ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Volume 5/Issue 1/June 2024

Ecocene Arts

Buffer Forever

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Anderson, Lucas. 2024. "Buffer Forever." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (June): 56–67. https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.114.

Artwork/ Received: 12.04.2024 /Accepted: 13.04.2024

Buffer Forever

by Lucas Anderson

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About the Artist

Lucas Anderson is an artist and educator based in Phoenix, Arizona, the ancestral lands of the Akimel O'odham and Piipaash. Their artistic practice and research explores the material sensuality of anxiety, grief, and gender through images and installation. He received an MFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2023 and is currently the Marketing and Community Engagement Manager of the Phoenix Forge Makerspace at GateWay Community College.

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Loading is an unfinished collection of looping GIFs, each work a meditation (and nostalgic dedication) to the affect of loading in the context of digital computing. The work is an output of a month-long collective exercise of repetitive creative practice: beginning on March 1st, 2020, I and two dozen other interdisciplinary artists committed to developing the same gesture each day for 31 days.

The day before, on February 29th, 2020, the first recorded death from COVID-19 in the United States occurred 22 miles from my home in Seattle, Washington. Soon, my project Loading and its focus on waiting for computers would find itself within a period when the practice of waiting would define each day. The act of waiting quickly became the "new normal" of pandemic living: waiting for the lockdown to end, waiting for the next public safety announcement, waiting for the next bit of research on COVID-19's effects, waiting to hear of the fallout from a friend's exposure, waiting for testing availability, waiting for test results, waiting for a 10-day quarantine to end, waiting for vaccines, waiting for vaccine eligibility, waiting for the next viral mutation, waiting to see if work would be there in the morning, waiting for unemployment checks, waiting for eviction protection.

Living in this kind of lagging, perpetual potentiality could be jarring, frustrating, isolating, and the source of real emotional and existential distress. For me, an asymmetrical catharsis arose: having lived the prior 20 years with chronic anxiety and depression, and seeking mental health care in the United States, waiting is the norm. Waiting for insurance approval, waiting for an available appointment, waiting in the waiting room, waiting for the prescription to be filled, waiting for the medication to take up in my bloodstream, and waiting for the side effects to subside. The space after a good day and before the inevitable return of the next bad day.

