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Oral history interview with Nicholas Krushenick, 1968 Mar. 7-14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Nicholas Krushenick on March 7, 1968. The interview was conducted in New York by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is March 7, 1968. Paul Cummings talking to Nicholas Krushenick. You're a rare born New Yorker?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. One of the last.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's see, May 31, 1929.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Very Young.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the year to do it.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That's the year of the zero, the crash.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, why don't you tell me something about your family, what part of New York you were born in.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I was born up in the Bronx in a quiet little residential neighborhood. Luckily enough my father actually brought me into the world. The doctor didn't get there soon enough and my father did the operation himself; he ties the knot and the whole thing. When the doctor got there he said it was a beautiful job. And I went to various public schools in the Bronx.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have what? –one brother? More brothers? Any sisters?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Just one brother.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you live in – a house? Or an apartment?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. Actually it was the Depression days. And we were the superintendents of a building. And, you know, everybody pulled himself up. My father worked for the WPA as a carpenter – as a matter of fact probably one of the classic builders of New York. He worked on the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center, a real contributor to the skyline of New York City.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of construction work did he do?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He was a carpenter, floor layer, and other things. I myself did construction work when I was very young. When I got out of the Army I built the Major Deegan Highway right in front of the Yankee Stadium, as a matter of fact. And I almost went over on the girders. So I decided to quit then and there and become a painter exclusively.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just a little much. Well, your brother is what? – younger or older?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He's two years older.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember the schools you went to?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In the Bronx? Yes, P.S. 40, and one of the oldest public schools in New York City, P.S. 4 in the Bronx, a very old, dilapidated building. But a very nice memory. I remember I got good marks when I was in that school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Aha!

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And then on to DeWitt Clinton High School. And I left – I'm a dropout. And I'm proud of it. I left high school and went into the Army when I was seventeen just for the simple reason that I asked my parents could they afford to send me to art school and they said they couldn't, so I decided to join the army to get the GI Bill. And while I was in the Army I took a ten-hour test and got my high school diploma at the same time. And at the tender age of nineteen I was already in art school. I was out of the Army like a week and I went

right into the Art Students League. I had probably the worst collection of instructors one could ever get. And it was so crowded at that time, in 1948, that most guys went at night, you know. And you just got whatever class you could get. So I got stuck with guys like Sidney Laufman and Liberte or somebody like that, and these were all kind of strange… And Harry Sternberg was kind of a fun instructor. I enjoyed him. And the last two guys I had were Byron Browne and Vaclav Vytlacil. But I never really felt that I had gotten anything out of any of these men. The only guy I ever enjoyed was when I went to Hofmann. He didn't teach me anything but I enjoyed him tremendously as a man. I just respected him. But I never liked his paintings. And as a matter of fact of late I'm starting to understand him a little bit better. But I never really could warm up to his pictures. His class was a very interesting one. In the daytime class there were people like Rivers, Gandy Brodie, Mike Goldberg. And in the evening there were Miles Forst, Jan Muller, my brother John, myself. Dody Muller was in the class I think. And even Wolf Kahn was in the daytime class, I think. So it was a sort of a very hip crew that session – that year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, let's go back. We took a giant step here. Tell me something a little more about your family.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, my father was a carpenter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Besides that. How would you describe your family life?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: When I was a kid I used to love to make model airplanes which is getting dexterity with your hands, building things. That I think has a great alliance to being an artist, you know, making things which you look at visually and transpose with your hands. And my father also acted on the Ukrainian or Russian stage down in the lowed East Side. So the family isn't quite devoid of culture at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you of Russian background?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: My father was born in the Ukraine. He came here when he was fourteen years old and didn't know a soul in the United States. I always think of him as a very great hero being able to do that. And my mother was born up in New York State near Canada. Her father got killed in a sugar mill and she went back to Europe with her mother. She spent most of World War I in real poverty in Europe. Then an uncle brought all these children back about 1921 or so. So she managed to get back here. But she was a citizen anyway. But the strange thing about our name Krushenick, when my father cane over it was really Krushelnitsky. And I think one of the funniest stories he ever told me was it seems that when he first got to the United States the only relative or person that he knew was a third-cousin or a second-cousin in Hartford, Connecticut, I think it was. So when he got off the boat in New York he went up to Hartford. This cousin was about twenty-one or so and knew a lot more about our family background than my father did. The first week in the United States this cousin had a fight with somebody in a bar and cut off his ear. He fled the next day to Chicago where he settled and got married, etcetera. About twenty-five years later, in 1955, my father gets this postcard in the mail saying, "How are you?" So my father writes back, "I'm fine, man; great." So the cousin invited them out to Chicago to visit and my parents went to Chicago. They started to talk about our family background. And it seems that way back in about 1840 we had two uncles who were writers. Their names were Krushelnitsky-Bejansky. One guy dropped the Bejansky and just retained the Krushelnitsky.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it a hyphenated name?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, with a dash. And we never knew that. But the other guy dropped his name completely, and it could be Dostoevski, or Gogol, or Tolstoy. I like to think it's somebody like that. But we'll never know who the other guy is. They were both writers and it's sort of an intriguing idea to think of what the hell the background could have been.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's kind of interesting that your father was a carpenter and an actor.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did your mother have any special interests?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: My mother, as a matter of fact, has taken up painting since about 1956 or 1957. And as a Primitive she's quite good I think. She has a real nice feeling for it, you know. I'm sort of delighted with some of the things she's done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have books or music or anything like that around the house?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. The only extension that one would consider art would be the little junk my mother bought in the five-and-ten and brought home. This was the only idea of art. Like she used to have a tendency – as I think thousands of mothers did – to rip out these pictures of pretty … oh, I do remember one, a dog howling at the moon and there's a child lying in the snow. This is a very cornball print that's been around for like a

hundred years. I don't know who did the painting. But that's the only thing I really remember well as sort of idea of what art was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you start drawing young?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I think in a funny kind of way I knew I wanted to be an artist when I was in kindergarten because I remember very faintly making a banjo out of a cigar box. Which was a delightful kind of thing to do. And one of the most delicious things I remember is when the teacher would give us a big piece of paper to draw on. I'd have this piece of paper in front of me for, oh, a good ten minutes; I'd sit there looking at it, and I used to envision all the wonderful things that I could possibly put on that piece of paper. And I was very jealous about putting that first line down. In other words, I wanted to hold back the second I had to dirty up the paper for a long, long time. My imagination would go all over the place what I could put down. And it was a very delicious feeling I remember very well to this day. I think that's when the whole spark was born for becoming an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of drawings were these?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: They were just childish drawings in kindergarten. It was a very exciting experience I remember. Because somehow there just wasn't any paper available at home. You know, a big piece of paper. So I enjoyed it tremendously. I remember it well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to kindergarten? That was kind of unusual for that time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. As a matter of fact, I went to kindergarten for two years. And I think that's what really turned me on to being an artist. I thought it was play and games for the rest of my life. And that's a long time to go to kindergarten. When I was in kindergarten it was like 1935-1936. Usually you sent to child to kindergarten for six months before he started school. But my mother sent me when I was four or something like that. And it went on forever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You got your doctoral in kindergarten.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, no, as a matter of fact in 1A – and nobody gets left back in 1A – I got left back in 1A because I kept thinking it was still kindergarten.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So after all those years of kindergarten how was grammar school?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, the funny thing about grammar school was I did have one teacher I remember in 5A who somehow sensed that I liked to draw and do these things. So she used to put me on all these wild projects of making slides. I used to be the official slide-maker and working with glass sheets and drawing pictures and sealing with the tape and everything. Somehow she left me all by myself with that. Like the rest of the class was doing geography and arithmetic. But I was the special sort of artist in residence working in that classroom. I always remember that woman for that. I can't remember her name. But I sort of liked the idea that she sort of set me on to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was just for that one year?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Just for a year I had her. I just remember she had bright red hair and she was a very nervous lady but I always liked her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great. Were there any other things about grammar school that you remember? Were you involved in athletics or anything like that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I never was involved with sports. I never took to it. I used to more or less like to do things with my hands. I used to love to make model airplanes and things like that, or draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were really involved in working by yourself?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I think I was basically a loner most of my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then you went on to high school?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In high school I majored in art. I mean I took a course in that. It was very blah because the facilities in high schools …Like you're not quite an adult and you're not quite a child. The quality of what they try to train you is just blah. You can't really identify … maybe in a high school of art it would be more sophisticated. But in a general high school it's a terrible kind of course really to take.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that was your first art course?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, so to speak. I got very little out of it I remember that very well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember any of the instructors or any students particularly from those days?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, not from high school. Not at all. I mean there are some friends that I can remember. One is a New York City policeman now. And one owns an advertising agency in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As a matter of fact, in 1965 I happened to go there and just out of curiosity I stopped in and said hello to him. He was a very successful businessman. I had the strangest suspicion that he thought I was hitting him for a handout so I could get back to New York. I was almost tempted to ask him for a flying $20 yet I must have been carrying about $2,000 on me at the time. But the way he looked at me he thought I had a sort of seedy look. I don't think I had shaved and I was dressed very casually. And he was in his very fancy office building. And I had that feeling all through the talk that we had that he thought I was going to hit him up for 20 bucks to get back to New York. I was really tempted just to say it for a kick, you know. But I didn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So then you dropped out of high school – right?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many years were you in high school?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I left in about the fifth term of high school, so I had a year and a half to go. But I was glad I made the decision because I was really incredibly bored with it, you know. I somehow wanted to get on to the business of becoming an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Academic subjects didn't interest you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Not tremendously. I mean when I look back at it now I sort of wish I had gone to college. I have a great yearning to know a second language. I would love to know French.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't learn another language at home?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: When My parents spoke Russian they used it so we wouldn't understand them, so they never taught it to us. And that was such a great loss. I do wish I had a second language, you know – I just think it makes you just a little bit more interesting and exciting as a person. Period. And I just don't have it. The older you get the harder it is to acquire a second language.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you can do it sometimes.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I know. If you have the fortitude.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you went into the Army then? What did you do? What was that all about?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I was stationed at Fort Wadsworth in Staten Island. I used to come home by Subway. I was the post librarian, which is about the cushiest job you could ever get in the Army. It amounted to a big four hours a day. Nobody read on camp so I never opened the door. It was a funny kind of insane year-and-a-half.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you had basic training though somewhere, didn't you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I had basic training at Fort Dix. And my brother kept telling me, "When you go in tell them you can type. Just keep saying you can type." So that's what I kept doing. I said, "I type." "I type." So they sent me to typing school. And it worked, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's great to go home from the Army by subway.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was working – I was pushing to get into the Fordham Road Recruiting Station which is in the middle of the Bronx from where I could have walked home practically. But I couldn't swing it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you think of the Army? Do you have any opinions of it? Or was it a momentary year-and-a-half?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I was so young. And I think it's a terrible way for a human being to conduct his life. But when you're 17 and you have very little direction of your own it's very easy to have it imposed on you. And looking back at it now it was like a terrible… I mean now if somebody wants to infringe on my life and tell me to give up two years of it for the Army, I'd say go scratch. I'd be very uncooperative.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you go to museums or anything like that when you were in high school? Did you see

any art books?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: My parents probably dragged me to the Metropolitan Museum once or twice. I used to be intrigued with the idea that it was a big, incredible, posh building on Fifth Avenue, and I lived up in this little blah Bronx. And it was exciting I suppose. But I really didn't look at the paintings with that kind of feeling. I mean I wasn't awestruck by them. I just was curious about them like any other child. I think children are just curious about anything. If you take them into a meat market they're curious, or a fruit market. It's just as exciting as going to a museum because you're acquiring and you're seeing things, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you didn't do much reading during your time in the library in the army?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I used to read the *Christian Science Monitor* form time to time. We had a subscription to it and it used to come in faithfully every single day. And I piled them up for a year and a half, and nobody ever read them. I somehow felt it shouldn't go to waste so I would read a copy from time to time. But I never really have become a reader. Occasionally I'll read a James Bond, which I enjoy, it's very light. But anything that really takes me very far from art I sort of put a stop to. If I get interested in something and it's tending to almost become a hobby I steer away from it rapidly. For a while I was very interested in – and still am – sports cars and the moment I do I want to become a partner in a racing car. And I say that's it, let's go, stop it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the first sign. Right. So you never have developed any hobbies of any kind?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Not really, no. I did a little photography with a movie camera in 1948 when I got out of the Army. But nothing really extensive. I'm sort of intrigued with it again now with the idea that maybe one day I'll get a camera. Everybody else is doing it, so I figure I'll have to make a try at it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everybody else is making movies.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, then we have you coming out of the Army and going to the Art Students League.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It sounds as if the instruction there wasn't really too exciting.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It wasn't. And I had an experience with Byron Browne which sort of set me off completely from even listening to an instructor ever again. I had done a painting that had like a wallpaper pattern in the background and he came up to it and looked at it and said, "You never do that in a painting to give it all the same look in the back." And I thought I had made some terrible, terrible mistake. And just three days later he gives us a slide lecture and he puts a Matisse painting on the slide projector with this big wallpaper pattern in back and he's telling us it's a very great painting. And I thought well, you bastard, for him it's okay but for me it's terrible. And I thought I'll never listen again. And I never took anybody's opinion again. I've just refused it from that moment on. And that happened very early. I'm sort of delighted that I felt that way because it made me even more independent. I felt that I had to depend on myself, and only myself, to become a good artist. I didn't want to take anybody's opinion on what I did, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They can say what they want but you do what you want to do.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. Why? Because painting boils back down to a very – it's the only singular art in the world. If you make a great painting you congratulate yourself. If you make a bomb you're responsible for it, too. And I kind of like those odds very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're one to one.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: One to one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're pretty tight odds.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, some people work very well under that kind of odds. I think they come to the fore each time because of it, you know. If you can depend on many, many people I think one tends to slide a little bit and say, well Joe will take care of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You spent two years at the League?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was your first contact then too with painters?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. My illusion when I first went to the Art Students League was that drawing like a photograph would make you a good artist. And within 6 or 7 months that whole idea was knocked out of me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: By what?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Somehow by accident I came to certain conclusions, which I was happy I had come to. Because I could have turned out to be one of those dumbbells that thought that that was the right way to become an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have facility in doing the sort of academic kind of thing?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Not really. As a matter of fact, I think ever painter has a certain feeling about certain areas of art in which he feels he's really not quite a master. Like if somebody doesn't feel he's a great draftsman, maybe he excels as a colorist, you see. I never thought I was a great draftsman but I think in other areas of painting I excel. I think any painter sort of leans heavily towards what he really is good at. There are very few artists in the world who are great at everything. And yet there is somebody whose name I will not mention who has great dexterity as a draftsman and as a colorist. But this poor cat doesn't have an idea in his head about how to make good art. So it comes back down to if one has ideas on how to make art this is really the paramount ingredient in making food paintings that are exciting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've got to have the idea but you've got to have the craft.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. But if you don't have the idea, you can have all the talent in the world and it doesn't amount to anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, you know, if you have the ideas and you have the talent and you don't have the craft and skill --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: You still have enough craft to make it work. I think Matisse is the only man that was a great draftsman, was a great colorist, was a great artist. We're all not that good. Period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He lived a long time too.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I mean that's part of it. One of my favorite stories about Matisse is that in 1954 Giacometti was asked to do a medal of Matisse. The French Government had commissioned Giacometti to make this medal that they were going to present to Matisse in homage to his being a great French artist. So Giacometti calls up Matisse and says, "Hey, man, I've got to make this medal of you." The old man was in bed then. He says, "All right, baby, come and draw." So he comes to his studio. Matisse is in the bed sitting there. And Giacometti sits down at the foot of the bed and starts drawing away. After a while Matisse says, "Let me see what you're doing." Giacometti shows it to Matisse, and Matisse looks at it and says, "You can't draw."

