A Synthetic Spring

John Metcalf

The University of Montana

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A Synthetic Abstract

Chairperson: Elizabeth Dove

_A Synthetic Spring_ will be to serve the public as an encounter rather than an art object. The actual event will be free and open to the public, and will only last two hours. The aim is to create something precious and rare. This _exclusiveness_ is a reaction to the twenty-first century’s fascination with identity through the online appearance, the viral video, the text message, the twitter posting, the sound byte, the Internet meme, binge online shopping, etc. In the greater scope, the event will technically begin with the use of promotion several months before the _actual_ event. The promotion will take all shapes and forms, both digitally and physically. We will lure spectators visually, sonically, socially, and psychologically, by creating hype, mystery, anticipation, and curiosity. _A Synthetic Spring_ will be a mixture of everything we have seen before, and nothing we have seen before.

_A Synthetic Spring_ will be a mixture of everything we have seen before, and nothing we have seen before. _A Synthetic Spring_ will be a constructed situation and outcomes will vary. _A Synthetic Spring_ will be experimental and challenging by necessity.

_A Synthetic Spring_ offers a dichotomous contribution; through the celebration of the artificial, the genuine will surface. A significant amount of the participants will not fully acknowledge this experience. The art of composing comedy is the same sort of thing as the art of composing tragedy. _A Synthetic Spring_ takes shape when we are all becoming its actors.
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THESES

i. *A Synthetic Spring* will be to serve the public as an encounter rather than an art object.

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iii. The aim is to create something precious and rare. This *exclusiveness* is a reaction to the twenty-first century’s fascination with identity through the online appearance, the viral video, the text message, the twitter posting, the sound byte, the Internet meme, binge online shopping, etc.

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vi. *A Synthetic Spring* will be a constructed situation and outcomes will vary.

vii. *A Synthetic Spring* will be experimental and challenging by necessity.

viii. *A Synthetic Spring* offers a dichotomous contribution; through the celebration of the artificial, the genuine will surface. A significant amount of the participants will not fully acknowledge this experience.

ix. The art of composing comedy is the same sort of thing as the art of composing tragedy.

x. *A Synthetic Spring* takes shape when we are all becoming its actors.
**Artist’s Note:** The following section is written in the style of an oral history, a form which requires interviewing a wide variety of witnesses and compiling their testimony. Anytime multiple sources are questioned about a shared experience, it’s inevitable for them occasionally to contradict each other. For additional examples written in this style, please see *Capote* by George Plimpton, *Edie* by Jean Stein, and *Lexicon Devil* by Brendan Mullen.
Introduction

+++ Every age that needs him recreates its own Diogenes. Diogenes himself—the fourth century pragmatist, Diogenes the Dog . . . created himself as a figment of history, to begin with. He did so not through dialogue, like Socrates, nor through writing, like Erasmus, nor through the favorite modern methods of public relations . . . but by a method called ‘performance philosophy.’

-Robert Bringhurst

+++ Ruth Eddy (KBGA Radio Personality): After I had Jack on my radio show (aired on KBGA April 16, 2013 2:36pm) that’s all people wanted to talk about with me. I was approached at a bar, in a parking lot, on the Internet and on the oval. Everyone had something to say and everyone had to say it to me.

Tom texted me immediately after saying “that guy might never have a voice for NPR thank god.”

Kalen thought I handled myself well, and wondered who is this Jack Metcalf?

Parker I think just wanted to flirt with me, and mostly just uncomfortably laughed when he tried to recall pieces from the 14-minute interview.

I wanted to help them understand, but I wasn’t completely sure either.

I left the studio that day a bit unsettled. Was the interview so bad that it was great? Or was it just weird? I couldn’t make up my mind. It made me uncomfortable.

I think many viewers of A Synthetic Spring had a similar experience walking out of the Crystal Theatre that I had walking out of KBGA the Tuesday before.

______________________________
1 Bringhurst, Robert, Diogenes: Defictions, Peter Koch, Printer (1994). Berkley, California.

Radio requires audience participation, even when the audience doesn’t know they are participating. Everyone hears the same sounds but each listener imagines a unique image, their experience relies on their own creativity. Theatre of the mind.

I think Jack created a similar space for the audience to play in. Stimulation without direction.

+++
PART ONE // The Conception Made Possible

+++ 

Waiting Spectator #1 (Participant): I’m expecting it to be a total experience.

I am expecting there to be a visual element. I am expecting there to be a sound element. I am expecting there to be dance. I am expecting there to be words . . . poetry.

That is the only thing I know.

+++ 

Waiting Spectator #2 (Participant): I have no idea what it is going to be.

I am kind of anxious to find out. It seems very intriguing, very different/unique.

I am very excited.

+++ 

Waiting Spectator #3 (Participant): The hype has really made it the thing to do in Missoula today.

+++ 

Spectator Reflection #1 (Participant): Unknowingly the A Synthetic Spring experience started in the waiting line itself. As we all waited to get inside of the Crystal Theatre rumors started circulating about what the show might be made up of. People started asking questions about A Synthetic Spring that no one had an answer for. It was covered in a shroud of mystery. Once the clock struck 8 PM, they started letting people in one at a time, which aroused even more questions. They treated it like we were gaining access to a V.I.P. club. The feeling of exclusivity stayed with us throughout the whole show.

+++ 

Stephanie Reiman - Part One (Make-up/Participant): I had the opportunity to be a small part of an ‘art experience’ created by Jack Metcalf. His one night show consisted of dancers, actors, construction, printmaking, costumes, merchandise, music, and some very strange

2 Cecile Bernerat anonymously recorded Waiting Spectators’ dialogues while standing in line on the night of the event. Transcribed from an audio file.
dialogue. I found the whole night to be interesting, new, exhilarating, a bit confusing at times, and just very Jack. If you know anything about him, you know that sometimes he goes for the uncomfortable and strange just to get people out of their normal lives.

A few friends and I were asked by Jack to help with makeup and setup a few hours before the show. When we showed up, there were quite a few people in the Crystal Theatre. Dancers and actors were getting their hair done in wild teased hairstyles that towered on the tops and sides of their heads. Jack put us to work doing everyone’s makeup. This consisted of white faces with a large black line that went across their entire face and covered their eyes. He referred to it as the same idea as a bandit’s mask or a censor box. Once their makeup was done, they got into costume. The dancers had extravagant outfits made by Jack that were covered in a print that he created out of flowing connected lines that reminded me of that the wraps of muscle might look like. The rest of the actors had outfits that reminded me of airplane flight attendants. White pants, black belts and western shirts with patches that advertised all of the businesses and organizations that helped to support Jack’s show.

By the time everyone was finished getting ready and things were all cleared up, Eva and I were sent through as the first ‘test run’ for the whole production. Up until this point, I really didn’t have a clear picture of what this whole thing was suppose to even look like. All I knew is people acted and had lines on a clipboard they could read, and they were to lead us through the whole experience.

+++  

**Bill Dawers (Writer, Savannah Morning News):** The last time Jack Metcalf had a show in Savannah, way back in 2010, buyers could quite literally pay whatever they wanted. So someone in theory could have snapped up the forty or so pieces in *Maybe Something, Maybe Nothing* for a penny. Literally.

But that didn’t happen. The pay-what-you-want system set up a peculiar dialogue between art and buyer — and within the heads of buyers too: “I want that, but I only want to spend this much, but I think that is worth that much, but how much of an asshole will I seem if I only pay this much . . . but I really do want that.”

Jack’s a multimedia artist, but illustration (but of what, exactly?) seems to be at the heart of his work — when it has a heart. He’s a surrealist, a comic fantasist, a mild-mannered iconoclast who — before he was spirited away to the cold of graduate school in Montana — seemed equally at home bartending at Chuck’s on River Street, binding books by hand, meticulously creating his intricate and fanciful drawings, and just generally confounding the heck out of people.

So who is this Jack Metcalf, “artist”? 

When I co-curated *Southern Discomfort: Art Inspired by Flannery O'Connor* last year, Jack was one of the first artists I asked to participate. The resulting image was so strange and evocative that I had to buy it.

And I’m betting that “A Synthetic Spring // an art encounter” will be an unforgettable evening in Missoula later this spring.

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**Jacob Kahn - Part One (Poet):** Probably the best way to know Jack Metcalf is to work with him. I always knew his art from, well, around, and of course thought it was great. That’s because it is. His print and drawing style is totally attractive; it’s speedy, aware, and iconic (zebra-print, ho-hum, quotable), buzzing with subdued humor and ironic commercialism—and yet, luckily, thankfully, not as boastful as older pop art. More fun, less filling. Where Lichtenstein can make a mouth chalky, Jack gets oiled-down. You get the sense he likes pop culture almost as much as Warhol (which is saying a lot: nobody liked it more) and that he likes people even more. That last part is a big deal, because as an artist Jack refuses to be an asshole and that’s different. Talking with him and looking at his art, he’s careful to draw a line between making fun of culture not people, something unique and special in this iconoclastic sphere. With Jack, we’re laughing at and deconstructing the torpid surfaces of twenty-first century capitalism and flat, amoral, technological society together. He is a wry humorist and really a sly romantic. His art makes me feel like I’m on a carrousel of zebras, riding and waving, totally giddy, cinematic. And Jack’s waving back.

