



A Promise and a Practice: CAROLYN LAZARD

BY
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*In their writing and artwork,
CAROLYN LAZARD
articulates material
existence recalibrated through
temporal dissonances
born of chronic illness and
disability. Addressing
the structural violence experi-
enced at the intersection
of disability with blackness and
queerness, Lazard's
practice has equally formed*

frameworks that place emphasis on the pleasure of life as shaped and reshaped by stillness, intimate dependency, and care. SYNC, Lazard's first solo exhibition at ESSEX STREET in New York (2020), dwells on what they define as the "paracine-matic in the mundane" to draw out questions of value, labor, and presence.



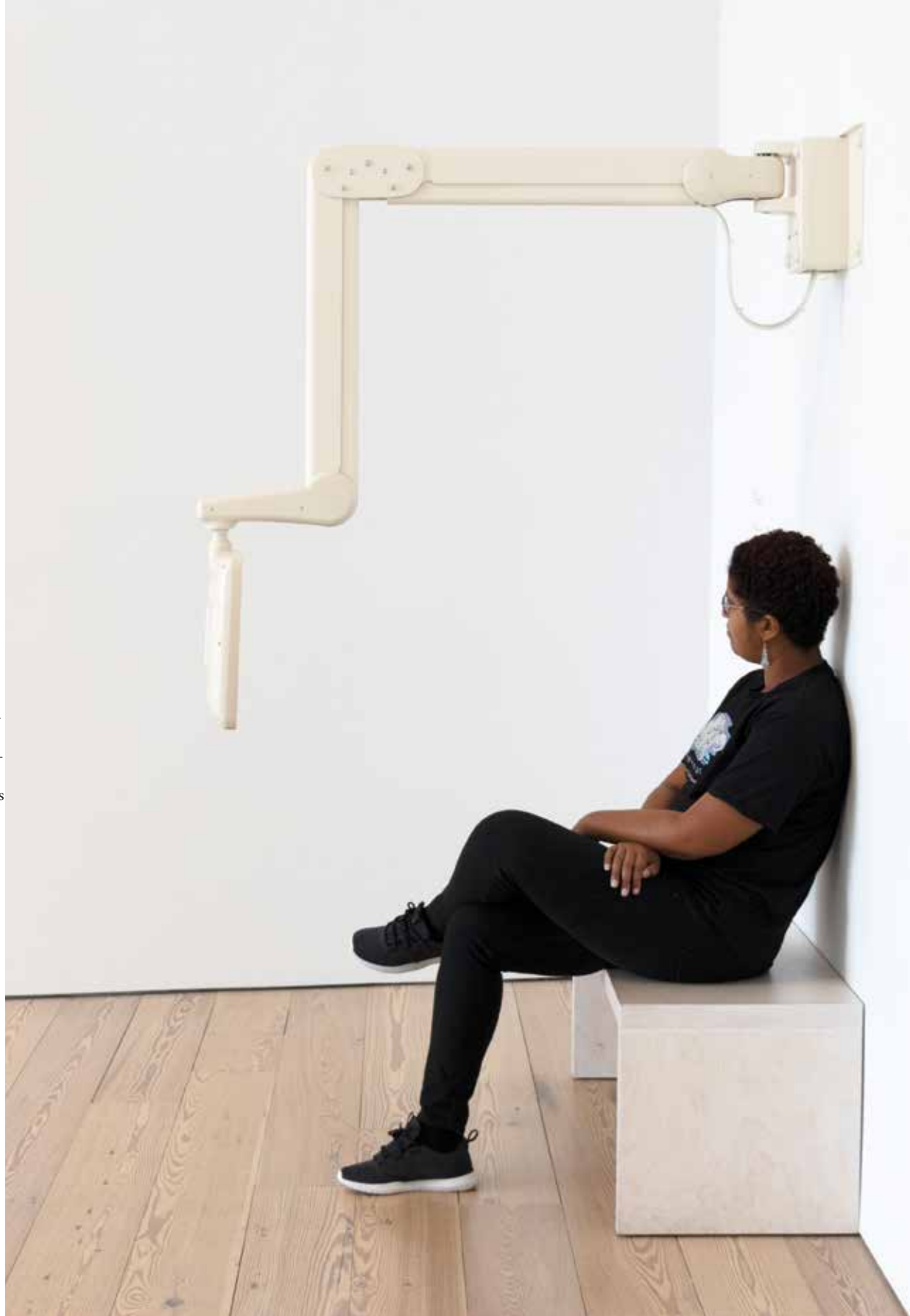




Pre-Existing Condition, 2019, Colored People Time installation view at Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York / Maxwell Graham