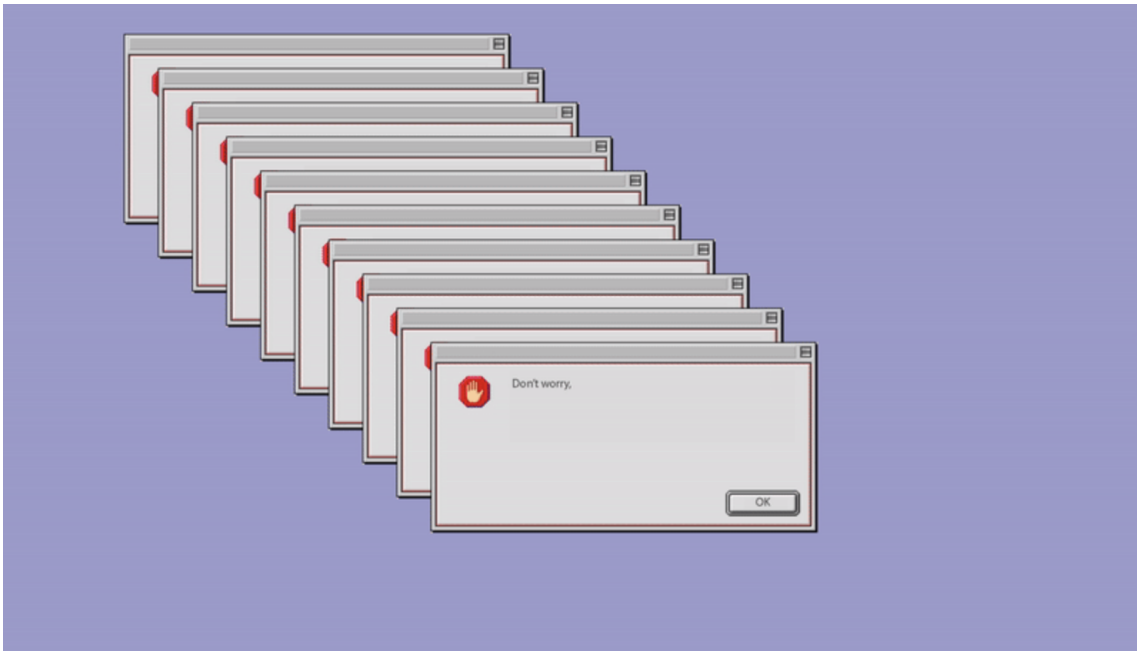

Figure 1. Anderson, Lucas. *March 3*. 2020. Animated digital assemblage.

Is it still called waiting if we cannot know what will come next? The discomfort of waiting comes when the reward for that time spent is undefined, with no promise of an end. Waiting was the official government policy for much of the early pandemic—a prescription that was inadequate (and inequitable) given the scale of danger and suffering, and yet at times the only right way to move forward. Despite this complexity and the embodied strain of waiting, the desire for it to have an end suggested a natural state of flow and continuity that we could return to.

For many who live in sick bodies and especially for those living with chronic ailments, perpetual waiting can come to define daily experience. In this reality, waiting must not be seen as a passive, empty, idle, or without value, but a meaning-full, agential place with its own phenomenology. In this essay and accompanying works, I explore this idea through two waiting technologies: the loading screen and the medical waiting room.

