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Kesia Guillery, Jorge Lopes Ramos & Persis-Jadé Maravala

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Goodnight, Sleep Tight

Training performers as palliative carers in an age of system collapse

KESIA GUILLERY, JORGE LOPES RAMOS AND PERSIS-JADÉ MARAVALA

This essay presents a series of instructions and explanations given by Persis-Jadé Maravala, artistic director of ZU-UK and writer and director of *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* (ZU-UK, 2016–), in training sessions for the performers who facilitate this one-to-one experience. Kesia Guillery, ZU-UK research associate, reflects, drawing on her own experience of the piece and familiarity with Maravala's methods, edited by Jorge Lopes Ramos.

Goodnight, Sleep Tight explores intimate care-relationships through the embodiment of childhood memories, merging virtual reality (VR) input (via a 360° film) with live, physical performer-participant interaction, driven by a desire to understand the human experience of loneliness through the medium of touch. It has been performed in the UK (London, Kent, Cardiff, Halifax, Sheffield), Canada (Montreal), Brazil (Belo Horizonte) and Colombia (Bogotá), in a variety of venues, including cafés, people's homes and bedrooms, teaching rooms and orphanages, and is in continued development.

A metaphor of an act of palliative care that at the same time contains the taking-charge and the protective leadership of a mother-figure sits at the core of the piece's artistic intentions. The audio-visual and interpersonal content of *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* evokes the participant's own mortality and carves out a moment in which profound self-reflective self-care is enabled, in the face of the participant's recognition of their own state of inevitable collapse. The piece constitutes part of a wider artistic project of palliative care, however, when this act is itself considered in context: it addresses and eases a more generalized social collapse by facilitating a temporary forum in which humans, both live and through various digital media, reach out to touch one another with compassion. The aesthetics that form the basis of this project

are unequivocally rooted in non-Western, marginalized rituals and values. Considering arts experience as a palliative response to the demise of Western capitalist hegemony, it is important to recognise the subversive significance of non-Western participatory practices as the scaffold of this response.

INSTRUCTION

It is vital to get the tone right because the amahs must talk to the audience as children without talking down to them or patronising them. The key element to the amahs is their soft and gentle trustworthiness.

In *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* the participant is put to bed, literally, by a performer representing an *amah*. The term '*amah*' widely denotes a domestic worker with nursing and childcare duties in various parts of Asia – its origins are uncertain, often attributed to Chinese derivation (Constable 2007). She guides her 'child', physically, and with minimal verbal input, through the process of putting on pyjamas, having a hot chocolate, being given a teddy bear and climbing into bed. The interaction is familiar – if not from the participant's own personal experience of caregiver and mothering figures, at least, very probably, in their cultural knowledge library of parent-child rituals and wider tropes bound up with the idea of having someone 'take care' of you or being 'put to bed'. She then guides them through the process of putting on a VR-headset. The interaction is less familiar, but by the point at which a VR-headset is introduced, the act of putting it on, or having it put on, is already imbued with and integrated into the tonality of being taken care of.



■ Figure 1. *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* at Gerry's Café, 2017. Performers: Jan Lee, Agnieszka Rolkiewicz and Ana Scheidegger. Photo Ludovic des Cognets

The participant slips seamlessly into a 360° film: at first it shows nothing but the exact surroundings they were able to see around them before the headset was on, with one difference – when they look down at their own body, their body and feet are the size of a 6-year-old child's. They see a woman tucking them in – she moves like the *amah* who just helped them put their headset on. They feel an actual sheet placed over them at the same time. They see a mother-figure stroke their hair, who they are perfectly aware is a digital representation of a figure just like the real person representing their *amah* who is still sitting close to them. They see/feel the real person stroke their hair, too – almost (*almost*) in perfect synchrony. They then see and feel themselves slipping away from their own body and gliding from the space where their body currently lies. They rise, zooming out, and observe the place where they, physically, are, from a great height. As they zoom out, the *amah* helps their actual body sit up in the actual bed it is lying in. They see their own location in perspective, from high above, as one spot among many. A child's voice speaks to them through the headset – the 'voice in your head': it asks them questions about their own mortality, their relationship to their memories and their relationship to their future. As the questions subside, the zoomed-out footage of the place they are in, filmed from a great height, rewinds at high speed, until they are back at the perspective from the bed, back in line with

their actual situation. The *amah* guides their body back into its lying position as they visually descend. She gently helps them remove their headset. She indicates for them to remove their pyjamas. They remove the pyjamas themselves, while she remains nearby should they need help. She sits with them silently, as they process what they have just experienced. She indicates for them to leave the space.

