

## Fragility Has a Singular Beauty

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Beata Nowacka-Kardzis talks to Małgorzata Markiewicz

**Beata Nowacka-Kardzis: Transformations—a fashionable world and much-used word—is the title of your present exhibition in the Bunkier Sztuki. What is its significance for you?**

Małgorzata Markiewicz: As far as I am concerned, transformations are not unplanned. Rather, I think of transformations as a process to which we succumb; something that happens to our bodies, something that we experience throughout life. What matters is to acquiesce; otherwise, we find ourselves engaged in a struggle against time, against our bodies, against ourselves. A struggle we lose, so we become rigid, live a living death. Instead, we should go with the flow, so that—come what may—we should experience peace of mind. In the work presented, I refer to the Law of the Five Transformations—a thousands-of-years-old Chinese system, which subordinates all material and non-material world phenomena. Each season is governed by a different transformation.

Our bodies undergo transformations both during our entire lifespans as within the individual annual cycles. We are born, we grow, we mature, wither away and die. Similarly, we go through daily rhythms. It is important that each day we should find the time to work, to develop our spirituality, to prepare food, to eat it, and to rest. Nowadays, people seem to have forgotten about resting and about spiritual development. But I don't want to go too deeply into this here. Those who are interested in this topic either are already familiar with this philosophy, or can read more about it. Personally, I am not an expert and I merely follow my intuition in this respect.

**Are you saying that the real transformations take place independently of us? That they occur as a result of time passing by, and that they are natural? And that we should simply acquiesce in their taking place, rather than fight them—is that the point?**

Yes. If we don't accept changes, then we start fighting against what may come. You know... this is what I associate with getting rigid. We have an aim, we are hoping to succeed, but if we want to achieve through struggle, nothing good can come of it. The effect of time on our bodies is the least problem here. What I mean is what matters is how we choose to live our lives, and our approach to life. There is time for everything: for getting born and for dying.

**In order to experience a full transformation, one has to be open to new situations. In what way are your works related to the Transformations of the title?**

They are themselves an outcome of a process and still continue as part of that process. I don't set rigid boundaries between works. There are photographs, a fresco, there are objects, but they all have a motif or an element in common: dresses. I started by collecting materials. I was intrigued by patterns on them... by their shapes. I kept looking at the embellishments, the regularities. In the embroidered works, I contrasted them with stains which are an expression of chaos and a disinclination to be regimented. In photographs, I contrasted them with the body. Additionally, I photographed a body, dressed in a dress made from a blanket, in different environments: in the countryside, with plants in the background and with a throw with regular patterns in the background.

I live in a block of flats and from my window, I can see lots of other blocks of flats which make a grid; in my flat, it is all right angles; from my windows, I can see a regular pavement, or other people's flats, stuffy and poky, with yellow light overhead, which I sincerely detest—because it is as sleepy and poky as the flats and the heads of their inhabitants. Inside the four walls of their flats, every day, tragedies take place—small or great. Spilt tea can also become a tragedy, or rather, a reason for spilling emotions, a reason to cry. I think that extreme life events or emotional crises can be an impulse to push oneself off the bottom and to start growing, but one has to be able to use them in this way.

Transformation is something necessary—it has to take place for life to exist. After winter, there is spring, after all... After death, the remnants of people and animals make food for worms, they—for the ones to come, and so on...

**Let's look at the fresco: We Are Born Delicate and Fragile... In what way do you demonstrate transformations in that fresco? I am also thinking about the fact that the motif of transformations is common for all the three series shown.**

When I get up in the morning and look out of the window at the Polish reality, this is what I see: blocks of flats, the pavement—everything laid out as a grid. To walk along the street, you have to walk in a straight line, you aren't allowed to walk on the grass, or take shortcuts. Depressing stuff. Take any Polish film. There are no intelligent, witty comedies. At most, some sensational flick, modelled on Hollywood. But most of the time, what you see is dramas. Any ambitious film is a drama. What a downer: Polish pathologies, unemployment, things going wrong in families. Drama is a typically Polish genre. We seem unable to get a positive thinking hat on, look to the future with optimism. I wanted to make a work that would be noticeably beautiful. So that, while living here, in this country, one could also aim higher. I am aware of the ugliness, and that things are not great, but I wanted to look for, and to show, that around me which is beautiful. The fresco is one such work. The silhouettes in it are almost reclining. They could be asleep or dead. But they are placed vertically, as an affirmation, because they are growing. This is the positive aspect. Transformations are also seasons, sometimes from birth to death. They are the natural rhythm. The five transformations—the five seasons: spring, summer, Indian summer, autumn, winter. The fifth, and the third in order, is Indian summer—the culmination of the year, which symbolises maturity, abundance and fulfilment. Traditional Chinese medicine uses the Law of the Five Seasons, and I also try to prepare my meals in accordance with that law. In the East, the art of preparing meals is governed by certain rules which are considered indispensable for health improvement. All the five elements must be balanced so as to achieve harmony.

