

A project by [Valentina Peri](#)

Produced by [Tirana Art Lab](#) & [Beyond Matter Eu](#)

Augmented Reality App developed with [transmatter.art](#)

[Website](#) created by [Valentina Peri](#)

The starting point of this project was the discovery of my Italian grandfather's WWII [photo archive](#) and the [love correspondence](#) between my grandparents at that time.

The aim of [Her Boyfriend Came Back From The War - HBCBFTW](#) is to reactivate this archive through the use of Augmented Reality (AR), and to trigger a re-enactment of individual and collective memories through Augmented Postcards inspired by the archive and my [research](#) in Albania on its traces.

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# Her Boyfriend Came Back From The War. And They Never Spoke About it Again.

## THE HIDDEN HISTORY BEHIND THE ARCHIVE

The “Her” in the title refers to my Italian grandmother, Manfredina Falchi and the “Boyfriend” is her future husband, my Italian grandfather, Giuseppe Peri (Peppino). The war her boyfriend was fortunate enough to survive, was the Campagna d’Albania during World War II.

From 1939 to 1943, Albania was an Italian protectorate and more than 100.000 Italian soldiers were deployed to the Balkan front to fight alongside the Germans. After the armistice of 8 September 1943, when Italy capitulated to the Allies, Peppino became a deserter, fleeing the Germans and their concentration camps. His fate, together with that of more than 20.000 men like him, has remained hitherto largely unknown.

The history of the Italian military in Albania, after September 8, is intertwined with that of the local partisan movements and with the affirmation of the communist group over the other resistance forces.

Going through my grandfather’s war memorabilia I have found 120 photographs he had taken until late 1942 on the South-Albanian front, along with a series of letters and postcards that Peppino regularly sent to Manfredina. The photos and the official postcards of the Italian Army make up the fragmentary mosaic of a love story that grew up between home and the front, an intimacy mediated by the propaganda images of the fascist regime.

This correspondence was the result of the peculiar epistolary phenomenon of the «war godmothers», women who were assigned to correspond with a soldier on the front. If the main objective was to provide moral support to the young men at war, these exchanges often evolved into intimate conversations, confessions of love and, once returned home, into long-awaited marriages. This was the case with my grandparents.

Along with their love contract, they signed another one: never to speak again about the painful period of their youth during the fascist regime and the war.

This story and the unspoken facts have always haunted me, until I recently found a small handwritten notebook, in which he had diligently listed places, events, and people he met day by day from September 8, 1943 to his way back home, on foot, in 1945.

## THE LOVE CORRESPONDENCE





THE REDISCOVERED PHOTO ARCHIVE



## NON-LINEAR STORYTELLING THROUGH AUGMENTED REALITY

This project attempts to reconstruct this story through the fragments I collected alongside my research and a journey to Albania, and to address some aspects of Italy's postcolonial heritage and Albania's postcommunist present.

The aim is to reactivate the found archive through the use of Augmented Reality (AR), and to trigger a re-enactment of individual and collective memories. I am particularly interested in how this will affect collective "memory", how it will impact the organization of narratives.

The metaphor of the theater is a reference to the dramatic [destruction of Tirana National Theatre](#) in 2020, and is a take on Giulio Camillo's "Theater of Memory", a mental device from the Italian Renaissance that created the possibility of a shared space, based on a common set of associations that anyone can use, but whose significance is intersubjective.

Inspired by my [grandparents' archival material](#) and the documentation I have gathered during [my research throughout Albania](#), on the traces of this archive, I have decided to explore the parallel between the operations of Camillo's mental theater and today's AR technologies by means of data that can be accessed and activated through the [Augmented Postcards](#).

The Augmented Postcards work as my own markers. They simultaneously historicize, narrativize, and personalize the encounters between the viewer and the images, generating a process of narrative discovery, as the users find new associations and coherence through newly sequenced encounters with their own markers.

Valentina Peri




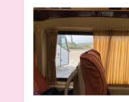

























# AUGMENTED POSTCARDS

## Augmented Reality and Non-Linear Storytelling

The images on the postcards consist of reproductions of photos taken by my grandfather on the South-Albanian front and photos of situations, places and objects I encountered during my research. Each postcard is accompanied by a short narrative text I wrote, a fragment of the many stories that are told in the work.

