

"You've never been in a rescue mission?" The old man seemed incredulous. He explained that they'd been founded in 1872, the first rescue mission in the country. A man named Jerry McAuley discovered God while he was in prison and decided he had to help other men in trouble. The old man showed us McAuley's pardon hanging on the wall, dated 1864.

"We take care of 300 to 400 homeless men a day and feed everyone who comes to the door. Are you hungry?" he asked. We weren't, but he said he would give us a present, and pulled xeroxes of a prayer he'd written from a file folder.

That was a poignant moment, and just a block away was a surreal one. We entered the Manhattan Detention Center, passing what looked like mesh towers in front. Sculpture? Just inside was a door on the west side labeled "sandbox area only one officer at a time." Hmmm. Inside the north door, an officer sat inside a little cage. He came out and asked what we wanted.

"Is that art work out there?" Hill inquired. "I have no idea," said the officer.

A quote from Dostoyevsky hung near the door: "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

Apparently, we are a civilization that doesn't know art from a pile of mesh on the patio. Or an artist from an entrepreneur.

*Tourguide?* runs through September 30. For reservations, call 212-802-7383.



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").

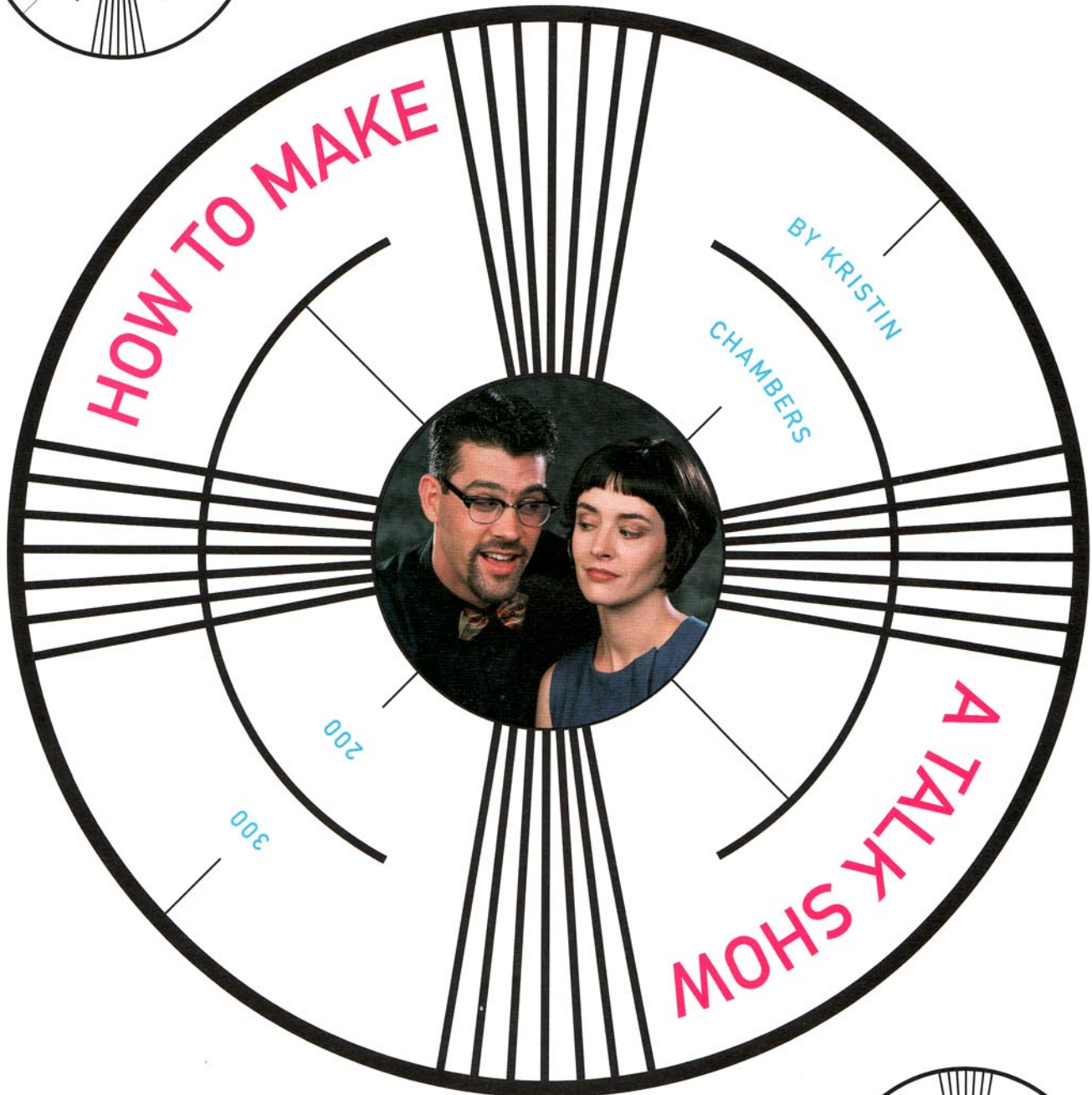
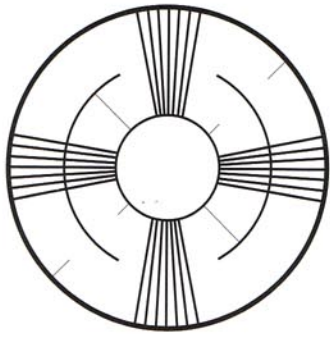
During the tour-guide piece, she met one of O'Brien's writers, and has since been backstage at his show five or six times. She's fascinated by the process: "Where do people stand? How does the teleprompter work? Who just walked by with a clipboard and what does she do?" And she's fascinated by the performance 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." ■

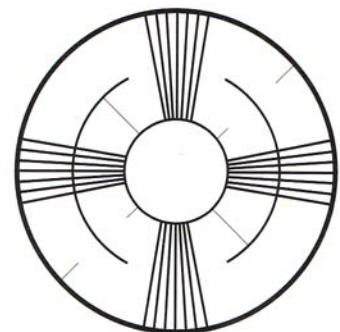
The completed tape will be on view, along with the set and workspace, through October 14 at the Feldman Gallery, 31 Mercer Street.





**Keen** (defn):

- a. characterized by strength and distinctness of perception;  
extremely sensitive or responsive
- b. eager; interested; enthusiastic
- c. Slang. Great; wonderful; marvelous





A tour-guide, a talk-show host, a thrift-store operator and a one-time punk rocker, Christine Hill spent five weeks in residence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland making *Pilot* (Cleveland), a talk show that was performed and taped on March 28. On view in the galleries now are the talk show's empty set, studio and abandoned production office, as well as a video installation of the taped episode. Hill situates all of her art projects within the context of business ventures of her umbrella company Volksboutique. Past projects include the original Volksboutique, a fully functioning thrift shop located in Berlin and later franchised for Documenta X; *Tourguide?*, in which Hill set up a unique tour operation in Soho; and *Pilot*, the creation, development and filming of a late-night talk show whose office and sound stage are located in a gallery setting. The offices of *Pilot* (Cleveland) are spotless, profoundly organized, undeniably comfortable and fully functional. Staffed by Hill and Dave Hermann (Hill's collaborator on *Pilot* and the show's "sidekick"), it is here that all the real art-making takes place. We caught up with them several weeks before the taping.

