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An introduction

Care has become a central component to my practice, performance and research in recent years, made necessary in part by age (as I approach my seventies), by the aftermath of stroke (in the case of my performance partner, Peggy Shaw), and by the need to respond to hierarchies, systems and global events that render 'caring' a radical act.

In my recent performance work as part of Split Britches, the adjustments and allowances made for the performer or participants are rendered visible and co-opt the audience in an exchange of care and understanding. This ethos disrupts our expectations of both theatrical spectatorship and the responsibilities of audience and performer. Exchanges of care between performer, participants and audience are built into the design, aesthetic and text of the work. This is most evident in the case of Peggy's solo performance *RUFF*[1] (2013), and my performance / chat-show / engagement project, *What Tammy Needs to Know About Getting Old and Having Sex*[2] (2014).

Aside from live performance, I have devoted much of the last decade to developing my series of Public Address Systems; re-imagining institutional spaces and conventional formats for conversation within new architectures of care. For example, the *Porch Sitting*[3] and the *Long Table*[4] make use of familiar, domestic phenomenologies, to stimulate different kinds of dialogue and modes of interrelation.

In the aftermath of the US election, I devised and trialled the *Care Café,* a temporary venue for *communitas*, conversation and activity within a spoken and visible frame of 'care'. It is a space which allows us to acknowledge social anxiety, our own vulnerabilities and our desire to enact and feel care. The *Care Café* is an open-source and unfixed protocol; it is still developing and evolving as it encounters new questions, contexts and communities. Anyone can stage their own iteration in their local arts centre, church hall, shop front or front room. The life of the project, as in so many of these practices and protocols, seems to be in the repetition, the reciprocity and the interconnection of disparate peoples and places through the principle of care and gathering.

The chronology

On 7 November 2016, I was sitting in the lobby of a disused bank somewhere near Wall Street in New York City. There were hundreds of people next to me, sat in folding chairs pulled up to long municipal meeting tables, sending texts and making calls. We were 'getting out the vote' and 'saving our democracy', or at least our version of it. It felt good to gather there with strangers in this purposeful social space. In fact, in those tense few days before the 2016 US Presidential Election, I couldn't stay away. I wanted to do my part, but I also just wanted to be in the company of others. We didn't know each other, but as we sat side-by-side and engaged in our repetitive tasks, we struck up easy, free-flowing conversations. We spontaneously ordered pizzas for the entire room, went out on chocolate runs and shared common and uncommon histories. It seemed that while we had come there to work or to allay our anxieties or to express our hope and enthusiasm for the future, we mostly had come there to be together. Sitting amongst that gathering, in those last few hours before the polls closed, reminded me of the concept of *café* described by Carson McCullers in *Ballad of the Sad Café*. She talks about the

importance of sociality and the significance of place. She talks about how we need to gather and when there is a place, we do gather and think and talk and wait until ultimately there comes a moment when we act. I resolved to find a way to sustain this feeling of *café* after our labour here was no longer needed.

Two days later, sitting alone and traumatised in my apartment, I realised sadly that my nearest café was a banquette full of solitary, ear-phoned millennials working away at their computers at the Starbucks down the street. I felt lonely and needed to gather, much the same way people in my neighbourhood in southwest Virginia needed to gather around food and mundane tasks when there was an illness, birth or death in the family. Knocking on the door, placing a casserole on the table and sitting together in the front room was one way that friends, strangers and the estranged could come together to *care* for members of their community. Something had to be done.

The next Sunday, I devised and trialled a *Care Café,* a temporary venue for the kind of assemblage of support, solidarity and purpose I had experienced a week earlier. It was a simple invitation to drop by the Club at La MaMa in NYC for a couple of hours on Sunday afternoon; to sit around small tables and chat while making homemade badges with individualised slogans or producing hand-outs with lists of survival hotline numbers and 'how to *care* for each other' advice.

The *Care Café* was set up to replicate the kind of *café* I imagined in Carson McCullers' story. It re-appropriated some of the aesthetic of *café* culture, with the arrangement of small tables, quiet conversation and provision of shared food and drink. However, the space also acknowledged and dismantled the common social anxieties associated with these spaces: closed conversations between strangers, a

school-canteen-esque difficulty in knowing where to sit and with whom. Just by entering the *Care Café,* participants acknowledged something of their own vulnerability, their needs in the present moment, and their desire to give and receive *care*. It also allowed for different kinds of conversation. Small roundtable discussions took place concurrently, with participants moving around and engaging with other groups as the two hours progressed. There was room for questioning, wondering and personal anecdote without the pressure of speaking in front of a larger group of people, yet the proximity of the tables created a feeling of a shared experience, as conversations were overheard and bled into one another. The tables focused attention on a particular activity or selection of activities. These included cutting and pasting, filling envelopes, badge making, stickering, or other simple actions. They were not so demanding as to preclude conversation, but rather provided an underpinning rhythm. Moments of silence were sustained through re-focus upon the activity, allowing for reflection, listening to surrounding conversations and an organic shift in topic. And more than anything, this Sunday afternoon *Care Café* was a simple space that allowed us to take comfort in our gathering, without having to respond to any particular agenda or call to action.

