



THE COLORFUL THOUGHTS OF AUDRIUS PLIOPLYS

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Translated from Lithuanian by Ramutė Plioplys

We first learned of Audrius Plioplys in Lithuania in 1978 when Literatūra ir Menas (Literature and Art) reprinted his articles published in the American press about the exhibits of M. K. Čiurlionis's paintings in Paris (1910) and in London (1912). V. Landsbergis, in reviewing these articles, favorably evaluated the efforts of the young enthusiast in tracking down biographic data of Čiurlionis's artistic life, which were at that time very difficult for art historians in Lithuania to obtain. Plioplys has continued writing articles and giving lectures about Čiurlionis's art in the West, about his relationship to abstract art and mythology, and the influence he had upon his contemporaries. This is but one aspect of Plioplys's varied and fruitful activities.

His interest in a great diversity of subjects and his fascination with representations of fleeting time stimulate both Plioplys's artistic imagination and his passion for collecting. In his home in Chicago you can find a fragment of cloth from an Egyptian mummy, acquired from the British Museum, a Babylonian clay tablet with an inscription detailing a man's purchase of a gazelle, Mayan pottery heads, Roman coins, coins of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Algirdas, daguerreotypes and

hand-painted antique maps. All of these privately collected museum artifacts strangely connect the everyday existence of their owner to distant epochs and civilizations. Searching for a personal connection with the past, Plioplys values highly an historic photograph of the Czar's army, taken at the time of the Russo-Japanese war, because his grandfather had fought in that war front.

The interrelationship between these distant spatial and temporal points gains substance in Plioplys's artistic endeavors and defines one of the tendencies found in his conceptual art. "In my own work I not only pause to reflect, contemplate and document the passage of time, but also to exalt the human spirit which steps forward, walks into confrontation with its own and societal inflicted limitations, in an attempt to conquer time," wrote Plioplys.

He is a practicing neurologist successfully working with mentally disabled children. He never formally studied art but very early during his education he linked an essential part of his life to art. Starting with metaphoric surrealistic paintings, he quickly moved on to an intellectual and analytic artistic expression.

In an attempt to bring back the past, to preserve



Homage to the Sun
June 11, 1980; Cornwallis Island, Canada

historic memory, Plioplys photographed the present day sites of pavilions which had stood during the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Fleeting visions experienced while in nature and impressions of his surroundings were embodied in four small photographic booklets entitled "Walks". The booklet Walk, Midnight, June 17, 1980, is composed of photographs taken on an island beyond the Arctic Circle in a small Eskimo settlement called Grise Fjord. More of Plioplys's artistic works are closely connected with the North.

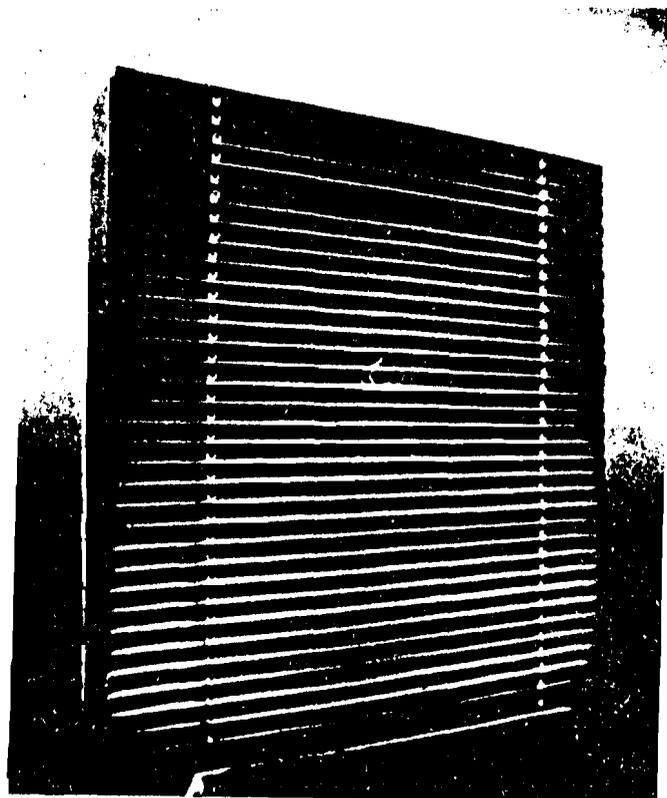
A long journey on the brilliant frozen Arctic Ocean expanse temporarily blinded him. When he regained his sight, he etched out by walking a large, approximately 10 meter wide, circle into the stoney Northern earth. He entitled this work "Homage to the Sun." It was June, the summer solstice was approaching, the sun was continuously circling in the sky above and its path was echoed in this man-made circle (a fragment of this piece has survived in a photograph). During that same Northern June midnight, Plioplys placed seven rocks and created "Time Line" in which individual rocks were transformed into a unified whole by their interconnected cast shadows. There is something archaic in these works of art, perhaps a bond with the primitive Eskimo way of life or with mythologic beliefs.

