

REVIEW

OFF TOPIC JUN 08, 2021

# X x Pati (X times Pati)

BY ROBIN WAART

***Something other than either*** at Kunstverein München, March-August 2020 & Kunsthalle Zürich, December 2020-May 2021.

***In Waking Life*** at Ampersand (with Sylvie Fanchon, Ana Jotta, Martin Laborde, Anafaya Supico), Lisbon, July 2020.

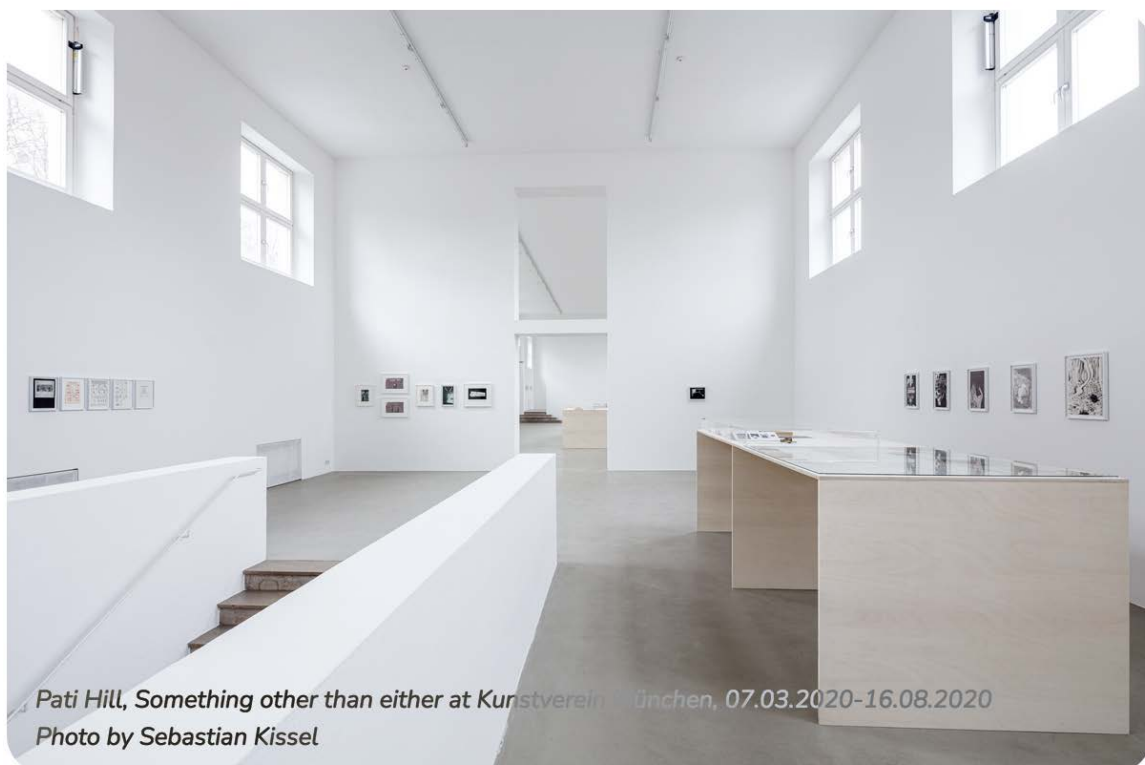
***Heaven's door is open to us / Like a big vacuum cleaner / O help / O clouds of dust / O choir of hairpins*** at Air de Paris, Romainville, September-October 2020.

***Mrs. Beazle*** at Treize, Paris, February-March 2021.

It is not so easy to write about Pati Hill without quoting her, finding a hold in her own words, whether it is from the notes on copying in *Letters to Jill* (1979), from the unpublished reflections in the Hill archive at Arcadia University, or the early novelistic work as an advance notice to what was to come. This year has been the year of Pati, with exhibitions at Kunstverein München continued at Kunsthalle Zürich, followed by the triptych of shows at Ampersand in Lisbon, Air de Paris and Treize in Paris <sup>1</sup>, the gallery's online viewing room at Art Basel this March <sup>2</sup> and *100 Years Pati Hill* organized by the Kunsthalle on April 3 <sup>3</sup>. And in print: with the republication of *Letters to Jill* for the show in Munich, the reprinting of a number of her stories in *Octopus Notes 9* and the forthcoming edition of *One Thing I Know* by Octopus Press.



