



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Tibor de Nagy,
1976 March 29

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Tibor de Nagy on March 29, 1976. The interview was conducted in the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 29 West 57th Street, New York City, by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS This is March 29, 1976 and it's Paul Cummings talking to Tibor de Nagy in his gallery at 29 West 57th Street. Let us begin with something about your background -- schools and background information. You were born in Hungary -- right?

TIBOR de NAGY: I was born in Hungary. I won't tell you when.

PAUL CUMMINGS Whereabouts?

TIBOR de NAGY: In Debrecen. My father was a landowner there. He died very early. We moved to Budapest and went back only in the summertime. So I was really raised in Budapest and went to high school there.

PAUL CUMMINGS Do you have brothers and sisters?

TIBOR de NAGY: I have one sister. My stepfather, who was a high judge, had really the important salon for scientists, writers, painters, musicians, when they came to Budapest. So that's how I . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS What was his name?

TIBOR de NAGY: He had a really Czechoslovakian name, Hotary. He was a collector of modern art. He discovered artists and sponsored them. So through him I had a very exciting childhood. He started to drag me to galleries when I was -- I don't know -- five or six years old. By seven we already played that game that he would take me to a gallery and he would say, "There are two paintings which I like. If you find them I'll buy them; if you don't, you forget about it." Of course, in the beginning it never worked but then it never failed. He took me to auctions, too. I knew I wasn't allowed to raise my hand. And yet once . . . it was like Parke-Bernet, you know, except I was very . . . in the front were the important people and in the back whoever came. So I was sitting with my father in the front and out came a Persian tile, a horseman with what do you call those -- falcon hunters. I thought it was so beautiful and I raised my hand. Everybody laughed. My father must have made a sign because the auctioneer turned to me and nobody bid again. The auctioneer said, "Young man, the tile is yours." My father was very proud. First I was afraid of what my mother would say but he smoothed it out. But then I thought it would be my own and that I could play with it. But oh no, it went right into the vitrine with the glass things. I cried and I said, "It's mine. I bought it. Why can't I have it?"

PAUL CUMMINGS What kind of paintings were there around the house? What kind of art?

TIBOR de NAGY: Mostly Hungarian. A few of them I have here. Now and then there was an Austrian. There were two Toulouse-Lautrec drawings. But before he married my mother he was really a poor man; he was judge Hotary, that was all. He really couldn't afford . . . But then later on he bought more. When I started collecting I started to collect old masters. I could afford it. That was one thing. So I collected Flemish seventeenth century, eighteenth century Italian. But my collection was completely lost. When I got married I built a villa which was a nice beautiful dream villa. I have a picture of it here.

PAUL CUMMINGS It's a marvelous house.

TIBOR de NAGY: As you see, it's French baroque.

PAUL CUMMINGS Where was this built?

TIBOR de NAGY: In 1936.

PAUL CUMMINGS Where?

TIBOR de NAGY: In Budapest, on top of the rows here on the Buda side. I could see the whole city design; it was a marvelous view. I had my collection piled up in one corner on the second floor ready to do something with it because the war started to get very hot. And then British airplane fell and cut this part of the house completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS Destroyed everything?

TIBOR de NAGY: I have china and all kinds of things still. Only the things like family portraits remained. My own portrait which I have here is riddled with bullet holes. Then after the war was over I rebuilt that whole thing -- it was very tempting -- for very little money. But I never moved in, couldn't afford to with servants and so on. Before I left Hungary in 1947 I rented it to the Czech Embassy. They were supposed to give me a little money now and then which really wasn't a wrong thing to do. But I never got a penny because then Czechoslovakia became Communistic. They escaped and the house and everything I owned in it was confiscated. So I had nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS That's incredible! How did you come to get interested in old masters, having grown up with more contemporary things?

TIBOR de NAGY: Just because I wanted to do something else than my father did. My father liked old masters just as well. He was always traveling, taking me to see things and so on. I think it started perhaps when I was in Rome and I found in a little antique shop a small little Italian painting which I loved; there was something on the back, too. It turned out that it was a Magnasco. I got it for very little. Maybe that gave me the impulse, I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS When were you in Rome? When would that have been?

TIBOR de NAGY: That was . . . wait a moment -- but I was often . . . it must have been in the Thirties, the first part of the Thirties. You see, I forgot this when we talked about education. My first year when I first left home when I was eighteen was to Germany to Frankfurt am Maim. Which I hated. I studied economics.

PAUL CUMMINGS At the University?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. So I begged my parents and for the next two years they let me go to Kings College, Cambridge. I also went for a short while to Manchester because Marshall and some other important economists whom I was interested in lectured there. Then I was studying much too little and had much too good a time so my parents, that is my mother -- my father wasn't alive any more -- insisted that I really take my studies more seriously. So then I went to Basel, Switzerland. There I studied economics, philosophy and on the side I attended also a kind of art course. There were very good art historians in Switzerland. My doctor's degree is really in economics and philosophy.

PAUL CUMMINGS What got you interested in economics? Was that a career choice, or family?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, my grandfather on my mother's side was a banker. My mother's second husband was head of our Centerbund -- the National Bank of Hungary. They lined up that career for me. I even wrote a book on the Centerbund in the German language.

PAUL CUMMINGS In German!

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. Because I wanted that it should get all . . . it was more a theoretical book really than what the title reveals. It was about credit and monetary problems. So then came the war period with all the horrors which I don't think is important to tell.

PAUL CUMMINGS Well, but it is to touch on slightly; I mean it was a ten-year period, more than that.

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, on March 18, 1944 we gave a big party in that house. We had about seventy-five people at a seated dinner. At that time in 1944 you can imagine we were already all feeling that this was really the end of happiness. And the reason I mention this is that at nine o'clock in the morning the Germans were in already, had marched in. I had two people at my party who warned me that the head of our country, Governor Horthy, was summoned to Vienna by Hitler. A lady who was at our house, her husband was one of the persons who accompanied Horthy, and she told us that she had gotten some secret information, a message, that he was imprisoned, that they all were, and they would let them come home only if they signed a paper saying that they asked the Germans to come in and help the country against Russian attack. So in the morning after the guests left, some later on came back, a neighbor came back. We were already hiding because the Germans had started to collect people who were endangering their existence in Budapest. That was March 19. On April fifth we had to leave our house within a couple of hours because they needed my building for important military men. They closed the street and I had to leave everything behind except clothes and jewelry and so on, and keep the servants and pay the servants for them. So we went to live with my mother. On April 27 -- even though I was warned two days ahead that I would be arrested -- I was arrested. This went on for a while. They kept me in Budapest with three hundred others they had arrested. We were all -- how do you say it -- hostages. The reasons they took me were partly political and partly because of my wife's family who had English connections and they were all more or less in England or in Switzerland.

