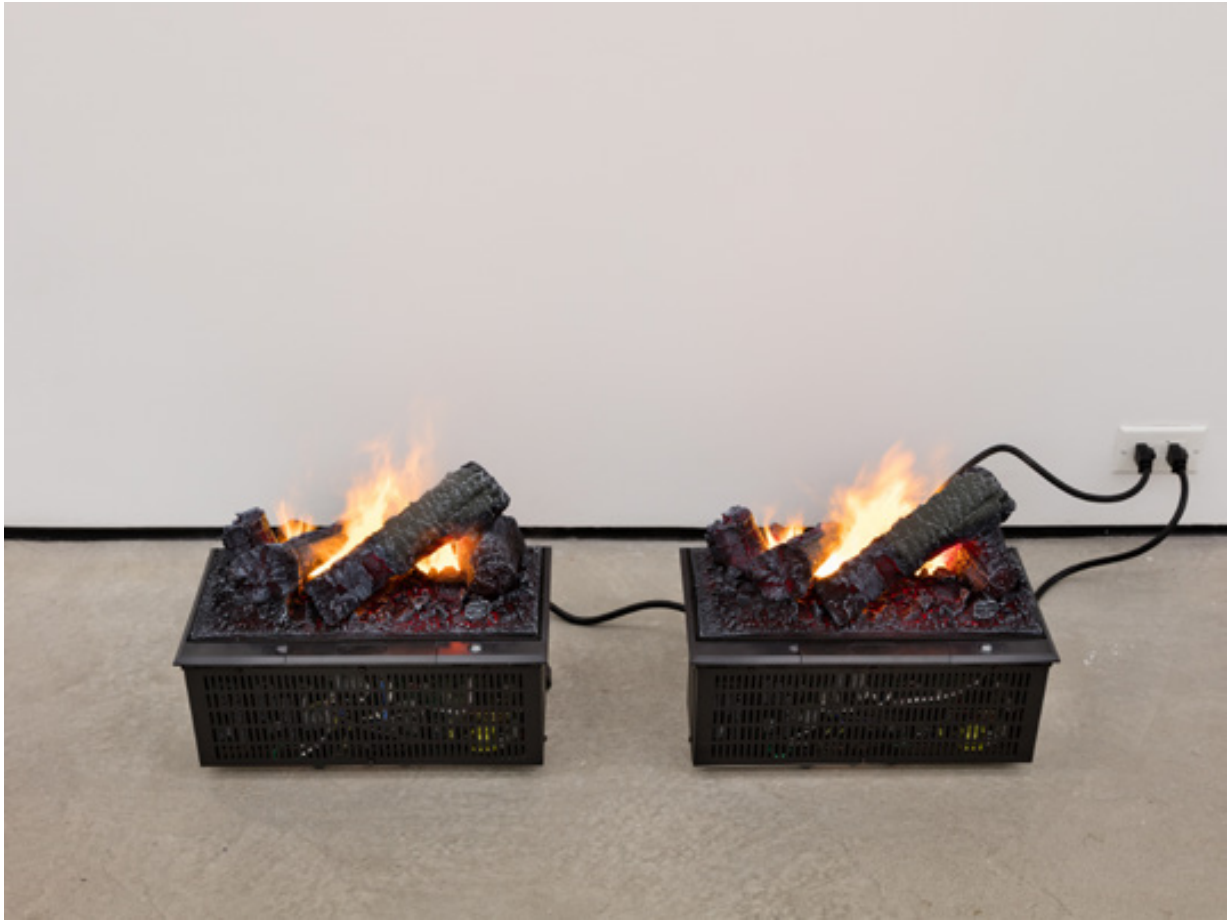

BENDING THE CLOCK
Magnus Schaefer on Carolyn Lazard at Essex Street, New York

A standing air purifier quietly humming in a corner of Essex Street's street-level entrance area almost blends in with the gallery interior, but a glance on the checklist confirms that this is the first work in Carolyn Lazard's exhibition "SYNC." There are more air purifiers below the stairs that lead down to the gallery's sunken main space and also there in the far corner of the room, alongside an assortment of ceramic and stainless steel sinks mounted on the walls, two La-Z-Boy recliner chairs, a television cart with another sink, a pair of electrical fireplace simulations with identical charred logs and dancing flames that appear to be projected onto some sort of smoke, a pen-on-paper portrait of the artist, and a large hourglass holding granite dust.

