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Oral history interview with Louis Mueller, 2014 June 24-25

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Louis Mueller on June 24-25, 2014. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Viola Frey Oral History Project funded by the Artists' Legacy Foundation.

Louis Mueller, Mija Riedel, and the Artists' Legacy Foundation have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Louis Mueller at the artist's home in New York [City] on June 24, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. Let's get the autobiographical information out of the way and we'll move on from there.

LOUIS MUELLER: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: —what year were you born?

MR. MUELLER: I was born June 15, 1943 in Paterson, NJ .

MS. RIEDEL: And what were your parents' names?

MR. MUELLER: My mother's name was Loretta. My father's name was Louis Paul.

MS. RIEDEL: And your mother's maiden name?

MR. MUELLER: Alfano.

MS. RIEDEL: Any siblings?

MR. MUELLER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your childhood? What your parents did, what you were interested in, did art figure into the sorts of things that you did as a child?

MR. MUELLER: Well, my mother had studied medicine.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And when—I think that in their seventh year of marriage, I was born, and she stopped working at a hospital and became basically a full-time mother. My father had a printing company in Paterson, NJ. And I guess an interesting fact: When I was born, my mother's father had developed a kind of common market for farms and fish and meat, and he had an island on the Passaic River in Paterson, NJ which he traded his common stock, called the Island Market Corporation. So it was about 11 acres—

[Telephone rings.]

MS. RIEDEL: Is that yours?

MR. MUELLER: No, that's a telephone.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. MUELLER: It will stop.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Usually the only people that call—anyway. So I spent the first five years of my life on this island in Paterson, NJ in a house my grandfather built in 1931. And—with my mother, my grandmother, and a very important—

Male Speaker: [Inaudible.]

MR. MUELLER: —that's the father of the bride in Greece.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. Calling from Greece?

MR. MUELLER: No, calling from Providence.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MUELLER: So my grandfather died three months before I was born, my maternal grandfather.

MR. MUELLER: So we'll have this on the—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: To a lot of people, the fact that I started off on this island, which the family called the island, which is where I learned how to drive, where one of my father's businesses was located. Because my grandfather was very successful during the Depression. So they lived on Bank Street in New Jersey—my parents before I was born. And so everybody—my mother is one of seven—had an opportunity because of her father.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: So—

MS. RIEDEL: What was the company?

MR. MUELLER: It's called the Island Market Corporation.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was—

MR. MUELLER: And it's still landmarked now in Paterson. It's called—and my cousin Albert, who is the son of my mother's youngest brother, my uncle Albert, is the only survivor of seven. Owns all of the entire island, all the buildings.

MS. RIEDEL: And how many are there? How big is the island?

MR. MUELLER: Eleven acres. About—there is a number of buildings on it.

MS. RIEDEL: And so the entire island is owned by—

MR. MUELLER: —by my cousin.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. MUELLER: Because my uncle Charlie—I don't know how interesting—but my grandfather, who was born in Italy, wanted all of his children to be college graduates. And so based on their high school achievements, he designated a career. So my mother was a straight A student: Doctor, Uncle Charles next: Lawyer, my uncle Bill: Engineer, my aunt Mary: Accountant. So those four actually went through, you know, law school, undergraduate, medical school, engineering, and when it came to the last three, my grandfather wasn't very well. And they only finished high school. So but—

MS. RIEDEL: Exceptional that your mother studied medicine—

MR. MUELLER: —in the '30s.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, to be a doctor, not a nurse.

MR. MUELLER: So then she went to Rutgers. Well—but anyway. My grandfather asked my mother, who was very devoted, to watch out for his mother. So this three-story house on the island that after World War II provided a place to live for my uncle Charles, my uncle Edward, and my uncle Jerry. And so my grandmother and I and then my father, who came back from World War II. My grandmother bought a house in Paterson and we—the three of us along with my uncle Albert, who was the baby, moved to this house on Union Avenue in Paterson. It's odd because I remember starting kindergarten in first school in 19—and then school number five. And then when I was about nine years old, my grandmother moved back to the island, so that I was—and we moved to Totowa, in 1952.

MS. RIEDEL: Totowa?

MR. MUELLER: New Jersey. It shares a common border with Paterson. And so I think maybe the most significant

thing that I remember many, many, many years later because I had no idea what the future held for me by any stretch of the imagination—but in the fifth grade, which would make me 10, we had to take a manual arts, which was a shop class. And so I remember being the only one that actually made a folding table. I guess I did every—I mean it seemed like my ability to work with my hands at 10, and maybe I was focused and enjoyed it all, more than any of the other classmates, I mean in terms of manual dexterity. And then when I graduated from Rochester Institute—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —the fifth grade teacher, his name was Mr. De Maio, Pops de Maio, sent me a card, you know, saying he had always remembered me, I mean from, you know, 12 years later. And I didn't—even at the time, it wasn't until maybe a couple years ago that if I had put two and two together and realized that might have been a good direction to consider but, who at 22—or—however this is going. Anyway, I floundered until I found art school.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MUELLER: And then it—I mean, I did study music starting at the age of eight, which is still one of my very first loves.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I mean, as a listener—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —not as a player.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you play as a child?

MR. MUELLER: I did. I played all percussion, you know, vibraphone. And then I think—and I was really practicing, and I use this as an example when I talk—when I taught that, you know, you can watch your own progress, if you practice something. It's simple as, you know, you practice for several hours a day and you can see your own improvement. If you don't do anything, all you can do is delude yourself. So, I mean, if you practice writing, you will write better. If you practice drawing, you know, you draw better. And the same thing: If you practice playing your rudiments, your scales, they will belong to you very easily.

So my senior year in high school, everything fell apart because of a romantic interlude and then, this is when my father was strict and I did not really appreciate, especially as an only child, his persistence. I came home one evening and they were in bed, and he said there are papers on the dining room table that I want you to look at. And it was an application to Rochester, to—

MS. RIEDEL: —to the Institute of Technology, RIT?

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: So at 17, had this girlfriend. I said, "I don't want to go to college." And so he said, "Well, here are your choices: College or the Army." So I said, "No, no, I don't"—anyway. And so I applied to RIT because they had a School for Graphic Arts, for Printing.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. MUELLER: And his dream was for me to take over his business, which was successful. A future for me, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: —retirement for him [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: Comfort.

MS. RIEDEL: Also family business.

MR. MUELLER: So I applied and I got accepted. I lasted one semester and I quit. And then the girlfriend and I, that fell apart. So I went to Seton Hall University in New Jersey for one year, did very poorly. And then at the request of my mother, she said, "You know, you and your father are driving me crazy. Why don't you go away to school?" So 1963, I went back to RIT. And I was the worst possible student, and just—

MS. RIEDEL: Fascinating.

MR. MUELLER: —unmotivated. I wound up at the University of Rochester for a year, and then, I think, my first semester—my first year back in Rochester, I had a roommate named Michael Penrod, who I believe was from Arizona, who had been a Ceramic major at the School for American Craftsmen. And so he mentioned that my disposition seemed suited to silversmithing, where he had been for one year because there was no room in the Ceramic program, so he had one year in the silver shop. So that was the first seed planted.

MS. RIEDEL: How extraordinary. Did he say what in particular made him think that?

MR. MUELLER: No. And I mean, you know, this is now, you know, 50 years ago. And then I went out with someone named Carol Manera who worked at Shop One, which was a store that was started by Tage Frid, Franz Wildenhain, Ronnie Pearson, and Jack Prip. And she said the same thing. She said, "You would—you have the disposition of a silversmith." So—

MS. RIEDEL: Nobody ever elaborated exactly what that meant?

MR. MUELLER: No. I guess they thought I was patient. I mean that's my guess.

MS. RIEDEL: The focus to deal with small things [Inaudible] as well.

MR. MUELLER: So I went to meet Harold Brennan, who then was the dean of Fine Art at the School for American Craftsmen in 1966 then, or '65. And he took me out to meet Hans Christensen, who was running the silversmithing part and Martha Craig was running the jewelry part of the program. And Hans—with his kind of broken English/Danish, said, "Ya, ya, you know, we take you." And then Harold Brennan looked at my academic record and he said, "You're in, but on probation," he said, you know. And I can't say that my intentions were sincere.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean the craft school students looked more to my liking, you know, jeans, and I had no idea that this would click at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: I had no idea what I was calling on this because a girlfriend and a roommate said it was appropriate.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your interests? Was there anything in particular, or you were just floating at the time, not sure what was—

MR. MUELLER: I was, you know, drugged up, just really indifferent to everything because I had no idea what I wanted to do. And my father was being very supportive financially, but he did say, when I did start—now this is my fourth year, and I'm going to be a freshman again. I'm 22 years old now, and I'm starting at art school. So he said, "You know, with your academic record, this is a mistake. But I, you know, I will back you one more time, and if this is a failure, get a job, join the Army, but, you know, that's it. You know, I'm not throwing any more money away and you shouldn't throw any more time away." So I started in the summer school program, and I enjoyed it. But it was a summer school program. It was six weeks.

MS. RIEDEL: So this would have been [… –MR] roughly '64—

MR. MUELLER: '65

MS. RIEDEL: '65, okay.

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you graduated from high school in which year?

MR. MUELLER: '61.

MS. RIEDEL: '61. And which was the high school, just to—

MR. MUELLER: Passaic Valley High School. Little Falls, NJ.

MS. RIEDEL: So you started in the summer?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. So I came in in the fall—now—and all of a sudden because I have all this transfer credit,

Harold Brennan makes me a junior. So my first project after six weeks is to make a silver lidded casserole with a heater. And then—

MS. RIEDEL: That's the first project?

MR. MUELLER: Well, yes, but Hans said that, you know, it's—we have to start as a freshman. But he also—I mean he completely turned me around, Hans Christensen. I mean I was talking, you know, all kind of ebullient about this school, and all he did was come in and say, "Lou, here we work; we don't talk. If you're interested in talking, you know, you'll have to find another place." And he never said anything to me again. And so I was able to do two years in one year.

I actually did a journeyman's—you know, a whole silver tea service at the end of my freshman year. And all of the first-year projects as well. So—and that's, you know, again, you know, I just—it came very naturally being able to work with my hands, you know, kind of being careful and paying attention to detail, going slowly. And then the interesting thing about Rochester versus RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] is the school was open eight to five, Monday through Friday, and that was it. That's when you were able to work.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary [Inaudible]—

MR. MUELLER: No nights, no weekends. And so with Martha Craig, I learned how to enamel, which is the thing that I really enjoyed. Hans Christensen hated it. I mean it was the time of Pop Art, so I used that as my vehicle for a lot of the—and I used opaque enamels, never transparent—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: —used these pop images. And he said, "It's okay for jewelry but never holloware." I mean I wanted to do something. He got agitated. Anyway, I wound up graduating with a 3.85 cumulative average. And I mean, I was a different person—I mean I looked forward to going to school every day, to working. But actually when I was there, Peter Prip, who was Jack's first child, Janet, the second, came as a—I think I was a junior; he was a freshman. I had never heard of Jack Prip, so Peter and I—Peter was a real dreamer, but so—and Martha Craig would come up and say, "They say that Jack is better than Hans." I mean whatever that—in the scope of things, however important that is. But they had gone—they had apprenticed together.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Hans, who was I think two years behind Jack, Jack wanted his son to study with Hans because Hans was a very, very competent technical instructor.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And he wasn't very creative, but he could figure out how to make—if it was holloware and it required raising, he could figure out how to do it. Peter didn't really last, but so I think my senior year, Jack came to Rochester to have an exhibition at Shop One. And I was completely knocked out by Jack's work. I mean the breadth of what he was able to do compared to Hans, who made these bowls, it was like—Hans was more like production work, and his big thing was this spice server for tempo, which I think they rejected. And Jack had these constructed things—little constructed boxes, which were geometric and, I mean things that were woven, enameled—

MS. RIEDEL: Enameled?

MR. MUELLER: Enameled. And I mean, he was using epoxy because he was also working for Reed and Barton—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —as a designer in a silversmithing firm. And I mean I was very interested, maybe because of printing and things that were more architectonic and kind of, you know, organic or curvilinear, you know, Hans's aesthetic was very much Danish.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I don't even know if you could call it modern, maybe, but it didn't come naturally to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I was actually the first senior that Hans allowed to do a thesis, not doing a coffee and tea service, but I did a series of small constructed silver boxes. And then the curious thing about RIT: We never had a critique. We never had—we would set up our work, the faculty—we would have to leave; the faculty would

come through, look, and never, you know, so I didn't know what criticism was.

MS. RIEDEL: How odd.

MR. MUELLER: Very odd, very odd. But I met Jack during the show and I wrote him about the—

[Phone ringing.]

—possibility of coming—becoming a graduate. It's Benjamin Moore.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh. That's—

MR. MUELLER: Well, we've been working together for almost 30 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. A long time.

MR. MUELLER: So I wrote Jack about graduate school at RISD, and he wrote back and he said, "There is no graduate program, but if you're interested, write a letter to John Lincoln, who is the dean of Industrial Arts—Industrial Design—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and tell him you're interest and make a proposal," which I did. And then another graduate student—another undergraduate named Douglas Legenhausen did the same thing. So—where am I—

MS. RIEDEL: Proposing to start a graduate program at RISD?

MR. MUELLER: —start a graduate program at RISD.

MS. RIEDEL: That such a thing was possible to propose a program that didn't exist? [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: Well, there wasn't even an—Jack Prip taught an elective through Industrial Design.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And it was in a little workshop in the basement of the Metcalf building, and then there wasn't even an undergraduate program. Howard Newman, who was a student at RISD, undergraduate student, had been taking quite a few classes with Jack, and so the—finally, the, you know, the proposal went through for a graduate program in what they called Light Metals—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —a division of Industrial Design, and at the same time Harold Brennan was putting a lot of pressure on me to stay because they offered me a fellowship, a tuition waiver, just—and he said, "There's nothing for you at RISD. RIT: This is the place to be." And they—Martha Craig had gotten dismissed and they had hired Albert Paley. And I had been friendly with Wendell Castle, who is in the Furniture program at RIT. And so Wendell invited me to dinner at his house out in Scottsville—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —Scottsville—to meet Albert and show Albert some of my slides. And I went out there, showed—met Albert, I mean he was completely, you know, driven, and, I mean I didn't really know—I mean it's very art nouveau, I didn't know much about his work. The only lecture we ever had in my four years there was Stanley Lechtzin, who was Albert's teacher, who came. I tried to get some information from Stanley via telephone about electroforming. I got nowhere with him. He was not exactly warm. So I wound up—I went up, found someone in Buffalo, so I did a couple of electroform pieces my senior year. But I had a good friend in the Furniture program named Joe Distefano, who had applied to RISD and didn't get in, unfortunately, but he did get into Yale. And—anyway, we were both torn. We were both accepted, and at the last minute he decided he's leaving to go to Yale.

And so now I'm at RIT, and in—again, in the midst of a terrible romance. And so the woman I was living with decides to move to Boston, and so—well, I called Jack maybe a month before school and I said, "I'm not coming." And he said, "That pisses me off," and he hung up. And then—well, he said, "I know what they're doing to you, and that pisses me off." And he hung up. And that was that. And so about two weeks before school started, I called him again and I said, "I'm coming." And he said, "You know what? Do me a favor. Don't bother me until you get here." So I got there and found an apartment and I made three trips—I mean it's about 500 miles each way driving back and forth to move from—the truck broke down, which is curious, in Oneida, NY,

which is where a silversmithing company is.

MS. RIEDEL: What?

MR. MUELLER: Anyway. I mean that's not that exciting. So I got to Providence September of 1969, and one of the very first people that I run into is Dale Chihuly—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my.

MR. MUELLER: —who had just come from Italy on a Fulbright. And he had lost his foot locker and a trench coat, and the reason he met me because he liked the woman I was with.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: So—and then, he had a roommate named—I don't remember, Michael was his first name, but it doesn't matter. He was a first-year Ceramics graduate, and I met him at some kind of a social gathering so I went—because I didn't know anybody to visit—Michael, who wasn't home, but there was Dale. And so from that point on, Dale and I sort of became—the first year we were both there, I mean we did everything together. We came to New York. We cooked. I mean he came to my house all the time because I lived alone on South Angell Street and he lived on Benefit. And we would go to Wayland Liquors, buy a bottle of either Louis Martini Pinot Noir or Louis Martini Cabernet Sauvignon Brix. I would write a letter to Janice, he would write a letter to Franny, who was living with his mother Viola in Tacoma, was a student there. And then I would—

MS. RIEDEL: How romantic [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: —always entertain visitors. So that's how I met Marvin Lipofsky and Fred Bauer and a host of kind of visitors who came to RISD. Friends of Dale's from Wisconsin are coming here for Thanksgiving and November of 1969, to Andrew Krantz who lived in a loft. Michael Elhers who lived in a loft. Just was all curious and then I think in—that summer, 1970, Ken Hunnibell, who ran Heavy Metals, and Jack Light kind of forced this move so that we got to move from the basement in Metcalf building to the second floor.

