

Rafał Solewski

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9631-9257>

Chair of Art Studies, Department of Humanities, Pedagogical University
of Krakow

rafal.solewski@up.krakow.pl

HOW TO EXPLAIN “OTHER TERMS” WISELY. A REVIEW OF THE BOOK *INNE POJĘCIA ESTETYKI [OTHER TERMS OF AESTHETICS]* BY GRZEGORZ SZTABIŃSKI¹

Grzegorz Sztabiński's book *Inne pojęcia estetyki [Other Terms of Aesthetics]*, published by the Krakow Universitas in 2020, continues and completes the theoretical work of the philosopher who had previously published *Inne idee awangardy. Wspólnota, wolność, autorytet [Other Concepts of the Avant-garde. Community, Freedom, Authority]* (Warsaw, 2011), *Dlaczego geometria? Problemy współczesnej sztuki geometrycznej [Why Geometry? Problems of Contemporary Geometric Art]* (Lodz, 2004) or *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych [Problems of Intellectualizing Art in Avant-garde Tendencies]* (Lodz, 1991). It contains texts by the philosopher, often previously published in English in the magazine “Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts” (Grzegorz Sztabiński was its editor-in-chief), changed and arranged into their own legible discourse of monographs on art and “other terms” applied to this field in contemporary aesthetics.

The monograph integrated into one discourse on art is almost a “handbook” with descriptive reminders of the traditional understanding of basic concepts in the field of aesthetics. These are, for example: beauty, identity and

¹ The author was posthumously awarded Andrzej Siemek Award 2020 for this book by “Literatura na Świecie” monthly.

autonomy of art and works of art, art media, the social role of art, artist and viewer, art criticism and curatorship, art history, the avant-garde as a concept, movement, or attitude. However, these basic aesthetic issues are nowadays treated with "other terms", which is primarily shown by the author. He chooses these "other terms" as topics taken up in discourses by various philosophers and art theorists, mainly 20th-century and contemporary ones. These are Wolfgang Iser, Richard Rorty, Georg Dickie, Jacques Rancière, Germano Celant, Clement Greenberg, Peter Bürger, Donald Kuspit and Hal Foster, just to name those who are frequently referred to. Sztabiński analyzes a given way of presenting the issue in question, only subtly evaluating it. He compiles several analyses in each separate chapter-article, gathering considerations into a clear conclusion, presenting a thesis often enriched with his own proposal.

The entire material is divided into four parts, which indicates the most important problems related to contemporary art. The texts from the first part, entitled *Freedom and the ethos of art*, consider the question whether contemporary beauty is to be eliminated and if it can be modified, and present it as the "living beauty of everyday life" (p. 28) in pragmatic action, and even in a playfully distinctive "camp" or as kitsch validated in art, when over-aestheticized ironic distance and pluralism replace ethics in everyday life. In view of the multiplication of crises ("post-crises") characteristic of contemporary art, Sztabiński suggests the answer: an artist faithful to an individually adopted moral code (p. 53). This may consist in accepting tradition as an obligation (p. 67). Such an obligation could be "anliberalization" (the author's own concept based on "anesthetics"), used in art to show how freedom is lost in political correctness. Responsibility in explanation (not adding contexts) should, on the other hand, apply to curators-selectors who have now taken the role of critics. Criticism of "judges" who normatively judge art or of (supporting) poets is disappearing.

The second part, *Historicity and art*, begins with the philosopher's admission that the time of macro-narratives, especially those of history, is over, while micro-narratives still serve art, the value of which is established in a given, present context. However, the quotation of old art, typical of contemporary practices, is then, as the place where images meet, an insertion into the history of art. It is characteristic of today's times to strive to "anticipate novelty" and to be more than up-to-date, enhancing and cultivating immature aggressiveness. This has replaced the previous, long-lasting allergy to actuality and the affirmation of what is unchanging and eternal. A model "masterpiece", other than a contemporary "open work" with temporary meanings, was assumed to be such. Sztabiński himself believed that "no work is timeless but, because of its role in history, it exceeds actuality" (p. 125). A contemporary alternative to linear-vertical historical discourse is not only a critical perspective of the Other, but also a synchronous horizontal frame organizing movement from one pro-

blem to another and local research (such as in the “ethnographic turn”). The artist then becomes a “rapporteur”. Artists document even thoughts and finally participate in information networks, interfering with facts. The philosopher suggests a place for historicism in bringing discourse on art closer to literary narration. He also believes that the postmodern metaphor of spectres in reflection on art leads to the questions: “to which part of us can we relate the individual components and aspects of what is inherited?” and “is heritage finite ... does history promise us a future?” (p. 193).

In the third part, *Convergence, participation and the problem of identity in art*, the blurring of the boundary between creators and recipients, resulting from possibilities offered by digital mass media, is considered as stimulating a democratic “bottom-up” culture, crossing boundaries between media and between domains. However, it is removing axiological standards, because individual identity and value are often determined only by the price. Hence, selecting, publishing and makeshift reassembling in a critical remix culture can completely alter the culture. Since the recipient has become a participant in an artistic event and its co-creator (e.g. in broadly understood social art), it is reasonable to perceive art and reality through aesthetics and evaluate them with the use of ethical norms. Reflecting on values, the question arises whether deconstructing the universalism of avant-garde tendencies, emphasizing the role of individuality and specific times, does not result from simplified understanding of the avant-garde (pp. 278-279).

