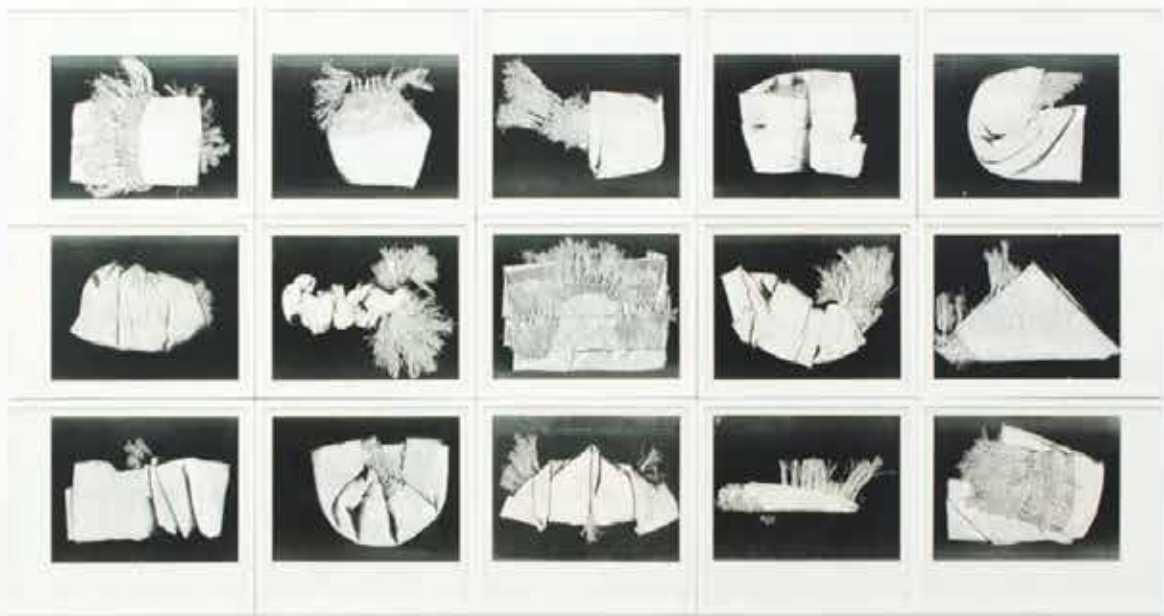


EXHIBITION REVIEW

Pati Hill's Scanning Bed Romance

By Jason Urban



Pati Hill, *Understanding your Chinese Scarf* (1983), 15 black-and-white photocopies, 11 1/2 x 15 3/4 inches. Courtesy Estate of Pati Hill and Essex Street, New York.

*"How Something Can Have Been
At One Time And In One Place And
Nowhere Else Ever Again"*

Essex Street, New York

8 September – 21 October 2018

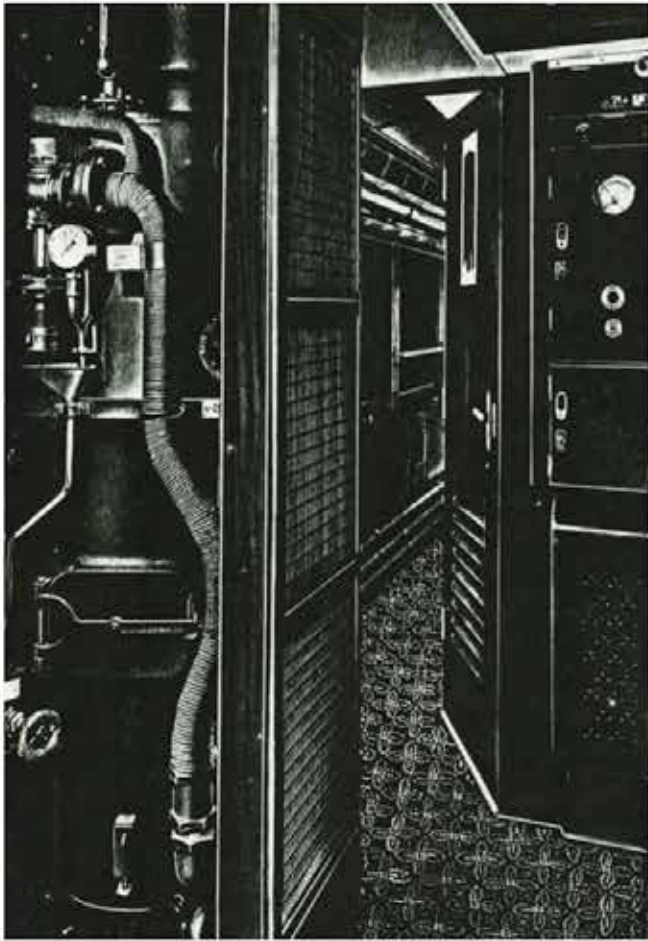
This exhibition marked the first New York solo show of Pati Hill's pioneering photocopy art since 1979, when "Men and Women in Sleeping Cars" appeared at Kornblee Gallery. Hill, who died in 2014, relocated to France in the early 1980s and remained there. While it would be inaccurate to describe the exhibition as a time capsule, there is an undeniable nostalgia invoked by the look of analog photocopies, which dovetailed with Hill's own elegiac aesthetic to produce an exhibition more poetic than technological.