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the source of that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, that's a true story.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That sort of takes care of Giacometti as a draftsman.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you think of meeting other art students? Did you get involved with any of them? Or were you still pretty much of a lone wolf through this phase at the League?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, most of the time I was. Then my brother decided to come to the Art Students League and be an artist. Which was sort of strange because he was going to college and he wanted to be a psychologist. All of a sudden in midstream he changed over. And I knew Al Held at the time. Al was going to become a photographer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet him?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I knew Al from 1946 from the Bronx.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he live in the neighborhood?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, he was a neighborhood kid that was around. I remember I said to Al, "Why don't you go to the Art Students League and see what it's about?" He had this old cliché idea that you have to be born with the talent to be an artist. And I said, "It's all about hard work." So he came to the League. I took him there one say and within a week he was a confirmed nut. He wanted to be an artist, the greatest one that ever lived.

And within six months he left for Europe to study at the Academie Grande Chaumiere, which I used to call the grand schlemiel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So what did you do for part time jobs or work?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The first one – I used to go to the Art Students League at night – and in the daytime I was a construction worker. It was brutal work. As a matter of fact, I used to be so tired when I'd get back from work that I don't know how I managed to paint at night. But sometimes I'd put in a couple of hours. I painted Saturdays and Sundays. And to this day Saturday and Sunday are my favorite days to paint.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? It started a habit.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It's an old carryover from working eight hours a day five days a week. So you just painted of those two beautiful, precious days that were yours. Now Sunday is my favorite day because the City is very quiet, too; which is very nice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that important?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I don't know if it's important or not. Maybe it's just an old habit. But I think one can concentrate a little bit better. It's a very quiet kind of thing with yourself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With fewer trucks and less telephones.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I live on a very "trucky" block with lots of noise. And I think maybe in the quietness you can relax and concentrate more. Although I think all New Yorkers become immune to sound after a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You live with so many decibels all the time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. When you go to the country and sit in the woods it can almost drive you crazy. You take records to make noise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well then you went to Hans Hofmann. How did you find that school?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It was very different from the League. As a matter of fact, one of the funny things about that is when I was at the Art Students League I sort of ended up painting very much in a cornball Picasso-ish style. And all these students at the League used to call me a wild abstract artist. I was sort of titillated with the title. And when I went to Hans Hofmann – when a new student would come he'd ask them to bring 5 or 6 paintings that he could look at. And I lined up all these little Picasso's that I had done. He looked at them and said, "Ah, you are a figure painter." Which was a real shock to me. I was flabbergasted that he considered me a figure painter. I was under the impression that I was a wild abstractionist all this time. It was quite a revelation. I remember it very well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He could really see what was there.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Not that I was so much against having a recognizable figure. Because I think up until 1954 I could not do a totally abstract painting. I had to have some kind of recognizable element in it before I could conceive it and do it. It took me like two years after I left Hofmann to be able to do a completely abstract picture. And that was a real battle royal, getting myself to accept that idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what drove you in that direction? Do you have any idea?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I can't really remember for what reason. But somehow I slowly went more and more abstract and it became a passion to get to the point where I could do something that was not recognizable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No figurative landscapes, still lifes?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And it was very difficult. It was a real battle. I remember it well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you were with Hofmann for – what? – one year or two years?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Just a year. What happened was while I was there the New York State Regents did not want to accredit his school anymore. They said it's okay if you're a GI and want to go there but we won't give you college credit for it. And Hofmann was very insulted by this. He didn't run a very tight school. He just ran a school. And they wanted him to do all kinds of attendance checking and grading. He didn't believe in grading art work. I absolutely agree with him. But they wanted it. And he said, well, the hell with it. So he suggested that all the students go to some other school which he had recommended. But it was just about time for me to leave art school. I felt I'd had enough training. If I was ever going to be an artist I had to go to my own studio and just

work. And that's what I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: At Hofmann's school did you study with him or with some of the other people?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, he was my only instructor. Nobody else was there; just him – to my knowledge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, well I know he had people --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He had assistants. But I worked with him only. He was marvelous. He had a tendency to rip somebody's drawing completely in half; like he'd rip the drawing horizontally and then he'd pull it down, like four inches down two inches to the right of to the left, and say, "Ya, now it's spatial." And that's all he ever did. And the funny thing is he never ripped one of my drawings in half. But everybody else's he did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. It was a strange kind of thing. Thinking back now, I think I understand what he was trying to say. He was trying to get across to the people that there was a great mystery that existed between that ripped paper and pulling it two inches over to one side or the other that they weren't getting. And that is all he was really tying to get across to them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of classes did you have? Were they drawing? Painting? Still life? Figure?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It was so crowded there that most of the time the students used to draw with charcoal. Or they would do black and white paint on paper. I used to hate that. I wanted color desperately in my work. And we really didn't have any facilities there for putting wet paintings in a rack. So it became very trying. He had very little space and it was difficult to really do paintings in color. You had to come back to that black and white idea all the time. I think there were as many as fifty students in that class, and it was a tight room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was on Eighth Street?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Above the Village Barn.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's intriguing that so many of his students have gone on to become part of the more interesting crowd.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I think I'm probably one of the few artists that made it out of abstract expressionism that came out of his school originally. In other words, all the other painters that I mentioned before are considered abstract expressionists. And I think possibly I'm the only one in my age group that got out of that bag. Mike Goldberg and Rivers and all those other guys are like four or five years my senior.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just those few years made the difference?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I think it really did. Because like Held who is just a year older than I am I think has a lot of abstract expressionism still in his work; even though it's hard-edge, there's a feeling of it in his work. There are those big rough surfaces and stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. What do you think of art schools?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I just did a thing at – recently when I did the opera in Minneapolis I did a week of teaching at the Minneapolis School of Art. And I told the three hundred students there to leave, go to New York, get a loft, and paint. And the director of the school gave me the dirtiest look you could ever want. But I really meant it. Because that's where they'll find out what's happening. And that's where they'll find out if they're really an artist or a dilettante, you know, one way or another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Be with themselves and with the milieu.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: If they can come to New York where the action of painting is going on and survive and paint and become part of the art community where the exchange of ideas and visual things happen and they can survive – and one has to have tremendous drive as a painter – in other words, letting no obstacles get in your way… I mean if you marry a woman when you're twenty-two years old and you're having sorry years for the first six or eight years and she says why don't we have this and that, but out on her, she'll drive you crazy. If you want to paint that's where your direction is. And you're better off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you don't think art school offers much? Or is it sort of an introduction?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I think in some cases it's a point of departure. I mean when you walk into an art school you're very raw – you can get a certain amount of knowledge about techniques. Which I think is helpful because

if one is self taught this is very hard to acquire. I mean like how do you mix oil, or what kind of brushes do you use. This is all useful information. It speeds it up, you know. I think six months of technical training in an art school would be sufficient. And then if one really has the imagination and the drive to become an artist, that will take place. Otherwise it won't,

PAUL CUMMINGS: Otherwise five years of school won't make --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. As a matter of fact, there is a guy – I don't know him – but there is a guy who was at the Art Students League in 1948 and that dumbbell is still going, and it's 1968!

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a professional student.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. He's never going to learn how to draw. I mean even though he probably does a very fine photographic kind of drawing, he still doesn't think – he's got an idea of what the best is, and it really doesn't exist, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He'll never know.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He'll never know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you've talked about Matisse. When did you discover him?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I really had more respect for Picasso when I was young. But about 1957 I came to the conclusion that Matisse is the greatest artist of the 20th century. When I went to see that huge exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art I thought it was probably the most superb exhibition of paintings I had ever seen. I knew that I was in the presence of a great, great master.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that the recent show or the one some years ago?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The one that took place in 1959 at the Museum of Modern Art. There were beautiful collage cutouts. And yet at the same time I felt that they were incredibly romantic French paintings. I had a great feeling for the work but I wanted to do it as an American. Which I think is really very different from European painting – the whole feelings and concepts are different. And I'm delighted that I had that feeling instead of -- if I wanted to copy Matisse outright at that time and not have any ideas of my own I would have been in big trouble as an artist, you see. I simply enjoyed it and I respected it tremendously, but somehow he wasn't saying it the way I wanted to say it. He's a great artist but he's not my hero. And I think that the day that an artist has no heroes he becomes his own hero. That's the day he starts to become an artist of an quality, you see. I've always felt this way about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think Is the difference between French art and American art?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The word "romance" is a very ambiguous word but it would be a good word to use. There are soft, tender qualities in European painting that American painting since 1961 doesn't really have. If we do have soft ideas in painting, say, somebody like Olitski, they just don't quite look European; they look American. I was in Europe last year and I discovered that Americans are such gregarious people whereas Europeans are so tight. They want you to call them by their last name and not their first names. And with Americans all this nonsense has been broken down so long ago. And yet we still in our own crazy way have a class system that exists in the United States. Usually it's in reference to money. I've gone up to Park Avenue apartments to deliver paintings of mine. And the dumbbell doorman will say you've go to use the service entrance; you can't go through the front because you're a bum and an artist. It got to the point where a collector said, "You come up the front way." I was delighted! I said, "I go up the front way, you fink!"

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's nothing as pompous as a Park Avenue doorman.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It's a part of America but it's not paramount. It's dying and dying more and more. But I think part of the idea of American painting is the gregariousness of Americans, their great sense of humor. I think this is part of American painting in a funny kind of way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think the fact that they generally have bolder images --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: This is true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That size has a lot to do with it? People don't paint with quarter inch brushes all the time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. We're ready to paint with rollers, spray bombs; we'll make an explosion bomb with color in it. We don't care how it gets done. No matter how exciting it may get – I'm trying to find the word for it – well, in other words, whichever way it gets made is not even considered. Whereas in the European