#### OFFICE AS STILL LIFE

Hill covets nice stationary, rubber stamps, leather-bound ledgers, note cards, German office supplies, dictionaries, and most things that come in volumes. She loves organization. Her aesthetic is impeccable and is central to every aspect of life and business. Her attention to detail permeates every inch of the office from the staplers and notebooks to the bulletin boards and guest chairs. She removes the labels from most products she purchases for a cleaner, more minimal look. Most, if not all, of her e-mails end with a dictionary definition of an appropriate word. "Inventory" for example. Or "pilot."

**Kristin Chambers:** All of your art projects are "organizational ventures" of the umbrella company Volksboutique. How would you define Volksboutique?

CH: Volksboutique was initially just a term that I coined and then it became the name of a second-hand store that I ran while I was living in Berlin. It was a riff on the Volks-Eigenen-Betrieb, a now-defunct production company in East Germany, which was basically the life management production company for everything the people needed. It was a kind of ridiculous, over-labored, cottage-industry, mass-production environment that most of the East Germans worked in. It loosely means products by the people, for the people. So Volksboutique became a boutique of the people.

I originally thought of it as this conceptual name for any work that was concerned with the discourse of appearance, or identity, excavation, or a kind of personal growth. After I closed the physical Volksboutique I re-established it as a brand or as a production label. Now I see the projects that it authors as three-dimensional definitions of what that word is.

**KC:** What is the Volksboutique aesthetic?

CH: My sister is always pointing things out as "this is volksboutique" or "that is volksboutique." It has become this adjective more than a name. I started thinking about what physical form these projects would take while I was in Switzerland. I visited a frame shop (that was also a cardboard manufacturer) where they had the most incredible display room/show room. It was just this utopia of boxes on shelves with little labels. Something like that is really "volksboutique."

**KC:** What appealed most to you, the aesthetic of it, or the organization of it, or both?

CH: I definitely appreciate a kind of aesthetic that is very hands-on. Accumulation, not reduction. The original Volksboutique was all about the recycling of second-hand clothing. Since then all of the projects have been about some kind of resuscitation or rescue of abandoned objects — like old furniture, old stationary supplies, remnants of ephemera.

#### ART IS WORK

For Hill, the role of production and of "keeping shop" is an essential element. Hers is a very punk, DIY approach. She cobbles together offices and businesses out of others' remnants. She is a self-made woman. In addition to artist, Hill has been a successful shop owner, tour-guide, talk-show producer and host, and handbag designer ... all in the name of life and art. I should also mention rock star. Hill was the lead singer of Bindemittel, a punk band that was skyrocketing to success when they called it quits.

**KC:** When people ask you what you do, do you tell them you are an artist or, like your business card reads, the "proprietor" of Volksboutique?

CH: Well, it depends. I would very rarely say "artist," especially living in New York. I would say "art-maker" if the context is correct. One of the people in my lecture here in Cleveland said, "it's funny that you identify yourself as a maker because I would think that you are just a producer of ideas."

**KC:** But you are a meticulous cataloguer, a prolific "maker."

CH: The complete construction of a vision is art-making. On the other hand, there is an enormous amount of industry going on as well. Like my handbag project. I probably could have done the project by drawing a handbag, making some measurements, picking a swatch of fabric and shipping it out to a museum to realize. Instead, I insisted on being involved in every painstaking step of that project. And it was exhausting...

**KC:** Because it wasn't about making a handbag, it was about becoming a handbag maker.





They say, "hey you, look at this." It's the same thing with a tourguide. What does a tourguide do? They point people in a direction and show them something.

The Volksboutique shop was initially like a funnel. Everything came together and it gathered in this shop and I would say that everything in the space is valid and is to be looked at. You can look at it from the outside or you can come in and look at it from the inside.

I get pigeon-holed as an artist interested in communication and that is just redundant. Conceptual artist is also redundant. If art isn't idea-based, then what is it? For me, the invocations of terms like communicative or conversational or anecdotal or conceptual are all repetitive.

CH: Yeah, it was about learning how to do that, so it was hard, it was really a big project. The object is so innocent, you know. Every time I see the bag it represents so much labor to me. And it carries stuff around, so it's a container for that. So I do point people to that. But in other contexts I say I'm a small business owner, which is also the case.

KC: Would you rather be a tour-guide, talk-show host, or rock star?

CH: Oh, rock star, definitely.

#### NO SHTICK

While the interaction between "business owner" and "customer" is an important element of Hill's "ventures," it is not necessarily central. Her projects are not ironic. She does not take on superficial personae. She gets in and works; works hard. The so-called "performance" is real-life. It's behind-the-scenes.

KC: You must be a fan of Gordon Matta-Clark.

CH: I do like Matta-Clark. And his Food project especially. I liked the discipline and the usability of it. I thought it was very functional, it wasn't a stunt, it was something that really just came into being. A project like *Tourguide?* is a great illustration of that for me. It was my first project in New York and everyone thought it was some kind of promotional stunt or something to draw attention to my "real artwork," I guess. They thought it was fake. They were thinking, "there's no way that she would go to all this trouble to do this job, she's probably just waiting in there for journalists to show up." And so to me, Matta-Clark's Food project was so honest and such a pure thing. It's like "we want to feed people, we want to be fed ourselves, so we're going to go do it, go set it up."

KC: Your work is often misunderstood to be about irony, communication, or social commentary. Where is the real core of these projects situated for you? In the ephemera that is produced? In the installation itself? In the performative aspects?

CH: For me a lot of these projects, and *Pilot* especially, are about helping to instruct in perspective shift. People do misconstrue *Pilot* as being a commentary on TV or celebrity or persona. Persona may be a part of it, but it's not in the forefront. It's not about fame, media attention or spectacle. It's really about helping people point their vision somewhere. I think that's what artists are supposed to do. They are supposed to say, "look, this is culturally significant, this is politically significant, this is aesthetically significant." And the role of the talk show host is moderator.



CHRISTINE HILL: PILOT (CLEVELAND)  
Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland  
8501 Carnegie Avenue: 216-421-8671  
Through May 4

Special Event:  
"IS IT ART? CHRISTINE HILL: PILOT AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE  
PERFORMATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY ART"  
by Tom Mulready  
Thursday, April 24, 7 pm  
MOCA (see above)



Levin, Kim. "Christine Hill."  
*The Village Voice*,  
November 5–11, 2003, p.  
55.

## Art

### CHRISTINE HILL

In her last exhibition, Hill produced and hosted a TV talk show. For her current venture—the latest incarnation of Volksboutique—the entrepreneurial artist performs office tasks, develops products, and mans the reception desk in a fragmentary old-fashioned "Home Office," replete with wainscoting, wallpaper, steamer trunks, ledger books, and other irresistible vintage details. Is it art as life or social sculpture as theater? She calls it "an exercise in labor." LEVIN

Through November 15, Ronald Feldman, 31 Mercer Street,  
212.226.3232



# The New York Times

October 31, 2003, P. E41

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## Christine Hill

### 'Home Office'

*Ronald Feldman Fine Arts*

*31 Mercer Street, SoHo*

*Through Nov. 15*

Christine Hill, performance artist and conceptualist, blurs the line separating art, life and business. In the gallery Ms. Hill has set up a "home office" for running a company called Volksboutique, which she founded in the 1990's in Germany, initially as used clothing store, or rather an artwork in the form of a used clothing store. In the past Ms. Hill has produced television talk shows and metropolitan tour services as art.

