SWEET DREAMS, BABY!

Life of Pop, London to Warhol

May 31–September 8, 2013

Albright-Knox Art Gallery

Once you "got" Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.[1]

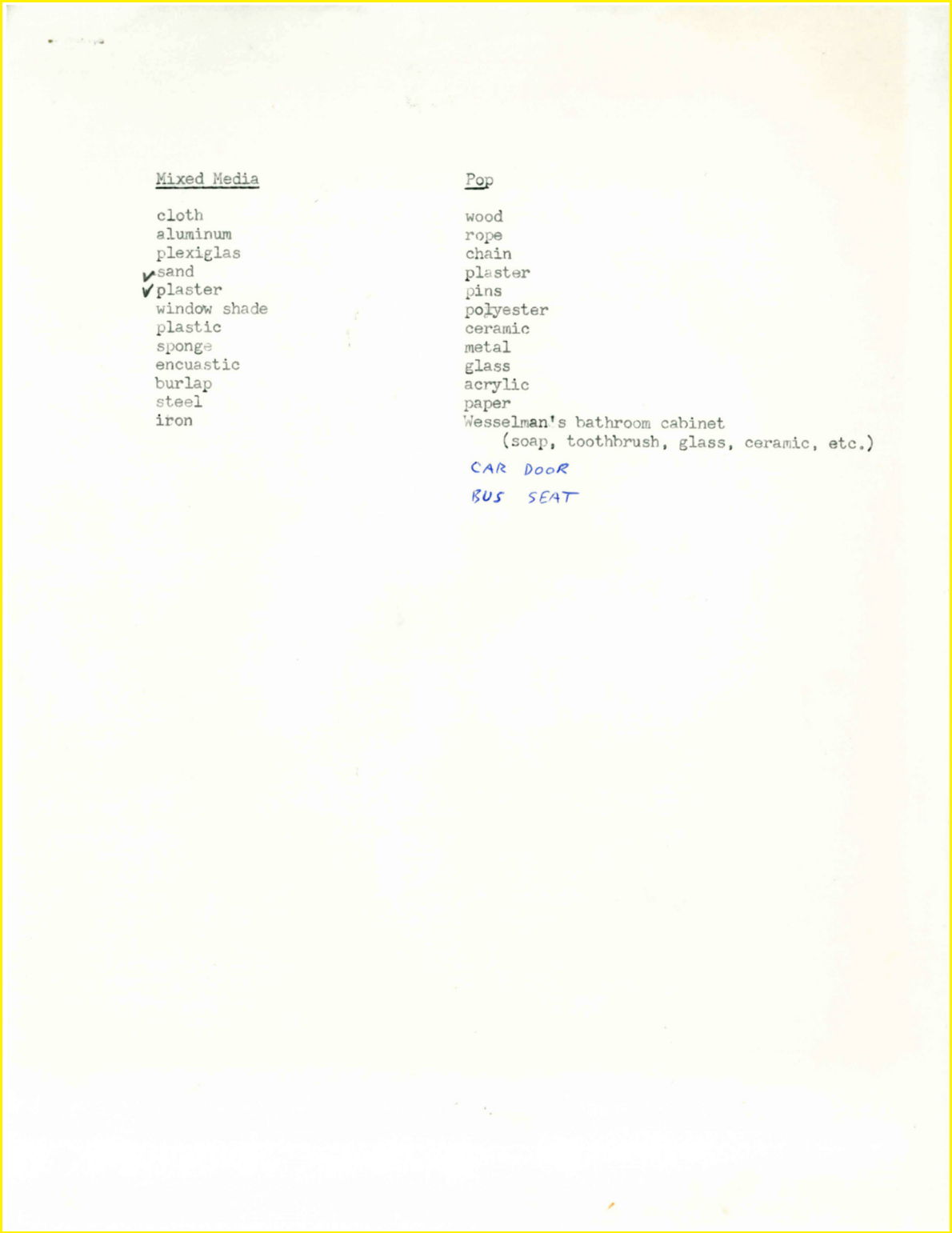
– Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)

In 1962, Andy Warhol was one of the most successful commercial artists of his time living and working in New York. That same year, on May 11, he was featured—along with Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923–1997), Wayne Thiebaud (American, born 1920), and James Rosenquist (American, born 1933)—in an article in *TIME* Magazine called "The Slice-of-Cake School." Warhol, the only artist photographed for the piece, is shown in his studio eating a bowl of soup. The article goes on to casually mention that he is currently working on a series of "portraits" of Campbell's soup cans. The series, which exploded with notoriety shortly thereafter, was a subject Warhol explored throughout his career—from a single can to multiple stacked cans (figure 1). Warhol would go on to become a household name, synonymous with a kindred group of American artists who rejected the introverted gestures of Abstract Expressionism in favor of more accessible imagery gleaned from the world around them. But Pop art, as we now know, is more complicated when seen in a larger cultural context, and in an international one. Warhol himself was a complex, elusive, and enigmatic trendsetter. And out of his Silver Factory came works that were ambivalent, deadpan, and sometimes sinister. Even to Warhol, life and art were not just fame and flowers.

