

Fabulae Romanae is a body of work by the artist duo Lucy + Jorge Orta that takes the viewer on a symbolic excursus across the city of Rome, drawn from archaeological and historical research conducted by the artists and their observations on the cultural and social map of the city and its seven hills. Starting from the most cherished form of the artists duo's language: the tent, Dome Dwelling and accompanied by the protagonists of their research the Spirits, who take on the form of ethereal and mysterious figures that inhabit the city. This publication brings together the installation of Lucy + Jorge Orta's work in MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts in Rome and the video performance in which the contemporary sentinel Spirits silently explore the Roman city accompanied by the poetic verses of Mario Petrucci: we encounter the Traveler under the Castel Sant'Angelo bridge and in the Trastevere back streets; the Observer overlooking the Sacro Cuore dei Monti and the Isola Tiberina; the Tunneler and the Myth Maker in the Villa Gregoriana Park; the Flying Man, Chariot Rider, Memory Man, Bale Maker... Fabulae Romanae assumes the meaning of "homage" to Rome and was commissioned by ZegnArt with the curatorial advisor by Maria-Luisia Frisa.



LUCY + JORGE ORTA FABULAE ROMANAE



FABULAE ROMANAE

LUCY + JORGE ORTA

Marsilio

ZegnArt | Marsilio

ZegnArt

FABULAE ROMANAE
LUCY + JORGE ORTA

MAXXI
National Museum of XXI
Century Arts, Rome
March 22 – September 23,
2012
part of MAXXI Arte Collezione
TRIDIMENSIONALE

Curated by
Maria Luisa Frisa

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STORY BOARD



DIE NONI POPULO ROMANO QUIRITIBUS COMPITALIA ERUNT

by ALESSANDRA MAMMÌ

On the ninth day the Roman people, the Quirites, will celebrate the Compitalia

This is how the festival dedicated to wandering spirits was announced in Rome. Lares squatting at crossroads to which it was prudent to pay homage as they also held sway over people's destinies. In the celebratory rituals of the Compitalia, fates mingled at crossroads and slaves were liberated. They became masters for a day. Then from forks and junctions in roads those minor deities blew right through the city and the Quirites, as the citizens of Rome were called, mollified them by hanging woolen dolls from the doors of their houses or offering honey cakes to slaves. And then the slaves hung up offerings too. But they were not allowed to use human figures. So to pay homage to the Lares who had set them free they could only hang rolled-up pieces of cloth or balls or bundles of wool. All this happened in the times of the Tarquin kings, in honor of the Lares Compitales, little gods who had hidden themselves on the roads at the points where they met. This at least is the story told over the centuries by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Macrobius, Aulus Gellius and Cicero.

Over the centuries of ancient Rome many spirits appeared and disappeared: good ones, bad ones and all of them inevitable. The Numina for instance: gods of the moment without a face or history. The Penates: guardians of the family and the homes. The Lares: spirits of ancestors who whispered good advice on how not to fritter away a fortune in dreams. The Lemures: spirits of the nights, souls of the dead who had not found peace, vampires, larvae, ghosts able to torment the living to the point where they drove them mad. And then the Nymphs, those invisible creatures who took care of the details. One named Carna was there just to protect the hinges of doors...

The Spirits of the Hills

In Lucy + Jorge Orta's *Fabulae Romanae* many spirits appear and disappear. At least seven, one for each hill certainly, and then more. Lucy + Jorge have imagined them, looked for and found them, studied, drawn and constructed them and finally dressed them.

The Flying Man. From the spiral staircase on the Quirinal Hill that the architect Borromini rolled up in stone for the palace of the Barberini family emerges a floating spirit. It is wearing a sort of silver-gray-black-white-blue parachute. A baroque unfurling of tough and light nylon, and at the same time a tribute to the goddess of health who in the time of the Quirites, long before the Barberini and the presidential palace, lived right here. On the highest hill in her now vanished temple. Thus the fables of the Orta begin to take shape, giving form to the spirits.

The Memory Man. He drags his snake bundle through the alleys of the Viminal Hill, on whose boundary was once located the Subura, home to the Roman lower classes, the decaying part of the city, the favela of the emperors.

The Myth Maker. He is dressed in idols knitted out of wool, covered with masks hanging on the back and the front like the woolen dolls that were hung from the doors of houses during the Compitalia. There on the Palatine, the hill on which stand the ruins and vestiges of those dwellings that the spirits have protected over the course of time, leaving for us the sight of their biscuit-colored walls, immersed in greenery, woven in the diamonds of "opus reticulatum."

The Bale Maker. He crosses the Esquiline, the largest hill in Rome, carrying with him bales of cloth tied up with string and labeled with stamps, to be delivered to a mysterious recipient. Perhaps an address hidden amongst the new communities of Chinese and Africans who have now, in these global times, occupied its stores, markets and slopes.

Between the myrtle bushes of the ancient park of the Coelian Hill glides **The Tunneller** with her enormous hank of white yarn, or rather the color of nothing, and twisted so many times that it looks like a soft hawser wrapped around the nymph until it almost suffocates her. And in its disproportionate size she even hides her human form.

An oracle (**The Observer**) watches the world from the Aventine. His head has turned into a helmet and two optical proboscises of a dark and dull red extend from his eyes. Form follows function. The spirit is a pure

spyglass. There where the hill slopes steeply down to the Tiber. That same height was scaled by the oracles to observe the flight of flocks of birds and make predictions to generals and emperors. There on the hill called the Aventine, "ab avibus," because of all the birds that flew up from the river to roost. Sic transit gloria mundi. The spirits do not believe in earthly power. Another creature descends from the equestrian monument on the Capitol. The symbol of the glory that eternally dominates nature, controlling the energy of horses and the destiny of men, becomes "**The Chair-iot Rider**." Puppet horseman, ironic and curious. He rides under the bridges with a wooden prosthesis in the shape of a chair. He trots along the walls displaying a mock horse's head made of paper maché. And conquers today's crossroads, renamed traffic circles and islands, amidst the honking and roaring of the motors of the new world. A blithe spirit. Happy to have lost his power, bronze horse and insignia but at last be free to go around the city.

The Journey

Among all the spirits that inhabit these modern *Fabulae Romanae* **The Traveller** is a guide, as "Wanderer-Migrant-Farewell Border-Hoarder-Gatherer-Vagrant." Lucy + Jorge Orta have dressed him in a black coat with a collar so high that his gloomy face is half-hidden, while the overcoat is turned into a tiring mass of suitcases equipped with handles and buckles. A 20th-century, archaic, Kafkaesque figure. Who is the symbolic traveler on this contemporary Grand Tour that Jorge and Lucy have embarked on in their descent toward the eternal city?

That symbolic and fundamental journey was in a way inaugurated in 1670 by a Catholic priest called Richard Lassels, a tutor and guide on physical and spiritual excursions. But above all author of *The Voyage Of Italy, or A compleat journey through Italy*. It was Lassels's book that persuaded the British aristocracy (and then that of Germany and the rest of Northern Europe) that a journey south in the direction of the cradle of a mother civilization was an essential stage in the process of transforming callow scions of nobility into

complete men, members of a ruling class capable of embracing culture and the world. And in the 18th century wealthy families sent their sons, especially the firstborn, on a “search for themselves” in the sunny lands of the deep South. The Grand Tour lasted for months, sometimes years. And took in cities as well as the countryside. On it the young travelers learned to recognize the beautiful and discovered the *dolce vita* of the libertine. It formed not just aesthetes, rich collectors and idle dandies, but also masterpieces of men, of painting and of writing. What would Goethe have been without his *Italian Journey* or Johann Heinrich Füssli if he had not given way to tears in front of the lost grandeur of antiquity, leading him to impress his despair on paper and in sanguine and turn that drawing into a symbol? The Grand Tour allowed a comparison to be drawn between past and present and travelers with the right frame of mind were able to see not just the great works but also the reality of poverty, of discord between men and the arrogance or absurdity of governments and the powerful. Like every opening to the world it brought with it desires for liberty and liberal aspirations and helped pave the way for the great revolutions that were to break out at the end of the century.