During gallery hours Ms. Hill works at her desk in a corner of the gallery equipped with old furniture, a red linoleum floor, wood wainscoting and green walls. Nearby five fake-antique steamer trunks stand open, displaying neatly organized clothes, tools and other accouterments associated with tasks Ms. Hill performs in her office, one for each day of the work week: reception, accounting, public relations, production and management.

Elsewhere she exhibits prototypes for entrepreneurial ventures, including the Volksboutique Accounting Archive, a woody place like a room in an old school or library, where people may record stories and experiences that will be kept on file. Ms. Hill is seeking a permanent New York home for the archive. This raises a question: Is she an earnest social activist or an Andrea Zittel-style satirist of modern industry, sales and bureaucracy? Or is the most serious purpose marketing one commodity, Ms. Hill herself?

KEN JOHNSON

## Christine Hill at Ronald Feldman

Just inside the entrance to *Home Office*, a recent performance/exhibition by Christine Hill, a time clock was affixed to the gallery wall. Used to stamp invitations to the show's opening reception, this device was also a fitting emblem for Hill's creative enterprise. Known for her deliberate confusions of art and commerce, Hill founded *Volksboutique* in Berlin in 1996. This is an ongoing one-woman cottage industry that presents productive labor as a form of art. *Home Office* offered a glimpse into the day-to-day operation of this business, as well as several prototypes for Hill's entrepreneurial ventures.

Tucked into a corner of the main gallery, Hill's temporary office was defined by a red linoleum floor, a large wooden desk and other props, including a few potted plants. Here the artist presided over the exhibition, assuming the tasks of reception, accounting, public relations, production and management, depending on the day of the week. For each of these roles Hill wore a different costume and utilized specific office supplies that were stored nearby in five custom-made steamer trunks. Though a cold kept Hill bundled in a nondescript sweater on the day I visited, the objects in the trunks provided detailed inventories of her various corporate identities. *Reception Portable Office* (all works 2003), for example, contained a floral print dress, a candy dish, nail polish and a desk placard that read "Ms. Hill." When performing managerial tasks, the artist preferred the name "Christine E. Hill," wore a matching corduroy skirt and vest

and carried a black briefcase.

The precise nature of Hill's daily exertions was clarified in a second gallery, where individual displays promoted her products and services. These included *The Volksboutique Reception Piece*, whereby Hill proposes to "enhance the environmental quality in neglected reception areas around the city through artistic intervention." Another venture, *The Volksboutique Professional Organizer*, offers to transform the clutter of one's work or living space into a highly organized, esthetically pleasing "Home Museum." Each of these services may be purchased or underwritten by interested parties.

Throughout the show, hand-painted posters encouraged productivity with phrases like, "Make the Most of What You've Got!" When coupled with Hill's deadpan performance of ordinary clerical tasks, these enthusiastic slogans could be read as ironic critiques of cubicle culture. But Hill, who chatted with curious visitors at her desk, claims a scrappy sincerity for her work, which mines her potential to make art (and money) through everyday labors.

—Matthew Guy Nichols



View of Christine Hill performing in *The Volksboutique Home Office* (Workspace Prototype), 2003; at Ronald Feldman.



Venice Biennale

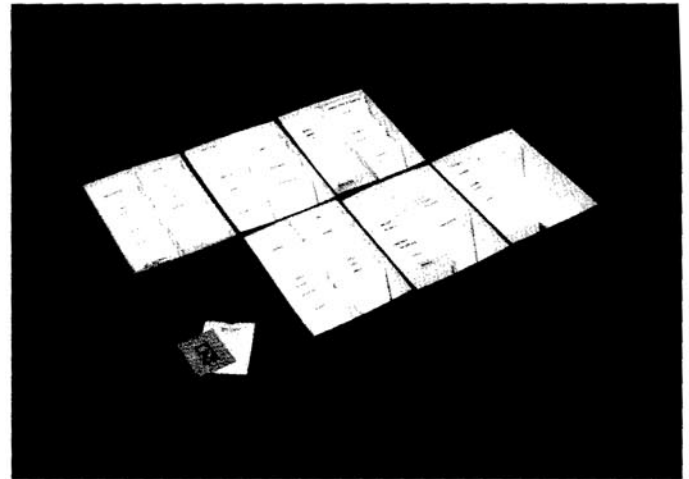
# Venice Biennale

Douglas Maxwell

Getting into the preview days of the Venice Biennale is kind of like getting past the bouncer at one of New York's most elite nightclubs. Unless you have been approved or sanctioned by the powers that be, you simply have to wait. Fortunately, the night before the first preview day, I had dinner with the commissioner and curator of the Georgia pavilion who happened to have a first day pass that trumped even my press credentials. So, with my traveling companions—some very astute and elite collectors with first minute credentials—we began the biennale adventure by embarking on the Arsenale, the vast former navy yard.

Let me digress to say a general word about the Venice Biennale. It is an international exhibition that includes pavilions from about 50 countries, both onsite and offsite of the Venice Biennale proper. So, during the first week of previews and including the opening, Venice becomes akin to an Epcot Center for the contemporary art world. Unlike other art fairs, however, such as Basel next week, the focus of this biennale is not exclusively on what the art costs or the insanity of the art market as of late.

In fact, sometimes the discussions are about the curatorial focus of the exhibition. The Arsenale and the Italian Pavilion comprise the curated show, "Think with the senses/fell with the mind (art in the present tense)," organized by the American curator Robert Storr, and the Arsenale has never looked better or



more professional. Storr has given each artist sufficient space to show off his or her work, yet, in some cases, this is not necessarily a strength. Often the works, mostly photo-based, could be interchangeable and are often indistinguishable from one another. The overall theme, not surprisingly, is about war, environmental degradation and death around the world. Here, artist after artist displays photos that are quasi-journalistic from an anti-war point of view. The implications of gloom, doom, death and destruction are rampant. One of my companions, a London dealer, was moved to comment, "If this kind of material is at the Venice Biennale (never known for controversial political material), then they probably just pile the bodies up at Documenta (know for it)." Certainly, the repetition of the material by artists coming from different countries points to the global concern about the state of the world, but on the other hand, history has always been consumed with a world at war, and its effects.

Still, certain works stand out from the crowd. Most notably *Bouncing Skull*, a video by the Italian artist Paolo Caneveri. Shot in Belgrade in 1999, it captures a boy presumably practicing soccer amongst the rubble in front of a bombed-out building. Closer examination reveals that the ball is a skull. The film is hypnotic and terrifying. What's with the boy? Have the horrors he has been subjected to made him completely disassociated, or is he just so hardened to the realities of his life that he is just making do? For those of us who haven't been in a war zone like that, the visual image seems surreal. The continuous loop reinforces the mundane way the boy seems to treat the skull as an ordinary everyday object to be used to improve his soccer skills.

