

# Pati Hill: Photocopies of a Woman's Everyday Life

An exhibition at Essex Street, New York, shows how closely Hill's literary and artistic work is linked to her critique of domesticity

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BY DIANA HAMILTON IN **REVIEWS** | 29 OCT 18

In 1982, US poets Eileen Myles and Bernadette Mayer argued about whether the accessibility of mimeograph publishing outweighed its scrappy appearance. Myles 'never liked mimeo' because it paled in comparison to a well-made book; Mayer 'always liked mimeo' and was turned off by the 'preciousness' of slick commercial publishing. Mayer decidedly wins this fight for me, but Myles makes a point: artists are often asked to celebrate material limitations as political ideals.

For Pati Hill (1921–2014), who used an IBM photocopier to reproduce common objects, dead swans, garments and the very stones of Versailles, the machine was neither limiting nor democratizing. Instead, she exploited the medium's specific formal affordances – turning depth into darkness and simplifying patterns (as in her copies of train adverts, where the flattening of colour makes all light look like an extension of the floral upholstery). Stepping into the artist's solo show at Essex Street, 'How Something Can Have Been at One Time and in One Place and Nowhere Else Ever Again', you might anticipate these photocopies to prize lifeless mechanicity. But any such misjudgement is quickly righted by the show's stunning centrepiece, *Understanding Your Chinese Scarf* (1983): 15 black and white copies that depict the titular garment in dynamic, even flirtatious folds.



Pati Hill, *Untitled (fish)*, 1977–79, black and white photocopy, 28 × 21 cm. Courtesy: the Estate of Pati Hill and Essex Street, New York

Hill was best known in her lifetime as a writer, and the show's press release centres that practice, detailing her efforts to give 'even footing side by side' to language and image. At the entrance to the gallery, her poetry, fiction and manifesto sit alongside a vase of roses, which mirror the copied rose in the main gallery space, hovering in a black background a few inches above a flat comb. In her collection *Slave Days* (1975), Hill's photocopies combine with poetry to consider domestic labour and confinement:

A local housewife  
Aged forty-eight  
Sent off for a dream  
And received a plate

In *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Angela Davis describes how women's labour is devalued by advanced capitalism; its divorce from direct profit means that women 'can seldom produce tangible evidence of their work.' In a literal sense, Hill's photocopies proffer evidence of labour. But the life of a housewife is a relatively privileged hell – Davis opens by noting black women's exclusion from 'the dubious benefits of the ideology of womanhood' as it became, in the last century, defined by the home.



Pati Hill, *Untitled (men's shirt)*, 1976, black and white photocopy, 35 × 21 cm. Courtesy: the Estate of Pati Hill and Essex Street, New York



Given that Hill first worked as a model, you might expect some self-scanning. On the contrary, as Meredith Sellers celebrates in a 2016 essay for *Hyperallergic*, Hill chose the copier to ‘make something that had nothing in it that had anything to do with’ herself. Hill learned the impossibility of repressing the subjective, though, especially in the copying of objects that stand in for their owners. Take the sole work on the gallery’s main level: a photocopy of a pair of white leather gloves, stacked in opposing directions, their wear, their creases and their undone buttonholes exaggerated by the light’s emphasis on relief.

In her 1955 essay ‘Cats’ for *The Paris Review*, Hill describes giving up a housecat because ‘it gave me the idea of what it would be like to be a prisoner’. There’s hope in Hill’s work for more independent living for women, objects and cats alike. In the end, it’s the copy machine that affords at least momentary isolation. Yes, a photograph captures the momentary, as the show’s title implies, but a rose, a dry-cleaned shirt or a fish are unlikely to find themselves on the scanner’s bed again. Neither cold, nor populist, nor social, nor self-reflective, Hill’s work reproduces the luxury of private attention.