

A photograph of a beach with waves in the background. The top half of the image shows dark, textured waves crashing onto a light-colored, sandy beach. The bottom half of the image is a plain, light-colored surface, likely the sand or a backdrop, where the text is located.

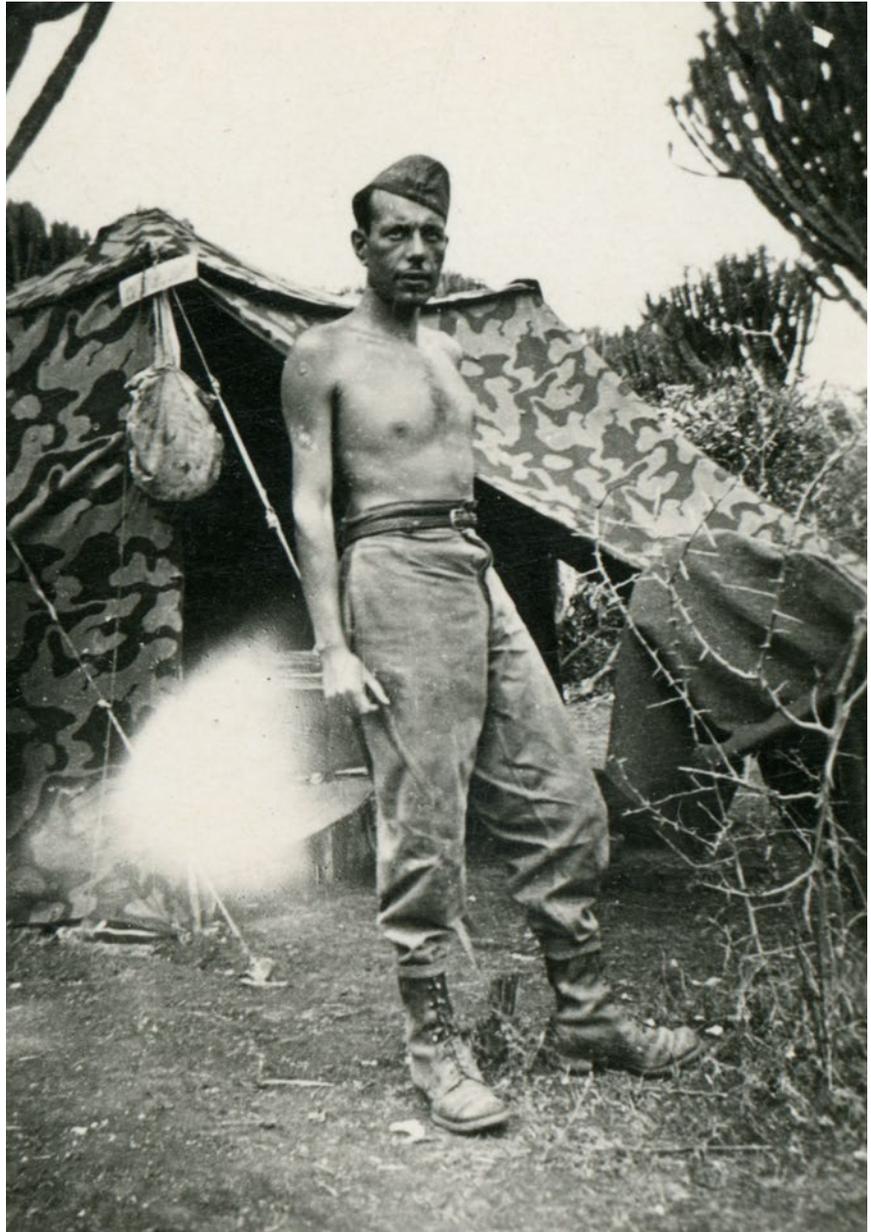
PROJECT PROPOSAL
ROSSELLA NISIO

i. introduction

It's probably safe to state that a number of people spend part of their teenage years thinking their family is the most dysfunctional out there. I, for one, was under this impression. Now that age released me from the spell of exceptionality, even of the negative kind, I know that every family has dysfunctional sides to it to account for. Indeed, it would seem that being dysfunctional is in the natural order of family affairs. This is why I was not too shocked not long ago when, after looking for details on web archives and forums related to an album of photographs from Africa from the late 1930s that has been in my family's possession for decades, I learned that my maternal grandfather was a Black Shirt (a member of the MVSN, the voluntary fascist militia) who fought in the second Italo-Ethiopian war. It's quite matter-of-fact: from a historical perspective, my grandfather cast himself as the aggressor, the villain.

