



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Adja Yunkers,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Adja Yunkers on December 9, 1969. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's December 9. Paul Cummings talking to AdjaYunkers. Let me ask you about your first name just out of curiosity because I've seen it spelled differently – or different names in different places.

ADJA YUNKERS: You see, originally when I came over to this country in 1947 they thought I was a Swede because I had come from Sweden. So the Museum of Modern Art, which already had several of my things before I came here, had it in the catalogue, you see, and I discovered it and it took me five years to get rid of that. I am not a Swede. My first name is spelled A-d-j-a. That's the correct spelling. The last name is Y-u-n-k-e-r-s. Many people spell it with a "G."

PAUL CUMMINGS: With a "G," yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: The German Gunker, you know. But actually my origin is Dutch.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really!

ADJA YUNKERS: The original name is Jonker (J-o-n-k..) It goes way back to the shipbuilders who came to Russia from Holland with Peter the Great, and the name became Russianized because people couldn't write nor pronounce it. So it became Yunkers. That's how it started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. You were born in – what? - Latvia?

ADJA YUNKERS: I was born on Riga. It was Russia at the time. It became Latvia in 1918. It is an accidental thing that I was born there because my father had a job there. After I was a year old we moved back to St. Petersburg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did he do?

ADJA YUNKERS: He was an engineer. So that's where I was brought up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In St. Petersburg?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like growing up there?

ADJA YUNKERS: Fantastic. People who come back, you know, my mother-in-law was there just recently, and literati like Kunitz and so on who were there, and Jay Smith and George Wilbur, who are my friends, they were raving about it. It's a beautiful city. It's really the Venice of the North to coin a cliché. Wherever you go you always see water, canals and this magnificent, large, overpowering river, the Neva which crosses through St. Petersburg. There are little islands and we lived on an island. We had a wild, large garden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. Did you have brothers and sisters?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, I have a brother and a sister. My father is dead. He died in a labor camp during the Hitler attack on Russia. He grabbed everybody who could just crawl and put them in labor camps in Germany. My father was standing in water, that's what I heard. I hadn't seen him since I was fourteen years old when I left home. This is the whole drama of my life. And I hadn't seen my father mother, sister, or brother up until 1952 or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: My goodness! How did you get together?

ADJA YUNKERS: The thing is absolutely absurd because it's only a biological fact that I have a sister and a brother at this point. There is no means of communication whatsoever. I saw them once. And after ten minutes the roof was falling down with explosion between my brother and me; my mother crying and my sister crying.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What does your brother do?

ADJA YUNKERS: My brother is an engineer, too. And although he had gone through all those damned experiences

he still is for law and order. He's a fascist. He hates the Jews, he hates the Negroes, he hates the Puerto Ricans, you know; so what is there---?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does he live in this country?

ADJA YUNKERS: Somewhere in America. It was fantastic because, you see, in 1948 I got a letter from my sister, from Berlin. She was working in a military office as a typist. It was the Quakers who found me. When I received the letter I was in Albuquerque at the University. My name on the envelope was practically invisible because it was all covered with kind of Cabalistic signs and stamps. It had gone throughout the whole world including the Congo, and then back via England to Paris, Paris to Stockholm and forwarded from Stockholm to the New School here. Finally the New School forwarded it to the University. So I opened the letter and there was a photo of a family group and the message in the letter was as if we had seen each other a week ago. You know, it was crazy. Then when I came back to New York after that summer job I had my first Guggenheim- no second Guggenheim. At that time I was already with Dore, and we decided to go to Italy. While we were preparing to go to Europe I received a letter from some strange immigration office in charge of something that I had to guarantee the arrival here of my relatives. So I signed all the papers. Then we left for Italy. That was in 1950. When we returned from Europe, off and on Dore would nudge me and say, "Aren't you going to see your relatives? It's about time you did." All right. One day I decided I would go to see them. I took the train to wherever it was. I arrived in that city and had forgotten their address. It was absolutely Freudian, you know. And it didn't occur to me to telephone to New York and ask Dore to look in the little black book and give me the address. I went to the police, to voting offices and so on; but nobody knew of them. So finally at seven o'clock in the evening I called New York. I had been walking the streets from eleven to seven looking for my brother and sister.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really trying to avoid it though.

ADJA YUNKERS: Exactly. It was Freudian, you know. So I telephone New York and got the address and then I telephone my relatives and said I'm coming now. They had waited for me since lunch. I arrived there and there was this huge table full of delicacies and what have you. And, as I say, I sat down and ten minutes later boom! So I left. I haven't seen them since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's amazing. Anyway, could we go back and talk about growing up in St. Petersburg and what it was like?

ADJA YUNKERS: Actually there is very little to say about it because- this may sound funny- you see we had a big house and I lived in one end. I had my rooms, and I had a model. My father never, never came to my quarters. And one bloody night, you know, there was a knock at the door; he opened the door. He said "oh, pardon me," and closed the door. That was it. I was just sitting there drawing. I was fourteen years old. So next morning I was called to my father's study. I stood at attention- yes, Sir; no, Sir; he bawled me out. I was making a brothel out of the house, and what have you. He threw things at me, books and so on. "Go." So I left the room, went to my room, went to my rooms, packed and left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start drawing?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, I started drawing when I was seven, you know, trivial things as everybody does. I had an uncle who was the black sheep of the family, he sort of supported me morally. One day I was walking on the streets and came to a house that was laid out with tiles in gold and blue and silver, beautiful blues. I went in. It was the art school of Leningrad. All these girls were standing there in their white coats. So that got me. I enrolled there, my uncle gave me the money for it. I could only slink out of the house in the evenings so I went so I went there in the evenings. I never attended classes. I'd go up to the cafeteria and stay there. In Russia it would be China where we simply drank tea. There I would sit and listen to much older guys talking about love, life, art, God, you know, the usual things. It was bloody serious. That's how I started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: what kind of other education did you have?

ADJA YUNKERS: I have no formal education.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't have primary schools?

ADJA YUNKERS: No. I didn't go to school. You see I wasn't even baptized. Because it was raining, my father refused to go. It's extraordinary, so you know, the whole thing is crazy. I had tutors at home, students who would come. But most of the time they were teaching me how to play chess and would lecture me about revolutions, the social problems. Our house was a revolutionary house because my father was one of the organizers of the first Russian Revolution of 1905. We had all sorts of people at the house. That is my background really politically and otherwise. I have a very varied foundation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very active.

ADJA YUNKERS: Very active, yes. Then came the Revolution. In 1915 I enrolled in the army. Somebody pointed out that my only qualification was that I was a good horseman. I was in the cavalry. I fought the Germans, or rather ran from them. At this time I thought it was about time to find my parents and become reconciled with them. I didn't find them. They had gone to Riga. It took me, oh, about three months to get to Riga. Nothing worked. The railroads were all broken up. Bands of soldiers were roaming the country. Anarchist groups. After three months when I got to Riga I was shanghaied by the Latvians.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. So I had to instruct men with beards because I still had my uniform on, of course it had no epaulets, so they just forced me. I did it for, oh, I don't know, a month or two.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you have to do?

ADJA YUNKERS: Instruct them, left, right, down, up; they were marching around bare-footed with broomsticks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: That's the first thing a republic does. The police and the army against the internal fiend or enemy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADJA YUNKERS: So then one day I succeeded in escaping. I went over the border into Germany. That was the closest country. That's how I happened to get out of Russia. It was a fluke of fate, not for political reasons whatsoever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This was what then?