Download the [HBCBFTW](#) App. Once open, point your phone at the images: the augmented content (video, images and sound) will appear as an overlay. For an optimal experience, visit the [website](#).

<b>The Notebook</b>  <p>After the armistice of 8 September 1943, when Italy capitulated to the Allies, Peppino, my grandfather, became a deserter: fleeing the Nazi and their concentration camps for more than one year. His fate, together with that of more than 20,000 men like him, has remained hidden largely unknown in Italy. In 2019 I found my grandfather's handwritten notebook, a sort of diary in which, day after day, he had listed places, events, and people he had met in Albania from Sept. 8, 1943 until he was back home, on foot, in 1945.</p>	<b>The Office</b>  <p>My grandfather's office in Delvinë military camp. The back of the photo reads: "The new, still miserable office". Peppino worked as a quartermaster sergeant in the Parma division. From 1943 to 1942 the division was based in Delvinë, with jurisdiction on a predominantly Greek-inhabited region in Gjirokastra County. The photos he took depict Jorgucët, Sotira, Porto Edoia, Likovë, Borez, Gërash, Krandë. I do not have pictures from 1942. Just a notebook starting on September 8, 1943.</p>	<b>The Sign</b>  <p>Buzmadhë. I could not find the name on Google Maps, or in the 1939 Guide to Albania. Albanian friends had never heard about this locality either. It was the "furgon" from Gjirokastra to Vlorë, on which I had to settle, lacking better alternatives, that took me to the right place. A stop at the coffee shop on a roundabout. I got out to stretch my legs, and there was the street sign: "Buzmadhë". And, suddenly, the old man with the kid riding the mule appeared at the horizon. A grandfather with his grandchild. He said hello.</p>	<b>The Pear Tree</b>  <p>A lonely pear tree in the middle of an olive tree grove at the entrance of Muhamarrem Suljo's property. Just one pear tree, heavy with big, yellow pears. I knew at once that had come to the right place and that it was a message sent to confirm it. "Pear trees" happens to be the literal translation of my surname: the family name I have inherited from my grandfather. As soon as I was leaving the property, in the middle of the road, we met the turtle. It was your way of saying thank you. And I thank you, grandfather, for making this journey an endless quest.</p>	<b>Breshkaxhij</b>  <p>One of the very rare things my grandfather used to tell about his time as a disbanded soldier in Albania, was that he was forced to eat land turtles in order not to starve. It was such an important fragment for me. What intrigued me the most is that upon arriving in Albania, I discovered that Italians called Breshkaxhij - turtle eaters. This definition originated during the Second World War (but it is still in use today). "Debak" is a popular Albanian movie confirming this. How have I lived until now without this piece of information?</p>	<b>Orthodox Church</b>  <p>The long braids of the women in the beautiful photographs remind me of the braids my grandmother wore as a child, which I treasure to this day. The photo was taken by my grandfather at the church in Jorgucët during the Orthodox Easter celebrations in 1942. My grandfather's photo archive consists of candid shots of Italian soldiers going about their informal daily activities, military exercises and gatherings, and civilians, plenty of civilians. I hope that by disseminating these photographs more stories will emerge.</p>	<b>Not on Google Maps</b>  <p>"It's Not on the Web, It Doesn't Exist at All." It is what we are used to think nowadays. But what about the places that elude the Internet? I found one of them looking for Muhamarrem Suljo. I could only find Buzmadhë by traveling 3 times up and down the country, thanks to a random bus stop. In Albania they say "E breke vete". (Threes the charm). This is why I entered that territory as a sort of magic land, where past, present and imagination merged - as soon as I got the confirmation that my grandfather had there, with Mario, Pepi &amp; Mario.</p>	<b>Eastern in Jorgucët</b>  <p>Jorgucët is the first locality we visited following my grandfather's photos with Klodian. It is part of a territory on the Greek border inhabited by Greek minority communities. Under the communist regime, the authorities banned all religious activities and destroyed thousands of religious buildings. In some cases, the churches were dismantled and stored in warehouses awaiting the time to rebuild them. Against all expectations, however, the Orthodox Church in Jorgucët seems not to have moved an inch in 80 years.</p>
