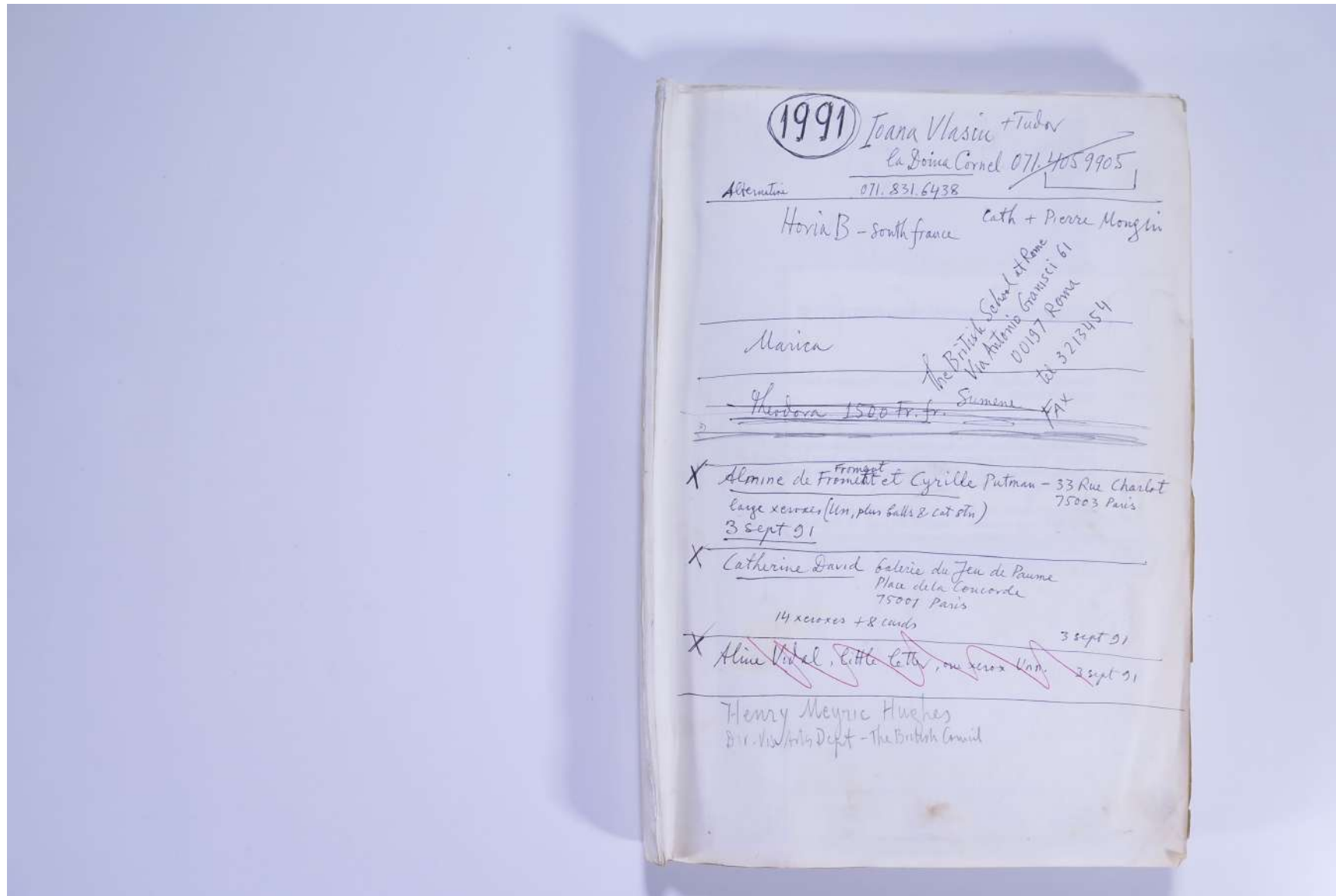


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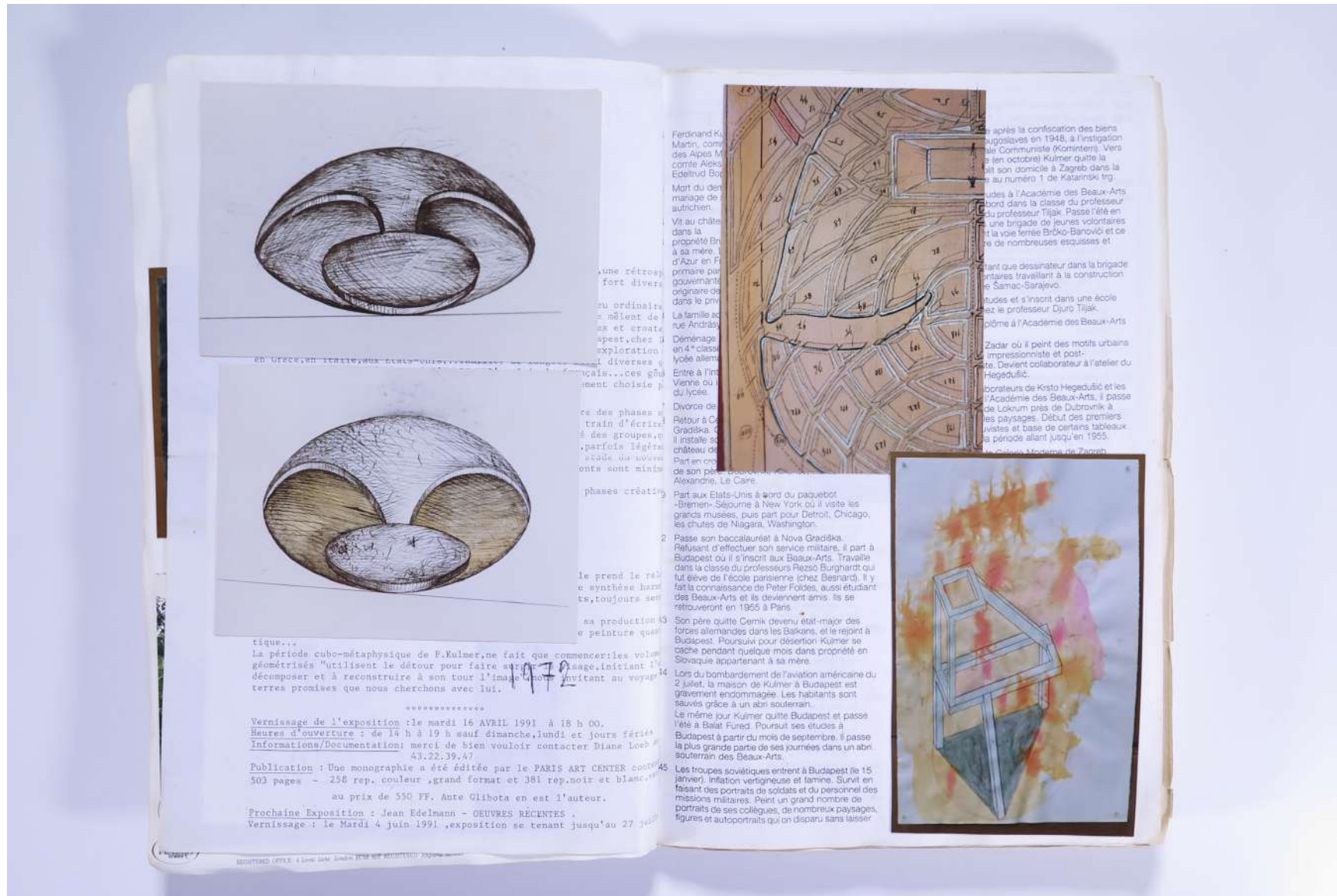
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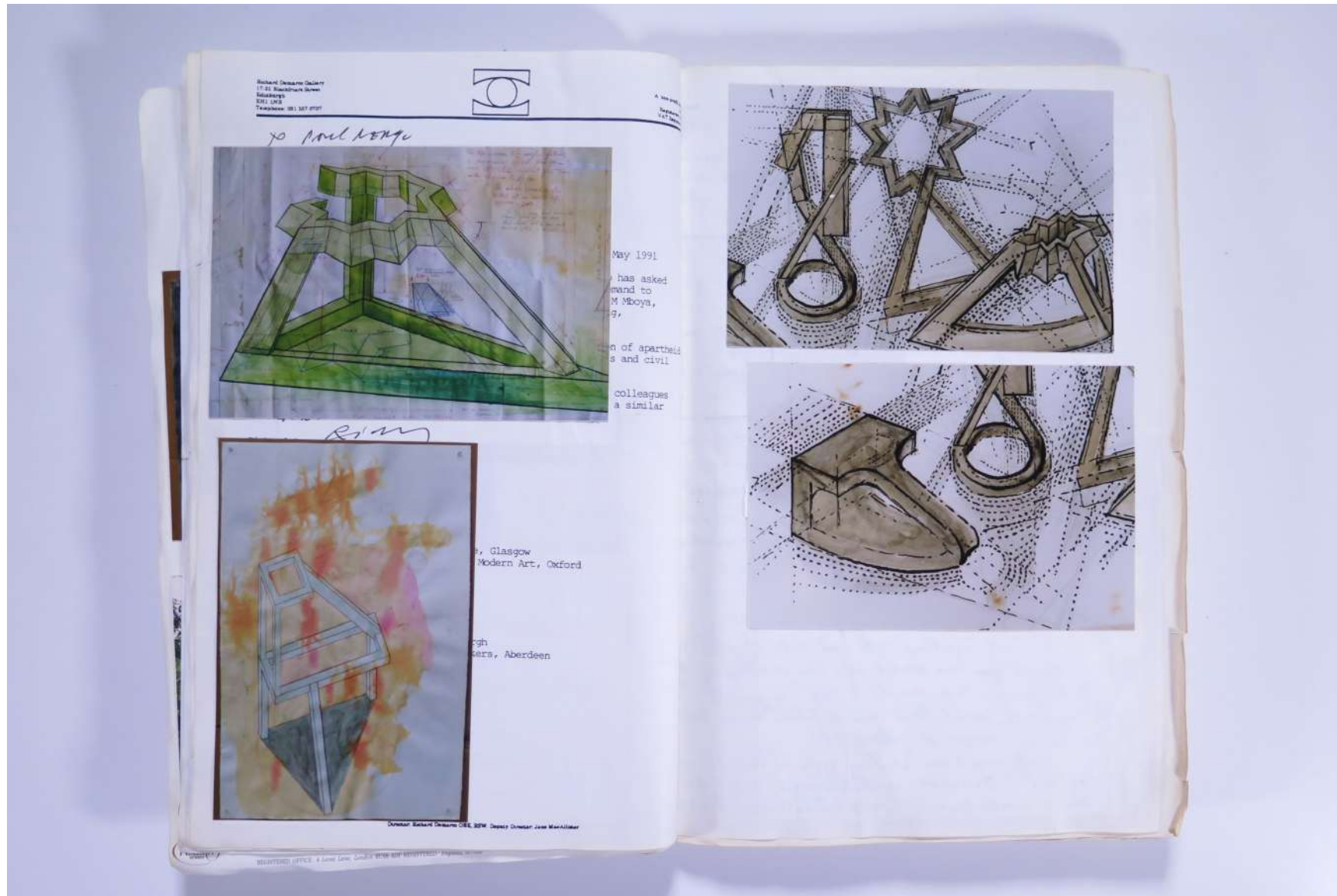
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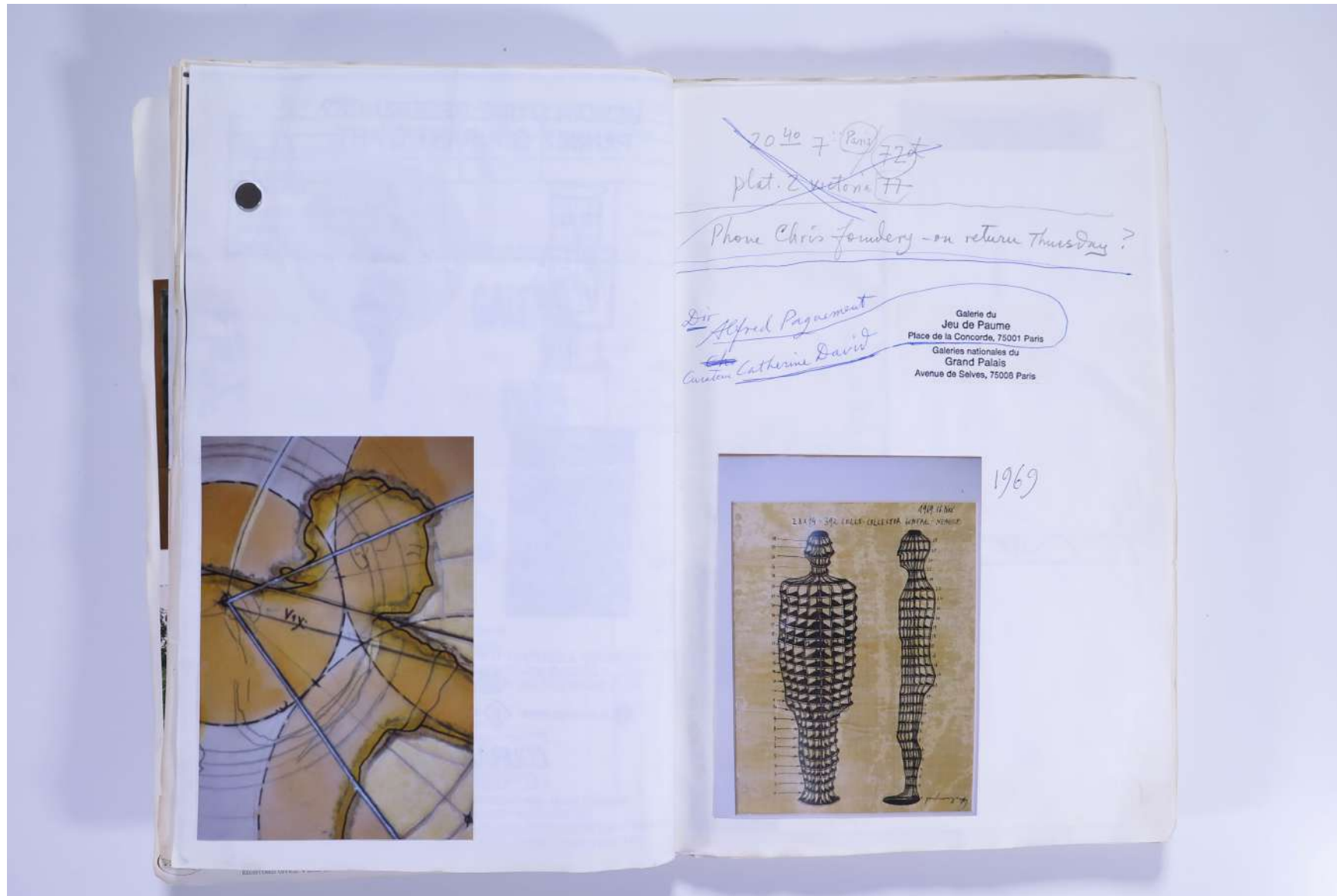
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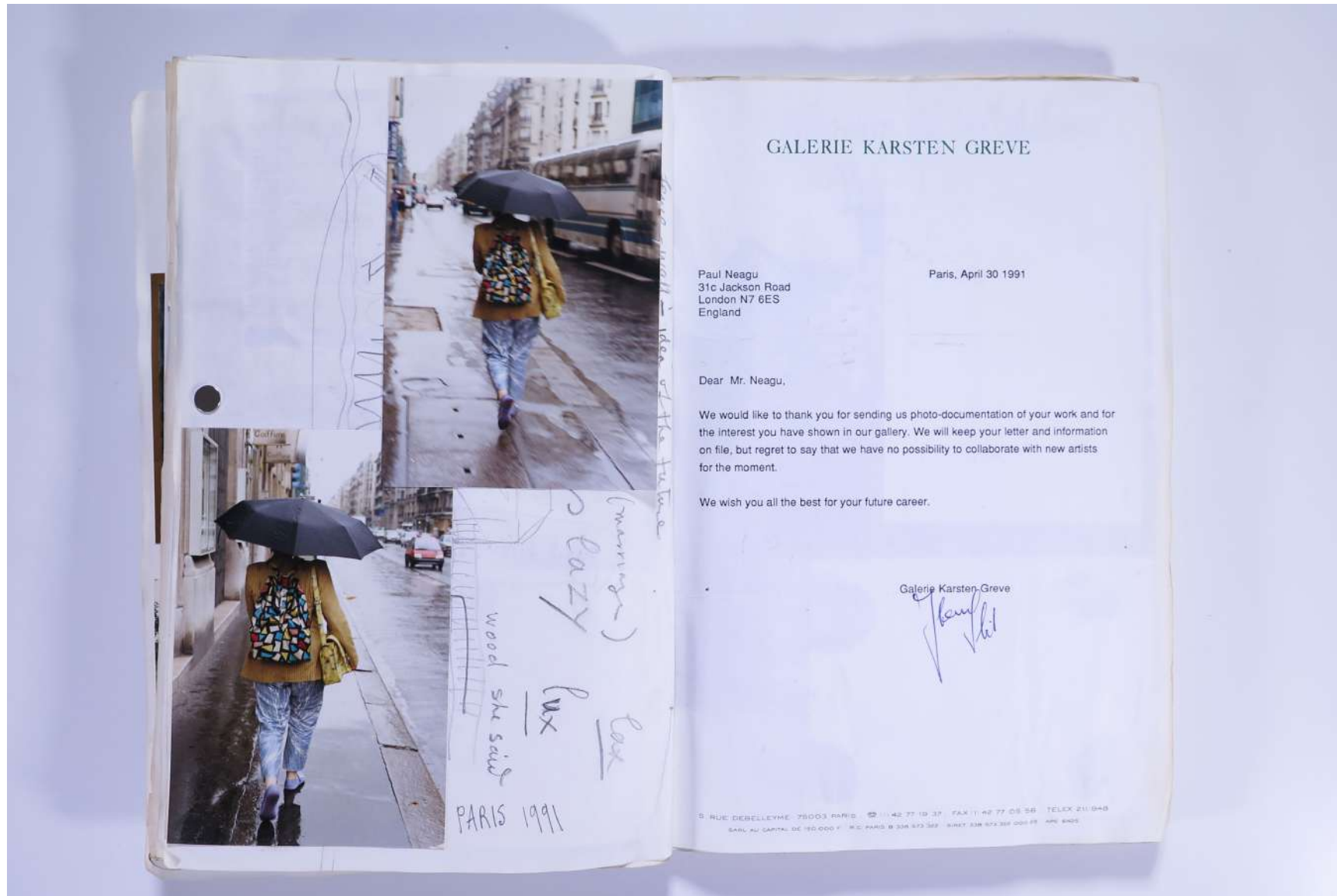
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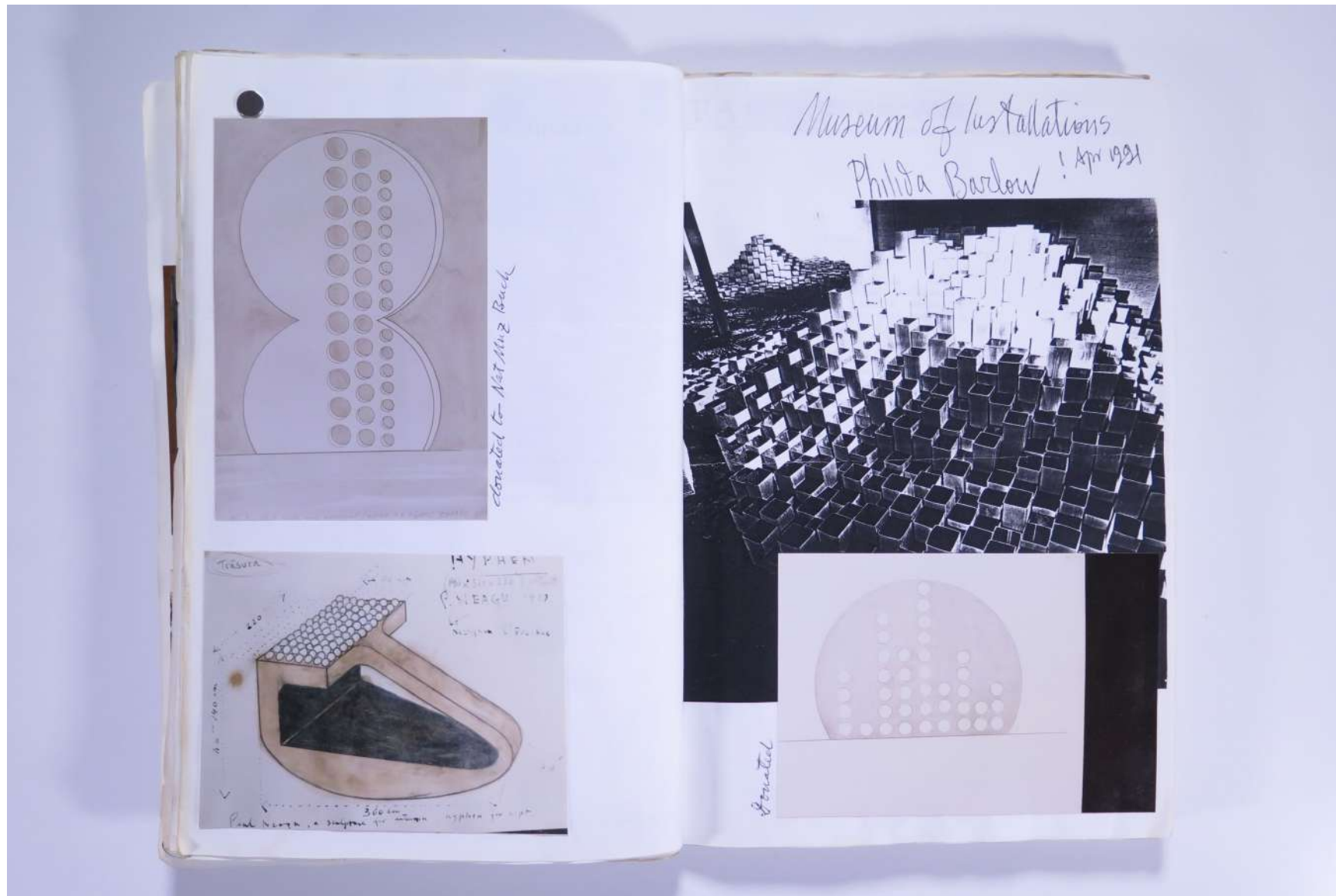