tradition it's always done with a brush on an easel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A certain size.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: A certain size, yes. As a matter of fact, the Americans turned the whole world on to big paintings. Big paintings have been done in the past but Americans are insistent about it. It's like a way of life with us. More people make big paintings. Europeans at first were very angry at Americans for making such big paintings because they were getting $30,000 for 20 x 24. And all of a sudden you've got to do a big monster and they can't possibly ask one million dollars for it because it just doesn't rate it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It's broken the market.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting, the fact that this has changed everything, changed all the values.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The funny thing about it is if you look at American painting since 1955, or up until 1955, symbolically speaking the flag of painting had flown over Paris and Europe for 300 years. And since about that year it flies over New York City. Americans can feel so proud of having captured this invisible, tender, fabulous thing that we have. And yet at the same time we can go to show after show month after month in New York and see terrible shows one after another. And then once in a while you see a crack show like Kenneth Noland's and you know it's here. In other words, you see ten bad shows and you see one incredibly beautiful show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a pretty good average.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. I mean that's a very good average. Because we all know that if a century can produce ten great artists it's something. And if two of them are really incredible geniuses – and Matisse already is one of them – and probably Picasso in his own way is the second one; so maybe this century will produce some of the greatest painters of all time. There are only 33 years left to this century for one of us young Americans to become the third name. We all like to hope anyhow.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you were at Hofmann's did you get to know the Cedar Bar crowd and the abstract expressionists?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I did. It was always a very tight crew. But they sort of accepted the younger painters. And I was like a third generation. I did get a chance to meet Pollock when I was very young and who I found very much a bore as a person. He was a very violent person. And de Kooning was an incredible gentleman and a charming man. And Kline I enjoyed tremendously. One of the rarest people I've ever met is Georgia O'Keeffe who is a charming old lady, probably a very great American artist too. I had a very funny experience with her where I did some work for her years ago. She fell in love with a hand-cut Syrian brass bowl that I owned. She wanted desperately to buy it from me. And I kept saying, "Georgia, you can have that if you'll give me one of your 1910 water colors, an abstract one." She said, "Oh, no!" That's what I wanted because I think those are some of the most beautiful things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. What were you doing for her?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I had worked for the Museum of Modern Art for four years as their assistant master framer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: About 1952 to 1956. And I had an opportunity to meet her through the Museum. And she was charming, charming. She was remounting all of Stieglitz's photographs – her husband, you know – and I was working on these mats for her. She was a charming lady. I enjoyed her tremendously. Once she told me that she had been using Windsor-Newton Paints since about 1910. She said, "That's the only paint I will use." And an interesting thing she said was that most painters hadn't lived to see what kind of damage starts to take place on a canvas if you don't use good paint. It was an interesting idea to think about, you know. Because Pollock used junky enamel and stuff and some of these paintings are slated to just fall apart over the years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was an early lesson in good materials.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, yes. I've always had this unwritten law with myself not to use junk things. I'll never use house paint or something because I take pride in the fact that I've learned a little bit about the chemistry of paints and I should be concerned enough to want to use good materials and care about the longevity of these paintings that I make because I somehow like the idea that possible 500 years from now somebody will walk into a museum and a painting of mine will still have lasted that long and they'll say, "Man, that cat could really paint!" I like that. But if it's not good materials it might not be there 500 years from now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's preserving your own effort.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I think this is just like a good craftsman who makes a piece of furniture. I think it's a marvelous trait to take pride in your craft. If you're going to make something with your hands it may take just a little bit more effort to make it more permanent. And how much effort is that, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, what other things did you do at the Museum of Modern Art? This started when you left the Hofmann School, about the same time?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I made stretcher bars for the big paintings, frames, passé partout prints. I even tried to pick up a little knowledge on restoring; not much, but… And in a funny way it was a very frustrating experience for me because here were all these paintings that I handled and paintings that the Museum was buying, and I was working in a dirty cellar there, a nonentity. Nobody knew me from a hole in the wall as an artist. In that way it was a little frustrating.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a long time. You were there for about 6 years.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I had incredible security there. What spooked me was that after working there for two years they said would I like to go on the pension plan. And that really frightened me like a rabbit. I knew I had to get out of there soon. I finally broke away from them. As a matter of fact, I started that framing business with my brother doing odd jobs that I produced in the basement in the Museum of Modern Art. And then eventually my brother and I opened that framing shop on Tenth Street. Brata – which was about 1957 or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's sort of what Tenth Street was beginning to form.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a logical place to go I suppose.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well artists were looking desperately for a place to show their pictures. I remember Sam Goodman bumped into John and myself in the Village and asked us if we were interested in starting a cooperative gallery. And at that time we just jumped for any kind of idea of exhibiting our paintings. We had a meeting with a bunch of the people from the Camino Gallery. You know, they were forming the first Camino. And the Tanager already existed. I went to Tenth Street to look at a loft. And they very explicitly had said, "Do not sign a lease unless we all see the loft." And I knew that these people were a bunch of creeping turkeys and that if somebody didn't commit them they'd never commit themselves. So I went with my brother John to look at this loft. And I said, "We're going to sign the lease. To hell with them!" We signed the lease. And they said, "You shouldn't have signed the lease!" But we got a gallery going. That was the first upstairs one, the first Camino Gallery. And my brother John and I had our first two-man show together, and about at the end of that year I had a one-man show; and then we were so fed up with the old ladies and the fuddy-duddies at the Camino that I was the first one to break out of there. I left. And then my brother left after I did. And we started the Brata Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was across the street?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That was across the street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Camino was upstairs?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And then eventually Brata moved around the corner on Third Avenue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. How did you get the name Brata? What did that mean?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Brata means brothers. My brother made the name up. "Brati" in Russian means "brothers." And since it was a cooperative gallery he thought it was a very appropriate name. And one of the things about making up a gallery name, it should be short and not complicated. So it served its purpose in that way. And our first original crew of people – we lost more people to uptown galleries than any gallery on the street. And I'm sort of proud that my brother and I originally made the choice of people. Those people were: Al Held, George Surarman, Yayoi Kusama, Bill Creston, Joe Feldman, Ed Clarke, Bernice de Voison, and Ronnie Bladen and myself. We had about ten people. And we lost more of them – and I was sort of delighted that we had chosen those ten originally. Because no other gallery on Tenth Street put that many people uptown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, they all had one or two.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. But I always felt that we had the insight into how good the quality of the work was originally, you know. I'm always sort of delighted about that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the group evolve? There were other people that had exhibitions there as I remember.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Al Held was one of the first to leave because he got into the Poindexter Gallery. And then Sugarman left I think because he got in to Radich.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And as people got seen and got noticed uptown galleries started picking them off and we kept supplementing them with new people coming in all the time, you see. And for a time even Peter Forakis was a member of the gallery I remember. And, oh, one or two others. And we had some very exciting shows I remember. Some of the very first, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The halcyon days of Tenth Street.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. As a matter of fact, Don Judd who is a big hot minimalist mentions in one of the articles that he's written that Yayoi Kusama really turned him on quite a bit the first time he ever saw a show of hers when she had that Pacific Ocean Series of paintings on Tenth Street, those little circular things. I don't know if you remember those very light gray paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He thought that was some of the first minimalist work being done in New York and that was back in 1958, 1959. So we had some good shows. I mean some shows that were really what was going to happen in the future.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were really involved with Tenth Street for a long time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, it was the only avenue of escape, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think art is an escape for the artist?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I mean it was the only place that we had to show our wares to people. The few sales that we ever made on Tenth Street were something. But it was exposure, you know. At a certain point an artist wants other people to look at his work. He wants a kind of acceptance even if it's only by his fellow painters. Because this is part of the idea of being a painter in New York – you put your paintings up and your fellow artists look at them and they're the first to judge you. And then if they really get excited they start talking about you, and to this day I think this is what really makes an artist. Not how good a dealer you have. You can have a great dealer and be a lousy painter. You may last 2 or 3 years but you're going to bomb out eventually, But if a guy is a good painter and his fellow painters start to talk about him, it gets around, somebody tells somebody else, and then sales start, and the ball starts to roll. If I've seen this happen once this way I've see it happen a hundred times. I think painters make their fellow painters. I mean who has the best eye to look at art? Another painter I think. And then come the very experienced dealers who really know art, who are borderline artists in a frustrated kind of way; they have eyes like painters but they don't paint, you see. And there are not many dealers like that but there are a few who are that sharp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there are lots of people who echo what they do.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, I remember Tenth Street as being a place where there were – what? – about 6 or 7 galleries at one time --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, at least.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And terrific activity.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I think in 1959 it hit its height. I remember one Friday night at an opening there must have been 2,000 people. The gutter was closed off. You couldn't get a car through. It was very exciting. It sort of hit its zenith and in 1960 I left Brata because I felt that Tenth Street had had it. And it had, you know. But I think it was a good thing for the New York scene. I think if that hadn't happened we might have a different art scene now in a strange way. Because if those young artists hadn't asserted themselves, the very tight clique of abstract expressionists who had the whole thing wrapped up for themselves would have still been in control for a lot more years. And to this day I personally feel that Pop Art was an accident.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That abstract expressionism was dying but because Pop Art caught the imagination of the press they gave it incredible coverage.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was easier than abstract expressionism.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And within 6 or 7 months Pop Art was like it, period. Now an art movement takes a lot more than 7 months to get started. I've always felt in a certain way that if Pop hadn't gotten the coverage it go that it would have died a lot earlier but because of this it mushroomed. And in a funny kind of way I'm delighted that it did because if it hadn't happened we might still be stuck with fourth, fifth, and sixth-rate lousy abstract expressionists now. The idea that Pop wiped the slate clean and we started fresh and beautiful was a delicious thing to have happen. Because in a way if you did something that was very different from abstract expressionism when it was in its heyday you were looked on like an oddball. 1968 we have guys still pursuing abstract expressionism in their own crazy way, we have Op Art still on the scene, we have Pop Art still on the scene, we have hard-edge, we have minimalists, we have super-minimalists, we have flirtations with concepts of painting as we know them that will not exist. And I think in a certain way to have 6 movements going simultaneously is probably more healthy because more things are being discovered visually than if you had one or two tight, narrow views.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's what happened to France, you know, the School of Paris after the war.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I think for that reason the art scene is incredibly healthy. It's like a real democracy in art, in a sense, if you think of it in a corny way like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the individual has a better opportunity of doing his own bit rather than imitating what the big guys are doing, otherwise nobody will look.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. In the last few months I've had feelings about what's going to happen in art; and that as we know easel painting and as we know sculpture now, and that art is an object that you put in your home – I don't know if it's going to take 20 years of fifty years of a hundred years, but art as we know it now will not exist. It's going to be something so radically different from this, I think man is going to start tapping that first 11% of his brain and it's coming up in that next one percent. In other words, we've only been using 10% of it and the next 1% is going to expand at least as we know visual art now to something very different. For all I know it can be a guy on a corner reading poetry to the wind and nobody listens to him but everybody says he's an artist. I don't know what form it's going to be at all. But I think it's going to change to something very, very different.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's see, you were in a business together with your brother in the Brata – right?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you worked – you made frames?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: We made picture frames. I didn't enjoy it because we started to fight like two teenage boys. And I was a little surprised because here we were both grown men. I said this is silly and that was one of the reasons I left. I just knew that we were getting on each other's nerves and the proximity of our personalities was just too close and too much of a drag on each of us. I left first. I gave him what was called "the business" and he gave me a small sum of money. I gave him that whole framing business and left. That's when I bought my old Cadillac hearse and went into the hauling business. I hauled sculpture and paintings for about two-and-a-half years. But the last thing that John and I did before I started to sell paintings was we had that antique shop in Greenwich Village for a year. I enjoyed that. That was a lot of fun.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where was that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, we had a little antique shop in the Village called Peekaboo. It was on Sixth Avenue near 12th Street, a little downstairs store.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And I kind of enjoyed it. It was fun. It was like being a discovery. I'd go to these little country auctions and would just let my taste run wild. And somehow my taste paid off. Everything I bought we sold. Somehow it worked out well. I enjoyed it because a lot of American antiques have such great beauty. You can look at a piece of steel that a blacksmith has smacked with a hammer and there's incredible beauty in it, you know. I felt this very much about a lot of the things that we bought. Some of the things we couldn't sell because we fell in love with them. There's an alliance, too, because good craft maybe in another history would be considered art. Like somebody might go to Michelangelo and say make me a golden goblet, and he'd say oh, yes, and he'd pound it out. And it was high art. But now we have the machine that is capable of doing all these things so we don't consider them high art. They're like second rate things. I still can appreciate a great ceramicist when he does a pot. I think it's a beautiful thing to look at.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The hand is there.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And I consider it art. Yes, it's made by hand, it's conceived with the idea of giving it intrinsic beauty. But it's not considered so. Or like a good tapestry or a rug or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's a decorative art.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. It becomes decorative now because we have machines making it. And yet we can look at that set of dishes that Roy Lichtenstein did and it's delightful and we consider them art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The black and white, yes.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Because it's been removed. A very great American artist has designed these dishes and we've put them in a gallery and we've given them a different presence altogether. And collectors come along and say, hey, look at that! And accept it as such. But if you took those same dishes to a five-and-ten and put them in Altoona, Pennsylvania the dumbbells might not want to buy them for twenty-five cents each.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very possible.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I'm sure of it. "Hey, crazy designer! Aren't those birds and flowers better?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, do you think there were any people that sort of helped you along with your art? That aided and abetted you in any way?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I'm afraid not. And I'm delighted now because I've been a lone wolf. Nobody has waved my flag. Nobody has blown my bugle. And in a certain kind of way I sort of like it now because I don't owe anybody any favors. There are painters on the scene who we know who have PR men working for them and God knows what. In some instances I suppose I could feel a little jealous of some of the positions that some of the artists hold because I don't think they really deserve it, and yet we know that if they make bad art it's going to catch up with them anyhow. So you can't really get excited about it. But I never had anybody doing this for me. And in a sense probably that's one of the reasons that my career has taken a little longer to get started. But I'm not bitter about it; not really. It bothered me more before I made any sales because making a sale of a painter meant that I didn't have to work and I could pursue my art and live off my art. Now that I do I'm much more relaxed about it. But probably I used to get more angry at it then than I do now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What other artists have you been interested in over the years besides, as you said, Matisse and Picasso?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I have a great respect for Morris Louis. And a great respect for Kenneth Noland. What do you mean? –more contemporaries?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Old, modern, anything.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Barney Newman is a favorite of mine. I think he's turned out to be the master of abstract expressionism because he's made the move completely out of it. I made a statement as early as 1959 in the Cedar Bar, that I thought that Franz Kline and de Kooning were fifth-rate painters if you put them up against Matisse, and I almost had my head handed to me by saying this. But it's coming out to be true more and more each year. And I know I was right when I said it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you see the de Kooning show this year?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It was terrible. It was terrible. I mean this man had his best period between 1947 and 1954, when he did his Women series and some of the other things. I think his art is finished. Barney Newman is older than de Kooning and is continuing. And I respect that tremendously. I think Mr. Calder is an incredible artist. A real giant innovator in American art. In a certain kind of way he's probably our Matisse. America's Matisse, so to speak. Because he's a man who made something that nobody even ever thought of making.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Calder?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And I think we should pay a great homage to him as a great American artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: His mobiles, the stabiles.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He's a great, great sculptor and a great artist. I have my reservations about Stella. I think he's too young to be judged. He's made some good paintings over the years but I think he's getting hung up with the PR idea. Which I don't agree with. I'm a little annoyed at him in the last few months in that Kenneth Noland, who I think is ten times the painter Stella is, is being pushed aside and they're grooming Mr. Stella to be

the new Jasper Johns, you see. And I'm annoyed at it. I read this little stupid *ArtForum* magazine which has become a little cliquey magazine and they've got 12 guys they're going to push. They're pushing Darby Bannard because he's Frank Stella's crony from Princeton, and he's a lousy painter and he's always going to be a lousy painter. I can't take him, and nobody else can take him. And they're pushing him. And Michael Fried shoots his mouth off and everybody thinks he has discovered the next new hero. Michael Fried is starting to be looked at like he is a young Clement Greenberg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many young Clement Greenbergs have there been?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I don't know. I'm starting to lose respect for critics because I figure Michael Fried is not going to tell me that Darby Bannard is a good painter. I don't care what he says he can't convince me. I figure I have a better set of eyes to look at art than he has. That's what I'm going to gauge it by. I've always gauged it this way and I haven't missed many times. I'm trying to remember back to the first time I saw Morris Louis's paintings. And I remember guys giggled at it and they thought it was a bunch of nonsense and they made fun of it. But the first time I saw Morris Louis's paintings I did not giggle. I was afraid of them. Which I think is a better reaction than the other guys had. I didn't quite understand them but I didn't make fun of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting that none of the people you've mentioned are pre-1900 artists.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: What do you mean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean there are no older painters that really interest you.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I think Rousseau is a great artist. He's a great favorite of mine. Edward Hicks, the wild jungle painter, the American Rousseau. My concept was always that Cezanne was the father of modern painting. And when I saw this Turner show at the Museum of Modern Art and I saw this little striped thing that looked like a Kenneth Noland and it said 1835 on it I really flipped completely. It revised my whole concept of who was the greater painter – Cezanne or Turner, or who was the father of modern painting. My concept now is that Turner was. And I've mentioned this to certain artists and they said well, it was just a little sketch. And I said, yes, but why did he keep it? That's the key to that little drawing – that he saved it. If he was doing a little sketch of a doorway or something he might have thrown it away, but why did he retain this? Then I heard from somebody – and I don't know how accurate this information is – that the man who selected that show at the Museum of Modern Art did very conservative selection – in other words, there are many other things that looked very much like that little Noland sketch that weren't included because they thought it would shock people too much. But you could look at his other paintings and you could see this crazy concept of smoke and space, which is very much this other idea except in a more literal way, you know, that was actually executed in his paintings. He was a strange guy. He had two lives, two wives, two styles of painting. He was really quite a genius.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Schizophrenic.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. But a genius. But that was really a shocking experience, that Turner thing because, you know, like from 1948 until 1966 when I think that show was, I was under the impression that Cezanne was the father of modern painting. And then to have this whole thing just whacked out for me and have somebody else take that place it was sort of delightful and shocking. But I just had to go that way. I felt so strongly about it. Now I have a yearning to see some very strange Turners. I'd like to see his work more extensively in London if I get there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, take that huge water color collection.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I'd like to see that. I'd like to get into the vaults, see the ones they're hiding.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hundreds of them, yes. Let's see, have you got involved in politics ever?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. I have a certain feeling about that. Well, when I was younger I was involved in politics quite often. But somehow you never really save the world anyhow. You find out you can yell and scream and rant and rave --