A few months before his show in April 2013, *A Synthetic Spring*, Jack contacted me about writing something for his ‘art spectacle’ as he is fond of calling it. He said he’d been thinking about having a poet write the script for the performance, and though he had never read my poetry (nor much contemporary poetry at all as he admitted) he said he liked the idea of a poet more than a playwright, as it theoretically would end up a bit more conceptual—or as I think about it, more fun. He seemed trustworthy and honest and even a little bit cute in soliciting the help of a poet he knew nothing about, so of course I said yes. I loved the idea.

When we first met, I showed him what I thought were some fine instances of poetic writing that had a performatve or script-like aspect (Paul Legault’s *The Other Poems*, Aaron Kunin’s *The Mandarin*) and some other writings that had an aphoristic bluntness I thought would resonate in a show as theatric and conceptual as his (as poetry of Lisa Robertson and the writings of Robert Smithson). Jack looked at me and smiled ardently. He has that habit that I find delightful of finishing sentences with other people, as if he’s right there, tracing their last word, and he did that too. He also has an uncanny way of seeming very charmed or peached by any critical input someone might have (maybe it’s southern propriety---he’s from Georgia), and so he said, wow, looks great. He said, so here’s what I was thinking. He said, go right ahead.

Based on the way the spectacle was organized, I was given five stations to write scripts for (the greeters, the merchants, the photographers, the gatekeeper, and the artist) and within those stations sometimes different scripts for different actors (the director of photography,
for example, and the photographer's assistant, or the artist and his assistant). All in all, I believe it was seven scripts for ten actors, and when more actors were added later (another artist’s assistant, front and back doormen, a gallery attendant for the inner sanctum) they were given lines mostly gleaned from the other scripts. We gave the actors leeway or flexibility in the delivery of their lines, but by and large they were to follow the scripts however they felt comfortable. More or less we wanted to find ourselves in that grey and purple haze between theater and performance art. Not improvisation, not fully directed. Performative freedom inside a cone of linguistic elasticity. Foucault might call this imprisonment. Situationists, detournement.

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**Erika Fredrickson - Part One (Writer, Missoula Independent):** The French Situationist and philosopher Guy Debord warned in the 1960s that life had become a spectacle in which people related more to commodities than to other people. He accused collectors and museum curators of "gorging on falsehood." He chastised the bourgeois for embracing representation over actual experience. The cover of Debord's book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, shows an audience wearing 3D glasses and staring trance-like at an unknown sight—a much grimmer take on J.R. Eyerman's 1952 Life magazine photo of an audience watching the first-ever 3D movie.

In his MFA thesis show, A Synthetic Spring, Missoula artist Jack Metcalf also addresses "the spectacle." He is inspired by Debord’s ideas, but his art tends to be more playful; a critique of inauthentic—or synthetic—life disguised in down-the-rabbit-hole quirk. In his 2011 show at The Brink, for instance, he created a woodblock print of a Tijuana Zebra or "zonkey," which he titled "I have nothing to say/and I am saying it." Metcalf has also put on performance art shows in the basement of the Top Hat. During the recent album release show for Missoula art-pop band Needlecraft, he stood on stage, oiled-up, wearing nothing but shorts and lifting weights to the music. In other words, he relishes absurdity.

Metcalf is also an elusive creature who will only reveal so much about his projects ahead of time. "I think people like surprises," he says with a grin. "People like surprises, right?"

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PART TWO // The Conception Made Actual

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**Active Spectator #1 (Participant)**: It’s more psychological than looking at a pretty painting.

It is a little uncomfortable.

It is fantastic.

+++ 

**Active Spectator #2 (Participant)**: I’m bamboozled.

I am not sure what to think; I'll probably be told what to think after it is all done.

+++ 

**Active Spectator #3 (Participant)**: With these art shows, I have a hard time knowing what they are trying to get at. So far I think it is some kind of absurdist satire on commodity fetishism or something like that.

+++ 

**Spectator Reflection #2 (Participant)**: Upon first entering, I was greeted by three actresses heavily clad in black and white, which were the two colors that dominated the entire set. They each spoke to me at the same time, evoking confusion and uncertainty. Before I had time to respond to any or all of them, I was pushed off toward the rest of the show.

The environment that Metcalf had created inside the Crystal Theatre was one of mystery and of familiarity. Many aspects of the show reflected the high appeal towards fashion as artificiality in today's society.

The robotic way in which the actors and actresses spoke and moved lent heavily to the ‘synthetic’ theme of the show. Each would complement me or give me a profound statement about life and repeat their lines of dialog to the next person who came along.

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3 Cecile Bernerat anonymously recorded *Active Spectators’* dialogues while inside the Crystal Theatre on the night of the event. Transcribed from an audio file.
I was told to take a number and step in the line that was forming in the center of the room. It led to a row of steps lined with dancers. At the top of the steps were curtains that led into another room.

Anxiety and curiosity had heavy roles to play in this show, and once again I found myself wondering what lay ahead. The expressions on people’s faces as they exited the show were unreadable, so there was no way of knowing.

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Erika Fredrickson - Part Two (Writer, Missoula Independent): A Synthetic Spring will be a one-night-only art show at the Crystal Theatre that employs visual art, choreography from Missoula’s Bare Bait Dance group, music from DJ Kris Moon, costumes by Needlecraft drummer Hana MT, plus work from other composers, actors, videographers and poets.

Despite the collaboration, this is Metcalf’s project through and through. As evidence, Metcalf’s studio is overflowing with things he’s made for the show that play on the idea of mass-produced commodities that Debord so loathed. There are 43-cent stamps, bottled water and pencils, all labeled with "Jack Metcalf" as the brand. Two small boxes brim with Jack Metcalf-brand fortune cookies, and instead of a fortune each holds poetry he and his collaborators wrote. He also has a life-size cut-out of himself smiling like a smooth-talking salesman. There are elaborate costumes adorned NASCAR-style with the show’s actual sponsors. "Nothing’s to be sincere or genuine," Metcalf says. "I’ve been studying printmaking, which [deals with] repetition and technology. Multiples of multiples. This show is about supply and demand, it’s about abundance, it’s about consumption, expansion and appearances."

The set of A Synthetic Spring is reminiscent of other pieces Metcalf has done during his tenure as an art student at UM. Everything in the show—the set, props, costumes—sports his tell-tale black and white zebra-like print, which evokes the zonkey. He used the same design for an art piece in last year’s Day of the Dead parade. Metcalf says he’s begun to use the zebra print as a way to brand his work, to create a Jack Metcalf identity. It’s made with a printmaking block and adhered to the 10-foot-tall set with wheat and water—which is what political street artists have often used instead of glue.

In the show, Metcalf will be played by Missoula actor Jeff Medley, whom he recently collaborated with on a verbatim staged rendition of an old Mister Rogers album. In fact, when I first met with Metcalf to talk about A Synthetic Spring I half expect to be greeted by Jeff Medley instead. "We thought about doing that," says Metcalf, laughing. "We should have."

A Synthetic Spring does something that Debord’s bookish criticism could never do. It revels in inauthentic commodity culture, and yet by being a show that celebrates creative artists, it’s exactly what Debord would approve of.
"The show is definitely meant to be fun," Metcalf says. "I participate in the spectacle, too. But it's also kind of a critique."

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**Stephanie Reiman - Part Two (Make-up/Participant):** First thing I came to as I entered the room were three of the actors spitting out lines that were a little strange like, "Looking around is fun." They were the greeters and welcomed us in with a very invasive and somewhat harsh welcome. It made me feel crowded at first. We were then directed to go to the merchandise table or the photo-op that had a background and a cardboard cutout of Jack.

The merchandise table had things such as *A Synthetic Spring* water bottles, posters for the event, actual stamps created for the event, and pencils. The merchants behind the table were very calm and serious, as were all the actors, and simply spit out lines that really had no meaning but sounded intelligent. They would lead me in circles when I wanted to buy something, saying to have a water bottle, I must buy seven pencils first, and to buy pencils I must buy three patches, and so on in circles until I finally understood that I could not purchase anything.

The photo-op assistants were harsh and told me everything I was doing was wrong and to change my pose. After my photo, they instructed me to take a number and wait for it to be called. While I waited, the dancers danced on stage and an actor playing Jack Metcalf welcomed me and thanked me for coming and explained his idea of the show in strange words.