INSTRUCTION

Do not step in time, i.e., stop–start–stop–start – rather, allow the walk to be more natural as you will need to walk with audiences and cannot expect them to walk in time to the Mina. The pulse is always coming from the inside.

The use of Mina (*tambor de mina* rhythms), pertaining to the dance culture of the Afro-Brazilian *tambor de mina* religious tradition, establishes the kind of profound, repetitive pulse that induces trance-like, hypnotic states. The care-ful performance culture that frames the training and direction Maravala uses to prepare the live facilitators of *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* has grown out of ZU-UK's racial, ethnic and class cultures – a core collaboration between a Brazilian and an Indian-Persian-Yemeni-Brit. ZU-UK's training methods have always drawn on physical collective experiences that are

distinctly non-Western – both in the approach to the body, and to audiences. Their current work, though often digitally mediated, still draws on these principles of rhythm, sound as psychophysical experience and co-presence with other bodies. Recognition that these vital aspects of the immersive aesthetic that ZU-UK's work is often associated with derive from marginalized cultures, communities and ways of being, is paramount to the political reality of the work. Performers in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* are trained to take stock of participants' energetic states with attunement, compassion and presence, and encourage receptivity to the tone of the piece, through mirroring (discussed below), acknowledging and reacting to where participants look, when they pause and the subtleties of their movements, and tantric eye-gazing - derived from Maravala's training with Candomblé initiate, Santo Daime shaman and theatre artist Urias de Oliveira.

■ Grey boxes: Extracts from voiceover track. ZU-UK's *Goodnight, Sleep Tight*, 2016 -. Performer: Kayja Maravala. Writer Persis-Jadé Maravala

INSTRUCTION

The amahs are further complicated by an inner powerful force. It is as though they are soft flesh surrounding an iron skeleton or frame and further to this iron frame as skeleton the bones are vibrating violently – there is a protective force and a vigilance, a watchfulness and a safe-guarding spirit that brews and bubbles away just under the skin.

Profound questions concerning the performance of care in a social sense are raised in various ways throughout the performance. Its multi-reality structure – combining 360° film with live sensory input and gentle, symbolic set-design (a bed), incongruously placed into otherwise undoctored, frequently public, locations, such as cafés – and resulting surreality of tone, allows participants to simultaneously inhabit various roles in relation to themselves and their present moment. The familiarity of the bedtime ritual casts them as children – cared for, care-free, even – but the content of the dream-film they then witness, zooming rapidly outwards to show

their current location from a universe-level perspective, casts them as insignificant, alone, a perhaps meaningless (uncared for?) part of an ungraspable whole. They hear the voice of a child speaking to them and suddenly they are no longer their own child-self, but listening to a shadow of their childhood speaking to their present selves. The 6-year-old child's voice evokes familial care-relationships –

do you miss your childhood or are you glad it's all over?

were you closer to your mother or your father?

did your family, on some level, disappoint you?

what is it that was never nurtured in you?

– self-care, asking how they, the adult, relate to the child inside them –

do you remember trusting that outstretched hand and putting your little hand inside of it?

as an adult how much of you is still that child?

when did you first become aware that life could be painful?

– and palliative care, projecting their imagination forwards into a future self and eventually into the absence of self in death –

let's skip forward

...

the moment of your death

the moment your personal narrative comes to an end

what will it be like?

where will you be?

the lifespan of each mammal on our planet is roughly 1.5 billion heartbeats

*whether you are a mouse or an elephant
we will take roughly half a billion breaths*

how many have you already used?

how many do you have left?

when will it end?

