

The Enemy

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A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.

Coming Face-to-Face with the “Other” Through Virtual Reality

Jennifer Carter

“We make sense of the world through stories, and we remember it through experiences. What happens then when someone else’s story becomes your experience?”¹

—photojournalist and creator of *The Enemy*, Karim Ben Khelifa

It’s a bit of a wager.

What does it take to empathize with the Other? To want to think – and feel – past stereotypes or ideologies one may have about people engaged in a war they may never experience, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the humanity of an individual they may never know? What does it take to identify with a stranger, and how might a brief encounter fundamentally change one’s attitude and behavior in relation to conflict and the suffering of others in our networked and global world? This is the wager award-winning Belgian-Tunisian photojournalist Karim Ben Khelifa made when he transformed his photographic exhibition, *The Enemy*, into a 50-minute

¹ Karim Ben Khelifa is quoted in the “Making Of” section on the exhibition’s website, theenemyishere.org/making-of. The exhibition is an international co-production by Camera Lucida, France Télévisions Nouvelles Écritures, National Film Board of Canada (NFB), Dpt., Emissive.

immersive virtual reality (VR) installation designed to probe the limits of empathy by experimenting with new forms of technology and media art, cognitive science, and interactivity.

Transcending War, Enabling Encounter: From Photo to Virtual Reality

Ben Khelifa has dedicated nearly two decades of his professional life to working as a war correspondent and journalist on the front lines of conflict. While particularly known for his work in the Middle East, he has traveled to dozens of countries around the world, freelancing for international publications ranging from *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* to *Time* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*. Over time, Khelifa has become increasingly dissatisfied with what he considers to be the limitations of photography – as intimate



Image of participants of *The Enemy*, wearing VR headsets.

ALL IMAGES PROVIDED BY THE NFB. THE ENEMY, 2017.



a portrait the medium may produce – in altering the responses of those who view his photographs of war-torn communities from a “comfortable” distance. Seeking heightened forms of encounter through interactivity, the immersive installation entitled *The Enemy*, which I recently visited at Montreal’s Phi Centre, is testament to how Ben Khelifa focused his lens ever more acutely on the human side of war, while embarking on a project that pushed the boundaries of the experiential within the exhibition setting.

Not all photographers would willingly trade their lens and the power of the image for the experimental platform of virtual reality. As Griffin has argued, photographic depictions of warfare and armed conflict – and notably those chosen to circulate widely in contemporary media – have a directness that is both visceral and voyeuristic, drawing viewers into their world while simultaneously functioning as iconic and often transcendent representations of the devastating consequences of war.² It is interesting, then, that Ben Khelifa seized upon the opportunity to experiment with newer technologies as a means to explore other possibilities for engaging viewers of his work and bringing about individual and social change. Winning a prestigious fellowship at the MIT Open Documentary Lab in Boston from 2013 to 2015, as well as a coveted residency in visual and computational arts at the same university’s Center for Art, Science & Technology in 2017–2018, Ben Khelifa collaborated with a team of MIT faculty and researchers, including the Imagination, Computation and Expression Laboratory, in addition to a host of other specialists in interactive and digital design. This intensive collaboration resulted in a cross-disciplinary, virtual reality project that originated with Ben Khelifa’s photographs and

which would explore artificial intelligence-based interaction models as a means to inspire empathy in viewers of his work. The project itself includes two components: the first, and the subject of this review, is an installation that experiments with virtual reality through the use of specially configured headsets and which enables participants to experience the personal narratives of six combatants in an immersive environment ([intro image](#)). The second is a smartphone application with augmented reality of the same immersive environment enabling people to view the project anywhere, at any time.

If the technology underlying *The Enemy* is innovative, developing the content of the project was equally a key element of the work. Ben Khelifa selected three distinct conflict zones, and proceeded to interview two opposing combatants in each from a local studio in their home country or territory. These interviews would become the main audio component of the immersive installation. Gaining the trust of these individuals was not only important, it was an essential component of the project and challenge for the photojournalist who was confronted by the issue in a number of ways. In one instance, the filming involved bringing a combatant onto enemy territory; in another, it required creative diplomacy to find a participant who would willingly enter into what is historically very charged ideological terrain.

