

Speculative Pasts: Generative AI and the Political Imagination of History

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This paper presents *Speculative Pasts*, an ongoing research and artistic programme that uses generative artificial intelligence to construct images and videos of histories that did not, could not, or cannot fully appear in the archive. The project is organised around a set of related works — *Montevideo, 1983*, *Abandoned Fictions*, *Abandoned Future*, *Hommage Numérique*, and *La MASA* — that approach the past not as a stable object to be recovered, but as a contested field of affect, ideology, omission, and technical mediation. The paper argues that AI-generated media can operate as a critical apparatus for the production of speculative memory: not the falsification of history nor the simulation of documentary evidence, but the construction of plausible images that make visible the instability through which memory, city, and political imagination are produced. Situated within practice-based research, media art, and urban memory studies, the project treats generative systems as instruments of estrangement whose errors, excesses, recognisable biases, and capacity for historical pastiche are not simply problems to be corrected but material conditions through which the politics of representation can be examined. *Speculative Pasts* therefore asks how synthetic images may help articulate memories marked by dictatorship, interrupted modernisation, artistic inheritance, and the exhaustion of official narratives, while remaining ethically distinct from claims of historical verification.

CCS CONCEPTS •Applied computing~Arts and humanities~Media arts•Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)~Interactive systems and tools•Computing methodologies~Artificial intelligence

Additional Keywords and Phrases: generative artificial intelligence, speculative memory, media art, urban space, political memory, practice-based research, synthetic images, Latin America

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1 INTRODUCTION

There are images that appear before they exist: they are not memories, but they behave like memories; they do not document an event, but they borrow the authority of documentation. They may show a street, an exhibition, a political crowd, a building in ruins, or a city under a light that seems historically precise and, at the same time, impossible. *Speculative Pasts* begins in this ambiguity.

The project uses generative artificial intelligence to produce images of the past as a field of political and affective reconstruction. Its concern is not whether AI can recreate history accurately: accuracy assumes the past is available as visual fact to be retrieved, and for histories marked by violence, repression, coloniality, or institutional erasure, that availability is precisely what is missing [19, 22]. *Speculative Pasts* proposes instead that synthetic images can work with absence. The works claim no evidentiary authority; they are speculative artefacts, produced through iterative prompting, selection, refusal, sequencing, sound, and framing, designed to expose the unstable relation between memory and representation rather than repair it.

The programme works across interconnected scales, and the distinction governs what each work can claim. *Montevideo, 1983* begins in autobiographical childhood memory; *Abandoned Fictions* and *Abandoned Future* address national narratives of interrupted modernisation; *Hommage Numérique* works on art-historical inheritance; *La MASA* interrogates epistemic legitimacy. Personal memory is a point of departure, never a substitute for collective historical experience.

2 CONTEXT: FROM ARCHIVE TO SPECULATIVE MEMORY

The archive is a system of power determining what can appear as evidence, be preserved, be narrated, or remain unintelligible [9]. Foster describes an archival impulse through which artists build alternative systems of collection rather than recover existing materials [8]; Huyssen shows cities crossed by temporal layers in which political histories persist as traces [11]; Trouillot locates silences in the making of sources, archives, narratives, and retrospective significance [22]. Nora's *lieux de mémoire* [17] and Ricoeur's account of memory, history, and forgetting [19] belong to the same constellation, while Azoulay's call to unlearn the imperial structure of the photographic archive [1] makes the enterprise political rather than documentary.

Speculative Pasts develops from this terrain but relocates it within the condition of generative media. The problem is no longer only that the archive is incomplete; it is that images can be produced with the visual grammar of archival material without belonging to any archive. This is dangerous when used to fabricate evidence, and critically productive when its artificiality is declared and used to question how historical plausibility is constructed — a question Flusser anticipated in his account of the technical image as coded surface rather than window [7], and that the variability Manovich identified as constitutive of new media has since generalised to every image [15].

