

# THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

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## AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by  
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## Andy Warhol, *Raid the Icebox I*, with Andy Warhol, 1969

Andy Warhol needs little introduction. But while his films, paintings, sculptures, drawings, and illustrations are well known, his curatorial work isn't. In 1969, Warhol was invited to curate an exhibition at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). To make a long story short, what he did there was to challenge and deny the very *raison d'être* of curating itself.

The story has to begin by understanding how and why he was invited, and by whom. The school, founded in 1877, opened its first public galleries in 1893 and has built an impressive collection of fine art, decorative art, and applied art from the medieval period to the present. Despite its profile as an encyclopedic institution, the RISD Museum began innovating early on. Alexander Dorner, a German curator who invented new ways to juxtapose art with other objects from different periods—a key reference point for and predecessor to Harald Szeemann, among many others—directed the museum from 1938 to 1941. Continuing in the tradition he famously began at the Landesmuseum in Hannover, Dorner reorganized the works in the galleries to create dramatic and surprising installations that defied standard categorizations and chronologies. Pieces of American furniture were shown alongside Impressionist paintings, and folkloric textiles alongside avant-garde Modernism. The museum had the ideal collection for this kind of experimentation.

The art historian Daniel Robbins ran the museum from 1965 to 1971.<sup>1</sup> Coming to Providence from New York, where he was an assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum, Robbins was especially passionate about contemporary art and worked to strengthen its presence within the museum's collection and exhibitions. In January 1969, he hosted *Look Back: An Exhibition of Cubist Paintings and Sculptures from the Menil Family Collection*. When Jean and Dominique de Menil came to visit, they were impressed with the breadth of the RISD collection, but dismayed to learn that so much of it—thirty-five thousand of the forty-five thousand pieces—was kept in basement storage, and in quite a sorry state.<sup>2</sup> In Robbins's words:

*Here paintings are hung floor to ceiling on racks, but no one can see them, can even pull the screens, because everywhere are paintings stacked against the walls, against the screens. Sandbags on the floor prevent the works of art from slipping. No one can be allowed in here, for there is no place to step; one can hardly turn around without endangering a precious object.*<sup>3</sup>

For Robbins, who was hoping to lure the de Menils to become ongoing patrons of the museum, it must have been a difficult tour. The wealthy collectors saw valuable works not only neglected but deteriorating, and a director/custodian faced with the unglamorous task of raising the necessary funds to repair, clean, mount, catalog, and properly preserve them all. Robbins himself admitted it looked like "grandma's attic," or, worse, a "junk shop," albeit one made up of "very valuable junk."<sup>4</sup>

1. In a striking coincidence, John W. Smith, the museum's current director, previously worked as assistant director of collections, exhibitions, and research at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

2. Andrew Martinez, "Raid the Icebox," in *Manual: A Resource about Art and Its Making*, <http://risdmuseum.org/manual/115 RAID THE ICEBOX>.

3. Daniel Robbins, "Confessions of a Museum Director," in *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1969), 8.

4. *Ibid.*, 12.





Storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969

All of this led Mr. de Menil to ask Robbins a series of questions that must have struck him as surprising, but also profound:

*What would happen if some important contemporary artist were to choose an exhibition from our reserves? If the only organizing principle would be whether or not he liked whatever he saw? Would the result be different from having a storage show chosen by a curator? Or by anyone? If the artist who selected the materials were strong enough, would he impose his personality on the objects? If he were famous enough, would it not oblige the curious to look? Might his attitude not do violence to the true nature of the objects?*<sup>5</sup>

These simple remarks from a Texas billionaire go to the core of the curatorial act and raise many of the ambiguous and controversial issues that still face the profession today: If “organizing principles” or thematic categories are ultimately arbitrary, what use are they? Is *liking* something less valuable than *knowing* something? Is scholarly expertise a necessary requirement for a curator? Could an exhibition’s purpose get at something other than traditional notions of aesthetic fulfillment, art historical scholarship, and cultural enrichment? Is the sophisticated and cultured world of “high” art free from the fame-driven obsessions of the entertainment industry? Is a curator’s own subjectivity, biases, and personality ever divorced from his or her selections and exhibitions? Isn’t curating ultimately a *violent* act—but if so, could we imagine how such violence could be productive, and not destructive?<sup>6</sup>