PAUL CUMMINGS: And they do what they want anyway.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And you can't get into picket lines and all that nonsense and nothing ever really seems to happen. And then I sort of devoted all my energies to being an artist anyhow. I have some feelings about it in the sense that I think American art in a way might have come quicker to conclusions if we hadn't gotten stuck with our Depression. The Depression sucked a great amount of artistic man power into the idea of using their art as propaganda. I'm very much against this because propaganda has nothing to do with painting. Certain countries like Mexico have used art as a propaganda thing. The Soviet Union uses it quite often. And in the United States all the parties during the Depression used – like Ben Shahn did some of those very early protest

posters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And Gropper.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And Gropper. And there were so many guys that we can think of now who, if they hadn't been touched with the idea of making their art into propaganda, may have gotten closer to what we know now as painting. It may have happened sooner. And then a greater number of artists went down the drain because of the great insensibility toward art in the thirties. Nobody cared about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: If you sold a painting you gave a party because it was a big, huge, incredible occasion. And you only got $15 for the stupid thing in the first place. It was a very sad era in American painting I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it always makes me think that the culture in this country is still very young.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. If you think of it that way. Because think back, say, from 1915 till about 1925 certain artists in the United States that gained respect like Bellows or Luke had a certain aura about them. They were artists at least and were treated as such. But everybody from 1930 to 1945 were slobs, that's the way they were considered.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They all became civil servants. No identity.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. Right. No identity at all. It was like a mass identity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think the fact they were, as you said, involved with social realism and that kind of thing got them on non-art ideas.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. America must have been a very terribly depressing place to live in if you were aware. I was a small boy when the Depression was at its height, so as a child I never really felt it because my parents took care of me and fed and clothed me. I remember just pieces of it in a very protected kind of way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of pieces?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I can remember that nobody had any money. There were no cars on the streets. We were superintendents of a building in the Bronx to get by, to make ends meet and my father worked only one or two days a week. These are the pieces and snatches that I can remember. But I want to remember them because it's part of what happened to me. As a matter of fact, I always get a strange feeling you can bump into a 20-year old kid now whose father is a shipping clerk and he's a Republican; you can never figure out why – Republican is for the wealthy usually when you think of it instantly, but this kid is a hot Republican and his father makes $106 a wekk. And you don't understand it, you know. He has no concept of what the Depression was. We live in a very affluent society now. There's no dream of ever really being poor again for anybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. More and more so. Well, you haven't done much traveling except in the last – what -- ?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I'm catching up now. Last year was our first time to Europe and it was very romantic in a funny kind of way because I had conjured up pictures of what Paris looked like since maybe I was 15 years old. And it lived up to all of my expectations. Which was very strange and very exciting at the same time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Paris was the place to go then for you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I'm sort of delighted that I never did go then because I think if I had gone to France and studied maybe there would be an influence of French painting in my work. And there's none. So I'm delighted for that reason that I didn't go. But Europe is an incredibly fabulous place. And being so different from the United States it's as if you eat eggs all your life and then suddenly somebody introduces you to a squab. I enjoyed it tremendously. We're going back again this summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, are there other places you've traveled besides --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, we went to Curacao off Venezuela last year, too. And in 1965 I was in California at Tamarind making those prints. So I've really finally gotten a chance to see the United States or a good portion of it. We drove across and back. And that's a great way to see the United States, the wild country we've got.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think of driving across the country?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I think drive one way. Always fly to L.A. or fly to New York and then drive back. But only one way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Once is enough.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: But maybe I'd like to try driving across once more seeing a different part, probably the Northern route, you know, up through Montana and Oregon and Washington. It's very beautiful there. And having seen the United States probably the most beautiful parts are the East Coast and West Coast. In between is just big, stupid wheat fields for miles and miles. I found Northern California just beautiful, the redwood forests; we even saw seals coming in from Alaska. It was very exciting. It's just beautiful up there, 150 miles north of San Francisco. It's spectacular like Maine, the whole coastline Mother Nature outdoes herself. She really shows off her best one-man show in both Coast areas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let's see, you had your first show at Camino in 1956 with your brother – right?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, a two-man show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And in 1957 you had your first one-man show and seeing the pictures out of the studio?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, sort of mixed, like finally feel you've had your first show and you think the world will come on their knees to your feet and say Aha, you're here. And it doesn't happen. It doesn't happen the first, it doesn't happen the second, and it doesn't happen the third. But what happens is each time something else happens which adds up to a kind of total idea. I really didn't start selling any paintings until the first one-man show at Graham. I sold two paintings. And I suppose you can consider that a very successful first one-man show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was in 1962?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And then I went on to Fischbach after that. I was only there for six months and she sold quite a few paintings for me. Then I went on to Pace where I am still and I'm absolutely delighted with them. They're incredible, fabulous dealers. And great businessmen. I'm all for them, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you feel about the critical reception?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, the strangest thing is I've never really had a bad review. I'm waiting for that first time. I've always had favorable reviews or rave reviews. I think I would probably punch the guy in the nose who gives me a bad review. But it hasn't happened yet. And I think one of the reasons it hasn't happened is that for quite a while when I first came on the scene in 1962 in the uptown galleries the Pop element started to pull me toward Pop. They were saying yes, he's a Pop artist. And then the abstract expressionists who knew where my real roots came out of kept saying well now he's really ours. And then people said he's a little Op. And even the minimalists in a certain kind of way look at me and say well he's sort of minimal, you know. So it's like each one of these factions has sort of said that there's a piece of them in me. They've never really pigeonholed me. So when I'm reviewed I'm reviewed in a very delicate kind of way. They don't really know where to place me. Like I'm out in Left field all by myself. And that's just where I want to stay. Because the moment they can say I'm right here I cease to become invisible to them. They've got me stamped. They say you're here, period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: They say we don't have to worry about him anymore. But right now out in left field they have to worry about me. They don't know what I'm going to do there. And I like the position very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's great. Well, after the two shows at Graham and Fischbach you had one at Gallery Muller in the Stuttgart?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And the Germans are crazy about my pictures. They buy them like mad. I'm delighted. The only thing I can see that stimulates them into buying them is those black lines that I have in my paintings. They're very precise and very orderly and I think it's a very German trait.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the color is flat.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And I think they respond to this kind of flat, direct, precise statement that each one of these pictures makes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like having a show in Germany? What was it like? Did you go? You went to Germany, didn't you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I didn't go to the show. I went last summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was about a year after the show?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That was 6 or 7 months after the show. I did a suite of prints in Germany last year. And I've had a show in Paris which I didn't get to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: At Sonnabend.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you feel like having shows in these 3 or 4 years before hitherto inaccessible places?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I was delighted. Because for years and years I had wanted to make inroads into Europe. I think if a painter shows on a national scale in his own country all he's ever going to be is a national artist. But the moment you start going on an international basis your career booms. It's good for the artist. It's good for his ego. It's good for God knows what. It's exciting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it's more difficult to sustain activity on that level?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, one can't really have more than, say, two shows in 24 months, or 30 months, say. Because to paint a one-man show I think takes a good solid year of work. In other words, if you have a show in New York and if you're lucky enough to sell out you have nothing if, say, somebody in Europe wants one. You have to pace yourself because you just cannot produce that many paintings in 18 or 20 months or something like that. And it becomes a little difficult because like if somebody says hey, I want to give you a show, and you'd love to have to show, but if there's no work available you're not just going to knock out paintings for the sake of knocking them out. They have to come up to your standard as art. It's a little frustrating at times. Everybody wants to give you a show. And you'd love to make all of these commitments but it just can't be done. So you have to pick and choose what really is more important as a show place than another place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was the Tamarind? Was that your first experience with lithography in 1965?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: With lithography, yes. I found it fun. A funny thing about it is when I left, out of the 22 prints I did was delighted with about 15 of them. The others were pressured in a certain way. When I first got there they were making great demands on me and I think if they had just let me relax those first six prints might have been even better. But a funny thing is an artist goes to a situation …I was there for 8 weeks and you're starting to really tune up to something and then it ends. You walk away from it and say, gee, if I was still there I'd do this, this, this, this and this. And that's when it would really get hot and really exciting. But a good chunk of it was very satisfactory and I enjoyed doing it. Now I even enjoy silk screen more because silk screen is more a direct idea of my paintings than lithography. Lithography goes more to a soft idea of painting than a hard idea of painting. And all of my lithographs come out looking like silk screens. Which drove these people crazy. They wanted me to use all kinds of exotic papers. I said, "No! Nice white flat paper." They said we'll give you this Japanese dark gray paper with interwoven junk in it. I said, "No, no, I don't want that junk. Just white paper." And I said, "You shouldn't have invited me here if you weren't hot to my aesthetic, period." So I finally got that across to those dumdums. And then they finally settled down to the idea that I was going to make what I was going to make, period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm interested in what you mean by lithography being soft as opposed to silk screen.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Lithography is more conductive to somebody like Olitski or Oldenburg than to somebody like Noland or Stella or myself. Because the aesthetic goes to a very sharp accurate look more in silk screen than in lithography. Lithography is a soft medium. The color is soft-looking. They're not hard. You can get them pretty bright but never really up to the intensity of what Liquidtex looks like. So for that reason it goes more to a soft kind of idea. Etching even to a softer idea. If you do etching only I black and white it's really drawing in a more permanent kind of manner.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: If I were to think of anybody right now who would be perfect for an etching idea it would be somebody like Dine, or like Oldenburg, or like Hopper, or like Richard Linder. But to think of etching for somebody like Noland it's very obscure for him to even want to consider etching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It would be why, you know. I mean I'm sure he would do some intriguing looking things but the medium really isn't right for his idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how about silk screens for Noland?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, perfect! Perfect. It's his bag. Just like it's my bag.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of inks do you use in your silk screens? Do you use Liquidtex?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, you don't use Liquidtex. But the inks that are used and the paints that are used are very close to the values of the bright Liquidtex palette that most painters are using now. So it's a perfect kind of – they complement each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start using Liquidtex?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In 1960.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's when the whole change started?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I remember I bought a set of Liquidtex paints and tried them. And I had about 60 tubes of oil that I could never go back to and I just gave them to my brother. Once you fall head over heels in love with it you just don't go back. And certain painters have tried – there are certain things that you can't do with Liquidtex. There are certain colors that you just cannot get. And occasionally a guy or two has tried going back to oil. There's a color that you can get – Rosmarin – That I would love to get in Liquidtex, but you can't even if you stand on your head. The violets are not – like the Aqua-violet that they have, you can take that violet just so far and then it starts to dissipate and you can't get this posh kind of look.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You find the color breaks down?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Cobalt Violet in oil is a beautiful color. You can't get anywhere near it with Liquidtex. So you lose one or two. But then there are things that Liquitexcan do that oil can never get near, you see. So you sort of have to settle for how much you're getting out of it as opposed to what you could get out of it if you went back to oil.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, in other words, there are technical limitations.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. Any one of these mediums has this. Like Larry Zox is working on some paintings now and he's using epoxy to get a shiny surface. Now epoxy is deadly, dangerous kind of crap to use. And I always say is it really worth that? You can always take another route. There's always another way. Like if a guy is making something in plastic and it scratches and it drives him crazy, you can always try glass. You can always do something else. There's always another material that you could use that would be satisfactory but might take you a little bit longer to execute because it's different. But it may be safer to use chemically, like the fumes that it may give off. So you have to consider each one, its attributes and its disadvantages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm not talking about styles of the pictures or anything, but you haven't used new materials, like the new material bit you know?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I've used wood. The shaped canvases that I did at my last show I was using veneer wood. Because it's too complicated to stretch a canvas that way. And in a sense using veneer wood on a shaped stretcher bar is sort of a different kind of thing to try. Recently Wesselmann had a show and he had very complicated stretchers made. He's seens so much shaped painting going on he figures he's got to do it too. And he's done it. The funny thing about that show was I thought it was his best show but I didn't like it. The only one I liked was the closed mouth with the cigarette butt, I think it was the most exciting painting there. But I don't respond to it because I think he's a fifth-rate Pop painter. I think that the two giants of all Pop painting are Lichtenstein and Oldenburg. And the rest of them are going to fall by the wayside over the years. It just seems that those are the two. Oldenburg is a literal translation and Roy is becoming the abstract translation of Pop. And I appreciate both of them. Probably Roy more than Oldenburg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How so would you think?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I think Roy makes a more positive statement with his paintings than Oldenburg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oldenburg I think is a little more conservative.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oldenburg in a sense goes more to a Surrealist idea that I've seen before. I mean he looks like a 1968 Surrealist but Surrealism is a quality that we know already. Now Roy is working with quantities that we're not quite sure of. For that reason I think I find Roy more exciting as an artist. In other words, there's a possibility he may stumble on the absolute unknown. Whereas with Oldenburg it's a pretty sure bag that he's in, and we kind of know which way he'll go. In other words, we knew he's next going to use vacuum cleaners. He goes from the kitchen into the bathroom and from the bathroom back into the living room and from the living room --

PAUL CUMMINGS: To the lawn, to the swimming pool.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. To the drugstore, to the supermarket. But with Roy he does some strange kooky things and we say, hey, look at that. Whether we agree or disagree. I was absolutely elated with those smear paintings of his. You know the ones with --

PAUL CUMMINGS: The brush stroke?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The brush stroke. I thought those were beautiful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Abstract expressionist kind of.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: But they were transposed in such an incredible, crazy way that they were just great. I can't go for this 1936 Empire State Building bag. It just leaves me cold. I don't really respond to it that much. But I have great respect for Roy in the sense that he's a searcher and a hunter. And I kind of like the idea that he's hunting. He's always on the lookout and hunting for certain things. You can almost predict what Oldenburg is going to say for the next five, ten years. But with Roy we don't know. That's why I find him the most exciting painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. Do you want to keep going? Or do you want to stop?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Whatever you want.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's see, after Tamarind, in 1967 you got a Guggenheim.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Heigh-ho, the bread was good, man, the bread was good!

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's nice. That's when you went with Pace? In 1967 you went with Pace?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In 1965. At the tail end of 1965 I went with Pace.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your first show with them was in 1967 though.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And I have one coming up in November 1968.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you've got work to do.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Remind me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was it like with the Guggenheim? This was the first big award you had received?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: A funny thing about winning a Guggenheim: in 1959 when I applied for a Guggenheim I couldn't get one if I stood on my head. In 1959 hell would freeze over before I would have gotten a Guggenheim. But in 1966 I got a letter from the Guggenheim saying, "Wouldn't you like to try for a Guggenheim?" And I said this is the year to try; when they send me a letter asking me to try that's the year to try. And that's the year I got it. And in a way it boils down to the Guggenheim Foundation is not willing to give a grant to an up-and-coming young artist. They want to give a grant to somebody who's sort of proven himself in the art world. So a hundred years from now they can say, "Hey, look at that! We gave one to him and look where he is now!"

PAUL CUMMINGS: A good conservative investment.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. In other words, they're sure of who they're giving it to. And the funny thing about it is that recently Henry Geldzahler and Robert Motherwell and somebody else were on the committee. Before that there were guys like Henry Watkins and some other fink who couldn't get past bumblebees on flowers in painting. And for years and years slobs got it, slob after slob. And any decent working painter just never could even consider getting it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Old lady painters.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. Now the years I got it Larry Zox got it and some other guys. I thought that Zox and I were the two guys that had really put in the years for it. The other guys – well, they may be just as dedicated etcetera but I didn't particularly know them personally, but I kind of felt that Larry and I in a certain way had put in the freaking years for it and maybe the other people hadn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you get married, by the way?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: 1952. Too young. I was 21. My wife 18. Sick!

