

The third edition of *Letters to Jill* from 1979 is published on the occasion of this exhibition, a book in which Hill explains to her New York gallery Jill Kornblee how her work can be read. *Letters to Jill* is as instructive as it is filled with a humour that should not be underestimated.

The exhibition is co-curated by Kunsthalle Zürich Director Daniel Baumann and Maurin Dietrich, Director of the Kunstverein Munich; it takes on and expands the artist's first posthumous solo exhibition, which was shown from 7 March–16 August in Munich. Kunsthalle Zürich is very grateful to Richard Torchia, Director of Arcadia Exhibitions and The Pati Hill Collection at Arcadia University, Glenside (Pennsylvania) for the work loans and generous support.

In 2021 Pati Hill would have been 100 years old. Information about events around this jubilee, tours and other events will be announced on our website, [www.kunsthallezurich.ch](http://www.kunsthallezurich.ch).

#### Opening Hours

Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed

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# Pati Hill

## Something other than either

### 11.12.2020–02.05.2021

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Once in a while bodies of work emerge out of nowhere, artistic works that astound us thanks to their idiosyncrasy and brilliance. They seem brand new and everyone asks themselves why they had been unknown. This is the case for the oeuvre of Pati Hill (1921–2014). Kunsthalle Zürich follows in the footsteps of the Kunstverein Munich, showing the most comprehensive exhibition of the artist's works to date – an artist who was equally an author, columnist, model, antiques dealer and gallerist. Pati Hill's oeuvre includes four novels, short stories and artist's publications as well as a collection of instruction manuals and the invention of a new Symbol Language (1977–78), as well as thousands of photocopies from 1974 onwards. The latter make up her central practice and are divided into different work groups such as the *Common Objects* (c. 1977–79) and *Photocopying Versailles* (c. 1980–2005). *Photocopying Versailles*, for example, arose from the idea that Hill would photocopy the entire Chateau of Versailles 1:1, an undertaking that was as pragmatic as it was unrealistic.

As Maurin Dietrich, Director of the Kunstverein Munich, writes in her detailed article, Pati Hill's oeuvre is not easy to classify. This may be a reason why Hill's work is only now being seen by a broader public, for she stood apart from the canon and the avant-garde as well as being distinct from emancipatory movements like feminism. Hill's artistic approach can neither be classified in conceptual art nor in Pop art or photography. She used her photocopier to capture the world, to fetishize it and to delegate the creation of art to a machine. Marshall McLuhan's foresighted dictum "the medium is the message" from 1964 is applied literally in this work. Machines know no morality but can generate unexpected poetry, as is the case here, where mundane objects are used like words and write stories. How significant this now appears in the contemporary context of memes and social media!

A few points to note regarding this exhibition: Pati Hill's estate is held by Arcadia University in Glenside (Pennsylvania). The works exhibited here are all taken from this estate, which encompasses thousands of individual pages. Some copies are signed, others were framed additionally for the Munich and Zürich exhibitions. Countless subjects have been copied several times, sometimes well over a hundred times. The status of these many variations has not been conclusively explained. Hill's work is thus at odds with the traditional terminology with which art is classified and the idea of a single, complete work. Even though these are all copies, some are still "originals" (which seems paradoxical), while others are possible or future originals, and others are copies. But fundamentally, it doesn't matter.

The Kunsthalle Zürich exhibition begins on the left-hand side with a chronology of Hill's life as published in the 2017 catalogue "Pati Hill Photocopier: A Survey of Prints and Books (1974–83)". It shows the many roles Hill adopted during her lifetime and how she determined and changed her career. Following this is the large block of the *Common Objects* (approx. 1977–79), a series which exists in different editions, this one consisting of 27 (or actually 30) copies. In relation to this Hill said "The main difference between this new series of objects and my previous exhibition of objects, besides their rather grandiose plan of interaction, was their absence of 'personality.' In other words, it was a kind of de-Freudianized series of symbols that suggested language." (Pati Hill, 1979). Next to this is a small selection from *Informational Art* (approx. 1962–79), a collection of pictorial user manuals that began when her daughter was born in 1962. On the narrow tables that follow are thematically grouped colour photocopies bound into books. Various work series from the mid '70s onwards are installed on the remaining grey walls. These excerpts allow us insight into Hill's subjects and how she worked. On the tables in the centre of the space publications, invitations, unpublished manuscripts and other work series can be seen.

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“The difference between you and shaky me is that until recently in my career I have been a master of the short order disguise but now I don’t have time for that. And as I do not believe too much in the future of art and literature (or books as art, either), I just want to cut a few little paths here and there and see if there is anything interesting in the grass. And I can best do this in Bangladesh and send handbills to Geneva. It is clear that in our day no one wants to be mistaken for a publishable writer! That we all want to come from somewhere else—even feel obliged to. Maybe this obligation is something for us to look into.” (Pati Hill, 1981)

Maurin Dietrich, Director of Kunstverein München, on Pati Hill:

Pati Hill (b. 1921 in Ashland, Kentucky, USA; d. 2014 in Sens, France) left behind an artistic output spanning roughly 60 years and encompassing various disciplines. Untrained as an artist, she began to use the photocopier as an artistic tool in the early 1970s and continued to do so until her death, leaving behind an extensive oeuvre that explores the relationship between image and text. In addition to this comprehensive body of xerographic work, she published four novels, a memoir, several short stories, artist’s books, and poetry. Drawing also became an essential part of her practice. The multidimensionality of Hill’s motifs and the stark lighting that seems to emanate from the photocopier’s depths distinguish her work from iconographic examples of Pop Art and offer another historical reading of that era. In addition to the primary works that Hill conceived for exhibitions during her lifetime, the presentation at Kunstverein München and Kunsthalle Zürich also encompasses a large portion of works that have never been shown before.