ADJA YUNKERS: This was 1919. Then I was kept on the German side by a lieutenant with a monocle who wore a corset. It was lovely, really lovely. I lived wonderfully. Well, he was a very well read and very civilized person. He sort of patronized me until the papers of permit came from Berlin. I arrived in Berlin with no money. I was very hungry. It was a long ride, it took twenty-four hours. The whole thing was disorganized in Germany at that time. The Revolution Spartacist had just ended in Bavaria. There were other putsches in Berlin. And here I was walking around in a Russian uniform. They were literally spitting at me and jostling me. I was going around in circles, I couldn't speak any German. I walked around the whole day. I got hungrier and hungrier. It got to be around ten o'clock at night. I decided it was a matter of utter desperation. I happened to turn into a street which I had later got to know was entirely dedicated to night cafes, cabarets, clubs. One side was for homosexuals and the other side was entirely for lesbians. Everything was organized. The vice was organized. You see now you only have to look at Richard Linder's pictures and there it is. He may hedonize it but of course it's a hangover.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure.

ADJA YUNKERS: And he knows that. We've often talked about it. So in one block there were sadists; the next block was for masochists; and for this and this and this specialty. And they would never trespass on each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADJA YUNKERS: Women with these boots with high steel heels and whips. It was a fantastic time. Well anyway, I went there- and, you see, I didn't know- I had never drunk before. I sat down and automatically there was a bottle of wine on the table. So I had a drink on an empty stomach. I got dead drunk. After that I don't remember anything. I only vaguely remember that somebody was speaking Russian to me. The next morning I awoke in Hamburg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, that's literally true. I found in the pocket of my uniform, you know, we had those long coats (which they wear now)—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, the maxi coat.

ADJA YUNKERS: --split in the back so you could sit in the saddle- I found this piece of paper which said "Batuchka, you're much too innocent and too young and too good to be in this bloody city and I take the liberty of putting you on a train to Hamburg where you will feel much better I'm sure." There was no signature, nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, so I awakened in Hamburg at six o'clock in the morning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did a lot of traveling.

ADJA YUNKERS: I did a lot of traveling, believe me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember who the German officer was that you first met?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, I don't remember his name. He was one of those Prussian Barons. I've often thought of him because he gave me quite a lot. I don't like the Germans, you know. But at the time I didn't know who they were. But no matter what they are, this man was literally exquisite. We played chess, we talked about literature. He taught me a hell of a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you there?

ADJA YUNKERS: About a month. That's a long time, you know. The only thing I can say is that I'm grateful to him. He pointed out certain things to be about painting and art. During that day in Berlin I walked around and looked in the windows and saw all those art books. That's where I first saw a book about German Expressionism. At that time I was entirely removed from expressionism because my dealings were with the Constructivists, which was my great experience in Russia.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know any of those people?

ADJA YUNKERS: I knew one of them, yes. But above all I knew poets. And some young painters. I knew Andre Bloch who used to be nice to me. I met Maiergosse. And so on and so forth. It's just a simple story.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've always had an interest in poetry and literature?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes, always. I cannot conceive doing anything in my work that does not relate in one sense or another to poetry. This is visible in my work. There's a certain sensuality, you know, put it that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Poetry always seems to be a great part of Russian life.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, I mean they are not separable. It would be on the same level, let's say, like- a typical, outstanding example would be Picasso. The same thing. Art begets art. Art thrives in art. I think that many, many things that Picasso did literally originated by poets, by talks, discussions with poets. It so happens that this summer I translated Kahnweiler's memoirs on Picasso from German into English and certain things from French into English. And I found there the most fantastic things. Who knows, you know?...But Kahnweiler I would believe because he would have his conversations with Picasso and then go home and write them down. But since he was German, a romantic, he may have exaggerated or stressed certain points which were beyond Picasso's intended meaning. There is one little episode which sort of sticks out. Kahnweiler calls Picasso and asks him if he may come and see him. There's a pause. Picasso says to him, "Yes, is it pour le plaisir, or pour le business?" There's a pause on the other end, and Kahnweiler says, "Pour le plaisir, Maître." Picasso says, "You're welcome, come." That's how he starts each evening. It's beautiful. And they talk about the greatest banalities: about how lonely an artist is, and he had to create his own loneliness and solitude; and it's the only way to be able to create, and how difficult it is to do "because we're surrounded by watches." There's a pause. He says to Kahnweiler, "Have you ever seen a saint with a watch?" Visualize it. It's marvelous. I think of Bosch and *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* with a wrist watch.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.

ADJA YUNKERS: No, but the beautiful thing is (which really shocked me) that when I was forced to reminisce and give this talk, I had to go back to things and collect material and to nail down dates—you know going through life so much is like an ash can—I wasn't sure about certain dates so I had to do research to make it accurate. Then I got to thinking of the things I was doing. And here I am now sixty-nine years old. And I'm doing the things I did in 1915-1917, right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ADJA YUNKERS: I mean like these Minimal things. I mean the simplicity. That's how I started out. I've made a complete circle through all the movements. The only movement I didn't stay longer than ten minutes with was Surrealism. But I went through all the Cubist thing and so on and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was your relationship to the Constructivists?

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, it was baffling. Look, Malevich, for instance. And the manifestos of Malevich. It was too much for a young guy of fourteen, fifteen years old. The thing was, I was like an unbroken ass. I wasn't corrupt. I

had no schooling, no academic background in the artistic sense. I never had done anything in that sense. I had an open mind. And that was very exciting because, you see, these things happened in relation to the things that happened politically in Russia, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADJA YUNKERS: They were of great significance. I remember during the Revolution in 1917, 1918 there were posters in the streets on the houses sometimes, manifestos by artists, by Malvich. Big manifestos next to government declarations and the revolutionary parties. It was a fantastic thing. The street cars were painted cubistically outside.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really!

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. And the poets were standing on the corners reading poetry. In no time there would be hundreds of people around listening. All this I say in this talk of mine. And you will have the information much better than I'm putting it in this interview. This is one thing that inhibits me in these situations now because I have to go over the same ground.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. And it's cold.

ADJA YUNKERS: It's repetitious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the art school that you went to. Was it academic?

ADJA YUNKERS: No! No! Well, the most modern thing was the Russian Symbolist – now what in hell is his name? – you know the museum on Riverside Drive?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: Now what is his name? He was a Symbolist and he finally took it all over here and made them build that museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know who you mean but I can't think of his name.

ADJA YUNKERS: He was officially my teacher. So was Rienden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: You know, this figurative painter. A very good painter, too. But, oh, somehow for me even then I couldn't tell you now, they were abstract things; the sublimation of things. And above all according to Malevich, the Suprematists, you know, nothing is to be touched; only feeling is the important thing, you know. Then he had long discussions about white and black and so on. There were white paintings and black paintings, pure black. I remember one painting I saw one day in an exhibit, it was a small painting absolutely black, there were tiny, tiny, barely perceptible scratches in it; and the title was A Negro at Night. I've never forgotten that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very interesting. Even that long ago.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. Look, I mean it sounds phony, or maybe funny, to say that it has been done, eh?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lots of things have been done.