Thinking back, elements of *care* and the *café* have been essential to my practice since I began working with Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin in the Split Britches Company. As we crafted our feminist performance methodologies in the 1980s, we believed that good political satire had to be based in good will, so we decided that if we were going to perform the villains of this time (the likes of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher or Phyllis Schlafly), we had to find ways to *care* about them. The concept of the *café* was also a fundamental aspect of our practice as we worked to grow a community for performance alongside the performances themselves. This was evidenced in the sibling upbringing of

our company, Split Britches, and WOW—a performance *café* for women artists in New York City.

In recent years, *care* has moved into a foregrounded position as both subject matter and aesthetic for the work. In the case of *RUFF*, for instance, the allowances made for the performer are not concealed; rather, the facilitating apparatus is core to the show. The audience are invited to participate in this support, right from the opening section of the show, where Peggy swiftly brushes away the usual expectations of passive spectatorship. She explains to the audience how she sometimes gets coughing fits since her stroke and speaks about how great it is when a performer coughs in a show. The audience gets on their side, wants to help—they are 'in the palm of your hand'. Peggy realises this dynamic in performance, that an audience may care for the performer, and hands out a bottle of water to an audience member in the front row in case they want to give her water (despite the fact that 'water does not help [her] cough').

Peggy Shaw in RUFF *at the Barbican, London. Photo by Michael Conti, 2016*

Much of my current performance work and research is conducted in collaboration with diverse groups of elders—

considering intimacy, sex, health, wellbeing and community with older people in the US, UK, Australia and Europe. These projects, predominantly under the guise of my performance persona Tammy WhyNot, demand both the practice and demonstration of care. Small groups of elder participants form temporary collectives as my 'WhyNets', supporting each other through the creative process. As Tammy, I encourage them to share their thoughts on somewhat difficult topics, building their stories into a performance framework. I observe the connections they form with one another outside of the business of the show itself, connections grown organically through the space and time to gather and talk, in an environment in which they all recognised and shared one another's vulnerability. In performance, the care they demonstrate for one another—in moving on and off stage, reminding each other of choreography and words, applauding their individual set pieces and anecdotes—empower them in the eyes of the audience, as a collaborating ensemble rather than lone participants.

Tammy WhyNot in What Tammy Needs to Know About Getting Old and Having Sex *at La MaMa Theatre, NYC. Photo by Lori E Seid, 2015*

The *Care Café* also follows on somewhat from a consideration of care in Public Address Systems; a series of open-source strategies for new kinds of public conversation. These systems often re-purpose the domestic to disrupt the 'panel-of-experts' exclusivity of conventional discursive formats. They allow the institutional spaces in which they are held to be re-imagined within architectures of care. In a *Long Table*, participants are actively invited to share responsibility for the flow of the conversation and the respect shown to each other as speakers and listeners; an 'Etiquette' is read out by a host at the start, the space is intimately lit, turns are taken, microphones are passed and shared. Everyone in the room has the power (and imperative, with the communal interest for a more satisfying discussion) to shift the direction of conversation, to mediate moments of tension and to make space for voices less easily heard.

A Long Table *at the Live Art Development Agency, London. Photo by Alex Eisenberg, 2014*

Similar nuance can be observed in a *Porch Sitting*, where participants sit side-by-side and face out in one direction to 'muse' on a particular topic. This inspires a gentler mode of discussion, with room for pause, welcomed tangents and a

calm familiarity amongst the participants—evoking the feeling of sitting out in the quiet of the porch at the end of the evening. There is no official summation, no bullet-pointed conclusions; the conversation folds into a silence, its ending natural as bedtime.

A Porch Sitting *actually held on a porch whilst in residence on Governors Island, NYC. Photo by Alex Legge, 2016*

As of 1 September 2017, the *Care Café* is still in the experimental stage. I have set *Cafés* up in New York City in the US, and in London, Folkestone, Brighton and Glasgow in the UK with more scheduled in London and Sydney, Australia. The contexts vary: from landscapes of political aftermath, such as the US Presidential Election and the UK's Brexit, to small grassroots performance festivals, to large national festivals focused on art, mental health and human rights. Venues so far include empty performance spaces, theatre bars, cafés and multi-purpose rooms in state libraries.

As with other Public Address System projects, I make this format open for anyone to use, trial, or change to suit their

situation and need for care. I invite you to take the guidelines laid out below in the Protocol and host a *Care Café* in your own town, to further engage and connect with your existing community—or as a starting point for a new one. Pass the idea on to people you think might be able to make use of it, whatever their field, passion or politics, wherever they are in the world. In some ways, I feel, sharing this idea is even more important than it has been with the other Systems. The radical power and personal comfort in acts of gathering can grow exponentially with the knowledge that the experience is being replicated in different locales worldwide—a truth perceived on a massive scale in the case of the 2017 Women's March.

