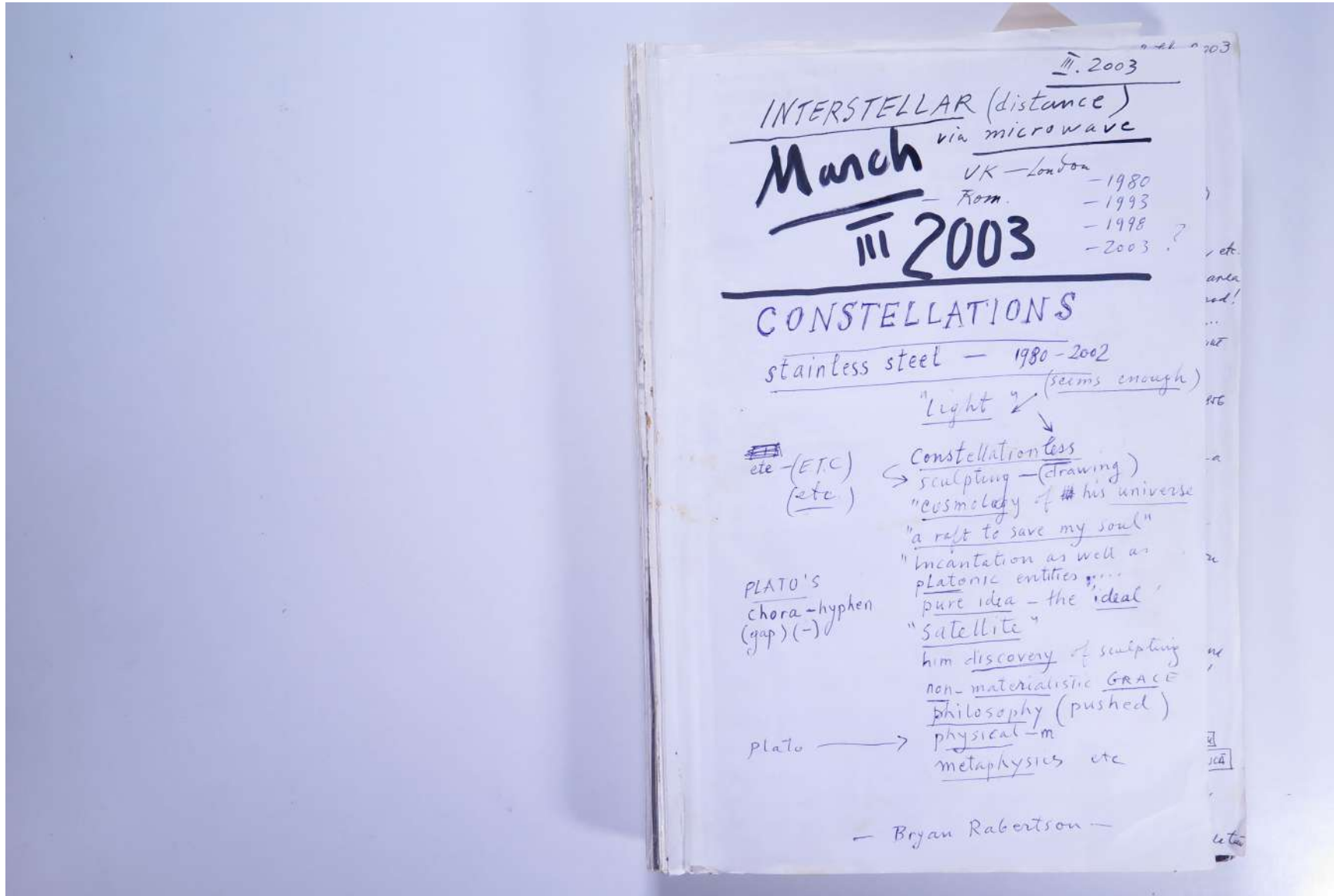


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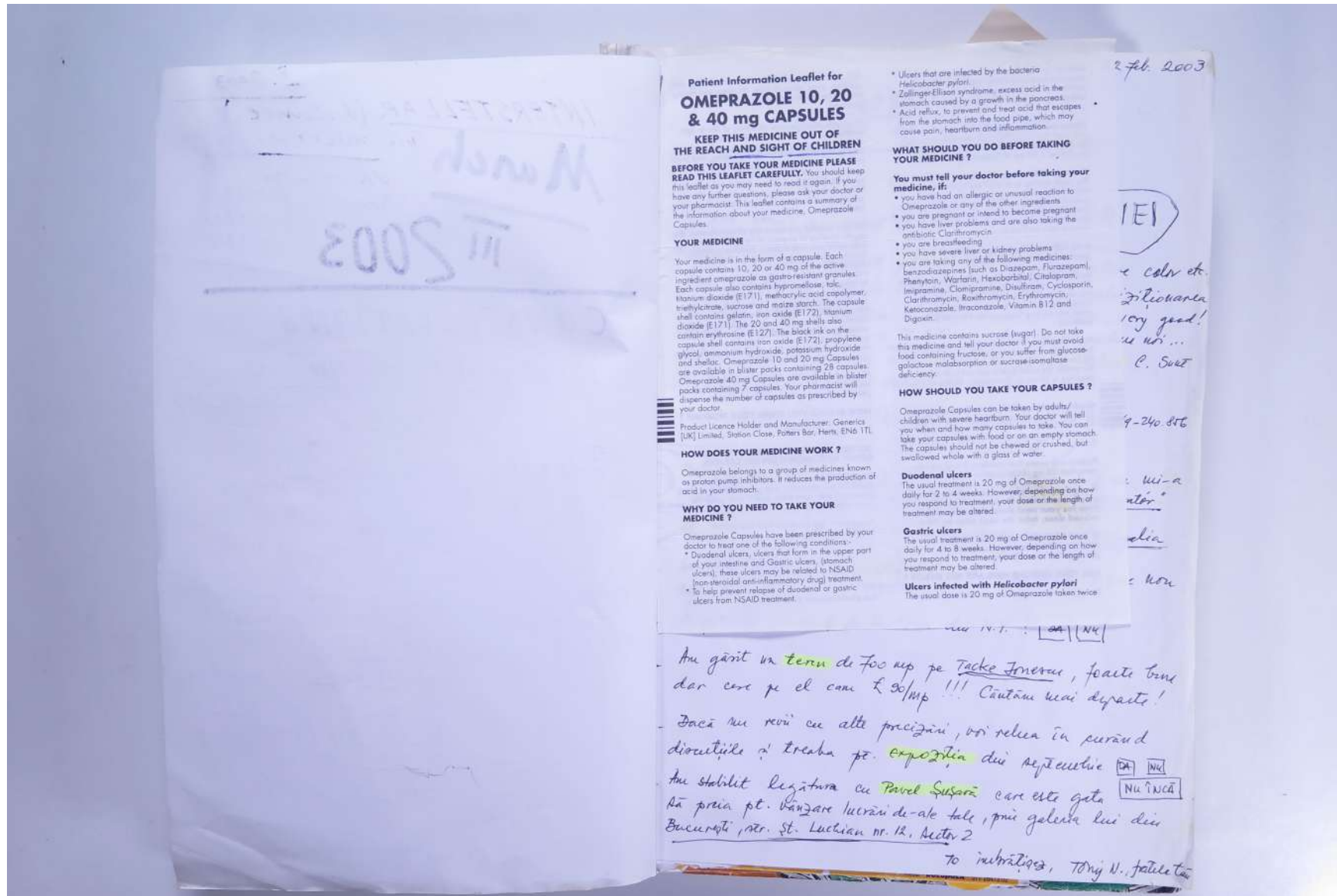
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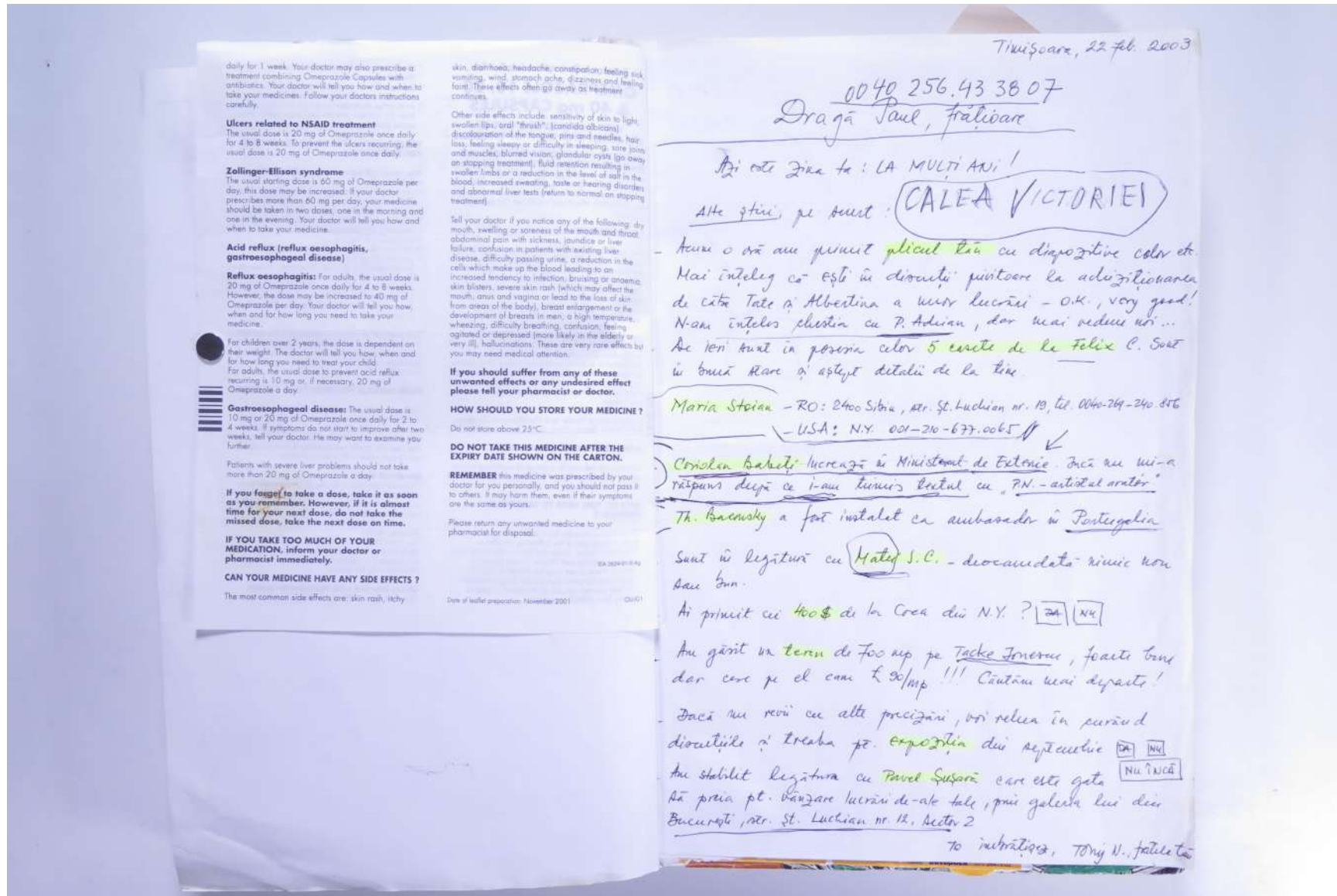
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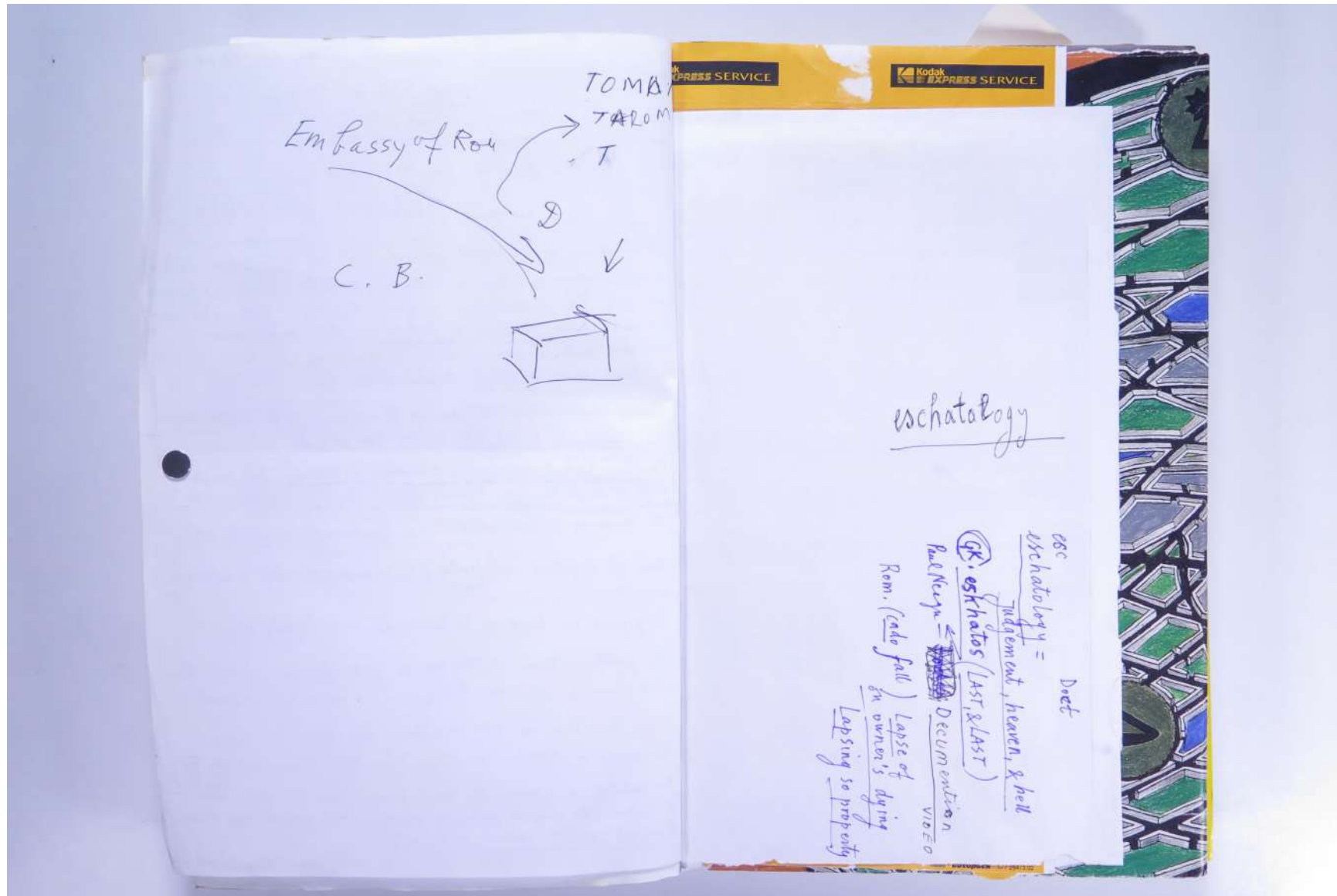