<b>Due Popoli...</b>  <p>From 1939 to 1943 Albania was an Italian protectorate and more than 100,000 Italian soldiers were deployed to the Balkan front to fight alongside the Germans. In Albania, Italian soldiers were mostly based in the South of the country, at the border with Greece, one of the regions that witnessed the Greco-Italian War. The fascist military propaganda was made of songs, slogans, symbols, and illustrations. And, as in this case, it shuttled between the front and home, via postcards.</p>	<b>Dora Leka</b>  <p>Having digitized my grandfather's archive, in March 2021 I continue my search through Albanian partisan songs. In the middle of the third wave of the pandemic, from my flat in Paris, I sent a message in a bottle into the Ocean of the Internet. I wrote a message to the nickname "Gavagav", a stranger who has translated a huge number of song lyrics from Albanian to English on a lively site called "Lyrics Translate". Against all expectations, he replied to me and we initiated a long conversation that would be continued by e-mail.</p>	<b>MBCBFTW</b>  <p>The title of my project refers to one of the most iconic works in the history of net art: "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" by Russian artist Olya Lialina, a browser based internet artwork from 1996. MBCBFTW is one of the first works of net art engaging non-linear-storytelling through hypertext. The story - the get-together of two lovers after the end of a war - unfolds by clicking on images and texts. The interactive narrative offered the possibility to create branching pathways and many possible outcomes through a story.</p>	<b>VINCERE</b>  <p>Together with "Credece, Ombrosine, Comrades" (Believe, Obey, Fight!), "Vincere" (Overcome) was a popular fascist slogan. The official postcards of the Italian Army that Peppino took in Manfredina make up the fragmentary mosaic of a love story that grew between home and the front, an intimacy mediated by the propagandistic imagery of the fascist regime. The correspondence was a result of the peculiar epistolary phenomenon of the "war godmothers", women who were assigned to correspond with a soldier on the front.</p>	<b>Turtles</b>  <p>It is as if the stereotype of the Breshkaxhij validated the veracity of my grandfather's story. It was not just a matter of life into a materialized it, expanded it. It is no longer just my private memory. In Albania it has become a reality. The funny paradox is that every time I mention this piece of trivia (not without a certain self-consciousness) that everyone confirms it off as the stuff of urban legends. It was I who brushed that it is indeed a fact, who reclaimed that truth, which gave a new meaning to a soldier on the front.</p>	<b>The Braids</b>  <p>When Manfredina was admitted to a special boarding school to become a teacher, she had to give up long braids. The first regulation she had to comply, right at the outset, was snipping off her long thick braids. Today, I am the keeper of those braids. They are more than 100 years old, but their texture and color are intact. The hair is the repository of a trauma, and mark the end of a free life. This is why I treasure them, as a perpetual reminder to live life exactly as I wish, without renunciation and without constraints.</p>	<b>Military Base in Delvinë</b>  <p>The Italian Army in southern Albania was based on the hills of Delvinë, not far from Saracikë where my grandfather was. The Parma division, to which my grandfather belonged, was stationed in Delvinë throughout 1940-1941. It is the last place Klodian and I have visited following the photos. We were lucky enough to meet a local historian who recognized the buildings in the pictures and showed us their ruins, not far from the current town hall, built at the time of the communist regime.</p>	<b>Love Messages</b>  <p>"I have my hands full, but I always have time for you, my Peppino." Jorgucët, 09/42. At the time of that correspondence, my grandfather's didn't know each other very well. A certain Carozza, a senior official of the fascist regime, assigned Manfredina, a gifted student with a vocation to become a teacher, to the role of Peppino's "war godmother". Through the messages they exchanged on the back of photographs and the postcards we can follow the evolution of their long-distance relationship that in 1948, back in Italy, culminated in their marriage.</p>