ADJA YUNKERS: So I've been through it, you see. There are certain things that I just don't look at anymore because they're banal travesties, banal variations on the *déjà vu*, eh?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whether they know it or not it seems.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, they know it. They looked it up. I know that they do. I've had long talks with Rauschenberg. I know that they do. He knows everything about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some of those people are very good art historians.

ADJA YUNKERS: Of course, they know it very well, they're very intelligent people, they're very bright. Jasper Johns, for instance, is an exquisite man.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's go back to the chronology a bit. You ended up on the train in Hamburg!

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. Well, look, this is like a story. So there I was on the street at six o'clock. As I said, I didn't speak German. I washed up and I went out on the street. Again I say I was hungry. This is the leitmotif of my life

up to the age of thirty-five. I've been always hungry. I starved a lot, in fact one day I decided to finish it and starve myself to death. I was discovered in my room by accident. Somebody came up and brought me back to life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How old were you when that happened?

ADJA YUNKERS: Twenty-eight. I've dies several deaths, you know. I once died from opium smoking, and I was brought back to life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was when?- in your twenties?

ADJA YUNKERS: In Hamburg. Yes, I was in my twenties. I smoked opium. I would smoke opium in the day time and work at night. That was the only time in my life I did work at night.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things did you do then?

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, if you want to have a simile, let's say, like Kandinsky, on that level. I had my first show in Hamburg- well, the story goes like this: you see I was there and there was this poster and I saw there- what is his name? Sergei something- a Russian name- I will recall it in a minute- a dancer- and it said "Kammerspiel"- I could read, you know. So I went to a policeman and I said, "Kammerspiel" and pointed to the poster. He just pointed across the square and there was the Kammerspiel just two steps from the station. It was early in the morning so I sat there on the steps waiting for somebody to come. Around ten o'clock somebody did come, an accountant or bookkeeper. Somehow we managed with his broken French. He gave me money for tram car fare. I found the place where the dancer lived. In the meantime the accountant had telephoned him that I was coming. When I arrived I was received in this baroque living room. He was a dancer. They were playing Bach. There was a pink wall around him. Of course he was much interested in me, so he sent me on to somebody else, to a Russian to a Russian lady who was married to a German professor in the arts and crafts school in Hamburg. I came there and she received me very nicely. She gave me a room, I stayed there. She gave me materials to paint and everything. After a while the atmosphere became too hot and I just left and never came back. So I was walking the streets and sleeping in the parks. It was summer. One of the whore picked me up. She said, "I see you walking. You're crazy. Come with me." So I came with her. And every night I worked there in her room in the brothel. At ten o'clock I would leave and at one o'clock I was permitted to come back. That's where I made my first exhibit - I mean not in the brothel but I did the work. Then I showed at Maria Kunde Gallery, which was a very good gallery comparable, let's say, to Martha Jackson at the time. And I sold out. Museums and collectors bought. And suddenly all doors opened. I still was in Russian uniform mind you. I had no money to buy. So the first thing I did was get rid of my Cossack uniform.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Out with the uniform!

ADJA YUNKERS: And that's how I started. And then came the business. And I went to Italy where I met Cavallon and other people of The New Realism who were very sweet to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the first pictures like?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, religious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Magic religious pictures, Madonnas and saints and Crucifixions and so on. These were all done with ink, watercolor and my fingernails. I had no materials yet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADJA YUNKERS: They were done on wrapping paper, you know this fat repellent paper that is used for sandwiches that I got from the brothel from all the girls. I just smoothed them out and drew on them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. That was a very colorful time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It sounds as if you had lots of fun in those days.

ADJA YUNKERS: I had, yes. But it was misery, too, because don't forget the whole thing, the so-called Russian

soul. And I really was miserable because, notwithstanding all the other pleasures I had, I was really frightfully – I was looking for God. I was a lost soul. I had seen so much blood, you know, as a young man. It's very hard to get rid of these things, to find yourself. It's very destructive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the military part of your life really had an effect on you?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, it hadn't, but The Revolution had an effect upon me. To see people tortured and shot like that point blank. I had three horses that were shot under me. All those things like that. All that reality that goes with war. I was a young man seventeen years old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything happened very quickly.

ADJA YUNKERS: Very quickly and intensely. So my whole life I lived very fast, and I have lived it, and I still do. You know there's this comparison with ruins, for instance. Now what you have here in architecture I call modern ruins not because they're eating time ten years and then they're thrown out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: And so I'm a modern man I'm eating time, so I'm the perfect symbol for a ruin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a marvelous expression. How long did you stay in Hamburg?

ADJA YUNKERS: Ohm I stayed in Hamburg and got a son there with a dancer. I met Labandar there, the papa of modern dance choreography, and danced for a while. And I met my first serious love and have a son. Of course now he's somewhere in Germany, had children.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you hear from him at all?

ADJA YUNKERS: Through his mother, yes. Well, a long time elapsed until I came to Sweden because I was running away from Hitler from Paris. I got a letter from her. She had written to the Museum of Modern Art and she found me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Yes. And then just a few years ago there was a congress in Warsaw and Prague. Dore wanted to go to this congress. We were in Paris, so I put her on the train at Gare du Nord and she went off to Warsaw. I came back and it was raining as usual in Paris. So I took the street directory, the little red book, you know, and I started reading it from A to Z, the names of the streets. Suddenly I discovered that though I had lived for fifteen years in Paris I had never bothered to notice the fantastic poetry in the names of the streets- La Place des Angles, and so on and so forth, and I wrote that down. When I was through doing that I thought, what next? What will I do now? So I took a plane and went to Hamburg. And then she told me stories about my son and herself. Pretty gruesome, it has no bearing on me. Then later she wrote me letters and she said, "Do you know what happened? There was a traveling show and you were in that traveling show and he saw it and he divorced his wife, left his children (he was a professor of mathematics with tenure and all that at University of Dresden) and he abandoned all that, and do you know what he is doing? Now he's writing about art and publishing art books."

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADJA YUNKERS: That's a true fact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, boy! Everywhere you go something happens.

ADJA YUNKERS: That's true, yes. I remember when I came to London for the first time in 1936 from Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you get to Paris? – because I still have you back in the mid- twenties in Hamburg.

ADJA YUNKERS: I just left there. In 1924 I was in Dresden. Never mind the circumstance under which I happened to be there. And I lived in ___ Studio. It was a tower with sixteen windows in the house of the Dürer Bund which is the Dürer association to continue the propagation of Dürer's work. So I had that studio. One of my mistresses came from Berlin and stayed with me. Suddenly I got this great melancholia, and I told her, "I can't stand it any more. I'm going to leave." She said, "well, where are you going?" Out in the hall there was a big globe and she said, "Let's go. And you close your eyes and turn the globe and wherever you point you're going." So it was Cuba. Three days later I was on my way to Cuba, and I arrived in Havana. Lots of things happened there. At that time, you see, the first dictator Machado was in power. In 1927, I got involved with these things. With one of my friends, Alejo Carpentier, who was a musician and music critic and so on, we built a nucleus.... when I came there, there was nothing. The children were still running around in their underpants. So we organized—Alejo organized chamber music. I helped to publish the first and only art magazine, one issue. We had the first modern

show, lectures. It was a terrific life. By the time we got around to making an Afro-Cuban theatre, the political situation was such that we had to leave. I met some of the min 1928 in Paris. Some had been shot and killed and thrown into the water to the sharks. I went to Mexico, and that's where I met Diego Rivera. So then I came back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened in Mexico?