These are still very early stages of development. Trialling the *Long Table* took ten years before settling on the final protocol. However, the *Care Café* is a simple idea. It is simply an invitation to sit with others for a specific period of time within a framework of care. Perhaps it's hard to improve on simplicity. It has been a pleasure to see how little explication *Care Café* requires; the importance of gathering is something felt instinctually[5].

The first UK Care Café *at Chats Palace, London. Photo by Alex Legge, 2017*

The protocol

Care Café is a place, either public or domestic, for people to gather their wits, thoughts and comrades in action.

- It can be a hall, a hallway, a meeting room or someone's living room—even the corner of a real café.

- You will need chairs and a few tables for sitting around and leaning on, placed so that there is room to move and mingle, as well as sit and talk.

- There doesn't have to be a specific agenda or discussion topic, just an open framework for self-selecting small group or one-to-one conversations.

- Food and drink are not necessary, but tea and biscuits are always welcome and it's fun to see what might arrive if you set up an informal potluck table.

- Music is optional but remember that conversation is optimal.

- Provide each table with small manual tasks of care. Think of things that need to be done for someone or some group, like folding laundry, texting appeals, stamping mailings, cutting out cookies, preparing art projects or political information. Or simply make you own custom badge for a cause of your choice. Having everyone engaged in simple physical tasks keeps the conversation easy and flowing.

- Think of a way to share resources for action, activism

and care—post-its, sign-up sheets, a wall poster, bulletin board or blackboard, video diary corner. Resist the urge to finish with a group discussion or public announcements. Let everyone go gently on their way.

- Document and log your activity on the *Care Café* Facebook community page so we can stay connected and share *care* strategies.
  https://www.facebook.com/cafeofcare

And remember that this is primarily a state of mind that we can carry with us, asking ourselves daily: how can we maintain an attitude of *care* in an uncaring world?

Notes

1. *RUFF* (2013). Created in collaboration with Peggy Shaw and performed by Peggy, this piece employs green screen technology to represent the 'dark spaces' left in in her brain after her 2011 stroke and displays her script on three movable monitors to assist with performance and the memory of text. *RUFF* toured to Alaska, New York, the UK, Poland and Tasmania, including a run at the Barbican in London. The piece also prompted the development of an interactive workshop, *Greenscreening*, for survivors of stroke. [↑]

2. *What Tammy Needs to Know About Getting Old and Having Sex* (2014). After premiering in New York with a cast of 16 elder participants (or WhyNets), the show was re-created with local older people in Brighton, Manchester, Glasgow, London, and Lublin, Poland. The show draws on practice-based research into ideas of sex, sexuality, friendship and intimacy in the over-50s and includes personal stories, 'guest spots' from local participants, and a number of the country-western hits of trailer-park survivor (and my alter-ego), Tammy WhyNot. [↑]

3. The *Porch Sitting*. First trialed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club (ETC), New York on New Year's Eve 2012 / 13, this protocol has the audience all face the same direction, allowing for a gentle mode of conversation based more on wondering than knowing. *Porch Sittings* have since been held in the UK, Ireland, Australia and Los Angeles. [↑]

4. The *Long Table*. Inspired by the ever-extending table in Marleen Gorris's film *Antonia's Line*, this conversation protocol uses the etiquette of the dinner party to encourage a more democratic exchange of ideas. Anyone can come and take a seat at the table.

Conversation is the only course; there is an end, but no conclusion. The *Long Table* has been set in diverse spaces around the world, for a variety of topics: on technology, housing, gender, age and sexuality, to name but a few. [↑]

5. *Care Café*. First trialed after the 2016 US election at La MaMa ETC, New York on 10 November 2016, this protocol is designed as a place for people to gather, encouraging gentle, politically-based conversation and activities. *Care Cafés* have since been held across the UK and Australia. [↑]

About the authors

HANNAH MAXWELL is a writer, performer and artist collaborator based in London. She has worked with Lois Weaver and Split Britches since 2014 and is co-writer on the performance text for their latest major work, *Unexploded Ordnances.* In 2015–16 she was lead writer for *The Sick of The Fringe* at Edinburgh Festival Fringe; her performance *Diagnoses* were featured in *The Scotsman.* An essay on the project, co-written with its co-founder Brian Lobel, was published in *Contemporary Theatre Review.* Her debut solo performance, *I, AmDram,* premieres at Camden People's Theatre in May 2018.

LOIS WEAVER is an artist, activist, and Professor of Contemporary Performance at Queen Mary University of London. She has been a writer, director, and performer with Peggy Shaw and Split Britches since 1980. Her experiments in performance as a means of public engagement include *Long Tables, Porch Sittings, Care Cafés,* and her facilitating persona, Tammy WhyNot. A book on her performance work, *The Only Way Home is Through the Show: Performance Work of Lois Weaver,* edited by Jen Harvie, was published by Intellect Live and the Live Art Development Agency in 2015. Weaver is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Wellcome Trust Engagement Fellow, and recipient of the 2018 Women of the World (WOW) Women in Creative Industries Fighting the Good Fight award.