Plioplys is the creator of art works called "Displacements": he transported a stone from one island to another, about 1,000 kilometers away; he cast a stone from the High Arctic into a lake very many kilometers

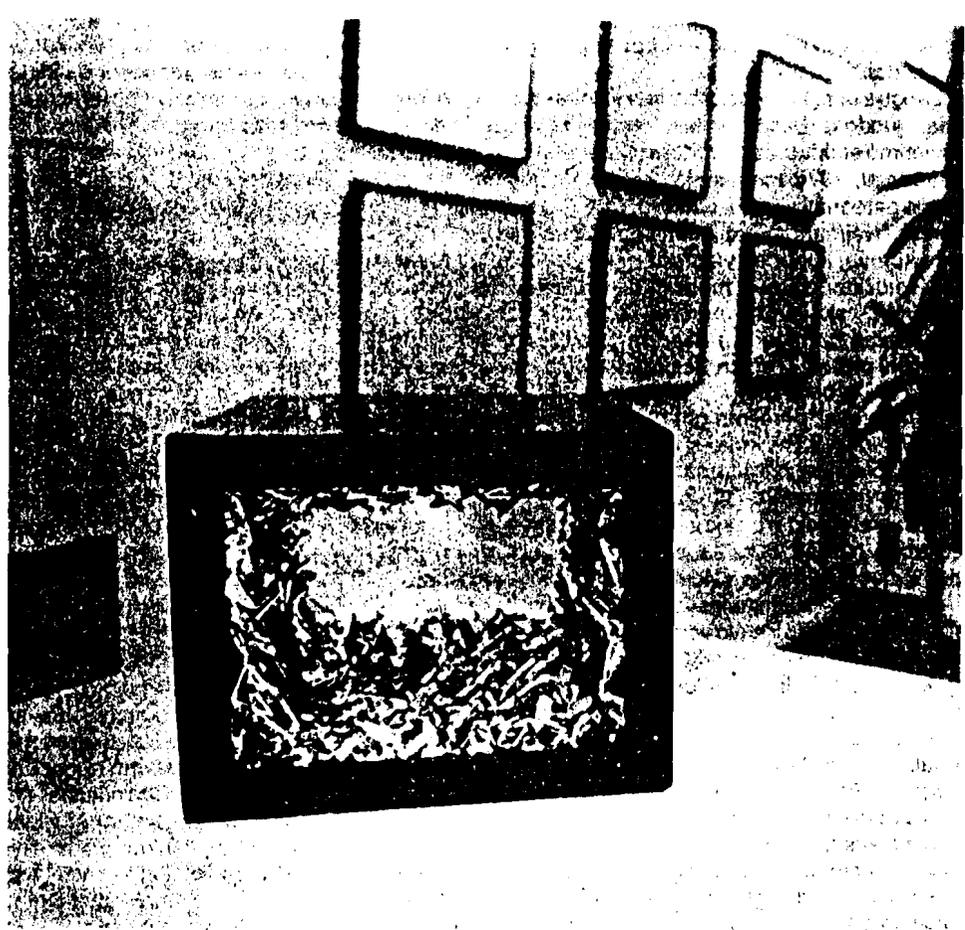
to the South. These works of art have a personal metaphoric meaning for the artist. Having been born and raised in North America (he was born in Toronto in 1951), Plioplys himself feels "displaced," not having cleansed himself of the label DP (displaced person) given to World War II refugees. His father, born in Pilviškiai, and his mother from Plungė, raised their children as Lithuanians. Many in Vilnius are familiar with Audrius's sister, Ramutė, who has visited here many times, and who spends her free time in Chicago, after her bookkeeping job, writing a scholarly work on Lithuanian linguistics.