The 1965 book *Pop Art*, the first written on the subject and its groundbreaking approach, set out to analyze the artists, their sources, and those who collected their work. In the book's foreword, Samuel Adams Green, then director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, places Pop art in the moment, exclaiming, "Indeed, this movement has already made its influence felt, significantly altering the value of aesthetics. Art is no longer an escape from, but is an appreciation of, reality."[2] Pop artists, with their emphasis on

figure 1

ANDY WARHOL (American, 1928–1987). *100 Cans*, 1962. Casein, spray paint, and pencil on cotton, 74 x 54½ inches (188 x 138.4 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1963.



Mixed Media

cloth
aluminum
plexiglas
✔sand
✔plaster
window shade
plastic
sponge
encuastic
burlap
steel
iron

Pop

wood
rope
chain
plaster
pins
polyester
ceramic
metal
glass
acrylic
paper
Wesselman's bathroom cabinet
(soap, toothbrush, glass, ceramic, etc.)
CAR DOOR
BUS SEAT

figure 2

A list generated during the organization of the exhibition *Mixed Media and Pop Art*, 1963. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Archives.

literalism, recognizable imagery, and mechanical methods of production, encapsulated the world through a lens that is far more than just an appreciation of, or a commentary on, reality. By incorporating subject matter from everyday life, they were able to build a critical, and discerning, dialogue around the very fabric of society from which they took their visual cues. Against the backdrop of 1960s America, Pop artists explored more than just household objects and the growth of consumerist culture, tackling darker issues such as gender bias, politics, racism, segregation, and war. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery was at the forefront of these developments, collecting a core group of works by Pop art's pioneers—Lichtenstein, Marisol (Venezuelan and American, born France, 1930), Claes Oldenburg (American, born Sweden, 1929), Rosenquist, Warhol, and Tom Wesselmann (American, 1931–2004). Albright-Knox Art Gallery Director Gordon M. Smith, who, along with benefactor Seymour H. Knox, Jr., perused Pop's many perspectives, proposed that Pop art was not just a fad, but was instead a pivotal art movement that reinvented traditional materials and introduced new ones. Smith organized *Mixed Media and Pop Art*—on view at the Gallery from November 19 to December 15, 1963—a landmark exhibition that presented a comprehensive overview of artists working in mixed media, as well as those engaged in what Smith described as "one of the latest modes of expression, so-called Pop art."[3]

Comprising works from the Albright-Knox's Collection complemented by major works on loan to the museum, *Mixed Media and Pop Art* presented seventy-nine paintings and sculptures identified as either "mixed media" or "Pop art." The distinction, documented in the Gallery's archives in a typed list that Smith himself may have generated (figure 2), suggests that the work's materiality supersedes its subject, style, and thematic orientation. Plaster, plastic, and burlap are listed as materials preferred by mixed-media artists, while other materials, such as wood, glass, and acrylic, are listed under Pop. Today, the definition of Pop art has become far more complicated. Though it does have a correlation with artists working in assemblage, or what was then defined as "mixed media,"[4] the Pop practice of making two- and three-dimensional objects out of found materials actually followed a period when the movement was dominated by painting. Abstract Expressionism breathed new life into painting with drips, pours, and sweeping brushstrokes, and it was also the medium of choice for Pop artists, who went on to introduce new methods and materials, such as silkscreen, metallic paint, and the attachment of found objects to the canvas. The notion that Pop was a complete break with Abstract Expressionism, or anything that had come before, is now outdated. Instead, Pop can be placed within a much larger context of experimentation during a time in which Abstract Expressionism was in decline and artists were poised for change.[5]

The historical precedents for Pop art are conceptually rooted in modernism leading up to the mid-1950s. At the turn of the twentieth century, Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973) and Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963) introduced non-painterly elements to works on paper and, later, to canvases. Bits of newspaper, cardboard, and even chair cane transitioned out of the real world and into the hands of artists who utilized them as mediums. Early Dada artist Kurt Schwitters (German, 1887–1948), best known for collages he called *Merz Pictures*, created abstract compositions from the rubbish he scavenged from the streets of post–World War I Germany. The impetus to garner and collage visual elements of everyday life becomes an important aspect of Pop art. However, whereas *papier collé*[6] is inherently two-dimensional, with images culled from varied sources to create new ones, the art of

figure 3

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (American, 1925–2008). *Painting with Red Letter S*, 1957. Oil and collage on canvas, 50½ x 52 inches (128.3 x 132.1 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1959.

assemblage is more ambitious in its three-dimensional extensions. During the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925–2008) began creating his own version of assemblage art that he called Combines. Rauschenberg, who once commented, "There is no poor subject . . . . A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric,"[7] had a no-holds-barred philosophy toward even the most unlikely of materials.

