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Meet Everyone with Art at Location and Time;
M.E.A.L.T. Phase 1

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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University of West Georgia
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture, 2013

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Abstract

As an artist who participates in socially engaged arts, it is paramount in my practice to cultivate the balanced power relationship between the audience and artist by providing an ongoing safe environment, accessible subject matter and venue location, and a mechanism that not only calls for participation from the audience but empowers them through direct action.

Meet Everyone with Art at Location and Time or M. E. A. L. T. Phase 1 is a mobilizable art exhibition with the long-term goal to meet the audience where they are and to offer an alternative to traditional person-to-person interaction and socializing.

M. E. A. L. T. is an acronym and portmanteau combining the words “meal” and “melt” to represent both food and the classical sculptural material choice of cast bronze. Cast bronze is historically reserved for monuments, memorials of dignitaries, and event markers of cultural significance. I choose to transform common food items into cast bronze sculptures because I believe they are *icons*. They are the *icons* of the morning rituals, must have on hand condiments, cheat day pleasures, grocery essentials, late night snacks, and ready to order family meals that are culturally representative of the American (and sometimes global) experience. They bind one another together because of how ubiquitous, accessible, relatable, and comforting they are to our daily routine.

During each showcase, guests are welcome to sign the *M. E. A. L. T.* guestbook to share their individual experiences, stories, and history with these food icons, and reflect on others’ writings. The guest book presents an opportunity to discover commonalities and differences, to experience a multitude of perspectives, and participate in a community through a visual and tactile medium.

This thesis is the backstory of how individuals contributed towards this communal artistic endeavor and the ever-evolving criteria of a socially engaged artist who calls for person to person interaction during a viral epidemic. I was a foundry specific artist who eventually realized that his practice was a community driven and not object-based practice.

Table of Contents

Qualities of an Artist –	1
Background Studies –	3
Types of Generosity –	4
Participants – Willing, Fence-riding, and Naysayers –	4
Magic of Party Size –	5
Worst Case Scenario –	6
Promotion –	7
Wayne Potratz, Author and Pen Pal –	8
Phil Hutzelman and Inferno Art Foundry –	9
Katie Hovencamp- Direct Object Burnout –	11
Metal –	12
Patina –	13
Works cited & Bibliography –	14
Images –	15

Qualities of an Artist

To garner a high activation rate my artwork must be inviting, alluring, and attractive, safe to handle and operate for a wide age and mobility range of people, and easily facilitated as art social exercise. (Image 1, 2, 3, & 4) The art object is presented in a traditional hierarchy of high craft and polish so participants willingly and comfortably engage with it. (Image 5, 6, 7, & 8) In addition, the art object is usually placed in a clean, quiet, and distraction-free environment for the participant to be focused, educated, and well-oriented within the activation space of the art social exercise. (Image 9) The work must be easily deployed in non-traditional art exhibition environments, because that is where the audience resides. (Image 10)

In interactive object-based work such as *I Will Scratch Your Back, If You Will Scratch Mine*, (Image 11) the 10ft backscratcher object was crafted to such a professional grade that participants are given the impression of security that the object is safe to handle and not hurt themselves when operating. In observational viewing such as *M.E.A.L.T. Phase I*, objects must be finished to such a point that a cast objects mimic the real-life object, inviting the viewer to wonder if the object is the actual original object or a replication in bronze. (Image 8) It is through that wonder that audience members become participants as they write their thoughts down in the guest book of the exhibition. (Image 12) When I do not possess a said skill set to perform professional grade or technical skill set, I partner with a craftsperson to assist in the completion of the art product. When able and given permission, I often like to credit said people to establish that the artist does not have all the power in creation of the work. During my education at the University of Arkansas (UARK) I have credited Vincent Edwards with fabrication and design credits alongside Piper Hart and Jullian Patrick with photography documentation. I have noted their partnership in the showcard of the thesis exhibition. (Image 13 & 14)

I say “social exercise” over social experiment, test, or evaluation because I, the artist, am not collecting data to prove society is socially inept or clinically diagnose a group of people but rather giving an opportunity to remind people to flex, articulate, and move a still part of themselves, bring awareness of more than oneself, and experience what operating within a healthy community system can feel like.

