

Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska

© <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5478-3336>

Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

anna.szykowska-piotrowska@cybis.asp.waw.pl

affiliated with the ACTE Institute

Sorbonne Paris 1-Pantheon

IS MAKING ART A WAY OF THINKING?

Abstract: Asking how artists think implies perceiving artists as a kind of a different species. The question may therefore provoke ambiguous reactions: from recognizing the difference between thinking in art and thinking in other domains, through a rejection of such a difference, to a total negation of the possibility to think through art. Where does the line dividing thinking about art and thinking about artists lie? Is even arguing that art can be a way to think or that it can be/does not have to be discursive still necessary? The article *Is Making Art a Way of Thinking* attempts to tackle these questions.

Keywords: artists, thinking, art

Asking how artists think implies perceiving artists as a kind of a different species. The question may therefore provoke ambiguous reactions: from recognizing the difference between thinking in art and thinking in other domains, through a rejection of such a difference, to a total negation of the possibility to think through art.

The negation of this difference may be accompanied by a reluctance to grant artists' thinking not only a special cognitive value but also, inherently, a special place in a society. What is more, such a negation does not have to be abrupt and uninformed. On the contrary, it may result from a sophisticated and subtle reasoning based on rich data. Such is the case of Catherine

Soussloff's arguments in her monograph *The Absolute Artist*.¹ Soussloff studies in detail the genre of artist biography in the Early Modern Period to move on to later conceptualizations of the artist. As she states herself, "this book locates the artist in the discourse of history".² Thus, the author turns to discourse analysis and structuralist ideas to conduct a study of how we picture artists in our societies. Therefore, Soussloff focuses rather on: HOW DO WE THINK ARTISTS THINK than HOW DO ARTISTS THINK. Yet, this move enables her to deconstruct the difference through implosion because she does not want it to become an ideal. As she claims, discourse analysis makes it possible to see intricate relations between power, institutions, knowledge and intellectuals in the ways in which we perceive and tend to think – in this instance, about art and artists. As one of the given elements, imposing itself through discourse, Soussloff immediately mentions the fact that:

1. "The artist can be separated from other categories of human beings in discourse".³

In the question: *how do artists think?* such a separation of artists from other categories of human beings takes place in the form of a presupposition that they think differently. At first glance, a category separate from other humans may seem to be an exaggeration. On the other hand, each time we use a noun to name something, it is an act of distinguishing a separate category. In this case, however, the difference does not lie in some accidental aspect but in thinking which would be used in definitions of humans as a *differentia specifica*, and hence its stronger significance.

The second aspect is even more interesting and invigorating for discussions today. What Soussloff discovers through language is what we already know but this knowledge has to be constantly reworked. There are major gaps in the history of art concerning women's stories. Different individuals, foundations and organizations⁴ have started ongoing research on women's unwritten stories but art history that stretches over whole centuries offers a challenge in filling such blank spaces. So, unsurprisingly, the study of discourse around the figure of the artist reveals the second given that imposes itself:

¹ C.Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1977.

² Soussloff, op. cit. p. 3.

³ Idem.

⁴ E.g., foundations such as AWARE, institutions such as MSN, or individuals such as Zbylut.

2. "The artist is always gendered male unless called 'the woman artist'"

This issue is complex enough in language itself. Of course, the study of works and archives of women artists is essential here. This, however, does not eliminate the linguistic problem, which, as it lies in the nature of language, reflects reality. In some languages, including Polish, efforts have been made to use inclusive language that could manifest the active role of both men and women in different spheres. Because of linguistic habits, the use of neologisms does, however, spark a lot of criticism. In the case of the artist, there is a separate word: *artystka* in Polish and therefore the use of the noun "woman" as defining the noun artist is unnecessary here. This linguistic fact could indeed result in different conceptualizations of the role of women in art than in English, where a female equivalent does not exist.

The third given uncovered by Soussloff through discourse is definitely controversial:

3. "The artist is constituted by and constitutive of discourse"

I can easily imagine my artist friends explaining to Soussloff that what they are constituted by to be artists is art and their practice, and definitely not discourse. But is that so? Is it not necessary for a concept to be perceived through language in order to exist in a society and be shaped by the dynamics of power (e.g., to be legitimized by institutions)? What would the history of art be without the concept of the artist? Who would the artist be without the history of art? The artist is created through the history of art discourse – such is Soussloff's thesis.