“I became a wanderer in order to come close to everything that roams. My heart has melted for all those who do not know where to warm themselves, and I have passionately loved the vagabonds of the earth.” André Gide, *Les Nourritures terrestre*
“Perception begins where sensation changes, whence the necessity of travel.” André Gide, *Paludes*
 The Ortas are familiar with the necessity of travel. Lucy was born in Sutton Coldfield in Great Britain, where she studied fashion design at Nottingham Trent University. She met Jorge in Paris in 1991. Jorge was born in Rosario in Argentina. He studied painting and architecture. He responded to the dictatorship using media considered subversive by the military junta, such as performance and mail art. Then he met Lucy in Paris in 1991.

Together Lucy + Jorge Orta have gone to the far ends of the planet and given their art a different, contemporary and global function. To seek freedom from frontiers and the dictatorship of nations they went all the way to Antarctica. In this place where nature is stronger than human life and the climatic conditions are at the limits of survival, Lucy + Jorge designed and mounted democratic and symbolic dwellings in the form of domes, constructing a temporary village on the only continent free of conflict and safeguarded by an international peace treaty (*Antarctic Village – No Borders*, 2007).

To understand and better protect the creativity of the planet, and following in the footsteps of the biologist E.O. Wilson (the man who said that “destroying rainforest for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal”), they have accompanied scientific expeditions and catalogued the biodiversity of flora and fauna in the dank depths of Amazonia, turning the results into a political project that has traveled around the world (*Perpetual Amazonia*, 2009).

They have dived into the garbage dumps of Cairo, infernos of waste and effluent inhabited by communities of outcasts, to give those physical and human dregs a possibility of deliverance. And they have transported simulacra of those mountains of plastic to Europe and used them to furnish the royal palace of Versailles with monumental clouds of bottles immersed in resin (*Clouds*, 2011).

They have invented machines to purify the water of the lagoon in Venice and make it drinkable, reminding the world that water is as precious as the gilded palaces of the Serenissima (*OrtaWater*, 2005).

They have staged banquets, one of them running the entire length of the Millennium Bridge in London, designing and sewing the tablecloths and setting the table with Royal Limoges plates of the finest bone china. The richness of the food and designs gave those meals back the ritual character that has been taken away by our hurried and unconscious manner of eating (*70 x 7. The Meal*, 2000-ongoing).

They have built emergency shelters for refugees and the homeless, creating clothing and tents and drawing on the great arts of weaving so as to be able to embrace their solitude as well. (*Refuge Wear*, 1992-98; *Connector Body Architecture*, 2001-06; *Dome Foyer*, 2001; *Life Guard Series*, 2002 ongoing...) They believed and still believe that there is no aesthetics without ethics, but also that there is no ethics without aesthetics. They have never even “thought of art as a purely personal expression and even less as an act of self-satisfaction. Each work or action was like a painful delivery with an extremely high ‘social price.’ [...] Much of our work finds its rationale in the consciousness of being part of the privileged class who had access to education. And this privilege involves, in my opinion, a duty of transmission.” (from Valérie Knochel Abecassis’s interview “Clouds / Nuages Versailles,” 2011)

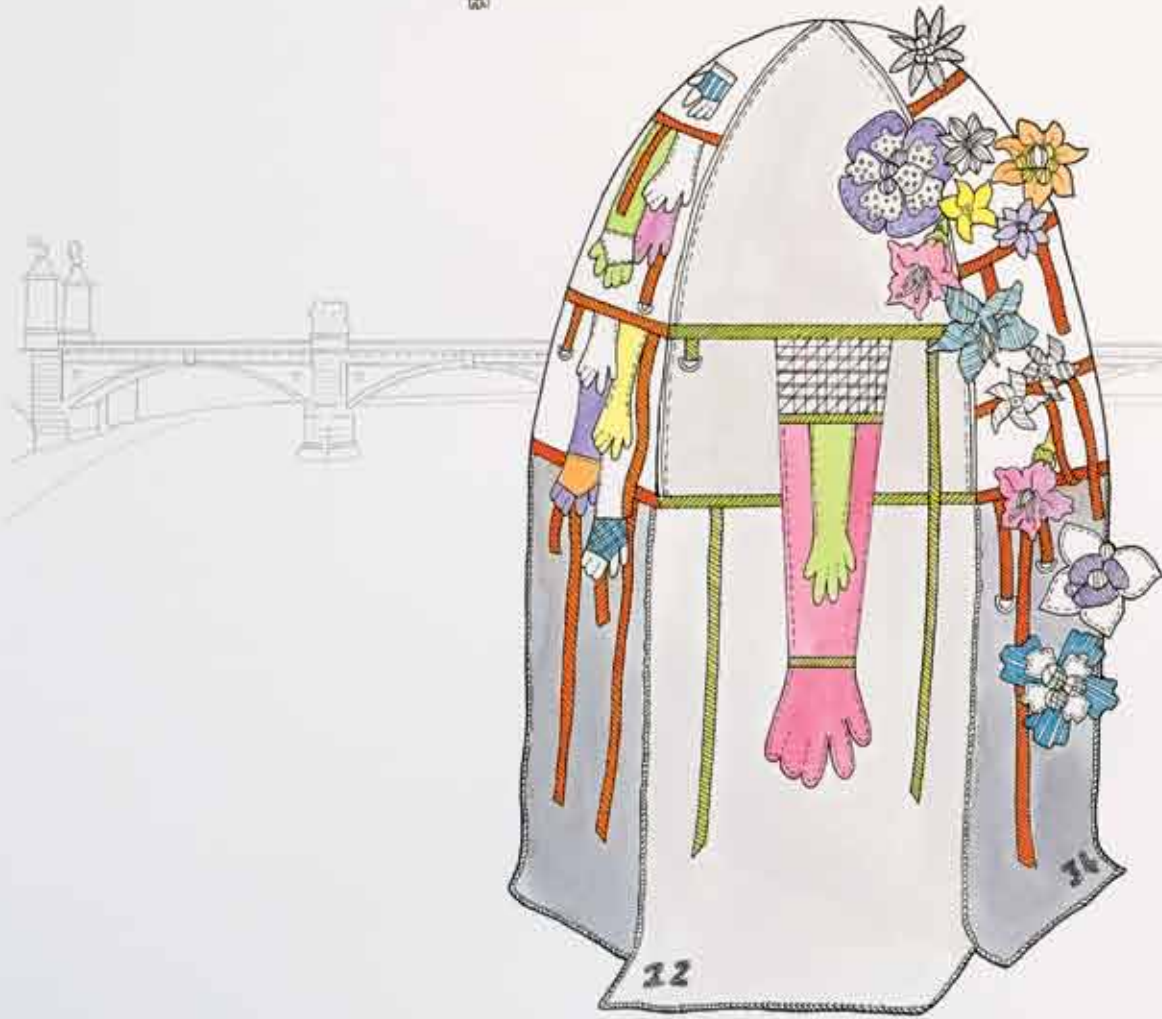
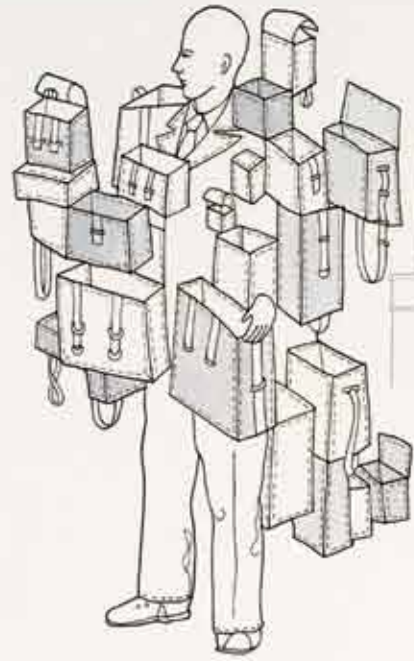
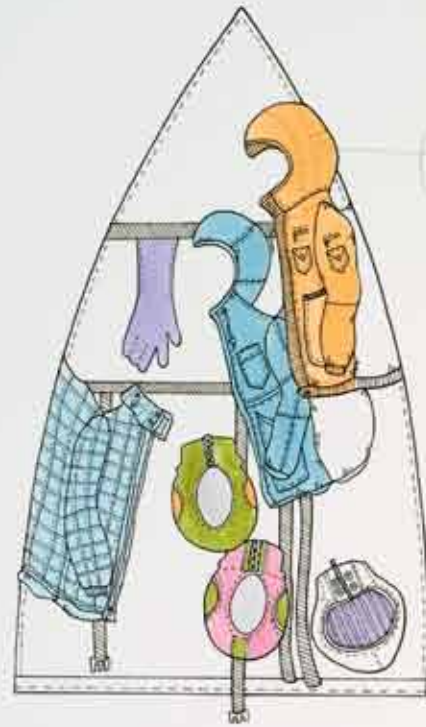
From *Refuge Wear* to *Fabulae Romanae*

Now Lucy + Jorge have set off on their Grand Tour. Arriving in Rome, they have chosen to focus on the city’s classical past. They have looked at it, studied it and weighed it up with new eyes. And they have told us in the form of fables about the solitude of its spirits, by now invisible, vagabond, unemployed and useless. Like the homeless.