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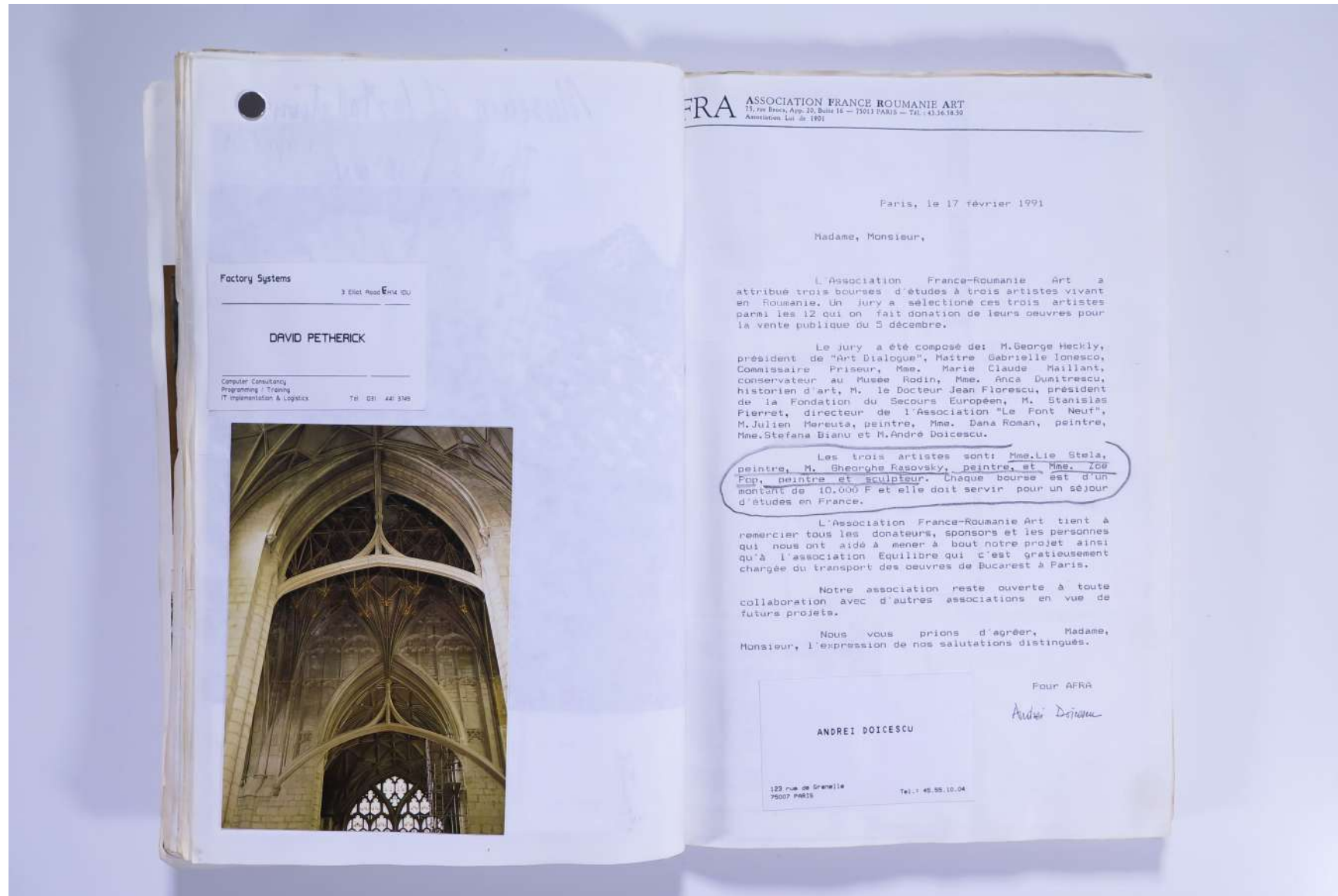
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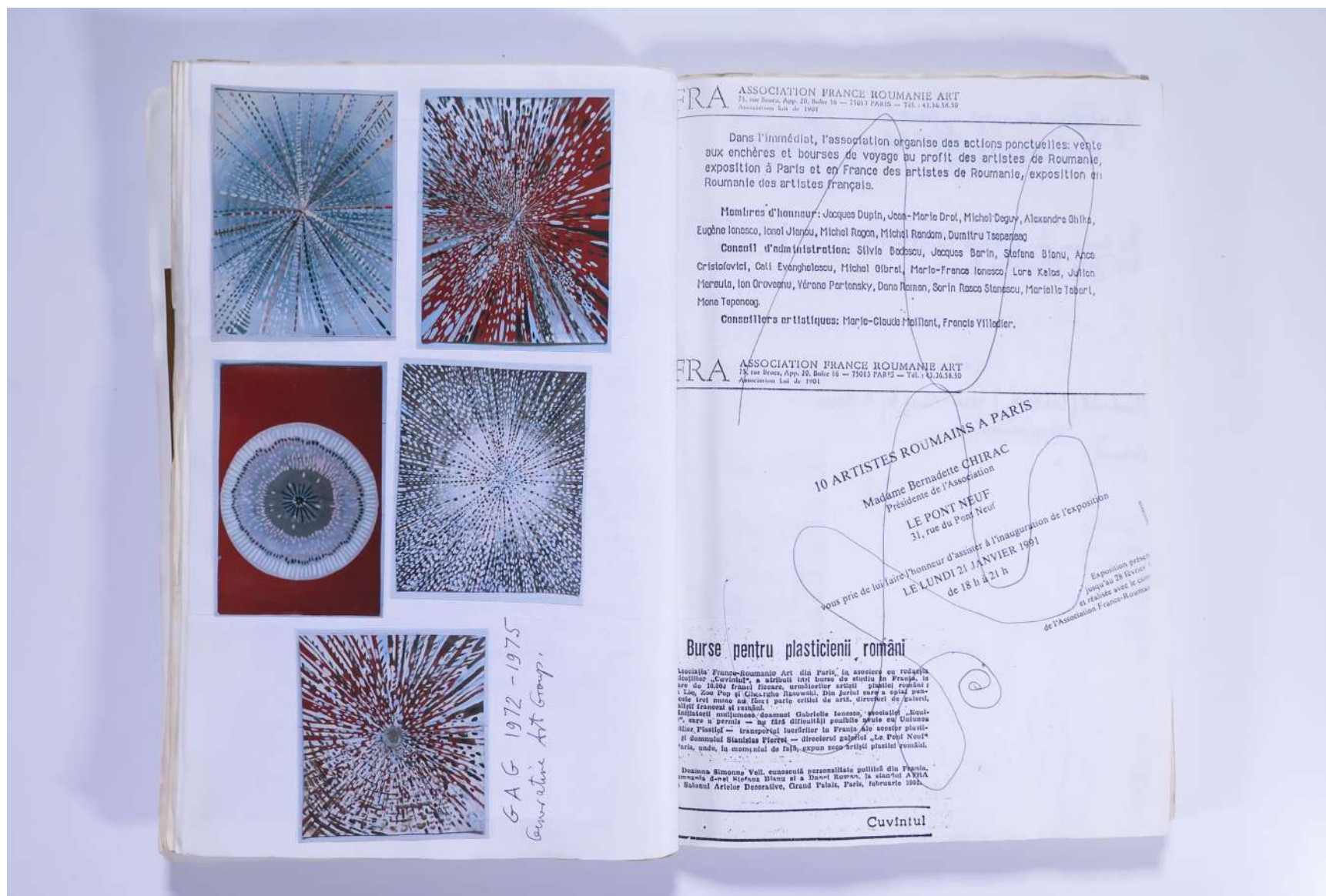
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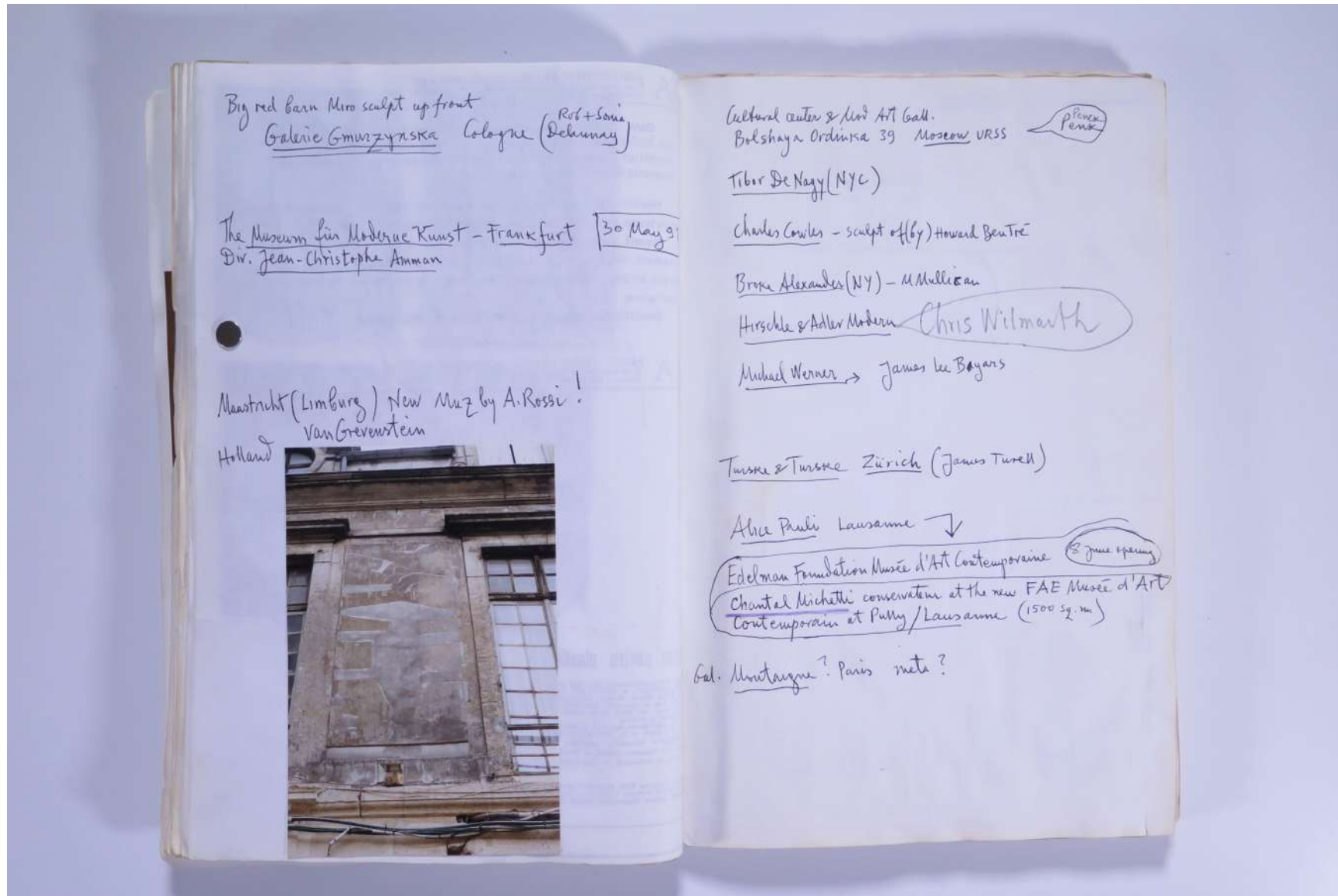
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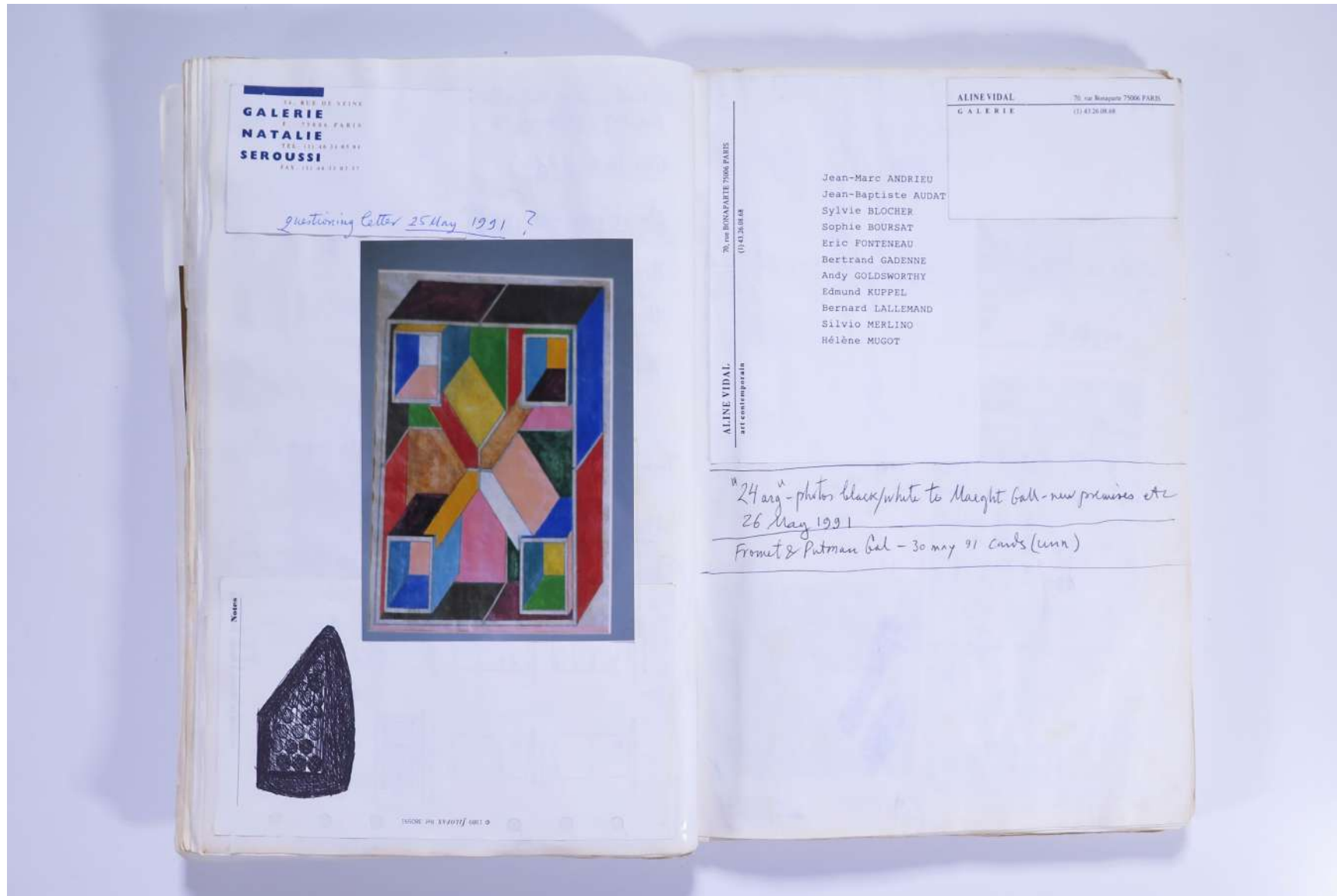
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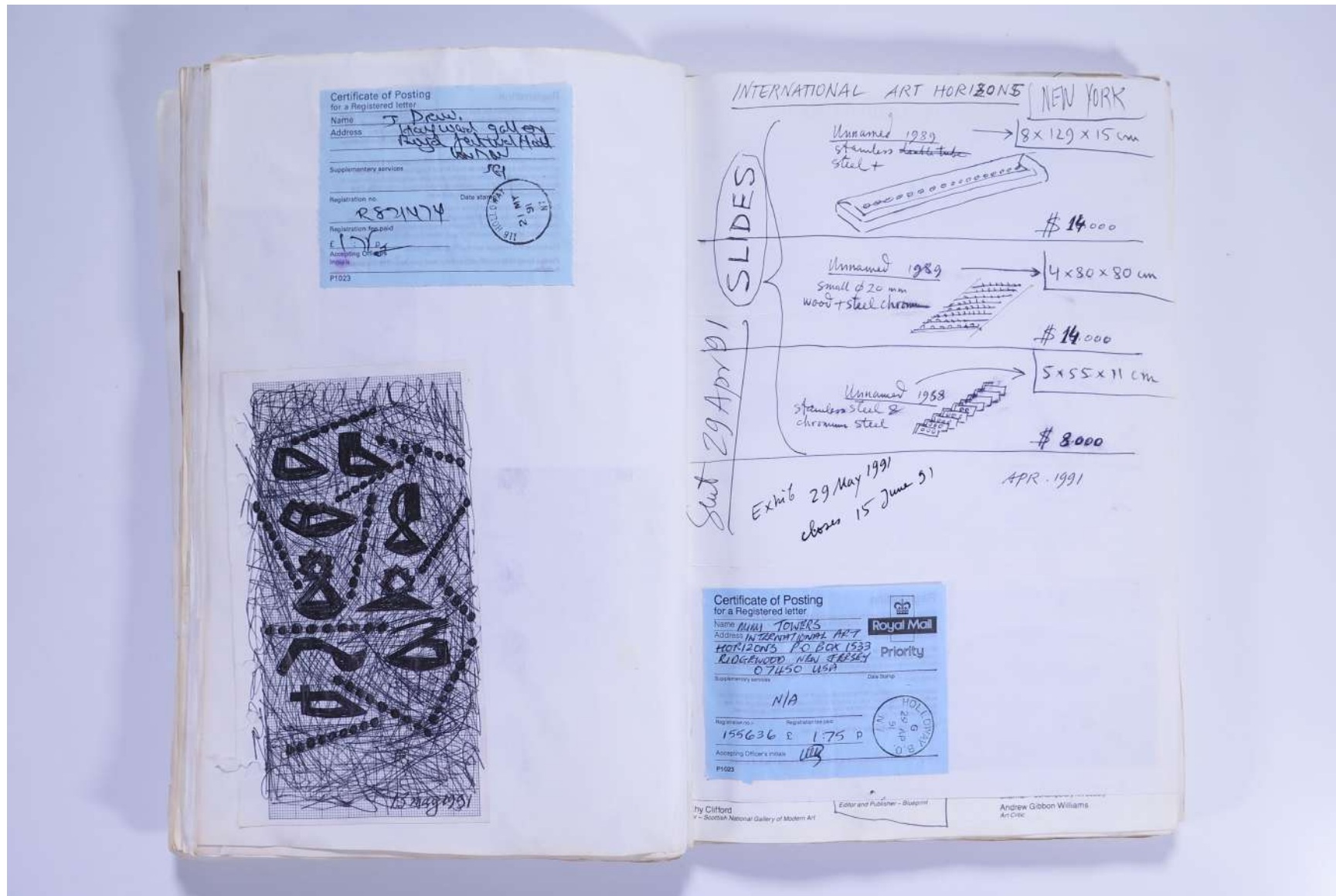
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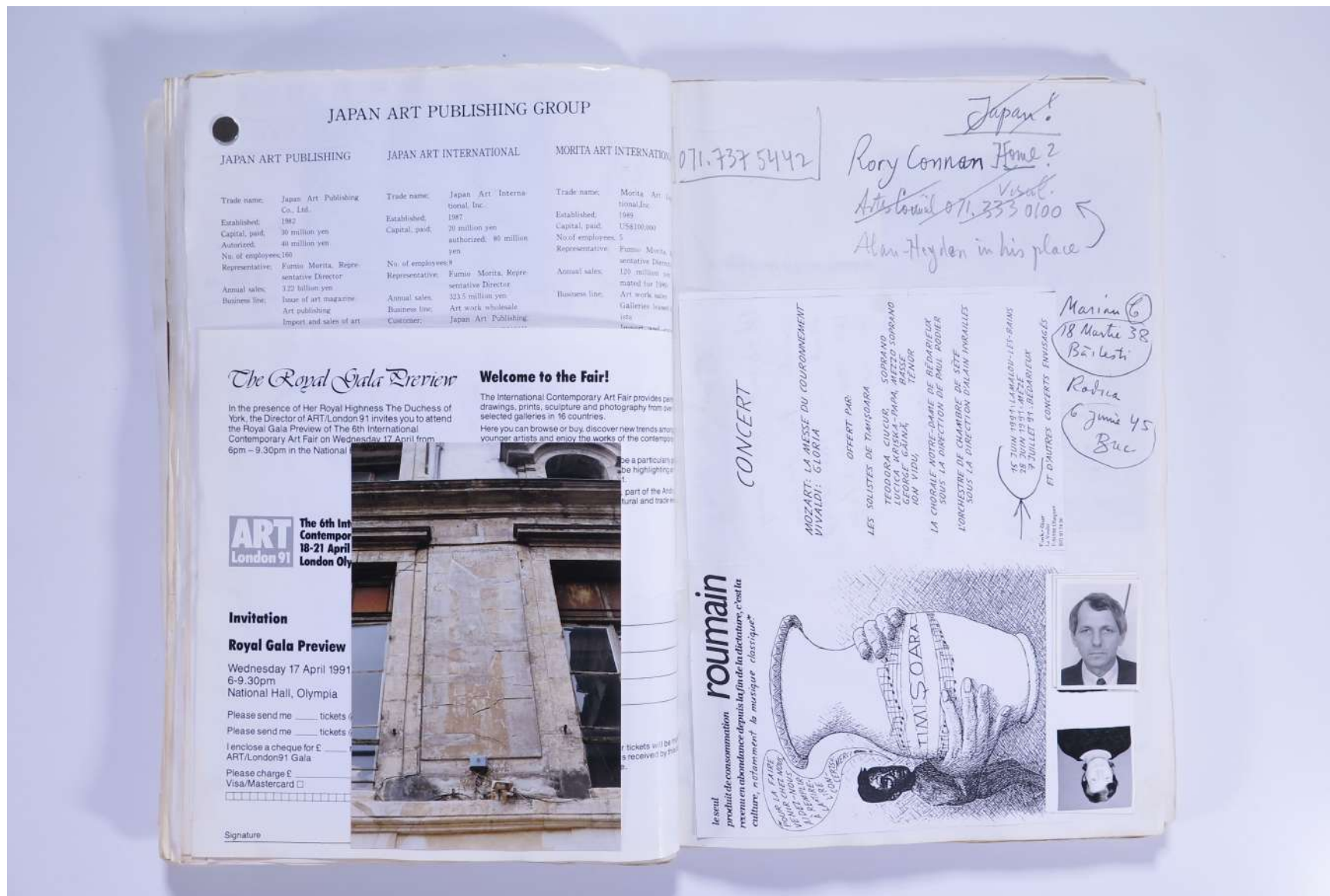


