



Louise Bourgeois

An Unfolding Portrait

MoMA

Louise
Bourgeois
An Unfolding
Portrait



Deborah Wye

Louise
Bourgeois
*An Unfolding
Portrait*

Prints, Books, and
the Creative Process

The Museum of Modern Art | New York



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Louise Bourgeois revisiting
an early copper plate for
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(1994), at her home/studio on
20th Street, New York, 1995.
Photograph by and
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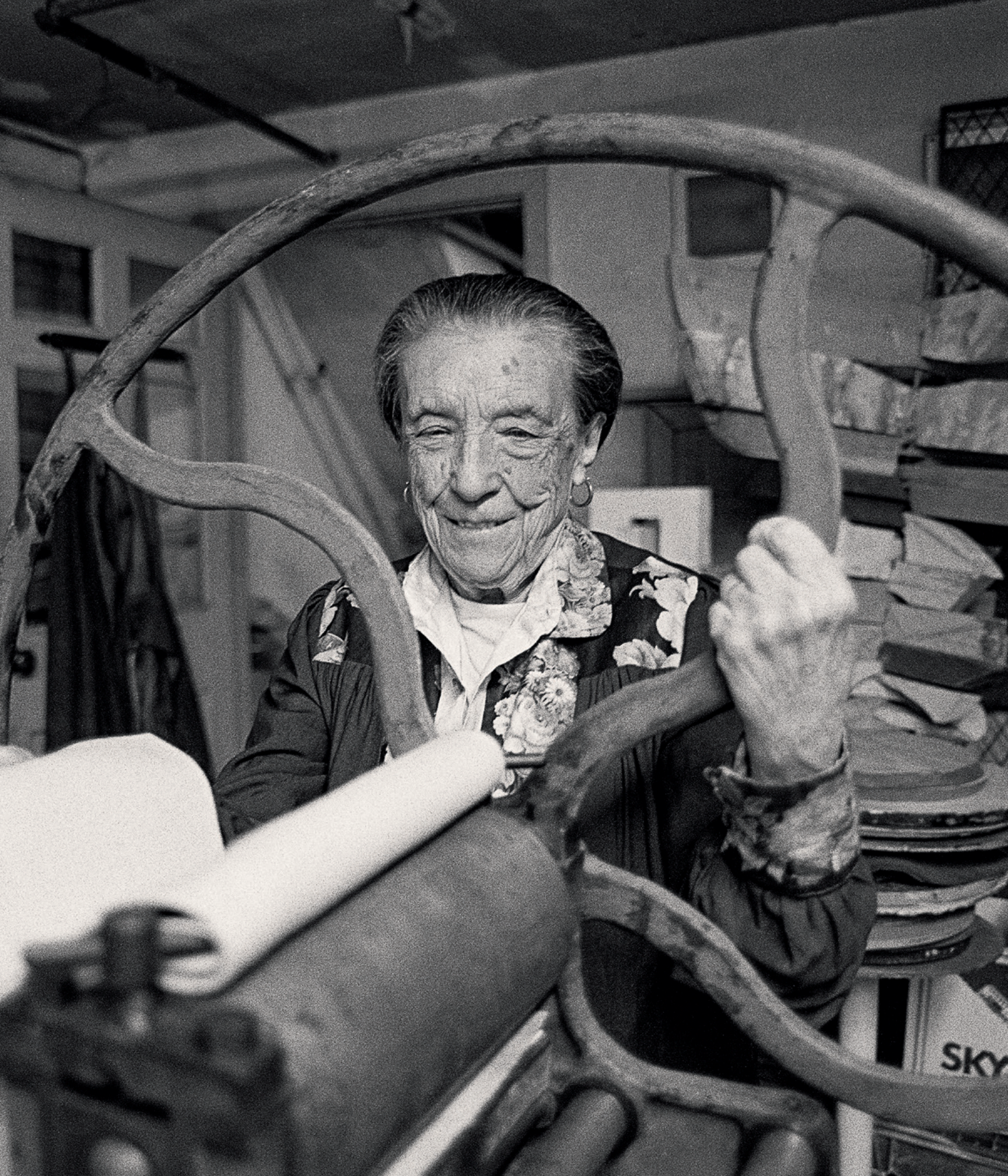
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Deborah Wye

“time stopped,
time remembered,
time recreated”

Louise Bourgeois:
Prints and Books

The deeply affecting art of Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) encompasses multiple mediums. The artist is most celebrated for sculpture, particularly her iconic *Spiders*, provocative figures and body parts, and room-size *Cells*. But Bourgeois also drew continuously and, most importantly for this study, created a vast body of prints and illustrated books. Her printed œuvre comprises some 1,200 individual compositions and, with their evolving states and variants, approximately 4,800 sheets in all.¹ Her printmaking took place primarily in the last two decades of her very long life, but also for a period at the beginning of her career. In the 1940s, while raising three small children, she printed on a small press at home and also at outside facilities. Later, in the 1990s and 2000s, specialized printers and publishers came directly to her to work on projects. The small printing press was resurrected in the lower level of her house and another one added. Proofing and editioning were also carried out at professional printshops.

Louise Bourgeois at the printing press in the lower level of her home/studio on 20th Street, New York, 1995. Photograph by and © Mathias Johansson

Bourgeois's approach to printmaking sheds light on her creative process overall. She constantly revisited the themes and forms of her art, in all mediums, as she sought to grapple with the troubling emotions that motivated her. Since printed images can be replicated, it was easy to go back over her compositions and branch out in any direction. She tirelessly altered her proofs with pencil, ink, watercolor, and gouache additions as she envisioned subsequent steps. Many prints went through fifteen, twenty, or even thirty stages of development, with states, variants, and versions. This unfolding progression of the artistic process has usually disappeared by the final stage of a painting or sculpture, but it remains visible in printmaking because these evolving proofs survive. Reviewing them is akin to looking over Bourgeois's shoulder as she worked—a rare opportunity for insight into an artist's vision.