This is not an isolated position. Ibero-American practice increasingly uses generative systems precisely where the photographic record is missing: Felipe Rivas San Martín's *Un archivo queer inexistente* (2022–2024) constructs images of Latin American queer lives never photographed, retaining generative errors so they remain visibly impossible [20]; Rogelio Séptimo's *Exhumar la memor.IA* (2023) builds portraits of ancestors from oral description [21]; Domestic Data Streamers' *Synthetic Memories* (2023–) visualises undocumented memories, blurring outputs so they cannot pass as documents [6]; Julio Pereira's *Con la carne desnuda* (2024) imagines the visual world of a woman under the same Uruguayan dictatorship [18]. Bañuelos Capistrán names this field *algorithmic postmemory* [2]; Martín Prada analyses how such systems problematise the past and produce archives that do not exist [16]. *Speculative Pasts* differs in one respect: it is not participatory, and it reconstructs on no one's behalf. Where those projects draw authority from the testimony of others, this one works from the artist's own memory and from public history, and its claims are correspondingly narrower.

The term *speculative memory* names this tension: a mode of artistic research in which memory is not retrieval but situated reconstruction. Remembering involves projection, omission, repetition, and displacement, and technological mediation is never external to it, since photographs, official records, family stories, and now generative models all participate in producing the past. Speculative memory is not opposed to truth; it refuses the simplification by which truth

is reduced to visual certainty. The works produce images adjacent to archives, testimonies, and historiography, to ask what historical imagination becomes possible when the image is a proposition rather than proof.

3 PRACTICE-BASED METHODOLOGY

The project follows a practice-based methodology in which artworks operate as research artefacts and knowledge is produced through making rather than after it [4]. The process — research, reflection, prompt writing, generation, rejection, selection, sequencing, sound design, interpretation — is not a pipeline but an iterative situation in which each output modifies the next question, extending earlier work on appropriation, explication, and political new media [12, 13].

In practice, generative AI rarely behaves as the frictionless instrument promised by platform discourse. The work is a persistent negotiation with models that overgeneralise, aestheticise, misrecognise, and repeat inherited patterns, and these behaviours are not incidental: they reveal the conditions under which synthetic images become plausible. A model asked to imagine Montevideo in the early 1980s does not possess Montevideo as a memory; it assembles signs of Latin American urbanity, dictatorship, childhood, and atmospheric decay learned elsewhere, so the image may be factually wrong while producing an affective truth about fear or temporal distance.

The methodology treats generation as a dialogue with a historically saturated machine. I work through prompts, references, failures, and repetitions, but also through refusal: outputs are rejected for being too cinematic, too clean, too nostalgic, too European, too generic, or too eager to turn political violence into consumable atmosphere. This curation is not secondary to authorship; it is where the work becomes critical. Rhythm, duration, sound, and montage determine whether an image becomes illustrative, contemplative, accusatory, or unstable.

The models used are named below; none is culturally neutral. Training corpora, caption languages, safety systems, and platform interventions condition what becomes visually available before any prompt is written: what a model renders of Montevideo in 1983 is determined by what circulated, in which languages, and under which regimes of visibility. The project does not claim that a situated Latin American perspective can be safeguarded within the model. Situatedness is produced elsewhere — through historical knowledge, prompt revision, reference selection, rejection, sequencing, and framing — and the asymmetry between a globally trained model and a local history is not a defect to correct but the condition the work examines.

Recognisable model artefacts are, for the same reason, not accepted indiscriminately. They are retained when they expose homogenisation, cultural substitution, or drift towards pastiche, and rejected when they merely reproduce a generic platform style. Authorship resides not in any claim that a raw output is unprecedented but in the criteria of refusal, selection, montage, duration, sound, and framing through which output becomes an artwork.

All the works are available online: *Montevideo, 1983*, <https://laurenzo.net/montevideo-1983>; *Hommage Numérique*, <https://laurenzo.net/projects/hommage-numerique>; *La MASA*, <https://laurenzo.net/la-masa>; *Abandoned Future*, <https://laurenzo.net/abandoned-future>, and should be considered part of this article.

4 WORKS

4.1 Montevideo, 1983

Montevideo, 1983 (2025) reconstructs the city of my childhood during the final years of the Uruguayan civic–military dictatorship (1973–1985). It works not from documentation but from fragments — childhood perception, inherited fear, street atmospheres, family stories, political silence. For a child such a context is not political analysis: it is tone, prohibition, adult silence, faces on television, the sense that some things cannot be said.



Figure 1. Still from *Montevideo, 1983* (2025). The street is synthetic and documents no actual location.

Formally, the piece is a continuous black-and-white video assembled from sequences generated with Stable Diffusion and DALL-e for stills and Stable Video Diffusion for motion, then degraded until it evokes both archival footage and the instability of memory. The city is almost empty. A carnival sequence of *cabezudos* — festive figures often experienced by children as menacing — interrupts it, before a building resembling the *Palacio Legislativo* expels a stream of synthetic cubes: an abstracted overflow of the tensions held within the institutions of the period.