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**Jacob Kahn - Part Two (Poet):** This part of the spectacle, the outer stations (or everything but the inner sanctum), I thought of conceptually as a sort of compartmentalized architecture of society, a caricature of synthetic culture at its scintillating zenith: thrilling, bewildering, innocuous, and utterly meaningless. The wet-dream of consumer-capitalism, the bright and glittering dream of boundless technology. Each station and its script implied its own critique of such a hyperbolically synthetic world: the greeters with gender and femininity, genuine conversation vs. prescribed interaction; the merch-table with neo-liberal global capitalism, brand manipulation and commodity fetishism; the photo-booth with simulation and simulacra, screens and two-dimensionality, genuine experience vs. artificial representation; the artist with identity and authenticity, celebrity and fashion, and, somewhat underhandedly, with the pretensions of the art-world and the artist’s ostentatious cult of personality; and the gatekeeper with bureaucracy and the civic interface. In a world this artificial, the art was saying, nothing is to be seen as genuine. Nothing is for sale; nothing to be held. Everything is to be seen. As the poet Lisa Robertson writes, “Everything surface is ambitious; we excavate a non-existent era of the human. Everything is to be lifted into place. Everything is illuminated; we prove inexhaustibility.” And the actors and dancers were inexhaustible: they didn’t stop! Every surface in the
spectacle was illuminated, but only by technology, by brand, by script; every interaction was ambitious but never human. The human was non-existent; it was artificially lifted into place. It was the opposite of the illuminated. It was dead.

As the scriptwriter I formally thought a lot about allegory, imperative, and the regulatory aspect of the sentence (that is, X does this, Y says that, Z is this). The scripts consisted mostly of directives ("Stare off like you're helpless and battered by solitudes," “buy whatever you like,” “It's not for sale”) and of aphorisms (“The abundant commodity stands for the total breach in the organic development of social needs,” “The photograph coalesces around you like water”). I wanted the vernacular to be clearly different than everyday speech, so that it might seem titillating if a bit disorienting to the vague listener, and conceptually provocative and funny to the keener folks. That sense of humor—aphorisms that deconstruct to gibberish, temperamental instructions to do ridiculous, indefinite things—I felt fit right in with the entire underhanded commentary of the show, and with Jack’s humorous complexion overall as an artist. Really everything except for the inner sanctum was a big potent joke, but hopefully one, as Jack made clear, that participants would enjoy. And hopefully something (à la the poetic fortune cookies) they could take home.

The night of the show, I was also the spectacle’s front-door man, it’s Cerberus, or I guess just bouncer. This gave me a much different perspective on the piece than I had as the scriptwriter. I was stationed outside the spectacle, in the hallway (for some reason a particularly dark spot in the hallway), before a large, thick comforter we were using as a curtain. I was all dressed and buckled up in white. I felt like an imperious bat. Too bad I couldn’t see anything. I stamped people’s hands, gave them programs, gave them no answers as to what was going on inside. At fifteen to eight, there was already a line stretching outside, down the cave-like hallway and through the small, rouged-up tapas restaurant that shares the building. The line fulminated; it teemed. This fanciful sense of anticipation didn’t let up all night, except to become less regal and more anxious, uncontrollable, wild. It would surge and overwhelm. Then I would stamp them and let them inside.

+++  

Jeff Medley (Actor): Oh . . . becoming Jack Metcalf . . .

It all begins with Patrick Swayze (a mask of his head minus the eyes). I went to a First Friday art show in the basement of the pre-renovation Top Hat and was mesmerized by the trippy, nonsensical art I encountered and went home with a souvenir Patrick Swayze mask.

It continues with Fred Rogers and my desire to perform, in its entirety, an album of his entitled Won’t You Be My Neighbor? There was a proverbial light bulb of awareness that Jack Metcalf must do the art for this show. I contacted him and, soon, we were sitting across from each other, sipping coffee, in a booth at Butterfly Herbs. I asked him to create a set to back me up on stage as I sang and spoke Fred’s songs and words. He agreed to do the art. It was brilliant and it still is . . .
I don’t recall exact dates, but at some point leading up to the Mister Rogers performances, Jack asked if I would be him for a project, something he was referring to as a spectacle. It was the least I could do. I should have done some fundraising to pay him what he’s worth, but if, by being him, I could repay him in some fashion for his selfless output, it goes without saying that I had to be Jack Metcalf.

As an actor, I wondered if I could sound like him and take on his mannerisms. Fortunately, we decided—well, Jack decided, early on, that I was to be his ideal self, which meant I was free to take on any affect I desired since nobody was privy to the inner-workings of his dreams. So, I really didn’t have to bother sounding like Jack or even acting like him. I went with a self-assured, hyper-confident and slightly flamboyant demeanor. Maybe it was actually Jack who made these decisions as well.

What are the implications of becoming Jack Metcalf?

Upon release of the Synthetic Spring infomercial, we discovered an interesting phenomenon: people who knew me, but not Jack, assumed Jack Metcalf was a figment of my imagination, an alter-ego, if you will. We liked this, Jack and I, and with Jack’s encouragement to keep his existence vague, I did my best to co-opt his very being. With his blessing, I continued to perpetuate this confusion with mystery and vagueness.

At the end of my Mister Rogers show, after thanking the band, I would thank “Jack Metcalf” for his art, using my fingers to make the quotes around his name. I made my name Jeff Medley (Jack Metcalf) on my Facebook account for the weeks leading up to A Synthetic Spring. Maintaining this particular ruse was helped by the fact that Jack doesn’t participate in the Facebook world. In passing conversation, I was less than direct when discussing the details of the project with the perplexed.

As a result of all of this, there are some people who think I have quite a knack for woodblock printing and a talent for coordinating unique events that cause people to line up around the block with very little knowledge of what they’re about to experience. I’ll take it.

+++  

Anonymous Art Student Reflection #1 (Participant): This show was indeed what Jack Metcalf promised it would be: an artistic experience. I’ve seen very little performance art, so this piece felt extremely new and uncomfortably foreign to me, but in the best possible way.

The thing that I personally managed to take away from that chaotic night was the effect of ‘hype.’ Jack started advertising for his show months and months ago. He created a commercial, hung posters, had radio advertisements, sent mass emails, the whole nine

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4 Anonymous Art Student Reflections are from written accounts collected from Elizabeth Dove’s Advanced Printmaking class at the University of Montana.
yards. He rallied his cronies to tell all their friends, and those friends told more friends. However, amidst all this advertising there was hardly any mention of what the performance would actually consist of. It was to be a one night only spectacular event shrouded in mystery.

So much hype was created for this performance, and so much curiosity surrounded it that people were willing to stake out for a mere glimpse. People may have left thinking, “Was it worth it? What just happened?” I later found out that those at the back of the line didn’t even get a chance to see the real performance. They waited two hours for nothing. It’s amazing the power that advertising and curiosity have over consumers.

+++  

Hana ‘MT’ (Seamstress): I want to write it all out… but at the same time I do not want to, because it all makes so much sense to me, but … it might seem silly to y’all, and then I will just second guess myself. Just believe me when I say that it’s possible for a person to understand a great deal about a person in a few moments.

I knew of Jack Metcalf, before I actually knew Jack Metcalf.

I had friends with crushes on him; I had seen his art all over town, sometimes in the most unexpected places. I thought of him as a recluse, a weirdo, a potential fable.

Our actual paths first crossed when my friend David Miles Lusk suggested him to be an onstage performer for my band, Needlecraft, at Missoula’s DIY music festival, Total Fest. I crafted him and DML custom hunk shorts; they were short, tight, and shined. The boys were asked the to lather their bodies in baby oil and lift weights as we executed our set. By the way, our band’s first purpose is to objectify men and they nailed it.

Shortly after Total Fest, Jack asked for me to play a drum solo on a hand built raft he constructed to float down the Clark Fork River (even through Brennan’s Wave) in part of the Roots River Fest. It was here; sharing a bottle of spiced rum, and strapping a homemade boat with a drum set attached to it to his mature pink truck, Jack mentioned he had bigger ideas. It was here he first mentioned A Synthetic Spring. And now that I think about it, he mentioned this in August, which was like 9 months before the two-hour performance.

For the next couple months we spent most of our days, watching youtube videos, browsing fashion blogs, going to glam rock shows (even a road trip to see the art-pop group Ssion in Olympia, WA) … we were building a scrapbook of ideas for the aesthetic of the costumes for A Synthetic Spring. Even though at the time, I really did not know what exactly he had in mind for the entirety of this event. All I did know is that he acted professional, proved to be sincere, and we shared the same taste when it comes to fashion.

We desired the costumes to summon a synthesis of fashion designer Leigh Bowery, the dreamy David Bowie, and any sci-fi movie from circa 1981-ish (think Blade Runner, Escape
from New York, Total Recall). I believe he mentioned something like he was after how we viewed the future in the past?

Anyway, we pretty much put together a checklist: Unitards . . . check! Pointy shoulders . . . check! Studs . . . check! Leather fringe . . . check! And so on . . .

Long story short, we spent roughly two months together creating patterns, printing fabric, and sewing them together, and yes, Jack can actually sew quite well. It’s that eye for detail.

Shortly after the completion of the costumes, my mother passed away and I needed time to grieve. So I distanced myself from the project Metcalf for several months, only to rejoin him on the actual day of the event, and shared a bird’s eye view of the whole spectacle from the projection room of the theater seated next to him. It was somewhat magical. It was here, the entirety of the project hit me all at once, the whole experience was amazing and I was kind of crying on and off all night after it ended . . .