Like a refugee. Like all the forgotten who wander around the city, like phantoms transparent to our eyes. Jorge and Lucy have stripped away the veil and turned the lights on those presences, inventing for them clothing ready to be converted into shelters and shelters as wraparound and protective as clothing. For Lucy the meeting with Paul Virilio in 1994 was enlightening in many ways. But in one above all: that of having understood how grave was the loss of social ties. “The precarious nature of society is no longer that of the unemployed or the abandoned, but that of individuals socially alone.” Where the community retreats like water at low tide and leaves naked and shivering the bodies that it does not want to recognize as part of the tribe. It is there that the Orta’s polymorphic domes arrive to reconstruct a collective

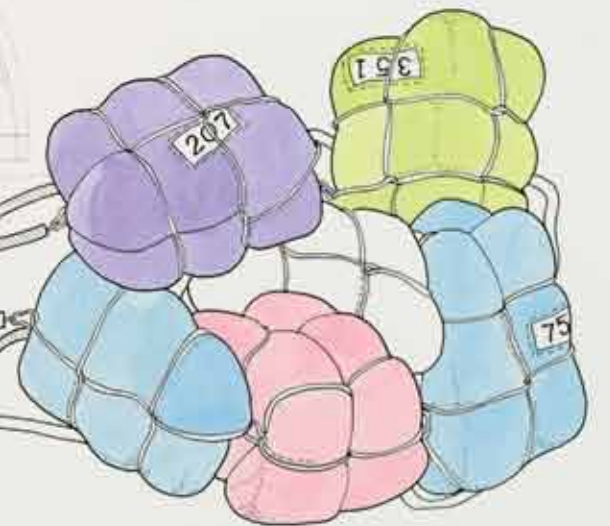
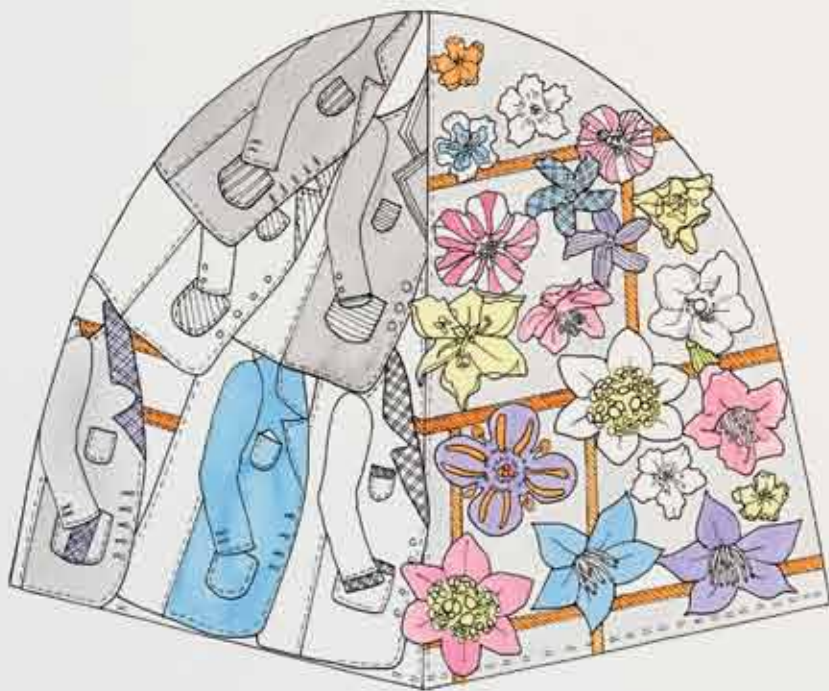
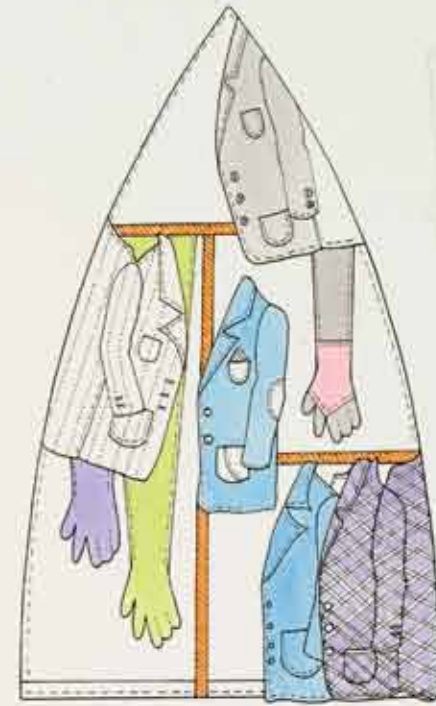
body that has been dismembered. It is there that the Orta’s fables arrive to restore speech, story and myth to the people to whom they have been denied. Lonely creatures like these new Roman spirits that no one recognizes and celebrates. No more festivals, no more shrines at crossroads, no more woolen dolls hung in doorways. While eternal, magnificent and baroque Rome exists and persists as a potential place of welcome that for millennia has played host to all the world’s races. We just have to find the way to perceive it again. Whence the necessity of travel. And a journey is also the tempo of a film: those *Fabulae Romanae* that take on digital form in the artists’ video, in the words of a poet (Mario Petrucci), in the faces, clothes and limbs of the little gods who thanks to the Ortas have returned to the hills. Spirits that are ancient and metropolitan, compassionate and ironic, necessary and neglected. Like all socially weak creatures. For once again the *Fabulae Romanae* of Lucy + Jorge Orta are not just fables.

ALESSANDRA MAMMÌ is an art historian and journalist. She lives and works in Rome, where she is correspondent (senior reporter) for the culture section of L’Espresso, focusing on art (and contemporary art in particular), architecture and film.