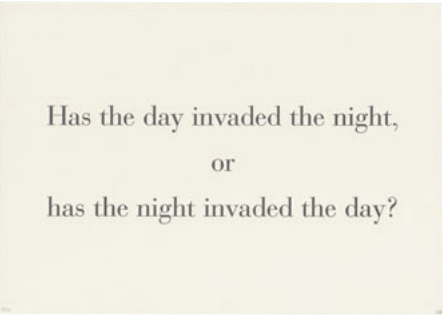
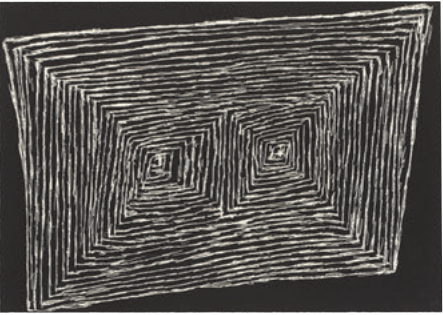
Just as she was inclined toward the dynamics of printmaking, Bourgeois also favored traditional print formats—the series, portfolio, and illustrated book. These involve the gathering of related images and their sequencing, with or without added text. Sequencing generates a form of narration, and this suited Bourgeois, who was a vivid speaker, writer, and storyteller. She was highly articulate in describing the motivations for her work and kept copious notes in appointment diaries and notebooks, on countless loose sheets,

and on the backs of drawings. Her pithy phrases also appear on individual prints, in series (FIGS. 1, 2), and on multipanel prints, while her parables and stories provide the texts for illustrated books.

Bourgeois was also well served by the collaborative nature of printmaking. It is not a medium often attempted alone in an artist's studio, although Bourgeois did some of that in her early years. Usually prints require technical expertise from professional printers and support from adventurous publishers. Bourgeois fostered several close and creative relationships through printmaking. In fact, the printers and publishers with whom she had a special rapport were able to buoy her spirits and lift her from recurring bleak and debilitating moods. When they were scheduled to arrive at her home she was most often energized. Such stimulating collaborations became part of the daily routine in her late years.

Interpretations

There are many approaches to Bourgeois's art, yet, as her fame grew, it was her own words that occupied center stage in interpreting it. Her riveting explanations captured the interest of many critics, curators, and scholars, this author among them. She dwelled on compelling episodes in her biography as motivators of her art, and they were indeed difficult to ignore. She also described her art in intimate terms as "a guaranty of sanity" and a form of "survival."² I interviewed Bourgeois extensively in preparation for her first retrospective held at The Museum of Modern Art in 1982, and again about each of the 150 compositions in her print catalogue raisonné of 1994. Her instinctual responses and disturbing memories were revelatory for me,³ and many others have found them similarly meaningful. Although she was speaking about herself — and one was moved to feel empathy — the concerns she expressed were universal. In addition, for those unfamiliar with her strange and disquieting aesthetic, her statements provide an accessible entry point.⁴



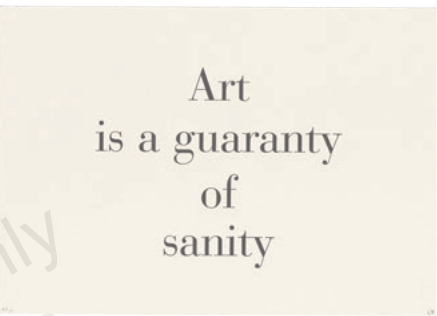
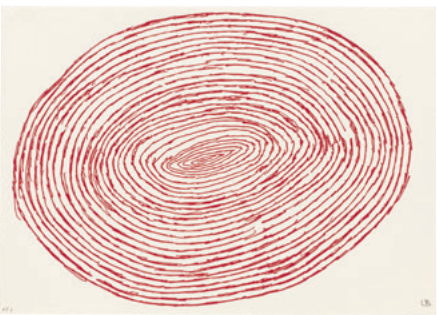
In the final analysis, however, her descriptions may be limiting: they can make it difficult to see her art with fresh eyes. Eventually, an overdependence on Bourgeois's captivating tales led to a justifiable critical backlash among those who believed her art's formal, historical, and theoretical dimensions were being overshadowed.⁵

That said, Bourgeois's words still must be taken into consideration. In addition to those she spoke, she left a voluminous body of writing, matched by almost no other artist. She conveys powerful sentiments in both and, in particular, reveals the distress she suffered and the struggles she had in coping. These emotions were clearly the force behind her art; to release and understand them was her goal. As she said: "It is not an image. . . . It's not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate."⁶ In a search for the forms of her art, she asked herself:

how this given vocabulary can be made to express elemental emotions . . .
the hunger
the envy
the disgust
the indignation
the violence
the revenge. . . .
no one could fail to be shaken by the emotion conveyed.⁷

"time stopped, time remembered, time recreated"

FIGS. 1, 2
Nos. 5 and 9 of 9 from the series *What Is the Shape of This Problem?* 1999.
Letterpress. SHEETS (each): 12 × 17" (30.5 × 43.2 cm).
PUBLISHER: Galerie Lelong, Paris and New York. PRINTER: SOLO Impression, New York.
EDITION: 25. Gift of the artist



Bourgeois fought against despair with a fierce will and directed her formidable intelligence to comprehending her emotions. Art was the tool, and making it was empowering. It allowed her, she said, "to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality."⁸ Yet she never fully alleviated the pain, even though very old age brought a certain mellowing. For much of her life she dealt with anger and aggression, guilt and anxiety, depression and loneliness.

