Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait explores this celebrated artist's prints and books, a little-known but highly significant part of Bourgeois's larger practice. Her copious production in these mediums — addressing themes that perennially occupied her, including memory, trauma, and the body — is examined here within the context of related sculptures, drawings, and paintings. This investigation sheds light on Bourgeois's creative process, which is uniquely and vividly apparent through the evolving states and variants of her prints; seeing these sequences unfold is akin to looking over the artist’s shoulder as she worked. Published in conjunction with an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, this catalogue features an insightful essay by curator (and longtime friend of the artist) Deborah Wye, examining Bourgeois's involvement with these mediums alongside the developments of her long life and career. Interviews with three of the artist's close collaborators further illuminate her artistic practice and output, some three hundred examples of which are presented in this volume.

248 pages, 330 color and 27 black-and-white illustrations
Louise Bourgeois
An Unfolding Portrait
Prints, Books, and the Creative Process
Deborah Wye
The Museum of Modern Art | New York
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Louise Bourgeois revisiting an early copper plate for Champflanette, the White Cat (1994), at her home/studio on 20th Street, New York, 1995. Photograph by and © Mathias Johansson
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.

“time stopped, time remembered, time recreated” Louise Bourgeois: Prints and Books

Deborah Wye

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, On her at the printing press in the lower level of her home/studio at 20th Street, New York, 1995. Photograph by and © Mathias Johansson.
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 work. Her pithy phrases and support from adventurous publishers. 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.

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apart, slowly and surely, so the sooner the better, and let us be thru with it.”

Bourgeois’s experience of World War I undoubtedly had a lasting impact. She was just under three years old when her father joined the military, following his brother who had been killed almost immediately. Her aunt and two cousins were taken into Bourgeois’s family household for a time. For other periods, she, Pierre, and their older sister, Henriette, were displaced to relatives in Aubusson, in central France, which Bourgeois later described as “the safest place in France.”

During the fighting, her mother visited her father near his encampments, with the very young Louise in tow. There are photographs of the trip to the hospital in Chartres when he was wounded. Bourgeois was four at that time and recollects her mother’s jealousy toward the nurses who fussed over her charming father. Adding more uncertainty to the family’s life, he returned to action after his recuperation. Bourgeois’s close proximity to war’s violence, the realization on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived in close proximity to war’s violence, the realization that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent, and the real tensions she perceived on an emotional level that injury or death could be imminent.

When Bourgeois was five, her mother, who headed the family’s tapestry restoration business, fell ill with what may have been influenza related to the pandemic of 1918. Thus, at an early age, Bourgeois had seen and felt the vulnerabilities of both her parents. Her mother never completely recovered and, starting in 1922, the family sought out the more healthful climate in the South of France during winters. At eleven, acting as a companion, Bourgeois began to help care for her mother, a task that continued until Louise was twenty. “I took her from spa to spa,” Bourgeois remembered. “They told me it was a vacation, but it really was a way of pushing back death.” Also at this time, her father brought an English tutor into the household for Louise and her siblings. Sadie Gordon Richmond would stay with the family for the better part of ten years. As a young adolescent, Bourgeois certainly would have looked up to the youthful tutor, only six years her senior. But Sadie also became her father’s mistress and Bourgeois reacted bitterly: “I was betrayed not only by my father, damn it, but by her too. It was a double betrayal.”

A final, extremely painful event of Bourgeois’s youth occurred in 1924, when her mother for whom she was caring died at age fifty-three. Bourgeois was distraught and even attempted suicide. To make matters worse, her father mocked her grief.24 Yet, of all these troubling details in her family history, it was the incident with the mistress Sadie that Bourgeois cited repeatedly—starting in the early 1980s—as the direct source of the jealousy, anger, and fear of abandonment that fueled her art. But aspects of any of these early events could have been sources of the loneliness and isolation she felt, and the difficulties she endured in her relationships, and the anxiety, despair, and depression that plagued her throughout her life. These were the maladies she exercised through her art. “Do not look for a rational treatise,” she said. “Life is made of experiences and emotions. The objects I have created make them tangible.”

A Turn to Art

After her mother died, Bourgeois returned to her interrupted studies. She began in mathematics and philosophy but eventually turned to art, studying painting with a number of artists in the studio training system of Paris. Letters to a friend at the time indicate that she was an eager young student and artist, enjoying the various exhibitions and films around town.25 In 1938, her father cordoned off a section of his tapestry gallery on the Boulevard St. Germain to provide Bourgeois with an area of her own in which to sell prints, drawings, illustrated books, and paintings by a range of well-known artists, and to earn a living. Her early interest in the rarified field of paintings and illustrated books was likely nurtured by her father; a dedicated collector and bibliophile. She actively attended auctions around Paris to build up her inventory. Early receipts enumerate purchases of posters and prints by Pierre Bonnard, Théophile Steinlen, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and others.26 And it was in this gallery that Bourgeois met her future husband, Robert Goldwater, who stopped in to browse. They married just three weeks later, which might seem plausible for the volatile Bourgeois but perhaps not for the more staid Goldwater, a young American art historian from New York. Nonetheless, that is how it happened, and Bourgeois moved to New York City in October 1938, and would live there for the rest of her life.

The early years in New York seem to have been happy and fulfilling for Bourgeois. She quickly enrolled at the Art Students League, where she continued her studies in painting and also took up printmaking for the first time with League printer Will Barnet, who was master lithographer there.27 She depended on Barnet as a printer for several of her earliest prints. This new direction is not altogether surprising, given her familiarity with the medium. She also began creating prints as annual holiday greeting cards. Her first one, St. Germain (1938; fig. 5), made after only three months in America, depicts her trip from Paris to New York.28 She would eventually submit prints to competitions at the Print Club of Philadelphia, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Library of Congress. The decade from 1939 to 1949 represents the first of two phases of printmaking in Bourgeois’s career; sixty-nine compositions resulted, with numerous evolving states and variants that bring the total to some 250 printed sheets in all.
Although Bourgeois must have been drawn to the Art Students League for the sense of community it provided, especially being new to New York, she also made prints at home. She taught herself linoleum cut and woodcut (fig. 4), which are relatively simple, but she also sought out instruction for the more complicated techniques of etching and aquatint.26 She came to favor intaglio,27 especially the "endearing"28 scratching of metal for drypoint and the "muscular"29 digging with the burin in engraving. "You give the burin its power," she once said, and Bourgeois was thrust into the New York art world through her husband: Robert Goldwater was a respected art historian who traveled in scholarly and critical circles of the highest order. His appointment diaries of the 1940s are filled with other New York artists at this time (plate 149). She also took part in group exhibitions with Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and others in the burgeoning New York School, as well as in the Annual Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, precursors to today’s Whitney Biennials. She seems to have been in the thick of things, in contrast to the more isolated figure she would become. At the same time, by the later 1940s, Bourgeois began to have anxiety and self-doubt, and psychological strains were coming to the surface. Notes about insomnia, depression, anger, and panic started to appear in her diaries.38 It is difficult to pinpoint what precipitated the change. In 1939, she had written positively about Picasso and negatively about Surrealism in a letter to her husband. This invented space permeated both the realm of printmaking. At the time, Bourgeois was likely familiar with the work of George Grosz, who came to social gatherings at their home, or with the Surrealist overtones. Her earlier printmaking was evocative. That optimism about Surrealism continued throughout the war, and Bourgeois must have been impressed when an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1944 celebrated Surrealist’s influence. Her earlier flattened, stylized forms morphed into something resembling dream spaces. The subjects were mysterious. This invented space permeated both her prints (fig. 5) and her paintings (fig. 6). It is difficult to pinpoint what precipitated the change. In 1949, she had written positively about Picasso and negatively about Surrealism in her diary: “All movements painted by Picasso have been seen and felt; he is never theatrical.”

In 1945 Bourgeois had her first solo show of paintings at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, and then another in 1947 at the Nortlyt Gallery. Her paintings and prints included gridded constructions, a visual device she had in common with other New York artists at this time (fig. 144). She also took part in group exhibitions with Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and others in the burgeoning New York School, as well as in the Annual Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, precursors to today’s Whitney Biennials. She seems to have been in the thick of things, in contrast to the more isolated figure she would become. At the same time, by the later 1940s, Bourgeois began to have anxiety and self-doubt, and psychological strains were coming to the surface. Notes about insomnia, depression, anger, and panic started to appear in her diaries.38 It is difficult to pinpoint what precipitated the change. In 1949, she had written positively about Picasso and negatively about Surrealism in her diary: “All movements painted by Picasso have been seen and felt; he is never theatrical.”

The Surrealists are theatrical. New York painting, the painting that wants to be or is fashionable, is theatrical.42 Yet theatricality, with its implied drama and narratives, would become fundamental to Bourgeois’s sensibility. Did the Surrealist mood permeating New York finally take hold of her? The art world was filled with exiled artists fleeing Europe, and prominent venues like the Art of This Century gallery were Surrealist gathering places.43 With its attention to the unconscious, and to psychological content generally, Surrealism seemed a natural vehicle for exercising Bourgeois’s demons. While she never acknowledged a debt to this movement—and in fact denied that there was any—it seems clear she began to see art as an outlet for her despairing state of mind.44 Later, when she talked about her art of this period, she invariably interpreted it in emotional terms.45 An important Surrealist-oriented venue in New York at that time was Stanley William Hayter’s print workshop, Atelier 17, which had transferred operations from Paris during the war. Hayter had brought the Surrealist method of automatism—a mode intended to release unconscious thought through art—to the realm of printmaking. New York’s Atelier 17, American artists sat side by side with a range of international figures, including such celebrated Surrealists as Max Ernst, André Masson, Roberto Matta, and Yves Tanguy.46 Bourgeois must have been impressed when an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1944 celebrated prints from the workshop.47 She began to participate herself in 1946, and befriended Joan Miró there the next year.48 Her diaries indicate that Hayter was a presence in her life throughout the next few years, up until 1950, as she sought out the...
Hayter introduced a method of rotating the printing plate while engraving with a burin, offering a new freedom to the process; he also stressed experimentation with intaglio techniques. Although Bourgeois did not adopt Hayter’s automatist approach, the Surrealist elements in her prints of this time—with their indeterminate spaces and strange figurative presences, and with the technical effects of gouging, soft ground textures, and occasional color—reveal his influence. But Bourgeois was no favorite of the master printer and that fact seemed to bother her, ever the student eager to please the teacher. Decades later she would write of a “recollection of Hayter outburst” and “the dangerous Hayter.” She claimed he did not like her. She set about creating an illustrated book, a call to mind the totemic wood pieces that Bourgeois would soon exhibit in her first solo shows of sculpture in 1949 and in 1950, and seem to provide a transition from her painting to this new sculptural direction. She was no longer satisfied with painting’s “level of reality,” she said. “I could express much deeper things in three dimensions.” These early wood pieces were clearly figurative, however, abstracted, and she deployed them around the gallery space so viewers could walk around and among them (fig. 11). Some of their titles give away the fact that the sculptures were stand-ins for people left behind in France but, more generally, they represented isolation and fragility. After this turn to sculpture, Bourgeois stopped making prints and paintings. But while she left painting permanently behind, she returned to printmaking many decades later. The intervening years would be formative for her emerging artistic sensibility.

A Long Interruption

After showing her work in two exhibitions devoted to sculpture, and now nearly forty years old, Bourgeois seemed to have reached a certain level of maturity as an artist, and it might have been expected that she would continue expanding upon her unique vision. But intimations in her diaries reveal the depression, anger, and bouts of insomnia that would become debilitating. In 1951 her father died suddenly and she and her family were in France for her husband’s Fulbright fellowship. Her father’s death seemed to be a psychological breaking point for Bourgeois. She entered psychoanalysis late that year, continuing that process intermittently through the mid-1960s, and then intermittently until her

Printmaking Achievements

Getting out of the house and sitting among the other artists at Atelier 17 must have relieved some of Bourgeois’s feelings of isolation. Also printmaking lent itself to cooperating with others, particularly her friend the artist Kenneth Kilstrom, who helped her by holding her plates into the acid bath, a task that frightened her. Kilstrom also assisted her in pulling impressions of prints at home on the press in her studio. She completed a range of printed compositions at this time, all with an otherworldly, Surrealist tone and subjects that suggest natural phenomena, enigmatic figures, and anthropomorphic architecture (plates 9–11). Her printmaking was not a pursuit of standard editions, but rather another opportunity to experiment (figs. 10, 11).

With growing confidence in her skills, Bourgeois seemed to accept the challenge posed by the group of dedicated printers around her. She set about creating an illustrated book, a format with which she was intimately familiar, and this time planned for its distribution. This ambitious undertaking took an enormous effort, balancing the fact that Depression and anxiety had her back. In 1947 she issued He Disappeared into Complete Silence, with nine plates and accompanying parables she wrote herself (plates 13–15). She had carefully studied portfolio...
analyt died in 1985. By the mid-1960s she had virtually stopped making art, with only a few attempts at developing her wood sculpture up to that time. After a final show at Peridot Gallery in 1953, primarily of drawings, she would not exhibit a new body of sculpture again until 1964.

To be sure, there were trends in the New York art world that did not favor her personalized sculptural vocabulary. Critical attention had turned, in particular, to abstract forms in welded metal. She was hurt and disappointed not to be included in the 1951 MoMA exhibition Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, organized by curator Andrew C. Ritchie, who with his wife were among the closest of family friends. Alfred Barr, however, had purchased one of her wood pieces for the Museum and installed it in a storage room.63

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This previously unknown cache of writings was discovered in two boxes in 2004 and, in 2010, just before Bourgeois died.64 She sanctioned their study and also asked that they be read aloud to her. As a group and individually, these sheets constitute a remarkably articulate testament of a person in crisis. They are now being scrutinized not only by scholars and curators with an interest in Bourgeois’s art, but also by those in psychoanalytic fields.65 And, most important for a new understanding of the full measure of Bourgeois’s achievement, her writings, generally, are receiving literary attention.66 Her art of the 1940s may in fact have been the written documents of this period. She noted the creative energy they required, even though she herself would not deem them an art form. She wrote: “Why did I need so long with L. [Dr. Henry Lowenfeld, her analyst]—ask him if [it] is customary to have to write down dreams + recall like these pages. It is very time consuming but it gives me the ‘joy of creation’ that I used to have after working beside[s] I build up strength. The result is not ‘art’ useless except as a catharsis—.”67 Later she would recognize erocism, catharsis, and the pursuit of self-understanding as motivators of her art.68

Although her earlier sculptures, and a few new pieces, were exhibited in group shows during these years, and she kept a studio in Paris when the family was there, she admitted that she was no longer producing art. She New Sculpture and an exhibition by her at the Fachetti Gallery in Paris in 1953. But she did try to pull herself out of this chasm by asserting herself in another direction. She began to make plans to open a rare book and print shop, like the small operation she had within her gallery’s Paris in Paris before she married. At places like the Swann and Parke-Bernet auction houses, she added to her inventory of prints and to the books she had inherited from her father’s collection,69 just as she had searched out auctions in Paris in the early years of these years.67 In 1956, she finally opened Erasmus Books and Prints on East 11th Street, opposite the historic Webster Hall event space, in what was then New York’s neighborhood for antiquarian books. It is remarkable that she had the energy to embark on this venture.68 Erasmus was not a success on 11th Street, nor was it when it moved uptown to a second location on Madison Avenue near 73rd Street in 1954. But the ruffled, elite world of the bibliophile and master print collector surely provided Bourgeois with a satisfying intellectual and highly respectable activity during this low point in her life. The shop got her out of the house—although, according to her diaries, on some days leaving home was difficult. It gave her a sense of agency. And from a feminist point of view it gave her the legitimacy of a job. Later she noted: “Motivations for Erasmus . . . have a ‘job’ because Robt has a ‘job’—if you have ‘a job’ you leave in the morning and come home at night . . . people respect you, you do what men do.”70 Although the shop closed in 1969, it was in operation—perhaps not at full speed—for nearly four years.71 “The house is a trap,” she said. “You look for a refuge and Erasmus I was one and that is what you need.”72 Running a shop, however imperfectly, was not a small accomplishment. It seems another example of the very strong survival instinct in this small, fragile woman.