While working at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Plioplys "displaced" a bit of ancient Lithuanian culture. He brought a huge pile of rocks to a marsh and described this conceptual art work, which evoked archeologic references, thus: "Quarry Hill, Rochester, Minnesota, June 25, 1981. Rocks arranged in the water according to ancient Lithuanian grave excavations (P. Kulikauskas, Lietuvos Archeologijos Bruožai [Lithuanian Archeological Traits], Vilnius, 1961)." Several photographs of this work were published in Metmenys (1982, nr. 43, pp. 89-91).

These pieces of Plioplys are related to the American offshoot of conceptualism - Land Art, which was developed in the seventies by such artists as Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim and others. They were dissatisfied with museum halls. They were drawn to larger spaces, distant and unpopulated places, where they could create their anti-museum, anti-commercial art without restrictions



Boxed Window
Mixed media construction; 1977



Boxed Mirror
Mixed media construction; 1977
Dolly Fiterman Gallery
Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 1980

and in complete freedom. It is precisely this, the romantic feeling of expanses and timelessness, the use of naturally occurring objects, the expressiveness of the natural, which is intrinsic to Plioplys's art work. It is true that this Lithuanian artist is more restrained in comparison to the gigantic scale of most Land Art artists. However, one can see the scope of immensity of the Land Art genre in the uncountable kilometers of his "displacements" and in the implied passage of centuries. He is concerned less with general societal and ecological problems, but much more with the philosophical question of man's place in nature and history. Plioplys's personal exhibits entitled "Displacements: Temporal and Geographic" took place in Minneapolis (1982) and Montreal (1987).

A separate category of his earlier works is that of minimalistic three dimensional structures, which he has called "objects of transition," or more simply - doors and windows. The artist also gives these objects symbolic and metaphoric meanings. The archetypal door and window motif represents the transition from one place or state of being into another: the opposition between self and other, between the known and the unknown, between closed and open spaces. Interpreting the archetypal motif in a modernistic way, Plioplys emphasizes the meaning and significance of looking to the future, of hopes and aspirations and their realizations, of defining various possibilities and impossibilities (blocked doors, hermetically sealed mirrored windows). When speaking of this he mentions

F. Kafka's egzistentialism and states that literature and philosophic thought (Kafka, Beckett, Dostojevski) have had greater influence upon his art than works of visual art.

For his window and door compositions, the artist uses mirrored glass, the contrasts of black, white and silver colors, and special lighting effects. One can feel certain reverberations of kinetic art. These works, exhibited in 1978 in Washington, D.C., in Plioplys's first individual show, attracted the attention of American critics. "There's no convenient way to describe these experimental, strange black works which use mirrors and lights to create moods ranging from melancholic to frantic. They call forth loneliness, pain, confusion, isolation, and occasionally, an eerie serenity...Plioplys, an M.D., has a metaphysical mind," appeared in the Washington newspaper What's Up in Art? (April, 1978).

For one of his "objects of transition" installation pieces, Plioplys had conceived of a S. Beckett play without actors. He sent Beckett his proposal of a collaboration in which the author would write a dramatic text for audio tape recording. By themselves, sound, light, and sculptural objects would create a theater of the absurd. It is unfortunate but at that time Beckett wrote that he was very busy and could not collaborate. However, later, he himself wrote several plays in which actors were no longer necessary.