Some part of Bourgeois's fragile temperament was surely inborn, and family history supports that premise. In addition, she experienced events in her young life that appear unmistakably traumatic.⁹ Such events, according to current thinking, could affect a child's developing brain and have long-lasting repercussions.¹⁰ As she said: "I have been a prisoner of my memories and my aim is to get rid of them."¹¹ This constant fighting back infused her art with the raw power and penetrating hold that are its hallmarks, and also led to an inventive multiplicity of forms rather than a clear stylistic path. As Bourgeois told herself in one of her writings: "Your formal inventions are not the meaning of the work whereas other artists have exploited those formal ideas as the meaning and very essence of their works . . . that is the reason I do not have one style medium."¹²

This discussion of Bourgeois's prints and illustrated books proceeds chronologically, placing them within the arc of her life and artistic development, and within the broader art world context. The visual and thematic correspondences found in her printmaking — and in all her work across decades — will be examined in later chapters. Bourgeois's situation was unusual in that she gained recognition late in life and her early work was discovered at the same time as her new work. This simultaneity certainly had an influence on her revisiting of earlier themes, but in fact she was always concerned with a recurring set of issues and emotions.¹³ While most artists are wrapped up in their latest efforts, for Bourgeois the past and present were intertwined. As she said: "For a lifetime I have wanted to say the same thing."¹⁴ To interpret this body of work, scholars now have access to the appointment diaries and notebooks she kept over the course of her life, letters, family photographs going back to the early twentieth century, and more than fifteen hundred handwritten sheets she never parted with.¹⁵ "Nothing is lost," she said, "there is something sacred about things that are your past."¹⁶

A Formative Childhood

Bourgeois, born in Paris in 1911, often talked about the early years of her life. She could be moved to tears describing a childhood incident, even some five, six, or seven decades later.¹⁷ Events of the here and now stirred up old memories and feelings not sufficiently buried. Her youngest years were beset by war and family conflicts that certainly would have adversely affected almost anyone to some degree. But Bourgeois had a deeply sensitive nature, vulnerable to emotional upset, and may have been predisposed to psychological affliction. Her brother, Pierre, just thirteen months her junior, suffered debilitating psychological breakdowns that led to his confinement in an institution for much of his adult life.¹⁸ She recognized their similarities. "I have Pierre's trouble and will fall



Shiff also brought partially printed proofs to Bourgeois that led in still further directions. Sheets with only printed fragments turned out to be additional spurs to her imagination. *À l'Infini* (To Infinity, 2008; PLATES 185–98) is an extraordinary series that began with partially printed proofs of *Love and Kisses* (PLATE 184). In this series, the printed elements—diagonal, twisting, veinlike fragments—are almost obscured by Bourgeois's additions in watercolor, gouache, and pencil. But one discerns them subliminally when the series is installed; they provide a kind of rhythm from sheet to sheet. *À l'Infini* is a prime example of the kind of unique print project that became integral to Bourgeois's way of working at this stage of her life. Its swirling, elemental forms constitute one of her most important achievements of this period in any medium, as well as a striking example of the potential of printmaking and of the collaborative process.

In her late nineties, Bourgeois's health declined further. Her eyesight suffered to a degree, perhaps leading to her more frequent use of red, although the color always had symbolic resonance for her. She responded positively to the large sheets of paper Shiff provided, again probably because she could work more easily with them from a visual standpoint. The intimacy of small printing plates and sheets

was now more difficult, although she remained engaged to some degree at that scale. Bourgeois also had mobility issues due to arthritis, and her insomnia was severe—sometimes she went for days with little or no sleep. According to Gorovoy, this sleeplessness drastically affected her mood and her ability to work, as she went from hyperactive to thoroughly drowsy. But her creativity remained; her printmaking is a tribute to the late phase of her work. She never stopped employing art to express her emotions and to understand herself and her world. Even in the hospital, just before she died, Bourgeois asked for paper and pencils. As Gorovoy says: “She wanted her life back. She wanted to continue what we always did together.”¹²⁴

The words *time stopped, time remembered, time recreated* in the title of this essay are from Louise Bourgeois, in “Time” (Paulo Herkenhoff notes, May 8, 1997), in Frances Morris, ed., *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate, 2007), 288.

FIG. 35
10 AM Is When You Come to Me (set 9), from the series of installation sets. 2007.
Installation set of 40 sheets: 35 soft ground etchings, all with hand additions, 4 drawings, and 1 handwritten text. SHEET (each approx.): 15 × 35¹/₄” (38.1 × 90.8 cm). PUBLISHER: Osiris, New York. PRINTER: Wingate Studio, Hinsdale, NH. EDITION: 10 sets. Private collection

Themes and Variations

The motivations that led to Louise Bourgeois's art were unwavering over the seven decades of her long career: it was emotional struggle that fueled her process. In seeking to understand and cope with painful memories, anger and jealousy, depression and despair, she created sculpture, prints, drawings, and, early on, paintings. Art was her tool of survival, her “guaranty of sanity.”¹

In giving form to her emotions, Bourgeois returned again and again to particular motifs that served as visual metaphors; together they offer a thematic framework for her work. While varying from architectural forms to the growth and germination of nature, from the human body and sexuality to motherhood, and even to a symbolic abstraction, such imagery and concerns appear in all her mediums, and sometimes overlap in individual works.

