

# WHITNEY

## *Sinister Pop*

November 15, 2012 – March 31, 2013



## Teacher Guide Pre- & Post-visit Materials

**Education**  
[whitney.org/K-12](http://whitney.org/K-12)

## About This Teacher Guide

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### How can these materials be used?

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

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### Which grade levels are these materials intended for?

These lessons and activities have been written for Elementary, Middle, or High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

### Learning standards

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills

<http://www.p21.org/>

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Links to National Learning Standards.

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area.

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards.

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, grades K-12.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

### Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. How did you use them? What worked or didn't work?

Email us at [schoolprograms@whitney.org](mailto:schoolprograms@whitney.org).

For more information about our programs and resources for schools, educators, teens, and families, please visit [whitney.org/Education](http://whitney.org/Education).

### Cover image:

William Eggleston, b. 1939. *Untitled*, (c. 1972, printed 1980) from the portfolio *Troubled Waters*.

Dye transfer print, Sheet: 15 15/16 x 19 15/16in. (40.5 x 50.6 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Marcia Dunn and Jonathan Sobel 2009.97

© Eggleston Artistic Trust, courtesy of Cheim and Read, N.Y.C.

# At the Museum

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## Guided visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the *Sinister Pop* exhibition, on view at the Whitney from November 15, 2012 through March 31, 2013. To schedule a visit, please visit [whitney.org/education/k12](http://whitney.org/education/k12). Guided visits are hour-long thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

## Guided Visit Themes

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We created these themes in order to foster thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

### Artist as Observer (K-12)

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

### Artist as Storyteller (K-12)

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

### Artist as Experimenter (K-12)

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

### Artist as Critic (6-12)

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

## Working with Museum Educators

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through the end of the school year.

### **Self-guided visits**

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment.

**For more information, please visit [whitney.org/education/k12](http://whitney.org/education/k12).**

**We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Whitney!**

## About the Exhibition

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*Sinister Pop* is an inventive new take on the Whitney's rich and diverse holdings of Pop art. Although Pop art often calls to mind a celebration of postwar consumer culture, this exhibition focuses on Pop's darker side, its distortion and critique of the American dream.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the well-worn gestures of Abstract Expressionism were pushed aside in favor of imagery plucked directly from America's exploding commercial and media culture. While this development—which came to be known as Pop art—is often understood as a celebration of postwar prosperity, *Sinister Pop* presents a darker look at this period of time. As evident from the works in the exhibition, this period witnessed cataclysmic upheaval in American society brought on by burgeoning consumerism, transformations in race relations, women's rights, urban and suburban life, and the escalation of the Vietnam War.

*Sinister Pop* presents many of Pop art's most prominent masters—Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Ed Ruscha, and Andy Warhol, among others—alongside their now less-known contemporaries in order to offer a more nuanced and expansive understanding of one of twentieth-century art's most revolutionary and influential moments. The exhibition also emphasizes the diversity of formal developments across mediums, as artists embraced new synthetic materials, ready-made motifs and objects, and photomechanical processes, as well as pioneering a renaissance in printmaking. Although generally acknowledged within Pop's canon only as source material or mechanical means, photography in this exhibition reveals many artists' growing interest in the complete melding of commercial culture and everyday life, as ordinary people and places conjure the protagonists and settings of filmic scenes.

While the word sinister connotes evil, it also suggests the ominous, foreboding, or threatening. These qualities are expressed throughout the exhibition in constellations of works that expand upon the themes of domestic alienation, consumer culture and excess, politics, celebrity, voyeurism and the objectification of women, and dystopic landscapes. Taken together, they elaborate an anxious, skeptical, and at times contradictory picture of an era in which the invention of new art forms dovetailed with a fundamental transformation of American society.

Co-curated by Donna De Salvo and Scott Rothkopf, *Sinister Pop* is the fourth in a series of six exhibitions aimed at reassessing the Whitney's collection in anticipation of its move downtown in 2015. Unfolding in chronological order over a two-year period, these exhibitions reconsider pivotal moments of American art within new frameworks and contexts.

# Pre-visit Activities

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Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and themes in the *Sinister Pop* exhibition. You may want to introduce students to at least one work of art that they will see at the Museum. See the **Images and Related Information** section of this guide on pages 11- 21 for examples of artists and works that may have particular relevance to the classroom.