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, I'm just telling you, you see. One of the stories is- I first landed at Vera Cruz and made my way up to Mexico City. I was looking for Diego Rivera. I came to his house- it was one of the first Corbusier houses (you know he lived in Paris for a time before he went back to Mexico). His house was surrounded by huge cactus plants, high trees, fifty feet high, and there was a wonderful fence. I went to the gate. There was not a soul in the whole house. I went from room to room and finally came to a bedroom in which there was a bed half the size of this room. And on that bed is lying a baby by Frida. Next to the bed is a big ten gallon or fifteen gallon hat and a coat, a maxi. Now I knew I was in Mexico. That was the time he was painting the frescos for the ministry, the Casa Publico.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you spend much time in Mexico?

ADJA YUNKERS: Half a year or something like that. Then I went back to Hamburg. I took care of some private affairs there, I just decided to quit it all and went back to Paris and settled there. But the experience with Diego Rivera and the frescoes and Orozco and all these people was so tremendous.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was that like?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, it was very wild. I was practically born with a social conscience, you know, and with my whole political background I was very much to the Left. So I had the idea that I would like to paint frescoes. This had never been done in Europe ever, that is political frescoes, and still not even today. Finally, I decided to visit Barbusse. I told him about my experiences and what I would like to do. And Henri (who died some time ago) gave me introductions to some mairies (you know, city halls) outside of Paris. I went to one and they had just redecorated the city hall, the salle des fêtes, and with roses, which was in bad taste. The French have no taste at all, you know. So then I went to another mairie, which was in Ivry which is totally a wreck. You know Paris at the time was encircled by what they called Ceinture Rouge (Red Belt). They were all socialists, or anarchists, and so on. Everything was there. So at Ivry I was received by the mayor. I told him who I was and what I had in mind. He said, "you'll have to come back because I have to consult my colleagues here, I'm not the only one, I have assistant advisors." He had everything in his assistants, anarchists, socialists. There were eight or nine people sitting around a green table and the mayor was there. I came with my sketches. And they babbled and babbled and babbled. They got so excited and carried away with legislation. And finally they just looked at each other and said, "Why not?" And then the mayor said to me, "Monsieur, we can't pay you. I said, "You don't have to pay me. You pay me per week the wages of a house painter as salary." For a year I painted frescoes. It was a huge salle des fêtes. I painted thirteen large frescoes. The normal size of a wall painting was the size of this wall, and there were thirteen. One big painting was twice as long, so it was a huge thing. I worked for a whole year. And the workers would come, and the mayor would come. The workers would sit down at lunch time and open their lunch boxes and their wine and chocolate and white bread. And argue with me, the hammer wasn't right; the man wasn't holding this and that right. The painting was all very realistic, figurative. Finally the day of the opening came. The frescoes were put up. The mayor came to me and said, "You know, you'd better leave France." So I went to Berlin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened to the murals though?

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, you see, he had to cover up one mural- no, two murals. One mural he covered up as unfinished; the linen was torn, and the other mural was a big satire on the bourgeois society. Mr. Keop, the police president who was to open the show, was portrayed there. The Premier of the time was in the mural. And there were some others. Madame de Noailles, the poetess, was in the mural, and then some sociologists and some art historians.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they were all real people?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, real people, real portraits. I worked hard on them. And in the background there were workers reading Carl Marx and Dreyfus and all that crap. So then I left Paris in 1939 because I smelled the who thing coming. At that time there was nowhere to go except Scandinavia. Luckily I chose Sweden, not Norway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are those murals still there do you think?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, you see, in 1946 before leaving Sweden for America with my then wife, a South African lady whom I married in Stockholm, I made a farewell trip around Europe to say goodbye. We took the North Express which goes via Copenhagen to Paris and to Belgium. It was a fantastic trip. And everywhere I went I had special literati friends. They all were jumping on me; "my God, you are bombing the flag, you are leaving, you are going

to these savages you will see." I'd say, "what in hell have you done? Where were you when you were needed?" And I have them what for, you see...What happened was that among others, T. S. Elliot, who became my very dear friend during the war, came to Stockholm- I had invited him- I had very good connections so they brought him over in a stratosphere just to give a lecture. By that time I had published books and magazines in Sweden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You started two magazines there, didn't you?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, I was a publisher, too, for a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get into that?

ADJA YUNKERS: It was so boring there. I had to have something to do not to die of boredom.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of support could one get?

ADJA YUNKERS: When I got there, there were some people with money. Of course it all went out the window. Bankruptcy, you know. I was the first one to introduce American Literature to Scandinavia.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Will you believe that? Henry Miller was one of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did they think of him in those days?

ADJA YUNKERS: They refused to publish him so I sold it to Copenhagen. I introduced Ben Hecht; I published myself, and Stapelton, an English writer, and so on. But they would put the books under the shelves and never would show them because they said there is a combine there. There are three big publishing houses. So my books were just not put out for sale.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes. You can't break through.

ADJA YUNKERS: Ben Hecht sort of repaid certain losses. I myself wrote two books. One about Forty Years of Film, and one on the History of the First World War. There are 380 or so photographs in it, or something like that. It was a big thing, I worked a whole year on it. It was actually a picture book with short political text to hang it together, about how the war happened, about the social democrats and the Communist Front, because I was in between you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. So there you were again stirring things up. That's incredible. I'm trying to get a little more of the atmosphere of what was going on and the things you were doing.

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, at that time I always painted. When I came to Sweden I was rather dejected. I didn't speak Swedish. But after a short while they didn't know that I wasn't a Swede. In fact, I speak eight or nine languages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You pick them up very easily?

ADJA YUNKERS: Easily, yes. I speak perfect Swedish and German and so on. So I came to Sweden and suddenly I remembered that some time ago from Paris I had sent to an art Syndicalist group, a publisher, some woodcuts. One of the packages contained the Ten Commandments. And Humanite had printed some of them. The eleventh of course was, you know... And the signature was a robot, a robot. I had never heard from them. So suddenly I remembered this. And I went up there and I was received like a long lost son. They embraced me, kissed me, dined and wined me, and gave me money. So I went out and rented an empty apartment, four or five rooms with a kitchen. I got some wood and a saw and a hammer and nails and made my furniture. And that's how I started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: The whole eclarte group, you know. It was a very interesting time. I really stirred things up, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of reaction was there amongst the people to all this activity you were engaged in?

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, they were curious, but they didn't really accept. You see, of there is artistically speaking a chauvinism prevalent on America, which there is, it is most pronounced in Sweden. So I had some difficulties. Even being close friends of practically all the poets, and most of the writers were very good friends of mine, some of them are now in the academy and all that. Members go on crutches, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very, very important people.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. This was a very good thing for me. You see, on the other hand it's always dark in Sweden. Jokingly I used to say it's seven months winter and five months cold. You know, you get up with electric light and go to bed with electric light and so on. It's always dark. And summer is six weeks or something like that. And bang! It's gone. Everyone bundles himself up. And during the six weeks of summer everything is wild, real wild. The chart of children goes up, you know, conceptions go up and boom stops. The first of September nothing. But it's a marvelous country, I love it, I love Sweden, I mean as nature. And Stockholm again is another one of those Venices; wherever you go, it's water. A beautiful city. I was there this summer to lay some ghosts which were still wandering around. But the ghosts were on holiday so I didn't meet them. I don't think I will ever go back again. It really was a sad experience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yeas. I won't go to Europe at all anymore. I'm through with it.

