

# Neurotheology and conceptual art

Ramute Rachleviciute

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Audrius V. Plioplys—physician, scientist and artist. For thirty years besides pursuing his primary occupation, as a scientist, he has been a very active member of the art world. Although we read about him in Iseivijos Daile (Art of the Diaspora), it was only this fall that the Lithuanian art world and general public could become better acquainted with him and his work. Plioplys came to Lithuania and exhibited his newest works at the Akademija gallery in Vilnius, and at the Monkute-Marks Museum in Kedainiai. His art work showed clearly that he is no Sunday painter, amateur, working on weekends. Plioplys' art is without a doubt professional. This fall he also participated in the Tallinn graphics triennial. Recently the Vilnius Academy of Art published his book about Ciurlionis. It must be recognized that in the Lithuanian cultural community there is no one with such broad abilities and talents.

Audrius V. Plioplys speaks and writes perfectly in Lithuanian, although he answered these questions in English.

*Tell me about your childhood, parents, dreams...*

I was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. My parents, immigrants from Lithuania, firmly believed that life in Canada was temporary and that they would quickly move back. Year after year passed, and migration back never took place. In the mean time, I was raised in a totally traditional Lithuanian household, where life outside was to be shunned. When I started attending school, I did not speak a word of English. I vividly remember that first day of school, the total sense of bewilderment, and the flood of tears that I produced.

My childhood was one of displacement. I lived and went to school in Toronto, but in my house, I was in another country, in another time period. I belonged to neither place. Not being attached to location, provided the opportunity for abstract thought to grow and develop. Perhaps it is not surprising that I have interests in theoretical pursuits such as physics, neurobiology and conceptual art.

*Can you explain your scientific and medical career? Where there periods of time when you were fully devoted to science?*

As a child neurologist and research neuroscientist, my medical and scientific work has concentrated on trying to understand how the brain is formed and how it functions, particularly in cognitive realms, at the level of the cerebral cortex. I have tried to find causes and cures for cognitive disorders: from learning disabilities and autism in children, to Alzheimer's disease in the elderly.

After graduating from medical school at the University of Chicago in 1975, and completing my internal medicine internship at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I worked as a full-time artist for three years. My works were primarily mixed-media sculptures and installation pieces. Amongst these works were pieces that dealt with the thought process.

Subsequently, I pursued residency training in neurology at the Mayo Clinic. My artistic efforts continued as outdoor and thought-related works.

As a staff neurologist and neuroscientist at the University of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children in Ontario, Canada, my art evolved into a total concentration on visual investigations of the thought process. Upon moving back to Chicago fourteen years ago, I further elaborated these visual and photographic metaphors.

*Could you please briefly comment about neurobiology? Why did this area attract you and affect your art work?*

Over 100 years ago, Santiago Ramon y Cajal, a Spanish neuroanatomist published landmark studies about the neuronal fine structure of the human cerebral cortex. He discovered the neuronal nature of the brain, and defined it. For these accomplishments he was awarded the 1906 Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine.

From neuronal complexity thoughts, words, and creativity emerge.

In this series of works, the underlying images are all previous photographic pieces that I have shown in exhibits across the United States, and internationally. Cajal's drawings were superimposed and then subtracted from the surrounding color, revealing deeper layers of underlying photographs. The neuronal arborisations divulge artistic memories, artistic processes and creative thoughts.

*Could you explain about the drawings by Cajal and how they play a role in your art work?*

The choice of Cajal's drawings was based purely on aesthetic grounds. In using these drawings, I substantially modify the originals, thus they are a blend of Cajal and Plioplys. As far as the underlying photograph is concerned, I choose it based on ideas and concepts that I want to incorporate in the art work.

*In 2000, in your art catalogue "Neurotheology" you wrote, "From neuronal complexity arises theology. FROM CHRIST TO CAJAL. From the 2000'th anniversary of the birth of Christ to the 100'th anniversary of Santiago Ramon y Cajal's publications on the neuronal complexity of the human cerebral cortex." Could you share some of your thoughts?*

I was raised as a Christian and went to primary and secondary Roman Catholic schools. The Catholic religious education was dogmatic, restrictive and I eventually decided, abhorrent. I rebelled and completely left the church when I was 16 years old. I felt that true religion, true spirituality, is contained in the creation that God has given us, and which surrounds us. There is much more spirituality to be found in a nuclear physics textbook (where the nature of God's creation is being studied and appreciated) than in a Baltimore catechism.