## Objectives:

- Introduce students to the more sinister aspects of Pop art
- Introduce students to the themes they may encounter on their museum visit such as “Artist as Observer” and “Artist as Critic.”
- Make connections to artists’ sources of inspiration such as everyday objects, found materials, and current events and issues.
- Ask students to reflect upon what inspires them when they create works of art.

## 1. Define Sinister

Ask your students to define the word “sinister.” Sinister is defined by Merriam Webster as “singularly evil or productive of evil” or “presaging ill fortune or trouble.”

The artists in this exhibition are all responding to different aspects of life in the 1960s and 1970s. While the word sinister connotes evil, it also suggests the ominous, foreboding, or threatening. Although Pop art often calls to mind a celebration of postwar consumer culture, this exhibition focuses on Pop’s darker side - its distortion and critique of the American dream, the Vietnam War, and contemporary politics. Taken together, these works present an anxious, skeptical, and at times contradictory picture of an era in which the invention of new art forms dovetailed with a fundamental transformation of American society.

Ask students to consider the celebratory as well as “sinister” aspects of life today in America. What do they embrace and celebrate about contemporary culture and politics? What aspects do they find troubling?

*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003. Also available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

## 2. Artist as Critic: Media and Images

Print out or project Andy Warhol’s work, *Nine Jackies* (page 16).

Ask students to describe the different expressions shown in each row of images. How does the woman’s expression change? Why do they think the artist wanted to repeat each image three times?

Andy Warhol was interested in how the mass media produced and distributed images. He created *Nine Jackies* after the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The work uses three images, each depicted three times, of Kennedy’s wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, known as Jackie. Taken from *Life* magazine, the images depict (from top to bottom) Jackie smiling in the limousine before the assassination; her grieving during

## Pre-visit Activities (continued)

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Kennedy's funeral; and her stunned expression during the swearing-in ceremony for Lyndon B. Johnson after the President's death. After sharing this information with students, ask them if their ideas and opinions of the work have changed. Why or why not?

Ask your students to think about a significant event in recent history. What images were used to depict the event? How were these images used in the media? Was there a particular image they saw over and over again? Did the images tell a story or describe a certain emotion?

### 3. Artist as Observer: Snapshot of Everyday Life

Print out or project William Eggleston's *Untitled* work on the cover of the teacher guide.

William Eggleston's snapshot style of photography draws attention to everyday life and objects, including the trivial and the mundane. His photographs often present a familiar but unconventional view of life in America. This photograph by Eggleston captures a familiar domestic scene—a freezer filled with frozen food. Ask students to compare the freezer photographed by Eggleston to the freezer in their homes. In what ways are they similar? How are they different? Ask students to imagine the person or family that uses this refrigerator and create a character sketch either through drawing or writing.

This photograph is the first of fifteen works from Eggleston's series titled *Troubled Waters* (1980). What might be troubling or uneasy about this image? Other photographs in this series include a sparsely decorated living room, a gas station that appears closed, and an alley piled with discarded cardboard boxes and trash bags.

### 4. Artist as Experimenter: Materials and Process

Print out or project Paul Thek's work, *Untitled* (page 15).

Ask students to describe the object they see in the box. What does it look like? Ask students to imagine where it came from and how it ended up in this box.

Let students know that the object inside this Plexiglas box may look like a piece of glistening, raw meat, but the meat is not real! The artist Paul Thek (1933–1988) crafted this "meat piece" using beeswax colored with oil paint. He sculpted the wax, adding materials such as nylon thread for hair and tiny glass beads to achieve a globular texture. Thin layers of DayGlo paint and glossy resin make the meat look juicy.

Using materials such as paint, clay, wire, and beads, ask students to transform an everyday item into a menacing object! What colors would they change or add to make it look scary? How would they create textural surfaces with sinister qualities?

## Pre-visit Activities (continued)

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### 5. Artist as Experimenter: Mysterious Package

Print out or project Christo's work, *Package on Hand Truck* (page 13).

Ask students what they think might be in this package wrapped onto a hand truck. Do they think the hidden contents are playful, puzzling, or threatening? Why?

*Package on Hand Truck* is part of a sculpture series entitled *Wrapped Objects and Packages*, which is intended to be shown indoors. Christo carefully nipped and folded the workmanlike brown canvas and tied it to a hand truck using an ordinary household rope. His intention is to only suggest—but never specify—the contents within.