PAUL CUMMINGS Was she English?

TIBOR de NAGY: No, Hungarian. My father-in-law was a partner in a sugar business. They had sugar factories all over; they were very international people, some in Yugoslavia, some in Hungary, some in England. So that started it. So then I disappeared. They didn't know what happened to me. I escaped to Germany. And then the Russians took me for a German officer and the Russians imprisoned me, condemned me to death. That was already when I was back in Hungary because they took us first to Poland. Then the Russians pulled us back. So when we reached the Hungarian border again that's when I escaped. They said that at midnight we'd hear a song and there would be a train and they would put us on the train and take us to Germany. And that I didn't want to do. All those that they took died. I escaped with a friend. I understand six more escaped; there were eight altogether that were alive. None of the others came back. The rumor was that they got sick in an epidemic and died a natural death. But . . . well . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS Very strange.

TIBOR de NAGY: So that was my second imprisonment. And then I was marched finally to Debrecen. But this is too long a story?

PAUL CUMMINGS No, no.

TIBOR de NAGY: To Debrecen. My native town, was already in Russian hands. Budapest was still in German hands so I couldn't go back. Finally I was released from imprisonment by the Russians. Even though at first they condemned me to death then they helped me; they used a military train to get me to Debrecen. I was already sick. I got into a hospital and they found my wet nurse and she took care of me. Voroshilov, the Russian general, was in Debrecen then. I forgot to say that a new Hungarian parliament was elected there in Debrecen which was supposed to move to Budapest when Budapest was free. The minister of financial affairs was a good friend of my family and of me, too. He asked me to work for him. So the two of us were the Ministry of Finance at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS Just the two of you.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. We hired a girl and a typewriter for a couple of hours. That was all. And then Voroshilov wanted that the banks should open so that he could say that things were normalized. So my assignment was to find a bank which wasn't completely bombed, to find the keys and so on. So I opened a bank there and also trained as a policeman because I understood that, as soon as Budapest was free, the first troops who would get to Budapest would be the police. I was anxious to find out whether my daughter, my wife, my mother were alive or not. I wanted to be the first one. Oh, then a very funny situation happened. Finally I got to Budapest and found my family in very bad straits, starved and so on. So then, being afraid of what would happen -- that Hungary sooner or later would become Communist -- my wife wanted to escape. So I resigned. At that time I was really head of the National Bank of Hungary. I resigned and asked help so that I could escape through Romania to America where my mother-in-law was. But that didn't work out. We had to return. I worked for the National Bank as a manager-director because there was already another person. And then, because of a misunderstanding around the whole thing, I got imprisoned again. The Russian Legation -- there wasn't as yet an embassy at that time -- accused me, as director of the National Bank of Hungary, of giving secret economic data to the American Legation. The truth is that the American Legation sent a questionnaire of fourteen questions about how much currency, how much this, how much that, and so on. We answered. They could have printed those figures in the daily paper; they weren't secret at all. But the Russians, being jealous, made a big affair and imprisoned me and questioned the Prime Minister of Hungary. He wrote up that affair in his book. So that was my third imprisonment. Then my wife divorced me. A Danish man whom we knew married her -- and we agreed -- and through his passport he and my wife could get out of Hungary. I could join them only a year and a half later. It was a very difficult time. She never came back to me because she fell in love with that man. He was poor but then he became a big shot at the Bank of America here. He died last year.

PAUL CUMMINGS Who was he?

TIBOR de NAGY: He was much younger than she; he was six years younger. He was much younger than I. But he had cancer.

PAUL CUMMINGS How did you eventually get here then?

TIBOR de NAGY: You know, the Hungarian government was still not a Communist government; it was little landowners. So I had friends. And the friends helped me get into something where I could travel with a diplomatic passport often to Czechoslovakia. You know, it's very complicated because it dates back so far. After World War I, part of Hungary was taken away and out of it they built Czechoslovakia and Romania and Yugoslavia. They were all new countries. So Hitler gave back to Hungary part of that territory that had been taken away. But when the war was over, it was given back again to the Czechs. There were Hungarians pushed back without anything into Hungarian territory leaving behind hundreds of years of houses, all their belongings and so on. I don't remember the figure but there were about 300,000 or 400,000 Hungarian peasants. They called it a "population exchange," by which Czechoslovakians living in Hungary were allowed to leave the

country and go to Czechoslovakia; but the Hungarians were pushed out of Czechoslovakia. They had to leave. So there was an economic problem to solve: their property which they left behind. And so I represented the financial end of that committee. So I often traveled to meetings to bring or track down. In the meantime, the American Legation whom I secretly told about my last imprisonment which was because of the Hungarian thing . . . I forget to tell you that when I was released from prison they hadn't fed me for a whole day so I had an empty stomach. They said, "Now we have found out that you are completely innocent so you are free, but let's leave as good friends and let's drink." They brought in rum and poured rum into me until I passed out; I was completely drunk. As it turned out later on, they made me sign a paper while I was drunk. On that paper it was put down that whenever they needed me or wanted to question me for the sake of Hungarian-Russian friendship, I had to appear wherever they wanted me and I would cooperate, and I couldn't leave the country without permission from the Russian police -- a permit. I didn't know about that paper. Later on, when I started to be too disagreeable they just called me in my office and said: "You meet me at this street corner. There will be a Mercedes-Benz car. " I had to do all those things. When I said, "Leave me alone" then they produced the paper with my signature. They really wanted to use me for a spy. So I told them to stop it; it is intolerable. So this was how I finally worked my way that I went to these meetings. At one point when I was in Prague, my visa was ready, I had a diplomatic passport when I traveled. They helped me to a British plane and I was free. I went to London. There I was promised a job. I didn't take it because I wanted to see my daughter and my wife. So I came to New York. I had very little money. I tried all kinds of things. I wasn't allowed to take a job because first I had to be considered a persecuted person. I had a diplomatic Hungarian passport. Luckily, the Prime Minister, Francis Knott, witnessed that case for example. It took about two years before I got the first paper. Then I could have taken a job, but up until then I couldn't have. I had very little money from real family jewelry which we had in England; we left it there once when we were visiting in England and the war looked very near. So that was about all I had. Which I thought was valuable. It turned out that it wasn't. So then I tried all sorts of things. At one point I met a writer by the name of Leonard Carter. Do you know him?