Engaging with the combatants of distinct conflicts ([fig. 1](#)) – Israel and Palestine; the Maras (gang wars) in El Salvador; civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo – Ben Khelifa sought specifically to humanize traditional and sometimes abstracted perceptions of the enemy by entering into a strikingly frank conversation with each individual on a one-to-one basis. “Who is your enemy? What is peace to you? What was the nicest day of your life?” were some of the

2 On this subject, see the analysis by Michael Griffin, “Media images of War,” *Media, War & Conflict* 3, no. 1 (2010), 7–41.

questions he asked each in turn. To these questions, his interlocutors – Gilad (Israeli Defense Force) and Abu Khaled (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine); Jean de Dieu (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) and Patient Kobayi (Regular Congolese Army); and Amilcar Vladimir (Barrio 18 Gang) and Jorge Alberto aka Koki (MS13) of El Salvador – all replied candidly. For a brief moment, their vulnerabilities are exposed. For a brief moment, the “enemy” becomes a specific human being with a particular past and future dreams. The foundational questions of Ben Khelifa resonate profoundly here: “The enemy. Who *is* he, and *why*?”³

Experiencing *The Enemy*

A visit to *The Enemy* is a unique experience for several reasons. The number of participants in each screening is limited to the available technology, but also by the intimacy of the encounter Ben Khelifa has sought to create. When I arrived at the Phi Centre for my timed entry, I was equipped with a VR headset which provided the audio and visual projection of the changing surroundings dedicated to each of three conflict zones, as well as a PC backpack computer, and I embarked with four others similarly outfitted on a 50-minute journey. I was surprised to be told that the entire screening would occur in a single physical room. Donning the headset and backpack, I soon learned that the VR element introduces a sequence of spaces and audio that would unfold in this one room and that defined the geographies of difference upon which the installation is premised: each pair of combatants occupies a different “locale” that I would enter into, circulate around, and then leave, as I physically moved from virtual space to virtual space and metaphorically traveled from geographic conflict to geographic conflict – all within a modest room at Phi.

3 Quote from the exhibition; emphasis author’s own.

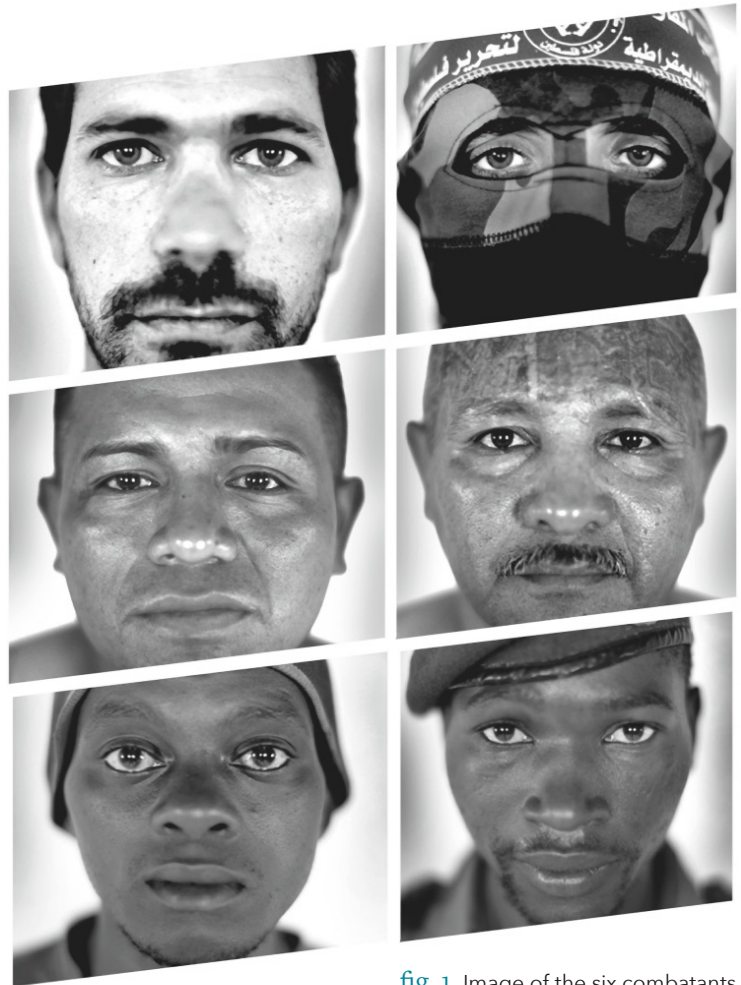


fig. 1. Image of the six combatants interviewed in *The Enemy*.