New Materials and a New Vocabulary

Bourgeois’s intensive psychoanalysis continued into the 1960s, along with the contingent written component. Her jealousy, anger, depression, despair, and recurring insomnia did not disappear but, as she wrote: “I do not have to say that I have been under anxiety twenty four hours a day— but now there are breaks in between—.”73 She had found a way to better understand herself, realizing even more explicitly that art could be an outlet the more closely it was tied to her emotions. While her instinctual expression of states of mind had begun with paintings, prints, and wood figures of the late 1940s, psychoanalysis gave her an even clearer path. Bourgeois had just turned fifty-two when her first exhibition of new sculpture in many years opened at New York’s Stable Gallery, in 1964. Her work was now composed of organic configurations, molded from fluidly yielding materials—quite the opposite of her wood totems. In plaster, she explored forces of nature with hanging nests and cocoons, and twisting...
forms that suggested germination and growth (fig. 13). Some foreshadowed the explicit sexuality that would emerge in her works later in the decade (fig. 14). She also introduced rubber latex pieces, with forms bordering on penises. But it was latex she turned to for one of her favorite artists, from left, of

Fillette. 1968. Latex over plaster. 23 1⁄2 × 22 1⁄4 × 11 × 1⁄2 (60 x 57 x 29 cm). Collection The Easton Foundation

FIG. 15
Fée Couturière (Fairy Dressmaker). 1967. Painted. 39 1⁄4 × 32 × 1⁄4 (100 × 81 × 1 cm). Collection the artist.

FIG. 16
Fillette. 1968.

This range of directions certainly did not contribute to a signature style, which was expected in the art world; nor did her work fit comfortably within formalist trends. But Bourgeois was prescient in her approach. The strict grip of formalist modernism was loosening in critical circles as movements like Pop art, Fluxus, and Happenings emerged. Later there would be an acknowledgment that art had always been more multifaceted than midcentury critical debates allowed, and “pluralism” would become the dominant term in a new era of postmodernism. Also, artists would eventually embrace multiple modes within their practices, with no negative consequences. Bourgeois’s place within this changing sensibility became abundantly clear in 1966 when she joined much of her generation at the alternative exhibition curated by Lucy Lippard. Terms like anti-form, process art, and post-Minimalism gained currency to describe the new phenomena, and rumblings of a feminist wave in the art world were soon to be heard. With her outpouring of highly original forms, closely aligned to emotions brought to the surface and examined through psychoanalysis, Bourgeois demonstrated a newfound confidence. She gave no thought to stylistic consistency. Her works were not formed from other genres, but from changing states of mind. As one art historian has noted, her work has a “psychoanalytic logic.” And that logic would continue to unfold for the rest of her career. Her analysis in the 1950s and 1960s had been a process of exploration, identification, and understanding. Although it was not curative in the deepest sense, it provided a pathway. As one prominent psychoanalytical writer put it, she was not ‘in her approach’; rather, she “used it.” In 1968, she succeeded in fueling her art by further personalizing it, and so lent the startling breakthroughs of the 1960s and beyond.

More Personal Than Political

The sypos was a watershed decade for the art world as the long-held and constricting formalist discourse finally gave way fully to a new openness. A defining force in this realignment was the women’s movement and the significance it had for the art generated and talked about at that time. It provided access to new narratives, with biography and the body as prime subject matter. Finally, Bourgeois moved to the center of this discourse, particularly among younger women artists. While she was not an organizing force in the new feminist art organizations, she was a willing participant and appreciated the attention she received, even while also maintaining an engaged ambivalence about being pegged “a female artist.” Thinking back about this period, she gave certain reasons for her hesitation. “The feminists took me as a role model,” she wrote, “as a mother. It bothers me. I am not interested in being a mother. I am still a girl trying to understand myself” (fig. 62 ). She did not fully acknowledge a feminist underpinning to her work, and this period, and both are unconventional. She turned to photostat as a medium to create an expression of revolt linked to a protest march in which she participated (p. 18), and to instilling and rubbing to rid herself of anger at being rejected for an exhibition (fig. 19). But Bourgeois’s teaching experience was stimulating in other ways. The vitality of the students attracted her, and she befriended several young people whom she enlisted as studio assistants and also as companions for social activities. This circle was a far cry from the coterie of art historians, museum directors, critics, and other intellectuals with whom she had interacted with her husband. By the end of the 1970s Bourgeois was even frequenting the Mudd Club, a punk performance venue in Lower Manhattan. Bourgeois took a crucial turn in this period as she began to assemble installations, well before the art form became established. In 1974, she mounted the eerie and cavernous The Destruction of the Father (fig. 64, p. 244) at the alternative space 112 Greene Street in SoHo, and later, in 1978, constructed the encircling Confrontation at the uptown Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art (fig. 65). Both pieces were replete with

that I work the way I do. It is because of the experiences I have gone through.”

In March 1973 Bourgeois’s loving and supportive husband, Robert Goldwater, died suddenly at age sixty-five. To divert herself and help regain balance, Bourgeois began teaching at New York’s School of Visual Arts. Her courses were in sculpture and printmaking, even though she had left the latter medium behind years before. She ran her class like a studio rather than offering technical instruction. She asked the students probing questions about meaning and purpose. But this experience did not revolve an interest in printmaking in her own practice. There are only two prints of note from this period, and both are unconventional. She turned to photostat as a medium to create an expression of revolt linked to a protest march in which she participated (fig. 15), and to stenciling and rubbing to rid herself of anger at being rejected for an exhibition (fig. 16). But Bourgeois’s teaching experience was stimulating in other ways. The vitality of the students attracted her, and she befriended several young people whom she enlisted as studio assistants and also as companions for social activities. This circle was a far cry from the coterie of art historians, museum directors, critics, and other intellectuals with whom she had interacted with her husband. By the end of the 1970s Bourgeois was even frequenting the Mudd Club, a punk performance venue in Lower Manhattan. Bourgeois took a crucial turn in this period as she began to assemble installations, well before the art form became established. In 1974, she mounted the eerie and cavernous The Destruction of the Father (fig. 64, p. 244) at the alternative space 112 Greene Street in SoHo, and later, in 1978, constructed the encircling Confrontation at the uptown Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art (fig. 65). Both pieces were replete with

"time stopped, time remembered, time recreated"
for nearly forty years. The art world seemed finally ready to appreciate Bourgeois’s life. The 1947 illustrated book He Disappeared into Complete Silence, an expansive view of art.80 Bourgeois reached an entirely new level of recognition with a retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1982, when her early work, much of which had never sold and was stored in the basement of her Chelsea brownstone, seemed just as relevant. As the decade closed, in 1979, gallery-goers could see the full range of her wood pieces from the 1940s in an exhibition at the Xavier Fourcade Gallery. That was followed by a 1980 show there of the full range of her achievement of over four decades of ideas emanating from the galleries was one that dominated the critical dialogue. With biography and identity issues now legitimized as subjects of contemporary art, Bourgeois's painful past became the default starting point for any analysis of her work.

In the midst of this growing attention, two factors were especially impactful. First, in 1980, she acquired a huge loft studio in Brooklyn, allowing her to think about art on a grand scale. This certainly fostered the creation of Articulated Lair, of 1986, an enclosure of folding metal doors, approximately nine by twenty-two by sixteen feet in size, with a small stool placed at the center. This architecturally scaled piece, and its theatrical implications, were an extension of Bourgeois’s explorations in The Destruction of the Father and Confrontation of the 1970s, and would lead to her far-reaching series of Gels—confined, room-size installations of differing scales and all manner of contents that began in the early 1990s. In addition, Bourgeois engaged Jerry Gorovoy, the young artist she had met through the Max Hutchinson Gallery, as her primary assistant. He was remarkable at freeing her up to focus on her art. He became her sympathetic daily companion and has even been referred to as her “muse.”84 His calm presence kept her on track, whatever her moods. He withstood her seemingly irrational fits of anger and kept things steady. His responsibilities continued to grow as he managed Bourgeois’s celebrated place in the art world for the rest of her life, and to this day.

If in the 1980s Bourgeois’s renown grew, it was in the 1990s that she truly came into her own, as the art world wholeheartedly embraced the kind of personalized content that had been her mainstay since the late 1940s. Among the panoply of ideas emanating from the galleries was one that was especially relevant for Bourgeois’s sensibility. Gender and sexuality had risen to the forefront in the feminist wave, and now was adopted as subject matter for a range of male and female identity issues now legitimized as subjects of contemporary art, Bourgeois’s painful past became the default starting point for any analysis of her work.

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Fillette, so outrageous in 1968, never seemed more timely. If one may acknowledge a filmed slide show comprised of old photographs that portrayed the same incident together with her voiceover narration. The film was installed in the Museum’s lobby during the exhibition as a last-minute addition.85 This tantalizing saga, and Bourgeois’s vivid recounting of it, came to dominate the critical dialogue. With biography and identity issues now legitimized as subjects of contemporary art, Bourgeois’s painful past became the default starting point for any analysis of her work.

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But as the 1990s ended, Bourgeois—now approaching her nineties—began retreating from the art world at large. She no longer attended her own openings or other art-related events. An agoraphobia that had oppressed her at various times in her life began to grip her more firmly. She increasingly spent time at her home/studio, going less and less often to the Brooklyn loft. Instead, people came to her, and the townhouse on 40th Street began to have a workshoplike atmosphere. Those who came with proposals and specialized skills gave her new energy; it was not time to rest if someone was due to arrive. Curators, scholars, and journalists added to the mix. Her well-attended Sunday salons became more formalized as a growing number of artists and others in the art world visited regularly, eager to hear her comments and advice—no matter how withering—or just to be in her company.

Prints as Studio Practice

It had been a long time since printmaking was integral to Bourgeois’s art, but she began to approach it, tentatively, once again when she was in her seventies. Asked for benefit prints in the early 1980s, she thought of photogravure, which could easily translate her drawings. Through friends she found the congenial master printer Deli Sacilotto, an expert in that technique. She enjoyed discussions with him, always appreciating the talents of a master craftsman. Later in the 1980s, she met Christian Guérin, a French printer with a workshop and small gallery in Tribeca. She was impressed with his facility and its printing presses, and was partial to his specialties in engraving, drypoint, and etching; they soon established a creative rapport. As with Sacilotto, she hoped that Guérin might finally help her complete the full edition of He Disappeared into Complete Silence, from decades earlier, something she had long wished to pursue. Sadly, Guérin passed away before that could happen. However, by 1990 printmaking again had a place in Bourgeois artistic thinking.

With her now considerable renown, Bourgeois was sought after by print publishers. Peter Blum, a New York publisher and gallery owner who had relocated from Switzerland, was known for issuing exciting print projects with many leading artists. He first approached Bourgeois about an edition for Parkett, a periodical of cutting-edge contemporary art that incorporated prints and multiples as part of its Collaborations & Editions series. Their relationship would grow over the decade of the 1990s and resulted in several notable portfolios, illustrated books, and individual prints. Bourgeois enjoyed their interactions, especially the fact that she and Blum occasionally spoke in French, and he was a like-minded admirer of books. He once delighted her with the gift of a seventeenth-century volume by a French midwife, also named Louise Bourgeois. As a publisher without his own print workshop, Blum sought out printers who would be good matches for his artists. In the case of Bourgeois, he asked the advice of Judith Solodkin, of SOLO Impression, herself a master lithographer. Solodkin had been a neighbor of Bourgeois and remained a friend. She suggested the Harlan & Weaver printshop, since the printers there were expert in the intaglio techniques that Bourgeois favored. Later, growing out of the Blum projects, Bourgeois and printer Felix Harlan would establish an extremely close and long-standing working relationship. Solodkin also hoped that Bourgeois might become fully engaged with lithography, but the artist was never completely comfortable with it. Eventually, though, Bourgeois and Solodkin did complete striking prints together, including the ambitious and large-scale The Song of the Blacks and the Blues of 1996 (fig. 22). Publisher Benjamin Shiff of Osiris also introduced himself to Bourgeois in the late 1980s with hopes of producing an illustrated book. He had seen an example of He Disappeared into Complete Silence at MoMA and it had inspired him. The idea of a book certainly appealed to Bourgeois, as did Shiff’s creative sensibility. Although not a printer himself, he was acutely sensitive to the potential of the medium. He encouraged Bourgeois to try a variety of technical experiments before deciding the best way forward. For printing, he depended on the Wingate Studio printshop in Hinsdale, New Hampshire. In 1990 Bourgeois issued the puritan, a major accomplishment in the field of contemporary illustrated books, under Shiff’s Osiris imprint (fig. X.XXII 52). Bourgeois’s return to printmaking in the 1990s continued unabated, with many undertakings echoing the artistic concerns of her sculpture at that time. For example, the portfolio Anatomy (1989–90) published by Blum and printed by Harlan & Weaver, captures in printed form her exploration of the body (fig. 22). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17). The spider motif, with a moving text by Bourgeois, fills a book that occupies a fitting place in the modern tradition of livres d’artiste (figs. X.XXXII 16, 17).
The Past and the Present
Prints and books turned out to be perfect vehicles for allowing Bourgeois to revisit earlier images and texts that remained highly meaningful to her. She often responded to something from a past decade as if she had just conceived it, wanting to start up again; it seemed that she was never really “finished” with an idea. When Bourgeois reviewed her early prints with this author for the catalogue raisonné of 1994, her memories were keen and the immediacy of her feelings was startling. A remark about a sculpture also makes this point: “A while ago I was looking at an early sculpture that I hadn’t seen in a long time. The trembling emotions I felt when I made it came right back.” 

For the portfolio Quarantania, of 1990, Bourgeois had plates from 1942–48 reprinted. They had been saved for nearly fifty years, just as she saved most everything. Some were too corroded to use and others clearly show the passage of time, but Bourgeois went forward, even insisting that the housing for the series duplicate the beige linen covering of He Disappeared into Complete Silence, in deference to the time when the prints were first created. That early illustrated book was also still very much on her mind. After remaking certain plates with printers Deli Sacilotto and Christian Guérin in the 1980s, she finally entrusted a new edition to Felix Harlan.

Autobiographical Series, of 1994, is yet another portfolio consisting mostly of compositions from the past. This time Bourgeois based new prints on drawings from her earliest years in New York, including a touching scene of two of her young sons in the bathtub. When this series came out, her sons were in their fifties. Album, of that same year, goes back even further, to her own childhood, reproducing more than sixty old photographs with her descriptive texts on overlaid pages.

In addition to images, Bourgeois revived her writings from decades earlier. The story in the 1940 illustrated book the puritan is from 1947 and details her long-ago unrequited feelings for MoMA’s Alfred Barr. Describing it, she said: “I analyzed an episode forty years after it happened. I could see things from a distance…. Instead of feeling a person drowning, I considered the situation objectively.” Another story from the 1940s was the basis for She Lost It, a project initiated by Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop in 1992. Bourgeois screenprinted the tale on a nearly two-hundred-foot-long banner, which became the centerpiece for a performance. An actor (actually the critic and curator Robert Storr) appeared onstage completely wrapped in the banner, his identity both invisible. Then other actors slowly unwrapped him, as Bourgeois’s parable of lost love was revealed to the audience. The freed-up portion of the banner was then rewrapped around an embracing couple standing nearby. All the performers were in costumes embroidered with bits of Bourgeois’s text in red.

