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Who Shapes the Remembered Past? Narrative Authority and Representational Contestability in AI-Mediated Memory Art

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Abstract: Generative AI can give photographic form to personal and familial pasts for which photographs are absent, incomplete, or irretrievable. Yet the memory that sets a generated image in motion does not necessarily determine the image that will eventually materialize. This article approaches such divergence by comparing Maria Mavropoulou's *Imagined Images* (2021-2023) with Weidi Zhang, Lijiaozi Cheng, and Jieliang Luo's *ReCollection* (2023). Drawing on Doreen Mattingly's idea of narrative authority, the article proposes four dimensions along which the control of representation may be distributed across generative processes: input control, elaborative control, revision capacity, and contextual control. It then develops representational contestability as a domain-specific elaboration of scholarship on contestable AI to ask whether those whose memories underlie generated representations can identify significant interpretive additions and have any meaningful capacity to respond to them. The contrast thus suggests that personal contribution, intimacy, emotional resonance, and narrative authority are interrelated but not identical. Therefore, memory art mediated by AI requires analysis not only of photographic truth or synthetic fabrication, but of how interpretations of personal memory are produced, attributed, revised, and open or resistant to contestation.

Keywords: AI Art, AI-mediated Memory, Synthetic Photography, Personal and Familial Memory, Narrative Authority, Participation.

1. Introduction

Not all personal memories come with photos. Other pasts are carried through stories, half-remembered images, bequeathed testimonies, or, sometimes, details recollected many years after the event. Generative image systems can realize such memories in photographic form. However, visualizing a half-remembered image will always require decisions regarding what has not been specified. A remembered room may come to be furnished with particular furniture, wallpaper, gesture, clothing, and even the arrangement of bodies-none of which the memory giver ever described. Hence, the resulting image may begin from a personal memory while incorporating visual details that were not supplied by the memory provider. Against this backdrop, the central problem of this article is the tension between the personal provenance of memory and its distributed production in visual form.

The literature on synthetic photography has thus enabled the understanding of why such images cannot be considered recovered photographs. Juan Martín Prada argues that generative images can be part of the visual language of photography without the temporality usually involved in the relation of a photograph to an event [1, pp. 3271–3272]. AI-generated images may replicate familiar poses, clothing, hairstyles, compositional conventions, and archival aesthetics gleaned from existing photographs, but such elements are not necessarily anchored to a particular moment in an autobiographical life. Accordingly, Prada identifies a "fundamental disconnection" between the photographic language and memory, arguing that synthetic photographic simulations can only "mimic that link to a specific moment in time" that conventional photography retains [1, p. 3277].

The distinction concerns more than factual inaccuracy. A synthetic image can appear historically photographic without originating in the historical encounter it appears to depict. Sara Oscar and Cherine Fahd make a related argument in their account of synthetic portraiture, where photographic registration gives way to algorithmic aggregation and ultimately to the "loss of any encounter at all" [2, p. 146]. Conventional photographs may be selective, manipulated, or ideologically structured, yet they nevertheless derive from an encounter in which something existed before a camera. Synthetic images require no equivalent encounter.

Joanna Zylinska's account of photographic mediation helps extend this distinction beyond questions of evidence. She describes images as existing with humans in "a dynamic relationship of mediation," participating in the formation of memory, perception, cognition, consciousness, and world-building [3, p. 66]. A synthetic image may therefore lack the evidentiary relation of a conventional photograph while still becoming an active representation of someone's past in the present. It may be exhibited, circulated, recognised, and associated with a specific individual or family. The analytical question consequently shifts from whether the image documents what happened to who shapes the version of the past that the image comes to represent.

This article approaches this question through narrative authority. Doreen Mattingly defines narrative authority as "the power to shape the way identities are represented" [4, p. 449]. Her analysis of participatory community theatre is especially pertinent because it distinguishes the inclusion of participants' voices from meaningful authority over the narratives constructed from them. Individuals may select experiences and contribute story elements while professional writers or directors retain control over their organisation into a coherent narrative [4]. Participation, in this account, does not automatically entail narrative authority.

