

MIT Announces Virtual Reality Project “The Enemy” by Visiting Artist Karim Ben Khelifa

Project will have U.S. premiere at the MIT Museum Fall 2017

Cambridge, MA, October 31, 2016 -- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) announces a new Virtual Reality (VR) project, entitled [*The Enemy*](#), conceived by acclaimed photojournalist Karim Ben Khelifa, and further developed during his visiting artist residency hosted by [MIT's Center for Art, Science & Technology \(CAST\)](#). *The Enemy* is an immersive experience that involves participants in discussions about violence and humanity by using pioneering VR technology to present interviews with soldiers on opposite sides of longstanding military conflicts. The project makes its international debut in Spring 2017 and the exhibition's U.S. premiere will be at the [MIT Museum](#) in Fall 2017, where visitors will be able to participate in a multi-user VR experience. In the coming years, the artist and his collaborators have plans to present the exhibition in the conflict zones represented, so that younger generations can experience new perceptions of long-standing enemies.

The Enemy is a groundbreaking, immersive VR experience that enables participants to see and hear firsthand two opposing enemy fighters from international conflict areas, such as Israel and Palestine, Congo and El Salvador. Using virtual reality headsets, participants will encounter real, 360-degree imaging and recordings of combatants who were interviewed by Ben Khelifa for the project. In their own words, the combatants offer personal perspectives on war, their motivations, suffering, freedom and the future. The VR experience has been developed by Camera Lucida Productions and Emissive, both French companies. In addition to the exhibition, *The Enemy* includes a smartphone application that uses augmented and mixed reality to expand the number of participants worldwide and was developed by two Canadian partners, the National Film Board of Canada and Dpt. The whole project was coproduced with France Télévisions Nouvelles Écritures.

“Being a visiting artist with MIT’s CAST allows me to break all the barriers I could see with my work as a photojournalist, and with this new medium, we have a whole new field to discover,” says Karim Ben Khelifa. “I hope to be able to propose a truly profound experience where the audience can rethink its notion of the Other. I believe that walking within a VR space allows for tons of other emotions we cannot provoke in more conventional mediums.”

The traveling exhibition, which makes its U.S. premiere at the MIT Museum, uses virtual reality headsets to create an immersive experience. Originally conceived by Ben Khelifa as a photo exhibition, *The Enemy* evolved into a virtual reality installation during his artist residency at MIT, beginning in 2013 at MIT’s Open Documentary Lab. Since that start, Professor D. Fox Harrell, founder and director of the MIT [Imagination, Computation and Expression Laboratory \(ICE Lab\)](#), wrote a CAST Visiting Artist grant to host Ben Khelifa in his lab and to collaborate on *The Enemy*.

Author of *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (MIT Press, 2013), Harrell is invested in exploring how computing can be used to create subjective experiences, cultural understandings, and critical empowerment, goals that are also resonant in *The Enemy*. Together, Ben Khelifa and Harrell are incorporating concepts from artificial intelligence and cognitive science-based interaction models into the project, with the goal of using testing the VR experience of combatants' testimonies to engender understanding towards "the Other."

"From the start of working with Karim, I was immediately impressed by his peace-oriented goals, intrepid spirit, and willingness to explore computational technologies for expression," said Harrell. "Our collaboration has been immensely rewarding and natural from the beginning, with both of us united by the goal to use VR not to create a spectacle, but rather to engage users in an intimate space of candid conversations they would not otherwise be privy to. With its capacity to reach and spark reflection across broad audiences, *The Enemy* presents a new model for interactive narrative and virtual identity in the journalistic domain."

"Bringing Karim to MIT to take his project to another level through his collaboration with computer science and digital media arts expert Professor Fox Harrell, is an excellent example of how our residency program advances the "research and development" phase of an artist's project," said Leila W. Kinney, Executive Director of the MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology.

