

What Are These Stories For?

Peter N. Miller and Richard Tuttle

Background

1. *Richard, where did you grow up?*

Roselle, New Jersey.

2. *Tell me about your parents. What did they do?*

They came of age in the Great Depression. Mother never realized her dream to go to art school. Father graduated from Lehigh University with a degree in electrical engineering. Both grandfathers were interesting and remarkably similar, but grandmothers were opposites, one who smoked behind doors, one who only ever wore a blue denim dress.

3. *What's was your assessment, obviously looking back from here, about what it is of your artistic-intellectual identity you got from them?*

My father had the most beautiful signature I've ever seen and could design a perfect rose garden while professing no interest. Mother had a yen for finer things, knew a lot, hard to please both as a Prussian stickler for detail and as an artist who knew what she wanted. Having two sets of kids fifteen years apart, neither batch could be called a success story.

4. *What's the earliest intellectual excitement that you can remember?*

Taken to Sunday school, I heard "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so." At age five, I could see that this was intellectually fraudulent and collapsed the authority of adults who would have kids sing this. All the points—Jesus, love, me, knowledge, Bible—were intellectually undigested and misunderstood. And the conjunction was shockingly unbearable. I experienced my intellect but had no one to talk to. Needless to say, this shut down the intellect. It also could never be forgotten—those poor kids missing a true religious experience, because of this drivel. It wasn't a question of opinion or even questioning belief. It was intellectually outside when I was hoping for nourishment.

5. *What were your favorite subjects in school?*

I liked everything. Still, reading was problematic, for I preferred my thoughts and it obscured my real love, the visual. I was not supposed to excel my brother, who was easily excelled.

6. *When did you know you wanted to be an artist?*

Before I went to school.

7. *Did you come to art through making art or looking at art?*

Really from finding the need and wanting to fulfill it.

8. *What artists had the biggest impact on you, and why?*

So many dead ones. Chief among the living was Agnes Martin, both the quality of her work and as an artist, not to mention a superior intelligence of great interest and depth. Sometimes I say Agnes is my mother in art, and Ad Reinhardt is my father—white and black squares. Ad's art may be the highest Abstract Expressionism reached in art.

9. *What about now? In the later, let's say "more mature" part of your career, has the dialogue with other living artists been as formative?*

I'm actually more interested in younger artists now. First among them would be my daughter, Martha, who already stands on her own two feet and follows grace with strength—always interesting. And then I am interested in some younger European artists, Alexis Gautier, for example, using premises very foreign to my generation. And even younger ones, who are parsing my work to both our advantages.

10. *You're married to a poet [Mei-mei Berssenbrugge], and your daughter, Martha, is a successful artist in her own right. How does their work intersect with yours, or impact upon yours?*

Not only did I marry a poet, I married someone from another culture. It is unaccountably rich in everything from daily conversation to a constant check on flights of ego, prejudice, and illusion.

11. *Is it silly to imagine that her poetry and your art meet through the importance of "line"?*

We came together with some similar natural gifts, like sense of form. But in other parts you could say we are miles in opposites. She's much more a verbal person, and I am more physical. This leads to daily rounds of entertainment that are funny and frustrating for both.

12. *What about Martha? Do you see or understand aspects of what you have been doing over the years more clearly as they are refracted through Martha's own original creation?*

I launched an image of a tree to understand us as a family: I am the roots, Mei-mei is the trunk, Martha is the branches. It's pretty good as an image, but why do the struggles of each seem like the total tree?

The Collection

13. *And what about objects? Do you recall when you remember objects being important to you?*

I suppose I was always looking. It's another question about myself and objects. And then having objects. I saw birthdays and gift-giving holidays could be turned into making a collection. For me, it was miniature horses. I asked to be given model horses and made quite a collection. Then someone gave me a ceramic donkey, which did not fit. It toppled the collection. I did not know why. It may have turned the focus toward acquiring (possessing) favorite objects, though I was (am still) not comfortable with "ownership."

