Mark Markov – Tell me where you lived before coming to New York and how you got here.

Slava Polishchuk – I moved from Moscow, where I lived for the last 20 years. I came with my wife Asya Dodina. Why did we leave? I will explain from my perspective because my wife may have other reasons for leaving, or she may have the same reasons, but to a different degree. The main reason why I chose to leave Russia is closely tied to my vocation. Living in Russia became boring for me. This feeling of boredom came from the way I understood, to certain extent, what would be there later… I knew the direction in which things could go: it was in the atmosphere of what was happening in Russia. These were the 1990s. We left at the end of 1995 and got to New York in January 1996.

And it was a boisterous time, because there really was full freedom in Russia. But for an artist — and by my main profession — not profession but by way of life — I am an artist. It was boring. Despite all the freedom that there was in Russia, that, which was shown in art galleries and could be found in artists' studios, was boring because all of it was, to a certain extent, based on political events that were happening at the time. Artists, en masse, under the influence of this freedom, jumped into politics. The same thing is happening in Russia today, but in the other direction. It was a quite depressing to watch this happen. I understood that for me, as an artist, there was nothing interesting here any more, despite the fact that my teachers (from whom I learned painting and drawing)… I thought very highly of them… And there were some very good artists there, but nonetheless, there was nothing left for me to do as an artist. That is how it seemed to me then, and I hold the same views today.

The second reason that influenced my sense of boredom was this indolent, common Russian anti-Semitism, indolent but not smoldering. Of course, I am not talking about any pogroms or violence. But, I remember one moment very vividly. It was 1993. There was another putsch in Moscow… between Yeltsin and the Duma. There were tanks on the streets of Moscow; people went out to protest; tanks fired at the Parliament. And I took some part in it. For a few days, I would go to demonstrations before Parliament, where at the time people would gather who wanted the enactment of Yeltsin's reforms (what many thought were reforms). I clearly remember, as I was going to another protest from the Barrikadnaya station to the Parliament (it was called the White House because it was a huge white house[1]), we went past a wall on Barrikadnaya Street, and on the wall there was a sign in large letters: "Kill the Jews." The people who were going from the metro to the White

[1] In 1992-1993, the White House (Supreme Soviet of Russia) housed the legislative branch of Russia. In October 1993, it was the center of armed clashes between President Yeltsin and the Congress of People's Deputies.

House – they were really all decent people. I was struck by the fact that no one noticed what was written on the wall. The writing on the wall was there for a very long time. It was probably later erased or painted over, but for a couple of weeks it was there, and no one cared about it. On one hand, that was good because someone just wrote something stupid – no big deal. On the other hand, for any decent person it would be completely unacceptable to go past it so often: the police went past it everyday; the parliamentary deputies went past it everyday on their way to work. And nobody — well, no one saw it. I remember that when I saw this, I thought: if these people cannot see *this*, that means that these are the *same* people, that few things came change here soon, and I had that feeling – I knew what was going to happen here. That doesn't mean that everything would be good or bad – I just knew what was going to happen here. That was the feeling. Moreover, this was not based on some political calculations or opinion polls. I just felt that few things would change here.

MM – What is your ethnicity?

SP – I am Jewish.

MM – Can you tell me about your way of life as an artist?

SP – In Moscow or here?

MM – First in Moscow.

SP – I am an artist. I graduated from the Moscow Regional Art School in Memory of 1905 (Revolution) and took part in many art shows. I never felt any harassment as an artist. Everything was fine. There were many exhibitions [with my work]. There was also a good company of artists. When I came to New York, right away there were exhibitions, publications, and interviews. The one thing that I did differently (I think that it was the right decision) – I went on to study at college. I did not go to college because I lacked an art education, absolutely not; I received a great education in Russia, in Moscow. The problem with Russian art school education at the time was that we knew practically nothing or very little about modern (Western) art. Albums of Western artists were just beginning to appear in stores. When I was taught, teaching on Western art ended somewhere at the end of the nineteenth century, with a little bit of the twentieth. That was it.

MM – So Duchamp?

SP – No. We did not know that name. Rather, no one told us about him. Maybe we knew about him from some Western albums, or articles in art journals. But this was not what we were taught (in terms of modern Western art). Everything ended with early Picasso and Matisse. It ended with Picasso because he was very close with the USSR, took part in the peace campaign and so forth. Everything that had to do with American twentieth century art – that is, abstract expressionism – was not talked about at all and was absolutely banned when I was taught. It was the middle of the 1980s. In the 1990s, yes, it was talked about, but I was not taught this. I felt the need, as an artist, to understand something slightly different – to understand what modern art is today. I went Brooklyn College [City University of New York (CUNY)] and studied with the wonderful art history professor Jack Flam. He no longer teaches at the college. Jack Flam is one of the leading scholars of Matisse in America, and I think in the world as well. And studying with him (because we interacted outside the classroom as well)… He gave wonderful lectures on modern art both in