Three bodies of work were on view, produced between 1976 and 1983, and all displayed the telltale visual clues of

early photocopying—heightened contrast and pronounced graininess coupled with refined detail, delicate edges leading to shallow gradients, a result of the machine's compressed depth of field. One can imagine an Instagram or Photoshop filter being developed to replicate this "copier look," but no screen could replicate the physicality of Hill's works. The discoloration present on a few prints and the gleam of melted toner set against the matte finish of the paper remind us that these are objects as much as images. Each is a shallow window reaching back into time, displaying objects touched and arranged by the artist's hand. The subject of *Untitled (men's shirt)* lies neatly folded and wrapped from the cleaners; in my mind's eye I could see Hill laying it face down on the copier bed to initiate an image that could almost be mistaken for a low-relief sculpture. The shirt itself is relatively timeless—plain cloth, placket

front, spread collar. While Hill's garment dates from 1976, the same item might be seen on Wall Street today, or for that matter on any of the pocket-squared advertising execs in the AMC television series *Madmen*, on which the Xerox model 914 made a cameo appearance. (The status of the photocopy machine as a tool of exclusively female secretarial staffs adds a gendered component to Hill's labors.)

While the works at Essex Street presented a range of subjects, Hill operated most successfully in the tradition of still life, documenting quotidian objects—a hairbrush, a pair of gloves, a sardine tin—floating in a void created by black toner. Stray motes of dust on the scanner bed become star-like pin-pricks of light, imbuing the images with otherworldliness. We can see her concern with the formal arrangement of objects on the scanner bed, with freezing time, and with emotional gestures. Like a medium at a



Patti Hill, details of *How something can have been at one time and in one place and nowhere else ever again* (1979), 10 black-and-white photocopies, ranging from 5 1/2 x 8 to 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Patti Hill and Essex Street, New York.

séance, she seems to pull objects from the past into the present—lifelike, but flattened and abstracted.

The centerpiece of the show was the ambitious *Understanding Your Chinese Scarf*, which debuted in a 1983 exhibition at Galerie Texbraun in Paris. The grid of 15 renditions of a fringed silk scarf—folded, tied, pleated and scrunched—highlights the machine's accentuation of the finest details, and alludes to the limitlessness Hill associated with her medium: "By using normal copies in a mosaic form you can go on forever, if you want to, so 'beginning' and 'end' do not have to be given much consideration."¹ She manipulated the fabric as if using the machine to memorize its every facet, while reminding us that there is almost never just one true solution to a given problem. Made 35 years ago, *Understanding Your Chinese Scarf* feels like a systematic inquiry of the present moment.

Hill came to copying after a career as a writer, so it is not surprising that she wrote a good deal about her intentions and choice

of technology. A number of her books were on hand at Essex Street, including *Letters to Jill: A Catalog and Some Notes on Copying*, published by Kornblee in 1979, which serves as her manifesto. In it she outlined the qualities that drew her to photocopying, including its 1:1 aspect ratio, its lack of clear vertical orientation ("up" is designated by the artist), and its instantaneousness. Lest you think anyone with a copier could do what she did, she also provided detailed accounts of the trials, travails and intricate manipulations that led to the finished works, such as adjusting the quantity of toner in the machine to achieve different densities of black.

Her 1976 novel *Impossible Dreams* (Cambridge: Alice James Books) used copying to bridge the worlds of literature and visual arts. Photocopied photographs by Robert Doisneau, Ralph Gibson and Eva Rubinstein add poignant moments of specificity to Hill's spare text, written before her first experiments with the copier. *Impossible Dreams* operates in an ambiguous space somewhere between

an illustrated novel and an artist's book. Though the images were copied with the photographers' permission, Hill's book suggests the role of the photocopier as both a facilitator (sanctioned and not) and a precursor of digital cut-and-paste.

Hill was not the only artist to explore the photocopier, but few of those who did, she wrote in 1979, were "like myself, . . . using the product of copy machines straight."² More often, artists saw the machine as an extension of painting and drawing, or employed it in the context of publication/exhibitions, such as the famous *The Xerox Book* organized and published by Seth Siegelau in 1968. The Whitney Museum's recent exhibition "Experiments in Electrostatics: Photocopy Art from the Whitney's Collection, 1966–1986" included the work of Barbara T. Smith, Edward Meneely, Lesley Shiff, Robert Whitman and the International Society of Copier Artists. Though some of these artists began playing with the machine earlier than Hill, none maintained her long-term commitment to it.

Hill's "straight" black-and-white copies—iconic representations of the copier-generated image—may ultimately prove to be of greater historical significance than more experimental and hybrid examples.