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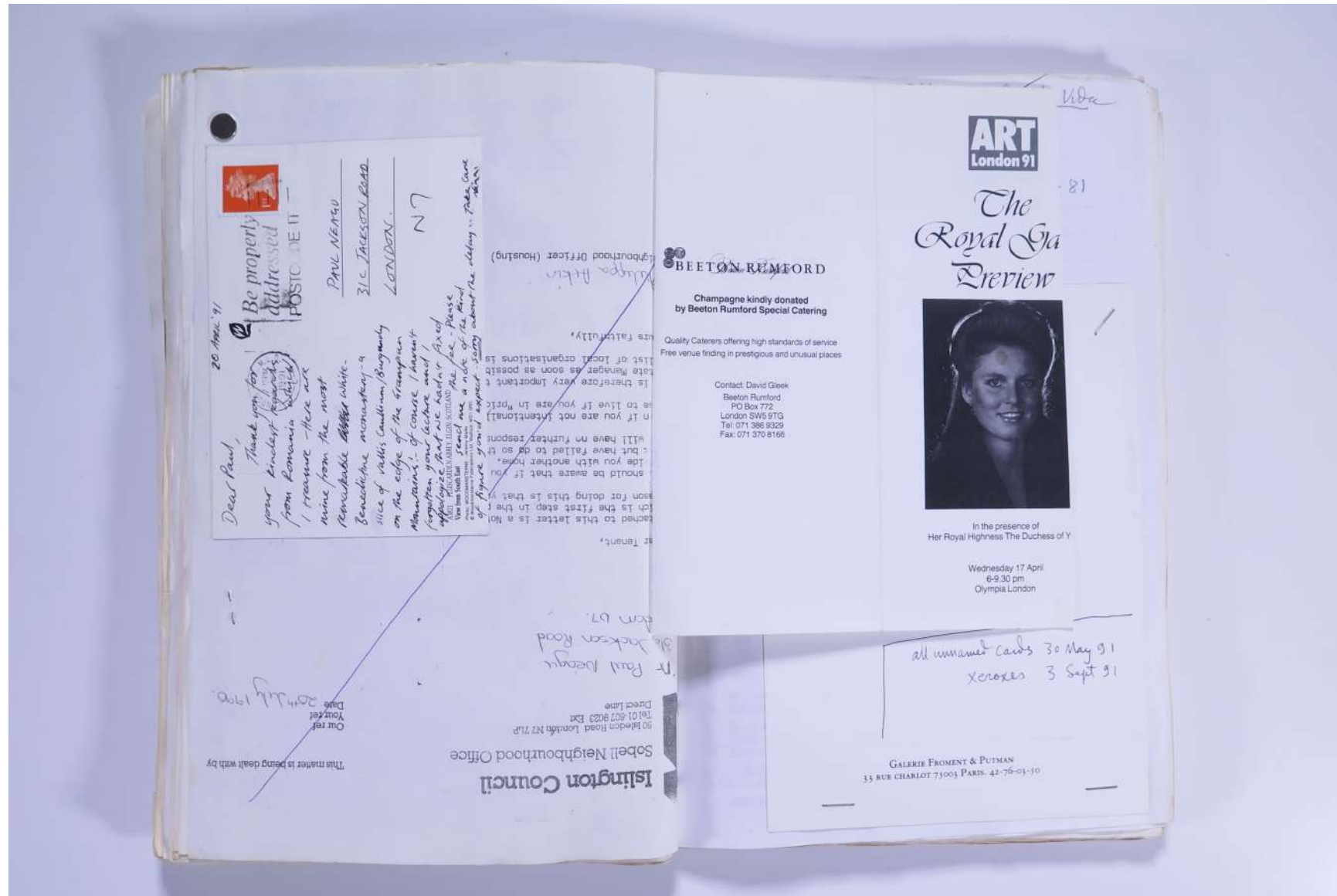
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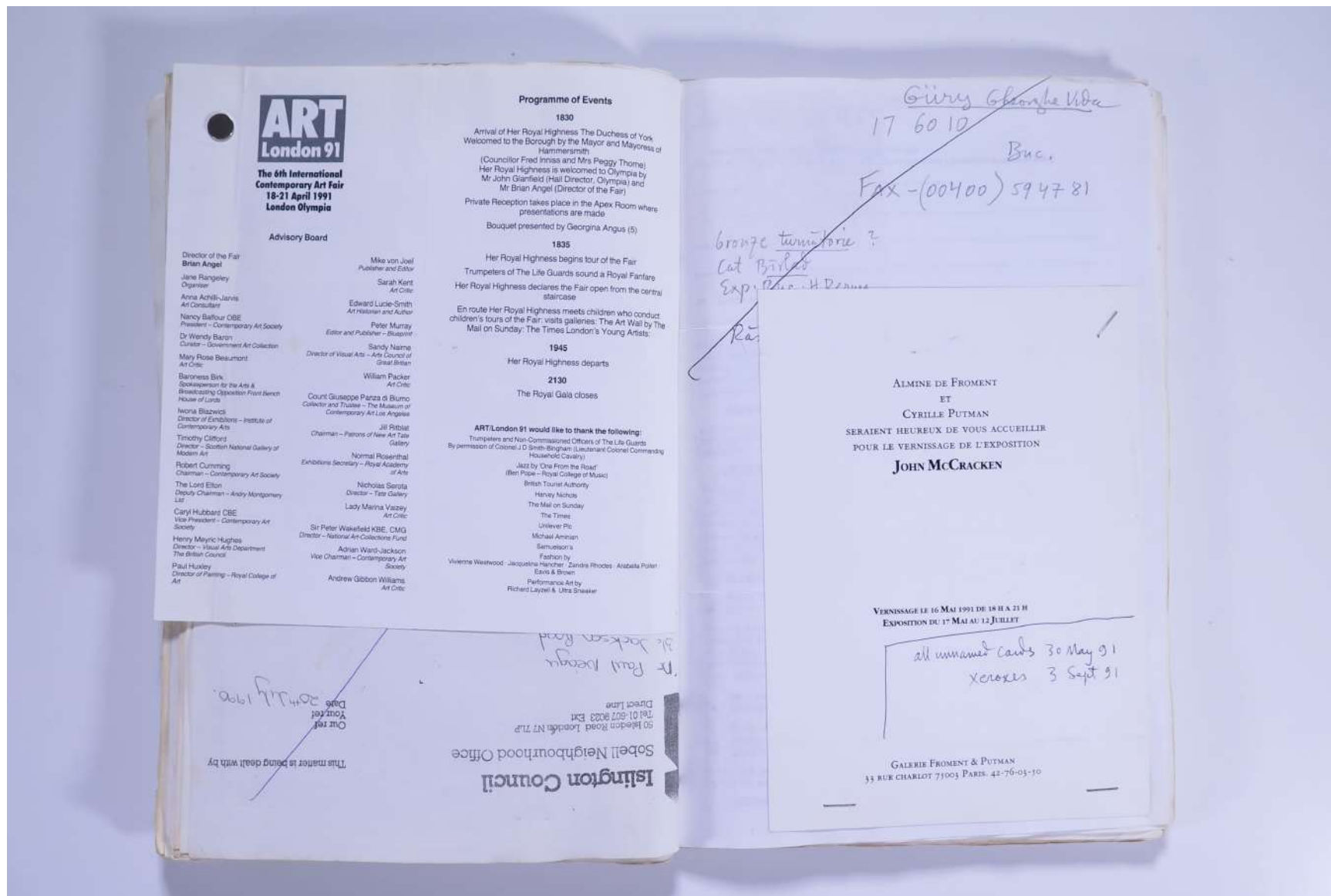