world as a whole and in the West, and the conversations [in my studio at Brooklyn College] after class was also remarkable. Everything else: art shows, illustrations, books[2]… All of that is the same as it was [in Moscow], and I hope that it will be so in the future.
MM – Talk about your artwork.
SP – In terms of painting?
MM – Yes.
SP – From 2003, my wife [Asya Dodina] and I work together. That means that we do every painting on canvas or on paper together. That is, we draw or paint together on one leaf or canvas. It is fairly difficult for me to define a definitive style of what we do because it is representational art (it is not abstract), but at the same time there are elements of dissimilitude, so to speak. This includes painting, graphics and printed materials. I write and illustrate books. We work together as artists quite a lot.
MM – If it is not difficult, can you tell me about — well, you were in Moscow in 1991 and 1993. It is important.
SP – To tell you the truth, I was never an active participant in political events with the exception of 1993 because mass manifestations of human activity make me uneasy, regardless of the good or bad nature of the event. A crowd is always a crowd. And when a crowd yells shouts "yea" or "nay," is always yelling. Thus, it is very difficult for me to remain in a crowd. I remember how in 1991 statues of public political figures, such as Lenin, were toppled. I remember how Dzerzhinsky's [statue] was toppled on Lubyanka Square,[3] raised with a crane and transported out. I found this interesting as an artist because I knew some of the sculptors who made these statues in earlier years. I found this strange, strange feeling very interesting: how does an artist who spent many years on the creation of these official, state ordered objects feel? How does the artist feel now when the fruit of his labor is being sent to the dustheap? Near the Central House of the Artist they made — there was this (and there still is) enormous barren lot (they later made a park out of it) where all the statues were brought. The most interesting thing is that now one hears that some works are taken out again and put back into their place. It was fascinating to observe all this. Yes, there were protests, demonstrations. People went to the KGB on Lubyanka Square or to the Central Committee of the Party on Staraya Square. Some people threw eggs, vegetables and bottles at the closed doors.
There was an atmosphere of freedom, yes. Yes, it was really there because right away books, which had been banned, were published and memoirs of prison camps were also published. That was all great and wonderful, but at the same time one

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[2] Slava Polishchuk's books:
"Diptych," StoSvet Press, New York, 2014
"What Remains," StoSvet Press, New York, 2013
"Army Notebook," New Arc Gallery, Moscow, 1995
"The Time of Happiness," New Arc Gallery, Moscow, 1994
[3] KGB headquarters were situated on Lubyanka Square. In front of the headquarters, there was a statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (first head of the Cheka/KGB), which was taken down in August 1993.

could see that the people who headed the country were more or less the same people [who were there before]: they simply left their offices and joined the opposition. Of course, there were people like Sakharov and Novodvorskaya. But these were few and far between, and it was evident that they did not have much support [by the public]. There were very few of them. They were able to accomplish some things, but the main mass of people saw them as (at best) as lunatics. That is in the best case – in the worst case, they were seen as enemies who deprived the people of a quiet, satiated life — not satiated, but normal life, in the manner that they understood it to be in the 70s and 80s. Therefore, there are few things I could say about political life at the time: I did not participate, with the exception of 1993, when I decided to take part in protests a few times. But, again, I found that boring. And I feel that I was right, for what is happening right now in Russia… It is as if nothing happened: in the 90s there was no Sakharov, no one at all…[4]

MM – Let's move on to New York. How was life at first, when you moved to the city?

SP – The things is, I never considered myself an immigrant, as it is understood by the situation that millions of people have found themselves in. Certainly, it was difficult, because my English was not too good. Maybe because I am after all an artist… That is, I felt quite comfortable because as I worked in my workshop in Moscow, so I worked in New York. Yes, and I went to Brooklyn College very soon after arriving. This also made it easier to cross any barrier of estrangement between my new community, my new country and me. I never felt that this country is somehow different from me. No, there are the same people, with the same worries, problems and everyday life. The only thing I felt was that nobody was disturbing me. If I do not want to take part in something, I do not take part in it. If I want to take part in something, if I have the strength and ability to do so, I take part in it. Thus, it was difficult only in purely day-to-day things: like everyone, I did not have enough money, etc. All of that is relative, however. Of course, a lot of time passed… But I did not feel that something had crashed down on me. I left with the yearning to learn something new. I saw this newness and tried to grasp it to the best of my abilities. I think that when people see another person who is interested in and respectful of their way of life, they usually answer in kind. That does not mean that everyone jumped to help in everything, but, nonetheless, I did not have the proverbial culture shock, which many people who change their country of residence get. Again, maybe this is because I am an artist. After all, the main thing for an artist is the studio, to be in the studio. The location of the studio is of course important, but the main thing is that the life that I led in Moscow is not too different from my life today. I would even say that it is not different at all.

MM – Tell me a little bit about your work as a conservator at Brooklyn College.