These virtual spaces are sparsely decorated rooms (fig. 2), gallery-like in their minimalist, white cube aesthetic, and populated by the combatants who stand opposite one another. Introductions to each are provided in the form of both a framed text and portrait on the wall, and Ben Khelifa's brief narration (roughly two minutes), which give basic context about the conflict and combatant, but little else mediated my encounter. What happens next is what underscores the uniqueness of this work, as each of us determined the terms of our own experience.

fig. 2. View of the VR installation of *The Enemy*, featuring Gilad (Israeli Defense Force) and Abu Khaled (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine).

From the initial approach to each combatant to the nature of the encounter with each, Ben Khelifa deliberately left the in-between unstructured: which of the two combatants I would approach first – and how close I would get to the life-size figures as they related, in their own language (with a translated voice-over) and in answer to questions posed by Ben Khelifa, personal details of their lives – were my personal choice. Combatants kept my gaze, reacting to my every turn as they might in real life. It was an uncanny one-on-one interaction.

To be fair, there are elements beyond the user's control that directly affect their trajectory, and thus their experience and interpretation of the work. As participants, our individual "routes" and encounters with each of the conflicts was pre-determined, based on our responses to a questionnaire that was distributed in



advance of the screening and which sought to evaluate our general attitudes to conflict and war. The amount of time we would spend in each “space” was roughly the same because the audio component of the installation was pre-recorded, but we were not necessarily collectively experiencing the same conflict and engaging with the same combatants at the same time.

Immersed in the visuals of our VR headsets, we were only mildly aware of one another’s presence – enough to avoid bumping into one another as we moved from one projection of a combatant to another – however we did not discuss or exchange amongst ourselves. The experience is an intensely individual one involving the participant and their interaction with the combatants. Ben Khelifa’s project compels participants to listen, look and feel, and my own attention was focused on how the stories of each of the individuals intersected or diverged. An (unsolicited) assessment at the end of the screening provides a suggestion about where the individual’s sympathies may lie based on data collected from their movement throughout the visit and their replies to a pre-visit questionnaire. While this association with one of the six combatants is neither conclusive nor even the strength of this exhibition, it does seem to respond to Ben Khelifa’s attempt to explore, as the epigraph at the beginning of this review first announced, “what happens (then) when someone else’s story becomes your experience.”⁴

In *The Enemy*, Ben Khelifa has created portraits that feel immediate and actual. One of the strengths of this exhibition is that Ben Khelifa managed to elicit from each combatant such poignant blends of testimony and personal memory about war and its devastating consequences – both local and personal.

4 Khelifa is quoted in the “Making Of” section on the exhibition’s website, theenemyishere.org/making-of.

Together, they convincingly reveal how each is more similar than different in their dreams and life ambitions: their happiest moments involve family; to some, peace remains elusive; for others, hope is an illusion. The poignancy of the participants’ own voices is enhanced by how their words and emotions are delivered. Ben Khelifa photographed, scanned, and then positioned each avatar so that opposing combatants and audience members exist within the common space of the exhibition. I noted that the subtle and particular forms of intimate contact permitted by the immersive technology of virtual reality assumed added effect as I was free to roam the space, circle the combatant, size them up and look them in the eye, or simply walk away as a “thank you for listening” rung hollow.

There is undeniably an ethical dimension to consider when representing the images and stories associated with war and conflict zones. Victims of war and of the mass displacement it occasions have long been the subject of exhibitions and museums around the world. Yet to give voice to the perpetrators of these wars, as Ben Khelifa has done, has largely been taboo. The various testimonies in *The Enemy* – such as the story of Jean de Dieu, once a child soldier – successfully blur the line between victim and perpetrator while putting into stark relief the author’s assertion that in the cycle of violence, “the enemy perpetuates the enemy.”⁵

Through its audio and visual components, *The Enemy* ultimately renders visible what lies for many in the realm of the invisible, if not the impossible: a face-to-face encounter with the estranged “Other.” In this, the wager is begun: I became a privileged witness to the testimonies that combatants have given to the artist, but also, indirectly, to one another. How would I react? The combatants’ courage to speak out and to enter into a dialogue –

5 Quote from the exhibition.

fig. 3. This image illustrates the global scope of Ben Khelifa's project, which maps both the placement of the conflicts, the sites that the installation has been mounted, as well as viewings by users of the smartphone application.

for that's what this is, in the end, a form of discursive contact with the Other – is a key feature of this work.