Part four: *Art. Autonomy, theory, spectre* begins with the defence of the autonomy of art, which the philosopher proposes to treat not “as the goal of art, but as a condition of creativity” (p. 307). Meeting this condition allows the artist “not to be used”, also when they are socially involved. Meanwhile, avant-garde values persist in pedagogical practice, in “theorism” (Sztabiński's term for “reflecting on art itself in art”, p. 322) and, finally, in the postmodern inclusion of art in the world of discourses, which may reveal the avant-garde perspective after the avant-garde. Assessing contemporary attempts at “direct communication” with the use of art, the author recognizes that focus on the *signifier* and a reflection on the relationship of the language system with freedom have led to a transmutation of the world into messages and the body into sentence equivalents, possibly close to “primary communication”. However, the “simulacral” removal of the reference object gives an illusory impression of directness. On the other hand, treating works as endowed with dignity leads to similar treatment of art as a domain. The concept of art even “ghostly” visiting reality, “not early”, but equipped with history and works, means preserving the idea of art as such and aesthetics as a reflection on it (p. 355). Observation of the 20th-century “transition” from creating works to getting to know and considering what art is, and the contemporary situation in which “art can be

whatever artists and patrons wish" (p. 368), leads to the final conclusion. First, Sztabiński presents another idea of his own: the use of the domino pattern, i.e. establishing compliance with the definition of art on the basis of contiguity of several components and the possibility of expanding the definition. Ultimately, the philosopher recognizes that today the term "art" has an integrating function, allows various phenomena to be incorporated and lets different participants "coexist within art".

It is admirable to learn about a large number of authors and texts, often difficult and controversial ones (the philosopher wrote about a multitude of contemporary concepts and terms in the introduction). It was also a challenge to make a choice based on clear values among this abundance. However, Grzegorz Sztabiński found beauty, social good, the person and relationship with the Other, dialogue, responsibility, dignity, work (especially intellectual), understanding, heritage, history, truth and freedom as values present in contemporary art and reflection on art. Art itself and aesthetics, as well as criticism as a domain, the work of art and the artist, are also tools and ways of revealing the values that the philosopher sought and found within contemporary understanding and definitions. It is these clear values that determined the choices of the philosopher. The greatest advantage of Grzegorz Sztabiński's book, next to erudition, readability of individual arguments and a comprehensive discourse, is finding values among reflections that may be considered controversial or even destructive, and therefore rejected. In his insightful analyses, presented synthetically and often explaining what the abused terms really mean, Sztabiński saw, however, what is non-superficial, sometimes hidden, and precisely most important. By objectively observing changes in art and the world, and understanding their causes, he sometimes tried to predict the course of future events. He presented his own and others' views in a subtle way, accurately pointing to the meaning and sense, less often to its lack. Perhaps that is why Władysław Stróżewski once said that Sztabiński was interesting and sensible. Wisely explaining what is different and other, using various theoretical tools correctly and with sensitivity, the researcher from Lodz also put signposts among the excess of concepts, discourses and terms. It is a pity that Grzegorz Sztabiński – a philosopher, theoretician, historian and, most recently, an artist with great understanding of art and aesthetics, died in 2020, just before the publication of his last book.

Grzegorz Sztabiński, *Inne pojęcia estetyki*, Universitas, Kraków 2020.

Rafał Solewski – assistant professor at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, Department of Humanities, Chair of Art Studies. Author of the books: *Umiar i namiętność. Życie i sztuka Janusza Orbitowskiego / Moderation and Passion. The Life and Art of Janusz Orbitowski*, Kraków 2019; *Wypatrując. Idea człowieczeństwa i hermeneutyka tożsamości osobowej we współczesnych sztukach wizualnych [Watching Out. The Idea of Humanity and Hermeneutics of Personal Identity in Contemporary Visual Arts]* (2016); *Viatoris. Który pokonuje drogę. Ponoroczesny romantyzm Piotra Jargusza [Viatoris, one who travels the road. Postmodern romanticism of Piotr Jargusz]* (2016); *SKrytość piękna. Idealizm i problem tożsamości w sztukach wizualnych na przełomie XX i XXI wieku [The Secretiveness of Beauty. Idealism and the Problem of Identity in Visual Arts at the Turn of the 21st Century]* (2015); *Synteza i wypowiedź. Poezja i filozofia w sztukach wizualnych na przełomie XX i XXI wieku [Synthesis and Utterance. Poetry and Philosophy in Visual Art at the Turn of the 21st Century]* (2007); *Franciszek Mączyński (1874-1947) krakowski architekt [Franciszek Mączyński (1874-1974). A Cracovian Architect]* (2005). He also published numerous articles in “Estetyka i Krytyka”, “Kwartalnik Filozoficzny”, “Art Inquiry”, exhibition catalogues and conference materials.