So Peter Prip, Douglas Legenhausen, and I, did move all these Bridgeport mills and benches from the basement—that was our entire summer project—to the second floor and reestablished the, you know, Light Metals and Heavy Metals department. So we spent our second year on the second floor. We had windows instead of—but I think the very first semester Dale and I went to do laundry, I got broken into, I got robbed, and I was saying to myself, "Why did I come to this godforsaken place? Everything in Rhode Island is falling apart and everything in Rochester was so, you know, good, and I was comfortable." But I think after the first semester, when I got adjusted, I realized if I had stayed in Rochester, it would have been the kiss of death. That it really was good to be uncomfortable. Because Jack Prip did say, "If you can succeed in one place, you can succeed in another; you just have to work harder." And so—and it was a totally different environment.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. MUELLER: Well, RISD was much more—it was filled with kind of affluent kids. Kids from, you know, wealthy families, more bluebloods. RIT was much more working class—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: —blue-collar, different attitude. Not nearly so many privileged—I mean and I didn't come from that background but anybody would think, you know, I had a car, good allowance, I mean, financial freedom. It just—different attitude in a way. I wasn't raised like a—I mean my parents didn't want anybody to know that—whether they had or hadn't, they would everyone think they hadn't—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and some of the people that came through RISD even though they're Yankees and they're tight, they feel, you know, that they came over on the Mayflower, that were treated—but I mean I really loved—my time at RISD was fantastic. Even when I went out to Oakland, I couldn't get that experience out of my head. I kind of wanted to go back. It was a really fantastic experience, in terms of my own growth. And the fact that place was open at nights and—

MS. RIEDEL: It was open evenings, it was open weekends, so it was a real difference between RIT and RISD.

MR. MUELLER: And I had a lot more freedom.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: With Hans, there, you know, he basically had to approve—we had to do mechanical drawings, three views before we could make anything. And also with Hans, I mean, and Jack as well, the idea of taking design classes, drawing classes—Jack told me, "Stop wasting your time in your life drawing. You should be here at the bench," which—and I didn't, you know, I didn't follow that advice, I mean—I think it—you become too insular.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And so, I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: So it [was also an –MR] interdisciplinary experience—you weren't just focused on metal, but working in a range of different media?

MR. MUELLER: Well, you know, I'm not a great fan of interdisciplinary.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I mean, I think for a very small group of people, it can work, but to be—because I had this—confronted this with students. You know, like, I had one class in raising—I know how to raise. I had a class on printmaking, and you know—I wish it was that simple—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —I had a guitar class. I can play the—it just—because I always recommended, if you have a major—whatever that may be, in ceramics or glass or metal, that you complement it by taking drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: You know, not mechanical drawing, but take a life drawing class, many life drawing classes, so you actually know and understand space. And then also art history, so you understand what's come before you.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: I had so little interest in those—they wanted to take welding, glassblowing—I mean, I can honestly say when I was an undergraduate, I wanted to make a rug, which I did a couple of times—I mean I made them at night because they were—you couldn't—but they were—I satisfied that curiosity and they were pretty bad. I mean, they were just, you know—I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: Besides drawing, did you take art history as an undergrad or graduate? Both?

MR. MUELLER: The entire time I was at RIT I took art history as an elective, and I still—recently I haven't been, because—I don't know, I'm out of the academic world now for 14 years. But I used to try to recommend to students, even though they were students in decorative arts, to be interested in kind of what's going on in the world of fine arts, and especially architecture, design—it can only help you; it can't hinder you.

And I mean, one of the things I've found sort of on my own with Jack and Hans is—and Jack much more curious in terms of his, you know—even trying to understand how to make something faster, not taking the longest way possible to get there. And Hans didn't want to know anything about shortcuts. He was familiar with something and that was the way he did it. And so I think it's one of the things I realized with Jack is if you can find a more efficient way to do it, by all means take it.

Nobody—I mean I made some dining tables for Charlie Cowles a number of years ago, and he said—I mean I made maquettes and he picked the design that he liked and said, "I don't care who makes them," and basically that's what the world has become, you know. I said—what's his name, Jeff Koons is proud to say he doesn't touch anything. And there—I mean I like making things. I mean certainly I would like help, and when I taught I did have students who wanted to work with me in the summer to learn how to do things larger, and it's good and bad because it just gave me more work, but I realized I wanted to not try with Hans—like he would bring out this teapot once a year when he had us over for dinner and say there were 400 silver solder joints in the base.

And I thought, "Do I want to make this as unbearable as possible to try and make things that become more and more taxing and less and less pleasant so that the cleanup on these things—and then what do you have at the end: 400 silver solder joints." And so I think with Jack—I mean he told me I was his favorite student. I mean I was a lot looser than Douglas and Howard. I mean I probably took more chances, and they were also married; I wasn't. And in the very beginning I made very, very fussy little constructed silver things. And that was when I experienced my first criticism. And it was like somebody stabbed me in the leg with a fork because it was unfamiliar—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MR. MUELLER: —I didn't like it, you know, and I didn't even know who these people were that—you know, verbalizing on my visuals. So I think once I found people whose work I really respected, I thrived on people's points, which is, you know, once you're out of school, you don't have anybody's reference to what you're doing at all, and you're everything. You're the judge, the jury, and the executioner. And so that's a very, very important point to learn. But with Hans I had discovered surrealism and Marcel Duchamp and he said, "What does Marcel Duchamp have to do with silversmithing?" And I didn't understand why someone shouldn't be interested in drawing. Why someone shouldn't be interested in another—the work of another person if it wasn't silversmithing. And so, I think that the one thing RISD gave me was a broader range of classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I met George Germon, who had just graduated, and actually he was the first person I met when I walked into the machine shop. And we're still friends. He now is the owner of Al Forno, a restaurant up in Providence. But I asked George, because he was a familiar face, "Who should I take drawing with?" So he recommended David Slater, so I took—actually, it was a sophomore architecture life drawing class because there really weren't that many classes for graduate students.

And then through—I guess Dale, I met Vicki Wulff who was a fantastic painting major up there—looks a bit like Betty Boop. And through Vicki, she was having dinner at an Italian restaurant called Smith's, you know, I met Richard Merkin, who was probably the faculty member at RISD at the time. And so Richard and I became very, very good friends.

And I dearly miss Richard. He was a very smart guy. I mean, he could answer so many questions. He was very—anyway. So I became friends with Richard that first semester, too. He was living on 81st and West End. And again, he was very open. He was—he commuted. He had a little old Volvo—drove back and forth from New York to Providence. He always—at that point in time, he had a mustache, he parted his hair in the middle, he always wore suspenders, a coat and tie; everything was custom made. He smoked these cigarettes that he had made by a Greek cigarette maker down in the Battery, and the cigarettes had embossed on them Krazy Kat.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MR. MUELLER: George Herriman character, you know, K.K.—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —Krazy Kat. And so—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know why?

MR. MUELLER: I think he loved George Herriman. He died in 1941 and as an homage to Herriman, the—what's his name—Hearst syndicate dropped the strip. But nobody carried on *Krazy Kat*. But Richard had a beautiful pair of velvet slippers that he had made, and one slipper was Ignatz throwing the brick and the other was Krazy, and I don't—I never actually asked Richard. But I remember, I took his winter session class my very first winter session. That would be 1970, and I sort of became his straight man or he became—so I mean, he thought I was the funniest person he'd ever known. That's exaggerating, but I remember from there being given the task of taking—oh, what's her name—Louise Bourgeois on a tour of RISD. And there was a little silver piece that I had made sort of a bit like the Guggenheim Museum, and she wanted to buy it. And I wanted $350 and she said, "That's too much money." So anyway, I'm just glad I didn't sell it. So—and I don't remember—I made some comment with Richard, and I can't remember anymore but he thought it was hilarious, with her, and anyway.

I think a woman named Ruth Tamura came through RISD. She was then in charge of Glass at the CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts, now CCA, California College of the Arts]. And Dale was always looking out for me. And I got a postcard from Dale in May or April, 1971, and it said, "I think you just might like it out here." He was in Oakland. So—and then he wrote to me, "Would you be interested in teaching out here?" I said, "It's this easy." So then about a month later, I get a letter from Marty Streich, who is the dean of—I guess Crafts—I think it was Crafts at CCAC. He was the dean of something in charge of Metal Arts. And he said, "Would you be interested in teaching summer school? $600." So I wrote him back and I said, "I can't come to Oakland, CA for $600." So he wrote back, he said, "How about $1,000?" So I said, "Okay."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: So I got on—I happened to have a friend who had been at RIT, Jack Amendt, who was at CCAC and a bartender at Jack London Square. So I wrote to him and he said, "Yes, you should come out." So I had all these plans about projects I was going to do and—I don't know if I talked enough about RISD—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I actually had one question—

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —in relation to the maquette [for –MR] the tables you designed. You were [saying –MR] it doesn't matter now who makes it.

MR. MUELLER: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: That's something I'd like to touch on because it seems that the process of working is an important part of your work, and that things get figured out very much in the process. I wonder if that is something that was clear to you from the start at RISD—that things were figured out in process? Was that something that became integral to your way of working?

MR. MUELLER: That is something. That's a good point because as I said, in Rochester, we had to do these laborious drawings and it made everything so stiff. And when I got to RISD, first of all, Jack introduced me to Styrofoam, so you could actually Styrofoam a lathe or coping saw and you could make a little maquette of, you know, whatever. And so there it was. You could actually see it in real space. And then you use it and you could make templates from it or, you know, just work from that model, and make it. So that actually made the thing—the approach more spontaneous. But one of the things Jack did with me—so like the little elves—I would—we had—we were just in this little room in the basement, no windows, and we had three benches. And Jack had a bench, but he didn't do anything with it. If—whenever—I mean he came in and sometimes quite late. I mean he introduced me to drinking.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: But I mean, I loved him so much—I mean I enjoyed identifying with him and his dogs and I would get very loose out there and roll under the table with the dogs. The other students—I don't think they were comfortable behaving the way I did. It didn't matter to me, I mean rolling with dogs, I mean nobody's—but so I would have things in process on my bench and I would come in in the morning and Jack would take some brown microcrystalline wax and stick things to it. So it made me actually think about adding, you know, something to an idea that I that I hadn't necessarily thought about. And I remember trying to make something that was very complex—undulating like a serpentine curve, but sort of extruded, trying to get it to fit onto a truncated pyramid. And so I had a few of those, and he actually put them up vertically and turned them into something I had never thought about.

And so someone else—that's why I say that this wasn't even criticism, but this is someone else actually manipulating your ideas. And you can take—he said, "You can take it or leave it; I don't care." But it also opened my mind to not being so interested in just a discrete object. Here, you draw it, you make it, and it's done, but then it can undergo metamorphosis if you allow it to. If you are not comfortable, you know, you—this is what you want to make, it doesn't—so I got then much more in the habit of actually relying then. As I worked more, I accumulated more of these kind of mistakes and discards. So I could actually take things from a box and start to assemble them with this microcrystalline wax until an idea was born without a whole lot of labor. And that was, I mean I started to really appreciate that approach to working.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And it's not so easy to do that drawing. You know, by actually drawing—it's for me, it's a good way of not forgetting a very basic idea: Make a note of it, like writing your name or writing someone else's name so you don't forget it, but if you can remember the reference to the little footnote and hopefully it all comes back when you look at it—too far in the past and it may not ring any bells.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So that—and I mean and Dale was trying to talk me into transferring into glass, so—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: —I went up there. I couldn't deal with the heat, and it's way too fast. And it just—it's too limited, you know, glassblowing. And the heat. the heat, the speed. I liked—maybe that's why these people said I was geared towards silversmithing, but I liked sitting there. I also liked, now in retrospect, things that I can actually hold in my hand. There's something—these small constructive pieces—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —that were very satisfying, but very slow.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about your work at RISD, some of that early work. Some of these rings were done at RISD or RIT?

MR. MUELLER: RIT.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the Coca Cola ring, Texaco—

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes, that was—

MS. RIEDEL: —that one was early—

MR. MUELLER: —early Pop Art, because there was—I think my—in my freshman year, and I, you know, one of the things I really liked was a little—it was called, *National Washboard Company*.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And it was a little washboard. I made a little cherry frame. And because [Laughs] that was my project for chasing, which I didn't really want to do. So I did the part on the scrub board that you—I basically cheated—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: —and so I made this flute which I said was chasing repoussé and then I cut out, the you know, the national washboard and two little stars, and I enameled it. And then, I mean, I remember I made these cigar band rings. Unfortunately, a lot of this stuff—and I did a lot—everybody was buying them for $35, so I don't know what happened to this stuff. It just kind of—I mean lots of enamel. I traded three or four enameled belt buckles with Wendell.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: There was a Superman buckle—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —there was Sky King. I mean they were—I mean I remember I did Coca Cola. I don't know who got that—

MS. RIEDEL: Superman is at the Boston Museum.

MR. MUELLER: Boston Museum has it.

MS. RIEDEL: As are some of those early rings.

MR. MUELLER: Really? Oh, yes, those were '67, '68. But—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know how those came to be part of Daphne Farago's collection?

MR. MUELLER: She got them from me because I kept—I started saying, you know—

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, you kept some. Okay.

MR. MUELLER: —I—they were going—I know because some of the cigar band rings; I didn't get any of those. And I think I have one belt buckle still, and I think Daphne got the Superman buckle and—because I made one specifically for Wendell. He wanted that. But there was one that was Beer Nuts. It was just the brand name, which Marvin Lipofsky wanted. We were going to trade, so he took it. I never got anything. And then one of the joints on the back where the belt goes, he snapped it, so he gave it back to me to repair, and I never—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: —I never gave it back to him. I never got anything, and there—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —I don't remember—there were some cufflinks. I did a whole lot of things—Krazy Kat things for Richard, but that was in graduate school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. .

MR. MUELLER: And a Krazy Kat belt buckle. And now when I think—all of that stuff, they were all pierced with a jewelers' saw and then the back soldered on. I wouldn't—I—well, now it would—I mean, even at 71, my—with one eye, enameling is not a—maybe not a—but I mean I remember a very conservative girl who was ahead of me in RIT, and I guess one of the things I wanted to do was a pair of trumpets, you know, like straight, like the horns for fox, make trumpets and then have Gabriel engraved on them. Well, I actually made one. It was so much work; it was crazy, which—and I still have it somewhere. But I think—I don't remember her name anymore, but she was doing such meticulous cloisonné clear enamels, fussy, fussy, and she came from Cranbrook and she said I was the only one doing anything worthwhile. And she was—when she left she said, you know, "This is—what you—this is all wrong. This is an insult to enameling," because it was opaque. But I didn't care for the transparencies. And I had no background whatsoever; it just, I think, you know, graphic arts, printing, Pop Art, you know—she also said, "You know, once it's in the news, it's dead. Pop Art is dead; you're crazy to be following"—but what should one follow? You know, and I don't know. So I think like the second year at RISD, I got—when we were upstairs, I set up an electroforming lab, and so I could do—I was thinking there: Plating. I wouldn't have to do all this meticulous scoring and folding and it's a pain in the ass. It's all chemistry. It is all chemistry. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Not how you wanted to spend your time [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean, it's—no, it's not. It's just—no. And it doesn't give you what a fabrication or construction gives you at all. At all. And I, you know, I electroform things for Jack. And I remember I was raising something that Jack liked, and the next thing I know it was gone. And he said, "I'll give you another one—some other, you know, I will give you something sometime." And then he actually used it for a lid on a box that made the cover of *Craft Horizons*, or something. And it was just a box with a drip going in it until there's, you know, something running in at the bottom. I mean, when we had a really good exchange when I was a student and—

MS. RIEDEL: What year would've that been roughly?

MR. MUELLER: '69 to '71.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's interesting.

MR. MUELLER: And I think when I got to CCAC, maybe if—Ken Cory retired, so I went to Washington state, and Marty wrote to me and said, "You know, if you want to come out." So I moved out there, and I remember then I got a note to Jack and had back surgery, so I sat down and started everybody in the class making postcards. So we sent him this barrage of postcards, which started kind of an epidemic with Jack and postcards. And then students after that started, you know, somebody sent him like a 30 pound squash. But I remember with—this is sort of a sideline, and it's later because this probably '73, but Sarah Bodine and Michael Dumas who were—one was the editor of *Metalsmith* magazine, they collected all the postcards that I had of Jack's. I didn't have my own—and they did an article on the kind of exchange we had, you know, that's 40 years ago, on Jack's side, because I don't know what happened with, you know, with Jack's. He really enjoyed them, you know, because I think at that time, he wasn't doing well.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: But he enjoyed the ability to, you know, scribble—take a very creative approach to things you sent in the mail.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were just paper postcards?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. But I mean, they were—could be pretty abstract—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: You make them yourself. You weren't taking actual postcards; you would make something and then Jack would see—I mean I did that with Jamie Carpenter; I did it with Dale. Not as, I mean they were goofier, and I mean, there were postcards with things stuck on like a condom or something. And Jack's, there was much more time spent on both our parts to make these things, you know, like a collage or a drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: One final question before we move to Oakland: It seems it was such an extraordinarily rich time, certainly at RIT but especially at RISD—incredible professors and students. When you look back on your educational experience, is there anything in particular that really stands out as especially [Inaudible.]

MR. MUELLER: Well, I don't know, the whole RISD experience was so unique.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I remember there was—I mean Harry Callahan was teaching photography, and we got to be fairly good friends. Aaron Siskind as well, I mean I went—they both retired. I got to cook for Aaron; I got to cook for Harry and Eleanor. But I remember one of—my first year there, there was a photo student named Bill Burke who had this black dog named Ralph who was really smart. And the photo department was Benson Hall, which was a separate building across from Mem [Memorial] Hall on Benefit Street. And Bill would get in his Volvo station wagon and, you know, whistle [whistles] Ralph. And Ralph would go running down Benefit Street and jump in the back of the—it just, I mean, it was a small school. There were only 800 students. And it was, you know, I felt you could leave your ego behind there, which RIT gave my ego food because it didn't have—all I had was being a nasty little druggie, but nothing to base anything on, and I think I gained confidence in Rochester. And, you know, just being able to develop an ability to make something.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So I actually, you know, would look—after the first semester, a little hollow ring, a little cigarette box, and if nothing else I could feel good about that. And it may—I think I developed a sense of self-contentment at RISD, which I never left—I never lost. In some ways it squelched some, maybe it's not in me anyway, ambition to be a player in some of these things that I see in New York, these openings and people actually give up a lot to make connections. They give up their work. And for some reason, it was not an easy place for me to find, but once I started to be able to understand what gave me pleasure and also freedom, I wouldn't want to give that up for anything. I mean certainly recognition is great; it's great to be acknowledged, but you also first have to acknowledge yourself. And if you can make something, it doesn't have to be a rocket ship, but there's something to feel good about, having a purpose and accomplish something. So I think I found that on my own at RISD because they—I was given the freedom there to be on my own and to flounder, because I had to teach a class, and it was a disaster, because I had never taught—

MS. RIEDEL: While you were still a graduate student?