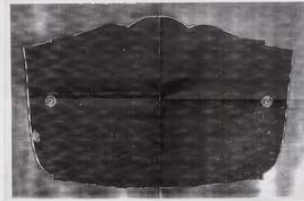
The problem with the words here is one of images. That the only way, basically, of keeping pace with her career path as a writer first, then a photocopier, transforming from model to housewife, gallery owner, and poet to cartoonist, is of finding a device or a machine that does not care if something is text or not — an image, a three-dimensional thing, or something else.



If hers is an aesthetic that never came off the ground in the time it came to fruition, the question is what makes Hill's work so attractive now, and the answer (or one of many): that we have been sensitized by a generation of artists that use degradation as a medium to complicate reception and circulation, Lutz Bacher, Marieta Chirulescu, Trisha Donnelly, Wade Guyton, Joëlle Tuerlinckx as the first to come to mind <sup>4</sup>, to not just like, but love to see this happening.



What? The elusive but usually still recognizable, often still timeless objects that she started xeroxing in the early 70s, white after-images of domesticity on a bed of black toner. (Wo)men's shirts, on standard blank or pastel papers. A pork chop peaking out at me like a rat cowering away. Photocopies of a mirror morphed into a flash of dark nothing. The framed and matted Pati, as she had presented herself in the few exhibitions she had during her lifetime: in the combining of text with photocopied photographs (termed 'illustrations') by the likes of Doisneau and Hervé for *Impossible Dreams* published in 1976 and the photostrip-like series of xeroxed press images for the Compagnie des wagon-lits (*Men and Women in Sleeping Cars* of 1979—the year of Douglas Crimp's expanded version of 'Pictures' for October—that time-warp her copies into the heart of the Pictures Generation. (At Kunstverein München and Kunsthalle Zürich.) The texts of *Dreams Objects Moments* on sheets of "classic office paper in tints of pink, pale green and baby canary" <sup>5</sup>, but now fortuitously in a group context, presented in relationship with the work of Ana Jotta, Martin Laborde, Anafaya Supico and Sylvie Fanchon. (In Lisbon at Ampersand.) And with the stardom of newness (in the fresh Komunuma gallery space of Air de Paris, in Paris): a smaller selection of xeroxed objects, flowers and segments from *A Swan*, outweighed by an installation of a 150 leftover copies of *Slave Days* (1975) and the entirety of Hill's collection of vacuum cleaner advertisements, on the wall, in a vitrine, summarized and redoubled in a video fragment from Claude Toney's *Toreador* (1983): one minute and eleven seconds of Hill herself performing the photocopier, wearing dark sunglasses against the bright artificial light it emits—pulling a scarf through the copier's head to the sound of an unwelcoming electronic swoosh echoing in and out of the galleries, as if a spaceship were about to land and immediately take off again, like a theremin.

