Warhol By the Book
THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
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Andy Warhol, whose work was inspiration to some and provocation to others, was an author and a bookmaker, as well as an iconic artist. His bibliophilic nature is being explored in Warhol By the Book at the Morgan Library & Museum through May 15. Some one hundred and forty objects represent more than eighty Warhol publications, as well as dozens of projects that were either unique or never made it to print. Through them, one gains a renewed sense of the energy and drive of one of the twentieth century’s most renowned artists, as well as a perhaps previously unknown understanding of the breadth of his vision and sensibility.

Curator Sheelagh Bevan described Warhol’s illustration work as “incredibly energetic, full of frivolity and pastel colors, delightful and alive.” A sense of wit and play suffuses many of the works, but so does a serious involvement with literature. Bevan, who co-organized the show with the Warhol Museum, where a different version ran, highlights Warhol’s bookish side. He wasn’t solely making artists’ books, though he created some of the most innovative and striking. Across several decades, he was developing ideas with poets, collaborating with musicians, paying homage to authors, writing texts of his own, spoofing cookbooks, making books for children, and writing his own experimental novel.

Giving a hint of Warhol’s diversity of thinking and vision, the exhibition starts with two of his charming, pastel-toned shoe sketches, from a series of advertisements done for the I. Miller shoe company. Selections from À la recherche du shoe perdu, his whimsically titled Proust–referencing series, ran weekly in the New York Times in the mid-1950s. Between the two offset lithographs is a portrait by Edward Wallowitch, a friend and frequent collaborator, picturing Warhol’s face ringed by (empty) high heels. Like many of the works in the show, it’s witty, but with a kick. Below them is a vitrine with an open copy of one of Warhol’s better-known books, the self–published A Gold Book, from 1957, in an edition of one hundred. In it, the line between Warhol’s commercial work and his fine art blurs. Imagery from one finds its way to the other, and the book had dual purposes as well—Warhol used them as Christmas gifts for friends, but also as promotional material. A page of gold and black shoes is on view.

Warhol’s involvement in the 1960’s New York poetry scene is documented with Ron Padgett’s Two Stories for Andy Warhol (“C” Press, 1965) for which Warhol designed the cover. John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, Allen Ginsberg, and Padgett were among the poets who posed for Warhol’s Screen Test series (1964–66), documented in Gerard Malanga’s Screen Tests/A Diary (1967) with a cover by Warhol.

A 1988 lithograph on metalized polyester film advertising The Andy Warhol Diaries (1989) glistens with a mirrored background, and plays with the ideas of the viewer and the viewed, as one sees glimpses of oneself reflected back through pink and orange patches of Warhol’s own face. It opens the main gallery arresting-ly. Opposite it is a sketch of James Dean in acrylic on paper titled Ads: Rebel Without a Cause (James Dean), from c. 1985. It shows the sure, practiced hand of an accomplished draftsman, reminding us that while Warhol toyed with many media, he didn’t need gimmicks. Lifting and copying images from the world around him was his response to the growing role of mass media as a definer, producer, and purveyor of culture. While some might dismiss Warhol’s recreating existing images as “lazy,” curator Bevan pointed out, “That’s how ideas and imagery have always been transmitted—through appropriation and copying.”

Andy Warhol’s Children’s Book (1983), included in the exhibition, seems as wholesome as any parent would want, with a big red apple on the front, a playful monkey on the back, and pages filled with trains and toys. His own sense of play seems to have led him to cut up a Marilyn screen print into unrecognizable abstractions, pasting them together to form Marilyn Monroe Book Maquette from Time Capsule 55 (c. 1968), a lush, crisp accordion-folded book. Embracing the humorous, Warhol collaborated with Suzie Frankfurt on Wild Raspberries (1959), a lampoon of overly fussy French cookbooks. With hilarious recipes (Baked...
Hawaii, Seared Roebuck) and fanciful Warhol images, it is delightful to consider, as are cartoonish images of cats and sweet strawberries.

But Warhol wouldn’t likely be accused of too much sweetness. There are many more serious works throughout the show. a: A Novel is an experimental stream-of-consciousness work Warhol transcribed from taped conversations with an actor friend, Ondine. It was a technique that Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs had experimented with. Warhol set out to write a best seller, and while a: A Novel was published by Grove Press in 1968, it was difficult to read and remained obscure. The novel is on display here, as is the 1965 Norelco recorder used to tape the sessions.

At the center of the gallery is Andy Warhol’s Index (Book) from 1967, the first artist book to be mass produced by a major publisher. Bevan described it as the “heart” of the exhibition. It was multi-authored and intended to be a multidisciplinary, multisensory experience. “Index (Book),” she said, “synthesizes so much of Warhol’s working methods and his approaches to bookmaking that are unique to him . . . [It] really challenges the idea of what is a book, in terms of its construction, and in terms of its demanding participation of the reader in order to take it apart, listen to the book, tear out pages, and build an object.”

One of the book’s editors predicted that it might be as important to publishing as Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type. Twenty thousand copies were printed in hardcover and paperback, and while it sold well, ironically, many of the book’s participatory possibilities have not been realized; having paid handsomely for the volume, many of its owners have refused to tear it up or even open, never mind play, its 45 rpm record, Bevan said.

Part visionary, part social commentator, part provocateur, Warhol—perhaps more than any artist of his time—had his finger on the pulse of society. Before there were social networks, he was networking. Before anyone had thought of the term “appropriation art,” he was reprinting everything from the Mona Lisa to Marilyn Monroe. He published his own books before it was mainstream. Yet, as successful as he was as a Pop icon, he never really made it as an author. One of the books on display has a discounted price sticker on the cover (“B&N $5.95”) and others were located in the remainder bins at Brentano’s, according to the exhibition wall texts. Still, it was a medium he never abandoned. Warhol, Bevan said, once commented, “There’s always another book.”

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NOTES 1. All quotations from Sheelagh Bevan, telephone interview with the author, December 4, 2015. 2. The versions of the exhibition on view at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (March 7–August 16, 2015) and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (October 10, 2015–January 10, 2016) were more expansive. The Morgan’s presentation was condensed but included loans not seen at the other venues.