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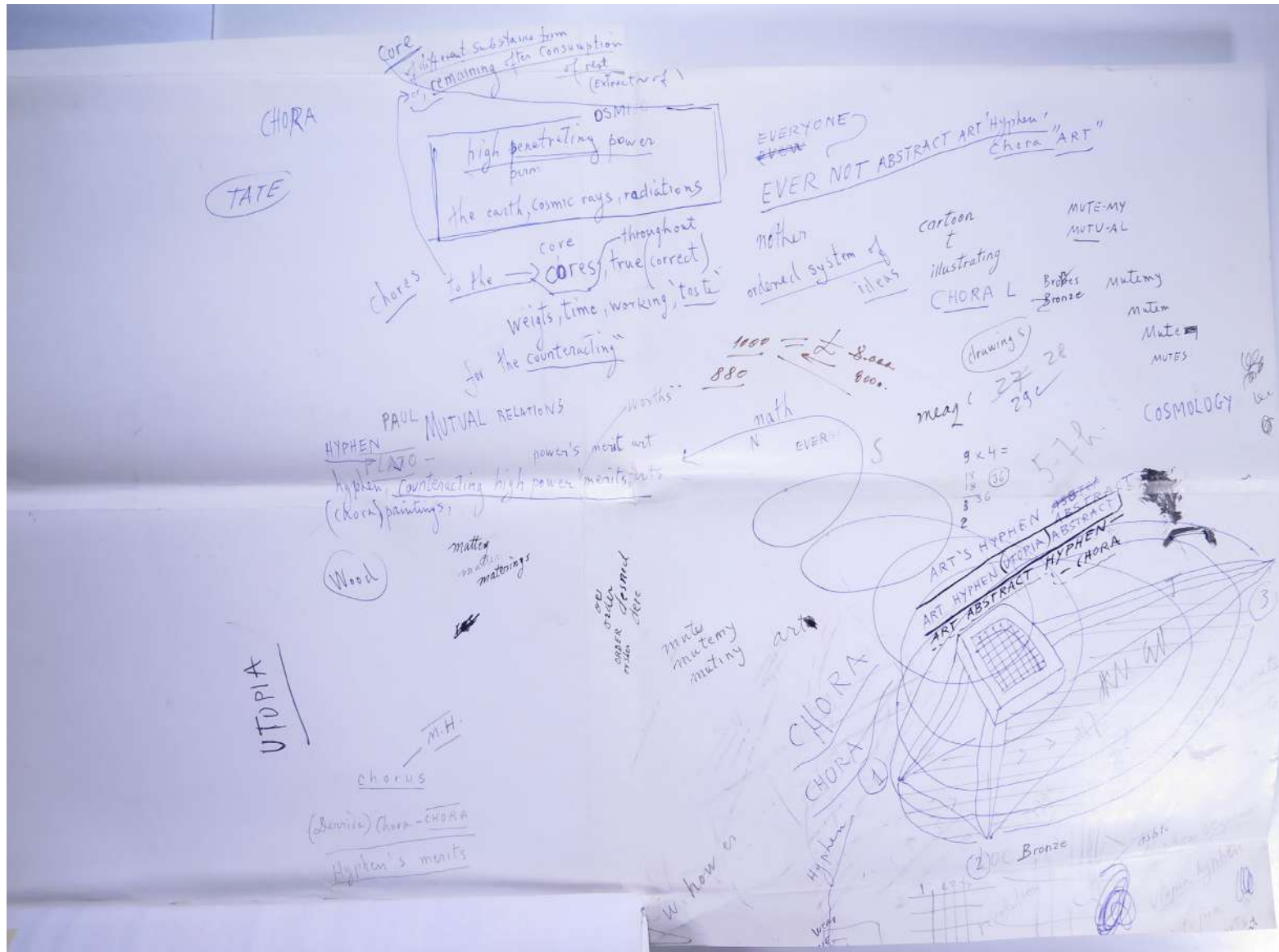
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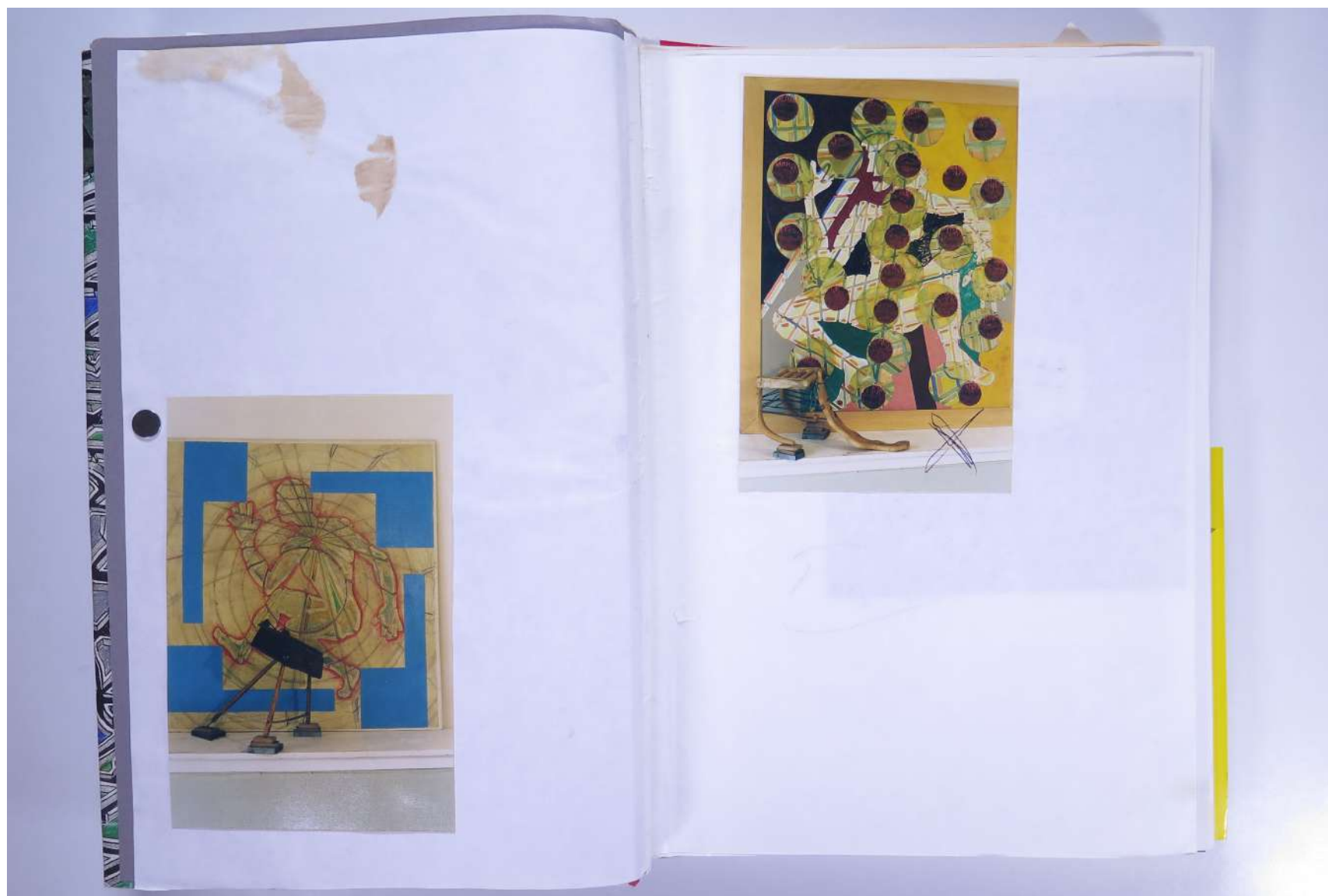
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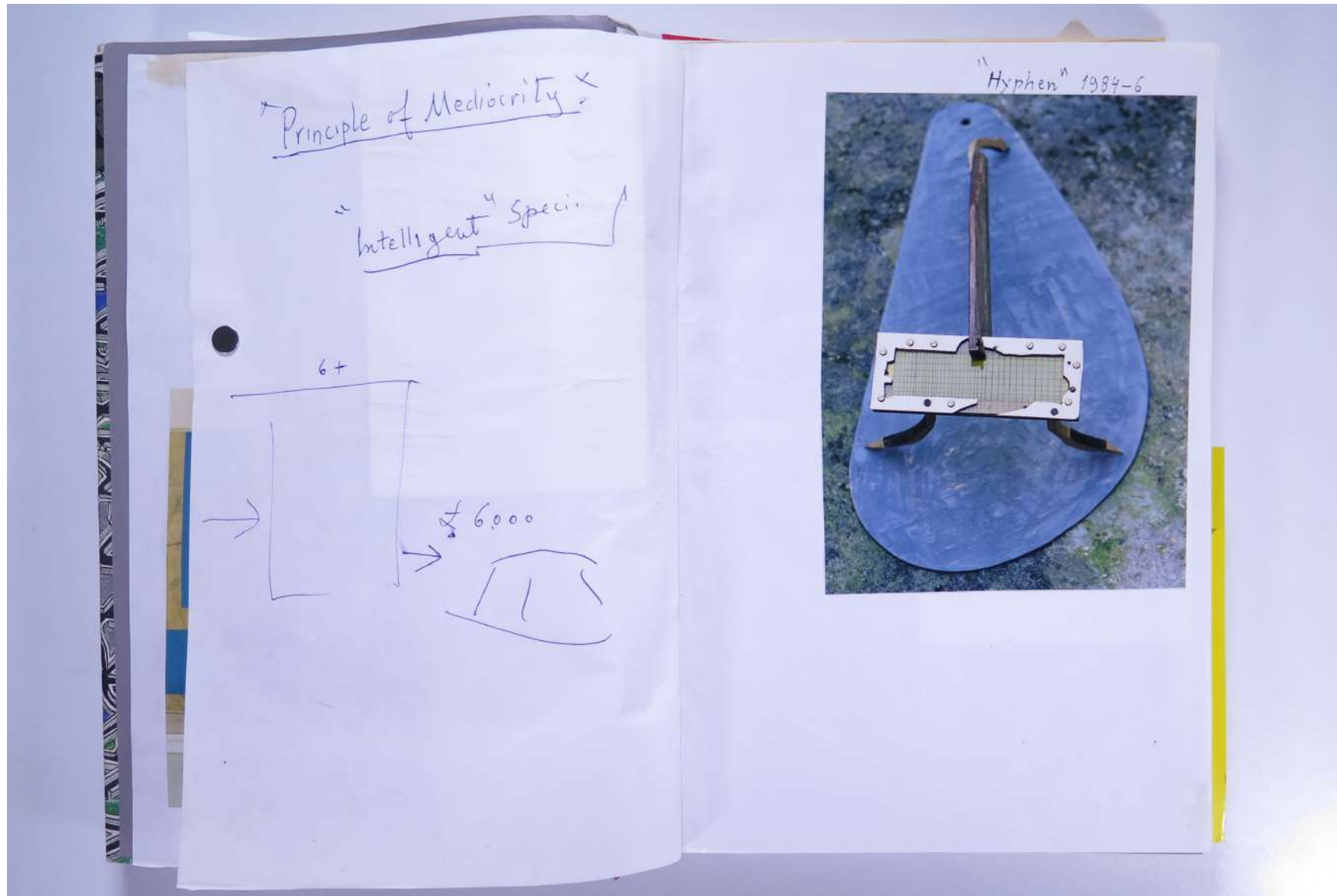
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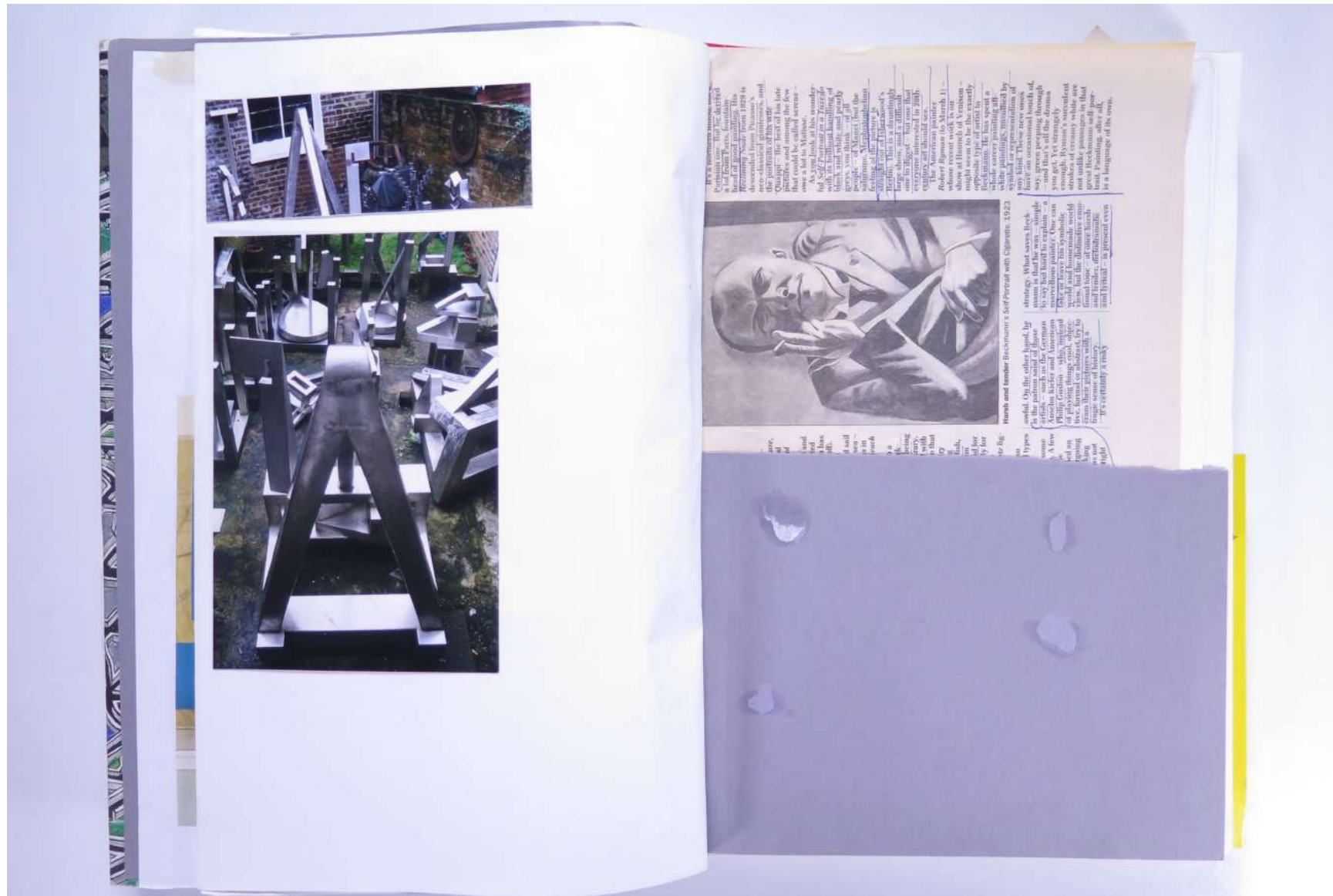