SP – After moving to America, I studied art at Long Island University for a semester. After just six months (a semester), I transferred to Brooklyn College. I was looking for work at the college. I knew that there was a large archive here. I saw exhibitions here [at the archive]. I offered my skills and expertise in the restoration of books and paper materials… My first degree in Moscow — I received my first degree in

[4] The people who eventually came to power in the 1990s were mostly interested in enriching themselves, and, instead of a democracy, established a plutocracy. – SP

conservation at the Moscow School of Art and Industry (former Stroganoff School). I began to work in the archives in the work-study position. At the time the chief librarian was Barbra Higginbotham, the college archivist was Anthony Cucchiara and the associate archivist was Marianne LaBatto.

I proposed to make a conservation lab in Brooklyn College. It so happened that the management of the archives agreed with my vision [of what needed to be done] to maintain the collection of rare books and personal collections that were kept in the archive. Such a laboratory was needed – not just needed, it was necessary. I am thankful for the support, because it was indeed a very difficult project to bring to life. A few years after I went to work at the archives (it was 2002), I graduated and received a master's degree in art. At the same time, a new library building was built (we are in it right now) — not just built, but also added to the old building with a remarkable new space for the archives. This is a fairly rare phenomenon because in the City University of New York system, this is the only college – Brooklyn College – that had an archives put into the original plan of the library. It is a rare thing.

As I had finished college, I was offered the opportunity to stay in the archives, so that, in time, I could take part in the actualization of the project – the creation of the laboratory. After a few years, we were able to get a grant from the state (from Albany), and the money was spent on all the hardware and accessories that you can see here. The place was built and the only laboratory for the restoration and conservation of [archival] collections in CUNY was built in it. Adele Cohen was the person who helped us get the money for the construction, because she was an assemblywoman at Albany. Each assemblyperson has a special fund. This fund can be used for a community project. Adele Cohen provided money from her fund for the hardware and construction of this laboratory. Without her participation and understanding of the importance of our project, we would have never received the grant and we are very grateful to her.

MM – Tell me more about working in the laboratory.

SP – The archives have over 300 collections. That is a lot, if you take into account that every collection has around a couple dozen boxes of materials. Some collections have up to a thousand boxes. Thus, it is a lot for our college. We have a collection of rare books, newspapers that are related to the history of Brooklyn College or Brooklyn in general… Newspapers are from the beginning of the 19th century. Rare books are from the 16th-17th centuries to this day. We also have a lot of personal collections that were made by individuals who were somehow tied to Brooklyn or the College. These people are famous politicians or writers, actors, musicians, community leaders and activists who may have been born in Brooklyn, graduated from Brooklyn College, or have had something to do with Brooklyn during some stage in their lives. We also have technical collections that have to do with the functioning of the college, its various departments and offices. There is also a collection of paintings and a (large and very interesting) collection of posters devoted to Brooklyn. There are also thematic collections. One of them is a wonderful collection on Coney Island history.

What do we do here? Everything that is published, that is printed on paper has the property, like a human being, of aging and dying. Paper is not everlasting. Therefore, we try to create the conditions, under which everything that we have that is

published on paper – photographs, books, posters, newspapers – is kept under certain conditions needed for the long term maintenance of the materials. We have special storage with a constant temperature and humidity level – the two main parameters of external factors whose proper regulation is necessary for the proper maintenance of documents.

What do I personally do? I am responsible for the restoration of these materials — not just restoration but also the conservation of documents at a proper level, so that they are available to college students and other scholars. This includes the whole body of work, needed for the restoration of books. That is, I make new covers, I make new bindings… I perform all the procedures of paper restoration that do not require chemicals. We do not use chemicals because it is impossible to do so in our circumstances. That means that all folders that documents are kept in are made of chemically inactive material. All that we work with here is made of special archival materials, made for work with archival documents.

MM – Can you tell me about the displays that are made by the archives?

SP – The archives make several exhibitions a year. They take a while to prepare because before a document can be put on display, it must be examined by the archivist to see if it can be shown to the public. If there are any physical problems, the document must be restored first. We make displays of Brooklyn history, from personal collections and from Brooklyn College history. We also exhibit scholarship that is done by college professors and students in many areas – it can even be music or science.

Now I would like to talk about a collection on the history of Coney Island. It is composed of documents… Mostly, it is a huge number of photographs, beginning with the 19th century, donated to us by John Manbeck. In the 1990s, he was the official historian of Brooklyn, of the borough of Brooklyn. On the basis of this collection we made an exhibit several years ago that was based on the history of Coney Island and the amusement parks that are still there today. They were first built the middle of the 19th century. Charles Denson took part in the creation of the exhibit. He furnished us with rare, never before seen materials from the collection of the Coney Island History Project. He also furnished us with many old photographs from his collection, as Charles is one of the few historians and scholars of Coney Island who has focused on it for many, many years.