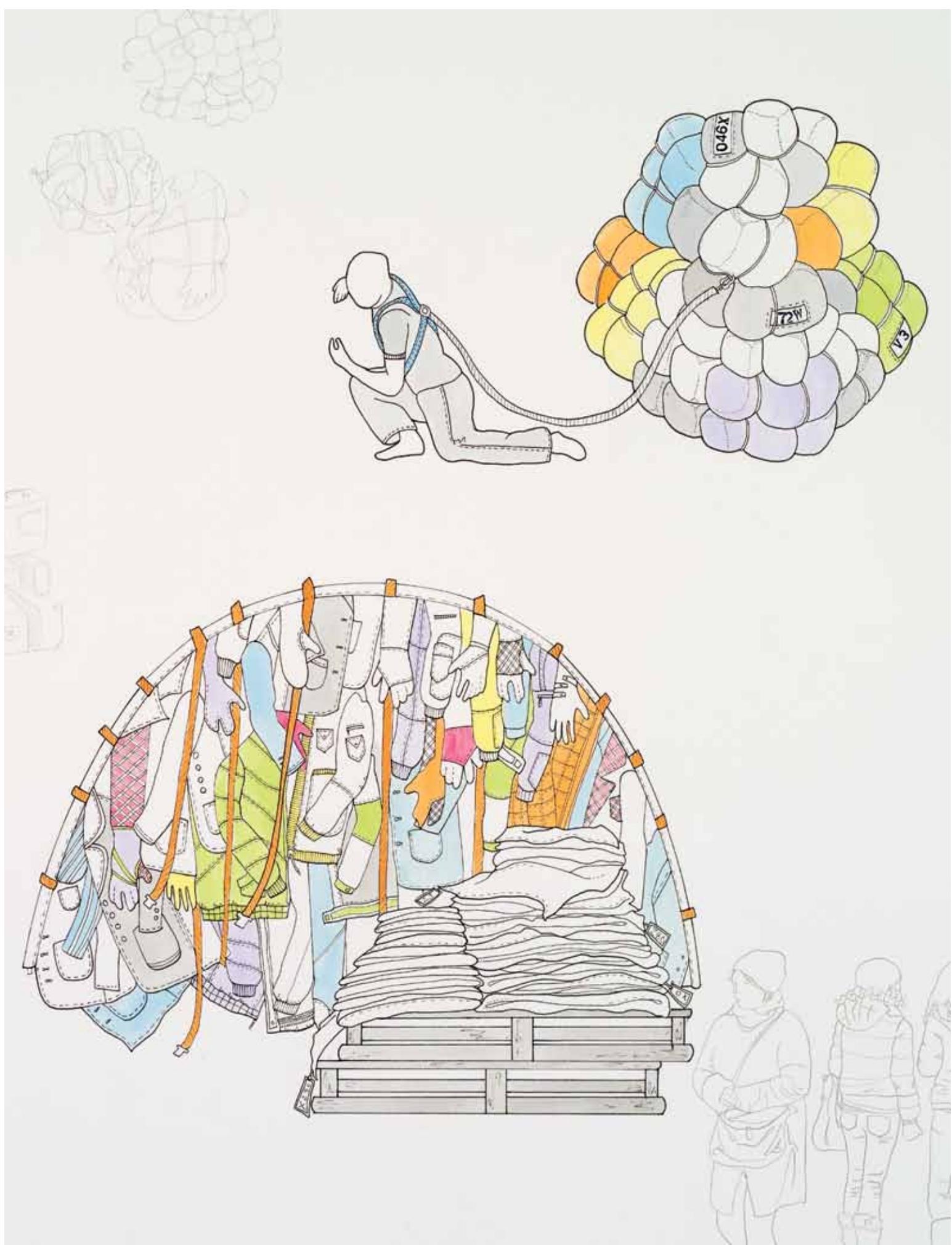


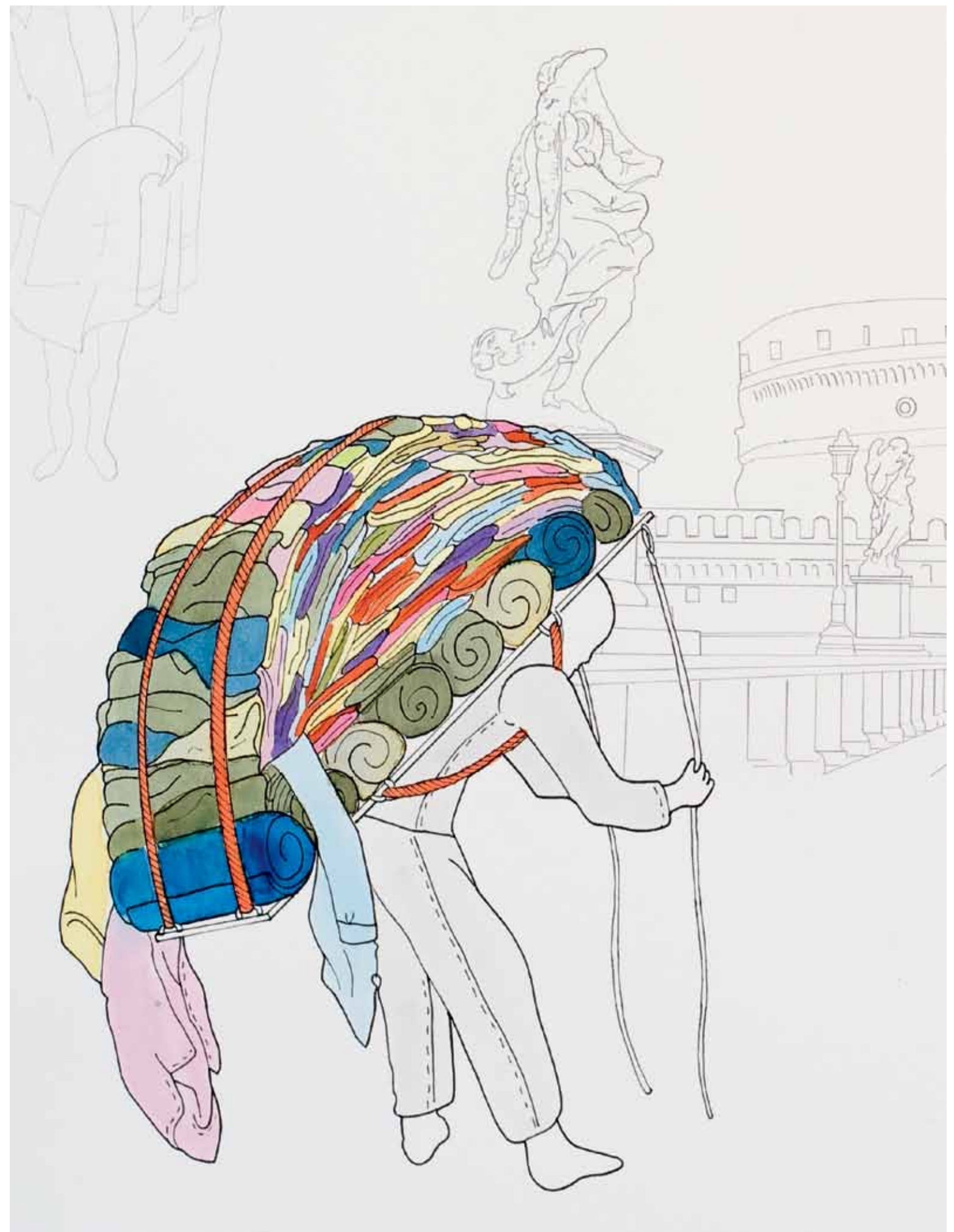
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ARTIST	OLIVIA

