

In the Waiting Room: The Sticky, Slippery Duration of "Sick Time"

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Installation view of the waiting room in "Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying," (2018). Image courtesy of Red Bull Arts Detroit.



(<https://bradleyertaskiran.com/>)

It's my last morning in Detroit, where I've come for two days to see an art exhibition. The wind's picking up as I stand waiting on a

street corner with the show's curator, Taraneh Fazeli. We had just pulled my roll-on suitcase around the perimeter of the Heidelberg Project, Tyree Guyton's oft-photographed outdoor art project on the city's east side.

Amidst the iconic junkyard assemblages, painted [clock](https://www.google.com/search?q=heidelberg+project+clocks&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjJxM6KqaTmAhWnATQIHVSOBPUQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=heidelberg+project+clocks&gs_l=img.3..0j0i24.14099.14685..14769...0.0..0.74.3i-wiz-img.w4ayURt2Yvk&ei=FQTsXYnmKKeD0PEP1JySqA8&bih=645&biw=1283)

[faces](https://www.google.com/search?q=heidelberg+project+clocks&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjJxM6KqaTmAhWnATQIHVSOBPUQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=heidelberg+project+clocks&gs_l=img.3..0j0i24.14099.14685..14769...0.0..0.74.3i-wiz-img.w4ayURt2Yvk&ei=FQTsXYnmKKeD0PEP1JySqA8&bih=645&biw=1283)

https://www.google.com/search?q=heidelberg+project+clocks&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjJxM6KqaTmAhWnATQIHVSOBPUQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=heidelberg+project+clocks&gs_l=img.3..0j0i24.14099.14685..14769...0.0..0.74.3i-wiz-img.w4ayURt2Yvk&ei=FQTsXYnmKKeD0PEP1JySqA8&bih=645&biw=1283

appear again and again with a frozen, biblical aspect. In this moment, surrounded by the eerie clutter of time-gone-still, I feel a few things at once: the sudden drop in temperature since yesterday; Fazeli's words streaming thick and fast towards me, percolating weakly through my brain fog; anxiety about our late-arriving Uber. It's a mildly stressful confluence of temporalities competing upon a body, a little echo of the substance of her exhibition.

There's a sticky-slippery quality to *Sick Time*, *Sleepy Time*, *Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying*

<https://redbullarts.com/detroit/exhibition/sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying/>) that complicates the "chrono-normative"

exercise of the exhibition review. *Sick Time* slips when you try to grasp its contours. It sticks when you try to move on. Conceived around the non-linear temporalities specific to illness, rest, and disability, the show is not too concerned with being "on time." Even now that the six-week exhibition has closed, and Fazeli's term as the inaugural curatorial fellow at Red Bull Arts Detroit has ended, *Sick Time* is still unfolding. A phrase from the exhibition text rings like a refrain – "Dragging on and circling back, with no regard for the stricture of the workweek or compulsory able-bodiedness, the time that this project investigates is non-compliant." *Sick Time's* curatorial use of duration feels unnerving, but depending on the day, it can also feel like a salve. I can't settle on one or the other, but

I'm sure this sticky-slippery time, its persistence and uncertainty, also gives the project its subversive force.



(<https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/conceptions-of-white/>)

Sick Time is a group exhibition about the politics of care from an intersectional and disability-justice perspective. The site-specific show is in its fourth iteration at Red Bull Arts Detroit, after versions in [New York/Houston](https://www.projectspace-efanyc.org/sick-time)(<https://www.projectspace-efanyc.org/sick-time>), [Omaha](mailto:https%253A//www.bemiscenter.org/art/exhibitions/sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying.html)(<mailto:https%253A//www.bemiscenter.org/art/exhibitions/sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying.html>), and [St. Louis](https://theluminaryarts.com/exhibitions/sick-time)(<https://theluminaryarts.com/exhibitions/sick-time>). Core artists like Cassie Thornton, Sondra Perry, Jen Liu, Fia Backström, Carolyn Lazard, Danilo Correale, and Constantina Zavitsanos have traveled with the exhibition since its inception. A number of these artists (including Fazeli herself) are affiliated with [Canaries](http://www.canaries-collective.com/)(<http://www.canaries-collective.com/>), a New York-originated network of female-identified and non-binary artists living with chronic and autoimmune illnesses.

Down the metal stairs of the Red Bull Arts Detroit building, a former brewery in the freshly-muraled Eastern Market district, we arrive inside a darkened, arched passageway where Carolyn Lazard is counting out a week's worth of their pills. It's a whack-load of medication, taken for a compound array of conditions. In a ten-minute video, continuously shot from above, a percussive parade of multicolored tablets fills seven Monday-to-Sunday plastic pillboxes. This is not the measure of an able-

bodied workweek; it's the looping tedium of chronic illness. Here is *Sick Time*'s first invitation to recalibrate: we're on *CRIP TIME* (2018) now.



(<https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/15.-Carolyn-Lazard-1220x678-1.png>)

Carolyn Lazard, "CRIP TIME," 2018. Image courtesy Red Bull Arts Detroit.

Sick Time describes itself as a “process-based” show, which is one of those things that sounds good in a press release. But when I draw nearer, it has an elusive sheen. “Process” here boils down to a promise of (more) time, and it’s everywhere. Fazeli’s curatorial methodology reflects a core tenet of her show: to resist the normative, ableist conceptualizations of time that are the cornerstone of capitalist production. Instead, she advocates for a more malleable temporality, one that foregrounds the experience of the sick, debilitated, or disabled body. This time is not for clocks; it might sputter or stall, it drops off, surges, drags, and comes in bouts. Its duration is uncertain. Naturally, then, the exhibition spilled and spills out beyond closing and opening. Many of its active ingredients are still underway: works with site-responsive or social practice dimensions, new commissions still evolving, institutional access work ongoing.

