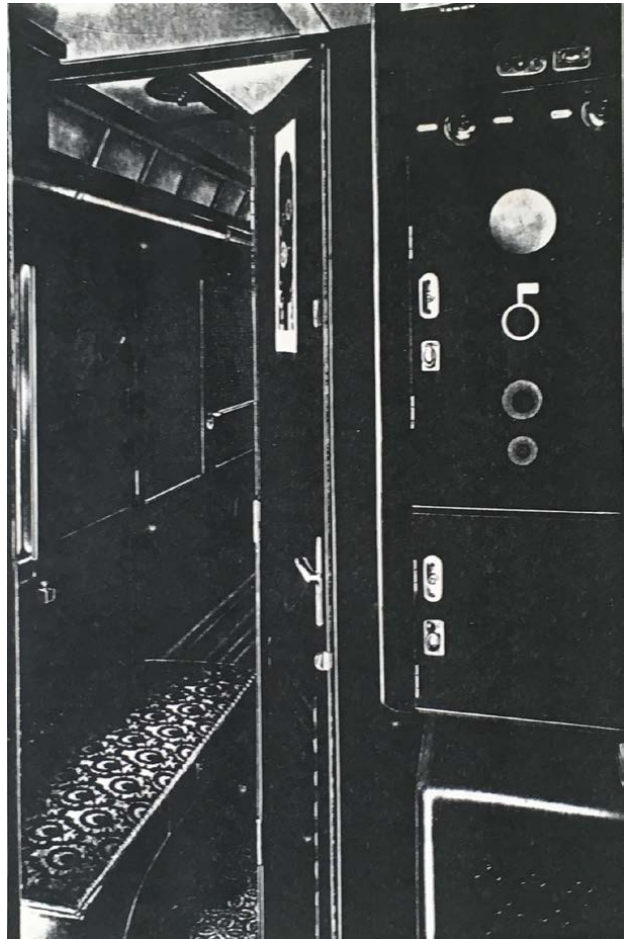


Pati Hill

In Waking Life



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Pati Hill (1921-2014) started making art with copy machines in the early 1970s. By this time she was in her fifties and had already navigated several lives. First known in the early 1940s as a model posing for *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar*, she started writing small columns for teenagers' magazines, before beginning to live the life of a writer a few years later when her first texts were published in literary magazines like the *Paris Review* or *Carolina Quarterly*. Her first book came out in 1955 and four would follow over the next seven years affording her a small success. She was forty-two in 1962 when, while living in Stonington, Connecticut, she claimed to "quit writing in favor of housekeeping". She had just published her fifth book and given birth to a daughter she had with her third husband (the only one she didn't divorce), Paul Bianchini – a young French art dealer who had just opened his gallery in New York. She would not publish for the next twelve years but that doesn't mean she wasn't doing anything. She kept a journal, ran her own small antique store and travelled to France every summer where she renovated a house in a small countryside village close to Paris, Les Massons. She also was granted writing residencies at places like Yaddo and MacDowell, and started collecting clippings, advertisements and instruction manuals that mirrored her domestic life. From collecting what she called "informational art" she started to collect objects. She kept them in a laundry hamper for a while and eventually recorded the ones that still intrigued her, before she got rid of them, through the use of a nearby copy shop that happened to have an IBM Copier II, which became the machine she preferred most. That's roughly how she described her meeting with the xerography in the early 1970s, as both an accidental and intuitive path.

Formally untrained as an artist she committed from then on to experimentation with the photocopier. She made art without romanticism but with the strong certainty she was doing something that mattered. In 1979, only four years after the first exhibition of her xerographs, she wrote herself a kind of retrospective catalog, *Letters to Jill*, to help clarify her feelings towards her practice. She talked about her desire to use the copier in a "straight" way so as to experience its intrinsic qualities: its "yes/no philosophy, multiplicity, limitlessness and instantaneousness". She kept working from this statement until her death forty years later, creating step by step, as a meticulous and discrete engineer, a complex and extensive oeuvre encompassing thousands of xerographs, drawings, texts and multiple editions: artist's books, writings and pamphlets.

This exhibition at Ampersand is the first part of a trilogy that will continue at Treize (Paris), and Air de Paris (Romainville) next winter. It will navigate through Pati Hill's production from her early photocopies of the 1970s to the last ones she made in the early 2010s, but also through her texts, artist's books, drawings and some other specific projects she made (namely a symbol language, a self-publishing residency project, and a collection of magazine advertisements). Her executors have recently given her archives to Arcadia University, Glenside, Pennsylvania; and a lot of this considerable collection has not yet been inventoried or subject to detailed study. These exhibitions will testify to research still in progress and assume a subjective and partial point of view from where this work can start to be seen. Gaps, blurriness and irregularity of narrative will not be hidden. On the contrary, this fragmented perspective (rather than an overall point of view) is induced by the way Hill considered her work herself. Most of the time she worked alone (she didn't want to belong to any movements) and without any models for her work (she rarely spoke directly about other artists but may have been exposed to works by Lee Lozano, Sturtevant, Robert Ryman and Lichtenstein that her husband showed in his gallery). She wanted to be comparable to no one but herself and identified as neither an artist neither nor a writer. She rather liked negotiating with a practice encompassing a huge range of formats, without a precise idea of what shape it could take or what kind of status she could claim from it.