PAUL CUMMINGS I've heard of him.

TIBOR de NAGY: He was John Myers' roommate.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes, that's where I heard of him.

TIBOR de NAGY: So he told me that with very little money we could make something big in television because at that time Howdy Doody was popular and his roommate is a brilliant puppeteer who lost his job on Vue magazine -- you remember there was a surrealist magazine -- and he was performing at Room on 57th Street, I think it was. Anyhow, I met John Myers. And this was how we decided with my little money to start a marionette theater company. Which became very famous. There were big articles in the New York Times and so on. Through the help of Serge Obolensky and Cecil Beaton and so on we got assignments. We played at the Sherry Netherlands once; we played at the Plaza Hotel. But grownups liked better our plays. And that is how we got in touch with artists really. Even Jackson Pollock made a carved hand puppet for John. And then Kurt Seligmann made puppets. And then Bernard Pfriem made all our designs.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, really!

TIBOR de NAGY: A fabulous old girl made puppets -- marionettes after Bernard Pfriem resigned.

PAUL CUMMINGS Who was she?

TIBOR de NAGY: Harriet Neal was her name. I don't know what happened to her. She was old. I don't think she's alive now.

PAUL CUMMINGS Where did Pfriem come into this? I mean, how did one . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: He was a close friend of a certain group which was -- Gorky was still alive -- financially helped by Peggy Guggenheim Osborne

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes.

TIBOR de NAGY: And Jeanne Reynal. And Bernard Pfriem was a great friend. And Kurt Seligmann and so on. And Fridolin and Matta, that circle.

PAUL CUMMINGS What kind of performances were they? What kind of plays were done?

TIBOR de NAGY: One was a Pueblo Indian play. Leonard Carter really wrote the play; we didn't write it. It was a Pueblo Indian fairy tale, charming, absolutely charming, and very philosophical. John Myers played the witch. That witch became a permanent character in all the plays we did, which was absolutely stunning, absolutely stunning. I don't know how many hundred times this was done but I've heard that the witch was never done the

same. He may have sold the puppets, I don't know. After we decided we had had enough of this -- it was terrible, terrible physical work and no money, and misery -- we stored all our marionettes at Larry Rivers' studio on Second Avenue and they were stolen.

PAUL CUMMINGS Really?

TIBOR de NAGY: At least that's what they told us. I don't have a single one.

PAUL CUMMINGS And they've never reappeared or anything?

TIBOR de NAGY: I don't know

PAUL CUMMINGS How strange.

TIBOR de NAGY: So the gallery grew out from there. We knew all these people: Jackson Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, several others. They all felt -- Peggy Guggenheim was gone -- there was no outlet for those young people who were influenced by them; a gallery was terribly needed. And they kind of encouraged us. Each one will put in some money and let's start a gallery. We had a whole list of people like Jeanne Reynal, Peggy Osborne, Baskin who was on Vogue, Rene Bouche -- who else? Several others. The idea was they would all put in a little money, including myself. I went and rented a place on 53rd Street. The EI was still running. It was on the first floor of one of those old kind of railroad flats. There was an Italian interior decorator whose name escapes my memory who did a really wonderful job for us. It was quite exciting. The lighting was all like a vat, you know, wires and in between the wires electric cords and bulbs were hanging. It was really outstanding. I put down the money. When I started to collect the money nobody was willing to come through with the money except one or two. So we were desperate. And then all of a sudden John Myers got hold of Dwight Ripley who was very much involved with Peggy Guggenheim. As a matter of fact, they were kind of engaged for a while; he was supposed to marry her. He agreed to pay our rent. He did that for about six years. Otherwise we wouldn't have had a gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS Now what did he do again? I don't know of him.

TIBOR de NAGY: He was a genius. He died only a couple of years ago. He spoke seven languages, wrote poetry in those languages. He was a famous botanist scientist. He was a very wealthy man. But a heavy alcoholic. He had a fabulous collection of Pollocks, Max Ernsts, Mattas and so on. I don't know what happened to his collection after he died. A British lord with whom he originally went to college, I think, Rupert Barnaby, who is a botanist and is still doing the same thing -- I think he has his collection. I don't know. So this was how we started the gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS Who were the first . . . how did you pick the artists? Larry Rivers was one of the first early members, wasn't he? Harvey Johnson?

TIBOR de NAGY: Our first show was really picked due to our friends -- Pollock and so on. Tino Nivola -- we showed his sand sculptures. But he wasn't really in control of his medium then. They were the sand sculptures which he did on the beach at Amagansett. So, by the time I got them in the station wagon, which I had because of the marionette company, we brought in those heavy sand sculptures. And it was a terrible thing. My station wagon was filled with sand. The new gallery was filled with sand; the sculptures were kind of falling apart. But they were very beautiful. So this didn't help our relationship with Tino Nivola at all. Shortly before that there was that famous Kootz New Talents Show selected by Clement Greenberg. We took in several of those artists: Grace Hartigan who at this time lived with Alfred Leslie. Then Larry Rivers was one of our first artists. Fairfield Porter whom we knew through his writing on art, coming in to review shows for Art News I think it was. So did Goodnough. And who else? Pendleton West who died was one of our few first artists. And, oh, Helen Frankenthaler who was just finishing at Bennington College. Clem thought it was too early to show her but we kind of needed somebody so we gave her her first show then.

PAUL CUMMINGS Where did Clement Greenberg come into this? Did you meet him early on?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes. We were friendly. John was friendly with him. Through John he used to come to our marionette company performances. Once we did our marionette performance practically only for artists in a Bridgehampton church sponsored by Harold Rosenberg, the Pollocks and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, really. How marvelous!

TIBOR de NAGY: They very much liked these.

PAUL CUMMINGS One thing that has intrigued me over the years as one looks at the list of people who have been in the gallery so many years were here for a long time and then disappeared, and the enormous change, and I think that . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, as you look through this list of artists -- I don't know -- it would come near to a hundred, I would say. Well, for example, we got Bouche at that time through Baskin. And Bernard Pfreim.