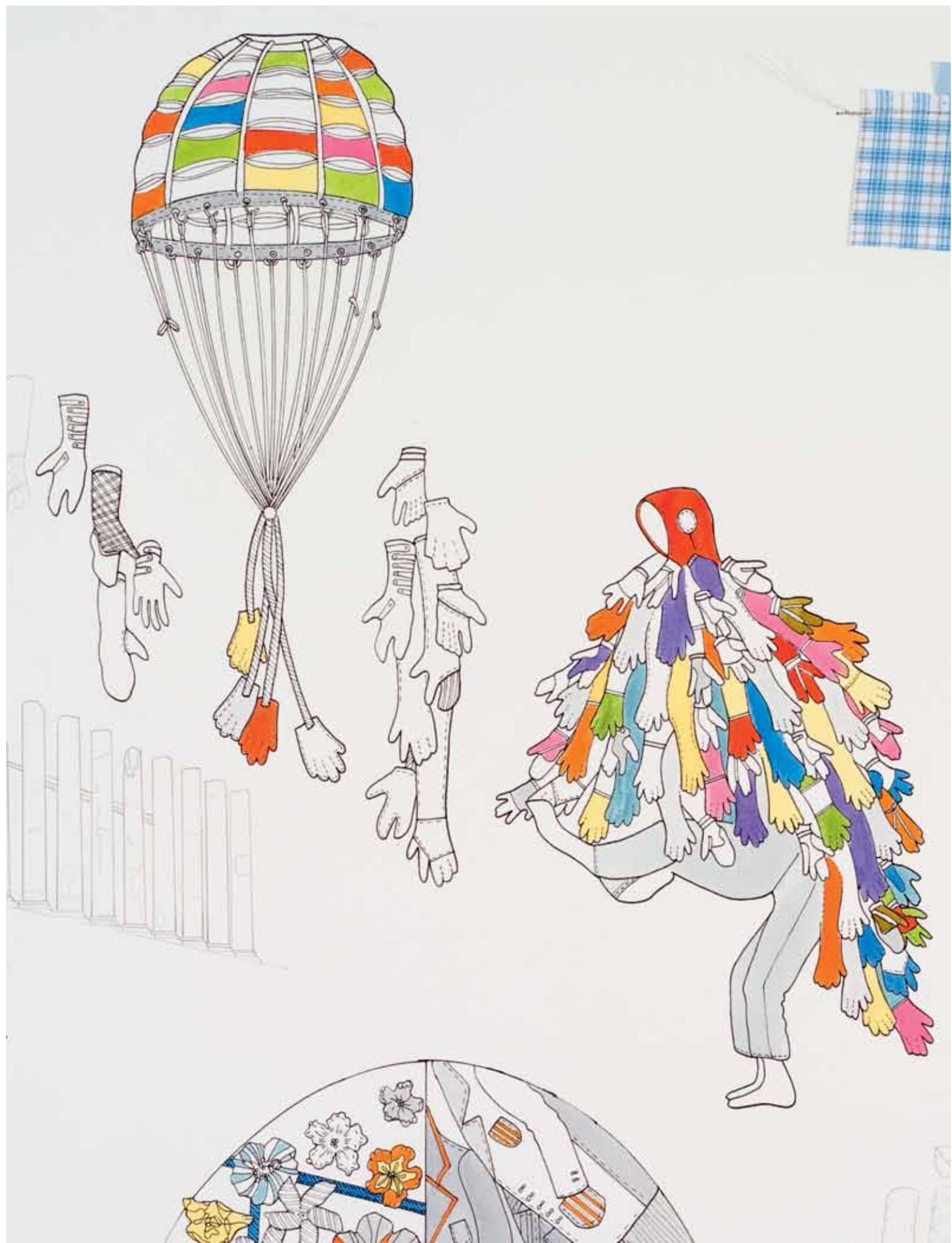
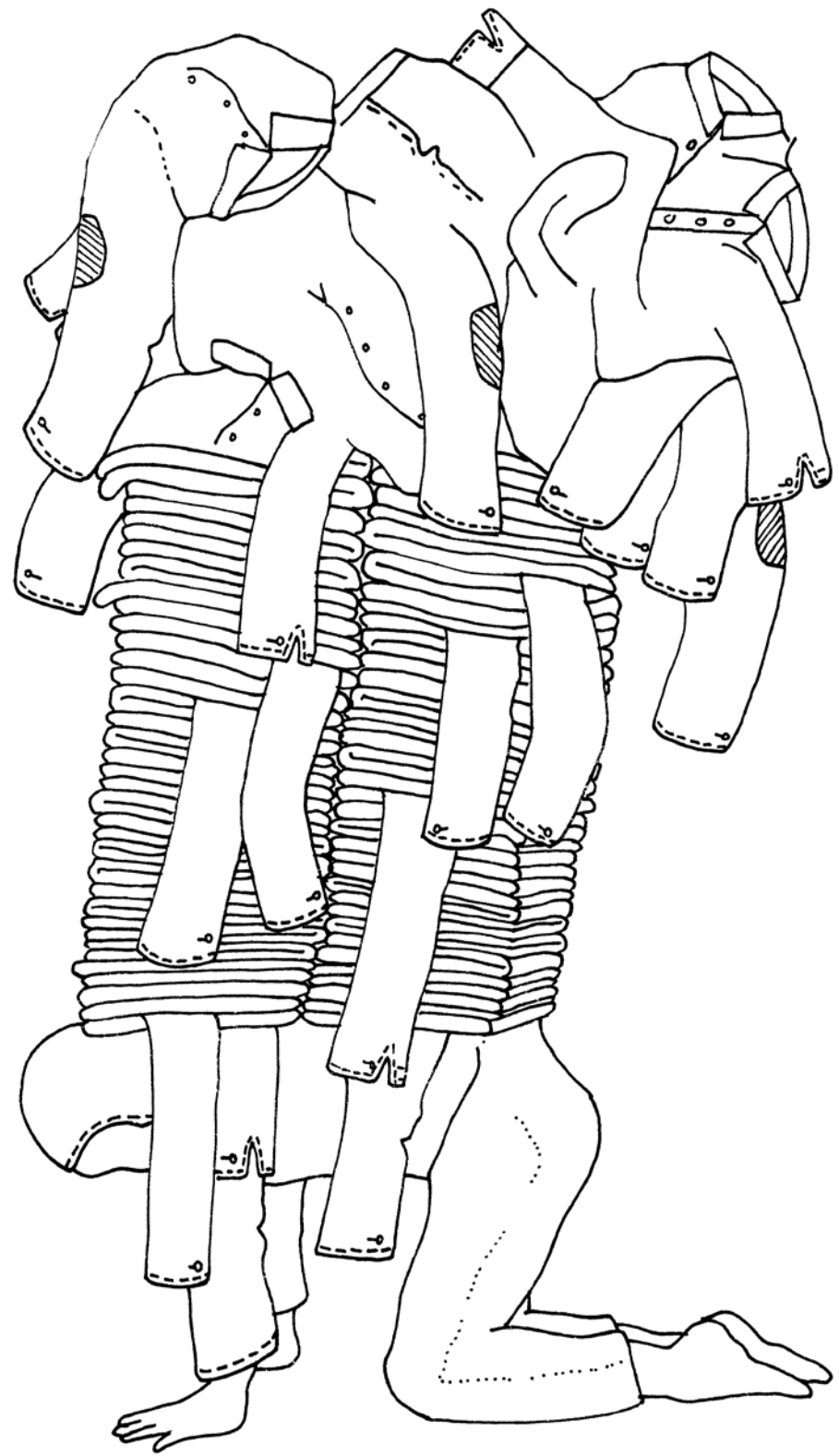