*Are you interested in religious architecture or artefacts? Have you participated in religious art exhibits?*

During my recent trip to Vilnius, I took many photographs of church architecture. However, what I photographed, were the old ruined portions of the churches, prior to renovation. In general, I am not interest in religious artefacts, and I have not participated in religious art exhibits.

*What is your work schedule? What do you do during the work week and on weekends?*

I work during the day, evenings, weekends—as much as possible. There have been several weeks where I could only allow myself 2 to 3 hours of sleep a night—the art work must be completed!

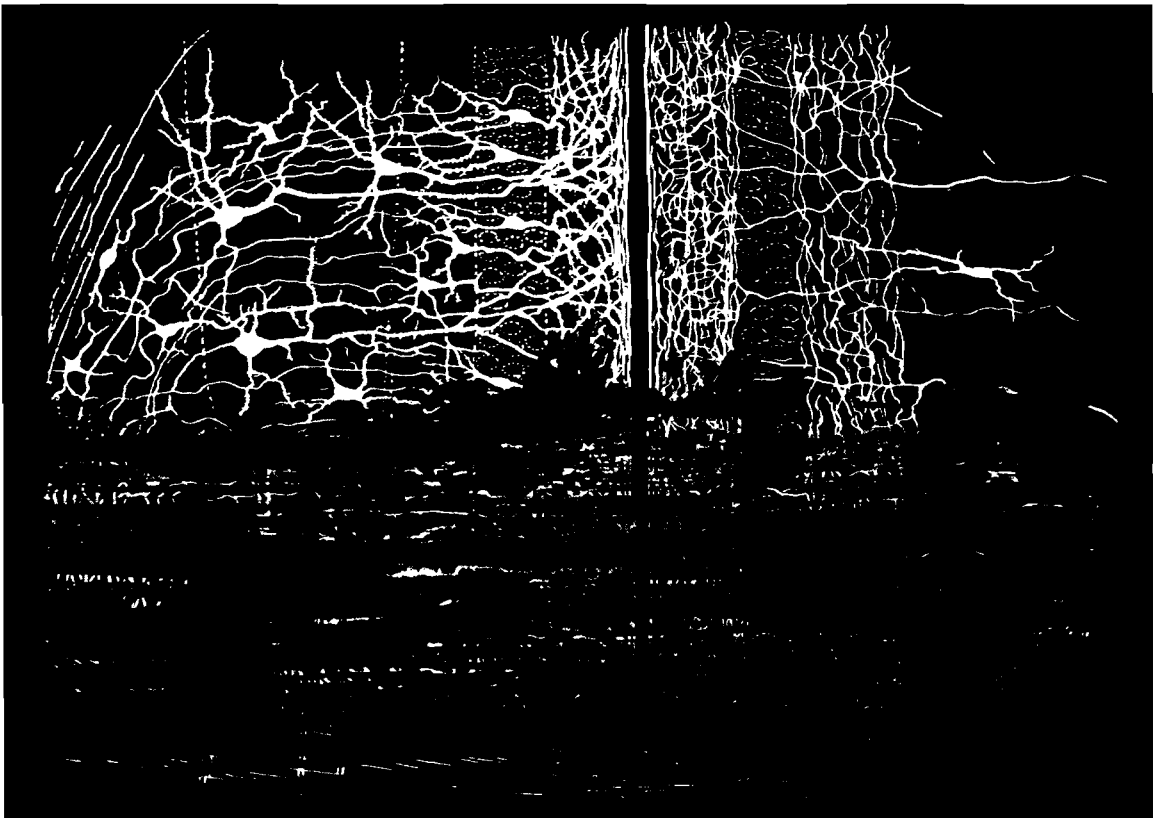
This past year has been an extremely busy one—a very large number of exhibits. Preparing for exhibits, packing and transporting the works, installing them, and then taking the shows down, consumes a tremendous amount of time. Thus, this past year has been very productive as far as the number of shows, but very little progress has been made with new series of art works.

