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1, 2, 3 Playtime

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I suggest the title "In the Absence of Stone" or "Mon+U=Ment". Installation view, Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024, IAC. Freja Andersson

Playing the AI: Blurring Reality and Fiction in War Memorials

Freja Andersson

For ten years, I filmed war memorials
performed at graves, marble and memories

Saved the surfaces, in my bodily memory
the numbers and names, in my books

Contemplating, who creates history
who decides, who will be remembered

Then, in 10 seconds
you created a similar scene at my prompt

A space where, my body will never move around
feel the cold stone, learn how to walk the stairs

There is no smell, no sound, nothing to touch

Repeat

After taking part in the workshop *Beyond hallucinations & dreams: Experimental approaches to generative AI* models with Gabriele de Seta – where we explored, repeated, pushed and played with different tools for generating AI – I thought to myself: What if I tried to AI-generate a video of a war memorial to find out what that might look like, being based on a large dataset (Runway, that I intended to use, trained its AI text-to-video generator on thousands of YouTube videos and pirated films, according to a report)?¹ My extensive past work on war remembrance across Europe had sharpened my eye for detail, and maybe therefore, my expectations for a detailed outcome

1 Cole, Samantha. 'AI Video Generator Runway Trained on Thousands of YouTube Videos without Permission', 404 Media, August 7, 2024. <https://www.404media.co/runway-ai-image-generator-training-data-youtube/>.

were modest. But I thought of this process as another method of examining our collective public representation of war. I prompted:

A war memorial in Europe, in the style of high-contrast black-and-white

The result intrigued me. It could have been one of the memorials I had filmed, which I always worked with in monochrome to enhance the white and black stone they so often are built of, and to keep them harder to place in time and space. Even if it wasn't a specific monument, it could be seen as a mashup of several real ones. Familiar details, common to many war monuments, were visible. Over the course of four seconds, a figure moved into a tombstone and ceased to exist.

A constructed landscape, no one in those buildings
no one buried in the graves, empty graves, or just no graves?

This made a strong visual impression and touched on themes I had reflected on for years – the complexity of war memorials, the act of remembering, and the fictionalisation of history. It was a way of visualising death; in ways filmed material could not do.

No one built them, to remember someone
they are only the summary, the mishmash
of everything recorded, stored, uploaded
everything built, in Europe
that someone deemed worth documenting, saving

Inspired by the methods described by Gabriele, I continued. After trying out different models, and repeating my prompt over and over again, I played around with the possibility to extend the generated material. The model I ended up using allowed up to three extensions, creating a sequence of 18 seconds. However, I could also play around with the speed, and in the most advanced (and most expensive) version, one-minute sequences were sometimes possible.

Extend

With each extension, I discovered that there was a risk, or a chance, that the content or unfolding of events would change direction. I began searching for two types of sequences: those that stayed kind of realistic and those that changed as much as possible, preferably in unexpected ways.

Avoid stereotypes, or look for stereotypes
understand stereotypes, I repeat

Avoid good or bad, or look for good
look for bad, bad equals good

De Seta had spoken of not judging the material as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and that idea grew on me during the process. But in my artistic process, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ also ‘came to reflect what I sought to question or visualise, rather than whether the content looked real or fake, was expected or unexpected, right or wrong. Juxtaposing AI-generated monuments with ones I had filmed became a path forward.

The fictionalisation happening already in the construction of war monuments, that often represents one part’s version of history, aiming for what the power wants the people to remember and believe, was something I played around with. I also considered how examining different types of memorials and details at a time – or catching glimpses of the physical within the generated and vice versa – could quietly comment on current debates on truth, deep fakes, cheap fakes, and fake news. I began playing with the idea of memorials, both real and AI-generated, as fragments of memory and history, existing in a space where physical grounds and digital landscapes blur and are easily forgotten or transformed. I also explored the aesthetics and politics of monuments, trying to expose their inherent power dynamics

Repeat

There were so many layers to my work, perspectives in my head. By asking different AI text models ‘*Why juxtapose AI-generated war monuments with filmed ones?*’ and collecting the most shifting answers, I hoped to visualise issues, values and ideas embedded in the juxtaposed video material. I wanted the audience to reflect on the implications of AI’s interpretation of memory and history, prompting them to question how technology reshapes our understanding of memorialisation.

Some weeks into this process, I started questioning the way I was handling the AI. The instructions – prompt, repeat, extend, save – and the actions to push, alter, and control, gave me a form of power I felt uneasy with, especially given the project’s theme. In one sense, generative AI is a tool, like Photoshop or a pen, that I use until achieving a desired result. But in another sense, I had less control over the outcome, even as the mechanics behind controlling it became clearer on the way.



I suggest the title "In the Absence of Stone" or "Mon+U=Ment", 2024 .Video still (above) and installation view (below). Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024, IAC. Freja Andersson

I am using tools, different tools
my body, my thoughts, my keyboard, my voice

You are a tool
what can I do with you, can I push you?
What are your limits?

There were also reasons in my process not to try to control certain things. I played with altering my prompt slightly, but wanted to allow the AI to define what a European war memorial or graveyard might look like without interference. This approach also raised ethical reflections on AI, including which datasets the models are trained on, data sources, and the limited accessibility of this information to users.

What is my responsibility
someone is really buried here

Have you've got
any responsibility?

Toward the project's end, I created eight AI clones of my voice to echo my thoughts throughout the creative process. For *My AI-Clones* was an exploration of identity and replication, blurring the line between human and machine, memory and experience. I wanted to use it for inviting the audience to engage with the complexities of authorship and the influence of AI on personal narratives.

Me, the repeater
you are being repeated

Repeat

Me, the player
you are being played

The result of this process is the audiovisual installation titled '*I suggest the title "In the Absence of Stone" or "Mon+U=Ment"*', which was exhibited at Inter Arts Center at the end of 1, 2, 3 *Playtime*.²

2 'Frejaandersson.se', 2024. <http://www.frejaandersson.se/intheabsenceofstone.html>.