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The vitality of despair

Art

Martin Gayford
Max Beckmann
Robert Rymen

In my end, wrote T.S. Eliot, is my beginning. That's certainly true of the work of the German painter Max Beckmann. Take a look at the first picture in the mammoth retrospective that has just opened at Tate Modern (to May 5). *Young Men by the Sea*, painted in 1905 when Beckmann was 21. And then take a look at the central panel of *The Argonauts*, completed the night before he died, in New York in 1950. The basic symbol of the sea – the zone of freedom stretching away towards the horizons – is the same; so too are the naked young men (especially the one with his back to us). But what an enormous amount of terrain Beckmann had traversed, in terms of art and life, between the two. No other figure among the great artists of

modernism seemed so consistently engaged with the terrible history of the 20th century.

Picasso and Miró, if it is true, both had a moment when their art expressed the drama and horror of the Spanish Civil War. But a great deal of Beckmann is like that – he pointed, you might say, one Goya after another. And he lived through much of the worst of the century – both wars, and Nazi Germany. His paintings take us into the torture chamber, we see limbs hacked off and mangled at work. This, he says, explicitly at the beginning of a series of sketches from 1919, is Hell, and he beckons us to it.

Like the master of ceremonies at a cabaret, he introduces what is to come in a spiel written underneath a self-portrait, "Honoured ladies and gentlemen of the public, pray step up. We can offer you the pleasant prospect of 10 minutes or so in which you will not be bored." There follows, among other images, the scene repeated in his painting *The Night* – his breakthrough work, which marks the beginning of his mature style.

In it we see a violent gang at work, apparently in a house they are riding. On

the left a man is being simultaneously throttled and having his arm broken by a phlegmatic fellow who is smoking a pipe while he works. In the center a woman is tied up, naked except for corset and stockings. She looks as if she has been or soon will be a victim of rape. On the right a man with a rascallous grin looks on.

It is the sort of scene that perhaps occurred in the violent anarchy that followed the First World War. But this is not reportage. It looks like a late medieval altarpiece depicting martyrdom or the torments of the damned by a painter such as Compi, Grünewald or Stephan Lochner – and indeed late medieval German and Flemish art was one of Beckmann's sources.

But that world of tense suffering has been squashed into the kind of tense, splintered space developed by late Cézanne and early Cubism. The floor tilts up, the back wall pushes forward, leaving the figures with a shallow, claustrophobic stage on which to act.

This was the formula with which Beckmann emerged as a mature painter after the First World War. He wanted, he wrote in a "Creative

Credo" from that same year, 1918, "to capture the terrible, thrilling monster of life's vitality and to confine it, to beat it down and strangle it with crystal, clear, razor-sharp lines and planes." Looking at *The Night*, you can see what he meant.

Yet a few years previously he had been a very different artist. Beckmann had gone through the First World War as a dreary sort of romantic Impressionist. He was tagged the "German Delacroix" and his aquatic disaster picture, *The Sinking of the Titanic* from 1912 suggests why. But a spell as a medical orderly on the Eastern Front changed that. He emerged after a year of this breakdown, charged with brilliant visual energy and metaphysical despair.

He could not, he wrote, forgive God for "having made us so we cannot love each other". In the 1920s, after all manner of ecstatic reading – including Buddhaist and Gnostic writings, the spiritist Madame Blavatsky and the Romantic philosopher Schopenhauer – Beckmann concluded that the world was an evil place from which escape was the only solution. That is what is happening in the first of his triptychs –

again derived from a religious form – *The Departure*, painted between 1932 and 1935, in the early phase of Nazi rule. On either side there is suffering, torture and evil being enacted in a naked prisoner tied to a column has had his hands chopped off. In the centre, a king and queen with a young child sail away into the wide blue sea – the same symbolic sea as in the *Young Men on the Beach* and *The Argonauts*.

In turning himself into a fractured modernist, Beckmann had not given up being a symbolist. On the contrary, his paintings are stuffed with symbolism – so much so that it would behoove industry toils away at interpreting them. Beckmann loved fish, for example – using them continually both to stand for sin and as in Christianity for the soul. There are also birds, comedias del'arte figures, zircosies, musical instruments – Beckmann was an enthusiast of all types of cabaret and theatre.

It is easy to see why some people can't stand him. A few years ago the magazine *Modern Painters* carried an extraordinary piece arguing that he – alone of ranking modern masters – was not just flawed but downright



Harsh and tender Beckmann's Self-Portrait with Cigarette, 1923

mad. On the other hand, by the patron saint of those artists – such as the German Anselm Kiefer and American Philip Guston – who, instead of playing things cool, objective, formal or abstract, try to strain their pictures with a fragile sense of history – it's certainly a risky

It's a moment of passion one. But he derived a lot from Paris, fountainhead of good painting. His primary mode from 1929 is descended from Picasso's neo-classical grotesques, and the pattern of his nets – Ouagga – the best of his late pictures and among the few that could be called serene – owe a lot to Matisse.

As you look at his wonderful *Self-Portrait in a Turquoise* with its brilliant handling of black and white and pearly greys, you think – of all people – of Monet but the salamine, Mephistophelian feeling of the picture is straight out of Blackwood's *Belshazzar*. This is a dauntingly large show, and a difficult one to digest – but one that everyone interested in 20th-century art should see.

The American painter Robert Rymen (to March 1) – whose recent work is on show at Haunch of Venison – might seem to be the exactly opposite type of artist to Beckmann. He has spent a whole career painting all-white paintings, distilled by symbol or representation of any kind. These new ones have an occasional touch of, say, green peering through – and that's all the drama you get. Yet strangely enough, Rymen's excellent strokes of creamy white are not unlike passages in that great Beckmann self-portrait. Painting, after all, is a language of its own.