Bearing Witness, Receiving Testimony

There is, of course, the inevitable question: why did each of these combatants choose to participate in Ben Khelifa's project, with the knowledge that they, too, would share space with the enemy, *their* enemy?

Is it the desire to bear witness? To convey their version of events, unmediated by traditional news media formats? The project itself has been described as a new form of journalism. But is it journalism, or art, or both?

The project hinges on Ben Khelifa's play on interactivity and the experiential as a means to engender empathy. He seeks to expose the universality of human experience as a point of contact. There are undoubtedly other ways to connect with fellow individuals, but in this instance, the deliberate attempt to humanize stories through the combination of visual and audio experience using the medium of virtual reality has a unique impact, because it heightens the terms of our rapport with each combatant. I not only came face-to-face with an individual – which a photograph already has the capacity to do – I was given the opportunity of hearing his personal story in his own words.

For Ben Khelifa, creating *The Enemy* was an opportunity to understand why these individuals do the things they do. He did not intend to provide a platform to articulate a political message, but rather a space for individuals to express themselves and their motivations for engaging in war. His methodology avoided reproducing the political forum that this project could so easily have become: when presenting himself and his project, the photojournalist emphasized his desire

to counter traditional mechanisms of dehumanization through the fundamental act of giving voice. Seeing their faces, hearing their words, we are encouraged to transcend the label of enemy in order to evaluate the agency of each of these individuals and the choices they have made in life and why.

In this sense, Ben Khelifa's own actions are guided by his desire to reveal the humanity of his subjects according to their own terms, and in their own words. Focusing on perpetrators is not an approach that one often sees in exhibition installations. In this sense, *The Enemy* circumvents this convention by giving voice directly to those whose lives are defined by war and who, in turn, define war with their lives. In this, Ben Khelifa is adamant that he seeks not to explain the war itself, but rather the viewpoints of those most affected by it – its enemy combatants. And if political messages were indeed communicated by these combatants, they were also beholden to the questions that Ben Khelifa put to them. Their replies, we learn, are not very different from one another.

Negotiating the Space of Conflict

If it is not already evident, fundamental to this exhibition's premise is the distinct manner it plays on duality. By hearing *both* sides of a story, the photojournalist wonders, how does this change our perception of events, if at all? And perhaps more importantly, to what ends? What will people *do* with this new insight?

Key to this questioning is the specific role that each of us played as participants in the installation. If Ben Khelifa's ambition is to bring about change in the viewpoints of those who experience his work, he does this not only by bringing us face-to-face with opposing combatants, but more specifically, by placing us in the middle of the proverbial battlefield.



I am reminded of other contemporary artists, such as Shirin Neshat, who have similarly used parallel videographic installations as counterpoints to underscore the tensions of alterity in different worlds. Both Ben Khelifa and Neshat literally position their audiences within immersive contexts that induce “a displacement toward otherness”⁶ – an opportunity to know the Other – if they are not caught in the limbo of the in-between.

In principle, I agree with Ben Khelifa’s premise: stories are our gateways to understanding the diversity of human experience, and our connection to the world is predicated on our personal experience. Yet an issue tugged at me as I traveled throughout this installation: Ben Khelifa’s explicit goal may well have been to expand the visitor’s moral imagination,⁷ such that the experiences of our common humanity might prove to be more important than the differences that divide us (fig. 3). Still, if his work is undoubtedly important in this respect, and provides a narrative that could very well

induce greater empathy and understanding in individual behavior, there is something left unsaid and undone. Unlike other curatorial forays into social justice, this exhibition does not offer tools for further activism, and for this reason, it is more difficult to imagine how this immersive installation might prompt people to actually step up to the wager, and in what way.

My own feeling is that *The Enemy* is an exhibition that provocatively addresses ethics and war, and how humans navigate their immediate and not-so-immediate worlds. In the end, though, it’s not the technology that leaves the greatest impression, but rather the similarities of humans across geographies of great difference that the exchanges themselves have revealed. And therein lies the profound achievement of this exhibition.

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6 Paulette Gagnon, “Between Seeing and Knowing, Discovering Otherness...,” *Shirin Neshat*, exhibition catalogue (Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain, 2001), 101.

7 See “Karim Ben Khelifa: Humanizing the enemy,” Center for Art, Science & Technology, MIT, <https://arts.mit.edu/artists/karim-ben-khelifa/#about-the-residency>.