Operationalising this concept for generative contexts, this article distinguishes four dimensions of control. Input control concerns who determines what personal material enters the process. Elaborative control concerns who or what determines what is added beyond that material. Revision capacity concerns whether a memory provider can inspect, reject, alter, or regenerate an output. Contextual control concerns who determines how the resulting representation is framed, presented, and publicly associated with the person or history from which it originates. These four dimensions are proposed here as an analytical framework for examining narrative authority in generative practices; they are not categories proposed by Mattingly.

A further problem emerges once authority becomes distributed across human and computational actors: whether a person can meaningfully respond to interpretations made from their contribution. This article describes this capacity as representational contestability. The concept adapts scholarship on contestable AI, in which Henrietta Lyons, Eduardo Velloso, and Tim Miller define contestability in terms of the ability to "contest, appeal, or challenge algorithmic decisions" [5, p. 106:2]. Kars Alfrink and colleagues similarly argue that contestable AI systems should remain "open and responsive to human intervention throughout their lifecycle" [6, p. 614]. Artistic representation is not equivalent to algorithmic decision-making, and these frameworks cannot therefore be transferred directly. Their relevance lies in a more limited principle: providing input to a computational process does not necessarily provide meaningful influence over what that process subsequently produces.

This article compares *Imagined Images and ReCollection* as purposively selected contrastive cases rather than as a representative sample of AI-mediated memory art. Both use generative systems to process incomplete personal and family materials to provide rich documentation for the reconstruction of a significant part of this change. However, they differ in the relationship between the memory provider and the production of representations. The artist in Imagined Images is also the heir and interpreter of family history. Participants contribute their memories to an installation designed and computationally structured by others in ReCollection. Therefore, although the comparisons indicate that these distributions of narrative authority are different, they cannot be assumed to apply to the whole field.

2. Mediated Memory, Distributed Authority

The division of memory and representation does not start with generative AI. Memory has reached us in language, pictures, rules for storytelling, family albums and talks with others. Zylinska's concept of mediation can be applied to move away from the idea of a single final picture and explore the network of relations in which pictures are told, created, framed, and experienced [3].

Intimacy is employed in this paper to express the closeness of a representation to a specific remembered or inherited life. The closeness may be due to the first-person narration, the speech of the participants, well-known conventions of family photos, or an explicit connection to a certain life story. It does not mean that every viewer or participant will be moved emotionally by the work of art. Intimacy refers to the location of the representation here, not to the reaction it is to be invoked.

Hirsch's idea of postmemory explains why inherited family memory is already mediated before the arrival of AI. Postmemory is the relationship with the past formed through narratives, pictures and conduct, rather than direct memory; thus, its connection to the past is "not through remembrance but by imaginative investment, projection and creation" [7, p. 5]. Imagined Images is not treated here as a work of postmemory; instead, Hirsch develops the concept in the context of intergenerational traumatic inheritance. The other is that she can also tell us about her family's life in recent years.

It is no longer a problem of memory disintermediation, but how all forms of mediation distribute representational power. Mattingly's research on community theatre has provided a model.Local participants in the project contributed experiences and story material, yet professional playwrights and directors retained substantial control over how those contributions were ordered and organised [4]. Participation therefore gave people a voice without necessarily giving them equivalent control over the narrative built from that voice. A similar distinction becomes important in generative systems, where someone may provide the memory that begins a representation without determining how it is subsequently expanded.

This issue should also be kept separate from Fricker's account of testimonial injustice. Fricker is concerned with cases in which a speaker suffers an unjust credibility deficit because of identity prejudice [8]. The cases examined here need not involve a credibility deficit. A memory may be accepted as genuine while still being elaborated in ways over which the memory provider has limited control. Narrative authority therefore concerns what happens after testimony has entered a representational process: how it is developed, visualised, revised, and placed within a wider context.