Award-winning photojournalist Karim Ben Khelifa is widely known for his coverage of conflicts, including the Iraq and Afghan wars, where he covered the insurgent sides. For the past 15 years, Ben Khelifa has been on an increasingly ambitious quest, driven by the questions: What is the point of images of war if they don't change people's attitudes towards armed conflicts, violence and the suffering they produce? What is the point if they don't change anyone's mind? What is the point if they don't help create peace? Ben Khelifa has worked in more than 80 countries and territories and has exhibited work on four continents and has freelanced for *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *Le Monde*, *Stern*, *The New York Times Magazine* and dozens of other publications.

D. Fox Harrell, Ph.D., is a tenured Associate Professor at MIT, joint in both the Comparative Media Studies/Writing Program and the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (CSAIL). Professor Harrell's work explores the relationship between imaginative cognition and computer science. His research involves developing new forms of interactive narrative, gaming, social media and other artificial intelligence-based digital media forms for creative expression, cultural analysis and social empowerment. Harrell has been recipient of a National Science Foundation (NSF) CAREER Award, a Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University, and the Lenore Annenberg and Wallis Annenberg Fellowship in Communication.

The project is made possible through [collaborations](#) beyond MIT. Camera Lucida Productions oversees the whole production of the project and the main sponsor is France Télévisions Nouvelles Écritures. The National Film Board of Canada is creating the application that will allow for a wide range of participation for people who cannot come to locations where the VR experience

is provided in person, with a focus on reaching the areas of conflict represented in the project. *The Enemy* is also supported by the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), the TFI New Media Fund, the Ford Foundation, the Sundance Institute New Frontier Program, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Arts' Doris Duke New Frontier Fellowship, and the Open Society Foundations. The project has been featured at the TriBeCa Film Festival.

HISTORY OF VISITING ARTISTS AT MIT / RECENT ARTISTS

Since the late 1960s, MIT has been a leader in integrating the arts and pioneering a model for collaboration among artists, scientists and engineers in a research setting. CAST's Visiting Artists Program brings internationally acclaimed artists to engage with MIT's creative community in ways that are mutually enlightening for the artists and for faculty, students and research staff at the Institute. Artists who have worked extensively at MIT include Mel Chin, Olafur Eliasson, Rick Lowe, Vik Muniz, Trevor Paglen, Tomás Saraceno and Anicka Yi. As CAST's inaugural Visiting Artist, Saraceno initiated ongoing collaborations with researchers in Civil and Environmental Engineering and Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences, which have generated a master's thesis and three senior projects to date, and his large-scale installations and aerosolar projects are inspiring further research into bio-inspired building materials and simulations of atmospheric turbulence and ozone depletion. Pedro Reyes is the inaugural Dasha Zhukova Distinguished Visiting Artist at the MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology, currently teaching a course and developing a new work during his residency at MIT.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR ART, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

A major cross-school initiative, the MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology (CAST) creates new opportunities for art, science and technology to thrive as interrelated, mutually informing modes of exploration, knowledge and discovery. CAST's multidisciplinary platform presents performing and visual arts programs, supports research projects for artists working with science and engineering labs, and sponsors symposia, classes, workshops, design studios, lectures and publications. The Center is funded in part by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Evan Ziporyn is the Faculty Director and Leila W. Kinney is the Executive Director.

Since its inception in 2012, CAST has been the catalyst for more than 35 artist residencies and collaborative projects with MIT faculty and students—20 cross-disciplinary courses and workshops, four concert series and numerous multimedia projects, lectures and symposia. The visiting artists program is a cornerstone of CAST's activities, which encourages cross-fertilization among disciplines and intensive interaction with MIT's faculty and students.

ABOUT THE ARTS AT MIT

Over 70 percent of incoming freshmen have prior training in the arts, and nearly 50 percent of all MIT undergraduates enroll in arts courses each year. The arts strengthen MIT's commitment to the aesthetic, human and social dimensions of research and innovation. Artistic knowledge and creation exemplify MIT's motto—*mens et manus*, mind and hand. The arts are essential to MIT's mission to build a better society and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

For more information, visit arts.mit.edu

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