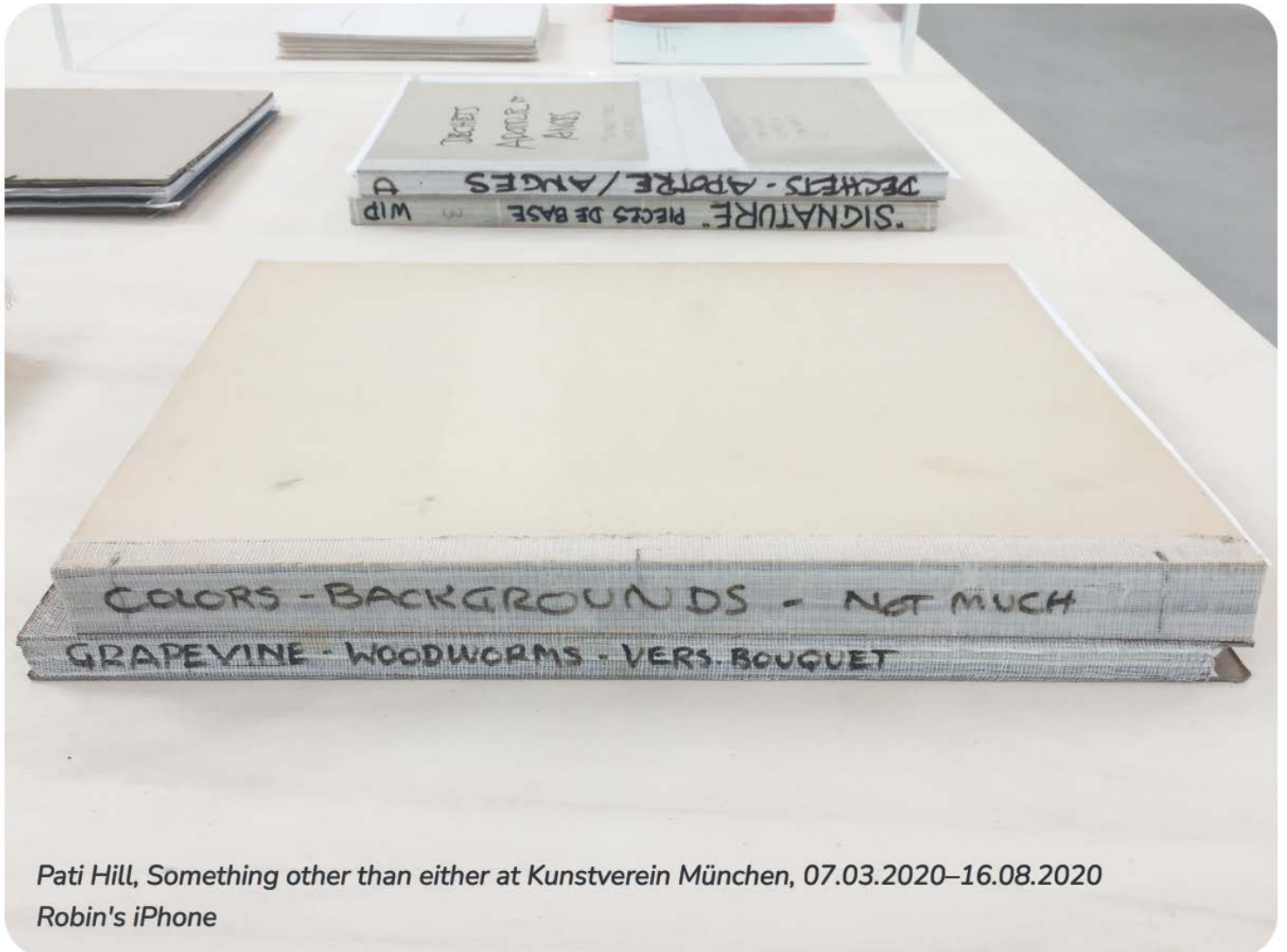


Pati Hill, *Something other than either* at Kunstverein München, 07.03.2020-16.08.2020

Photo by Sebastian Kissel

Hill's works, if anything, are repeated asynchronous steps into the future, even when often this future never happened. As much about technology as technique, when the work is shown, everyone is careful not to frame the pieces as in any way nostalgic. The last exhibition to open, *Mrs. Beazle* at Treize, curated by Baptiste Pinteaux (who also signed for the show at Air de Paris; and, together with Martin Laborde, that at Ampersand; <sup>6</sup> while the exhibitions in Munich, repeated in Zurich, were curated by Maurin Dietrich, and co-curated with Daniel Baumann for the Kunsthalle Zürich), is more than an exemplary sampling. Intended to showcase the loosely bound books of prints and misprints that had also been part of *Something other than either* <sup>7</sup>, but shifting its premise pending covid, to copy pieces, computer prints, film and audio recordings from the estate still in France in the collection of Hill's daughter and Nicole Huard, her friend and last assistant. This limitation has proven felicitous in the double sense of the Latin words *felix* (happy) and *felis* (cat), leading to a version of 'Pati'/Hill

that is as unpredictable as it is unpretentious, and the most faithful introduction into her work and process thus far.