As they lie in an actual bed as they listen, aware of the female body sat patiently at their bedside, the *amah*-figure established by the performer blurs with that of a nurse, or relative, at a (their) deathbed. The deeply personal nature of the questions the child asks inevitably provokes a cascade of associations with their own experiences of care-relationships, of caring and being cared for, uniquely constellated around each participant.

EXPLANATION

I think both for myself and the people around me, the slow dawning realization that we are now bearing witness to an unfolding and slow collapse of empire isn't surprising - what is surprising is how long it's taken for us to wake up to a highly surveilled, capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy, and now that it's been found out, as it were, it's really doubling down: doubling down on itself through ultra-violence, e.g., Russia threatening nuclear war, Bolsonaro multiplying land grabs in the amazon, abortion rights being overturned, etc. This piece is a ritual through which the temporary community formed by the participants and you, the amahs guiding them, can align yourselves with and process the collective trauma we are going through as a collapsing society.

Acknowledging that our society is in a state of catastrophic 'catabolic crisis' (descending in steps or stages) (Spagnola 2022), Maravala sees her work as a form of collective palliative care for communities caught in the accelerating anxiety of this catabolic descent – suggestions of ways to cope better during a period of overwhelming if

subtle distress. Spagnola describes the emotional effects of societal collapse on individuals and collectives – 'collapse grief', a non-specific anxiety, despondency and emptiness – and proposes the skills and strategies we need to cultivate, both as individuals and collectives, in order to 'make the quality of collapse better': 'collapse skills' such as 'collapse awareness', 'trauma sensitivity', 'ritual literacy', 'creativity and play'. Maravala chooses to place the artist in the role of palliative carer: 1) providing environments in which 'collapse awareness' can be experienced playfully and with poignancy, with ritual connectivity and with a sense of agency despite powerlessness in the small choices we can make; and 2) providing guidance or training in the 'skills' we need in order to live with the global 'predicaments' (problems without solutions) that face us (Spagnola 2022). The role of the artist thus described becomes akin to that of the shaman or priest in the religious practices associated with the cultures from which the *Mina* rhythms forming the invisible beating heart of the piece derive: Tambor de Mina, Candomblé and Santo Daime. In this sense, the participant's experience of *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* is an extension of the care-ful training of the performers, in embodied strategies of becoming present with and for others.

BREATHING EXERCISE

Let's breathe together. Long slow even breathing.

No deep breaths – this only encourages us to breathe into the upper chest cavity where it can panic your involuntary systems.

Instead, imagine that you want to keep your breath hidden so you breathe longer and slower.

Try to nose-breathe all the way down into your belly.

Place your hands on your lower abdomen so your fingertips are touching and breathe into your belly; notice your belly becoming fuller and your fingers floating apart and as you breathe out notice your fingers coming back together.

*Be aware of the back of your head on the floor.
Push your head back slightly into the floor here.
And now imagine the whole of your head split
in two.
Split your head open lengthways
and widthways.
Find the centre of your head.
And just breathe into that tiny space – that tiny
opening – breathe into the middle of your head,
opening it out.
Breathe into the middle of your head.*

EXPLANATION

*A tiny aperture for seeing things as they are
is opened. We can breathe into it and it's in
these openings, in these glimpses, in these
breaths, that we can recognize who we are and
who we are to each other and what we need to
remember and what we need to aim for.*

Exercises used to train the performers in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* alert them to their own breathing patterns and encourage association of breath with physiological and mental space. The training they undergo involves incorporating specific shamanic physical tools, like the *tambor de mina* rhythm and breath control, into their behaviour, that put others at ease, imply confident but benevolent control of a situation and efface the performer's own egotistical thrust into the space so as to allow room for the participant's impulses and self-reflexive openness. This includes an understanding of the mechanics of physicality as instruction (movements and postures that invite participants themselves to move or behave in certain ways), a prioritizing of physical over verbal instruction (the performers are themselves instructed to avoid speaking as much as possible) and their use of breath. The performers are trained to echo the breathing rhythms of their participants to establish, subconsciously, the participant's sense of an interpersonal harmony, the sympathy of the care-figure guiding them with their own impulses and a resulting willingness to

relinquish control to the care-figure. They are also trained to use the rhythm of their breath, as soon as synchronicity with that of the participant's has been established, as an entrainment tool: when they slow their own breathing, the participant subconsciously follows suit, which produces physiological and emotional responses in the participant's body – most prominently, relaxation and calmness (Van der Kolk 2015).