Ask students to imagine seeing this sculpture in different settings or environments. What would their responses be if the sculpture was placed in the corner of the classroom, at the entrance to the school, in a loading dock, or in a subway car? What actions would they take in the various settings? You may ask students to tell their stories by writing a descriptive essay or creating a comic strip.

# Post-visit Activities

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## Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the *Sinister Pop* exhibition.
- Have students further explore some of the artists' approaches through art-making and writing activities.

### 1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? What did they learn about the artists? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

### 2. Artist as Observer: Part of Our Time

Print out or project Lee Bontecou's work, *Untitled, 1961* (page 11).

Allow students time to look carefully at the image. Ask students to list words that come to mind when they look at this work. In groups of three or four, have students share their words with each other. Then ask them to share their lists with the class. What are the words that come up the most? Is there a pattern you notice?

Bontecou has said that her art responds to the historical moment in which it was created: "I wish my work to represent or to be a part of my time. . . I want them to be things and facts inside us—from war to the wonders of the space age." For middle and high school students, ask them to draw from what they have learned in Social Studies class about American history, politics, and culture in the 1960s, and discuss how Bontecou's work represents that time period. Ask them to be specific and use visual evidence found in the work to support their opinions.

Ask students to think about our present time. What objects and facts represent us and what would they reveal about our time in history? Ask students to create a time capsule using objects found around them in the classroom, at home, and/or in their neighborhood.

Maxwell L. Anderson. *American Visionaries: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001, 55.

### 3. Artist as Critic: Responding to War

Print out or project Peter Saul's work, *Saigon* (page 14).

Peter Saul created *Saigon* in response to the atrocities of the Vietnam War, a war that he and many other Americans felt was unjustified. Using exaggerated, almost cartoonish imagery, Saul depicts the stereotypes and violence that consumed this era of American history. What are some of the stereotypes that Saul portrayed? Why might he have included them in this painting?

## Post-visit Activities (continued)

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In 2008, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter described Saul as "one of our few important practicing history painters." After looking at this painting, discuss the quote with your students. What does it mean to be a history painter? How has Saul tried to capture that era of our history? Is he successful? Why or why not?

Ask students to think about two contemporary conflicts—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What are the different opinions people have on these wars? How have they been portrayed in the media or in pop culture? If your students were to create a history painting about these wars, what would they show?

Holland Carter. "Provocateur: The Peter Saul Manifesto." *New York Times*, August 15, 2008.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/16/arts/design/16saul.html>

### 4. Artist as Experimenter: Changing Spaces

Print out or project Vija Celmins's work, *Heater* (page 12).

When Vija Celmins was a graduate student at UCLA, she started a series of paintings that depicted objects in her studio in as much detail as possible. *Heater* was one of these paintings. Celmins painted the heater in a highly realistic fashion, and then isolated it against a field of grey, separating it from its physical context.

As a class, look closely at this image, and think about where this object might be found. What kind of place is it? What does it feel like? Imagine yourself in the space. What do you see around you? How would you describe this place to a friend?

Have your students look around your classroom and choose an object they would like to focus on. Take a photograph of the object using a digital camera. Using Photoshop or iPhoto, have students manipulate the background of the image. What changes did they make? How did these changes alter the mood or meaning of the photograph?