Emily Prince's comprehensive piece, *American Servicemen and Women Who Have died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But not including the wounded, Nor the Iraqis Nor the Afghanis)*, is moving and beautiful—a rare combination for a piece so highly charged. Using the internet, she has logged pictures of every American soldier killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the picture, she made individual drawings and further cataloged them by ethnicity and skin tone using slightly differently colored paper (e.g., white for Caucasians, beige for Hispanics and darker brown for







African-Americans). She then uses the drawings to create a map of the United States with each drawing placed just so that it forms the state from which that the dead soldier came. One point she drives home in this work is that the horrors of war are experienced in a direct correlation to one's own proximity to them.

Just so I don't leave the impression that all was depressing gloom and doom in the Arsenale, I will mention three other notable works: Christine Hill's *Minutes*, an ongoing project in which she compulsively sorts and organizes the objects in her everyday

life; Italian Tatiana Trouve's *Technica Mista*, a strange combination of tech and non-tech-looking materials used to make sleek, abstract sculpture and Ghana's El Anatsui, an artist who has made the most magnificent and monumental tapestry out of the metallic material used on wine bottles.

Next, on to the Giardini. □

Opposite Page, Top to Bottom: Emily Prince. / Christine Hill, Accounting Portable Office (detail), 2003. / This Page: Paolo Canevari.



Meet one of my favourite Berliners! Christine Hill invited me last year to give a talk at the Bauhaus University in Weimar where she heads the Department Media, Trend and Public Appearance. That's how i got to know her, i then googled her name and immediately realized the extent of my ignorance when i discovered that she has been exhibiting all over the world with a very unconventional and intriguing project (or should i label it "production label"?) called Volksboutique.



Volksboutique projects kept on evolving, surprising and questioning the audience and the art world. She franchised the boutique for Documenta X in Kassel in 1997, then abandoned her role as a salesgirl and mutated into a late-night talk-show host, a tour guide, a masseuse, a handbags and retro-looking stamp kits designer, etc. Turning everyday job into an artistic activity that could either be presented inside galleries or taken on the road inside carefully crafted trunks.

**A book about your work "Inventory : The Work of Christine Hill and Volksboutique" has been published recently. How did it feel? Like a chapter of your professional life that had been turned?**

INVENTORY  
THE WORK OF  
CHRISTINE HILL  
AND  
*90th-boutique*

WATJE CANTZ

I also was glad to have the opportunity to formally define what makes up Volksboutique for me, as it has often been (mis)understood as solely a second-hand shop. The book was the opportunity to show breadth, and to also underscore the aesthetic and "philosophical" stance I take. I also write a fair amount, and the book was the perfect showcase for that activity.

And as I've gotten increasingly interested in libraries and other archiving systems, I am happy to be working on books that can show that interest.

### Why these deliberate confusions between art and commerce?



Well, I'm quite interested in properly defining which things are assigned value. And I'm very preoccupied with what counts as labor.

This began quite practically following my move to Berlin in 1991 — with my larger project of assimilating. It is noteworthy that I had no real permission to work here, and so I devised series of service pieces in the early 90s, where I, for example, worked as a masseuse, largely for tips. Also, that I was included in (and working for) numerous group shows all over Europe at this time, and realized that, rewarding as that is, it doesn't pay money.

This idea of merging income and art occupations culminated with opening the Volksboutique-as-shop in 1996. It was a way of claiming autonomy. It both freed me from being anyone's employee, and launched me straight into Proprietor-status, and it absolved me from having to rely on the art system to provide me with an audience. It allowed me to build a base of operations, and work from it, which is a device I've held onto over years.

**"I've always held the belief that art is labor that deserves proper compensation. It is often difficult to assert this, in all levels of the art system. I'm sure that all involved would agree that art has "value", but where the work lies, and who is paying for it becomes a very clouded issue. I have issues with the premise that art is its own reward."**

My work path over years has continued to punctuate my thoughts on this, in the form of anecdote or in specific exhibition or project experience. A museum I did a project with revoked a small production fee when they discovered that the piece I had made — a vending machine — was turning a small profit within the exhibition itself. Hundreds of visitors to my installation at documenta X (a franchise of the Volksboutique shop, installed in the exhibition) complained loudly that this "wasn't a commercial exhibition!", missing the irony that, for example, a Jeff Wall was hanging directly opposite my store. Numerous visitors (including a reporter from The Wall Street Journal) found my \$12 tour fee as part of my Tourguide? piece in New York city excessive, although that is exactly the sum charged by all tour guide agencies in the city. A museum director in Italy refused to refund my travel and production costs for the installation, barking at me that I was "lucky to be in Italy".



Volksboutique Franchise, 1997

On the one hand, we have art fairs and Sotheby's auctions reminding us all the time about the financial inequalities or excesses of the art system, but then, on the other, we have puritan calls for the work to be freed of economics so that it can exist in some reality-free bubble. And I disagree with both of these extremes.

Of course, I am isolating these experiences to underscore this particular point. It should not be misinterpreted that my entire work path has been a litany of complaint or abuse. To the contrary. Most artists I know find themselves being pushed forward by "mistakes" or such experiences, and I am no different. Hitting a point of adversity, whether within one's own process or from the outside, pushes things forward.

Basically, I identify with being a working artist - I work hard in order to live from this and live AS this. And it's important to me to feature that in projects. And it is important that that include financial aspects.

Of course, when I am involved in larger scale projects — which I call "Organizational Ventures" — that contain large amounts of administration, preparation, and on-site labor, I am often asking myself what I am trying to prove to myself by creating these insanely confounding schemes. It IS the addition of chaos, of overwhelming-ness, of over-stressing productivity that ends up defining many of these projects.



Pilot, 2000

### Do you perform or role-play with Volksboutique? How do you differentiate one from the other?

It is good that the the word "performative" has entered the general art vocabulary, because it rescues work like mine from being labeled as Performance Art. I am extremely averse to theater, because I don't want to see a simulation of life. I want life. I want things real and in real time. And there is always going to be that unfortunate leap the mind makes when hearing the phrase "performance art" that conjures the stage whisper, or someone setting themselves on fire. So I don't consider myself to be performing in the sense that we understand "acting" or staging. But I DO find that the entire thing is about performance, in terms of what in German is the word *Leistung*. And I do have a certain public persona that is in the work (and probably in my teaching as well). It is a part of my own personality, not something that is assumed, but it is also specific to certain projects that contain

an extroverted element. Initially, my labors in the Volksboutique were specifically about pointing directly to the fact that this was an occupation. Something all-consuming, that required a sweat to be broken. And about clarifying that my own person/a was the guide through this set of ideas. This is also a way of addressing accountability and responsibility. Projects of mine require participation of various levels by viewers. How much they can access has in part to do with how they approach me as the representative of any given work. I feel this is a fair exchange, similar to any in a shop transaction.



