

Yazan Khalili, Medusa, Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto

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Yazan Khalili

← *Medusa*, installation view, MOCA Toronto, 2020.

Photo : Toni Hafkensheid, courtesy of the artist & Mophradat, Brussels

↑ *Medusa*, video still, 2020.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Mophradat, Brussels

Yazan Khalili *Medusa*

This fall, a neat row of six cracked televisions suspended precisely one metre apart welcomed MOCA Toronto's visitors as they entered the museum's lobby. This video installation titled *Medusa* (2020), by the Ramallah-based architect and visual artist Yazan Khalili, was commissioned by the Consortium Commissions—an initiative supported by Mophradat (Brussels) and various partnering institutions, including MOCA Toronto, Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, CCA in Glasgow, and KW in Berlin.

Yazan Khalili is known for his extensive research into facial recognition technologies and for drawing parallels with Indigenous and classical masks. In Greek mythology, Medusa is the female figure with venomous snakes in lieu of hair, whose gaze turns humans to stone. Khalili was reminded of the goddess as he photographed a collection of Greek masks and the facial recognition feature of his iPhone identified the stone carvings as human faces—symbolically reversing Medusa's harrowing curse. This spurred a two-fold investigation into our growing reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) and the equivocal description of what exactly constitutes a face.

Khalili's *Medusa* offers a compelling examination of new relationships between people and technology at a time when the fields of ergonomics and AI are turning objects into increasingly capable surrogates for humans. In the last fifteen years, AI has shifted from the niche world of computer science to be assimilated into public consciousness as the subject of much fascination. Khalili's carefully planned installation prompts the viewer to move between the TV monitors without ever truly being able to settle into a comfortable distance from the screen. In this way, *Medusa* presents the unresolved posture of facial recognition technologies in public consciousness as both an entertaining feature widely used on social media (think of the filters on

Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook) as well as a worrying tool of surveillance.

In the work, not only are there six screens to move between, but there are multiple interfaces that are overlaid, playing different videos simultaneously. The viewer's gaze is constantly shifting between the disparate things happening in different areas of the screen while remaining incapable of capturing everything that occurs in the installation at the same time. Khalili often talks about his interest in issues of (power) structures. As a Palestinian artist, the concept of recognition provided an interesting framework with which to work. With *Medusa*, Khalili plays on the duality between seeking individual anonymity and the desire for political and diplomatic recognition.

Another important element of the video installation is the implicit tactility that permeates the work. From the growing importance of haptics in technology, to the cracked screen as a symbol of resistance, and hands used to hide the face to bypass facial recognition, touch is a recurring theme. During this global pandemic, touch has also become a cause of anxiety in public consciousness. But COVID-19 has also complicated things in other ways. When wearing face masks to protect one another, we might be countering the pressure imposed by facial recognition, but we are also making ourselves as inadequate as Khalili's iPhone when it comes to recognizing each other's face.

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Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto

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