Figure 2. Still from *Montevideo, 1983* (2025), *cabezudos* sequence. The scene is generated.

Generative AI matters here because the work concerns the impossibility of direct access: I cannot photograph my childhood, only construct an image of the distance between it and the present. Childhood memory is not a stable recording but a constantly reconstructed narrative, and generative systems offer a deliberately imperfect analogy for that reconstruction — imperfect because they do not only infer. Diffusion models have been shown to memorise training images and emit them at generation time [5], so what returns is neither reliably invented nor reliably remembered, and the difference cannot be established from outside. That undecidability is the sharpest part of the analogy: an archive present inside the machine in unindexed form. Hirsch’s postmemory applies precisely and narrowly. I was present in Montevideo in 1983; my perceptual access was direct. What was not direct was its political meaning, which arrived later, through adults, silence, and subsequent knowledge. Childhood under dictatorship is a limit case for postmemory: the images are one’s own, but their significance is inherited [10].

4.2 Abandoned Fictions

Abandoned Fictions (2024) reflects on Uruguay’s mid-twentieth-century industrialisation, and specifically on the import-substitution model pursued under Luis Batlle Berres (1947–1951, 1955–1956), which produced real social progress before its industries declined under structural and global market pressure. The work received the First Prize (Acquisition Award) at the inaugural Colorado AI Art Competition in 2024.



Figure 3. *Abandoned Fictions* (2024). Generated image of a fictional industrial structure that does not exist.

It approaches that trajectory through speculation rather than documentary representation. Large-format images generated with Stable Diffusion depict fictional abandoned factories drawn from the architectural language of mid-century Uruguayan industry: concrete, steel, large mechanical interiors, progressive decay. The locations do not exist. The model assembles composites from learned patterns — algorithmic interpretations of an unrealised future — a modernity that once appeared attainable and remained incomplete.

4.3 Abandoned Future

Abandoned Future (2025) extends that work into a serial meditation on the same industrial project: six large-format images generated with Stable Diffusion, exhibited in 2025 at the IEEE/CVF Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition (CVPR), each a distinct spatial configuration within a shared language of decline.

Hyper-realistic textures combine with the distortions of generative models to produce an atmosphere both plausible and uncanny. The images document no existing ruins; they propose imagined remnants of Uruguay's industrial ambitions, in dialogue with Benjamin's angel of history [3].



Figure 4. *Abandoned Future* (2025). None of the images documents an existing site.

4.4 Hommage Numérique

Hommage Numérique (2024) engages the legacy of early twentieth-century avant-garde cinema — Ruttmann, Eggeling, Len Lye, and especially Hans Richter — revisiting that tradition through contemporary generative AI. The film does not claim to escape the recognisable aesthetic of current models; it works against the assumption that this aesthetic is the medium’s natural or only form, treating it as a historically specific platform style, something with a history and therefore an outside.

