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Pati Hill (1921-2014)
By Richard Torchia



Pati Hill offered at least two explanations for how she, a published writer in her fifties, started to experiment with the photocopier in the early 1970s. One recounts her surprise at noticing images of fingertips in the margins of her copied manuscripts. Another describes her impulse to use the machine to document a collection of household items before discarding them. Both stories convey a sensibility defined by a lifelong curiosity about the details of objects and phenomena and an instinct to describe them. From initially asking an attendant at a local copy shop to scan gloves, buttons, and small toys for her, Hill proceeded to placing such objects on the glass platen of the copier herself, however surreptitiously at first.

By 1977, thanks to a chance encounter with Charles Eames on a transatlantic flight, Hill, her husband (gallerist Paul Bianchini), and their teenage daughter were living with a state-of-the-art office copier on loan directly from IBM in their Stonington, Connecticut, home. Hill's images of a dead swan (found on a nearby beach) made on that machine were included in a survey of copier works organized by the George Eastman House that traveled to the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York City in 1980. Other examples of Hill's work were later exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, among other venues in Europe and the US.

Untrained as an artist, Hill was not alone in experimenting with what she called "a found instrument, a saxophone without directions" at a moment of unexpected possibility for this evolving communication technology. Nevertheless, her approach to the copier, coupled with her lucid and inspired writing about it, proved both singular and prescient, especially regarding the potential of self-publishing and image-sharing we experience today. Unlike many artists who flirted with this instant-duplication process—a medium whose affordability and use of plain paper made it revolutionary—Hill sustained her commitment to xerography (or "dry writing," from the Greek) for forty years, never wavering from her aspiration to create works in which image and text might "fuse to become something other than either."

Born in Kentucky and raised in Virginia, Hill spent much of her twenties as a fashion model and on occasion posed for her close friend Diane Arbus, then working as a commercial photographer. Eventually finding herself in Paris, Hill abandoned modeling to live in the French countryside, where she wrote a memoir (*The Pit and Century Plant*, 1955) and her first novel (*The Nine Mile Circle*, 1957), both celebrated for their sensitivity, charm, and natural prose. She also contributed an essay, short stories, and an interview with Truman Capote to the *Paris Review*.

Hill's interest in uniting image and text materialized with her first volume of poems, *The Snow Rabbit*. Illustrated by the poet Galway Kinnell, the book was published in 1962, the year Hill's daughter was born. Her next work, *Slave Days*, did not appear until 1975. Produced with the support of James Merrill, it featured twenty-nine poems paired with photocopies of small domestic objects—a cookie cutter, an eraser, ball and jacks, etc.—all reproduced at exactly life scale, one of the many attributes of the process Hill appreciated. Her use of pictures to "extend" her texts, rather than illustrate them, was perhaps most conspicuously realized in *Impossible Dreams* (1976). The last of Hill's four novels, it includes forty-eight photographs appropriated with permission from an eclectic range of sources, including Robert Doisneau and Ralph Gibson. Unified by Hill's photocopying and uniform use of full-page bleeds, every image in this book assumes an oblique equivalence to the text it faces in a manner that still feels ahead of its time.

Hill's use of the IBM Copier II distinguished her work. By spooning toner into the machine in quantities not possible at local copy shops—nor advisable by the manufacturer—Hill obtained rich blacks that bear comparison with charcoal drawings and the linear precision of etchings. She also relished the Copier II's flaws, such as the tiny white spots this model sometimes dispersed across the surfaces of its prints where specks of the powdered ink failed to adhere to the paper.

Hill's writing about her efforts with the device, along with her attempt to invent a universal hieroglyphic language, are sampled in *Letters to Jill: a catalogue and some notes on copying* (1979). Published by Jill Kornblee, the New York gallerist who gave Hill numerous solo exhibitions in the '70s, the book not only serves as a concise survey of the first phase of Hill's copier work but stands as a jargon-free primer on medium specificity. In it, she articulates, for example, the way the copier differentiates itself from the camera. "Your object is your negative," Hill states, a proposition that reorients our understanding of lens-based depiction while placing her practice within a broader context that includes Anna Atkins's nineteenth-century cyanotypes of algae and Man Ray's photograms.

The objects Hill chose to copy, which she could not fully ascertain until the machine had seen them, are visually transformed yet faithfully convey their intrinsic properties, as well as those of the copier. "It repeats my words perfectly as many times as I ask it to," Hill wrote, "but when I show it a hair curler, it hands me back a space ship, and when I show it the inside of a straw hat it describes the eerie joys of a descent into a volcano." Hill's research with the machine assumed the nature of a conversation, if not a partnership. (She commented on how its "responsiveness" was one of the things women like about the device.) Despite this collaboration, Hill admitted to allowing the copier to "dominate" her work, suggesting that her "literal use" of the equipment was due to "having come to copying from writing."

With the exception of the swan, her subjects in the '70s were no larger than sheets of copier paper and to some extent represent a class of objects she believed the machine to be best at portraying. "A copier works like a magnet, attracting or rejecting things," she told the *New Yorker* in 1980, the year she moved to Paris intent on "photocopying Versailles," an

ambition that emerged from her desire to work with an expansive subject that was consciously at odds with the constraints of the copier. She began with small, portable subjects there, ranging from a nearly weightless bellpull to cobblestones held just above the platen (lest they should crash through the glass) and went on to scan an espaliered pear tree, including its roots and the ants living inside them. Obtained in the middle of winter from a nursery on the site, the tree bloomed unexpectedly once she brought it into her studio, making it impossible for Hill to cut the plant into pieces as she initially intended. This effort marked the beginning of the production of large-scale works—prints arranged in grids, often made with colored toner—that document the details of the palace, its grounds, and fountains. The works resulting from this five-year process were later shown at Versailles itself as well as Sens, where she eventually settled in the '90s. There, with assistance from her husband Paul and mindful of the democratic idealism that marked the first generation of artists associated with the medium, Hill found ways to exhibit and publish the copier work of veteran practitioners and novices alike.