

# Dead curious: the artist inviting questions in a Bristol cemetery

Marcus Coates will see families of the dead assemble in Arnos Vale graveyard to ask loved ones a final question

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*Marcus Coates, getting in touch with the dead. Photograph: Marcus Coates*

As dusk falls on the Victorian angels and leaning tombstones, voices will ring out across Arnos Vale cemetery in Bristol, questioning the dead. The questions range from heartbreaking to barely printable: “Why didn’t you let me say goodbye?” one woman will ask, while a man wants to know “Any chance of one last blowjob?”

Marcus Coates, an artist whose work often explores shamanism and ritual, has for months been inviting people to leave their questions at the cemetery. On Friday night they will return and ask them aloud, or hear them chanted like an incantation echoing from speakers set among the memorials to waken the sleepers.



Marcus Coates: 'There's something very interesting about asking questions.' Photograph: Marcus Coates

All the places for the public have now been allocated, but Questioning the Dead is one of events happening across the country in the annual Museums at Night festival, when hundreds of museums and galleries open their doors after hours.

Some of the questions are painfully serious: "Why don't I believe like you did?" or "Do you want to rest in peace? Or have the truth be spoken to those who hurt you?" But Coates expects laughs over questions such as: "I now know it was you that smashed the tail-light with the camping hammer ... How did you manage to take that to the grave with you?"

One woman has asked the question that formed in Coates's own mind when he stood by the war memorial in the cemetery: "Was it worth it?"

Another asked: "Miss you so much Mum. Did you know what was happening when you couldn't speak to us and hope you understood the choices we made for you."

And another similarly troubled: "Thinking of my great grandmother who is buried there somewhere ... could anyone have helped you?".

That last query echoes the question Coates has been asking himself since his grandfather died 10 years ago: "I've carried this feeling around with me ever since, that I somehow let him down. I don't know if I will actually ask him out loud, in the presence of other people, if he thinks I did - but it will be there in my mind."

Arnos Vale was opened in 1839 as a garden cemetery, an alternative to the old

parish graveyards which were so overcrowded that in some, bones were literally poking out of the soil. By the time it closed 150 years later, the 18 hectares (45 acres) held the remains of more than 300,000 people. It was brought back from dereliction by local people, alarmed by the threat that some of the land might be cleared and developed, and is now run by a charitable trust.

Coates, who lives near Highgate in London, likes cemeteries and observing how people behave in them.



*Marcus Coates. Photograph: Marcus Coates*

“Why do people talk to the dead, as if to continue the conversation? And if in some sense we believe the dead can hear, why not go the whole way and ask those questions out loud, and together?”

He is expecting replies, but not from the dead.

“There’s something very interesting about asking questions,” he said. “In the right circumstances they can free the imagination, and supply their own answers.”