The neurological effects of breathing slowly and rhythmically become both a literal and metaphorical mechanism for coping with trauma, stress and the disorientation of collapse. Spagnola (2022) describes the importance of breath in attaining 'inner coherence', one of the 'metaskills' she sees as developmental milestones to work towards within a collapse journey:

that little, small opening, where we see things for what they are ... lets us take a tiny breath. And with that breath, our prefrontal cortex is slightly more available to us. Our executive functioning kind of comes back and we can think about how we're feeling ... More options become available to us ... How will we proceed, given this reality?

The slowing of participants' breath induced by the *amahs*' wordless guidance intends to calm their nervous systems, inviting a tiny crack in repetitive thought patterns, through which they can appraise their situation spontaneously. The intimate links between breath-patterns, as well as modes of touch, and the strengthening of community and 'formation of cooperative bonds' is prominent in psychological and behavioural research on the phenomenon of 'compassion' (Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas 2010). Arguing for the empirical existence of 'compassion' as an emotional and physiological experience distinct from those of love, or vicarious distress, Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas identify certain breath-patterns, associated with activation of the vagus nerve, which regulates our 'social engagement system', as instinctive indicators that a person is experiencing compassion towards another. In turn, the recipient of these subtle communicators of compassion is often soothed, experiencing a reduction in distress. It seems a not far-fetched extrapolation to suggest that we can, quite literally, by understanding and

modelling modes of communication embedded in breath and touch, reduce the negative impact of distressing situations – whether we come by these understandings through modern science or ancient spiritual, pro-social practices.

In the context of the performance, receiving prompts from the voice referencing mortality and the human predicament, the participant, through breath-work, and instinctively receiving communications of compassion from a performer, can access a rare reflective space within which to safely survey an inherently stressful reality. In the context of the piece as a rehearsal of globally relevant collapse-skills, this breath and reflective space extend, metaphorically, into practice-strategies for realistic but agentic appraisal of a sense of irresolvable disintegration.

Kolcaba's Theory of Comfort (2003) within the field of holistic nursing, posits three forms of comfort necessary to a complete care-plan for a suffering patient: relief, ease and transcendence. 'Transcendence' consists of a state in which an individual is able to rise above the challenges they are experiencing. In this sense, care is not simplistically an alleviation of suffering (relief) but includes a recognition that suffering and disintegration are inevitable conditions, and that care ought also to include strategies encouraging 'transcendent' experience of these conditions. We would argue that provisions for this branch of care, for both individuals in need and Western capitalist society itself as an ailing organism, are lacking in systems that cast reception of community care as the right only of those in the most acute need of physical relief and allocate little to no resources towards forms of mutual, interpersonal, psychospiritual and socio-cultural care (Kolcaba 2003). It is a social role that performance, arts and participatory spiritual encounter can strive to compensate.

INSTRUCTION
(THE APPROACH)

As you approach your child, be clear that you are looking at him or her. Use your body as one big channel for communication without using your voice. Speak through your eyes, breath

and INTENT. Remember to use your spine in an open way. DO NOT TOUCH audiences unless it is very, very specific. Everything must be calm and deliberate. You are the one the audiences can trust. They must be able to sense that. Keep your instructions clear and do not falter or fumble. Not slow motion, but deliberately and calmly, with clear intent. Always run the action in your head first and then execute the action and see how this grounds your action. Earth your movements.

In a 'touch-starved society' (Maravala 2022), in which friendships are conceived of in terms of conversations rather than embraces (Keltner 2010), and where a pandemic has driven added feet and inches of empty space between us and our friends, families and co-workers (Halton 2021), the very act of confidently and compassionately touching the participant is an act of literal social care, also activating the vagus nerve, which calms the nervous system, and releasing oxytocin, 'the love hormone', generating feelings of emotional connection and well-being, in basic ways of which many individuals in a Western context are deprived (Halton 2021; Keltner 2010; Wagner 2016).