Thinking about this austere, generously spaced out arrangement, the image that eventually came to my mind was that of a three-dimensional diagram with vectors between sets of works, establishing interrelations between disability, Blackness, environmental racism, and cinematic time. One set of vectors connects the sinks to the air purifiers and the artificial fireplaces. While not sharing the material conditions of film or video works, they engage with the aspects of narrative, duration, and movement that inform the conventions of those mediums. The sinks are installed with their basins facing the viewers, so that their shapes evoke the slightly rounded screens of vintage CRT televisions. Their titles consist of the word "TV" followed by a number and a subtitle in parentheses. *TV1 (Dead Time)* and *TV4 (Delayed Reception)* (both 2020) point to temporalities existing at odds with the pervasive demands of contemporary 24/7 capitalism that are reified in social relations and modes of social reproduction.

Displaying an open void where the TV screen would be, the empty, concave sinks preclude representation or visual narrative and instead create an extended time frame that invites viewers to pay attention to the miniscule differences that allow us to distinguish between one moment and the next. In this regard, they echo historical examinations of the material and conceptual underpinnings of the medium of film, such as Tony Conrad's *Yellow Movies* (1972–73), screen-like rectangles of white paint that would gradually, at an imperceptibly slow rate, turn yellow as they aged. Lazard's 2018 video *Crip Time*, which is not included in this exhibition, shows Lazard's hands sorting their weekly medication into color-coded pillboxes. Presented in real time, the process takes about ten minutes. The video's title references a concept that, as Alison Kafer has argued, includes the requirement to reimagine "our notions of what can and should happen in time […]. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."[1] The quasi-moving-image works in "SYNC" bend "the clock," the social and cultural expectations for what or how to perform, by drawing on the models of film or television to articulate alternative modes of time and temporality.

Another set of vectors links these works to the two recliners and the drawing. Like the sinks, the fireplaces, and the air purifiers, the chairs are domestic objects. *Lazy Boi* (2020), a chair displayed in reclined position, conjures up the image of a person sinking into the soft cushioning to enjoy some time off, away from the workplace, temporarily sheltered from the demands of social reproduction in the privacy of their home – likely in front of a large television screen and with a drink placed in the cupholder in the chair's armrest. Although the distinctions between work and leisure and private and public have eroded significantly over the course of the last few decades, the notion of laziness championed by the branding of the chair is still legible as providing time to recharge in order to be productive again upon the inevitable return to work – the chair model used for *Lazy Boi* is outfitted with USB outlets, which drive the recharging metaphor home.

Disability and queer studies have highlighted alternative kinds of labor that often remain unacknowledged as such and amount to, as Lazard put it in a recent interview, "staying alive and keeping one's loved ones alive under the regime of capitalism" while not conforming to the pervasive

Carolyn Lazard, "TV1 (Dead Time)," 2020

expectation to be productive in a way that can be exploited economically.[2] The drawing *Carolyn Working* (2020) shows the artist in bed, their head propped on one arm and their face partially hidden behind an open laptop: with the artist's pose suggesting that they might be reading, browsing the internet, or watching a movie, the portrait offers an image of labor that is not bound to a clearly defined "productive" outcome. Modifying the brand name of the La-Z-Boy recliner to read *Lazy Boi*, which introduces a non-standard spelling common online, proposes a reevaluation of the concept of "laziness" vis-à-vis the conditions of disability or chronic illness. Assuming a more active stance than *Lazy Boi*, the second recliner is presented in an upright position, leaning forward to make it easier for a person to sit down or get up. Its title, *Piss on Pity* (2020), rejects a sentiment commonly understood to signify an empathy for disabled people that implicitly equates disability with suffering and the impossibility to lead an independent and fulfilling life.