PAUL CUMINGS: Oh, really? It's finished?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. It's a sad thing. Why should I go to Europe? There's nothing- no affinities anymore. Except sentimentality. You see, when I went there it was literally like *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. And I would touch houses, I would climb upstairs and look at a doorway where I used to live and all this sort of thing. It was really a sentimental journey. Sad. You see, it's worse then ever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, sometimes one has to do that though.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. Then I went to Paris and before I joined Dore and the kinds in the south of France I was alone in Paris for about eight days. Of course it was raining. It rained for eight days. And with my hands in my pockets I was wandering through the streets in the rain. Everything has declined somehow. There's not even a cuisine left in France, it's lost. If you want to eat good French food you've got to pay through the nose, fourteen dollars for lunch. It's incredible. I mean fourteen dollars for two people, the cheapest lunch in a good place which I found.... That's what I did for eight days. I was eating and drinking food wines. I went around. The cheapest lunch I ever had was twelve dollars.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. I haven't been there in years and I rally find no inclination to go.

ADJA YUNKERS: It's so sad because I remember in the 1920's we'd sit in the cafes, in, for instance, the Rotonde, or wherever, all night long with a cup of coffee, and would never be bothered.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No more.

ADJA YUNKERS: Whew! No, I found to my disgust that all the bad things of America have been taken over because it's profitable. It's not in them; they don't know how; they just take the mechanics of it, and it becomes sort of sloppy, wishy-washy. The only city I might go back to is London. I still like London Very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have made prints for a long time, haven't you?

ADJA YUNKERS: That's what I started to tell you about in Sweden. Suddenly I gave up painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that where you started the printmaking?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. I happened to be on the seashore somewhere walking around. I found a piece of wood. This is literally true. I looked at this piece of wood, I held it in the palm of my hand, and I found it sort of mysterious. So I took it home and dried it- it was wet- I dried it and covered it with oil paint, on color and put in on paper. And that did it. From then on.... actually I created the whole damn thing in Sweden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Thursday afternoon for the ladies.

ADJA YUNKERS: That was pretty bad, you know. So I came with huge things. That made a revolution, you know. That's what sustained me actually, the prints. I sold everything I made, everything. That's how it started. And that how I got to be known in America, through my prints. Most of the museums already had my prints before I came here, so actually, I never had to struggle in America. I came and everything was ready. It was very nice. Three months before I left... Oh! By the way, I must state that it was the New School that brought me over to America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about?

ADJA YUNKERS: That came about in a very funny way. You see, I had made up my mind to leave Europe, and it was a logical conclusion. I didn't believe in Europe anymore. Somebody was here with my prints. This somebody —this happened during the war actually—was later drowned by a German submarine; the ship sunk. He showed my prints at the New School. They had a little show. So they sent me some references. I wrote back that I had made up my mind to leave Europe and come to America. So they sent me a contract which gave me the opportunity of getting a visa within twelve hours. You see, according to the immigration office it doesn't matter what passport you have; it's the place where you were born; that's what counts. Then you are in that quota, otherwise I would have had to wait for 165 years. It was a semi-diplomatic visa., so that's how I got here with the help of the New School. It was a help. Also you see there was a point in history in 1939 when I came, the Russo-Finnish War was going on, which didn't exactly make my life comfortable. So my only windows when the war started for America in 1941 were the English Legation and the American Legation. So I would go every day to the English Legation for tea, and then for cocktails to the American Legation. I would get cigarettes and magazines and books in both places. In fact, through the American Legation- I knew the First Secretary and the Second Secretary very well both socially and otherwise and they got books for me from America. Everybody was so starved for literature and papers, so I just passed the books around among my friends and they all read them. For instance, I translated lots of Mayakovsky simply sitting like this with you with the poet, I would recite a poem in Russian and then translate it into Swedish. Then he would read it to me and there would be certain words I would have to explain to him. Then he would find another word that would cover it. Then we'd make a clean typed copy. I did a lot of things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. You've always known lots of poets?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. I was very lucky.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you know a lot of them here still?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes, I know quite a number of poets. Kunitz, Wilbur and Lowell. Although for the past few years, three, four, five years, I'm leading a rather withdrawn life socially. I don't see many people. I seldom go to exhibits and openings except when friends are having an opening. Not always even then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you teach at the New School?

ADJA YUNKER: Painting. And then graphics, woodcuts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was this your first experience teaching?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, no. I had taught to a certain extent in Sweden during the war. There was a sort of free academy. Well, there's a story connected with that: To get that visa, I had to point out how many hours... you see, you cannot get into the country even if you have an engagement; you still have to prove that you have the proper qualifications according to the immigration officials. When I arrived at Baltimore, I wasn't allowed to disembark. They took me to the immigration offices and grilled me for three hours, because two hours were missing, to make it legal. I refused to accede that I maybe had made a mistake and forgotten the two hours. I was so mad Then they said, "What is this New School? What's that?" "The New School for Social Research, is it Communist? It doesn't exist." I said, "Look, you must have some book somewhere all the institutions in America are listed." So one of the Italian- Americans disappeared and came back and said, "Yes, there it is." "Is it communist?" For three hours.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. Because of these two hours missing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADJA YUNKERS: And they called up the New School. So then I left. They gave me a permit for fourteen days; I could go wherever I wanted but whenever I left New York I had to notify the immigration office in New York. It was in Brooklyn. And in fourteen days I had to send them a brief on "why I want to be in America." But yet I had this engagement. It was absurd. It so happened that I thought of Lessing Rosenwald, the big collector of prints and first editions who had purchased practically everything I had made. I didn't know him. But I telephoned him and we made a date. I went to Philadelphia and saw him. He telephoned someone: "there's a young man here who's in trouble." I saw that man, you know, the same day. I explained the case. He said, "Don't worry. I'll let you know when to come back." So later on I got a letter from him to be in Philadelphia, which is the central immigration office, to see the boss. There I was waiting to see this young man of 35 or 40 who came in with a hop and a rush: "What seems to be the matter Mr. Yunkers?" I said, "Well, you've got in there in front of you, sir." Ten days later I got my passport with a stamp on it. Now I was so mad. I was thinking about those people who don't have these connections who go straight to Ellis Island and rot away there all that time. That was twenty-two years ago. I said, "Jesus, I've come from the fat into the fire."

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. Most Americans don't even know these things exist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they do if they look around.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes, but it's disagreeable I want to say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went out to the University of New Mexico?

ADJA YUNKERS: yes. Well, you see, my then wife suffered from all sorts of sinus trouble and Asthma and so on. The New York weather was very bad for her. The number of times I had to carry her to the doctor in the middle of the night! And she was dying, so I said, "this is hell." After holding classes here for two months I got very tired and I told her "I'm leaving, I'm going to New Mexico." So I just flew out there with an Englishman...La Farge was there in Santa Fe and parties and parties and parties. Then I came back and said, "Look, that's the only place. It's like the veldt; It's like South Africa. That's where you belong." I knew a painter by the name of Johnson (who is now dead). I wrote him a letter telling him that I would like to come back to New Mexico but "I can't afford it." Eight days later I got a contract for a summer job in the West. So we went out there. I bought land and started building an adobe house, with a huge living room thirty feet long. All alone, mind you, except for the roof. I had students help me to get things up. I built the whole damn house alone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. How did you like living there?