MR. MUELLER: Yes, first year graduate student. Jack said, "No choice. I don't want to do it; you teach it." Because he wanted the time off, so we each had to teach, and I was clueless, having never taught. And teaching is something that's very much learned, and criticism is even more difficult. You know, to make an intelligent observation of what you see can turn, you know, visuals into words. A lot of people just bullshit, just to talk, and so I think maybe that's what I gained, the sense of confidence at RISD, and a sense of—and because of that a sense of freedom. And I mean I started to learn how to enjoy—have fun. I mean, it was a—because it was a much more wide-open world, and—if that's fair.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And I think that does capture the spirit of the place and one of the things that you took from there.

MR. MUELLER: Oh, it did have—I mean there were very interesting students there, Vicki Wulff and Bill Burke, and my classmates, the two that I had, but you know, Dale and Richard Merkin, and—what was his name now? He was my first drawing teacher—David, David—anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Not Slater—

MR. MUELLER: Yes. David Slater, thank you. I mean he was a wild man. He decided he was going, and he would go out—wherever it was—out to some Indian with a machine gun. And he was whacked out, you know, he was—I mean just a whole—this whole—I mean I remember, party [Inaudible]—Dale and all these faculty members, there were all these nude photographs. It was just pretty—you know, it wasn't RIT. It was not RIT.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I mean, just also the diversity of faculty, because I had gone to Provincetown. I met Hazel and George. George was an Indian and I was just a kid. But the way that faculty and the students kind of intermingled, and it—you know, at RIT, I felt more like I was with my parents because everything, you know, no criticism. Everybody, you know, the little—the kids are over here. And there, I mean, it was Art Wood, who ran silkscreening in the basement, and he sort of took me in and he was a very nice guy. And he had a white shirt and tie every day, and he did a silkscreen portfolio every year, so people contributed prints. He provided the paper for the size and went into a box or a folder. And then I wanted to know if he wanted a beer he said, "No, no, I'm allergic. I'm allergic to alcohol."

And then a couple years later, I actually came back to Providence because of Dale, 1973. He said, "You want to do a show at the Glass department?" So I spent the weekend drawing, and I did a poster, mailed the poster and the drawings to Providence. They—Jamie Carpenter, Bruce Chao, we put this exhibition up in the Glass shop. And I ordered you know, several tons of ice, some prosecco, and strawberries. So the ice melted from the fourth floor all the way down to the ground floor. But I ran into now Art Wood who is drinking, drinking, and I said, "I thought you were allergic." He said, "No, what I was allergic to was my wife."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: So anyway, that was—I remember using my father's printing company to do a print for Art that year. It was called, *Further—Farther and Farther Away on Narragansett Bay*. And I actually still have them. But I took—what I guess was like a—something from the Printing department—was like a brick wall, but it didn't fill the entire picture frame. And then a ship coming through the wall, and a music note. But I—so I did it in maybe five colors—five images on one side of this piece of card stock that Art provided me. And the other side, each one was a unique drawing, so, *Farther and Farther Away on Narragansett Bay*, which is Rhode Island.

So I sent some to Art, but I—somehow they got—they didn't get there in time, so I got back however many I did. We were supposed to do 200. So I think I had—anyway, that was an interesting experience. And then poor Art: Lee Hall came in as the president of RISD. I mean I wasn't there. And she asked everybody to hand in their resignations because she's—no, no, no—she didn't—she wanted everybody to be engaged as a professional artist. And Dale was her favorite amongst the faculty, and so it's because of she that the faculty unionized.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: —out of fear because she was threatening to get rid of anybody that actually wasn't involved professionally. And at most art schools, that's a fact of life. There aren't enough places in the entire world for everybody that teaches visual art to be successful.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: It's not possible. And she never thought that the—this—I wasn't there, but she never thought that the union would go through, and it did. So anyway, Art Wood unfortunately resigned in protest, thinking that he would get his job back, and she didn't take him back.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And then he developed—because of all the acetone and lacquer thinner, he developed pancreatic cancer and—but he was one of the early pioneers to go out to Pilchuck with Dale in 1971, which I would have done if Dale hadn't gotten me that job at CCAC.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about that, and about Viola Frey there, as well. What was CCAC like at the time, what were you teaching?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think on the plane ride from New York to Oakland, I think, and Jack had to pick me up, I was planning all these projects I was going to do when I got to Oakland. So I went in, introduced myself to Marty Streich, and he took me over to Metal Arts, which looked like an old army barracks. It was just two rooms. The back room was like this fluted metal hut with an annealing station, one spool of 18 gauge yellow brass wire, two sort of common benches, and I went, "What am I going to do here?" And I—it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Shock.

MR. MUELLER: Shocked.

MS. RIEDEL: To put it plainly.

MR. MUELLER: Now, trying to remember what I did, what I did to compensate for all this.

MS. RIEDEL: You'd been hired to teach full-time?

MR. MUELLER: No, I was hired then to teach just for six weeks, summer school. So I guess I went out. I found a supplier in San Francisco. I bought some copper, brass, whatever. I think I got—we were allowed to charge a lab fee, maybe $25, so I gave them basically—I'm at a loss for what kind of projects I gave, but I know we were supposed to have an exhibition, each studio, at the end of the six weeks summer class. So I set up an exhibition using fruits and vegetables for our models. And I guess apparently Marty liked the projects that were done, and that's why he called me. But it was a very funny department. I don't think Ken Cory liked it that much. He had graduated from CCAC. I mean, Victor Ries was a teacher, Marty Streich was a teacher, and Byron Wilson was a teacher. And Byron was an insurance investigator on the railroad days; he only taught casting. Victor Ries was an old German silversmith, and Marty had gone to school there and hadn't really worked. Marty was a sweet guy. But so nobody there really was working, so it was easy to come in and—soon as I got there, they made me department head.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: So it was an interesting challenge, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Was the idea to get the program up and running? It sounds like they were looking for somebody with your experience—

MR. MUELLER: —well, the idea was, you know, I mean I remember at meetings, you know, Viola and Marvin and —they would talk about exit standards, and I mean here's where Viola agreed with me. I don't know about—you know, and unfortunately, Marvin lost his job at UC Berkeley, and then he got rid of Ruth Tamura, who's the reason I came because he needed a job. But I said, "How can you have exit standards if you have no entrance standards?" Anybody that applied to CCAC got accepted. And so they wanted the—like the Metal Arts program to see like 80 to 100 students a week in this little—I mean these little two rooms and, you know, it's—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —it was unrealistic, but it was a way to provide, you know, financing to the school—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and the—I think while I was there, they took what was this little dormitory next to the cafeteria, and that was torn down, and then that was turned into—I think printmaking. Or no, no, no. Printmaking—that was Charlie Gill, and Jack, who—Jack—geez, remembering all of this. Ai-yi-yi-yi-yi.

MS. RIEDEL: We can add it later.

MR. MUELLER: I mean that—the names because there was a Safeway that it was an estate—CCAC. And they had to sell part of the estate in order to raise money because they built printmaking, Charlie Gill did I think lithography and Jack did intaglio etching. And in Ceramics, was Viola, Corky, and Art. And Art and Viola were inseparable. And she actually got the funding to build that new Ceramic facility. And then eventually they also built, after my time, a new Metal Arts facility, but—and—

MS. RIEDEL: You weren't a fan of what they built.

MR. MUELLER: Well, I, you know, I don't think—they hadn't—I mean I've been critical of a lot of the things that came after RIT—not so much in terms of facility, but one of the things about RIT that I thought was right and wrong at RISD after I went to teach there in Rochester, I mean, you know, it was basically 40 hours a week, no nights, no weekends, and people got a lot of work done. There was no screwing around. And when you break the day up so you have two hours of class in the morning and then three hours of class in the afternoon, but you only do that three times a week, and you are taking a major as time-consuming as silversmithing or jewelry, that's 15 hours a week. And so, I think for most students—and most students don't really go on to practice what they study anyway, but—and then the same at RIT, I don't know who went on to do anything, even—I just thought the structure was good. It was a good environment to learn. And kind of no-nonsense, and you know, that—my whole theory about drawing and art history is very—is very kind of classic. It doesn't fit much with modern times. A lot of people would say drawing's a waste of time. No one needs to know how to draw. And some people might say no one needs to know how to write when you can type. Why waste your time? So I don't know where I was going with this.

MS. RIEDEL: The—this—

MR. MUELLER: Oh, CCAC.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Metals—

MR. MUELLER: Well, you know, I tried to talk to Marty. I think Viola—I mean, I never met anybody, you know, talking to Viola over the years, as devoted to her work. I mean Viola would opt not to go to any kind of family affairs because she told me, "If I, you know, take, like, seven or eight major holidays, that's eight days at least that I have to give up of my work, and I'm not interested." And then also I invited her to RISD; she said, "Give it to somebody who is more deserving." She said, "I don't—I've had it with the academic world, you know. I want to work."

MS. RIEDEL: This was much later?

MR. MUELLER: Well, 20 years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. MUELLER: And even with the Carin van Krimpen show in Amsterdam, which I think was either '93 or '94, she didn't want to go. And—

MS. RIEDEL: She wanted to work. How did you meet her?

MR. MUELLER: I met her, you know, at faculty meetings at CCAC. I mean yes, she looked very matronly, kind of small and—it's funny that she and Art were inseparable. And I guess Corky as well. I didn't—I mean she was—didn't appear the way she came off. If you talked with her she was very intelligent, very well read, so there was a kind of dichotomy.

MS. RIEDEL: You came in '70 or '71?

MR. MUELLER: '71.

MS. RIEDEL: —and she had just started teaching full-time there in '70.

MR. MUELLER: She had just started teaching there.

MS. RIEDEL: She had left her Macy's job and started working there full-time. Someone at ALF had told me that you two had breakfast together on a regular basis?

MR. MUELLER: Well, yes, but—at the school there, and Art.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And I—what I think we, you know, we both had goals about what we wanted the programs to become. She was much more determined. She had much more—she had better ammunition. She had Peter Voulkos as a, you know, an alum. And I think a lot of people liked Corky. But we both wanted new facilities; we both wanted the programs to grow in strength. And I think that was something that we agreed and talked about, and I think one of the things we were upset about was that Ruth Tamura got dismissed and Marvin got put in, and Ruth seemed much more interested in the Glass program, and I remember—and Viola said to me, "That's disgusting," but we were at a faculty meeting and Marvin had just come back. And so Marty said, "So Marvin, tell us, what did you bring back?" And I said, "Gonorrhea." And then that's when—and Marvin said, "I'm speechless. I—who can follow that?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: But then Viola said, "Good for you"—and because I think what was done wasn't right, but Ruth wasn't known and at that point Marvin was—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and so I think the important thing to understand about Viola is her devotion. I mean, and it was really kind of incredible self-determination about her work, and her desire to build a new Ceramic facility. And she didn't really like—she didn't like to socialize; she liked to, you know, her—there was another—there was a painting instructor very much like her at RISD, named Dean Richardson, and you know, try—he would have lunch like Viola would, but he'd try to, you know, break their habit later, you know. And I think when she started to get sick, I think that she grew—you know, her time was much more guarded and much more precious.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I mean she had a sense of humor, but she, I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: She had a sense of humor. Did that come out in your conversations? Did you see it more in her work?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think I saw it more in her work, but, you know, it's so hard to remember going back to the—you know, other than, you know, she did have a sense of humor. She appreciated mine. I mean she was always very loyal to me. And, you know, if I would call her, she would be responsive with—would suggest something, but she really didn't want to give up any time. She didn't mind talking, but she would, you know, say, "What about this person?" And so—and maybe in some ways that hurt her career; I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: I don't know. I mean I admire that dedication to work more than I do these people that, you know, they certainly know how to schmooze. But I've also seen that hurt some people. They know everybody, but they don't work. So they don't really have a lot to offer. And Viola was ferocious with her work.

MS. RIEDEL: At that time, the early '70s, what did you see as her major influences? Did you [talk –MR] about that?

MR. MUELLER: Well, it seemed like Peter Voulkos because of the wall plates. But I don't think the figures started

until later—

MS. RIEDEL: Right, a little later. She was working on the *Endangered Species* series at that time—

MR. MUELLER: But they were much more modest scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I think her use of color was much more restrained.

MS. RIEDEL: Her dad died during that time, I think in '73, and there's been a lot of talk about his influence, maybe the influence of her family. Did she ever talk with you about that?

MR. MUELLER: No. And I think in some ways, that her father dying in a way gave her kind of freedom to go forward and not worry so much about other things. I mean, I think Art Nelson, you know, passed away. But that—he seemed to be in her confidante, you know. They were inseparable.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm [Affirmative.] Did you meet Charles Fiske as well?

MR. MUELLER: No. No. Was he there?

MS. RIEDEL: I know he taught [there. I don't recall –MR] if he was there when you were there.

MR. MUELLER: I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Because Corky retired, but I think I was still there when he—no, I think he was still there when I left, but I'm not—see, the dates are—

MS. RIEDEL: I think Viola was living with Charles from that point. Did you go to her house at all?

MR. MUELLER: No. Or did I? They got married. No.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think so.

MR. MUELLER: They just lived together.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so.

MR. MUELLER: Then Viola was 69 when she died, right?

MS. RIEDEL: It was 2004. Let's see. She was born in '33, so that sounds about right.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. I know she went to—she worked in Holland, in Ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. And a place in France as well, Sèvres. She was there as well [in '86 and '87. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she talk with you about her work at all? Did she talk about [inaudible.] on some environmental pieces? Did she talk about political commentary or social commentary?

MR. MUELLER: Well, she was very political.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I was anti-political, and still—so that was a sore point. I mean, I don't think she understood my indifference to politics.

MS. RIEDEL: When you say she was very political, what was she political about?

MR. MUELLER: Well, don't forget, this is California in the North Bay, and in the early '70s, and politics were, you know, everywhere. I came from the East Coast—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and—where I couldn't engage in an intelligent conversation with her about politics because I didn't follow it—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —you know. I didn't follow the paper. I think that pissed her off about me. But—and other people as well. She's not the only one. And it—and I still don't understand. I mean as people don't understand my indifference to politics, I don't understand how—the amount of passion that some people put into discussions about politics and politicians. And, I mean I think—I thought Viola was dreaming about what she thought might be possible, as I do with what I talk to people now. It seems it's great to have cause and to be an idealist, but I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever go to her—with her to any of the flea markets—the Alameda flea market?

MR. MUELLER: Well, we went because of Jack that—you know what flea market was it? Ai-yi yi-yi-yi. Boy, now you're really—

MS. RIEDEL: I think probably Alameda. That was the one she went to—

MR. MUELLER: Probably Alameda—big and—

MS. RIEDEL: Was she photographing then?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. But I also remember some guy—and I thought she—we were walking around and I don't know whether—I don't think a phone rang, but this guy I—we didn't know picked up the phone and said, "Hello. It's for you." And I said to Viola, "No, it's for you." And—that's not much of a story, but, you know, I looked for—I found an old—it was called—it wasn't Coca-Cola, but it was like a chest, which she thought would suit me fine. But again the flea markets—again. I mean, it was something to do on weekends—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —especially when it was nice out. Ai-yi-yi-yi-yi.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems the major thing that you remember about her [was a –MR] relentless commitment to work.

MR. MUELLER: Well, yes. I think that was the most important thing that I got. Even talking to her later, you know, that there was nothing that would dissuade her from—that seemed to be the most important thing driving her.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] What would you two talk about besides developing the programs? Anything in particular? What were the visions for the programs?

MR. MUELLER: Well, we both wanted new buildings.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: We wanted better facilities. We both thought that it was kind of rinky-dink. That it wasn't very professional. They kept talking—we would agree to spend time trying to talk to Marty Streich to—for him to go to the board. I can't—anyway, I had, when I first got out there, when she thought it was a good idea to have an exhibition of my work at—if you go up the steps, it was sort of a new—I don't remember what it was called—Isabel Chuck Percy West. Isabel Percy West. So I got, I mean I think Viola's—

MS. RIEDEL: Was that in Oakland or San Francisco or—

MR. MUELLER: Oakland. No, Oakland. Oh, no. I was gone long before San Francisco.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And I even remember when I got to RISD—I don't remember whether he was the president of CCAC—and I can't remember his name to save my life, but he came for an interview to be president of—he might have been president of CCAC—Jack Ford. That was the printmakers and that was Alameda flea market—Jack Ford. I don't know if—I mean Jack's wife's name is—I mean things start coming back, but slowly.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: Marty—she had multiple sclerosis. Jack always had a booth. He was friendly with Viola at the Alameda flea market. He specialized in Hawaiian shirts.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: She took pictures of the Hawaiian shirts. This president, anyway, I remember when he came to

RISD—this is after Hall, but somebody said, "He wears makeup."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: He didn't get the job, but he might have been a drawing instructor at CCAC. Anyway. That—it's unfortunate it's so long ago—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —because I mean I think Viola and I talked about curriculum changes, and what—I mean we brought this up at meetings, too, with Marty about what would be appropriate, and it was always money, you know—how to go about raising money, I mean, because for her it was raising money for the Ceramics program and for me it was raising money for Metal Arts program. So I initiated a lab fee, which she thought was a good idea. A lot of it was academic talk, you know, because I also think that was sort of her main objective. She had come there—she did—she was ultimately going to take over—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and she wanted the program to continue to grow and flourish if it was going to be under her wing. I mean, and unfortunately with a lot of the type of discussions I had at RISD with people, it was—it's kind of, you know, academic discussions or—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —I mean, that's more current, but also trying to give a program visibility.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And visibility allows you to try and raise money or it gives you the ability to raise money if you're visible, and I don't remember things that we talked about in terms of, you know, what were, you know, possible approaches. We—each of us did things and we were both new.