Spagnola (2022) cites cyclic patterns as vital in dealing with the grief and destabilization of collapse trauma: somatic 'grief cycles' and 'satisfaction cycles' that allow us to feel both sadness and pleasure and integrate the feelings in such a way that we can move on from them with renewed energy and appreciation. In order to complete these cycles effectively, an individual needs to 'yield' to emotion – and in order to yield, the individual needs to feel 'safe, seen, secure and soothed'. These are feelings we can only gain from contact with others – the principles of attachment theory (Fleck *et al.* 2017) suggest that in order to allow ourselves to 'yield' and process, we need to know how to let ourselves be held, in essence maternally, by others. In this light, *Goodnight Sleep Tight* becomes a case-study in playful, performative rehearsal of yielding and holding relationships and of benevolent control (by the performer, or care-figure) with the purpose of creating

spaces in which participants, momentarily, can feel held and soothed and ultimately re-connected with themselves, revitalized and re-empowered. The performers are trained to always touch people with both hands, so that on an instinctual level they never have to worry about what the performer's second hand is doing – Maravala (2022) calls it 'closing the circuit: creating a touch-field that can contain a person'. It is vital that the *amahs* learn in their training how to gently and sensitively take responsibility for the participant in such a way as to induce them to yield.



■ Figure 2. *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* at Gerry's Café, 2017. Performer: Agnieszka Rolkiewicz. Photo Ludovic des Cognets

EXPLANATION (THE APPROACH)

When you approach and you say, 'It's time to go to bed now', there's an importance in the wording and the delivery... The wording because... it's really nice and ominous, right? But it's also factual. We're going into the bed of this piece: that's what's actually happening. And of course, it's about the story of being a kid having to go to bed, so it's working on those three layers. Delivery-wise, it's very important that it's not said in an acted way – it goes with an understated tone and you're taking care that the person doesn't feel too freaked out. One of the things about the delivery, the first contact and the Approach is a technique called Mirroring.

*When we did *Hotel Medea* and *Onion Bar* (Para Active, 2002–03), we, the actors, would go up to audience members in an effort to get them to dance and dance like maniacs in front of them. All that happened was that you were dancing at them, not with them. You definitely were not getting them to dance with you. I realized that the opposite had to happen, which is that you match what they're doing. They might be hyper, they might be very shy, they might be stiff, they might have or not have rhythm, feel self-conscious, whatever it is that they're doing, you do the same. You just do the same. And then very, very quickly, they register that you're doing the same and there's an immediate relaxation, literally immediate, and from that relaxation is where you can start to steer what happens and then they start mirroring YOU.*

That's interesting in the context of power and consent, right? Because you haven't said to them: 'We're going to do this thing. I'm going to mirror you and you're going to just, without knowing what you're doing, end up copying me and then I'll get you to where I want you to be.' But I think people come to art to be out of their comfort zones... comforted in one way – held and seen momentarily by the artist or artwork – which then, however, allows for this cyclic journey in which, in another way, emotionally, they can allow themselves out of their comfort zone, in that they can allow themselves to yield to what they are feeling.

Goodnight, Sleep Tight is, in some ways, a study of the care-dynamics embedded in the one-on-one performer-participant relationships that ZU-UK directors had begun to explore in early works like *Hotel Medea*, *Onion Bar* and *The Zoo-oid Fight Night Experience* (2004). In *Goodnight, Sleep Tight*, the performer is explicitly framed as a caregiver, putting the participant to bed and lulling them into a dream-like, self-reflexive space that carries destabilizing potential in its fusion of the 'virtual' or unreal with very real, deeply personal emotional response. The contractual assumptions between the performer, as a carer (who 'knows' and guides, providing access to a narrative, or

performative (alternate/dream-like) space with ‘extra-daily’ (Barba 1997: 128) rules), and the participant, as a dependant (who discovers, is led and responds), are thus taken to a logical extreme.

