

# Focus on Members

## Bojana Bartrop



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In May 2017 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (MSU), opened an exhibition dedicated to Bojana Bartrop's amazing body of work: 'The Great Chain of Being'. Alessandra Cianetti interviews the artist.

**Alessandra Cianetti:** You have had a brilliant career as a visual artist, photographer and performer and were one of the most experimental female artists of the ex-Yugoslavia scene during the 1990s. Can you tell us a bit more about your practice, its developments and how it felt to go back and present your work in Belgrade after 25 years?

**Bojana Bartrop:** This will seem like a digression, but it is not. First, I had a rather privileged upbringing as far as it was possible after World War II. These were times of all sorts of rations, and people used these rations in different ways. I had a grandmother who would come home with pieces of cloth bought with coupons and she would turn them into, metaphorically, suits coming straight from Dior. Her daughter, my aunt, was at first a ballerina, then prima ballerina. My grandmother was tearing up her gowns from some more prosperous times to make my aunt's most gorgeous tutus. My mother was a polyglot, well-educated and believed that she could share her intellectual pursuits with me from my early days. From her I heard about Braque, Picasso, etc. before I heard about Red Riding Hood. My father was an architect who often worked abroad and, unlike many children, I was well travelled, in the proper sense of the expression, before I reached eighteen. It was within my family, its friends and circles in which my parents mingled that my life's agenda was set. It was assumed that drawing and painting were mothers of all visual arts and that visual art covered everything: ballet, opera, film, drawing, painting, sculpture, design, architecture, urban planning, conservation, way of life. It was also assumed that pushing boundaries was what artists should do. Thus, although considered an 'experimental artist', I do not feel so. For me, what I have done and am doing is simply a duty, an obligation. Actually, I find my output quite classical, well founded in the history of arts and especially in the history of photography, thus, their continuation.

I was mainly taking photos of myself at one stage and I am aware that some people found this shocking. Again, in my opinion, self-portrait was a common theme in the history of arts and especially common to early female artists who painted themselves because it was difficult for them to find other models. Likewise, I was taking photos of myself because I did not know models with whom I could work so relentlessly. If you think about it, it is the same with selfies today. People take photos of themselves because they are the models they know best. Everything else is just decoration.

I came to Great Britain as an accomplished artist and designer. It was a new country, new mores. I consigned my whole artistic output to a few large trunks and continued to work along other routes. The invitation for a solo exhibition I received from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade after all these years was therefore at first a surprise. On the other hand, it was logical. Indeed, the country I came from does not exist anymore. Still, my work exists and therefore it is not less important. Finally, I am honoured. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade has one of the most important collections of European Art of the 20th century and the fact that I was given space and that at least one of my works will be included in its permanent collection, it is something I never dreamt of.

**Alessandra Cianetti:** As an artist you have been exploring notions of identity, body, and space in what Milanka Todić defines as an 'urge to re-examine the deepest layers of [your] own personality, and [your] relations to the world'. Although you have been using various media, the photographic Polaroid format has been one of your major modes of expression. How did Polaroids enter your work? What did you find in this medium?

**Bojana Bartrop:** Professor Milanka Todić curated an exhibition of my work in 1992 at the Museum of Applied Arts in Belgrade. I was not aware at the time, however I now find her text very, very good and the sentence which you quoted quite significant, especially the reference to my 'relations to the world'. Because this is what 'The Great Chain of Being'

exhibition at MSU is about, isn't it?

Yes, I used Polaroid quite a lot. There were two reasons. First, I became especially attached to the extraordinary SX 70 Polaroid camera. Second, the medium is rewarding. The pictures which it produces are not simply shots: they are more often just what the artist wanted.