MS. RIEDEL: You both had such focused teaching careers. [You went –MR] on to RISD, and I hear the visiting artist in residency list is extensive. Clearly teaching has been a huge part of your life and career—

MR. MUELLER: Well, see, that—

MS. RIEDEL: —[Viola –MR] didn't do that residency work, but she certainly was a devoted, committed teacher for her entire life.

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes. Well, she didn't want to teach summer school anymore. I mean, she really wanted—she didn't want to dilute, you know, as her work got bigger, more demanding—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —she didn't want to rely on the academic world. And I think 1980 was the last time I taught summer school. It's—for friends of mine that teach nights and summers, I don't understand them. You never have any life then. You know, and I think that was one of the things she wanted to do was run the department intelligently but not have it take all of her life.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And that—because her work was the most important thing, basically in the end, that was the most important thing to her, not the academic world. It was a means to an end. But she wanted it. She wanted her job to be done intelligently and well. And I think—and that's what I wanted to do as well. And it wasn't—it was too difficult there because what I had, you know, Byron wasn't going anywhere, Victor wasn't going anywhere, Marty wasn't going anywhere. So there was nowhere to—there was no way to add anybody. And I think with RISD, there was a lot more money. And I think when they made the merger with San Francisco and they added Architecture and Industrial Drawing, I think it changed the entire economic structure of CCAC and they dropped Craft—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and I don't know that that—really that's good or bad. I mean this American Crafts Museum turned into MAD [Museum of Art and Design].

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: It hasn't really changed the nature of the exhibitions or the nature of the space. I think—I have a friend who works in a gallery, worked for Peter Joseph when he had furniture, and one of the things that I started to realize—and maybe even talking about—I don't—I'm not sure whether I talked about this with Viola, but just how a lot of people that are really part of decorative arts and perhaps uncertain about content tend to add a lot more of these little kind of technical flourishes, so it—the thing becomes really, very, very burdened with skill and that formally, contextually, it's kind of sophomoric.

And that sometimes, you know, what isn't there is better than what is there. Leave something—and I think we might have talked about how glazing is done, you know, because of enameling, and the difference between something that's applied and something that's kind of necessary. And—but it's—because I know that was something important to her because of—you know, had it become actually part of the skin, not the—something that stuck out like a kind of blemish. And that's what some people—the way some people approached, you know, glazing. And that, I think I tried to do enameling there, and that was—

MS. RIEDEL: I would have thought that color would have been something that you two might have connected on, around, or discussed—

MR. MUELLER: We—see, I remember talking, but it's just a difficult thing to go—but because, you know, she liked, sort of, at that time kind of a—really a colored accent as a sort of surprise to actually accentuate some particular part, and mine was more in the arena of pop art than it actually had to do with graphic design. And so the color, again, highlighted the subject matter—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —but it was incorporated in it. And that's what she wanted to do was to try to incorporate it, not that it just be stuck on, so that it was an intelligent use of color. And these discussions about extraneous information, which a lot of people in decorative arts use. And then—that—this whole thing between craft and fine art types of view really complicated discussion. And I don't think she wanted to touch it. I think she said, you know, it has to come about naturally, what you do. You can't force it. And maybe why she came upon these figures and why they're kind of skinned in this very painterly way—but it's appropriate.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she talk about any of her experiences back east or down south or her studies with Rothko?

MR. MUELLER: We kind of—I think that was another—I didn't care so much for Rothko.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And I guess I still don't. Well, you know, sometimes if you and I, if you will—we're both working and we're friends, but I don't care for what you do and I'm honest about it, it can become a real point of contention—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MUELLER: —and one it's best to stay away from. I mean, I got to respect what she did later, I mean, but I wasn't [Inaudible.] I think that she discovered something that was truly her own. And I think—Marty had talked to me about coming back, but I was happy back east. I didn't see there being any real future there.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were at CCAC until '75—

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and then at St. Mary's in '76 and Dominican in '76, '77. Then back to RISD, and it sounds as if that offered you the opportunity to work with Jack Prip and really develop a curriculum there.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. Yes. So somebody that I—because I had a show out in Dominican College, and this guy Kishi, who ran it, wanted me to come there—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I mean, there was no money at CCAC.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And I think I had gotten into a show at Quay Gallery with Ruth Braunstein—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —because of this soapbox derby. And then Victor Ries was at St. Mary's and the problem, you know, was none of these places were very serious, all three of them, in terms of just—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, certainly compared with where you'd come from—

MR. MUELLER: I mean, I had a girl who was making slugs using the balance, the casting balance, so that her boyfriend could use them in, you know, coin operating machines. And I mean, some of the students, you know, I would have 80 students a week, and it's hard to control—one teacher, no assistants.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did your move back to RISD come about? It would be wonderful to talk about you and Jack working together and developing that program for that staff.

MR. MUELLER: Well, I mean, it's funny. In 1974, I got a call from Jack, and he said, "You know, they've given me"—or maybe it was '73—I know—I had only been there two years. And he said, "They've given me permission to add a second full-time position. Do you know anybody in California that might be interested?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And I said, "I don't," but—and I had one of—when I was there, I came back from teaching summer school to pack up, and I met a new graduate student named George Van Dynwick, and Jack asked me if I would, you know, show him around since he was there, and he was one strange character. I mean, I didn't even know the man, and he comes over to my house and said his wife had stabbed him in the hand. And then I'd heard, you know, he tried to seduce every girl in the class. And Jack calls me and he says, "What do you think about George Van Dynwick?" And I said, "Great choice, Jack." What am I supposed to say?

So I had only gotten there, so I didn't know whether he was asking me if I wanted to apply, and he just—"Do you know anybody in California?" So he hired George Van Dynwick with a two year contract, and after one year, they got him out because, you know, he was—and I actually—the first year that he was there, Jack talked me into inviting him out to CCAC as a guest. I mean he came on to every female student. It was embarrassing. It was absurd. It was absurd. Anyway, so then I think I went to there in '76 to teach winter session because Jack was already in bad shape, so—

MS. RIEDEL: His shoulders?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. He had frozen shoulders, both shoulders, and he had got—well, the first thing you can do is physical therapy, so you exercise so you get mobility back. It's very painful. It is very painful to move your arms when you have a frozen shoulder. So one of the things you can do is exercise and use a physical therapist. Another thing is called manipulation, so they actually knock you out with general anesthesia and they try to break all of these lesions or whatever they are. But what my orthopedic surgeon told me is that because you're completely out, we can dislocate your shoulder. They don't recommend it. Those are what my two options are. I went for physical therapy. Meanwhile, I never knew why Jack had this operation on his spine. But what they did was up here—I don't know between what vertebrae—they took like a plug from his pelvis—like a port—and they drilled in between two vertebrae, and they said they were relieving pressure. Well, they drilled all these nerves and so he could never deal with the cold. He had to leave and go to Mexico every winter. I mean, his arms atrophied; he could only walk a couple blocks. It was—he was only 56 years old when this happened.

So when I went there to teach winter session now, there was someone named Harold Schremmer, who had taught at a reform school up in Maine, and he was a crackerjack silversmith. He was a—I mean, Jack could make the weirdest choices. So I mean, I went. I remember going there for this six-week winter session to teach, and I got along, I mean, I loved it there. I got along with all these students. I mean it was like paradise because you have really good students, all this facility, and Harold—we had this little office we shared. And he said—and he couldn't stand the kids. They were all spoiled, he said, "You know what they need is—take them in the office with a stick, and I'll straighten them out." "Harold: Not a good idea, not a good idea."

So I love winter session, so I called Jack, and I said, "You know, is there any chance that there'll be a job?" And he said, "You know, Harold is, you know, 60, you know, I—no, there's no job because, you know, I have to"—well, the following year, which was the spring of '77, they had to let Harold go, you know. He had a two-year contract, but the complaints—I mean he was basically, you know, like from a trade school. He didn't belong. I mean, he could engrave; I mean, he could make pots, but, you know, first of all, he had no tolerance. His wife lived in Germany, and the whole thing was just—so Dale was then the dean—or no, the head of Sculpture, which was now under the umbrella of Jewelry and Light Metals, or whatever it was called. And he said, "You should apply," you know, Dale said that. And dean—Gil Franklin, who was the dean who was there when I came, he said, "You should apply." So Jack didn't like the pressure they were putting on him.

And so he called me and mentioned there was—that somebody had applied from maybe Carbondale, IL. And he called me a couple of times about some of the people that had applied, and they had come through. And I didn't

—I mean I had already been there, so they weren't going to fly me to RISD for an interview. And so, I mean, there were students that I had had that were also on my side and I don't—I still—I don't think Jack liked the pressure but that—

MS. RIEDEL: The pressure to hire you?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. You know, from other people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And yet I think I was told later, I was who he wanted. But because of the last two, you know, he hired George, thinking George would be good, and Harold, and they became bitter enemies, and he didn't—he was worried that it would affect our friendship.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. I see.

MR. MUELLER: So he finally called me, and he said, "Well, it's between you and this guy from southern Illinois." And so he said, "You know, this man eats, lives, and breathes metal." And I said, "I can't probably do that." You know, and said, "You should hire him." And you know, I said, "It's not my only interest." And then he called me the next day, and he said, "Yes, we didn't—you can have the job if you want it." So anyway. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's pause there because that's the end of the card.

MR. MUELLER: Okay. Okay. Kind of a sad thing to [Inaudible] you know, transparent—

MS. RIEDEL: We'll get there.

[END OF CARD ONE.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Louis Mueller at the artist's home [Laughs.] in New York on June 24th, did we say?

MR. MUELLER: 24th.

MS. RIEDEL: 24th, 2014, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number two. So [you –MR] had just arrived in RISD. How did you and Jack [divide your responsibilities –MR]? Were you going to develop the department together? Were you working on it separately?

MR. MUELLER: Well, the department started in 1969 with—Jack Prip was the sole instructor; Howard Newman, Douglas Legenhausen, and myself, so that was the department. Then in 1970 he got permission to start an undergraduate program. We were now on the second floor of the Metcalf Building. And so we were the only—there were no graduate students but the three of us. And then, there were probably eight undergraduate students majoring. And now, in 1973 he got permission to hire a second full-time faculty member, which was George Van Dynwick. So George was there until '74, and then he was gone. Then Howard Schremmer came in. I don't know whether there was an interim professor from '74 to '75. I just don't remember. I mean I wasn't there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: But then, Harold didn't work out. And as I said, Jack called me and said, "You have the job."So I remember I was living in Oakland on—that doesn't matter. So my friend Dewey, who I had met, he had a sandwich shop in Providence, you know, had a restaurant called Joe's. He flew out. And I rented a Ryder truck, and I had a car. And so we packed up the truck. I had a studio in Berkeley on Dwight Way. I had this apartment in Oakland. And we drove about 72 miles to Truckee and the truck broke down. So we were stuck there for a couple days—not that eventful. So we got to Providence. I found a little carriage house on Manning Street and came to RISD. You know, introduced at a faculty meeting, new faculty member.

Come to find out, you know, Jack is really not very well at all. Like I said, I hadn't seen him, but I knew about the back operation because that winter session, '76, I had the entire—I mean, all of the majors took my class. I think I only had two outsiders who didn't like me because we were going to make this totem, which would go in his backyard by the pond, which was supposed to resemble a spinal column. So I made—actually, Dan Dailey did the isometric projection for this marble base I wanted to make. He did the drawing so I could bring it in to a stonecutter. And then, I basically designed this thing on this one-inch tube. So it was like a shish kebab. I gave everybody the outside diameter tube, so they would have to put that into the piece that they made, so it all slid down. And then there was a screw that put it all together. So we made this thing. And I had to leave before it was done, but I left the students in charge to deliver it to Jack's backyard. When he came back from Mexico, he would find his column.

So we sat down to talk about once I was there in September of '77, what kind of curriculum we wanted to do. And basically, he sort of put it in my hands because—so, I tried to put together a—I mean, and this is the first time where I'm actually putting together a real academic first year, which would be sophomores with—the first year was foundation, sophomore program. So we have to make—having them construct a small cube, a three-inch sphere, a number of sort of academic exercise that lead to them actually giving them some facility to then go on to do something else. And because Jack came from Copenhagen, you know, it was—he liked all of these exercises.

And then, already, as soon as I got there, he was already going on sabbatical. So he had arranged—I mean, this was a great thing—for me to meet someone named Claus Bury. And Claus was sort of like the wonder boy of goldsmiths in Germany. I didn't really know a whole lot about him, I'd seen a lot of these extremely complicated things that he'd made using Plexiglas. So I talked with Claus. His English was very good. And he had an American wife named Miriam Sharlin. So we agreed to meet at the Museum of Modern Art. I think this was in—I don't know whether it was 77 or '78. He was wearing a white wool—I mean it wasn't what I expected. So we meet and talk. And he was who Jack wanted.

MS. RIEDEL: Jack wanted [Claus –MR] to fill in while Jack was gone?

MR. MUELLER: Wanted Claus as the sabbatical replacement.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: So all I did was meet Claus. And then, he and Miriam I met. I picked them up. I befriended them. I found an apartment across the street from me. So this was '78 on East Manning Street. And Jack goes away. But no sooner does Claus get hired, but he tells me, you know, "I don't do goldsmithing anymore."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: "I'm a sculptor." So, okay. So he has the students. He does a fairly big drawing. And it's also because of Claus that I met the Faragos.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. MUELLER: So this piece out at the RISD Beach, which is just maybe four-by-fours and sail cloth. And so, he has all these kids work this whole time to build this thing out at the beach. And then, over that evening or the weekend, somebody destroys it. So he writes, you know, "An imperfect act of vandalism." So he was upset. But, you know, Claus was so ambitious. He set up a wood shop. He took a studio over where I had a studio, and I don't even know what it is anymore, but not that far from school. And the spaces were just, you know, a hundred dollars; they were nothing. But he was so—I mean an animal for working. I loaned him a line trimmer, which is what you can make picture frames with, to make the corners. And, you know, he was watching me do it, but I've also used it. He cut a piece of his finger off. But, I mean but he taped it up. He was determined, but he only was working in wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: So I mean, Jack came back, and he was infuriated. And he said, "What? Couldn't you do something about it?" I said, "Jack, you wanted him. What am I supposed to do, tell him, you know?"

MS. RIEDEL: Had [he recently –MR] stopped working in metal and converted to—

MR. MUELLER: 1977 he stopped.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: But he wouldn't—I mean, talk about stubborn. "I'm not a jeweler. I'm not a—I don't do it. I don't do anything anymore." I mean, and he was German about this. It was only one semester. But it was through Claus that I met Hermann Jünger. And I learned about this whole school in Munich because prior to that, which—and Jack hated that stuff. Oh, my God.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MUELLER: But prior to that, I knew. And I can't say that I was much of a fan of American jewelry. Not that I was, you know, doing anything earth-shattering, but I was more interested, at that point, in trying to go in this direction and—

MS. RIEDEL: Furniture. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —lighting and well, I didn't know. I mean the scale was unfamiliar. You don't go from working, you know, five inches to—it's a whole different set of tools, heat range, everything. So I wasn't impressed with the politics of Society of North American Goldsmiths and how much they kind of promoted their own. And a lot of it just—and so, when I went—actually went to Germany, maybe 1982. I don't know. I wasn't at RISD very long. But in the sequence of events, Claus came, Jack was infuriated, he came back. But Jack was doing really poorly. That was 1979. And you know, he can't give a demonstration. He can't really work.

And so, I covered for him. I mean I never made an issue. I mean unlike George Van Dynwick—started it, but one of the things that really started with George was, he was trying to get Jack fired because he knew he wasn't well. He wanted Jack's job. And I wouldn't. What's the point, you know? And then, Harold just was fed up with the whole place. And so, I tried to cover for Jack. I kept on running the department because he kept leaving, and I would be acting department head. But by 1980, I'd only been there two and a half years, Jack basically said, "I have to retire. I have to resign."

So I got Lee Hall, then the president, to agree to finance a little jewelry departmental catalog as a kind of homage and a gift. There was a picture of Jack; I don't know if he liked it, wearing a gas mask at a crit. And that was the inside. I did a drawing so it was a cover. And we got a company to donate the graphic design and printing. So the whole thing cost $1,600. And so, inside were the students of the last class that Jack had and the faculty. And we had a little party at the dean's [Inaudible.] and gave him the catalog as a kind of farewell.

And then that was—and then Jack retired. But I had faculty that he had brought in part-time, and that was awkward. So Rod Nakamoto, who—Jack's choices were sometimes—anyway, within about two years, I began to implement the faculty. Dale retired in 1981. He had a class called "Professional Practices for Graduate Students," which I, sort of, took over. But I went to Germany, I think it was in '82, and that's when I met Hermann, I met Daniel Kruger, I met Otto Kunzli, I met Gerd Rothmann, Gabi Dziuba, Manfred Bischoff, Manfred Mischa Mueller, Giampaolo Babetto.

I mean, it wasn't all in one visit, but I was just knocked out by everything over there. Now that I've known them for 30 years, but I was just amazed at the quality of the work, at the spirit of these people. And I mean I hung out with Hermann in—kind of smoking cigarettes, drinking, going back to his house, which was incredible. I had no idea what the structure of the educational system was in the academy in Germany. I had only the United States as a reference. But I mean, the work was—I mean execution, there was nothing to compare to it in the United States.