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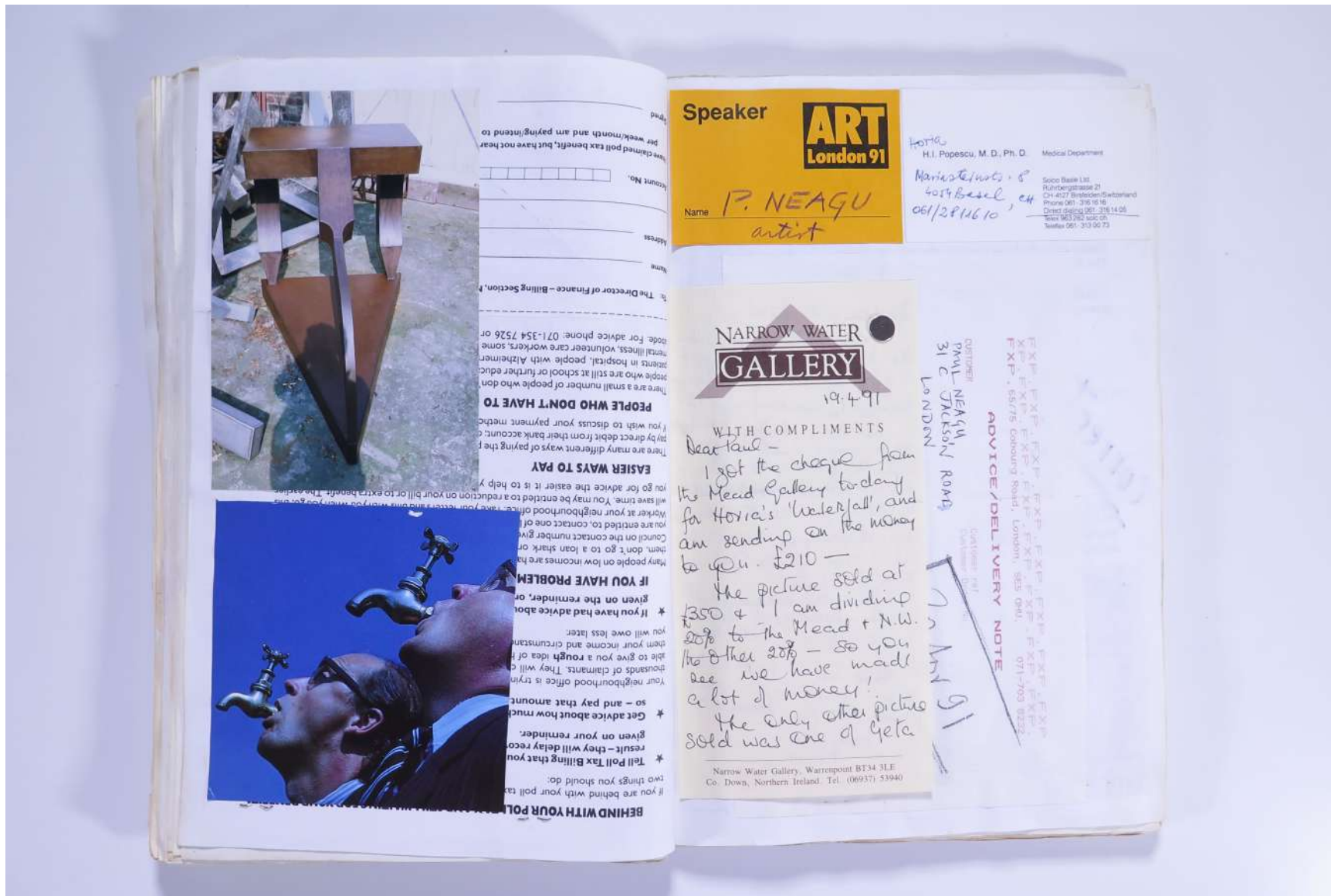