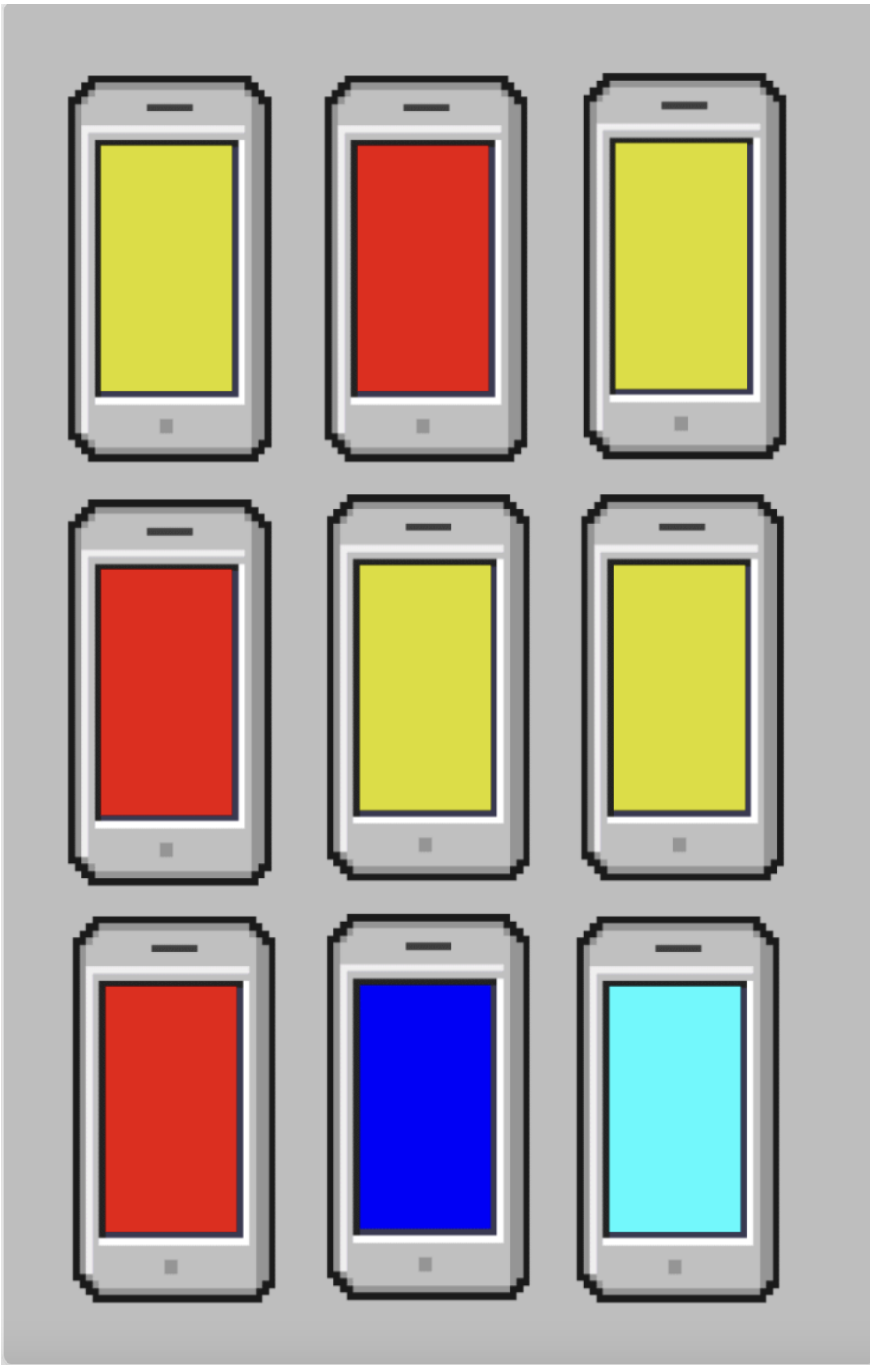

Figure 2. Anderson, Lucas. *March 17*. 2020. Animated digital illustration.

Loading was an icon (literally) of early computing and the internet, but one that is quickly becoming a relic. Once an essential tool for a website or application designer to maintain the illusion of seamless flow and high-speed web, the experience of waiting for a computer to think was now a problem to be solved not just for user experience but a quickly developing ideology of doing business online. The online retail giant Amazon

famously claimed that "every 100ms of latency cost them 1% in sales" (Linden 2006). Loading time is an error, a glitch, and a risk to the bottom line.

Buffering was created to solve this problem: digital files are preloaded and temporarily stored on a device to allow for uninterrupted access to networked data. This is most commonly experienced in online streaming video platforms such as YouTube or Netflix, where the video files load "just in time," the pixels coming together to form the image just seconds ahead of you. However, this process is not just contained to video—modern browsers and some e-commerce company websites now preload portions of pages based on which visible links it believes you are most likely to click ("Speed"). Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024) outlines the potential consequences of a technology like buffering through a diagnosis of 21st century capitalist production as a destroyer of mediation, privileging immersion, flow, continuity, and presence over all else. Seeing immediacy as both a negation of medium in an affectual sense in our relationship to media and culture ("eating the real with a spoon") as well as our temporal relations: the just-in-time urgency of globalized supply chains seeping into our everyday experience (Kornbluh 2024, 20). As Kornbluh writes, "a hurry-hurry that compresses time into a tingling present" or "presence without future (18)."

The process of enacting immediacy as the "natural state" of our relationships to software and the internet is in many ways the historical arc of communication and computing itself: the production of increasingly powerful microprocessors and compression protocols, expansive networked infrastructure and even more expansive adoption of mobile devices. Achieving an individual experience of information immediacy through networked digital computing ironically requires untold layers of complexity and mediation. Having the world at our fingertips involves such distance from the bits and the hardware that contain them that the most apt metaphor for their location in popular imaginary is the cloud—a weightless, ethereal informational miasma that is everywhere and nowhere.