### 5. Go Digital

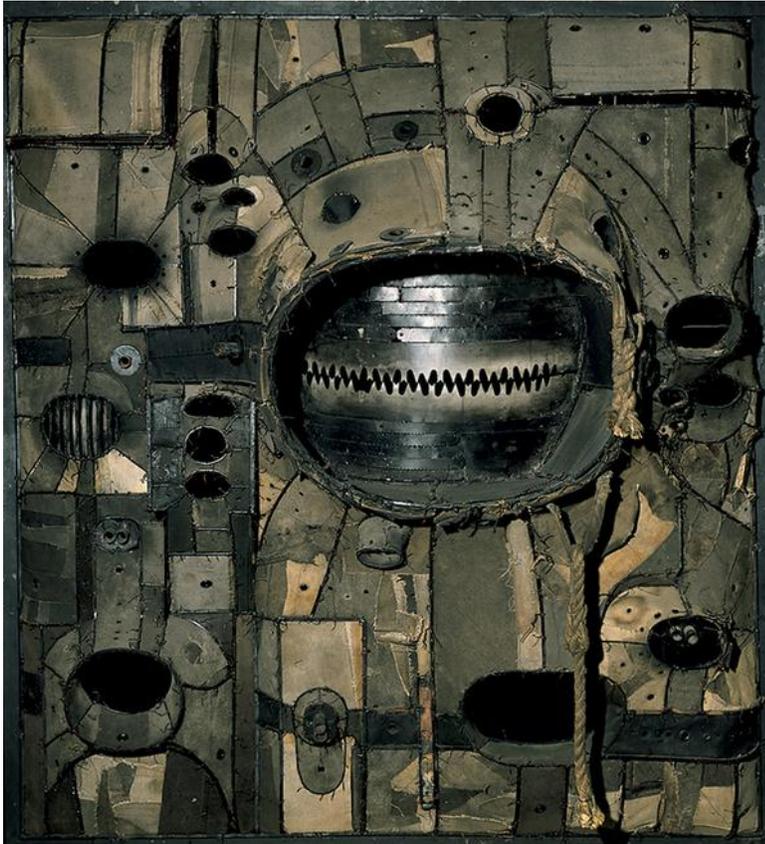
If computers and the Internet are available to you and your students, use online resources for student projects and assignments. Make a blog (<http://www.tumblr.com/>) or Flickr set (<http://www.flickr.com>) for student work. Include the assignment instructions and use the text and image features for student work. For student work, you may want to use Blurb, (<http://www.blurb.com>), a site for creating and producing books.

## Images and Related Information

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We have included some selected images from the exhibition, along with relevant information that you may want to use before or after your museum visit. For larger images to use in your classroom, please visit [whitney.org/collection](http://whitney.org/collection). You can print out these images or project them in your classroom.

### Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, 1961



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, 1961. Welded steel, canvas, wire, and rope, 72 5/8 x 66 x 25 7/16 in. (184.5 x 167.6 x 64.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 61.41

© Lee Bontecou

Between 1959 and the mid-1960s, Lee Bontecou made large-scale, metal-and-canvas wall reliefs. These hybrids of painting and sculpture were created by welding a metal armature and then using suture-like stitches to attach fragments of canvas with copper wire. Bontecou scavenged most of the canvas from bags and conveyor belts discarded by the laundry below her New York studio. She also included other found objects, such as grommets, saw blades, and rope. These objects are configured into a complex assemblage that hangs on the wall like a painting but projects more than two feet into the room. The visual allusions generated by this configuration range from destructive man-made devices to organic and geological structures: riveted airplane engines, celestial black holes, gun barrels, volcanoes, human orifices, and the segmented shells of insects. Bontecou has said that her art responds to the historical moment in which it was created: "I wish my work to represent or to be a part of my time. . . I want them to be things and facts inside us—from war to the wonders of the space age."

Maxwell L. Anderson. *American Visionaries: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001, 55.

Vija Celmins, *Heater*, 1964



Vija Celmins, *Heater*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 47 7/16 x 48 in. (120.5 x 121.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee 95.19

For more than forty years, Vija Celmins's art has been concerned with a meticulous representation of objects and the natural world, devoid of human presence. This early painting, *Heater*, was made when Celmins was a graduate student at UCLA and engaged in a methodical depiction of the contents of her studio, recording the physical condition of the objects and the space around them with precise attention to detail. Painted in a highly realistic fashion, the heater appears to radiate warmth from its glowing coils. Isolated against a field of grey, the heater is separated from its physical context, rendering it neutral and almost abstract.

## Christo, *Package on Hand Truck*, 1973



Christo, *Package on Hand Truck*, 1973. Metal, tarpaulin, wood, and rope, 51 15/16 x 24 1/4 x 29 in. (131.9 x 61.6 x 73.7 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albrecht Saalfield 74.74  
© Christo 1973

Christo and his late partner Jeanne-Claude are renowned for their wrapped buildings, bridges, and environmental surfaces. Since 1958, Christo has worked independently on a series entitled *Wrapped Objects and Packages*, which is intended to be shown indoors—including *Package on Hand Truck*. Unlike the large-scale public projects he has produced with Jeanne-Claude, whose interiors are often known, if not visible, the nips and folds of the workmanlike brown canvas tied with ordinary household rope in *Package on Hand Truck* are carefully designed to suggest—but never specify—the contents within. Instead, Christo emphasizes the work's poverty of means, signified by the tarpaulin and common rope as well as by the hand truck, which replaces the noble pedestal of traditional sculpture and insists on the mobility of the object. Our response to it strikes no political chord (as their public projects often do); instead, it sounds a personal note, asking the viewer to decide whether the hidden contents are playful, puzzling, or threatening.