My work will never alleviate chronic, systemic social, racial, class-based, and economical problems to ultimately shape society as some form of utopia. If my practice can assist participants to recognize one and another for even a moment and bring awareness beyond oneself, then I have done something worth pursuing. D’Souza states in the introduction of *Whitewalling: Art, Race, & Protest in 3 Acts* on page 10,

“... we (both) give art too much credit and place an undue burden on it when we imagine that it can interrupt or overturn such pervasive systems of power as white supremacy and capitalism. What art can do, in its best and worse forms, is reveal the mechanisms by which such powers assert themselves. Art can lay bare the way that it is used as a marker of boundaries and a sign of belonging in the culture at large.”¹

I agree with D’Souza’s statement of the practical and actual power of art and why I am attracted to more than just passive viewing and observation of art works. When an artist can activate the audience, that artist can have a more profound effect on the audience. Instead of simply illustrating a conceptual value in visual form and demonstrating artistic prowess of technique and

¹ D’Souza, Aruna. *Whitewalling Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*. Badlands Unlimited, 2020. Pg 10.

application, the artist welcomes audience members as participants, collaborators, and partners in the art process.

Background Studies

During my time at UARK, I have taken surveys of Native American Art culture, Afrofuturism, Critical Race Theory, African Diaspora, and post-Marxist and post-Capitalist studies of non-fiscal exchange. I have worked with low-income, at-risk youth, Marshallese and Hispanic communities, and studied abroad and lived in a community in Onishi, Japan. My goal as an artist is to appropriately include the widest audience possible and find common factors to bring people together. These surveys of research in diverse cultures and communities might not have any obvious overlapping commonalities, but all have the same general policies on how to engage into the culture as an observer, researcher, participant, and outsider. These general policies include being openminded; contributing into an event; not take away; be patient with yourself; try not to invite yourself but be invited; create social guard rails for yourself to prevent accidentally making faux pas; create healthy boundaries; and *when in Rome, do what the Romans do*. (Image 15) These are also some of the attributes and guide markers I consider when creating and deciding if a social art exercise is feasible because to ask people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to actively contribute in a field that is usually regarded as a passive activity is ambitious and needs to be checked and balanced to operate correctly. Missteps and mistakes will occur, but a practice worth pursuing is a practice of falling forward, picking oneself up, reviewing the steps and actions taken, and proceeding on.

Types of Generosity

On page 102 in *What we want is free; generosity and exchange in recent art*, Ted Purves discusses the 4 forms of generosity in art: *gift sculptures*, *democratic projects*, *generosity in the confrontational mode*, and *social aesthetics*.² *Gift sculptures* reconfigure the art object as a gift of generosity for the viewer to take away, changing the context of the visitor to guest in a museum setting. *Democratic projects* are characterized by the artist redistributing privilege of the exhibition, performance, or funding to others, transforming the traditional role of the artist as creator to instigator, and audience as viewer to participant and community author. *Generosity in the confrontational mode* uses gifts, generous actions, and alternative exchange systems as a forum for social dissent and criticism. *Social aesthetics* or what we know now as social practice is the redistribution of funds, materials, or narrative of an art project for a community and changes the approach from the benefit of, to partnership with a community.

I would call my thesis one of social exercise and of a “democratic project” practice.

Participants: *Willing, Fence Riders, and Naysayers*

I believe there are 3 categories for active participants in an interactive or community focused art works. The “*Willing*” are persons already acclimated to community engagement and role of participant. The *Willing* usually are already seeking out for these types of interaction and thrive in them. The “*Fence Riders*” are persons that are curious about the community event and attend but need proof of safety and maybe some positive peer pressure to participate. *Fence Riders* might also be persons with alternative motives to attend an interactive event such as

² Purves, Ted. *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*. State University of New York, 2005. Pg 102.

networking, for the event being a collection and gathering of people. “*Naysayers*” are persons who, for the most part, do not attend and reject the interactive event even though it is a social gathering. *Naysayers* could reject the event to the point of protest. Their position of not being active in the event is steadfast and almost fixed. It is the testimonies of the *Willing* and *Fence Riders* of the event that give context to the *Naysayers* for future consideration of participation.

My ideal audience for participation would be the *Fence Riders*, because they have the highest potential for personal growth in the interactive art social exercise and in creating traction. Being a *Fence Rider* gives context to the benefits and purpose of participating and criticism that one is willingly following the artist’s commands and letting go of personal control for a brief instance. Their positional conflicting duality harvests bountiful and fruitful context back to the artist for consideration for future participatory pieces and provides concrete testimonies for the *Naysayers* to potentially reconsider their non-active position.