So I started, without even getting financial permission [Laughs] from the school, asking any of these people if they would be interested in coming to do a workshop, to give a lecture. And Otto Kunzli studied English because he wanted to come so badly. I mean a number of them—so it was a great. It didn't make me any friends in the American academic because I seemed sort of aloof. But I mean I was thinking about it wasn't for me. I was thinking about it for the program and the students because I found them a lot more interesting. They weren't connected to the politics of American jewelry. And none of them were teachers. They were all—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, Hermann was teaching, right?

MR. MUELLER: Hermann never came.

MS. RIEDEL: But the ones who came—

MR. MUELLER: Hermann got stomach cancer. Hermann was going to come, and I actually got him an honorary degree from RISD. But then, travel was—

MS. RIEDEL: Impossible.

MR. MUELLER: —not possible, yes. So—but—

MS. RIEDEL: Why was someone like Otto so eager to come?

MR. MUELLER: He's so ambitious. He retired this year. But yes, unfortunately, Otto with everybody was a fair weather friend. And it happens. I mean, I had great memories of times with Otto, and Hermann, and Gerd Rothmann. Daniel Kruger is still—I mean Gerd and Daniel Kruger were very, very loyal, really lovely people. There's something lovely about all of them. If you're overwhelmed by your own desire for whatever it is, sometimes nobody can get in your way. There is no such thing as friendship. The end justifies the means. But Otto was one of the first to come.

MS. RIEDEL: That would have been early '80s?

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes, early '80s, '83 maybe. Yes. So he taught winter session.

MS. RIEDEL: The first time he taught in the states?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. Hermann's son Kristof was my sabbatical replacement. That was Claus Bury's suggestion, I think. Daniel Kruger was there several times. Otto was there several times. Giampaolo Babetto was there several times. Gerd Rothmann—he was there several times. Manfred Bischoff was there several times. I—what's her name—Lily [ph]. Stephen Bottomley came as an exchange student from England. I had quite a few. We established exchange with a couple of German schools, which was great. I don't know if any of that still goes on. I don't know. Otto went on to take Hermann's place at the academy. And I think some of the problems that these Germans and Italians and Austrians and Swiss gave to the kids—there was just such a different perspective. And also, they were not part of the academic world and not even part of the American world.

The things that they presented—it was a lot of work for me because I had to find places for them to stay and show them around. But I enjoyed having them around. I enjoyed the diversity it brought to the students and the—I don't know what [Inaudible.]. I mean we did a catalog every year of the department for about 10 years. And it's funny how people react because other departments wanted it. They just wanted to be able to make a phone call. And I basically traded a piece of work for graphic. I did everything so that we would keep the expense down to about a thousand dollars. And then, finally, I had the money in the budget, but it got to be such an issue with everybody, they finally took it away from me—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MUELLER: —the administration.

MS. RIEDEL: This would be a catalog of what the students had accomplished over the year?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. MUELLER: We would do students and then visitors like, Otto was in [it]. Giampaolo was in our catalog. Daniel Kruger. And then the other thing which was really good, they got a work bench, and they worked there when they weren't teaching. And then, towards the end, the dean—because I was working there, and they said, "We can't afford to allow you to work there. You know, then everybody's going to want to work there."

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MUELLER: It's—

MS. RIEDEL: What an incredible resource [for the students. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: When I first got there, Dale—that was the only place he could work, was the glass shop at RISD. He lived in the Metcalf Building for two years.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean, he would [Laughs]—he had a shower.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: You know you couldn't get away with that now in a million, billion years. But it was fantastic. I mean people drank there. Now everything is off limits. I remember going to Rietveld in Amsterdam because I did a lecture there and a workshop. And they had liquor in the cabinets. They moved the work-benches away and they had food for me, and a party, and they're adults. It's realistic. I mean, it's starting to be at RISD, even if you wanted alcohol at an opening, you have to get all these signatures. When I was a graduate student, it was pretty wide open in the studios. It was much more realistic. And as they got this bigger security force, and it—

MS. RIEDEL: I'm struck by the parallel. [… –MR] This international exchange you set up at RISD with extraordinary, primarily German jewelers, [makes me think of Pilchuck and all the Italian glass artists that came there –MR]—the richness of that exchange of information, and its uniqueness. Nothing similar was happening anywhere [else –MR], correct?

MR. MUELLER: Anywhere. And nobody else did it. Nobody. I tried, when Otto got to be the head of the—because we talked about that. Like Viola, we talked a lot about academic plans and what we would do because, I mean personal things with him, personal things with me. So we were trying, planning, at least I thought we were planning, that we would do exchanges. And once he got in there, you know—and this was way above RISD, Providence. He had his. Hermann got taken, completely taken. And as soon as he got the job, he was done with Hermann, unfortunately, and done with me. You know, I provided all the credentials he needed by

being at RISD.

But we still had a lot of fun. Some of the projects he gave were great. They did produce some incredible pieces from the students. I mean I was very happy that he was there. Gerd was the funniest one. He was going to do this alchemy, turning lead into gold. And he wanted a very expensive poster, which I just didn't have the money to provide. But we did an exhibition called *A View by Two* at the RISD Museum, which was 15 jewelers. And Daphne paid for the catalog. Her husband Peter, was infuriated. He wanted nothing to do with RISD.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MUELLER: And Peter was the single largest alumni donor for 30 consecutive years. He graduated from RISD, Peter Farago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: So Daphne donated, in my name, $10,000 for this catalog. And I got Renata Gokl, who was a student of mine, to do all the graphics for nothing. And it was a beautiful catalog, turquoise cover. One of the big problems was I didn't have an American in the show. And I did a show earlier at Staten Island for Olivia Georgia, this Snug Harbor, because I had had a show at Helen Drutt's when she was on Fifth Avenue in 1988. And Olivia Georgia came, and she liked—and that was just sculpture and drawings. But she wanted me to do something on the ground with signage, but that never happened. So she said, would I curate a jewelry exhibition out there? And I designed and made all of the cases. The show was called *the Virgin*. It was 1991. And I wanted each person to make a piece uniquely for that show, never before seen. Jack Prip said it was a crock of shit. He said, "How can you have one piece?" You know, he said, "That's nonsense. You can't tell anything about"—so, he sent me two little—I only showed one, but, you know, I invited him out of affection, not because I thought it would be good for him. But before I could do anything, Olivia Georgia invited a friend of hers. It's a black woman who does beading—

MS. RIEDEL: Joyce Scott?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And she showed me this piece of, like, I don't know. It was supposed to be pornographic, but it was just a column. And I said, "Ai-yi-yi-yi-yi." And then, the first piece to come was Otto's. And she said, "Oh, jeez."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: "I had no idea what you had in mind." But anyway she was in. And then I said, "Don't invite anybody else, Olivia, please, if you want me to do this." So I think Jack was the only American. But it was Robert Schmidt and what's his name? Anyway, 25 people, 25 cases. And each one was made out of one-inch baluster molding stained white, and then they had a plastic vitrine, which was basically rectangular, except for Peter Skubic. He had—I think something that he had printed, it would look like a hole so it would be like a bullet hole.

I mean something like—somebody else have the space, or I don't know. But again, Daphne paid for that catalog. But because it's a Catholic community, they wouldn't use the word "virgin." So I had to find a word for the show, so it was *Neoteric*, "new." It was horrible, horrible. Anyway, when I did the graphics, I had to explain "The Virgin," and I had them print the word "virgin" in red so it stood out. Anyway, from that show, Daphne bought so much stuff. Philip Sajet was in it, Onno Boekhoudt, I said—Manfred Mischa Mueller, Manfred Bischoff, Gerd Rothmann, Otto Kunzli, Gabrielle Dziuba.

I was having fun doing these things. There was another one that was based—I don't know where the show was, maybe in Pittsburgh, based on couples. But I don't—I'm completely blank on that one. All I can remember is, Manfred Bischoff and Gabrielle Dziuba were a couple when they were at the academy under Hermann. And they were no longer a couple, but they said they would do this. They would do something. But I don't remember anything else about this show. And there was a catalog. Pretty bad. But—

MS. RIEDEL: Not really, we're talking about 40 or 50 years of material here.

MR. MUELLER: Quite a while ago. But one of the things I set up because enrollment wasn't so good at RISD—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. From the start, or—

MR. MUELLER: —again, that was another thing I remember with Viola, we talked about how do we actually get people to—one of the things we had at CCAC—and this is really digressing, but there weren't really declared majors. There were people; that's why we both had so many students. But how do we get to actually encourage somebody to declare a major in ceramics or metal arts, so that they will support, you know, the facility? She had

better luck. I think she had better faculty. There was always pressure. Ceramics did better then. I don't know if it's doing so well now. But RISD's enrollment—in order to keep your faculty, your budget, you need students. So I called my friend Kate Elliot and asked her if she had any. "Do you have any ideas on what I can do to try and boost enrollment?" She had a gallery that I showed with in Seattle. So she said, "What if I do a show at the Armory for SOFA [Sculpture Objects Functional Art], just featuring, you know, jewelry and glass?" And so, she said, "I'll do a silver card for your department and whatever card for glass. And it will just show alumni, students, faculty." And she said it was the only show she made money off. So Roger, who was the president then, was all excited, and he came and talked, and then Mark Lyman, who was then in charge of SOFA. This was quite a while ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So I—

MS. RIEDEL: This was in New York, at the Armory.

MR. MUELLER: In New York, at the Armory. So Mark liked the idea a lot. So I approached him, and he gave me, maybe six or seven consecutive years, a free booth.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? How great.

MR. MUELLER: But I had to do everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So I got the booth. I made two cases, sort of, out of this material, small top. One of them had acrobatic rings—well, they both—there was something underneath. And so, some woman from New Jersey was a judge's wife said, "How much is this case?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: So I sold her the case for $2,500 and delivered it over to the Palisades in New Jersey. But that part was a plus. That was interesting. But I would pick a color for the walls. I would get the signs made and put the signage up, "Rhode Island School of Design, blah blah blah blah blah." And, you know, "Think I could get students to man this booth?" They said, "Well, that's your job." One in Chicago now, because I did Chicago and New York.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was just RISD. No New Paltz no—

MR. MUELLER: Well, I did it. I'm—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But that's—

MR. MUELLER: —they never—you have to understand, this is a lot of work force—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —just like the—you know, and I wasn't gaining anything. But I thought it was good exposure. So I talked—Marzee, because we had at Marzee Galerie, we did some exhibitions with the jewelry department in Nijmege.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: So then I convinced the school and Mark and Marianne that's her name. "So we'll do a booth of Dutch and American students in Chicago." So I did the entire booth sort of based on Gerrit Rietveld. And most of them had to do this whole thing, because of RISD, on $300. So I just made these shelving brackets that were based on a red and blue chair, and the ends were painted yellow, and the shelves were cobalt blue, quarter-inch Plexiglas. And everything just either sat on the shelving or was hung on a little hook that I made on the walls—and then the signage. And we weren't supposed to sell anything, Mark said. But they were going like [snaps fingers]. It was, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this, '90s? 2000s?

MR. MUELLER: Maybe 2000—'99, 2000.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yes.

MR. MUELLER: And—

MS. RIEDEL: This was SOFA Chicago?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. SOFA in Chicago. And anyway, I think well, I don't know when I started doing this Professional Practices class, because I know I called Viola about the show with Carin van Krimpen because I'd shown there once before. She didn't. She had no interest in going back on. And then I called her about this. I had a graduate class called Professional Practices. And I would invite someone once a week who was involved professionally in some aspect of visual art—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: —whether it was, a practitioner, a curator, museum staff, writer. Again, Viola: "Give it to somebody else who's more deserving. You know, I don't have the time." And so, I had a very interesting array of people come over a period of years. And one of them was Gary Burton from Berklee School of Music because I was invited to teach a course in interior architecture that year. And so, I called it *the Pleasure of Space*. And I called Gary because I actually met him when I was a student in Rochester, and asked him if he would come and talk about how space is used in music.

MS. RIEDEL: Nice.

MR. MUELLER: And then he came, and he played his vibraphone. He came with his vibraphone, projected—used an overhead projector instead of—at the time, slides were in [Inaudible.] So he chose this song by Thelonious Monk called *Blue Monk*, which uses a lot of space and anticipation. And then he just talked about, in a recording studio, how space can be front, middle, or back, and how it was a very diverse approach to space versus visual space. And I enjoyed that class, and—

MS. RIEDEL: And was it a week-long thing, a lecture, a semester?

MR. MUELLER: It was a night. I had to do it at night.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: It was three hours, once a week, at night.

MS. RIEDEL: For a term?

MR. MUELLER: For the term, yes, which was in addition to my course load. You know, I didn't get paid for that, but I enjoyed it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I remember bringing Ron Nagle, and he had a disaster getting there. But he's great.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And he was funny. I mean he was funny. And I actually met him when I first met Dale, in 1969 when he had this record called *Bad Rice* with a blacked-out tooth. Dale was using this cup that he had made, this pink cup in this box, you know, that was molded. And that was an example of—because Dale then tried to do these kind of fume blue pieces in boxes, but Wendell Castle was there. I had a lot of interesting—Wendell wasn't that interesting. I brought a guy, a jewelry writer from England who was a big disappointment. And some other people from—I don't know if I should tell you this, but from—what is the decorative arts museum in the Smithsonian?

MS. RIEDEL: The Renwick?

MR. MUELLER: Boy, three incompetents that I met: Ken Trapp, who—Michael Monroe, and then the third one was the very first one. Wow. I mean, one of the problems I found—I can't remember his name.

MS. RIEDEL: Lloyd Herman, maybe.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And especially with someone like Helen Drutt, who was very fond of me, very devoted. It's very easy, in a field where there isn't any real history, like American crafts, to come off as, you know, being an expert. And it's not like the history of decorative arts. American craft is not—but it's a very, very new field. Anyway, I don't even know why I brought that up, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, what was disappointing about—

MR. MUELLER: Ken Trapp?

MS. RIEDEL: —the lectures, or—

MR. MUELLER: It was just completely devoted to kind of homosexual jewelry with no other base at all for—and as someone who's presenting a class and teaching, I was disappointed. I was disappointed. I don't know what the students—I didn't really get into a big discussion afterwards with them. I mean, one of the things I told them when the class begins is, "The reason I'm doing this is, you can learn, you know, how comfortable someone is as a presenter, how well they know their material, and how well they get it across to you. You know, and you can learn something from, you know, the way somebody presents themselves, their material and their presence." And that, in itself, was worth something to me, and to see how uncomfortable some people were.

I mean, somebody came—and this was a night class, and he was Dutch; I don't remember his name now. He comes with 13 carousels. I said, "This is unrealistic." He said, "No, no, no, they'll get into it. It'll just go like that." And after about four carousels, nobody was there. I said, "Thirteen carousels?" One carousel should be enough to, you know, so—

MS. RIEDEL: What were you looking for in terms of these night classes? What were you hoping that they would give to the students?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think I was looking for—

MS. RIEDEL: This was all still the Professional Practices class?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. I was looking for something a bit more diverse in terms of what I was able to—I was trying to do something that I thought was more my strength. And you know, after you teach for 30 years, and especially, you know, like nuts and bolts, "This is how you make a ring. This is" —it kind of loses its momentum. And I thought that my strength was actually in my critiques.

MS. RIEDEL: In the critiques?

MR. MUELLER: In the way I could actually verbalize what I saw. But—

MS. RIEDEL: I just want to say that "verbalize what you saw," in case the plane [overhead erased –MR] your voice, yes.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And I became interested in, first of all, being able to make an intelligent presentation. But I also became interested in allowing students to see what went on in the professional world, out of the academic world. And that was more of an interest of mine than just going in and, "This is how you light a torch. This is"—because I had very competent people doing that. But the school was also changing. You know, the school was growing. You know, when I went there, it was 800; now it's 3,000. So the goal is really tuition. It's not so easy to, you know, have standards.

You know, even in the '90s there was a girl that didn't come at all to the second semester of her senior year for her thesis. And I flunked her, and the dean kept saying, "You should reconsider." And so, finally I had to pass her. And he said, "You did the right thing." And I found it immoral. She could never come and graduate just like somebody who came all the time. And I mean, I think the academic world is changing because there is such a need for money. You know, they keep buying more buildings and all schools, not, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And you know, I'm, like I said, very traditional in my beliefs of drawing and art history. And I still think there's something good about learning a skill even if it's writing, which is a skill, but knowing, understanding yourself, your strengths, and your weaknesses, and learning how to actually work on both. Interdisciplinary things are good, but it also allows students lots of leeway, you know, to dabble.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Without focus, yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I think focus is a good thing. I mean, I realize that, in retrospect, when I talked about fifth-grade manual arts and just how, when I was 22 and being confronted by Hans Christensen, and then just forcing myself to sit down and make a little cigarette box, and it just changed my view of myself. And I think—

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I never thought I could do something like that. I mean I didn't know that I would have the patience or the wherewithal to sit still and actually make something very specific with very little tolerances. You know, this big, very accurately. And you think, "You know, I made that. I don't have to be a little shit-head

acting like an asshole who doesn't do anything, just being critical of everybody. I don't have to say anything to anybody now." I just look forward to coming in to do the next assignment, and yet add another—you know, another, you know, experience. And you know, two years later, I don't have to think so much about how I'm going to go about making it. I can solve—the goal is to be able to come up with an idea and not have to ask anybody anything, and then you execute it, and you execute it professionally. And that's a great thing, I mean for me.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting to hear you say that because it sounds as if continually challenging yourself and continually learning and figuring things out in the process of making has been a big part of your career. I've thought about that as I've looked at your work. There is an extraordinary range in your work—in scale, for one; from tiny rings and earrings to the—I'm thinking of the Braceway [ph] arches right now in particular, or some of the larger installations from the '80s, and then also in content from very formal, very abstract sculptural pieces, to very narrative pieces. I wonder if that's something that you approach consciously or if that came out of constantly challenging yourself to try the next thing.