CAROLYN LAZARD (b. 1987, Upland) lives and works in Philadelphia and New York. They received a MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2019 and a BA in film and anthropology from Bard College in 2010. Lazard has published numerous texts and has participated in group exhibitions at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2020–21); Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2020); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2019); Cell Project Space, London (2019); the Whitney Biennial 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Shoot the Lobster, New York (2018); The Kitchen, New York (2018); and the New Museum, New York (2017). In 2021 Lazard will have solo exhibitions at Cell Project Space, London, and Kunstverein Braunschweig. In 2022 they will have a solo exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

RICHARD BIRKETT is a curator and writer based in Glasgow. He is curator at large at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and previously a curator at Artists Space, New York. He has also organized exhibitions at Yale Union, Portland; mumok, Vienna; MoMA PS1, New York; and the National Gallery of Kosovo, Pristina. The artists, writers, filmmakers, and performers he has worked with include Terry Atkinson, Julie Becker, Bernadette Corporation, Chto Delat, Forensic Architecture, Emma Hedditch, Morag Keil & Georgie Nettell, Chris Kraus, Taylor Le Melle, Laura Poitras, Cameron Rowland, Hito Steyerl, and the Wooster Group. He has edited and written for publications including *Cosey Complex* (with Maria Fusco, 2012), *Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years* (with BC, Jim Fletcher, and Stefan Kalmár, 2013), and *Tell It To My Heart—Collected by Julie Ault, Volume 2* (with Julie Ault and Martin Beck, 2015).



Extended Stay, 2019, Whitney Biennial 2019 installation view at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York / Maxwell Graham

“Everything that I have ever lived is concentrated in my cells and somehow persists even as my body continues to regenerate itself. This undifferentiated mass of tissue and memory, alive and sticky, is an unknown place worth approaching with an openness and willingness to let it reveal itself to me. Everything I have ever lived burrows in my cells and never leaves. It is ghost matter, the stuff of the past mixed up with the present. It’s the body, haunted. Here and also elsewhere.”

—Carolyn Lazard¹

In early September 2020, artist and writer Carolyn Lazard’s first-ever solo exhibition opened at ESSEX STREET in New York.² The show’s title, *SYNC*, invokes a sense of time in, or perhaps out of, alignment. Its accompanying press release republishes “And the Sun Still Shines” (2002), an autobiographical prose piece by Philadelphia writer and disability community advocate Tameka Blackwell.³ The text narrates a hospital visit, Blackwell’s joy in a spot bathed in sunlight and the possibility to spend time writing while waiting for her appointment, and intrusions into this private space of work and thought by other people. Blackwell’s writing moves intimately between interior thought and dialogue, gesturing toward the work of maintaining the self in the face of the regulation of time and the structuring drives of able-bodied whiteness. “And the Sun Still Shines” echoes a question that resonates throughout Lazard’s practice: How does one make work when the reproduction of life itself is nonnegotiable? At the center of *SYNC* hangs *Carolyn Working* (2020), a framed self-portrait in biro of the artist lying in bed, arm propping up their head, looking at a laptop screen.

In the texts “The World Is Unknown” (2019) and “How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity” (2013), Lazard addresses their own experience of chronic illness. They detail their diagnosis with Crohn’s disease and ankylosing spondylitis, both conditions that are autoimmune in nature, one attacking the intestinal system and the other the spine and peripheral joints. The texts are personal, speaking directly to the alienation of illness and the lack of language suitable for communicating physical ailment. Lazard articulates an experience overwhelmed by the flux between the biomedical imperative toward diagnostic precision, and a holistic understanding of healing where feeling and belief supplant reason. This in-between space, one of opacity only deepened through the urge for transparency, is rendered by Lazard not as a problem of knowledge or representation, but as a condition defined by social and material relations.