Magic of Party Size

In Chapter 2 of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters* by Priya Parker, on page 52, Parker discusses the effectiveness and categories of gathering sizes. Parker states that a gathering of around 30 people has “its own distinctive quality: that buzz, crackle of energy, that sense of possibility that attaches to parties.”³ Around 30 people seems to be a good manageable number for participant safety and to give an active and memorable feel to the event that will carry through in conversation in and outside of the social art exercise. For the inaugural showcase of my thesis, about 50 people attended. (Image 16) The following show dates saw an

³ Parker, Priya. *The Art of Gathering*. Penguin USA, 2018. Pg 52

addition 50 people come through the exhibition. The sign-in guest book has been an effective mechanism to record audience engagement.

In *Warmest Regards: Letters to a young caster*, on page 39, David Lobdell notes two reasons iron casters gather and practice.

“We can explain everything about casting as though it’s science or nature or whatever, but the truth is that it’s magic. The gathering of people, the process, the materials, and the intensity of it is all MAGIC. Some think we cast iron because it’s cheaper. Ha. The metal may be, but the driving around isn’t. What you’re really driving around for is the education and the like-minded people.”⁴

A good-sized iron pour could be around 30 people and pouring over 5000 lbs. Both Parker and Lobdell use similar language to describe a gathering.

Worst Case Scenario

I acknowledge with this thesis exhibition; participants will sign in the guest book and might give commentary outside the art social exercise. I accept these variables because the sign-in book becomes an open journal in the attempt of “self-actualization” under the Maslow hierarchy of needs and as a democratic project gives a part of control to the participants.

I cannot accept any persons who would sign the guest book to deface other’s comments, inscribe hate messages, or destroy the guest book in general. The same is true for rallying for alternate causes over the original art social exercise. Participants put social faith and are willing

⁴ Holloway, Stacey, et al., editors. *Warmest Regards; Letters to a Young Caster*. first ed., Chackline Press, 2018. Pg 39

to congregate with strangers and to be coerced into another unexpected cause would betray public trust. For these situations I have a contingency order of operations.

Promotion

When selecting the audience to invite for the inaugural showcase of my thesis, I thought of making this a selection for the general public of NWA, local NWA art organizations and community centers, UARK art students and colleagues, UARK administration staff that I work with, neighboring art departments in the region, and friends and family. There is a lot of personal time invested into this thesis from many people who have supported me as a student with educational and physical accommodations.

I mainly used emails for invitations because it was the quickest way to expand reach to bolster participation and attendance in such a short time. I worked alongside the social media department in the UARK School of Art to establish a weblink for the event to add into the email. I used personal investment language to give power to the digital words such as “I formally invite you,” “I would like to include into the fold,” and “friends and family are coming from coast to coast” to give desirable context that you, the reading invitee, have value and a place to belong at this particular moment. In response to these emails, I received personal testimonials from people, such as, “I am coming because this is my first invite to an exhibition and I have worked here for *x* amount of years.” The professors and students of architecture and non-hierarchical educational studies, and director of Pat Walker Health Center and Center of Educational Access all attended.

I also deployed postcards and broadsides with the show information to local institutions and community centers and added the exhibition to online and radio format calendars.

Social media has allowed me to contact people from coast to coast and internationally. The consequence of distributing information digitally on social media is knowing your reach. I am aware I have promoted to people whom live out of range of attending the show which has become an exclusion where I am trying to optimize inclusion. This situation of potential exclusion allowed for creativity. I promoted on social media so that any person who was interested, but not able to attend the show could share their address and I send them a show card. The gifting of the postcard trades exclusion of proximity for a different type of responsive social engagement. Postcards have currently reached across the nation and to Japan and England.

Wayne Potratz- Author and Pen Pal

Wayne Potratz is not only a caster but a professor, community member, author, and a pen pal of mine for almost the last 10 years. Wayne is a first-generation cast-iron artist who, with a coalition of likeminded artists, figured out how to take industrial foundry tools and machinery and scale them down for individual artistic usage. Some people in the casting community call this group of people “grey beards.” The first time I wrote to Wayne, I recalled the first time we had met. It was Fall 2010 at Georgia State University for the preparation of the retirement iron pour of another first-generation iron caster, Professor George Beaseley. For this pour, there were over a handful of different types and variants of cupolas from the South East, including multiple performance pours all in one night.