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a long road.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: We've been married for 16 years and we think it's neurotic being married that long.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why so?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I don't know – everybody that we know who got married at the same time has been divorced eight times over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, that's the thing I've seen. But you like it?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Do I like it? I suppose so. I didn't like it so much in the sense that if I was still knocking myself out eking out a living and not selling paintings, I think it's very hard on an artist to sustain a family and to sustain an art career and possibly do another job to support his family. I think it would be just too many responsibilities. You can carry that responsibility for a certain number of years, and it's tough and hard. But I think after a while you would just want to give up on it. I always think back to how many years my wife couldn't buy a dress, or I couldn't go to the dentist. Or just going to the country for three days in the summertime was a big deal. That was our vacation, three or four days. And the first time that we consciously went to the country for a week was in 1958. And we went on a very limited budget. We were married in 1951 so it was some seven years later before we ever got to the point where we could afford to go someplace for even one week. That's a long time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's tough. Do you think that counts, though, after a while? I mean that counts towards something.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In what way?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, in any kind of way. The fact that you've survived that difficult time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, there's an old stupid cliché that an artist has to suffer before he gets good. I think that's a lot of bull shit because Frank Stella didn't suffer and he's very happy about it. And there are other people like Poons who practically got out of the cradle and was making paintings that were selling and he was enjoying great prestige, etcetera. And I don't think any artist wants to go through that nonsense of being a fifth-rate citizen in the sense that he has no money and a landlord doesn't even want to look at him to rent a place to live in. It's hard, and in some ways you can look back and smile at it all, but you never really want to go back because it was terrible. It's if you compare yourself in a sense to a doctor or a dentist or any kind of professional – you leave school and start a practice and there's an absolute guarantee that within three years you are going to be making a certain amount of money and enjoying a certain standard of living.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And have prestige.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. Now an artist doesn't even ask for this. He asks just to live. He doesn't ask for the standard of living that the psychiatrist or the doctor knows that he's going to have. I made the statement in 1952 or 1953 that id somebody gave me $5,000 a year for the rest of my life I would give every one of my paintings away free. And I meant it when I said it. I wouldn't do it now. But at that time if you had given me a written paper I would have signed up like a shot. You know, this is the way it is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. I see you were in some group shows here. You were in the famous Post Painterly Abstraction.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Is that considered a famous show now?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's one of historical note.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Why I got in it I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's just what I was going to ask you.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Clem and Ken Noland came up. And Ken liked the painting very much. I think Ken was an influence on Clem to make the decision to put me into that show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a historical statement. It's been said the other way around so often.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I wish I knew Ken better. I have great respect for the man really but I don't really know him that well personally. Oh, I know him well enough to say hello and talk with him for a while. I think a great thing took place in Ken's life recently. I think he became a very great artist recently. I always thought he was a good painter but I think recently he became a very great American artist, with that stripe series that was at Emmerich. Those were beautiful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The recent horizontal lines.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Just great.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Tight color.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Superb. You know, I think all of us have a certain kind of dying feeling when we see a good artist go bad. But when we see an artist who we've been watching getting better and better it's a delightful, beautiful feeling. And we have so few of those artists. We should protect them and nurture them you know, they're our future.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, but sometimes they've got to have a life where they're beat up a little and knocked around to keep doing it.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Well, listen I'm sure that Noland has had his beat up periods where he's felt out of it, etcetera. What artist hasn't had those feelings? But in his case I'm just so delighted that he gets better every time I see him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you think of being in a Systemic Show at the Guggenheim?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I didn't really belong. I felt that way after I walked into the show. It's a funny thing, it did something, it sort of spooked me a little because everything else at the show. It sort of shook me up a little.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And yet I knew it was good painting. But somehow I had the feeling when I saw that show – I knew instantly I didn't really belong in it. And I thought well all those guys are going on to incredibly beautiful big super-duper things and I'm sort of slipping away. I don't feel that way at all now. But I remember at the moment it seemed that way. But somehow they didn't progress and I think that I have progressed with my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then in 1960 at the Modern collage show.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do at Expo – one of those huge things?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I wasn't asked to do a big one but they put in one of my paintings. And I was delighted that I was one of the artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever see Expo?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I didn't go to Expo. But my mother went with all her girls from her shop. And no mother was ever prouder.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of shop is she in?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: She works as an operator. She must have been delighted, you know. And that wiped the slate clean with my mother forever. "I knew the slob would make it."

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've gotten into quite a number of collections now. What was the first one – the Chrysler?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The Chrysler, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: About 1960. He was the first collector to buy me. I've always respected Walter in a sense because he was the first man that was willing to take a chance on me. Up until that moment nobody else had been willing to. So I've kind of always liked him for it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the Kalamazoo.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, that was a Longview Grant from Tom Hess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. And the Aldrich Museum – that was more recent – right?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. That was recent. And Walker was the first major American Museum to purchase a painting of mine. I've had a soft spot in my heart for them since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In about 1963 or 1964, the first major museum to purchase a painting. I mean I appreciated Walter's buying the painting but when he bought it I didn't know whether it was going into his museum of his private collection. And his museum is not a major American museum. It's a minor place. But when Walker bought one I was sort of delighted because --

PAUL CUMMINGS: They have a good collection.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And I just gave them a huge painting as a gift, a painting 189 inches long. I think they deserved it. They gave me this one-man show at the museum and they spent a fortune mounting the show and all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like going out there to see that --?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, you know, the strange thing is that every painter the first time he has – and it wasn't considered a retrospective – it was just the last five years from the 1962 to 1967.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A pretty good survey show. Well, there were fifty – 35 paintings, collages --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, there were almost 70 pieces of work. And walking into that show I think a painter feels like – well, what if a lot of paintings are going to die on the walls?

PAUL CUMMINGS: And there you are, you're spread out.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. There I am, exposed, naked to the world and my paintings are croaking on the walls. And the funny thing is that only one painting – I could still accept it – but I felt I would conceive it in a different way now. And I felt that that was a pretty good average that only one out of 70 pieces of work disturbed me just slightly, all the others are that strong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's pretty good for five years.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And 3 of the old paintings from 1962 sold out there. Which delighted me. In other words, there was still great power in the older work that people still sensed. And I was absolutely delighted with the response and feelings that people had for it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a nice museum. Where was the show – on the second floor there?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. In the back part. It was a nice feeling that the older paintings sold.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Stood out.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. One is always more excited about his new work. And the newest painting in here, which is this one, was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Winston. This is my favorite painting that I'm in love with right now. And that was purchased like the first hour it was there. He has a very beautiful home. One of the early Philip Johnson houses in the United States. And that painting is hanging in his Philip Johnson house, and that house is so conductive to painting that it's incredible, they put it up and it looks as if it had been there forever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You haven't done any architectural projects or anything like that yet?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, but while I was out there there's a possibility that a Roman Catholic Church in St. Paul will commission me to do 25 stained glass windows. This is just in the works now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's something!

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I've done the opera. And now maybe the stained glass windows in the church. And there's the possibility of a ballet in the offing.

END OF SIDE 1
SIDE 2 March 14, 1968

PAUL CUMMINGS: March 14, Reel 2. Well, I think we've pretty well covered everything up to about the early sixties in the biographical material. You had mentioned that you were doing some teaching. When did you start teaching?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The first time in 1965 just for an 8-week guest shot at the School of Visual Arts. And I was very nervous about it all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were you teaching?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: A fourth year class in painting, you know, like to top kids that they had. And it's really very much like speaking to some friends over drinks. It becomes very relaxed after a while. But I think the thing that still tightens me up is if there's a teaching position open and they mention lectures I back off instantly because I don't really believe that they have a function. I'd rather sit with a group or one to one with a painter and walking through the studio I think is exciting what can come out of both of us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've got something right in front of you to talk about rather than --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And in most cases we don't even talk about the paintings because what can one say verbally that may physically change a man to paint that differently in such a short time? Like maybe he got 4 months left and he's graduating. Right now I'm teaching at Cooper Union.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did that start?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I started there in September of this year. And then I did that shot out at Minneapolis when I was doing the opera. And I just booked myself for the University of Wisconsin for one month in April 1969 (not this April). There's a possibility that I may go to La Jolla for ten weeks early next year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you teach at Cooper now?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Ready to graduate fourth year class in painting a studio situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find it a much different kind of school?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, schools differ. I mean as a matter of fact I subbed recently for Allan d'Arcangelo at Visual for five weeks when he went to Japan. And he had 22 students at Visual. When I first walked in I was sort of bowled over. They looked so hip to everything I sort of felt that my class at Cooper was stale. This was a first reaction only. After really looking at all that stuff at Visual it really boiled to four little Wesselmanns, two Kenneth Nolands, three Frank Stellas, one Oldenburg, three Rosenquists. None of them really had anything of their own. Where at least at Cooper in my class they are all plowing away at their stupid unknown that they all have. In other words, none of them are copying anybody. I somehow feel stronger about that. Whatever bad paintings they're making now as students at least it's theirs and I have more respect for them as young painters. It's very easy to copy somebody. It's hard to eke something out of your own system.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder if that's because Visual Arts is so hip about the scene and they really try to teach the students what's going to happen before the show opens?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Possibly. It could be. Yes. And, you know, maybe the first or second year in an art school situation I could see a young person coming for the first time and saying, "What am I going to paint?" So as a point of departure you look at something – you see Leger and you say, hey, that's kind of nice, I'll see if I can do that. And you copy it. All right that's a beginning. That's a start. That's to feel how to put paint on a canvas and to make some kind of form that looks like something you've seen, and then you get a feeling of hoe to make a picture. But then it should grow from there. And these people were fourth-year students and they were still copying something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Visual Arts people?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Where at Cooper there are one or two there that are really exciting young people to watch. I don't know if they'll go on to be painters. But they certainly look good for 21-year-old kids, or 22 or whatever it is. So each situation is different.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was Minneapolis?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Minneapolis is a little bit stiffer in the sense that it's a provincial city. It's off in hinderland. The young students don't have the opportunity of going to see all the crack shows taking place in New York. I mean the town here is loaded with museums and galleries. You could be saturated just walking around for a week. If you got interested in art and if you went diligently for one solid week looking you'd be a slight expert by the end of the week, you know, really from viewing and seeing things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's all there.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And you can get a lot of free drinks at the same time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If you pick the right days. That's the fun of it all. Do you think you can do much for students as a teacher?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. I really believe that all painting is self-acquired. I mean you can be shown the tools and how to apply the paints, but you can't really be taught to paint good pictures. That can't be done, you know. What one instructor thinks is the way to do it is his idea, and that student may want to do it a different way eventually. And I can't see somehow these young people acquiring my attitude toward art, my visual attitudes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: But some of the things I may say to them may be helpful. Maybe I could spark them a little. And that's about the only thing I can see that I could possibly give them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just kind of keep turning them on.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. To excite them to want to probe and hunt out things, you know. More people I talk to agree absolutely with the idea that art cannot be taught and cannot even be graded because the biggest dumbbell in the class may turn out to be the greatest artist of the 20th century. And the real goody-goody in the class may turn out to be the worst slob that does A.S. Beck shoe ads or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Let's see, what other projects did you do? You did the opera. Tell me something about that because that was a whole new field. How did that happen?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Martin Friedman, who is director of the Walker Art Center museum has this idea that if you invite a contemporary artist to tackle something like this – someone who has not had any experience doing stage sets or costumes, something more exciting may come out of it than if it's done by a guy who does it all the time. If one does stage sets and costumes there are always these rules and regulations. Like a carpenter says well, you can't fly a 900 pound ball there. And an artist approaches it with the idea that it can be done somehow. For that reason he felt that some exciting things could happen. And I think probably in some cases it has. In my case the reviews in the newspapers said that it was the most exciting visual production they'd had in five years. So I was delighted with the end result.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like it when you saw it though?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, it was almost like the first time I had a one-man show because – well, something I had done that an audience of 3,000 people were watching. It was a very funny kind of feeling. I had that feeling a bit when I was very young, the first time I showed some paintings in some dirty barn up on Cape Cod, you know, where the postman and three other people came. But I was still very nervous about it. And this was the same kind of feeling a little, you know. But I was delighted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the name of it again?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It was called The Man in the Moon. The music was by Haydn. The book was by a guy names Goldaldi, I think. I personally hate opera, but I wanted to do this, you know. I listened to the taped music once through and I said no, it has nothing to do with art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you talk to the director or the producer?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, we had a lot of talks. One thing about doing an opera that an artist has to take into consideration is that when he does his paintings it's a singular thing: he makes all the decisions whether they're right or wrong. If he makes it he's a hero. If the painting finks out he's responsible. But with opera you have other people to contend with. You may want to do this but also there's a budget thing. You have to ask what kind of budget they possibly have. And once experience was there were three sequences of choreography. The dancers needed costumes. And for one of the sequences I had designed just black leotards for the dancers to wear with these big pompom balls that were sewn on loosely so they would sort of jump around. One sequence was orange and blue, another was red and yellow, and the third was another color. And when a dancer would jump you'd have all these balls moving back and forth and I thought that would be very exciting visually. But it worked out that whenever these dancers jumped some kind of fluff came out of these balls. The opera singers said they would not sing with this junk floating around in the air. So like three days before the opera we had to junk all these costumes and go another route. So there's something that I couldn't possibly control. They should have tested this stuff 2 or 3 weeks before their deadline. Because with 3 days left you couldn't really go a whole thing, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, we substituted. We did a few other things with attachments to the leotard with black vinyl, with silver vinyl material. It was affective but I think it would have been more effective the other way which had really been thought out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do – you listened to the music and you didn't like that. Did you read the book then?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I just had a rough idea of what the characters were and what their function was in the opera. Part of that material I used. Like one man is an astronomer and in a way he was probably the main character. So I sort of gave him a more elegant and important costume than his flunkies. And the father in the thing is supposed to be a real clod, I especially designed his costume in an awkward set of colors so he would look like the buffoon, like he couldn't even pick a good set of clothes. And it worked that way. He was sort of the dullest-looking nitwit on the stage. Whereas the handsome young prince was very elegantly dressed. So in those cases I did use the characters for what their function was, and the designs followed their background and character.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Would you like to do another stage -- ?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, yes, I'd like to do a ballet next. Because ballet is more a visual thing. You almost get the feeling you could make paintings from the figures. Then you'd have to go to the choreography. And then you'd get bopped over the head because the choreographer would say no, you stay with your end and we'll stay with our end. But I think if an artist designed costumes for a ballet and he had some say on the choreography idea something very interesting I think – not all of the choreography because he's not equipped as a choreographer. But there could be some simple things that he could suggest with the body movements that would be in conjunction with the design of the costumes. And I think some wild things might happen that way. Like some of the designs would be touching against each other like a series of arms right near each other. Things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you go to modern dance or ballet?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, not particularly. When I was a very young man I had a sort of feeling to become a dancer. I used to like to do square dancing and thing like that. I thought about it for a couple of months and then I decided you could paint when you were ninety but you couldn't dance when you were ninety.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The practical point of view.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Like if you want to do something all of your life you might as well be able to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Balanchine still dances and he's pretty aged.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, but he wouldn't be doing it superbly. Whereas an artist can still paint superbly as a very old man.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, that's true. There's one thing that struck me. I was looking through the Walker catalogue and I had never seen a list of the titles of your paintings before.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, that's my fun bit, you know. I like to make up titles that are very different from anything you might see, or try to make a literal translation from a painting. I go the opposite way with it because I only put a title on for identification purposes. If somebody says, you know, Tel Aviv Hippie and the moment I hear that title I know just what the painting looks like. If I put down "Untitled" I have a tendency to forget what the painting looked like. So this is one of the reasons I like to give titles. And then I have a lot of fun with them. I sort of try to get a little cute and poetic. Sometimes it comes off well, sometimes not as well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've had a James Bond series because you are interested in the books and movies?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Right now I'm doing a series using colors. Sometimes if you pick up a commercial color chart with color chips on it, you see something that says Primrose Red. And you say what the hell is Primrose Red. As a matter of fact, a gal in Minneapolis who is involved with women's clothing, shoes, bags, etcetera, who has a shop or something, was telling me that there's a specific brown called Park Avenue brown. And I thought that was one of the funniest things. What the hell is "Park Avenue brown?" And yet it's supposed to be something that most elegant women know, what that color is. So I got onto this kick of making up insane stupid colors giving them names. I have one called Extra Long Blue, Wild Turkey Blue -- I'm somehow using blue a lot – or Yellow in a bottle. These strange things that I've been thinking up. And for awhile I did a lot of sports cars. And even my son made one up, which is in the Stedelijk Museum, called Duffle Swan V6. And it got to the point where I wanted to call cars Yom Kippur 6 or the Rosh Hashanah 9, or Groundhog 6. Because Detroit insists on making up these names for those very meek automobiles, like Mustang, and Cougar. They're just stupid medium-priced cars; that's all they're going to be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, when do you title the picture – after they're finished?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes – sometimes – when I'm in the mood, or if I'll think of a title… like I was looking out the window a couple of days ago and I saw a big truck passing. It said "Tri-State Trucking Corporation." And somehow that "Tri-State" had a very zippy sound to me. So I made up a title called Tri-State Zen Company. It means absolutely nothing, but it has a nice kind of ring to it. Last year I called one Tulip Factory. And recently I named a painting that was untitled Soft Aluminum Roses. I just have a lot of fun with it and I enjoy it. And somehow some of these kooky titles that I've made up have been sticking in people's minds.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's no image then involved with the title?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. None at all. It's especially done to go the opposite way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just labels.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, it's just a label.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I want to talk about is a complicated thing: That's the development of the images in the paintings from the expressionist to the cool things. You had mentioned before that you went to Hofmann and you brought in some paintings from the League, you know, when he said "You're a figurative painter," the Picasso kind of things.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. My point of departure when I was a young man was I looked to who was the hippest and the biggest and the best, so to speak, and it was Picasso on the scene. Most younger students idolized Picasso right after the war up until about the early fifties. And then it started to switch off from him if you learned anything as a student. It took me almost four years after leaving art school to do the first abstract painting without any reference to a figure. That took me a long time because --