Tameka, the first-person narrator in Tameka Blackwell's 2012 short story "And the Sun Still Shines," which Lazard chose as a press release in lieu of the usual one-page blurb, refuses the preconceived ideas about disability and Blackness that she has to endure from various fellow patients during a doctor's visit. The narrative culminates in Tameka responding to a white woman who asks why she is disabled by adopting a friend's story about having been shot at random by a white man who inexplicably identified her with his blond wife and subsequently committed suicide, because Tameka feels that telling what really happened (she was severely injured by a stray bullet fired by a police officer chasing someone for a minor crime) would not have elicited the same compassionate, albeit misguided, response from her nosy interrogator and instead confirmed stereotypes about crime and violence in the predominantly Black neighborhood of North Philadelphia.

Tameka pisses on pity, so to speak; the story furthermore highlights correlations between disability and Blackness that inform Lazard's *Free Radicals* (2020), the hourglass filled with granite dust from a quarry outside of Philadelphia. Though not identified as part of the exhibition, the landing page of Essex Street's website links to a recent *New York Times* article on the ongoing health crisis affecting Black communities in Philadelphia and across the United States, and on the community-organized activism that has developed in response to this situation.[3] As a result of redlining and other discriminatory practices, Black Americans tend to live in closer proximity to industrial sites compared to other parts of the population and are thus exposed to higher levels of harmful chemicals in the environment. Standing in for the toxic industrial waste products that

accumulate on surfaces and in people's bodies, the dust in *Free Radicals* fills the hourglass entirely, rendering it incapable of marking the passage of time and thus precluding the possibility of a future, signifying a systemic predisposition for illness or premature death – not unlike (but also distinct from) how disability is, structurally and in the liberal-empathetic imagination, related to being cast out of time and "too often serves as the agreed-upon limit of our projected futures."[4]

The motifs and themes in "SYNC" – televisions, recliner chairs, air purifiers, domestic space, temporality – may resonate with the disruption to usual patterns of life and work that many people are experiencing during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In the aforementioned interview, Lazard is clear about how their show is positioned vis-à-vis the current situation:

> Life has been interrupted. And at the same time, quarantine is no stranger for many disabled people. The risks and fears of this moment are unevenly distributed. And it's been challenging to attend to the specificity of this moment as an "event" when the twin crises of the police and the healthcare system are always present for Black disabled people.[5]

In my attempt to make sense of "SYNC," I found myself relying frequently on Lazard's incisive writing and on ideas gleaned from Kafer's 2013 book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, often only to be reminded of the necessary discontinuities between concepts, artworks, and texts. The ready-mades left me alternating between feeling that I was treating them too literally (as in "this stands for that") or not literally enough (by not foregrounding their biographical and local situatedness or not mentioning Marcel Duchamp). Perhaps, however, these concluding observations help me draw out what I think are key qualities of this exhibition: it insists on the importance of form as a medium for analyzing the grinding mechanisms of ongoing systemic crises and offers glimpses of what can and should be different, doing so within a diagrammatic framework that favors synthetic connections over linear explanations.

"Carolyn Lazard: SYNC," Essex Street, New York, September 10–October 17, 2020.

Notes

1 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 27.
2 Carolyn Lazard interviewed by Catherine Damman, *BOMB*, no. 153 (September 10, 2020), p. 126.
3 Linda Villarosa, "Pollution Is Killing Black Americans. This Community Fought Back," *New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/magazine/pollution-philadelphia-black-americans.html.
4 Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 27.
5 Lazard, *BOMB*, p. 126. The majority of the works in "SYNC" were made before the outbreak of the virus; e-mail exchange with Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, September 19, 2020.