

Simulacra

A Web-based Exploration of AI and Spatial Representation



This project will compile various images of the physical world (primarily landscape and aerial shots) on a public website. By clicking on the images, users will expand them into networks of AI generated copies and reimaginings that will branch off into ever more fantastical and unfamiliar forms.



The concept is loosely inspired by Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* which discusses levels of simulacra as levels of copies of reality that increasingly lose their resemblance to reality and hyperreality, a state where the lines between reality and simulations of reality collapse.

A good example is shown in this image:



Stage One:

Initially, the sign (image or representation) is a reflection of basic reality.



Stage Two:

The sign masks a basic reality. The image becomes a distortion of reality.



Stage Three:

The sign marks the *absence* of basic reality. The image calls into question what the reality is and if it even exists.



Stage Four:

The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

This image also demonstrates it:



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Stage Four:

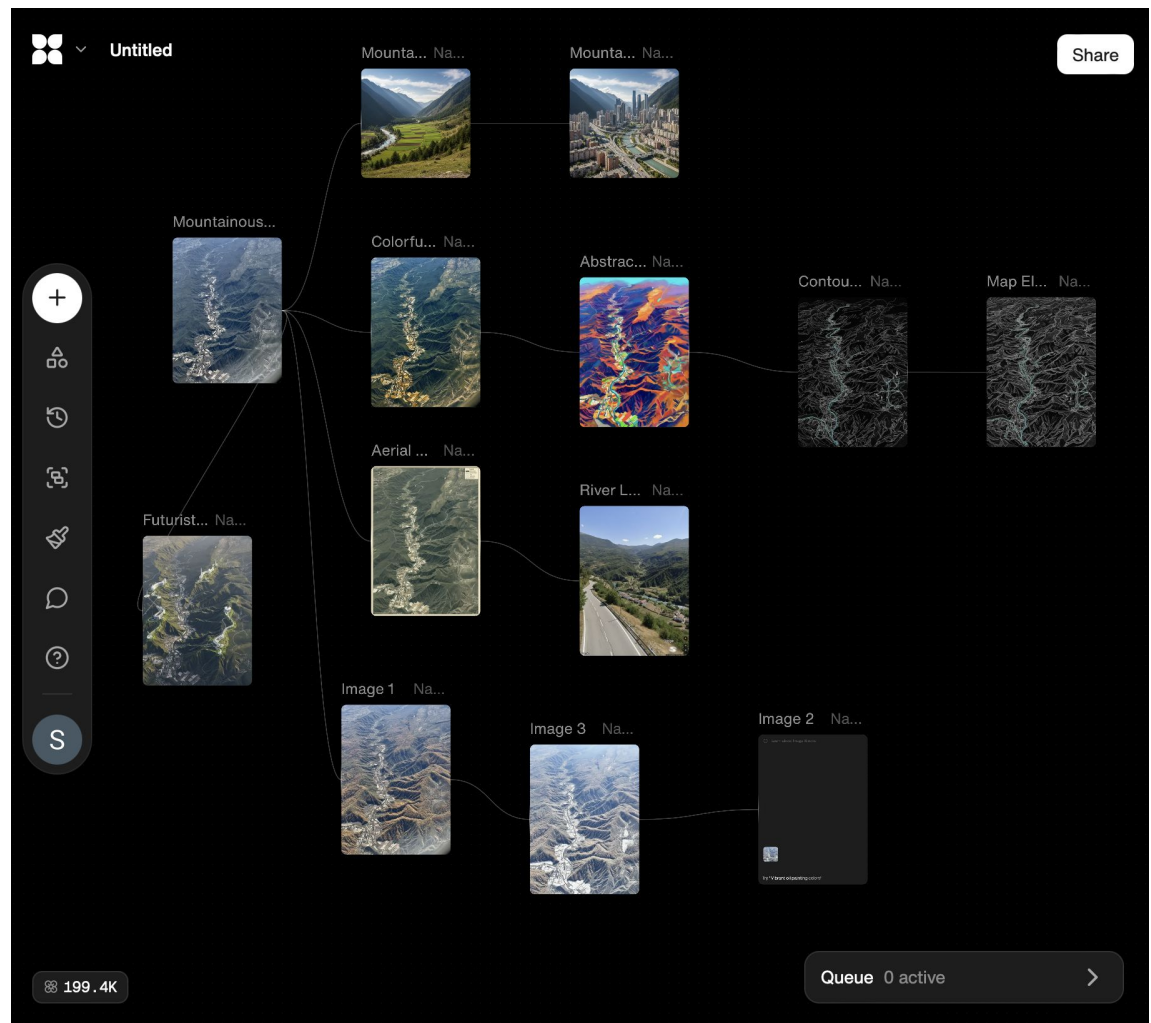
The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