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**Anonymous Art Student Reflection #2 (Participant):** On April 18\(^{th}\), at the Crystal Theatre of Missoula, Montana, I experienced, *A Synthetic Spring*. The show involved actors, dancers, construction, photography, printmaking, music and props. With a strong use of sensory-stimulating mediums and overall concentrated theme, the show carried a high level of viewer involvement and emotion.

To begin, the line at the door was enormous and slow moving. After a few hours of waiting, if not more than that, one came to realize that this was due to the lengthy intervals of single person entry. Upon entering, the music is loud, the room is dark but sliced with neon lights, and there is a group of oddly dressed actors robotically repeating disagreeing phrases. The small theater is crowded with people standing in front of a large white stage. This construction is printed repeatedly with a design that matched the eccentricity of the dancers, because yes, there were dancers. In synchronized routine, dancers in spandex and heavy makeup perform routines like those of a pop music video. Other corners had opportunities for audience involvement, such as a photo-op with a cardboard cutout of Jack Metcalf. But most bold and significant was a large projector displaying a large number that would change every few minutes. A friend told me that I needed to pull a number from the dispenser by the stage, and wait to be called to enter a mysterious doorway in the center of the stage.

Formally, the show was interesting to look at. The dancers, the music, and light invoked a feeling of fear for the future, repetition, and waiting. The photo opportunity and merchandise table created a sense of celebration. Unfortunately, I have no idea what was in the mysterious doorway behind the stage because my number was not called before the closing of the event. The design of the entire event, from stage to costumes, was well matched and eye invoking. The printmaking on the clothing and stage was neatly composed and interesting. I am very curious about what I must have missed behind the stage.
There was most certainly a strong emotion of frustration among the viewers. The exceeding long wait was unexpected and many did not even make it into the theater. I am unsure as to whether or not this was intentional.

Overall, the show suggested feelings of waiting, frustration, sexuality, and celebration. If these were the goals of the production, I believe that it was successful. Though some clarity as to whether or not turning people away was an intentional decision to invoke a feeling from the viewer might have strengthened the message of the event. Many felt cheated, hearing that they were intentionally cheated might improve the artistic communication. Otherwise, amazing effort and well-thought out exhibition.

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**Joy French (Choreography)**: Jack Metcalf knows how to throw a party.

You might think I’m devaluing his work somehow by saying his art is a “party,” but truly, I do not mean it condescendingly. According to a, not-so-academic, Google search, a party is a “social gathering especially for pleasure or amusement.” Making an evening of art feel like party is challenging and, in my experience, rarely works out.

But Jack succeeds. One element of the party-like qualities of his most recent show, *A Synthetic Spring*, is his use of performance. I became involved specifically with the dance component of the evening when Jack invited my company, Bare Bait Dance (BBD), into the work almost a year ago. As one of two professional dance companies in the state, BBD often gets invited to perform at various events throughout Missoula and Montana but this felt different. What Jack proposed to me was unique: BBD would be a part of the two-hour, continuous external art spectacle of the evening. This meant the dance should be constant and compelling but not narrative nor overly sincere. I began to think of it as part of the artifice without much heart.

To be clear, this is not how I usually choreograph. Sincerity, vulnerability, and telling stories tend to be my artistic leanings so I knew this project would challenge me. Jack was essentially asking me to create a dance, which on first glance might feel dynamic but quickly lose its charm as the viewer realized they were essentially just seeing it repeat over and over again. It needed to change enough to be lively in the short term but quickly become part of the background noise of the party. Much like professional nightclub dancers who add to the scenery but are not the main focus of why you are there.

Then came the music: a five-minute piece created by DJ Kris Moon was our score/blueprint. Of course it was electronic (after all, it’s party) and would be looped continuously. That meant that I needed to choreograph either two hours of dance for my four BBD dancers or find ways to have them loop through sections together but include breaks occasionally. After exploring many different looping versions, we settled on a four part score: first duet (1 dancer on each platform), quartet (2 dancers on each platform), second duet (the two dancers not in first duet, 1 on each platform), and repeat quartet. Repeat 4 parts again and
again for two hours. The structure gave the dancers 5 minutes off during every 20-minute loop.

Based on the music with its electronic space-travel sounds and the other-worldly unitard costumes, the dancers and I collaborated on sci-fi style dance moves. No, I don’t know what that means exactly but I think it felt right given the spectacle goal. In the end I can tell you this: the dancers never looked at the audience (they instead kept their focus high above the crowd); their movements were precise and sharp leaning towards a more jazzy, MTV style of dance; and we played with using big, dynamic movements even within the confinements of the 4’x7’ performance platforms.

Do I think this is the most compelling two hours of choreography I’ve ever compiled? To be honest, no. (I would not normally choose to show the same 20 mins of choreography 6 times in a row.) But I love when dance can transcend the proscenium stage, connect with new collaborators and audiences, and be used to entertain in unexpected ways. In other words, I love to show up at a party and suddenly realized I’m at a performance. Jack, the man of many talents, created layers for us all to be part of and witness together. For me, A Synthetic Spring took it another step (or two?): it was an art opening disguised as a party disguised as a performance disguised as an art opening. I’m honored BBD was invited to rock those unitards and be a part of the “noise” of the party.

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**Anonymous Art Student Reflection #3 (Participant):** My initial thought on *A Synthetic Spring* was disappointment. After waiting in line for an hour and a half, I made it into the Crystal Theatre, snagged a numbered ticket when alas the lights came on and the applause began. I did not clap. I had been inside the theater all but two minutes when 10 PM rolled around, signaling the finale. Annoyed, I shuffled through the herd of patrons out the back and once I had reached the cold night air, it dawned on me. Metcalf had wanted this all along.

Exclusivity was the life force of this exhibit. Personally I can say that I was able to breach the outer layer of the show, whereas many didn’t even make it into the actual venue due to the seemingly endless line down the street.

The theater was full of people. As the door swung open three actors greeted me all repeating the same lines. As to what they actually said, I have no idea, nor do I think I want to remember. The characters face painted in black and white all wore matching creations made out of Metcalf’s printed fabrics. Teetering on my tiptoes over the many heads, I saw *IT*. I call it *IT*, considering I never got to see *IT*, thus have no idea what *IT* was. I saw a large white structure covered in Metcalf’s abstract line work. A woman’s voice called B20 and a man was let into the edifice, disappearing. From what limited vision I did have I caught a glimpse of the dancers. Adorned in similar creations than the actors, all were moving in a fairly modern and robotic-like way.
A *Synthetic Spring* was a culmination of how we conduct our lives around commodities. However to me, the show was about time. A friend of mine was kind enough to share with me what was actually in the structure, but considering I didn’t see it myself, I feel as though I cannot speak of it. Time. At first, I had felt that I had wasted my time. A chunk out of my Thursday night had been devoted to standing on a street to no avail. Yet, looking back I had a quality hour and a half with my good friends, and even got to enjoy a nice beer from the Silk Road (a tapas restaurant that shares the building with the theater). What I am getting at is, we as Americans, value time as money. We have valued time in such a way that if what we are doing is not immediately beneficial; it’s not worth it. *A Synthetic Spring* took a good deal of all of our time. More so than ever, our culture displays a strong sense of entitlement. Just because I stood in line I feel as though I am entitled to see what lies at the end. In addition, the exhibit was for one night and only one night. This factor only enhanced the overall importance of a creation that was fleeting.

The viewers were just as instrumental as the actors, without the awaiting masses the shows exclusivity couldn’t have kept the curiosity flowing throughout the night. I think as a whole the extravaganza shed light on the importance of experience. It was not a series of paintings on a wall, it was an artwork you could walk around in and even be apart of. The art form appeared in the overall ambiance and the ability to conger a large enough crowd where two thirds did not even see the pièce de résistance.

As a whole, the exhibit was successful in gaining attention. Was I impressed? Yes and no. Maybe I would be more so if I had experienced *IT* all. However, I was quite fond of the dancer’s fringe lined, Canadian snow lynx get ups. The large size of the structure was surprising and the actors holding true to character was a strong addition. There was even a life size cutout of Metcalf himself where you could get your picture taken next to, adding ever more so to the ‘synthetic’ aspect. The execution was precise, and every little detail had been thought of, down to labeled water bottles. The fact that I am annoyed is that I never saw the main event, which made the spectacle even more so ‘synthetic.’ In all reality, I went to the event, and didn’t really do anything, but I wouldn’t say I didn’t see something.

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**DJ Kris Moon (Electronic Musician):** I received an email from Jack in November asking if I would create a looping track for what he was calling ‘an art spectacle.’ He provided a list of things he had in mind, here it is from the email, verbatim:  
- Electronic  
- Danceable (It will be choreographed for performance by the Bare Bait Dance Company)  
- 'Pop' tendencies, garnished with artsy delivery  
- Catchy  
- 3 to 4 minutes in length  
- Not opposed to sampling of songs with certain upbeat existential themes (i.e. Talking Heads "Once in a Lifetime")  
- Basically, a modern, danceable mashup with the Talking Heads (specifically "Once in a lifetime") is generally what I am after. A couple weeks will be fine. I probably will
not need it until mid-December or January. If you need any feedback along the way, let me know.