14. *When did you acknowledge or say to yourself that “I am a collector” and “this is my collection”?*

I have never acknowledged myself as a collector or as owner. I know that sounds strange to people. These things seem like something others call us, more like attributes. On the other hand, I recognized I had the bug, or the collector’s disease, when I was very young. It frightened me, and I wanted to run away. Is that why I still prefer to keep my things in a Kunst Cabinet, away from view?

15. *The objects you’ve collected range widely in time and space. Was that always the case, or did you start in one area or time or material—and, in that case, which one?—and extend, step by step, to all these other places and times—and in that case, can you reconstruct the map of this extending?*

There is a part where the object sits in a matrix made up of what I know, want to know, have experienced similarities, combing museums. Another part is exploring the ceramic world (stationary cultures) and the textile (nomadic cultures), seeing modern man is both uncomfortably.

16. *Did any of your objects directly inspire any of your art-making projects?*

The spirit in which I work, seeking synthesis of eye, mind, and heart, is usually in the objects I collect.

17. *Or turns in your art-making practice?*

It is very important; the artist today exists at a very special moment when she/he is expected to be free. It is so rare, and we are already seeing its end. Many do not appreciate this and are ready to throw it away for something deemed more valuable. What can be more valuable?

18. *Did something you had made get you excited about collecting a certain object or object type?*

There are examples of having been in a country, thus exposed to worthy horizons that could be housed in an object of choice—no question. I am thinking of a ceramic bunny from southern Austria.

19. *How do you physically interact with your objects? Is it visual only—you walk by and look at them and experience something? Or do you make a point of interacting haptically, picking them up in some order or nonorder?*

I like to have them away, so I can rediscover them. There is definitely a life span, or should I say, life, between us. But each object only works inasmuch as it can be removed from me. This is why I would say I am not a collector.

20. *Do you ever . . . Maybe, better: Have you ever lost interest permanently in something you had acquired? Has this ever led you to “deaccession” an object—just give it away?*

The process of acquiring does not allow deaccessioning. I have given away certain objects that made it through the process. Not long after and forever after, I regret.

21. *Have any of your objects helped establish a connection to another person or another type of art that has endured?*

Yes, they all do, for I do not use the instinct to close but to open. Part is eye training. I am thinking of a brass candlestick I found after looking for years at thousands. I love it, but I am not sure it is what I think it is. Many verifications take years of looking, something I value as training.

22. *I suppose the obvious question that anybody would ask is, How does your collection of objects impact upon your art-making practice?*

Not at all. I imagine you could ask this of Andy Warhol or Robert Indiana, and they would give a very positive reply. Yet I find them supportive, especially during recessions.

23. *Are there pieces you were interested in that you never acquired but still think about?*

There are still things that I want. I have an obsession, which is painful to live with. The pain goes away when I acquire what causes the obsession. This is also about knowledge, that I do not know what causes an obsession. The obsession (bad) ends (good) with acquisition.

24. *Are there any that you passed on at one point in your life and then acquired later? If there are, can you tell us what changed?*

There is a total blend (as what I think of the object) between an object which may be isolated and an object which may be used in everyday life. I worry about this. Right now the objects going to BGC are only the isolated. Can that represent everything? Is representation even important? This question, for example, could be more easily answered if one looks at the objects acquired to be used daily. And then one has to see there is more in the collection than objects. Formal works of art, prints, furniture, architecture, fashion—how many have superb examples of both Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steven Holl?

25. *Has your collection, or any part of it, ever been shown before? Or talked about by those writing about your work?*

In Rotterdam the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen made a superb show called *Oxyderood (Red Oxide)*, where broken pots from their collection were shown together with my pots and artworks. I'm sure there were reviews. I have kept my objects secretively otherwise, though I have shown textiles publicly and included American pressed glass in my own exhibition.

26. *If yes, what have people—or you—said about them? If they haven't been talked about, why do you think that is?*

Unfortunate to say, criticism is in a sorry state.

How RT Thinks about Objects

27. *OK. Up to now we've really been establishing just some of the basic facts about you as a collector. Now I want to ask you to think out loud about things.*

In the Netherlands part of getting a doctorate in art history is dating an object within five years either side—I can do this. It's a certain type of head. Anyone looking at any of my work knows this head. It is looking like it is not the case that leads to the imperative of contemporary, again, privileging seeing over looking.