*What do you think about modernism and post-modernism? Do these areas of art exist for you as an artist or as a viewer?*

I do not separate art into epochs—art historians do. I have not found labels to be helpful in appreciating art. Furthermore, when I look at art, I cannot separate myself into a viewer or an artist—I am one the same person. I enjoy certain pieces, certain artists, spanning many centuries.

*Which artists, artistic styles do you admire?*

Last week I returned from a trip to New York City, where I visited my favourite museums, and art galleries. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has recently opened an addition in which are displayed some of their most famous art works. I was stunned to see six paintings by Vermeer, all side-by-side, on one wall. I had just visited the Frick Collection



Northern White Threat II, Audrius V. Plioplys, 2004. Archival digital print on canvas, 54" x 72"

where there are three paintings by Vermeer on display. To see nine Vermeer originals, in a few hours time, was amazing. As you see, I very much enjoy the work of Vermeer.

I enjoy individual art pieces from all time periods—from the oldest cave drawings to the most recent contemporary works. It all depends on the piece itself.

As far as contemporary artists are concerned, my fascination and interest has changed over time. From my current perspective there is one artist that I consider to be the best one of this past century: Barnett Newmann. His works are pure spirituality on canvas: elegant beauty, deep philosophy, with a profound sense of peace and tranquility. It was extremely appropriate that he was commissioned to paint his "Stations of the Cross" to fill the interior of a chapel.

*Have works of literature had an influence on your art work? Do you have time to read novels?*

The strongest influences in my art work were literary, not artistic. I have always approached my work from a conceptual perspective. Ideas and concepts are of paramount importance and these have appeared in literature much more frequently than in visual art. The authors that I have admired the most are Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Samuel Beckett. In the late 1970's I made a series of mirror portraits of these authors, on a black background. All of these hang in the entrance way of our home. By looking at the portraits, at the authors, you literally see yourself.

I even corresponded with Samuel Beckett in the late 1970's, in trying to do a collaborative installation piece. At the time I was working with installations of doors and windows, and accompanying audio systems. I thought that a text, authored by Beckett, would be an interesting amplification of my ongoing work. He also agreed, but due to prior work commitments, he could not start a new project. (My own impression is that indeed Beckett took my suggestions to heart, and that some of his last plays incorporate purely audio taped sounds with no characters on the stage—exactly what I had proposed to him.)

*Which personal or group exhibits are the most memorable, and why?*

Of course, my first solo exhibit at the Washington Project for the Arts, in Washington, D.C., is very memorable. The more recent exhibits at Flatfile Galleries in Chicago, Akademija Gallery in Vilnius, and the Tallinn triennial in Estonia, all have been elegant and beautiful displays of my work. One exhibit of considerable honour to me took place this summer at the University of Wisconsin art galleries in Madison, Wisconsin. In the 1920's a benefactor gave a large sum of money to establish the gallery, and also provided funds to maintain it forever in the future. However, there was one stipulation to his gift: all exhibits in the galleries are to be decided upon by a committee of fine art students studying at the University. There is to be no input from faculty, administration, nor from the government. To be invited by a group of energetic, intelligent, young students was an incredible honour.

*Could you please explain the technical aspects of your work? What importance does technology have in your work?*

Technically the works are on canvas, printed using a Hewlett Packard 5500 plotter. Archival quality inks and canvas were used. Using the HP plotter, which only became available six months ago, I was able to increase the sizes of the individual pieces to 54 X 72 inches, and 54 X 144 inches.

When I conceptualized the first sequence of works, "Neurotheology," in 1999, my intention was to have the works printed on canvas. When I started my art career 30 years ago, I painted oil paintings on canvas. I thought that it was time to return to my origins. The actual images were all processed by me using Adobe Photoshop. In 1999 there were no commercial printers available to do what I wanted. I sought out a print shop that manufactured billboards for outdoor display. The inks that were used would survive several years of direct sunlight exposure, along with rain, snow and tremendous temperature variations. Steve Grant agreed to print my first sequence using his commercial billboard sign printers. It was only two years later, in 2001, that Epson produced the 10,000 printer. I used this printer for the first sequence of "Thoughts from Under a Rock." Then, when the HP 5500 became available, I switched to using it because the size of the pieces could be increased, and the colors would be more vivid and more intense. Thus, historically speaking, I was the first person, anywhere, to use ink jet printers to produce large scale art works on canvas.