Tourguide?, 1999

### Which criteria guide the choice of the identities you adopt in the Volksboutique performances?

I spent one year at a university before switching to an art school, and while I was there, I remember being astonished at the number of extremely focussed majors some people had. I had no idea that these occupations existed. In high school, I was told by those in the position of advising me that I would be a good artist or a good lawyer. (I will assume because I was generally considered a "creative type" but I was also extremely loud and opinionated.) My step-mother thought I should become a dental hygienist. Upon graduating from art school, though my occupation as artist was never really something I questioned, I realized I missed many aspects from other occupations. I remain infinitely curious, for example, about office culture, although I've never worked in a true cubicle-zone ever. My initial incarnation as

shopkeeper at the Volksboutique was mostly informed by my taking German service culture to task, not to mention wanting to define publicly what I felt was the role of the artist in the society, and that this was a service providing role. Thereafter, I began investigating which jobs would best illustrate my preoccupations. I am particularly interested in librarians now, for example.

I suppose it is redundant to mention these works also point out my femaleness to an extent. Either I have chosen to take on some stereotyped female roles (shopgirl, librarian) or I am intentionally trying out things that fewer women end up in (late night talk show host).





Volksboutique, 1996-1997

"Dumping Kuhle" sold off stockpiled VEB products that were suddenly rendered valueless. That was the environment I lived in, and so it naturally entered my work.

However, this is not exclusively a GDR nor Ostalgic thing. My residence in Brooklyn had me obsessed with visual elements I found locally, for example, my studio there is housed in a former pencil factory. Many elements invoke a hand-made aesthetic, and I have a predilection for cast-off objects. I collect 50s office furniture, vernacular signage, manual typewriters, and have a mini-museum of vintage stationery products.



Volksboutique is to a large extent about examining concepts of "value"? in our culture and re-investing discarded appurtenances with meaning and use. I'm trying to point viewers' attention to specific objects and events in life that risk being overlooked as being too quotidian or too common.

**One of the mottos of Volksboutique is "Make the most of what you've got." Are there examples in your life when you had no choice but "make the most of what you had"?**

I think I could answer this many ways. In my family, there is a particular tic to be constantly striving for a point of "readiness" or "departure" that is pretty unattainable, and can be frustrating. What I mean here is, that "work" can only get done once every little other thing is done — dishes washed, clothes straightened, recycling out, checkbook balanced — rendering a clean slate so that this WORK can begin. But this is a state that will never really be attained! I realized pretty early that rather than waiting for this ultimate constellation or alignment of graces, or whatever, that I simply had to jump in and work with whatever was at hand. This could easily be seen in financial terms, that when XXX stage of financial security is arrived at, THEN XXX can be achieved. Rather than waiting for an impossible or utopian situation to suddenly arise, better to get to work and create a better situation. I mean, I moved to Berlin with no permission to be here, not speaking the language, and with really no obvious skill set that differentiated me from anyone else...and so working within these limitations became my project.



Volksboutique Accounting Archive, 2002

One of the more reproduced photographs from the Volksboutique store shows me holding up an actual debutante's ball gown in a wall-sized mirror. There was a fair bit of sniping regarding that image, that it was self-serving or narcissistic, etc. But what it was was my trying something out that interested me. Sizing it up, putting it on.

**The aesthetic of the Volksboutique object is very peculiar. What inspired it?**

The name Volksboutique stems from the VEB, or VolksEigenen Betrieb, which was the socialist term for collective ownership and industry in the GDR. I moved to Berlin Mitte in 1991, and it was a profoundly different aesthetic experience than today, not to mention from that which I was accustomed having grown up in the States. The remnants of the GDR were everywhere, literally cast out on the street in piles day by day. I wandered the streets daily hauling in everything I could physically transport home. A store called

With regard to being a practicing artist, especially since entering the teaching community, there is this misunderstanding to dispel that one entered an art career with other cards than anyone else. What I mean here is that I went through the same channels that anyone would: art school, move to urban environment, work, dialogue within the art system. People are not born with cards optioning them to art careers, (or any careers). There is no mystical thing that suddenly bestows an artist with a career. An artist works and finds him/herself in the midst of it.

I also understand art making to be less about the invention or construction of new things, but more about the close paying attention to and realignment of existing things.

**What is Christine Hill doing when she's not keeping the shop? I'm particularly curious about the work of your students.**

Well, I make a lot of lists. And I am a master procrastinator. It is sort of a job in itself. But yes, one of the larger re-structurings of my work life since 2004 is that I teach full time at the Bauhaus University. I chair the department "Media, Trend and Public Appearance" within the media faculty. This is something that sort of serendipitously presented itself to me, and turns out to have been fairly revolutionary for me. I am lucky that teaching is less a diversion from what I normally would be doing, rather it is a pretty natural extension of what I do. And though it has taken some getting used to in terms of the organization of my working time, I find myself impressed and inspired by my students to an amazing degree. The math for embarking on a career as an artist is not necessarily in one's favor, and the culture — even if we happen to be in some art market boom right now — doesn't necessarily jump over itself in appreciation for the artistic occupation. So these people are incredibly brave, and I appreciate them following their instincts, and their being uncompromising about what they demand from their lives. And it is there that I can offer the most guidance. I am not necessarily sitting with them teaching them software or how to patina something to a particular finish. More so, it's training them for the long fight. To instill in them a rigor, so that they can go out with that in their toolkit. I'm not trying to scare them, but I am trying to explain to them what will be required of them in terms of discipline and focus. Furthermore, I am myself a huge fan of good work, and when my students come up with good projects, I'm just completely invigorated by that.



**Can you tell us something about the work you're preparing for the upcoming Biennale of Art in Venice?**

Well, that aforementioned Second Book is the main contribution for Venice. It is entitled Minutes (as is the entire piece for Venice) — referring to detail, minutae; the passing and accruing of time; and of course, taking meeting minutes, the tallying of progress.

The book as an object is patterned after a calendar/datebook. In considering what one could/should put in an exhibition like Venice, there seemed to be pressure for Big Project, and I sort of dislike the notion of the masterpiece or opus. I like the continuum, that the machine is humming, that things are ebbing and flowing insofar as industry is concerned, and that many factors contribute to the so-called Process. This is most easily evidenced by a glimpse into my own datebook. So, the piece for Venice speaks to that...how my (or the mind) is organized, and what things are in there, and they can be very small things, and that it is something about growth

via accumulation. And organization. I like that haircut appointments reside in the same space as big deadlines, and so-called Events of Note.

"Minutes" features work since the Inventory book, and texts I've written on them. There is a marvelous essay at the beginning by the author and musician (and my friend) Rick Moody. The publication was designed by the Leipzig-based Markus Dreßen (as was Inventory) and he is simply a masterful talent. Our collaboration is one that I am incredibly proud of.