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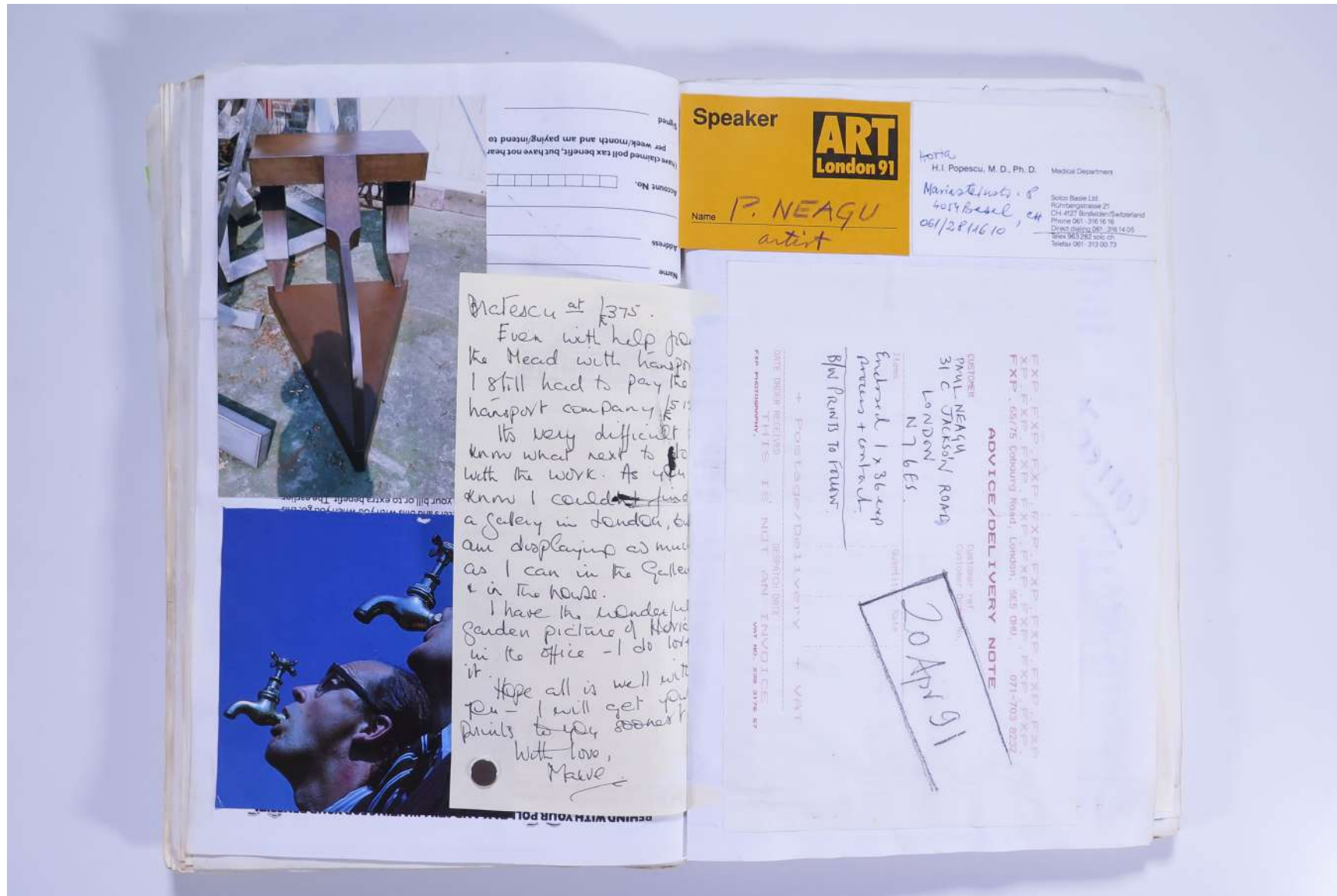
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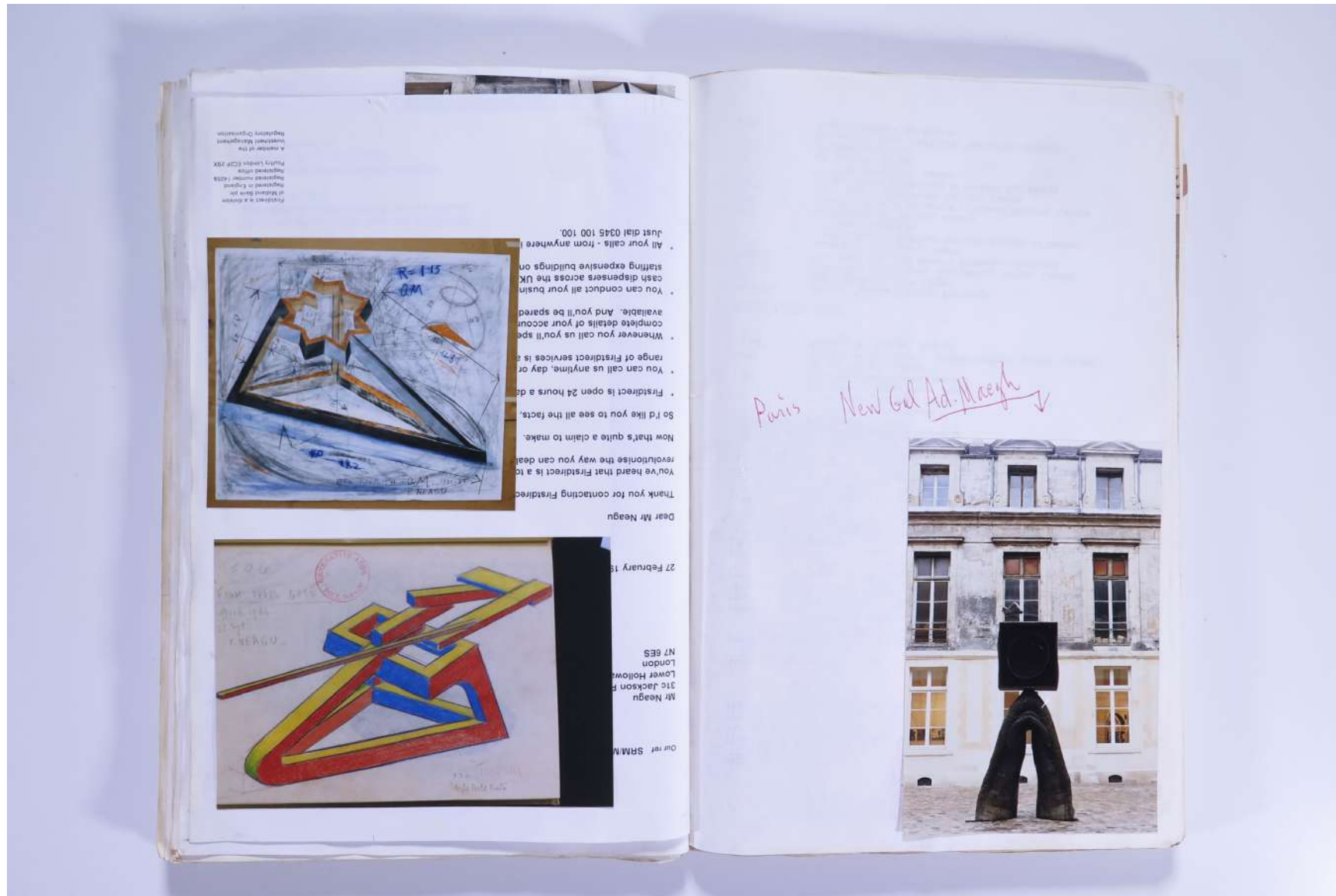
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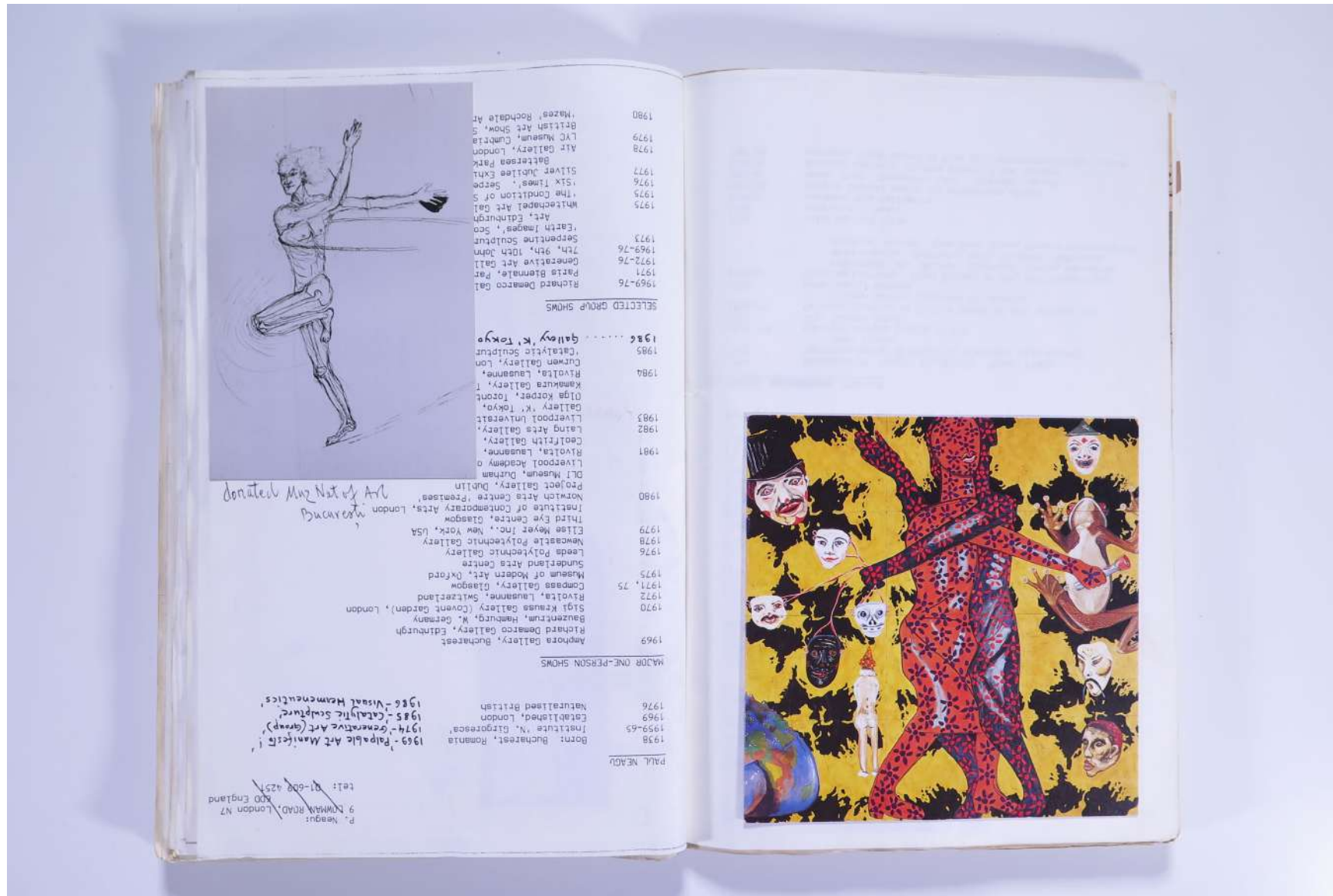
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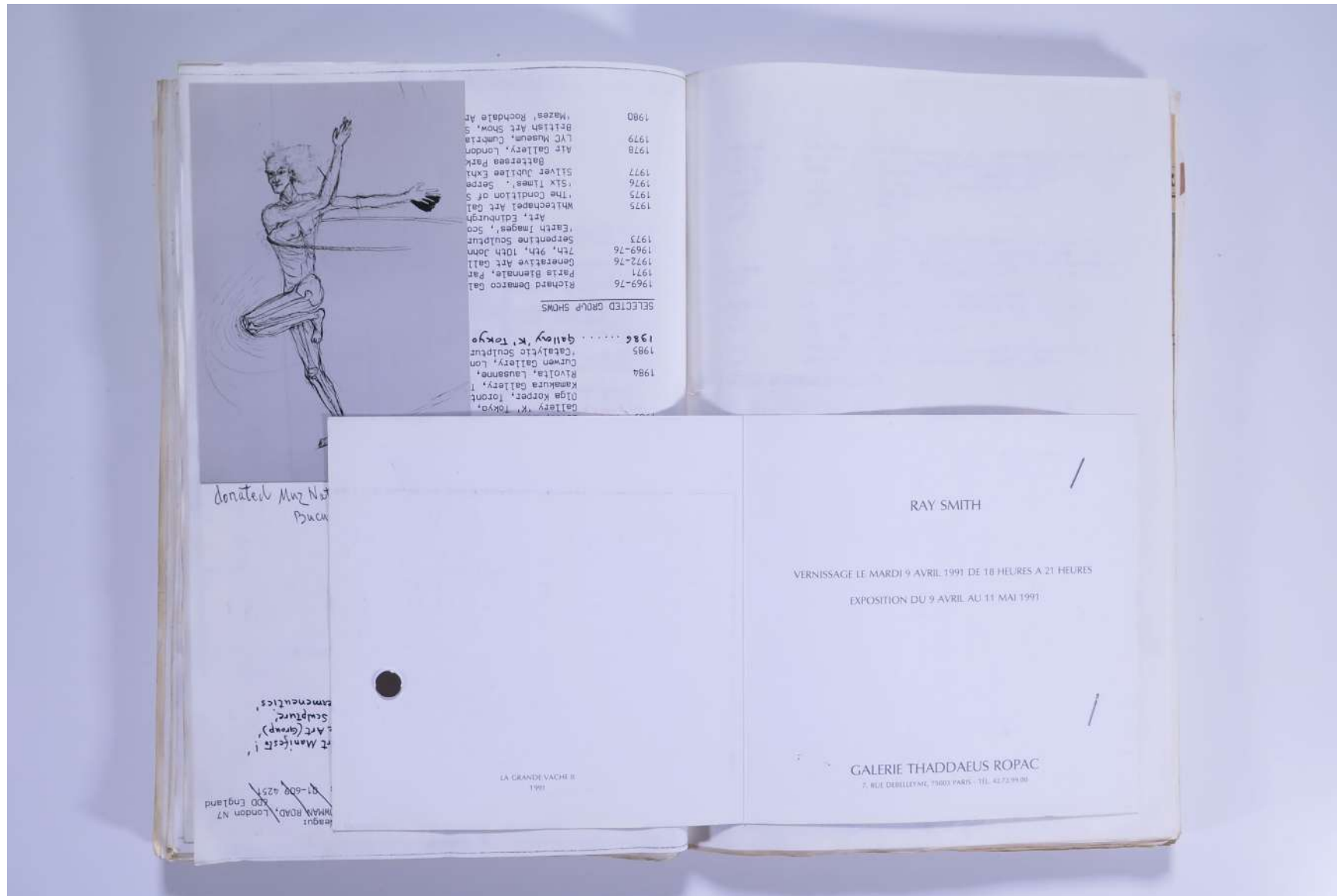
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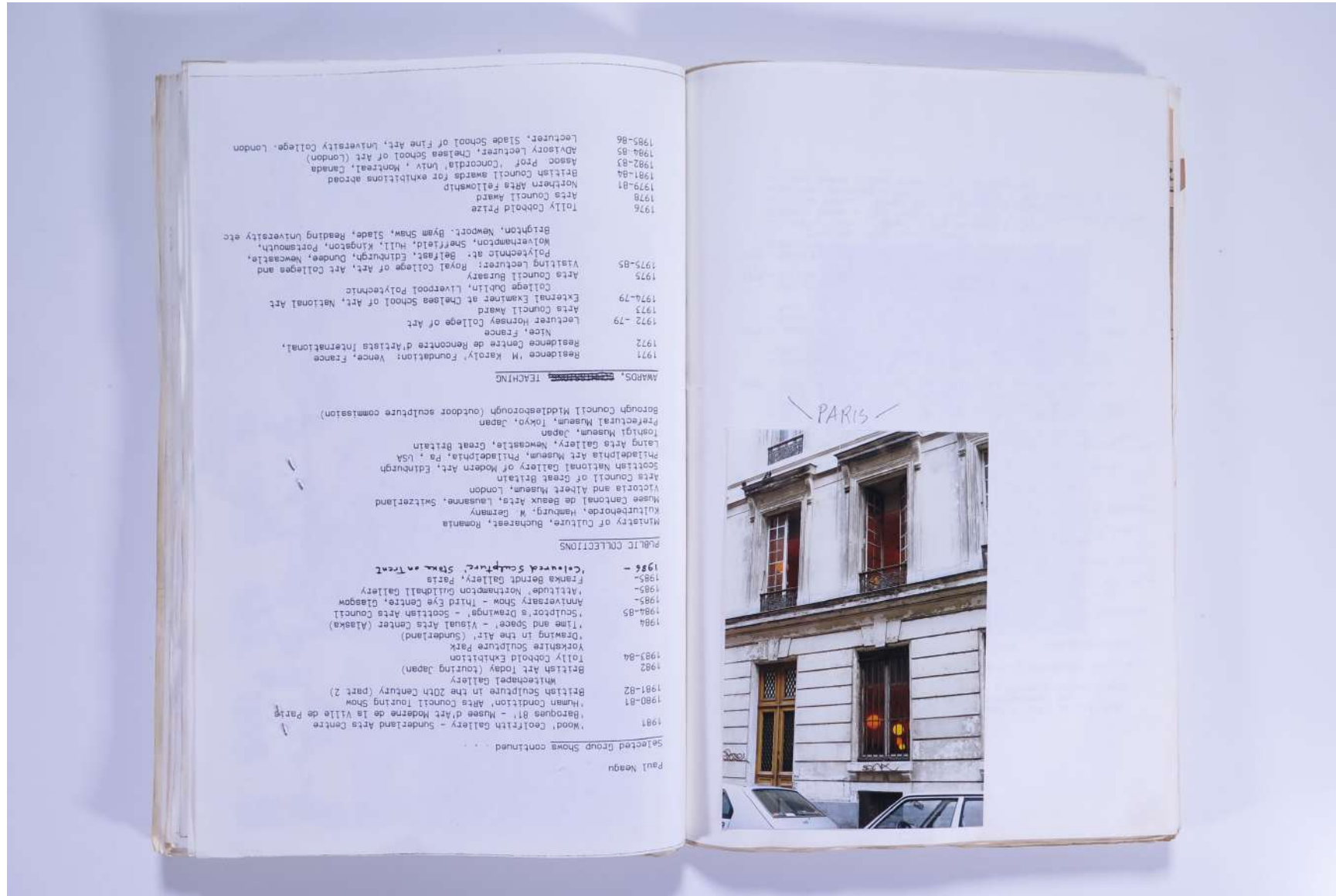
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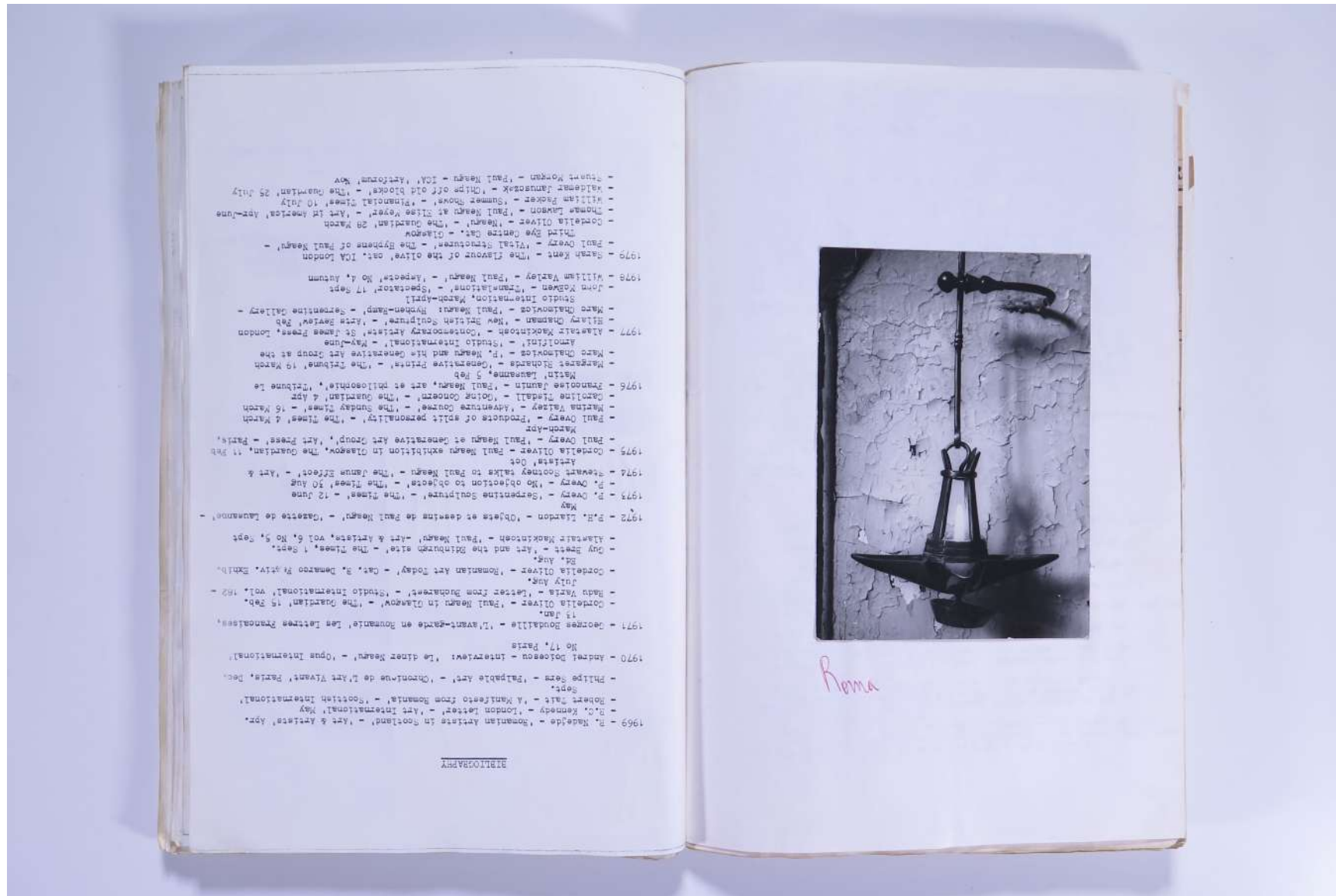
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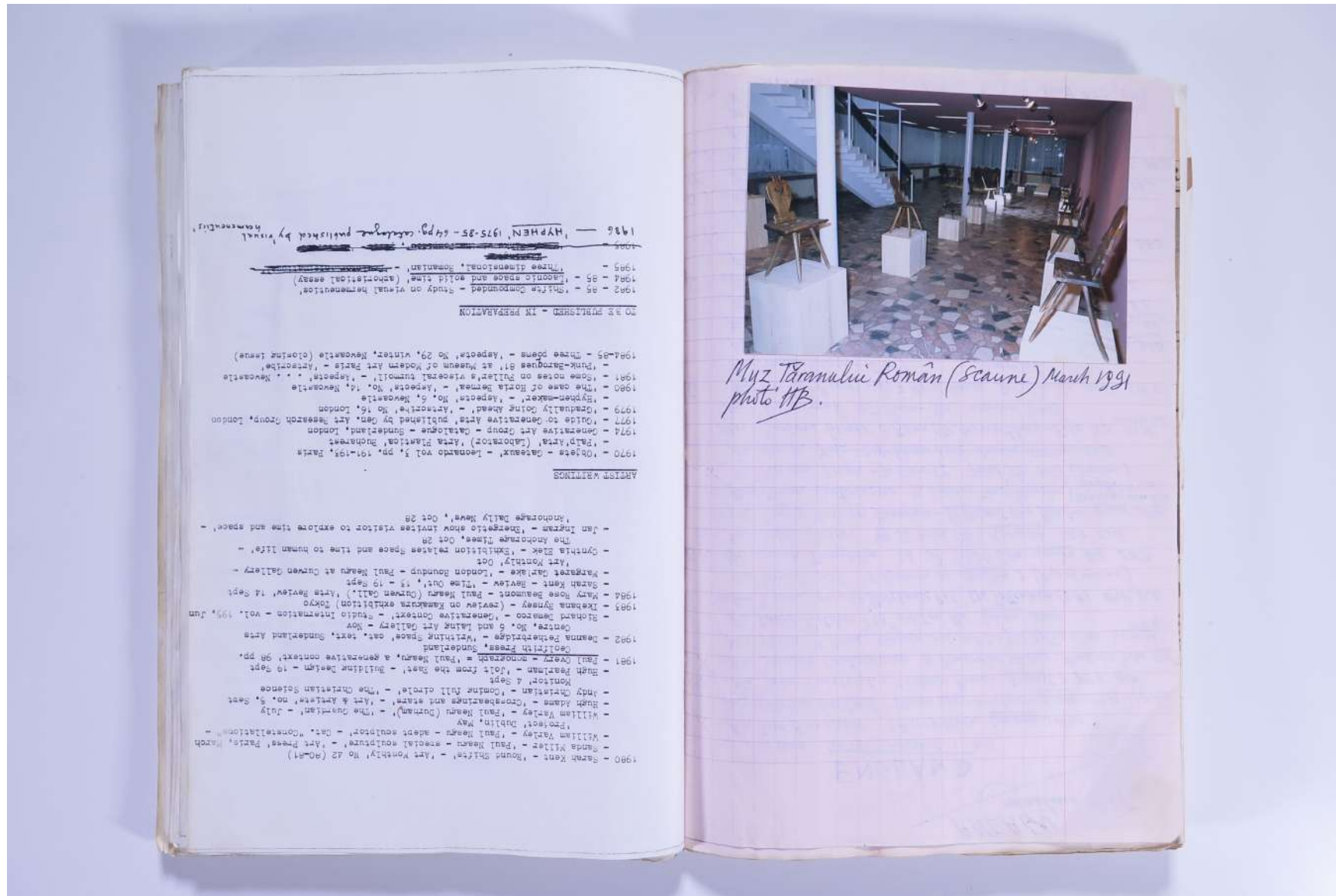
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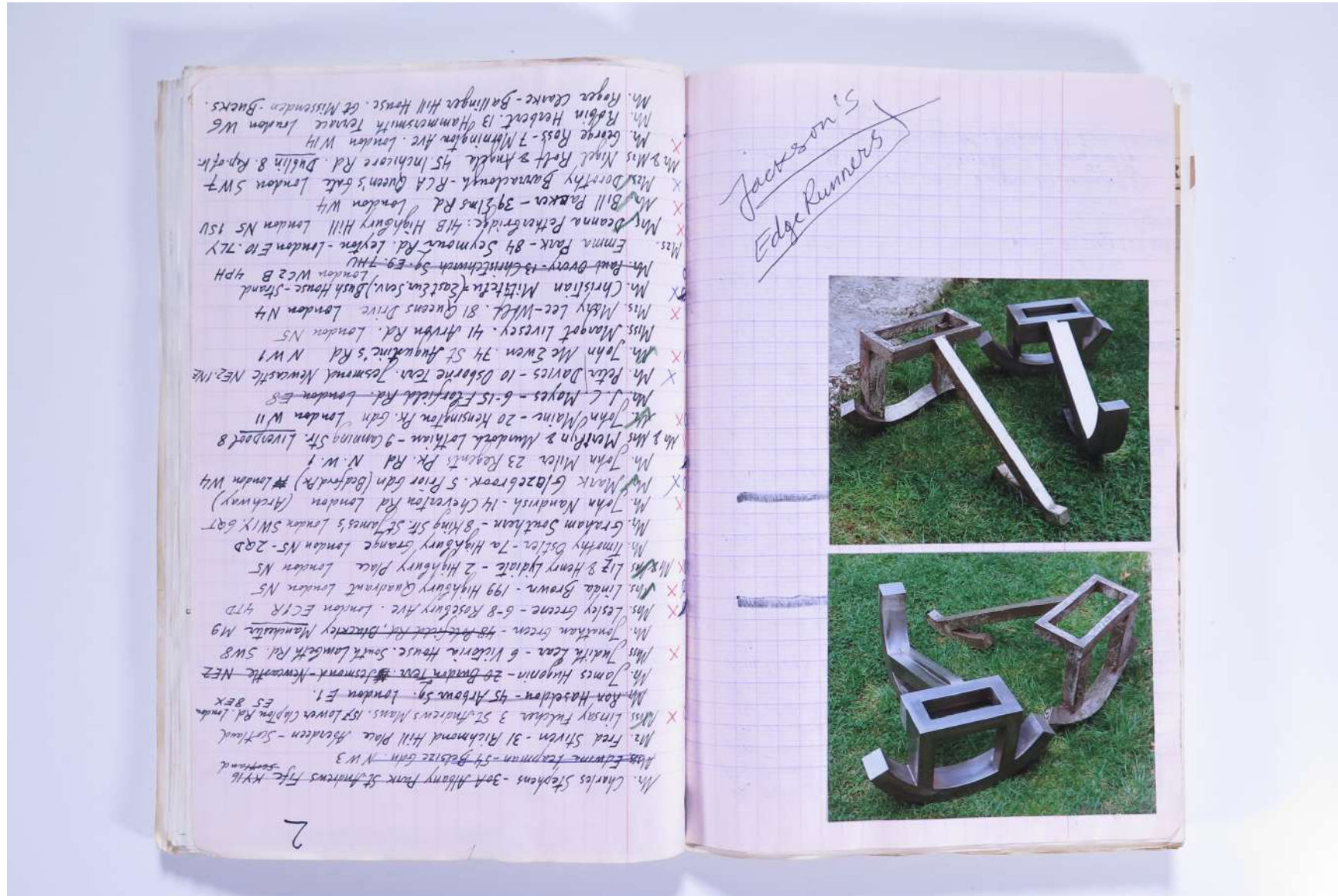
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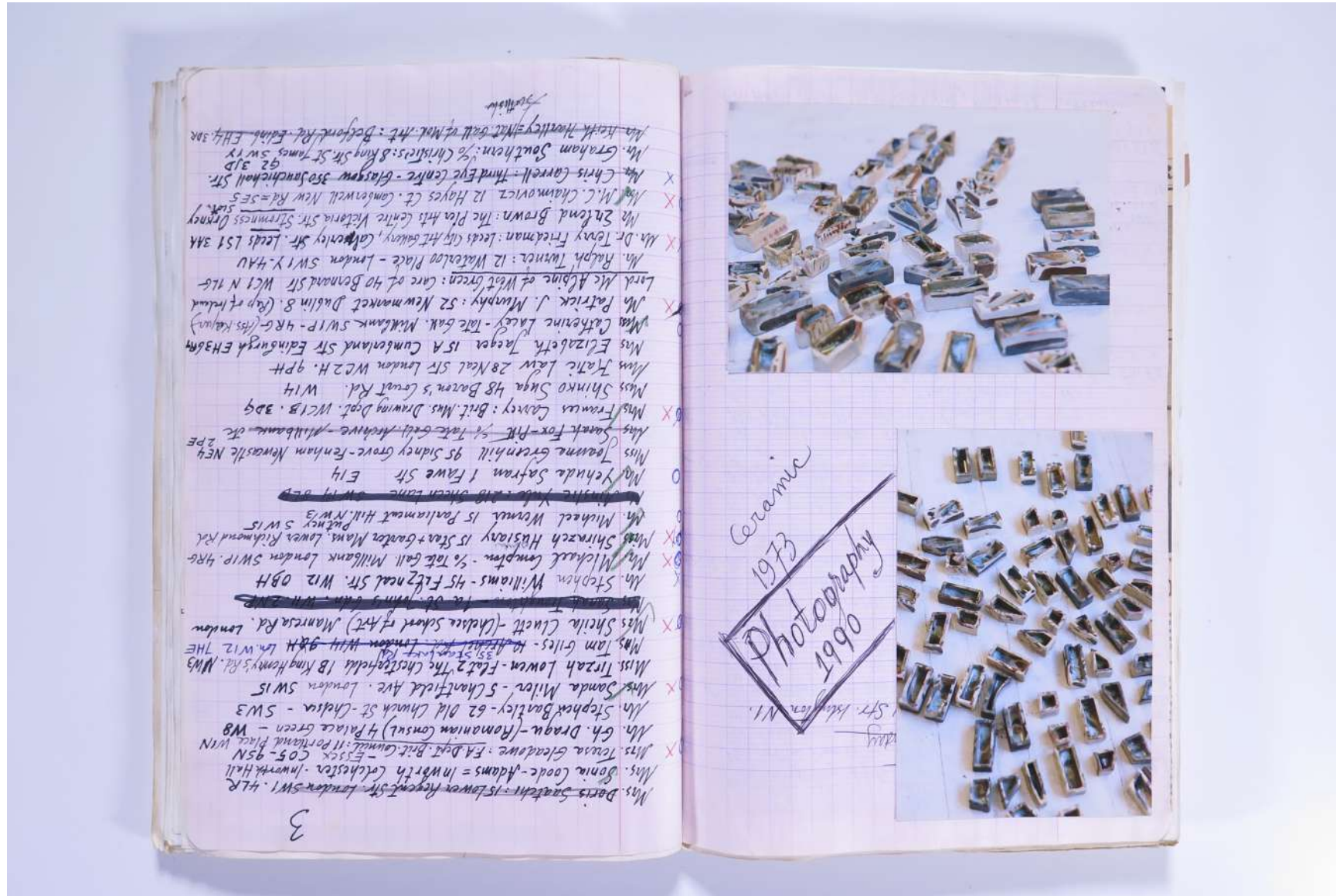
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ART / Andrew Graham-Dixon on the attenuated pleasures of Giacometti's sculptures at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool

