

ditch me

rhona mühlebach

september 23rd — december 2nd 2023

CCA: 
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Curators Text

Francis McKee

00:00:16:22 - 00:00:19:22
Is this the end of the world?

00:00:22:19 - 00:00:25:11
Have I crossed the border?

00:00:26:00 - 00:00:28:07
There is no reason to run.

00:00:28:08 - 00:00:30:11
The border.

00:00:30:22 - 00:00:33:15
The no-man's-land.

00:00:33:18 - 00:00:36:07
Is this it?

The Antonine Wall stretched across Scotland from the Clyde to the Forth. It was the Roman Empire's final border in Britain and its construction has left a still-visible scar across the country. Rhona Mühlebach's new work – *Ditch Me* – draws on the gradual evolution of that landscape, transposing historical aspects into a new fictional universe. A variety of characters and stories populate her film: Roman and medieval soldiers, a barber, three lovers, lice, some slime mould, a thief, a humming violinist, and a latrine cleaner, among others. In the spirit of world-building, this tapestry of anecdotal events is linked through the ditch-world, suggesting a series of multi-dimensional slices of time. In this strange new realm, even slime mould can become an articulate character or an all-powerful being.

For Mühlebach, this creation touches on questions of how narrative is generated. For Ursula Le Guin, a vital world builder, finding new ways to tell stories was essential. In her essay, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* she declares that:

"It sometimes seems that that story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished." And so she found herself writing in a non-heroic, inclusive style:

"When I came to write science-fiction novels, I came lugging this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world, and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand."

This may offer a useful approach to Mühlebach's consideration of narrative and storytelling. As Le Guin points out, "It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality."

This approach is evident in the fabric of the films. In scenes that deliberately confuse the digital with the real, characters appear part-avatar, part-human, and their CGI manifestations become drawn towards glimpses of the actors who they are based on. That real-action footage takes on an almost documentary quality, and we see how the digital dimension flows into the "real" in ways that become inseparable. Within the game-engine, the digital characters are termed "metahumans," but in Mühlebach's rendition, they are not seamless creations. Her characters glitch, perhaps betraying their own position in an ongoing history of digital evolution, where such technical flaws are set to become a thing of the past.

The characters of *Ditch Me* are constantly crossing borders and reaching towards new forms. There is a persistent yearning to step beyond confines and a desire to make connections (or escape connections). In

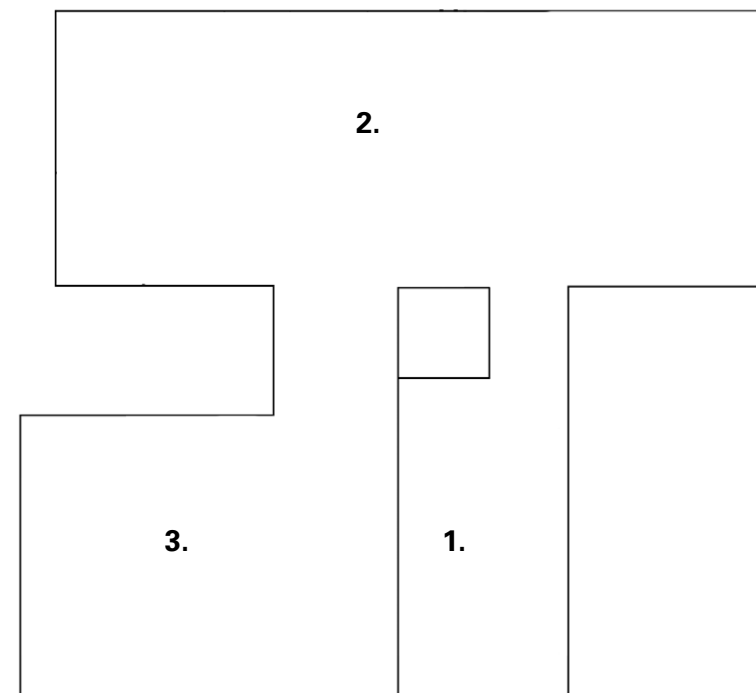
one scene, a couple lie by a fire at night talking and staring at the night sky above. They share their thoughts and begin to bond: the closest anyone comes to a moment of intimacy in the work. Their discussion centres around care – the demand to care for others and the equal desire to escape from the burdens of that demand, even if the care is based on deep love for the other. While one character urgently wants to escape those constraints, the other welcomes care and wants to embrace it. The ditch they are in offers both the potential to cross into a new realm, or the possibility of escaping across a border into a “no man’s land” for the potential freedom that lies there.

In a different scene, two characters bluntly reject a third friend, telling them: “It’s time for you to leave. We have made our decision. We wish to explore new territory...the territory of vulnerability. We believe you don’t have the capability to follow us in this exploration...” The smugness of the couple making this announcement undercuts their presumed sensitivity to vulnerability, even as they declare it. And so, we watch a person being crassly ditched, in this larger ditch. The opportunity to cross the divide is not on offer to everyone and it can have brutal consequences (even more so in another scene where two characters form a connection over the idea of networking as a more effective means of conquering the world before one has their throat cut).

These notions of passing and crossing permeate all the elements of *Ditch Me*. Characters debate about the role of the ditch as a kind of corridor, one commenting that it functions as a ‘corridor of time.’ Certainly, in Mühlebach’s work, a corridor of time is a useful framework in navigating the different scenes we find scattered across the gallery. Whilst *Ditch Me*’s scenes are united by the larger landscape seen in the main gallery, and the characters gather together for a song in the last gallery, the work primarily pops up across time, realities and alternative spatial dimensions. Corridors of time, like sci-fi wormholes, help us understand how we can traverse this non-linear structure. They guide us, of course, to the end of the world, but also perhaps to the beginning of many others.

Ditch Me’s world creation myth is attributed to the slime mould. Legend has it that the slime produced the ditch in a moment of rage, because people did not comprehend the necessity of randomness.

Gallery Map



Ditch Me (Rhona Mühlebach, 2023)

1. **Introduction**
2. **Prologue**
(35 min)
3. **Tale**
(5 min)

Credits

With

Adura Onashile

Trish Mullin

Elaine Whiteford

Lawrence Boothman

Dusty

Singers

Abby Carter

Lucy Duncombe

William Aikman

Matthew Iain Anderson

Composer and Sound Designer - William Aikman

Costume Designer and Production Manager - Holly McLean

Technical Artist - Louise Coomber

DOP live action - Nelisa Alcalde

Sound Recordists - Pete Smith, Jack Coghill

Dog Handler - Kim Reilly

Additional Motion Capture Performance - Daniel Kvoras

Runners - Nairn Brown, Josie Parrianen

Throat FX - Ben Ashton

Marten Animation: Lizzie Watts

Graphic Design - Melina Wilson

Colourists - Stephen C. Horne, Irene Sánchez

Slime Mould visualisations created using Physarum, slime mold simulator

Long Chair Productions - Holly McLean, Rhona Mühlebach, William Aikman

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