<b>Teatri Kombëtar</b>  <p>Tirana National Theater was built in 1939 by the Italian architect Giulio Berti, inspired by metaphysical aesthetics. It has survived many political transitions and was active until recently. On May 17th, 2020, despite a strong opposition, the building was torn down. An important site of the cultural patrimony was erased, leaving a gaping hole in the memory of the country and creating an empty square in the public space, a sort of "negative monument" in the center of Tirana.</p>	<b>Muharrem Suljo</b>  <p>From the notebook, on November 28, 1943: "Roma-Buonai. We work for Muhamarrem Suljo until August 44". Some of the soldiers who no longer belonged to a proper unit took refuge in the homes of farmers, working for them in exchange for food and shelter, even in danger of falling prey to German reprisals. This story is recalled in many Albanian movies and books. But no traces are found in the Italian memory. I went on a quest to trace Muhamarrem Suljo and found his descendants and his house in Buzmadhë.</p>	<b>The Lunch</b>  <p>Muharrem Suljo's nephew Isa and his wife Suzana welcomed us for a delicious lunch at their property. They recounted what they remembered his grandpa used to say about Pepi (my grandfather) and Mario. Muhamarrem was Kryepikuri (Village Chief) until 1946, when the party confiscated his land. The family has got the land back after 1997, and I could visit the places where my grandfather worked for more than one year as a "disbanded" (straggler). I naively asked if his land was full of turtles. When he asked me why, my answer made him laugh.</p>	<b>Aulon</b>  <p>Aulon. To my ears it seems the name of a mythological deity. Aulon is the original name of the city of Vlorë. Vlorë is the city from where my grandfather boarded a ship to sail back to Italy in December 1944. Vlorë is the port from which I arrived in Albania. I am glad that I finished my trip with Aulon. It made total sense. Always grateful for his amazing contribution to this magic journey, and for being there with Manfredina - a divinity of beauty, love and fertility - that we met on the mountain where Muhamarrem Suljo used to live.</p>	<b>The Cow</b>  <p>"Kur të kthehem në Itali, do të të dergoj një lopo të më të". "When I return to Italy I will send you a 'milked cow' - one of the Italian soldiers hidden from the Nazis in Buzmadhë - told a farmer. This story was passed on to us by an old man we met while searching for Muhamarrem Suljo. This cow, of course, never reached its destination, because Albania closed its borders in 1945, until 1997. Even letters, postcards, messages never made it, and some of the people we met in Buzmadhë were actually waiting for the return of the Italian Army. Who knows if they ever tried?</p>	<b>1939 Albania Guide</b>  <p>1939. End of the age of travel. The era of tourism begins. As does the fascist occupation of Albania. The first Tourist Guide of Albania, by the Conspicuous Turistica Italiana, also saw the light that year. The cover and the format are very reminiscent of Mack Bee's Book. A strange coincidence for a country that will turn into an autarkic communist state in 1944. The guide on the left found me at an antiquarian shop of Rroga Demal Stafa in Tirana. The one on the right is the anastatic reprint published in 1997, after the country reopened.</p>	<b>The Missing Postcard</b>  <p>4:30 am Since the beginning of the project, I have been looking for a precious postcard of Tirana National Theater. I looked for it at antique dealers and present-day souvenir shops, but I couldn't find it. The missing postcard. Built with an experimental and lightweight material of the 1930s, the Populi, Teatri Kombëtar ceased to exist at 4:30 am, on May 17th, 2020. It is on Google Maps, but it doesn't exist. What will happen to the digital archives of disappeared buildings? How do you claim that memory?</p>	<b>Service in Jorgucët</b>  <p>A service for Easter 1942 on the plain below Jorgucët, whose ancient old town is located on the hill behind Italian fascists. It was based on a strong link with the Catholic religion. A good fascist was a good Catholic, too. This is also why in Italy the transition from the fascist regime to decades of Christian Democratic hegemony was comparatively easy. The sparseness of the architectural landscape makes it easier to recognize the slopes of the hills and situate the photos of the service - and the more bizarre one of a play for soldiers.</p>