THE INDEPENDENT

Tuesday 16 April 1991

On the G-Plan diet



Alberto Giacometti's *Man Pointing* (above), sculpted in 1947, on show at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool; and (right) the artist in his studio in Paris in 1954

A WONDER that they can stand at all, let alone stand in attention as they do. Thinner than aortic, their defiance of their own frailty is what impresses: their eyes forward, chin up, dehumanisation simply to exist. Bits of them are missing — part of a leg, or an arm — but that is no surprise under the circumstances. They have been through a lot. They are graduates of one of the most punishing physical regimes of modern times: the Alberto Giacometti Total Fitness Programme. They might only be works of art, but other sculptures would have crumbled under the strain.

Standing Women prove that the G-Plan diet was nothing if not demanding: slim, slim again and then slim some more, until there's almost nothing left of you. More than 20 of these almost-nothings can currently be seen at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool, in what is itself a slumped-down display of the artist's later oeuvre.

Alexander Lieberman, who visited Giacometti in Paris in 1960, described the single room where the artist lived and worked as a monastic retreat, its walls stained a desponding grey by a lifetime's chain-smoking. Lieberman was particularly disconcerted by a multitude of "long, narrow, life-size figures of white plaster" which seemed to him "like apparitions from another planet". There are some photographs of Giacometti's studio in the current show, but what counts now is the work rather than the milieu in which it was created.

Giacometti's figures look like survivors, figures persisting on the brink of extinction. The tallest of them, the *Four Figures on a Base*, are almost miraculously attenuated. Black and they might disappear altogether. They are the products of what can seem a bizarre notion of figurative sculpture, the chief prospect of which is not, in fact, the human figure, but the space that envelops it.

No one has ever made figures that seem more alone, or more threatened by the condition of solitude, than Giacometti. Like a lot of artists, he alienated the work of others when it excited most nearly to address his own concerns.

He liked the engravings of Jacques Callot, a minor French sculptor and print-maker of the turn of the century, on account of their "multitude of minuscule people emerging from whole spaces", and for their creation of "a great gaping void in which gawking figures are exterminated and abolished". Giacometti was

describing his own work.

Few major artists have worked on quite such a tiny scale as Giacometti. At one point in the early 1940s, he recalled, "All my figures stubbornly straddle to our centimetre high. Another space with the thumb and whoopst do more figure". He worked in Switzerland, his country of birth, during the Second World War, and in 1945 found he was able to take his entire output of four years back to Paris in his trouser pockets.

Giacometti made larger works, too, but his smallest sculptures are interesting because they prove that artists do not have to think big to address big themes. In many ways, Giacometti's smallest and frailest works are, in his most ambitious. The poses struck by the *Four Figures*



SABINE WEISS

No one has ever made figures that seem more alone, or more threatened by the condition of solitude, than Giacometti. One visitor described the room where he lived and worked as a monastic retreat, its walls stained grey by a lifetime's chain-smoking.

Giacometti gave visible form, and a new consequence, to modern man's sense of his place in the order of things — or, rather, he gave form to modern man's sense of purposelessness. It has become a cliché to speak of Giacometti as an existentialist sculptor. But the facts remain that his mature work was created in existentialist Paris, and that his closest friends — Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett, for whom Giacometti worked on the first set for *Waiting for Godot* — were major contributors to the philosophy and literature of the absurd. Sartre wrote one of the most lucid appreciations of Giacometti's later work: "between things, between men, connections have been cut; emptiness flares through everywhere, each creature secretes his own void".

Yet Giacometti's art is not about its rootedness in art as it is in philosophy. The

figures in Giacometti's portrait paintings, which emerge like specters from murky grounds, represent a draughtsman's re-orientation of Giotto. Giacometti's posing figures are translated by Giacometti into a corresponding uncertainty of line. Giacometti's dense, white-bodied physiognomies are, paradoxically, the products of months upon months of reworking, and what this suggests (Giacometti has this too in common with Egon Schiele) is an artist deeply aware of the paradox of his enterprise — of the fact that something as prosaic as a human being can never be captured in paint.

Existential man, as conceived by Giacometti, is a frail creature, but he is not an entirely new invention. Giacometti's figures, which seem eaten away by the air that surrounds them, contain dim reminiscences of Rembrandt's paintings. Meant as movement over — Giacometti once said that his new people are "decisions in space" — their handling recalls the extreme slantiness of Rembrandt, a device which implies the malleability of flesh, its vulnerable softness. Giacometti's figures also evoke the memory of Bernini's grotesques and of the misanthropic, solitary still commonly encountered in Italian gardens like the Boboli. Giacometti's stigmatic figures seem mineralogically unstable.

What is most memorable about them, though, is their extraordinary thinness. Their thinness became Giacometti's signature, but it was also his way of giving expression to his greatest insight: in Giacometti, more completely perhaps than in any other modern artist, we find the old Western conception of space finally rebound by its opposite.

Think of these spaces, further removed from the world of a Giacometti exhibition. A Gothic church interior might be a good example. There, everything is ordered, everything takes its place, within a theological structure — evident in paintings, carvings, stained glass windows — that leaves no room for doubt about man's place in the universe. Now think of a room full of Giacometti. No stories, no iconography (just these skinny, diving-rod figures, stranded in an abyss of thin air. What we exchanged faith for faithlessness we exchanged) one way of thinking about space for another. Claustrophobia gave way to a phobia. Fear, as the end, was Giacometti's theme: the fear of open spaces.

See change opposite page for exhibition details.