MR. MUELLER: It's interesting because I remember I had a studio. I lived and worked in the Singer Building on Prince and Broadway.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I was doing a particular kind of drawing then. Well, I shouldn't say that, because it changed. Sometimes, when I didn't know what to do, I would just make, like, hieroglyphs. And I remember a Korean student seeing it. It was just graphite on a piece of 22-by 30-inch paper. And she said, "What does that say?" And it didn't say anything, but it alluded to, you know, Asian—I don't know. And sometimes when I was at a loss for how to scribble, I would just start doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: And then, some I did with color. And I did those in sort of a frame, a picture frame. So they're inside; they weren't going all the way into the edge, like some. But this all started because as a high school student, going to someplace in Montclair, New Jersey. Somebody whose name I don't know and I don't think I ever knew, was up on a ladder. And he had one of those, like, musical paper in the kitchen. And I don't even know what he was. I mean this is my memory playing tricks on me. But it looked like he was just doing kind of, like, graffiti. And so, I decided to try it. I did books of it when I had a [Inaudible] I have whole sketchbooks of just characters. But once something came, after I warmed up doing this stuff, some of the drawings that I did then. They were in there, but I couldn't do them again. And I think some of the narrative pieces that I did, both three-dimensionally and two-dimensionally—like, I did like that *A Prestidigitator*, they were kind of surrealist still lives. And they were very narrative, and they probably had their origins in H. C. Westermann. I mean probably not as lyrical as his things, but they allowed me to work the way I sort of started with Jack. I could build a platform, and then I could arrange things on the surface, and I could actually include things underneath because there was one that had a little—like a birch bark canoe that was all rods—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —but it was painted white underneath—

MS. RIEDEL: That was *One Little, Two Little...*? Is that the name of it?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. *One Little*—exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And on the top were five cups that were graduated, and in front of each up was a pair of dice. And so, it had to do with the evolution of the Indian from the canoe to the casino. So I think I—earlier, on these pieces that were just like table-top pieces, which probably come from Giacometti's funerary pieces. They were just patinaed, fairly simple. But then, after the pieces were constructed, I would come up with these titles.

MS. RIEDEL: After they were constructed?

MR. MUELLER: And the titles had nothing to do whatsoever with the—except I remember because I have a girlfriend who was another only child. I had taken some of her scraps, and I'd put them on these three chairs. So I called it the *Thoughts of Two Only Children*. So that title has relevance. But I think the reason that, sort of, the subject changes is I get up and I think, I mean, you know, "I should go out and maybe try to make some friends in the gallery world, or go to a friend artist." And then I start working, and then it's dark. And I spend a lot of time with my work. And I think it's because of that that I entertain a variety of ideas because even now, since the eye has sort of abandoned me for the moment, and I have—

MS. RIEDEL: Shall we mention that at this point?

MR. MUELLER: Oh. Well, it's curious because I don't know if it's important. And it's on my mind.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: We can—I can always talk. I can't cancel it, you know, because I sort of—but the things that I did in that period of time, which is over three and a half years now. I started with just taking writing paper, which I have here, and folding it and just coloring it, and then, as I was able to leave here, because I was here for a year in this apartment, so—

MS. RIEDEL: You really couldn't leave.

MR. MUELLER: Well, I—yes, well, I could go to the ophthalmologist.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: You know, but like, going to the studio—I set up a drawing table in here, had a drawing table over there. And then, I started, and these are actually done there. And these have nothing to do with that. And then, they're fairly new. And this has nothing to do with that. I mean, this—

MS. RIEDEL: And this is a table versus two-dimensional drawings, right.

MR. MUELLER: Yes, and so this whole thing came about—it's kind of a mathematical progression. I started not knowing what to do, putting 11 dots on the pages. And then I multiplied that times three. I mean this is just sort of how I arrived at a beginning. And then I started connecting the dots with just with a line. And then, I sort of thought about Richard Diebenkorn.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And so, I sort of approached filling in the dots and that in a way is going now back to actually being a student to early teaching, those are things that really inform my work. And that's also what I tried history—

MS. RIEDEL: Art history—

MR. MUELLER: —trying to pay attention to what I actually found points of contact with, you know, looking at visual art and things that I've felt something for.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And certainly Richard Diebenkorn. There's a lot. You know, Edward Hopper. And they're far too many to mention. But when I was—

MS. RIEDEL: At some point it would be interesting to mention some of the more significant ones.

MR. MUELLER: Well, very early on, Max Ernst was a very—I mean not now, but very early on. I even drove to Sedona to see the house that he built in 1974. And then it's curious because when I showed at a gallery in New York called Area X, and I had Bobbie Goldberg, who was Terry Dintenfass' director, called me in Switzerland because Terry—they had come to look at my work a couple times when I was living on Mercer Street. And she said, "It's not a show of Terry's, but my grandfather died; he was an architect; he left me some money. And I want you to have the first show." So this was in 1984. So I had this show of sculpture and drawings at Area X Gallery on East 10th Street. But in subsequent years, I had a show there with Eric Ernst, who was Max's grandson, which is curious.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And the opening of the show, his father Jimmy died, right after, and there was an interesting book called *Not So Still Life*, which was sort of an homage to Lou Straus-Ernst, Jimmy's mother. But I think am I wandering too much?

MS. RIEDEL: No. What —

MR. MUELLER: 1991 I was doing a lot of monoprinting at RISD. And I met an undergraduate student there named David Korty from California. And I think he was eating a piece of pumpkin pie. And again, looking for a topic—on a paper plate, so, I did an entire sketchbook, of David Korty's pumpkin pie. And just recently, some friends that live on Orchard Street had seen a little monotype that I gave to these friends down in Miami, and it

was called *Mister Potato Head's Plan*. So it was a shotgun, sort of taken from Looney Tunes, an attaché case, and Mister Potato Head with these sunglasses, mirrored sunglasses, and a bow tie. And I said, "I think I pulled a second image," because a lot of monotypes, you sometimes end up with still oil on the plate. But in the course of looking for this, I found—this was another monotype I did of David Korty's pumpkin pie.

I'm looking at it, and anyway, one of the ways I would spend my time—and I don't do it now, but I don't have an excuse, even with the one eye, but would sit, listen to music, and fill up a sketchbook with anything. Could be pumpkin pies, could be hot dogs. It could be—I started just doing something called—in this period of three and a half years, you have to do something—comic parts. So I started to extract, well, Daffy Duck's bill. So I just would draw the bill with oil pastel and graphite in a field of white. So it was very modeled. And so, I did Olive Oyl's hair, Popeye's hat, Little Lulu's hair, and Sluggo's hat. And I mean, not everybody knows who these people are [Laughs.] And then there was Dick Tracy's hat.

But I sort of enjoyed doing that, got it out of my system. And I think that's how some of these things come to be. I work on an idea, and then something else comes along. And then I—sometimes—everybody told me, in the art world, I should do more of those still lives like *the Prestidigitator*, the *One Little, Two Little, Three Little*. But I started a few, there were a couple in Brooklyn. For some reason, they don't come as fluidly as I would like them to.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that now, as opposed to early?

MR. MUELLER: Now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Because, you know, the first one of these wall pieces was done around 1998.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And in a way, they're hollow. They're very light. They're just sheet metal, but then they're painted. So this was a studio in Providence. And it was pretty big, 3,000 square feet by the door. And there had been a plastic sign, it's plastic that you could bend—that said "fire extinguisher." And I didn't know what, like the pumpkin pie, I didn't know what I was to do. And those still lives are a lot of work, not that I—anyway. And it had curled over by the door, so it was just like this. So I thought, "Well, that's an interesting." And it cast a shadow. So I cut out the triangle, and I had to build an armature the same shape, to give it dimension, and then put a back on it. So the front was pointed, and the back was—and I painted it red, maybe vermillion. And that was the title, *Vermillion*. I made a little bracket.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And at the time, I was showing with Franklin Parrasch. So I brought the piece, maybe two pieces. And it—and prior to—

[Audio break.]

—were these still lives, which he sold very well. And he said, "Well, what is this crap?" So it was a group show with Sol LeWitt. This is all secondary-market stuff. Anyway, he put it up, and it was the first thing to sell. So then he says, "I think you're onto something here." [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Was this before or after the rolling papers idea?

MR. MUELLER: After.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Much earlier.

MR. MUELLER: The rolling papers was the same. No, no, rolling papers is after.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: This was probably the third show, which was—the first show I did with Franklin was *Lights*, in SoHo. And then, I don't know. I don't know maybe there were a few shows with—maybe six. I don't recall.

MS. RIEDEL: Please go on.

MR. MUELLER: So that was the very first of these wall pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MUELLER: And I was intrigued with the idea of the simplicity. I mean they're more involved to make than what they look like.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this the same series that had the pieces named for colors? *Cadmium*?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. That's—

MS. RIEDEL: This one.

MR. MUELLER: I did that so I wouldn't forget what color.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Because if I had to touch them up, I knew what the oil paint was.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was about as far, conceptually, as you could go from those still lives. Scale-wise, they were still relative.

MR. MUELLER: They were small. I mean they were small.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And that's when I started. That's when I discovered I could use corners.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay. Great.

MR. MUELLER: So I started to use positive and negative corners. And then there were a couple little—and Franklin told him that there were a couple little pieces that I liked. And the problem with this is, it was, like, all of a sudden, you know, we're "Let's have a show in three months." And I couldn't even live with these things because I would make them; sometimes the paint would start—you know, oil paint takes a long time to dry, even with a cobalt drier on bronze or brass or copper. There's nothing to absorb it. And with some of them, I would have enjoyed spending a little time. I've been here 10 years, and I never did this before, but everything in here I made and in Providence it's hard to—not much is mine. I mean there's a few things here and there.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: But I decided, you know, I'm from—curious to sort of live with my own work and look at it, you know. So—

MS. RIEDEL: And what has that experience been like?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I mean, I'm content with the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: You know, and I've moved some, taken some things down. I think this drawing has remained, and that's from 1982. And there were a whole series of the—this drawing, this *Planar* series, when I lived on Mercer Street. I think this piece over your head has remained. And then that question mark has remained. And the drawings that were all changed. And the Mickey Mouse in the mousetrap came recently. And I have so many drawings. I have flat files. And then, because I make my own frames, I can frame things. I mean I can also take the things out, use them. I don't want to have hundreds of frames for them. So I have things kind of stacked. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you find that it influenced your work to live with your work more directly? [… –MR]

MR. MUELLER: Well, it's funny because without seeing the work, sometimes I think about something and I change it. I think, "There's something wrong with this piece." I may have a screw loose, but I want to go back and correct it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Or alter it; but do what I think should be done to it. But there were up here something that I did with my—I have a daughter who's 22. And something I tried to do with her and her mother at Penland [Penland School of Crafts], maybe in 2003. So she was 11 years old. And something I've enjoyed doing for a long time is illustrating the alphabet before she was born. You know, and sometimes with nonsensical, like, put an A and, I don't know, draw a pickle, but not necessarily the A has anything to do with the image. And so, this time I decided with Cordelia, I would—her mother's teaching. We're in this residence for Penland. So I brought a

bunch of paper and oil pastels and graphite. So I said, "Let's do the alphabet." So Cordelia lasted about two pages and so, I did A to Z. And so, I remembered seeing these. And again, they're in flat files. So I framed five of them, and they were up here. And then, I kind of got tired of them. And I actually sort of remember these, but I do them, and then I put them away, put another piece of paper up. And so, I think I was curious to see these because these have a relation to some of the white pieces in terms of just color choice. These are much more controlled than those are, in terms of the image. That has more to do with form. And that's how it—

MS. RIEDEL: Does this piece have a title?

MR. MUELLER: *Three and Two*? *Two and Three*? Something like that. That's probably 10 years old, nine, 11 years old. And the reason is, it creates sort of an environment that's mine.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean I didn't make the rug or the chairs. And I do like, you know, early 20th-century architectural furniture. And I really like classic modernism. And—more than, you know, what follows. You know, people like Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, you know, Josef Hoffmann. You know, Josef Hoffmann made a flatware pattern in 1904 that's unbelievable. And it was all handmade with the little five spheres at the end, basically. But I mean I made a few chairs, but they're very difficult. They are very difficult to make them beautiful and comfortable. So I think that was something Dale and I had in common. I would buy chairs. I had so many chairs just, you know, to have chairs around. But they take up so much space. And they're beautiful. They're beautiful things.

I mean Rietveld made something called a Berlin chair. And I remember, when there was a gallery, 420 West Broadway, when Mary Boone was there, the gallery next door, I don't remember—a very interesting sculptor. He just kind of manipulated things. I don't remember his name because this goes back a long time. But in the office was this Berlin chair, which was just gray, white, and black. I don't think it's ever been manufactured. And then this guy is in, like, his glass room, and there's something about this deep manipulated matchbooks, and he's sitting on this chair. And it was a beautiful interior, but this chair is just plain, just vertical and horizontal, no diagonals.

And that's something that I wouldn't mind spending some time to look at because I actually went to the Schröder House in Utrecht to see the—Rietveld and Mrs. Schröder sort of put that house together in 1924. And it's a small two-story house, but I've gone on tours to see Frank Lloyd Wright's houses in Beverley Hills, and the building on Maiden Lane in San Francisco, the V.C. Morris. And you're not allowed to take pictures, but the Richard Neutra. I mean that period of architecture it's just amazing. Amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] I have two questions. I'm going to go back to the earlier one first.

MR. MUELLER: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You started talking about titles, and then you went in another direction. That would be interesting to pursue further because the titles seem so significant. And sometimes—

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes. I remember some friends, you know, kind of irritated, "What's with these stupid titles?" And I didn't think they were stupid at all, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I don't think they're stupid either.

MR. MUELLER: I mean I read a lot

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I can tell [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And I really enjoy reading. I mean I have no use for television, unfortunately. But I enjoy music and literature. But I spent a lot of time studying surrealism. And there was a title—I mean and this now goes back to the '80—something about the industrialist and the mermaid.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right. It's the *House of the Industrialist*, something like that.

MR. MUELLER: Something like that. [*The Home of the Industrialist and the Mermaid* –LM] And I found that piece recently. It kind of needs to be refinished, but it was a piece that I liked. I mean they're small. They're modern, thin—

MS. RIEDEL: When you say small—

MR. MUELLER: Oh, probably 16-inches high by 14—inches square. I mean, so I made these bronze bases. And generally they're about an inch high, and then there's a plate on top. And in order to keep them clean, they're

all put together with machine screws underneath. So I could do my composition and then attach everything. But now, the titles—they were—they came so—it was so much fun to make a piece and then come up with a title that—I—there was a piece, the first show at Area X, and it was about three feet high. Richard Wells painted it with Imron in Lafayette Street. It was very industrial, very shiny, automotive paint. And what was it called? And it had to do with Miró and Giacometti because there was a piece sort of vaguely reminiscent of *The Palace at Four A.M.*, but I can't—there was a yellow ladder. There was an electroform goose egg, and it was painted. But it sort of looked like a mouse, and it had something to do with "mouse" in the title, but— [*The Plight of a Catalan Mouse* –LM]

MS. RIEDEL: We'll have to look. Is it on your website?

MR. MUELLER: No. No.

MS. RIEDEL: There's one with a long ladder on your site.

MR. MUELLER: That—but I—

MS. RIEDEL: Not the one you're thinking of.

MR. MUELLER: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: That one is later. That's from the '90s. '92 because that piece was from, like, '83.

MS. RIEDEL: Some of the titles seem so straightforward, like *One Little, Two Little*, it seems—

MR. MUELLER: And that was exactly—

MS. RIEDEL: —and then, there are others that are just—

MR. MUELLER: And that's also later.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Because there's a piece that is called *Requiem for Gandhi, Gantry, and Helms*, and that's sort of an altar. And on the altar is a gun, which I made. So it's constructed; it looks like a gun. And then, coming out of the barrel is a string of a thread. And then, on the surface are three concentric circles that are in relief, a quarter of an inch, that sort of try to represent a target. And then, there's a hole in the middle. And at the end of the string is a little bronze cork. And that's hanging down, so it's like a cork-gun through the target. And then, underneath, there's this red tantric hand, which represents Gandhi. I think the altar is Gantry, Elmer Gantry. So I can't tell you more than that about the—again, it was called *My Last Dance with a Demon*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And that is probably the first of these kind of surrealist still lives. So it's kind of a library ladder going up to what looks like something out of a chemistry set, like a beaker. There's a beaker over here.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And that's it. Oh, there's a head with rabbit ears.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And they're painted white, but the inside of one is red. And so, somebody that I went out with, who kept saying she was harmless as a bunny, this was an homage to her. So that's why *My Last Dance with a Demon*, because she wore these rabbit ears. I mean, like ear muffs but, anyway. But they were white and pink; they didn't have a—so, the red was, kind of, a symbolic gesture of, kind of, you know, nasty demon. And I still have that piece. I think I have it. I know there was a show in SoHo that Bobbie Goldberg put on. And I made a piece that was called—a kind of three-dimensional version of Morandi.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And so, I took the vessels, and I think it was called *For Morandi*.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so.

MR. MUELLER: And brought it to the gallery; woman came in, bought it, and took it away. I never saw it again,

so—

MS. RIEDEL: Two questions. First is about how your work has been received over time. But we were just talking about guns, and for somebody who was talking earlier about not being political, it does seem [that in certain pieces –MR] there is some kind of political or social commentary.