PAUL CUMMINGS Well, how did you know Dzubas? Was he through . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, he was through marionettes. Aline DeVeau wrote an article on our marionettes, too. She was in love with Bernard Pfreim. So they are into this background thing which we won't record.

PAUL CUMMINGS No, but that's how all these things happen anyway.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, exactly. Then Jane Freilicher we showed.

PAUL CUMMINGS Right. And Fritz Bultman.

TIBOR de NAGY: Fritz Bultman came later.

PAUL CUMMINGS Later, yes. But that was -- what -- 195_?

TIBOR de NAGY: We started the gallery in November 1950.

PAUL CUMMINGS At the beginning of the Fifties.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. At that time Grace Hartigan called herself George Hartigan. For quite a while I couldn't persuade her not to.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh yes, because of Women's Art, was it?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. And we had great fun. And, you know, one artist brought the other. This was how everything happened. It was a very close kind of situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS Now what happened in terms of operating the gallery? Who bought pictures in those days? Who came to see them?

TIBOR de NAGY: There were very few collectors then. One of our first collectors who bought was Leo Castelli. The Club was already in existence so that was also a factor. And then there were a few wonderful people who really helped by buying our art and donating it to various museums. The most important one, I would say, was Alex Bates.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes, the real estate man.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. He really helped considerably Grace Hartigan's career, various careers, Helen Frankenthaler's, too. And then Mr. Enny, for example, who helped. So did Becky Reis. And there were several others. And then something very exciting happened. One of our puppeteers who worked for us was Peter Gray, the son of Marian Polis Gray, the sister of one of the famous poets from England. She was the curator of the Metropolitan Museum's lace and had one of the most important lace collections, a fabulous collection. She was a very bright, intelligent old lady. We had the idea that we would like to show those beautiful laces and she said, "That would only be good for the laces. Go ahead." So Al Leslie designed the lace show. Well, we really violated those laces, putting them on wires and making a very avant-garde ambience in the gallery of these laces -- parasols, plants and beautiful laces. And we advertised it. And all the important lace collectors came in big limousines, Rolls Royces, what not, stopping in front of the gallery. They came in wheel chairs. It was a scandal. They all left very angry at what we did to those beautiful laces. We didn't sell a single one. Toward the end of the show I was sitting alone in the gallery and in came a lady and asked the prices. She wasn't dressed to look like a very important somebody -- I didn't even get up. But then she made some notes and said to me -- she was very kind -- that she wanted to come back and see those laces again. I said she had better come tomorrow because the show closes soon. I didn't pay any attention; I didn't think she would come back. The next day she came back and bought all those laces for over \$10,000. That was the first time we made money. She was a very important lace collector. Her name was Mrs. Lackler Mathews, a railroad millionaire family. She lived in Rye. I got friendly with her; she had a daughter and I have a daughter. She invited us for Sunday lunch at which time we would deliver the laces in my station wagon. My daughter at that time was about seven. When we reached Rye, the entrance to her home looked like the Buckingham Palace entrance. My daughter said, "Father, we can't go in here; we'd better drive to the other entrance." So we did. We had a very good time there. But that really gave us a financial basis to the gallery that late.

PAUL CUMMINGS That exhibition was when the gallery was in the first location still?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. From there we moved to Madison and 67th, which was a very nice gallery in a huge kind of marble mansion.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes, I remember that mansion; it's still there.

TIBOR de NAGY: We stayed there for quite a few years. They sold the building and we had to move. We went then to 149 East 72nd Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Between Lexington and Third, yes. I want to talk about the early Fifties a little more before we go through all the facts. Did you know The Club ever? Or did John go to The Club?

TIBOR de NAGY: We both went, John more often than I. I forgot to tell you that I could never live off the gallery money. In the meantime my real capital and all other capital -- like we started off The Record shop on Lexington Avenue and 92nd Street with an American who put in the same money and who was running it because he knew the record business. We failed. But I didn't quite lose all my money. So then we went into an export-import thing where I then lost all my money. So that's when I had to take -- I was already near to becoming an American citizen -- a bank job on the side. So from that time on John was at the gallery during the day and I spent evenings, weekends and lunch hours there.

PAUL CUMMINGS Now you worked for what -- which bank?

TIBOR de NAGY: --

PAUL CUMMINGS What did you do there?

TIBOR de NAGY: I was in the foreign department. The head of it was a Hungarian friend so it was tolerated that I had a gallery on the side. But after he retired it got worse and worse.

PAUL CUMMINGS For what reason?

TIBOR de NAGY: Because the gallery got better and better known and it would have been kind of funny to make an officer out of somebody who had a gallery, a well-known gallery. So it was a permanent conflict. They refused to make me an officer of the bank. So I got really practically nowhere in the bank. The gallery I felt I was overworked. It was just too much to do the two things. John just insisted that we needed the money. So this went on and on and that finally produced the break. I just refused to do any more at the bank. Plus there was a guy who worked for us who caused dissension between John and me. I didn't like the way he worked and I wanted to get rid of him.

PAUL CUMMINGS So it got very complicated. Could we talk some more about the early days in the first location in the Fifties? Were the exhibitions reviewed by the magazines?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. Doris Preston and -- what was the name -- Howard De Vries. And we still had the Herald-Tribune -- Boro . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, my heavens, yes.

TIBOR de NAGY: . . . who I liked much better than what happened afterwards, after he left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there were very few galleries then showing younger Americans?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. Betty Parsons Gallery was already there. Sidney Janis was showing known artists, better known artists. Egan was showing de Kooning, Kline.

PAUL CUMMINGS Right. Kootz.

TIBOR de NAGY: And Kootz, yes. He was showing Soulages and Hans Hofmann. But mostly Betty Parsons and Egan did it. The very important ones. There weren't any others. Then came the Stable Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS Right. Eleanor Ward.

TIBOR de NAGY: And then came the Hansa Gallery. And then down on Tenth Street there was the Tanager Gallery. And Poindexter. At first we talked with Poindexter that we should join forces. But then they rather decided to do it on their own.

PAUL CUMMINGS In the early Fifties was there a sense of competition among the galleries? Or not . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: The stealing of artists from each other didn't happen.

PAUL CUMMINGS There was really no big money involved?

TIBOR de NAGY: No. It didn't happen. I remember the first artist who left us was really when Martha Jackson

appeared on the scene. She started to get Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan away from me. But she first got Harry Jackson away.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes, right.