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was after Hofmann?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I had a hard time accepting the idea of making a totally abstract painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've mentioned that before, but what kinds of Picasso-ish type of things – were they people pictures? Still lifes? Interiors?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, still lifes, people, nude women, femmes fatales, all kinds of general saleable type nonsense. Or what one does as a young man – still lifes and some nudes, mother and child, and all that nonsense, you know. And it took like four years before I could come to another idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And this was all painted in – what? – kind of thick brushy painting?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Not terribly. No, I never really was a thick painter, so to speak. I sort of flirted even a little with Matisse touches in the very early paintings. Then it went on to becoming abstract finally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You weren't interested in Mondrian or any of those Neo-plastic people at that time?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I was just trying to get to the point where I could make a totally abstract painting and accept the idea to begin with. That was a real brutal kind of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. That was the problem.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I still had a literal idea of what art had to be. It had o have an identification in it still. It took that many years for me to accept another idea. And it was a tough thing for me to change to. Yet I sensed that that's what I wanted to go into, a more unknown thing where I would be completely lost. Because I felt if I got completely lost maybe I could find something out of it, you know. And then it developed into – well, I mean there I was. I hit Tenth Street in 1956. I had done some strange pieces of work between, say, 1954 and 1954 that I sort of liked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were they about?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: One of them was just a sheet of paper that was ripped and stapled to a hard piece of cardboard with some very delicate stain around it. And I remember when we started the Camino Gallery and they asked each person to bring a piece of work so everybody could look at everybody else's work and see how we felt about each other. And I had the biggest argument that evening because the staples were showing. I kept saying, "They don't bother me. I don't know why they should bother you." And they kept saying, "No, you have to take the staples out of that picture. They're showing. Everybody can see them. It looks ugly." And I couldn't get over the idea why should that upset them. And that made me fall in love with that picture even more. To this day I happen to like it. I think it's an important early thing of mine, you know, that I was able to accept it way back in 1953 or 1954, to make something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So how about Hofmann. Did he --?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. I just enjoyed him as a man. I never flirted with his style of painting. In fact, I never even liked the way he painted. But I respected him very much as a man. There were certain attitudes that the other students had in Hofmann's class which were more to my liking as an idea of what an artist than some of the stiff conservative conversations I had with some of the people at the Art Students League. It was exhilarating and stimulating just to speak to the other people because they had totally different ideas about what art was supposed to be than the conservative types at the Art Students League. That was very refreshing to me. The students were more hip, so to speak, than the students at the League.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've mentioned that Mike Goldberg and Al Held and all these people were there.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, Held never was there. But Jan Muller was in my class. Niles Forst. And Rivers was in the daytime class. Goldberg, and people like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So after the Hofmann then the Tenth Street experience you're getting on to the end of the fifties.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Well, I had Tenth Street in 1956 when I helped start the Camino. And I had been there for about ten months only and I had had a two man show with my brother John. I hated the people there, I thought they were a bunch of fuddy duds. And a bunch of old ladies were in it. Sundry types that I just couldn't stand. So I was the first one to leave the gallery. One guy once accused me of turning a light bulb out on his painting. It just blew out by itself. And I had an hour fight with this jerk about that. And that was that. I had to leave after that. And then my brother John left. And we started the Brata Gallery and we put that framing shop in the back. And the two of us picked those original ten people. We had a great crew. Of all the galleries on Tenth Street we sent the most people to uptown galleries.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was your painting going at this point?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, when I went to Camino it was sort of mixed bag of ideas that I was working on. And when I got to Brata I was starting to get interested in a central image idea in painting. And I was using lots of circles, like circular balls in a sort of action painting feeling. But I never was really in love with abstract expressionism. I always used to go against it. I never felt right with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what respect?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Everybody around me was doing it and I figured I'd be just another schnook who was making abstract expressionism. I just wasn't that interested in it. You know, I could appreciate de Kooning and the other guys who were doing it, but I wanted to do something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They were another generation.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. But there were guys my age who were copying. Like Zacharias was a very polished idea of de Kooning at the time. Leslie was a better polished idea than de Kooning. And then from the I went to a big assemblage thing. I was making assemblages like mad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got those going do you think?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I always have liked collage. I was making boxes and pagodas and totem poles with collages coming out of them. And a table that was like a coffee table and you looked inside of it and there was a collage in it. I had been making these recessed boxes with collages. And I had the idea of making like 200 of them and bolting them together across a whole wall. And I happened to walk into the Museum of Modern Art and lo and behold there was Louise Nevelson's black boxes. So I said forget it. But I had really considered it; I had drawings for it, you know, ideas of how to build it and put it together. Because I had so many collage boxes amassed already I figured I might as well put them all together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of boxes were they?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, it was like a box that was maybe 4 or 5 inches deep, and sometimes like 20 x 24, with some kind of wild collage with projections on it; and then I had a sheet of glass in front of that to protect it from getting dirty and everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know about Nevelson before?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. I didn't know that she did that. I think I had seen one or two things but never boxes like that. There were other things that she had done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about Cornell or any of the other box people at that time?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I might have seen boxes around like recessed collages but I had never seen them put together the way I had in mind. And just about that time I started to leave assemblage --

PAUL CUMMINGS: They weren't exhibited, were they?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Not really. To this day I have some of them which I've just put away with the idea that I still like many of these things, you know. They're my early works and they're very personal and I think some of them are fine enough that if the right guy came along and offered me the right price I might part with one. But I'm not even thinking about that right now. And then I went into a triptych idea in painting. And started to go into the hard-edge feeling for the first time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was about when?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That was about the tail end of 1958 into 1959. And the triptych idea got more and more pronounced toward the hard edge thing. I started to cut paper and put it up against clean fields of color. And I kind of liked the beautiful shock value it had. Then the first pure hard-edge things that I was doing the first time was in 1960 when I did a whole series of collages with bright paper. And then I made some big paintings of it, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was in flat color?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Flat colored papers that I had cut up and put together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: These were papers you had painted, weren't they?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I paint the paper always with Liquidtex so it wont bleed out in the sun, because any colored paper is usually a cheap kind of paint and will fade. Liquidtex will not fade. So I painted on paper and then I cut the paper and put it back together. That's when I discovered Liquidtex, too, in 1960. I switched from oil to liquidtex at that time, and started doing those first Liquidtex paintings. Which were in that first show that I had at Graham in about 1962.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm trying to remember, I saw some of those collages here. It must have been about that time.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You already had gotten pretty well into the similar kinds of shapes and things that you're using now.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Well, I'd like to go back to that in the sense that I think that I think that every painter, whether he's conscious of it or not, in a certain way makes a fingerprint of his visual ideas for all of his life between, say, 18 and 30 when he acquires a mass vocabulary of forms and shapes and ideas that he keeps juggling for the rest of his life from, say, 30 until he dies. Even though it's like a little thing he may do, and he'll do it in an entirely different way 15 or 20 years later. But it's like some people love to make a painting anchored and bulky at the bottom and have a tendency to always do that. And they love it. They may change their style completely but there's a feeling that they like. I always get the feeling that there must be some kind of slight visual difference in a left-handed painter from a right-handed painter. I don't know why. I just think it must be, for whatever reason.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you a left-handed painter?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I'm a right-handed painter. Most painters probably are. The only guy I know who is left-handed is Held. But you can think about that and try to wonder about it sometimes like the actual physical approach to a picture. But then again I really have a feeling that this really takes place; that these forms are forever for you. You change them and develop them, and make them more sophisticated each time. But it's always there. And if an artist is clever enough he can juggle it for the rest of his life. Like in the case of Pollock. Nobody would dare paint like Pollock because it was too oblivious. But then again by painting the way he put himself out on such a visual limb that he could never get off. When he finally started to go away from it he went right back to Picasso. Which was very disconcerting to everybody. They felt what a loss you know. There it goes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Including him, I think.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And he died at a better time. Now look at Ellsworth Kelly, he is a very fine painter and has developed what he's been doing for many years now. And the last show that Ellsworth Kelly had, I knew it was good but it wasn't a shocking and exciting show as it should have been. Normally he gave you that in each show. And what seems to have happened is that we have already seen it two years previously by a lot of young

artists who never even got to the point of developing it to that; where he actually, in a sense, was a father giving those guys the idea to get there a little faster than he did. So that last show of his was a letdown. But at the same time he has put himself on a limb visually. Where can he go from there with what he's got? In other words, he hasn't left himself enough leverage to operate visually. Whereas I kind of feel I'm always bringing in and introducing new ideas and forms into the paintings. And then as I tire of some I dump them and I look for others, or I look for a completely different – I don't like the word "composition" – a different compositional approach. But to hunt constantly for a new visual feeling and not to get rid of it too fast. Like I nurture it to the point where I've gotten out of it every inch of visual mileage. Then I say all right I'm tired of that . And I put it aside. I may come back to it ten years later. But right then and there I'm not interested in that form or idea anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you say you "hunt" for images and then look for things. How do you that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. But how that gets done I really can't explain that. It's like I think you see things that register into your memory back in a certain way, whether is be a yellow banana on a fruit stand, and sort of spun the arc or it or something; and in another way you pick that up later from something you've remembered.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, like the Persian prints that --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Or as a matter of fact, in the last show I had some forms that looked like postage stamps. I showed him how to gather a lot of stamps fast by writing letters to all these stamp companies and never paying the money for it. They don't bother you anyhow. And in a funny kind of way I can se that those things came out of postage stamps from these perforated edges. It's very, very obvious to me now, but when I was doing it I didn't think of it at all. But something like that will set me off into an idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's subconscious; it's not --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I'm really certain of that now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the essay in the Walker Catalogue you referred to the basket weave of a net kind of image.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Those were in the earlier ones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think they evolved from that kind of thing? Or is that just his description of it?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I suppose when Dean Swanson wrote that he did a very literal translation of what he saw. I really wasn't interested in the basket weave idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, because it knits the surface.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Just that painting formed up that way. I wasn't thinking of basket weave or anything at the time. I was just laying out patterns of color in the most interesting possible way that I thought was right for that painting at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know if it was a quote from you or something you've just taken and used, but you were talking about your feeling about using the black line and the way it affects the color.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. When I first started to use the black line, I had been working with colors and I noticed that if you take blue and red and put two chips of color up against each other, there's an invisible point where they're starting to interfere with each other. In other words, the red is starting to override onto the blue, and the blue is starting to override onto the red, and there's a certain kind of magic, invisible color that starts to mix like an optical feeling. And almost all colors … If you put two color chips up against each other in some cases one starts to dissipate the other one and steal from it, and vice versa.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One dominates.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And I notice that the moment you put a black line which isolates one from the other they somehow had a great tendency to complement each other because of this line that isolated them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And I got absolutely intrigued with the feeling of it. And to this day it always seems to – that's what happens visually for me when I put that black line in, bang! It goes in that kind of --