Print Processes
Prints involve techniques that often mystify even those well-versed in other art mediums. At this point, Bourgeois was familiar with woodcut and linoleum cut, lithography, engraving, etching, drypoint, and aquatint—all of which she had employed in the 1930s and 1940s, when her highest regard for engraving and drypoint. She once called engraving a “symbolic act.” She loved its assertive line on paper and felt it merited an even higher status than drypoint. But engraving requires a certain manual strength in order to push the burin through a metal printing plate; as Bourgeois said, it takes “biceps.” On the other hand, drypoint requires only a simple scratching stroke. She liked the gentle, almost tentative line it produced; nearly half of her total output in printmaking utilizes drypoint, by itself or in combination with other techniques. In the 2000s, she would actively turn to soft-ground etching and also find new uses for other techniques. In the 2000s, she would actively turn to soft-ground etching and also find new uses for other techniques.
sometimes screenprint; she also drew directly on plates with ink marker for a starting point. After that, her changes were indicated on proofs in a combination of pencil, ink, gouache, and watercolor, and those changes always led to more. She constantly revised her compositions, and was almost never ready to stop. She routinely went through fifteen, twenty, or more evolving states and variants. This process did not entail Bourgeois settling in at a professional print workshop for a project, which is standard practice for most contemporary artists working in the medium. Instead, those who assisted Bourgeois came to her home.

Printer Felix Harlan was the most frequent visitor. For years he came daily, or at least several times a week. This required a special rapport with Bourgeois, and Harlan’s gentle, patient manner was a great asset. Bourgeois accomplished more in a single hour with Harlan than with anyone else. He remembered always bringing both engraving and drypoint tools, to be ready for whatever she might want to do on a given day. He would place fresh proofs in blotters to dry on his morning with more alterations with brushes, pencils, and pens.11

One of Bourgeois’s most ambitious drypoints of this period—begun with Christian Guérin and completed with Harlan—is Sainte Sébastienne (plater 102–13), which went through numerous stages between 1940 and 1944, comprising eight states and variants, and some thirty-six states and variants in all, with stops and starts over that period. With this print, and others, she took advantage of photo COPYING to experiment with color. Sainte Sébastienne changed markedly as it evolved. This progression offers an illuminating look into Bourgeois’s dynamic creative process. Another composition with dramatic changes across developing states is Bed (1947), which went through three source drawings, three versions, and twenty-four states and variants, while also incorporating color (figs. 27, 28).112 Color printmaking, though, was not a natural fit for Bourgeois at this point. She found its technical complexities off-putting and held a more traditional view of printmaking as a black-and-white medium.113 She preferred adding color with hand additions, which gave her optimal control. On occasion she tried red or blue printing inks with plate tone, or colored chine colle for accented backgrounds. And her choice of the numerous benefit prints she contributed to social, political, and arts organizations was usually color, since it has such wide appeal.114 Later, in the 2000s, screenprinting and digital printing made working with color much easier. As the 1990s unfolded, Bourgeois’s 190th Street home/studio was increasingly busy and productive. Print people came and went. Harlan might be downstairs on the press, joined there by the seamstress Mercedes Katz, who became crucial to Bourgeois’s work with fabric pieces. As always, Bourgeois appreciated the expertise of these professionals. “I have the greatest respect for technicians,” she said; “I give credit to people who are related to a certain tool, a certain craft.” “I do get along very well . . . because I admire them,” she wrote in her diary. “. . . I want to hire workers to imitate my mother.”

The 2000s would bring yet another outpouring of prints, co-authored with Carol Smith,110 including all the proofs in her possession and a promise, going forward, of one example of each new print with its numerous states.111 This new attention to her printmaking acted as a further stimulus for Bourgeois, and for the additional printers and publishers who sought her out.112 The 2000s would bring yet another outpouring of prints, one that served the aging artist well in the last years of her life. The social dimension of all this activity helped distract her from bleak moods. When she knew someone was due at the house—a fact she recorded on a blackboard near the front door—she rose to the occasion. Not that she was always in the best frame of mind when he or she arrived. Most of those close to her, including this author, were at points subjected to her fits of anger. Those could be frightening, indeed. But for the most part Bourgeois was thoroughly engaging and inspiring; the people around her felt lucky to be there. Bourgeois’s prints began to attract attention and were exhibited widely at this time. She was surely gratified when two of her illustrated books were part of a 1993 exhibition at Manhattan’s Grolier Club, the distinguished bibliophile society.116 In 1994, this author organized a full print retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of the publication of a catalogue raisonné of her prints to date co-authored with Carol Smith.112 That catalogue brought together some 150 compositions, spanning from 1939 to 1993, with approximately six hundred states and variants. Also in the early 1990s, Bourgeois decided to donate an archive of her prints to MoMA, including all the proofs in her possession and a promise, going forward, of one example of each new print with its numerous states.113 This new attention to her printmaking acted as a further stimulus for Bourgeois, and for the additional printers and publishers who sought her out.114
A Flourishing Production of Prints

In Bourgeois’s last decade—the 2000s—the artist reached her nineties. She was remarkably active and continued to produce an ever more constricted life. Her home/studio was filled with activity and visitors of all kinds, including President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who came in 2008 to bestow on Bourgeois the French medal of Commandeur de la Légion d’Honneur (n.o. 37, v. 264). Her Sunday salon was still a major attraction. And, most importantly for this study, she continued to be stimulated by producing an undiminished stream of print and book projects, and by the various collaborators involved with them.

The decade opened with a major commission for Turbine Hall, the vast entry space of London’s new Tate Modern. Her mammoth spider, Maman (fig. 29), was completed in 1999 and first installed there in New York. There were many more commissions involved with them.

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Sketchbooks, at this point, were a prime time in her life.120 This print is one of many on the theme of aluminum, left over from casting a sculpture, on fabric being Bourgeois’s individualized but editioned print, one example for her prints. Nitsch is an advocate of the Nitsch, who also served as the primary dealer with New York publisher and gallerist Carolina 32 33 Louise Bourgeois: Prints and Books 34 35 Louise Bourgeois Trust

The hand-embellished, unique print had its most ardent champion in Ben Shiff of Osiris, who had first established a creative rapport with Bourgeois in the late 1980s and early 1990s when they published the print series together. With his encouragement, Bourgeois also combined plate proofs from that volume into diptychs, triptychs, and multipanel formats.124 After a hiatus, Shiff began working with the artist again in the 2000s. He picked up where he had left off, bringing earlier proofs and suggesting that she revisit them with hand additions. This suited Bourgeois perfectly, since she was always eager to explore her compositions anew. Prints with their multiple impressions, lend themselves to this process since each provides a stable jumping-off point from which to go in any number of directions (fig. 33 – 34).

By the mid-2000s Bourgeois’s efforts with Shiff took yet another turn, bending the boundaries of printmaking even further. Ever responsive to her creative thinking, he decided to focus on soft ground etching, a relatively easy process for mark making. The results can closely resemble pencil drawing and these prints captured Bourgeois’s distinctive, sometimes shaly hand. He brought large, narrow printing plates to her house, designed to fit the width of her worktable, and they set up a routine. Although Bourgeois was occasionally too tired when Shiff was scheduled to arrive, more often she was stimulated in anticipation of his visits. They could work for a full afternoon, as he and Gorovoy assisted her in positioning and shifting the plates as she drew. Proofing was done by the printers of the Wingate Studio. She created a large body of individual compositions with this procedure, some requiring two printing plates, side by side. For the final editions, she chose a variety of inking and wiping effects. (figs. 33 – 35, 164 – 69) Shiff then brought back extra proofs for Bourgeois to enhance with pens, pencils, and brushes; she usually transformed them (figs. 210, 213, 247 – 70).

Shiff comes to an armature for a mesmerizing visual exploration of the natural world.125 In this period Bourgeois began to work with New York publisher and gallerist Carolina Nitsch, who also served as the primary dealer for her prints. Nitsch is an advocate of the individualized but editioned print, one example being Bourgeois’s The Good Mother, a digital print on fabric (2008; fig. 33). Here, a ragged fragment of aluminum, left over from casting a sculpture, is adhered to each print—a different one for each sheet in the edition of nine, and three artist’s proofs. This print is one of many on the theme of maternity that occupied Bourgeois in this late period. She said the mother and child motif referred not to the birth of her children but to her own birth—a poignant preoccupation at this time in her life.126 Bourgeois’s digital prints often included unique elements. Another example is the series titled The Fragile (2007), printed on fabric sheets (fig. 33). Sketchbooks, at this point, were a prime vehicle for Bourgeois since they provided a firm, compact support that could easily be manipulated at her table or while sitting in bed; they also became sources for several print series. As with all her digital prints, decisions about The Fragile involved extended discussions about inking, colors, sizing, and specific fabrics. Jerry Gorovoy served as the conduit for the project, bringing samples to Bourgeois for feedback and otherwise managing logistics. After The Fragile was printed, with some sheets in screenplay, Bourgeois used special dyes to make hand additions on individual compositions within the series, varying them across the edition of seven sets and three artist’s proof sets. She thereby produced an editioned print project, but with each set being unique.

Since compositions can be generated at various sizes and in different orientations with digital printing, the technique also offered new creative possibilities for Bourgeois, especially with the numerous figurals she was creating at that time with gouache on dampened paper. These figures, many depicting pregnant women, and men with erect penises, were printed and then assembled by Bourgeois in diverse combinations, mostly as couples. Some sixty new compositions—each unique—emerged from these individually printed figures (figs. 14, 18). Others found their way into the 2009–10 portfolio of digital prints titled Do Not Abandon Me, made with artist Tracey Emin, and into the illustrated book To Whom It May Concern, a collaboration with her old friend the author Gary Indiana in 2009.127

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

"Time stopped, time remembered, time recreated"
À l’Infini (To Infinity, 2008; plates 185 – 98 )

out to be additional spurs to her imagination. Sheets with only printed fragments turned to Bourgeois that led in still further directions. (plate 184 ).

printed proofs of Love and Kisses, an extraordinary series that began with partially printed proofs of Love and Kisses (v. 100, 4), etc. 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, 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.”

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.”

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. 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.”

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 accessions 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.

Themes and Variations

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), 488.

34

35

35 soft ground etchings, all with hand additions, 4 drawings, and 1 handwritten text. sheet (each approx.): 35 x 35 cm (13-7/8 x 13-7/8 in). Publisher: Ostrov, New York. Printer: Imperial Studio, Hinsdale, NH. edition: 10 sets. Private collection

‘time stopped, time remembered, time recreated’
“The sky, the building, and the house, knew each other and approved of each other.” Louise Bourgeois

Architecture Embodied

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.” 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.”

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, surrealistic 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.” 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).
It was in this period that Bourgeois left painting and printmaking behind and turned definitively to sculpture. Many of her early wood totems suggest figures—including family and friends she missed in France—but others merge figural and architectural elements. Titles include Pillar (1915); Pier, Façade, Captains’ Walk on Irving Place Building; and Figures Qui Supportent un Lintou (Figures Supporting a Lintel). When she exhibited these wood sculptures, she took advantage of the gallery’s architecture to add drama to her installation by arranging the pieces as an environment, which encouraged visitors to walk among them.

Around the time that Bourgeois introduced this architectural imagery in her work, she and her husband were interacting in social circles that included several prominent architects—Paul Nelson, Josep Lluís Sert, and Le Corbusier among them. Bourgeois befriended Le Corbusier in particular, and associated with him at the Atelier 17 print workshop. The celebrated stiltlike “pilotis,” part of this architectural imagery in her work, she and them. Bourgeois befriended Le Corbusier in

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Figures Qui Supportent un Lintou (Figures Supporting a Lintel). 1947 Oil on canvas, 54 5/8 × 96 (182.8 × 243.5 cm). Collection The Easton Foundation

When the celebrated stiltlike “pilotis,” a distinctive feature of his modernist architecture, is suggested in several of Bourgeois’s works (see Portrait of Jean-Louis, 1947–49; plate 12; and Plate 6 of Jean-Louis, 1947). The celebrated stiltlike “pilotis,” a distinctive feature of his modernist architecture, is suggested in several of Bourgeois’s works (see Portrait of Jean-Louis, 1947–49; plate 12; and Plate 6 of Jean-Louis, 1947). The celebrated stiltlike “pilotis,” a distinctive feature of his modernist architecture, is suggested in several of Bourgeois’s works (see Portrait of Jean-Louis, 1947–49; plate 12; and Plate 6 of Jean-Louis, 1947). The celebrated stiltlike “pilotis,” a distinctive feature of his modernist architecture, is suggested in several of Bourgeois’s works (see Portrait of Jean-Louis, 1947–49; plate 12; and Plate 6 of Jean-Louis, 1947).

When she owned a small bookshop in the late 1940s, it sometimes took an effort to get herself out and to the shop. But being there also afforded a kind of security. Once, after rearranging the furniture, she reflected: “I was conscious of the walls and I was constantly leaning against them and feeling their strength.”5 Rooms and buildings offered safety, or at least a controllable environment in her life, and they recur time and again in her art. In the 1970s, Bourgeois created the cavetlike tableau The Destruction of the Father (1974; fig. 42, r. 286), as well as the oval assembly of wood boxes titled Confrontation (1978; fig. 20, r. 22). Each had the quality of a stage set where Bourgeois could reenact a vividly recalled event, or conjure up an imagined scenario. Yet even as this theatrical, installation-based vocabulary developed further in her work, Bourgeois still explored individual frailty within an architectural framework. Her Maisons Fragiles (Fragile Houses, 1978; fig. 31) give form to tenuous human emotions and potentially unstable relationships, yet in strictly geometric terms.

Bourgeois presented the first of her ominously titled Cells in 1943. This eventually led to sixty-two of these architectural sculptures, which she produced up until the last year of her life in 2010. Each can be viewed as a chamber, whether assembled from a circle of old doors or fabricated with steel mesh. Some are small and meant for a single inhabitant (such as Cell VI, 1991; plate 32, fig. 36; 6’ × 27” × 14” [182.8 × 68.5 × 35.5 cm]. Private collection), while others are large rooms filled with assemblages of found objects, old clothing, and various sculptures by her, which together generate an affecting poetic resonance. One Cell, titled Passage Dangerous (Dangerous Passage, 1997) is the most elaborate in its architectural implications; it is made up not of a single room but of a series of them laid out one after another and connected in the fashion of a railroad-style apartment. The provocative contents of each room may be contemplated through the structure’s porous mesh walls.

Each of Bourgeois’s Cells is different—some suggest violence, others are forlorn or memorializing, but all are strangely haunting. In Cell (Choc) (1990–95; fig. 31), Bourgeois makes a direct reference to her past with a detailed, pink marble model of her childhood home in Choisy-le-Roi, a suburb of Paris. The hovering guillotine may be interpreted as a dramatic cry echoing back through the years of Bourgeois’s own life, but viewers can also respond to this scene on their own terms, without knowing that the artist lived in that house from the time she was one until she was six. With the Cells, Bourgeois found a vehicle—the confined architectural space—for isolating her thoughts and emotions and grappling with them. One cannot help but draw a parallel between these enclosures and the home/studio she restricted herself to in the last decade of her life. There, she was surrounded by her books, old posters and photographs, sculptures from all periods, and many personal belongings that were eventually transformed into works of art. At the end of her life, containment within the walls of 347 West 20th Street was a psychological and, eventually, physical necessity, though Bourgeois never ceased recalling all the other places she had lived in her long life.
This theme of symbolic abstraction, through the creation of forms that suggest both the structure of geometry and human individuality, has been a consistent preoccupation of my work.”