In addition to the publication, which is displayed in a sort of reading room environment, there is an installation of my Trunk Show in the Arsenale. These are a pretty spot-on manifestation of how my work and thought process organize themselves. The idea for this trunk system came



Minutes, installation view at the Venice Biennale, 2007

from a conversation with my sister a number of years ago. She had





visited a 60s submarine-turned-museum in Hawaii, and was extolling the wonders of how the interior worked...the attention to detail, how every little thing had its place in order to economize space, etc. She exclaimed "It was SO Volksboutique!". I realized that at that time, it wasn't particularly that any Volksboutique pieces were like this, but that my sister has such a good understanding of how my mind works, that she knew I would identify with this sort of organizational system. And so, the trunks were about making a physical representation of that. They isolate a five day work week into 5 governing tasks (Accounting, Management, PR, Production and Reception) and there are the complete accouterments for each of these occupations in each trunk. They are about economizing space and also rendering these tasks mobile.

My Brooklyn studio is right alongside the workspace of Booklyn — a bookmaking artist alliance that I've worked closely with since having been in New York. Particularly my friendship and collaboration with Mark Wagner — who manufactured these trunks as over-dimensional, exploded "books" — is important to me, and the show pays homage to that.

**Name us 3 to 5 artists whom you think should get more attention from the public.**

Well, I will preface this by saying that these are artists I admire and am inspired by, and am lucky enough to be

friends with. But I am not inferring that they are necessarily under-respected or underexposed in any way. But it is certainly excellent if even more people learn about them, because they all do amazing work. I notice that they are all mostly based in New York, which certainly means I need to get out in Berlin more!

Allison Smith (The Muster and Notion Nanny.)  
 Nina Katchadourian  
 J. Morgan Puett  
 Pablo Helguera  
 Michael Rakowitz.

**Thanks Christine!**

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Number of Characters: 17,090 (approx.)





Original Photo by Hermann Feldhaus, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

I'm trying to add a new tradition to my life, so I am assisting at [The Armory Show](#) every year. (So far, I have just attended two, but traditions have to start somewhere right?) This year it happened about two weeks ago, from March 5 to 8. Compared to last year's show, this year seemed slower. Less people showed up despite the fact the exhibition itself had expanded from last year. The exhibits were expanded to Pier 94, dividing the show into The Armory Show 2009 (Pier 92) displaying contemporary work, and the Armory Modern (Pier 94) with the work of more established—and sometimes deceased—artists.

About the show itself, [Gothamist's](#) John Del Signore couldn't have said it better. "Overall, the show (was) as deliriously overwhelming as ever, with the usual small percentage of memorable work scattered throughout the vast shopping mall of unremarkable crap." I agree with him, but I still love the formidable task of trying to digest the enormous amount of visual information, determine your favorites, while holding a glass of wine and trying to not lose your friends. One of my favorite booths (and perhaps everyone else's as well) was also one of the busiest. It was the "[The Volksbotique Armory Apothecary](#)," where you "consulted" the artist, Christine Hill, about your troubles, and she prescribed you with herbs and natural remedies to heal your soul.

Another good piece, in my opinion, was Anya Zholud's installation "Gynecological Office." It depicted the office as an installation room that looked like you walked into a line drawing.

The huge watercolor of Bernard L. Madoff by Yan Pei-Ming was really striking, but even more impressive, was the fact that it was been offered at \$100,000. I learned from a [New York Times article](#) it didn't sell during the show. On the other hand, the neon sign of the French artist, Claire Fontaine reading "Capitalism Kills" sold for \$20,000. Yes, people are hurting.

Egan, Maura. "Now Dealing: The Armory Show."  
The Moment: NYTimes Blog, March 5, 2009,  
[http://themoment.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/  
now-dealing-the-armory-  
show/?scp=2&sq=Christine%20Hill&st=cse](http://themoment.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/now-dealing-the-armory-show/?scp=2&sq=Christine%20Hill&st=cse)

# The Moment

March 5, 2009, 4:46 pm

## Now Dealing | The Armory Show

By [Maura Egan](#)



Photo by Hermann Feldhaus, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts  
"The Volksboutique Armory Apothecary," 2009, at this year's Armory Show.

The artist Christine Hill's makeshift apothecary, "The Volksboutique Armory Apothecary," at the Ronald Feldman Gallery booth perhaps best embodies the mood at this year's [Armory Show](#), the international art fair. Everyone in the art world is in need of a remedy for the current economic malaise. Hill was selling prescriptions for whatever ails you, for \$20 each — a tad more reasonable than recent offerings from, say, [Damien Hirst](#) — and there was a line of waiting "patients." In fact, you could find lots of quick fixes and one liners all over Piers 92 and 94, where the fair is being held through Sunday, March 8.





Photo courtesy of Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin "Les Bains" 2008: the show's best conceptual gimmick.

The artists Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragse etched the words, "Everyone Is Broke" on a slab of cracked marble at Milan's Galleria Massimo de Carlo, while the Regina Gallery from Moscow, home to many dwindling billionaires these days, hung up a neon sign that announced simply, "Capitalism Kills." But the best conceptual gimmick came from the French art duo Kolkosz, who showed gold frames within frames, creating a series of Escher-like optical illusions. Were they too poor to afford canvas? Hardly. "We wanted to make paintings but we stopped at the frames because we got lazy," explained Benjamin Moreau, one half of the quirky French team.



Photo courtesy of the Modern Institute "The Jesus and the Mary Chain": the show's most bedazzling moment.

The halls were filled with lots of sparkly pieces too, which offered a bit of Dorothy-in-her-ruby-slippers optimism. There were exuberant, rhinestone-studded works by Mikalene Thomas at Rhona Hoffman Gallery from Chicago, as well as shimmering tapestries from [El Anatsui](#) at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, and John Armleder's beautifully rendered glitter paintings, spotted at several booths. But the most bedazzling moment came courtesy of Glasgow's Modern Institute. Combining chair backs, old handbags and pieces of mirror, the artist Jim Lambie's debauched disco-style installation "The Jesus and the Mary Chain" suggests that the art party is not entirely over.

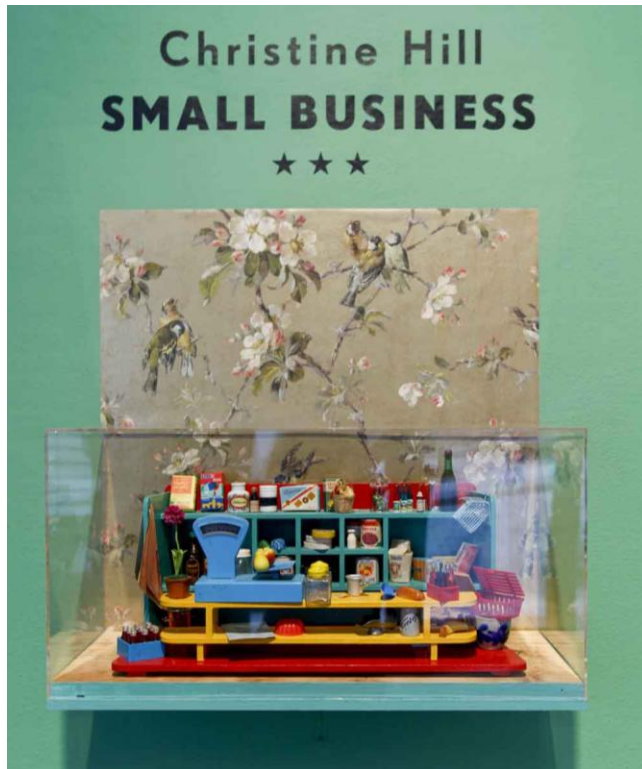


Art in Review

## Christine Hill: 'Small Business'

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Published: November 22, 2012



Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Varvara Mikushkina, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

"Kaufladen Toy Model," by Christine Hill, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.  
ArtsBeat

31 Mercer Street, SoHo

Through Dec. 22

The Berlin-based artist Christine Hill envisions mom-and-pop stores as modest theaters, opportunities for visual delectation and human interaction. Her point of view, as expressed in her latest solo show, is refreshingly apolitical. And it's made poignant by the small-business crisis in Chelsea, where many galleries are still sorting out damage from Hurricane Sandy.