Considered, along with Jasper Johns (American, born 1930), to be one of Pop art's pioneers, Rauschenberg held the notion that painting was a hybrid. Deferential to the gestural bias of Abstract Expressionism, he was experimental in his creative process. His Combine works—large-scale, free-standing or wall-mounted mixed-media pieces created between 1954 and 1964—represented a groundbreaking approach to painting that offered a much larger group of artists a new direction. Rauschenberg's experimentation with painting came at a time when Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School, still had a strong hold on the scene. Rauschenberg had his foot partially in the New York School, allowing him to dig into the past with a more forward-looking approach to the painterly process. Rauschenberg saw beauty in everything. He brought cast-off materials into the viewer's space by choosing recognizable items—pillows, signs, neckties, and even personal effects—arranging them in a way that allowed them to be read spontaneously and analytically. In *Painting with Red Letter S*, 1957 (figure 3), the first of the artist's works to enter a public collection, Rauschenberg applied a mixture of fabric and paper collage surrounded by areas of thickly applied, and sometimes running, oil paint to form a repetitive pattern of squares and rectangles. Beyond the exuberance of the paint's application are much subtler moments in which beauty, nostalgia, and the found object bleed through. The faint hint of a paisley pattern jockeying for the foreground or a lipstick-red *S* turned on its side, becoming more deliberate gestural sweep than cuneiform, are the definitive moments in which Rauschenberg's process combines the gestural and the familiar. His interdisciplinary interests, such as theater, dance, and technology, were informed and enriched by art. From the theatrical presence of his Combines to his co-founding of Art and Technology, a non-profit organization established to help promote cross-collaboration between artists and engineers, Rauschenberg's interests were as varied as Pop's origins.

Pop's conceptual origins can be traced to England, specifically to an ad-hoc collective known as the Independent Group. Socially and politically conscious, this gathering of writers, artists, and architects came together in 1952 and met regularly until 1955 through informal seminars, held at the London-based Institute of Contemporary Art, featuring critical discourse centered on contemporary culture's status quo. No part of visual culture was off-limits as source material, especially the multiple aspects of American popular culture. The group discussed, analyzed, wrote, assembled, and exhibited work inspired by sources such as science-fiction literature, Hollywood tabloid magazines, automobile design, and the paintings of Jackson Pollock. The critic and curator Lawrence Alloway (British, 1926–1990), a

member of the Independent Group who organized an early exhibition of American Pop art for New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1963, is credited with developing the term *Pop art*. In his 1958 essay "The Arts and the Mass Media," Alloway describes "popular mass culture" and his theories on the "fine art–pop art continuum": "a proposed arrangement of mass and fine art in a continuum as opposed to the traditional, hierarchical organization."[8] In the early 1960s, he went on to actually define the movement by its name in reference to a new style of art born out of the influence of popular culture and centered on the power of imagery.[9]

The ability of imagery to shock and provoke, or to offer contemplation, appealed to the group of artists who formed the core of the Independent Group—Richard Hamilton (British, 1922–2011), Nigel Henderson (British, 1917–1985), John McHale (Scottish, 1922–1978), Eduardo Paolozzi (Scottish, 1924–2005), and William Turnbull (Scottish, 1922–2012). Their culturally responsive works collectively represent a fascinating prelude to American Pop. Although the group is often associated with Pop, even referred to as *Brit-Pop*, its socio-political context vastly distinguishes it from its American counterpart. Streetwise and savvy, with a predilection for Utopian posturing, the group rose like a phoenix from the ashes of post–World War II Great Britain. Paolozzi's *Japanese War God*, 1958 (figure 4), is an extraordinary three-dimensional assemblage that exemplifies the myriad concepts the group sought to articulate. Fragile, yet in a confrontational stance, the figure is part myth, part human, and part rudimentary robot wounded by commercialism, the media, and the spectacle of politics. Like other figurative sculptures Paolozzi executed throughout the 1950s, this work is made of found objects and scraps that he assembled and cast into bronze. Attracted to all aspects of the printed image—such as scientific charts and diagrams, magazine advertisements, wallpaper designs, comic books, and botanical drawings—Paolozzi offers a visual aesthetic that articulates the group's engagement with, and subversion of, traditional aesthetic boundaries.