Bogda - mai 1991
near Timisoara - july 1991

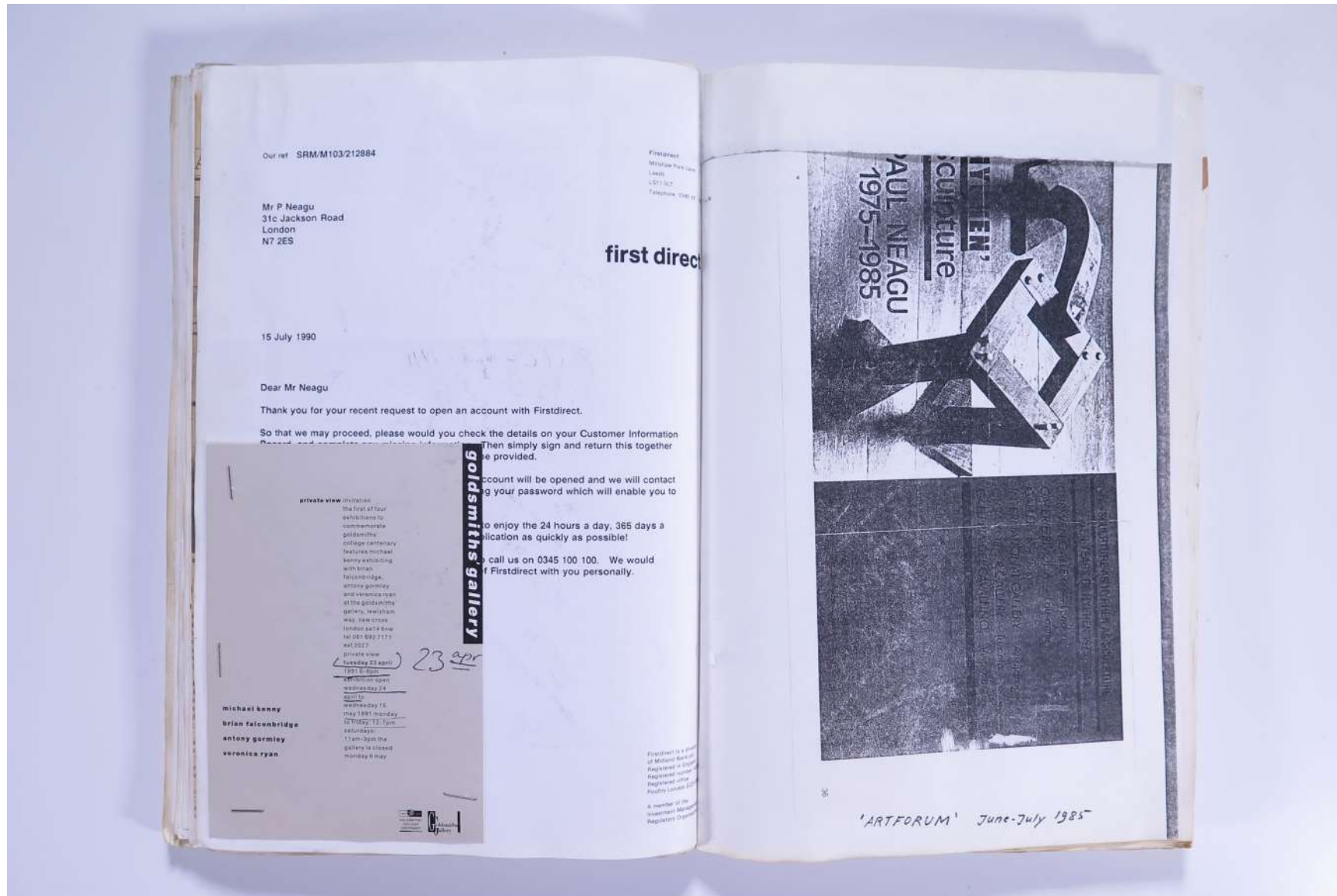


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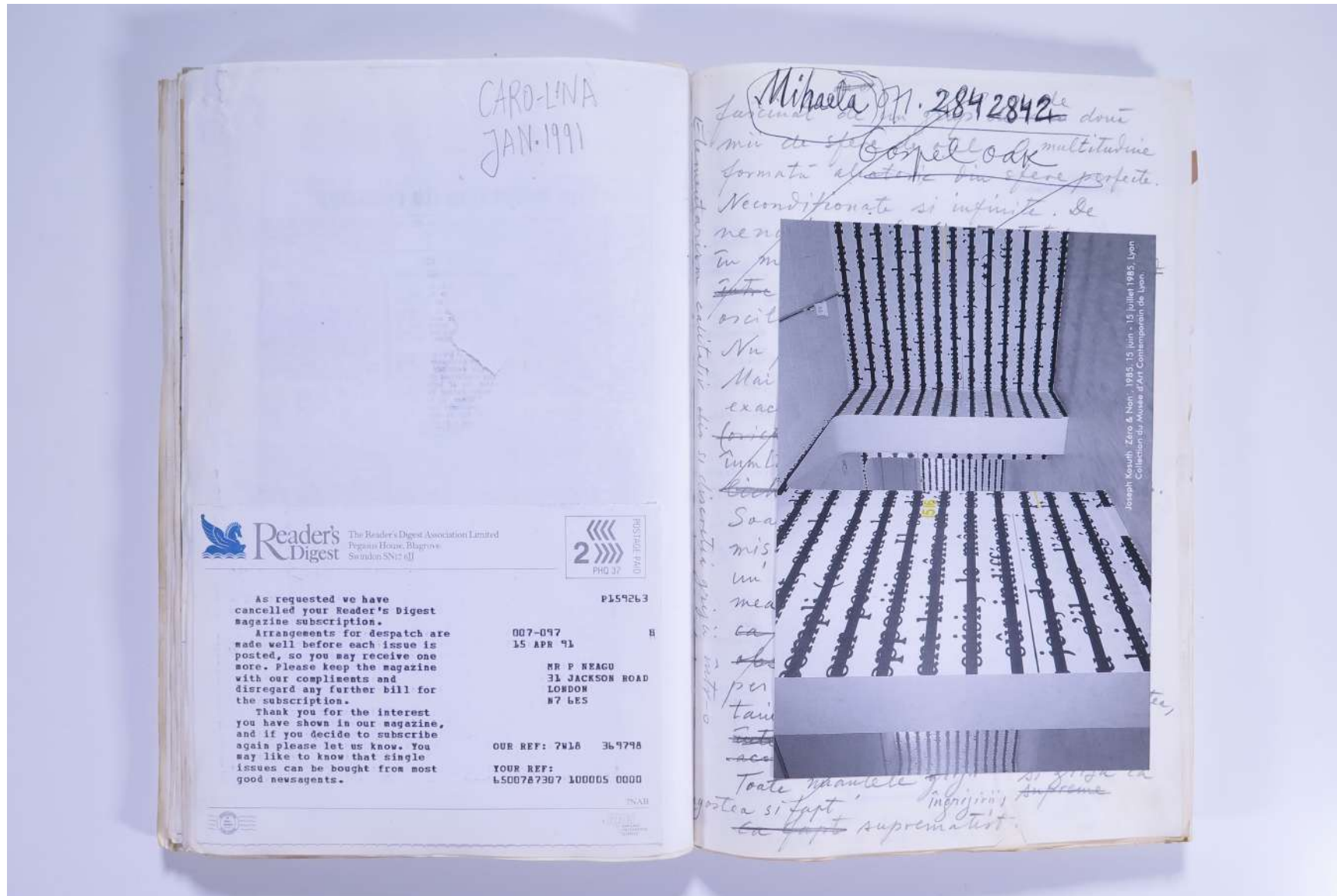
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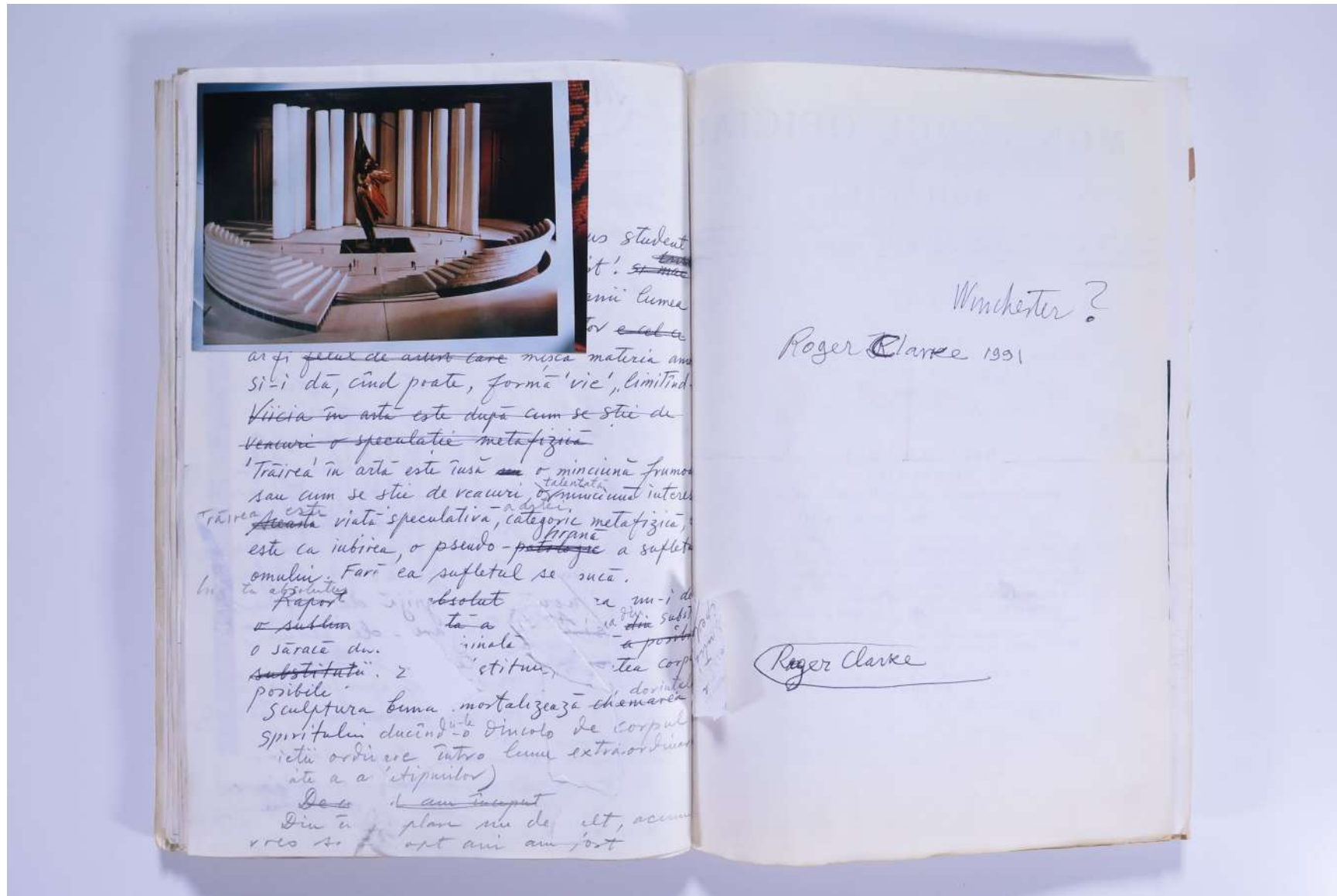
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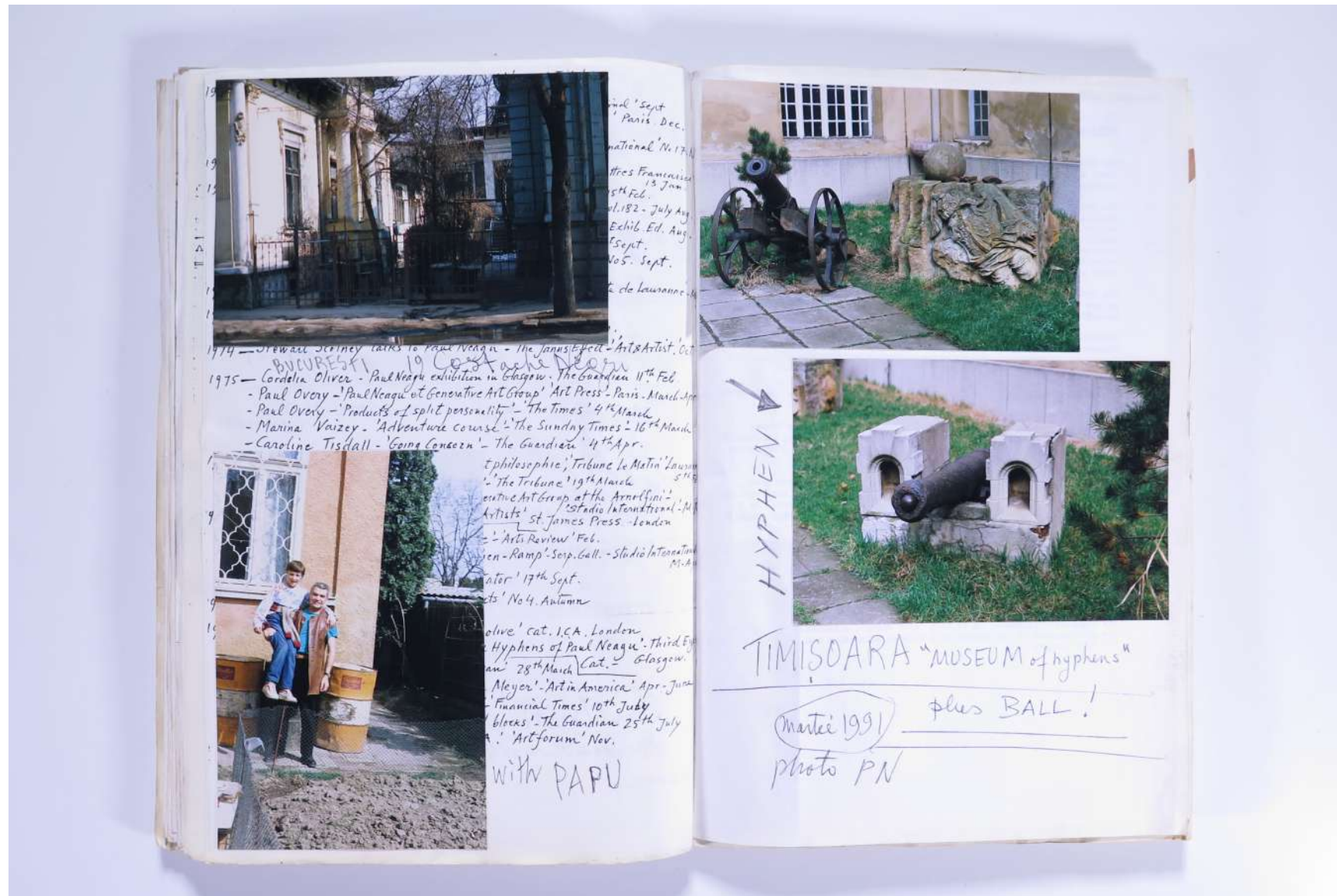
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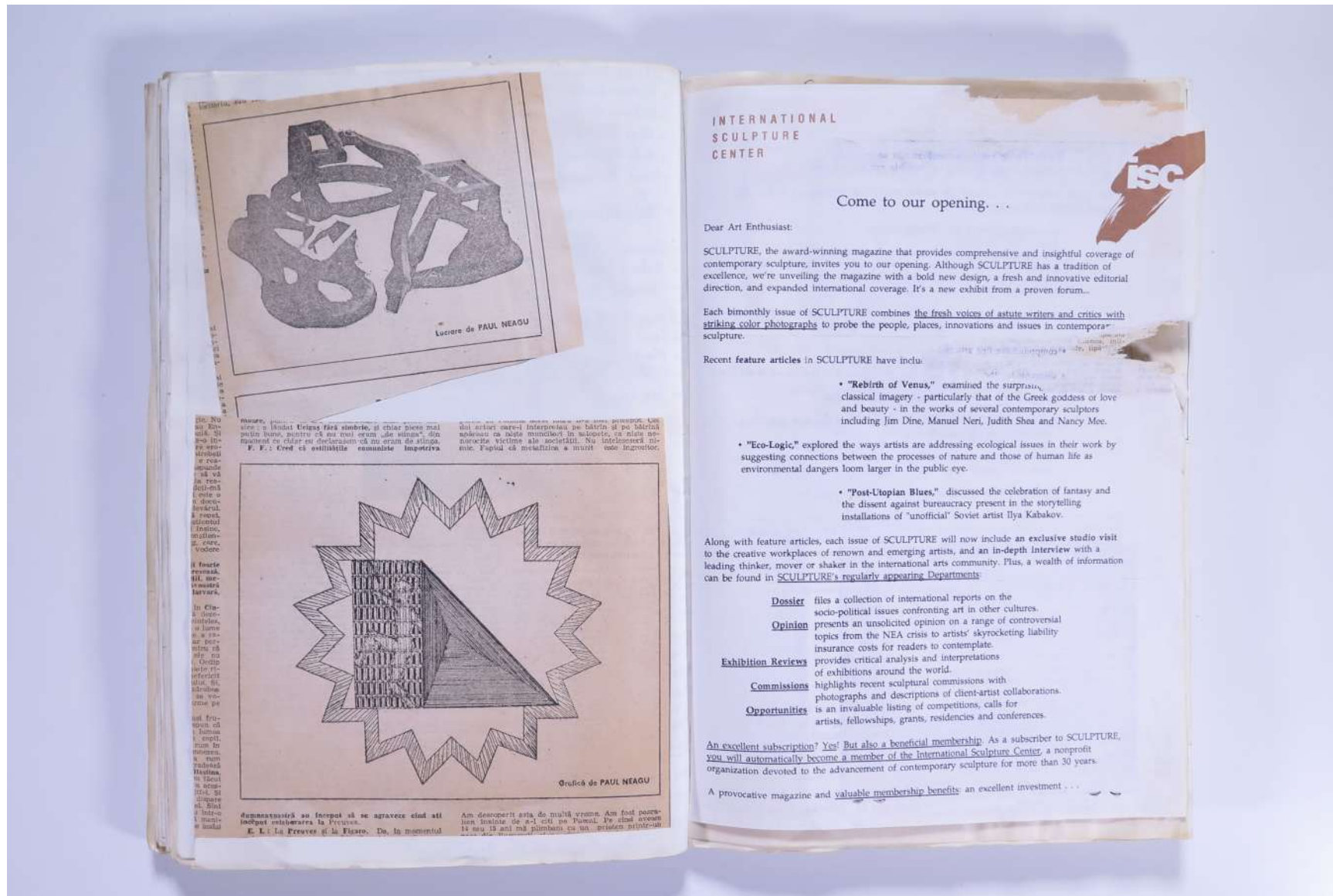
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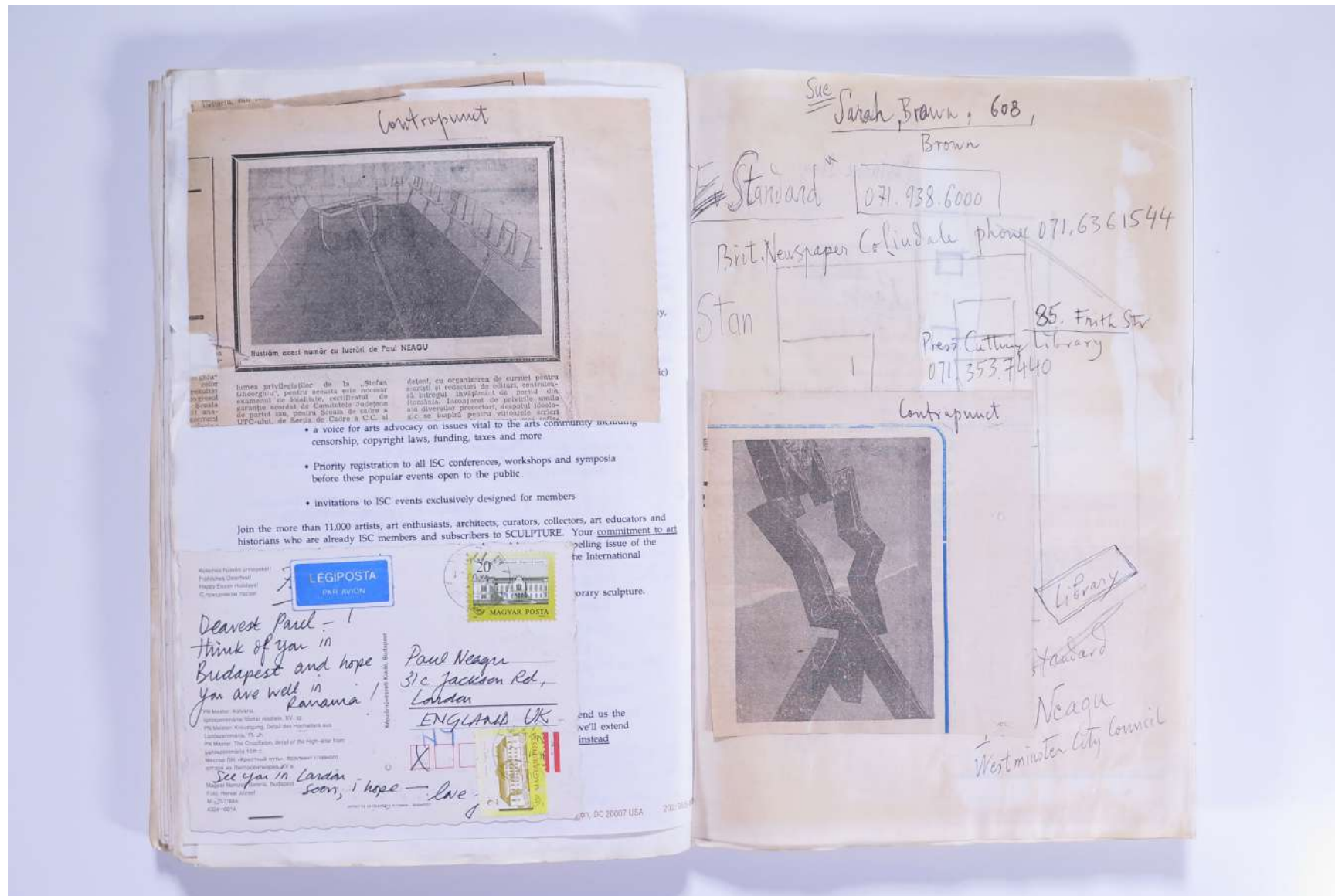