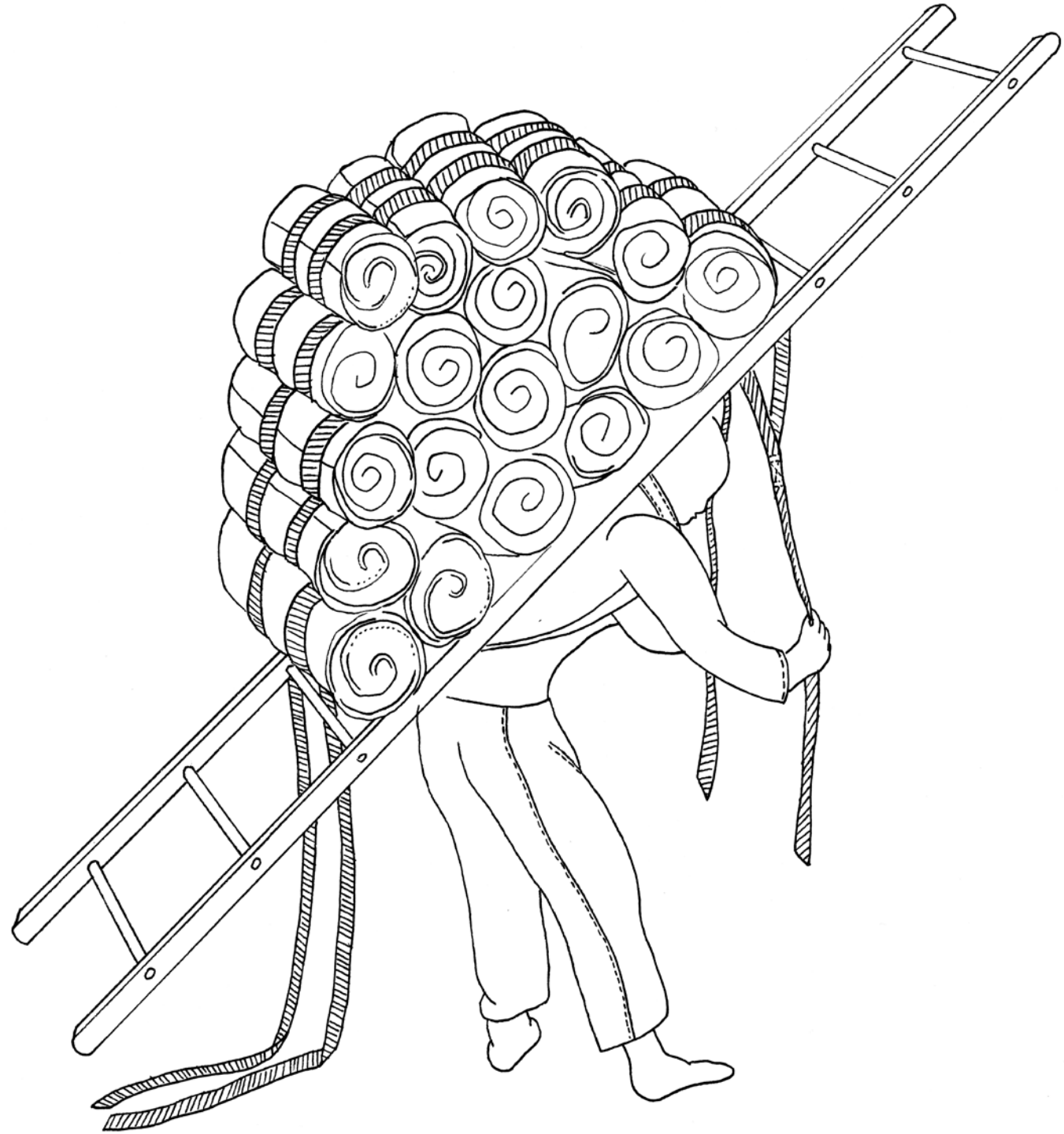


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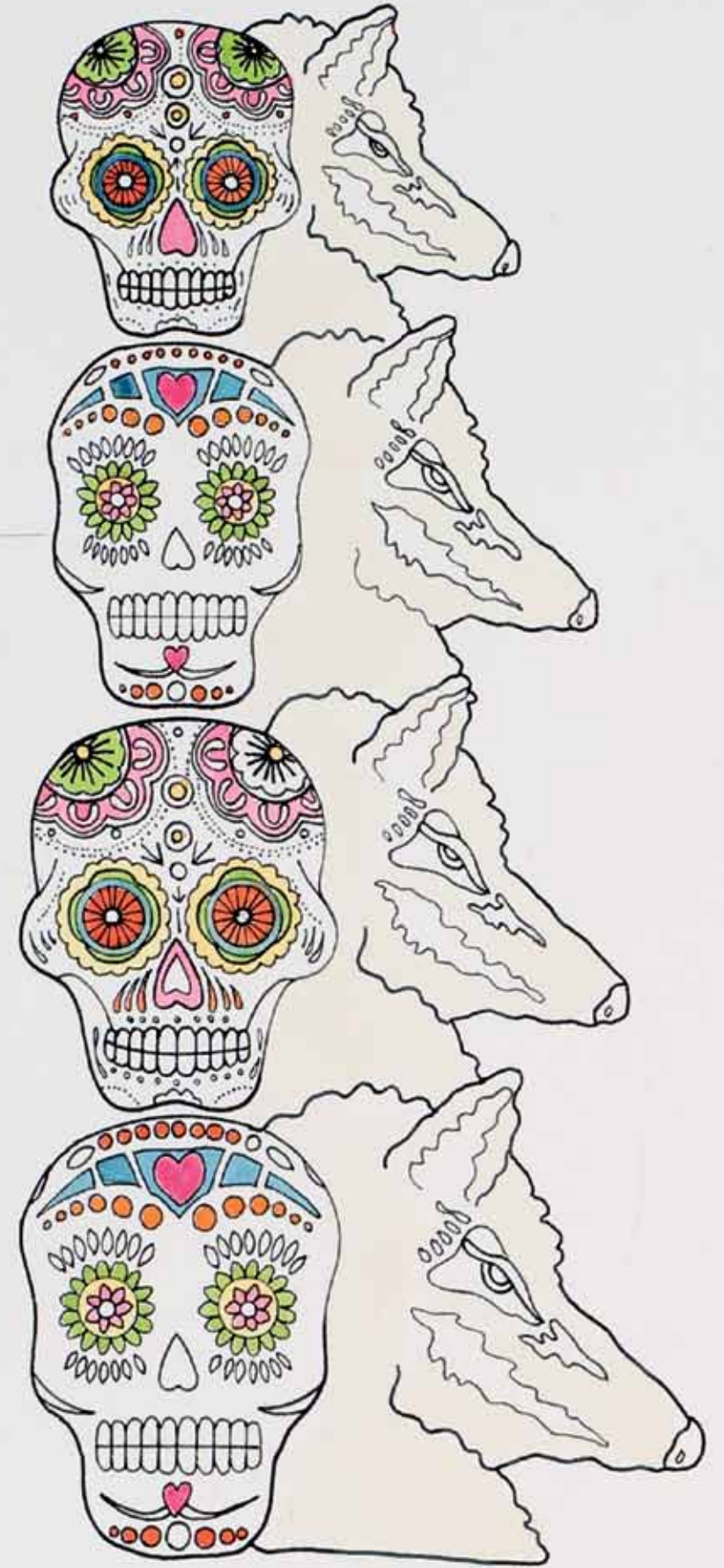
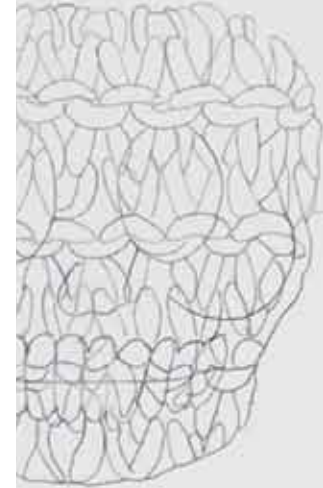