I never met my grandfather, as he was dead almost one decade before I was born. Pictures of him and by him were, together with random documents and words from other members of the family, the only traces that he actually ever existed. The album was a very peculiar trace of him, as the pictures in it were from a world that no one else in our family had ever been part of. Some of the photos the album contained terrified me; nevertheless, they

became part of my childhood's visual imagination, as much as reproductions of Pellizza's *The Fourth State* or the pink elephants in *Dumbo*. For years the album in question was stashed in various bookshelves, first in my grandmother's sitting room, then in my own, in turns rubbing elbows with *The Woman's Encyclopedia* (from grandmother) and books on the collections of the Musée d'Orsay and the Louvre (from my parents). It was therefore a common sight, and yet at the same time it was a lost relic. Nobody spoke about it, nobody seemed to know exactly what was in it, and why.



portrait from the ethiopian campaign, 1936.

ii. what i want to make

As I *inherited* the infamous album, I now feel a certain responsibility to understand it. This is a crucial reason why the final project I have in mind for this year wants to explore it as a space where, for good or bad, the imagination of a singular person came alive. I want to explore the album's ties with what surrounded it, which means, among other things, the possibility of dealing with what its construction meant and the inevitable consequences it produced.

In practical terms, I want to attempt a deconstruction of the album. The object “album” has been a veritable totem, keeping watch and influencing its surroundings in sure even though imperceptible ways. As objects are never innocent even when we perceive them as such, I can see how the diffusion of objects of this kind—in homes like mine and elsewhere—must have exercised a silent authority over time, with consequences that are still in plain view today. Hence, I see a deconstruction of this specific object as a metaphorical act, of both acknowledgement and renegotiation of this authority.

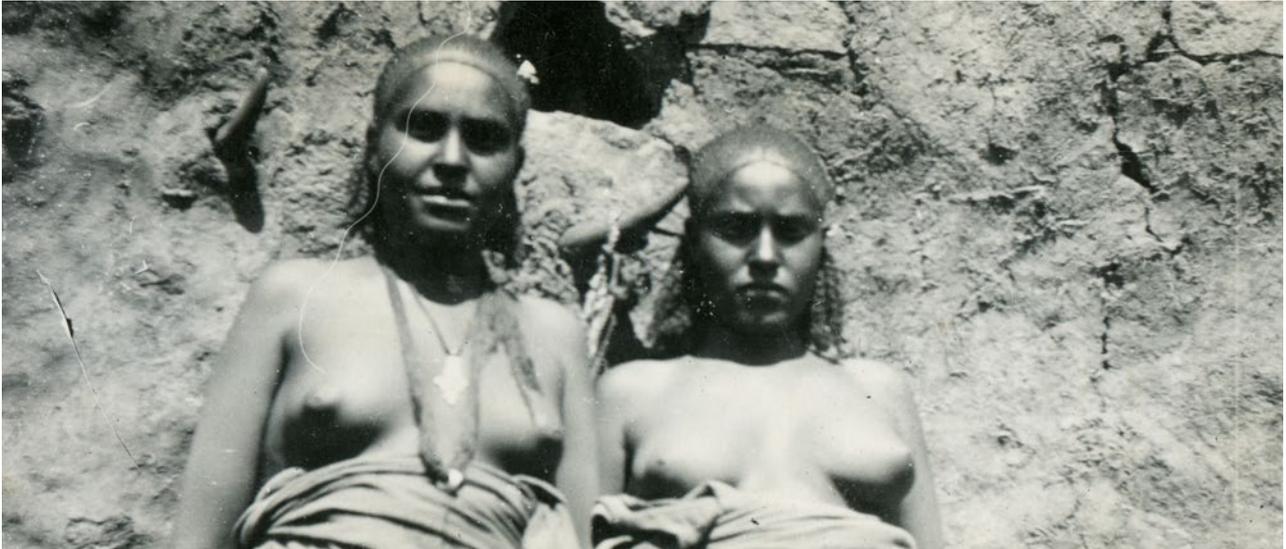


the album's front cover, 2018.