<b>Albanian Movies</b>  <p>If one can say with certainty that no film has ever been made in Italy about Italian soldiers in Albania before and after the Armistice, it is even more certain that in Albania that subject is a common trope of communist propaganda films from the 1950s to the 1980s. More often than not, the figure of the disbanded Italian soldier renews the myth of the good Albanian partisan. Thanks to these movies, I could reconstruct part of that missing story that my grandfather, and many like him, did not want to remember.</p>	<b>The School</b>  <p>Sotira is the second place Klodian and I visited following my grandfather's photos. The school sign is bilingual, in Greek and Albanian. We are in the Drocull area, a predominantly Greek-inhabited region in Gjirokastra County. To get to the village from the main road, the bus driver had to call the taxi driver (from Illyria, the ancient name for Albania), who drove us to our destination. The school is right at the entrance to the village, and it is very well preserved, though the gate is locked. It will soon become a museum.</p>	<b>Wedding in Jorgucët</b>  <p>My grandfather's photo archive consists of shots of Italian soldiers in their informal activities, military exercises, gatherings, and plenty of civilians, taken with an Hasselblad camera. Apart from the fascist propaganda images produced by the Istituto Luce, documents from the 1940s are actually rare. Like the collection of the Albanian partisan G. Massani. In this photo my grandfather is present. He invites me to join him in Gjirokastra in the summer of 2021. We meet and start the road trip to the Drocull area by public transportation.</p>	<b>Klodian</b>  <p>"Caravaggi", the person I contacted on the website "Lyrics Translate" is Klodian, an Albanian researcher originally from Gjirokastra, now living in Italy. He helps me finding on the map many of the places that are mentioned on the back of my grandfather's photos. His grandmothers come from one of the Greek minority villages in the South of Albania, where my grandfather stayed during WWII. He invites me to join him in Gjirokastra in the summer of 2021. We meet and start the road trip to the Drocull area by public transportation.</p>	<b>The Ring</b>  <p>As a child I used to daydream about the version of the story I was told, of my grandfather coming home from the war on foot, walking from Albania to Italy. As I looking up his route on Google Maps, which didn't exist at the time - remember following his path across the Balkans, a vertical line going up north, then left, to home, which was next to the house where I grew up. Such a distorted version of events revolves around his ring with the symbol "partisans" - his headscarf, made. Most probably a military ring made in Milan in the 1930s.</p>	<b>Sotira</b>  <p>Sotira is the second place we visited following the photos with Klodian. It is a Greek minority village on the border between Greece and Albania. Sotira was also occupied by the Italians. A series of photos shows soldiers and locals, mostly children, posing in front of the camera. In 80 years only one other Italian has come back to visit, the son of a senior official of the Fascist regime. Local men are in the village square handling public relations. The women, at home, are also occupied by the legacy. And of the will's password.</p>	<b>Albanian Books</b>  <p>The list of Albanian novels dealing with the Italian soldiers in Albania after the armistice is not very long, but the names include some of the country's greatest, such as Ismail Kadare &amp; Petro Marko. If the former is translated into several languages (and many films are based on his stories), the latter is unknown abroad, and the book in question, Qytet i fundit (The Last City) is one of the most poetic building blocks of the missing story. On the other side of the Adriatic, apart from a few memoirs of veterans, we find just blank pages that will remain so.</p>	<b>Love Postcards</b>  <p>She never stops the moment when she discovered that he was alive. This was the starting point of my research. You fear that your future husband is dead, and after almost two years of silence, he comes back. Everyone, including his parents, believed him dead. They both passed away a couple of months later. This is a shocking moment. What a shocking moment. What a joyful moment. But nevertheless, she never mentioned that moment, that episode. How is it even possible? How is it even possible that she never shared her secret, dear grandmothers.</p>