The Sunday Telegraph

15 Feb. 2003

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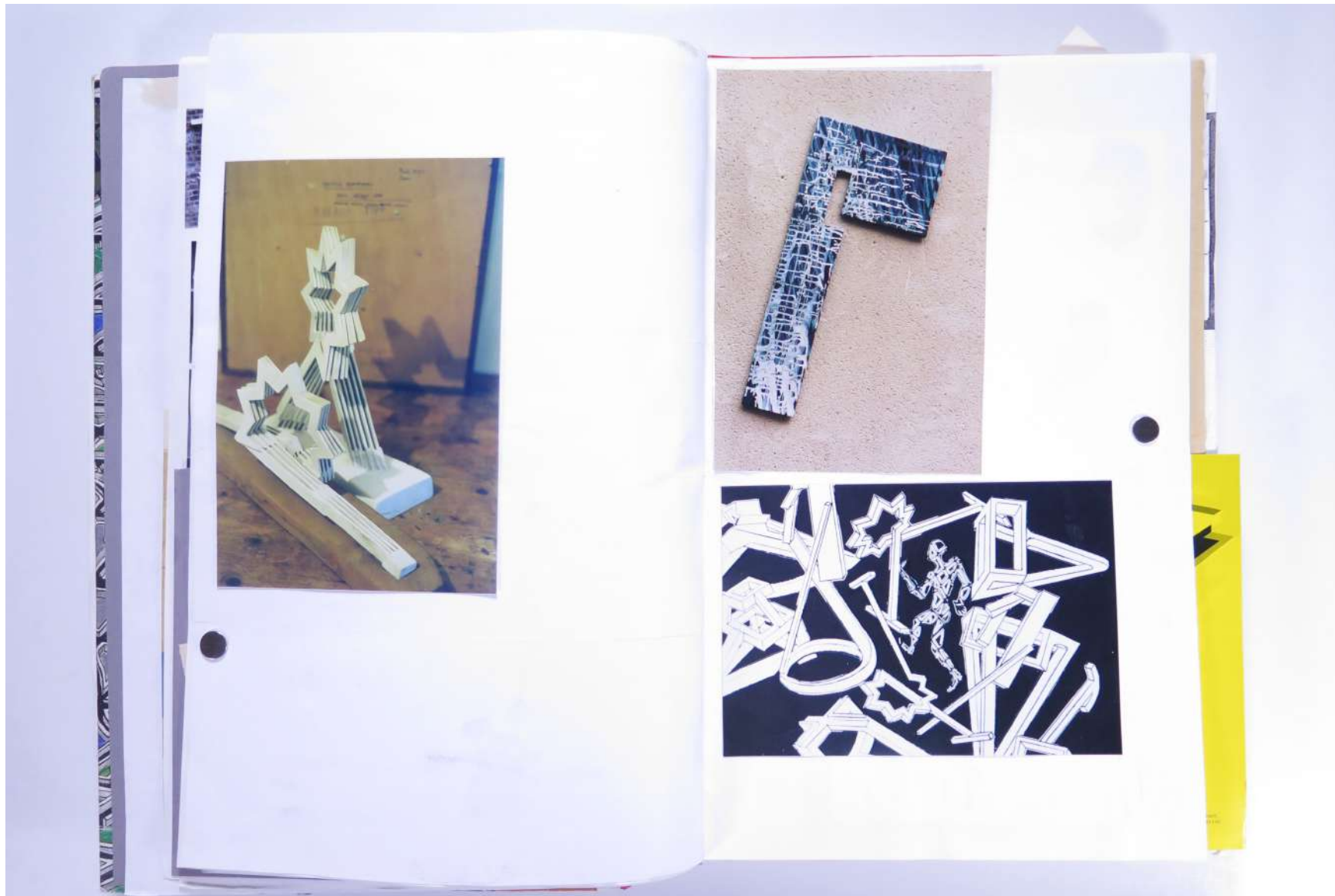
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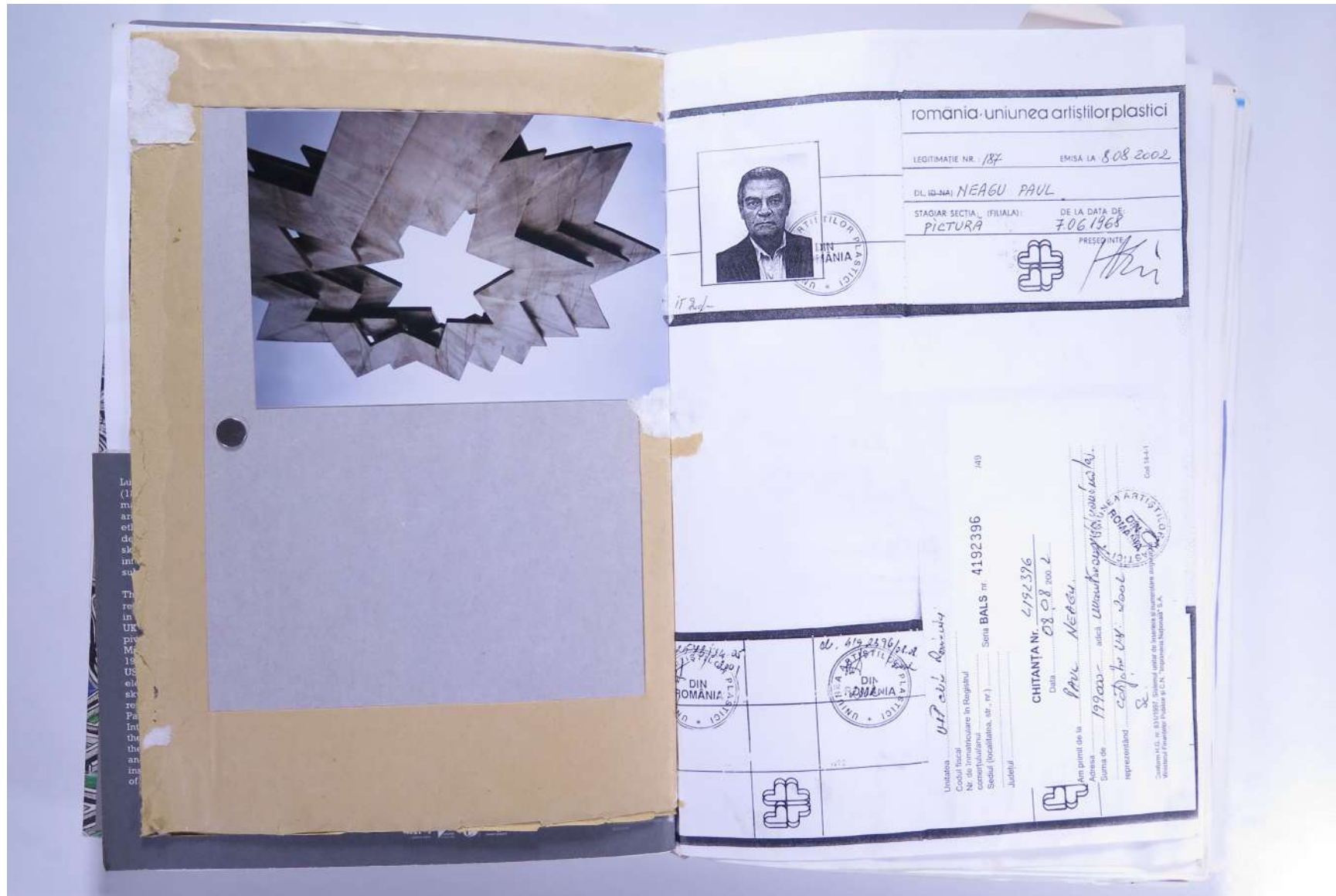
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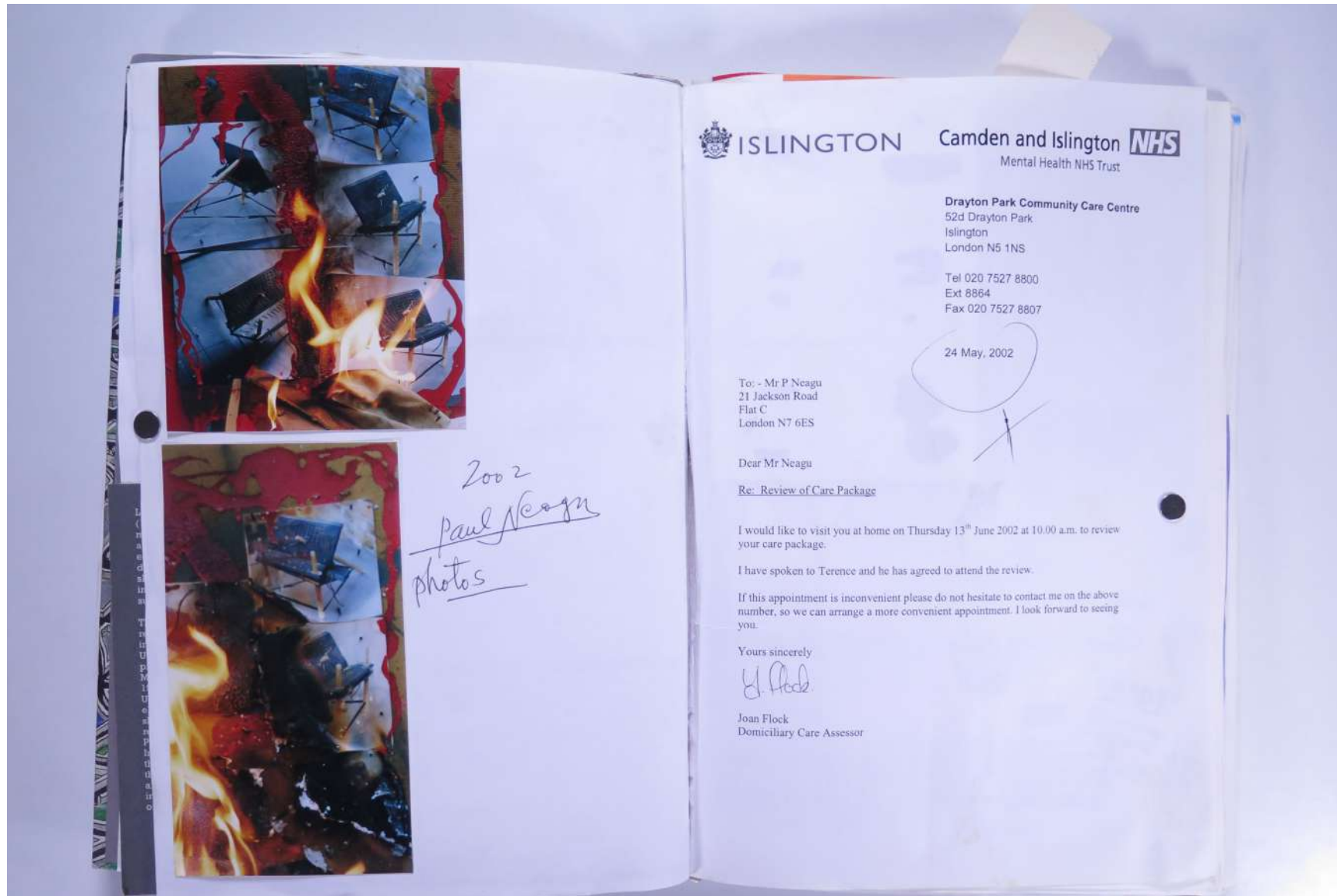
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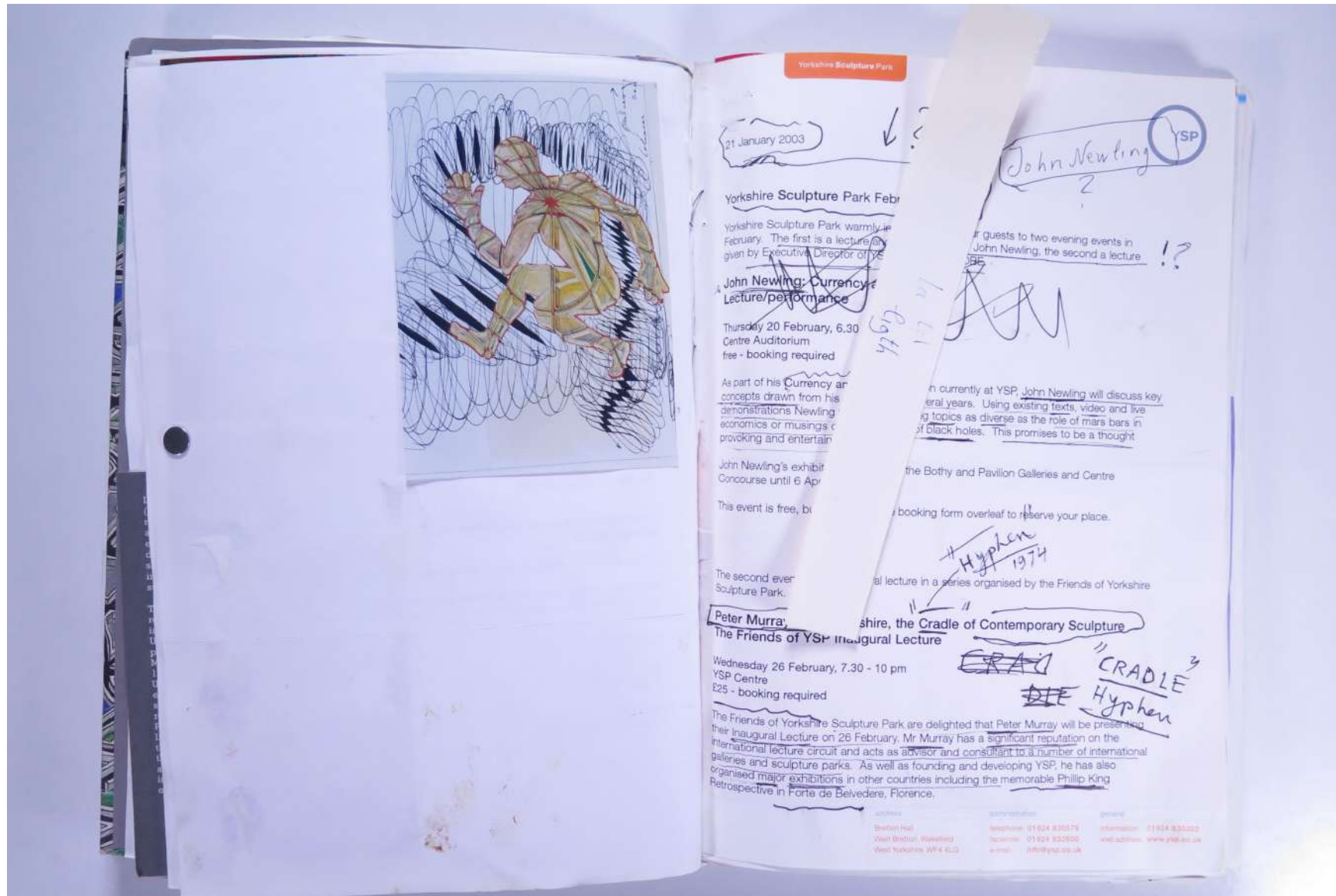
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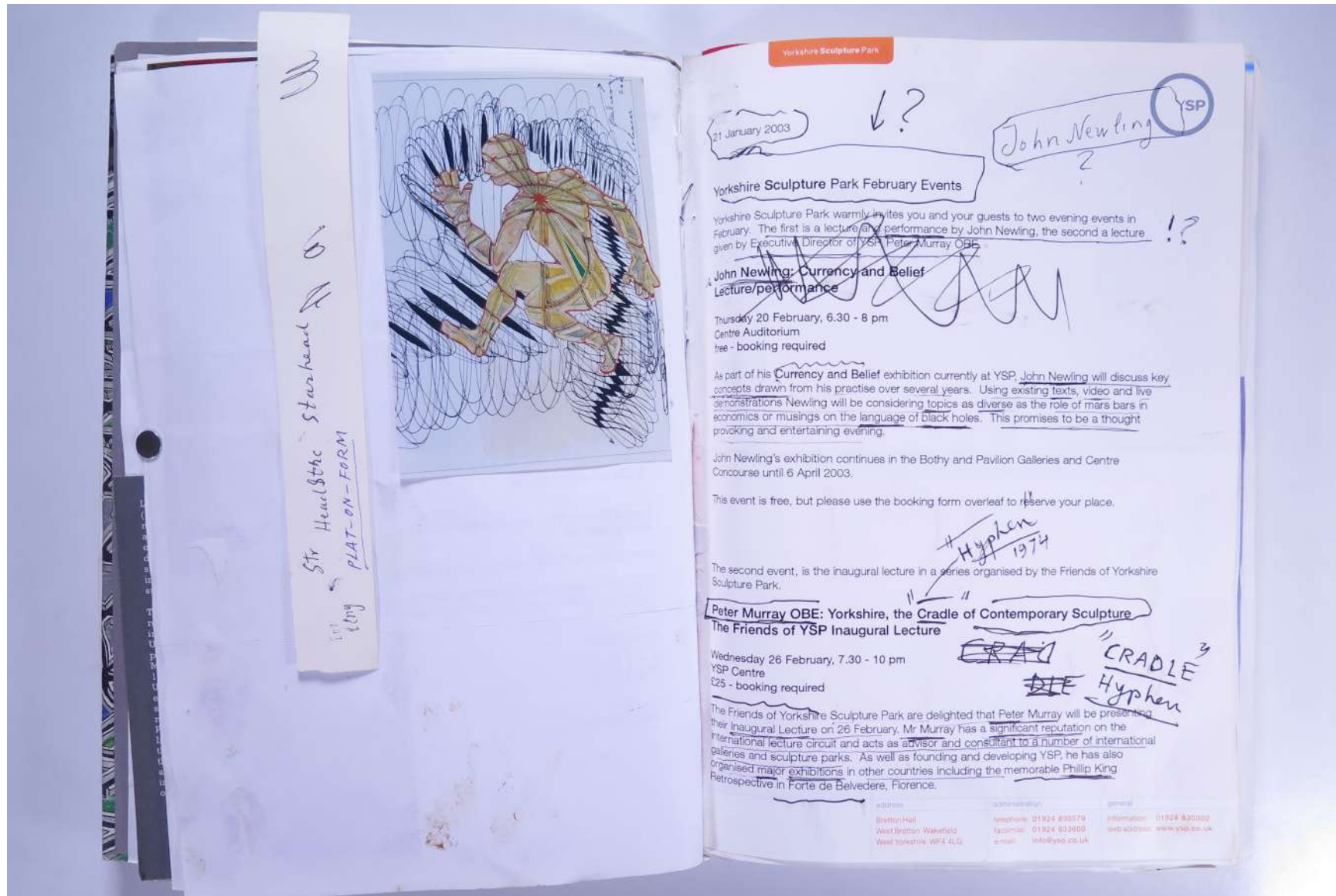