**Peter Saul, *Saigon*, 1967**



Peter Saul, *Saigon*, 1967. Enamel, oil, and synthetic polymer on canvas, 92 3/4 x 142 in. (235.6 x 360.7 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 69.103

At first glance, the Day-Glo palette, lively composition, and exaggerated figures of Peter Saul's *Saigon* seem cartoon-like, even whimsical. But the painting offers a biting critique of American policy during the Vietnam War. In a war-torn environment that includes uprooted palm trees, a river of blood, and a spiked American bomb, Saul depicts a voluptuous Vietnamese girl who has been trussed and labeled "Innocent Virgin." A couple of American GIs are shown drinking Coca-Cola as they rape, dismember, and torture the girl's family. The chaos is heightened by Saul's rendering of the figures, including a headless, three-star officer in blue, two blasted Vietcong guerillas, and a nightmarish profusion of body parts. In the canvas's lower corners, old-fashioned Oriental-style letters spell out "White Boys Torturing and Raping the People of Saigon"—emphasizing Saul's condemnation of the war's hypocrisies.

[Watch an interview](#) on whitney.org with Peter Saul where he discusses *Saigon*.

**Paul Thek, *Untitled* from the series *Technological Reliquaries*, 1966**



Paul Thek, *Untitled*, 1966. Wax, plexiglass, Formica and melamine laminate, and rhodium-plated bronze, 14 x 15 1/16 x 7 1/2 in. (35.6 x 38.3 x 19.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 93.14

This untitled work is from a group of sculptures that Paul Thek termed *Technological Reliquaries*, or “meat pieces.” In Catholic tradition—which Thek drew on frequently—reliquaries are sculptural containers intended to contain relics of the saints, often parts of their bodies. Thek responded to that tradition by creating Plexiglas boxes filled with naturalistic beeswax replicas of hunks of meat and body parts. In *Untitled* (1966), a replica of a severed limb oozes a fatty, marrow-like substance from its hollow opening. Short “hair” follicles spring from its waxy “skin.” Longer lengths of hair-like threads extend through holes at the top and side of the yellow-tinted Plexiglas case—a cross between a vitrine and an incubator—that is set on a Formica and plated bronze base. Discussing the unnerving juxtaposition between the boxes and their contents, Thek remarked: “inside the glittery, swanky cases. . .Formica and glass and plastic—was something very unpleasant, very frightening, and looking absolutely real. . .the hottest subject known to man—the human body.” For Thek, this grotesque assemblage of organic and inorganic forms involved a response to the carnage of the Vietnam War, and an expression of fear that the scientific technology which fueled the war would suppress the human spirit.

Richard Flood, “Paul Thek: Real Misunderstanding,” *Artforum*20, 1981, 48-53.

## Andy Warhol, *Nine Jackies*, 1964



Andy Warhol, *Nine Jackies*, 1964. Synthetic polymer and silkscreen ink on canvas, 59 1/2 x 48 1/4 in. (151.1 x 122.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President 2002.273

© 2009 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In 1964, Andy Warhol appropriated newspaper photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy for a series of dramatic paintings in which he depicted moments before and after the assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy. The top row of *Nine Jackies* features a smiling Jackie, the President's face barely visible to her left. This image stands in juxtaposition to the shot that appears in the painting's middle row, taken during the ceremony two days later in which Kennedy's flag-draped coffin was carried to the Capitol, and to the bottom row picture, snapped as a grief-stricken Jackie stood by Lyndon B. Johnson's side during his swearing-in ceremony, shortly after Kennedy's assassination. To produce this painting and the others in the series, Warhol photo-mechanically transferred the images of Jackie onto silkscreens, which were then printed onto canvas. The works combine two of his signature themes—celebrities and fatal disasters—yet these closely cropped, voyeuristic newspaper pictures differ from the glossy publicity stills that the artist typically used as the basis for his work. Now embedded in our national consciousness, the images of a bereft widow in the hours and days after her husband's death reveal emotions that were then rarely seen in public. By using photographs from before and after the event, Warhol created a modern history painting in which the murder of a president is unseen yet tragically present.