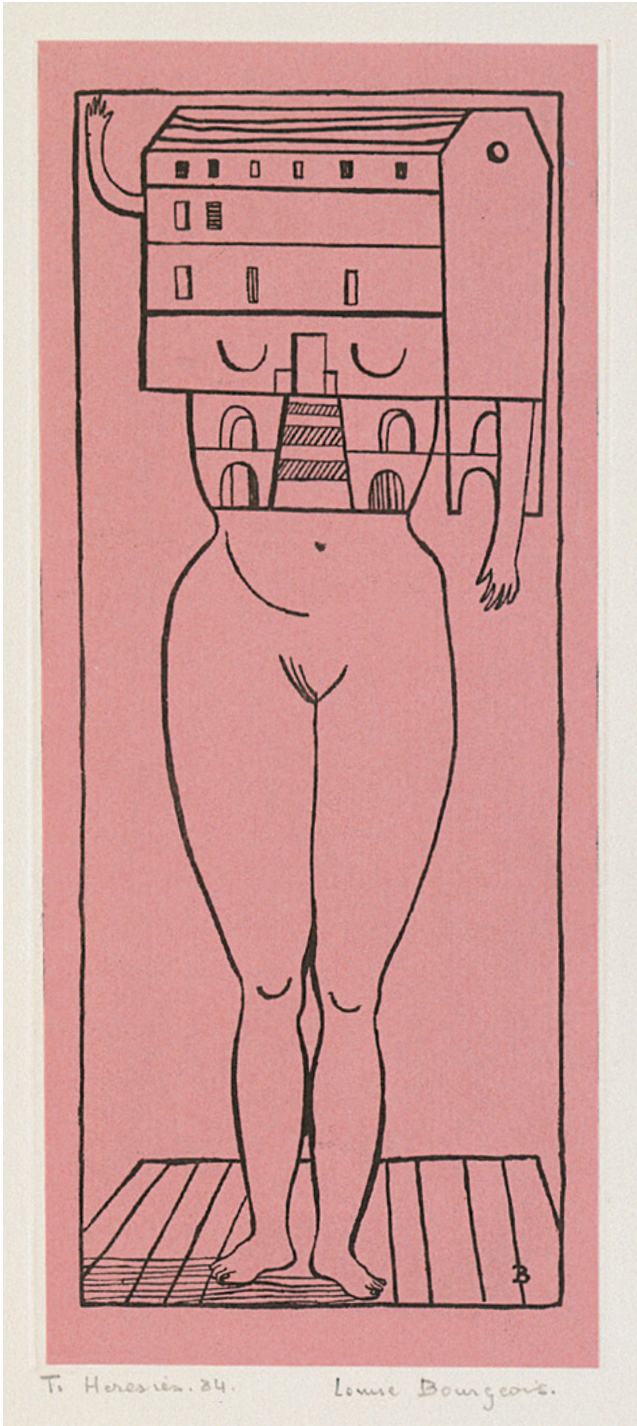
The following discussion of the themes and variations in Bourgeois's art explores the artist's creative process, with a focus on her prints and illustrated books and the evolving states and variants that trace the development of her imagery. It also includes examples of related sculpture, drawings, and paintings, demonstrating that Bourgeois saw no “rivalry”

between them. “They say the same things in different ways,” she maintained.² Finally, corresponding works from different periods are brought together. This organization emphasizes overarching relationships within Bourgeois's practice and a remarkable consistency in her aims over the course of her lifetime. She fully acknowledged this ongoing process when she said: “to be an artist involves some suffering. That's why artists repeat themselves—because they have no access to a cure.”³

NOTE TO THE READER:
In the plate captions, dimensions are cited with height preceding width (for sculptures, height precedes width, which precedes depth). For prints, dimensions generally refer to the plate size or the composition size; if a full sheet or book page is shown, those dimensions are cited instead. Most prints are on paper; those on fabric are so indicated. This volume's Checklist (PP. 231–39) provides additional documentation: full dimensions for all sheets and pages; publishers, printers, and edition sizes; credit lines; accession numbers for works in MoMA's collection; and the MoMA online catalogue raisonné numbers for all prints and books. All works are in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, unless otherwise noted.

“The sky, the building, and the house, knew each other and approved of each other.” LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Architecture Embodied



1. *Femme Maison* (Woman House). 1984. Photogravure, with pink chine collé. PLATE: 10¹/₁₆ × 4⁷/₁₆" (25.6 × 11.2 cm)

Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* is among her most potent feminist subjects. It appeared first in paintings and drawings of the 1940s, in various configurations, and was later reprised by the artist in marble and in fabric. This

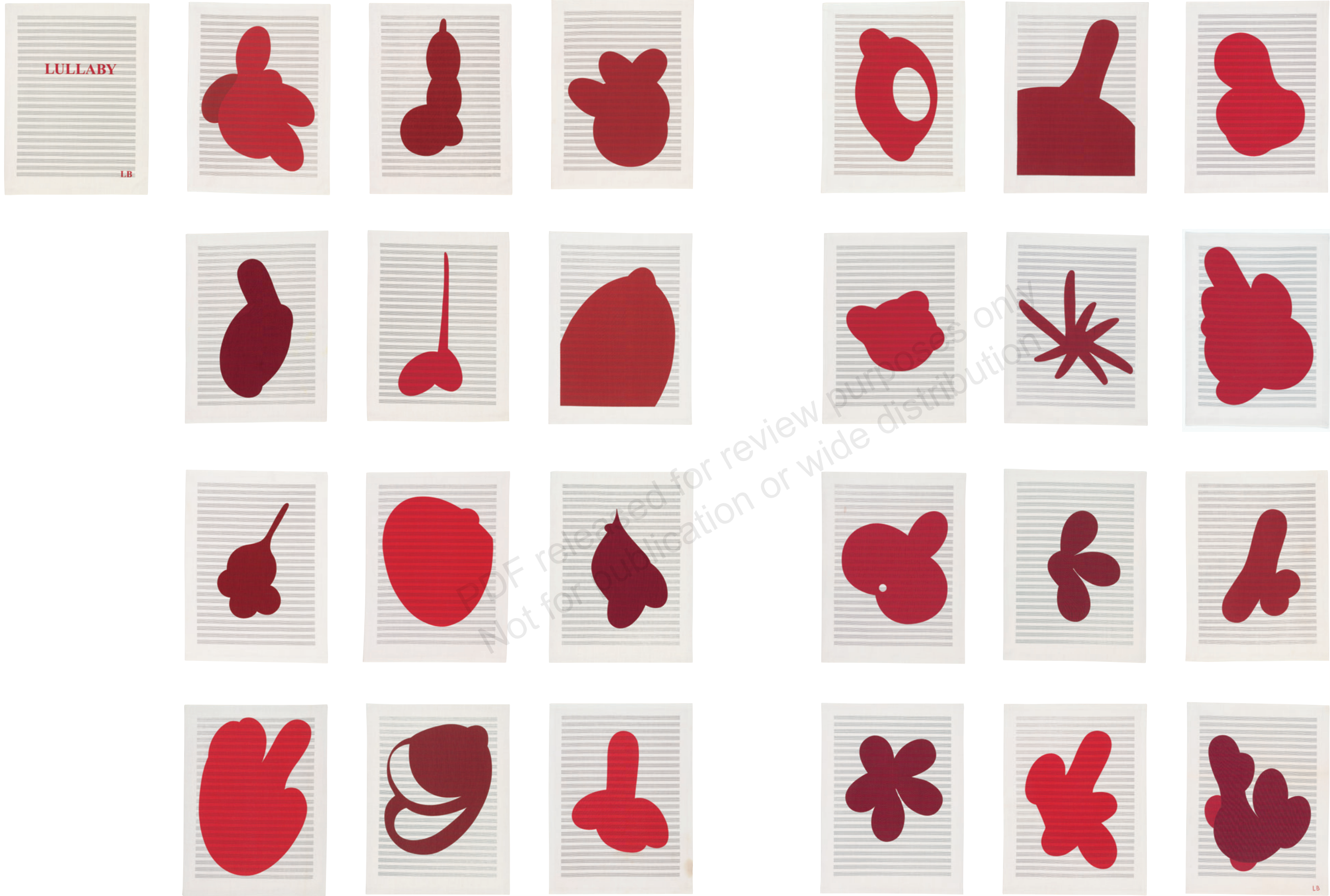
version, returned to in 1984, had become a symbol for women artists in the 1970s, appearing on the cover of a now classic book by critic and activist Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (1976).