What she means is that from early on, starting with the Renaissance, artists' biographies were inspired by hagiographies of saints. Soussloff points out patterns that constituted the necessary elements of an artist's biography, such as: dreams, portents and unusual signs in nature even before the birth of the artist, the importance (often symbolic) of the place and time of birth and signs of talent in youth, being recognized by a renowned artist, etc. Even the death of the artist and the fate of his body mattered, not just the fate of artworks. The last pattern could be traced up until the 20th century and is not only present in visual arts but also concerns other fields of art, like music and a whole pantheon of genius composers. For example, Chopin's heart was brought to Poland after his death, following his request. One could also mention the issue of Chopin's hands, a mold of which can be seen in the Museum of Romantic Life in Paris. Meanwhile, in visual arts, the whole genre of portraiture is witness to numerous versions of memorizing artists' bodies or at least faces: self-portraits, famous portraits of an artist by another famous artist, hiding one's silhouette in mirrors, reflections, etc.

Where then does the line dividing thinking about art and thinking about artists lie? Where does art end? Maybe it is not a line but a gradient. This question is a way of evoking a definition of art. As we well know, different definitions of art have made their way into discourse about art but none of them has been eternal. Here we stumble upon the problem of the changing "nature" of art. Criteria of art and art's paradigm have not been the same throughout the centuries. We owe a thorough study of the changing definitions of the notions of art and beauty to Władysław Tatarkiewicz.⁵ Although definitions of art may differ, researchers tend to agree that a very important change took place at the turn of the 20th century as to the way art is understood and made. The boundary between art and life has been blurred since then. And yet we still seem to divide one from the other, even in the absence of a definition that would satisfy all. Maybe then there are reasons to see a difference between the way artists think through art and other ways of thinking. We all think differently and yet the expression "to think out of the box" leads us to admit that we do tend to produce certain schemes for thinking and perceiving. Staying out of the box, being able to do it, or not being able to fit into the box is often attributed to artists – not only to them, however. Children, philosophers and people who mentally do not fit the so called norm are credited with the same: thinking out of the box. Nevertheless, those groups differ in that children tend to adapt to the box with the passage of time, while people who mentally do not meet established norms are constantly challenged to do so. In the end, it is mainly philosophers and artists who produce works on the basis of being somehow unfit and hence critical and/or creative. Of course, those groups can intersect, artists can shift from accepted norms. Such a sentence sounds almost like a tautology. Is being an artist a way to socially legitimize one's incompatibility with norms, a way to claim one's uniqueness, or a compulsive necessity? It may be one thing for some and another for others. In my experience as a person of working with artists, making art and thinking through art seem to be necessities as organic as breathing. My students would not sit still but scribble during all my lectures, would pay attention to different aspects of what they saw and often be very detail-oriented.

For Jan Gostyński, a young sculptor, the question of how artists think is important in that it can lead to a practice of sensitivity on the part of the viewers by which they can get closer to a work of art created by him. According to Jan Gostyński, what also matters is the condition and the context of the artist. Apart from the internal process, there also exists external pressure. Before establishing themselves (which, alas, falls after the death of the artist at

⁵ Wł. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas*, trad. Christopher Kasparek, Springer (1980), 2011.

times), the artist has to struggle to survive: materially, socially, psychologically and creatively. Jan also compares the process of creating to a desire of a child to have something. A child does not ask whether something makes sense, he/she wants to have it, that's all. This is how Jan Gostyński describes his process: "FIRST STEP. I am driven by immense curiosity. I feel like I am conquering the cosmos. The cosmos is that area of the unknown, it is a dream, seemingly visible, but invisible, intangible. I want to find the courage to be able to go into the unknown. Sculpting for me is like lighting a fire, bringing to life. It is going out to people. Talking, engaging in dialogue, confronting, tearing apart fears and phobias. I want to explore, fight and conquer. I have a certain idea, which in the course of work "dissolves", loses strength, fades away. Suddenly it becomes sharper, more interesting, shocking. It surprises me, I must get used to it, tame it for myself. This is a kind of a self-portrait, it is born from my sub-consciousness, it arises intuitively".⁶

I asked Jan about his thinking in the process of creation, and what seemed to matter to him the most was the struggle to think form: "The creative process involves construction, creation of an indefinite form, and then its destruction, which, under the influence of emotions and self-imposed discipline, leads to its reconstruction. Imposition. Stripping away. The refinement of matter. To create something, I must first destroy something. Otherwise, it will not be a creative act, but processing. I destroy the first thought. The whole action makes a full circle. [...] In the first phase there must be a skeleton, a structure. Something that will bear weight. The most important part. The backbone. From it the dynamics will stem. It's the critical moment for the form.

