LEAFING THROUGH the catalog of Gagosian’s 2011 exhibition *Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L’amour fou*, the reader comes upon a small paper pocket glued onto one of the pages. Inside is a tiny flip-book of pictures of the young Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso’s great love, making mischievous faces in a photo booth. Hitherto unseen by the public, it was contributed by the couple’s granddaughter, Diana Widmaier Picasso. Reproducing it was not exactly inexpensive.

“That’s the kind of thing I can suggest to Larry and he goes, ‘Let’s do it,’ instead of ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ ” says Alison McDonald, 37, head of Gagosian’s publications department for the past 10 years.

“Larry,” of course, refers to Larry Gagosian, 72, one of the most important art dealers in the world. His empire is global: five galleries in New York, three in London, two in Paris, one each in Beverly Hills, San Francisco, Rome, Athens, Geneva and Hong Kong. He has a space in New York at 980 Madison Avenue, the old Sotheby’s building across from the Carlyle Hotel, that includes the top three floors accessed by their own dedicated elevators. The gallery’s retail storefront, currently on the ground floor, opened in 2009. It is not only the primary outlet for Gagosian’s books; it also sells magazines, T-shirts, mugs and even Peter Marino–designed gold boxes. A pop-up store called Picasso: By the Book opened in the gallery’s central Paris space in October.
It is estimated that Gagosian clears $1 billion a year in art sales. With that kind of money the gallery can afford to publish books that are costly to produce—and it can afford to publish a lot of them. Gagosian has been doing it for over 30 years. Ten people now work in the publications department, which, in addition to exhibition catalogs, produces catalogues raisonnés (Cy Twombly, Ed Ruscha), monographs, a quarterly magazine and newspapers for art fairs such as Frieze.

This month the gallery brings out its 500th publication, Streetlamps, on a series of works by Chris Burden, the conceptual artist who died in 2015 at the age of 69. Burden—whose first Gagosian show was in 1976—created controversy in the course of his career, during which he staged performances that included, at different times, starving himself, getting shot and being nailed to a Volkswagen. Streetlamps shows a gentler side of the artist, namely his focus on the ’20s and ’30s cast-iron streetlamps he began collecting in 2000. Alongside dreamlike photographs of the lamps are pictures of their reconstruction, Burden’s sketches and images of his permanent installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Urban Light (2008).

A new issue of the in-house quarterly, which boasts a print run of 50,000, also appears this month, featuring a conversation between Gagosian and old friend Woody Allen, a piece by Patti Smith and an interview with filmmaker Harmony Korine.

The gallery publishes between 25 and 40 books a year—neck-and-neck with most art publishing houses. Printing is done all over the world, including the U.S., the United Kingdom, China, Italy and Germany. The catalogs come in a remarkable range of styles, shapes and textures. One over-the-top example is the limited-edition volume made for artist Ellen Gallagher’s 2004 New York show eXelento. It’s a 9.5-by-6.5-by-4-inch rubber box that contains reproductions of the stylized portraits Gallagher made from advertisements in African-American magazines, in which she covered the subjects’ hair with yellow Plasticine wigs. The covers are affixed with a three-dimensional rubber cutout of a wig. There are eight wig cover options to choose from, each in an edition of 100—and every volume sells for $1,000.
The first catalog Gagosian published himself was a more modest venture: a simple, slender volume with metal-ring binding and a cover of heavy, uncoated drawing paper, for Robert Rauschenberg’s 1986 New York show *The White and Black Paintings: 1949–1952*. “I wanted to distinguish myself in some way, and putting together the best catalog I could afford was a way of bringing useful attention to the gallery,” Gagosian says. “I started out with limited means, but for some reason I never really thought in terms of a budget or asked, Is this cost-effective? I’m not saying that’s necessarily the best way to run a business, but right from the beginning what I tried to do was make the best book I could.”

The text in art catalogs is generally dense prose by academics. But the authors who have written for Gagosian are drawn from a diverse group, among them Dave Eggers on John Currin, Adam Gopnik on Edmund de Waal, Salman Rushdie on Francesco Clemente, Geoff Dyer on Thomas Ruff and John Waters on Andy Warhol. Karl Ove Knausgaard wrote the essay for the catalog of Anselm Kiefer’s 2017 New York exhibition *Transition From Cool to Warm*.

The artist the gallery has published the most books on—24 in total—is the late Cy Twombly, who was a close friend of Gagosian’s and inaugurated five of his European galleries. There have also been 19 on Ruscha, 12 on Picasso and 18 on Warhol, including *Warhol From the Sonnabend Collection*, which accompanied a 2009 show that included Warhol’s *Flowers* series, works that were originally exhibited at Ileana Sonnabend’s Paris gallery in 1965. That catalog contains facsimiles of Sonnabend’s correspondence with the artist, copies of the original French booklets with English translations, and early reviews, including one by the late poet John Ashbery. This year has seen two books (appropriately huge and weighty) on sculptor Richard Serra alone. Coming up soon: a monograph on Giuseppe Penone of the *arte povera* movement and a catalog for Brice Marden’s current show of paintings in London.

Gagosian says that his publications stand out because he doesn’t do cookie-cutter books: “We let the show and input from the artist influence what the book looks like, rather than imposing a strict structure. I want each catalog to feel special and appropriate for that particular artist and the work.”

“Each relationship is different, and each book is different,” says McDonald. “In what we do, the artist and the art lead.”
At the end of the day, do impressive books and catalogs have any impact on the value of an artist’s work? “This sounds facetious,” says Gagosian, “but a crummy catalog can hurt it. If you do a crummy, cheap catalog, I don’t think it makes people want to run to see the show.”

TITLE CREDITS Gagosian publishes catalogues raisonnés, books, exhibition catalogs, a newspaper and a quarterly magazine with a distribution of 50,000. These are some of the most memorable books in the gallery’s history. Clockwise from left: Oldest: Gagosian’s first publication was a free handout for Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings 1949–1952 in 1986; Longest: Ellen Gallagher’s 2004 book eXelento boasts 1,188 pages and eight limited-edition covers done in silicone; 500th: Chris Burden: Streetlamps, out this month, focuses on the late artist’s sculptural installations; Most Expensive: The $85,000 volume Bettie Kline was produced by Richard Prince in 2009 in an edition of eight copies; Best-Selling: The $100, 210-page Jean-Michel Basquiat served as the catalog for the gallery’s 2013 show of the same name. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN (3); RICHARD PRINCE, BETTIE KLINE, 2009, 18 1/8 X 15 X 2 1/8 INCHES (46 X 38.1 X 5.4 CM), EDITION OF 8, © RICHARD PRINCE. PHOTO BY ROB MCKEEVER. COURTESY OF GAGOSIAN; F. MARTIN RAMIN