In countries in thrall to unregulated development and neoliberal labor formations, autoimmune disease diagnoses have boomed since World War II. As Lazard highlights, this corollary raises the question of the role of environmental factors in these diseases, and further, a metaphoric and metabolic resistance of the body to its own consumption and working conditions. Lazard’s writing speaks to the paradox of medical treatment that seeks to return the body to a “working” state, able to reenter “normal” cycles of production and consumption: “What we are left with is bodies that are confused: incapable, on a molecu-

lar level, of maintaining the basic boundaries that are constitutive of self. Mimicking, on a molecular level, the degrees of alienation and commodification that happen to the body on a social and economic level.”⁴

Notably, Lazard does not center their identity as an artist in “The World Is Unknown” or “How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity.” The specter of work, however, hovers at the periphery of both texts. Lazard describes the passage from pre-sickness industriousness to a state of withdrawal in order to focus on healing, not career, with the desire to “valorize my time in ways that have nothing to do with work.”⁵ In Lazard’s testimony, the enmeshing of time and value, and both the necessity and the desire to detach this relation from the structure of work, suggest a figuring of value that lies outside of an ends-oriented capitalist hegemony. As Lazard and others have exemplified in their work in support groups for artists living with chronic illness and impairment,⁶ this figuring moves beyond the conception of regenerative care as caught within the social reproduction of labor power, to emphasize the *perpetual* labor undertaken by those living with disability in order to exist. Central to this movement is the experience of time; in its noncompliance with patterns of work and leisure, the dissonant temporality of illness described by Lazard, between cycles of remission, excruciating flares, and slow healing, renders what has been termed “crip time” in the disability community. In the words of disability theorist Alison Kafer, speaking of crip time and its intersection with queer time: “These shifts in timing and pacing can of necessity and by design lead to departures from ‘straight’ time, whether straight time means a firm delineation between past/present/future or an expectation of a linear development from dependent childhood to independent reproductive adulthood.”⁷

In this ontological realignment of normative configurations of time, value, and work, Lazard’s practice and “output” as an artist take on a particular position in relation to the historical dialectic between art and labor. Lazard has described their practice as “an attempt to think and feel through the radical possibilities of incapacity.”⁸ Karl Marx states, “Labor-power or capacity for labor is to be understood as the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which [they] exercise whenever [they] produce a use-value of any description.”⁹ To think and feel as an artist from the position of incapacity is not to invoke the Kantian “purposeful without purpose” of the aesthetic, as a condition oppositional to the capitalist imperative to sell one’s labor power, but rather to insist on the visibility and affectability of the labor of disability, and its value outside of capital, in the face of ableist expectations of capacity. In 2019, Lazard published an accessibility guide for small-scale art institutions titled “Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice,” a set of recommendations that looks to engage “principles of disability justice to think through what can urgently be done to create more equitable and accessible arts spaces.”¹⁰ Accessibility is employed here as a capacious condition, a “speculative practice” moving beyond typical institutional terms of mobility and legibility. The guide is equally intensely practical, a set of





tangible measures for art spaces to undertake. In this meeting of the logistical and the relational, access is invoked as a powerful and deepening intersection of the material, the temporal, and the gestural.

As a condition of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the temporary experience of inaccessibility by the nondisabled has led art institutions to respond to a crisis of “presence” in galleries and museums through the implementation of virtual remedies. As Lazard has expressed, this valorization of presence in the face of a newly felt absence emphasizes both the lack of accommodations previously made for disabled people by institutions, and the ways in which such a rights-based framework of accommodation has long served to resist the address of ableism as systemic and intersectional. The question of presence, and what presence is dependent upon, resonates within Lazard’s work as a sense of life entangled with others, to be known through perception and affection. It is both the “joy of being with others and giving and receiving care,”¹¹ and “the body, haunted. Here and also elsewhere.”

In thinking with this entwinement, acknowledging the framework of crip time as historical method, we might alight in 1997 at Donald Rodney’s celebrated exhibition *9 Night in Eldorado*, which opened at South London Gallery in the absence of the artist. The degenerative disease sickle cell anemia was leading to increased periods of hospitalization for Rodney (he passed away in 1998), and at the opening of *9 Night*—named after the Caribbean tradition of an extended gathering in the wake of the death of a family member, and marking Rodney’s absence from his father’s *Nine Night* two years previously—the work *Psalms* (1997) served as his surrogate presence. Video documentation of the opening shows *Psalms*—a motorized wheelchair adapted to operate autonomously using sensors and neural-network-based software—edging back and forth between groups of people chatting and drinking. Haunting the room, *Psalms* gestured toward the expected bodily and social labor of artistic mediation, its absence, and its presence elsewhere. *Psalms* is in theory perpetually in movement, but in reality constrained by its negotiation of spectators, its host architecture, and technological limits—a site of labor where productivity and the maintenance of life collapse into a temporality of fits and starts.