The exhibition centers on a life-size Kaufladen, or German model store, in which gallery visitors may browse amid shelves of clear jars filled with stickers, plastic toys and other small items. They

can also don aprons and poke around behind the counter, in a grown-up version of the role-playing traditionally performed by children with their toy-size Kaufladens. (One is on display in the front gallery.)

Nearby are encouraging posters bearing inspirational quotes from famous artists and writers in the sort of typography used to advertise supermarket specials. From John Cage: "Art is a sort of experimental station in which one tries out living." And from William Morris: "The true secret of happiness lies in taking genuine interest in all the details of daily life."

Tidy and cheerful, Ms. Hill's project offers a new slant on Warhol's notion that "good business is the best art"; it correlates creative success not with profits or productivity in itself, but rather with the well-kept shop.

A version of this review appeared in print on November 23, 2012, on page C32 of the New York edition with the headline: Christine Hill: 'Small Business'.

## Christine Hill's Small Business

by Donna Stonecipher on October 6, 2013



*Christine Hill in the Volksboutique Small Business (Photo © Felix Oberhage)*

The protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 novel *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hepzibah Pyncheon, is an elderly aristocrat recluse who has come down in the world, so far down that, to survive, she is forced to open a sundries shop in her own home, the house of the title. With that act, she loses the protective mantle of noble idleness:

Let us behold, in poor Hepzibah, the immemorial lady ... born in the Pyncheon House, where she has spent all her days, reduced now, in that very house, to be the huckstress of a cent shop.

This is the occasion of much terror and shame. Upon opening the door of her shop to the public for the first time, Hepzibah breaks down:

Then — as if the only barrier betwixt herself and the world had been throwndown, and a flood of evil consequences would come tumbling through the gap — she fled into the inner parlor, threw herself in the ancestral elbowchair, and wept.





*A vintage paperback cover of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The House of the Seven Gables"*

But once the horror of the first days is over, with its nosy stares, difficult neighbors, and opportunistic urchins, once the shop is up and running, selling gingerbread cookies, needles, soap, marbles, and Indian meal, Hepzibah undergoes a transformation: her shuddering embrace of lowly commerce actually opens her up to the world, to new energies, and, eventually, to a whole new lease on life.

In charting this transformation, Hawthorne does nothing to conceal his New England Protestant work-ethic agenda:

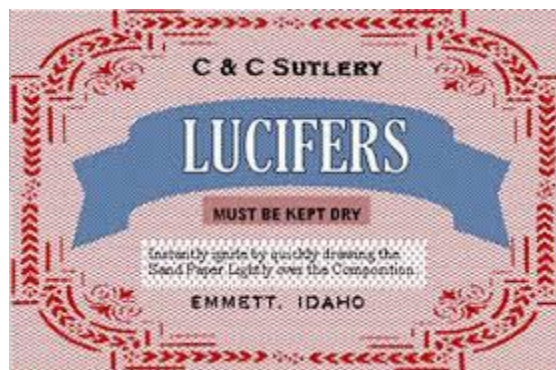
So wholesome is effort! So miraculous the strength that we do not know of! The healthiest glow that Hepzibah had known for years had come now in the dreaded crisis, when, for the first time, she had put forth her hand to help herself.

But more than just Hepzibah's life has been turned upside down. In the figure of Hepzibah Pyncheon, a massive societal, and particularly American, shift is signaled, one in which not only the very notion of aristocracy — of a natural hierarchy among humans — is exposed as a hideous relic on its way to the dust-heap of history, but also the idea that commerce bears any kind of taint will be resoundingly swept aside.



*Details from the Volksboutique Small Business (photo © Ethan Hayes-Chute)*

I had just finished reading *The House of the Seven Gables* when I encountered Berlin-based American artist Christine Hill's artist-shop "Small Business," the current iteration of her ongoing project [Volksboutique](#), which has taken the form of a number of shops, "organizational ventures," and interventions with commerce since 1993. In Volksboutique, as its name suggests, Hill marries a can-do American optimism in the tradition of the New England Transcendentalists to the aesthetics of East German labor politics. In fact, one can easily imagine Hawthorne's "So wholesome is effort! So miraculous the strength that we do not know of!" splashed across one of the "motivational" posters Hill often hangs in her installations, with sayings like "Make the most of what you've got!" hand printed in cheerful blue and red ink.



*Something that might have been sold in Item in Pyncheon's store.*



With *Small Business*, Hill has, like Hepzibah Pyncheon, opened up a shop in her private realm — her studio. I was intrigued by the parallels and discontinuities between Hepzibah Pyncheon's shop and Christine Hill's shop, by the mirror images of a woman disdaining commerce within a system that embraces it and a woman embracing commerce within the ruins of a system that disdained it. But unlike Hepzibah, Hill assumed the mantle of “huckstress” with alacrity, and, instead of Indian meal and marbles, offers a canny set of assumptions — about structures of consumerism, value, commercial interaction, women as independent proprietors of their own financial fates — to be fingered by the mind like bolts of Egyptian cotton in department stores of yore.



*Sampler Assembly (photo © Ethan Hayes-Chute)*

Just as the mode of Hepzibah Pyncheon's in-home cent shop has fallen away with time, so have many other models of commerce along the way. A history of shopping in the West would parallel a history of ever-increasing anonymity. (According to the OED, “shop” as a verb entered the English language in 1764, in this sentence: “Ladies are said to go Shopping, when, in the Forenoon, they order the Coach, and go from Shop to Shop.”) Let's follow an imaginary woman through the centuries as she buys a pair of gloves: from the familiarity of dealing with tradesmen (who came near or even into her home); to the “general store” model, in which she would interact with a shopkeeper (whom she probably knew personally) behind a counter who would fetch the gloves for her; to examining the gloves herself in a department store, where her interaction has shrunk to handing over her money; to self-check-out, in which she can leave the store with the gloves without ever having interacted with another human being at all. (Dare I even mention internet “shopping,” where she doesn't even have

to set foot in a shop or lay eyes on another human being to acquire the gloves?) This evolution has much to do with speed and ease, of course, but it also reveals a deep lingering uneasiness with commerce for buyer and seller alike.