ADJA YUNKERS: I love New Mexico. I know about forty states, you know. New Mexico to me was a revelation. My whole life changed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ADJA YUNKERS: Colors and everything. The whole conception of my life. I had long monologues with the desert. But then I found out that you can't argue with the desert. So I had to come back to New York. Finally due to this leaving New Mexico and staying here in the winter to make some money, our marriage sort of collapsed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you teach out there- printmaking?

ADJA YUNKERS: No. Painting. I was the man who first organized the graphics art department. They didn't have one. I brought everything with me. They wanted me to do that, so I did it. I did many things like that, you see. Now I'm going through the same thing with painting at Barnard. I swore I would never teach again after I finished Columbia last spring. But suddenly I fell into a trap again at Barnard College. They have nothing. You see, I have to organize the whole damn thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're going to set up a printmaking department?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, a painting department.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A painting department- oh, really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. They don't have anything yet. Nothing. It's amazing. Miss Barr, you know Barr's daughter, was teaching there. But it's like a Sunday finishing school. So now they want to do something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. That's incredible. Speaking of the University of New Mexico and then Cooper Union where you were for a long time---

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, that I did a long time after. I taught at Cooper Union for eight years. In between times I would leave Cooper Union and travel and come back. I've taught all over the place, all over the map, mostly summer school. I didn't know where to go in the summers so I would get a job in Hawaii or Colorado at Boulder, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you had fun and traveled and worked?

ADJA YUNKERS: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you ever kept track of any of your students?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. I don't have to keep track. They keep track of me. I constantly get letters from even twenty years back. They're now grown up men with beards and children and several marriages, you know. They write to me about all their things. I have a good relationship with my students mostly. I get lots of letters, nice letters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific. You've had lots of exhibitions in this country.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, God, yes. Also in Europe. And then suddenly I don't know what happened I just got sort of really depressed by this whole thing and I just cut out everything. I lost all my contacts with Europe and here. This is really true. And for six years nobody knew what I was doing. I was with Emmerich before. And then after six years I had my first show at Rose Fried; that's about a year and a half ago. It was very successful. That's it. Then she went off her rocker, you know the story. In fact now I don't look for any gallery. I'm sick and tired of being married to galleries. So unless somebody comes and makes a good proposition—

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1961 you got a grant to Tamarind.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yes. I was the second one at Tamarind after she started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that?

ADJA YUNKERS: I loved it. I had three master printers at my beck and call. I made many, many experiments there which had never been done before in lithography.

PAUL CUMMINGS : Oh, really! What kind of things?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, it's very complicated to explain. It would take an hour. For instance, I used material- paint which cannot be used in lithography because it does contain any fat. Like poster color. I would use this poster color and through the poster color filter color and get grays, you know, filter the ink through and get grays that are absolutely impossible to mix or create. The only difficulty was to hold it up in an edition, the same gray so that it wouldn't disappear or get black. There was this one printer, a Czechoslovakian- Horreq was his name- who had started doing this as a boy; he had grown up with it and he was really fantastic. We would start working at six o'clock in the morning and work until twelve or one o'clock at night. We did this for six weeks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very exciting.

ADJA YUNKERS: It was a glorious time. I had a nice apartment, which I didn't use, I just slept there. There was a stove there and a kitchen and a bathroom and all that. In the evenings I would go to the supermarket to shop. It was within walking distance of the Tamarind. I would just smack my steak on the stove. Then I'd go to bed. At six in the morning I'd be walking down the street to the Tamarind. And there he'd be already working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She has terrific printers out there I guess.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. They're all over the place now. New York had several from Tamarind. Just recently I met one in Tampa who got his degree at the Tamarind. I got a commission to make reprints for the Feigen Gallery. "Would you like to go to Tampa?" he asked. I said, "what for?" "To make three prints" he said, "or as many as you can." I said, "When?" He said, "Tomorrow."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Zoom!

ADJA YUNKERS: Off I went. I haven't seen them yet, I expect they'll come any day this week for signing. You see you get an idea how fast these things are.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Transportation and everything now makes so much difference, doesn't it?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, God, yes. Also, the decisions you know, from one day to another. A very charming story was about the American federation of art. They had a program- I don't know if they still have- they had institutions all over the country to invite artists to come there for jobs. So someone called me up- I forget his name now- and said, "Would you like to have a job?" I said, "Yes. When? Where?" He said, "Well, it's around here somewhere." I said, "No. I will only take a job where there's sunshine and water. The sun must shine." So for two years I didn't hear from him. Suddenly a man from Honolulu pops up here at the American Federation of Arts, and there I was off to Honolulu.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like it out there?

ADJA YUNKERS: It was all right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very lush I understand.

ADJA YUNKERS: It's too lush. It's like a greengrocer. The sky and the rocks and the sea are fantastic, overwhelming. And there I was, really spoiled. They went out of their way to make it pleasant and comfortable and lush. A big tropical house. They offered me a car when I was there. They bought three paintings, and so on and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it's difficult for a creative person to live in that kind of climate?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. I can't imagine... of course I met most of the painters there because it was part of the program. I had to criticize them once every week, thirty or forty people popping up. And I had to lecture and all that sort of thing. And I saw what happens.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is it I wonder?

ADJA YUNKERS: It's laziness. It's nature itself. You know when you go to South America- we were in Brazil recently and we saw what happens there. You just can't work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder what it is?

ADJA YUNKERS: It's a certain feeling.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. They'd rather sit down.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. That's right. By the time you have breakfast it's already afternoon.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. It's like Florida it a way, too.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, I can't stand Florida. But really tropical places, you know, that is the undoing... that's how the English lost the Empire. They stopped shaving. They got careless, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That will do it. You did a great series of pastels.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. You see, one of my characteristics is that I hate to plagiarize myself. When I can't do things, when I've sort of absorbed the material and seen what I can do with it; in other words, when I've squeezed everything out of it and then there comes a point when I can do those things in my sleep; from that moment on I just lose any interest whatsoever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's been accomplished.

ADJA YUNKERS: It's been accomplished and gone. I still get reproached today that I don't make pastels anymore. It's a sort of scandal. I can show you letters from curators and people because the word went through the city that I had just stopped, that I had abandoned the pastels. I haven't made any pastels since. I made pastels for three years, large ones. They're all gone. I have one large pastel. I said, Dore, look, you'd better chose one and keep it."

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got you interested in doing pastels?

ADJA YUNKERS: It was an accident. One day the Borgenicht Gallery asked me if they could have a small work. I just looked around and I saw a few pastel sticks lying around that I used to sketch with but never made a pastel. I thought, well, she wants a little thing so I'm going to make a little thing. So I made a little thing. And it was fascinating what I could do with it. I sent it to her gallery. It lasted an hour; it was gone. So then I developed a technique which nobody, nobody—Degas in that sense is a Sunday painter in comparison—not only in size but in technique. You know, he would draw the musing strokes. Well, I would use three or four sticks in the palm of my hand and use them like oil color technique.