Methodologically, the article combines visual analysis with documentary analysis of artist statements, technical publications and exhibition materials. Merrill and his colleagues believe that the mnemonic study of AI should be specific [9]; that is, one needs to specify both the type of AI and the form of memory being studied. Artificial intelligence should not be treated as a single subject of analysis in this way. The steps in the process of representation are: interfaces, prompts, language models, image models, artistic selection and exhibition design.

The two cases are not recorded in the same manner. Mavropoulou offers a first-person account of her artistic process, and ReCollection is presented in a peer-reviewed technical paper and creator-reported observations of participants. The latter does not include a system-atic participant study on representative control or authorship. Therefore, this paper will only report the contents of the published materials and will not include any undocumented experiences of the participants as data.

3. *Imagined Images*: Inheriting the Missing Album

Maria Mavropoulou's Imagined Images begins with a missing link in her family's archive. Photographs from the earlier generations had been lost due to repeated moves, and the family's history was carried by only a few pictures in the album. Mavropoulou uses the stories of her family and relatives as prompts and has created visuals for them with the DALL·E-2 system [10].The project therefore starts from

inherited accounts rather than from surviving photographic evidence.

The status of the resulting images is deliberately uncertain. Mavropoulou includes events that happened but were never photographed, episodes she knew only through family stories, scenes she imagined or wished had taken place, and moments that never occurred at all [10]. Prada also draws attention to this mixture in his discussion of the project [1, p. 3274]. *Imagined Images* does not ask viewers to treat these pictures as recovered photographs. Their constructed character is part of the work from the outset.