## About the Artists

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### Lee Bontecou, b. 1931

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, Lee Bontecou attended the Art Students League of New York from 1952 to 1955, where she studied with the sculptor William Zorach before traveling to Rome on a Fulbright scholarship. While studying in Rome in 1957, Bontecou began making drawings with soot. She drew on the canvas with a welding torch, creating dark, otherworldly abstractions. “Getting the black. . . opened everything up. It was like dealing with the outer limits. . . I had to find a way of harnessing it.” Black continued to play a part in her work after her return to New York, even as she transitioned into large-scale, sculptural forms. Bontecou lived above a laundry, and she began using discarded pieces of material and machines from the laundry in her sculpture. Discolored canvas came together with twisted wire and worn-out conveyor belts, creating volcanic shapes with deep black craters. The resulting assemblages were mounted on the wall, even though they protruded out several feet. “I want to get sculpture off the floor and on the wall,” she declared.

Bontecou garnered considerable critical attention for her first solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli gallery in 1960. She continued to work on the wall sculptures, adding materials from hardware and army surplus stores. She also cultivated an interest in airplanes, including aerodynamic elements in her work. In the 1970s, she experimented with Styrofoam, using it to sculpt plastic fish and plants, which she then placed in a vacuum press. During this period, Bontecou began to work in relative isolation in her western Pennsylvania studio. She taught art at Brooklyn College for over twenty years and continued to produce art, but stopped exhibiting her work publicly. After recovering from a serious bone marrow disease, she began exhibiting her work again in 2003. That year, the Hammer Museum at UCLA mounted a career retrospective of the artist’s work, with half of the pieces coming from her unseen cache.

Mona Hadler, Lee Bontecou’s “Warnings,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America, 1945-59, (Winter 1994) 56.

Jo Applin, “‘This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object’: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void,” *Art History*, Association of Art Historians, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 482.

### Vija Celmins, b. 1939

Physical reality is at the core of Vija Celmins’s art. Based on careful observation and executed with meticulous detail, her work is inspired by perceptual experiences. The surfaces of her paintings and drawings are composed of thousands of individual strokes and gestures. By divorcing her subjects from their narrative contexts or physical surroundings, she creates highly detailed compositions that simultaneously seem abstract.

Born in Riga, Latvia, Celmins and her family fled war-torn Europe to settle in Indiana in 1948. While studying at John Herron School of Art in Indianapolis, and later at the University of California, Los Angeles, Celmins explored a variety of styles. Abstract Expressionism was in vogue, and in an interview she admits to spending a couple of years trying to make her brush strokes “meaningful.” Celmins could not reconcile the emphasis on gestural action with the stillness of the canvas. “I started pulling back into myself and painting what I was seeing,” she said. While at UCLA, she found inspiration in the everyday objects in her studio—a hot plate, a desk lamp, a fan, and a heater. She began painting with detailed realism, but with a minimum of color, using tonal gradations of gray. Isolated on the canvas, the subjects take on a haunting anthropomorphic

## About the Artists (continued)

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character; they seem to be portraits as much as still lifes. Celmins's early works came to be associated with the Minimalist painters of the 1960s, because her dispassionate, precise approach reflects their aversion to emotional engagement.

Whether through oil paint, charcoal or pencil drawing, printmaking, or sculpture, Celmins's work is dedicated to exploring natural forms. Often derived from photographs that lack horizon lines and other orienting cues, her works comprise such subjects as night skies, desert landscapes, and ocean surfaces, empty of human presence and extending past the frame into eternity. Celmins is fascinated by spider webs, and has explored their intricate structures in her more recent work.

Vija Celmins interviewed by Chuck Close at her New York loft on September 26 and 27, 1991, 5.

### **Christo**, b. 1935

Born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff, Christo grew up in Bulgaria and escaped through Prague to Western Europe in 1957. In Paris in 1958, he met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon, known simply as Jeanne-Claude. They collaborated for more than fifty years, until her death in 2009, making monumental environmental sculpture around the world. Christo and Jeanne-Claude immigrated to New York in 1964 with their son, Cyril Christo, born in 1960.