The artist used intact and broken mirrors, and their shards, in his mirrored books ("Book of Sympathy", "Book of Six Concealed Mirrors", "Book of Entrapment"

and others), in which the images of a shattered and deformed world are interreflected. However, books that are more representative of Plioplys's work were created using photocopying methods. Here he makes use of the conceptualists' favorite means of verbal expression (recall J. Kosuth's "books"). In a visual format, the verbalized concept of the work is presented in a written form. In Plioplys's Book of Meaning, the word "meaning" slowly emerges, then just as slowly it vanishes, becoming just a mass of dots. This work was originally exhibited in an avantgarde art gallery in Washington, D.C. (Washington Project for the Arts). The individual pages of the book, hung in a black room, were accompanied by the word "meaning" constantly repeated from an audio tape and the image of the same word flashing in the gallery's window. The Book of Meaning, as a process, was filmed and a five minute videotape was produced. "Meaning is the principal motto in A. Plioplys's artistic work," wrote V. Vengris at the very beginning of the artist's creative endeavors ("Between Art and Medicine", Draugas, August 19, 1978).

The conceptualists' declared principles of the universality of the language of art, the analysis of the limits of art, using "self" as the subject and the verbal attestation of one's own existence as being completely sufficient for the work of art are notable in Plioplys's works such as Book of I and Book of Self. Here, as in the mirrored works, the artist does not negate certain narcissistic elements in his art.

In Book of Mythology and Book of Faith, the artist analyzes the fundamental cultural precepts of mankind - myth and religion. Plioplys states that he is not religious, that he cannot accept the dictates of the Church, which constrain his individuality and creativity. He has also attempted purely linguistic, poetic works, having written fifty experimental poems in a collection entitled Žodžiai (Words). Several of these were published in Metmenys (1982, nr. 43, pp. 83-85), though they did not appear as a separate book. Plioplys attempts to transform even his scholarly publications on brain activity, Down's syndrome and other studies, into visual works of art. The articles, framed as pictures and hung on the walls, acquire a new quality, expressed with new titles: "Elaborate Thoughts", "Insightful Thoughts", "Evocative Thoughts" (all 1989).

Utilizing sculpturally expressive materials and electrical lighting, both natural and man-made objects, symbols of earth and culture, photographic and photocopying techniques, Plioplys has found, both for his individuality and for his professional medical experience, the most satisfactory format and theme for his creative works. He yearned to represent thinking itself, to visually depict the very process of thought. In 1980, while working at the Mayo Clinic, he made approximately twenty electroencephalograms of himself thinking about various artistic topics ("Thinking About the Significance of Contemporary Art", "Thinking About Vermeer", "Thinking About Michelangelo", "Thinking About Rembrandt", "Thinking About Ciurlionis",

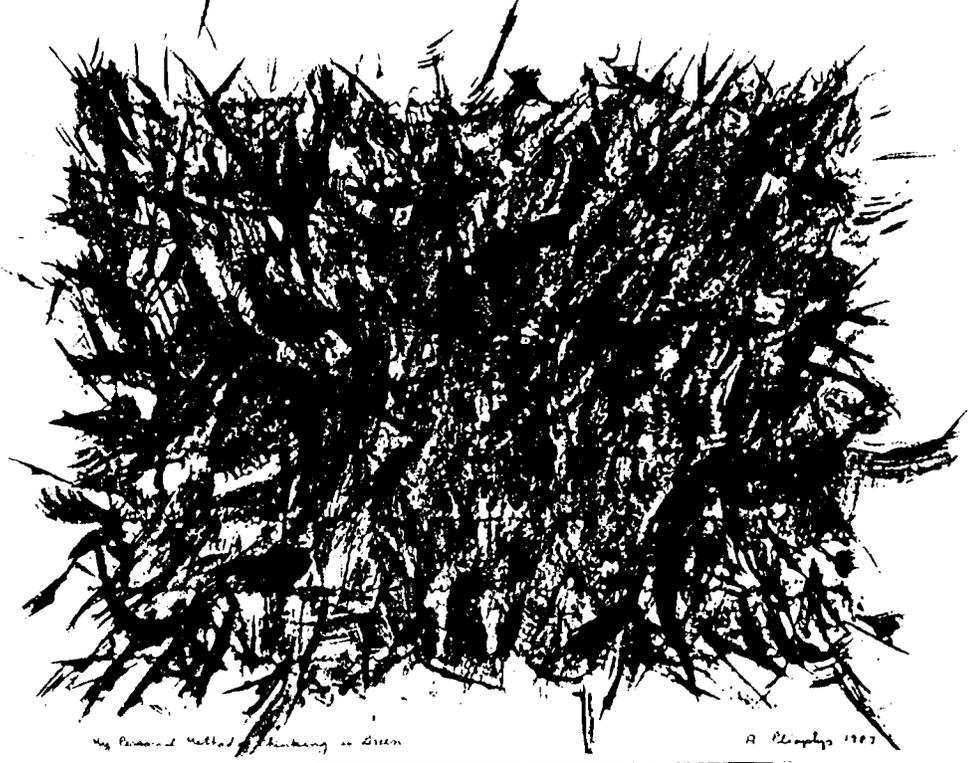
"Thinking About Robert Morris's Mirrors") and he regarded these as works of conceptual art. Plioplys is impressed by R. Morris, proponent and creator of various expressions of conceptual art, minimalism, "Process" art and avantgarde theatrical productions.