TIBOR de NAGY: Who got completely corrupted in one year. He got famous but did cows and horses for a Texan's ranch, a Life article and so on, but for the art got completely lost. Then Emmerich appeared on the scene just when Helen Frankenthaler married Robert Motherwell. Motherwell just didn't like John Myers and so we lost Helen.

PAUL CUMMINGS But had any of these people started to sell very well, say, through the Fifties?

TIBOR de NAGY: No. The first artist among them who started to sell well was Larry Rivers. He really started to bring money into the gallery already. And then Grace Hartigan grew rapidly. As a matter of fact, Hartigan reached a point where she overdid the financial figure . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS Pushed too fast.

TIBOR de NAGY: . . . compared to Larry. Jane Freilicher was the old-timer who never did really well. Porter started to pick up a little. And who else? Nell Blaine sold a little.

PAUL CUMMINGS Noland and Dzubas?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. That happened in the mid-Fifties. We started off with Noland. He was with us until French & Company started, which was started by Clem Greenberg, so naturally Noland went to French & Company. That's how we lost him.

PAUL CUMMINGS How did you meet Noland? How did he come into the gallery? He didn't live in New York then, did he?

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, we knew all these Bennington College people. And we had Paul Feeley, too. And Helen And Dzubas were his friends. We also first showed Dzubas. But we didn't give him a second show. We thought he was too disputable to Clem.

PAUL CUMMINGS What did one do in the Fifties to promote the artists? I mean do an exhibition, send out announcements and things . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: It was mostly donations.

PAUL CUMMINGS Oh, yes, to museums.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. Don't forget museums weren't spoiled yet for first generation and second generation American artists. So it was a great help. Some of the collectors, fine collectors -- I've mentioned a few -- like Mr. Blaubere, for example . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS Who would buy and then give things.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, just to help.

PAUL CUMMINGS But also art was much less costly then, wasn't it? I mean younger artists now want so much more money.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, sure. I remember when we sold the first Hartigan for seventy-five dollars. It was a big painting. A young man bought it and two days later his parents brought it back. And we were desperate; we had to return the money. Finally, we agreed that we would wait until the boy found something that the parents liked, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS For seventy-five dollars. Incredible! How did new collectors come on the scene? Were they brought by people the artists met? Or by other collectors?

TIBOR de NAGY: By word of mouth mostly, I think. Of course, there was hard promotion going on. John was very good at that, calling people, talking to people.

PAUL CUMMINGS He was very gregarious and bouncy and talk, talk, talk. Go to parties alone.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. He could really go to parties, stay all night; which I couldn't do.

[END OF SIDE 1]

[SIDE 2]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side 2. One of the other things I think is interesting about the 1950's -- those were really the great years of Art News -- Tom Hess

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. Tom Hess deserves a lot of credit for, if I dare call it, success.

PAUL CUMMINGS I know that many people were in your gallery who would feature articles. They would do for a Fairfield Porter painting or something.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, sure. And there was also Frank O'Hara writing. There was a lot of activity going on which doesn't happen now, like, for example, we published poetry of unknown artists who couldn't get published otherwise.

PAUL CUMMINGS How did that come about -- publishing books of poetry?

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, artists and avant-garde poets were all around the whole time. They came in and out of our gallery. People like Frank O'Hara. Like John Ashbery. Like -- what's his name? Ellsworth? No, not Ellsworth?

PAUL CUMMINGS Kenworth?

TIBOR de NAGY: Kenworth, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS Was it you or John . . . ? How did it come along to publish all those little . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, it was going hand-in-hand with illustration. There was in each issue Our first issue I think was Frank O'Hara with Larry Rivers and later on with Hartigan. Then there was Rene Bouche with Chester Corman who worked together with Auden. John was very much involved with the English Vue magazine before this. Ashbery was, too. So it was a very active gallery as far as And theater, too. We started giving avant-garde plays and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS Do you think all those things brought people into the gallery? Or was it just other interests of yours that were . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: I find these things so closely connected one with the other that it's hard to tell. But, you know, John being a very extroverted person, and me -- I don't know. They always considered me a solid base perhaps The combination worked fine for quite a long time. I was always the better organized one, too. Our "eyes" were -- I would say we never took on an artist without each other agreeing. We agreed ninety-nine percent always on the artists. I can hardly remember an artist whom John would have very much liked, or I would have very much liked and the other would have completely opposed. There wasn't any conflict there really.

PAUL CUMMINGS Did either of you go to studios very much in the Fifties?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. I went first or he went first. First we always went together but then when I had this banking situation sometimes I had to go separately, usually on Sundays.

PAUL CUMMINGS I've always been curious about the bank and your relationship to the operation of the gallery. Was it helpful having studied economics and being involved with banks and finance and business on that level as differentiated from a gallery being more intimate?

TIBOR de NAGY: I don't think the bank was of much help.

PAUL CUMMINGS It was just so different.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. It was perhaps in my nature, and it still is in my nature, that whenever I spend I calculate. I would never use for example, what Castelli openly admitted -- using one artist's money -- paintings -- to help with another artist and so on. I always, like a bank, let's say, kept myself liquid so that I could always at the end of the month pay what I owed to the artists. I knew that each one needed it. I never had checks bounce. But I never really made any money either, you know, without using credit. I'm very conservative. I never use bank credit. I don't use personal credit either. So my reputation is very solid. And it was very difficult when you have as a partner John Myers. Without me in the background he couldn't exist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. One thing that has always interested me I guess, particularly about galleries that have lasted for a long period of time and that is one wonders about the acquisition of works by the artists in the gallery where one would buy things and hold them . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. We never did enough of that because we never had enough money. At one point, for

example, we've had artists who couldn't pay a back loan that we gave them; then they gave us paintings. So we accumulated paintings. We had quite a lot of excellent Larry Rivers paintings. As a matter of fact, when he started to get famous he insisted that we buy some. So did Hartigan. But then again, one summer John and his roommate, Albert Manchester, a theater director, rented a summer theater somewhere in New Jersey -- I don't remember where -- and they put up as collateral our paintings. I didn't know they did this. I don't know -- there were about ten or so. Somebody who was an artist from somewhere in South America -- I don't remember his name and I wouldn't like to mention it -- they borrowed the money and they put up as collateral ten of these paintings. They didn't tell me they did this, and we lost all the paintings. Then, of course we had to tell him. John promised he would never do it again. But it was gone. And every year such crises happened again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrible. What do you think was the reason that people would leave? So many of the artists really got launched here and it seemed that as soon as their prices started to move

TIBOR de NAGY: They left partly because they thought they could sell better in another gallery and partly because they were lured away with contracts by other galleries. Very rarely it happened that there was conflict. There were very difficult artists we handled. When John couldn't cope, I tried to cope; or the other way around. For example, Goodnough was a very, very difficult artist to handle. John couldn't cope with him. I coped with him for so many years. And then, you know that when I split up with John I had a skeleton. He took all the artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he couldn't keep them.