By using the copier—a machine that was stereotypically linked to secretarial work and thus to feminized labor—to trace everyday objects such as a comb, a carefully folded pair of men’s trousers, or a child’s toy, Hill developed an artistic practice that programmatically translated invisible domestic labor into a visual and public language. Through her use of this reproductive apparatus, she created a model of artistic production that critically opposes the convention of individual expression as well as the supposed neutrality of technologically produced images.

For example, the series *Informational Art* that Hill began in 1962 took printed diagrams and instructions from product packaging as their subject matter. Whether it was through detailed illustrations that showed housewives how to carve meat or instructions about how to make a doll dance, Hill was interested in arranging quasi-narrative sequences and the subsequent juxtapositions and coincidences of text and image that emerged. In 1975, Hill published the book *Slave Days* with financial support from the poet James Merrill. The book is comprised of 29 poems thematizing the partly fictionalized everyday lives of housewives, which were then juxtaposed with 31 xerographs. *Slave Days* was Hill’s first work to combine her xerographs with her own texts, which also described the production site of the works with a sinister humor. In one poem she notes that “Heaven’s door is open to us like a big vacuum cleaner,” thus resignedly outlining the limits of her own spaces of agency. Here, Hill doesn’t use the xerographs as material for a collage or the starting point for further production, but rather presents them alongside her texts as independent works. She thus had a sense of production and reception being equally important parts of her practice. Even though she mostly worked outside of an institutional context and exhibited irregularly, she also wrote about the process of publishing: “I have always thought publishing should be like taking your clothes to the laundromat.”

In her 1981 book *Women, Race and Class*, American author and civil rights activist Angela Davis explains how women’s labor has been devalued under advanced capitalism. The separation of domestic labor from immediate profit means that women “can seldom produce tangible evidence of their work.” Hill’s works can certainly be seen in this context. In the series *Garments*, for example, she documents various pieces of clothing, like corsets or riding pants, whose reproduced

images are characterized by high contrast lighting as well as specific interventions with the copying machine, such as adding excess toner. It almost seems as though the glass platen of the copier is actually helping to fold the clothes, thus testifying to this otherwise invisible form of domestic labor. Hill deployed the copier’s ability to flatten objects to surprisingly dramatic effect, and thus also made the process of image making the subject of her work. Hill doesn’t try to visualize the invisible as in some of her other works. Instead, she reveals the uncanny aspects of the familiar and questions its everydayness.

Already in the 60s, Hill had conceived of the private sphere as a site of political resistance. Several years before she began working with the copier, she wrote a short novel titled *An Angry French Housewife* that described a series of transgressions against heteronormative relationship models and was later published together with a number of xerographs under the title *Impossible Dreams*. At the same time, she worked on the series *Dreams Objects Moments*. Increasingly frustrated by the lack of access to her copier of choice, the IBM Copier II, she began creating short texts for “[...] an exhibition that conveyed my feelings about copier work without requiring the use of a copier.” By using colored paper—green for *Dreams*, pink for *Objects*, and yellow for *Moments*—Hill created elements of what she described as filters of how we receive and classify information by occasionally confusing the respective categories.

In 1977, Pati Hill met the designer and architect Charles Eames on a transatlantic flight. Through his consulting work for the IT company International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), he finally helped Hill access her long coveted machine of choice. By 1979 she had used it to create two significant series of works, which differ formally but similarly pursue the destabilization of narration. Hill developed drafts for a universal sign language under the title *Proposal for a Universal Language of Symbols*. Shortly thereafter she wrote Eames to share her wish for the symbols to be “returned to their original position amongst us...where things were what they seemed.” The second series was *Alphabet of Common Objects*, one of Hill’s most important works. Arranged in a grid, the 45 images that comprise this work convey the potential that she attributed to visual communication. Moreover, her classification of the objects as alphabetic implies a “linguistic” quality in these images.

The series *Men and Women in Sleeping Cars*, made in the late 70s, is one of the very few examples that features people in her oeuvre, here sourced from advertising campaigns for the railway industry. Hill never made her own body the subject of her works. She thus stood apart, both formally and thematically, from the dominant tendencies in feminist art production of the 70s and 80s, where the female body was often taken as the starting point in order to extract it from a system of fetishizing and objectifying representations. Through her successful work as a couture model at a young age, Hill was confronted very early on with the dominance of the male gaze, which she negotiated accordingly in her work, only to go beyond this in her later artistic production. In “Letters to Jill. A Catalogue and Some Notes on Copying” from 1979, she writes: “Many copy artists are women and only copy themselves. I don’t copy myself, but images were made of me for years, and this gave me a sense of reality. The reality of an object perhaps.”

Ironically, the copier was invented by a patent attorney and finally led to a fundamental questioning of the concepts of ownership and authorship as well as the eventual strengthening of copyright law. The discourse around questions of appropriation, original and copy, seriality and authenticity were not only at the heart of Copy Art from the 1970s onwards, but are also inherent to contemporary art. This is, in part, what makes the first comprehensive presentation of Hill’s work so relevant today. Though it takes the artist’s visual work as the primary starting point, the exhibition also considers her writing, publishing, and editing as practices that both question and accompany the visual work. As a fragmentary, necessarily uncomplete index of her engagement with image and text (re-)production, the show includes published novels, poems, sketchbooks, unpublished manuscripts, and letters in addition to the xerographs.