

## Essay on Afterlife Woodland

Agnieszka Gracza, January 2016

*Philosophizing is nothing other than getting ready to die. That's because study and contemplation draw our souls somewhat outside of ourselves, keeping them occupied away from the body, a state which both resembles death and which forms a kind of apprenticeship for it; or perhaps it is because all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually come down to one conclusion; which is to teach us not to be afraid of dying. (Montaigne, Essays, 1580, I. 20)*

The body has long been banished from the afterlife. For those who believe in it, the immaterial soul or spirit of the deceased detaches itself from the body and strikes out on its own, so to speak, at the moment of death. A repository of the deceased person's identity, the soul hovers, poised over the lifeless body, before embarking on a journey to face its maker, join the ranks of the blessed or the damned, or migrate into another body, depending on one's creed.

Whimsically titled *Afterlife*, French & Mottershead's latest collaborative venture turns this somewhat outdated notion inside out. Theirs is a resolutely atheist vision of the afterlife, one that draws on forensic science rather than eschatology. Conceived with four site-specific scenarios in mind, *Afterlife* in its different guises is concerned only with the body – not the soul – and what happens to it after death. Rather than being cast aside, the decaying body for once takes centre stage.

Not just any body; your body. You, the participant in what is an immersive artwork calling on audience participation, are handed a media player at the outset of *Afterlife* along with a blanket perhaps, depending on the season and where the piece is staged. (It can take place indoors and outdoors; in a public gallery as well as a private home.) You're implicated in the artwork that you complete. It's for you to find a spot – in the case of *Afterlife Woodland* a tree to lie under – and start playing the MP when you're ready. You may decide to listen to the audio guide all by yourself or in the company of other bodies lying near you.

Your immediate surroundings match those described in the audio, always in relation to 'your body'. On the occasion when I experienced *Afterlife Woodland* – a bitterly cold but sunny morning in late November – the trees in a city park I happen to know well, London Fields, stood in for the woodland scenery amid which the dead body is set in the audio narrative. The park's majestic plane trees with their smooth dappled trunks and sprawling branches, bare in that season, put another participant in mind of a skeleton. Without giving much thought to its symbolism at the time, I opted for one of the few evergreens in the park, and spread out the blanket the artists had given me on a carpet of dry needles beneath its low-lying branches, which made me feel less exposed. Someone else who took part in *Afterlife* that day spoke of the urge to hide away, as if death and by extension what we were engaging in was a shameful activity. If only the passersby knew what we were listening to.

Written by French & Mottershead, the text of *Afterlife Woodland* is read out by a female voice actor who had been instructed to address the anonymous listener as if she were talking to a friend. The slow and steady pace of her delivery has a soothing and reassuring effect, despite the graphic and potentially disturbing nature of the account. She lingers over certain words, bringing out the musical quality of this densely alliterative piece of prose writing. The occasional pauses of eight seconds each impart a rhythm to the roughly twenty-minute-long piece and mark the passage of time. They allow the listener to digest

the content and at the same time pay heed to the ambient sounds – in this instance of airplanes flying overhead, birds, people in the park, their dogs – which act as a reality check.

Just as the trees around us corresponded to the oak and beech trees mentioned at the start of the sound piece, our supine bodies dotted around London Fields served as a foil to the lone decaying body in the woodland. Though not explicitly directed to do so, we seemed to be encouraged to adopt its position: ‘You’re on your back, arms by your sides. Your eyes and mouth are open.’ Placed at the start, this sets the tone. We cannot help but identify with that other body, which progressively takes form in our imagination. As the narrative unfolds, we reluctantly graft its decomposing organs, muscles, tissues, bones and limbs onto our own body until we become one with it.

The use of the pronoun ‘you’ is key to the work’s success, and yet it is by no means straightforward. While it brings this spiritual exercise into line with other meditative practices – from Saint Ignatius of Loyola to the Buddhist metta bhavana – which also rely on a direct mode of address, what ‘you’ ultimately points to is a corpse. Even if it were your body whose post-mortem transformations were thus being charted, ‘it’ would still be a more fitting way of referring to a body that’s no longer alive.

But just how dead is it? There is still some body heat and oxygen left in it, at least to begin with. Its cells – we are told – are self-digesting. Eventually, they themselves perish: ‘The last of your skin and bone cells are no longer able to survive, and they die.’ By that stage the dead body has already undergone a series of transformations, assisted in this process by bacteria, maggots, insects, birds and other animal species further down the food chain, which feed on its remains and on each other. Alternately warm and cold, tense and relaxed, hard and soft, the body is continually changing – as alive in death, if not more so, than prior to its demise. Bereft of life, it appears to have been granted a new lease of life, which is another way of reading the work’s title.

‘Grotesques’ – from the Italian *grotto* – were fanciful decorative motifs inspired by fresco paintings found amid Roman ruins in the Renaissance. They depicted hybrid creatures in which human, animal and plant elements seamlessly merged. The dead body as portrayed in *Afterlife Woodland* exhibits many of the traits that the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin ascribed to the grotesque body in his landmark study *Rabelais and His World* (1965). For one thing, it is porous and permeable. The open mouth and eyes of the opening sequence allow flies to penetrate the body and lay eggs in its moist orifices; from these maggots will grow. The traffic goes in both directions. Blood and other nutrient-rich fluids escape the body and seep into the ground, making it more fertile and stimulating plant growth. For Bakhtine, blood as a seed buried in the earth is among the most persistent motifs associated with the grotesque body.

Above all, the grotesque body as Bakhtine conceives of it is cosmic and universal. At home in the cosmos, with the elements, the sun and the stars, it can become one with geographical features such as mountains, seas, rivers, islands, continents – or fill the whole universe. Likewise, the decaying, festering and germinating body of *Afterlife Woodland* gradually melds with the surrounding landscape, reaches its temperature, sinks into the ground beneath it. The exposed skeleton is repeatedly likened to an island at the heart of a thriving ecosystem. As time passes, what’s left of the dead body is slowly whittled away, reclaimed and absorbed by nature.