In Muna Mussie’s solo exhibition, *Bologna St. 173* – whose essence is a single movement of braids rising horizontally from the force of swiveling bodies – a millisecond-movement is expanded to reverberate through the entire space, encompassing twenty-three years of annual Eritrean political congresses and festivals at once. Attended by diasporic Eritreans from several continents, and held in Munich, Nuremberg, Pavia, but mostly (uninterrupted from 1974 to 1991) in Bologna, these festivals were a front of the struggle to overthrow military dictatorship and gain an independent new nation.

While inhabited since prehistoric time, the nation-state of Eritrea is so much an imagined community. It was severed out from many kingdoms by the Italian nation, who ruled Eritrea as a colony from 1886 until 1941. The Italians gave it the name in 1890 from the Greek words for the Red Sea. In 1942, the colonial army was defeated, and Eritrea passed from the Italians to the British, who administered it until 1952. That year, Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia by a vote in the general assembly of the United Nations. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), began an armed struggle in 1961. In 1962, Ethiopia annexed Eritrea, casting Eritrean identity as under siege, or occupation, leading to thirty years of secessionist guerrilla militancy to overthrow Ethiopian rule – that of Emperor Haile Selassie till 1974, then the military government known as the Dergue. The left-wing nationalist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), broke-out of and then fought the ELF, and it was the EPLF who overcame the Dergue to achieve independence in 1991, through guerrilla armed struggle, and the intellectual, organisational, moral, and financial support of the diaspora. EPLF aided a coalition of Ethiopian rebel forces take control of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. In 1993 a referendum of the Eritrean people declaring this new nation was supervised by the United Nations. ELF’s successor was the EPLF, whose successor is the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). They formed a National Assembly, and a constitution was written in 1997, which provided for multi-party elections the same year. The constitution was never implemented. PFDJ is the only political party of Eritrea. Disappearances, crises, wars, have dogged its independent history.
Amnesia and nostalgia haunt the micro-history of the congresses and festivals in Bologna. Much too little remains in public memory, although the festivals continue – now as commemorations of the independence struggle – in Kassel and Milan till date. Embarking on crucial new research, the installation, slowly built over the course of her residency at Archive Milan, sought the unofficial sonic memory and emotive content of the open grounds and industrial spaces, which hosted the annual congresses and motley put-together tents of various shapes. Entering the installation space, we enter into the emotive impressions left by an annual political festival on an observing child, who fled with her family from Eritrea to Bologna at the age of two. Amidst a pervasive, ubiquitously imbibed presence of war, the archive of what remains of struggle, its symbols, its iconography, its acronyms, is shot through with an artistic imaginary, that is fluorescent, neon, hallucinogenic, psychedelic, flickering and strobe.

This work is an immersion into the iconography of struggle, only to haunt it with the present. The raised fist and outstretching arm, the ever-present sun – that rising rainbow semicircle, ever-shining poster-art symbol of a dawn to rise, is fluoresced with a sensibility of contemporaneity, highlighted with alternating silver scotch tape and party-streamers. Except, these party tapes are printed with vorticist dazzle patterns, ubiquitously adopted as the pattern of camouflage on military uniforms. Mussie’s work is constructed from these ambiguities and gaps between meaning. Not unalike her voice, a terse poetry of abbreviations which splutter out, like the pop of the popcorn hitting tin-lid-covers. It is her fluorescent aesthetics, that chooses to brandish a kitschy inelegant popcorn machine across her installation, spewing the room with a thousand bullets of corn.

Mussie’s poetics occupies the single spacebar between PF and DJ, the title of her performance, moored to the room-sized installation. Her works tend toward lists – in this case, of the associations, organisations for workers, women, students, each with their own acronyms and abbreviated forms that read to her like one long dadaist poem. In other works, she will list phobias. Her works fill the space between homophones: Milite/milite, a name for Mary or the word for soldier. PF DJ: Disc Jockey, Democracy and Justice, an association in the liberation struggle, a political party? Separated from these associations by a single space, PerForming DiscJockey is an apparition of a woman wearing a carnival mask of glittering outlined hollowed eyes. She spent weeks carefully embroidering, often removing and re-embroidering this nonsense verse of abbreviations onto ne’zzla, a fine, handspun, white double-gauze clothing, cossetting the bodies of women. The abbreviations (sigla) of associations for women appear on single sheets of transparent gauze, in silver and gold. To make a house, all you need is a sheet. She recalls, or observes, how elderly Eritrean women sleep. How this enwrapping themselves in the ne’zzla, they have cover from the sun, and cushioning for their bodies, a tent that assumes the form of the wearer. The homophones are also haptic: soft fluffy clouds of cotton gauze and the soft fluffiness of popped corn find a unison. In a previous performative video work, Oasi (2018), a UFO spacecraft like transparent sphere is a kitchy/luxury camping tent used to observe wildlife while protected inside. Over the video-imagery she orates, like invocations, a series of phobias. Sigils are signs, inscribed or painted symbols, considered to have magical power, like amulets, they give protection, create a space, a zone. The ne’zzla do this in Mussie’s present work. The embroidered physicality of the sigla or abbreviations, is turned to magical sigil.

The ne’zzla also conceal in their softness. They were adorned by women guerriera. Did their cloudy softness conceal arms? The archive of the guerriera is accessible only in their form as icons, on posters, idealised, courageous, fierce, symbolic. The oral archive, though still in living memory, is hidden, obsfuscated by the women themselves. In the present work,
an archive of images is slashed by a florescent light. The neon light makes the ne’zzla transparent, the images serigraphed onto the walls become visible, but the light also cancels out this archival imagery. What does the image hold? A political banner with a date – 1989. A place – Bologna, Emilia Romagna, Italy. A stage, musicians, instruments, dancers, their ne’zzla flowing, their braids rising up. A traditional dance called shelil, of the Bilen one of the nine ethnicities of Eritrea, is a head dance in which women shake their heads from side to side. It is a dance of restricted movements, arms and legs straight down under the long ne’zzla, the back is limber. The dance immobilises the lower extremes of the body, translocating vitality and eros upward, thrusting heads side to side, till shoulder-length braids fly sideways, electrically communicating desire; and liberation, self-determination. In the grain of the wall, one of the faces is tender. Then the neon goes off, and the ne’zzla is again opaque, the archive invisible, protected by an emboridered sigla that is also a sigil.