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ARTS

Artist's 'Portals' to connect Milwaukee and Newark



"Portals" artist Amar Bakshi (right) and Lewis Lee, a local collaborator on the project, paint the shipping container that will be used as the portal to connect people in Milwaukee and Newark, NJ. Credit: Angela Peterson

An online journal about visual art, the urban landscape and design. Mary Louise Schumacher, the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic, leads the discussion and a community of writers contribute to the dialogue.

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Travel between Milwaukee and New Jersey is about to get cheap and fast.

Milwaukeeans will have a chance to step inside a shipping container, painted a lustrous gold and tricked out with cutting-edge audiovisual technology, in order to have one-on-one encounters with strangers in Newark, N.J.

The "[Portals](#)" project is the brainchild of artist Amar Bakshi, who has created hangouts between people in different cities around the globe in his converted shipping containers, often set up on college campuses and in art galleries.

For the first time, though, the full-body, Skype-like experiences will be purely domestic, connecting community centers in two American cities for the purpose of a specific dialogue about criminal justice and policing.

"This is very much a pilot," said Bakshi. "It's one thing to invite people in to talk to Burma. It's another thing to invite people in to talk about this very intense project."

The Milwaukee "Portal" was installed Tuesday at the COA Goldin Center, 2320 W. Burleigh St., where Bakshi met with local collaborators, started rigging up the technology and gave the boxcar-like container a fresh coat of shiny paint.

"Even though we are far apart, we all have the same problems, the same kinds of issues, that we are trying to overcome," said Lewis Lee, one of the local collaborators for "Portals," which will launch Monday.

"I think the dialogue is definitely one that is needed," said Dennis Walton, 41, another collaborator. "It's a creative way to go about discussing what's going on with police in our community."

Lee and Walton believe young people in the surrounding Amani neighborhood, many of whom have never traveled, need to talk about issues like gun violence, safety and police profiling in a safe environment.

"There is some security in that distance," Bakshi said.

The hope, also, is that the art project will attract a wide array of Milwaukeeans who aren't familiar with the area.

"This neighborhood is looked at as sort of a bad part of town, and part of that is true, but part of it isn't," Lee said. "What better way to kill a lot of stereotypes."

"Portals" got its start in 2014 when Bakshi connected people in New York and Tehran. He eventually expanded to more than 20 cities worldwide, and the project snagged headlines in major newspapers and glossy art magazines around the world.

Bakshi decided to come to Milwaukee after being challenged by academics at Yale and Rutgers universities to bridge cultural divides right here at home, in the U.S.

In Milwaukee, anyone will be able to sign up for an appointment online (sharedstudios.com/milwaukee), go to the portal and have a 20-minute conversation with someone in New Jersey. The portals will be open for the focused dialogues from 1 to 5 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

On other days, the portal will be opened up for school groups and arts organizations that want to connect to the wider "Portals" network in Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Rwanda, Cuba, Afghanistan, Switzerland and a Syrian refugee camp, among other locales.

The participants in the focused dialogues about policing will drive their own conversation, though there will be a few prompts, including a question about their impressions of Ferguson, Mo., where Michael Brown, an unarmed black man was shot and killed by a white cop, causing protests in 2014.

The normally private conversations that occur inside Bakshi's "Portals" will be recorded and later analyzed by researchers at Yale

and Rutgers who are trying to better understand public perceptions about police. That's a first, too, and all of the conversations will be stripped of any identifying characteristics, so the gathered recordings will be rendered anonymous.

"The idea of actually having a truly public conception of how police understand communities and how communities understand police has alluded us until 'Portals,'" said [Tracey L. Meares](#), a professor of law at Yale working on the project, during a presentation for the Greater Milwaukee Committee on Monday.

"Portals" was inspired by a year of travel around the world that Bakshi did as a [blogger for The Washington Post](#), talking to people about their perceptions about America. Some of the more meaningful encounters he had were incidental and oddly sacred, he said.

"People are curious about other people," Bakshi said. "We've realized that it is not all that often when you meet a stranger, you know, not to date, not to get a job, but really just to come to know them."

While the shipping container is planned as a temporary installation, the hope is that it can become permanently placed in Milwaukee, which is what's happened in the majority of other cities visited by the art project.

That could lead to long-term relationships — high-tech, pen pal-like relationships — between people and organizations across the "Portals" network, Bakshi said. A launch celebration for "Portals" will be held at the COA center from 3 to 5 p.m. Monday.

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About Mary Louise Schumacher

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. She writes about culture, design, the urban landscape and Milwaukee's creative community. [Art City](#) is her award-winning cultural page and a community of more than 20 contributing writers and artists. Follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

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