*Small business item (photo © Julia Zimmermann)*

Hill rewinds this newsreel of modes to the Hepzibah-Pyncheon-style shopping experience, in which interaction with the sales clerk is part and parcel of the purchase. When one enters Small Business, Hill is standing behind a magnificent oak vitrine in which the most ordinary of everyday objects — a white plastic Presto letter opener, a metal tea ball in the shape of a house, a notepad from a long-gone stationery store crowned with a jaunty obsolete letterhead, GDR paper bags with beautifully faded prints of fruit on them — are displayed, and take on the status and presence of valuable art *objets*. But one can't just select the Presto letter opener and walk furtively out of Small Business with it; for sale is something much more intangible, historicized, and ritualistic. A conversation between Hill and the customer occurs, during which a selection of objects is made that will all go into a Whitman's sampler-like cardboard box, sealed with Hill's trademark green Volksboutique sticker (all for a flat price — far less than purchasing one of Hill's works from her gallery, which is part of the point). The interaction, as it were, also goes into the box. Anonymity is not on offer, because Hill is aiming at the awkward sweet spot of commerce, in which the consumer is confronted with her relationship to her own desires and assignments of worth. Like a highly condensed course in object therapy, Hill asks the customer to consider her role in the object world — as desirer, acquirer, selector, rejecter.

Hepzibah's shame around offering objects, and in some very real sense herself, for sale, might look quaint to 2013 eyes. This vestigial anxiety, almost expunged, around unbridled capitalism is thrown into relief by Hill's placement of her shop in former East Berlin. Berlin's legacy as the divided heart of the Cold War's opposing economic ideologies reflects Hill's structural ambivalence: the no-holds-barred consumerism of free-market capitalism sits, not devoid of friction, next to the constraints of Konsum. In Small Business, by elevating the status of the Presto letter opener to art object, she



references the scarcity of goods in the former German Democratic Republic: a Presto letter opener is “only” a Presto letter opener, after all, until you want one and can’t get it—then it takes its place in the vitrine of dreams. *Small Business* exposes the fissure between the object and the object’s value, which fluctuates drastically depending on a complex of social, political, and economic factors. It also asks why exactly an American who grew up among absurd plenty is fetishistically attracted to East German scarcity. Hill wants us to linger over just such questions.



*Christine Hill, “Small Business Model” shown at Galerie EIGEN+ART Leipzig, 2011 (photo © Uwe Walter Berlin)*

At first, Hepzibah is clumsy with her own wares (which show up magically in the shop; their provenance is never mentioned), drops the marbles, is unsure what to stock in her own store, her failure to know her neighbors (who are “commoners”) translating to a blindness to their needs. Her eventual mastery of selling the items signals her growing mastery of her own fate. Hill’s wares, on the other hand, just as lovingly lingered over, are marked by the collector’s passion: one senses that she would be sorry to see each of the objects she has meticulously gathered go. (Which adds to the sampler box the frisson of absconding with the object of someone else’s desire.) For if the artist presents herself here as collector, then she is allowing the consumer, as collector, to collect a part of her collection. As Hepzibah identifies her wares with herself, so too does a little piece of Hill reside in each object, though the relation is directly inverse: when Hepzibah sells, she decreases her social value; when Hill, an artist, sells, she increases hers. Of course, Hill’s shop is the fantasy of a shop and her objects refer to the fantasy of use; but it’s the enthusiastic adoption of the fantasy of a reality

that tortured Hepzibah Pyncheon a century earlier that interests me here. (Small Business reminds me very much of girlhood games, in which my friends and I were mistresses of our own enterprises. This notion of fantasy gets especially interesting in another of Hill's projects, Shop/Like, in which a toy shop (*Kaufladen*) is built life-size and gallery visitors are invited to play at shopkeeper themselves.) Hawthorne lingers long over both the aristocratic accoutrements in Hepzibah's home — see the “ancestral elbowchair” quoted above — and the items she stocks in her shop:

A curious eye, privileged to take an account of stock and investigate behind the counter, would have discovered a barrel, yea, two or three barrels and half ditto, — one containing flour, another apples, and a third, perhaps, Indian meal. There was likewise a square box of pine-wood, full of soap in bars; also, another of the same size, in which were tallow candles, ten to the pound. A small stock of brown sugar, some white beans and split peas ... there was a glass pickle-jar, filled with fragments of Gibraltar rock; not, indeed, splinters of the veritable stone foundation of the famous fortress, but bits of delectable candy, neatly done up in white paper ... Another phenomenon, still more strikingly modern, was a package of lucifer matches, which, in old times, would have been thought actually to borrow their instantaneous flame from the nether fires of Tophet.

This near-obsessive description of the items (which goes on much longer than I have space to quote) turns out to be a symptom of the larger material agenda of the novel: it is the changing material circumstances occasioned by the Industrial Revolution that form the underlying dynamic of Hepzibah Pyncheon's story.

In fact, Hawthorne understood modernity through its objects. Hepzibah's lodger is a daguerreotypist; the epitome of the healthy, self-made young man, he is transcending his own unfavorable socioeconomic status thanks to this invention. And the novel climaxes in an exhilarating ride on a train — a technology that Hepzibah and her brother experience for the first time. Modernity's products, Hawthorne argues, help break the spell of a humanity benighted by old orders and values. Hill, a century and a half on, looks back at the flood of objects the Industrial Revolution unleashed upon us and adjusts the lens through which we view the overabundance. Her objects, most made by industrial processes, have lost value in repetition, have become serial objects, copies, as Jean Baudrillard writes in *The System of Objects*. In isolating one Presto letter opener out of the millions churned out by unseen factories and decontextualizing it, presenting it like a precious artifact, Hill elevates the devalued serial object to the status of a valuable model, thus reversing the process Baudrillard traced and questioning a paradigm in place since at least the Industrial Revolution, dragging along with it systems of class, prestige, and worth. Any old schmoe can own a Presto letter opener, because, thanks to technology, millions of them are available, which has driven the price



down. But only someone educated in art (and thus, privileged) can understand — and own — the Presto letter opener as an art object.



*Customers in the Volksboutique Small Business (photo © Uwe Walter Berlin)*

The “impersonality” of the industrially made objects is transformed through the personal interaction with Hill and her personal interest in them: suddenly the house-shaped tea ball is interesting in and of itself, not just for its use. Its original, anonymous creator is also paid oblique homage, for Hill respects nothing if not labor, her own and others’. The tea ball from Hill’s oak vitrine is also, of course, invested with something like Benjamin’s aura, and the “collector” is thus entangled in a complex web of values. He will take home a collection of items he probably wouldn’t have looked at twice were they offered in a “real” stationery or sundries store, so he has also (wittingly or unwittingly) played a role in a critique of the art market’s fetishistic hypertrophying of the artist’s aura. In the shrewdly named Small Business, the “lowly” Presto letter opener, the “lowly” shopkeeper turn into “high” art, and the values assigned to commercialism/consumerism are up for reassessment. Artists like Joseph Beuys or even Marcel Duchamp called attention to this phenomenon long ago, of course, but Hill’s unique stamp is to make her ambivalence so alluring, her enthusiasm so seductively fraught with nagging questions.

At the end of Hawthorne’s book, the curse over the house of the seven gables has been broken, and the useless aristocrat has become a useful member of society. And Hepzibah Pyncheon’s embrace of commerce has paved a little bit of the way to Christine Hill’s brilliant critique of it.