At the end of the journey I plan to have a publication—the thesis—which documents the process of dissection, and evoke the notion of an “anti-album,” possibly shaped as a multimedia work, comprising imagery taken from, connected to and/or inspired by the original album. The thesis wouldn't be limited to explaining the practice-based work, but would be either its foundation or an expansion of it.

iii. how i want to make it

First of all, I want to spend enough time to study the context that made the album possible: naturally, the nationalist and imperialist impulses present within the socio-political climate of the time are the foremost referents I need to face. I also want to grasp the contemporary visual culture—the diffusion of private photo albums for instance—side by side with popular forms of expression such as cinema and literature that may be related to it, even indirectly. There is an abundance of information on the subject and I plan to read and watch on it while I keep developing my project.

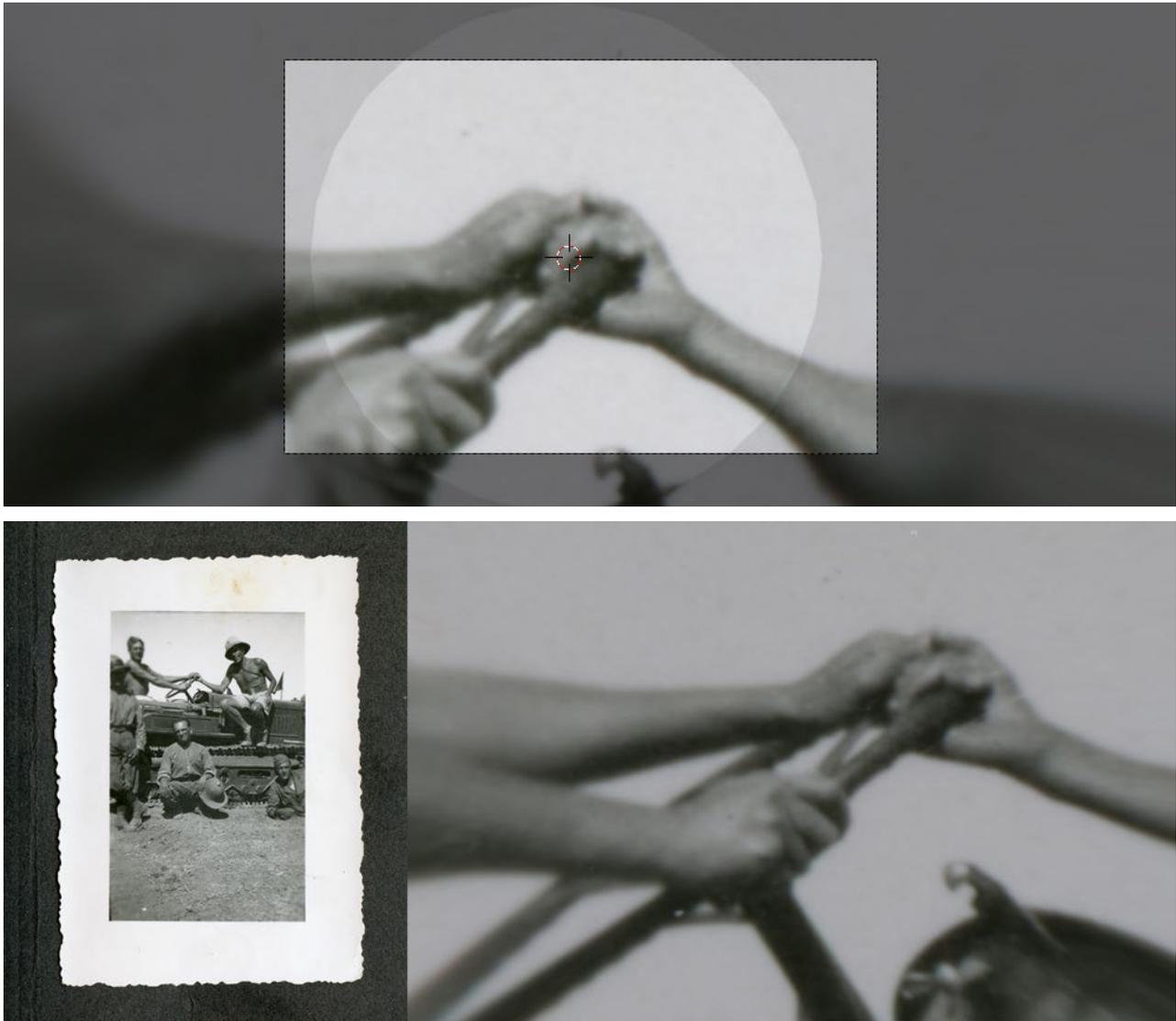


"african beauties": the album (top) vs the film *sotto la croce del sud* (1938, bottom).