The record remains unclear as to whether it was the de Menils or Robbins who arrived at the idea of inviting Andy Warhol to organize an exhibition. To Robbins, Warhol would have seemed a good fit for the RISD context, since the artist was himself a collector of Americana and folk culture; was an obsessive pack rat who recorded, kept, and stored everything; had brought industrial design into the realm of fine art; and was a role player par excellence—someone who could presumably inhabit the role of a museum curator just as easily as he did a paparazzo, a dandy, a rock music producer, an artist, a socialite, and so on. Robbins was also committed to finding a way to bridge the museum’s activities with the youthful energy of RISD’s student body, and Warhol could have struck him as a perfect way to give the museum a hipper and less “academic” image. All of the students surely knew Warhol’s name, as he had recently been in the news for having survived a gunshot by Valerie Solanas.

Still, it seems surprising that a very famous artist, recovering from a traumatic attack on his life, would accept an invitation by a somewhat provincial and unglamorous museum to organize an exhibition that included none of his own works. On top of that, Warhol had visited RISD once before, in 1967, to present his *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* spectacle, and it had been poorly received.<sup>7</sup>

A more convincing explanation for what might have motivated him to take on the project lies with Jean and Dominique de Menil. Several years earlier, back in Houston, the collectors had gotten to know a young art history student named Fred Hughes, and had taken him under their wing. They brought him on art-buying trips to New York and Europe, and he became what we would now call their art advisor. Hughes then met Warhol in 1967, and moved to New York to become the Fred Hughes we know well: the man who ran Warhol’s Factory, published his *Interview* magazine, managed his business affairs, served as his official gatekeeper, and, after his death, masterminded the ten-day Sotheby’s auction of his personal collection, in which a cookie jar sold for \$250,000. Hughes had maintained a close connection

5. *Ibid.*, 14.

6. To understand how Jean de Menil was prompted to ask the same questions in 1969 as those asked by professors of curatorial studies in 2015 is also worthy of some context. The de Menils were no ordinary collectors or philanthropists. They didn’t just buy art, they often commissioned it; and they didn’t just support museums, they founded them and either ran them themselves or hired innovative directors to do so. By 1969, they had commissioned Philip Johnson to design their home, supported Max Ernst’s first exhibition in the United States, commissioned Mark Rothko to make the Chapel, and collaborated with the pioneering curators Jermaine MacAgy and Pontus Hultén. They were, in short, exceptionally forward thinking and had a fine-tuned sensibility for unconventional exhibition strategies.

7. Andrew Martinez, “Raid the Icebox.”



to the de Menils in hopes that they would become significant collectors of Warhol's work, and he had succeeded: Dominique commissioned Warhol to do a film of sunsets (the reels appear in his film \*\*\*\* (Four Stars) [1967]) and to paint her portrait (Portrait of Dominique [1969]), and she had expressed interest in buying a series of early paintings directly from the studio.

This cast of characters and constellation of interests suggests a slightly more "crude" explanation as to why Warhol accepted the RISD invitation: Hughes, out of business savvy but also surely out of loyalty to his mentors, probably told him that doing the show would likely secure the sale of those early paintings and, even better, turn the grateful de Menils into generous and reliable patrons for many more years to come. Sure enough, by the end of 1969, the de Menils had one of the largest Warhol collections in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Warhol made six trips to Providence over the summer of 1969 to look through the collection. The art critic David Bourdon, his close friend, chronicled the visits for ARTnews (his text was also published in the exhibition catalogue):

*He approached a large wooden cabinet and opened all five doors to reveal the museum's impressive shoe collection—an orderly arrangement of hundreds of shoes of all sorts: ballet shoes, boots, men's dress shoes, children's shoes, sabots, ladies' dress shoes, most of them dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s. . . . Warhol wanted the entire shoe collection. Did he mean the cabinet as well? "Oh, yes, just like that."*<sup>9</sup>



Storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969

Just like that soon characterized his entire selection process: Warhol simply wanted to move upstairs what he saw downstairs, changing as little as possible. He noticed a series of paintings stacked against a wall with sandbags positioned to

8. In other words, it's worth underlining that Warhol—an artist infamous for embracing and manipulating his relationship to money, patronage, and the marketplace—took on this project out of an allegiance to a patron, not a museum director or curator.

