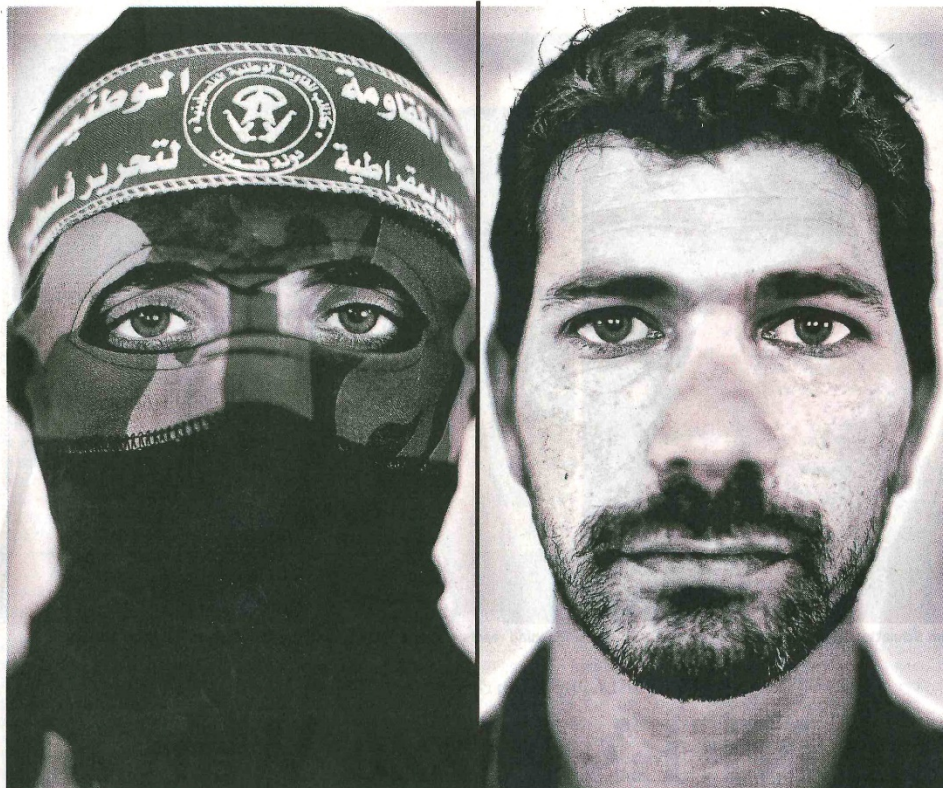


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LIFE & ARTS



Combatant Abu Khaled, Palestine, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Combatant Gilad, Israel, Israeli Defense Forces

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Facing Down Conflict

Can an immersive virtual-reality project engender empathy and end violence?

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Cambridge, Mass. **ABU KHALED'S** eyes follow me as I approach. He is dressed to kill, his face hidden by a ski mask. He is "at ease"—in military fashion—and I am wary. He is a fighter for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Pales-

tine. His headband bears an insignia with two rifles flanking a star—an allusion to the PFLP's Marxist-Leninist roots? He has agreed to be interviewed, but I am not the one asking questions (and they are not questions I would ask). The questioner is the photographer Karim Ben Khelifa, who has choreographed this event. He is

heard, but not seen. Khaled answers in Arabic and I hear simultaneous translation.

But this is dialogue with a 3-D wraith. Though Abu Khaled seems to appear in the flesh, he is a digital illusion, created by scanning the actual fighter with multiple cameras when Mr. Khelifa interviewed him for this theater piece/interactive exhibition/

technological exploration/social experiment called "The Enemy," which has already had some international exposure and is now at the MIT Museum. So vivid is Khaled's interactive presence that when he begins to leave and I suddenly move, he momentarily seems to leap at me; I jump in alarm.

But there are more ene-

mies to be met. Near the opposite wall stands Gilad, a reservist in the Israel Defense Forces; he is Khaled's enemy, as Khaled is his. He speaks without a ski mask. In the adjacent gallery two other men are enemies in Congo, where there have been five million deaths since 1994. And in a third gallery are two fearsomely tattooed, bare-chested members of rival gangs whose warfare has steeped El Salvador in blood, achieving what we hear are 37 murders a day.

Who is your enemy? Mr. Khelifa's voice asks each. Have you ever killed? What is violence? What is peace? What gives you joy? Many answers are similar. And when I have heard them all and I walk through an exit passage, I reach up and remove the enormous headset that sits over my eyes, along with a large PC backpack. The enemies disappear. So do the brightly lit galleries through which I have seemingly walked. Now I see a large almost empty space in the museum. Other figures in virtual-reality gear blindly walk about or peer ahead into their headgear, presumably seeing what I saw.

Mr. Khelifa, whose father was Tunisian and mother Belgian, is a photojournalist who spent considerable time in war zones. He gave up his vocation after having a child, but not, in his account, his dream of ending war. This project began as a photo exhibition, but after a residency at MIT beginning in 2013 it was reconceived with D. Fox Harrell, a professor of digital media and AI and director of MIT's Imagination, Computation and Expression Laboratory. The virtual figures they created are uncanny, though not yet versatile enough to react to unscribed questions like Alexa and Cortana.

But the technology created a discomfiting intimacy, leaving me uneasy. Was it the realism? I had stood near a man who described his parent's gruesome murder in Congo, their heads

split, their brains splattering on him as a child. Somehow, too, hearing the ruthless Salvadoran gangster in the "flesh," I felt sympathy for his wrecked and wracked childhood. That was the point. Mr. Khelifa wants to turn the invisible enemy into a visible human being. This, he suggests, will lead to feelings of empathy. Once you really see the enemy, he can no longer be an enemy. And then, why fight? He plans to bring this piece directly into war-torn societies.

Alas, empathy has its limits; for one, it doesn't encourage analysis. How might one know, for example, that Khaled's stated compromise with Israel and his insistence that the PFLP's tactics do not constitute "violence" do not quite gibe with the group's 2001 murder of an Israeli government minister or its 2014 hacking to death of Jewish worshippers? Would empathy be the best way for Israelis to welcome the PFLP and its more powerful allied groups? As for the suffering of Salvadoran gang members, would empathy lead them to mitigate their (tactfully undescribed) brutality?

The questions Mr. Khelifa asks are also designed to minimize distinctions. Nearly every fighter gets joy from his children and wishes there were peace. Every conflict is called a "cycle of violence." History doesn't matter. Do we understand Congo any more from the empathy we feel for these two individuals?

Once history and analysis are supplanted by empathy, everything becomes sentimental. I understand Mr. Khelifa's desire. It haunts much journalism: Begin with a case history about individual suffering, thus harnessing empathy for a championed cause. But here, in this well-packaged presentation of virtual reality, empathy actually inspires virtual unreality.

The Enemy

MIT Museum, through Dec. 31

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.