Beyond ever-increasing speed, maintaining the virtual's immediacy and continuous flow requires permanent reliability. As Tung-Hui Hu writes in *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, modern networks are designed to ensure data "get to its destination with 'five-nines' reliability, so that if one hard drive or piece of wire fails en route, another one takes its place, 99.999 percent of the time" (2015, 1). This includes an industry standard of the 3-2-1 backup strategy, which prescribes that you have three copies of all of your data, "two local (on-site) but on different media (read: devices), and at least one copy off-site" (Elliot 2021). Often this off-site is a datacenter. These spaces are most familiar to me as massive, air-conditioned warehouses scattered around my current home of Phoenix, Arizona, but

they are also found in former missile silos and military bases—acting as literal and ideological bunkers to keep our data "safe." An interruption in the flow is intolerable. Waiting, loading, and (most terrifying) data loss become anomalies, abnormalities, and something to fear. As Hu also writes, "the cloud is not just built to solve specific technological problems . . . but is built around the shape of our imagined vulnerabilities" (2015, 97). In hindsight, loading screens represent an onramp to this hypermediated immediacy. The fear that came with the growing distance from the workings of computers through the interface and the internet browser needed to be quelled—don't worry, they said, things are happening. A reassuring voice in a moment of change and uncertainty, distracting us (at times, through deception) from our unknowing and the possibility of the computer's processes being stuck in a state from which it cannot escape. Worse than stasis, a computer "freezing" is the machine being caught in an infinite loop, with no other resources or logic or code to get it unstuck. The freeze compromises the sense of immediacy, agency, and control that modern computing promises (Alexander 2017, 2). So undesirable, feared, and existential, it was colloquially equated to death (Swain 2010).

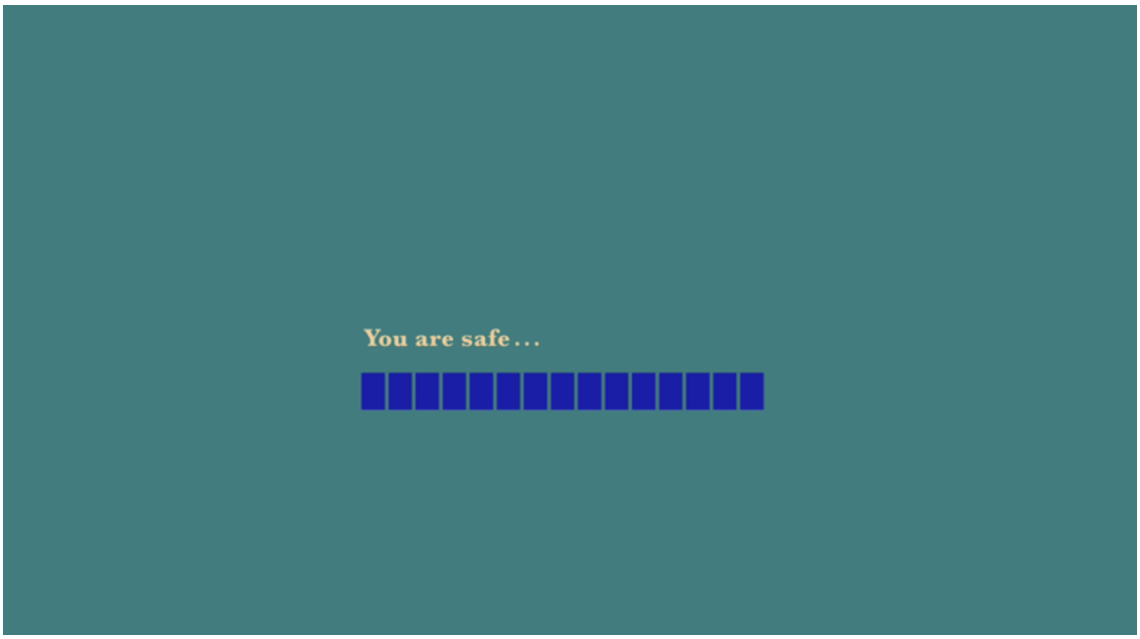

Figure 3. Anderson, Lucas. *March 2*. 2020. Animated digital assemblage.

March 2 came about in exploring this tension, giving voice to the loading screen while also taking away any sense of "completion" of the process. There is no edge for the progress bar to reach. And as a looping GIF—a low resolution and nearing obsolete digital media format—the work removes the possibility and the authority of ending altogether.

