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## **Marzena Nowak**

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### ***Knowing and Feeling: An Enveloping Whole***

Marzena Nowak's works have an air of imprinted memories; a series of visual explorations revisiting everyday actions and gestures whose inexorable flow she attempts to oppose with a form of active resistance. The relationship between the persistence of material traces in memories and the transitory dimension of the present is central to her work. By evoking events of the past, she reconstructs their potentiality, transfiguring them in a space for reflection and mnemonic, emotional reconsideration. In this way, her practice establishes an ontology of reminiscence, shaped around operative approaches that appear to be precisely oriented in their formal rigour.

In her 2011 creations such as *Untitled (Hula Hoops)*, *Untitled (Jumping Rope)*, *Untitled (Clips)* and *Untitled (Balls)* from 2012, she presents examples of children's games — balls and jumping ropes — along with the domestic tranquillity alluded to by clothes pegs. These elements, brought into the foreground through a clear process of perceptual transformation, then change. They are transfigured from light, ephemeral and volatile objects, acquiring a statuary and immobile character through their use of metallic and heavy materials.

The interrogation posed by Nowak in these works concerns the relationship between mundane and artistic experience, and the possibility of reconciling the two in continuity, resolving these given experiences and their aesthetic responses in potential syntheses. This was a central theme for many questions posed in twentieth-century aesthetics, which found a profound philosophical response in John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. Published in 1934 as a synthesis of his thoughts on art, *Art as Experience* outlined an understanding of art as a harmonic interaction between human beings and the world, a kinship of knowing and feeling, and a balance within which diverging elements could converge into unity. According to Dewey's understanding, art allowed the human being to restore a feeling of balance between sense and action, reconciling artistic experience with the normal processes of daily living. The aesthetic moment is thus not an exception, but rather the normative features of life brought to clear evidence, and the work of art then follows the model of a complete experience by returning the impulse in a more intense, and concentrated way.

Through her artistic research, Nowak operates within a similar preoccupation, confronting the relationship between movements of the body and their meaning, with respect to a form of *making* that is connected to the experience of labour and craftsmanship. In several video works, she explores the phenomenology of affections, focusing on the rituality of bodily gestures that characterise human physicality: hugs, twirling around, hand and eye movements, and so on. With Nowak, the body seems to be an emotional seismograph — an instrument subject to the unpredictability of individual emotion, but also the normativity expressed due to social conventions. In her 2010 video *Untitled (Mizianie)*, a pair of hands makes haphazard fluttering movements against a neutral backdrop. As if in a dance, or the

symbolic representation of a dialogical rapport poised between proximity and distance, the hands seem to seek a possible harmony and, by gesturing the movement of sewing, spark memories of the artist's family and an ancient work tradition.

What emerges from the contrast between the latent metaphysical tension inherent in the overwhelming evocative power of the artist's works, and their irreducible profane essence as prosaic situations, is the completely secular and earthly dimension of Nowak's practice. Her body of work acquires the identity of a catalogue of earlier actions that have been saved from oblivion, and which can testify empathically to the way life currently unfolds in communication with the expressiveness of the body and its concretisation in space and time. Nowak seems to be seeking redemption from everyday life; with a different kind of temporality composed of care and passion for every moment of existence, her work bears witness to authentic empathy that can counter the erosion of contemporary life. This is also a theme profoundly near to Dewey's insights on art in *Art as Experience* in which he wrote "the work of art operates to deepen and to raise to great clarity, that sense of an enveloping undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience".

**Luigi Fassi**

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