TIBOR de NAGY: He couldn't keep them. And there were some who insisted they didn't want to discriminate between John and me. One was Fairfield Porter, so he left. So did Bannard.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting how the art market and the art world has changed. How do the 1960's differ from the 1950's? By the early 1960's -- 1962, 1963, the art market was growing; there were more galleries. It was a whole

TIBOR de NAGY: There were fantastic promoters coming in in terms of dealers, in terms of collectors -- Robert Scull, Leo Castelli.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But Castelli had been around the art market for a long time before he

TIBOR de NAGY: He was a collector and he was always going to meetings. Whenever I went to The Club I always saw him there. For a while it looked as if he might have to close the gallery. He was in a very awkward situation himself. Really Larry Rivers and -- I don't know -- a few others; Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg who became really the foundation of the gallery that he built up everything on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Now Ileana was around and she was very important.

TIBOR de NAGY: She had money, yes. But there again the family was upset that Leo was kind of losing money and so on. I remember that Leo was crying on my shoulder that he had to move out because they didn't want to give him the place any longer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think changed the whole atmosphere of the 1960's?

TIBOR de NAGY: Things became kind of more and more phony. There were new trends. Opportunism became involved. I mean some were really rather valid and artistically justified trends, but some I found really an absolute bore. I mean I never really got involved in Pop art. Personally I didn't like it. Neither did John. I felt that there were a few rather talented artists pulled into it who had made the grade with us. I don't know -- I don't think I was absolutely a hundred per cent right. But I still get too little out of Pop art even now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I know later when the gallery was on 72nd Street you took in people whose work was very difficult, like Carl Andre, for example.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. And we had people whom they considered Pop artists and weren't; like Larry -- I don't think he was a Pop artist. And Red Grooms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, Grooms was by himself in a strange kind of world.

TIBOR de Nagy: Yes. We had Minimal artists, yes -- Carl Andre, and Pat Johansen who even when he was here I mean the whole wall was just one line. But each one did excite us intellectually; emotionally no. Intellectually so much that we thought it was worthwhile to go with them. Of course, it was very difficult because we couldn't sell anything. So they weren't happy with us and we weren't happy with them and the first chance they had

PAUL CUMMINGS: They would fly.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now the whole business of the Sixties seems to have been so different. In the Fifties an artist would come to New York and try to get involved with the Tenth Street Gallery. In the Sixties they would come to New York and immediately want to have a show on 57th Street at enormous prices, an instant career. But I don't think your gallery ever really got involved with that kind of activity.

TIBOR de NAGY: No, we never did that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And is very involved with painting.

TIBOR de NAGY: We never really took in famous artists anyhow. We struggled through them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you've made a lot of careers though.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, we did. And that's really the whole reward I think I've had of the twenty-six years so far. Though my bank account didn't improve.

PAUL CUMMINGS: After all that.

TIBOR de NAGY: After all that. I mean my ambition is still to end the year without loss. If I ever made money it was because I had left-over paintings which I had to buy. For example, I have about twelve Porters now; I have Bannards; and I have Goodnoughs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Porters must be very expensive now?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I notice now you have paintings by Milton Avery and other artists. Is that the new . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, I will do that now if they are fine artists. Besides I find them if it happens to be exciting. I saw a few very good Averys at somebody's house and I started to built up a show around that with the help of Gerald Walter who is a very brilliant young artist who is my art director now. You know him, don't you?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who is that again?

TIBOR de NAGY: Gerald Walter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, I know him.

TIBOR de NAGY: He's a painter. We were just near to giving a Picasso-Braque-Leger show this June. But it didn't come through because it would have come from Switzerland and for very understandable reasons they didn't want to send them because that would have involved many other galleries.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But now this is a new kind of attitude on your part, isn't it, dealing with established things?

TIBOR de NAGY: You try, yes. You try. For example, it looked like Garcia-Torres would have a fantastic career. I still think he would be a most important artist because nobody could do what he really involve painting combining it so obviously with contemporary art that people started to see that. And if he hadn't died I think that sooner or later he would have had great success. This way we are left with an estate of about three dozen paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which is nothing.

TIBOR de NAGY: Which if he were alive So that's

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get involved with the gallery in Texas?

TIBOR de NAGY: I was hoping that I could show all my ex-artists there and make a little money if I really gained territory there. I proved right because now Houston has over one hundred galleries and we are kind of number one in the field. The other number one is Jenny Lee who competes with us madly. But in order to do that I had to have somebody there who knows the field. And that happened accidentally. I was looking for an art director because I wanted to get rid of the one who I didn't consider honest nor a good administrator David Wallace who went as John. So here was this Texan . That's how the whole thing happened. He asked too much. I couldn't pay it. John didn't want to do the change. So we talked about opening the gallery there. John didn't want to do it. I started to do it without John. But it took many years until the situation was right so that we really could do it.

And then there were many, many complications there. My partner was an architect who wanted to build. He had a lot. But then he used the lot for something better. So then I had to buy myself a lot which I still have. But I can't sell it. Real estate is very low. But meantime a very good building was available quite near to the museum, to both museums. It lent itself marvelously to a gallery. My ex-partner, who is an architect, said he could re-do the place for very little money. We started with \$10,000 budget and by the time it was finished it cost over \$40,000 and we had no money left to run the gallery. So we had to take in a third partner. The third partner is supposed to be a silent partner and he's a very very rich man, as you you know, Meredith Lund. Now each of us has one-third and now the two thirds get together and I am voted down. So the situation is that I didn't get even a penny out of my investment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's still operating.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, and doing very well. Doing very well. There we could start with doing a Motherwell show and things like this. My partner, Marvin Watson, who runs the gallery there, is very capable. He is all over the art field. So we show most of the artists I have here. And we always have ex-artists who show there -- Goodnough, Darby Bannard, who else? Dzubas. Helen Frankenthaler refused to come with me because she was before with Jenny Lee. When Jenny Lee heard that I was moving in, she moved to Houston. Lee Castelli promised to give me all his artists and when Jenny Lee moved he said, "I'm sorry, I can't do it because Jenny Lee had all my artists in Dallas. So I can't do that." So I hardly have any. But we gave Noland a show. We gave Carl Andre a show. So we're doing quite well there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good. I didn't know there were so many galleries already there.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. When I started off there were about fifty some galleries; now there are over a hundred.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Absolutely incredible.

