

Experimental installations put the social in social science

May 30 2016, by David Porter



In a Friday, May 27, 2016 photo, Joe Martinez reads over information about a container outfitted with video conference electronics that is part of an art installation at Military Park in downtown Newark, N.J. The portal allows people inside a container to communicate to people in containers in other cities across the world. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

The truck-size metal container sitting in a downtown park here isn't meant to raise awareness about the global shipping industry, though it

may nudge some people's curiosity in that direction.

Step into the carpeted interior, and it's something completely different: a combination of an art installation and social science research project that lets people converse with others in far-flung regions of the world, on a life-size screen.

The gold-painted shipping container in Newark's revived Military Park is the hub of a 10-week pilot program sponsored by Shared Studios, an arts and technology collective, in collaboration with local arts group Gateway Project Spaces and researchers at Rutgers-Newark and Yale University.

The program has two basic components. Participants can connect to similar portals set up by Shared Studios in cities including Havana; Tehran, Iran; Nairobi, Kenya; Mexico City; Kigali, Rwanda; and Erbil, Iraq. Or, they can take part in a conversation about policing and social justice with people in Milwaukee.

Both Milwaukee and Newark suffer from high incarceration rates of young black men and are grappling with residents' deep mistrust of law enforcement. Newark's police department is under a recently signed federal monitoring agreement after a report detailed rampant misconduct and unconstitutional practices.



In a Friday, May 27, 2016 photo, Divad Sanders opens up a video portal art installation at Military Park in downtown Newark, N.J. The portal, a combination art installation and social science research project, allows people inside a container to communicate to people in containers in other cities across the world. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

"These are two cities where there are police and community tensions," said Shared Spaces co-founder Michelle Moghtader. "It's a way for people to engage with peers who are facing similar challenges."

The portal's criminal justice piece has been an eye-opener as it substitutes freewheeling conversations for more conventional research methods of focus groups and direct interviews.

"What we've found is people have these very rich and detailed and passionate conversations with strangers," said Rod Brunson, the incoming dean of Rutgers-Newark's school of criminal justice.



In a Friday, May 27, 2016 photo, Timothy Little reads over information about a container outfitted with video conference electronics that is part of an art installation at Military Park in downtown Newark, N.J. The portal allows people inside a container to communicate to people in containers in other cities across the world. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

Lewis Lee, a community activist in Milwaukee, was in his city's portal Friday afternoon and said the installation has had a pronounced effect. Its location near two schools has driven foot traffic, and locals have put on music, spoken word and movie nights connected to the portal.

"The kids are really involved," he said. "The crime volume has gone down noticeably, too."

The first portal was set up between New York and Tehran in 2014. The shipping containers housing them were previously used as, well, shipping

containers, said Shared Studios founder Amar Bakshi.



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Moghtader, a former journalist who worked in Tehran, said they initially thought it would be a one-off project.

"But it has developed into a network where these portals are sort of a global community center," she said.

Rutgers-Newark's school of criminal justice is funding the Newark project along with the Justice Collaboratory at Yale Law School, the

ISPS Center for the Study of Inequality at Yale University and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Moghtader said.



In a Friday, May 27, 2016 photo, Divad Sanders, right, stands inside a container in Newark, N.J., as he converses with Lewis Lee, standing in a container in Milwaukee, as part of an art installation at Military Park in downtown Newark, N.J. The portal allows people inside a container to communicate to people in containers in other cities across the world. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

Brunson said he and other researchers will go back and analyze the conversations when the portal is shut down at the end of June, looking for themes and patterns and, in the process, re-evaluating their own methods of collecting data.

"We've been surprised how open and willing people are to share intimate details of their lives," he said. "Maybe it has something to do with the

fact that social media is a mainstay in younger people's lives. Maybe the reality TV industry helps too. As social scientists, maybe we have to catch up."



In a Friday, May 27, 2016 photo, Divad Sanders, right, stands inside a container in Newark, N.J., as he converses with Lewis Lee, standing in a container in Milwaukee, as part of an art installation at Military Park in downtown Newark, N.J. The portal allows people inside a container to communicate to people in containers in other cities across the world. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

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