28. Are there some traditions that have played a large role in shaping your thinking about objects? Were there teachers? Or friends?

Born a collector, you have to learn how. I was very fortunate to know Sam Wagstaff, Gordon Washburn, Betty Parsons, Herb and Dorothy Vogel as teachers.

29. I've heard you talk about Greek philosophy and especially about Kant and Fichte and Schelling. Schelling in particular. Why?

Frustrated in art, probably philosophy, as a hidden passion, was next. Philosophy can be practiced as an interior, hidden thing where art cannot.

30. How do philosophy and Richard Tuttle's art making go together?

Though many would not agree, art is rational. Where it is free to contradict to find itself, philosophy finds itself in avoidance.

31. You and I have talked often about Heidegger. Does he have a particularly important role for you, or was his presence in our conversations just an artifact of a mutual interest?

I am genuinely interested in Heidegger though there is so much that doesn't seem necessary. Philosophy seems to have a contemporariness like art, something philosophical that reveals at the moment. This is why Heidegger is important. I am just as interested in the Kyoto school.

32. You have many Japanese objects in your collection. It seems that you've been very "influenced"—a bad, clumsy word, but I'll use it here anyway in the general sense—by Japan. Could you say something about this? I think you told me once that it came about from a gift you received when young. . .

Yes, I fell in love with Japan by smell when we opened a package my uncle sent while stationed there after the war. After making my cloth octagonals (1968), I needed to go to the other side of the world. China was closed. The closest was Hokkaido, Japan, the beginning of a very important twenty-year relationship—still alive. The interest is in everything Japanese, encyclopedic.

33. Can I ask about your reading? I know you are a careful and deep reader. Do your reading programs track your art making or interrelate in some conspicuous way? Or do they run on separate tracks with only felicity, or some deep unconscious resonance, bringing them together? They seem to track one another.

As an Epicurean, I will read about the symbolism used on ancient Chinese bronzes while water from the roof dampens the pages without thinking to fix the leak. As a Confucian, I believe we should never stop study.

34. *Do you remember yourself always in a conversation with writers, poets, philosophers, historians?*

It seems to matter that we articulate what we think life is. The language to do that comes from the general group mentioned.

35. *Do you feel closer to one or another of these (i.e., with poets more than writers, philosophers more than historians)? And why?*

Developing the immediate answer above, language must be as alive as possible. Poets definitely have the inside track.

36. *How do your friendships connect to your reading connect to your collecting connect to your art making?*

It may sound arrogant to say I have met everyone worth knowing. Still that is very natural and happens by itself. I would not say this today, for getting older, COVID, use of social media, etc. have left the field divided. And, of course, everyone is interesting.

37. *I've asked about you as a reader. Now I want to ask about you as a writer. This past year you've been sending me stories that you have written. Some of these are long (or long-ish). Others are more like fragments or facets of a whole. Can you tell me about the role of writing for you?*

Recently my collected writing was published—quite a surprise! The editor, Dieter Schwarz, who cannot be exceeded, begins his essay by quoting me saying, writing has always been part of it. I admit having said this, but add, I have never (until now) considered myself a writer. Of course, I do not consider myself an artist either. They are both honored professions, what other people call you. During COVID recovery, I had a brain facility and need to cheer up friends by writing stories and chapters. I just published ten poems on Paul Klee about the work he made in 1939, the last year of his life, in the David Zwirner Gallery publication.

38. *How does your writing connect to your collecting or your art making?*

I don't know.

39. *You've written poetry as well. And you are married to a poet. Can you say something about the role of poetry in your art making?*

Some people have called my work visual poetry. I do think it is enough to make a poem, i.e., standing away from purposes ranging from structural innovation to time-sensitive social comment, which may not be enough?

40. *And what about poetry with understanding your objects?*

The objects, I would say, are all poetic.

This Project in Particular

41. *This project began with a letter you wrote to Leon Botstein, president of Bard College. Can you say something about why you wrote that letter?*

Not understanding the structure of Bard, I wrote to my old friend Barbara Haskell, wife of Leon Botstein, proposing a gift. She wrote that Leon would know what to do and how to do it.