PAUL CUMMMINGS: I see.

ADJA YUNKERS: And layer on layer, you see. I would fix them in layers on the transparencies. I recently went to Cleveland and saw in a collector's house two of my large pastels. I was flabbergasted. I was absolutely flabbergasted. Who made them? To me this is strange now. I wouldn't know how to do it anymore. I was so carried away, so drunk with it, I was just like a fountain. Then suddenly at a certain point I got so sick and tired of this lushness and all this color, and it coincided with the death of Expressionism somehow on an emotional level. Although I didn't think of it, this lushness made me really seasick. Suddenly I had this longing for herring, black bread, you know, for rigid discipline. And I just gave it up. That was when I left Emmerich. And it was six years. The result is these white paintings. So I abandoned woodcuts, I abandoned graphics. Recently I took them up again. But I don't make them anymore. I make woodcuts but they make silk screens. I don't make them myself. I make collaged and then I just supervise the printing of lithographs and so on. Lithographs, of course, I have to do; I set the stones, you know, at least the plates. But I don't do the printing, the physical labor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was reading in something you have written that you said that living in Rome at one point was very important to you.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you didn't say what it was or how it became important.

ADJA YUNKERS: No, the important thing was the experience I had in Ostia Antica, which is the original, the first Roman harbor that Romans built which was built by seamen and merchants. They had everything there, the senate, the theatres, an entire city, and it lasted fifty years or something like that. Suddenly one morning they awakened and the sea had receded a hundred miles, just receded. And it was a ghost town, they abandoned it. Now still today there are inlaid symbols the size of this carpet where they had their stalls, in the fishermen's there were little fishes, in the shoemaker's there were shoes. Beautiful things that you walk on, and it's absolutely empty. One day I went out there, there is never a soul there. I went out there with Dore, and Dore somehow wandered off, so I was alone. And all the time I had the feeling that I was being observed, that someone was practically looking over my left shoulder. You know what I'm talking about? So I sat down in one of the fisherman's bars. There were a few frescoes left. I sat down and started drinking. That was it. I came to such a conclusion. So then I left. Now Rome specifically did things to me on a different level. Ostia Antica was a significant experience. I made my last woodcuts in Rome. I did a whole series on Ostia Antica. One day I made a woodcut and it was Ostia Antica. I didn't know it. From then on everything I did related to Ostia Antica, I couldn't get away from it. Then I made thirty large woodcuts. They're all gone, I have one left of the series. So I was through with it. I haven't made any woodcuts since, I just abandoned it. But speaking of Rome, the fountains, the ochre colored walls. Do you know Rome?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

ADJA YUNKERS: The walls are ochre colored. The sensuality of the city. The ease of their way of living, the whole atmosphere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very appealing?

ADJA YUNKERS: More than that. If you can see or listen it does things to you. And that actually was the germ for my pastels; which I didn't know at the time. It happened many years later. You see, this always happens to me wherever I go. You know, there's nothing like the eye. I don't sketch, my eyes are my sketchbook. It sinks in and one day I will sit down and the subconscious pops up and there it is. Things start happening.

PAUL CUMMINGS: you don't make drawings, do you?

ADJA YUNKERS: Very seldom. Lately for the past couple of years instead of drawings I have been making collages. Dozens of them from, say, one idea; sometimes three, sometimes ten, sometimes more until it hits me. Then that's it. I destroy the rest and just keep that one. Which I then translate into a painting without copying; just translate—

PAUL CUMMINGS: The image.

ADJA YUNKERS: That's right, yes. And prints. I make prints the same way. You see, this is a collage. It became a print, an embossed lithograph, and it became a large printing 72 inches by 62 inches wide, which is now in the Los Angeles County Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very interesting, you seem to have themes that go through the work.

ADJA YUNKERS: yes. That's another thing because somebody said to me some time ago, "you've been through so many evolutions you know there is another word for transformations- mutations." I said that if you put me in a computer there would be about two billion permutations coming out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

ADJA YUNKERS: Wherever you live how can you help absorbing what is around you. So without losing myself I always was sort of under the spell of a specific situation – climates; you know, I mean emotional, moral, ethical, physical climates. Do that is always the important thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm just curious, we've mentioned poets a number of times. Do you read a great deal?

ADJA YUNKERS: I read.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kinds of things do you read?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, for the past couple of years I read pornography. I'm pretty well- read. I used to read serious things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You are interested in politics and things?—

ADJA YUNKERS: Very much so. That's the overwhelming interest. I think everything is literature now. I'm concerned with certain realities. Very much so. For instance, we had an evening here where Octavio Passo was reading his poems. There were a number of invited guests who paid ten bucks. We collected quite a lot of money that way. Those who couldn't come sent checks to Dore. It all went to Mexico for the imprisoned students there, that's why we did it. And so it goes. Last year I gave away twenty- four pieces of my work. Every day I get letters, every day. Most artists get them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. There's always another cause.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. It's give, give, give. It's one of the outstanding things. It reminds me of these Uncle Sam posters during the first world war- "Where were you?" I say, "Look, where were you?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was there. Do you think there's been any one person along the development of your career that's been a great influence.

ADJA YUNKERS; No. Honestly, I cannot say that there had been. I would like to be able to say that. Except for Malevich and certain poets. Yes, Reiner Maria Ulke, a poet whom I met in Germany; and others. You see, actually they were keys to new experiences; but not actually impressing me, you know, sort of leaving their mark on me. Here nobody. So as a result, you see, when I said that I'm back to where I was before conceptionally is that I'm the one person who is totally non-eclectic. Everything I do is very personal; it comes from nowhere; I don't know where it comes from. It takes a lifetime to be able to formulate our concentration or experiences, you know, to put them down in one denominator. And with that of course the peripheral phenomena that go with it you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I read in one place that you had a fire in your studio at one point?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. Before I came to America. I had a fire three months before I left. Everything burned. Ten years of life. A I said, I came to America with nothing except for the few prints that Kleemann had at the Museum. That's all. I had nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS:That must have been terrible.

ADJA YUNKERS: I had two fires actually. One in Berlin and one in Stockholm. I'm pursued by fires. So I've evolved this mania. I smell tobacco or fire or ashes miles away. In my studio I have water; but not here. I will go out of the house and walk for several blocks and I'll have to come back to see if the cigarette is extinguished. After that experience,, you know, I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel anything. A year later here I would awaken in a cold sweat screaming. My bed was burned. My wife saved me. That was a fantastic experience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Incredible.

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, I could show you the article in the newspapers. It was six in the morning. It said, "Fire, Artist's Studio Burns Down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's horrendous.

ADJA YUNKERS: Then several years later- we were very poor- Dore and I lived in a room about this size and we had to wash our dishes in the bathtub, you know. And I made huge prints, huge prints, around fifty. There was one woodcut fourteen feet long, it was politics, five large panels, a large center panel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of wood did you use?

