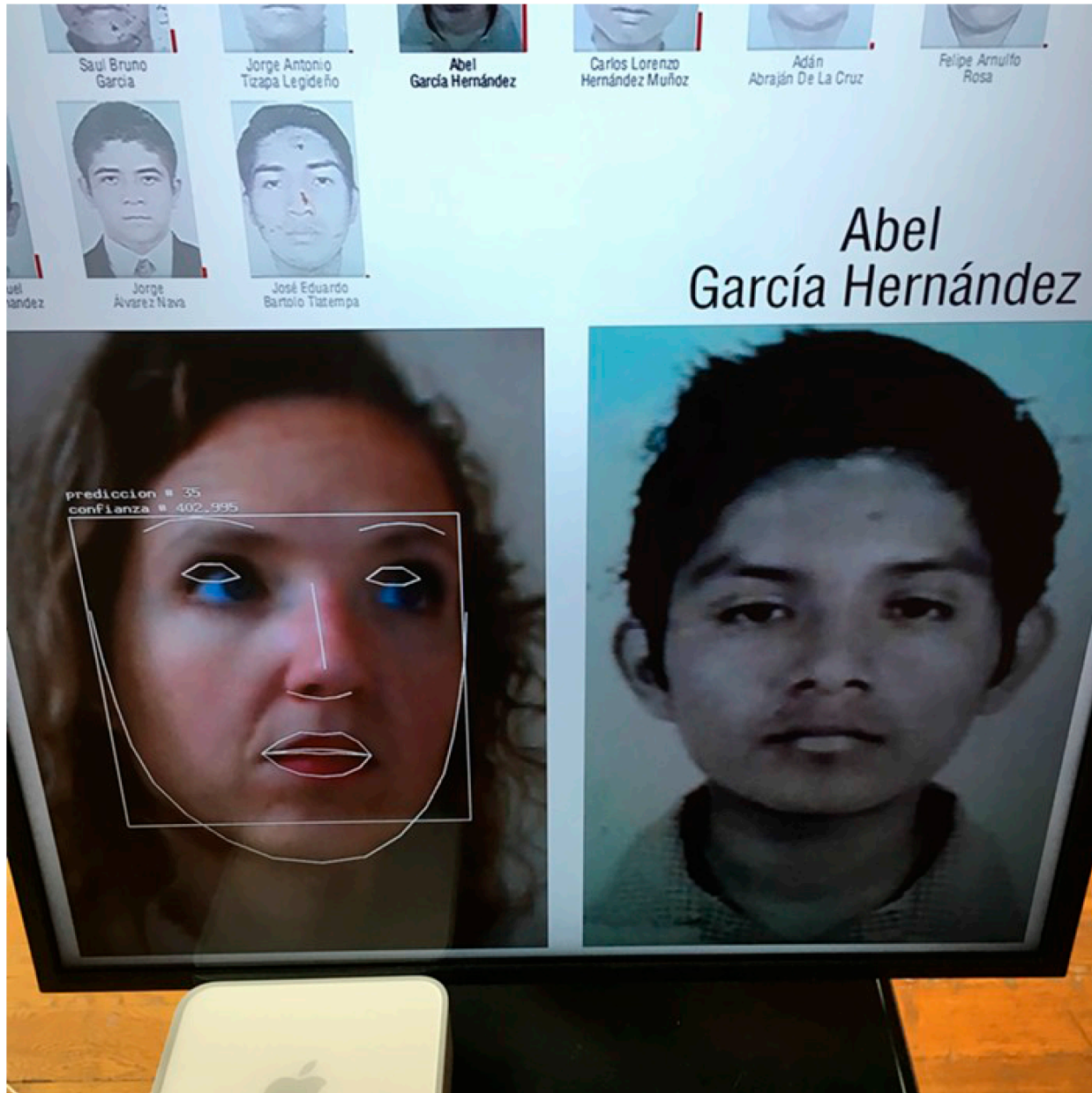


the Stranger

"They Were Taken Alive, We Want Them Back Alive!" (Artists for Empathy, Part 2)

by [Jen Graves](#) • Oct 19, 2016



Abel Garcia Hernández and I can't be a match in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 2015 installation *Level of Confidence*, but I want us to be. PHOTO BY THE STRANGER

I'm standing in front of a large monitor where my face is being projected live, and

compared to a set of other faces. The computer is searching for a match.

As I tilt my head or move my lips, the facial recognition software keeps trying. It lines up faces next to mine, pulled from a grid of black-and-white headshots. *Why do you keep trying?* I think. I am not Abel Garcia Hernández. Except that the longer my eyes, nose, and lips are modeled on the screen next to the soft features of the boyish teenager, I wonder whether I do look *something* like Abel Garcia Hernández. Am I imagining it, or are his lips and my lips almost congruent? Are we joined in a geometry kiss?

He disappears, and another face follows his. Another face where I will find faint echoes, but no positive match.

This is not just an exercise in interactive art. All of the 43 teenagers whose faces appear in the grid are actual sons and brothers whose families are still holding out hope that they are alive.

These are The 43, the students whose disappearance one night in September 2014 set off revolts across Mexico against not only the drug cartels and the local police—which the national government blamed for the attacks in an "investigation" whose conclusions are full of holes—but the national military and all the way up to President Enrique Peña Nieto. (The best writing and reporting about the 43 has been **from novelist Francisco Goldman in the *New Yorker*.**)

Nobody has been able to find them, or to figure out the circumstances of their deaths, if they did die.

And the Mexican government is calling it over.

It's not only the mothers and fathers of those 43 for whom it's not over. Many people have "disappeared" or been outright massacred by cartel and government forces, with impunity, in recent years in Mexico. So, many Mexicans see the 43 as representative of the whole besieged, vulnerable population of the corrupt narco-state. The uprisings have been **huge**.

The work of art that spreads this rising spirit of solidarity to Seattle is *Level of Confidence*, included in an excellent group exhibition titled ***Robots Building Robots***, curated by Amanda Donnan at the Hedreen Gallery at Seattle University. Numbers appear on the screen that display the software's level of confidence that the viewer and each teenager are a match. The phrase "level of confidence," which I assume is part of the straight-faced apparatus of how this software is used by police and military, here becomes a satire on technological utopianism. Computers can pick a petty criminal out of a crowd, but not a whole criminal system.

And not the victims. That's the most heartbreaking thing about the whole story of the 43, and of this work of art. The searching goes on, fruitless. Every viewer who stands in front of that monitor will not be a match. Montreal-based, Mexican-born artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer made ***Level of Confidence*** in 2015, six months after the students disappeared.

Since then, the piece has been installed around the world—it's now in at least two other locations, too. The art isn't actually trying to find the missing 43, of course. It's seeking, and finding, empathy (like the *Machine To Be Another* that I **wrote about here yesterday**). Go to Abel Garcia Hernández. See him.