Louise Bourgeois’s most recognizable sculptures are surely her provocative figures and body parts, and her monumental Spiders, all representing a personalized realism that issues from deeply felt emotions. She once noted that realistic drawings signify the “conquest of negative memory, the need to erase, and to get rid of it,” while “the abstract drawings come from a deep need to achieve peace, rest and sleep.” Abstraction, in fact, was integral to her practice, though not often fully acknowledged in critical accounts. It provided a tool for ordering and analysis—giving Bourgeois a sense of control and calm—but could also express anger and tension. The range of her abstraction veers from the resolutely geometric and biomorphic to the more overtly suggestive, with references to the human body or elements of nature. In the midcentury period, when formalism was ascendant in art circles, Bourgeois wanted that aspect of her work to be regarded as paramount. Asked about its clear erotic content, she demurred: “I am exclusively concerned, at least consciously, with the formal perfection.”

Bourgeois’s explorations of abstraction reach back to her early wood sculptures, among them Untitled (The Wedges) (1945; PLATE 56) and Spiral Woman (1951–52; PLATE 59). Bourgeois’s attraction to such systemized shapes has its roots in her early study of mathematics. “In geometry,” she said, “there cannot be violence because all the cases are considered — no surprises, one can be calm.” Here, the strict posture of Untitled (The Wedges) is inflected with personalized touches: the sizes and colors of the linked segments vary, and the work’s arrowlike thrust conveys determination and stability. Spiral Woman, on the other hand, is comprised of parts that can move, giving the figure an air of responsiveness and implying that it can adapt to its surroundings. Both of these sculptures rely on repetition, which is a significant compositional strategy in Bourgeois’s practice of abstraction. The methodical, almost ritualized act of threading wood segments onto metal rods would have been comforting for Bourgeois. It approximated the act of stitching, and sewing always carried with it a link back to her mother’s work in tapestry restoration, as well as the satisfaction of repairing. Repair, on a symbolic level, also extended to reparation and making amends in her personal relationships.

This ominous abstract image gives form to the whirling wind suggested by its title. It was created by hammering a nail and screwdriver into a thin sheet of copper. Flickering lights and darks resulted from ink catching on the edges of the indentations. Bourgeois once referred to a print from the 1940s, similarly titled Tempête du Vent (Tornado; PLATE 146), as “an exorcism of the fear . . . of being blown away and demolished.”

44. Tornado. 1991–92. Drypoint, with selective wiping. PLATE: 17 15⁄16 × 13 5⁄16” (45.5 × 33.8 cm)
Bourgeois’s pen strokes on paper could also be repetitive and mesmerizing. Many drawings from her early years display curving and meandering lines that call to mind strands of her own long hair, or the skeins of wool and bobbins of thread that were touchstones of her youth (fig. 30). The solace that drawing on paper offered her was a constant throughout Bourgeois’s long life. In her last years she filled sketchbooks with repeating lines and shapes, sitting quietly at her table or propped up in bed when plagued by insomnia. Her markings are seismicographic: tracking the slightest waverings of her hand, but also her unending resolve. The title of the group constituting Acoustica (2005; fig. 40) suggests that these sheets might have been filled as she listened to music to help pass the time at night. Also in this late period, Bourgeois created room-size installations on paper that feature replicating abstract printed forms. The delineation of a strict geometry — without a clear indication of something outside itself — is somewhat rare for Bourgeois but finds its way into her 1940 book the puritan (1940:45–54), illustrating a text she wrote decades earlier about her friend Alfred Barr, the founding director of The Museum of Modern Art. In describing the visual mode she chose for re-examining those reflections, she says: “Geometry was a tool to understanding . . . it was a pleasure . . . there was order.” These elegant engravings, with their sharply defined structures, are a particularly apt evocation of Barr; the celebrated champion of modernism. Geometry also permeates Bourgeois’s fabric collages of the 2000s, a fact that is underscored when she selects materials already printed with abstract patterns. In certain of her fabric illustrated books (plates 82, 87), Bourgeois compared the primary motif, even with figurative implications, to a clear indication of something outside itself. The spiral holds everything is welcome.”8

Another way Bourgeois created an overarching visual narrative was with the format of the series. Lullaby (1999; v. 1–20) comprises twenty-four whimsical screenprints on backdrops of musical staves — an abstract visual toll that occurs again and again in her later prints and drawings. Lullaby reverberates with an unmistakable rhythm across the whole, while individual plates bristle with signs of sexuality. Bourgeois favored the presentation of such a series in a stabilizing grid. Describing that abstract framework as it appeared in her early paintings, she said: “The grid is a very peaceful thing because nothing can go wrong . . . everything is complete. There is no room for anxiety . . . everything has a place . . . everything is welcome.”9

While lines, curves, circles, grids, and a wide array of biomorphic formations were highlights of Bourgeois’s abstract language, the spiral holds a singular place in her œuvre. It originated with the plaster pieces of the 1960s and became a primary motif, even with figurative implications, as in Partial Recall. Bourgeois compared the turn of the spiral to the twisting and wringing out of tasselleries as they were washed at the river when she was a child. In one fit of anger, she wrote: “The spiral, means squeeze out of, wring the laundry, wring dry — spin dry — twist your own idiot, twist his arm to make him do or talk or give, squeeze him, here is then the message of my spiral . . .” Yet the spiral afforded a variety of expressive possibilities. It might convey coilng tension, as in Untitled (2006; plate 60), or aloof to a gathering storm (1999; plate 42), but it may also foster a peaceful serenity (Progression, 1990; plate 67). All of Bourgeois’s imagery — abstract or figurative — emerged from a complicated psychological domain. As she vividly declared: “It is not an image I am seeking. It’s not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving, of destroying.”10

Themes and Variations

64

Abstracted Emotions

65
Louise Bourgeois's origins are intimately linked to fabric—to the tapestries that were the focus of her family's business. Her childhood memories were filled with the washing, restoring, and selling of these historic textiles. She keenly remembered the workshop women on their knees at the river, washing and wringing those heavy objects, herself drawing in missing fragments of imagery, and her mother with a needle and thread, mending. “My mother would sit out in the sun and repair . . . ,” she remembered. “She really loved it. This sense of reparation is very deep within me.”1 A lovely letter of 1929, from mother to daughter, reminds the young Louise as she travels: “On your return I am quite delighted to do tapestry together. You must not neglect that.”2 The association with her mother is clear, even though her father was also involved in the business through sales at the family’s gallery in Paris.

Bourgeois’s interest in the craft of weaving found an art context in the mid-1940s, when she exhibited her own woven textile designs at The Museum of Modern Art.3 She may even have considered business opportunities in designing textiles.4 But those exhibited works were an exception in her art career. As for sewing, that skill was mainly relegated to her own clothing—making garments, repairing and altering them. Fashion, however, was something of a preoccupation from the time she was very young, and her parents enjoyed dressing her in stylish outfits. She never discarded any of her clothes, admitting: “The pretext is that they are still good—it’s my past and as rotten as it was I would like to take it and hold it tight in my arms.”5 But the time came when she was ready to transform these items—not throw them out. This was true also for a range of fabric items amassed over the course of her life—towels, handkerchiefs, bedding, and the like.

The occupation of sewing, long demeaned as “women’s work,” began to be supported as a legitimate art form with the feminist revivals of the skill in the 1970s. But sewing and fabrics first made an appearance in Bourgeois’s art in 1991, with Cell I, the architectural structure that initiated one of her most important series. The focus of the assemblage of objects filling that eccentric “room” was a metal bed fitted out with fabric bedding constructed from such items as old pillowcases and postal mailing bags from France (fig. 42). Most were embroidered in red with phrases Bourgeois often wrote in her diaries.
or on the backs of drawings, among them: “Pain is the ransom of formalism,” and “Art is the guarantee of sanity.” Fabric elements were soon found in subsequent Cells. And such aphorisms would later be printed on fabric items with lithography (plates 82–83), and in fabric books through digital processes (plates 84–93).

A significant embrace of fabric in Bourgeois’s printed work came about in 1994 with She Lost It, a project created at The Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. There she printed variously colored silk scarves with a tale she wrote in the 1940s, and then expanded it onto a nearly two-hundred-foot-long white banner screenprinted with red text. Bourgeois incorporated that banner into a labyrinthine installation that visitors walked through while reading the text, and also made it the centerpiece of a performance in which it was wrapped and unwrapped around her actors. For that event, she also made costumes embroidered with her pithy statements (fig. 26; p. 27). Such words were occupying a more prominent place in her work generally.

Ideas engaging fabric and sewing began to inspire a range of Bourgeois’s art in the 1990s. She created several fabric sculptures with a rough stitch that lends a vaguely memorializing quality to the loosely hanging attire in these works. Concurrently, this was a moment when clothing was being explored by a range of contemporary artists, many of whom were investigating issues of identity, as opposed to memory. Bourgeois, now in her eighties, rarely left the house at this point. As she emptied her closets for her art, it was as if she were closing a chapter of her life. She no longer needed to dress up to attend social occasions, and wore simple outfits at home in her studio. But her former wardrobe provided a way to look back and remember events. “You can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, the weight, the color, the smell of the clothes in your closet,” she said.

The act of sewing had symbolic resonance for Bourgeois, but also a soothing effect. She once wrote: “I feel depressed . . . fighting depression. . . . If I go to bed, I cannot sleep, only sewing will restore me to a balance.”9 She initially sewed her fabric sculptures with a rough stitch that lends those works a vividly emotional quality (see for example Untitled, 1998; plate 73). But as her fabric work increased, she began to rely on a full-time seamstress. Mercedes Katz, whom she hired not long after that, Bourgeois saw potential in the linen hand towels from her trouseau. It was clear that each towel could be folded to form four “pages.” Perhaps thinking of the cloth children’s books she once collected, she asked Katz to sew a batch of folded towels together to make the binding for Ode à l’Oubli (Ode to Forgetting, 2002; plate 83), and then filled the pages with collages made from bits of colorful silk, linen, chiffon, tulle, nylon, and rayon from her old garments. Some materials exhibit stains, soot marks, and even cigarette burns, suggesting their histories.10 More fabric books and prints followed, as she continued with fabric sculptures, some incorporating tapestry, with its associations to her family (fig. 43). In fact, fabric was a primary material of Bourgeois’s last decades. Indeed, when she took up digital printing in the mid-2000s, it was for the ease with which she could print on fabric. It superseded paper as her preferred printing surface; she liked its tactile qualities and the way it absorbs ink. Her last two print projects were a series made in collaboration with artist Tracey Emin (Do Not Abandon Me, 2009–10), and a book with author and friend Gary Indiana (To Whom It May Concern, 2009), both compilations on cloth.11 Fabric had followed the arc of Bourgeois’s life and art—from childhood to very old age.12

Themes and Variations

Fabric of Memory

Plate 82

Plate 83

Plate 84

Plate 85

Plate 86

Plate 87

Plate 88

Plate 89

Plate 90

Plate 91

Plate 92

Plate 93

Plate 94

Plate 95

Plate 96

Plate 97
Alone and Together

The human figure, and specifically self-portraiture, are integral to Bourgeois’s art in all periods of her career and in all mediums. "Bosom Lady" (1948; fig. 45), a figurative engraving and drypoint, encompasses many of the concerns the artist grapples with again and again, in terms of both subject matter and visual strategies. At this early point in her artistic career, her work had evolved from a stylized realism to a more dreamlike realm, influenced by Surrealism. But combining features of both modes—the real and the imagined—became central to Bourgeois’s vision.

In "Bosom Lady," an indeterminate space and a figure juxtaposing a female body with the wings and feet of a bird are signal devices of the irrational world conjured by the Surrealists. Yet the female’s head is recognizably Bourgeois’s own, as indicated by the hairstyle she wore at that time. When describing this print, she pointed to three shapes in the bowl on the shelf, saying: “These are her three eggs . . . her three children . . . her three jewels. The bird will take care of the eggs . . . but the bird can also escape by flight.” This is a self-portrait of Bourgeois as mother, conveying the rewards and responsibilities she felt in that role. In succeeding decades, the urgency of her changing moods and fears would dramatically affect her sense of herself, her body, and her relationships with others, and that in turn would shape the meanings of her figurative art.

When Bourgeois turned definitively to sculpture in the late 1940s, her first exhibitions of life-size, abstracted wood totems referenced human figures—whether symbolizing actual people (as in Brother and Sister of 1949), or giving form to perceived hostilities (as in Persistent Antagonism of 1946–48). Later, after an intensive period of psychoanalysis in the 1950s and 1960s, the role of the figure in her art gave way to a preoccupation more specifically with the physical body. After an endless exploration of dreams and previously unspoken thoughts and desires, Bourgeois acknowledged this newly discovered realm of feelings in her art through explicit imagery. Works with obvious sexual references appeared in the late 1960s, including the rather shocking "Fillette" (1968), a two-foot-long latex penis sculpture that she hung from an ominous hook (fig. 16; p. 20). Bourgeois also, on occasion, cradled this disturbing sculpture like a baby in her arms, adding a touch of irony and humor, and perhaps thinking of the sons she had raised many years earlier. With this and other works, the body fragment became firmly entrenched in her vocabulary of forms (as in Janus Fleuri [Flowering Janus], 1968; plate 118), and led to further...
Thèmes et Variations

Provo-cative creations. In Fragile Goddesses (1970; PL. 45), the swelling belly signals pregnancy, but the head of the figure has morphed into a defensive weapon. She can take care of herself and protect her unborn child. But Bourgeois understands the precariousness of this position. Here, she recognizes “a determination to survive at whatever fragile level you can achieve.”

Bourgeois’s body imagery shifted from the merely suggestive to the overtly sexual to the surreal throughout the rest of her career. But the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a heightened level of realism, particularly with full-scale figures, some cast from models (as in Arch of Hysteria, 1990; PL. 47, 48) and others constructed in fabric. The diminutive Do Not Abandon Me (1999) also displays a graphic naturalism, while Couple I (1996) renders this in her art through the scrutiny of bones, muscles, intestines, and bodily fluids (PL. 122–13, 123–127). “With the emotions there is always the physical reaction—the heartbeat, breathing, perspiration,” she noted. But the response can go deeper: “Depression set in, and paralyzing fears. Somatic ailments.”

In Fragile Goddesses (1970; PL. 46), the swelling belly signals pregnancy, while the gaping mouths scream, ribs burst through skin, muscles tighten; when they relax, our muscles tighten; when they relax, a liquid is released,” she observed. These fluids became the subject of all Bourgeois's elegies. One late print series titled Extreme Tension, from 2007, interposes its compositions with handwritten text panels that call out pains, cramps, and hot flashes, and the effects of tension on the scalp, shoulder blades, stomach and esophagus, intestines, and rectum. Bourgeois first listed these ailments in her writings of the late 1940s and then revived the text nearly fifty years later for this print series. Stress was a constant problem and ailment in her writings of the late 1950s, and then revived the text nearly fifty years later for this print series. Her work, other personal relationships engage her firmly in charge. Bourgeois was endlessly interested in all these elements.10

Bourgeois approaches the end of her life, she looked back to the beginning, to her mother’s womb and breast, for the reassuring safety and security they represented. Even at this late date, the figure served as a probing vehicle for understanding, as it had in so many guises throughout Bourgeois’s career. “Content,” she said, “is a concern with the human body, its functions.”13

While sexual body parts and sexual relationships are pervasive subjects in Bourgeois’s work, other personal relationships engage her imagination as well, particularly motherhood. The birth of her son Jean-Louis in 1940 spurred the emblem of family unity seen in an untitled work of the same year (PL. 47), with mother, father, and son entwined. The interdependence conveyed there still affected Bourgeois some fifty years later when she revisited the earlier image for her 1990 print Self Portrait (PL. 86–87), which relates to the sculpture of the same provocative title. But in the print, Bourgeois adds an enclosing glass bell jar, conjuring up a surrealistic dream state or, more darkly, suggesting that this relationship will be suffocating.