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She had already exhibited her xerographs twice at the Kornblee Gallery, New York, when she presented her *Dreams Objects Moments* series for the first time, in 1976. She wanted to make an exhibition conveying her feelings about copier work without requiring the use of a copier, and for this opportunity displayed about a hundred typewritten texts copied onto sheets of colored paper. Each of them offered a literal description of a dream, an object or a moment, in texts from two lines to several pages. The paper's color related the texts to three categories, each displayed on different walls: green for *Dreams*, pink for *Objects*, yellow for *Moments*.

Some texts resemble poems whilst others could be short stories, but they all share the same illustrative and concise quality; the same humor – cynical, detached and tender towards the characters and situations they depict; as well as the same peculiar way of highlighting an unexpected trouble found in ordinary situations, univocal dreams or common objects. Navigating these series you will observe how each of her feelings, memories or observations – whether lived or dreamed – are thought of as a fleeting and specific occasion to negotiate her perception of herself and of reality. She says about these texts: “They have a queer effect when you read them successively. I mean if you think you are reading a dream and you are reading an object, then the most ordinary object seems really weird. [...] Moments and objects interchange all the time like bathroom tiles used to look when you looked at them too long.” Reading them also gives the feeling of watching a hazy subjectivity negotiate and formulate its shifting shape, experimenting with and mirroring Hill's own taste for transformation. This is something important to understand in her work. How it doesn't care to distinguish between a dream or material life. How it always tries to create stereoscopic vision out of simultaneous and contradictory points of view. For Hill, it may have been a way of keeping herself on a razor's edge whilst considering several possible doors that might allow an exit from one's narrative and its ideological strictures – specifically as a woman, a mother and a housewife who doesn't want to be part of any inextricable system of power, dependency and status.

While working on this project, Pati Hill planned to publish a book in which xerographs of “common objects” would face small written descriptions of the same. By doubling her perception of things, she settles on a principle essential to the comprehension of her work: the more precise you get in your description the more open and non-arbitrary might be its reading. That's maybe the main goal of her peculiar work combining words and pictures: to produce works “in which the two elements fuse to become something other than either”. Already while collecting “informational art”, Hill was mostly interested in observing how these commercial pictures, which are supposed to convey specific meanings – thanks to the clarity of the illustrations, the use of common references, fantasy, metaphor and metonymy – might fail in their goal; how their information can get lost on its way to bring to the reader unexpected meanings.

In one of the drafts she wrote for the *Dreams Objects Moments* series, talking about her copier practice, she states how she fears being “dangerous to the thing [she is] describing [...]”. How she fears she might “deform [her] subject by [her] exploration of it, to cripple or kill it so no further exploration could be made, the way we destroy dreams by choosing wrong words for them, or memories we destroy by the repeated insertion of modifications or lies thinking that we can keep an unexpurgated version of ourselves.” The selection of works exhibited here show how she constantly negotiated with this initial fear by creating pictures in which subjects are never exactly what you would expect, so that the reassuring aspect of her work – clear and graphic – is actually a way to constantly create misunderstanding.

About the *Dream Objects Moments* series Hill said something that could also be applied to all of her work: “I like mistakes. When you are reading a book and your eyes make a mistake it is sometimes the best thing you read. You may really have to reach for it to make any sense or the sky may open and you dive right through the hole. Either way it’s exciting”.

In the same decade, inspired by her daughter’s trouble with grammar that pushed her to write in hieroglyphs (due to being raised speaking French and English), Hill started to create a language composed of symbols. She worked on it for several years, using some resources from her collection of informational art and instruction manuals. A teacher in a Connecticut school taught this language to children for some months until (as Hill tells it) their parents started to complain because their children would refuse to write in the “proper way”. What you see here is pages from a proposal for this language she sent to Charles Eames, a designer working for IBM, in 1978, shortly after having met him on a transatlantic flight. She told him at that time about her recent work with the copier and they started a short but dense correspondence until his death. He was certainly one of the most important interlocutors she had in those decisive early years of her exploration with the copier – less by his responses (less regular than Hill’s letters) or by the model he could represent to her (she acknowledged having a poor idea of his work) than by his practical help (he facilitated the loan of an IBM copier for her home) and the occasion he offered to her to situate herself in a story in the margins of art history. Unsatisfied both by a community of writers she finds not progressive enough, and by the contemporary art that she knows at that time, she clarified in her correspondence with Eames the way she pictured herself as a kind of engineer who has to deal with technique, language and visual information as a whole. This symbol or pictographic language must be considered as fully part of her artistic work, rather than in tandem with it. It says something important about her attempts to enounce contradictory feelings through univocal symbols, of her interest in creating and observing things that are both easy to read and absolutely opaque. It also says something about her idea of science and technique being ways of creating mystery as much as clarity.

The last fragment of this exhibition documents and presents a book selected from the dozens she herself made from her photocopies. These books testify to late advancements in Hill’s work with the copier – her use of colored toner, accidents, and superimpositions. They say something decisive about the way she thought of xerographs in profuse series, full of loss and counterpoint in their appearance, never fixed merely by the thing being recorded, but rather subject to the tools of their representation. They are reminders that one should always look at this work with humor and agility, avoiding the temptation to hide its profuse and irregular aspect.

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