For context, I participate in the subgroup of iron casters who run *continual*. A continual furnace is an iron smelting furnace that is designed with equity in mind. It is not defined by its holding capacity but by crew composition and smelting rate because of its well and spout design. Continual furnaces are also called “teaspouts” because of their upward facing 45- angled tea

kettle like pouring spout. This spout design allows metal to flow continually and at a steady rate for a wider selection of participants and ladle capacities to collect and pour. Traditional “bot and tap” or intermittent furnaces are defined by their internal metal holding capacity which limits whom might pour and more volatile to produce metal from. (Image 17)

An iron pour is usually only one furnace, to give an idea of the pomp and circumstance of the accomplishments of George Beaseley in the community. On a Wednesday before the Saturday pour, Wayne and George called me over from breaking iron water meter covers with a sledgehammer with my friend Phillip Evans. They asked for my name, my professor, and what school I was from because they knew I was not one of their students. After I told them what they wanted, they allowed me to go back to work and chuckled that Kevin Shunn had better and more prepared students than they did which would be indicative of how the Saturday would go for most of them, besides the crew from the University of West Georgia. Phil and I also dropped off finished molds on a pallet which were the first molds to arrive for the event. In my first letter to Wayne, I retold this story. He did not recall the story, but for us it became the starting point of our friendship, and it was a no-brainer to ask for his assistance for recommendations of art foundry reading material for this thesis and troubleshooting at the UARK foundry. We exchange letters about once a season now.

Phil Hutzelman and Inferno Art Foundry

Reporting my concerns and unsafe conditions of the UARK foundry allowed me to partner with the school of Art at UARK and Inferno Art Foundry to process my thesis work and reconnect with my former employer and place of work before graduate school. Phil Hutzelman is the owner of Inferno Art Foundry located right outside Atlanta, Georgia. Phil is always sympathetic and tries to help artists who pay their casting bills. It is unusual for an art foundry to

take on work that was in mid-production or specialized labor. Art foundries take on full commissions from start to finish for ease of calculating costs and profit margins. During Covid, the foundry was drying up on commissions so to have an unsolicited but specialized commission come into the foundry was viewed in a positive scope. It felt important to reconnect with former colleagues who still work there and spend some time with them. Both times going to Inferno, I dropped off a 30-rack of beer and Gatorade to say thanks. Years ago, I picked up an old foundry book from a used bookstore that stated if you keep a low profile while at an art foundry and do not get in the way of the workers, someone will get curious, might talk to you, and even offer you a cigar. It was at such time you could politely ask for a request of some kind. The same was somewhat true with beer and Gatorade for the workers because they could not stop talking about how refreshing it was to work on a commission that they could relate to and play around with. Usually art foundry workers are working on figures of history, scenes of nature, or abstract commercial geometric works so to have pizza, chicken wings, milk, and eggs to work on was a relief of low stakes but personal work to be assigned to work on.

Phil was extremely curious about the UARK foundry situation and gave tons of valuable information about locating the problems. I do not believe I asked for his take on the position either, which is common in the community to just fix the problem and give what knowledge you do have willingly to everyone who has ears. I once posted having problematic results with burning out a PLA print in a ceramic shell mold on social media and I felt very attended to the point that there were subconversations within the posts from members of the casting community. To be opaque or unwilling to help a fellow caster in the community can spread word in the community fairly quickly and lead to isolation or abandonment from the community.

Katie Hovencamp- Direct Object Burnout

Direct object burnout in the ceramic shell casting process is not a new innovation but it is a process that calls for more attention and insight for to produce a successful casting. A friend and colleague from Pennsylvania, Katie Hovencamp, just finished a pair of cotton oven mittens casts in iron using ceramic shell. Katie posted her results on social media, and I asked if she would be willing to explain the process and identify its pitfalls. (Image 18) It is commonly perceived as a compliment to be asked for your professional opinion as this validates the person who holds the knowledge. As a casting community though, for the preservation and growth of the practice, it is expected to assist a fellow caster if asked upon as long as it is a clear overview of the topic and not a handholding through the process. To be unwilling to disclose information to another is to deny why we practice as a community.

My timeline for my thesis and condition of the foundry defined how I would navigate through the foundry process and my icon selection. Katie's knowledge of direct object burnout allowed me to maximize my production rate within a small window of time but could only choose food iconography that was either organic or plastics that were easy to burn out in the ceramic shell mold. I was not able to use glass or metal objects or vessels like beer, wine, and soda. I would also have to do more work in metal grinding ("chasing") and welding. It is not my preferred way to operate and it extended the manufacturing timeline, but it was what the situation and timeline called for. In most, if not all cases, I would select an object, make a rubber or plaster mold to create wax copies, and then go through the ceramic shell process. One could say I was operating "fast and loose" with metal casting because of the undefined parameters of my thesis, my physical health limitations, and condition of the foundry at UARK. I would rather

operate and pride myself on working proactively and preventatively so minor incidents do not escalate. This usually happens with a great deal of communication and preparation.