Pati Hill, *Something other than either* at Kunstverein München, 07.03.2020–16.08.2020  
Robin's iPhone

On one side (left), the early publications, the books, and the article *Cats* as it was published in the 1955 Summer issue of *The Paris Review*, on a long shelf without glass, for the touching and reading, copies and drawings, on mylar, taped to the wall or in simple clip frames, and some green *Dreams*, leading to 26 pink *Objects*. Then followed by three of the already signature b/w photocopies—in color now, of red petals, some white—, more of the drawings of cats, of their namesake Mrs. Beazle's kind, and the first of the many cartoons that flank the other wall. Yellow *Moments* against the back of the long, rectangular room, where both sides of the work come together. The cartoon of an elephant and possible feline captioned '*Faster ! and more circussy colors. . .*' that reappears toward the entrance of the exhibition, just as the A4-photograph of Hill with one of her cats in the studio, slung around her neck like a living scarf, taped onto the window and repeated indoors, in the back left, making a point of the French spaced punctuation.

8 That with copies, when repetition is a matter of pressing a button, oneness is not what matters.



The really surprising series is in the eight clip frame pieces on paper, back to the right wall, that have an air of water poured over ink, of animals hiding in blue and purple-pink puddles: drawings of rats, cats, birds, a bear, that like all the others turn out to be copied and recopied drawings, flipped with the color amp on max and mirrored so that in one of them two tailed rats stand looking at each other like divided twins. The lines they are drawn and redrawn with have become angular, scratchy, interrupted, crumpled folds tracing an invisible model. This 'copied' line you see here is not blotted, but *blotched*, even if both (Hill's copied one and the Warholian blot line) come as the result of touch not taking place, not originals, but reconstructions of contact broken, and the copier's blurry colored exaggerations. Like the lines in the palm of a hand, what they reproduce is the messiness of life, where indeed sometimes dreams, objects and moments intersect, are the same. It makes sense to say: A photocopier is the opposite of a vacuum cleaner —which as Hill wrote in her short story *Cats* (1955) <sup>9</sup> can be used equally genre-breaking, simply to scare a bored old tom <sup>10</sup> — a machine that spits out ink dust.





In that sense too the take and retake this series are made from is a blueprint for the copy act Hill is getting known for since her first exhibitions at Arcadia University in 2016 <sup>11</sup> and Essex Street in 2018 <sup>12</sup> . It is even better, and more than exemplary, because this selection matches the mismatch Hill's work was to the art world (despite her vicinity to it, through her husband's gallery, the friendship with Diane Arbus), and even why after the early recognition as a promising writer, her work was not picked up in the way it is now. The 24 cartoons signed 'Copyright Patricia Hill Bianchini (PHB)' and dated '200 ' and '2004' on Treize's right wall proved unsalable: the *New Yorker* refusing to print the cartoons she submitted, while Hill on her end was not satisfied with the font used to caption them. The emblem of the cat, then, becomes / has become that of the misfit, that goes her own way, refusing refusal, with eight more lives and chances left.