Indeterminate, flexible time is the all-over balm with which Fazeli keeps these processes active.

If there is one place where *Sick Time*'s drift can be felt, it's in The Waiting Room. As a recurring feature of the show, a section of the gallery space was made into a replica of the kinds of generic purgatories found outside any health specialist's office – pallid teal walls, water dispenser with too-tiny cups, dispassionate clock. My body slackens in a familiar way into one of the identical chairs. Everyone has felt waiting time before, but *Sick Time* reminds us how this inertia is most systemically imposed on bodies marginalized by race, class, disability, and gender. Lining two reading racks is a selection of artist, activist, and academic texts related to radical care and health autonomy, as well as pamphlets from a range of Detroit care organizations. (In truth, though, there is too much to read in this room and, ironically, not enough time to wait.)

The Waiting Room serves as the stage for *Sick Time*'s commissions, which all take up and deploy the time differently. Ava Ansari + Poetic Societies's new participatory work *Healing Machine: Audio Rituals & Healing Scripts* (2019), through embodiment mantras delivered over mini-iPods and dispensed via candy machine, suggests we might reclaim the dead time in waiting rooms to heal from the healthcare system itself. Two other commissions for the Detroit show locate their work in hints of a future time and place. Framed posters – Cassie Thornton's *Give Me Cred!* (2013-) and Wayne Curtis's *Feed the People* (circa 2013) – behave curiously like flyers for upcoming acts. Thornton's screen-printed image of a three-fingered, studded diamond ring spelling "CRED" foreshadowed her alternative credit report workshop, which took place after the exhibition dates at the public library. Curtis's line drawing of a teen holding a strawberry to his mouth previews a page from the artist's food-justice coloring book, which launched at the show's closing.

Referencing Curtis's lifetime of grassroots activism in Detroit and the Freedom Freedom community garden he continues to run on the city's east side, the book will figure, presumably, in future Waiting Rooms. That there will always be more waiting is part of the point. But here it's braided with another kind of protracted temporality, that of healing – from chronic pain or illness, predatory debt, or systemic food insecurity.

Sick Time sticks around, deferring its next act. Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa's installation *Black Power Naps: Black Bean Bed and Altar to the Ancestors* (2018) will have a second go in the spring, as part of a new series of offsite programs called The Warp and Weft of Care. Addressing the [racial sleep gap](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/the-sleep-gap-and-racial-inequality/412405/)(<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/the-sleep-gap-and-racial-inequality/412405/>), the ceiling-high, gold-foiled sanctuary invites visitors (visitors of color, as a priority) into a wide basin filled with dried black beans – a vivid expression of rest as reparations. As much of a mood as it is, it was not working in the Red Bull basement. Backstage discussions swirled as to why people were not engaging. Fazeli hopes to reprise *Black Power Naps* next year at a new site, one that is community-based and more intentionally Black-inclusive. No updates yet, though; those conversations need more time. I return to the feeling of my hands sinking into the cool, dark density of those beans. *Yes, better not to rush...*



(<https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/7.niv-Acosta-and-Fannie-Sosa-Black-Bean-Bed.png>)

Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa, "Black Power Naps: Black Bean Bed," (2018). Image courtesy Red Bull Arts Detroit.

In the same way that *Sick Time*'s durational ethos frustrates the exhibition-review format, I suspect it must be frustrating other things too. I flash back to poet-critic Claudia Larocco's [thinking](http://intermsperformance.site/keywords/duration/claudia-la-rocco)(<http://intermsperformance.site/keywords/duration/claudia-la-rocco>) about the wartime expression "for the duration" – how the phrase unsettles because the duration in question is always unknown (until the war finally ends). "Is this [upheaval] maybe one of the things that liveness gives to the institution?" she wonders. "Dragging on and circling back" for who knows how long, what is the effect of *Sick Time* on its corporate host institution and its temporalities? And obliquely, perhaps significantly, on the accelerated time induced by its trademark beverage? What happens when the durational drift of sick time infiltrates the capitalist slipstream of maximal, wakeful productivity? What sticks? I wonder about parameters for the next curatorial fellow. How will Red

Bull Arts Detroit continue to implement the recommendations from the accessibility audit it underwent as part of this project? I wonder about the access “tool kit” to be shared with other Detroit organizations, and the future book. This curating “for the duration” – under the sticky-slippery time signature of illness and disability – holds promise as a vehicle for institutional critique, but fittingly, frustratingly, I did not see it materialize.

With so many tendrils still sprawling in the shade, I get the sense that *Sick Time* is an exhibition that might not really aspire to be an exhibition at all. Maybe it’s a sort of Trojan Horse that gets wheeled in, and after nightfall, what seeps out – still leaking – is “(a) time reforming,” to use performance writer Adrian Heathfield’s [description](https://www.adrianheathfield.net/project/durational-aesthetics) of durational aesthetics. Visually, I imagine this to look a bit like Sondra Perry’s Vaseline-slathered workstation bike, her weirdest and most recent in a series. The artist has started coating every inch of her exercise workstations in the waxy lubricant, deterring the kind of labor they were once designed to perform. On a convex vertical strip of screens, Perry’s avatar decomposes and recombines while singing a pitched-down version of Jennifer Hudson’s ballad: “I am chaaaangiing.” A molting is afoot, a quality of liveness that disrupts.

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