Outside of the screen, my memories of loading are rich with sensuality. An embodied encounter with the labor of the computer that is in stark contrast to the smooth silence of our touch screen mobile phones and the seamless experience of the modern internet. Waiting for the computer meant hearing the hard drive clicks and whirrs, feeling its vibrations through its cold steel case, or holding a hand to the warm air emanating from the cooling fans. A loading screen is a liminal space, an in-between, that provides for what today feels like a rare kind of intimacy between the user and the computer.

The culture and technological immediacy of modern computing have reduced this process, and in some cases removed it all together from our digital relations. The heat, noise, and kinetic density of computing has been exported, virtually off-shored from our homes, housed instead in data centers whose fans can be so loud as to spur municipal noise regulation if located too close to neighborhoods ("Chandler's" 2023).

A primarily networked, cloud-based computer relation means that our own devices become a kind of remote interface, a purely visual portal into a digital experience, wherein the average user knows little to nothing about the scale, function, or impact of its material realities. Picking up my phone and connecting to this network is now a seamless, almost instantaneous process. Waiting has finally, seemingly, been eliminated. But in reality, the labor of waiting has just been reversed: when the network is constantly poised, computers wait for us. Is it still waiting if they know what will come next?

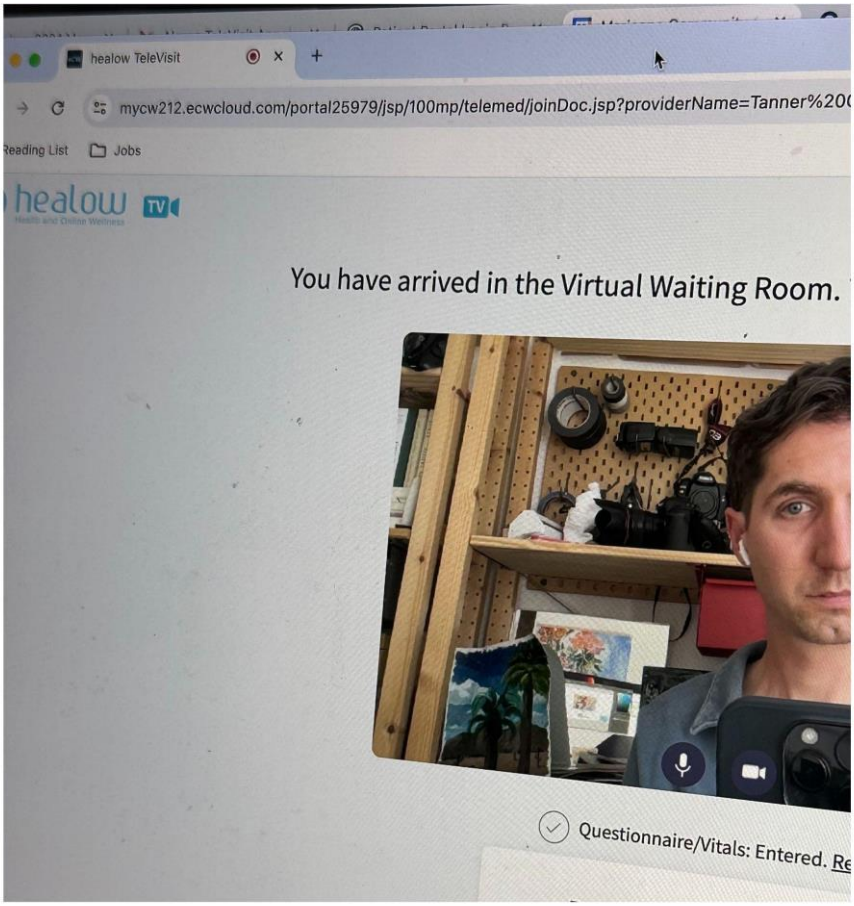

Figure 4. Anderson, Lucas. *Untitled*. 2024. Digital image.