On both sides of the Atlantic, Pop meant different things to different people. Artists brought their own sense of style to a new way of making art. Aside from its social context, what further defines Pop art in a new light is the varied, and extremely personal, methodologies of its most prominent contributors. Whereas Marisol takes a more intimate, autobiographical approach, Rosenquist sought out the surreal in the everyday and repackaged it into a complex, abstract iconography. Lichtenstein, on the other hand, an active and exhibiting abstract painter throughout the 1950s, evolved his imagery into something far more unsettling. In the latter part of the decade, he began to sketch images of cartoon characters he found on bubblegum wrappers. He got the notion to paint one at a larger scale and, liking the result, went on to create a series of works utilizing comic-book-style images sourced from children's stories, product packaging, catalogue advertisements, and the like. His intent, however, is not as easily revealed as his sources. Instead, his perception and interpretation of the world recedes into a murkier, more disparate view of society. He was not so much interested in painting the world around him, but in capturing what he thought was a decreased sensitivity to imagery, social issues, and ultimately one another, that permeated modern culture.

figure 4

EDUARDO PAOLOZZI (Scottish, 1924–2005). *Japanese War God*, 1958. Bronze, 64½ x 22 x 13 inches (163.8 x 55.9 x 33 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1960.

figure 5

ROY LICHTENSTEIN (American, 1923–1997). *Sweet Dreams, Baby!* from the portfolio "11 Pop Artists, Volume III," 1965. Screen print, from an edition of 200, 37½ x 27½ inches (95.3 x 69.9 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Gift of Tom Wesselmann, 1972.

One of Lichtenstein's earliest prints, *Sweet Dreams, Baby!* (figure 5) incorporates his signature use of Benday dots, a thick, black outline, and a highly charged, primary color palette to depict a violent altercation. Because the artist has given us no context, no pre- or post-action narrative, we are only left with a snapshot of a moment that results in the onomatopoetic *Pow!*, leaving us to wonder, Why? Where? and Who? Like Pop, Lichtenstein's work was born from an intricacy of ideas. *Sweet Dreams, Baby!* serves as a visual benchmark for the Pop art movement. To see Pop as a clean break from all that came before is much too simple an explanation, because what we now know presents a far more intricate, multifaceted narrative—one that is an extension of art history, yet still resonates with relevance. Although a thorough curatorial consideration of Pop's origins and meaning has been slow to emerge, we now know that Pop is much more than an image-consuming, image-generating machine. Instead, Pop's development is evolutionary. It was not a revolution against painting, gesture, and emotion, but a widened embrace of these ideals, offering further stylistic interpretations. Pop art was, and still is, far more avant-garde than kitsch, and in the more than fifty years that have passed since "The Slice-of-Cake School" first appeared in *TIME* Magazine, much more is known about the cultural, social, and political impetus behind the creation of these works and the artists who made them. Raw, gritty, and at times as confrontational as a punch in the face, Pop art is a crash course in experimentation, change, and social awareness, a musing on the rise, and the decline, of American popular culture.

HOLLY E. HUGHES
Curator for the Collection

1 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 39.

2 Samuel Adams Green, foreword to John Rublowsky, *Pop Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), np.

3 Gordon M. Smith, *Mixed Media and Pop Art* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1963), 3.

4 It was at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York that the Buffalo-born dealer first brought together installation and assemblage art in the 1960 exhibition *New Media—New Forms*, which featured works by Jim Dine (American, born 1935) and Claes Oldenburg. The Albright-Knox often acquired works from Jackson's gallery either through purchase or as gifts from Seymour H. Knox, Jr., who was also a patron of Jackson's.

5 Donna DiSalvo and Paul Schimmel, *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–1962* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

6 This method is similar to collage; however, with *papier collé* the artist pastes materials such as newspaper or cloth into a painting, rather than onto a piece of paper.

7 Dorothy Canning Miller and The Museum of Modern Art, *Sixteen Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 58.

8 Sylvia Harrison, *Pop Art and the Origins of Modernism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54–59.

9 Ibid.

About the Exhibition

Featuring more than fifty works in all media, *Sweet Dreams, Baby! Life of Pop, London to Warhol* is the first comprehensive survey of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's expansive holdings by the pioneers of the Pop art movement. The exhibition offers an in-depth look at rarely seen works from the Gallery's Collection, while providing a historical analysis of Pop's influences, key contributors, techniques, themes, trends, and legacy. Beginning with select works by artists associated with the British Independent Group, the exhibition also traces the bridge from Abstract Expressionism to Pop's explosive, colorful, and witty portrayals of the modern world.

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