## 1939 ALBANIAN GUIDE

### One of the 32 Augmented Postcards



*Her Boyfriend Came Back From the War.  
And They Never Spoke About it Again*

A project by Valentina Peri  
Developed by transmatter.art  
Produced by Tirana Art Lab & Beyond Matter EU

#### 1939 ALBANIA GUIDE

1939. End of the age of travel. The era of tourism begins. As does the fascist occupation of Albania. The first Tourist Guide of Albania, by the Consociazione Turistica Italiana, also saw the light that year. The cover and the format are very reminiscent of Mao's Red Book. A strange coincidence for a country that will turn into an autarkic communist state in 1944. The guide on the left found me at an antiquarian shop of Rruga Qemal Stafa in Tirana. The one on the right is the anastatic reprint published in 1997, after the country reopened.

Download the app HBCBFTW on [www.hbcbftw.com](http://www.hbcbftw.com)  
Enable the app to access the camera of your device and use it to experience the AR through the image on the postcard.

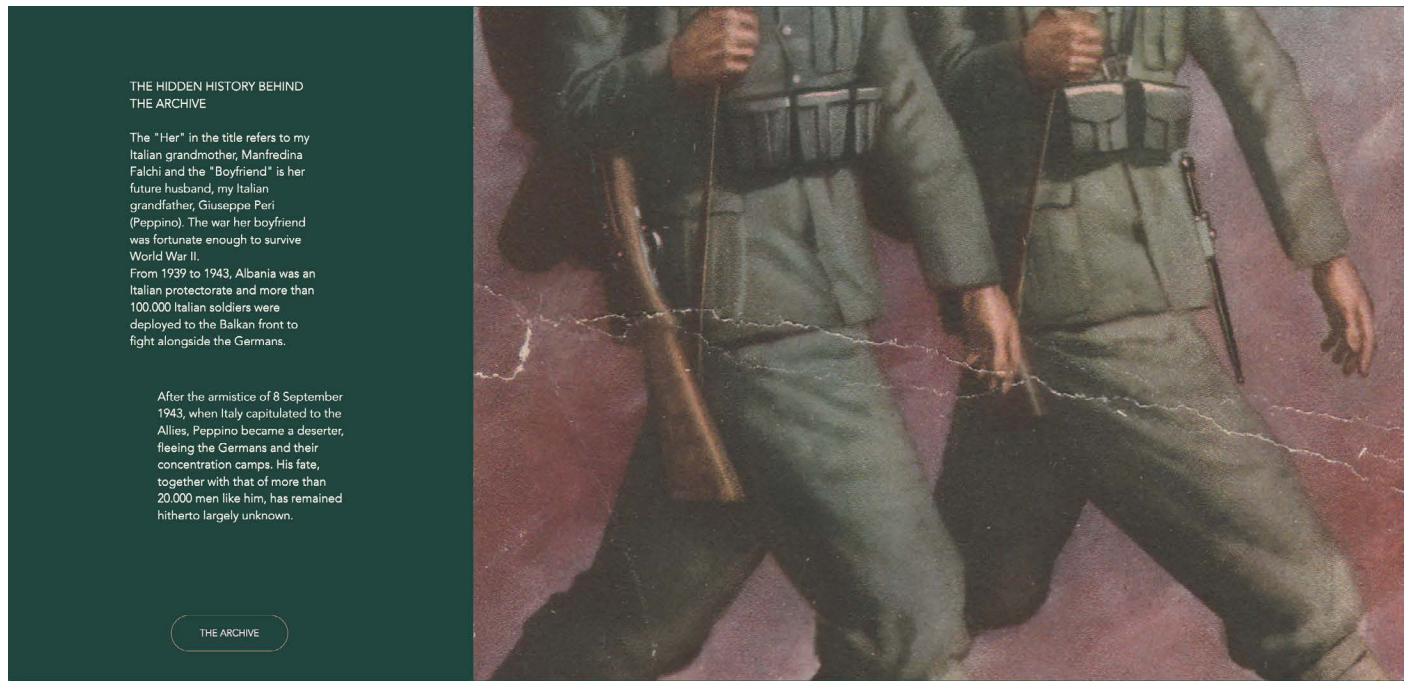
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## HBCBFTW website

The augmented postcards link to the website [hbcbftw.com](http://hbcbftw.com) for more in-depth information on the contents and stages of my journey to Albania following the archive.