42. *What does it mean for you to be connected to a teaching institution?*

Whereas the collection is not really a study collection, it could fall under that rubric. A teaching institution promotes learning through intense looking. I feel intense looking will wind up putting the object in free space eventually. That my name can become attached to this extension could help it.

43. *What does this exhibition project mean to you?*

Sharing an idea. Leaving the world better. Bettering my enemies. Beauty. Transparency of thought and fiction.

44. *You've been working and thinking about this show for a couple of years while making new art and working on new gallery shows. Does this exhibition feel different for you and, if so, why?*

It seems to grow in its direction under its own power. Now we are having to fix things because of deadlines and time constraints. There is a big part, which will not be capable of knowing until the end.

45. *What are you hoping to get from doing this exhibition of your collection that is different from what you hope to get from exhibitions of your art (or is this not the case)?*

It is very different, indeed, must be—but remarkably working toward the same end. There is a big difference between acquiring and creative collecting. I pride myself on always being creative. The creative is my guide. I simply would not have direction without it.

46. *Why is it important to you to share your thinking about objects with others?*

Instinctively, we share the good things in life with others.

47. *I've heard you talk about this show as important to you because it is about freeing (or revealing? or promoting) the "Postconceptual" object. What do you mean by this?*

Very often, the dark contrasts with the light. My work began with a huge burst of positive light energy. Light will always win without my help. We know how the concept is formed. We do not know how light is formed, but we can try to find out. Very much, I am hoping to learn a little bit about how light is formed when I see the complete exhibition in all its forms: show, catalogue, video, etc. For another round of how the concept is formed is boring.

48. *How do you place this project in the history of art? Or, is it, in the history of art making?*

I think we are in a leadership role, even revolutionary. I expect to get bloody, although do not want others to suffer unless they want to—the gains are not always seen equally

fortuitous, or seen at all. Even though these objects have been in my hands for years, I still look forward to (especially) seeing them with new eyes.

49. *Why is the Postconceptual object important?*

It opens regions of the self, closed off conceptually.

50. *Where can it lead us in terms of understanding the object world?*

These are unknowns. I suspect we can walk through the world as much better people among other people when we are free of the conceptual bias. On the other hand, beautiful objects have survived. This leads me to the important idea: I am talking about a condition always in place, that it is just time to reveal it. This is why I feel, once the object is in free space, we can use all the ideas and attitudes of the past, in fact better, for they are renewed. What does that, is a new definition of history too.

51. *Where can it lead us in terms of understanding art and art making?*

One can never understand either art or art making. It is not in nature to do this. But if this question implies expanding the perimeters of art and art making, I think it will have the effect just because so many of the objects are not included in the classical canon.

52. *Where can it lead us in terms of understanding your work?*

Here I would like to change “understanding” to “appreciating.” This actually troubles me, for I want the show to be about the objects—as much as I see them that way. The whole show of objects could wind up being a frame for my work, so if my work is included, the visitor could go with eyes created by the objects to see my work better. How this would happen is not known, so I am already advocating choosing examples of my work for rhetorical reasons, rather than aesthetically.

53. *Having talked with you about this for a couple of years now, I’ve come to feel that that the line between the three-dimensional works you make (your “art”) and the three-dimensional works that you meditate upon (your “collection”) is much thinner than I thought at the beginning. You conjure with both. I suppose my question is, Do you feel there is a sharp line separating products made by you and products made by others but taken up and made close by you?*

A young publisher of a “very contemporary” style magazine gave up doing an article (thank heavens) saying, How can a contemporary artist live like this? His question was unintelligible to me, but I have often thought of it, as if to figure out what he was saying. Perhaps he meant, a contemporary artist is supposed to live with factory-made things? I have a few, but by and large, most things are made by hand. Perhaps he meant there should be a consistency? I love putting a hand ax next to a 1950s Easter bonnet sitting on a wooden tool used for sand casting. All awash? Perhaps? How do you think a contemporary artist should live?

54. *Where will it lead you in making new work?*

Who knows? The visual culture to which I aspire may have strong elements of Asian thinking, where long and living relationships with visual material can pass into us and help to develop the very stuff of which we are made.