The same year as *9 Night* and in tandem with *Psalms*, Rodney began working on the internet and CD-ROM based piece *AUTOICON*. Completed in 2000 by a group of friends under the moniker Donald Rodney plc, *AUTOICON* proposed to serve as a simulation of “both the physical presence and elements of the creative personality” of Rodney.¹² The work took its cue from utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s pamphlet *Auto-Icon; or Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living* (1831), which advocated for the practice of “becoming one’s own icon.”¹³ *AUTOICON*, however, inverted the principles of utility and continued authority that Bentham proposed. The artist’s body is present as a data set already exhausted of biomedical potential, the website archiving scans, X-rays, and tests results collated in service of monitoring and treating Rodney’s sickle cell anemia—a condition prevalent in those with a genealogy marked by the forced displacements of the transatlantic slave trade. Alongside

this archive, the user can engage in simulated text dialogue with the artist, the program drawing from interviews with Rodney to automate responses and create “new works in the spirit of Donald’s art practice,”¹⁴ thanks to *AUTOICON* crawling the web to generate montages of found images. The collective production of *AUTOICON*, both through Donald Rodney plc and the work’s users, maps presence as a continuum preserved in acts of intimate care and (inter)dependence. The stasis of the scientific reading and regulation of the body, written into the racialized and ableist fabric of capitalism and its disregard of sustained socio-historic violence, is met with an enmeshing of mind and body where the premise of the legible and autonomous script breaks down. *AUTOICON*—without an institutional host to maintain it, so no longer accessible as a website—maintains in its virtuality (its housing of past and future) the body as a representation of real action bound up with memory and desire, and freedom intimately organized with necessity.

Lazard has described their work as “arriving the way it arrives out of necessity.”¹⁵ Across videos, objects, and performances it has centered time, both as a medium and in the experience of reception. In its relationship to the body and to matter, in Lazard’s work the temporal is seen to hold both the particularities of structural violence and that which is made from the “conditions of debility [and] difference.”¹⁶ Alongside the drawn self-portrait *Carolyn Working*, Lazard’s exhibition SYNC comprises of a number of works that make use of manufactured domestic commodities. As with the self-image of Lazard in bed, but working, the presence of these objects locates the exhibition in the space of the home, as a site of leakage between recuperation and labor, the private and the public. While ostensibly generic and fungible, Lazard’s choice of objects registers stratifications and projections of status, class, and taste, as well as implying levels of personal significance for the artist. Presented, in all but one case, unaltered, their mode of display imposes subtle distantiations that emphasize moments of repetition, reorientation, movement, and surface effect. Lazard has described thinking of these commodities as “paracinematic objects in our mundane surroundings,”¹⁷ a framing that dissolves a perceived dichotomy between sculpture and the moving image into a common space of temporality and the kinetic.

On entering the ESSEX STREET lobby, the visitor encounters two upright, rotating air purifiers, with six others located in positions around the gallery. The materials for *Privatization* (2020) are listed simply as “HEPA filtered purified air,” the purifier units themselves secondary hardware for the generation of the work’s primary substance. *Privatization* can be seen as an act of care and hospitality toward those able to negotiate public space and visit the gallery. Constituting circulating gaseous matter cleansed of toxins, allergens, and virus-bearing particles, the work seemingly demarcates a transition between an external miasmatic environment of harm and an internal space of safety. Its title, however, points to the delimitations and capitalizations of this ostensible space of well-being, the air itself becoming a site for the parceling of the commons into propertized, purified units.