In the pursuit of emotional balance and stability, Louise Bourgeois frequently rendered architecture as a symbolic presence in her sculpture, prints, drawings, and early paintings. “As the architectural consciousness of the shape mounts,” she said late in her life, “the psychological consciousness of the fear diminishes.”¹ These forms were invariably personified, with structures exhibiting poignant vulnerabilities and, occasionally, assertiveness. Figural works took on architectural features, molded enclosures became refuges or, conversely, traps, and roomlike constructions were sites of personal drama.

Bourgeois's attraction to architecture was rooted in her youthful study of mathematics, which she appreciated for its reliability — it provided her with a sense of calm and security. Thinking back on her time as a young student, she wrote: “I enroll in Mathematics at the Sorbonne with the idea of strengthening my analytical mind — there is nothing I enjoy more than a demonstration by a + b — It has the beauty of Rockefeller Center — it makes me feel safe.”²

Bourgeois later turned to art, and then met and married American art historian Robert Goldwater in Paris; she moved to New York in 1938. Some of her early paintings and prints show architectural interiors of places where she lived with her young family. By the second half of the 1940s, when Bourgeois found her distinctive artistic voice, she began to feature buildings prominently in her paintings, with eerie, surrealist overtones and narrative implications (FIG. 36). Her works titled *Femme Maison* (Woman House; PLATES 1, 6, 7) exemplify her gendered depiction of the realities of a young mother confined at home with inescapable responsibilities.

Bourgeois's illustrated book *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (1947; PLATES 13–21) depicts buildings in various guises, many calling to mind the skyscrapers she admired in her adopted home. She had romanticized these buildings even before she arrived, writing from Paris to her new husband (who returned to New York before her): “I dreamt about you, we were running one after the other in a street full of skyscrapers.”³ At the same time, the images in her small book suggest a range of human emotions: loneliness, stoicism, fear, aggression, despair, and defeat. One enigmatic composition includes two windowless buildings set in a barren landscape; Bourgeois's accompanying parable mysteriously identifies a single New York City landmark and gives it a clearly human dimension: “The solitary death of the Woolworth Building” (PLATE 14).



53. *Lullaby.*

2006. Series of 25 screenprints on fabric: title sheet and 24 compositions. (Nos. 1–24, left to right across spread.) SHEET (each): 15¹/₈ × 11³/₈" (38.4 × 28.9 cm)

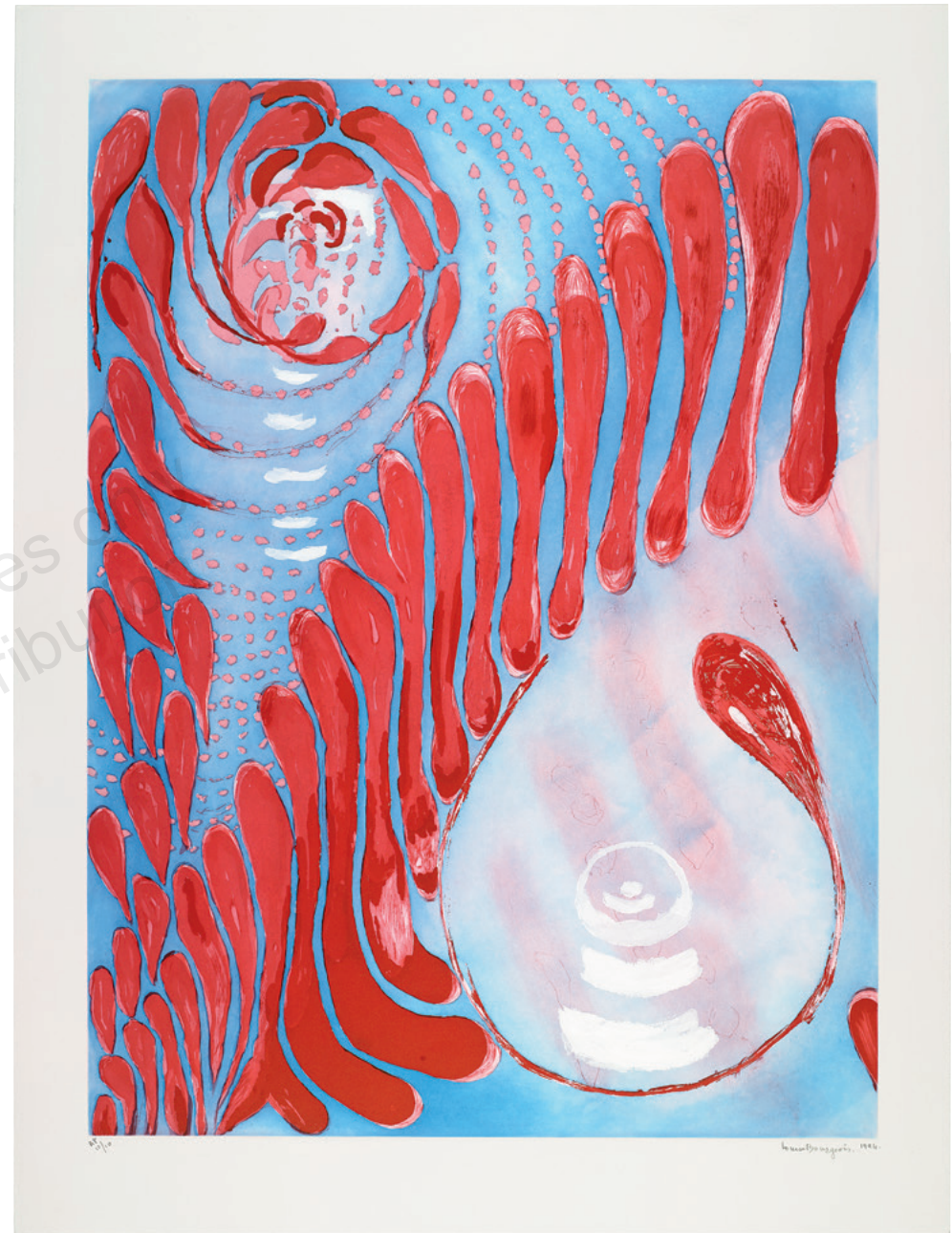
These compositions were formed by turning and tracing common household objects, including a sardine can, cutting shears, an oval candy dish, a knife, and a magnifying glass. Bourgeois envisioned this series as a manner of musical score. Eager to publish it immediately, she did so under her own imprint, Lison Editions. ("Lison" was a childhood nickname; others were Lise, Lisette, Louison, and Louisette.)