The first moment is a sketch on paper. It is spontaneous. It relates to a specific event, an image, an emotion, a dream. I check different possibilities. I make sure. I anticipate. I plan. My work is based on this fantasy, a sketch is created from it. It's mostly an image of the final form. It will be more complex, spatial, and at the same time synthetic in its matter. Always different from the drawing, but this drawing is important. It is an embryo, a new stage of life of the form. I feel a strong need to actualize, to change myself in the process. Sometimes it is so that I go through different phases, however, I return to the stage of drawing, then the form is already ready. The form is sometimes sketchy, sometimes not. It is charged with my person, expression. The human hand. There comes the final moment. The transition from paper and black marker strokes into space. The battle begins".⁷

⁶ A fragment of the author's conversation with Jan Gostyński.

⁷ Idem.



1. Jan Gostyński. *Non-Humans' drawing*, 2018



2. Jan Gostyński. *Non-Humans'* drawing, 2021



3. Jan Gostyński. *The Deconstruction of Survival*' drawing, 2022



4. Jan Gostyński. *Fragment of a sculpture the Non-Humans series*, Warsaw 2021



5. Jan Gostyński. *Sculpture from the Non-Humans series*, Warsaw 2021

There is no such thing as one kind of artist, a universal or, as in Soussoff's book, an absolute version. There are different kinds of artists or rather artists choose different media. Sculptors, painters, graphic designers, media artists, performers, actors, etc., do not necessarily think in the same ways. A different way is entangled in each of these media.

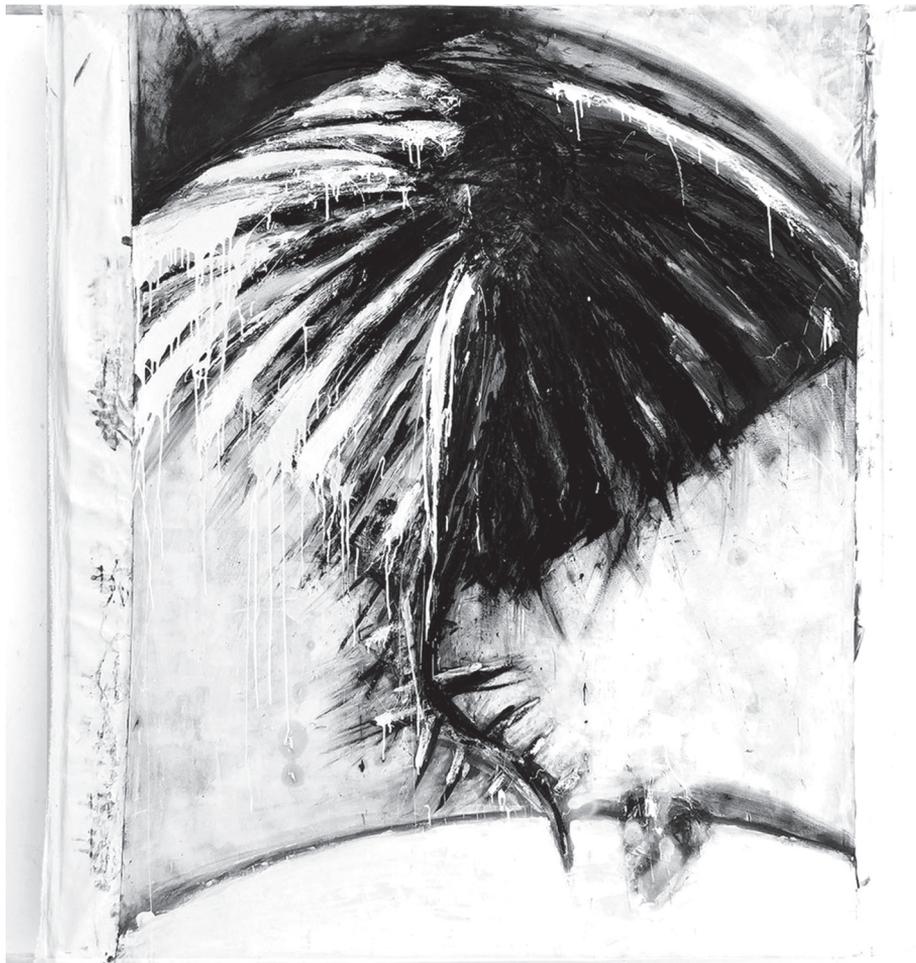
If making art is a way of thinking what does an artist think about? Forms? Problems? Agnieszka Szejewald, a young painter, explains: "The artist's thoughts are formed in the course of work, a process that is unpredictable and lively directly influences and shapes them. I know that I cannot lock myself in the rigid framework of my initial assumptions, I must surrender to what emerges on the fly in the process. A thought chases another thought. The work and the process itself shape the ideas. This is something so unpredictable, an artist thinks with every cell of their body, it's work under constant tension, where thoughts flow freely in the stream of the subconscious. If you cut yourself off from this process, you switch to the moment of a conscious analysis of the image. On the other hand, it is really hard to evaluate anything from a distance, it's a very long process that takes months as I make sure that the images can come out of the studio".⁸ What is this thinking in art comparable to? Does this description correspond to what we have in mind when we ask about thinking in art? The second sentence of Szejewald's description brings artistic thinking close to philosophical thinking and one may recall the phenomenological method here: do not lock yourself in the rigid framework of initial assumptions. Agnieszka further explains: "I try to think with images, not tools - they only serve to implement certain ideas. On a daily basis, I write down "thoughts" in the form of notes on my phone, on paper, but I also do it with a camera, a drawing, a processed photo. These are my first "thoughts" about the image. Thinking with images is completely different from what we are taught in schools, here there are no formulas to which one could try to substitute anything. Thinking requires a full, holistic view of the problems that I myself create and at the same time try to solve".⁹