Invented in the early forties, Polaroid did not gain ground among the public in general. Still, it shaped the artistic landscape of the last decades of twentieth century to a great degree. Those interested in this period in the arts relate Polaroid usually to Andy Warhol, but this medium was used by many artists such as David Hockney for example. I saw Hockney's Polaroids for the first time few weeks ago, just after my exhibition. These are very much about what the artist had seen and how he had seen it. Warhol's Polaroids are simply

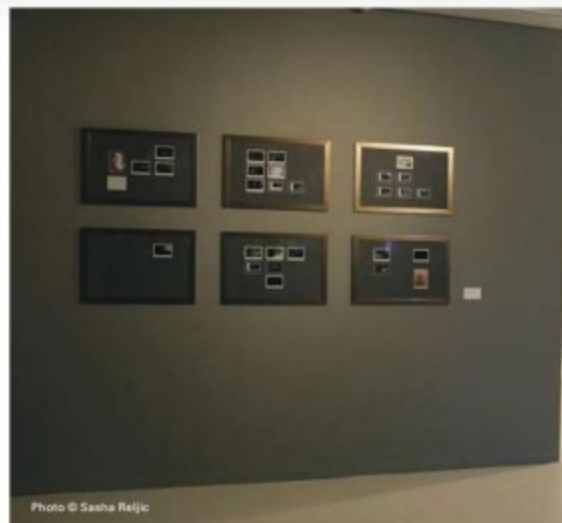


Photo © Sasha Reljic

memos. As far as I am concerned, I used Polaroid in two ways: firstly, like a painter's brush, to produce art; secondly, to expose the limits of photography showing what it could and should be, of course, in my view.

**Alessandra Cianetti:** In your multi-disciplinary work you experiment with photographic and video technologies following their development in decades that have seen huge changes in the way we all relate to the production of images. Over the years, how has your approach to technology changed? What role does digital technology play in the creation of art pieces?

**Bojana Bartrop:** Yes, again, you are right. I used also analogue cameras and video extensively. The seventies (and I started in the late part of this decade) were the times of Antonioni's film 'Blow Up', photography and photographers as depicted in this film. Analogue photography was one hundred percent 'IN'. The eighties were the times of its decline and the nineties of its imminent death. This coincided with the medium of Polaroid's long agony and the birth of digital cameras and camera-phones. At the beginning of this millennium, Polaroid cameras and film and analogue equipment and production became obsolete. Of course, one was still able to leaf through

family albums of photos taken with analogue cameras, and this brought immense pleasure to people. Professionals were able to put old photos on display or sale, but this was not what my analogue production was about. So, I digitised most of my work in 2007. This extended its life. It was also a challenge. At first, I had all sorts of ideas, mainly, to produce works which would resemble my Polaroid displays. But digital technology developed fast. From what I imagined as being a series of stills I ended up creating videos. Meanwhile, people got bored with images stuck in their mobile phones. Interest in instant cameras which still were on the market increased. Moreover, quite quirky instant 'Lomography' cameras and a new generation of Polaroid ones opened even more possibilities. For example, I used mirrors for my first 'selfies' in the eighties. It was almost impossible to avoid having the camera within a picture and therefore on my pictures there were mainly torsos. The use of the latest generation of Polaroid cameras, computers, monitors and occasionally a camera phone, helped me to show my face. It also helped to extend the repertoire to architecture: Belgrade, Dubrovnik, Copenhagen, New York, Tokyo and Venice; and to notions which I wished to explore such as 'the English Garden', memory, history and narration. Thus, indeed, the exhibition in Belgrade this May was about my work in the late seventies, early eighties and especially my time in Britain, but also, rather oddly, it was about an important part of the history of photography and approaches towards photography at its most dramatic moments.

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Bojana Bartrop, PhD, is artist, designer, architectural historian and theoretician. She is Assistant Secretary of Pacific Island Society of UK and Ireland and holds voting membership of Architectural Association. She is widow of the late Roger Bartrop, CMG, CVO.

Alessandra Cianetti is a London-based art curator, producer and writer. She is co-director of the arts organisation Something Human and author of the research-blog 'performingborders. Conversations on live art | crossings | europe'. Visit the following websites <https://performingborders.wordpress.com> <https://something-human.org> <http://wesatonamat.weebly.com>