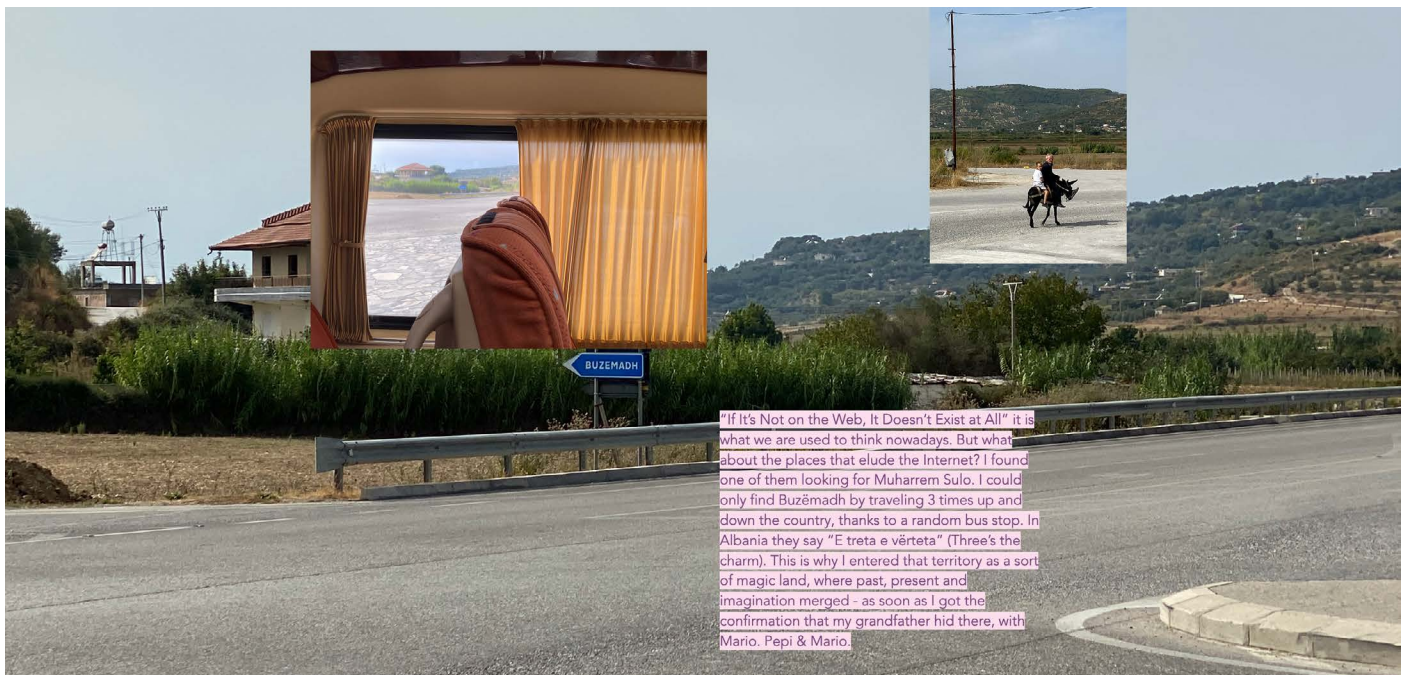
It is also possible to consult the entire [rediscovered photo archive](#) and read about its history.







The photos and the official postcards of the Italian Army found in the archives make up the fragmentary mosaic of a long story that grew up between home and the front, an intimacy mediated by the propaganda images of the fascist regime.



"If It's Not on the Web, It Doesn't Exist at All" it is what we are used to think nowadays. But what about the places that elude the Internet? I found one of them looking for Muharrem Sulo. I could only find Buzemadh by traveling 3 times up and down the country, thanks to a random bus stop. In Albania they say "E treta e vërteta" (Three's the charm). This is why I entered that territory as a sort of magic land, where past, present and imagination merged - as soon as I got the confirmation that my grandfather hid there, with Mario, Pepi & Mario.



## THE INSTALLATION

The augmented postcards were exhibited for the first time from 25.06 to 28.08.2022 in Tirana, on the occasion of the end-of-residency exhibition with the Tirana Art Lab, in the context of the [European Project Beyond Matter Eu](#), which brings together several European museum partners such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the Tirana Art Lab, among others.