9. David Bourdon, "Andy's Dish," in *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, 17.

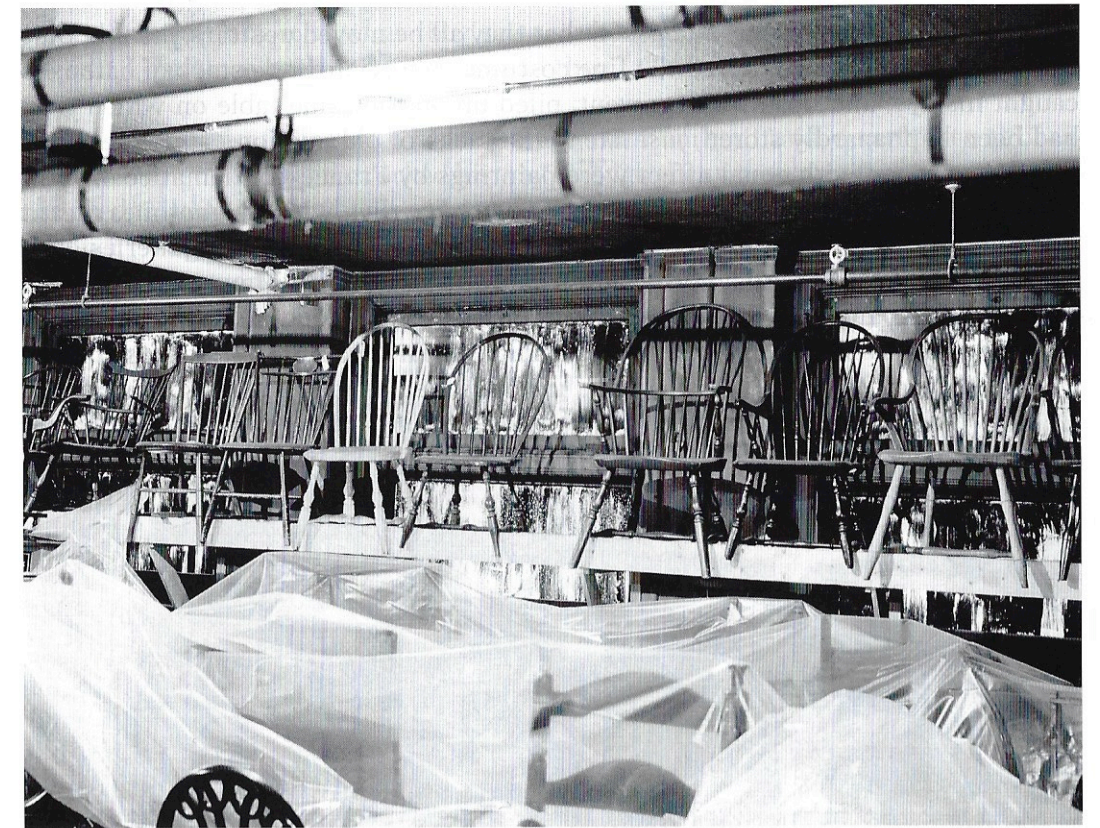


Storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969





Top: storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969  
Bottom: installation view of *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, 1970



Top: storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969  
Bottom: installation view of *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, 1970



prevent them from slipping, and asked that they all be moved upstairs, *just like that*, sandbags included. He ignored the fine costume collection, but a stack of hatboxes caught his eye, and upstairs they went, piled up on the same table on which they had been haphazardly stored, *just like that*. Stacks of old auction catalogues—*just like that*. Chosen with equal affect were paintings by Francesco Primaticcio, John Singer Sargent, or James McNeill Whistler—*just like that*, which sometimes meant pulling out entire metal storage screens and installing them in the galleries. The sculptures crammed in that corner there (a Degas, a Rodin, a Mayan head, among others), please, upstairs, huddled together *just like that*. A set of Windsor chairs perched in a row on a shelf—*just like that*. Robbins later admitted that those chairs, while technically part of the collection, had only been kept around as spare parts.