I had worked with Jack previously, and actually have a bunch of his prints littering my walls at home, so I knew he was legit.

From there, I started making a sample track and sent it his way to make sure we were copacetic. After he said he was in, we continued to develop the track. I would send him updates; he would give feedback, I would adapt. We ended up with a track that, while completely constructed from ‘Once in a lifetime,’ only showcased subtle references to the song. It was popping at the seams with gospel-esque moments, dramatic breakdowns, elements with more rise, some drum rolling, and the an overall upbeat feel.

After completion, which was like January, he kind of dropped off my radar until I started to notice all the promotion around town and from some mutual friends.

I should have checked my email to discover he had what he called ‘a golden ticket’ waiting for me at the door, because the night of the event I waited in line just as everyone else . . . ha . . . I got in just in time to witness the last 5 minutes, wish I had known. :) Great event, the line was around the block for pretty much the duration, strong work.

From what I saw, everything was solid, and I was proud to be apart of the event.

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**Benjamin Adams - Part One (Art Critic):** A Synthetic Spring places the participant in something of a unique position. Thrown into a kind of shallowing objectification, she becomes a rote piece of a larger process that seems to function entirely independent of her. At the same time, her personal space is almost flagrantly disregarded as she is assaulted by the actors working the particulars of their memorized scripts. The participant feels at once forgotten & scrutinized. The effect is alienating.

But hasn’t she been here before? I find A Synthetic Spring to be a curious mix of the conceptually socko and the theoretically redundant, a grand but ultimately ineffectual portrayal of contemporary life, at times nothing more than an absurdly well-wrought refraction of a commodity engaging emptily with itself.

As I hope this quick note will outline, I don’t think that necessarily means A Synthetic Spring doesn’t succeed in its endeavors; rather, the piece runs up against the limits of our critical representation of ourselves in the infancy of the 21st century. There seems to be little space anymore for a subject’s spontaneous improvisation within the larger field of cultural colonization that entraps her. For better or worse, A Synthetic Spring reflects that sad fact. The bitterness I felt was the result of my own distaste for ideas that ape the totalization of a hegemonic discourse over the weirdness of an unpredictable, situationist ethic. A Synthetic Spring happily sups from totalization, feeling like so much coquettish play in the face of a
world ripping the living soul right out of itself, but it offers little redress, little recuperation, little space for response, reaction, spontaneity, seizure.

I am sounding like I hated the thing, but I must admit I really didn’t. There is much to admire & explore. If nothing else, art should compel the participant to feel a careful despair that bears witness to the nihilism of the world around her. I do think A Synthetic Spring succeeds in this way.

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PART THREE // The Conception Made Necessary

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**Jack Metcalf (Artist)**: Hello Todd, I recently gotten in touch with Felco Industries to inquire about fabricating a 'machine' for an upcoming art project. Kirt from Felco spoke very highly of your capabilities.

To give you a brief overview of the potential 'machine': The project requires an AC powered paper shredder that can feed, and continuously cut a 42" x 30' scroll of paper for 2 hours at a slow speed. I have sketched several design ideas, but I am definitely open to the potential of a more logical solution. (Deadline would be April 18th, 2013)

I do have a good amount of funding for the project, and would like to take the next step to make this idea a reality. I appreciate your time, and look forward to possibly working with you in the future. My schedule is pretty flexible, let me know if/when you could meet to discuss this project further.

Regards,
Jack Metcalf

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**Todd McCollum (Engineer)**: Jack, it sounds like a very interesting project. How wide will the shredded strips be after running through the shredder? Are you looking for both design and building assistance for this project?

I assume you have a target budget in mind for my assistance based on your funds available. What is a ball park price range we are working with so I have an idea on how to approach my first line of thinking?

Usually a quick visit over the phone works best than setting a time and place from there.

Regards,

Todd

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5 Dialogue from an email correspondence between Jack Metcalf and Todd McCollum. September, 26, 2013.
Jack Metcalf (Artist): Todd, Thanks for the quick response.

There is a bit of tolerance concerning the size of the discarded shredded paper. Ideally, the shreds would be a small enough dimension that they could not be easily arranged back together. So maybe a maximum size of 3” x 6,” there is some wiggle room here.

The theme/idea behind the project is to create a situation that in order to see the scroll drawing, is to destroy the drawing. So there will be a small room with a spring-loaded floor, when the floor is depressed it completes a circuit, which turns on the paper shredder that feeds and cuts the scroll drawing. Since the viewer will only be able to see the drawing while inside the room, they are forced to destroy the drawing if they wish to view it. (Referring to a basic physic principle that to view something is to change it) The only documentation of the scroll will be the spectators/participants’ memory and the left over paper shreds.

I imagine I would need assistance with the design and the construction. I do have access to complete metal and wood shops, but I am not completely confident in the high level of craftsmanship this project might require. I have a feeling precision will be important, ha-ha.

I was thinking to spend around $*000 on this component of the project. Is that realistic? There is some wiggle room here too.

I have been collecting a certain type of high-end forged scissor for the past few years with this project in mind (I roughly have 20 pairs of shears). If they could be included, that would be great, but not a deal breaker.

Thanks again,
Jack

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Todd McCollum (Engineer): Jack, this gives me a pretty good idea of what you are setting out to accomplish.
I will give it some thought and get back to you tomorrow.

Regards,
Todd

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Jeremy Sher (Actor): I participated in the installation as the Gallery Attendant. I was positioned inside the small room that housed Jack’s 30-foot scroll drawing, ensuring no one got hurt or messed with the art.
By far I had the most rewarding position in the entire operation, getting to witness the entire scroll and, to my surprise, the fascinating individual reactions to it. I’ll attempt to categorize the public’s interactions with Jack’s scroll:

- **THE HELPLESS CHILD:** Several people came into the room, took a one-second snapshot of the scene and immediately asked for instructions. “Am I supposed to do something?” “What’s supposed to happen?” “Is there some other door I am supposed to find?” “Is this it?” I softly gestured toward the scroll and left it at that.

- **THE TOURIST:** A shocking number of people witnessed the scroll getting diced into confetti, and then darted into the pile to take home a souvenir snippet. I suggested that the paper on the floor was part of the exhibit and needed to remain there at the artist’s request. Most respected the rules but a couple brassy individuals sneered at me and took a piece anyway.

- **THE SLEEPER CELL:** Some people’s entrance timed out perfectly with the rotary cutter activation, leading them to believe that they caused it to happen. This made them freeze in their tracks, check in with me, then slowly inch forward to make it happen again. They didn’t quite notice the drawing as much as the mechanism, but they were completely engaged with the experience.

- **THE MATHEMATICIAN:** Many individuals entered the room, took in the drawing and studied it thoughtfully, only to be interrupted by the rotary blade crossing the scroll and chopping it up. They all diverted attention to that, then back up to the drawing, a pause to process, a look of incredulity, a check-in with me, back to the scroll . . . and then the AHA realization of what this whole thing was about.

- **THE IMPATIENT:** Several people entered in exasperation, saw the scroll in whatever state it was in, glared at me and bolted. All before the cutter activated, which happened every 20 seconds.

- **L’ARTISTE:** A precious few took it all in: drawing, cutters, scroll moving toward cutters, drawing being destroyed, the gauntlet they ran to get in here, the simultaneous superficiality and depth, implications of it all. Each of them crossed their arms, some stoked their chins, all slowly blossomed a smile of recognition, and appreciation. Some thanked me as they left.

The microcosm of the viewing room was many things: an oasis of calm, the pinnacle of the journey, a complete letdown, a rip-off, a joke, a stroke of genius. What struck me was the notion of providing a sublime destination at the end of a bombastic journey. The downshift one had to make clearly affected the reactions tendered. I’d be very curious to witness reactions in a completely different setting. This type of experiment is the stuff of a whole new line of Theses.

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**Spectator Reflection #3 (Participant):** As my number was called I excitedly stepped past the dancers and behind the curtains at the top of the steps. Inside the room there was a man standing beside a elaborate paper shredder which was slowly slicing up a drawing.
I observed the scroll for a while, and looked around the machine, exploring every angle of it. The man at the side of the room waited patiently with his arms behind his back, not saying a word. As I withdrew from the room I was directed toward the show’s exit, and was given a poetic fortune cookie to remember what I had experienced that night.

It was easy to see that Metcalf’s intention behind *A Synthetic Spring* was a success, because many people walked out of the show with much to think about. The entire show was very well planned out, and the choreography and acting were wonderful. As an artist I found this show to be very inspiring and creative. Each of the spectators and the participants in the show were part of the art, and that shows that art does not have to be an object, it can simply be an experience.