PAUL CUMMINGS: It jumps right up.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And they both have great presence on their own. I mean when you put blue and yellow next to each other you obviously get a green haze. But the moment you drop a black line in it sort of

kicks that whole idea out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting, because some of the Op people use that business of the haze.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I can see that it's very exciting at times. I'm not saying it's bad. It's marvelous. I've seen it in Op pictures where it makes the eyeball go crazy. I'm not against it but I just don't want to use it that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can't remember seeing any of your pictures that you could really call Op.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: But I've been called an Op painter at times.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I've been called Op, Pop.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cool. Minimal.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Hard-edge. The abstract expressionists say, oh, we know where he comes from; he must have some kind of alliance to us. And I say, well, all factions are happy; great! I have no alliance to anyone of them. In fact, I'm getting tired of being called a hard-edge painter. I don't even like that title. Somehow I think one does not really want a title because that immediately means we've put him aside and we know what he is. I don't want anybody to know what I am.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You want to keep them guessing.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think any of the little critical titles like that do anything?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, I just think they're annoying. Every critic has this great feeling that if he makes up the next title of the next group of painting it's going to create great homage to him as a critic. In other words, I think almost all critics would love the idea of having it said – "He made up the name 'hard-edge.'" Or "He made up the name 'Pop.'" You know that's going to go down into the history books forever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's Alloway. He loves that.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And about hard-edge, I think it's a term that just came into being. I don't think any particular person used it first.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think somebody in California thought that up some time ago. But I notice one thing in you pictures. Or at one point they change so frequently that you can't generalize. You have a busy area and a quiet area.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I've been doing that lately.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The juxtaposition of those two things.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. And I think what that comes down to – it's almost like using something busy and using something quiet just like I was talking about those color chips. Now I'm trying to use the forms to complement each other that way, to give a field of quietness something with a fabulous shock element.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean the juxtaposition of colors -- ?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Some kind of insane structure of painting because I'm all for – I'm very concerned with the idea of giving a painting great visual power even if it's going to suffer going back to that bad word "composition." Which I don't even want to think of it as an idea that a painting should have great visual power even if it suffers in other ways.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Suffer in what way, for example?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I don't know. Like, say, the colors are not absolutely superb and perfect because that's what sets the mood to give it the visual power.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but they work.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, yes, but I'm saying we have seen incredibly ugly paintings that have some kind of bruteness to them. They're not pretty. They're not nice. They're not even beautiful. But they have some kind of -

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PAUL CUMMINGS: Energy.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: -- foreboding energy that's getting across to you. You know, I think this word energy is a good word, too, for that idea. That there's some kind of kooky life unto itself in that picture. And it's not just laying there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you still work with collages?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Occaisionally. Not as much. I think lately I haven't been doing it because of the space – you need lots of big tables to cut the stuff. And you have to stop all production of painting because you've got to put these tables in the studio. And there's just no room. So I haven't been doing as much as I'd like to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've changed your working pattern slightly?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. Because somehow making shaped paintings takes up a lot more space. You have to set up horses in the middle of the floor, move from the wall to the horse and back and forth. And if I set up tables I have to stop that completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why? Because your space has got so limited?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: You need six floors. One floor for the silk screens, one floor for paintings, one floor for collages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, if you decide now that you're going to start some paintings, do you work in a series?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: If I want to start a new bunch of paintings I'll just sit and draw for about a month or so and I'll open up my memory bank, so to speak, and just let everything come out whether I'm happy with it or not. And I also let it go in a very different way if I possibly can. I'll draw things that I normally don't draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would that be?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, instead of doing open fields I'll do things with dots and circles or squiggly lines. And somehow I stumble into things that way once in a while. And I do it especially for that reason, with the idea that something will come that I haven't seen before. In other words, instead of forcing myself away by doing something that I'm always happy with, I do something I'm unhappy with with the idea that something will come out of it. If you always take your known quantity it's not really going to develop that much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, it's just going to go around and around.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It's just going to go around in a big circle all the time. So if you go contrary to your visual likings other things start to come. You may not be able to use all of it, but even if you get a piece here and a piece there that's part of the hunting and searching for visual things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of drawings are they? Are they done with pen or pencil, colored paper?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Pencil, in some cases – first I'll do a lot of rough open drawings without color. And then sometimes I just put down color identifications. And sometimes I even take it further by actually coloring it in. And then sometimes I do a very rendered drawing almost like what the painting would look like for a last classification of it in the sense is it really that good to produce into a painting. And then going into the painting actually becomes boring because I can predestine what it's going to look like as a canvas. But an artist makes paintings to sell so he actually has to visually make the painting, you know. Like I would really like to go on to the next one, the next problem, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you use graph paper or anything?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Occasionally. But I use graph paper with the idea that if I have to make a very accurate-shaped canvas it's much easier for construction reasons to use graph paper. In other words, you know exactly how the stretcher bar has to be curved at this spot or there and it's all sort of laid out in scale. A lot of artists are using graph paper. One bad thing about graph paper is it has a tendency to predestine what a lot of the work is going to look like. It's so easy to make a line from this point to that point and all those points are laid out for you. So I have a suspicion that a certain amount of things will happen. In other words, if you put a pencil between all the points on a piece of graph paper you'd have billions of possibilities. But it's always going to be those possibilities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. The same ratio.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, the same ratio. And then the whole idea of curves has to be forced into it completely. So I'd rather do it free and let the curves comes as they will.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like the curves?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I like the curves but I hate to paint them because you can make straight black lines with tape, but you can't make curves with tape. You have to do them by hand, so I get angry at curved lines. But I like to do them very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have a lot of them in some of the pictures.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, I know. So it becomes difficult. And I figure I can't become lazy about that, the form should change because I'm too lazy to make a line.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, have you ever thought about signs? You were talking about the visual impact of things?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: You mean posters?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, posters, signs, billboards?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I've made a lot of posters. And I have a certain idea about what a posters function is supposed to be. Its first function is to catch the eye. Its second function is whatever message it has to get across. And I've seen posters that have been designed so that you couldn't read them if you stood on your head and they have no attracting qualities at all. I don't know what their function is. They're just decorative. If you're thinking of designing a poster it's supposed to have those two elements.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did a poster for the opera, didn't you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I did a poster for the opera. I did a poster for that show I had at Cinema I and II. I've done a poster for Mrs. List for the 50th anniversary of art in the City of Minneapolis. And I just did one for her this week for the American Ballet Theatre, which is one of the biggest silk screens – 41 x 86 – that is almost the size of a painting. That is going to be a monster. And I'm very excited to see what it's going to look like when it's printed up because that's big, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How is that going to be done – silk screen?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. On one sheet of paper called Ex-tex. Very big sheets of paper.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When is that going to be out?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In about a month. I hope it doesn't kill my painting it's so big. They'll say well we can buy a print instead of a painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'll have to sign 50 and put an enormous price on them.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. They'll all be monotypes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, you have before talked about drawing as important for students to do as a development idea. Will you tell me more about that.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, painting in a funny kind of way is changed from a direct execution on the canvas to a well-thought out idea on paper before. And yet I always left myself leeway. Say, I'll start a painting very much from a drawing idea. And when a certain amount of the painting is actually made for some reason a certain section is not working. And you have to catch it then before it goes any further. Because the idea of the surfaces have to be impeccably clean. In some of my early paintings when I didn't have any money and I had to repaint an old canvas, occasionally there would be ridges from the older painting underneath. And at that time it didn't bother me so much. But now it foes completely against my feeling of what it should look like. And the same holds true in a sense in Kenneth Noland's work. I'm sure he's stained many a canvas where the stain went cockeyed or something and it bled into another spot, and you can't take it out. You just junk the whole thing because it goes completely against the idea. So, you know, most painting now is thought out much in advance of that actual execution.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, but even classical painting, or Ingres and people like that did lots of drawings and figured out where --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: They did but it was all executed on that, you know, like action painting. All of abstract expressionism was born on the canvas. In a lot of cases the guy never had an idea when he started. He figured

the idea would come as he worked. And sometimes he'd make it, and sometimes he didn't. This whole feeling has changed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Doing all the preparatory drawings and sketches.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes. I think in a certain kind of way it also means that the artist is searching hard and harder to make that statement and he figures let's make all the mistakes on paper beforehand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's an interesting thing because I've noticed recently in some European things where people get one idea, you know, and they take the idea and they make it longer and taller and then round and square and all this; but here you cant line up ten paintings and say well, that's first, that's second, that's third. Whereas in Europe you still pretty much can do that.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, this is another idea that they have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it seems to be more of an American idea, that every picture has got to be living on its own, has got to be more --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I believe in this one-to-one. In other words, each painting is an individual thing. But there are American painters who are painting in a series idea, too. Like Stella. He feels that if he does a series , like 30 paintings, he'd like all of them in a sense to be shown in one particular place. But no artist can ever predestine --

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's going to happen.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: In other words, you know you can never depend on that many pieces of work being together in one spot where one is banking on the other one to get it across. A collector comes and buys on the wall and that thing has got to stand by itself, you know, with no help.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: You can't say, well, this one isn't so good; the one before it is leading up to this one; and the one after it is going to … You know, you're not seeing that … you're seeing this one. That's like saying, we have three children; the second one is an idiot; but the first one is great; and the third one oh, he's going to be marvelous, you know. But right now we're looking at Number 2 boob.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, I find it very interesting because you use the circles and ovals, and then some of the recent things have a lot of straight lines. The ovals and circles have been around for a long time in various sizes.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Yes, off and on, back and forth. I've been getting very interested – and I haven't really done any of these paintings yet – but I've been getting very intrigued with less color and more blacks and whites and silvers and things like that. I just somehow have a feeling that a big group of paintings is going to come in the next year or so that is going to have a lot of that in it. But I can't figure out now for the life of me what the hell they might look like. But I keep responding to certain things I see. And I always sense that – it's like a flirtation with something. But how it's going to form up I really have no idea right now. I could conjure it maybe but it wouldn't be an accurate description.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you do a drawing, and then you said you sometimes render them or fill them in with color, do you ever make 2 or 3 versions of the same drawing with different color combinations?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, occasionally. What happens is I start in on a second drawing for different color combinations. And then I tend to change it. I add and subtract. And it becomes something very different. Then I say well, there was one idea; now I have two ideas; and then I've got three ideas. And then I've have like six of them that all started from one. And then I have to make a decision which of those six is more exciting. I'm not so interested in making one with different color combinations. That's too boring for me I think. But I like to change the whole structure very much. I'll rip out a whole thing and change a whole feeling and section of a painting. I rarely tend to do two exactly alike with different color combinations. I just feel that that's becoming indecisive. And yet I can accept it when I've seen it done by other people – like Albers has been playing with that stupid square for 25 years. But that's just not my bag. I certainly respect him for what he's done. He's a great artist etcetera. But I could never function that way as a painter. I would be too bored with it, you know. I think there's so much more besides the square.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he's got all his color theories. They all hinge on that format.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. That's the hang-up, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned a couple of times the development to abstract painting and how it took 3 or 4 years. When did you know you broke through?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: There was a painting I did that was completely abstract. It was also one of the first paintings I had ever done where I thought for the first time I may have made an individual statement of my own. It was a very exciting moment because I kind of felt I wasn't really a student any more. I wasn't a professional but I wasn't a student. I was some place in the middle. And it was a nice feeling because I sensed it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That you were moving away --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The paintings weren't great. But there was something that had happened that I had felt, that I had known. And it was just growing pains. I was delighted when it happened.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened after that? Could you keep on --?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, after that it went into that central image idea, to a ball kind of thing. And also just around then I stopped… you know, like a lot of painters have a hero. And I think the day that one has no heroes and one becomes his own hero he becomes an artist. I mean I could still respect great artists but they were not my heroes anymore. As much as I loved Matisse I think I'm more excited about the way I approach painting than the way he did. I would prefer being my own hero.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was really then a sort of – when was that? – in the late fifties when that happened?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, middle fifties – 1955, 1956. I made a statement to a bunch of painters in 1958 I think it was one night at the Cedar Bar. I said that I thought that Franz Kline, Bill de Kooning, and a couple of these other guys were third rate painters if you put them up against somebody like Matisse. And it's proved to be true now. But I almost had my head handed to me when I said it. They looked at me and they said, you dirty fink, these men are your fathers. I said they may be your fathers but they're not mine. I mean I respect them greatly for their efforts. But I felt that way about it at the time. I somehow felt they didn't have that great presence as painters. Like Calder has.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, you mentioned that.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Other American painters I can think of – I think Rothko turns out to be a bigger hero than de Kooning coming out of the abstract… And Barney Newman even. Barney Newman is interesting because he has taken it one step further. Barney Newman is all about now. Which is beautiful. I mean he's a man almost 70 years old and he does incredible things that make some of the minimalists now look like clowns. And even Ad Reinhardt's turned out to be the father of the whole idea. Which I'm delighted about because he was bypassed for many years, and was very bitter about it. It's turned out that he's more what's happening now than de Kooning ever would be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think now of all the minimal things?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Some of it I like. Some of it is overlapping so badly you need a scorecard to tell one guy from another. Especially among the sculptors. Not so much with the painters. But there was that crew out of Park Place and I got a little annoyed at that whole bunch of cats because one day you'd have a one-man show and three months later a new guy would have assimilated the ideas and was incorporating them into his own stuff. And everybody was looking so alike you needed a scorecard. And then there were a lot of sculptors who weren't even involved with that crew but who were influenced by them. The strangest thing about it is that the best minimalists on the scene were never part of that crew. As a matter of fact, Ronnie Bladen came out of Tenth Street. Don Judd came out of Tenth Street in a certain way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, di Suvero doesn't do that. He does a different thing.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Bob Morris is one of the earliest guys that was way before the Park Place cats. And the guys who really have a background of having worked for what they've become now seem to be the better ones. Not those Johnny-come-latelys. And yet I'm not putting that idea down. In other words, one of the guys that I like very much at Park Place is Ed Rudda. I think he's one of the finest painters on the scene. And the other kid – Mark – no, David Navros – a few things that Navros did I was very – I thought he was a very talented young man and I said, Jesus, the guy has really got a lot of promise. And then last year he had a show at Dwan and he laid a big egg; hadn't developed to anything. There was no future or promise in his work. And it was sort of annoying. He looked good and all of a sudden zero.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a gamble, the big chance that you take.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The same thing with Ron Davis. He was a hero last year. This year you couldn't give

him away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, are there any other people, contemporary Americans or Europeans that you're interested in?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: There's a couple of European artists that I like. I like Thomas Lenk, the sculptor, very much. I think Karl Pfahler is a very good German painter also. I like Paolozzi tremendously. I'm still a great fan of Francis Bacon. There are one or two other guys in Britain that I kind of like. I like Richard Smith very much. He's a very fine sculptor or painter or whatever you want to call him now. And then there are several European blue chip artists that some of them – I dig Vasarely from time to time. Dubuffet occasionally. There's not much more on the European scene that one can really get excited about though. I like Dubuffet because he's a fine painter who's done a lot of beautiful things and somehow one can still respond to some of the work he does. Which is to his credit. He hasn't gone stale. Even though he fashions his art in the European manner which is a sort of passé idea. He's so good he has presence as an artist in his work. I can appreciate it and I'm sure other people too. I mean I don't go crazy out of my head when I see it but I certainly appreciate it and know it has visual value. It still has an excitement to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What are the other people on the scene that interest you general or specifically?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: It's a long list. There are a lot of people. Well, I could go from gallery to gallery. At Castelli I think Roy Lichtenstein is a very fine artist. I think Stan Landsman is a good sculptor. Occasionally I see something Morris does that I kind of like; but I somehow respond better to Judd. And who else is in there now?

