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THE BRISTOL BRAINS BEHIND WORLD'S FIRST LGBTQ+ VR MUSEUM

By **FLOSSIE PALMER**, Thursday Jun 9, 2022

Antonia Forster says the idea to create the world's first **LGBTQ+ virtual reality museum** was born out of a need to fill a gap in queer history.

The Bristol-based XR (extended reality) specialist is currently showcasing the unique project at the **Tribeca Film Festival** in New York but has plans to eventually return it to the city that shaped it.

Antonia, an alumnus of the **University of Bristol** and **We The Curious**, set out to create a museum dedicated to celebrating the lives of queer people by preserving their personal histories in virtual reality.

3D scans of real-life objects belonging to those who shared their stories are projected into the virtual space, ranging from a pair of wedding shoes to a teddy bear. Each object also has an audio story for users to listen to, in which each person explains what their item means to them.



25 2D artworks and illustrations by queer creators all over the world will also be exhibited on the walls of the virtual reality (VR) museum.

Antonia reached out to Bristol's queer community to collect participants for the museum and of the 15 stories shared, 12 are from people based in the city.

The museum will also exhibit stories from people in Wales, Denmark and Ghana. Homosexuality is currently illegal in the latter so the identity of the person behind the story will be kept anonymous.

Speaking about the origins of the project, Antonia told Bristol24/7: "Last year, I wanted to visit a queer museum because I wanted to be in a space that really centred and celebrated queer stories.

"I was shocked to find that there isn't one at all in the UK; there are no physical museums that are dedicated to queer stories and histories."

Antonia instead decided to create a VR alternative.

The first iteration of the museum was exhibited last year in London and Queensland, Australia, while a new version is premiering at Tribeca Film Festival during Pride month.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pride march in the UK so is particularly poignant for many.

The centrepiece of the museum's Tribeca iteration is a 3D scan of the funerary sculpture Memorial To A Marriage by Patricia Cronin, depicting Cronin and her now-wife, Deborah Kass, a key collaborator in the museum, embracing. It is the only statue in the world depicting LGBTQ+ marriage equality.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the statue, which was created when same-sex marriage was ruled illegal in New York and only recognised on death certificates.

Wrist and finger monitors worn by the user will measure skin conductivity and heart rate, which indicates user levels of emotional engagement with the museum. This emotional response is then projected into the VR space in the form of virtual particles floating around the user.

A depth camera also captures the user themselves, projecting them into the virtual space and replicating the user's movements in real time.

“We’re hoping this allows users to reflect on what stories touched them most,” Antonia says.

“We wanted to give users a sense of presence that you can’t have in real life in a museum. It’s really an ability that you can only add to a virtual space.”

Antonia hopes to showcase the museum across the globe and eventually reunite it with its Bristol origins, although no dates have yet been set.



A 3D scan of the sculpture, Memorial To A Marriage, by Patricia Cronin, is projected into the LGBTQ+ VR museum – photo: Antonia Forster

New iterations of the museum are in the works too, with its stories set to be replaced depending on its different locations. Antonia is currently working with the Danish Consulate in New York and Brighton Pride to adapt the museum, allowing queer communities across the globe to share their stories.

“My hope is that because it’s VR, we can reach more people than a physical museum,” Antonia explains.

This also applies in terms of the museum’s accessibility, which has reduced the physical barriers posed by real-world museums.

The museum is accessible for both wheelchair users and deaf users. Antonia would also like to make multi-lingual versions going forward to reduce language barriers.

Antonia also highlighted the potential scope of the museum for showcasing an infinite number of stories from across the globe in an infinite number of locations, aiming to increase accessibility to queer history overall.



The LGBTQ+ VR museum was officially selected at the Open City Documentary Festival in London last year – photo: Antonia Forster

The museum received several commendations last year, including official selection at the [Open City Documentary Festival in London](#), and a finalist position at the QLD XR Festival in Queensland, Australia, for the Best in Gaming and Best in VR categories.

Main Image: Antonia Forster

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