**It seems to me that the message of the work *We Are Born Delicate and Fragile* is to live in harmony with nature. Let's not protest or rebel against the usual course of life. The current Western culture objects to old age, to wrinkles, to impermanence, and to Time itself. We fight it every day. The methods vary, but the results are always the same. When we try to cheat time by plastic surgery, we land up cheating only ourselves. And our lives become more and more unnatural and unreal. So pathologies are born...**

When I look around, I see people, adverts and money. Buying things. Surrounding oneself with objects. Growing layers. People lose touch with their own bodies, with themselves. And to be in touch with themselves is the basis of love. If they are not in touch with themselves, they cannot love others, because they don't love themselves. As soon as there is any 'you ought to', or 'that's what you should look like,' or 'you ought to behave like this' or 'this is what you must own', you are no longer here and now, because you are never happy and satisfied. All the time you are running, and you don't ever realise where you are running to. In your work, you emphasise feelings. Your work does not take up speculative intellectual stances. Feelings are the primary stimulus for reflections and it is for this reason that your art seems so real, so personal, and so honest.

For me, words are lame, they do not fulfil me and they cannot express my feelings, nor what I am trying to put across. I cannot describe a real emotion. First, I experience it, secondly, I see it, and then I want to convey my vision to others. That is how my works are born. Without a doubt, the source is always feeling. Words come last. I hope that viewers also interpret my work via emotions.

My projects are multi-layered. The first is the visual layer, usually quite attractive, and one could just go no further. But, at a second glance, it is possible to notice more. How the next layer is interpreted, depends on the sensitivity of the viewer. And it would be best not to talk at that stage, not to verbalise, because then all that we have discovered may become grey or

disappear. This also applies to this conversation right now, in which I have already said a lot...

**I was surprised when I talked to you about your writings. You said that you found it easier to write in English than in Polish.**

The reason is that in Polish there are many words that I would like to use. They have different nuances and shades of meaning. I also realise that not everybody interprets each word in the same way and, as a result, I find it hard to decide which words are the nearest to my emotion, to my sensitivity. In English, I know many fewer words, so my choice is limited. That is why, if I need a text, usually I search for it in books. I select it and I quote fragments which express a sensitivity similar to mine. That is what happened with Breathe. I found Joanna Brach-Czajna. In *Błony umysłu* (The Membranes of the Mind), there was an entire chapter about air-breathing creatures, about breathing, about the fact that we really live in the air and so on. She expressed very well what I have been trying to say in that work.

**It seems to me that you are not interested in the technological trappings of the modern world. It is clear that you distance yourself from the artificiality of techniques and materials, ready-made objects, advertising strategies and manipulation. You go back to traditional techniques. Some of them can hardly be associated with artistic techniques but, rather, they make one think about tedious, time-consuming work, often boring or requiring a lot of patience (not to say simply: fit for women) such as crocheting, knitting or embroidery.**

I am not in any competition; I don't have to race anybody. I could not identify with work that came into being too rapidly. Time is on my side; otherwise, I would not be able to experience my work. If I work slowly, this means that I can afford to engage more emotion in my work, I can become absorbed in it. And, if I so decide, I also have time to make changes during

the process. Of course, I do use the computer for processing photos, but this example in itself shows how very small my influence is on any technical matters such as, for example, the colour of the prints. In principle, I have no influence on what comes back from the PhotoLab. I know what final shape something is to have, I even have samples, but then I get the print back and it is not what I had expected. But if I choose colours myself, doing it manually, I know that I am in control and I know what the final result will be. It is not the outcome alone that matters, but everything else that happens along the way. And how much had happened transpires from the work itself. And the touch matters, that sense which is somewhat neglected. In the era of well developed visual culture, only a small part of cognition takes place via the sense of touch. The techniques and materials which I use are those the closest to our bodies. After all, we do not cover ourselves in tin foil, nor do we snuggle up to marble. The marks that our lives leave are stains on bedclothes, table clothes or clothes, and embroidery is a permanent commentary, or a quotation, which I add.

**There is a great deficit of time in our lives, and, as a consequence, of patience. Modern people cannot afford to be patient. Today, anybody patient comes over as a simpleton. And it was not so long ago, that patience was a virtue of those mature and wise.**

I am trying to say that—by being patient—we gain, and not lose. Because if we rush and use gadgets to help us out, in reality, we lose touch with ourselves. In our spare time, we put brakes on, and we realise that we are in a vacuum. We try to fill it up the best we can: with easy entertainment, inventing more and more extreme tasks to perform or we may take drugs—all in order to fill up the time. For me, to be in a hurry is a loss. We don't notice what it is that we have failed to catch up with. Then we wake up, surprised how old we are—some don't even notice that, because they die of a heart attack. We realise that we don't know ourselves or those around us. We have had no time to tell someone that we loved them, or, we realise that we have never loved them, because we never had the time to stop and think about it.

All our illnesses are caused by this continuous being in a hurry, living in stress, wanting to do many things at once. We give ourselves no respite.