⁸ A fragment of the author's conversation with Agnieszka Szejewald.

⁹ Ibidem.



1. A. Szejewald, *Hating the image*, 2021, photography



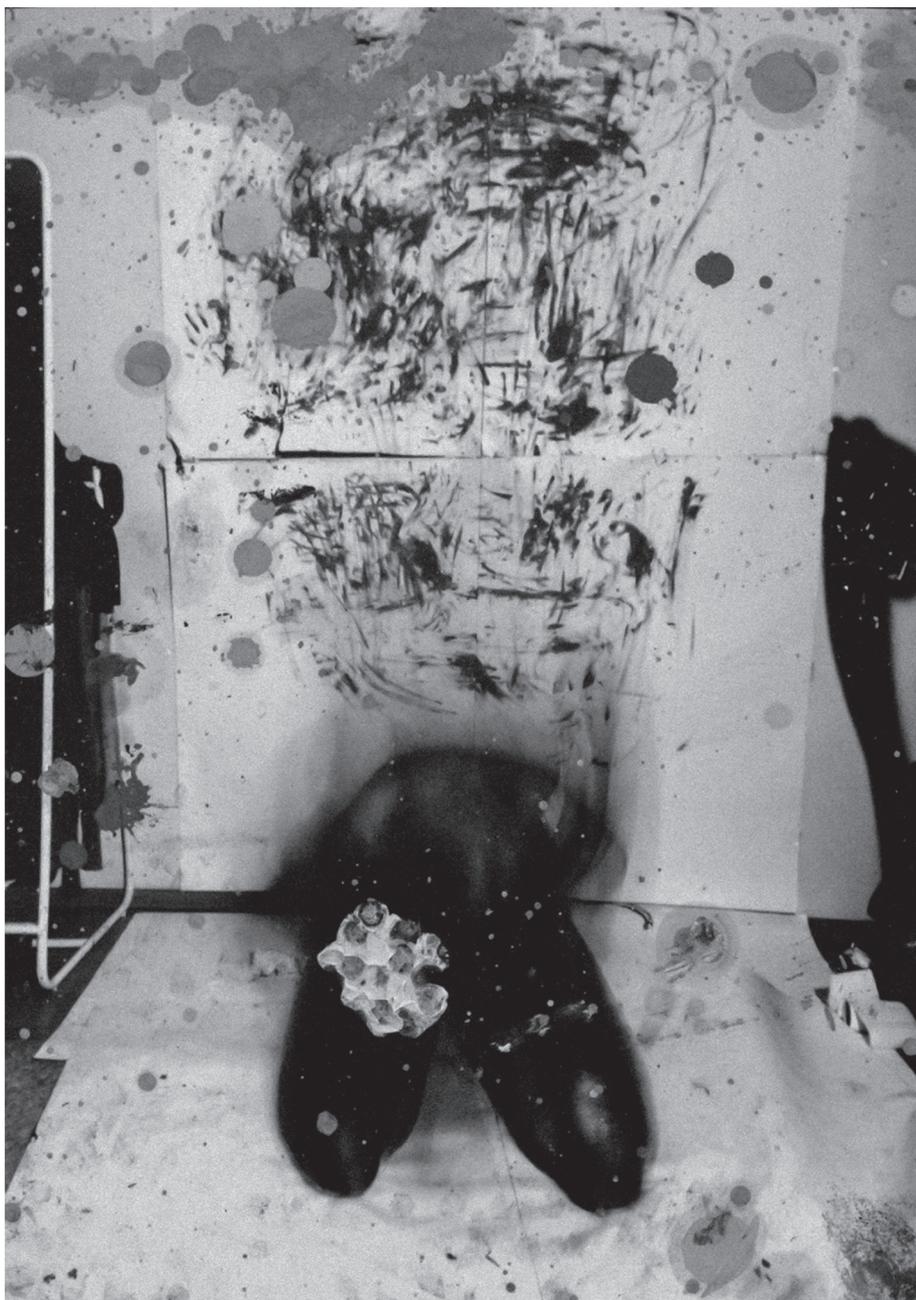
2. A. Szejewald, *Hating the image*, 2021, oil, acrylic on canvas