Images of motherhood fill Bourgeois’s final years, when she fashioned simplified forms to depict pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, by brushing red gouache onto dampened paper (PL. 143). These subjects—all of which recur in Bourgeois’s imagery. A certain playfulness pervades the sexual encounters in the awe-inspiring book The Laws of Nature (PL. 138–143), where the male holds a commanding position at the start of the sequence, but the action flips and the female is ultimately firmly in charge. Bourgeois was endlessly fascinated by the male/female relationship. “There is the desire,” she said, “the flight, the fear of failure, vulnerability, jealousy, and violence. I’m interested in all these elements.”

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The metaphors in nature are very strong . . . nature is a mode of communication.” Louise Bourgeois

Forces of Nature

From the time she was a child, Louise Bourgeois was a keen observer of nature. She and her siblings tended garden plots and had an intimate knowledge of plants, flowers, shrubs, and fruit-bearing trees. Years later she recalled tall boxwoods, shaped by topiary trimming, which smelled “so sweet” when it rained. “When I went into the garden at night,” she said, “it was as if friendly presences populated the landscape.” That tendency to humanize natural phenomena would be fundamental to her thinking as an adult artist.

In 1941, when she and her husband purchased a country house in Easton, Connecticut, she took the opportunity to teach her young sons about their surroundings. “Nature was one of the ways I communicated with the children,” she said, “both through the animals and the plants. . . . If we observe life in the garden, we share the same love. It makes you very close.”

As a young painter and printmaker, Bourgeois often chose motifs of flora and fauna, analyzing and systematizing them through the device of the grid. She also hinted at primordial fears and mythic powers embodied in the landscape through such paintings as Untitled of 1945 (fig. 49), where trees, roots, and layers of sediment are cloaked in foreboding. In prints, she represented wind and dangerous storms, as well as seeds, fecundity, and processes of germination. When Bourgeois turned definitively to sculpture in the later 1940s, her prime concern was abstracted figures, but she continued her practice of drawing with black ink, many of the resulting images calling to mind plants and landscapes. When a group of those drawings was part of a solo exhibition in 1953, critics noted the resemblances. The sculpture Forêt (Night Garden) (plate 143) was also on display. A wood piece comprised of separate elements clustered on a shallow base, set close to the floor, it immediately conjures up plantings and growth; shrouded in black paint, it emanates mystery. Discussing this piece, Bourgeois remembered past experiences: “I have looked down at the plants crowded together . . . the darkness that surrounds those plants near the ground has always seemed to me attractive and frightening . . . my approach to nature is a very subjective one and it revolves around the idea of security or danger.”

When Bourgeois exhibited an entirely new body of sculpture at New York’s Stable Gallery in 1964, she traded her upright, rigid wood totems for works of organic and biomorphic contours, incorporating plaster and rubber molds to create her shapes. She introduced the motif of the “lair,” Swelling (#3). 2008. Soft ground etching, with watercolor, ink, gouache, and pencil additions. Sheet: 60 1/8 × 35 1/2” (152.7 × 90.2 cm). Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust and Osiris, New York

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a bulbous, nestlike sculpture with a hollowed-out interior. **Elle Couturière** (Fairy Dressmaker, 1963; *fig. 48; p. 103) was one of two pendulous lairs hung from a tree.7 She revisited that idea years later, in 1995, for a public park in Choisy-le-Roi, the town where she spent her earliest childhood years. Commissioned for a sculpture, she created **Les Bienvenus** (The Welcome Ones), two bipedlike aluminum nests that hang from a tree.8 Some years later, a similar pair was displayed in Somerset, England (fig. 30).

In the late 1940s, Bourgeois devised yet another sculptural strategy from ideas based in nature. She fashioned a series of “landscapes,” with forms that suggest hills and mounds, and that may just as easily be interpreted as breasts or other shapes of the body. (For example, see **Soft Landscape II**; 1967; plate 155). Such likenesses led one critic to identify the spider with her mother, and associating the spinning of a web with the mending and restoring of tapestries, Bourgeois remarked. “The spider is a friend.”12

In 2002 she constructed an installation in Bourgeois’s work when she exhibited her first **Spider** sculptures. She also created a range of prints with this same eerie motif (**fig. 49; p. 116 ), familiar from the iconography of late nineteenth-century Symbolist art. By identifying the spider with her mother, and associating the spinning of a web with the mending and restoring of tapestries, Bourgeois again brought together the spheres of the natural and human worlds. In addition, she appreciated the cleverness of the arachnid, remembering how it caught mosquitoes that plagued her family during summers in Easton. “The crafty spider, hiding and waiting, is wonderful to watch,” she remarked. “The spider is a friend.”

Natural motifs regularly appear in Bourgeois’s work in her last decade. The rivers she lived near had always been potent symbols: the Creuse and the Bièvre for memories of her childhood, and the Bièvre for its centrality to Paris, and the Seine for its centrality to the city. Most importantly, these sculptures, shaped in marble, bronze, and plastic resin, represent mutability, with forms seeming to transform in marble, bronze, and plastic resin, represent the branch of a tree. Bourgeois exhibited it in a garden, suspended from the ceiling in that show. The next year, Bourgeois revisited that idea years later, in 1995, for a public park in Choisy-le-Roi, the town where she spent her earliest childhood years. Commissioned for a sculpture, she created **Les Bienvenus** (The Welcome Ones), two bipedlike aluminum nests that hang from a tree. Some years later, a similar pair was displayed in Somerset, England (fig. 30).

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Natural motifs regularly appear in Bourgeois’s work in her last decade. The rivers she lived near had always been potent symbols: the Creuse and the Bièvre for memories of her childhood, and the Seine for its centrality to Paris, and the powerful Hudson for its proximity to her 20th Street home in adulthood. “Each had a different character,” she said, “but all could be unpredictable and dangerous.”13 In 2002 she constructed an installation in Bourgeois’s work when she exhibited her first **Spider** sculptures. She also created a range of prints with this same eerie motif (**fig. 49; p. 116 ), familiar from the iconography of late nineteenth-century Symbolist art. By identifying the spider with her mother, and associating the spinning of a web with the mending and restoring of tapestries, Bourgeois remarked. “The spider is a friend.”12

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“Never let me be free from this burden that will never let me be free.”

Louise Bourgeois

Lasting Impressions

The concept of a “late style” as the capstone of an artist’s life has long been a subject of study in relation to those major figures who lived to advanced ages. A romantic notion of the work produced in this period presents it as a source of profound meaning and rare insight. No matter the artistic era or the circumstances of particular artists, similarities are observed even among artists whose “late styles” transpired at very different ages—such as Titian (who died at eighty-six) and Rembrandt (who died at the much younger age of sixty-three). For painters, loose, spontaneous brushwork is frequently a hallmark, as is a tendency toward abstraction, with content interpreted in terms of spirituality and transcendence. Even when certain effects may be linked to physical ailments attendant to old age—such as the vision problems that afflicted Monet, or the dementia suffered by de Kooning—late style as a phenomenon continues to intrigue scholars of art. The late work of Picasso, who lived to be ninety-one, has been the source of recurring study and evaluation since his death, although its brash paint handling and bold subjects evoke struggle and haunting dissonance more than transcendence.

What should be made of the late work of Louise Bourgeois? Her long life stretched well past that of many of the major artists who have been subjects of analysis. When would this late period have begun for an artist who lived to ninety-eight? Was there a definitive change at a particular time? In a rare essay devoted to the subject of Bourgeois’s late style, art historian Linda Nochlin chose to contrast the artist’s soft fabric sculptures with a marble architectural piece, although Nochlin acknowledged that it was “impossible to summarize the work of her latest years in any coherent way.” In fact, for much of the first decade of the 2000s—Bourgeois’s final years—she continued to expand upon innovations that first emerged in the 1990s, with Spiders, fabric sculptures and collages, and Cells. At the same time, new directions appeared in her works on paper, particularly a return to the subject of motherhood with vivid imagery brushed in red gouache, as well as copious line drawings filling sketchbooks. Those latter pages—mostly drawn on both sides—are assembled in suites and exhibited together as grids, many wall-filling in scale; Bourgeois’s repetitive strokes are mesmerizing to contemplate.

1184. Love and Kisses. 2007. Soft ground etching, with selective wiping. sheet: 59 7/8 x 39 15/16" (152.1 x 91.3 cm)

This composition was formed from two tall, vertical printing plates, placed side by side. Selective wiping of ink created highlighted areas and an overall mottled gray plate tone. Bourgeois issued Love and Kisses in an edition of 9, but did not stop experimenting. She went on to generate sheets for À l’Infini (plates: 185–98) by printing only the twisting, veinline elements of the composition.
Weaver workshop. Projects in collaboration with her longtime digital printing. She also carried on with intaglio near the end of her life. With a new printer and publisher, she explored the full potential of new imagery in an extended series of large-scale compositions from tall, narrow printing plates approximately five feet in height and from ten to twenty inches in width, some joining two plates side by side. Her forms, while straddling the line between abstraction and representation, continued to reference long-standing themes of the human body and nature (plates 132–136, 146, 149). After issuing many of these as editioned prints, with variations in inking, wiping, plate tone, and paper, Bourgeois kept the process going. She went back to extra proofs, reimagining the existing imagery with extensive embellishments in gouache, watercolor, and pencil (plates 145, 170). Shiff and her longtime assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, were there to help, rolling the paper under the table as she worked down its surface, holding the prints up for her inspection, and arranging them on the floor to dry, all so Bourgeois could remain seated while she worked, which was necessary at that point.

Bourgeois was thoroughly energized by this process, working on as many as four or five prints in a single session. As Shiff described it: “I think when you work in the most spontaneous way, and you work with principles—only by the unconscious. Here, Bourgeois’s handwriting itself becomes a poignant feature.”

Bourgeois started with a repertoire of inventive new imagery in an extended series of large-scale compositions from tall, narrow printing plates approximately five feet in height and from ten to twenty inches in width, some joining two plates side by side. Her forms, while straddling the line between abstraction and representation, continued to reference long-standing themes of the human body and nature (plates 132–136, 146, 149). After issuing many of these as editioned prints, with variations in inking, wiping, plate tone, and paper, Bourgeois kept the process going. She went back to extra proofs, reimagining the existing imagery with extensive embellishments in gouache, watercolor, and pencil (plates 145, 170). Shiff and her longtime assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, were there to help, rolling the paper under the table as she worked down its surface, holding the prints up for her inspection, and arranging them on the floor to dry, all so Bourgeois could remain seated while she worked, which was necessary at that point.

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Bourgeois combined other such hand-colored and reworked prints into a variety of multipanel works and series, several of which became room-size installation sets. Others were bound into unique books in which she wrote texts in pencil, her handwriting itself becoming a poignant feature. In fact, it was the combination of words and texts with printed imagery that first brought Shiff and Bourgeois together in 1989, resulting in the publication of the puritan (1990; plates 151–154), an illustrated book with many unique offshoots. Now, the artist and publisher again collaborated on works that encompassed their shared love of art and language. In I Give Everything Away (2000; plate 54), their last large project together, Bourgeois matched eight of her transformed compositions with a moving text that seems like a final good-bye:

I Give Everything Away
I Distance myself from myself
from what I love most
I leave my home
I leave the nest
I am packing my bags.

The 2008 series À l’infini (To Infinity), an installation set made up of these reimagined compositions, epitomizes Bourgeois’s late printmaking practice (plates 184–189). This work began with variant printings of Love and Kisses (2007; plates 184–185), in which only fragments of the composition appeared. One such fragment sparked Bourgeois’s imagination: the interlocking elements that extend diagonally across the sheet from top left to bottom right. She turned her partially printed sheets to a horizontal position and then proceeded to freely brush on red gouache and watercolor, and add lines and scribbles with pencil. Each sheet is a unique visual experience, but the twisting printed forms echo from one to another. This intuitive method calls to mind the free-associated automatism of the Surrealists, where the artist’s hand was ostensibly prompted only by the unconscious. Here, Bourgeois’s scrawls, washes, painterly strokes, and dabs come alive on one sheet and then dissolve on the next, as a sense of movement ripples through the series. Occasionally, representational details appear—babies floating in amniotic sacs or a couple embracing—but overall, this pulsating world operates on what seems to be the cellular level of an elemental domain. À l’infini can be interpreted as a meditation on life’s primordial beginnings or perhaps an expression of the boundless universe identified by its title, both typifying “late style” content.

FIG. 54
Series of 6 compositions, all soft ground etchings, with handwritten texts. Sheets:
no. 1: 59 3/4 × 79 1/4 inches (151.8 × 196.8 cm)
no. 2: 60 × 81 inches (152.4 × 205.4 cm)
no. 3: 59 3/4 × 69 3/4 inches (152.1 × 177.8 cm)
no. 4: 60 × 81 inches (152.4 × 205.4 cm)
no. 5: 60 × 81 inches (152.4 × 205.4 cm)
no. 6: 59 3/4 × 69 3/4 inches (152.1 × 177.8 cm)

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Working Relationships

A long-standing notion of artistic creation features the artist working alone in the studio—and indeed, it may be the case much of the time that artists work in solitude. But production sometimes requires collaborators who bring particular expertise to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. Th at is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process. That is clearly true for certain sculptural endeavors, and to the art-making process.

In Bourgeois’s second phase of printmaking, beginning in the late 1960s, circumstances had changed. Her fame had begun to grow, and now publishers sought her out. Their invitations were stimulating in and of themselves, prompting a renewed engagement with the medium. She then began to work with various printers, but not at their workshops. She preferred her home/studio on 20th Street, where they came to collaborate with her, returning to their shops for printing or making use of the two presses in the lower level of her house. She looked forward to these visits. That anticipation, and then the work done together, could dispel the despairing moods that plagued her. She appreciated the social dimension of these relationships but they were also creatively energizing. Bourgeois became an avid printmaker in the final decades of her life. The following interviews are with three of Bourgeois’s primary collaborators. They were conducted between September 2016 and January 2017.

Jerry Gorovoy: Everything was very much tied to the emotional intensity of the moment. Louise’s mood affected who she wanted to see and the way she interacted with them. Her immediate feelings would determine what kind of work she needed to make, what level of concentration or skill it required, and what she needed from the other person.

Usually, appointments were made in advance, and she rarely canceled. She felt she had to take advantage of the technical assistance. It was almost like a work ethic: “Someone is coming here, and I’ve got to be prepared. I have to do my homework. I have to be ready, and not lose my chance.”

Her collaborators were involved in the technical realization of ideas and images that for the most part Louise had already elaborated in her creative solitude. Yet the resistance of the material could also force changes as she went along. She always used to say: “What I want and what I get are two different things.” After she tweaked the image, the result would sometimes trigger something in her unconscious that could bring about further changes. Chance and even mistakes played a role in shaping the print. This is what she meant when she said that making art was a search, a voyage without a destination.