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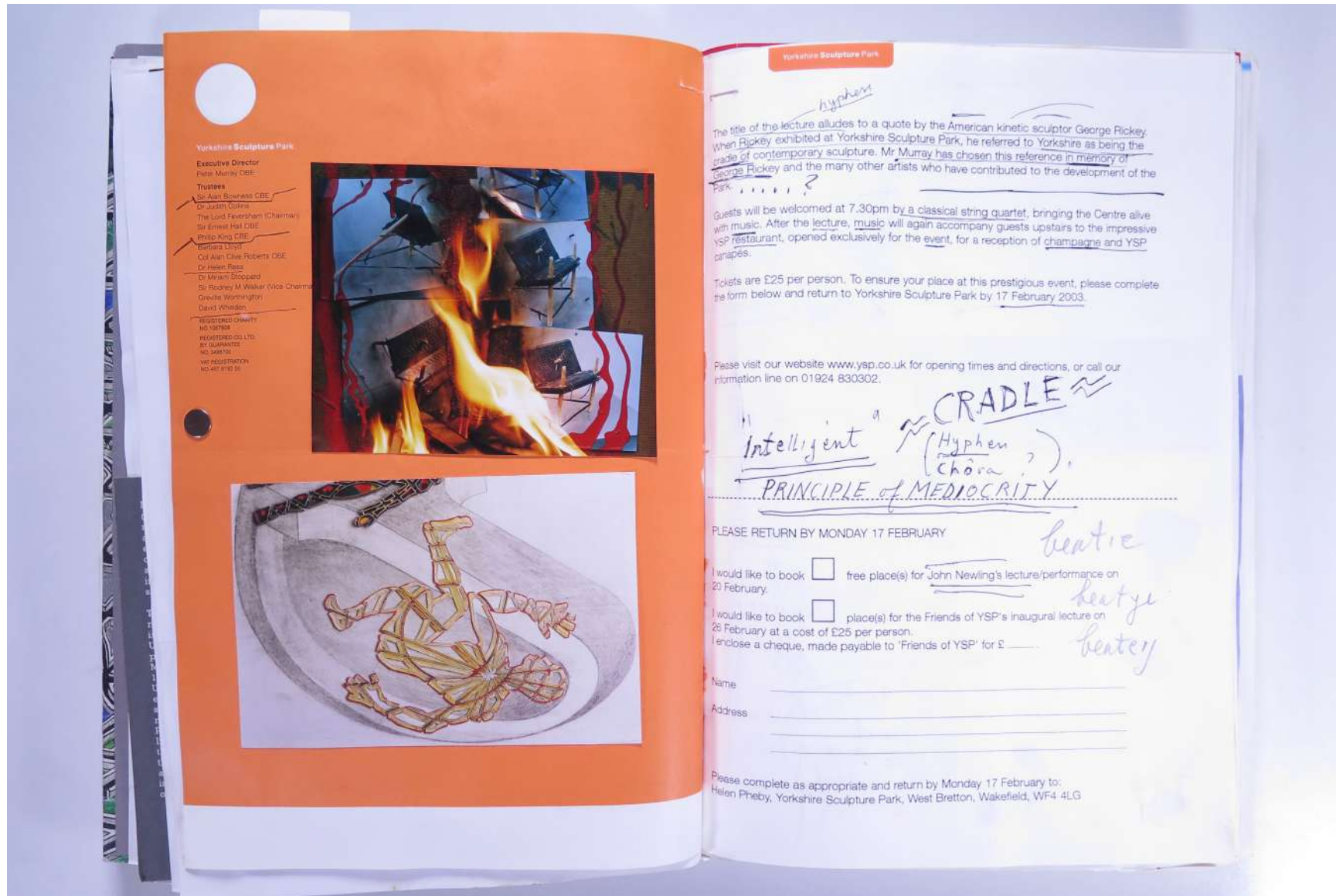
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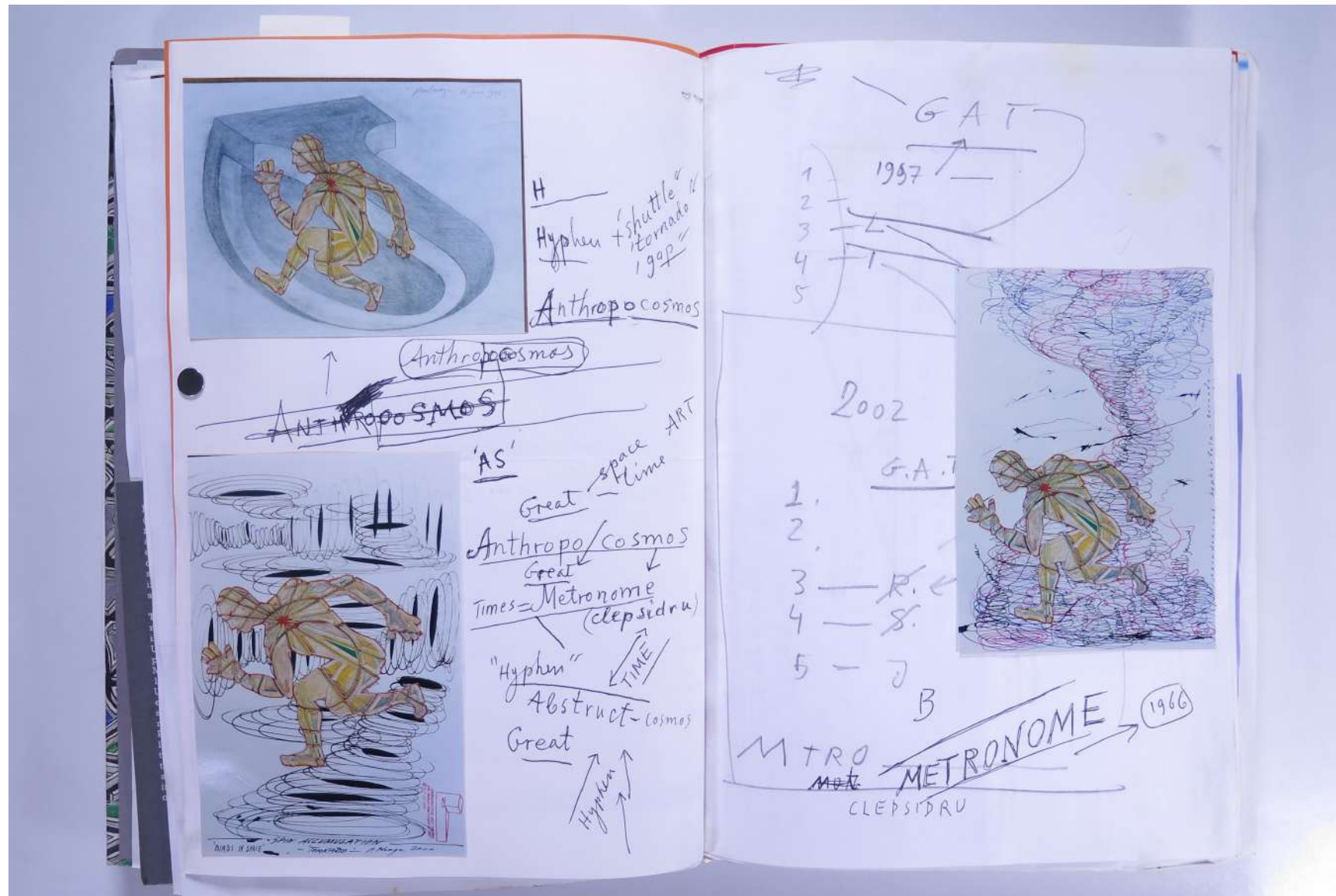
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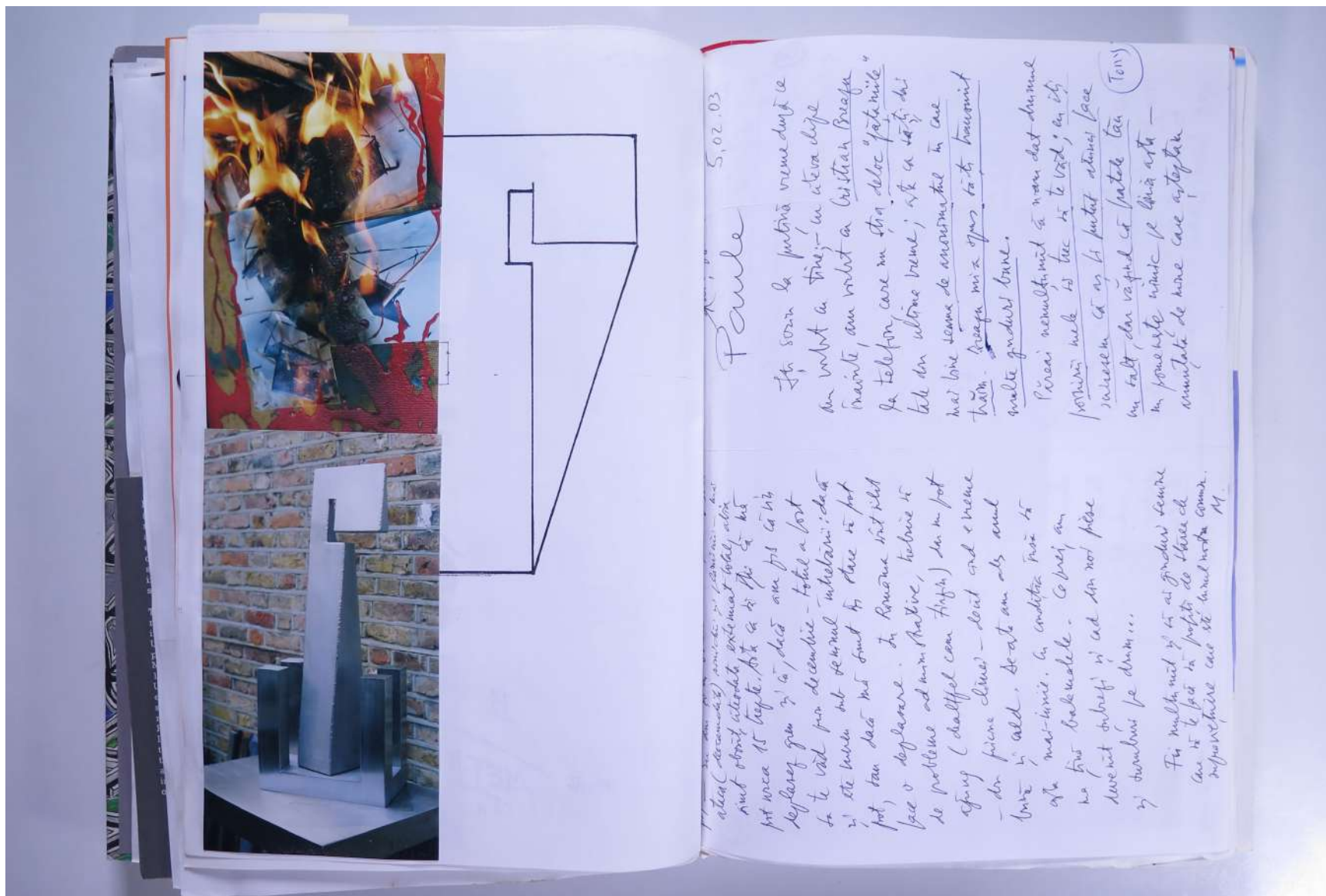
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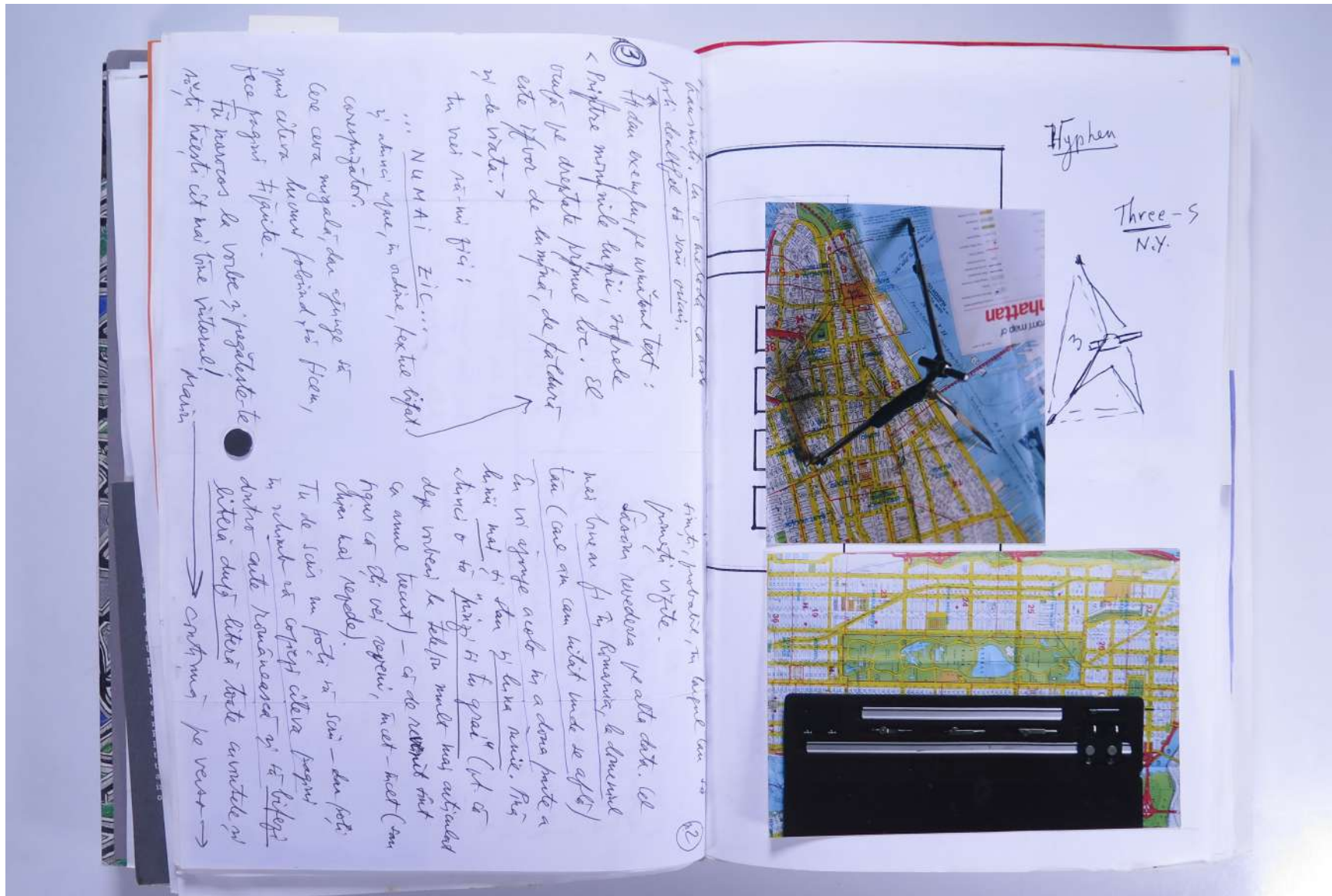
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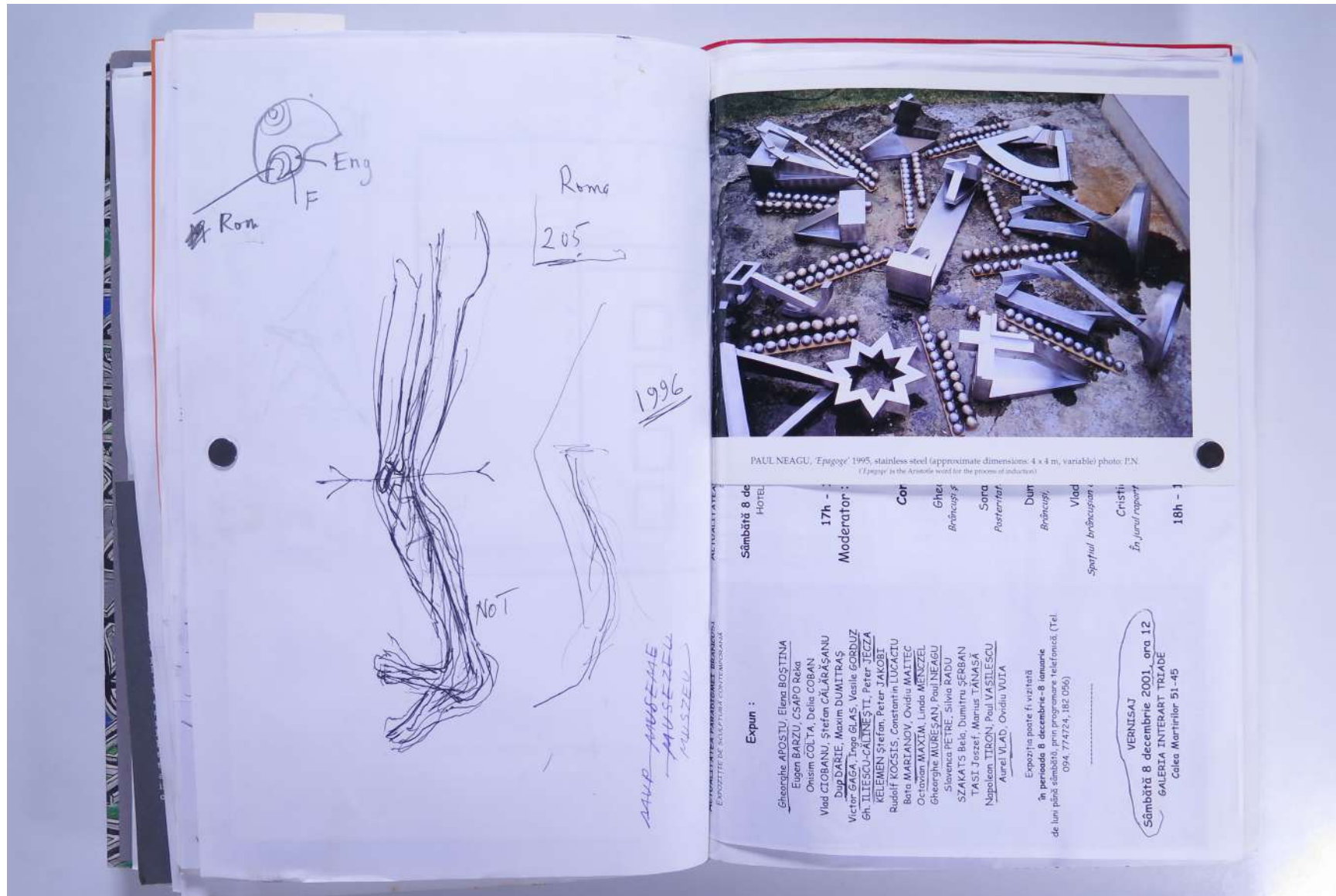