Storage at the RISD Museum at the time Warhol made his selections, 1969

In a general sense, it was those spare parts, leftovers, and misfits that Warhol was after. He chose the tten, the stained, the torn, the damaged, even the faked. He ignored the extraordinary craftsmanship of Rhode Island's eighteenth-century furniture makers and chose a little table whose surface was so warped it couldn't usefully hold anything. "It was the warp, he said, that gave the table its 'style.'"<sup>10</sup> After he found a *Mona Lisa*, he began looking for other copies, fakes, or forgeries, losing interest in the "real" thing.

Marcel Duchamp is a clear reference here, and Warhol was a great admirer. But if a readymade is also an exercise of *moving* an object from one place to another, getting any artist's touch out of the way and showing it *just like that*, it is done with objects that otherwise have no cultural or aesthetic value, such as a urinal or a bicycle wheel. At RISD, Warhol moved objects that had value already and didn't need the framing of a museum gallery to turn them into art. His gesture, in that sense, was a curatorial subversion more than an ontological one. He wasn't challenging the definition of art, but the definition of value and the politics of judgment. He was moving the spotlight away from what museum curators considered the "best"

10. Ibid., 18.

pieces and pointing it at what they seemed to think were the "average" ones—the ones that had once been acquired but had then failed to make the cut.

The artist (along with his entourage, museum staff, and, on at least one occasion, Dominique de Menil) worked his way through the storage rooms and gleefully announced "I'll take that!" whenever he saw something he liked, like an excited and spoiled shopper ("Pop art," he once quipped in an interview, "is liking things.")<sup>11</sup> He ended up with eleven categories: drawings and watercolors, paintings, sculptures, handboxes and hatboxes, baskets, ceramics, chairs, costume accessories (footwear), costume accessories (parasols and umbrellas), textiles, and wallpaper, ranging in dates from 1000 BC



Andy Warhol (right) with Dominique de Menil in the basement of the RISD Museum, 1969

11. Andy Warhol, interview by Gene R. Swenson, "What Is Pop Art?," *ARTnews* 62, no. 7 (November 1963): 26.

12. Those forty-four were, in alphabetical order, Alessandro Algardi, Giuseppe Baldighi, Frank W. Benson, Luca Cambiaso, Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, Paul Cézanne, Alonzo Chappel, William Merritt Chase, Arthur B. Davies, Herman Decker, Edgar Degas, Christopher Wilhelm Eckersberg, Lyonel Feininger, Jean-Louis Forain, Jan Gossaert, Robert Henri, John F. Kensett, Wilfredo Lam, Marie Laurencin, Silvestro Lega, James S. Lincoln, Eduardo Mac Entyre, Isaac de Moucheron, Joseph Paelinck, Maxfield Parrish, Bartolomeo Passarotti, Guy Pène du Bois, Rev. Matthew William Peters, Francesco Primaticcio, Waldemar Raemisch, Guido Reni, Diego Rivera, Hubert Robert, Auguste Rodin, Henri Rousseau, John Singer Sargent, George Seurat, Charles Sheeler, Florine Stettheimer, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alonso Miguel Tovar, Antonio González Velázquez, and James McNeill Whistler.

13. David Bourdon, "Andy's Dish," 20.

14. Dominique de Menil, "Foreword," in *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, 5.

(ceramics by mound builders in Arkansas) to 1966, with the vast majority dating from the nineteenth century. Of the paintings and drawings, most were portraits. Of the 404 works, all but forty-four were by unknown artists.<sup>12</sup> When she was told that Warhol wanted to exhibit the entire shoe collection, the museum's costume curator said, with the tone of a schoolteacher, "Well, you don't want it *all*, because there's some duplication." Upon hearing this, Bourdon recounts, Warhol "raised his eyebrows and blinked."<sup>13</sup>

Dominique de Menil, in her catalogue foreword, summarized the intentions of the project in incredibly flowery terms:

*Like a bewitched castle in the fairytales of old, the world of art lies asleep. To break the spell unusual gifts or thorough preparation is needed. Occasional good will is not enough. Sunday visitors roam museum galleries lost and bored. . . . If critics and scholars can open many doors, only seers and prophets open the royal gates. . . . For what is beautiful to the artist, becomes beautiful. What is poetical to the poet, becomes poetical. So let's visit museums with poets and artists.<sup>14</sup>*





