

feature





Sara Greenberger Rafferty finds a Pantry and Some Pantyhose in the Smithsonian Collection.

[Shana Lutker](#) in conversation with [Sara Greenberger Rafferty](#) | October 26, 2020 TAGS CENTRAL EUROPE 20TH CENTURY



Julia Child's Kitchen on display at the National Museum of American History

Paul Cushing Child

[Sara Greenberger Rafferty](#), a former Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow, discovers a connection between pantry design and the founding of [MoMA](#), reads through 50,000 [Phyllis Diller](#) jokes, and art directs the photo documentation of the comedian's undergarments.  

To celebrate [MHz Foundation's](#) collaboration with the [Smithsonian Open Access](#) initiative, we asked artist [Shana Lutker](#), one of MHz Curationist's Advising Editors, to introduce the new Smithsonian Open Access collections to artists and talk with them about what they found. Shana and the other artists in this series are all former [Smithsonian Artist Research Fellows](#) (SARFs). The SARF residency invites artists to spend a month or two in the Smithsonian Archives in Washington DC, exploring a topic of their choice and expanding their artistic research.

For the fourth interview in the series, she spoke with [Sara Greenberger Rafferty](#) on April 10th, 2020. The two artists have been in a number of exhibitions together since the mid 2000s, including the [Whitney Biennial 2014](#), and are good friends.

Shana was in Los Angeles and Sara was in New York City. Both were at home in response to government ordered lockdowns to quell the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). Their conversation was also before [George Floyd's killing](#) in police custody was the catalyst for mass protests for racial justice and against police violence across the US.

As we publish this now, months into these crises, most schools, museums, and libraries are closed, and the value and necessity of [Open Access](#) initiatives is all the more clear.

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Shana Lutker: Tell me about what you found in the Smithsonian online archive.

Sara Greenberger Rafferty: I started searching around and wondered what the Smithsonian might have about a pantry, perhaps related to World War II or times of rationing. I was curious if there was anything in the States like the [Frankfurt kitchen](#) style designs for pantries or pantry items that would be emblematic of American culture.



Frankfurter Küche im MAK Wien [Frankfurt kitchen in the MAK Vienna]

81inden Frankfurter Küche, Christos Vittoratos

Source: Wikimedia Commons

I found a whole selection of “[pantry boxes](#).” They’re sort of Shaker style, bent plywood boxes with a buckle and a lid. I see them a lot at tag sales. But as objects, they didn’t really appeal to me. The thing that did appeal to me was [this 1936 plan by the architect Donald Deskey for a pantry for Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and David Milton](#). As you may know, [Abby Aldrich Rockefeller](#) was one of the main founders of the [Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\)](#) in New York. There were three women that founded MoMA and she was

one of them. It was interesting to find myself in New York looking online at this plan for a New York pantry. It looks like the plans were drawn up in 1936, which was about seven years after MoMA was first initiated in 1929. It wasn't a museum with its own architecture at that point, it was housed in a number of temporary locations in the first years. But it's also notable that MoMA was established right after the stock market crash of 1929. The birth of that institution lays alongside the austerity that allowed for the entrenchment of [modernism](#). And then we head straight into World War II.

"It's a hybrid between a financial crisis and a wartime crisis, like rationing during World War II. Of course, there's never been anything exactly like this. You can't really help, you can't go out there. You're at home, in your kitchen."

I am thinking a lot about this stuff in our current moment. After living through the 2008 financial crisis, the situation we are in now ([an economic shutdown resulting from global pandemic of Covid-19](#)) is a hybrid, at least from what I can tell. It's a hybrid between a financial crisis and a wartime crisis, like rationing during World War II. Of course, there's never been anything exactly like this. You can't go out there. You're at home, in your kitchen.

I thought it was interesting to find this pantry design for these luminary, affluent New Yorkers. I did a little more searching, and concluded the pantry is probably for the daughter of Abby Rockefeller (also named Abby Rockefeller) and her husband. An ideal pantry which, of course, is probably for the servants of these people.

Anyway, that's how I came to choose this.

And it looks like a really nice pantry! I'm off social media right now, but I can still tell, based on [The New York Times articles, that pantries](#) are trending on social media. People are posting about organizing your pantry and how to make food out of pantry staples, or [how to make masks](#) or [PPE](#) out of what you have on hand. I liked going back in history and seeing what the pinnacle of kitchen home preparedness would be in terms of architecture for a downtown New Yorker.

I wonder who's living in that apartment now?

SL: I suppose we could figure it out.

SGR: It's a major building, [One Beekman](#).

SL: It might take some detective work.

"... architecturally, what do you do to prepare? How do you build a space so that you can live in moments like this?"

SGR: I feel like that's up your alley. For all you know an aging Surrealist might have had a whiskey in that pantry you know?

SL: Yes, and 1936 was when all the Europeans were there, having fled fascism. Maybe [Duchamp](#) had an affair in that pantry.

Are the rest of the designs for this apartment also in the collection?