> *Grocery store shelves are starting to empty out, and fill up with lines of people whose faces looked as if they were smelling something rotting but not sure where it was coming from. Some people wear masks, face shields, plastic gloves. I see an older gentleman wearing empty plastic sandwich bags on his hands.*

Colloquially, buffering has built a powerful digital connotation in its relationship to online video streaming. Its other meaning as a safe in-between, or "something that serves as a protective barrier" raced into our embodied relations in the first weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic ("Buffer"). What was between us and the technologies that mediated that space were a primary concern. Masks and 6 feet of air most commonly, but also windows, doors, and layers of plastic—between bodies, in the form of plexiglass sheets and face shields, and between objects, everything becoming potentially individually packaged—just in case.

Despite its near invisibility in common online activities, waiting also returned dramatically to the everyday digital experience. As with so much of the global economic and cultural infrastructure, home digital networks strained as the broad adoption of video calls replaced unsafe—and in many countries, unsanctioned—in-person gatherings. During the initial lockdowns, the spinning, looping, and loading icon was seen often as low bandwidth and slow connections interrupted meetings, family game nights, weddings, and funerals hosted on services such as FaceTime and Zoom. A virtual buffer in need of buffering itself.

As the novelty of the new technologies wore off and the weeks wore on, the true danger and uncertainty of the pandemic's impact had stripped away most daily routines, including my commitment to a daily creative project on loading screens and buffering. Looking back, the staggered gestures are traces of some spike in energy, confidence, fear, and need for distraction. They also function as a reminder that days still held their significance, despite the fragmented temporality of my memory of those first few months. Robert Hasan, finds this fragmentation within digital temporality, calling it "connected asynchronicity," theorized by Neta Alexander as "a tension between slowness (in the form of waiting) and excessive speed" (2017, 12).

For me, the first month of the pandemic provided an opportunity to notice an embodiment of this kind of temporality, through Loading as well as its familiarity in my experience with depression, anxiety, and their treatment. It is an understanding found within the disability studies framework of "crip time" first articulated by Irv Zola (1993) and Carol Gill (1995), and has become a loosely defined word to encompass the temporal experience of living with a disability. Alison Kafer, in *Feminist, Queer Crip* (2013), explores "crip time" not only as a lived experience but as a theoretical notion and a way of engaging in concepts of non-linear time and speculative futures.

It is March 2022, and I am still waiting. This time for insurance coverage to begin, for appointment with a new doctor, a new prescription, and a new dosage of a medication that I had stopped 4 years prior. The closest doctor I could find shared an office with a physical therapist, brightly colored exercise balls piled high in the corner. His biceps bulged through his shirt as he scribbled the order for venlafaxine and alprazolam, and he told me that a recent study had found that exercise was more effective than most medication at treating depression. "If I could prescribe a weekly visit to the gym, I would," he said.

Waiting rooms are, like loading screens, an abject technology. That is, a technology whose purpose is to become obsolete. Waiting is an error within an imaginary of seamless, immediate, and hyper-efficient care. They are in-between spaces, whose nowhereness and everywhereness are deeply felt. By waiting, you are not yet being cared for but living in the

promise of its eventual arrival. Waiting rooms are full of bodies, misfit bodyminds in the presence of illness often in silence but always in shared potentiality.

Figure 5. Anderson, Lucas. *More than half the days*. 2023. Gallery view.

More than half the days (2023) is an intermedial installation where the waiting room becomes a place that foregrounds this potentiality, this in-betweenness, and explores what is possible in its solidarity. Four black chairs lined a corner of the gallery surrounding a plain white table. A monitor plays a looping, 14-minute two-channel video, and the sound of breathing fills the space and the surrounding area. A large black plastic flat sculpture is framed on the wall. Additional elements of a waiting room—based on my own experiences in behavioral health centers, counseling offices, and hospitals in the United States and additional visual research—are also present, such as a potted plant, a "candy jar," and clipboards, pens, and intake forms. In this waiting room, the form has been rejected, replaced with a 30-page zine, itself rejecting the waiting room trope of "light reading." For this installation, there are no numbers or appointments, no expectation of services—the doctor will not see you now.