Non-artistic modes of transmitting information, adapted resources from practical life and non-artistic communication systems, various recordings and documentations of artistic works, egocentric lectures, the elimination of the function of aesthetics - all of these make Plioplys a typical representative of conceptualism. However, thinking about thinking is his own very original discovery. He depicts thinking as an inseparable part of man, as the antecedent of linguistic expression. In one of his pieces, in bright acrylic colors, he wrote: "In the beginning there was a thought." The analysis of thinking for Plioplys is the most appropriate venue to represent art as a concept. At the end of the eighties, he primarily created serieses of works based on the theme of thinking. The principle mode of expression was the written word (mostly in English), accompanied by geometric figures ("Linear Thinking", "Circular Thinking", "Triangular Thinking") and colors ("colored thoughts" series: "Green Thought", "Red Thought", "Blue Thought" and others). The artist attempts to convey the nature, quality, intensity, and length of thinking and thought. An interesting series of works is called "My Personal Method of Thinking" (1987-1988). The words "over and over" are repeated many times. The irksome and constantly recurring thought is masked by bristling blue, red, green, strokes of color, or the multi-colored letters are assembled into expressive typographic compositions. In this instance, it appears that the artist does not avoid visually aesthetic effects.

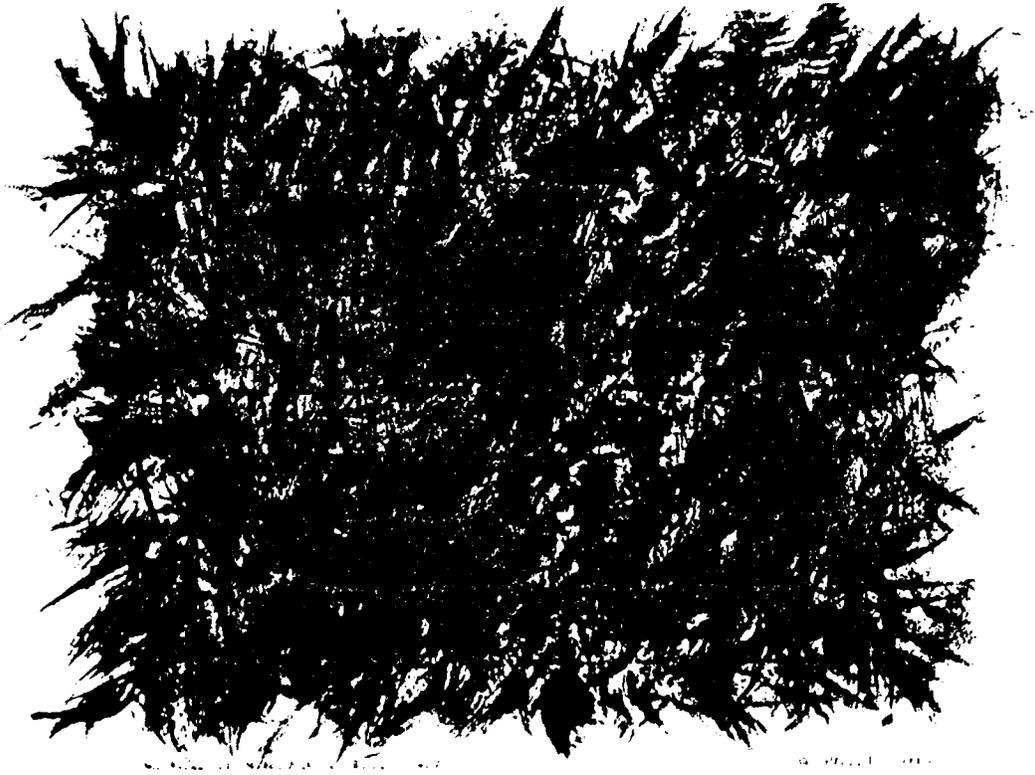
In 1987, due to the efforts of Algimantas Kezys, twenty four of Audrius Plioplys's newest works were exhibited in Chicago at "Galerija." As an introduction, Geri Critchley wrote: "This exhibit is the beginning of an exciting and unique line of art. The subject matter is thinking and the thinking process, addressing what takes place in the human mind. Clinically important cognitive issues are being explored as an art medium by an expert in the field. This sort of an artistic exploration has never been done before."

Having had six individual exhibits in various cities in the USA and Canada, Plioplys has also participated in group exhibits: "Artists' Books", "Artists' Publications", "Photographic Art", "Inch Art", "Foot Art" and many others. His works have also been shown in group exhibits of Lithuanian-American art organized by A. Kezys.

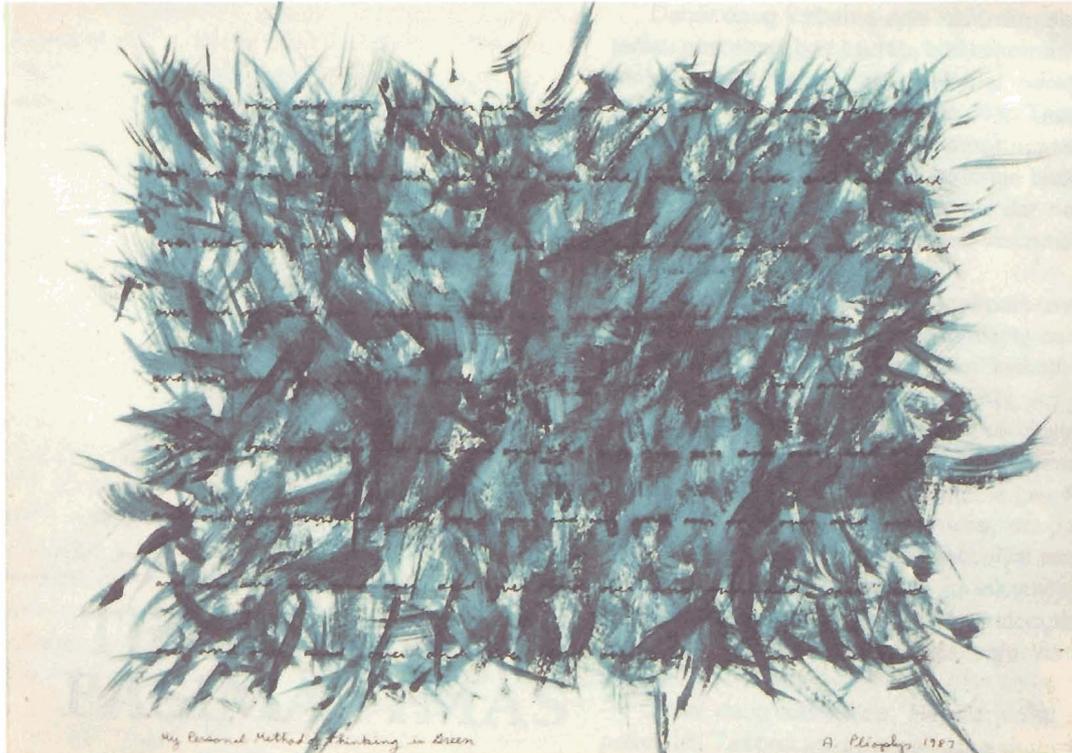
Lithuania's youthful art world, presently being rapidly enriched with various late modernism and post-modernism trends, is open to the experience of conceptualism. Audrius Plioplys is one of the few Lithuanian-American artists (along with the world famous Fluxus representative Jurgis Maciūnas) who can be considered to be a pioneer of conceptual art. His recent art works can be considered to be part of the currently popular wave of neo-conceptualism.



