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Pati Hill: Something other than either 11 December 2020–2 May 2021

Opening weekend:

11 December 2–6pm

12 December 11am–6pm

13 December 11am–6pm

Press conference 11 December 2020, 11am

Kunsthalle Zürich Director Daniel Baumann and Kunstverein Munich Director Maurin Dietrich will be present.

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 Alphabet of Common Objects (c. 1977–79) and Photocopying Versailles (c. 1980–83). Photocopying Versailles, for example, arose from the idea that Hill would photocopy the entire Chateau of Versailles 1:1, an undertaking that was as feasible as it was unrealistic.

As Maurin Dietrich, Director of the Kunstverein Munich, writes in a 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!

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 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. The exhibition will now be on display on the 3rd floor of Kunsthalle Zürich and runs until 2 May 2021.

The Pati Hill press release, including Maurin Dietrich's text, can be downloaded [here](#). 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.

Should you require further information, press images or wish to organise an interview, please do not hesitate to contact Aoife Rosenmeyer: +41 (0)44 272 1515 or presse@kunsthallezurich.ch.

Opening hours: Tuesday–Sunday 11am–6pm, Thursdays 11am–8pm, Mondays closed

**Kunsthalle
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**Limmatstrasse 270
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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 highcontrast 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 imagemaking 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.

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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 longcoveted 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.