Beginning in 1961 with their first outdoor work, *Dockside Packages, Cologne Harbor*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude worked together. Their works were credited to "Christo" until 1994 when the outdoor works and large indoor installations were retroactively credited to "Christo and Jeanne-Claude." Other indoor works from 1958 onward are credited to "Christo." In the 1950s, Christo began to create sculptural works by wrapping found objects, usually in fabric. These eventually gave way to temporary sculptures, for which he and Jeanne-Claude used fabric to envelop or intervene in environments at notable sites, including Central Park in New York, the Reichstag in Berlin, the Pont Neuf in Paris, and a wide swathe of ranchland in Northern California. The sale of early work from the 1950s and 1960s, combined with the sale of preparatory drawings for their projects, were the sole source of funding for the artists' large, costly outdoor works, which often demanded convoluted bureaucratic processes to obtain the required planning and permits. They accepted no sponsorships or grants, believing that it is better to remain unencumbered. "Our work is a scream of freedom," said Christo.

In an interview, Jeanne Claude stressed the importance of ephemerality in their work: "[F]or 5,000 years, artists have tried to input into their works of art a variety of different qualities. . . But there is one quality they have never used, and that is the quality of love and tenderness that we human beings have for what does not last. . . That quality of love and tenderness, we wish to donate it, endow our work with it as an additional aesthetic quality. The fact that the work does not remain creates an urgency to see it. For instance, if someone were to tell you, "Oh, look on the right, there is a rainbow." You will never answer, "I will look at it tomorrow."

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Interview, January 4, 2002  
<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/eyeLevel.shtml>

Ibid.

## About the Artists (continued)

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### **Peter Saul**, b. 1934

Peter Saul lampoons politics, culture, and “good taste” in his surreal, deliberately impolite images painted in vivid, cartoony colors and rubbery shapes. Born in San Francisco, Saul studied art at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) from 1950 to 1952 and received his BFA from Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis, Missouri in 1956. During his last year as a student at Washington University, he decided to begin making paintings from the photographs he saw in *National Geographic* magazine. In an art world dominated by Abstract Expressionism, this idiosyncratic decision resolutely set Saul apart from his peers. While visiting Paris in 1958, Saul saw a copy of *Mad Magazine*, which further inspired the development of his energetic visual style and interest in political satire. In his paintings, he drew from these magazine sources as well as the imagery of Walt Disney, even incorporating Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and other cartoon figures into his work. Saul has stated that rendering images in a cartoon style is the “modern way to draw, any other style is copying from the last century.”

From 1956 to 1964, Saul lived in Holland, Paris, and Rome in relative isolation, though he did meet his long-time dealer Allan Frumkin and the Surrealist Roberto Matta during this period. In the mid-1960s, he returned to California and began making paintings prompted by the Vietnam War. Saul described his decision to delve into the heated politics of the war: “I was thumbing through *Time* magazine in a motel room in Ohio when suddenly I remembered one of the rules of modern art is you’re not supposed to have any political content (for no good reason, some nonsense about a lot of artists doing it in the 30s, therefore no one is supposed to do it again). How could I resist breaking such a stupid rule? I began immediately. . . The more I thought about it, the more I protested the war.”

In the 1970s, Saul embarked on a series of pictures based on well-known works by masters such as Jacques-Louis David, Willem de Kooning, and Pablo Picasso, recasting these works in his own satirical style. In the 1980s, Saul moved to Austin, Texas, where he taught and painted for nearly twenty years before settling in New York. He continues to make hilarious, often gruesome and deliberately offensive works based on a range of subjects, from politics and popular culture to self-portraiture.

Michael Duncan, *The Spectacular Wrath of Saul: Peter Saul’s History Paintings*, from an unpublished, recorded interview by Victoria Lautman, WBEZ, Chicago, 1996, 61.

Northern Illinois University Artist Series, 1980.