Installation view of *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, 1970

In reality, Warhol's exhibition eschewed the beautiful and the poetic in favor of the factual and the deadpan. For the publication, he demanded that each item be catalogued as exhaustively as possible, with a complete caption, description, acquisition number, and provenance, whether it was an ancient jar or a Velázquez. There was no poetry in sight, only *information*, and the radical act of leveling that this implied. He was, in that sense, that seemingly impossible type of curator who sought to make as few decisions as possible and abstained from presenting any explicit judgment or opinion. He simply stood aside, got out of the way. As was always the case with Warhol, he worked like a machine, and a machine handles everything it comes across—what a subjective mind might consider good, bad, ugly, or sexy—as if it were exactly the same.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Warhol *did* make specific selections, and much of the collection was excluded from his exhibition, but by treating a Cézanne painting with equal weight as ragged Native American quilts, he implied that no qualitative criteria could possibly apply and that any other choice would have been equally arbitrary. The only distinction he sought to make was quantitative, as he wanted the catalogue to divide the works into two categories: single objects and objects in series. There were 193 pairs of shoes, 56 umbrellas or parasols, 23 jars and vases, 12 types of wallpaper, and so on. "Quality," as Vladimir Nabokov once put it, "is merely the distribution aspect of quantity,"<sup>16</sup> which echoes the lesson from Warhol's own work: the degree to which an object gets distributed is the only possible way to determine its quality.

Arranged by a storyteller with no story, a tastemaker with no taste, the museum was laid bare and viewers were left only with the rawness of the container itself. On view in *Raid the Icebox* were rarely seen treasures, but with the baby came the bathwater: storage equipment, sloppy maintenance protocols, dubious purchases, spare parts, leftovers—undigested, unadorned, and fully undressed—*just like that*.

Yet as a collector himself, Warhol also recognized that there is no such thing as an "ideal" or even "good" or "bad" collection, collector, or collecting institution. Any and all collections are inherently biased and incomplete, while still considered beautiful and extraordinary by their proud owners. In that sense, all collections are full of conviction and full of ignorance at the same time. Therefore, Warhol saw no purpose in making RISD's collection out to be an "excellent" or a "problematic" one, since neither was the case. Unlike, for example, Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992), a curatorial effort using the collection of the Maryland Historical Society, Warhol wasn't hoping to correct an injustice or point out institutional wrongdoing, but simply to flatten and nullify the playing field so as to render bankrupt the very notion of winners and losers.

In art historical terms, *Raid the Icebox* should not be filed under what would later be called "institutional critique" because it didn't criticize what a museum does and how it works, but happily celebrated it for what it is: a great place for great *stuff*, just like (and truly no different from) the thrift shop, the suburban garage, or the corner deli. Warhol valued each of those equally, and, therefore, behaved in one just as he would in another. The implication, however, is to neutralize anyone's (or any social body's) ability to discern and determine value. From the perspective of a museum curator, whose job is to seek out, identify, study, acquire, present, contextualize, and preserve works of art that represent the "best" of their type, period, or style, Warhol's gesture leaves him or her with no reason to exist.

15. The staff member in charge of the catalogue, RISD Museum chief curator Stephen E. Ostrow, found himself made into a machine—told to record only the facts about each work and not allowed to use his vast art historical training to produce any scholarship or insight—yet another indication that Warhol was succeeding in his attempts to be a curatorial irritant.

16. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 70.