54. *Paris Review*.
1994. Aquatint and drypoint,
with acrylic stencil additions.
SHEET: $36^{13}/_{16} \times 28^{1}/_{16}$ "
(93.5 × 71.3 cm)

The color version of this composition was illustrated on the cover of the literary journal *The Paris Review*.¹¹ The print itself was donated by the artist as a benefit for the journal. Printer Felix Harlan remembers Bourgeois wanting something

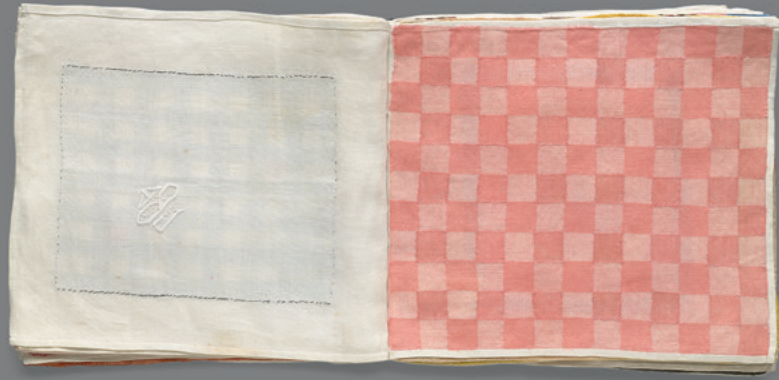
large and impressive for the occasion.¹² Curiously, she related its imagery to her many interviews: "It is the . . . twisting and squeezing out the juice of the pomegranate. All those interviewers squeezed me to exhaustion."¹³



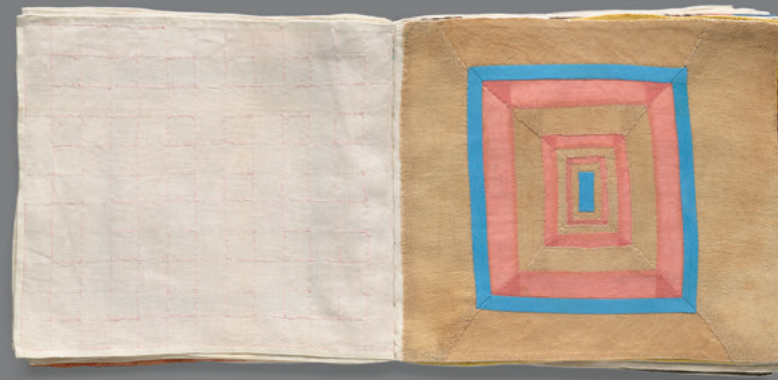
55. *Paris Review*.
1994. Aquatint and drypoint,
with acrylic stencil additions.
SHEET: $36^{13}/_{16} \times 28^{1}/_{16}$ "
(93.5 × 71.3 cm)



