

## How Pati Hill Photocopied the Impossible

In an exhibition at Kunstverein München, Hill's work from the 1960s appears prescient in its exploration of female office labour



The ubiquitous keyboard shortcut 'command-C' is used to copy text to a computer's clipboard until it's 'pasted'. For the US artist and author Pati Hill, copying was more than just a useful tool – it was a basis for her artistic practice. Combining roughly 100 exhibits from both her writing and artwork, 'Something other than either' at Kunstverein München is Hill's first European solo exhibition since her death in 2014 at the age of 93.

When the first photocopiers were first introduced to offices in North America in the late 1940s, only trained 'key operators' had permission to use them. With tasks such as fanning paper and removing paper jams being seen as more menial, these roles were usually assigned to women. In her writing, Hill often decried the low value bestowed on women's labour and, having temporarily abandoned her own writing career after the birth of her first child in 1962 – by which point she had already published three novels and a memoir – it was something she had directly experienced.

Pati Hill, 'Informational Art',  
1962–79, installation view,  
Kunstverein München. Courtesy:  
Kunstverein München e.V., Pati Hill  
Collection, Arcadia University;  
photograph: Sebastian Kissel



Hill's response came in the form of her series 'Informational Art' (1962–69), which is on view in the Kunstverein's first gallery. For these first experiments with the photocopier, Hill reproduced images – including instructions for folding an ironing table and a guide to preparing cuts of lamb – from various manuals. Largely targeted at housewives, these instructions reminded me of Lucia Berlin's short story *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (1977), which came after Hill's series: its first edition was not only illustrated with similar reproductions, but also describes the life of a housekeeper. Although both Hill and Berlin used manuals to highlight the domestic labour of women; but whereas the latter never released another such publication, 'Informational Art' was only the beginning of Hill's persistent exploration of the combination of images and text. In *Slave Days* (1975), for instance, Hill paired photocopies of household objects with her poems. Her writings, displayed in glass vitrines throughout the space, reveal Hill's belief that the photocopier could serve to unite writers and artists.



Pati Hill, *Alphabet of Common Objects*, 1977-79, installation view, Kunstverein München. Courtesy: Kunstverein München e.V., Pati Hill Collection, Arcadia University; photograph: Sebastian Kissel



It's hard to single out a highlight in this excellent small retrospective, but the work that best demonstrates the linguistic potential of Hill's art is, arguably, *Alphabet of Common Objects* (1977–79). Placed in one corner of the exhibition space, the piece comprises 27 photocopies of ordinary objects composed in a grid. Originally designed to reproduce text, the copy machine creates sharp contrasts, its glare highlighting every detail as well as the complexity of individual items, which include hair curlers, a shell, a rope, a fish, tea bags and a cassette. Removed from their original context and illuminated by the photocopier, the objects are alienated from their functionality, but the grid creates a systematizing structure, which evokes relationships between these ordinary items.



Pati Hill, *Photocopying Versailles*, 1980–83, installation view, Kunstverein München. Courtesy: Kunstverein München e.V., Pati Hill Collection, Arcadia University; photograph: Sebastian Kissel

Most of Hill's works maintain 1:1 ratio between original and copy but her last project did not fit on the copier plate. In 1980, Hill began *Photocopying Versailles* (1980–83), her attempt to replicate the impossible. Shown here are reproductions of a tuft of grass on a white background and a building fragment, reminiscent of a galaxy, from the Grand Trianon chateau. What at first seems like an exposure of the limitations of the photocopier in fact brings forth the beauty and details of Louis XIV's palace – without the pomp.

While copying may have migrated from stationary Xerox machines to shortcuts on our keyboards, Hill's works still appear prescient for their foregrounding of female labour. Moreover, it's the playfulness with which images and texts are treated that turns the copies into more than a reflection of their time; they are a call for artistic practices that are 'something other than either'.

*Pati Hill, 'Something other than either' runs at Kunstverein München, Germany, until 31 May 2020.*