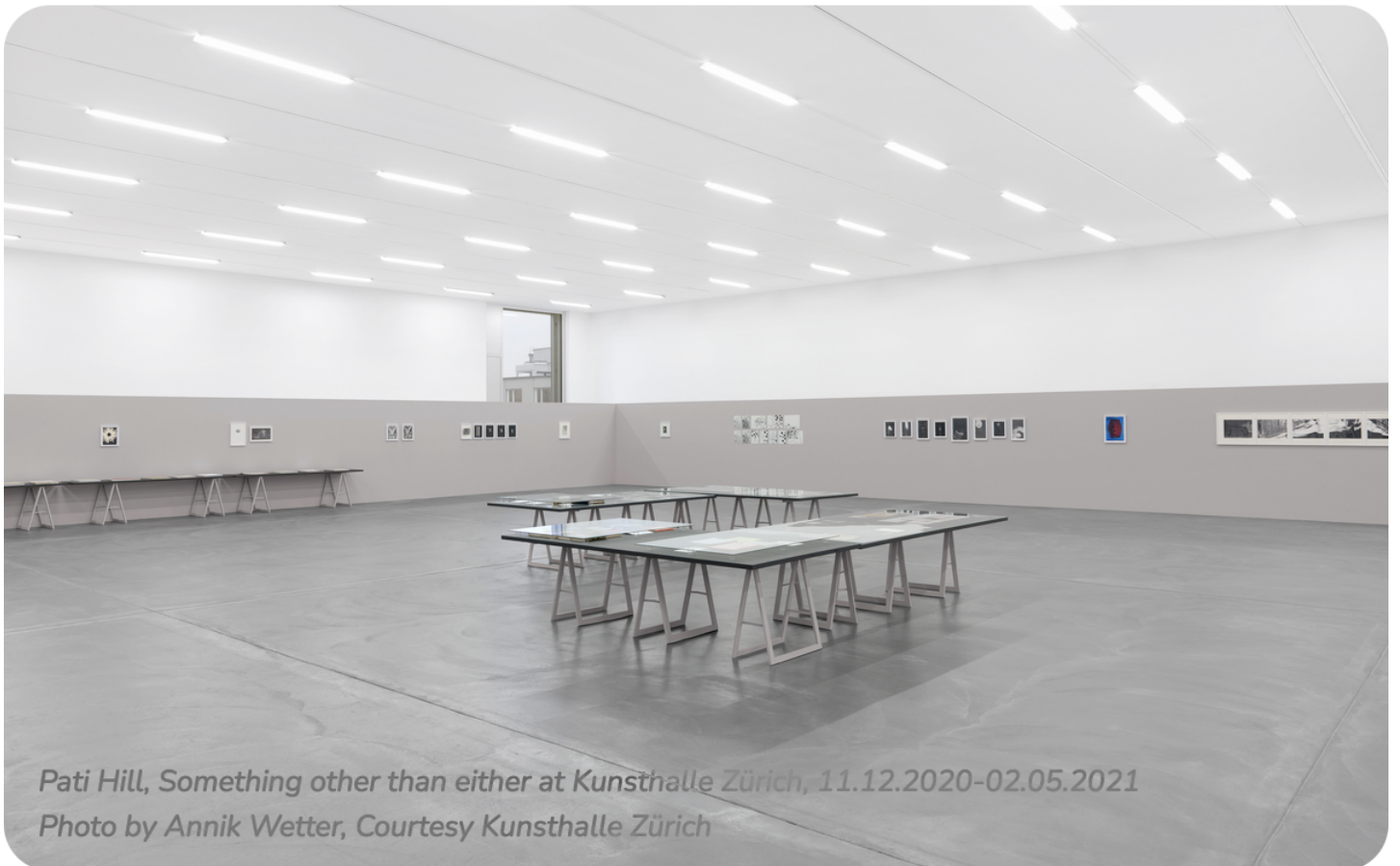
*Mrs. Beazle* is different from the joyous, exuberant presentations that preceded, in a space run by a group of curators that allows for a break with the official rhythmic formality of a survey in the gallery and Kunstverein/Kunsthalle settings — a liberty to choose to show less that is just as needed to provide Hill her placing in art history as its story rewrites itself.

It is this 'other' Pati that speaks here. In the works, in her own voice resounding from the small television screen, on the floor, behind the sofa in the middle of the space, that takes on the position of the viewer, listening to itself. A pensive, somewhat sad and murmuring tone, speaking both to someone specific and nobody in particular, into the camera, the microphone, smiling at other decades, that seems to be looking back but might as well be looking forward to us.



*Pati Hill, Heaven's door is open to us / Like a big vacuum cleaner / O help / O clouds of dust / O choir of hairpins at Air de Paris, Roméville, 12.09.2020-17.10.2020  
Photo courtesy Air de Paris*

With all the ‘What if?’ surrounding the work, and the ambition that just about comes through too, at times, when she turns her photocopies of a found dead Swan into an ‘Opera’ and that an impossible undertaking as like *Photocopying Versailles* makes so clear, that puts Hill where a lot of artists are who do not have the means or the network to erupt into the career she is (‘finally’) getting now. *What if* Charles Eames had lived to answer the letter she wrote asking him if he knew people at the Museum of Modern Art and *what if* he had proposed *A Swan* to the MoMA. Maybe it was the not choosing that was not forgiving to her. The move from model to writer to mother and copy artist, from the manuals she amassed to the pictographs she would draw for her daughter, from decades of collecting vacuum cleaner advertisements to the drawn and copied comics at Treize follows a logic, but one that is irregular itself, an approach to the relationship between image and text that was constantly refreshed, and, because of that, has stayed hidden in plain sight.