Louise couldn’t work with just anyone. Encountering strangers could provoke fear and anxiety. “What does this person want, what if I cannot deliver, oh, they want too much from me.” With printmaking, she only worked with a few people. She established relationships with Felix [Harlan, of Harlan & Weaver], and with Ben [Benjamin Shift, of Osiris], and Judith [Solodkin, of SOLO Impression], and with David Procunier [of Procuriar Workshop]. How Louise felt about each of them affected what she produced. All the printmaking people represented different personalities, but consistency was important.
people. I had to be careful. I didn’t want her to people. She’d create triangles with me and other jg how things were going, to get fair warning. image making came from deep inside her. The skill and knowledge of her collaborators, but total concentration. She had a lot of respect for Louise also needed to work in isolation, with to deal with her, what to do, what not to do. But what Louise wanted, or ask them not to mention out. She would break relationships, even with her family and close friends. are asking too much of me!” she would say. She finished, the day is over, go home.” These people who died in 1973]. He disappeared into silent. Then she’d say: “Oh, you’re like Robert [Cochrane, Bourgeois husband of thirty-four years, who died in 1973]. He disappeared into complete silence.” Or something like that. At times, it was almost as if she craved some sort of confrontation.

Did that continue as she got older?

These rages were physically exhausting. They came pouring out. No one can sustain that. As she got older, I think she was happier. She reduced her life to her work and a few people around her. She wasn’t going out of the house anymore. There were no longer those social pressures. She just gave herself to her work, and that was the one thing that kept her in balance.

I’d like to ask about the routine Louise had when printer Felix Harlan came to the house.

Felix was very calm and easy to work with, very reserved. Louise really loved him. They did amazing things together. He was a printmaker in the classical sense. If Felix was expected to arrive the next day, she would prepare an image that she wanted on the plate. At other times, she had plates that she had worked on ready for him to proof, or proofs that she had reworked by hand. There was always preparation, both physically and mentally, for the visits. But her working methods could also be more intuitive: “Oh, Felix, can you cut a circle in that plate?” really want to have a circle in copper.” Of course, Felix wasn’t prepared to cut a circle then and there. But he would stay calm and say: “Next time, Louise, I’ll bring you a circle.” Louise also liked immediate gratification when she was working. So with prints, she wanted a proof right away, from her press downstairs. But for larger-scale works she sometimes had to accept delays in the process, and that interrupted her creative flow. That’s why she liked it when Felix came back the next day and the day after that. “Oh, Felix, can’t you come tomorrow? I really need to do this!” she’d say. When he couldn’t come, there was a break in the rhythm. But sometimes that break could be productive, because she knew when she’d had time to look at the image with fresh eyes. It all had to do with a flow, a sort of energy. Also, when working at home, she liked that the house had different rooms. If she wanted in the mood to deal with someone, she could say: “Felix, can you go downstairs and put this on the press…?” Or I might say: “Felix, why don’t you make a few proofs?” I knew that would get her excited, to work directly on new proofs. So I tried to juggle things and keep things on an even keel. That’s what I felt I was doing, not just with printmaking, but with everyone.

When I traveled abroad, Felix would block out a week and come to the hotel to work with Louise. I felt more comfortable knowing he was there. When I called, I could speak to Felix. I knew they were working. A person’s things were okay. They were so productive when I was away.

How did it work with Felix on making changes and corrections to images?

Sometimes Louise would work on the plate herself, making corrections. Other times she’d say to Felix: “Oh, it’s too light.” and then Felix would engrave deeper to make a line darker. She’d also ask Felix to take lines away that she didn’t like. He would have to scrape and burnish parts of the plate. But once the line is deep, it’s not always easy to remove.

Did Carol Weaver [partner in Harlan & Weaver] ever get involved, or it was mainly Felix?

It was mainly Felix, working directly with Louise. What Carol did was great. She often printed the editions. But she only came to the house once in a while. She’d bring the prints to be signed. Felix worked next to Louise at her table.

Sometimes you would run down to the press yourself and make a proof, if Felix wasn’t there, right?

Yes, I would try, because Louise wanted that immediate gratification. But I’m not a printmaker. With the old press, you had to get the pressure right. I would make proofs that weren’t dark enough, because I hadn’t wiped the plate correctly. Lou said I didn’t have the right. But sometimes the results were surprisingly good, particularly with the fabric prints.

Was it the same when she worked with the stonecutters in Italy? What were those dynamics like?

Louise always liked to make adjustments in marble, and sometimes she’d have trouble with the technicians, who preferred making exact copies. They’d have big fights that I would have to iron out. Once the stone was cut, the damage was done. With printmaking, she could always work on another proof.

She didn’t want to be asked: “What are you doing? What does this mean?” She liked things to remain technical, for the technicians. “I can achieve what you want in the following ways.”

In the upos and early ’80s, Mark Setteducati [had been a student of Bourgeois’s at the School of Visual Arts] was Louise’s assistant. He once told me that he was a success with Louise because he didn’t say much. If she asked him to see something in two, he never asked why.

Mark had the perfect temperament for Louise. And that was a very particular time in her life. Rob had died and then she just got out socially again, she was teaching printmaking at SVA. Mark was really pivotal, at that point. There were other people around too, wilder people, like Suzan Cooper [a singer and performer], but Mark was very stable.

How were things different when you came along?

I was a young artist, working in a gallery, and she could see that I loved her work and that I was visually oriented. I also was thinking of becoming an analyst. And she saw that I could possibly help her professionally. At that time she hadn’t been exhibiting that much. It was a transitional time in the art world. The aesthetic concerns of younger artists were moving closer to what Louise had been expressing for decades.
jg: The performance was unique, in the same way that she continuously retouched the waxes for her bronzes, making them perfect for him. That was a very long-term relationship, very demanding.

Sometimes he would say something that was very personal. He liked her, when to talk and when not to talk. And she understood how to work with him.

The Art Foundry was definitely very collaborative. In terms of another collaborator, how did she work with Bob Spring [owner of Modern Art Foundry]?

jg: Suzan was a performer. Louise wanted to help her get gigs. They would go out to clubs together, like the Mudd Club. I think that whole period was like the Mudd Club. It had a lot to do with their dialogue.

Jog: Suzan Cooper can be seen as another kind of collaborator?

dw: She definitely transformed things with all her evolving states and variants.

jg: There were always conflicting emotions contained within the same motif, multiple stories that could evolve around subtle changes to the form. With Sainte Sébastienne [fig. 11, p. 224] and Confrontation [fig. 20, p. 23], in one variant the woman has arrows, in another she has long hair, in yet another her face is transformed into a cat’s face, and in another she has eggs in her hair that represent children. This is a motif that went through various permutations. She was constantly tweaking it, changing its meaning, changing the narrative.

jg: It’s like re-mining. I remember showing her something she had made forty or fifty years before and she would respond as if she had just made it. The distance had gone away. Whatever emotion was there, she would still respond to it.

jg: Yes, Louise had an amazing power of recall. You see in her diaries her recollection of minute details of things that happened in the ’30s and ’40s. Her subjects and symbolism always came out of her life. An incident would happen, and then the next day it would be incorporated in the work in some way or another. It was the retelling of the incident, or the repair of the incident. Memories were an arsenal of forms for her. The conflict between things that happened yesterday with things that happened today, was the re-mining of the unconscious through her work. And that explains the mystery, brilliance, and eccentricity of her forms. It was a means of self-knowledge. “Why do I feel this way?” “Why am I guilty?” “Why am I aggressive?” She was trying both to understand her feelings and to control them.

Even in her writing, there’s this stream of consciousness, a total volcanic spewing out. Then she steps back and looks at what she has done. She was able to recontextualize, and then analysis. These two things come together in her creative process.

jg: She certainly had intense emotions and anxieties. Her fears and phobias were expressed through her body and transferred into the work. Her relationship to her body was crucial, because her psychic life manifested itself in the physical realm through symptoms such as nausea, palpitations, insomnia, and the like. She would say: “Oh, my work is my body.” I see the work almost like vibrations of a heartbeat. It’s almost like the forms are coming out of her body.

A lot of art today explores the body through a political or social lens. Louise’s work was coming out of her own torment. It was a body under siege, a body that’s going to break apart. She was working in leather and fabric, and later helped with the fabric books and editions. She came to the Sunday salons and wore crazy hats. Louise liked that.

jg: She knew Judith way before she met me. I think she tried to fix her up with Jean-Louis [Bourgeois, Louise’s son]. Judith is eccentric, and she was really good with Louise. She had skills, besides lithography, that Louise appreciated. She was working in leather and fabric, and later helped with the fabric books and editions. She came to the Sunday salons and wore crazy hats. Louise liked that.

dw: Could you comment on the fact that she was a female collaborator? A lot of people say that Louise didn’t like women very much.

jg: She liked Judith’s personality. She liked Suzan Cooper. She liked you. And don’t forget Mercedes Katz, who helped Louise do the sewing for all the fabric books and editions. They worked together for over a decade. All these people had different talents, and each collaboration was very different. But, I don’t know, maybe it was also a certain kind of woman that she had difficulties with. She could be jealous. More with women, but with men, too. She could be very jealous if she thought that someone was pursuing me. But probably Louise preferred the company of men.

dw: I’d like to turn to the writings Louise produced during her psychoanalysis [undergone intermittently in the 1950s and 1960s, and then intermittently until 1985], numbering close to a thousand documents. That’s a remarkable body of work. When I read her notes and papers, and saw her struggles—it was among the most emotionally draining things I’ve done.

jg: Louise was barely hanging on in that moment in her life. There was a lot of anger, guilt, and utter despair. People don’t realize that when she wrote “Art is a guaranty of sanity,” she really meant it.

dw: I know she would blow up at me, and that she was very complicated, but I had no idea of the depth of her torrent. Those writings make me wish I could have comforted her in some way. Her pain was heartbreaking.

jg: People didn’t realize the depth of the emotional chaos that gave rise to her forms. Her emotions were raw. Louise said: “My work is about my problems, and you may not be interested in my problems.” Louise knew that her work was a sort of life raft. And who knows where she would have been without art. It really kept her alive.
Silence
He Disappeared into Complete copper plates for everything. So the resonance of the past was rediscovery. The other thing was that she saved drawings show in the '80s. She got inspired again because she was looking at the drawings from the '40s and '50s when she was preparing for a drawing show in the '80s. She got inspired again by the early images and related them to what she was feeling and making in the present.

It was a discovery for us, and for her, because the rediscovery of the book was that she saved everything. So the resonance of the past was always present. She saved every photograph. And she was curious that she couldn't find the copper plates for He Disappeared into Complete Silence. She saved all those clothes and linens.

Louise felt that she had been rejected, so she couldn't reject anything. If she got rid of old clothes or an old pair of shoes, she almost felt guilty, like she was abandoning them. That's why she held on to the old clothes of her mother, and ultimately wanted to incorporate them into her work.

Let's talk about Peter Blum [of Peter Blum Edition], and how he came into the picture.

Things really began when Peter approached her to make prints. That renewed her interest in printmaking. It's not to say she wouldn't have gone back to it, but having publishers propose things was a motivating factor. It affected her emotionally and psychologically, because she'd say: "Oh, I have a publisher now, who's publishing this."

The invitations were a stimulus, then.

She knew the project would be going out in the world. She had never had that outlet before with printmaking. The publishers offered the possibility of reengaging with a medium she loved.

Peter was involved with Parkett magazine and was doing a lot of printmaking. Louise was showing in Europe a little bit, and he got interested in doing a print project with her, which led to several others. She thought Peter had a very good eye, very good taste. He was connected to the international scene, and was interested in books like she was.

She did the Arthur Miller project with Peter [plates 13]. How did that work, in terms of collaboration?

Peter initiated the project. We already knew Inge Morath, Arthur Miller's wife, and that's how Miller came into the picture. He was invited to the Brooklyn studio. Louise was working on the Cellos series at the time, many of which dealt with the five senses and memory. He later sent a story for the collaboration, but Louise didn't really respond to the text so much. I was worried it was going to get awkward, but Peter handled it. He spoke to Inge, and Miller sent another story that he had been working on, titled "Homely Girl," about a woman who marries a blind man. Louise loved it. It related to her Cellos and inspired her to make the series of prints, and then the second volume with photos of diseased eyes.

After that, other people started approaching Louise with ideas for projects. For book projects she usually preferred to use her own writings. There are only a few projects with other authors. There's To Whom It May Concern, her collaboration with Gary Indiana, whose writing Louise always loved. That was much later. When Carolina Nitsch approached Louise about a collaboration with a writer, Louise wanted to instead use her own writings. Carolina published the Hours of the Day [plates 45–49], which contained older texts from Louise's diaries. Reading her old writings again was like revisiting her older sculpture after a long time.

But the simultaneity of all that happening, the old and the new, all at once—that is so fascinating to me. The old things remained relevant and vital.

Another thing I'd like to explore is the format of the series, because it is typical in printmaking, with sequencing as another kind of storytelling.

I think the idea of working in series in printmaking probably came out of Louise's love for books and writing. All the bodies of work inform each other, whether it's sculpture informing the printmaking, or the printmaking informing the drawing, then a drawing can inform a sculpture, and so on. It's all revolving, and each one of these things allows her to articulate the same issues, but in a different medium and material. She started working a lot in suites, which I think is inspired by seeing the proofs for prints. Everything comes out of the working process. She'd say: "Oh, I like them all together. I don't want to break them up."

Would you talk about Louise's relationship to publisher Ben Shiff? You were around when he first came to Louise.

Ben made the puritan [plates 45–49] early on. It began as a book project and then morphed into a series of hand-colored wall suites. The images were very geometric. When Ben came back some years later, he wanted to move away from traditional books and periodicals. So, Louise, I'm going to bring you a big copper plate and we can print it a different way," or "What if we try putting these plates in different combinations?" Louise was loose about it. She thought seeing all the proofs together was beautiful. She would switch the order, turn some upside-down, things like that. She liked that the scale got bigger, and also she liked working with the proofs as a series. At a certain point, her eyesight was not as good as it had been. So, working on a larger scale was better for her. With Felix, the work was on a small scale, with small plates. It was more difficult for her to see, and she used a magnifying glass.

Ben would say: "How about using paint? Don't worry, they can all be unique. Don't worry about the paint smearing; we can mop it up." He seemed to want to get away from printmaking, strictly speaking. It was wild. She became much looser with her gouache additions. There would be drips when she turned the sheets. She didn't wait until things dried. She started at the top of the page and worked her way down. We helped pull the large sheets down for her to reach areas she was working on, since she needed to be seated while working. Then we'd put them on the floor to dry. Sometimes she liked the drips. If not, she'd wipe them out.

She also had this thing about wanting to get rid of the plate work. She didn't want to be defined by the plate edge. A lot of times that was the first thing she would do on a proof, extend her marks physically. The thing you could work on depended on her mood and physical state. She always wanted Ben to come, but sometimes I could see she was too tired. She might only be able to work for twenty minutes. At other times she could work for a whole afternoon.

What about the fact that Louise stopped leaving the house, that she suffered from agoraphobia? I know sometimes she feared people coming to the house, too.

She had bouts of agoraphobia her whole life. It was particularly intense in the 1940s and '50s. Later in the 1940s, her son Jean-Louis would sometimes have to hold her hand to take her to see her shrink. She couldn't go on her own. In her late years, her agoraphobia got worse. She had loved going to the Dean Street studio in Brooklyn every morning, and she'd be up and ready on the stoop waiting for me. But slowly she became fearful of leaving the house.

What about her declining health?