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**Stephanie Reiman - Part Three (Make-up/Participant):** Once my number was called, I was instructed to go up the stage and into a room where there was a large drawing created by Jack. Most of the drawing was rolled up and about four feet was rolled down. At the bottom of the drawing was a large contraption that would roll the drawing down slowly, then slice off about an inch at a time from the bottom. The sliced piece would fall down into the open blades of a row of scissors that cut all in unison, dropping the small confetti pieces of the drawing to a pile on the ground. This action would repeat about every ten seconds. As part of the drawing was being destroyed at the bottom, new sections of the drawing were being revealed to me at the top. It was this bitter sweet experience of this incredibly detailed and enormous drawing that would never be completely revealed to me, and parts that I had the pleasure to see would never be revealed to anyone else. Each person that walked into that room would have a unique viewing experience from the next because no one ever saw the exact same part of the drawing. This idea was by far my favorite part of the whole experience.

After I felt like I had my moment with the drawing, I walked out and was told to exit out the back, where I was handed a fortune cookie containing a strange fortune created for the show and I left out the backdoor into an alley. Coming out into the real world flooded my mind with questions about what exactly I had just seen. I was having trouble deciding if I enjoyed the piece, or found it strange and over the top, or just plain weird. I think that is what Jack ultimately wanted for his audience’s reaction. He wanted us to think and ponder what the whole experience really meant and what it was intended to teach us. Jack’s show was something I have never tasted before.

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**Spectator Reflection #4 (Participant):** Talking with some of my friends, those who are not art majors in particular, they were somewhat frustrated at the feeling of spending two or so hours for a fairly impersonal experience that they described as ‘weird.’ It’s a bold move in small place like Missoula, to have people wait a considerable amount of their time, for an artist of their town. But I suppose that was the point of it all to some extent, if I recall he described it as a rare experience for some, which certainly held true. As well, I don’t
think there are many people in the town cursing his name or anything. Though, and again I don’t know Jack at all, but part of me thinks he might quite enjoy if some people’s reaction were along the lines of “This was Bullshit! Fuck You Sir!”

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**Brace Hayden (Physical Therapist):** Hi Jack, I suppose you've already heard a raft of criticisms from the 100+ folks that didn't get to see the robo-performance, so I'll keep it short.

I was in the line @ 8:20 and finally entered the Crystal at 9:55, to stand around for another 10 minutes awaiting the next loop or something, then to be told 'please leave, the show is over'. No walk through the Metcalf mobile, no performance, no music . . . ?

We'll assume you had no idea how many folks were going to show up, no idea how to keep people moving through the Crystal while you looped the performance, and the Crystal gave you a inflexible end time. Hopefully, you've gathered it was/is a worthwhile production to put on for a 2nd show.

I would have been there at the 7:30 time I'd aimed for, if it hadn't of been the Artini gang assuring me food first as their was certain to be a line and an assured viewing of the performance.

Well done, it looked like a fantastic performance. Please consider putting on a 2nd show, I'm sure you could charge $10, and the peeps would line up around the block again.

I'd still like to trade out Teag's medium women’s Tee for a large, if the cotton isn't pre-shrunk.

Keep me posted. Cheers,
B

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**Jacob Kahn - Part Three (Poet):** Robert Smithson has a theory of art he likes to call “a dialectic of site/non-site.” The dialectic interacts in a loosely formulated interplay between “the site . . . the physical raw reality---the earth or ground that we are not aware of” and “the non-site, which is an abstract container,” a space formally and conceptually delimited and installed by the artist. The non-site is more or less an artistic installation with an earthen site it squarely refers to—a framed, predictable gallery space interacting mentally and physically with an unframed, unpredictable outdoor situation. The two in conjunction create what Smithson calls “a dialectic of place.” That dialectic of place is where the two converge (or don’t), and where the two converge (or don’t) art occurs. Anyway as the night wore on, this dialectical interplay between the inside and the outside of the art situation became more and more fundamental to the way *A Synthetic Spring* was being experienced. It was happening differently, not as site/non-site, but as event/non-event, spectacle/non-
spectacle. Analogous to Smithson, there was a lively interplay between the planned and the unplanned. In other words, the waiting was becoming just as important to the feeling and understanding of the art as the seeing.

To get into the spectacle most people waited an hour---less toward the beginning, more toward the end. The line for the majority of the night stretched around the corner, and the restaurant was utterly inundated by people waiting (business, apparently, was not so good). The enormity of the traffic (really, a spectacle of itself in Missoula) created a profusion of reactions from everyone. Some people loved the sense of social clutter and coagulation, the civic time in line, the conversational chirpiness and general absurdity of such a Sisyphean “wait”. Some asked if this was the art. They said they’d be happy. To them, the time spent in line was a wondrous exercise in being public, in drinking and conversing anticipatorily, a great and humorous feeling, like a Beckett play, a play called “Wait” (I am thinking of Ionesco also, or all of The Theater Of The Absurd), especially if nothing was inside. More than anything it became a time to be inside of, to be present in and get lost in. Yes totally worthwhile and only working to bolster the art inside.

On the other hand, were those folks who reacted intensely and rather adversely to the specter of waiting so long to see ‘art,’ whatever it mat turn out to be. Most of the folks who didn’t like the art, mentioned something about the line and wait in an account of their distaste. It was a physical thing. They said they were claustrophobic, they were tired. It was a mental thing. They thought it was rude, they felt they had a right to get inside in a timely and appropriate manner. This is very Missoula. A civic concern becoming a sort of private righteousness. Many folks felt it necessary to personally relate to me how long the line was and make sure I was aware of that fact. I told them I was. I told them Jack is aware. They said, well can you do something about it. I said, no. They guffawed. I told them they could go in, but that was all. This seemed to offend them. An odd reaction, I thought, but more and more people seemed to be just that: offended, aghast at the audacity of my holding this line back. I was just following my directions. I could nothing about it. You begin to wonder what art could satisfy this mounting frustration. The art became a problem of expectation, a small egg balanced between the twin wires of suspense and anticipation; and for a lot of folks the egg had already cracked before they ever even made it into the spectacle.

Admittedly not everybody reacted along either of these extremes. However, the more the line and pressure on it grew as the night wore on, the more I began to realize that this reaction, however mild or extreme, was becoming an integral part of the art. It intently and quite linearly referred to the spectacle, and was becoming more unpredictable, undefined referent, its vestigial moral haze. Any response to the art on the inside, had to include some sense of the spectacle’s outside, what harnessed and framed it, what lead to it and where it lead away. Jack and I had a sense people would react to the wait (especially those who wouldn’t make it in at all, about a hundred or so in the end, mostly very mad), but I don’t think we realized how instrumental the site itself would become. More than a critique of capitalism, authenticity, and twenty-first century identity, A Synthetic Spring explored the very nature of being public. It investigated the moral shape of community and civic participation, and brought to the surface various discrete understandings we have of being part of something, of being social and being “there”. It was discovery of thereness (that is, a
sense of and reaction to being “there”), and a discovery of *thereness* as the very root of the spectacle.

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**Benjamin Adams - Part Two (Art Critic):** But then again, perhaps what I mentioned before is not entirely true. I realize I’ve left out the piece’s beating heart, namely the self-eating loom concealed behind the inner-chamber. After all the roundabouts of alienation, the participant walks up the steps, enters, & is allowed a moment to watch a mechanical thing devour itself. If nothing else, the participant in this room either reflects upon the beauty of something well-wrought or critically reacts to the ugliness of a machine. Either way, the experience of art suddenly becomes almost touchingly traditional. One piece of art, one observer, one museum attendant. This could be anywhere. If perhaps all the orchestrated calamity outside succeeds in outlining Debord’s fears of the contemporary world without securing the situational freedom essential to such a critique, then the inner-chamber reaffirms the participant’s subjectivity by allowing her a moment of solace, of reflection, a simple bit of time. & for that, throughout it all, I was quite appreciative.

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**Leaving Spectator #1 (Participant)**: The contraption in the box, it was engineering genius, and I am kind of sad I won’t be able to see what was on the rest of the roll of paper . . . and the gallery attendant wouldn’t let me have a piece.

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**Leaving Spectator #2 (Participant):** I thought it was really fantastic and it really surprised me. When the paper started to unroll, and scissors all in a line, sharp and shiny, cut it up, it was a complete surprise as to what I was entering into. I was shocked, because I thought I was creating the destruction by entering the room. It was interesting too, because I was thinking about the time I spending while I was spending in there . . . if it was long enough, maybe it was too long.

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**Leaving Spectator #3 (Participant):** I thought that the slicing machine that I had my ticket for in the end was amazing and lovely.

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6 Cecile Bernerat anonymously recorded *Leaving Spectators’* dialogues while positioned at the exit of the Crystal Theatre on the night of the event. Transcribed from an audio file
Addendum

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**Jack Metcalf (Artist):** While enrolled in the M.Arch program at the Savannah College of Art and Design, during the formative years of the 21st century, I quickly discovered (and became infatuated with) the writings of the Italian futurists from roughly 100 years prior.

Although the futurist did not have the time nor funds to build much more than what I like to call *paper architecture*, their manifestos alone were fearlessly refreshing, and unapologetic. From what I researched, two of these young futurists stood out—the architect, Antonio Sant’Elia, and the poet, Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti.