Installation view of *Raid the Icebox I*, with Andy Warhol, Isaac Delgado Museum, New Orleans, 1970





Installation view of *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, Isaac Delgado Museum, New Orleans, 1970

With *Raid the Icebox*, Warhol took aim not at the institution of the art museum, but at those who control, determine, and evaluate its collection. He took aim, in the words of Stephen Koch, at "Middle Bohemia." Deborah Bright, in one of the most significant texts in the slim body of critical literature about *Raid the Icebox*, recalls Koch's succinct characterization of Warhol's axis of good and evil:



Installation view of *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, 1970

*Upper Bohemia* is the world of celebrities, money and café society (and traditionally the haunt of upwardly mobile youth on the make). *Lower Bohemia* is the world of outcasts and failures at the American success story celebrated by the Beats and populated by drag queens, hustlers, dancers, dope dealers, aspiring poets and actors, speed freaks, and other assorted fallen angels—those Warhol himself referred to as society's "leftovers." The social stratum Warhol particularly detested, Koch continues, was *Middle Bohemia* as it existed forty years ago, epitomized by the macho Cedar Bar scene and much of the vanguard art world of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In Greenberg's influential wake, artists and intellectuals discoursed endlessly and authoritatively about each discipline's self-critical values; disparaged popular culture as the opiate of the masses; and professed to judge quality on the basis of disinterested principle while vigorously disavowing their own subjective investments.<sup>17</sup>

Warhol had been a champion of the Upper and Lower for years: he painted Marilyn and Mao, and he surrounded himself with drug addicts, misfits, and others that society spit back out. While he participated in an elite celebrity culture, he loved bad taste, B movies, and underground culture. For Warhol, Lower Bohemia belonged with Upper, and he saw them as flip sides of the same coin.

In the context of *Raid the Icebox*, Upper was the de Menils, Lower was the basement full of rejected and damaged works of art, and Middle, naturally, were

17. Deborah Bright, "Shopping the Leftovers: Warhol's Collecting Strategies in *Raid the Icebox I*," *Art History* 24, no. 2 (April 2001): 281.



the museum director and curators, the self-appointed gatekeepers who, in Warhol's eyes, are the ones who could be made redundant. His project was to directly connect the Upper with the Lower and cut out the Middle. By doing so, he didn't just replace Robbins, but denied the value of so-called erudite judgment in its entirety.

In subsequent years, artists such as Hans Haacke or Andrea Fraser would work to expose how museums are guilty of financial conflicts of interest and power games. But Warhol, let's remember, had accepted to do the exhibition only because he was himself playing one such finance-related power game. His beef was not with those who make the payments, but with those who make the judgments.<sup>18</sup>

The exhibition had three venues, and, therefore, three different installations. Titled *Raid the Icebox I, with Andy Warhol*, it was on view at the Rice Museum in Houston from October 29, 1969, through January 4, 1970.<sup>19</sup> Warhol had asked that a tree be planted in front of the museum as part of the exhibition, and it remains there today even though the original building is gone. The show then traveled to the Isaac Delgado Museum in New Orleans (now the New Orleans Museum of Art), where it was on view for less than a month, from January 17 to February 15, 1970. Local press made note that the opening party began at ten o'clock in the evening and featured a hot dog vendor, and had visitors enter the building through the basement storage area. While little documentation and no precise floor plan exist, one newspaper article noted that "each of the 400 pieces will be shown in the same order in which Warhol selected them."<sup>20</sup>

The most comprehensive documentation comes from when the exhibition arrived back where it started, and was on view at the RISD Museum from April 23 to June 30, 1970. There, the Windsor chairs were shown in a black room with three bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The entire show was dimly lit so as "to give a cellar effect."<sup>21</sup> The main gallery featured an accumulation of crates against one central wall, next to a collection of paintings hung so closely that their gilded frames touched. In the center of the room was an immense, fragile-looking wooden storage rack with an assortment of packed, wrapped, and piled objects. A tall ladder stood in a corner, in front of another group of paintings. A third gallery included a series of metal screens—extracted directly from storage—with paintings hanging on them, while additional paintings leaned against each other on the wall, sandbags nearby. Some umbrellas hung from the ceiling while others were stuffed in with the shoes.<sup>22</sup>

The joke, for sure, was on us. Warhol was seeing how much he could get away with ("I want that tree!") and smiled as the museum directors ate it up ("Fine, we'll get a copy"), scattered sandbags all over their galleries, and led their patrons in through freight entrances at the openings.