The socially stratified understanding of disease transmission and its antonyms of wellness and cleanliness have deep histories in Western societies. Particularly in the United States, the disproportionate exposure of communities of color to pollutants both at work and at home, and conversely a lack of access to health care, sustains “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”¹⁸ The private, hermetic space of the home is for many permeated by forces at work on the body-mind that intensify the necessary work of the body-mind. Forming an elemental partner to *Privatization*, in the main gallery space two small faux log fires generate the material of “fire” listed for the work *Cinema 1, Cinema 2* (2020). These objects, marketed as an alternative to a wood-burning hearth, generate the illusion of fire through light playing on mist; a literal projection, the work suggests both the placebo effect of comfort and warmth, and the potential for insurgency. The title cites Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (1985), books that drew on Henri Bergson’s philosophy of movement and its understanding of the body as an image distinct from all others, known by both perception and affection. *Cinema 1, Cinema 2* suggests the entangling of body and mind in the world of matter and image as a site to encounter radicality, in its paracinematic form echoing Deleuze’s words: “The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.”¹⁹

Mounted on the far wall of SYNC, almost as an icon presiding over the exhibition, is the work *Free Radicals* (2020). A wood and glass hourglass, the object is rendered dysfunctional as a timekeeper with its glass vessel completely filled with grains of a gray substance. The materials list for the work tells us that this is “granite dust from McCoy Quarry, Glasgow Inc., King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.” Located at the northwest edge of the city of Philadelphia, where Lazard grew up, the quarry is part of an industrial complex of granite, concrete, and steel works. As with a disproportionate number of other industrial sites in the United States, this complex is in particular proximity to suburban areas historically home to working-class immigrant and black communities. McCoy Quarry is a remediated “Superfund site,” previously designated by the Environmental Protection Agency as a risk to human health. The inhalation of granite dust can cause silicosis, a severe respiratory disease that can take years to reveal itself. Alongside *Privatization*, *Free Radicals* points to a systemic and industrialized loop of environmental violence and the provision of health as a propertized space. *Privatization* might be seen as a real-time system, where the kinetics of the rotating air purifiers set particles in motion; whereas *Free Radicals* reduces time to an image, and an image of the cessation of time at that. Within this space between image and circulating matter is the lived temporality of sickness, both immediate and impending, as a universal but unevenly materialized condition.

The work *Piss on Pity* (2020) comprises a padded leather power-lift recliner in its upright position, emphasizing the object’s solidity as a form in space. Hydraulically elevated in such a way as to enable the standing body to be held by the armchair and lowered down, the manner in which *Piss on Pity* “hails” the body

performs a kind of inversion of minimalist sculpture’s “stage presence.”²⁰ If, in Robert Morris’s words, such sculpture was intent on controlling the “entire situation” and placing “kinesthetic demands . . . upon the body,” *Piss on Pity* suggests a surrogate kinetics where control is located within the object as a bodily necessity.²¹ A second work, *Lazy Boi* (2020), has a similar armchair positioned in its fully reclined state, replete with extended footrest and cup holder. The two works formally plot the extent of the recliners’ movement, from standing to repose, and potentially back again. This mechanical loop constitutes a measurement of the functional capacity of the commodity, in its conflicted reading as both a classist symbol of idleness and an assistive device. The loop equally marks the negative space of the absent body, and by extension the labor of regenerative care and maintenance of the body caught within the use value of the commodity. The slogan “piss on pity” was first used in the early 1990s in demonstrations in the United Kingdom against daylong charity telethons, which perpetuated the social narrative of disabled people as subjects to be pitied and patronized. *Lazy Boi* and *Piss on Pity* conjure both the physical orientation of passive spectatorship, mediated by the television screen, and the closed circuit of disabling social, material, and cultural conditions.

In a linguistic sleight of hand, the main space of SYNC is spatially rooted in the display of four separate bathroom sinks, three ceramic and one metal, each in its naked state without faucets or plumbing. Three of the sinks are presented on the wall at picture height, with the well of the basin facing the viewer, while the fourth sits upright on a TV cart. The allusion is immediately recognizable, the rectangular form of the sink mirroring that of a television set, with the basin’s concave space neatly summoning the illusory depth of a screen. The works’ titles, *TV 1 (Dead Time)*, *TV 2 (Against Metaphor)*, *TV 3 (Love Island)*, and *TV 4 (Delayed Reception)* (all 2020), further both this sense of metamorphosis and the familiar disposition of TV watching—at once inactive, receptive, and anticipatory. Both washbasin and TV speak to everyday habits and rituals of regeneration; in their coming together, there is the sense of the different ways in which they call upon bodily movement, perception, and affect to generate both image and action. In the TV pieces, object and image are enfolded in the durational phenomenology of reflecting light on the sinks’ surfaces of metal and ceramic. The viewer is cast into a space of attention where bodily presence and extended temporality intersect.