*Pati Hill, Something other than either at Kunsthalle Zürich, 11.12.2020-02.05.2021*

*Photo by Annik Wetter, Courtesy Kunsthalle Zürich*

While the approximately ten exhibits and events that took place over the year 2020-2021 all aim to reinstate and reintroduce Hill and could often not be visited in person, in real the institutional shows are not as austere as they might appear in documentation. With sometimes overlapping selections, then other exposures, *Something other than either* at the Kunsthalle Zürich maybe included fewer prints —but just a couple— than its counterpart in Munich, and while it had none of Hill's correspondence with Eames, more of the larger copy proofs for *Impossible Dreams* were laid out (filed with repeated 'do not crop' notations to the printers), next to other manuscripts on the tables in the center of the space. Both shows, though, featuring the sketch books of later color photocopy works that seem to have rarely made it out of the archive.



It is in the gaps between, in these books of 'discards', closed but ready to be opened —that gallery attendants will present upon request— in what does not give itself away immediately, that something really happens. Even if it is unclear what their contents are, studies or leftovers, extras, or purely archival material, dated with asyndetic titles in all caps like *DREAMS OBJECTS MOMENTS: VERSAILLES ROSE GARDEN DECHET + ALTERNATIVES ('97)*, *DECHETS APOTRE ET ANGES*, *UNSIGNED 'UNRESOLVED' FRAGMENTS AND LEFTOVERS REFERENCES UBIX ('95)* or simply *BLUE 1989?* — they were carefully glued, bound together and never thrown away.



*Pati Hill, Something other than either at Kunsthalle Zürich, 11.12.2020-02.05.2021*  
*Photo by Annik Wetter, Courtesy Kunsthalle Zürich*

One of the images copied and recopied, enlarged and blurred almost endlessly in the folder *Vers. Canal Folio - End Papers Dechet* ('95), seems to reappear not as an indecipherable abstraction of green-blue flowers (an end-paper?) but at last readable as a reference or part of the logo for the 'Espace Jules Verne' in Sens on the invite for Hill's show *Xerographies* of May 1990, prompting visitors to leaf both through Hill's books on 'l'art xérogaphique et ses romans', on view under the glass of one of the other vitrines.



What these exposures, exclusions and inclusions of alternatives, in the books, on the tables, the vitrines and collection of vacuum cleaners at Air de Paris, and the copied drawings on the walls of Treize make exponentially visible, audible, clear is the upside of indecision. You don't repeat something if you already know for sure, if you know what you are looking for, if you've had enough of it. The photocopier, Hill says somewhere toward the end of *Letters to Jill*, is a cropping device, always partial, that reproduces the side "you do not see". <sup>13</sup> It is a machine that does not doubt itself, but produces it. The bound and unbound pages in the Hill archive are what this sustained doubt amounts to, looks like.



No surprise, the situation she describes in a letter of October 1980 about the impossibility of making copies to give away to friends, because “nothing seems complete enough to bother with actually sending anywhere” <sup>14</sup> — mirroring a remarkably self-reflexive passage in *The Pit and the Century Plant* —her first novel— published 25 years prior in 1955, about the hardships at deciding which of “hundreds of happenings” to write or not write about because “none of them were any more vital than the next one, or any more complete in itself.” <sup>15</sup> But there is also the opposite, that comes as a discovery, in *Letters to Jill* again, being confronted with and looking again at a floor strewn with photocopies of a clam shell that Hill had nearly labeled and archived as ‘rejects’, when she will suddenly “see that that clam shell is *the* clam shell”. <sup>16</sup>

A silent performer with a loud machine: the photocopier herself, always already an audience, a witness. <sup>17</sup> Already enough, but not enough either.