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think because I have eyes and ears and it may be subconscious, but I'm really against guns.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I mean I think I woke up this morning thinking about this kid who killed all these little kids in Connecticut [Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in Newtown], and the stand that the NRA [National Rifle Association] takes about, "We need to abide by the Second amendment it is: A right to bear arms." And you know, I don't agree with that, but I don't know that anything would prevent somebody snapping and going out and deciding to kill other people. And that's unfortunate. I mean the first person that man killed was his mother. It's unfortunate. And that doesn't give you an answer about guns. And I think owning guns is not necessary. But because I enjoy constructing things and I decided, "I want to make a gun." And I made a few of them, and they're complicated. And then I wanted to think of, "How do I use it?" You know, in the context of an idea. And so I think that's the only one that I actually used successfully.

I have another gun that has a coin slot on the top with a dollar sign that I had engraved. And I tried that in a few things, and they've all been disassembled. And I don't know if there was ever any other. I made a little gun as a pendant, which I still have, that I liked. And it was a silver gun with lead bullets that slid on this little stainless steel cable; just a little silver gun. And some people found it objectionable. The subject matter, it's a gun.

MS. RIEDEL: There are some drawings, too, [with guns. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: I did books, sketchbooks of just—you know, and I even wrote in the title page, "The Gun." And so, sometimes they were pastry guns. But they're not using any illustration, just drawing guns of my own invention. And you know, why? And I wasn't even looking at guns like pumpkin pie, and I wasn't using an abstract language. And I have no idea why I did that.

MS. RIEDEL: It's some combination of formal structure and form with content that's somehow compelling and disturbing?

MR. MUELLER: I don't find them disturbing. I mean, in reality, I don't really want a gun. I don't have any guns. I just think that, for some reason, I decided to try and draw guns. I don't draw a large variety of guns because I don't have a vocabulary of guns. And I do better taking something like that than if I decided I wanted to sit down and draw designs for tables. That would last about three pages. That's too hard to explain. I would actually rather try to build a table from the material, you know, get an idea, and then try to work it out. Sometimes I used just baluster molding and stick something together so I can see what it looks like for a table or a chair, but I don't have a sense of what it is if I draw it two-dimensionally. That's me. Other people do very, very well.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I like jazz very much. And I like spontaneous solutions because I lose patience. Once an idea begins, and I can build on it, then I have something tangible. And I can still manipulate it. Because it's just a series of objects stuck together. And I can change proportion, change the scale. That's how I'm most comfortable working.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So that—

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds—and it's something you said earlier—it sounds as if the drawing, the 2D and 3D work really are quite separate. And they might overlap in terms of color or maybe even some imagery, but that's pretty much it.

MR. MUELLER: The one thing I can say about the lasting of the wall pieces is that they come the closest to actually incorporating drawing because they're actually camouflaged. You know, so many people—well, not so many, but the few people that realize how laborious these things are to construct wonder "Why do you paint them? Then why not make them out of wood? Why go through all that work?" And I said, "Because, you know, they're not about metal. That's not what the idea is about." I'm looking for a form, but I need the surface to be a certain way. You know, I want it to have color. Without the color, they're dead to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: And yet, at Franklin's I made a kind of an African head without features. And it was just cooper. And that was the only thing that sold in this one show. I did some pieces early on for Micky von Bartha in Switzerland. And this was early on. And so, one was a—if you take the wrapper off of Life Savers, and what you have inside is this kind of aluminum skin which looks like a pile of tires. I found in a junk store some porcelain Life Savers about that big. So I made this tube and all these grooves and set on the top this white Life Saver. I think that was one. But I also I made two Mickey Mouse heads. They were raised [Inaudible] the ears. So one was fat; one was thin. They were upside down so that the ears were the feet. And there was a lid on the two. So the top of one was a replication of one of Andy Warhol's dollar signs. And the top of the other was the Swiss flag. You know, it's a white cross on a red field. And they were titled *For Otto and Andy*. So Otto Kunzli, who's Swiss, and Andy Warhol.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Anyway, they were oxidized black. And then there was a third—what was the third piece? I mean, he bought them when I was working on them. He liked these things.

MS. RIEDEL: Who bought them?

MR. MUELLER: Micky von Bartha. He's from Basel.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: He's a dealer, and I don't remember what the third one was. But it was also sterling silver, you know, carefully made, but probably painted. He flipped out when he got them. But I mean, again, as with Hans Christensen, "Sterling silver? You paint sterling silver?" So, anyway, I don't know what became of them. I mean, they were paid for and shipped, but he was very unhappy with that, so I was told. You know, I'm working with an idea. The material is just a vehicle. You know, the idea is to change that material so that it doesn't really represent what it was but now what it's become. And so, if it just looks like sterling silver, I sort of haven't accomplished what I set out to accomplish. I mean in my opinion, that is. I still wish I could remember what—oh, I know what it was. It was a pencil. So I had scored the body of the pencil, so that it's six faces. And then I made the bezel for the eraser, made the eraser out of copper, and then I took the carbon rod that you would use to remove slag from casting, and I made another setting at the bottom of the pencil so this could go inside, so it would look like it was graphite. But I painted the pencil yellow. So anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the title of that one?

MR. MUELLER: That might have been called, whatever—pencils—I mean, I made a pair of rings like that, which Daphne—I don't know if they were yellow and white gold and red jasper and one was the point of the ring, one was the eraser.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes. The pencil and the eraser rings, right.

MR. MUELLER: I don't know whether Daphne has those or gave them to the —

MS. RIEDEL: I think they're at the Boston Museum. I think I've seen them there.

MR. MUELLER: Because I did, I think, maybe starting around 1992 in dealing with lighting, trying to actually turn the lights into something more narrative, not as recognizably lights.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I think the first—and they just came up from watching the first two lights that were done. So Leslie [ph] somebody—Leslie told them they were part of Annie Hauberg's collection. But they were just kind of a bronze shelf. And on one was a burgundy bottle and on the other was a bordeaux bottle. So when you turn them on, the bottle looks like a wine bottle on a little metal shelf. And then, when you hit the switch, they're lights. And so, that led the way to others. I did make a big number two yellow pencil, and the eraser was pink glass blown. I had to figure out how to make it stand, so I was using a half-inch bronze rod and you all, you know—it was—anyway. And there was a piece based on Magritte's, *Time Transfixed*, which is a locomotive coming out of a fireplace. So it was just like a black and red freighter coming out of the wall, and the smokestack was the light.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. But I mean I didn't do that many of them. Trying to come up with an idea that I could use. There was a fountain pen point with a light behind it, which was in a restaurant here, and I took it back.

MS. RIEDEL: You did a lot with lighting over the years. How did that begin?

MR. MUELLER: Oh.

MS. RIEDEL: I mean we're looking at Pluto with a lampshade right here.

MR. MUELLER: Well that was from a show in SoHo, and in 1991. It was called *Pet Show*. The show was to raise money for the pets whose owners had died of AIDS. So I made Pluto. Somebody almost bought it but then it sat in storage. And then when I moved here, I said, "Oh. I'll bring"—doesn't make—I mean if I was smart, I would put in bigger sockets that we could put a bigger bulb. In 1980, walking down West Broadway—and Art and Industrie was on West Broadway, and I was with my friend Dewey who was saying, you know, "You got to get involved." So we go into Art and Industrie, and he says to Michael White, I think was the director: "What do you guys need? What do you need?"

[They laugh.]

And he said, "We need lights, lamps." And so, Dewey said, "Go make some lamps. That's what you should do. Go make some lamps." So I went back to Providence. And you know, not an easy task.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MUELLER: I mean I made two stupid, stupid lights, one of which Helen Drutt bought and owns. And so, I have this little table, whatever you—

MS. RIEDEL: Coffee table size, yes.

MR. MUELLER: Coffee table, that was my mother's, in her very first apartment. And it's the one thing that came from that early house that I kept. I never knew anything about it, but it's a round table. It's chrome-plated. It's got four legs. It's all screwed together. It's a very smart—it probably influenced—very smart piece of furniture. And when I was in Rochester, students said, you know, "That's a Mies van der Rohe, or Corbusier." Anyhow whatever. I don't know when it was, the Brooklyn Museum had a show, maybe 1988, called *The Modern Age*. But I went to see the show. And in the catalog, there's a full page with this table. And it's a Wolfgang Hoffmann, Josef Hoffmann's son, who was an industrial designer until about '55, and then I don't know—he went into real estate. I made a small version of this table, sort of. And then, I made this ziggurat out of, like, one-and-a-half-inch tubing. I mean, and the interesting thing [Laughs] and then at the top, I put one of Dale's. Because Dale was giving me his rejects. And so, Jack would say, "Stop drilling holes in those things."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And I mean I said, "It's, you know, I needed a lampshade." So it was just—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MUELLER: And even Charlie Cowles came to this opening. I don't know, the lamp was $1,800. And he said, "Buy it. The glass is worth more than the lamp." But they weren't really well suited for—but it was all I had at the time, what Dale was throwing me. And then I started to—people that would come—you know, go up to the glass shop. And Jack Wax, Jim Harmon, Therman Statom they all—I mean, these clunky things, heavy, and I made bases for them. You know, these lamps were probably made around 1985. But that's Benny's glass, so—you know, and Richie Royal. My structures were getting more sophisticated, and I was beginning to learn more about what I wanted on the top.

MS. RIEDEL: Don't some lighting—I'm thinking of the Port of Seattle and some of the restaurants, that's really very—

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes. It's very functional.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's more streamlined, conceptual, minimal, and very little to do with lamps at all—much more focused on lighting.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. White. A lot of the people that would buy these things. I only like white. People that buy glass and "Oh, white, no no—" and, you know, color. So at Port of Seattle they were very, very simple and conical white—kind of almost like a torch because the metastructures are quite big. There was this house, the Reeve House in Seattle, and they were supposed to look like Japanese lanterns. And that sort of colored the—it just black trim and I think kind of ochre glass, with WD50, which was a restaurant.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: What I liked best about this is this fireplace that I did that was sort of based on a Mondrian asymmetrical grid, where the hearth then becomes part of one of the rectangles in the grid. But that's all colored glass. But then, over the bar are all these wine bottles. And that illuminates the bar. And that's sort of functional but not as obvious as, you know, just a light fixture that provides light. But that was probably the last lighting that I did. And that's early, you know, 2002, 2003.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I did a couple of lights for them, trading things around. There was a kind of a Monopoly hotel that hangs flush on the wall, and the underside is glass. And I think I got more wrapped up in doing these low-relief wall pieces. And then I, in a way, got away from the lights.

MS. RIEDEL: You've done so [many collaborations –MR] with glass artists over the years. How did that come about? I'm thinking particularly of Dale Chihuly.

MR. MUELLER: The very first piece I did was with Dale. I mean I remember: I'm in the basement, and we had only known each other a month. He comes down and sees me, says, "You make some silver spurs." I said, "Okay." So he brings me this little glass cowboy. And he said, "Figure out a title. Figure out something." So I made these little silver spurs for this clear and black cowboy. And there was an exhibition at RISD. It's in the catalog. I think it's called the *Wild Wild West*. And I called it *Bronco Boy*, and I mean, I wrote a little slogan, like, four lines. But I don't remember it.

And we did a little lamp. It's very low; it has a round dowel at the end that Daphne has. We did a—well, when I saw there, again, Dale was great at just turning over his—he said, "You know, we should do these Christmas ornaments Mondale, the vice president." And he said, "We'll get an article in the paper. You be in it." But he said, you know, "We—you know, work it up. I'll get some glass tubes, but you know, you"—so, we got the two departments working on all of these ornaments. I went down; I got somebody in the wood shop to build this incredible box to house all of these ornaments. So Dale made one; I made one. And then, they were great. And we got invited down to Mondale's house. Stanley Lechtzin was there. But it's what's happened—what has happened sometimes with me or with Dale and I, who are sort of engaging. And Stan—you know Stanley Lechtzin?

MS. RIEDEL: I know who he is. I don't know him.

MR. MUELLER: He's kind of dry. We're having a great windup at—Dale was very sick. We have a hotel room in Washington, D.C. We go to this restaurant for lunch, this is before going to Mondale's for this cocktail reception for being contributors to the Christmas tree. And somebody next to us—all of a sudden, they bring a phone, they plug it in, and he's on the phone with—Dale said, "This is incredible." And so, we start talking to this guy who has these three-by-five white cards. And he says, "You know, this is all I carry." So this was another idea Dale thought was great. We'll telephone the white cards. So I'm remembering weird details. I mean, how important this isn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, sometimes they all connect together. Last time you pulled something interesting out of that. So go ahead.

MR. MUELLER: So we go to Mondale's house, and they're serving sherry. You know, little guys in Eisenhower jackets passing rum and sherry. And then, so, next thing, we are arm-in-arm with Joan Mondale. And she's taking us, like, on an art history quiz on the pieces in her collection in the house. And I don't remember what—after that. I know that some of the other faculty members weren't too happy about us, kind of, capturing Joan Mondale. But such is life.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So that's when I first got there. And then we decided to give the entire collection to the American Crafts Museum, so they got—

MS. RIEDEL: The Christmas ornaments?

MR. MUELLER: They got all the Christmas ornaments and the collaborations. In the beginning, I was trying to get people interested, because I wasn't making a lot of money selling lamps. Like, they're a lot of work. And, you know, I would get $1,000 or $900, so I was trying to find—you know, I got Helen to agree to do a show for Richie Royal, Benjamin Moore, and somebody else, if they would blow the glass for the [floor –LM] lights. And they didn't care about Helen Drutt. I mean I don't know if they cared about—you know, it was more important to me that—they wanted to make money. So I don't even know how the first collaboration with Benny started. But it's 30 years ago. And you know, we had a—I mean I got really—

MS. RIEDEL: He was a student at RISD, wasn't he?

MR. MUELLER: Of Dale's, graduate student, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And when you were there as a [member of the faculty –MR], he had already graduated.

MR. MUELLER: He left the year that I came.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: But I knew him because of my friendship with Dale. And Benny is a sweet guy. But also, I mean he had nothing to do with the collaboration because that was another pitfall for me not taking money. And next, everybody started thinking that this was his work and nothing to do with me. So there was a show in 2003 with —2004—2003 with Jim Schantz, where the actually—a piece called *Amsterdam*, which was a wall piece. Which was, you know, bronze construction, powder-coated, and then with roundels in the face. And Mark Lyman had done a banner for Park Avenue. And my name wasn't anywhere on that. So I called Jim Schantz, and he said, "Well, I can't talk to you. This is Benjamin's work." So then, I called Benny, and I read him the riot. I mean, I flipped out. And he said, "Well, calm down." I said, "Benny, you know, you've been taking credit for all these things, you know, and this is outrageous. You know, you had nothing to do with that thing, nothing." I mean, except, you know, somebody blew the glass. "But the whole concept of these things is all mine."

You know, and the whole thing was righted. Benny was just put down as the glassblower, but the card that went out was—Jim Schantz did a card for the show with my name and we thought we had—and this is a bad thing, is we thought we had a commission for somebody from Brooklyn Heights, and then my retina detached. And I mean I did drawings, and then I couldn't do anything for a year. And then that was the end of—because they needed something to fit a space. So anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: So are those collaborations tabled for the time being?

MR. MUELLER: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And that was something else I did about three months ago and mailed it out to Benny, just based on kind of a new one of these—a new way of mounting everything. And it's all these parallelograms. And he liked it; he didn't like—I don't have a lot of glass, so he didn't like the glass that I used. So he's going to make new glass. But that was also done with, you know, with him.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've done some commissions together as well, yes?

MR. MUELLER: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Lots. We talked about Port of Seattle; that was the two of you.

MR. MUELLER: Port of Seattle was a commission. Reeves was a commission. We did a couple of big chandelier commissions for lodges up in Sun Valley, Idaho. We did a big, big chandelier, about 14 feet, for a private residence in Seattle. And [we were] trying to figure out how to get these things from the East Coast. So I had to make them so they all screwed together so they could be assembled. And I mean, that again was a learning experience. I mean this one chandelier was pretty bad, I mean, that I made in Sun Valley. And—

MS. RIEDEL: You don't like it?

MR. MUELLER: No. I mean, in retrospect, no. But I've made a lot of things. I mean I'm honest. I made them. But just because I made them doesn't mean that they're good.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you and Benny collaborate? Do you make the metal and send it out, and then he adds the glass? How does that actually work?

MR. MUELLER: Well, what's happening, he's sending me glass.

MS. RIEDEL: He sends the glass, okay.

MR. MUELLER: But I have sent him just the metalwork he's put glass on. But over the years, I mean I figured out better ways to mount the glass, more decorative ways, more connecting—sort of more homogenized ways to put the whole thing together so that this armature, the way it hangs on the wall, you don't see anything. It's just in the beginning, just using the machine screws or these nuts it takes a little bit of time to—it's slow.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And it's not something I work with all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: I did. The things that I'm really interested in, I tend to devote more time to solving them more to my liking. And there was a big piece for a house in Connecticut. Kate got me that. I just use these. They're very nice, but they're just machine screws, so they're oxidized black. And now, I actually make these bronze disks, and they're powder-coated. And so it's actually some—repeats the theme of this run-down the circle.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. MUELLER: And the bracketing becomes part of the whole composition, so this last one, it was red, blue, and yellow. So there's a bracket that goes on the wall that the actual frame mounts on, and then what holds the glass mats on that so, it has more dimension.

MS. RIEDEL: I think I've seen photos of this.

MR. MUELLER: So evidence of the three trolls coming through. And they're all parallelograms, and they're different materials in different diameters. And I was able to think about this, which was the size problem for a while. And that's probably why it changed when it did, so.

MS. RIEDEL: I think we'll stop here because the card's about to end.