TIBOR de NAGY: And we really educate collectors [inaudible]. There's so much money there. So much money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Over the years I'm curious about the relationships you have with museum curators and people who are involved with public collecting. Have there been many? And Frank O'Hara and The Museum of Modern Art I suppose would have been . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, it was so very, very little. I can't completely blame the museums because there are so many galleries now. But I think I can safely say that there was hardly a month that Alfred Barr or Dorothy Miller or one of the others didn't visit the gallery. They came all the time. There wasn't a show that they wouldn't have seen. With the Guggenheim it really was very difficult to lure them now and then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was still European art, you know, and some American.

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, yes. Well, I once accused him that he doesn't like John Myers so he goes to Chicago to buy Goodnough instead of buying it from us. If your directors says that, then you had better fire him because he is a perfect . But certainly we had a very close connection with the Whitney Museum, the Friends of the Whitney. Roy Neuberger and so on, Bob Friedman, they came all the time. Collectors came, they bought, they supported the artists and so on. There was a lot going on but now its practically nil. I don't think my gallery is as exciting any more but I don't think that's the reason.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you thin has happened?

TIBOR de NAGY: They are afraid because if they go to one gallery they have to go to others, too, so they just go when they absolutely have to, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think the whole social milieu, though, has changed in the last six or seven years.

TIBOR de NAGY: And the people aren't so very involved. I don't know. For example, I can tell you one example which bothers me no end. I called up Larry Rubin to lure him at least in. And I said, "Boxer is now a recognized artist. I would still like to donate to the museum a Stanley Boxer painting. Would you come to see the show and select one." He said, "I'm involved with . . ." -- I don't remember now whose catalogue -- ". . . I have closeted myself in my room. I can't do it but I will send somebody."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, William Rubin.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes, I'm sorry -- William Rubin. So he sent Kynaston MacShine. Kynaston MacShine came, looked around. He didn't even call me back at my office. So finally I called up and Kynaston MacShine said, "It was a fine show but I'm not excited about Stanley Boxer." So by now I think he will have to pay to get a Stanley Boxer because Stanley Boxer is important and the museum has to have one. This is a typical 1970 story.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they're having a lot of problems at the Modern now.

TIBOR de NAGY: They have no money but they . . . oh, problems, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nobody has any money. Has the economic shift in the last few years affected the gallery business a great deal from your point of view?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, sure it has, a great deal. Not so much my gallery because I was always operating on a shoestring. But the galleries that used to really make a lot of money I think stopped doing it for a while. Now it's getting better again. But at the first of the year for a couple of months I really thought I might not be able to survive. Now I feel a bit safer again. I had a few sales. But I still have problems with sculpture because once the show is over I can't store the sculpture here. I may have sculptors whom I start out. When they sell during the year I have to sell them from their studio and then the problems start. The studios fail and so on. The sculptors owe me money. They can't pay me back. Then they, say, consider a studio sale. I get mad and so on. It's difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very difficult. What do you think is the trend in the art business now, if there is any? Do you see any current trends or movements?

TIBOR de NAGY: I see a crystallization going on around us. I don't think there are new, important trends coming up. Of course, they are mixed up very much with other art fields, you know. By that I mean pulling in literature more, pulling in music more, pulling in mechanics more and trying to build up something valid. Everything is very exciting when you first get involved with it but the excitement dies off too fast for me. So that's why I don't believe that there are great things. And Photo-Realism to me I think is very boring after a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Terribly. It's very dull. It's a lot of surface skill.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, very dull. So that's why I consider this crystallization that is going on is very important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way do you mean that and what is crystallizing?

TIBOR de NAGY: Good art. They don't seem turned off really keeping the public thinking in terms of going to the museum themselves and being more honest. I think they are more honest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The artists now?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, getting more honest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, some of the glamour of the Sixties and showbiz and Women's Wear Daily and all that Vogue magazine stuff is gone now.

TIBOR de NAGY: It's gone in that field in which we are involved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Which is better.

TIBOR de NAGY: It's gone out from there. It's more in the public relations

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But I think that's better for the artists.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes, it's better for the artists. I like what's going on now really. And I think Europe is getting rather important now although I know too little about what's going on there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you travel much?

TIBOR de NAGY: Not enough, especially now since I have to go to Houston, too. My staff, as you know, is much too small to allow me to go around as much as I should.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm trying to think over the years that I've known the gallery, the various people that have worked here. None of them have gone on to be dealers or anything, have they?

[INTERRUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, you know, what do you see . . . do you go to studios now and look at young people's work? Or less . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: That's the big problem. I really don't go around . . . there are ever so many artists here now. One morning here about one o'clock I went out for lunch I started to count -- fourteen artists were coming in with their work and we expected phone calls.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's an awful lot.

TIBOR de NAGY: Twenty-four. And we stopped looking. For the buyer I have too many artists. I would like to reduce my stable. And Gerald has a right to look because he's so much in the art field that he knows about every good artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One never does.

TIBOR de NAGY: One never does. He's very much involved with one kind of art which is mostly color field, which I think is doing great -- color field artists. But Mr. Kramer doesn't think so and . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that the Times is a big influence when they review a show?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, a big influence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If they like it then people come and buy?

TIBOR de NAGY: If they read a lot. They come and see it again. They are really impressed when I sell a painting. I hope they bring it out and show it and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what about, say, if a magazine like Art in America does a feature on one of the artists, three or four pages with color plates, does that have an effect?

TIBOR de NAGY: It has an effect.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It does?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. I don't know how much effect it has in the case of Artforum. I don't know if many museum directors read these articles; I don't think they do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Collectors do, though I think.