### **Paul Thek**, 1933-1988

Born in New York, Paul Thek studied briefly at the Art Students League and Pratt Institute in 1950 and at the Cooper Union from 1951 to 1954. Thek left New York in 1963 for a year-long sojourn in Europe. He traveled to Sicily with photographer Peter Hujar, who was a close friend and lover; their visit to the Capuchin catacombs near Palermo would have a profound impact on Thek’s art. Upon returning to New York, he began creating works that reflected his experiences in Italy as well as the rituals and symbols of his Roman Catholic upbringing. Most important among these were a group of sculptures that he called Technological Reliquaries, or “meat pieces.” These meticulously constructed objects adhered to the same basic structure: a hyper-realistic piece of glistening, bloody meat sculpted in wax and paint and housed in a geometric, Plexiglas vitrine.

## About the Artists (continued)

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In 1967, the Stable Gallery in New York held a groundbreaking show of Thek's now-lost work, *The Tomb*, which included a life-size effigy of the artist laid to rest in a pink ziggurat. The effigy—which Thek and fellow artist Neil Jenney had dressed in a suit jacket and jeans and painted a pale pink—was surrounded by goblets and other funerary items. Soon after the exhibition, Thek left for Europe again, where he was invited to mount one-person exhibitions in several major museums. He turned these opportunities into art-making experiences, enlisting an evolving group of artist-friends to create immersive installations that he called *Processions*. These ephemeral environments incorporated elements from art, literature, theater, and religion, often employing fragile substances, including wax and latex. Thek's *Processions* included two surrogates for himself, one popularly known as the “Dead Hippie” (which had first been presented in *The Tomb*) and the other a cast of his entire body covered with fish, called *Fish Man*.

In 1976, Thek moved back to New York and turned to making small, sketch-like paintings on canvas and newspaper, although he continued to create environments in key international exhibitions. With his frequent use of highly perishable materials, Thek accepted the ephemeral nature of his art works—many of which were dispersed or disposed of. By the 1980s, almost nothing of his work had been acquired by institutions, and he had fallen out of favor with the New York art world. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1987, Thek continued to work until his death the following year, producing a number of works that meditate on mortality, bearing inscriptions such as “Dust” or “Time.”

### **Andy Warhol, 1928-1987**

A pivotal figure in the development of Pop art, Andy Warhol was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. The son of Eastern European immigrants, he was born Andrew Warhola in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1949, after graduating from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh with a degree in pictorial design, Warhol moved to New York and began a career as an award-winning commercial artist and illustrator. Among his most memorable projects of this period were his advertising campaigns for the I. Miller shoe company and his window displays for the department store Bonwit Teller. During the 1950s, Warhol underwent a personal transformation; he had cosmetic surgery on his nose, began wearing a silver-gray hairpiece, and changed his last name to Warhol.

Warhol's experiences with commercial art significantly informed his development in the early 1960s, as a Pop artist rendering images of consumer goods, celebrities, and even disasters in painted form. By 1962, Warhol developed a screenprinting technique to transfer photographic images to canvas, a method that gave his paintings a mechanical, almost assembly-line feel. His habit of stacking identical images in vertical or horizontal columns across his canvases also suggested the repetitive processes of mechanical reproduction and the scrolling frames of film strips. As his career flourished, his studio, nicknamed the Factory, became a hotbed of countercultural activity, with Warhol extending his reach into music (through work with the Velvet Underground) and filmmaking. Inspired by the movie stars he adored, Warhol created his own stable of “Superstars” who he featured in his films. He also experimented with fashion, creating paper dresses with images from his paintings.

By the late 1960s, Warhol himself was a household name. A pivotal moment in his life and career occurred in 1968, when Valerie Solanas, a disgruntled Factory denizen, shot and seriously injured him. Unnerved by the experience, Warhol nevertheless kept on working, continuing to make paintings and commissioned portraits (usually with substantial help from studio assistants) and

## About the Artists (continued)

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venturing into publishing with his influential magazine, *Interview*. He also became a fixture on the New York social scene, partying at such glamorous venues as the venerable nightclub Studio 54. During the 1980s, Warhol became important for a younger generation, befriending artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf. Warhol's health, however, remained fragile following his shooting; he died in 1987 from complications following routine gallbladder surgery.

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This Educator Guide was prepared by Dina Helal, Manager of Interpretation and Interactive Media; Liz Gillroy, Senior Assistant to School Programs; Heather Maxson, Manager of School, Youth, and Family Programs; and Ai Wee Seow, Coordinator of School and Educator Programs

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