

Virtual Vessels and Tangible Touch: Slow Engagement in the Digital Era

1 February 2024 - What unfolds when one pauses to slowly engage all senses with material objects in both physical and virtual realms? This question took centre stage at "Somatic Vessels," a collaborative event organised by Future 50 PhD Candidate Shelby Navone, a Fellow of the Institute for Digital Culture at the University of Leicester, and Jenna Hall, a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (MADA) at Monash University, Australia.



Image Credit: Jenna Hall

Held as a pop-up event within the Museum Studies department at the University of Leicester, "Somatic Vessels" invited participants to embark on a sensory journey, exploring the worlds of tangible and virtual objects. Through tangible vessels sourced from Leicester charity shops, interactive 3D scans in Augmented Reality (AR), and a creative environment in Virtual Reality (VR), attendees experienced an immersive afternoon.

In the first segment, visitors interacted with a curated selection of vessels, each acquired from local charity shops. Guided by multi-sensory prompts and thoughtful questions, they mindfully engaged with the objects, fostering a deeper connection.

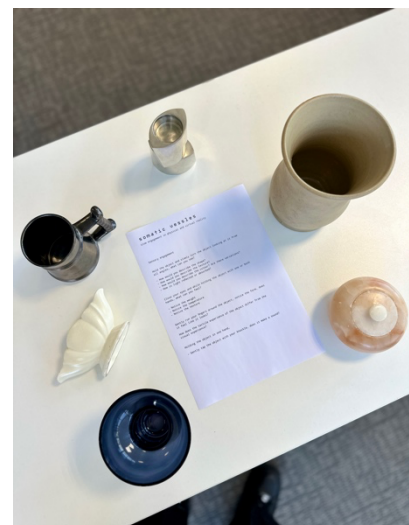


Image Credit: Jenna Hall, Shelby Navone

The second phase introduced 3D scans of the same objects through an Augmented Reality (AR) viewer on iPads. Placing the vessels virtually on a museum-style plinth in the centre of the room, participants compared this mixed reality visualisation to their earlier tangible experiences.



Image Credit: Jenna Hall

The final and participatory element immersed visitors in Virtual Reality (VR), but with a twist. Instead of replicating the tangible objects, participants used the 3D painting app, Open Brush, to create their own virtual vessels. Guided by Navone's pre-created examples, users experimented with various brushes, mimicking tangible materials in the virtual space. This unique approach allowed for free creation, observation, and application of the experiment's core principles of slow engagement.



Image Credit: Jenna Hall, Shelby Navone

The event drew a significant attendance from graduate students within the Museum Studies department. For many, it marked their inaugural first-hand experience with VR, unveiling the exciting potential of emerging technologies in shaping immersive digital culture.

This collaboration between Navone and Hall exemplifies the transdisciplinary ethos at the heart of the Institute for Digital Culture. Both scholars stepped outside their specialities, embracing new skills to orchestrate this multi-modal, forward-thinking event. The exploration of slow engagement offers a glimpse into the future of immersive experiences, pushing boundaries and challenging traditional museum approaches.



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