TIBOR de NAGY: Collectors do?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

TIBOR de NAGY: Anyhow, I do my utmost to get these articles . . . writers doing them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's very difficult. Do you read all the art magazines, though, and keep up with what . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: Who does?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean do you kind of look at them?

TIBOR de NAGY: I look through them all, yes. But I mean Artforum became a textbook to me and I stopped reading it. Now it's changing again since Max Kozloff took over. I think Art in America has become better than it was. And Art News is quite a good magazine. It's far from what it was. And Arts magazine is the liveliest magazine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But somehow it doesn't have any weight to it.

TIBOR de NAGY: [very low voice] They shouldn't . . . why shouldn't a writer do that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But I guess, you know, he wants to . . .

TIBOR de NAGY: He should be more discriminating because if they continue that it loses completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think that's perfectly true.

TIBOR de NAGY: But I can talk to him. I can talk to that Martin guy. But Artforum, you can't reach them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that has interested me. Do you share artists with dealers in other parts of the country like, say, Chicago, California, and so on?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes. Part of my work is really to try to get them shown wherever I can in the country, outside the country. That is very important. That is, if I can do it without overlooking my own financial interest. If it comes to the point where I don't make anything, I don't do it. It's good for the artist. I consider that very important. It helps me because more people get to know the artists. It's very important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was a time when dealers in, say, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles complained that, if there was an exhibition of New York artists, their local collectors would come and see it and then ten months later they would buy it in New York. But that's changed though, hasn't it?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes, it has definitely changed.

[INTERRUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how has that changed though with collectors from around the country buying? Do they still come to New York and buy things?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, they come but, you see, for example, in my case Houston dealers come but most of the time they buy there; they don't buy here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's it? But that means you really have a business going on there.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, but I would make out better if they would buy here. But my partners make sure they buy there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Over the years you've had a very broad range of images, you know.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, you couldn't keep me down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Abstract and figurative, one never knows.

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes, you couldn't keep me down. I am the same way and I want to be that way. I don't want to sell my soul for one kind of thing. And this is also . . . my taste is that way, too. You see, my father collected modern, I collected old masters but I still have modern paintings in my apartment. But what I have in mind now is one thing: what I show has to be alive. It can't be nostalgic -- whether it's representation, image, abstract; any vocabulary works with me if it is now and not something . . . if it is real. To me what is nostalgic is not interesting. So I don't know -- I will never show to survive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned a while ago so many artists phoning and coming in. Do you find much that interests you? Or is the percentage very small?

TIBOR de NAGY: It's very small. We have many good artists, I think, but nothing above that. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Outstanding is very rare?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. When I see something very personally then I get excited, and I at least keep a record of the person and when I'm downtown I look at his studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you found many artists over the years who have come in with slides?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes, more and more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean if you take them into the gallery.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, I very rarely took in an artist from slides. When I had an empty gallery the only artist I took because I saw the slide was, I think, George Kozloff. The rest I went to the studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do they come recommended by other artists? Or by collectors or people?

TIBOR de NAGY: Other artists, mostly. That's the best way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now do you have any particular plans that you follow in the course of organizing a year? Or does it just depend on how the artists produce work in the way of calendar of exhibitions?

TIBOR de NAGY: Well, for one thing, I have more artists than months in the year so that in itself creates a situation where I have to find out which artists whom I didn't show last year are ready to show this year and so on. And then this creates the base of my thesis which I start at the end of the season to get together the new season. First, the ones which were left out last year, then the ones which have to be shown every year, and then what is left, either for new artists or for extra-curricular shows -- like this year I had the Avery show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have contracts with all the artists, or are they just verbal agreements?

TIBOR de NAGY: I should have contracts. But I don't pay too much attention to those. What I usually like to do -- or used to do -- is put down in writing in an exchange of letters the artist's conditions, what I am to supply and so

on. If an artist insists on a contract, like George Kozloff, then we do it. But contracts are valid only as long as the artist wants it. As soon as Larry Rivers forced a contract from me he broke it. When I told him the contract is violated he said all right stick to the contract until the four years are over. Take the paintings. Yet I go to Marlborough Gallery. So what do you do?

PAUL CUMMINGS: You can't win.

TIBOR de NAGY: Contracts are only good in cases where I say, "I told you that you have to supply me with bread and wine," and the other says, "You never told me."

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've retired from the bank, haven't you?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, yes. I went on early retirement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you miss that or not?

TIBOR de NAGY: I miss those years which I spent there -- Oh, I hated it. Ugh! It was terrible. In Hungary I was a banker with the Central Bank. I dealt with theoretical problems; I went to international meetings. There you discussed credit, the monetary problems of the country. It was very interesting. But when it boils down to doing one special routine of banking over and over, it bores me so much that I do it badly. It was really bad. But John forced me to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there were not advantages in terms of how that activity affected the gallery? It just supported it in a way?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, it helped. I never would have got in that condition if Goodnough

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, on 57th street?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. It helped a little bit. But I wanted it much more for a while I tried all kinds of things one after another to discredit the gallery loans to artists to develop situations bank sponsored the auction of the paintings which they had to take over because the loans weren't paid. They didn't pay any attention. I was very friendly with Dr. Horthy only because he thinks he knows everything about art They don't buy from me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a good economist though, isn't he?

TIBOR de NAGY: Yes. He was Eisenhower's advisor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things I'm curious about, just to finish with the bank, what was it like to work with people who knew you had the gallery on a sort of equal level? Were they interested in it? Did they think it was a hobby you had?

TIBOR de NAGY: Most of the time it was good for the bank but they would never admit it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

TIBOR de NAGY: Then they'd just send me out we got into conversations or where we had lunch which wasn't each one found out some kind of attachment either to artists or to the art world or wanted to know about price So it was an addition to develop a friendly relationship. And banks don't appreciate that. They think customers

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very curious. Do you think they will ever change or is it just in the nature of bankers?

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, they changed last year. They have an art department now. They were failing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there are banks all across the country that when they build a new building they put sculpture and paintings and tapestries.

TIBOR de NAGY: Oh, sure. And they employ either interior decorators or one of those ladies who run around and know a lot about what color goes with what.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also how to sell the bank pictures. Some of them are very good at that.

TIBOR de NAGY: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, is there anything else you think that we should talk about or that you would like to talk about in terms of the evolution of the artist, or . . . ?

TIBOR de NAGY: I think we've really covered a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... March 26, 2004