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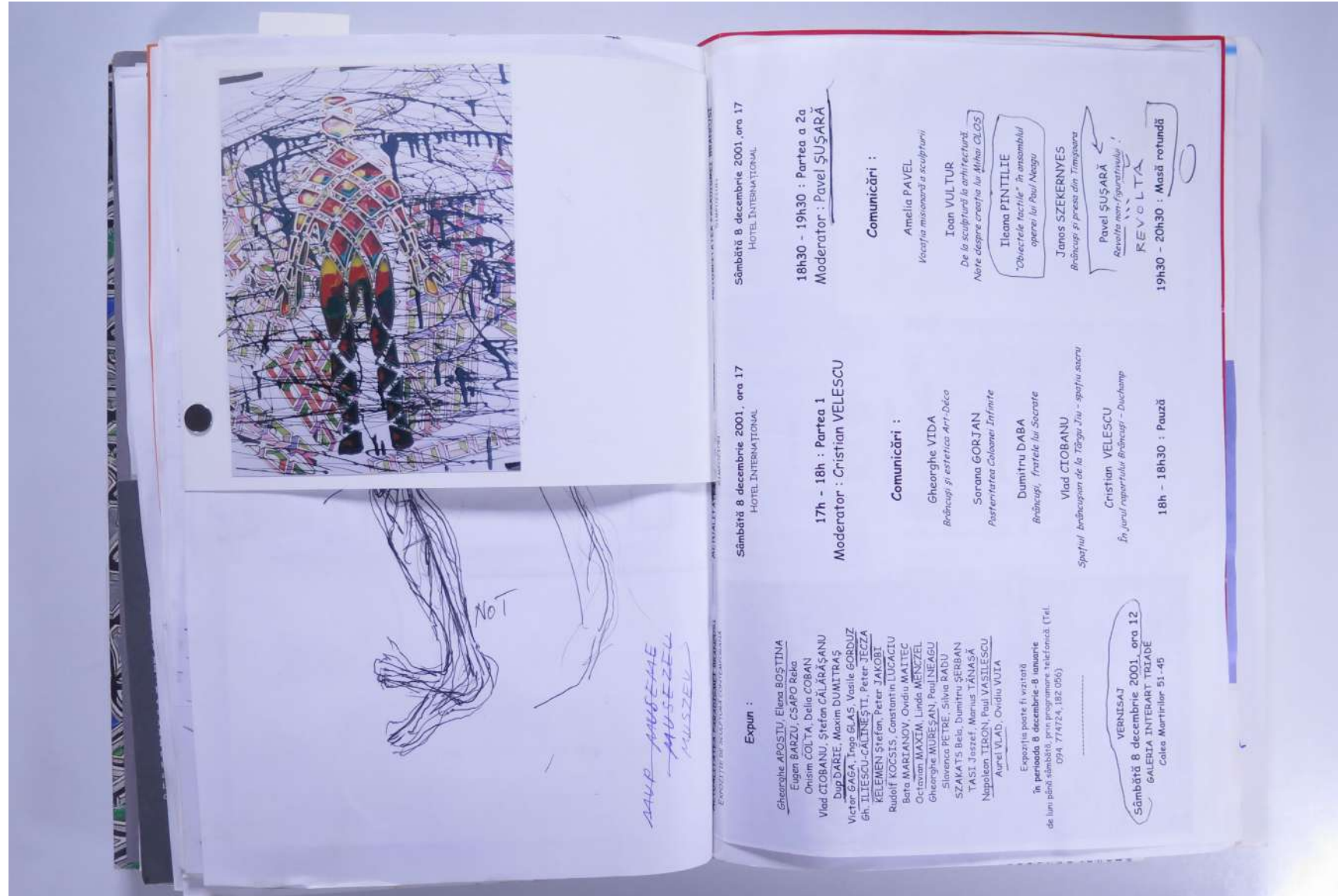
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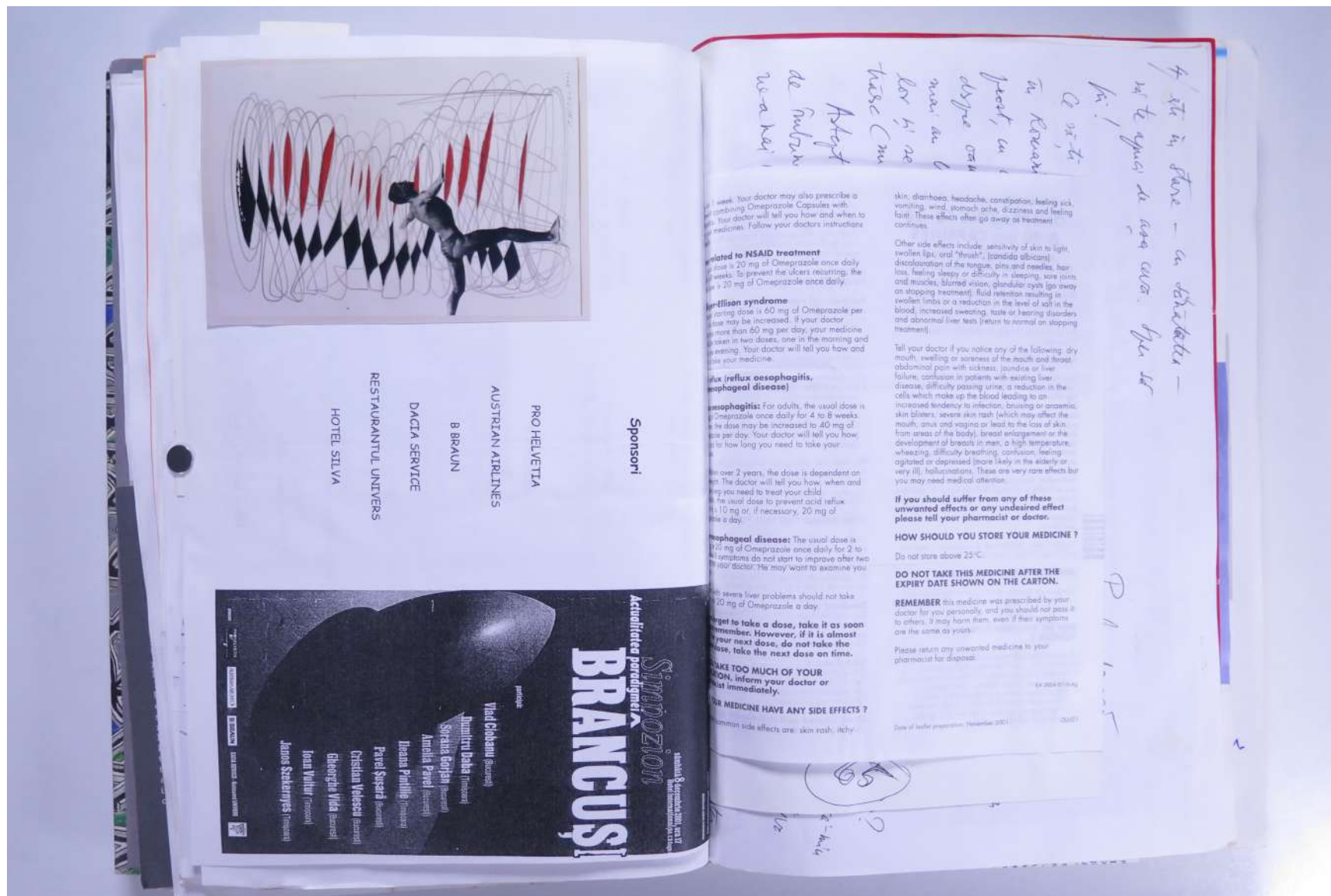
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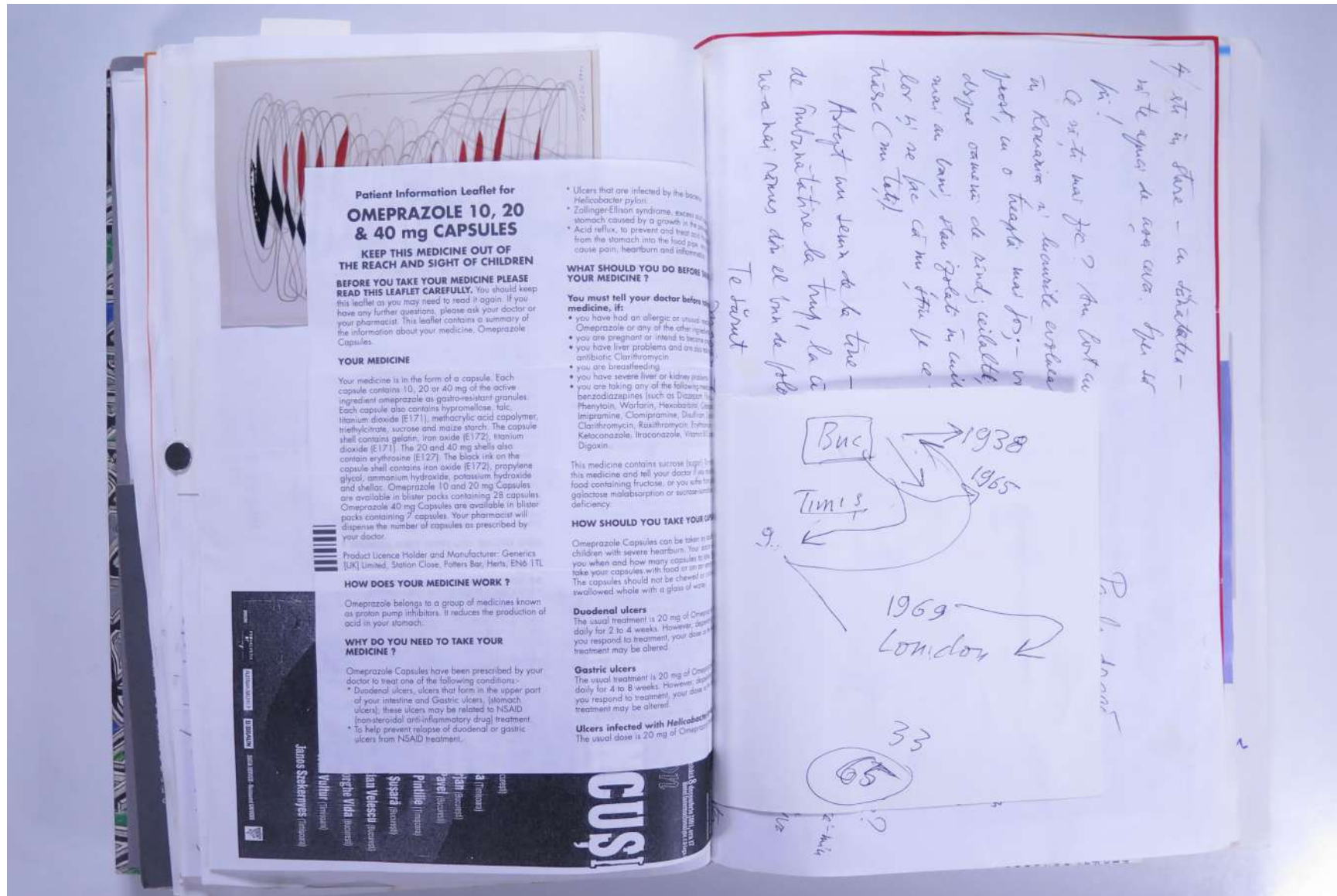
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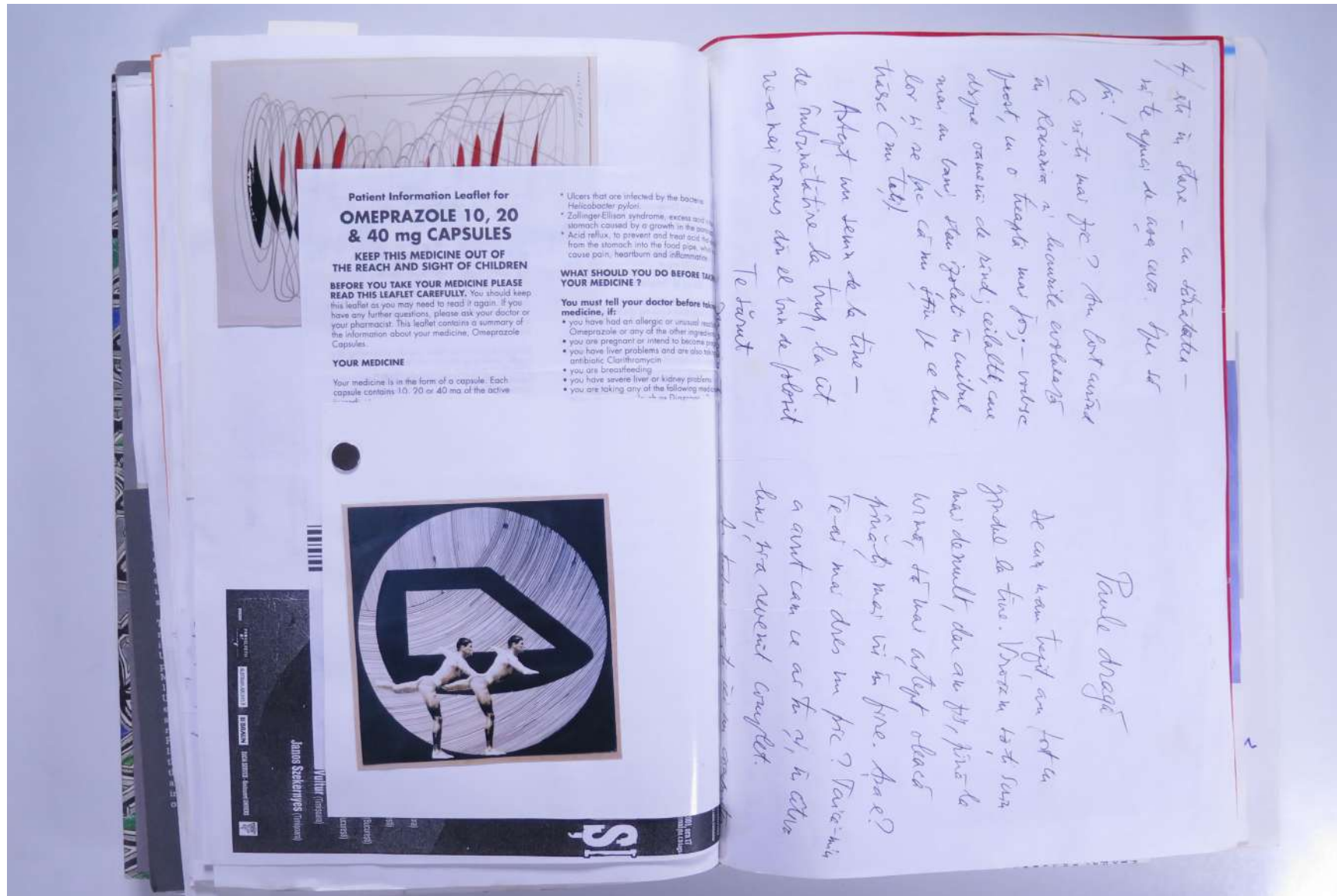
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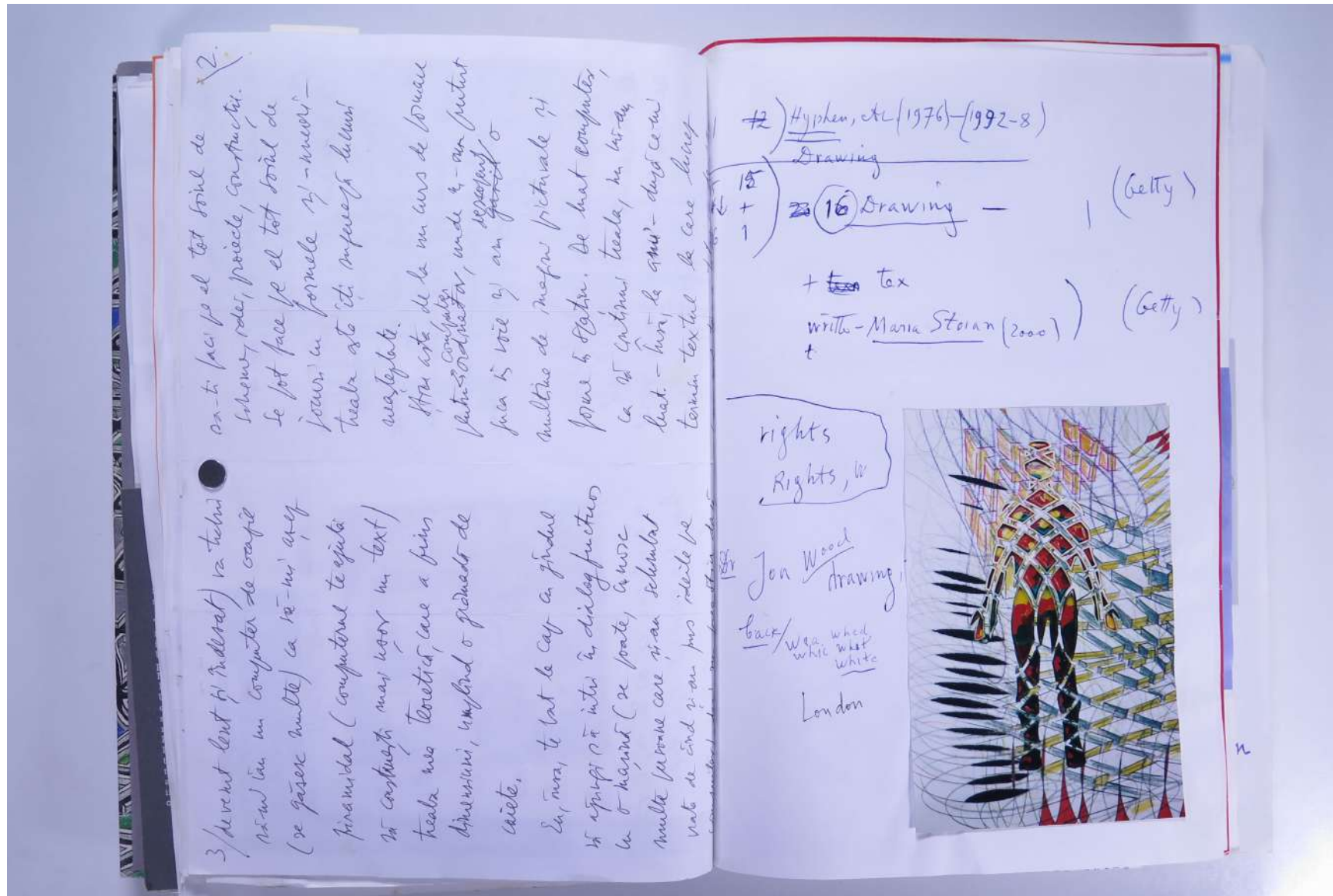


