Yazan Khalili, *Medusa* (2020), installation view at MOCA Toronto

Educator Resource
Recommended Age: Grade 9 and up

Yazan Khalili
Medusa
September 3–November 15, 2020

Museum
Of
Contemporary
Art

About the Artist

Yazan Khalili (b. 1981) is a Palestinian artist currently working in Amsterdam. His work examines issues such as political structures, landscape, and how technology is being used today. Khalili examines ways of rethinking historical moments in a way that makes sense in our present world, and in the near future.

Khalili links the algorithms of facial recognition technologies with the colonial and anthropological practice of reading and classifying faces based on certain features.

Exhibition Overview

The exhibition *Medusa* consists of six hanging screens, each playing a video work. The work investigates the rise of facial recognition technologies, which are increasingly pushing people to be more attached to their individual identities. The human face is an everyday mode of personal identification, and throughout the six videos, we see faces being identified, facial features being manipulated, and masks being detected as faces. Khalili links the algorithms of facial recognition technologies with the colonial and anthropological practice of reading and classifying faces based on certain features.

Medusa serves not only as the title for the installation, but as a key symbol that appears throughout the work. In Greek mythology, Medusa is known as a mesmerizing angel of death. Her gaze petrifies anyone who looks at her, but Medusa can be overcome if one mirrors her powers back onto her. This work points out that technology is not untouchable or abstract–it was created by humans and thus humans have the power to resist and change it. Technology is not separate from us, and it is subject to human weaknesses and bias.

Viewing the work is an immersive experience, as visitors can walk freely among the screens and are encouraged to get close to them. Screens are brought to the foreground in this installation as a means to confront viewers with the materiality of the technology we use in our everyday lives–some screens are covered with cracks, others are superimposed with objects like a smartphone, pieces of paper, and a plastic mask. Here, the screens are not just a platform for the videos that play on them, but are themselves a medium, seamlessly connected to the images they are producing.

Guiding Questions

- The installation is designed so that the screens hang close together, with only a few feet of space between them, forcing the viewer to get very close to the screens when watching the films. **Why do you think Khalili designed the installation this way?**

- In mythology, Medusa's deadly gaze petrifies whoever looks her way; however she can be overcome if one mirrors her powers back onto her. **How do you think Medusa can be used as a symbol to represent humans' relationship with technology?**

- *Medusa* layers together six narratives that investigate individuality and collective practices. Khalili points out that technology, specifically facial recognition, is reflective of a political structure that is more interested in us being individuals and less as part of a collective. **What does this mean? What are some ways in which technology can make you feel more like an individual and less as a collective?**

- Though this work was created before the COVID-19 pandemic, we are now viewing it in a time where the new societal norm is wearing face masks in public. **How might mask-wearing disrupt everyday uses of facial recognition technology? Does the current practice of wearing a mask in public change the way you perceive Khalili's work?**

Ontario Curriculum Connections

VISUAL ART
Grade 9 & 10
- Production and Presentation A3.1, A3.3
- The Critical Analysis Process B1.1, B1.3
- Art, Society, and Values B2.1, B2.2

Grade 11 & 12
- Production and Presentation A3.1, A3.4
- The Critical Analysis Process B1.1, B1.3
- Art, Society, and Values B2.1, B2.2

GENERAL SOCIAL SCIENCES
Grade 11
Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology
- Explaining Human Behaviour and Culture B2.1, B2.3

Grade 12
Challenge and Change in Society
- Causes and Effects of Social Change B2.2
- Technological Change B3.1, B3.2, B3.3

COMPUTER SCIENCE
Grade 11
Introduction to Computer Programming
- Emerging Technologies D3.1, D3.2, D3.3

Grade 12
Computer Science
- Emerging Technologies and Society D3.1
- Exploring Computer Science D4.1

CLASSICAL STUDIES
Grade 12
Classical Civilization
- Mythology B1.1, B1.2
- Intercultural and Other Connections B4.1, B4.2

Yazan Khalili, *Medusa* (2020)

Additional Resources ———

READ
Madeleine Glennon, Medusa in Ancient Greek Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 2017

Allison Meier, The Beauty and Horror of Medusa, an Enduring Symbol of Women's Power, *Hyperallergic*, March 2018

SEE
Medusa in the ROM's Collection

WATCH
MOCA Spotlights: Yazan Khalili

CREATE
TD Community Sunday Activity: Masked by Kendra Yee