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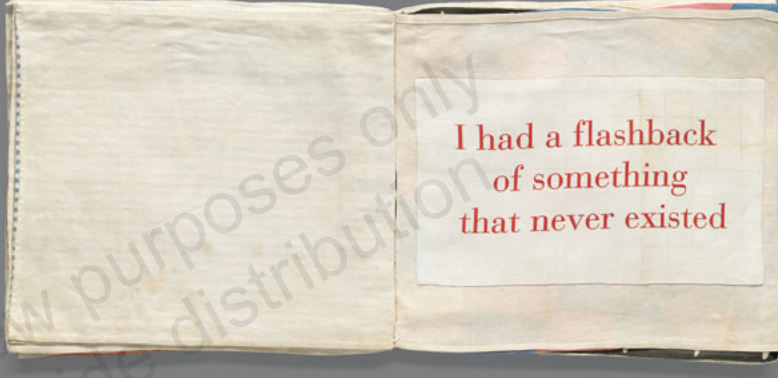
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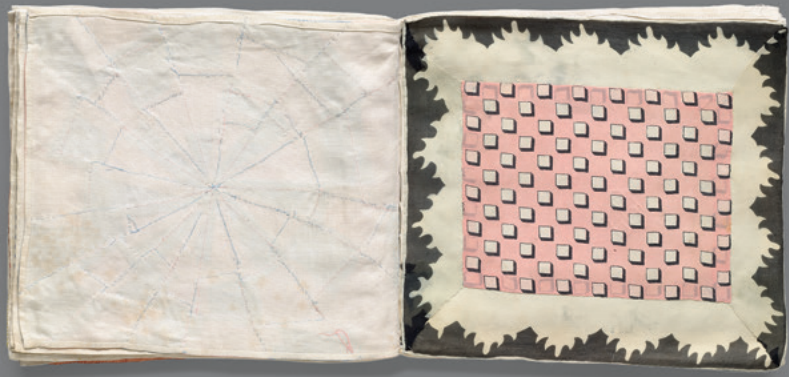
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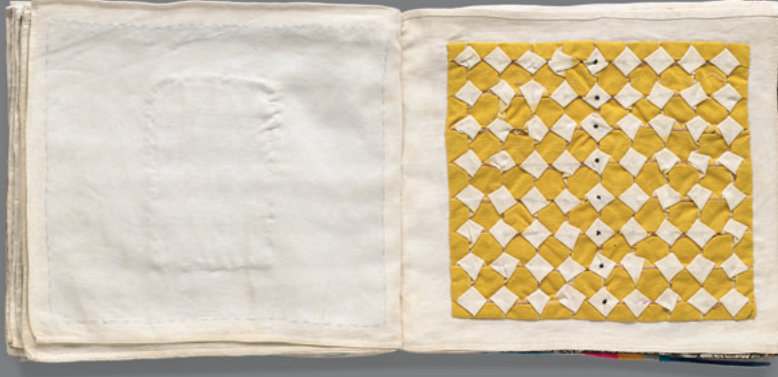
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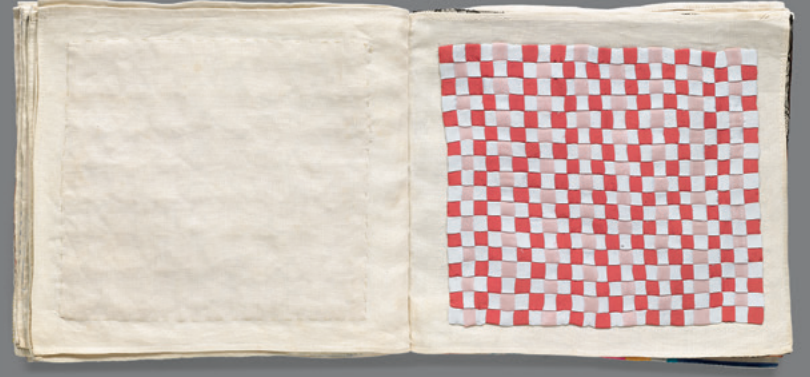
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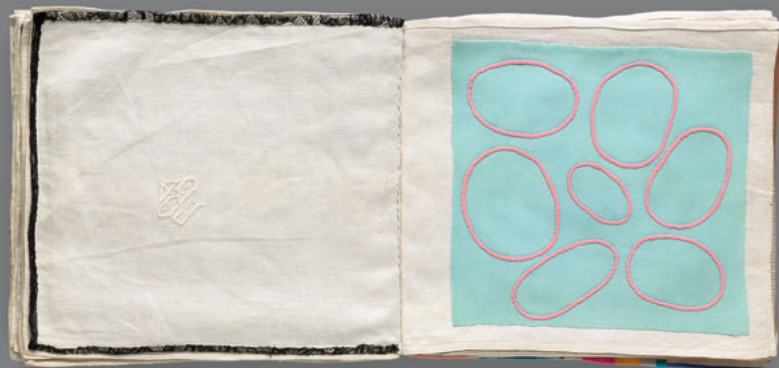


23

82 (cont.). *Ode à l'Oubli*
2002. Fabric illustrated book
with 32 fabric collages,
2 lithographed texts, and
lithographed cover. No. 12 with
ink additions. PAGE (approx.):
10³/₄ × 12¹/₁₆" (27.3 × 30.7 cm)



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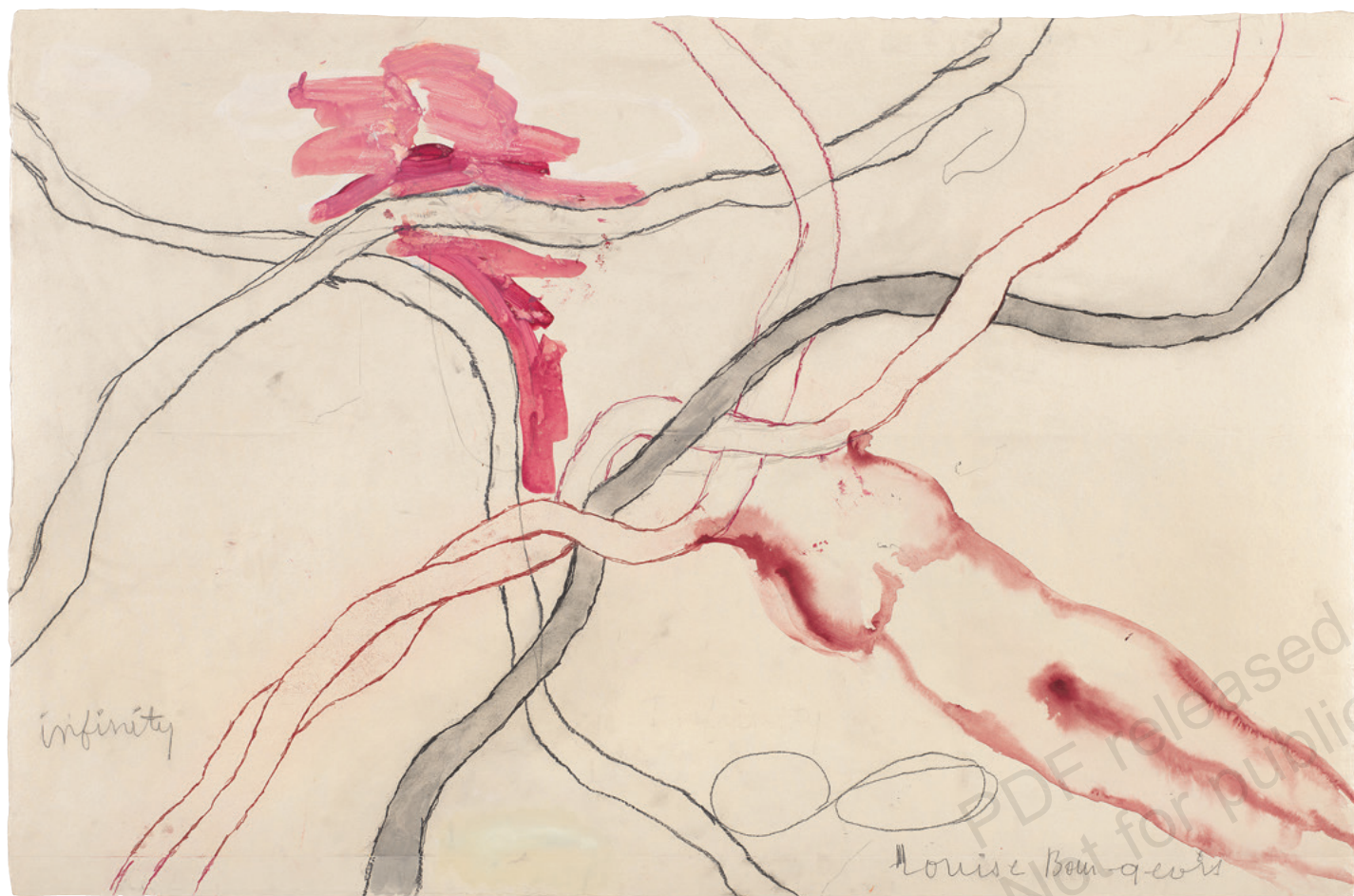