Metal

Metal casting is not an operational system of direct input and output transactions to get to a final result. It is a trust-equity social exercise for a group when actively pouring and a philosophical question to ask yourself when creating, “when do you want to work, when it is easier at the beginning or harder at the end, because you cannot escape work?” No conceptual explanation can excuse casting flaws, only dedication to your craft.

In *Hot Metal; A Complete Guide to the Metal Casting of Sculpture*, Wayne E. Potratz speaks of a similar nature with respect to the process foundry that is over 8,000 years old. Potratz notes to misuse and abuse the foundry process, personnel, tools, and equipment is to diminish your own power and strength, because all active participants share that responsibility of power. To disregard the foundry process and the power it gives you is to waste and dishonor the elemental materials changing the production of metal “castings” to “cast-aways”. This is on page 2.

Potratz mentions in chapter 8, under melting and pouring metal, that unless you are running a one-person foundry setup, it takes teamwork, especially when you are casting iron. Foundry is a process of community and inclusion, where every person has a singular and different duty to perform in relation to each other to successfully conduct a pour. No one person has ultimate power over every single attribute during a pour. Developing trust equity in with your collaborators, transparent civil responsibility of safety and guidelines to protect one another,

and the ethical responsibility of knowledge of the process and the capacity of the equipment must be passed onto others if one is ever going to conduct a successful pour.

The democratizing practice evens out the perceived social order and fabricated hierarchy of individuals and rotates the whole system 90 degrees, as participants are partnering as a collective to create traction and momentum for each other.

Patina

Since metal casting is such an arduous process of time, equipment, finances, trade skill set, and personnel, finish and patination is critical to the reception of the piece. Potratz notes on page 137, “After making the pattern, completing the mold, melting the metal, pouring, and shaking out the casting, you are half way done.” Potratz notes on page 139, “patinas do not hide bad finishing or chasing, if anything they amplify any castings defects.” Patination is an overarching term to describe a finishing treatment on a metal casting, that could be paint, wax, acid, or any number of types of coatings. Since bronze is copper based alloy, it allows and receives well to the widest arrange for chemical color treatment. I believe one’s finish coating selection should assist to determine what medium one uses though and should be considered at the pattern construction stage of art making. I have a more orthodox view of patina on bronze. To not use a chemical treatment, polish, and in some cases electroplating on bronze is to disregard and dishonor the material, labor, and history of the process. There is a similar debate in the ceramics sphere: should the application of paints on ceramics be considered as an appropriate finish when traditional glaze methodology and application are available? I believe in both cases it shows a lack of professionalism and dedication to the craft and process, and a reevaluation of medium choice should be made.

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All images produced by Michael Louis LeBlanc

Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

Meet Everyone with Art at Location and Time

Phase 1

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-Michael Louis LeBlanc

Image 5, 6, & 6



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10



Image 11

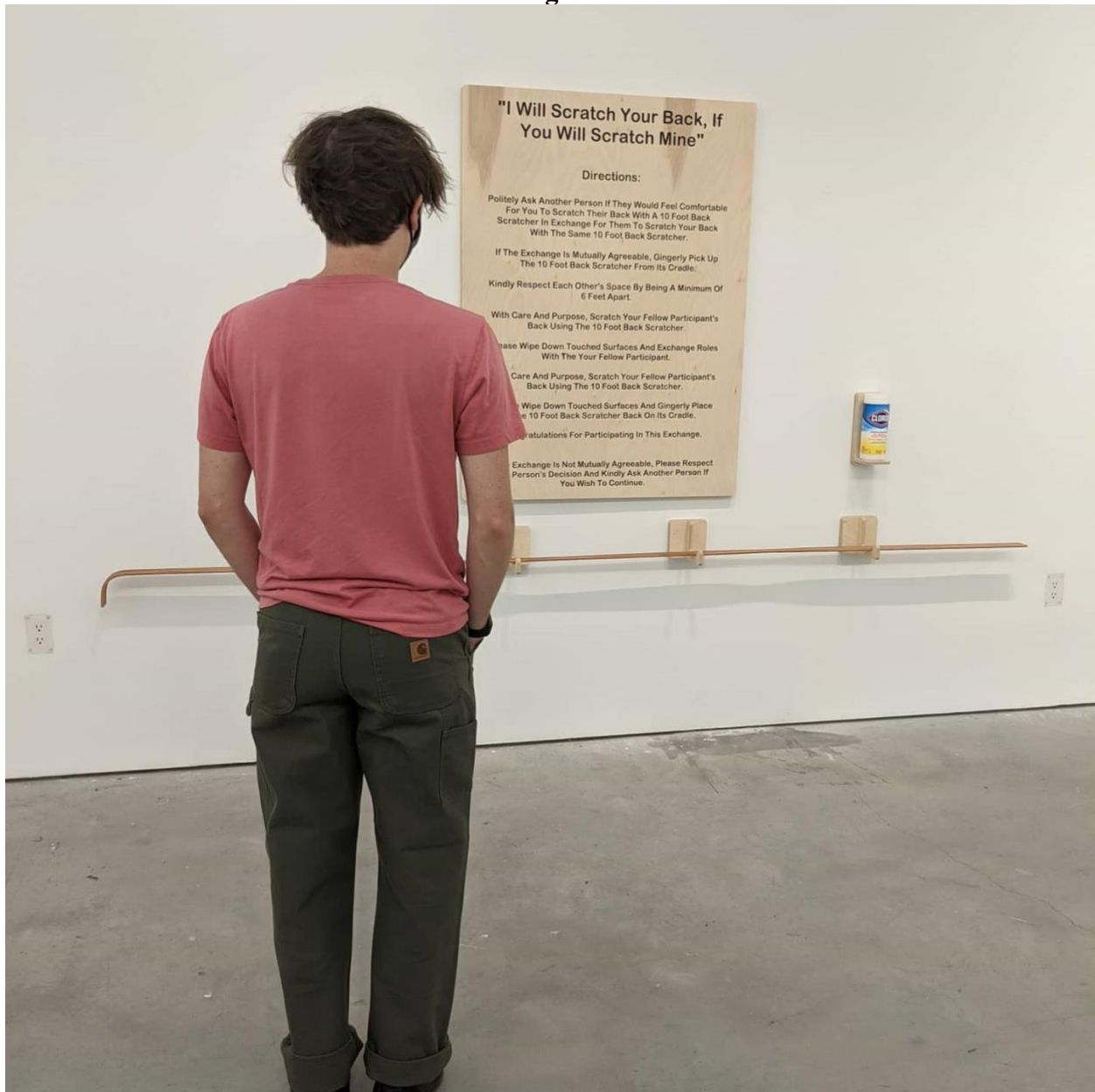


Image 12



Image 13



Image 14

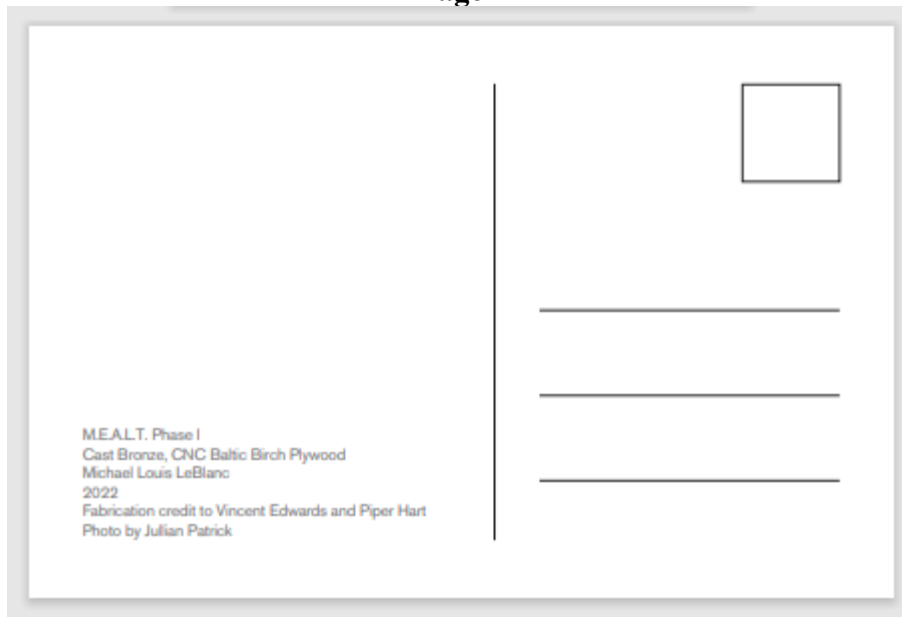


Image 15



Image 16



Image 17



Image 18