**In the meantime, we keep rushing and we waste the time that has been given to us on constantly looking for shortcuts, better and better solutions for everything. Always more and more, faster and faster. And so our lives go by, and we don't even realise that, at best, we only taste it through the window of an express train going at full tilt. If you could have another life, where and when would you like to live?**

None of us has had an ideal upbringing. Everybody has some gaps, black holes, which, however, can be transformed into strengths, as part of the process of growth. The experience that we get on the way is impossible to gain from reading books.

It seems to me that there is no ideal place in the world. It all depends on the person. It does not depend on 'where', but on 'how'. So, our well-being and the quality of life do not depend on where we live, but on us ourselves. Our problems are inside, not outside. This is the problem that I deal with in the Malmutants.

This is where I take on my past, in a big way.

**In your exhibition in the Bunkier Sztuki, you are showing brand-new works; you look for new means of expression, such as black and white photographs or fresco, and you give poetic titles to your work. So it could be said that your very art has also undergone some transformations...**

I have decided on black and white photographs, because they have a specific ambience and intensity. Colour would water down their design and everything would drown in it. I was especially keen on contrasting soft body with the grid of linoleum, tiles, pavement or blanket, and on observing what happens with such juxtapositions. Dresses are soft and warm. They retain a memory of the

body. They can be that body, shoved into a slab of concrete; just as we are shoved into a flat in a block or stuffed, with all our softness, fragility and sensitivity, into other cold places. In fact, this idea is three years old. I wanted to make a concrete sarcophagus, and inside it, there was to be a sofa bed and in front of it, a TV set.

A concrete box—a vision of people in towns who cut themselves off in their cages and have such horrible yellow light, curtains, sofa beds, and everything would drown in it, so... buried alive. There is no freedom, no breathing, no air. From my window, on the ninth floor, I can see lots of blocks of flats, and in the evening, those feeble little lights, which give everything such a cramped impression... It is horrific to live in a block. I miss contact with nature. If one has contact with nature, one can feel it and notice it and be at one with it, one becomes a better person. What we have lost is the ability to interpret our own bodies. We have no idea where our emotions come from, we do not think about the real motivation behind our actions—why we are bad? We become rigid, hard, enclosed, even to ourselves. And that is not good.

**When I look at your work, the same questions keep coming into my head, that Gauguin once asked, 'Where have we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?' You are also looking for those answers...**

Or rather, listening out. I have the need to live to the full and to reach deep inside me. I don't want to lose time by mindlessly following the set routes and stereotypes. That which matters is not external; it doesn't depend on material values, possessions such as a house, a car, professional success, travelling round the world and I don't know what else. One has to direct oneself inside a bit more.

This is an interesting exploratory journey, full of discoveries.

**What is the significance for you of the projects which you have done in public spaces?**

I have not done many of those. Breathe... I am still un-sated with this project, because in Kraków it was not realised as I had intended. I had intended for the slogan 'BREATHE' to appear on indicators inside buses and on mobile billboards in the railway station. I have not been completely fulfilled with that project. But Polklore in Stuttgart was a very interesting event: a commercial street in the town centre, full of shops and galleries and people carrying bags, parcels and shopping, who appeared in a trance. We succeeded in distracting them for a while. We snatched them briefly out of their everyday, mundane situation. They took notice of our unusual clothes and behaviour. They told us that we looked nice, asked where we were from and what we did. I felt that those people, on top of their daily routine, managed to notice something else. That felt good. If I had to choose between an exhibition which is a collection of my works in a gallery or an exhibition which I prepare as a site-specific presentation, I would without a doubt opt for the second possibility. I prefer such challenges. I like to have to consider a 'set' place: how people will function there, will they come, how they will react, how I will be myself in that space and so on... Sometimes, a gallery has a similar potential and it is possible to do a project in the context of a particular place. For example, the Galeria Dolna in the Bunkier Sztuki. Transformations was prepared specifically with that space in mind. One goes down the stairs, there is a chapel, in which there are tombs, it is semi-dark... On the wall, there is a fresco, often found in chapels, temples and other sacred places. And there is that special moment of descending into the underground, where there are tombs, and the moment of pausing before reemerging back to the surface. If there were a big window there, I would have never put that work in there. The interior of the Gallery and its location became a challenge for me.

**In your work, you deal with people, their psyche, identity, spirituality...**

I am learning about human beings, I am learning how to be one.

**...what is fascinating is the way that you present a problem. You show the two poles—the opposites, but not on the basis of exclusion but of complementation, co-existence and mutual inter-dependence. This multi-faceted dependence says a lot about our reality. Because we are not good or bad...**

When one looks at the overall picture, one does not differentiate between good and bad, because everything has an opposite. I think that such an overall outlook is what is frequently missing, because it is more difficult; it is easier to compartmentalise the world into my outlook—good; and all the rest—bad, and then try to shout loud enough to convince others.

**You are looking for the truth in nature, in the ordinary things, in everyday life. You perceive beauty in things which are imperfect...**

Well, what is perfect, and what is not? It is a matter of words, because that which is essential cannot be expressed. Generally, in everything what is important is the consciousness of how we breathe, what we say and what choices we make.

**If I were to describe your works using just one word, I would say: genuine. One can see in them the real person and her experience.**

Art is coming close to reality...