3. A. Szejewald, *Open the gate, bird*, 2023, oil, acrylic on canvas



4. A. Szejewald, *Mask* form the series *Open the gate, bird*, oil, acrylic on



5. A. Szejterwald, *Room I* from the series: *Hating the image*, 2021, photography

Thus, we can move on to the second reaction to the question: *how do artists think?* – recognition of the difference. As I claimed in my book *Dyrygując falom. Myślenie w wizualno-muzycznych awangardach*¹⁰ (*Conducting the waves. Thinking in visual and musical avant-gardes*), thinking about art at the beginning of the 20th century turned into thinking about art and through art, by means of art. I am not solitary in this kind of a diagnosis, although here emphasis falls on different aspects of the observed tendency in various researchers' views. Some focus on rationalizing processes, others on the senses and sensual perception, and some on problematizing that brings art close to philosophy. In his *Visual Thinking* (1969), Rudolf Arnheim stated that, for him, artistic endeavors were a way of reasoning in which perceiving and thinking become entwined. Arnheim placed main emphasis on the senses as portals of thought in certain ways equal to the brain/mind. Painters or dancers would therefore be the ones, according to Arnheim,¹¹ who think with their senses. One can perceive ideas in visual shapes. Mosche Barasch underlines the role of theory in art from the times of impressionism to the times of abstractionism by saying that if those four decades have something in common or a certain unity, which makes them come together and become a certain body of thought, it is common problems that they tackle. Problematization, rather than periodization, is at the core of modernist thinking.¹² Esther Pastory¹³ also argues that the way we think alters objects and therefore artists who make physical objects like sculptures, paintings or installations, work through their ideas by means of those. She thinks that we create objects to further our thinking, and thus the existence of objects in our lives mainly matters from the cognitive point of view. Her observations are affirmed by Jan Gostyński's description of his involvement in objects and matter: "I observe... the object that interests me meticulously... I disassemble it into individual fragments, rebuilding it, reassembling it.[...] I am very restless in this thinking of mine. I observe an object, such as a lantern, and wonder what it would be like if it came to life? I look for complexity in simple things. I put everything into doubt. I wonder about the meaning of existence. This applies to both life forms as well as utilitarian objects. For example, when I look at a form, a shape, I wonder what would happen if this thing, person, animal, phenomenon, behaved differently, as if it changed. If they changed their proportions, center of gravity, etc. I look at an object and I would like to be able

¹⁰ A.Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, *Dyrygując falom. Myślenie w wizualno-muzycznych awangardach, Słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk, 2019.

¹¹ R.Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, University of California Press, 1972.

¹² See: Mosche Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art. From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, New York University Press, New York, London 1998, pp. 7-8.