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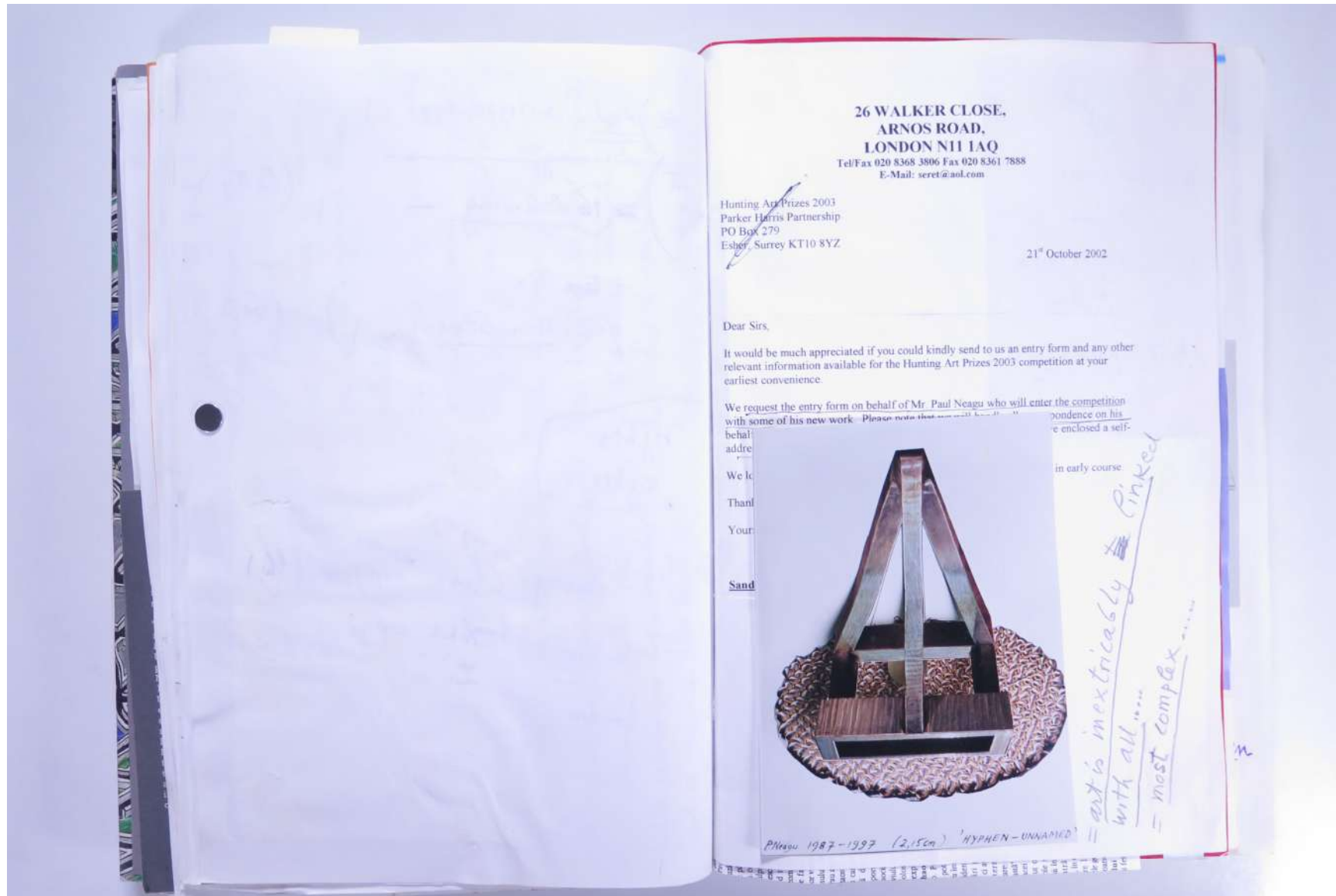