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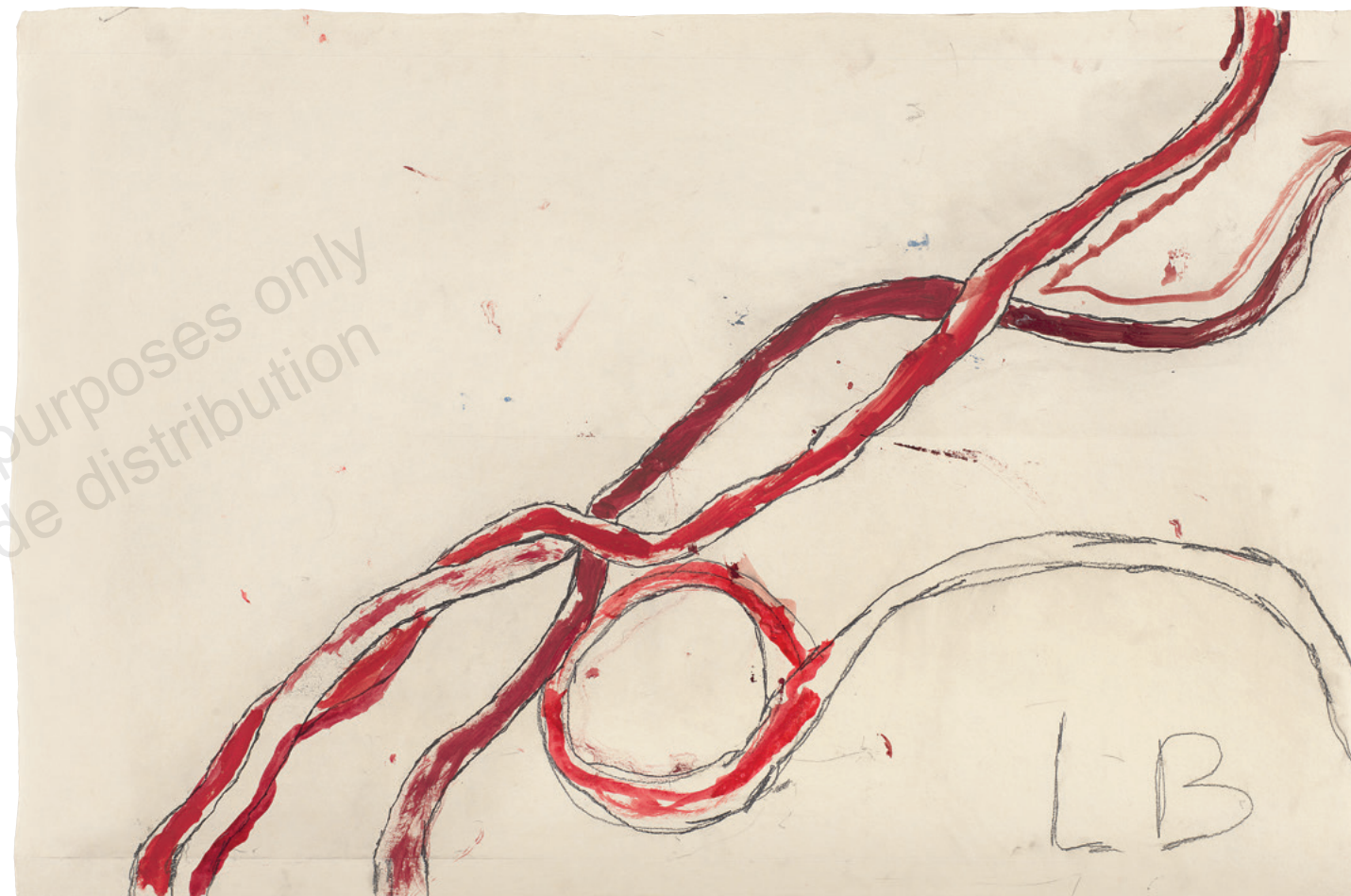


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82 (cont.). *Ode à l'Oubli*
2002. Fabric illustrated book
with 32 fabric collages,
2 lithographed texts, and
lithographed cover. PAGE
(approx.): $10\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{16}$ "
(27.3 × 30.7 cm)



189. No. 5 of 14 from the installation set *À l'Infini*. 2008. Soft ground etching, with selective wiping, watercolor, gouache, pencil, colored pencil, and watercolor wash additions. SHEET: 40 × 60" (101.6 × 152.4 cm)



190. No. 6 of 14 from the installation set *À l'Infini*. 2008. Soft ground etching, with gouache, watercolor, and pencil additions. SHEET: 40 × 60" (101.6 × 152.4 cm)