I am not mesmerized by technology, and I do not use tools simply because they are new. Keeping up with technology, if it is of relevance to your art work, is important. Perhaps this comes from my background in science and medicine. To be a successful scientist or physician you must keep up with all of the latest developments in your field.

*What does Ciurlionis mean to you? How did you discover him? Could you explain the period of your life devoted to the study of Ciurlionis—it appears that it has culminated in the publication of your book by the Vilnius Academy of Art publishing house? Can we expect a further volume? What are your future plans—are you collecting information, writing articles?*

I grew up in a Lithuanian household where the name of Ciurlionis was frequently mentioned. I thought this was simply another nostalgic manifestation of longing for the homeland. When the first folios of Ciurlionis's works were published, and I saw them in the late 1960's—I was mesmerized. I knew that I would have to do a more deep analysis of Ciurlionis's accomplishments at some time. When I left the world of medicine, and I spent three years creating art full-time, that is exactly what I did. I studied Ciurlionis, and published a series of articles which included a number of important discoveries. The book that was recently published, Ciurlionis: Mintys / Thoughts, is a compilation, in English and Lithuanian, of these articles. I do not have any plans to continue further investigations of Ciurlionis.

In August, 2004, I had the opportunity of visiting the M. K. Ciurlionis Museum in Kaunas. The current display of his works is truly magnificent. They speak to me in the same way they spoke to me when I first saw them in reproduction folios. They reveal a magical, mystical world which underlies our own very existence—which is intertwined with our daily lives. If only we would allow ourselves to see it, if only we would allow ourselves to feel it.

*What do you think of art criticism? Are evaluations important to you? Do you have any favourite art critics, art historians?*

Jasper Johns made an impressive mixed media piece, fairly small (about 4 by 8 inches in size) entitled „The critic sees“. This is a ceramic piece, with the appearance of a brick, consisting of a pair of eye glasses. In each of the lenses is an open mouth speaking.

Certainly, I enjoy critical comments as long as they are favourable. I have two art critics close to my heart, both of whom wrote the very thorough evaluations of my art work: Ingrida Korsakaite and Jurgita Pociute.

*What do you think of the book Iseivijos Daile (Art of the Diaspora)?*

This is an excellent book, well written. However, the information contained in it is fairly old. For example, the discussion of my art works dates from the late 1980's (the book was published in 2003). Nevertheless, as an art historical document, it is very good. I especially enjoyed reading the chapter about Jurgis Maciunas and Fluxus.

*Do you have any hobbies?*

I enjoy my automobiles. I have a 1961 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud II (a most impressive „proper motor vehicle“), a 1983 Porsche 911 Carrera cabriolet and a 1972 Porsche 914. Two years ago I decided to use the 914 for auto racing. I equipped the vehicle with all of the necessary safety features (roll bar, 6-point harness belts, fire extinguisher, etc.) and have been racing it at Porsche Club of America events. I also enjoy Lithuanian numismatics. I collect coins of the Lithuanian grand dukes, and Lithuanian paper currency from the 1920's.

*What does Lithuania mean to you? Do you feel that you are an American, a Canadian?*

As my dear wife has heard me say many times, I am half-Japanese, half-Italian, half-Greek, half-Jewish, half-French, etc. Thus, I am also half-American, half-Canadian and half-Lithuanian. Since I don't belong anywhere, I actually belong everywhere.

Lithuania is the country of the origin of my parents, in whose culture I was raised. Canada is the country of my birth, the orderly, polite and peaceful nature of which is part of my soul. America is the country in which I work and live, the country that provides the greatest opportunities for those who are willing to work and assert themselves. All of these countries are truly dear to me. I am a part of all of them, and they are a part of me.