In Marinetti’s “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” he creates the following observation:

*A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes; like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.*

It is here; Marinetti poetically declares that historical static art/architecture can never compete with the excitement and the potential beauty of machines, such as a racecar. These texts, coupled with a studio visit with the infamous Frank Gehry, prompted me not to register for courses the following quarter. At this romantic stage of my development, museums were synonymous with cemeteries; academia served as a place things go once they are dead.

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Through my initial theses (or shall I say, the rules I set for myself with this project), I attempted to create a foundation for a situation/environment/’philosophical performance’ that would be true by their own definition. In rhetoric, a tautology is a series of statements that form an argument, whereby the statements are constructed in such a way that the truth of the proposition is guaranteed. It is a way of formulating a description such that it masquerades as an explanation when the real reason for the phenomena cannot be independently derived. Beginning any project, you are required to begin somewhere. With *A Synthetic Spring*, I began by establishing my initial theses as a form of a tautological experiment. The ten statements laid the parameters to which I constructed the entirety of the project within. The theses acted, as a foundation, for all that was to become and be decided. The statements possess a strong, thought out foundation that is not refutable, nor

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necessarily verifiable under any condition by axiomatic obligation. How you chose to construct that foundation supplies the innate ability to nurture, protect, and distribute a statement in natural language that is true solely because of the terms involved.

Not to say that these initial theses are not important, because they are. They were the starting point, the foundation, and like I said before, you have to start somewhere. Obviously, what is more important is the project itself. The project utilized an energy I gained through the frustration and restlessness in what I have experienced as an artist practicing in Missoula, Montana. Albeit the context is different, the motives are similar to that of the aforementioned Italian futurists. I was dumbfounded at what was being passed off as contemporary art in Missoula, and had the desire to construct an opportunity that would challenge the community’s idea of what a visual artist is capable of offering. I wanted to create a situation that blurred the lines of a range of disciplines, and was more challenging than any static artwork I was competent of producing.

Did I succeed? I think so, but at the same time, I acknowledge an unavoidable ignorance towards things of this sort. This ignorance stems from the inability to truly achieve critical distance—the ability to completely detach from the situation at hand and see behind the façade of the self-constructed reality. It is a personal philosophy of mine that in order to complete any creative endeavors you must, on at least some level, maintain and nurture a delusional state of being. While I am confessing this lack of complete self-awareness, I did welcome and reflect upon the feedback offered by a variety others. From the wide range of responses/reactions (supplied above and from undocumented, candid post- A.S.S. conversations), I do view the project as a success.

Did everyone enjoy it? Hell no. Am I going to do it again? Hell no. Did it spark ideas, conversations, and opinions? Hell yes. And that is why this project was successful, people actually engaged with the ideas that were on display for those two hours, and developed evolving opinions in the following days/weeks. It took folks out of their comfort zone, where they could typically mingle amongst the humble wine and cheese, and supply their share of fanfare to the artist. During A.S.S., the ‘art’ was not something you accidently backed into while you are juggling a plastic cup of merlot in one hand and a wax-coated paper plate of ranch dressing covered veggies in the other, all the while, attempting to make sure you congratulate the ‘artist’ on their thesis exhibition.

From the conception of this project, I knew not everyone was going to be able see the event in its entirety. Is that ungenerous? Well, it was free, and I didn’t require anyone to stand in line for two hours. I just offered an opportunity for members of the community to participate in something I heavily invest in—emotionally, intellectually, financially, and in time.

I planned for everything outside of the inner sanctum to operate as an exaggerated commentary on pop culture with the delivery to summon the same feeling as one would naively experience at the dreaded DMV—forgotten and scrutinized. Everything would be slightly outdated, like the old futurist toys of the past. It is easier to poke fun at the trends of the past. I think the environment marked the end of an era, the era of large, visible relics
of ‘hipness’. From that grew an idea for a situation geared towards the increasing digitalisation of society—a science fiction scenario where organisms and visible commodities share a common superfluity.

The event as a whole was so layered it prompted a variety of individual opinions. It had to be a surprise, it had to challenge what people expected. While I continued to build upon processes and themes, I turned this event inside out of everything I had done three years prior in Missoula. The ideas of commodity and supply/demand were in the front of my mind during the entirety of creation of this project. Although I quickly realized that folks in Missoula do not spend their money on art, they could possibly spend their time on art.

You might ask, how is this a MFA thesis exhibition for someone focusing in printmaking and not theater?

Printmaking has a steep tradition in the multiple. This technology has exponentially shaped our lives from democratically supplying us with seemingly endless information. Its beginnings can be generalized with the Gutenberg press, which without much imagination can be linked to the contemporary tweet, the blog posting, or the means to spread a message in whatever technological format she prefers. Repetition as a technological endeavor.

We created an environment inside the theater where the same soundtrack, dance, and conversations repeated every five minutes. Where at first, everything that was exciting and new, quickly becomes alienating, forgotten and scrutinizing. Repetition as a conceptual endeavor.

Viewing printmaking as only a technological contribution to society, by its ability to supply us with the tools to create the multiple, would be a great disservice to simply limit its means to the tradition of editions and reproductions. It is exciting and refreshing to develop and implement new ways of utilizing and conceiving the multiple—to be able synthetize conceptual aspects of printmaking with other traditional disciplines of expression. In A.S.S., we did just that. We took the conceptual idea of what printmaking has historically offered, and used it as a vehicle in the form of installation art, performance, dance, and dialogue.

In doing so, we took the concept of the multiple and created a unique event. Ironically, it only lasted two hours; the drawing in the inner sanctum was never documented, and it took the efforts of over twenty individuals to re-interpret the concept of the tools of the past in a contemporary context with contemporary concerns. This, I feel, would be in line with the writings and ideals of the futurist that I once found so liberating.

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(The poet Jacob Kahn, in collaboration with Jack Metcalf, wrote all scripts)

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+++ SCRIPT // the Jack Metcalf // local actor JEFF MEDLEY

Thank you for coming, your presence is instrumental.
Thank you for coming, your presence conditions raw materials into art.
Thank you for coming, your presence responds well to varnish.
Thank you for coming, your presence responds well to yellow.
Thank you for coming, your presence prompts school boys to clap.
Thank you for coming, your presence locates our underlying society, the way honks locate a tunnel.
Thank you for coming, your presence encloses space entirely.
Thank you for coming, your presence devises lilies in unlikely places.
Thank you for coming, you look great in my show.
Thank you for coming, your presence causes me to forget what I was about to say.

Hello I’m Jack Metcalf, am I interrupting your experience of my art?
Hello I’m Jack Metcalf, the artist you’ve been talking about.
Hello I’m Jack Metcalf, the pleasure sits between us like a clubbed nerve.
Hello I’m Jack Metcalf, from this art show.
Hello I’m Jack Metcalf, you look great in my show.
Hello I’m Jeff Medley, an actor playing Jack Metcalf for the purposes of this art show.

In my art, the images fuse in a common stream of mere contemplation.
In my art, the totality of use is replaced by the totality of abstract representation.
In my art, individualist variants cohere through the repetition of a series of basic gestures.
In my art, the expectation of liberty returns as bemusement and fun.
In my art, eternity idealizes the daily machines of our permanent consumption.
My art portrays expansion like an endless pregnancy with society.

In this piece, I crossed the threshold of my own abundance.
In this piece, I finally grew some balls.
In this piece, I was thinking of cosmic order like a beach ball.
In this piece, we possess the dream of a time we are living.
In this piece, I might seem purely conceptual, but only to the purely conceptual.
In this piece, I’m most happy with the way you’ve turned out.

You know, I’ve always thought cities require museums.
Someday our romance with choice will be over.
You might not know this about me, but salt really hurts my tongue.
I’m from a few different places on earth, none worth discussing.
Hey look, another Jack Metcalf.

If I forget what I’m supposed to say, I’m supposed to stand here and smile.
If you trick Jack Metcalf, he will turn into Jack Metcalf.
If people bring up personal conversations:
Oh, I’d rather not talk about that, or I’m not supposed to talk about that.
Ah, that must be something we’ve talked about in the past.
Past conversations are like trees whose leaves have fallen off.

I must be moving on, there are a lot of people I need to look at and speak with at the same time.
It’s great to see you, another Jack Metcalf will be by shortly to entertain you.

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PROMPT // the assistant // the ANNA

As the artist’s assistant, your first job is to keep an eye on Jeff (playing Jack Metcalf), make sure everything is going smoothly, and feel free to confuse, stimulate, excite, and arouse the people walking through the spectacle. The main rule is to STAY IN CHARACTER. Be plastic but not robotic, smile in a phony way, and do not allow anyone to directly engage with you. NEVER break character to talk or say hi to someone you know. Try not to smile or laugh in a genuine way. Attached is a script to follow, hopefully there is an option for any occasion that will arise. If you forget your line at any point or in doubt, you may say, “This conversation was brought to by (your sponsor’s name here).”