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about Warhol, for example? What do you think of all that?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, he's in show business now, you know. He's not really a visual artist anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think of his pictures though when he was making pictures?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: The most impressive thing I ever saw of his that I liked was that giant painting of the Daily Mirror which Henry Geldzahler owns. Somehow that picture titillated me. I thought it was a very important thing. He had blown up the Newspaper to 8 x 10 feet – the front page. And there are some other things. I liked his silver balloons very much. But he doesn't sustain enough for me. In other words, he tickles your funny bone occasionally and you say, yes, that's fun, I can enjoy that. But it doesn't seem to have --

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's no real meat there.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: We all had the feeling he never was going to continue. And he didn't. He's become a showman now. And I think he's become a showman because he didn't really have anything more to say visually. You can't outdo yourself every season. So to keep his name and to keep his notoriety he's gone onto filmmaking and everything else. And Mr. Rauschenberg does it but he comes on like he's still an artist, and I can't take him any more. And Jasper Johns has had the worst show of his career. And then coming downtown, at Cordier & Exkstrom I think Richard Linder is a marvelous artist. I can't think of who else they carry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Noguchi, Ossorio. Noguchi doesn't appeal to you?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, not really. Then I think Kornblee has good people, Zox and one or two others. At Janis – well, Oldenburg is the second runner up to the title number one as the best Pop artist. I think it's between him and Roy. And the rest of them become second string eventually. And Segal has his moments for me; I like Segal. Kenneth Noland I think is a superb artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about Morris Louis? He's sort of one of the early --

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: One of the papas. And we missed Frank Stella at Castelli. I like his older work. Somehow I think he's giving us a big shaft job now. I want to see what he does when he's 40 years old. Because I felt that way about Jasper Johns once. I didn't think Jasper Johns would have the staying power, and it's coming true. He didn't. He had his 6-year run and he's shot his load, so to speak. And that's it. Because he's gone progressively bad. One of the reasons I think he's gone progressively bad is that his very early poetic Targets and encaustic paintings were really him. And he's flirted more and more with Rauschenberg's idea and it's gotten to the point where they both look so much like each other that you almost can't tell them apart. Except that Rauschenberg now uses more electronics in his work. He's done that with the idea that it's making him look fresh and it doesn't. And then even in my own gallery – Pace – I only really like Chryssa, Samaras. Paolozzi is in there. Occasionally Craig Kauffman does something that I like. I like Larry Bell's stuff. I'm intrigued with some of Whitman's things. You don't really think of him as an artist. He's sort of an object show business idea; he's an idea man really is what it boils down to. And at Fischbach I like Ronnie Bladen very much. And who else?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Antonakos?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: He's fun. But I think Chryssa is the better Neon artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about the Dwan people? She's gotten very cool.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Dwan I don't know. I get the feeling that Dwan is another uptown Park Place family, that's what it comes to. Sol Lewitt has a little something. I'm not familiar with all of her artists. I'm interested in this Bykert Gallery. He seems to be showing all the guys that have no names and some of them are very, very interesting and good, you know. I even congratulated him on the idea that he keeps showing sort of unknowns. He doesn't have one name in his gallery. And I'm sort of delighted that we're able to see this stuff whether we like it or not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you like there? Who do you think has got something going?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, there was one guy who had a whole bunch of paintings that were like long tubes with curved edges that were set in squares. I forget his name. It's a strange long name. They were sort of wine-colored paintings. He's one of the few painters there. He does some intriguing work that I kind of liked. And I don't know – California has a mixed bag of cats. They go hot and cold every year. I don't really dig any of them out there that much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: California is a very unformed scene.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Like Robert Irwin, I don't understand what he's trying to do. Kienholz is just a poor man's Oldenburg. Billy Al Beckson I couldn't care less. There's nobody else really out there that I can think of at all. To come back to the East – what's left? That's about it. Peter Young is a fine painter. I think Dan Christensen is making some interesting paintings. These are two very young men to be watched.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where are they?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Dick Bellamy is sort of handling them, and they've been showing at Goldowsky occasionally. And Bob Israel, a young painter who I met out in Minnesota – he's the guy that did that gas sculpture with the air pump that's in the Whitney – he's a young man and that's a kind of wild thing to have made. And I met a young stain painter out there by the name of Joe Zipp who I think is very good. He's coming to New York soon. He's going to be teaching at Visual. And so is Bob Israel. I think they're both good painters; one is a painter and one is a sculptor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have any interest in all the critics, or any of the critics?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: You know the funny thing about this is I never had anybody work for me. In other words, nobody was ever out to wave my flag.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't have a critic pumping gas for you.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No. Like Al Held had Irving Sandler. Frank Stella had Barbara Rose and Michael Fried and this one and that one. And Kenneth Noland has had Greenberg. And Hess did a lot for his boys. I never had anybody like that who was that intrigued with me. So everything I got I got on my own. I had to get it through the quality of the paintings. I couldn't depend on somebody tooting my horn or giving me big write-ups… I've had very little written about me in magazines. Occasionally it's made me jealous. I'll see some other jerk who I think is a slob of a painter get huge spreads. You feel slighted. But you can't do anything about it. And if you let it eat you up it drives you crazy. So you forget about it. You say, all right, I sell my paintings, I have my shows. The quality of the painting is what counts in the long run. I mean I never had a spread like Ron Davis did last year, and he's bombed out already. He had a one-year run. I've been on the scene since 1956 and I've been steadily going in an up manner. I just hope it continues that way. But if it doesn't, it doesn't. I'm ready for the idea that if they wipe me out they'll wipe me out, and I can't do anything about it anyhow. So in some cases I get very angry at critics when they write garbage about some guy who is really a very – let's put it this way: you know we were talking before about Jasper Johns. Now that man has had more publicity than you can fill a library with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Now I've had a feeling that he was going to bomb out six years ago, seven years ago. And what if he really does? In other words, all that was a lot of crap. All that didn't amount to a hill of beans. They waved flags. They're doing it with Mr. Stella now. They're going to make him the newest and biggest super-hero they've got. And like I don't believe it yet. I don't see it through. I see it true more with somebody like Noland. Noland got slighted this season, and it's not fair.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's whimsy everywhere you go.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: And then I've heard stories about Michael Fried. He thinks the moment he blows the bugle on somebody that it's going to happen. I've talked to some painters about him and they say, "who is that idiot anyhow?" He thinks he can make somebody overnight because he's Michael Fried and he writes a big article and he is God. And I still insist that who has a better pair of eyes than painters to look at another man's work. How many critics really have the intuitiveness that a painter has? Very, very few, Paul.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very few. And I think a lot of them do a different kind of thing.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, frankly I don't think there are enough honest critics. There are critics but how many of them can be truthfully honest? I've seen so many critics write an article about an artist and four months later somebody else is writing an article about that same artist and he stole half of the stuff from that other guy, changes a word or two. He lets the other guy say it first, take the chance. Now I appreciate a critic who's willing to take a chance on somebody, the first shot out, and put his head on the block; he might get it chopped off because he made a big mistake. But most of them tend to pussyfoot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, well, because they get on all kinds of little political things they're nervous about it, you know.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, I suppose some painters do this, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: They pussyfoot around. I went into de Nagy a couple of days ago and I met the woman who runs the gallery in Paris. And Johnny Meyers was sitting there. And I said, "Did you see that lousy Jasper Johns show?" And his face went blank because we were in mixed company. In other words, if I had said this to him when just he and I were present he probably would have agreed with me instantly. But because there were 2 or 3 people in the room he sort of looked at me like "Ahh – well, you know…" And then when somebody else said something to confirm what I had said then we all tore him apart. Everybody went at him. Except the French woman. She was still reserving judgment. Because most likely she still had some Jasper John's in her bin. But, you know, he should have been honest enough, if he felt the same, to say yes, I agree. But because we were in mixed company he reserved saying that and I didn't care. I figured nobody has ever come to my help. So who cares?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You've got nothing to lose. Well, I'm just wondering if there's anything else that I can go into with you here. I think we've covered quite a bit. Is there anything that you think I should know about or that you think I should think about, you know, in the development of pictures or what's going on?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: No, I can't think of anything. I'm delighted that the greatest painting being done in the world is now being done in the United States. Symbolically speaking we suffered for so many years. Americans were just bypassed constantly as being good artists. And in a certain way I think we should nurture this because we certainly have the talent in the United States. The ideas seem to be here for what the future of art is more than any place else in the world. And I just hope we treat it in a very gentle and beautiful way and not get dissipated quickly. You know, like the idea of communication is so rapid now that they eat up style after style each year. I think this isn't too good an atmosphere to be working in because it makes everybody very nervous. But you can't control something like that anyhow. The tastes and whims of collectors sway back and forth so rapidly that an artist shouldn't even concern himself with it. If he makes good pictures and he believes in them, even if they're wrong, and he gets wiped out, at least he believed in them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you do a wrong picture?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I have a friend who goes along on the assumption that the longer you paint the better you get. I know 60-year old painters who stink from the first day to the last day; they're still terrible. They're never going to get better. So that's no true. An interesting case in point, and I'm sure that you'll agree, maybe, is somebody like Alfred Leslie or Milton Resnick who in 1959 were the brightest stars on the art horizon in New York. And both of these men happened to have incredible dexterity as artists. Leslie especially is one of the most fabulous draftsmen I have ever seen. He can paint anything and do anything with a brush. And yet this guy doesn't have an idea of what it is to make art. In other words, he has all this knowledge but he doesn't know what good painting is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're all stillborn.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: So they're all stillborns one after another. Now somebody who doesn't have as much dexterity and quality but – and I think every painter knows where he's sure to lose – in other words, one guy knows he's a better colorist but he's not so hot on draftsmanship. So it's compensation. But at least he has an

idea --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he's found something he can use to make a statement with and develop.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And that's what counts in the long run. I mean how well you draw a tit has nothing to do with it, you know. It comes back down to pumping love and beauty into your painting, no matter how you do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How is it you can use beauty? Nobody uses that word anymore.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I like that word. Going back to what I said before that a painting can look beautiful and have power, can look ugly and have power, and can look awkward and have power – all three of them can have that quality, whether they're beautiful, ugly, or awkward. And that's the real key. So even if you use beauty and power, it always has to have power, visual power anyhow. And even if the visual power is a minimal idea it's still a power. In other words, if it looks bland that was the idea. But in its blandness it had better have some kind of impact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you define what that is, though?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: That's an invisible quantity that one just senses and tries to feel. I mean like you look at Judd's. There's very little there and he comes across with a certain kind of visual presence in those things that you feel. And for that reason he's an important artist. He makes important pieces of art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that things like that, you know, people's reactions have a life span, or do they change or develop?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, this is always a problem in the sense that when an artist paints a painting he always has the feeling that well maybe six years from now it's going to die as a picture; it's going to look tired. And I think every painter dreads the idea of his paintings six years hence looking tired; that they have no impact left to them because it's like passé; that idea has had it. And yet at the same time we know that this is not true on the part of a great artist. I've seen Kandinsky Impressionist painting with the dots. They were little paintings of the Seine River that are like jewels. And they will be beautiful till the end of time. And that's not what he got famous from either. He got famous from his abstract art. So here's a case where an artist whatever he did could put such great qualities in it that they'll never look tired. And there are many painters like this. There are Matisses that will look beautiful till the day the earth blows up. There are Van Goghs and Gaugins and Georgia O'Keeffes, Sargents, Francis Bacon, Cezannes, Turners that forever will have that incredible quality of never looking tired. They'll always have that visual spark still there. This is the kind of thing a painter hopes and wishes that all his paintings will have. And yet we can look, for instance, at Van Gogh who's a very great artist. I never respond to his Potato Eaters paintings, which are very dull, somber. And yet, they're very valuable paintings to this day. He was going from a student to a professional. But I don't particularly respond to them. Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon which is supposed to a milestone in painting is really a bomb. But it's an important piece of work because of what was happening in that picture. People forget that Picasso was 26 years old. He was a punk kid. He was doing an awkward body painting. But in the awkwardness he stumbled on to something that was obvious and there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And grew and grew and grew.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. In other words, I look at it and say that's really a bad picture but it's an important picture. There's something by a great artist that at least to me is not great visually.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you go to museums much?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: From time to time. I'm not an avid fan. You could take me through the old-fashioned section of the Met and I wouldn't be able to name half the artists. Oh, a goodly number of them I could probably identify. But sometimes I'll miss a Courbet, I won't know it's a Courbet. But I couldn't care less about that, you know. I'm not one of those nuts that runs up to the label and says, "Oh, yes," and then steps back and looks. I just look the first time and I feel how I feel and if I don't like it I don't like it. I don't care if Rembrandt did it or anybody else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does that indicate that you think that people's reactions to pictures should be more emotional than intellectual?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, it's more truthful if we think of it …In other words, like it goes back to the idea of a blind man shaking a Negro's hand or a white man's hand. He doesn't know the difference. It comes to this kind of an idea. Just because it's Courbet I should like it? I refuse to accept that idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But everybody has winners and everybody has dogs.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Oh, sure. I think all painters have done paintings that are losers. Every great artist has done a couple of bombs. Maybe even more than a couple of bombs. I've seen Giacomettis that are terrible. I don't know how they ever got out of the studio. They're just clunky junk. And Rouault. I'm not a particular fan of Rouault's. I never really liked his work. But I had great respect for that man when in 1953 or 1954 he burned something like 6,000 drawings in a furnace that somebody wanted to put on the open market through some hanky panky. There was a picture in Life magazine of him burning all these things. He could have made a fortune on that work but he didn't like it and he wanted it destroyed. He didn't want it to be hung.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was still his own man at that age.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Right. And I never liked him as an artist but I respected him tremendously. That's one of the reasons. He felt that that was the right thing to do and I agreed completely with him. Collectors and gallery dealers and people like that squirmed and sweated and thought about all the goodies and riches from that. And what he had done was a very pure thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but who else could do it? I mean he was the only one who could do it with his own work.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I mean I rip up a lot of these drawings that I do, and paintings. And recently some collector was in here and he begged and browbeat me and I finally sold him eight little drawings that I normally would destroy. Because I kind of liked them. But normally I rip those and throw those away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't keep sketchbooks or anything?

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, lately I've been keeping some, you know, like if I put some color into it, some of them I kind of like for that reason. And sometimes the painting is changed. But I kind of still like that idea. But I never make it into a painting. So I just put it away. I think we've run the gamut here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: We've pretty well come to the end of the tape.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: How long is this tape supposed to last – I mean is it supposed to be forever?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything is forever.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: I mean this tape is going to be used for further generations or that kind of idea?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. It's going to be archives.

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK: Well, if you're living and it's a hundred years from now put the wars to an end whatever you do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If we survive that long.

END OF INTERVIEW

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