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Portals: Shared Experiences over Skype

01/19/2015 in Play Blog by The Skype Team

"There is so much opportunity now to have really powerful experiences, in a world that's evermore connected," Amar Bakshi, former journalist-turned-artist explains. "But so often, we use these tools to cocoon ourselves in our own communities. Sometimes it takes art, and an aesthetic moment, to sort of shake things up a bit."

Judging from the ecstatic expressions radiating from participants, since Amar and Sohrab Kashani's opened their collaborative project "Portals," 'shaking it up' seems like quite the understatement. Sohrab, an Iran-based, multi-disciplinary artist adds, "This project is so pure—in that a person just enters a room. There is the other person. Together, you have 15 minutes. And that's it. It's your time. It's your moment."

This 'moment,' shared between two strangers—however organic, however surprisingly moving—combines basic shipping containers with Skype, a Sentech camera, and a simple computer, and preps curious partakers with a prompt of "What would make tomorrow a good day for you?"

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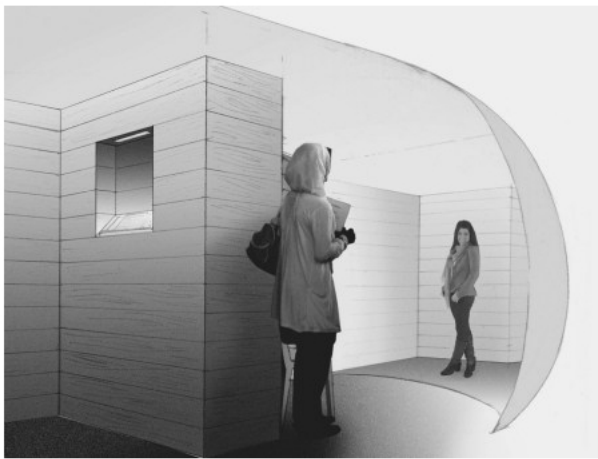
Amar says that, "The whole idea behind the project was to take technologies that we all have access to, and make it sacred by the community we're putting behind it."

While the concept for "Portals" initially sprung from Amar's 2007 interview series How the World Sees America—a global journey wherein people repeatedly presented their cherished pen pal's letters—it wasn't until earlier this year, after Amar and Sohrab crossed virtual paths, that their project began taking shape.

"We met over Skype. A mutual friend connected us. I've never been to Tehran," Amar explains. "And I've never been to the States," adds Sohrab. "But," Amar continues, "even though we've never been to each other's countries, we've come to know each other very, very well. We make the most of the connection we have."

Perhaps it's this precise notion—one of a shared experience—that has, and continues to touch the ever-engaged public. Sohrab says, "At first people were a bit hesitant to go in, but once they get in, they don't want to get out." He laughs, "They come out smiling, having just shared this incredible moment. We've had people who were in tears after this experience."

Turns out, when offered a wholly unique window into the everyday lives of another individual, it doesn't take long for folks to find common ground. Amar adds, "You know, I know *my* life—but so much is happening at this very moment. It's so rare when we actually get out of our heads enough to feel it, but I think this box helps you realize for just a moment that 'Wow, there are shared experiences that we're all going through in life.'"

Currently, the project links New York to Tehran, but plans for more portals are in the works. "We're looking to launch a global network of these gold boxes of physical spaces, so that we make a moment inside the box for the individual, but also then publicly," explains Amar. "Our great hope is that these boxes come to symbolize both the potential people hold at their fingertips, as well as just remind them of the joy that comes from interacting with people different from themselves."

Check here to learn more about the shared spaces project:
http://www.sharedstudios.com/

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