"How Something Can Have Been At One Time And In One Place And Nowhere Else Ever Again" offered a chance to reflect on Hill's artistic output, and also to place it within the never-ending march of technology. For someone who recalls late nights at Kinko's running copies for youthful art projects, seeing that familiar xerographic physiognomy in a white-walled gallery on the Lower East Side was like meeting a long lost friend after years of estrangement. (I'm using "xerographic" generically; Hill was a diehard user of the IBM Copier II.)

The inclusion of digital scanners in desktop printers ushered in a new era of copying convenience and autonomy, and sealed the analog photocopy in a kind of technological amber. But as Hill observed back in 1979: "What we will have learned from the present day copier, may lead us to an entirely different art in which the copier, as such, no longer even plays a part."³ She was right. In retrospect it is clear that the analogue photocopier was a provisional step on the path to our current crop of digital tools. It coupled photographic image-capturing with the gratification of near-instantaneous physical results, and it made that gift available to anyone. Far from trivial, Pati Hill's quiet ghosts of hairbrushes and accessories mark a moment of profound cultural change.

I would like to thank Richard Torchia, Director of Exhibitions at Arcadia University in Glenside, PA, for sharing his wealth of information about Pati Hill, her artwork and xerographic art in general. ■

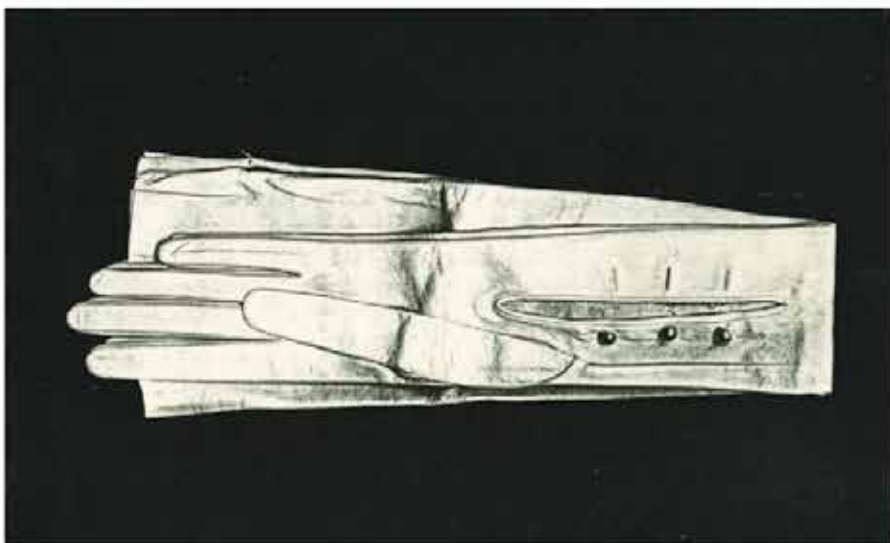
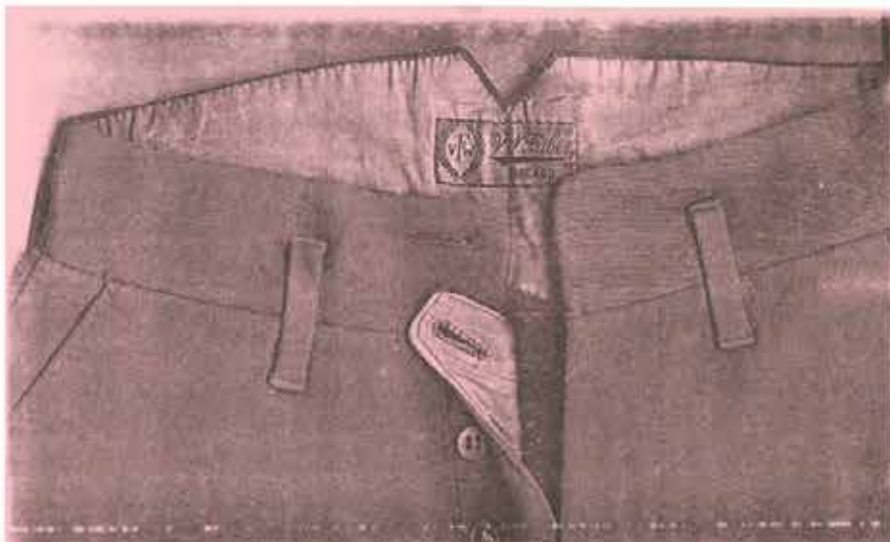
Jason Urban is a Brooklyn-based artist, writer, teacher and curator.

Notes:

1. Pati Hill, *Letters to Jill: A Catalogue and Some Notes on Copying* (New York: Kornblee Gallery, 1979), 123.

2. *Ibid.*, 118.

3. *Ibid.*, 119.



Above: Pati Hill, Untitled (front of riding pants) (1976), black-and-white photocopy, 8 1/2 x 14 inches. Below: Pati Hill, Untitled (white gloves) (1976), black-and-white photocopy, 8 1/4 x 13 3/4 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Pati Hill and Essex Street, New York.