Three reporters came to the press preview. Just like in New Orleans, visitors entered through the basement. Unlike at the other venues, however, this opening was marked by protests. Students waved banners and panhandled in the galleries, yelling, "The money's there, if you care," demanding an increase in financial aid for minority students—not an unusual sight at a time of such widespread political activism on college campuses. Warhol asked his companion Jane Forth to answer all of the press' questions on his behalf and left immediately after the press preview, leaving the six hundred people who attended the opening wondering where he was. All told, from the museum's perspective, the show suffered from a case of bad timing, robbing Robbins of the feather in his cap he was hoping for, and perhaps contributed to the fact that it ended up being the only installment of what had originally

18. It is important to note that Warhol delivered his critique of a museum's curatorial authority by himself working as a museum curator. Complicity was always Warhol's most effective (although much criticized) critical strategy. Another strategy occurring during this same period was the one adopted by Marcel Broodthaers, also a forerunner of institutional critique, who chose to invent and create his own institutional structure, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1972).

19. *Raid the Icebox* would not be the last artist-curated exhibition that Dominique de Menil would host. She also hosted John Cage's *Rolywholyover A Circus* in 1993. See Sandra Skurvida's essay in this volume.

20. James A. Perry, "Andy Warhol to Host Art Show at Delgado," *New Orleans States-Item*, January 14, 1970.

21. Jean Bergantini Grillo, "'Raiding the Icebox' with Andy Warhol," *Phoenix* (Cambridge, MA), April 30, 1970, 8.

22. The RISD Museum's files contain a condition report for the umbrellas. While some were marked as "frayed" or even "heavily frayed" before they left Providence for Houston, most were in "good condition." Upon their return to Providence in April 1970, none were marked in "good condition," but "all seams torn," "one panel of edge heavily ripped," "edge of one panel completely torn," or "ivory handle broken at one end."

been conceived as an ongoing series.<sup>23</sup> Retrospectively, of course, the opposite is true: *Raid the Icebox* has joined the pantheon of significant art historical events and is credited with being the first time an artist was tasked with curating an exhibition from a museum's collection.<sup>24</sup>

But more than being a simple mockery of curatorial authority, at stake in *Raid the Icebox* was a question about the relationship between display and secrecy. Michael Lobel, in another of the few critical texts about the show, asks the central question: "How can one display something and keep it hidden at the same time?"<sup>25</sup> To exhibit, by definition, implies a making-public, an unveiling, a putting-on-display. This exhibition, however, included none of Warhol's own work, which remained effectively hidden, yet somehow on display at the same time.

The paradox between presence and absence is central to Warhol's own work, and even though none of his art pieces appeared at RISD, the project was unmistakably Warholian. As an artist, he shows us the Empire State Building, but keeps it void of any information, narrative, or explicit meaning; he shows us screen tests of famous people, but keeps them mute; he gives us Elvis, Marilyn, and Mao—the most ubiquitous of public personae—but drowns out their individuality via sheer repetition and accumulation; he saves all the random things he uses every day and packs them into cardboard boxes, but then calls them *Time Capsules* and keeps them closed until after his death. If everyone will be famous, to use his own phrase, then no one can be. Since celebrity is also anonymity, concealment is just another form of exposure.

The same paradox between presence and absence applies to Warhol's private life. He had a very famous public persona but kept his personal life hidden—something Lobel connected to the artist's homosexuality and "the well-known opposition between public and private that is so essential to the construction of the closet of homosexuality."<sup>26</sup> It's true that for many, being gay can mean a life of "hidden pleasures," at least in the eyes of mainstream culture, and Lobel likens *Raid the Icebox* to the almost emancipatory impulse of opening a forbidden closet. But that's not quite the case, since Warhol himself remained hidden—he was opening someone else's closet, not his own.<sup>27</sup>

Lobel points to Warhol taking secrecy to an extreme, not only with regards to his sex life, but also to his home and his personal belongings. An avid collector, he filled most of his four-story townhouse on East Sixty-Sixth Street with objects bought from street vendors, shops, or auctions. He was the worst impulse shopper of all, completely seduced and oblivious at the same time. It was only after his death that his hoarding became public,<sup>28</sup> but his friends were probably not surprised. Andy "hid what he had," Jed Johnson recounted in the Sotheby's auction catalogue. "It was inconspicuous consumption. He'd wear a diamond necklace, but only under a black cotton turtleneck."<sup>29</sup> Instead, Warhol spent his life opening other people's closets. He made films about things people usually do in private, but never appeared in them himself, and he took society's most perverse (and usually hidden) realities, people, and desires and made them into fabulous superstars. In that sense, Warhol did to Danny Robbins what he always did to others but never to himself: he brought out his trash, revealed his perversities, exposed his irrelevance, and made him vulnerable. Warhol had warned us in his own autobiography, "I breach what I preach more than I practice it."<sup>30</sup>