ADJA YUNKERS: Pine. I had to carpenter glue them together. One woodcut is as big as this painting, you know, only square, where this is oblong. There were thirty-six colors in it. And I did it on—you know in doctor's offices they have little white tables that they keep the instruments on? That's the kind of table I worked on. And I used this huge paper; I got it from Boston in rolls. And when there were two or three prints, I had to jump over, I had to stack them on the walls and all sorts of things. And then when the edition was printed and the ceiling fell down on the prints. I was in med with Dore. It was three o'clock in the morning. The prints were lying at the end of the bed sort of stack up, stretched out nice and neat ready for a show. I was supposed to have a show. These huge chunks of plaster fell on them. You can see some of them in the Philadelphia Museum. Zigrosser picked some up. So then I was left after a whole year's work with nothing. So I had to start all over again. Simply for that reason there is no edition there- there are three or four editions I couldn't bring myself to do. My first reaction was to jump out the window. I had had it. But I didn't. I went on working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you meet Dore?

ADJA YUNKERS: She was a student of mine at the New School.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. By accident. Because she was in Kuniyoshi's class and one day suddenly he disappeared and left them flat. So the Dean asked me to take over Kuniyoshi's class. And there was Dore. And she hated me because I spent most of the time drinking beer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there any special things you'd like to talk about or get into here?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, not exactly. But speaking about my work, I think it's trivial really. I don't like to do it. It's become so literary and so forced unless in a discussion, then things come out. I just can't stand it, you know. It embarrasses me. That's actually all. One thing I must say though- people often ask me that. I remember when I came over here somebody was writing a biography about me and asked me, "What is your history?" I said, "I don't have any history. It just started here. Which is literally true. That's it. This country has been very good to me, very good. I've done lots of things which one disagrees with, or are uncomfortable, or disturbing; especially now, you know. In the beginning the only thing that disturbed me was the chauvinism among my colleagues. It was very pronounced.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean at places like the New School?

ADJA YUNKERS: No, no. Painters. I'll never forget something I overheard.- I don't want to mention the name, it isn't relevant. I had a show and I happened to be passing by and this individual was standing there with Al Reinhardt and some other people. I overheard him say, "Isn't it fantastic to have a European among us?" It took me about ten years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever get involved with The Club?

ADJA YUNKERS: Oh, yeas, I used to visit them. But, you see, look, to me that was like playing in sandboxes. I just gave it up. It was a bore, an endless bore. I understand perfectly well why these things had to happen. It's good that it happened, that it was there. But not for me. I didn't need it, you see, because I had my identity. In the 1940s and 1950s they were looking for identity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you're very right. They had no support whatsoever.

ADJA YUNKERS: No. So that was good. But I mean to me they wee speaking about things and attitudes that were common to me, that I experienced already when I was seventeen or twenty years old. I'll never forget when the club was on Eighth Street, a great sculptor was walking up and down the room with Motherwell and they were discussing the attitude to certain movements. This sculptor was walking back and forth with his hands behind his back in a professorial manner and he said, " Now I must ask you what is your attitude to Matisse?" What can you do, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that was their way of communicating.

ADJA YUNKERS: I know, I know, I know. But to me it was infantile. For them the club was very healthful. Gradually I got to know them all. The best of them became my friends, and good friends. And that's the only communication I have here, these few people whom I can talk to. We don't even have to talk because we are on the same wavelength and there's no need for talking. Another thing that disturbed me was- well, these are kind of negligible things- their refusal to talk politics. First of all, they were frightened to touch politics, or any attitude. That was one thing that surprised me. Then the other thing was that whenever they were together the conversation was about their mistresses, their wives, their kinds, their taxes, their villas; you know, all this nonsense. Never about art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. I've done-I don't know- dozens of these tapes now and so many of them said, "You know, we'd all get together and we'd go to the Cedar Bar and we'd talk about art."

ADJA YUNKERS: At the Cedar Bar, yes. But they didn't talk about art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. It was about politics.

ADJA YUNKERS: They'd talk about personal resentments and so no. But that is not talking about art, you know, sitting together and picking out an idea and analyzing and getting down to the bottom, as I was sued to doing in Europe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder why that hasn't really happened here.

ADJA YUNKERS: It still hasn't. The only man you can talk to about these things to is Motherwell. He's interested in analytical and aesthetic points.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder why that hasn't developed with Americans.

ADJA YUNKERS: I don't know, but it has to do partly with the whole conception of society. Quite bluntly, lots of things are just covered up with ashes and can never come up because of materialism. And then there's another thing, specifically in New York, I can't speak for the rest of the country, but I can speak for New York. It has no memory.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Everyday it's a new--

ADJA YUNKERS: It's not only that. But memory means history. Right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: No memory. No possibility of having a tradition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lots of people seem to be afraid of having a memory.

ADJA YUNKERS: It isn't so much being afraid as that it is safer. It's safer not to have it. Because it may become very unpleasant, you know, if you nail something down then you have to have an attitude and you have to take a step that may be very uncomfortable. So it's better to let it go. Except for the younger painters now, the younger artists, there's a whole young generation. This to me is sheer delight.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about them?

ADJA YUNKERS: I mean I think this is a fantastic new America growing up. A real America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which people do you mean?

ADJA YUNKERS: I mean the young generation. All these people, the rambunctious young people. The people who make noises. The people who are disturbing everything, doubting everything. It goes beyond the state of conception. Now this is the fascinating thing, the good thing. Whereas The Club and all that was a sort of a sly finding out about a possible combination between good life, materialism and aesthetics. You know, they never go together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. They wanted a happy medium.

ADJA YUNKERS: They wanted to have the whole thing, to have the cake and eat it, too. But I say that being an artist is not a metier. I mean it's not a career in that sense. You don't make a career, you are; it's a way of life. And you pay I advance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's like my friend who is in the music world says you have to pay your dues.

ADJA YUNKERS: Yes. If you pay in advance you know. You see I was brought up in a world, in an art world where nothing could be of less importance than the material side of life. The only thing was we could do what we wanted to do was making out. And we all hungered. People here don't know what it means to be hungry. Real hunger. Not that it's desirable, but you see that only proves one thing: that it was a bloody serious thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. Occasionally I see young students who come out of Pratt or Copper or places like that and they show you a painting and they say it's five thousand dollars. It's wild.

ADJA YUNKERS: I know. It's a sort of cold war status that we live in at present in the arts. It's a cold war. Somehow it has become so atrophied and also so exaggerated that each movement, Pop, and kinetics, and so on and so forth each one tries to prove exactly one thing only. And so you have these absolute strict divisions and there's professionalism among the good ones involved that is serious. But it is not serious in the sense of the end. It is a seriousness concerned only with the immediate results. By twenty-five these guys must be millionaires. Some of them are. You know it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. That's true,

ADJA YUNKERS: Then it becomes a little doubtful, this whole damn thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, how true. You wonder if they are making art or automobiles.

ADJA YUNKERS: You see, this is one reason why I lost all interest, I mean personal interest in these things. Because it bore me. It bores the shit out of me. It's so trivial.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

ADJA YUNKERS: Well, as I say, I'll send you that thing. And I'm going to correct and go through it to correct

names and things like that. And if you have time maybe you can correct the grammar because my grammar isn't good, you see, because I never learned it. I just learned English by reading books and going to the movies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like movies?

ADJA YUNKERS: Very much so. So that's how I learned English.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

ADJA YUNKERS: Are you satisfied?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ADJA YUNKERS: All right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Unless there's something else you'd like to talk about.

ADJA YUNKERS: No, offhand I don't think of anything. We could sit here and one thing leads to another and it's endless.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, that's right. Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

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