Her health was quite good until about 2004, when she started having some recurring health issues and began to get frazzier. Her mobility and stamina were affected. She suffered from terrible insomnia. But none of these things kept her from working. With her inability to sleep, she became manic and very productive, and then she would crash. It was a cycle.
DW: It seems that her collaborative relationships were energizing, stimulating. But I think getting recognition in old age was also empowering. When I first knew her, she talked to me a lot about ambition. And you see it in her writings.

JC: Early on, she was professionally ambitious, but I think in some respects she gave up. It was difficult juggling being a wife, a mother, and an artist. To be a woman in the art world in the ’40s and ’50s was not easy, but she actually said that being anonymous and outside the art market gave her freedom to develop her work. People ask why she wasn’t that well known earlier. It was her own psychology, partially. She was very self-destructive.

DW: I remember her talking about being jealous, about having the “green disease” of envy. She’d warn me: “Don’t get the green disease.”

JC: She really did believe that many of her successful male peers were not that good. Then you start thinking: “Oh, the whole system is rigged, why bother to play the game?” On the other hand, when she had opportunities, she didn’t take advantage. She could have a show scheduled in Paris and then cancel it. She couldn’t handle the pressure. She alienated people, too.

DW: She once told me — back when I did that show at Brandeis in 1977 [From Women’s Eyes, a group show at Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum, with a number of Bourgeois’s works] and told her there would be a catalogue — “The only thing that’s important is the printed word.”

JC: She definitely liked people who were writers. But I think she appreciated visual people more. Being visual is rare. She always felt that, in the end, writing had the power to convince people. But if someone’s not visual, can you really convince them to see?

Deborah Wye: I know you started to work with Louise on the recommendation of lithography printer Judith Solodkin of SOLO Impression, who sought you out for intaglio printing.

Felix Harlan: We had known Judith over the years. She was working with Louise, but then Louise went off into etching rather than lithography. I think it must have been a disappointment for Judith, but they did some amazing things together, like that fabric book. Judith got in touch with us because Louise needed drypoint plates proofed.

DW: What were the first plates you worked on?

FH: They were for the Anatomy portfolio [fig. 54]. We proofed the plates and sent them back to Judith. I stamped our address on the wrapper because I was a little concerned that they might get lost with the messenger. I think Louise got curious about who was printing the plates. She saw our address on the wrapper and called. That was a pretty exciting moment. She said something like: “I want you to come over right away.” I went to meet her and she had some suggestions for how she wanted the plates printed. Jerry was away that day.

We looked at proofs together and she told me exactly what she wanted. She told me she didn’t like what she called “the blotted effect,” which meant that the drypoints were too full of ink. They were too fuzzy looking. She wanted them wiped a little more, so they’d be more lean. I promised her I’d do that, and we took it from there.

DW: What did you make of her at that first meeting?

FH: Oh, it was thrilling, of course, to meet Louise in her beautiful, strange little house, and to go into the back room full of books and everything else. We were pretty comfortable with each other right away. Actually, she may have seemed a little nervous, perhaps.

Then we began working with Peter Blum [of Peter Blum Edition]. We did the large spider and the spirals [fig. 54]. Louise liked Peter. He had a lot of connections in Europe and she was excited about that. She was very happy to be working with him. His portfolios were always beautifully done.
DW: Did Louise ever come to your workshop?
FH: Louise never came over to the workshop [at 87 Canal Street, in Manhattan]. The closest she came was when she and Jerry drove back from her studio on Dean Street, in Brooklyn, usually late in the afternoon. Those were pre-cellphone days, and Jerry would pull the car up on Eldridge Street and call up from a pay phone, I’d go down with proofs and hand them to Louise through the window!

DW: I don’t think she was interested in going to workshops the way other artists do. She preferred the comfort and security of being at home.

FH: I think that with all the people around in a workshop, she would have been uncomfortable. And she didn’t seem to think it was important to be there.

DW: I know you picked up on a few projects that Christian Gruvin [of Gravure] had started, like Self Portrait [plates 107, 108], for instance.

FH: We did quite a bit of proofing on that plate. Louise was very concerned that we get it just right since it was going to be a benefit for MoMA.

DW: That blue was a little unusual for her. Is that aquatint?

FH: No. It’s soft ground. Instead of doing aquatint, you can lay down a fine fabric screen for a soft ground. But if you don’t look too closely, it’s a lot like an aquatint.

DW: I hope we have our cataloguing right! If you need a soft ground for your aquatint, you can lay down a fine fabric screen for a soft ground. But if you don’t look too closely, it’s a lot like an aquatint.

FH: I was very fond of Louise. And I think she liked having me around. She did once say: “You know, you’re a friend.” I think it was one time when we were having lunch. It had become clear that we were not going to have just an artist-printer relationship. We could drop that and be more friendly. It was very, very special. I miss her. It was a tremendous opportunity to be able to work with her and watch her work and to work with her. It was what every printer hopes for, to have a relationship like that with an artist.

DW: I know you soon began to work with Louise at the house on a regular basis.

FH: Yes, but there would be breaks if I was proofing something. And I’d work around her schedule. Then, as she began to trust me, I would go when Jerry wasn’t there. She was beginning to make more and more trips to curate and install exhibitions. So I would go to the house on those occasions, too—sometimes for four or five days in a row.

Louise liked me to arrive at eleven. I would stay all day and then close up. We’d have lunch together. She’d tell me what she wanted and I’d prepare it. We’d talk while we ate, but she wouldn’t want to talk about artwork at that point. She wanted to know what was going on. We’d usually sit in the front room so we could look out the window onto the street. She’d comment on what was going on outside. And she’d want to know what we were up to. She was always interested in our neighborhood, in Chinatown. Then I might do some grocery shopping for her, or other little things like that. It was a long day, which was fine, except in the summer when it got very hot in there. Louise didn’t seem to feel the heat.

DW: That routine seems so calm. Didn’t she have her moods and blow up at you sometimes?

FH: Just one time.

DW: Oh, Felix! That’s a record.

FH: Pretty good, I think. It was early on. Maybe she wasn’t completely comfortable with me yet. Jerry had gone on a long trip to Europe. But he was a planner, and he thought of everything in advance. He said: “While I’m gone, I’d like you to work on this project with Louise.” So I arrived and was ready to go with that project. But Louise didn’t want me to do that at all. She wasn’t interested. So I said: “Well, Jerry wanted me to help you with this project while he’s away.” That really set her off. It was like I was paying more attention to what Jerry wanted than to what she wanted. That was not good at all. She blew up and called me a “bullshitter.” And pretty much much said: “Get out of here!” I can’t remember if I left right away. But I thought: “Well, I guess that’s the end of my working relationship with Louise.”

DW: Oh, no! But you knew that was just a mood, right?

FH: Well, I didn’t know her well enough at that point. I just thought: “Well, that’s it, I blew it.” And I didn’t see her again for a couple of months after that.

When it happened, I hadn’t known what to do. I’m a bit slow on the uptake sometimes. I couldn’t think of a good response. So I just swallowed it up. But eventually Jerry called and said: “Look, if you want to work with Louise, you’d better come over. Everything’s okay now.” She was a little stiff with me at first, but then we got over it.

DW: It’s remarkable that only happened once in all those years together working. But how would you characterize your relationship, generally?

FH: It was very friendly, very familiar. And she never pushed me. She left me alone to work on what I needed to. I’d go downstairs to do things there. Or I’d go up to the second floor and retrieve things for her. It was a very comfortable relationship. I was very fond of Louise. And I think she liked having me around. She did once say: “You know, you’re a friend.” I think it was one time when we were having lunch. It had become clear that we were not going to have just an artist-printer relationship. We could drop that and be more friendly. It was very, very special. I miss her. It was a tremendous opportunity to be able to work with her and watch her work and to work with her. It was what every printer hopes for, to have a relationship like that with an artist.

DW: How did you happen to set up the old printing press downstairs?

FH: It had been stored in the Dean Street studio and then Louise had it moved to a third floor. It was in pretty rough shape, very dirty. It hadn’t been cleaned and greased. So I took it apart and cleaned it up, and then put it back together again. It’s a nice press. The wheels are nice. We hole it down to a stand and then started using it. But that press had its limitations. It was small, with only an eleven-inch-wide press bed. And it didn’t generate a lot of pressure. So I would always get better proofs when I took the plates back to Canal Street.

But the crux of it was that Louise wanted to see things right away. She didn’t want to wait for me to take the plates away, print them, dry them, and bring them back. And she was very serious about printmaking and wanted to have it going on in the house. In a way, it was when she lived in the family apartment [on 8th Street], early on. I know the press was set up there, because [Jean-Louis] Bourgeois, Louise’s son told me he remembered it.

DW: And then you added a second press, right?

FH: Yes, we had the opportunity to get another one for a little more than the cost of moving it. It was an even smaller press, but it was interesting. I felt like rescuing it. I have a bad habit of collecting presses. But Louise was fine with the idea. And the second press—a King press—had more pressure.

I remember proofing the series that ended up being both a paper and a cloth book—The Laws of Nature [plates 138, 139, 140]—on that press, to show Louise how it worked. But then the full editioning was done on Canal Street. The original idea was for a cloth book. But at first I was a little unsure about how we would do that, since we were so much accustomed to printing on paper. So I printed the plates on paper first, and then on cloth. We also tried those plates on silk, and on a silk scarf. Silk is so soft and prints beautifully. It’s so closely woven that it takes a very nice impression.

DW: What was it like to print on fabric: napkins and handkerchiefs?

FH: When Louise first asked about it, I went downstairs and just got started. It was when they were going through all her closets upstairs, pulling out all kinds of stuff that she wanted to go through. She wanted to use everything. I think she liked the random staining and the softness of fabric, and the way it drapes. I got better at printing with it. You’ll notice on some of the earlier plates the registration—the placement of fabric and the way it drapes. I got better at registering the plate. I was able to get better proofs when I took the plates back to Canal Street.
DW: Just one more thing about fabric. It seems that after a while she preferred it to paper, for prints.

FH: I agree.

DW: What about Mercedes Katz [a professional seamstress hired to help with Bourgeois’s works in fabric]? I know she sat down there at her worktable, right near the press. How was the relationship between you two?

FH: She was really nice to get along with. It was a tight space down there. But I didn’t need very much room. She was finishing prints, hemming them, embroidering the initials. So I could check in with her and see how things were going. She was there I think at least five days a week. They found a good person in Mercedes. She’s very talented.

But I had a different role upstairs, too. I had to be more present there. And, you know, I’d even venture a suggestion here and there!

DW: What about Louise’s use of selective wiping, which I see a lot? [see pages 124-125.] She even used it way back in the early period, in the 1940s.

FH: It was because of her prompting that we did it. We wouldn’t normally use it at our shop. Of course, printers have different styles of printing, but they usually avoid selective wiping because it’s difficult to repeat for an edition. But she was pretty relaxed about that aspect. For a printer, it is definitely more of a challenge to use it. She would go into the folder and start working on them, before I got there. She had that pile of drawing materials right there on her table.

DW: Do you think she liked the security of the printed image, the fact that more could be made and she could keep on experimenting?

FH: I think that’s very true. And she talked about liking etching because it was really in the metal. It had a permanence and it was repeatable. She could always get back to that place. The image wasn’t going to change. It was dependable. She could take off from there.

DW: When you say “etching” do you mean anything in metal—etching, engraving, drypoint?

FH: I mean anything in metal, but she always talked about engraving most of all. She wanted to go as deep as possible below the surface of the metal. But she liked drypoint, too, and used it a lot.

She also liked the fact that there was other stuff going on, on the metal, when it wasn’t just a mirror finish. So she was often interested in the metal itself and the kind of effects of the metal plate. She liked the physicality of printing from copper. I think it directly related to her interest in metal and sculpture.

I remember watching the way she worked. It was just so wonderful to see her imagination being brought to bear on what she was doing on a plate. She’d add things. And I thought: “Wow. This is really going somewhere great.” But I wouldn’t see all the proofs she worked on, only the ones where she wanted changes on the plates, or she wanted to sharpen up the printing, and such. Actually, with your website [mooco.org/bourgeoisprints], I’ve been learning a lot more about those proofs I never saw. When the plate work was finished, I’d help with the choice of papers and then do the editioning.

DW: How did it come about that you began to publish Louise’s prints, as well as printing them?

FH: Well, we were invited. It was Jerry and Louise who had the idea. Harlan & Weaver was doing so much of the printing, it seemed like a better arrangement, practically speaking, to publish the projects, too. It worked out beautifully.

DW: How do you think Louise felt about the social aspects of collaboration? I’ve always thought that having someone come to work helped pull her out of despairing moods.

FH: I hope that was the case when I came. There were only a very few occasions when Jerry would say: “Don’t come today. She’s not in a good mood. It’s not a good day to come.” Sometimes, I would see that she was a little tense or maybe a little more withdrawn, but she always had a sort of professionalism about doing the printing that came into play. “You’re here. We have to do something together.” Also, if she wasn’t in a good mood, I could always go downstairs for a while and find things to do. With prints there is always something to do. So I’d make a proof and bring it up and show her. That made her happy. But there was definitely a social aspect to the relationship, which she liked.

DW: I’ve been reading her psychoanalytic papers, which are filled with despair.

FH: Yes, she did that. It was great. It’s a little crummy, as you might imagine, so I have it wrapped and put away. It was eingraving, and we talked about engraving a lot and she knew that I’m a big Hogarth fan, naturally. It was really nice that she did that.

DW: How did you feel about Louise’s advancing age? Did that affect your work together?

FH: Things were changing by, let’s say, the mid-1980s. I was still working with her. Brigitte [Cornand, filmmaker, who was Bourgeois’s daily companion in her later years] was there pretty much all the time at that point. I definitely began to go less frequently. My work with Louise was tapering off.

I remember once when I was there, her energy had really dropped, but she was actually not well. I didn’t realize it. I just thought: “Well, she’s old and just exhausted.” Once she got over that bout of illness, she came back. But I could see that her age was beginning to show and she was getting less energetic, generally. Also, her eyesight was getting worse. I think it was easier for her to work on the big plates that Ien [Shiff, of Osiris] brought. The work we did together was small.

DW: Maggie [Wright, The Easton Foundation archivist, who had worked at the Harlan & Weaver workshop] mentioned that Louise gave you a bound volume of Hogarth prints from her collection of prints and illustrated books. That seems very special.

FH: Yes, she did that. It was great. It’s a little crummy, as you might imagine, so I have it wrapped and put away. It was eingraving, and we talked about engraving a lot and she knew that I’m a big Hogarth fan, naturally. It was really nice that she did that.
Jerry Gorovoy, Bourgeois’s longtime assistant, sat in on this conversation.

Deborah Wye: What were your thoughts when you first approached Louise for a project? I know you were inspired by He Disappeared into Complete Silence (1971). Was that the beginning of Louise and Ben?

Benjamin Shiff: Osiris wasn’t really about books. It wasn’t about prints. There was a different angle. There was also the idea that a writer could make the images for his or her own text, or the artist could, in reverse. Those kinds of ideas were floating around. I didn’t want to think about the history of bookmaking, or printmaking, or livre d’artistes.

I remember Jerry was there when I first met Louise. I wasn’t a printmaker, but when we were experimenting, Louise approached things as if she had no printmaking background at all. To start, we worked on small plates. I asked Peter Pettengill, of Wingate Studio, to give me materials. I remember all the spit bite [an aquatint printing technique] plates lying out on Louise’s terrace after she’d worked on them.

Jerry Gorovoy: Louise worked in different ways. Sometimes she’d have a group of images ready to work on for prints. But when Ben came, things were much more experimental and loose. To be honest, if things hadn’t clicked between them, that would have been it. But Louise liked Ben.

DW: Ben, could you tell that things clicked right away?