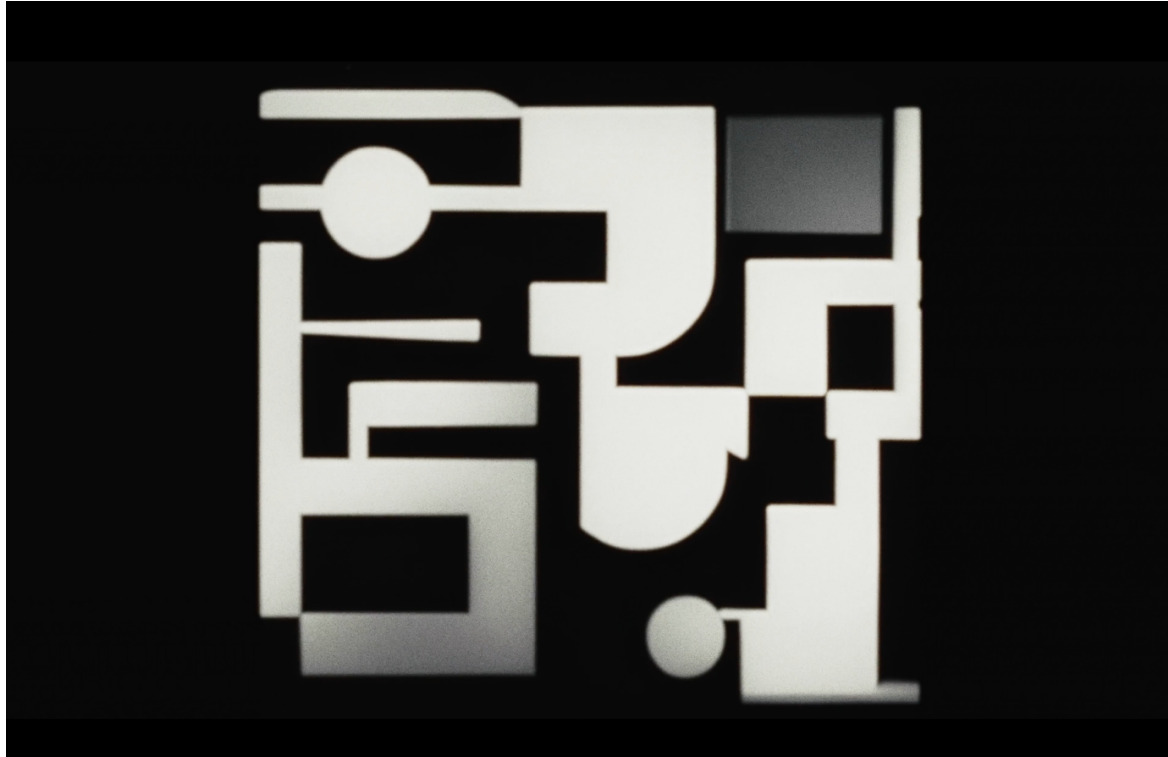


Figure 5. Still from *Hommage Numérique* (2024).

The material was produced through a multi-stage pipeline: stills generated with Stable Diffusion and DALL-E, animated with Stable Video Diffusion, then interpolated with optical flow into a continuous image. The piece progresses from flat geometry to three-dimensional structures, before close-ups of multi-eyed synthetic faces — referencing Richter’s *Filmstudie* (1926) — introduce a tension in which the image appears to observe the audience. The model does not remember art history; it reproduces patterns circulated through datasets, descriptions, and repetition, and the work occupies that distortion and turns it into a meditation on inheritance. It was selected for *Punto y Raya Festival 2025* and shown at CVPR.

4.5 La MASA

A first version of *La MASA* was completed in 2025. It has been used in teaching but not publicly exhibited, and will be developed further; it is discussed here as a provisional research artefact rather than as evidence of public reception. The

film is a surrealist short in black and white blending science fiction, historical imagination, and invented ritual. It recounts the only successful interplanetary voyage of a fictional Mexican space agency in 1960, said to have combined mid-century technological experimentation with a ceremonial apparatus the film invents rather than documents. Narrated by its sole surviving astronaut, it follows his recruitment and training until the boundary between technical and ceremonial knowledge dissolves.



Figure 6. Still from *La MASA* (2025).

All footage is generated through creative coding and AI models rather than recorded. The imagery is oneiric: landscapes appear plausible yet subtly distorted, and the monochrome situates the film in an ambiguous temporal space evoking both archive and speculative fiction.

The film constructs a fictional, syncretic cosmology out of mid-century institutional technoscience, Mexican political imaginaries, and a ritual vocabulary that is invented rather than documented. It does not represent, reconstruct, or claim access to any Indigenous knowledge system, and it should not be read as staging an encounter between Western technology and Mesoamerican tradition: that opposition is itself a colonial artefact, and among the film's targets rather than its premises. What *La MASA* examines is the hierarchy through which institutions classify some knowledge as science and other knowledge as myth, and the ease with which a state apparatus confers legitimacy on the unverifiable. It stages a conflict between competing regimes of epistemic authority, extending the project's concern with the speculative reactivation of histories the archive does not preserve [14].

5 SYNTHETIC IMAGES AND POLITICAL AMBIGUITY

The ethical risk of AI-generated historical imagery is evident: synthetic images can falsify evidence, manipulate publics, and destabilise visual truth. *Speculative Pasts* does not deny this risk; it begins from it, depending on clear framing, declared artificiality, and the refusal to present generated images as documents. Its images are not proofs but questions. This does not make them harmless. Their force depends on the discomfort of plausible falsity, since they reveal that many images we accept as historical are also structured by convention — grain, composition, captions, curatorial context, the authority of display. What follows sets out what the distinction between speculative imagery and fabricated evidence rests on, where it fails, and what remains untested.