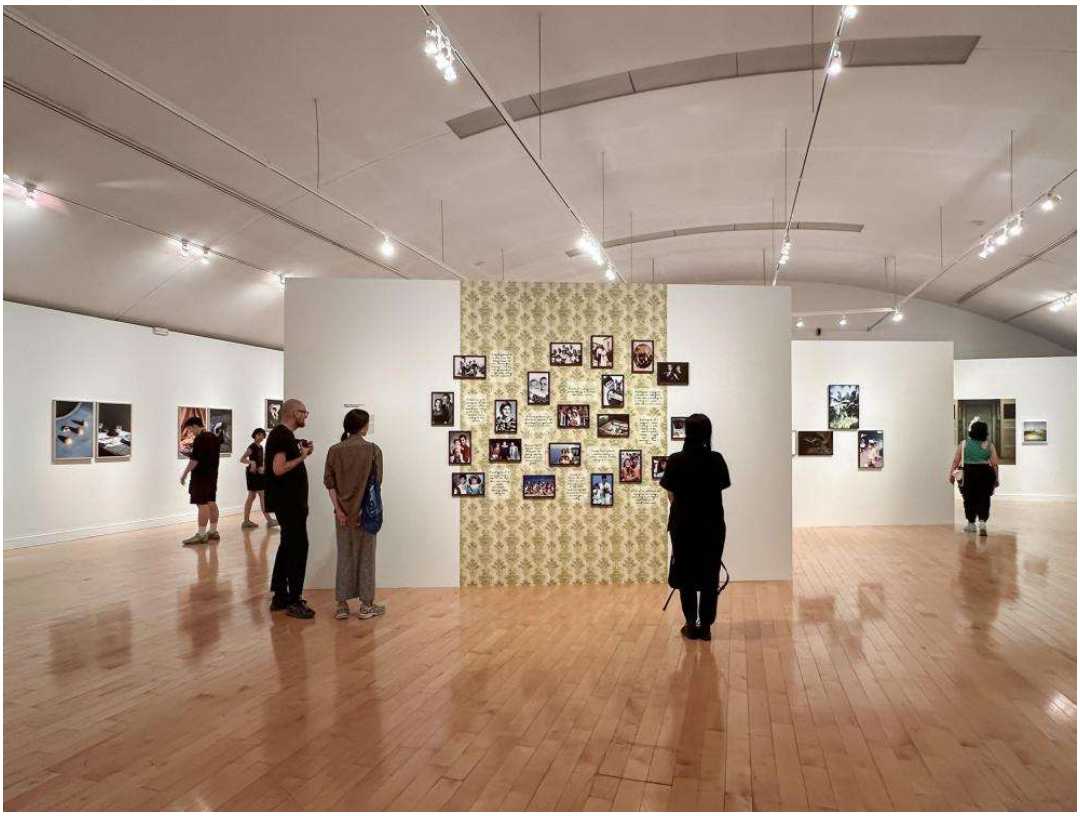


Figure 1. Maria Mavropoulou, *Imagined Images*, 2021–2023. Installation view, Athens Photo Festival, Benaki Museum, Athens, 2024. Image source: Maria Mavropoulou, artist's website.

What becomes more difficult is deciding where the family story ends and generative elaboration begins. Mavropoulou notes that the AI was "adding details to images that I wasn't aware of" [10], a remark also cited by Prada [1, p. 3274]. Mavropoulou reports that her parents were able to confirm the truthfulness of some details that she herself had not known [10]. It is difficult to distinguish between remembered content and model-added content. A model-generated detail may be in line with the family history, but it still entered the image via the generative process rather than through Mavropoulou's prior knowledge.

Prada can help to explain why the additions still look good. Generative systems learn from the patterns in a large amount of existing images. Therefore, what appears in a synthetic photograph can have familiar visual conventions that do not belong to the specific family history being depicted [1, p. 3277]. Imagined images are ideas that a picture can appear completely natural in a family album without all of its visible parts being derived from that family's memories. Historical plausibility and autobiographical origin are not the same.

Thus, the origin of the story is unknown. Mavropoulou still has considerable control over the project. She selects which family stories serve as prompts and decides where to place the resulting pictures in the larger narrative of her family's history. Therefore, her contributions and contextual modifications are noteworthy. The least stable place is Elaboration. DALL-E 2 adds visual details that are not explicitly specified by the user, and the final image is thus a combination of the user's narrative and generation.

Mavropoulou is still the main narrator, but the image may not be a direct reconstruction of memory. The resulting images can be seen as the result of interaction between specific family narratives and statistically learned visual conventions.

What is not clear from the public documentation is how much modification occurred in production. According to Mavropoulou, DALL-E 2 was used as the model in this study, but the number of outputs, how frequently the prompts were modified, which images were excluded, and how the final selection was made were not specified. This does not mean that revision was absent. It simply means that this part of the process cannot be reconstructed with confidence from the available record.

The project also shows why transparency and narrative authority should be kept separate. Mavropoulou makes clear that the images combine memory, inherited stories, imagination, and invention. Viewers are therefore not encouraged to mistake them for rediscovered documentary photographs. Yet knowing that an image is constructed tells us little about how control was distributed during its construction. Disclosure concerns what the audience knows about the image. Narrative authority concerns who helped determine what the image became.



Figure 2. Maria Mavropoulou, *Imagined Images*, 2021–2023. Installation detail of AI-generated family portraits. Image source: Maria Mavropoulou, Artist's Website.

4. *ReCollection*: Completing the Unsaid

ReCollection changes the structure of this problem because the person providing the memory is no longer the artist who frames the finished work. Participants contribute a brief spoken recollection, while the subsequent expansion and visualisation take place through a system designed by Zhang, Cheng, and Luo. Their paper states that the system converts the spoken account into text and then "automatically fills in details as a completed narrative" before generating a visual memory [11, p. 51:2].

The technical process is described in considerable detail. A participant's speech is first transcribed with Whisper. GPT-4 then expands the text through two prompted agents, one concerned with narrative content and the other with visual style. Stable Diffusion creates the images via Replicate, and then TouchDesigner alters the visual materials for display [11, pp. 51:4-51:5]. Therefore, the participant's original memory is processed and artistically modified, such as narrative expansion, before being presented on screen.