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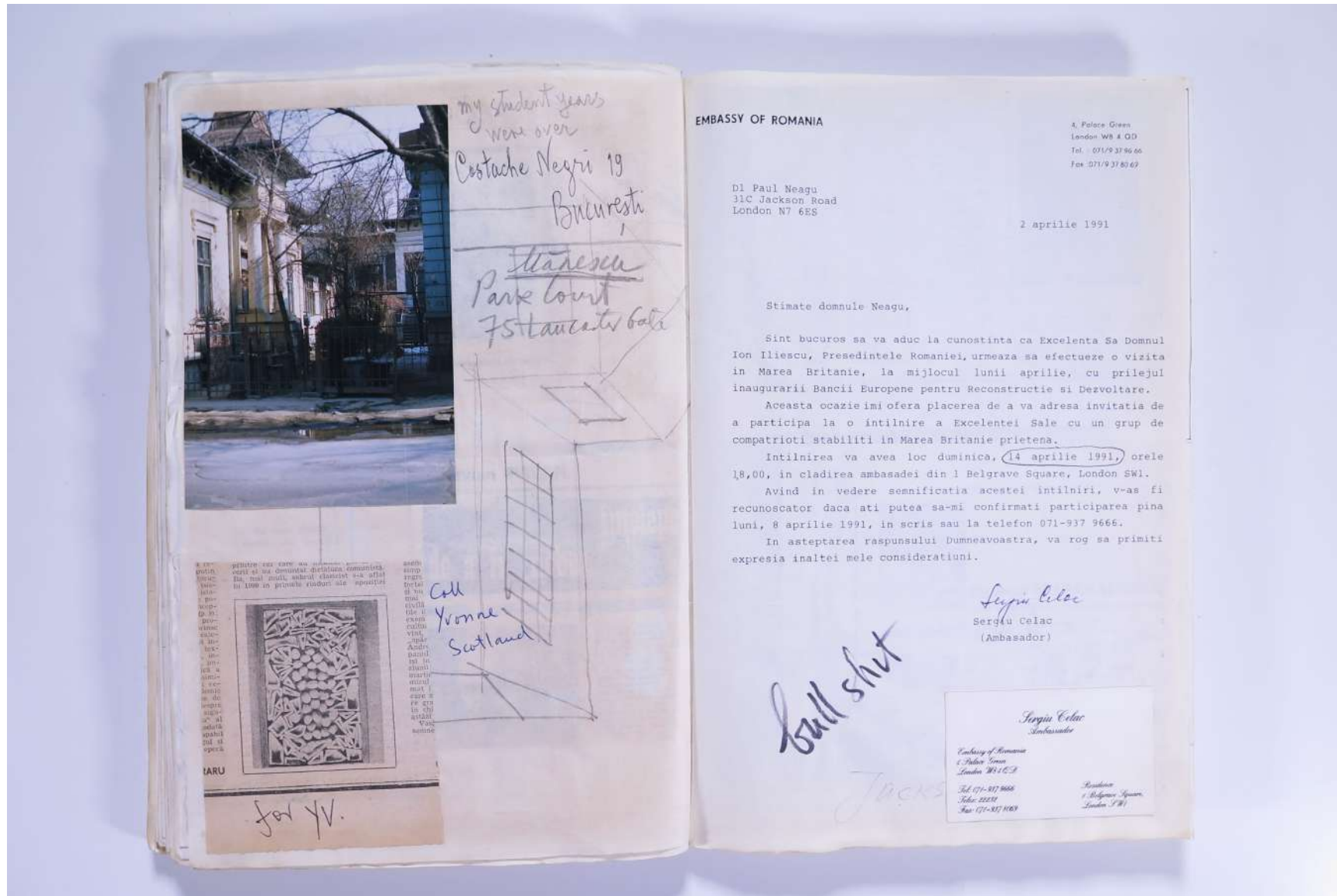
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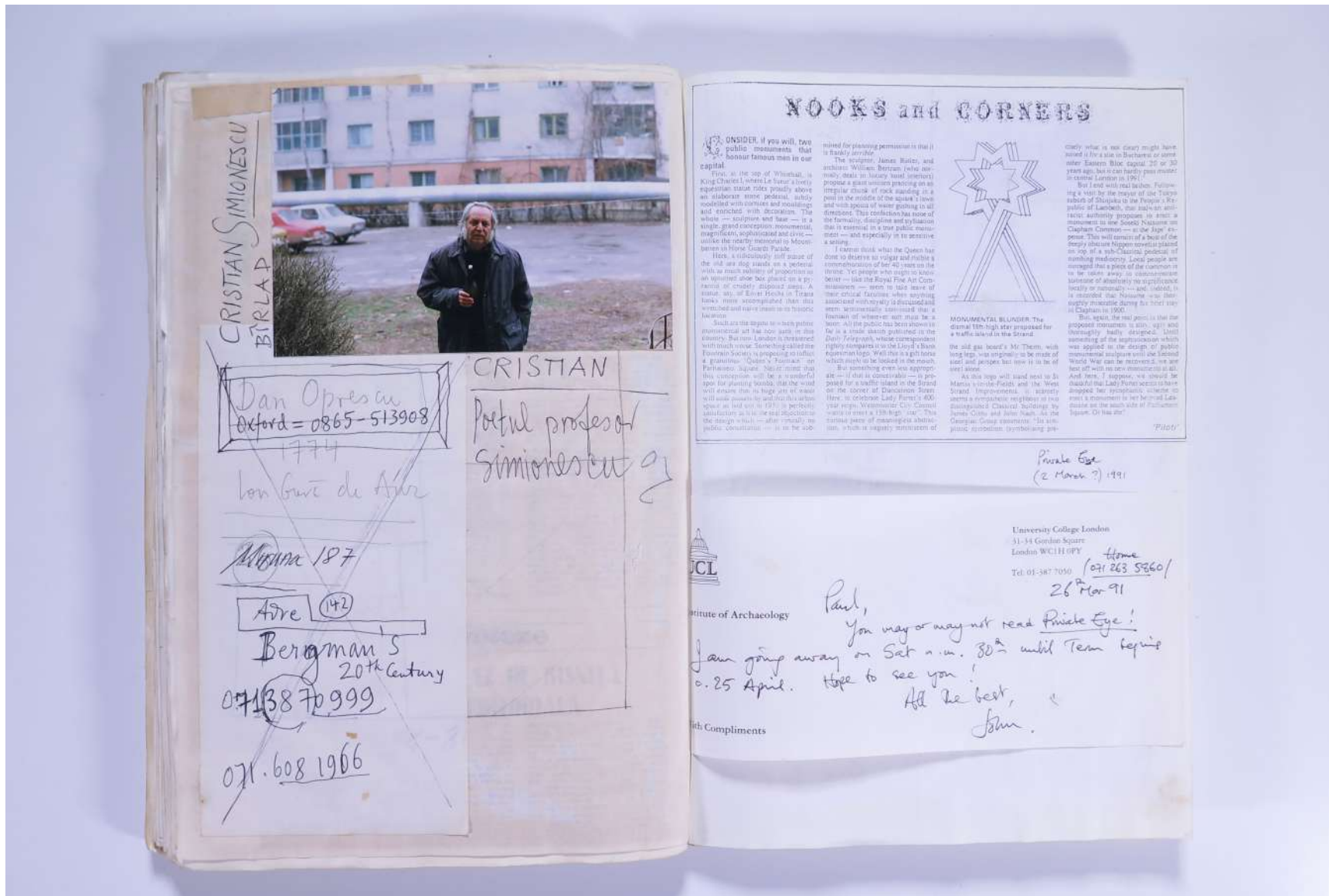
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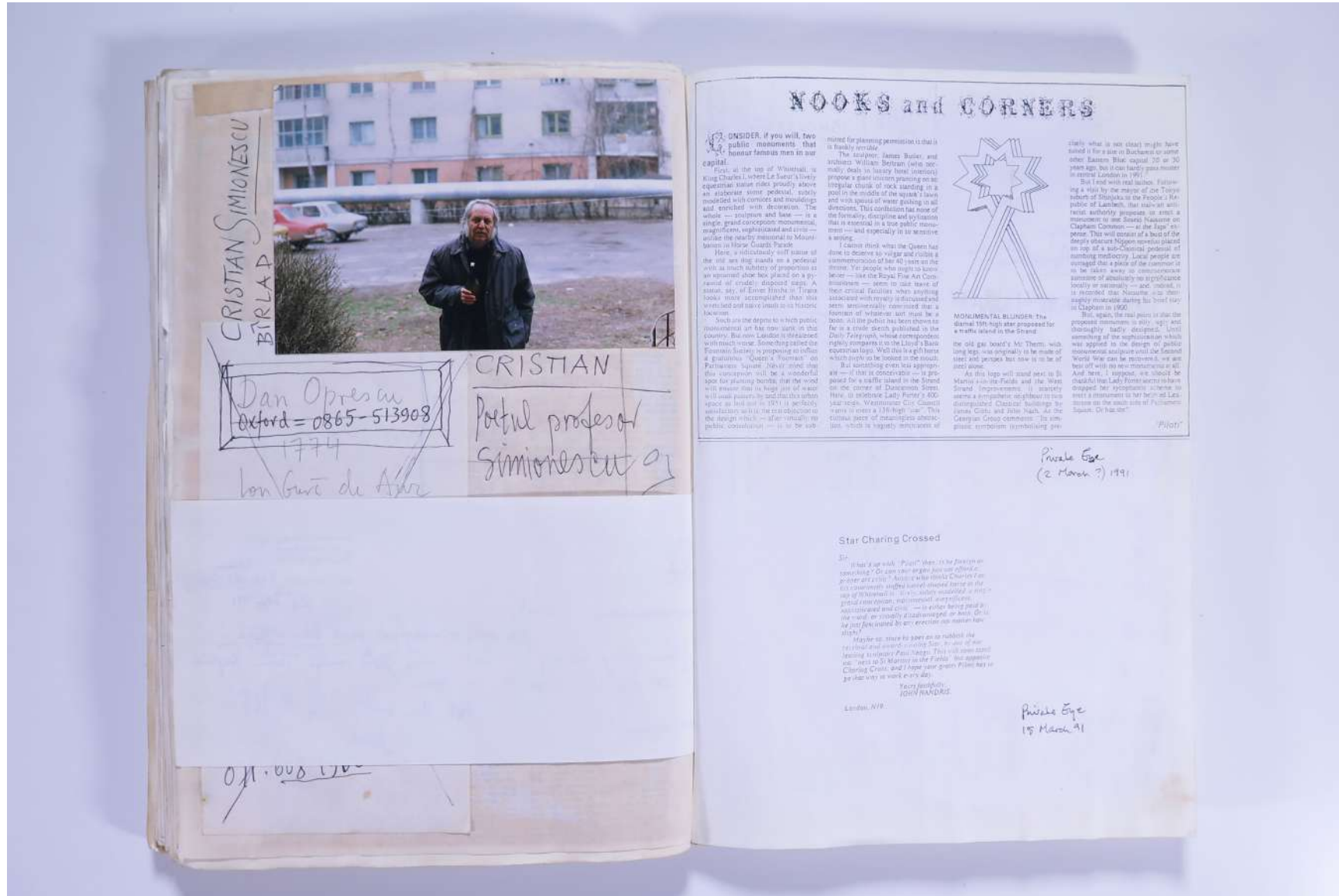
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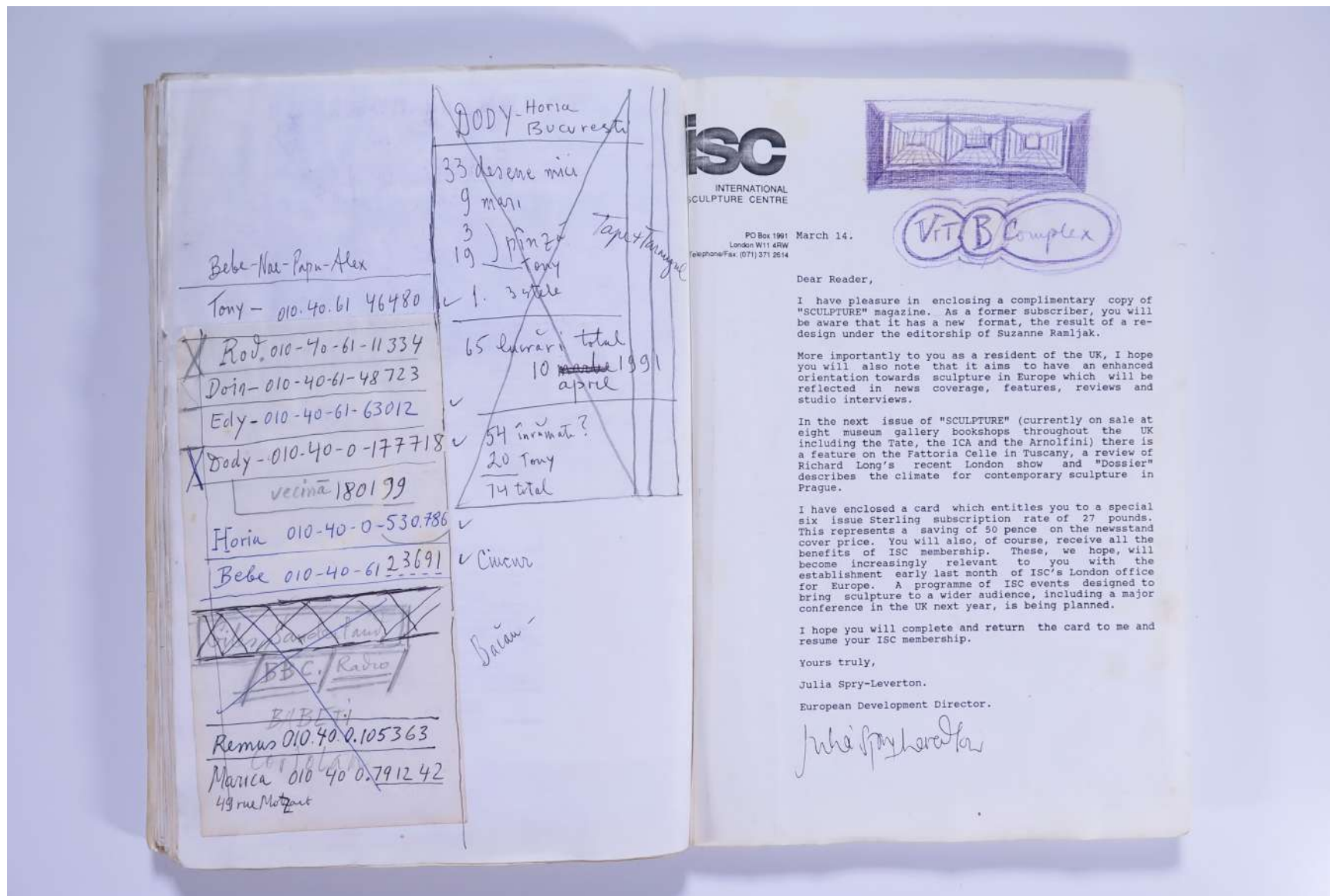
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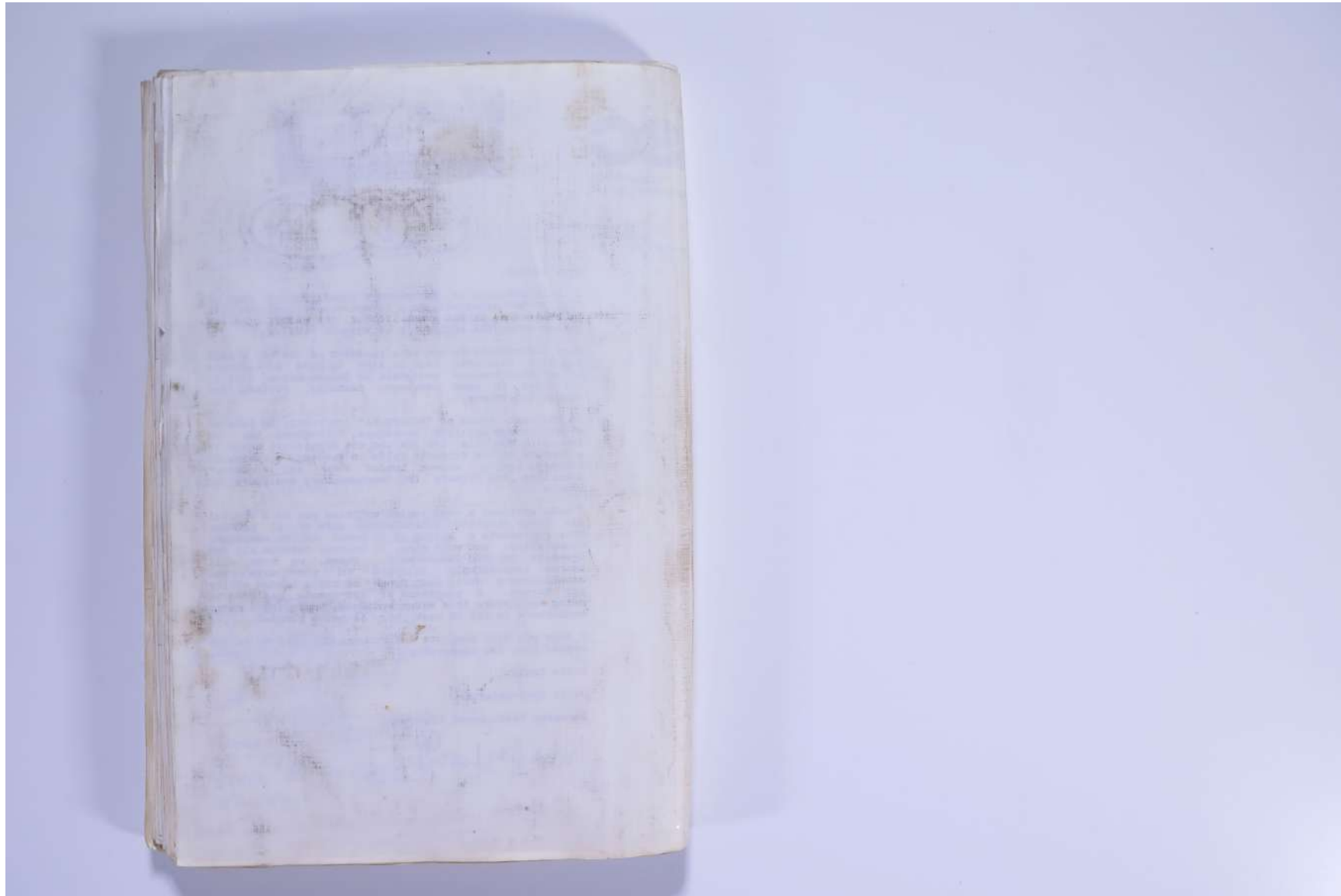
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