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“Portals” Public Art Project Seeks to Connect Havana and DC

MARCH 19, 2015



In December of 2014, New York's Lu Magnus Gallery hosted what appeared to be a gold-plated shipping container — or, rather, a “Portal.” Conceived by Shared__Studios founder Amar Bakshi, the container was equipped with AV equipment live-streaming to an identical site in Tehran, allowing visitors at each location to speak one-on-one with each other for 10 to 15 minutes. “Think ‘Being John Malkovich,’” reads a description on [the Portals Kickstarter page](#) — though the actual effect appears to be more akin to your basic “Star Trek”-ian full-body hologram, a Skype session inside the Void. Artists like Titus Kaphar came through to stretch the creative possibilities of the Portal — but the main exchange occurred with over one thousand everyday citizens having everyday conversations, bridging the

presumed gap between nations through simple face-to-face dialogue.

Now, after launching a second similar Portal connection between the Yale University Art Gallery and Tehran's Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art in February, the Shared__Studios team are looking to expand the project even further, their next proposed link between Havana and Washington, DC. Plans are also in the works for Portals in Ferguson, Missouri and Herat, Afghanistan, while early missives mention ambitions stretching to Moscow and Mexico City. As of press time, the [Portals Kickstarter](#) is a little more than halfway to its \$60,000 goal, with almost 200 backers — and only five days to go. We caught up with Bakshi and Shared__Studios director Michelle Moghtader via e-mail to ask them about their experience with the project so far and their plans for Havana and beyond.

How did the first Portal project come together? What was the impetus for the idea and how did you go about realizing it?

Amar: The idea for Portals came years ago. I was a reporter for The Washington Post from 2006 to 2009. During that time, I traveled around the world and across the U.S. creating text and video vignettes about people from all walks of life. I traveled with just a backpack and a video camera – no iPhone and no Netflix. I ended up spending hours upon hours moving from one place to another via bus in the evening. With nothing to read or watch, my fellow bus travelers and I often struck up conversation.

In those evening hours, we spoke with a rare focus. We were decontextualized. Time was capped. We were unlikely to see one another again, or even remember one another's name. I found those conversations among the most meaningful of my life. What I loved most about those conversations was how they were relatively de-instrumentalized. I was not seeking a job, a date or a news story. I was just passing the time, entertaining myself and satiating my basic, human curiosity in the lives of other people.

This set of experiences led to the idea of Portals, which has been growing and evolving in my mind for many years now.

Michelle: Amar approached me in January 2014 with this idea. I was living and working in Dubai as a journalist. I set out looking for an appropriate location in the region to pair with the U.S. As a journalist writing about Iran for a global audience, I particularly liked the idea of removing myself and enabling people in Iran and the U.S. to speak directly to one another. I was traveling back and forth to Iran around that time and was struck by Iran's vibrant arts scene.

That is where I met Sohrab Kashani in early 2014. Sohrab has worked with technology as art for years. He founded a cutting-edge art center in Iran called the Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art. The first Portal in Iran came together after months of VOIP calls with Amar and myself and the team in Tehran, which included Sohrab, Mahsa Biglow and Homa. We also had an amazing group of architects, gallerists, curators, advisors and videographers who made the NYC side possible.



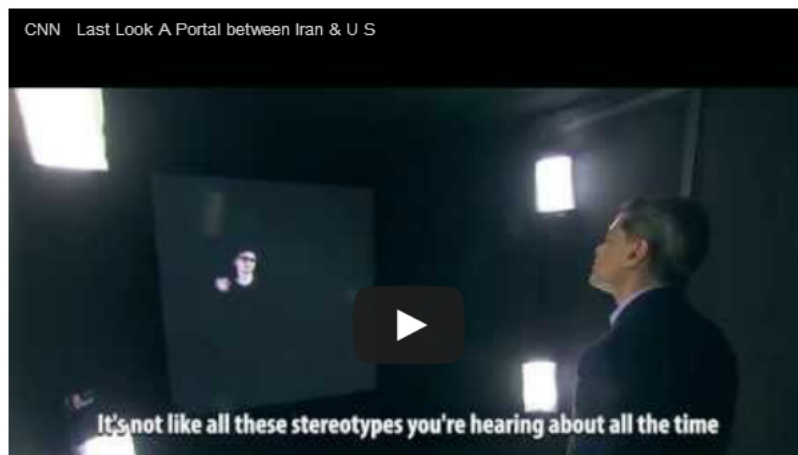


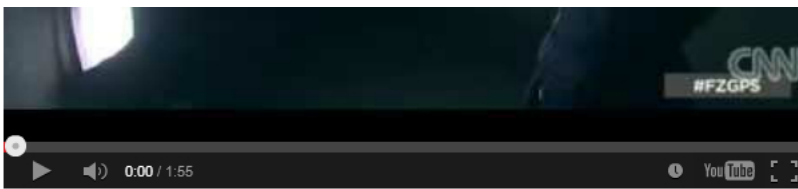
What was the turnout like, and did it differ from what you expected?

Amar: The December launch far exceeded our expectations. Three days after we opened, we were booked solid. I was surprised by how powerful peoples' experiences were inside the Portal. Some came out weeping. Many came out bouncing, feeling rejuvenated, excited. The range of experiences and their intensity convinced us we were on to something.

Michelle: A lot of people were quite nervous about entering the first Portal — what would they speak about for 15 minutes? Turns out that was hardly a problem. People were surprised at how easy it was to connect with someone halfway across the world. I found it most difficult to get people out of the Portal. Most felt 15 minutes was too short. So in our second installation with the Yale University Art Gallery, we extended each conversation to 20 minutes.

The conversations in the U.S.-Iran Portals focused on food, family, love and personal ambitions. Our prompt was "What would make today a good day for you?" We asked people to be specific. And they were. People wrote about their experiences in our gold book and described long discussions about daily life, from the mundane hassles of traffic to the pains of watching a sick loved one approach death.





Ferguson and Havana are places that have recently experienced important political upheavals. Do you have long-term plans for other Portals in other cities, or is this relevance to recent news an important factor?

Amar: Ultimately, we want Portals placed wherever a group of citizens or an institution wants it. Portals must be free and publicly accessible. They also need to be attended when open, and artist collaborations need to be facilitated. We want people to come to us seeking to place a Portal and join the broader network.

Michelle: In an ideal world, we place Portals all over the world from rural towns to megacities. But funding is limited, as is people's attention span. We are focusing right now on pairs of places in need of person-to-person dialogue such as between a police force and a heavily policed community in the U.S., or between Iran and the U.S. The Portal gives people the chance to speak to people far from them, in a private space and for a fleeting moment in time. This is very different from the narratives we see on the news. But by pivoting around the news, we raise awareness and engage key dialogues of the day.

— Anneliese Cooper (@DawnDavenport)

(Photos: Conversations outside the NYC Portal; Portal open at the Yale University Art Gallery. Photos courtesy Amar Bakshi and Michelle Moghtader.)



Amar Bakshi Anneliese Cooper Michelle Moghtader Portal Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art Shared_Studios Yale University Art Gallery

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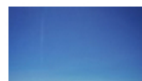
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