Figure 3. Weidi Zhang, Lijiaozi Cheng, and Jieliang Luo, *ReCollection*, 2023. Interactive AI art installation, installation view. Image source: Weidi Zhang, official project website.

Due to the small initial investments, these periods are relatively long. The participants speak for about ten seconds, which is about the length of a single sentence, and then the visual result is generated shortly after [11, p. 51:6].A memory told in that amount of time is likely to leave many details unspecified. But an omission does not have one fixed meaning. A participant may have forgotten something, may be uncertain about it, may simply have run out of time, or may have chosen not to mention it. The published system description provides no mechanism for distinguishing among these possibilities from absence alone.

When GPT-4 fills in what is missing, it is therefore not recovering information that can be assumed to exist within the participant's memory; it is elaborating an incomplete account. At this stage, elaborative control is redistributed beyond the memory provider.

The creators themselves offer examples of what such elaboration can introduce. French-language input may result in cafés, croissants or café au lait, and scenes of household labour may reproduce gendered assumptions [11, p. 51:4].

These details can give a place a sense of culture without any mention by the participants. Not all recognizability is based on true life experience.

According to the participants' responses, computation does not exclude emotion. The authors report that more than 1,000 foreign visitors were attracted to the exhibition, and some of the participants were moved to tears when the generated visuals evoked their own memories [11, pp. 51-56]. At the same time, the first iteration resulted in what the creators referred to as a "disconnection between the narrative and visuals", so they redesigned the visualisation for the second version [11, pp. 51:7-51:8].

These responses point to an important distinction. A participant may recognise something of their past in a generated image without having determined the details that made that recognition possible. Conversely, a mismatch between recollection and image does not by itself establish representational harm. Emotional resonance concerns how the image is received; narrative authority concerns how the image was produced and who had influence over that process.

Viewed through the four dimensions proposed in this article, participants retain clear but constrained input control. Their memories initiate the work, although the interface limits the duration and form of what they can contribute. Elaborative control then becomes distributed across transcription, GPT-4, prompt design, Stable Diffusion, and artistic post-processing. Contextual control lies mainly with the installation design and the artists' decisions about how the generated material is displayed.

Revision capacity is more difficult to identify. The published system description does not document a participant-facing stage in which the GPT-4-expanded narrative can be inspected or changed before image generation. It therefore provides no evidence of a formal pre-display revision mechanism. This should not be taken to mean that informal discussion or negotiation never occurred during particular exhibitions; it only marks the limit of what the published documentation allows us to claim.

The evidence concerning participants is similarly limited. Zhang, Cheng, and Luo report observations and paraphrase participant reactions, but they do not present a systematic interview study focused on representational control or authorship. Interviews instead appear as part of their proposed future work with people experiencing memory regression, for whom they state, "We will interview them with permission" [11, p. 51:9]. The existing responses therefore tell us something about reception, but they cannot establish how participants themselves understood their authority over the generated images.

5. Making Memory Contestable

As shown in the two cases, one thing is clear: providing the memory is not the same as creating that which will be remembered. Participation can give people a sense of closeness, and thus the generated image may be more emotionally appealing; however, it does not indicate how much influence the memory provider had on the final form of the image.

Another problem is that in the work of Bañuelos Capistrán, Zavala Scherer and Lugo Rodríguez, they indicate that synthetic representations can "crystallize some narratives at the expense of others" [12, p. 12]. The Demand for Openness is Fair. The viewer should be aware that the image has been created and is not based on historical fact but rather on reconstruction. Only Transparency has solved some of the problems. It can help the audience learn about the picture they are about to see, but it cannot tell us whether the person whose memory is linked to that picture will be moved by the interpretation of their past.

It is also relatively complex to address the issues with the generative model itself. Somaini believes that in the construction of latent spaces, there is compression, inclusion and exclusion; therefore, it determines "what can be written or Visualized" [13, p. 38]. The model is not the product of design, and it is not simply the transmission of information by individuals. Based on the training data, it will learn to recognise some visual items and consider them more suitable for display. In memory-based work, this is problematic because the generated image may contain conventions that feel familiar but do not belong to the individual history of the work.