Touch is crucial to this. As soon as the performance begins and the participant is greeted by the *amah*-figure, she leads them towards the bed with one hand on their shoulder and the other hand holding theirs. Her contact immediately absolves them of responsibility for the interaction and the expectations of them – both in terms of their movements and, figuratively, of their emotional and intellectual responses: they can simply follow the physical guidance and with this literal security and elision of the pressure to make decisions, allow themselves to think and feel freely and direct their awareness to what they are experiencing. The quality of the contact between performer and participant bodies is therefore also of great importance. As well as breath-patterns, Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas (2010) highlight the importance of specific qualities of touch that seem to be understood, cross-culturally, as communicators of compassion. They emphasize the power of soothing touch to ‘stimulate activation in reward regions of the brain’, ‘reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol’ and ‘reduce activation in stress-related regions of the brain when pain is anticipated’ (360). In situations of inevitable suffering, and anticipation of suffering, touch has the power to help us transcend the distress that these situations can trigger.

It is thus important that a performer, conceiving of themselves as delivering transcendent palliative care for individuals in conditions of collective collapse grief, pays precise attention to how they communicate through touch. Maravala coaches the performers on the details of making a physical contact that is not forceful, but that is charged with enough certainty and vigour that the participant feels safe: a touch that is too tentative or flimsy, perhaps even with the intention of respecting boundaries, or seeking the approval of the participant, results in a sense that the performer is not in control of the situation, or is investing the participant with responsibility for the interaction and how it progresses. Feeling responsible for how the performance unfolds can lead to anxiety and frustration around

what are and are not the ‘right’ ways to react, which impedes a participant’s ability to connect emotionally with its content.

The value of this sense of being cared for is not primarily in the amiable goal of maximizing participants’ comfort so that they ‘have a nice time’, but in the aesthetic goal of eliciting a state between the individuals and the bodies present that allows access to forms of deep, largely non-verbal connection with others, with oneself and with the content of the experience.



EXPLANATION

As performers, we need to be so aware of all kinds of trauma audiences might be suffering, all kinds of pain audiences might be in, all kinds of futility audiences may be experiencing, and therefore our training is a kind of training in skills that elevate the beauty in our humanness but also on an earthly and pragmatic level, of being the competent and reassuring adult in the room that can hold whatever may come up.

I think we are so brought up on films that it’s hard not to see your life as a film that has cast you as the sympathetic lead. I think we like to think that we are scripting and shooting the film as we go along – that we are calling the shots, that we are in charge, masters of our destinies – but secretly, deep down, we kinda

■ Figure 3. A still captured from the 360° film viewed through virtual reality (VR)-headsets. ZU-UK’s *Goodnight, Sleep Tight*, 2016–19. Performers: Persis-Jadé Maravala and Kayja Maravala. Filmmaker Nacho Durán

know. We know that it doesn't matter if we turn left or right, if we fail or pass, if we obey and tick all the right boxes – no amount of 'good life choices' is going to allow us control over the story.

But we keep hoping and that persuades us to keep on living.

My aims are that we can be easeful with each other – both as bodies and as beings – and that we are able to use our work to provide what seems needed – companionship, reciprocity and care. This incredible time of collapse creates unease that seeps into all the corners and under all the shadows, everything experienced as though underwater – a sense of disbelief and incredulity – and yet, through this, there is still the possibility of true solidarity in mutual intimacy.

Revisiting, from a post-pandemic perspective, the aesthetics of care in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* inherent in its choreographies of touch and proximity, serves as a reminder of the ways in which proximity and bodily exchanges, on a molecular level – of dust from our skin and moisture from our breath – nourish us, as artistic substance, and as physical beings in shared spaces, whose acts of care for one another are necessarily ultimately enacted by bodies and received as sensation. *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* represents a fundamentally non-Western experiment in opposing the fetishization of technology as an aesthetic aim in itself with the foregrounding of instinctive and involuntary bodily responses and exchanges as gateways to transformative interactions, self-reflective experiences and deep interrogations of what it means to care. The acts of care woven into the creative process behind the artwork, into the behaviour of the performers themselves and alluded to by the metaphors and poetry threading its multi-media layers together, serve as microcosmic questions around care as a wider – and ancient – social project.

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