BS: Oh, totally! The mission in the very beginning was still about text, even though I didn’t want to be followed around by categories.

DW: How did you settle on using Louise’s own text?

BS: It happened through a discussion with Jerry and Louise. And then one day Jerry opened a drawer and said: “Look at this.” It was a story on a piece of 8 ½-by-11-inch copy paper. It was the text for the puritan.

JG: That was in keeping with the way Louise worked. She always had to update, to contemporize. She’d tweak a text to make it relevant to the moment.

DW: Ben, did you know, at the time, that the puritan was about Alfred Barr?

BS: No. But I knew exactly what that last quote was about. It was so completely true. I think that is one reason that many of Louise’s works are so powerful. They are so true.

DW: You eventually did more with the plates from the puritan, when Louise made folios, triptychs, and studies with hand additions, on extra proofs. I guess I’d call that “blurring the boundaries” between the worlds of prints, drawings, books — or maybe it’s not making any boundaries to begin with.

BS: I would say, as a note, that those studies “left” the puritan.

DW: That kind of experimentation continued in the work you did with Louise in her late years.

BS: I had been going through Louise’s diaries and sheers of writings and I found that story. It was such a beautiful thing. It just made sense to use that text. But Louise changed it a little. There’s something at the end, a new paragraph.

BS: She added a quote at the end. It will always remain mysterious, but it’s very, very specific why she put that there, and what was going on.

DW: I don’t remember that, about her adding the last couple lines.

BS: She said: “If you have a secret, you are very much afraid.” [The full 1990 postscript is: “If you have a secret, you become afraid. You are paralyzed by your desire, and in terror of the desires still to be uncovered. The demands of love are too great, and you withdraw.”]

JG: That was in keeping with the way Louise worked. She always had to update, to contemporize. She’d tweak a text to make it relevant to the moment.

BS: Whenever Louise wanted. I can say this. I never called up and asked: “Louise, should I come?” and she said: “No.” Even if nothing happened that day. She could be very tired, or even manic, really hallucinatory. But I’d say: “Sometimes I would sit there for hours and we would say almost nothing. Sometimes, you can’t help.”

But there was so much going on at any given time, with various sheets at different stages. I was managing sometimes fifty plates. So, when I came over, I’d ask: “Which one of these should I think it always worked, and if it didn’t work it never got to go public.

BS: But it’s fun to destroy something and then see it somehow come out at the other end of the process as something extraordinary. I remember things going into the sink, for instance.

JG: Yes, she would wash things. Because with the gouache painted on, if it didn’t work, she could wash it. . . . and then we’d need to take paper towels to dry it. But that was liberating for her printmaking. Compared to other materials, like stone: once you chip it, you can only go in one direction. With these prints, if it didn’t work out, she would go to another proof and have another idea for that image. She liked that.

Louise always looked forward to Ben coming. And he would leave materials. “Okay, Louise, I’m leaving twelve sheets. At your leisure. . . . Sometimes when he came back, she hadn’t touched them. It depended on her energy level. At other times, he’d see that a lot had been done. Then they’d go through them together. Ben could get her to continue.

BS: But she liked to work! Honestly, the whole idea of an artist as solitary, in some cabinet — that’s nonsense.

DW: But most people don’t realize that those kinds of interactions can be important for an artist, can be like sparks.

JG: Ben would come every day.

DW: How long would you stay?

BS: Whatever Louise wanted. I can say this. I never called up and asked: “Louise, should I come?” and she said: “No.” Even if nothing happened that day. She could be very tired, or even manic, really hallucinatory. But I’d say: “Sometimes I would sit there for hours and we would say almost nothing. Sometimes, you can’t help.”

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was such a strong woman. I think that's really

bs: They were getting patience! I'll tell you
something: the last study from the punion, one
of the panels . . . it was behind the washing machine
for, I don't know, seven years or something. And
then when it came out from behind the washing machine,
it looked pretty good!

dw: 'That's so funny! That's the ultimate 'going
with the flow.'"

jc: But Ben did direct her. I mean, Louise knew
where she wanted to go with a particular image, but
Ben was good at knowing the right time to
say: "Okay, let's go another." "Let's try this."

dw: When did you move so close to Louise?

bs: It was in 2005.

dw: Because I noticed the incredible boom in
your work together around 2005, 2006, and from
then on. So that's when you moved close.

bs: That was probably the best period, even
though I like the early things, too. But there
was anxiety.

jc: Well, the work kept her alive. And she could
never really relax. You know, when we went
to Italy together, she had to work, work, work. And
then on Sunday, there was no working, and I'd
say: "Okay, let's go to the beach." I would drop her
off and by the time I had parked the car, she's like:
"Let's go." It was almost like, when she was not
working, there was anxiety.

dw: Ben, this must have been an incredible
experience for you. I know I can speak for myself,
since I feel that meeting Louise when I did in the
late '70s, and having that relationship, was one of
the great things of my life. But you, and obviously Jerry,
had these incredible, rich relationships.

bs: I know what comes to mind. When I went
off on my own, and started Osiris, I always used
to say that [Robert] Ryman was the father of
Osiris and that Louise was the mother of Osiris.
She was so supportive. That's a horrible word that
I would just say that she didn't stop giving. It was extraordinary what
she was able to do.

dw: That's a side of Louise, in relationship to
abstraction, that's never totally understood.

bs: It was such a side of Louise.

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jc: I have to say that the thing that differentiates
Louise's work with Ben was that it went beyond
the usual limitations of being a publisher of
prints. It was integrated with everything else,
and now is integrated in all exhibitions of
Louise's work.

dw: But since I'm a print specialist, I like
that printmaking was the underpinning of the
projects, that it had the flexibility to
accomplish this.

bs: Well, it was the most forgiving environment
that you could give. That was also part of the
practice.

dw: I want to ask about A. Hnifi [To Infinity; 2007–8].

bs: With A Hnifi, it just happened. And it might
not have happened. The printed elements are
the consistent armature. That was, you know,
in a musical sense, it was an aspect of its sonic
construction. And the printing wasn't the same
every time. But you start by starting. She would
work on stacks, and then let them dry. And then
I'd bring them back. And then something would
be pulled together out of it. But it has this web
of abstraction, going in and out of abstraction
and figuration; it has a really nebulous quality or
the working of the very beginning and the
very end. It also has weaving.

jc: Louise was just so giving. I would just say that
she was such a strong woman. I think that's really
what comes through. The work's a testament.
I felt like Louise was reaching out . . . keeping
going. That was an inspiration. Don't think
because you're getting old you shouldn't surround
yourself with energy and creativity, and
that you shouldn't test yourself, and you shouldn't
communicate what's going on in your own
individual life. She was really staying so alive and
was inspiring young people.

I remember when Nick Serota [then director
of Tate Museums, London] came, and I showed him
what Louise was doing. He said: "This work has
all the energy of youth, with the wisdom of the
ages."

Louise was just so giving. I would just say that
she didn't stop giving. It was extraordinary what
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Osiris and that Louise was the mother of Osiris.
She was so supportive. That's a horrible word that
I would just say that she didn't stop giving. It was extraordinary what
she was able to do.

dw: Beautifully said, Ben, I must say.

bs: Louise was so many things. It was so
beautiful. She could be very consistent with
certain things and then that would disappear.
She could get into this kind of — almost like a
dervish . . . certain trances. It was part of her
inner communication that she extended into
the work. She would have a routine, almost like
a fetish, but then also a meditation. She could
spend hours on something, and then integrate
it for three months.

jc: With Ben, she had no fear. Whereas when
she was working in stone she'd be afraid because
she knew she could cut too deep; it was forever.

bs: Well, it was the most forgiving environment
that you could give. That was also part of the
practice.

dw: I want to ask about A Hnifi [To Infinity; 2007–8].

bs: With A Hnifi, it just happened. And it might
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be pulled together out of it. But it has this web
of abstraction, going in and out of abstraction
and figuration; it has a really nebulous quality or
the working of the very beginning and the
very end. It also has weaving.

jc: There's a side of Louise, in relationship to
abstraction, that's never totally understood.
Her work is not only spiders and arched figures.

bs: To expand on that — Louise had an
extraordinary education. She not only knew it,
but lived it, and very often knew the players . . .
but also the Dadaists and Surrealists. And
she could reach back to a formal arts education,
back to the tapestries, even, which are from
a completely different era. This was all something
she lived with, that came with the traditions of
her space, through her family in society. She
was someone with tremendous breadth and
curiosity. And she read, while very few artists
actually read.

jc: I have to say that the thing that differentiates
Louise's work with Ben was that it went beyond
the usual limitations of being a publisher of
prints. It was integrated with everything else,
and now is integrated in all exhibitions of
Louise's work.

dw: But since I'm a print specialist, I like
that printmaking was the underpinning of the
projects, that it had the flexibility to
accomplish this.
JG: It was the initial impulse, the spark.

DW: And as Ben says, the armature. It’s built into each composition. That makes the sheets all connected.

BS: Yes, they are connected. Genetically!

DW: What about the multipanel projects with text, like *I Give Everything Away* [fig. 52; pp. 178–79], that bring the word and image together again—which I think is wonderful?

BS: That one’s got huge energy. It’s storytelling on a large scale. And with the writing . . . I mean, that was an advantage of my coming from the book side.

JG: Louise was brought back to a lot of texts with the discovery of her psychoanalytic writings. We were reading them to her, and Ben would say: “This is really poetic—I love that sentence.” She was mining her own past with those writings. But there was new writing, too.

BS: Yes, that was so fresh and from the moment, that just bubbled up. It was alive. And sometimes that’s part of the action . . . a kind of storytelling, but in a different way. You see the way the words move in and out of any given series of works. But the sense of storytelling sometimes could be with no words. That’s what you’re trying to get from people. You’re trying to get people to really look and make up their own stories, to follow threads, to activate their hearts and their minds. Louise is just all over on a matrix of real quality and authenticity. She reaches my heart all the time.

DW: I know. Me, too, Ben. I wonder, when was the last time you saw her?

BS: The day before she died.

JG: Ben came to the hospital. Louise wanted to work.

BS: Yeah, I thought she was ready to go back to work. She was getting better. I remember I said: “Okay, but put on your riding boots. We’re getting ready!”

Notes
Chronology
Checklist of Plates
Selected Bibliography
Index
Lenders to the Exhibition
Trustees of
The Museum of Modern Art
In 2016, Greenberg’s daughter brought favored Bourgeois’s work. Interestingly, Elisabeth Bronfen, Donald Kuspit, Sander Kruys, Hélène De Ganck, and Meg Harris Williams organized a symposium at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, which included Bourgeois’s writings from these years. They found two separate studies for the 1966 show at New York’s Stable Gallery. Lippard describes how Bourgeois talked about Sadie Gordon Ruben at the installation of her 1964 show at the Stable Gallery. Lippard describes how she realized the Later part of 1947, which she called “an exquisitely rare” print that Bourgeois had done a retrospective of Bourgeois’s work.

Interest in her work is higher than ever before,” they wrote. “The time for musings about the possible exposure is as soon as possible.”

8 Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois, Artforum, 40–43. For a full time in my college at Moma, she told me to call her for a surprise. She was always in the lobby of the Museum. I could not help laughing when she returned it. She used to do a retrospective of her art that I would see. She would not even go out into the streets. At times, she would not even go out into her backyard, but she resumed doing that. She found out that she was in her twenties. “After Maman’s death, I started to be afraid to leave the house especially,” she wrote in her notebook, “I have wanted to know how it feels to be a mother. My father loves me. I long for the father’s love.” She wrote in her notebook, “I have wanted to know how it feels to be a mother. My father loves me. I long for the father’s love.”

9 In 1948, Bourgeois was described by art critic Lucienne’s "Art in the 20th Century," in 1949, Bourgeois was transferred to: Wye, ed., moma.org/ 131. All the various techniques with which Bourgeois worked can be searched in "Prints & Illustrations: Wye’s Collection", moma.org/ bourgeoisprints.

10 Telephone interview with Felix Harlan, April 12, 2012.

11 All the various techniques with which Bourgeois worked can be searched in "Prints & Illustrations: Wye’s Collection", moma.org/ bourgeoisprints.


14 See "Wye’s Drama of the Self," available online at "About the Artist" (wye.org), moma.org/ bourgeoisprints.


Themes and Variations
Bourgeois wrote that the phrase “art is a guaranty of sanity” in conversation and included in several works of art in the 1940s and 1950s. For example (v. 2: 35), no. 9 from the series Untitled [painting] (1943), and two of the series Untitled [painting], 1944, in which she depicted the artist’s body as a symbol of strength and resilience.


Architecture Embodied

Bourgeois, in conversation with Jerry Gorovoy, 1993, as cited in Gorovoy and Danièle Tiltin, Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1999), 25, this volume, with essays by Blake Bal, Jennifer Bloomer, Beatrice Colominas, Lynn Cutler, and Jerry Gorovoy and Danièle Tiltin. José Helfenstein, and Christiane Terrisse, is illuminating for its various interpretations of the subject of “life.”

Abstracted Emotions

Fabric of Memory
See this chapter’s epigraph is from Louise Bourgeois’ diary, June 6, 1994.


Alone and Together
See this chapter’s epigraph is from Louise Bourgeois’ loose sheet, July 14, 1994: 127.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 545: Thompson Street.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 540: plate 7 of Complete Silences.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 546: Untitled.


See MoMA cat. no. 49: Sporting Fly.

See MoMA cat. no. 65: Odi (1961).

See Telephone cat. no. 792: Self portrait (on a bed sheet); and cat. no. 753: The Long Night (see MoMA cat. no. 754: The Long Night I (on a bed sheet)).


Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 559: Party Conversation.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 514: To Whom It May Concern.

See MoMA cat. no. 516: Party Conversation.

The checklist includes six works by Bourgeois, see Massimiliano Gioni, The Sky’s the Limit (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 318–21.


Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 537: Untitled.


Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 550: plate 7 of Complete Silences.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 1132: Untitled.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 1046: Plate 6 of Complete Silences.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 1045: To Whom It May Concern.


Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 545: Party Conversation.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 514: To Whom It May Concern.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 559: Party Conversation.

See MoMA cat. no. 516: Party Conversation.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 514: To Whom It May Concern.

See MoMA cat. no. 516: Party Conversation.


Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 559: Party Conversation.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 514: To Whom It May Concern.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 545: Party Conversation.

Bourgeois, Artist’s Remarks, MoMA cat. no. 559: Party Conversation.


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Fig. 56 Louise Bourgeois with her parents, Josephine Valérie Fauroix and Louis Isadore Bourgeois, 1909.

Fig. 57 Louise Bourgeois with her tutor, Sadie GordonRichmond, on the Bière River, 1943.

Chronology

1911 Louise Joséphine Bourgeois is born in Paris on December 25 to Joséphine Valérie Fauroix and Louis Isadore Bourgeois. Louise has an older sister, Henriette (1910–1960), and will have a younger brother, Pierre (1913–1960).

1917 Louise Bourgeois’s mother becomes ill with what is likely influenza; she will remain in poor health for the rest of her life.

1919 Family moves to Antony, another Paris suburb, setting up the tapestry-restoration workshop there, while maintaining the tapestry gallery on Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris.

1922 Family begins spending winters in the South of France where the climate is better for Josephine’s health; Bourgeois cares for her mother on these trips. Family employs an English tutor, Peter Nasbitt, Nature Study: Louise Bourgeois and John Hatten Bailey, 1918–24.

This chronology provides an overview of Louise Bourgeois’s life and career, with a focus on her prints and illustrated books. Along with important solo exhibitions and retrospectives of her work in general, it includes solo print exhibitions that were accompanied by publications.