AI models produce representations of reality without having a direct experience of it. They are trained on representations of reality that we create, and then create new representations of reality that synthesize those representations.

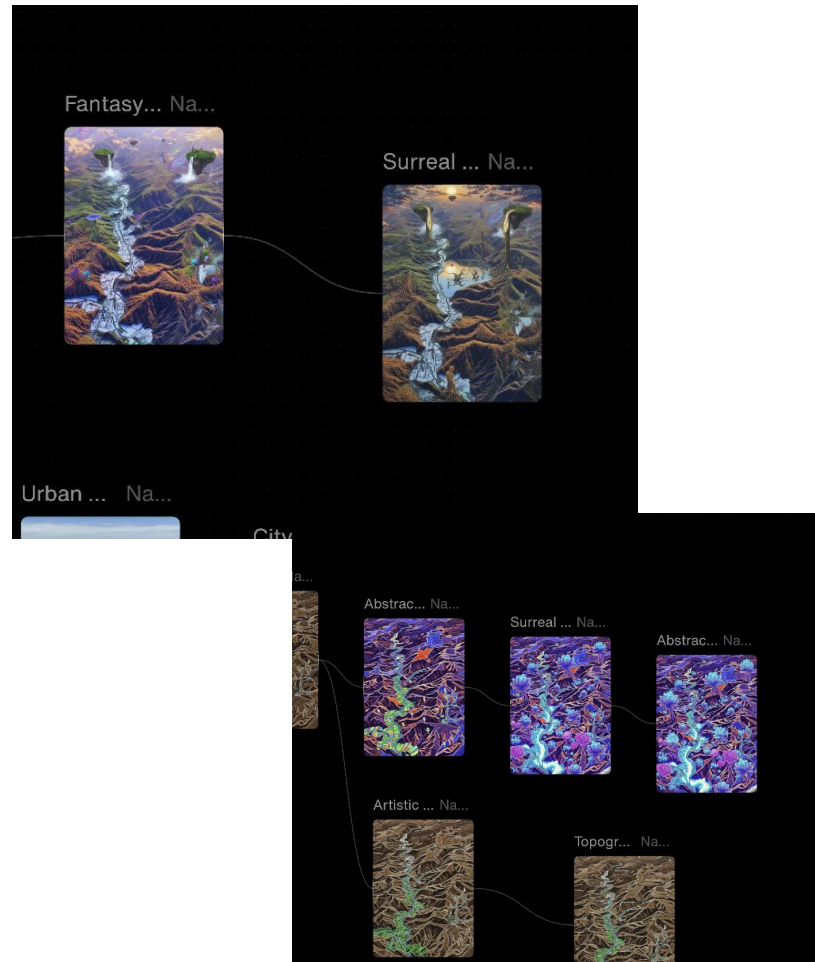
This makes the way that AI represents space and the physical world incredibly interesting to me.



So far, I have been experimenting with how different prompts create different reflections and reconstructions of the initial image. For example, a prompt to recreate the image will often result in a near perfect recreation of the image but with minor tone changes and occasional details added (such as clouds or more buildings) whereas a prompt to reimagine will often result in the same structure but with a more vivid and fantastical color scheme.



Certain models also veer readily into reinterpreting certain natural and architectural structures into new ones. For example, this model (Nano Banana) often skewed towards interpreting this aerial image of a suburb in a valley outside of Mexico City into a cascading river surrounded by plants and flowers.



What is next?

The next steps are to continue to build out the range of images, and to begin compiling them on the site.

There is no specific number of images needed for this, and so I think I will build the website sooner rather than later since that will give me a better idea of how large this image library should be in order to create a user experience that feels like you are going down an extensive rabbit hole but doesn't crash the website.