1. As well as the group shows *Nothing Is So Humble: Prints from Everyday Objects* at the Whitney in New York and *Pictograms Signs of Life, Emojis: The Society of the Signs* at the Leopold-Hoesch-Museum in Düren and the Museum für Neue Kunst in Freiburg ↩
2. Air de Paris with Pati Hill at Art Basel OVR: Pioneers, 24.03.2021–27.03.2021 with an online discussion between curator and director of Kunsthalle Zürich Daniel Baumann, curator Baptiste Pinteaux and gallerist Florence Bonnefous on March 25 ↩
3. *100 Years Pati Hill – A day of readings live streamed*: <http://kunsthallezurich.ch/de/100-years-pati-hill> ↩
4. And the ground-breaking exhibitions (*Other*) *Mechanisms* curated by Anthony Huberman at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco and *Secession* in Vienna (2017-2018), that it is hard not to be reminded of here, featuring Jay DeFeo's *Untitled* (1987) photocopied series of a tissue box that could have come straight out of Hill's hat (but did not). ↩
5. A description that is impossible not to quote from: Pati Hill, *Letters to Jill*. A catalogue and some notes on copying. Kornblee Gallery, New York (1979). Reprint Kunstverein München and Mousse Publishing (2020), p. 104 ↩
6. Pinteaux and Dusapin run *Octopus Notes* together with Alice Pialoux and Martin Laborde. ↩
7. "Most of the exhibitions I have made so far would do ok without words. I am increasingly interested in work that is interdependant though. *Work in which the two elements fuse to become something other than either.*" Pati Hill, *Letters to Jill*, p. 121 (italics by Hill) ↩
8. The non-breaking space in '...' ↩
9. Pati Hill, *Cats*, in *The Paris Review*, issue 9, Summer 1955 ↩
10. "I would run the vacuum cleaner to give him the pleasure of putting his hair on end", Pati Hill, *Cats* in *The Paris Review*, Summer 1955: <https://www.theparisreview.org/letters-essays/5021/cats-pati-hill> ↩
11. *Pati Hill: Photocopier: A Survey of Prints and Books (1974-83)*, Arcadia University, 25.02.2016–25.04.2016: <https://www.arcadia.edu/add-content/page-68> ↩

12. *How Something Can Have Been At One Time And In One Place And Nowhere Else Ever Again*, Essex Street, New York, 08.09.2016–21.10.2018:  
<https://www.essexstreet.biz/exhibition/122> ↩
13. “It is the side of your subject that you do not see that is reproduced.” Pati Hill, *Letters to Jill*, p. 119 ↩
14. Pati Hill, Letter of October 1980 to the writer Thomas McGonigle, reprinted in *Photocopier: A Survey of Prints and Books (1974-83)*. Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2017, p. 37 ↩
15. “And that is how it seems to be with everything, in fact. There were hundreds of happenings that delighted and interested me and were good to think about, but none of them were any more vital than the next one, or any more complete in itself. They were all interdependent and intertwined and interlaced that you could not call any of them a story when you cut it all up and divided it out. Oh it was terrible!”, Pati Hill, *The Pit and the Century Plant*. Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York 1955, p. 190 ↩
16. Pati Hill, *Letters to Jill*, p. 116. ↩
17. It makes sense to relate this idea of witnessing to Robert Pfaller’s conceptualization of *interpassivity*: on the one hand the photocopier (in both determinations: Hill and her machine) as a ‘third eye’, registering and seeing all of the work they produced for her — but also transposed to the relationship between the keeper and her archive, outlasting her. Indeed, Pfaller often literally refers to the act of photocopying as an example: ‘Intellectuals, for example, often photocopy hundreds of pages from books in the library and then go home with a feeling of deep satisfaction. In doing this, they often have never considered that the photocopier might have just ‘read’ the texts for them.’, Robert Pfaller (trans. Lisa Rosenblatt, with Charlotte Eckler and Camilla Nielsen), *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*. Verso, London/New York 2014, p. 29 (originally published in German in 2002). Pfaller’s words, emptied of their magical thinking, reappear in Kenneth Goldsmith’s reflection on the contemporary storing of pdfs, releasing into a concept of the archived as the future: ‘On my laptop, I have hundreds of fully indexable PDFs of e-books. Do I use them? Not in any regular way. I store them for future use. Like those PDFs, all the data that’s stored on my hard drive is part of my local textual ecosystem.’, Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press, New York 2011, p. 29 ↩