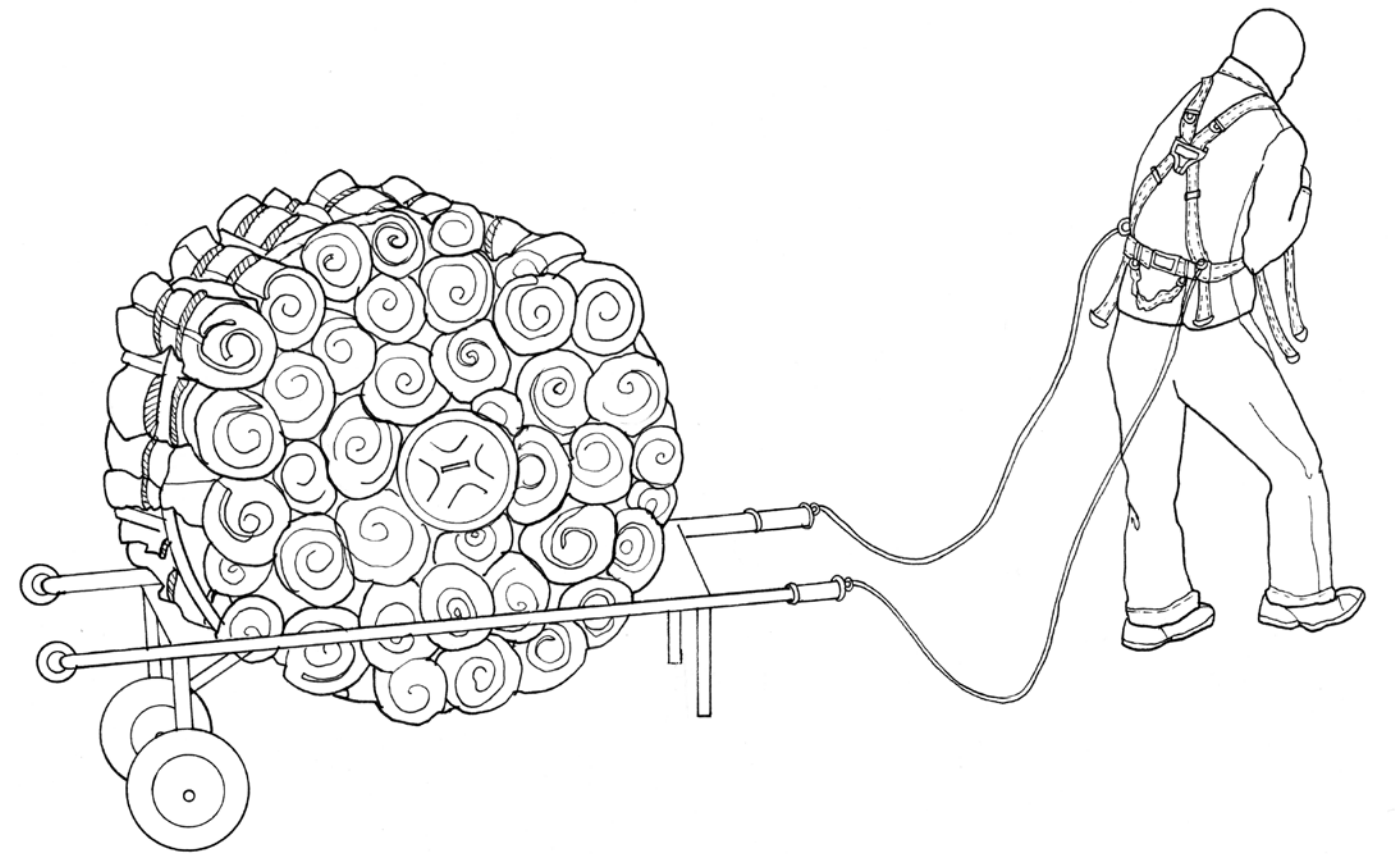
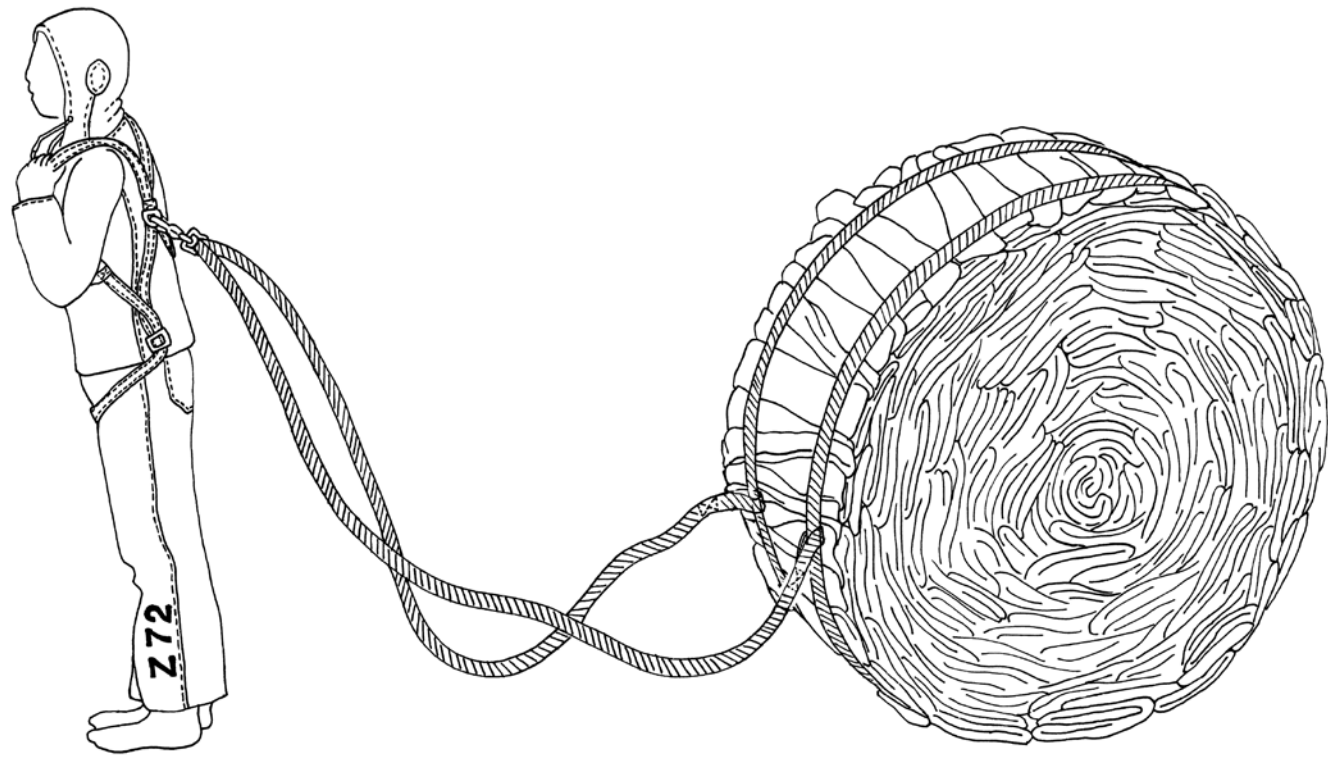
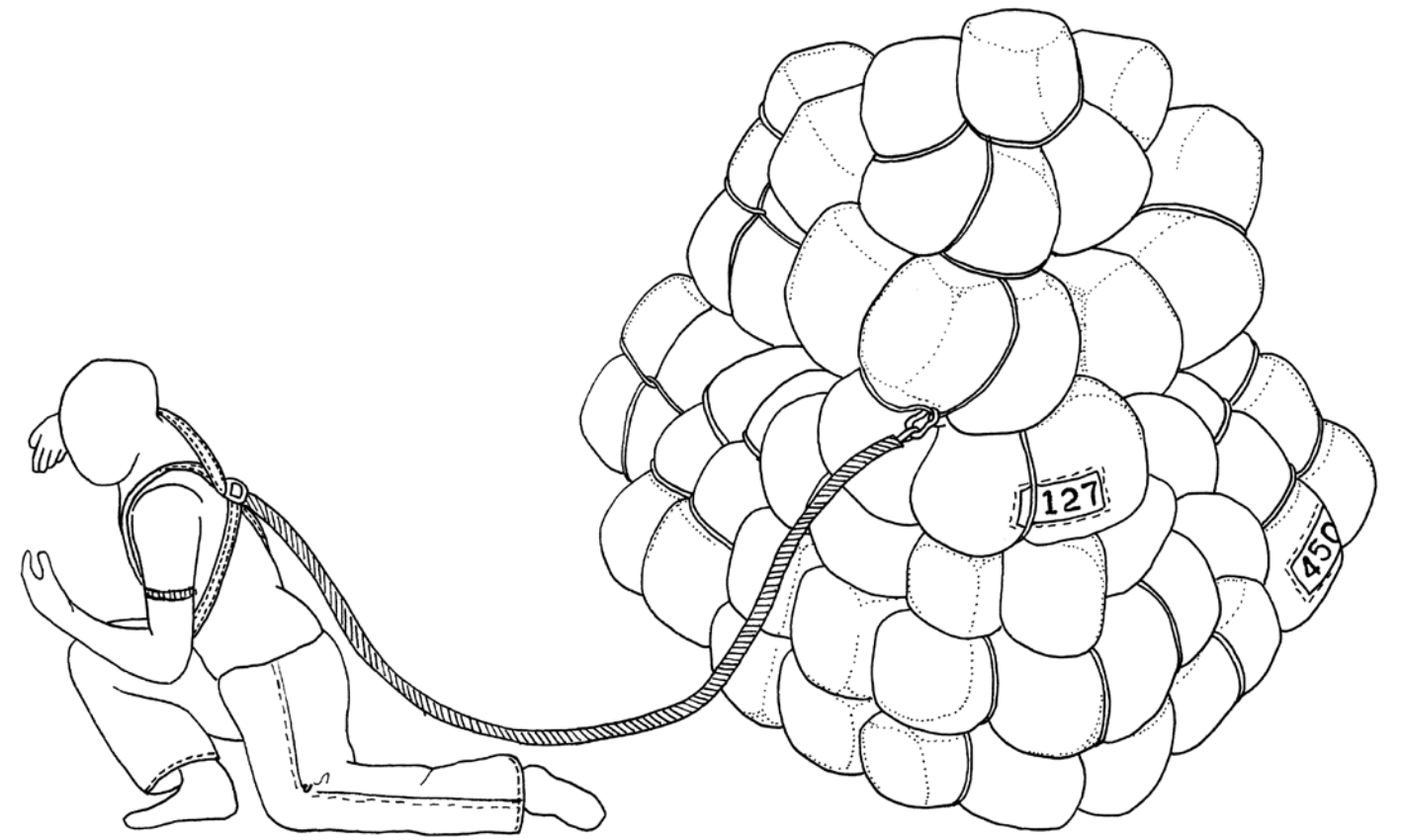
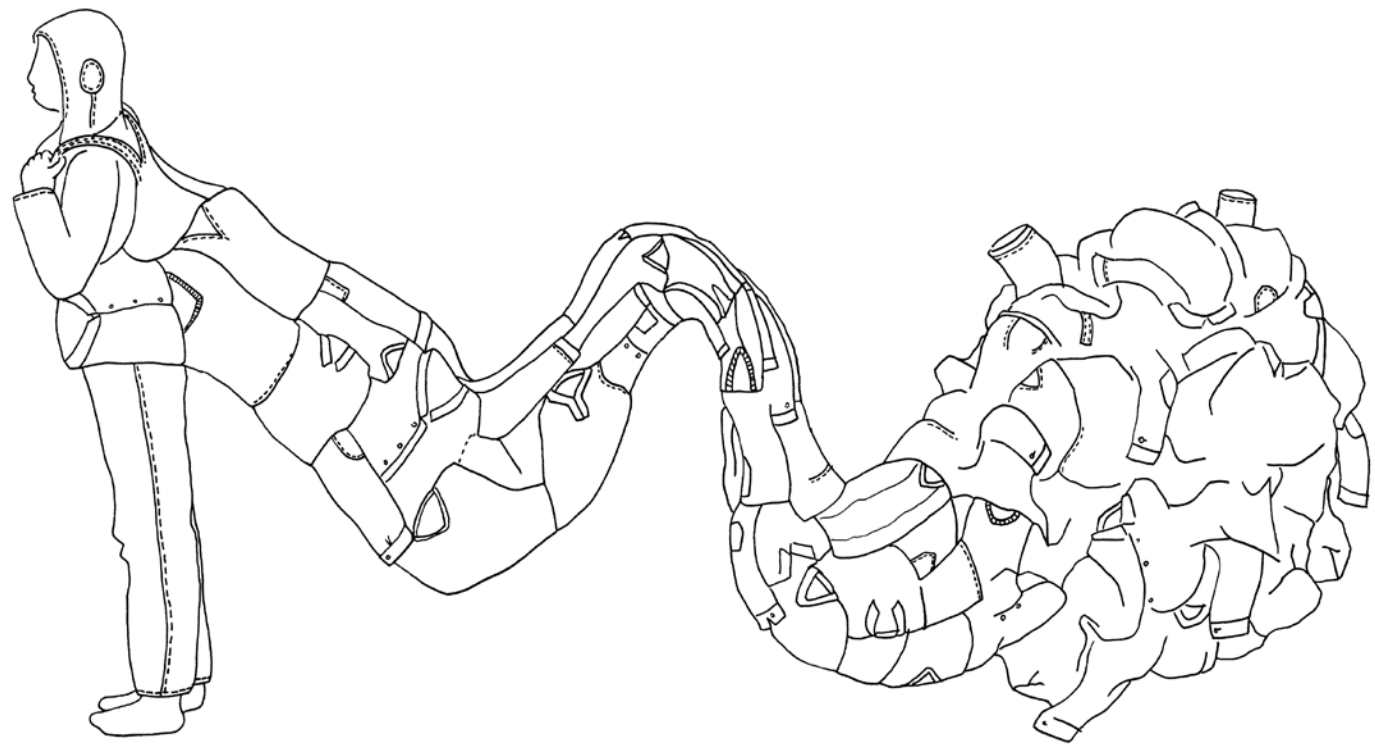