¹³ E.Pasztor, *Thinking with things. Toward a new vision of art*, Texas University Press, Austin 2005.

to freely transform it, deframe it. I like to rearrange things and shapes to my liking. Therefore, the creative process is ... without the beginning, without the end.... The creative process, including thought, does not stop. Being an artist, a sculptor, involves constantly thinking about form and how it interacts with space and vice versa".¹⁴

The third potential reaction to the question: *how do artists think?* is a total negation of the possibility to think through art. The author of the article finds it not only difficult but also pointless to focus on this type of reactions in the face of artists' testimonials. It seems that the third reaction relates to a specific understanding of art which reduces it to (at best) material aspects but possibly and mainly focuses on the decorative. The idea that artists do not think through art but rather create and produce objects is connected with the ancient definition of art as *techne*, whereby an artist is the one who has the knowledge and ability to produce a certain effect, a skill. Today we understand the semantic scope of *techne* as that of craftsmanship. One could therefore perceive this reaction as a cultural communication breakdown and argue that craftsmanship is mistaken here for art. Although the definition of art changes, as pointed out in the aforementioned monograph by Tatarkiewicz, some viewers are not as ready to adapt to it or to even consider what art is and not what they want it to be. If that is the case, the third option outlined at the beginning of the paper would not even concern the actual question the author has embarked on tackling.

Is even arguing that art can be a way to think, or that it can be/does not have to be discursive still necessary? Considering extensive research pointing to both possibilities, sceptics would still say: this or that is not art. The evidence, however, simply seems to be out there, and yet the stakes seem to have changed. For some people, including the author, thinking in art and through art is a certainty but what it is concerned with is what is at stake here.

"In re-enchanting world in which nature speaks back, the stirring tropes of demystification and enlightenment give way to new possibilities of thought and politics, rhetoric and power – what I will call 'art versus art'. What sort of art is that, you ask? Well, not to put too fine a point on it, it is certainly not ideology versus truth, nor discourse versus counter-discourse, but an art of sorcery-speak in a world gone rogue, piling on the negative sacred in which nature speaks through animate impulse and mimetic relays (...)".¹⁵

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Michael Taussig, *Mastery of the non-mastery in the age of meltdown*, The University Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2020, p. 144.

Michael Taussig expresses his conviction here that art (what he calls "art vs art") is a new possibility of thought. In fact, he sees contemporary art as a chance to re-enchant the world for nature to resurface. Art can therefore be viewed not only as a way to think through objects and processes but also a way to alter the thinking of others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rudolf Arnheim Rudolf, *Visual Thinking*, University of California Press, 1972.

Barasch Mosche, *Modern Theories of Art. From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, New York University Press, New York, London 1998.

Esther Pasztory, *Thinking with things. Toward a new vision of art*, Texas University Press, Austin 2005.

Catherine Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1977.

Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska, *Dyrygując falom. Myślenie w wizualno-muzycznych awangardach*, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk, 2019.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas*, transl. Christopher Kasparek, Springer (1980), 2011.

Michael Taussig, *Mastery of the non-mastery in the age of meltdown*, The University Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2020.

Conversations with Jan Gostyński and Agnieszka Szejterwald

CZY TWORZENIE JEST SPOSOBEM MYŚLENIA?

(streszczenie)

Pytanie o to, jak myślą artyści, implikuje postrzeganie artystów jako pewnego rodzaju odmiennego gatunku. Pytanie to może zatem wywoływać niejednoznaczne reakcje: od uznania różnicy między myśleniem w sztuce a myśleniem w innych dziedzinach, poprzez odrzucenie takiej różnicy, aż po całkowitą negację możliwości myślenia poprzez sztukę. Gdzie leży granica między myśleniem o sztuce a myśleniem o artystach? Czy w ogóle twierdzenie, że sztuka może być sposobem myślenia lub że może być/nie musi być dyskursywna, jest nadal konieczne? W artykule *Is Making Art a Way of Thinking* staram się odpowiedzieć na te pytania.

Słowa klucze: artysta, artystka, myślenie, sztuka

Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska - philosopher of culture, linguist, culture and art theoretician. She is an associate researcher at Sorbonne 1 Pantheon University (ACTE Institute), assistant professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music. She also holds lectures at Collegium Civitas.

She gained her MA degrees in philosophy and applied linguistics with a specialization in English and French interpretation at the University of Warsaw. She obtained a PhD degree in philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw.

Author of the books *After -face. Transgressing Visibility in Art and Philosophy* (Słowo / obraz terytoria 2015) and *Directing the Waves. Thinking in Visual and Musical Avant-gardes* (Słowo / obraz terytoria 2019). NCN scholarship holder, author of articles and essays on art.

She publishes her works in "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts", "Sztuka i filozofia" and "Estetyka i Krytyka".