5.1 Evidentiary status

The distinction cannot rest on visual appearance. A speculative image and a fabricated document may deploy identical conventions of credibility; the works here depend on that identity, since an image announcing its falsity through visible incompetence would produce no instability. What separates them is not how they look but what is claimed for them: provenance, disclosure, context, and the propositions they support. The works do not present generated scenes as recovered photographs, substitute them for testimony, or use them to substantiate factual historical propositions.

This is the inverse of practices such as Forensic Architecture, which build digital reconstructions precisely to make them admissible before courts and inquiries, and which accept a burden of methodological accountability this project does not carry and must not appear to claim [23]. Reconstruction seeking evidentiary standing answers to verification; speculation refusing it answers to the visibility of that refusal.

The position therefore has a boundary, and the boundary is the referent. Where the subject is a specific person with continuing legal, forensic, or familial claims — a disappeared person, an identified victim — synthetic completion is not a proposition but an interference, and the appropriate formal response is designed incompleteness rather than plausible reconstruction. That argument belongs to a separate line of work on AI and the memory of Uruguay's disappeared [14]. *Speculative Pasts* operates on another class of referent: a condition, an atmosphere, an interrupted modernity, a childhood. Nothing here licenses the synthetic reconstruction of persons.

5.2 Framing and decontextualisation

Declared artificiality is necessary and insufficient. Titles, captions, programme notes, and papers such as this one establish the intended status of an image but cannot accompany it. Stills circulate independently of the works they belong to; screenshots outlive their wall text; a frame from *Montevideo, 1983* posted without attribution is indistinguishable from a photograph of Montevideo in 1983. This is not a hypothetical vulnerability but the ordinary condition of images now.

The ethical distinction cannot therefore be a guarantee about reception. It is an accountable protocol: preserve provenance; identify synthetic production in the file and the caption, not only the exhibition text; distinguish historical claims from speculative propositions; refuse to treat generated imagery as archival evidence. Where earlier presentations did not carry such information, they should have; the protocol is adopted for subsequent exhibitions rather than claimed for past ones.

5.3 Intention and reception

There is also a political reason to work speculatively. Dominant histories leave marginal subjects with fragments rather than archives, and repression, migration, and neglect produce gaps documentation cannot repair; to insist only on verified images may reproduce archival inequality. Speculation can approach what is structurally under-documented, provided it

does not confuse invention with testimony. The works are positioned between mourning and critique: they mourn what cannot be recovered while critiquing the systems through which some pasts become visible and others remain spectral.

Whether they are experienced that way is a separate and open question. The works are designed to produce perceptual instability through anomalous detail, imperfect locality, montage, duration, sound, and the tension between historical familiarity and factual impossibility. No audience study has established that viewers experience this as critical discomfort rather than as atmospheric nostalgia or attractive AI imagery — precisely the consumable atmosphere the methodology rejects. The risk is structural, since the qualities that make an image affectively persuasive are those that make it consumable. This paper analyses intention, production, and formal strategy; reception remains an open empirical and curatorial question.

One might ask whether the argument ought to be legible from the works themselves. It ought not. The pieces are not built to transmit a proposition, and a work that induced uncertainty and then resolved it would have undone its own operation; what they produce is an unresolved perceptual state, while discourse — title, paper, exhibition frame — gives that state historical and ethical articulation. This is not an exemption from the question of reception but a claim that artistic and scholarly forms perform different epistemic work, and that requiring the image to argue would reduce it to illustration.

6 CONCLUSION

Speculative Pasts proposes *speculative memory* as a practice-based method for working with generative AI on history — one that uses AI neither to reconstruct the past faithfully nor to produce autonomous novelty, but to generate images that expose the instability of remembrance. It offers a model for engaging AI-generated media beyond the opposition between technical celebration and moral panic, treating the model neither as creative subject nor as neutral tool but as a historically situated apparatus that can be appropriated, redirected, and made visible.

The value of AI-generated media in artistic research lies not only in its capacity to produce convincing images but in the opposite: in its capacity to make conviction itself unstable. What the project cannot yet claim is that this instability is what audiences experience, and that gap is the next problem rather than a concluding flourish. The past is never simply behind us — it is organised, narrated, forgotten, weaponised, and sometimes invented — so to speculate on the past is not to abandon history but to recognise that history has always been mediated, and that the present demands forms capable of making that mediation visible.

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