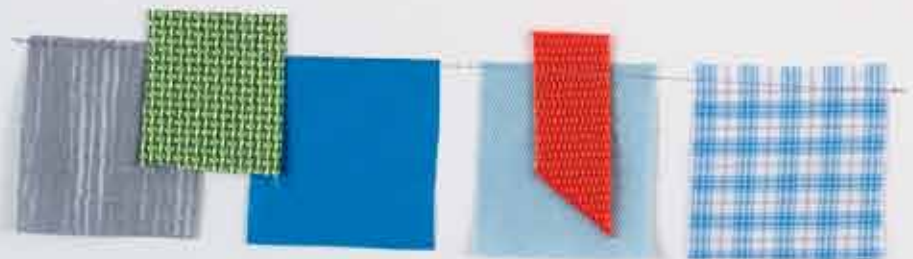




videns
rochet / knit







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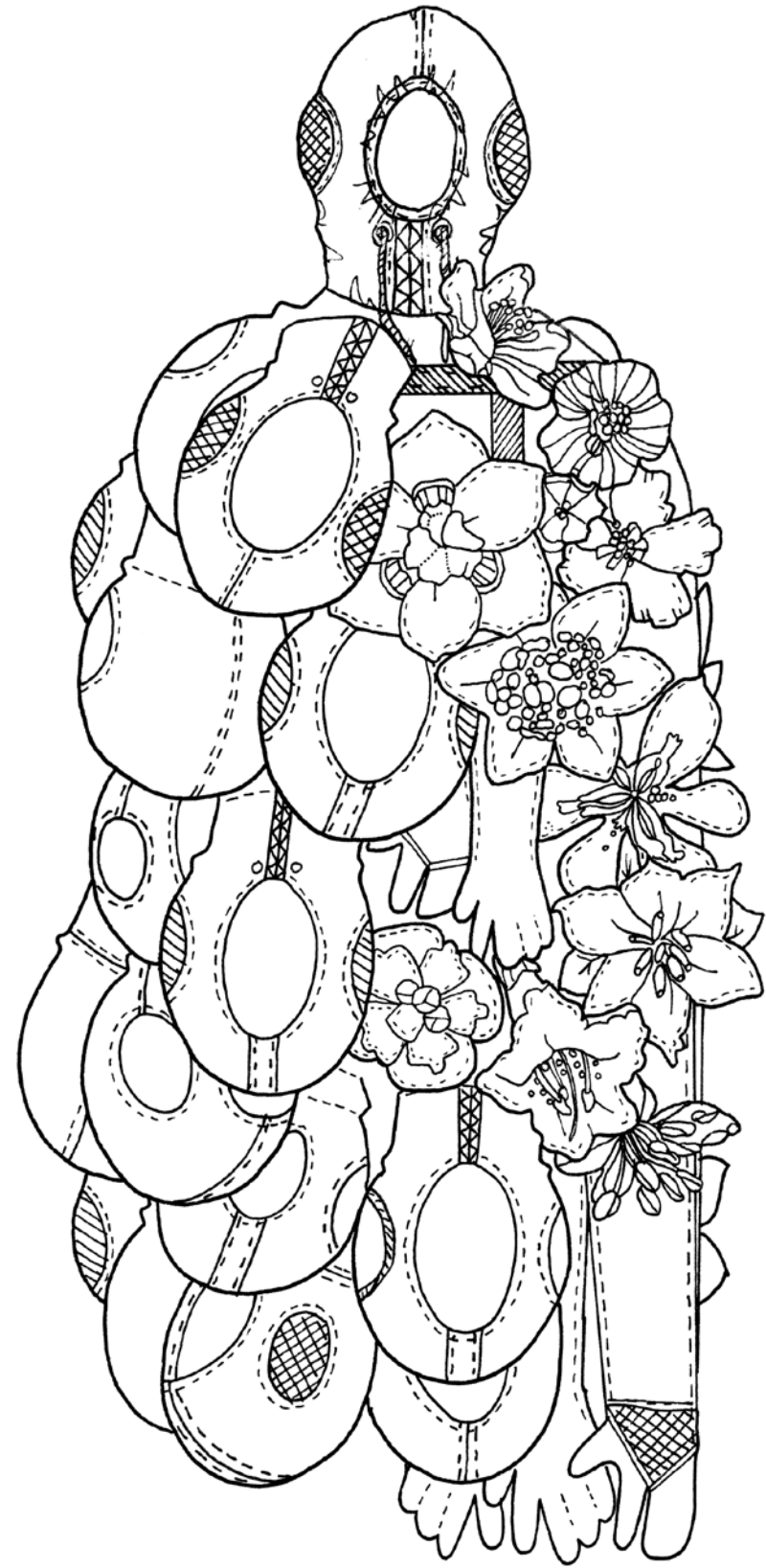
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T.A.



SKETCH TITLE: FABRICAL ROOMS
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SECRETARIA	FABRIZIO	DESIGNER	
TITO	FILIPPO	ORLANDI	
MATERIALE		002	
DATA			