TV 2 (Against Metaphor), with a basin standing upright on a TV cart pedestal, is perhaps the most assertive of all the TV works in its association with Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). As with the infamous urinal, it resists the retinal as the primary site for the reception of art, while insisting on the presence of the thing. The Duchampian readymade, inscribed as art at a given moment, is constituted through this intersection of the object and the temporal;²² in the titling of *TV 2*, Lazard draws a relation to materialist film and Peter Gidal’s 1988 essay “Against Metaphor,” in which he states: “The moment-to-moment placing and unplacing of oneself (not ones thoughts but ones fragile

or not self, seeming-self) is the removal, outside language, in relation to things, objects in the world.”²³ TV 2 serves to unsettle the placing of oneself as viewer, the awareness of physical presence, and the temporal measure of this presence.

Through the domestic scale of SYNC, Lazard’s engagement is with a “small life” as an aperture—an attentiveness, perhaps, to what Duchamp termed the “infrathin.” In the words of philosopher Erin Manning, a “politics of the infrathin” might mean “a quest, in registers more-than-human, for the most minor of variations. A commitment to the creation of modes of existence that practice a pragmatics of the useless. A care for ecologies of practice that value the effects of what can but barely be perceived, if it can be perceived at all.”²⁴

- 1 Carolyn Lazard, “The World Is Unknown,” *Triple Canopy* (April 2019): <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-world-is-unknown>.
- 2 This text was written without the possibility of visiting SYNC in person. I experienced the show through images and video documentation. I am very grateful to Carolyn Lazard for their time in discussing the exhibition with me.
- 3 Tameka Blackwell, “And the Sun Still Shines,” in *No Restraints: An Anthology of Disability Culture in Philadelphia*, ed. Gil Ott (Philadelphia: New City Community Press, 2002), 105–17.
- 4 Carolyn Lazard, “How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity,” *Cluster Magazine*, 2013, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55c40d69e4b0a45eb985d566/t/58cebc9dc534a59fbd98c2/1489943709737/HowtobeapersonintheAgeofAutoimmunity+%25281%2529.pdf>.
- 5 Lazard, “How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity.”
- 6 Lazard is a cofounder of Canaries, with Jesse Cohen and Bonnie Swencionis, a network of cis women, trans, and nonbinary people living and working with autoimmune conditions and other chronic illnesses.
- 7 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 34.
- 8 Madeleine Seidel, “Carolyn Lazard: Living Here and Together,” *Art Papers* (August 2020): <https://www.artpapers.org/carolyn-lazard-living-here-and-together/>.
- 9 Karl Marx, *Capital* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), 1: 186–87.
- 10 Carolyn Lazard, “Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice,” <https://promiseandpractice.art/>.
- 11 Catherine Damman, “Carolyn Lazard,” *BOMB*, no. 153 (Fall 2020): <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carolyn-lazard/>.
- 12 Donald Rodney: *AUTOICON v1.0* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2000).
- 13 Jeremy Bentham, *Jeremy Bentham’s Auto-Icon and Related Writings*, ed. James E. Crimmins (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2003).
- 14 Donald Rodney: *AUTOICON v1.0*
- 15 Damman, “Carolyn Lazard.”
- 16 Carolyn Lazard, *A Recipe for Disaster*, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/267429320>.
- 17 Damman, “Carolyn Lazard.”
- 18 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28.
- 19 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989), 171–72.
- 20 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 16.
- 21 Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture Part 2,” *Artforum* (October 1966): 20–23.
- 22 Duchamp once described himself as an “engineer of lost time.” Marcel Duchamp, *Ingénieur du temps perdu: Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* (Paris: Belfond, 1977), 19.
- 23 Peter Gidal, “Against Metaphor,” in *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966–2016*, ed. Mark Webber and Peter Gidal (London: Visible Press, 2016), 235.
- 24 Erin Manning, “For a Pragmatics of the Useless, or The Value of the Infrathin,” *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (February 2017): 97.



