



French & Mottershead with *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*,
Woodland, 2019, sound work

Sound

French & Mottershead: *Woodland*

Approaching from the nearest overground station, I took erroneous but portentous turns into both a cemetery and a church on my way to experience *Woodland*. Ultimately encountering a gazebo tent, I was offered a pair of headphones plugged into an iPod shuffle fished out of a bucket and instructed to follow the yellow ribbons up the hill. Here stands the 'one tree' of One Tree Hill, where you are expected to settle, back to the earth, eyes to the sky and the branches of the oak above. You unlock the iPod and an audio track begins. A voice, in a cadence somewhere between a bedtime story and a mindfulness app, talks to the position of your limbs and the tension in your muscles. It begins to note changes in your body as if you've been there too long: 'Blood drains from your face', 'your lips dry out', before the realisation with each passing statement that your body is losing the control it took for granted in life: 'the contents of your bowels and bladder leak out'. The work places the viewer in the role of the corpse - your own corpse - and then narrates what it feels like to be your body in that state. Written in consultation with Dr Carolyn Rando, a lecturer in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Archaeology at UCL, the 20-minute piece charts the journey through five stages of human decomposition, to include the fresh state, bloat, black putrefaction, butyric fermentation and, finally, dry remains. *Woodland* is one iteration in a series of audio works entitled 'Afterlife' by French & Mottershead (Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead), which narrate the site-specific progress of the listener as a dead body in various conditions, including water, a museum and a private home.

There's something particularly discomfoting about lying flat out in woodland. It's a habitat I feel particularly vulnerable in - best approached standing, but never supine - where body parts are far too close

to the hunting grounds of creepy crawlies. In life, the boundary between self and other is vigilantly maintained and defended by structures such as skin (wounds provide a site of pathogenic entry) and the immune system (deficiencies of which are responsible for the opportunistic infections in AIDS, for example). Survival of the human body is based on not dissolving into your environment, by protecting yourself against what a human body could be used for by the countless other bodies in nature. In *Woodland*, we experience absolute defencelessness. Bloating with gas and collapsing down again, we rot, dissolve, decay and redistribute. With an acceptance of this, though, comes a newfound sense of personhood - when a fox runs off with your hand you feel generous, and when 'your body is no longer an attractive environment for maggots', perhaps a little disappointed. Biochemically and architecturally rendered as a mere substrate for other life, you disintegrate and, in doing so, become provider for the world as pure fleshy matter.

The language of *Woodland* is clinical, forensic in detail, and remarkably lean on affect. And yet despite all its scientifically rendered realism, *Woodland* comes across as a work of fantasy, not simply because it depicts in detail an experience none of us will consciously have, but also because the dead are a tightly controlled group of bodies subject to rigid governance, largely intolerable in both private and public space without strict professional and institutional guidance. Usually cremated, embalmed or buried, surely the decaying corpse is close to the summit of unacceptable bodies in modern life. The peace of having permission to fester away in *Woodland* has the feeling of being, perhaps, the last and final body - a body after humans, unregulated by the sense of threat that would conventionally accompany the rotting dead.

Woodland, then, constitutes a form of bodily consciousness beyond the moment of death, finding its place in a host of conjectural situations imagined by the living on behalf of their future selves. Many of these absorb fear and manifest as horror - consider the ghost, zombie or vampire - each retaining varying degrees of physical and mental permanence. However, there is something in *Woodland*, too, which circles not around fear but faith. On this note, a comment by Rebecca French about the 'Afterlife' series has been worming its way through my brain: 'I'd quite like these works somehow to be thought of as an atheist's afterlife'. It is here, in tapping into our attempts to understand and appreciate what remains of us when we die, that *Woodland* finds its driving force.

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