At the moment I am gathering basic information on the album's photographs, not so much for a need for absolute historical accuracy, but be able to penetrate its essence. Part of the fascination of this project for me is after all in the realization that the album is a cipher which I will not be able to solve entirely. Therefore, I assume that my research will be an open ended one. I already made scans from the album, to have documentation and also to be able to manipulate its contents as the project dictates. The acts of scanning and scrutinizing I see as integral steps in the project's development.

iv. who can help me

As much as I am wary of it, I believe it is necessary to have a conversation about the album with the surviving members of my family—that is, mostly, my mother and her brother. I already contacted photo album specialists and camera collectors to ask specific questions on the object, and plan to continue to do so as I progress.



magnification testing inside blender (top); original photo vs enlarged detail (bottom).

In the meantime, it will be extremely important for me to have a continuous flow of feedback from PZI colleagues and graduates from the previous years, and to receive suggestions about additional study material in order to find the most appropriate angle and tone to approach the research from tutors such as Marloes and Steve, and also Simon, Ine, and David.

I can also foresee that I may need advice from Barend and Javi, or from the people working at the WdKA stations, concerning the most effective ways to make use of available tools, and this in strict relation with the material at hand.

v. why i want to make it

I want to make use of the album's defined theatrical character, as this very character I can see as an accessible reading entry to interpreting it in a larger social context. I want therefore to use this character as speculative matter, to test the limits between the private and the public. Through this work, I am not looking to give an answer to the many questions that the present moment is posing with ever increasing urgency, but to better frame them through a process of visual and verbal dismantling and reshaping.



rome, 26.9.18, before a government announcement. the scene brings back to mind other times, other balconies.

I feel the idea behind this project has a connection with the present moment, not only within the obvious discussion about resurgence of extreme right wing tendencies in Europe—which certainly is a pertinent one to be noted—but also within a discourse on the afterlife of memory, which relates at large with historical memory and amnesia, and on the marked fictional element in both.

vi. relation with previous practice

Previously, I developed work that questioned understanding of historical micro- and macro-events connecting them with our visual culture, imposing on these events a forced perspective, that of spatial imagination. This forced perspective was especially evident, even though in varying degrees, in the body of work produced in the course of the last academic year, and it was interwoven with preoccupations concerning the notion of ambiguity in morality of the single as opposed to external impositions—from societies, states, and so on. In several pieces, factual information from diverse sources, with special attention to mass media, was abstracted from its original context in order to expand its scope. This movement towards abstraction and the process of deconstruction-reconstruction was for instance at the core of *Universal Time* and *Repérages*, both making use of archival and found imagery to reflect on the destructive effects that faceless power in its various forms has on the individual. Both these works isolated secondary elements present in source imagery and made them the dominant of the reconstruction.



detail from macron's presidential portrait vs universal time's clock replica.

It's my intention for the graduation work to stem from these previously explored themes; I also want to make use of some of the experiences gathered in my recent practice, both in the researching and making stages. Even though this means I expect the new work to entertain a dialogue with what came before it, I however don't plan for it to be the repetition of a scheme. What I would like to do is to move forward on the path of blending the boundary between authentically photographic and computer generated, still and moving image, in view of the construction of a semi-fictional space and story deriving directly from the examination of the album.

vii. relation with larger context

The frame of reference for this project is one that incorporates works that are very diverse, ranging from the visual arts to literature. Among those that I find have a kinship with it are, for instance, Christian Boltanski, who used extensively photographic albums, and Peter Piller, who built several of his pieces around redefining archival material.



a page from the *archiv peter piller zeitung* (2007).

More meaningful influences come from writers as Ennio Flaiano, who related the degeneration of the Ethiopian war with the act of retelling it, and also W.G. Sebald, who explored in books such as *The Rings of Saturn* connections between private and public memory.

viii. references

Reading list, sources, references to use both in the research and in the making stages of the work (these are subject to change).

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c. Other references

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