Therefore, the concept of contestability can be used to extend the scope of exploration for narrative authority. Lyons, Velloso and Miller refer to the capacity to "dispute, appeal or contest algorithmic decisions" as such [5, p. 106-2]. Alfrink and others believe that contestable AI systems should still be open to human intervention [6]. As they focus on algorithm-driven decision-making rather than art, the idea cannot be directly applied. Therefore, the first problem that needs to be solved is how to provide options for users after the computational system responds to a user's input or modifies the system.

Representational contestability here refers to whether the person's memory serves as the basis for the generated representation can be significantly expanded by interpretation and still possess a strong capacity for questioning or responding to it.

The three questions help to restrict it. Traceability is the ability to trace the origin of art or computation materials. Intervention inquires about the opportunities for examination, questioning, correction, regeneration, rejection or withdrawal of a representation. Attribution refers to the degree of public association that a result has with the person or historical period of the original work.

Not all of these questions require the generated image to show memory literally. They do not require the participant to be the sole creator of the work. Interpretation is part of artistic practice. The cases examined here have added interpretive content to the original contribution through generation. It is unknown whether "contribution" refers to the consent of all the above.

Thus, consent and contestability should not be taken to be the same. Consent to contribute a memory does not constitute consent for all subsequent visual or narrative interpretations of that memory. Consent Limits Participation in Specific Circumstances. Contestability is what is still possible after the commencement of an oral hearing.

In light of the above, Imagined Images and ReCollection should not be regarded as successful or unsuccessful models. They have different powers. In Imagined Images, several roles are concentrated in Mavropoulou: she inherits the stories, writes the prompts, selects the images, and decides how they are presented to the public. Generation still adds new details based on previous knowledge, and she is still involved in the interpretation of the project.

The Roles in ReCollection are more distributed. The participant provides the memory, the artists design the interface and prompts, GPT-4 expands the narrative, Stable

Diffusion generates the image, and the installation structures how the resulting image is experienced. Therefore, the problem is no longer whether artificial intelligence has taken away the freedom of choice for people, but rather how that freedom has been altered in the process.

Therefore, the question is not how the AI-assisted memory artwork was created, but whether a person can still have doubts, changes or refusals of what has been created.

6. Conclusion

The problem of AI-generated memory art cannot be solved by determining whether a picture is real or fake. Prada has shown that generative systems can reproduce the visual grammar of photography without retaining the temporal connections of a traditional photograph to a specific period. Although this link in evidence has not been established, the synthetic image may still evoke emotions or gain public attention through its association with the person's past.

It is therefore necessary to distribute authority in the process of memory representation. Who provides the materials for the picture shown above? Who is responsible for the missing information? Who can modify the result? And who will decide the final form of presentation for these results and link them to individuals or history?

The four kinds of authority in this paper are input control, elaboration control, revision capacity and contextual control; thus, there is no concentration of power in one place. A person may have considerable influence at one time in the process and no recorded influence at another. Therefore, contributing to memory, recognising one's past in an image, and regulating the production of that image should not be considered the same thing.

Contestability of representation is also a problem of feasibility after an interpretation has been made. Can the memory provider distinguish between memory that was allocated and that was added subsequently? Can they query and alter the additions? How is it different from the original text now?

The two are close together. The two cases cannot determine the spread of such structures in AI-mediated memory art, and available documentation is sparse. ReCollection provides detailed technical and exhibition information, but there is no systematic study of participant narrative authority or contestability. Future research can conduct interviews and user studies to have the contributors directly express how they understand generation, revision, attribution, and the possibility of challenging a representation in their memories.

Thus, the main problem is not whether generative AI can turn memory into an image. It is this person who shapes the version of the past that the image will convey, and whether the person whose memory is used to create that image can still respond to what is created in their name.

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