In that sense, de Menil's initial question about the degree to which the artist's own "personality" exists within the works he chooses was a relevant one. One

23. The invitation card to the members' preview in Providence lists *Raid the Icebox* as the exhibition's title. Apparently the museum had already dropped the "I," implying that the exhibition was no longer slated to be the first of a series.

24. Today, major museums around the world regularly invite artists to curate collection shows.

25. Michael Lobel, "Warhol's Closet," *Art Journal* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 46.

26. *Ibid.*, 44.

27. Warhol did open his own closet several years later, for the exhibition *Andy Warhol's "Folk and Funk"* at the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 1977, where he displayed his own collection of folk art objects such as quilts, American furniture and ceramics, and cigar-store Native American figures. These were also shown as if still in storage: piled and stacked in casual disarray.

28. The six volumes of the Sotheby's 1988 auction catalog "The Andy Warhol Collection" contain an eerie echo of the different categories Warhol identified in the RISD basement nearly twenty years earlier: Art Nouveau and Art Deco; collectibles, jewelry, furniture, decoration, and paintings; jewelry and watches; American Indian art; Americana and European and American drawings and prints; and contemporary art.

29. Michael Lobel, "Warhol's Closet," 48.

30. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 144.



reviewer of the exhibition wrote that Warhol had "created one huge and sprawling Pop masterpiece,"<sup>31</sup> indicating that his presence was not only felt, but that the exhibition's success relied on it and that the result was a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—an artwork in its own right. Daniel Buren later charged Harald Szeemann with the same accusation, in the context of the latter's Documenta 5, but Warhol, as a fellow artist, seemed to survive the problem of curatorial "violence."<sup>32</sup> It should be noted, however, that except for an Eduardo Mac Entyre Op art painting, Warhol chose no works by living artists, and so never contended with the issue straight on—perhaps precisely for this reason. One art critic described the exhibition in those explicit terms, as "the dead visited by the living."<sup>33</sup> Robbins himself admitted that "there were exasperating moments when we felt that Andy Warhol was exhibiting 'storage' rather than works of art, that a series of labels could mean as much to him as the paintings to which they refer. And perhaps they do, for in his vision, all things become part of the whole and we know that what is being exhibited is Andy Warhol."<sup>34</sup> But Robbins almost certainly didn't realize that what was also being exhibited was his museum's curatorial authority, and that the show was a dismissal of everything he stood for—a caricature of the notion of selection itself, where the stage is given to all that curators like to edit out.

In fact, *all* of de Menil's initial questions proved to be relevant ones. With *Raid the Icebox*, Warhol effectively exposed the fundamentally contingent nature of judgment and value by making an important exhibition that also avoided scholarship at all costs. He surely had a good laugh as he watched registrars carefully condition-report torn umbrellas. But while Warhol sought to cut out "Middle Bohemia's" self-conscious and authoritative exclusiveness, he succumbed to his own personal obsessions—to seduce the Upper by championing the Lower—and made an exhibition that spoke to the same fantasies and contradictions that informed his own work and that lay hidden within his own lifestyle. Robbins (and his profession) may have been mocked and paraded for all to see, seemingly without him ever truly realizing it—the victim of a perfect con—but Warhol also did Robbins (and his profession) a great service: by occupying the role of curator himself, he ultimately contributed to enriching and expanding the conversation around what an exhibition can be.

31. Alberta Collier, "Delgado's Icebox Raiders Will Include Andy Himself," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 14, 1970, 6.

32. Not all reviews were favorable. Many critics complained that the show was a mindless mess.

33. Christopher Andreae, "An Exhibition—'Just Like That,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 15, 1969, 15.

34. Trevor Wyatt Moore, "Raid the Icebox: An Exhibit Selected by Andy Warhol," *Ave Maria*, December 19, 1969, 20–21.