SCRIPT // the assistant // the ANNA

1. Welcome to a Synthetic Spring,
2. It’s so exciting that you’re here,
3. I still remember the first time I met Jack,
4. Please look around,
5. The dancers are over there,

1. A Synthetic Spring welcomes you,
2. You look great, you look ravishing,
3. Jack would love to meet you,
4. Looking feels good,
5. You can buy stuff over there,
6. Make yourself comfortable,
7. There is a photo-op over there,
PROMPT // the gatekeeper // the WINNIE lohof

As the gatekeeper, your job is to continually call, welcome, and thank the spectators once their number is called. The most important rule is to STAY IN CHARACTER. Be plastic but not robotic, smile in a phony way, and usher people smoothly along within a couple of seconds. Confidence, eye contact, and good posture are important. Below is a basic idea of how your night will proceed:

- Call their number
- Take their ticket
- Welcome them with, “Thank you for coming, your presence is instrumental. You MAY NOT wait and see.”
- Open the gate
- Close the gate
- Open the gate
- Give a fortune cookie
- Instruct them to “Exit through the backdoor, and you MAY have a good night.”
- Repeat

NEVER break character to talk or say hi to someone you know. Try not to smile or laugh in a genuine way. Treat everyone the same, regardless of who he or she are, or what he or she are doing. If someone attempts to talk to you out of turn or asks you a question, respond arbitrarily with one of the following lines:

- You look like everything I expected you to be
- I’m here because of Jack Metcalf
- Jack would love to meet you
- You look great, ravishing even
- This conversation was bought to you by (insert sponsor here)

PROMPT // the greeters // the KELLEY sisters

As the greeters, your first and only job is to immediately confuse, stimulate, excite, and arouse the people stepping into the spectacle. The only rule is to STAY IN CHARACTER. Be plastic but not robotic, smile in a phony way, and usher people brusquely along within five to ten seconds (unless there is a line and then restart the conversation every 5 - 10 seconds). NEVER break character to talk or say hi to someone you know. Try not to smile or laugh in a genuine way. Try to speak in synchronicity (step by step at the same time), but I imagine this will be impossible and that triple-tracking voices will just make it all more confusing and stimulating. Attached is a script to follow, one through five. Choose any option from the numbers sequentially and proceed that way before ushering the patrons
on. If you forget your line at any point, you may say, “This conversation was brought to by (your sponsor’s name here).”

**SCRIPT // the greeters // the KELLEY sisters**

1. Welcome to a Synthetic Spring,
1. A Synthetic Spring welcomes you,
1. Thank you for coming to a Synthetic Spring,
1. Spring welcomes you in its synthesis,
1. Spring welcomes synthesis,
1. A synthetic welcome to spring,
1. A spring synthesis of welcomes,
1. Of synthetic welcomes, there are many springs,

2. A collaborative installation by artist Jack Metcalf,
2. Artist Jack Metcalf has collaborated with many artists to bring you this synthetic experience,
2. I’m here because of Jack Metcalf,
2. This is the most amazing spectacle you’re ever going to be a part of,
2. It’s so exciting that you’re here,
2. You look great,
2. You look ravishing,
2. You look like everything I expected you to be,

3. Jack is an artist, candidate, printmaker, photographer, runner, and lover.
3. Jack is a producer, believer, mapmaker, stunt and logistics guy,
3. Jack is the ideal artist, a great listener, and a seriously sexual guy,
3. Jack has great muscles and sings in a baritone choir,
3. Jack votes arbitrarily and eats three times a day,
3. Jack loves to talk about philosophical things and laugh,
3. I still remember the first time I met Jack,
3. Jack would love to meet you,
3. Jack has been waiting for you,

4. Please look around,
4. Looking feels good,
4. Make yourself comfortable,
4. Don’t hesitate to come in,
4. Buy whatever you like,
4. Lose yourself in the fun,

5. The dancers are over there,
5. You can buy stuff over there,
5. There is a photo-op over there,
5. Everything is free,
5. Everything costs money,
5. You may take a number and wait,
5. When your number is called step up to the gatekeeper and you can see what’s inside.

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**PROMPT // the ‘merch’ table // the DML/JONATHON**

As the ‘merch’ table attendants, your first and only job is to immediately confuse, stimulate, excite, and arouse the people stepping up to the table. The main rule is to STAY IN CHARACTER. Be plastic but not robotic, smile in a phony way, and your job is to make it inordinately difficult, if not impossible, for people to buy any of the products we have for sale. This is the opposite of the warm welcoming capitalist shopping experience.

The techniques you have to invert the transactional experience are to confuse the customer rhetorically, confuse each other rhetorically, get in arguments, don’t talk or respond to the customer at all, arbitrarily set and change prices, or tell them flat out that they can’t buy something, it’s not for sale. Once in a while you can give something away for free or make it extremely easy and cheap to buy something (three cents, for example, but only in exact change) if it’s utterly arbitrary and in the end makes the shopping experience all the more befuddling. An integral part of this show is its critique of capitalist modes of self-identification and means of self-creation. We want to destroy those means and modes through detour, situation, and inversion.

Attached is a script in the form of a list of responses that you can use. It is understood that you will probably break this because you will forget some of the lines, so don’t worry. Try to memorize what you can and use what you remember. To make it all the more mechanical (and less pointlessly theatrical) you will also have a script in front of you (on a clipboard) that you can consult whenever you’d like, however you’d like. You may use entire lines, you may use fragments of multiple lines together, you may appear to consult market charts, and you may argue nonsensically, you may read the entire script until they go away. For example:

“The abundant commodity…fidelity to use…elaborate on price…waves of enthusiasm…no more apples…that will cost you eight hundred dollars.”

If you forget your line at any point or have a hiccup, you may say, “This conversation was brought to by (your sponsor’s name here).”

The point of the script is to complicate the rhetorical exchange by using these sorts of systematic words and economic phrases, so try not to veer far from it. We want to avoid “normal” vernacular except as a random assertion of confusing speech. Which means no being yourself, no being normal. Remain synthetic and remain spectacular.

NEVER break character to talk or say hi to someone you know. Try not to smile or laugh in a genuine way.
- The abundant commodity stands for the total breach in the organic development of social needs.

- The colorful commodity destroys the principle of primary feeling in terms of human development.

- The fascinating commodity inflames local desires as archaic oppositions.

- This commodity has no fidelity to its price or use.

- We consult price to elaborate price.

- If you want to buy a hat you have to buy a ________ first.

- Price serves as a false proposition of guarantee.

- Waves of enthusiasm for a given product give it no clear ability to perform.

- Every market needs limits and ours is desire and we don’t want you to buy that.

- We recommend you think of eight reasons to buy this first.

- Because of a general increase in regional wage stimulation the price has jumped to eight hundred dollars.

- Because of deflation and implicit worldwide shortage we can’t sell that product right now.

- Jack now wants us to charge $65.70 for that.

- It is impossible to buy souvenirs at this merch table.

- Everything on this side of the table was made by children in Indonesia, while everything on this side of the table was made by mothers in central Africa. Jack pays them thirteen cents an hour and uses only factory cows from Mexico for his materials.

- We represent a buyer’s market vindicating a seller’s economy.

- The stocks are down on these hats and the market is swamped, so you may purchase them but only if you buy more than ten at once.

- Sorry, it’s not for sale.

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PROMPT // the photo op // radio personality R. EDDY & the infamous M. WORKPERSON

As the photo op attendants, your first and only job is to immediately confuse, stimulate, excite, cheapen, and arouse the people stepping up to the photo op. The only rule is to STAY IN CHARACTER. Be plastic but not robotic, smile in a phony way, and do not allow anyone to feel completely comfortable. NEVER break character to talk or say hi to someone you know. Try not to smile or laugh in a genuine way. Attached is a script to follow, one through five. Choose any option from the numbers sequentially and proceed that way before restarting to the top. If you forget your line at any point, you may say, “This conversation was brought to by (your sponsor’s name here).”

SCRIPT // the photo booth director // the RUTH EDDY

Don’t resolve, move deeper into the foreground.
Foreground yourself as if you’re lunching on a shoal.
The lens dissolves in the middleground.
You clearly don’t understand how a background propels you into being.
You clearly don’t understand how a background propels you into being faithful.
Stare off like you’re helpless and battered by solitudes.
Stare off and dream of someone else’s misfortune.
The photograph coalesces around you like water.
The photograph diffuses the misery it denies.
Photography was created in the collapse of Rome.
Photography is the sole dream of empire.
I want you to feel warmly abbreviated.
You look like digits to my lens.
You look like you’re in college.
That pose is pure nihilism.
That pose is not unique to this continent.
That pose reminds me of a collage.
I hate collage.
Stop posing like that.
Stop smiling, this is not a Facebook photo.
Smile so this can go on Facebook.
I’m sure somebody will like this on Facebook.
More teeth, less whiskers.
Arms in here, legs out there.
You will be easy to manipulate later.
You’re a convenient figure.
I’m sorry, this isn’t working.
Quit it.
Do something else.
Look different.
This isn’t what Jack had in mind.
Photos over, move on.