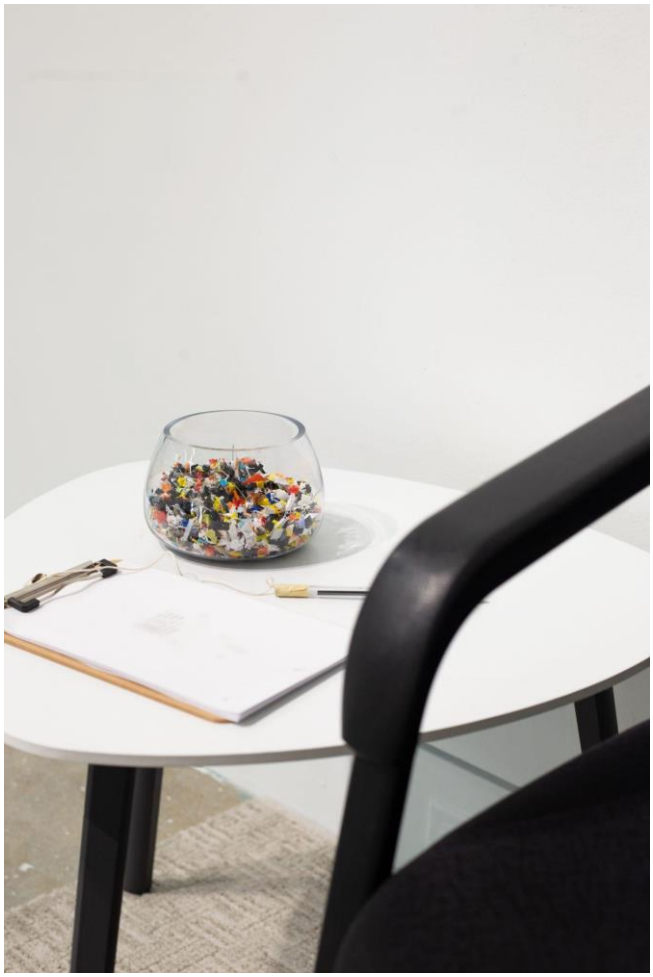

Figure 6. Anderson, Lucas. Detail of *More than half the days*. 2023. Gallery view.

Visitors were invited into the space with a plain paper sign reading "Please wait," at once a directive to stay where (what) you are until a specified point in time, and an overeager invitation. Those who chose not to enter still made a choice that so often is not in the hands of those that regularly engage with the medical system: to not participate when it does not serve you, to seek other more affirming spaces, to seek other treatments, and, in more dire scenarios, to refuse treatment altogether.

It also became clear over the course of the 12-day installation that, for those who did choose to enter, many visitors had had a meaningful life experience in a waiting room in the past. In some moments, the installation became a place specifically for sick, disabled, and neurodivergent bodies to inhabit and engage directly with the agential politics of the space. As observed, this looked like the waiting room becoming a space of public conversations, for joy, and for simply being—a contrast to a place that is most often private, quiet, solemn, and implies deficiency of being not enough. It was through observing these particular encounters—and in some cases participating in them—that I

came to understand this waiting room as a place to have agency in a sick body's inherent uncertainty, even if that agency looked like doing nothing at all.

At the end of *Immediacy* (2024), Kornbluh asserts that we cannot fight fire with fire. Aestheticized immediacy is inadequate as a critical response within art and theory—more flow will only feed the machine. Instead, she suggests other "sources of aesthetic value" including "hold" which "clogs circulation, keeping some reserve from exchange, or slowing down processing, or impeding flow, making palpable the work of relation" (Kornbluh 2024, 216). Loading and more than half the days came from a similar place, attempting to reveal the weight of relational labor within the acts of waiting and loading and acknowledging these liminal acts as forceful in-betweens that cannot be technologically reduced.

It is March 2024, and I'm still waiting. While the risk of catastrophic COVID-19 epidemics is lower, infections and deaths from the virus continue, and the impact of "Long COVID" remains uncertain. It is still very much in-between its beginnings and an end that may never arrive, and as with other in-betweens, vulnerable, sick bodies bear the weight of the pandemic's systemic liminality. In the face of this, waiting, holding (on) can feel like hollow gestures, but as embodied relations, they can, and must, be radical, forceful, and without end.

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