SGR: Yes, I believe it's a [Cooper Hewitt](#) asset. I looked up the name and the architect and there's tens of thousands of documents from that architect. But I appreciated that this was the only thing about pantry architecture. In any of these collections, that I could

find. It's the only thing that was keyed with the word "pantry" and it called out to me. There might be other gems in there. There are definitely kitchens—the [Museum of American History famously has the kitchen of Julia Child](#).

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Julia Child's Kitchen on display at the National Museum of American History

Paul Cushing Child

Source: Wikimedia Commons

SL: I like the decisiveness with which you found this drawing, and how it instantly expands into thinking deeply about our current moment. I do think the word "pantry" is activated in a new way right now—whether you're on social media or not.

We're also gaining new access on our screens to interior domestic spaces—through all of these zoom meetings, or seeing [Anderson Cooper's living room on CNN](#), for example.

SGR: A pantry also sounds so luxurious. It seems like such an extraneous thing. But, architecturally, what can you do to prepare? How do you build a space so that you can live in moments like this?

SL: Yes. Exactly. Many domestic spaces are not designed with the stay-at-home lifestyle in mind. Especially in New York City.

Can you talk about the research that you did during your SARF residency?

SGR: Yeah. That also had an interesting tie into the political moment. That's probably my nature.

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Phyllis Diller portrait

Allen Warren

Source: Wikimedia Commons

As a SARF, I was researching all of the [joke files that Phyllis Diller donated to the Museum of American History](#).

Upon arrival in DC, I got my security clearance and my fingerprints taken. They issued me a card and gave me keys that allowed me access to the room where Phyllis Diller's jokes were stored. The Museum is like a hospital, all hallways and doors. It was a windowless space, with cabinet after cabinet of objects. I was just in there, looking, opening these drawers and reading all these 3x5 inch index cards.

It was the summer of 2016. [No Place to Hide](#), the Glenn Greenwald book about Edward Snowden, had just come out. The revelations about mass surveillance and the [NSA](#) still felt new, and it was the very end of the [Obama era](#). Right across the street, they were building the [Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture](#), but it wasn't open yet. It was the middle of the election season. The bus stop that I got off at was the post office that was being turned into the [Trump hotel](#). Every day, when I got off the bus I saw a banner on the building site that said, "Coming in 2016 TRUMP." And then I would go in with my security badge to the Museum of American History, where no one cared what I was doing, because I had the badge. I was doing my own thing, making a video, taking pictures, and making scans of all these documents. It really made me laugh. I felt like I was the first one to read this bulk collection of governmental data, years after it was collected.

"... there was just a trove of jokes sitting in a random closet in a random room, and that's where I spent my time, reading. There are 50,000 cards."

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Since my fellowship, [the Museum did a crowdsourcing thing to digitize the collection](#). So now it's more accessible. But in 2016, there was just a trove of jokes sitting in a random closet in a random room, and that's where I spent my time, reading. There are 50,000 cards. It was literally absurd data, that really had no national security implications, but nonetheless, I needed my clearance to get there.

SL: Are any of those jokes now available online through the Smithsonian Learning Lab search?

SGR: I can look now. [typing.]

SL: What are you searching for? What did you type in?

SGR: "[Phyllis Diller](#)." Yes, the [joke chest](#) is in there! A lot of the jokes are there, her costumes, a lot of her wigs, and the objects that I studied at the Smithsonian.

The first thing that I thought to look for was not the jokes, but something else, a pair of pantyhose. I directed a photoshoot of a bunch of her objects in the Collection, including [these tights](#).

SL: You art-directed a photo shoot as part of your fellowship?

SGR: Yes. There were no photographs of many of the objects that I was looking at, including these things of Phyllis Diller's, as well as costumes belonging to [Steve Martin](#), and [Rodney Dangerfield](#). I documented the photoshoot itself, and that is included in the video that I made in 2017. But I never got copies of the photos files.

SL: So you were leaning over the shoulder of the sanctioned Smithsonian photographer.

SGR: Yes. They didn't allow me to officially photograph the objects, but they did allow me to art direct the photoshoot. I was there, asking the photographer, "Can you photograph it like this?" I also photographed and filmed the photo shoot. In the end, that was the only thing that I had.

SL: But now they're here in the archive.

SGR: Some of them. And they stick out in the archive—you can see the way that the majority of photographs of her other things don't look like the ones that I shaped, which are very flat and direct.

SL: I'm looking at [the pantyhose](#) and I can tell it's your photograph.

SGR: Yes, those are the ones.

SL: And [the red underwear with the beautiful clean white background](#).

SGR: That's me. I pinned them up. I liked the idea that pantyhose and the underwear on the white background felt like evidence. It felt really charged. A pantyhose without a leg in it is an intense object. That's why I wanted to photograph those in that way.

SL: Thanks so much, Sara. I think our work here is done.

[Visit a collection of things from Phyllis Dillers' archive at the Smithsonian's Learning Lab.](#)