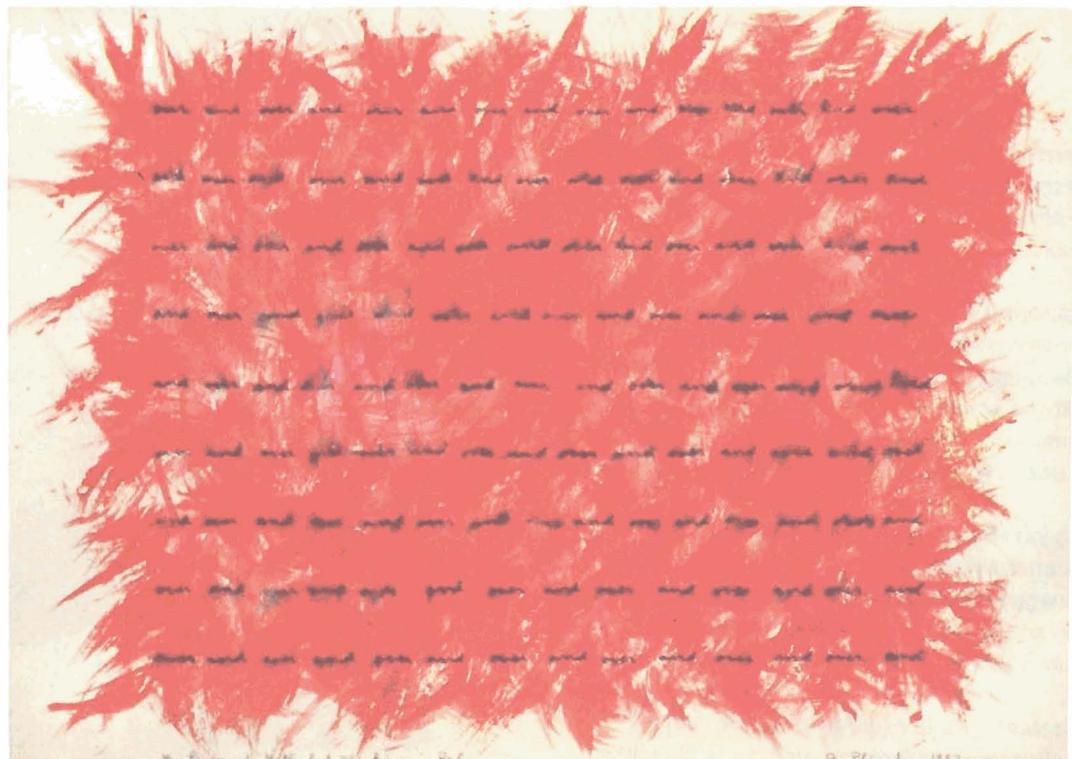
My Personal Method of Thinking in Green. Audrius Plioplys. 1987. Acrylic on paper.



My Personal Method of Thinking in Red. Audrius Plioplys. 1987. Acrylic on paper.



II (iklija) Audrius Plioplys. "Mano asmeninis galvojimo būdas žaliai"



ir "Mano asmeninis galvojimo būdas raudonai". 1987. Pop. akrilas