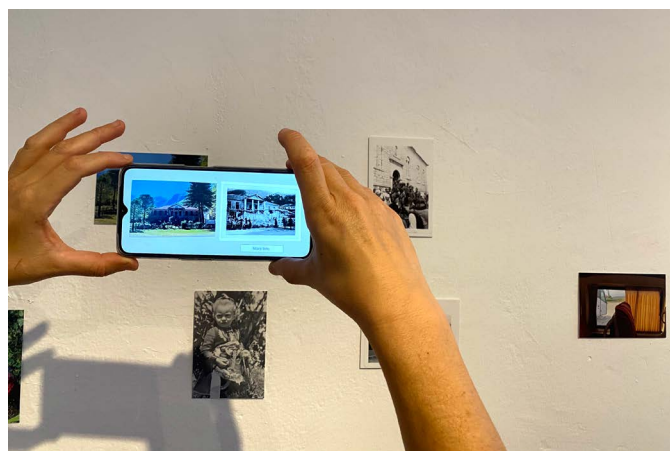
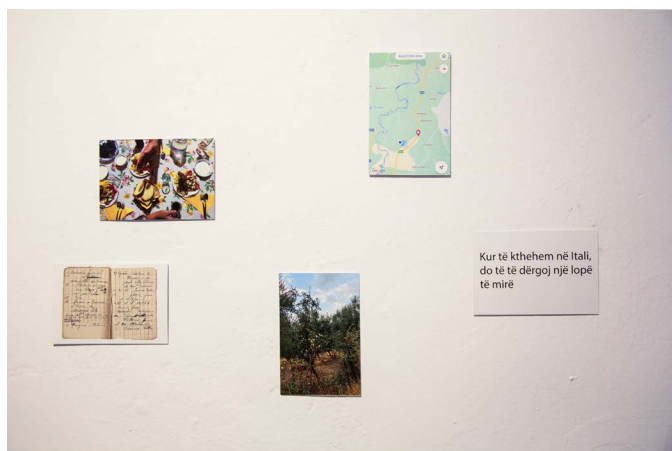
### Matter Anti-Matter Non-Matter

Tulla Culture Center

by [Tirana Art Lab](#)

curated by **Adela Demetja**

They will be on view in Italy, at **Alberodonte Culture Center**  
from **September 24 to December 4, 2022.**





## VALENTINA PERI

Valentina Peri is an independent curator, cultural critic and author based in Paris.

Her work examines the role of technology in contemporary culture, with a focus on love and intimacy in the digital age, media histories and technologies in the anthropocene. She has curated exhibitions, published writing and given lectures on a broad range of topics in these areas, including data collection and surveillance, the commodification of desire, representation and identity, media ecologies and new materialism.

Her travelling exhibition [Data Dating](#) has been presented in France, Israel and the UK. In the context of this exhibition, she co-edited an essay collection published by Intellect: "[Data Dating. Love, Technology, Desire](#)"

Her research on dating continued with the exhibition [SWIPE RIGHT! Data, Dating, Desire](#) that she curated at iMAL in Brussels in 2021, and continued with [TECHNO ROMANCE](#) that she presented in Geneva in 2022.

[DATA DATING DESIRE](#), a new iteration of this travelling exhibition will be presented in Brescia, at Mo.Ca from 23 September to 4 December 2022.

In 2022, she began researching the phenomenon of Internet romance scams in Ghana, and published the book "[The New Romance Scammer's Instructor](#)", a collection of original messages from Ghanaian love scammers.

She is one of the artists in residence in 2022 of the European program [BEYOND MATTER Eu](#) - Cultural Heritage on the Verge of Virtual Reality at Tirana Art Lab (Albania). During the residency she realized "[Her Boyfriend Came Back from the War. And They Never Spoke About it Again](#)", an augmented reality project based on the history and photographic archive of her grandfather during World War II, and her grandparents' love correspondence.

She received a [Fluxus Art Projects](#) Grant 2022 for her curatorial research on the history of dating to be presented in London in 2023.

Since 2021 she has collaborated with [peer-to-space](#), an independent exhibition platform based in Berlin, which creates virtual and IRL exhibitions.

From 2010 to 2021 she was associate director and curator at [Galerie Charlot Paris - Tel Aviv](#), a contemporary art gallery specialising in digital art.

Valentina Peri is co-founder of [SALOON Paris](#), an international network of women identifying art professionals in Paris and many other cities around the world.

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