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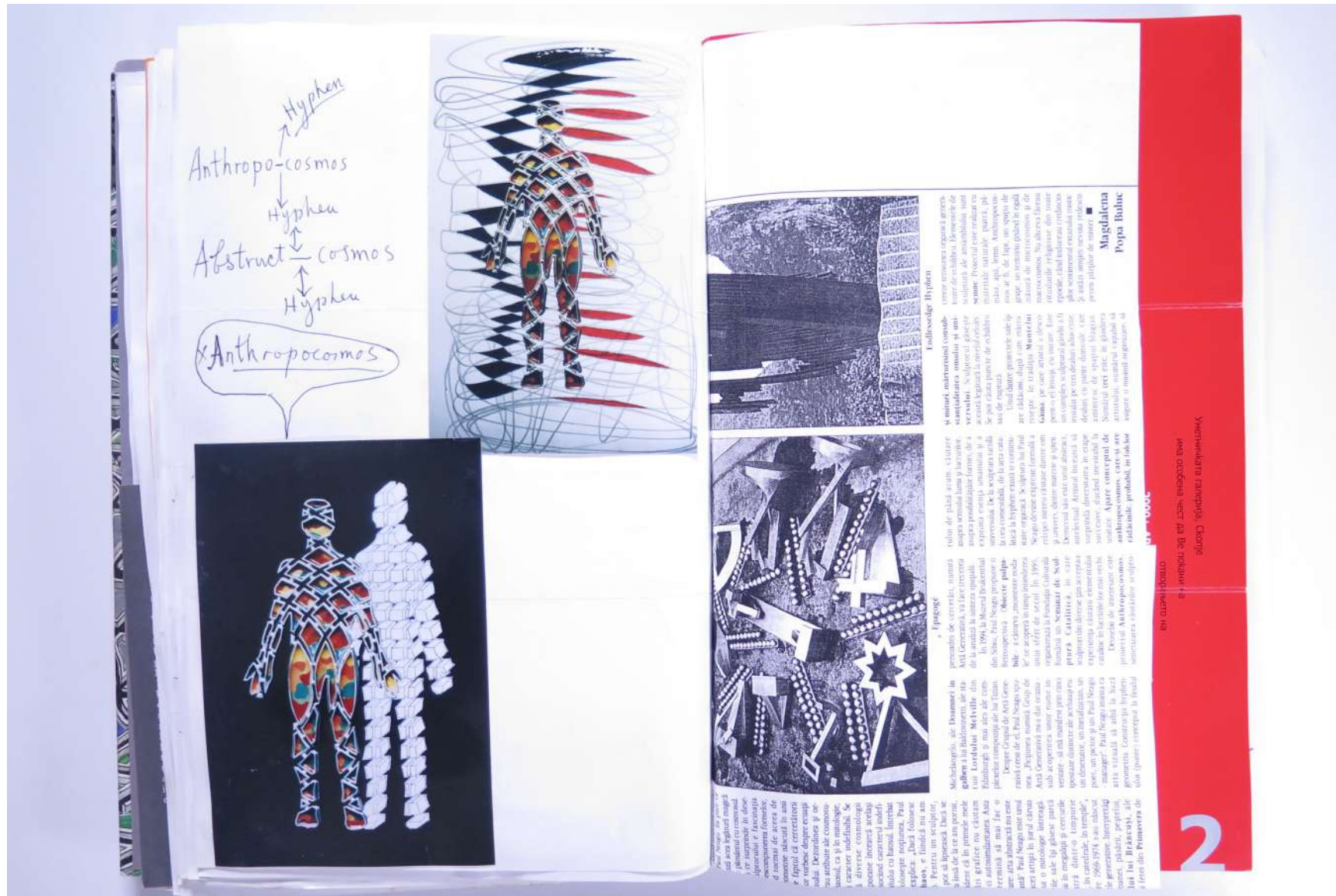
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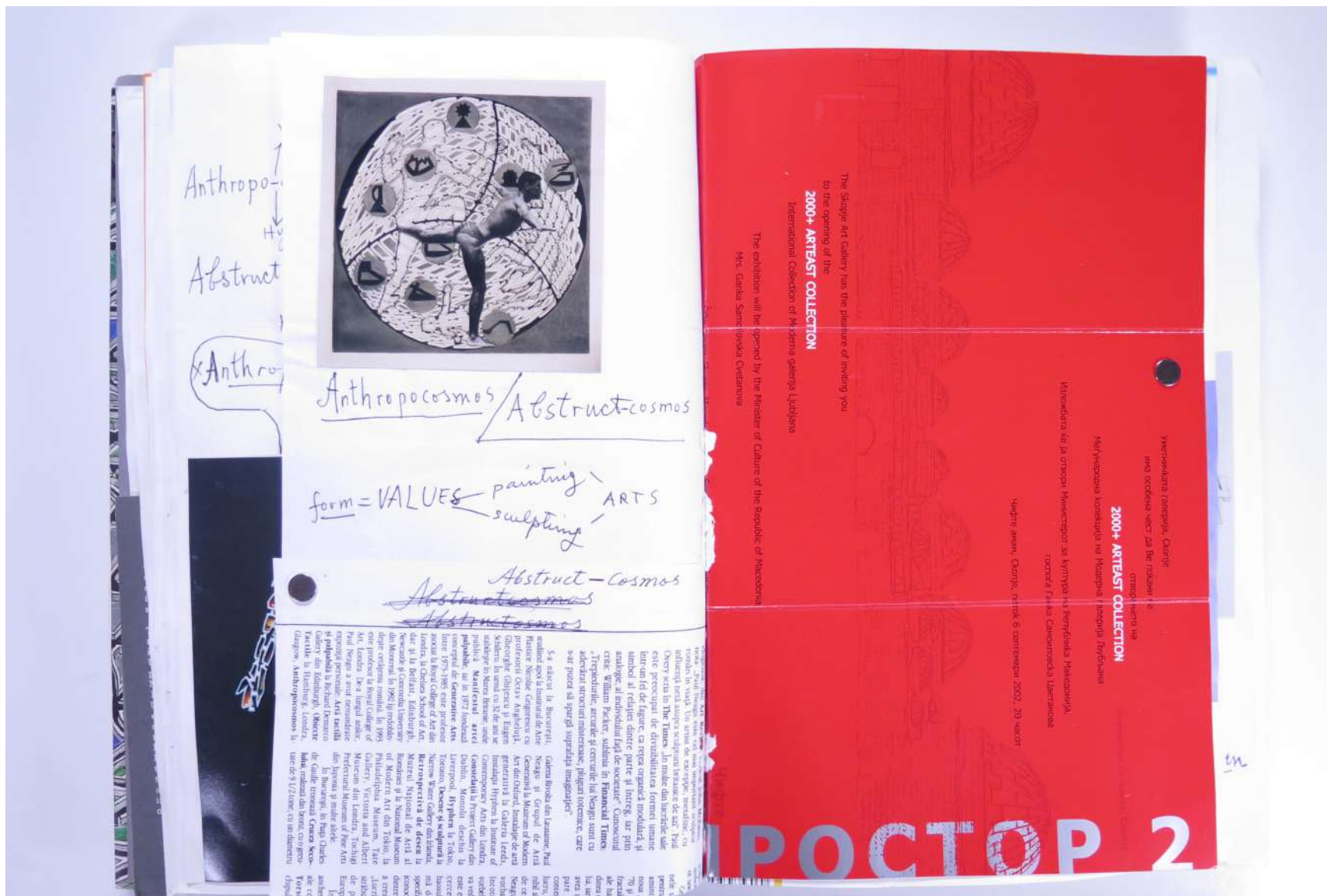
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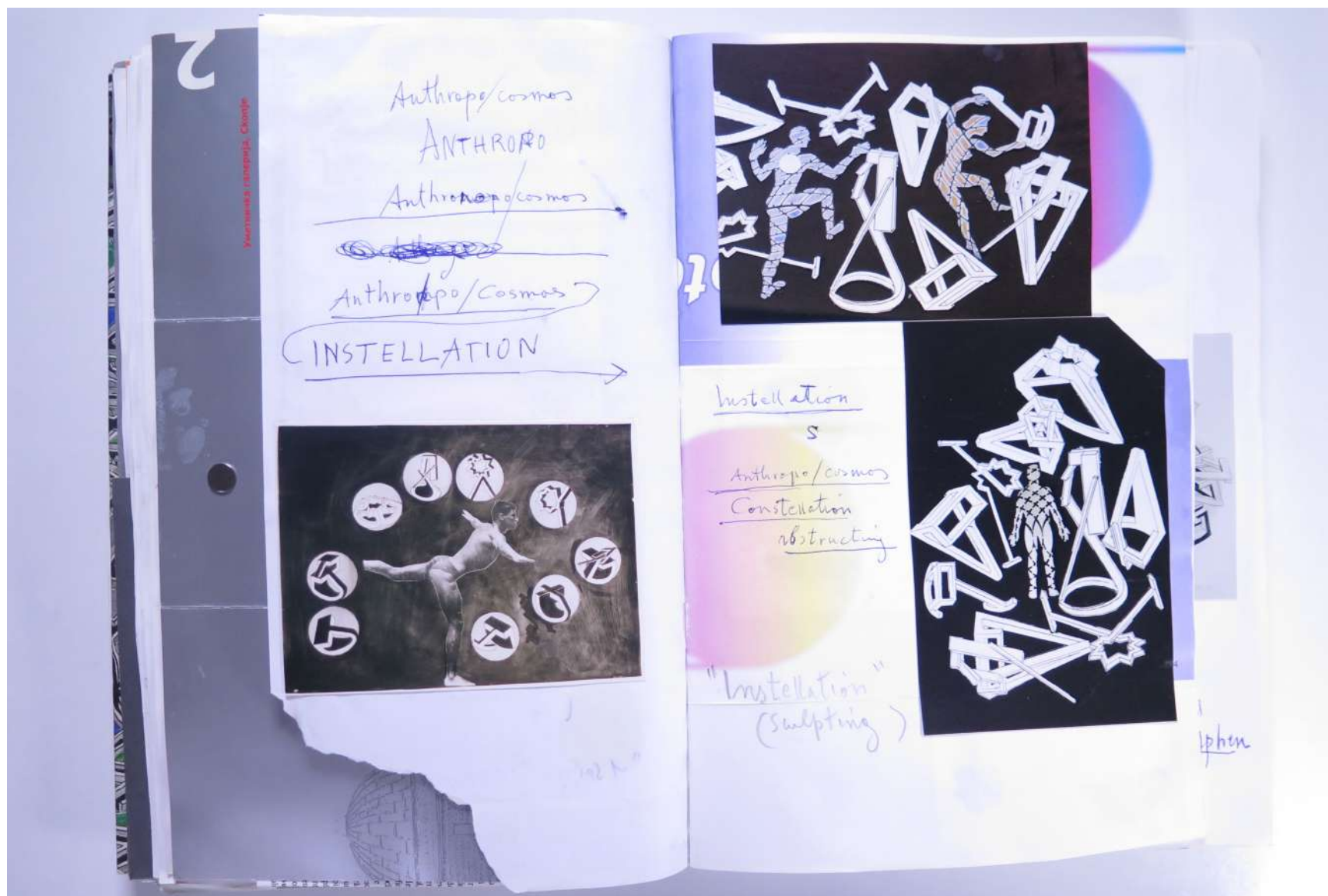
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