MR. MUELLER: Okay. Yes, my and I'm getting—

MS. RIEDEL: Your voice, I can tell.

[END OF CARD TWO.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Louis Mueller at the artist's home in New York City on June 25, 2014, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and this is SD card number three. So, yes, any thoughts that occurred [to you –MR] last evening?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think I remembered that Jack Ford was the one who was interested in Hawaiian shirts, and he had a booth at the Alameda Flea Market every week. One of the reasons I remember that is I didn't socialize much with the faculty at the school, because they lived in Oakland and I lived in Mill Valley.

MS. RIEDEL: So you had started off in Oakland and then moved to Mill Valley?

MR. MUELLER: Only in the summer.

MS. RIEDEL: So you moved almost immediately.

MR. MUELLER: And I found out from Wade that actually Viola was one of the major supporters of me getting Ken Cory's job.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MUELLER: Because he just said, "Well she was on your side to get, to have you hired," and I had only met her, you know, and she saw what I did that one summer school, because she had already been there six or seven years, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And when you came out to teach for the summer—

MR. MUELLER: The summer, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —for summer work and you had a little time.

MR. MUELLER: Well she saw actually, what the students did.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And I think then a slide presentation, and I think they proposed that I do, Viola and Marty, an exhibition of my work at Isabel Percy West Gallery. Anyway, and she saw this pleasure chest in the, I think I

mentioned it. I had set up an electroforming bath in this little back closet in the metal arts studio, and she asked if I could, you know, actually electroform one of her little figurines or whatever it was, which I never actually did. And I think the bath was up and running but there was a cafeteria right outside the metal arts studio, and then there was a lawn where people used to sunbathe, and then there was a ping-pong table that I remember I would play ping-pong on lunch breaks with Jack Ford and sometimes—anyway, I just remember it was metal arts, glass, ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it led by Viola experimenting with luster glazes and this was another alternative?

MR. MUELLER: This was a matter. It was actually taking a little, I think, ceramic figure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: Because I think she used to embed them, maybe do slips and embed them in these, like, plates that were mounted on the wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: They almost looked like, you know, figures in an avalanche or an earthquake. I would put a metal skin on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. MUELLER: So that it actually was transformed from ceramic to metal.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. MUELLER: So, anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, but it never happened.

MR. MUELLER: No, it never happened. It never—

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that she was interested in exploring that.

MR. MUELLER: Like, I mean we did talk at lunchtime, we talked about artists and books and art and the people that she thought I might be interested in looking up, and I especially found this guy Jess—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —who lived in San Francisco, and actually saw a show of his at the Berkeley Museum. A very interesting kind of singular character who lived with a poet named Robert Duncan and I think Viola was much more on top of the art scene there since she was from California.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And, you know, I also liked Jeremy Anderson's work, who I think lived in Marin County, and also was represented by Rena Bransten of—well it was called Braunstein/Quay.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: So Rena, Ruth and actually Sylvia Brown—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —were the three partners.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I actually had my first show with them in 1975, all thanks to this artist soap box derby that Fletcher Benton sort of invented.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you get involved? With [other artists from –MR] CCAC or they were simply making—

MR. MUELLER: I actually was told about it by, I think, Dana Draper, who was my next-door neighbor in Mill Valley, at 135 California Avenue. That was my address, Mill Valley. Turns out, he's Harry Guggenheim's grandson. And so I called the San Francisco Museum of Art and they said, "Sure," you know, "It's $100." You know, "If you don't do it, you have to return the $100. And so you can participate." So, I got an idea to make this big basketball

sneaker, and I had no idea how I would make it, so I made paper templates out of brown craft paper. I found a sail maker, Russian guy in San Francisco, who made the whole thing out of black canvas on the outside, white canvas on the inside, and brass grommets, and then gave me some webbing for the lacing. And then, I actually bought an old soap-box racer from a kid in San Jose to see how the steering was, and then made the shoe out of one-inch plywood. I made the toe out of aluminum sheet, and then aluminum for the edge and then just tilt. And I was one of the very first ones to finish this sneaker. I had a picture taken of it, sent it to the museum and they used it for all their publicity because it was done.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And it actually made the cover of *The Village Voice*.

MS. RIEDEL: How cool.

MR. MUELLER: Me and the sneaker.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And then Marvin Lipofsky sent me a photograph of it from, maybe, Kyoto, someplace it was in that, you know, in Japanese. Anyway, I remembered that yesterday.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I guess, I don't know what else about CCAC. I remember 1974, I drove across country with Nanny Vonnegut, who was Kurt's youngest daughter, and we went—my only trip to Las Vegas. And Las Vegas was a bunch of little two-story buildings on one street. And then I agreed to drive with her if we could go to Sedona, AZ, and see this house that Max Ernst built. So I took a picture of my sneakers on his floor, and these two sisters finally let us in, they were very nice. And then we drove across country, wound up in New York. It turns out, Edie, Kurt's older sister, was married to Geraldo Rivera. So we stayed a few days with Geraldo and Edie. That was a trip.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. MUELLER: And with Kurt and Jill. That was a long, long time ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Kurt lived in Turtle Bay. And then up to Cape Cod where Janie, her mother, lived who was very, very nice—and pictures of Jack Kerouac. And I actually met the second president of RISD at Janie's house in, I think, Chatham, I don't remember, it's Cape Cod. And he came from RISD in 1964. Well, anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: Quick question about Braunstein/Quay, were you showing with Ruth or with Rena?

MR. MUELLER: Well—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember?

MR. MUELLER: There were three owners, and then Sylvia Brown left. So, it was with Ruth, because I think it was the Quay, Q-U-A-Y, Quay Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly, exactly. I was just talking to Rena, and she said that Sylvia actually worked for them. I don't know if she was an owner.

MR. MUELLER: Oh.

MS. RIEDEL: —Rena said that she went back and forth between Braunstein and Bransten, but, you know, it's interesting.

MR. MUELLER: And then I did have a show with Ruth, because Ruth and Rena split up—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —with Richard Shaw.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: But that's, anyway. And then I was in show with Rena and another—

MS. RIEDEL: With Rena as well.

MR. MUELLER: —at another time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yes.

MR. MUELLER: Anyway. I'm sort of—so and I mentioned in our—how important that is, this EF Robbins and the pleasure chest. Anyway, I think a lot of what we talked about at lunches were artists and books on artists, because I think we both liked reading—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and reading biographies and reading—and she was also a very intelligent speaker.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: You know, whenever I spoke to her on the telephone, I was always impressed with how articulate she was. But—

MS. RIEDEL: That's helpful. It helps to [flesh out a portrait of Viola –MR] —

MR. MUELLER: —I mean she was very, very good at explaining things.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I think one of the things that we agreed on is, more than anything, was very strong interest in our work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And also an interest in just learning about other artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: Because I also have a lot of books. Not here, because I don't have space but—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you say that your reading informs your work indirectly?

MR. MUELLER: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Does it directly inform it as well?

MR. MUELLER: Well, because I'm not, you know, I haven't watched television unless it's at a friend's. I think my television was destroyed in 1968, and the—

MS. RIEDEL: Never replaced it?

MR. MUELLER: No, and I have a monitor, and I can use Netflix, but I don't think I've seen anything in four or five months.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: But I'm sort of disconnected from television, radio, and newspapers.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: So my only contact with television is when I'm in the gym—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —and I listen to music, so there is no sound, and whatever is projected for, you know, hearing impaired, I can read it. And I hate Fox News, and I get really crazy if it's on. And if I don't have a remote, I'm not going to make an effort to try and find the remote to change the channel but—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —the news isn't very good. And so I think reading allows me to imagine what I think is being portrayed in a particular story. And so I would rather use my own inventive devices and listen to music and try to just draw from, you know, whatever I have internally.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you read more fiction or nonfiction—

MR. MUELLER: Fiction.

MS. RIEDEL: —mix of both?

MR. MUELLER: More fiction than anything but I'm not so wild about a lot of art critics. A lot of it requires me to have a thesaurus and a dictionary, to try and get through what they're actually saying. And I enjoy the book by, well Montbriand was a very intelligent writer, but brief and I think—what's her name? There's a book written around 1923 by Marsden Hartley called *Adventures in the Arts*.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And that's a fairly interesting book discrediting all, you know, not to trust any art critics—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —you know, they have nothing to do with visual—and Myer—Mayer. Philip Guston's daughter, and the odd thing, is I think about Viola Frey when I think about that book, and this is a long time ago, because Philip Guston was—he didn't even want the daughter. He actually wanted—I don't know whether he actually did give her up for adoption to a Canadian Catholic because it would interfere with his work. And she wound up coming back because he got a Prix de Rome to go to Rome to paint and he—anyway it's called *Night Studio*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I mean, books like that, which are biographical, and if they're intelligently written, I enjoy them. I tried to read something called *Birthday*, which was a book written by Dorothea Tanning about Max Ernst, it was just unreadable.

MS. RIEDEL: So do you prefer [… criticism books that are written by artists rather than critics? –MR]

MR. MUELLER: Well, I'm curious about them. And, you know, I've tried reading some of Donald Judd's writing, it's a little mechanical for me. It's—you know, there was a time, and it's a while now that there is somebody whose writing I enjoy. It was more romantic—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —it was written so that you could understand what they were talking about. It actually addressed the issue of content.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Content.

MR. MUELLER: A lot of the writing, I think, is sort of a showcase for the writer, and it really hasn't so much to do with the work that they're writing about. It's more about themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean that's just my opinion.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: But a lot of discussions I had early on, when I was in school, had more to do with work coming from sort of an intuitive place.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that way. I had wanted to talk with you about that.

MR. MUELLER: You know, how one feels. You know you develop a certain affinity for what it is you've elected to do. And in my case it's visual art. And so, you develop a kind of working vocabulary in your head through your own experiences, of, you know, what you see, and what you see, you know, sort of gives you in terms of an emotional reaction.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And if it's something that is three-dimensional, how forms relate to one another in proportion. You know, if it's completely abstract, you know, then, how this idea deals with space in your eyes. If it's successful, if it actually leads you to, you know, find something of interest, in what you've put together. And so rearranging these things in space and see how each new order makes you feel until, you know, it seems I've captured the right emotional state, and then you can fix it all. And when it's a two-dimensional piece, you know,

it has, first of all to do with the line quality, how it's drawn. And then if I elect to use color, you know, what the color does to either enhance it or destroy it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And so, sometimes you work and you can step back and try to digest what you see, and then determine whether, is it done or should I do more? And herein lies really critical points because this is where an idea can either be born or killed.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I think Lucas Samaras came to RISD and gave a talk, which was, I think, enlightening, because he said, "Unfortunately a number of you are going to come back and take possession—positions as teachers."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: But then he said, you know, "Ultimately you're all left to your own devices." Which, this is an old-fashioned way, because now if you have an entire crew of, you know, executioners, they can, you know, add all kinds of information to an idea. But if it's truly just you, then you have to actually decide what is the idea that's going to stimulate your activity? You know, how do you do it, and then when do you stop? And all these things are critical. And if you stop too soon, or if you don't stop soon enough, and it's just like cooking. If you take the turkey out too soon, no one cares for raw turkey. If you take it out too late, no one likes cardboard.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And so, I think those are things that you hopefully learn in sort of your rudimentary, you know, engagement. And that's why I think the more time you can actually devote to trying to understand yourself and your ideas, the more comfortable you can become, or uncomfortable, in realizing, you know, each successive idea. And so, that's why sometimes, if I find something that I'm interested in pursuing, I'll do as many variations on that idea until it just seems to—I'm exhausted, or the idea just seems to be worn out, and then take a break and hopefully something else will come along. But at least from my part, in the way I work. I rely very much on sort of intuition and spontaneity, and just the feeling that is emitted by sort of the raw idea. And I think that color has become more and more of an important component of what I do. And I even think that with this work, which is now, you know, 30—1982—I have the wrong year. You know, I actually set them—the idea of—

MS. RIEDEL: What series was this?

MR. MUELLER: This is called *The Planar*, P-L-A-N-A-R.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: But I just wanted to limit my drawings to just carbon pencil or graphite, nothing else, to see if I could actually deal with the picture planes and space and composition without having to rely on color at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And so a lot of the sketchbooks are just graphite.

MS. RIEDEL: How many sketchbooks do you have? Do you know how many you've filled up over time?

MR. MUELLER: Oh, I don't know maybe 40. You know, maybe more, maybe less, quite a few.

MS. RIEDEL: And has that been a regular part of your working process from the beginning?

MR. MUELLER: Actually, my very first semester at RISD, in a sophomore live drawing class, which architects took by David Slater, the very first class he told all of us to go out and buy one of these hard-bound black cover sketchbooks, maybe 100 pages, and fill it up over the weekend. And, I had never really done any drawing. One life drawing class in Rochester, but I wanted to learn how to draw. And I was with Dale, and I carried that book all around for the weekend and I was using tea bags as—and, you know, they're crude, you know, and actually almost nobody even did any and I brought it in. I hadn't finished it, but it sort of planted the seed of what a great idea—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —because then I started. I remember cutting the flap on a shirt pocket off of a shirt, and sewing the button onto a page and the pocket so I found that the sketchbooks could be a great resource for just

spontaneous adventure.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: So, I mean I think that it's a great addition, and it doesn't have to have anything to do with the nature of what my work is. But I think it's a very important way to stay in touch with your own kind of profession and your ideas, and instead of vegetating with, you know, television or the—although, what I used to do is just sit by myself, listen to music and try to fill up a sketchbook, you know, sometimes, and it was strictly abstract just like, until I liked what was there, go to the next page, and just these abstract compositions just using very soft graphite, like 6B, 7B, 8B. I liked—I had a lot of paraffin.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So they were very juicy and loose.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I thought, you know, that was such a contrast to these very, very tight, you know, constructed things.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MUELLER: And it was a great release.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's a wonderful story.

MR. MUELLER: That's smearing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Has –MR] this back and forth between those sketchbooks and the work itself been ongoing throughout your career?

MR. MUELLER: Yes, well the first year, the first semester of graduate school. And it's funny because I was using a rapidograph, because I liked the—it looks like a needle. They're the worst possible thing to try and draw with. But because I knew nothing about drawing, and these things are tight ass, and I mean, just, in every way, they're terrible, terrible, terrible. But it was. It broke the ice.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: You know, and then I began to—I mean quite a bit later, really liked the idea of juicy and, like, putting this pencil, a very soft pencil, under my thumb. So I actually wasn't even seeing what I was drawing. It was very emotional. I could feel and think of what I was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And then, you know, after you start to kind of destroy the paper, you know, I mean it's no longer pure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And then you actually get shadows because your thumb is now, you know, rubbing the soft graphite. So I'd watch Dale take handfuls of pencils and, you know, like draw something, and it would be like the same line 20 times in 20 different colors, and they were beautiful. I mean these were very early drawings, you know, like in '85, and they've gotten more like his signature.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: But I think, you know, it's a piece of paper, that's all that it is. Even if it cost $20, it's just a piece of paper. And so, if you're intimidated by it, you'll never draw it. So the best thing is to just stand up in front of it and you can put an X. Once you've actually broken this trance, it makes it much easier to go onto the next piece of paper, the next piece of paper. The same thing with a sketchbook. Now I haven't done it in a while and it's scary.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And it's—scared of what? That's why I'm asking myself, "What am I afraid of?" What am I going to do, ruin a sketchbook for $10?

MS. RIEDEL: Is that a feeling that's been repetitive throughout your career, or is it something new since your—

MR. MUELLER: No, if I did it every day—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —there is no fear.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: When you stop—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and there's hesitation, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. MUELLER: And again, so okay, so what I start to do is going to be kind of awkward, stiff and if I never do it, it will always be stiff in my head. But so, if I can start to sort of break my own curse and just—

MS. RIEDEL: Get going. Just move your hand, just start.

MR. MUELLER: —yes, just go, go. And, if anything, you know, I actually was going to do some sketchbooks of just these kind of comic parts. You know, Donald Duck's feet, Minnie Mouse's slip and skirt, Daisy's shoes and so I did drawings but I never did the sketchbooks and Francis Picabia has been somebody who's work, and his sort of his style, I've enjoyed since graduate school. I mean very Cuban, French driven.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And very, just incredible, very very—he's a fantastic artist. He covered lots of different character. But he did this little—it's just like a black and white print, and I actually used the image. I made an enamel badge, this was quite a while ago, and I might even still have it. It's like a six-pointed stone, like a sheriff's badge.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And then enameled in the middle is the symbol. It's a circle with a diagonal through it, so it says for no. And so, there's a little glass that's half full, so no drinking. And over here, there's a little gun, no guns; pair of gloves, no hands.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. MUELLER: Anyway, there is—

MS. RIEDEL: Smoking? Maybe there's a cigarette. I think I remember seeing an image of this.

MR. MUELLER: Maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I made it and I don't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: I'm using it because a little picture of Picabia's, which was no sex, but there were a picture of just the bottoms of women's high-heeled shoes from the bottom, and then men's, and that's all there was. You know, men's shoes with the points down, women's shoes with the points up. And so, I mean, so I don't know how many people got it—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —but I actually did drawings like that using Donald Duck's feet and Daisy's shoes, and then I think I did Mickey Mouse's shoes and I don't know why I pick on these poor characters.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: But that's taken literally from this idea of Picabia's.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So, why did I bring this up?

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about the working process, and about influences earlier on—

MR. MUELLER: Well that's, on this piece, you know, I thought that was a great example to use for no sex. I mean, I wasn't really appropriating to copy it directly; I was just taking a section of something he did and putting into a piece of jewelry. And so then the second time I did it was last year with these two comic book characters. I don't know if anybody even—not that anybody's even seen it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: They're in a drawer in the—

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like so much of your work refers to or starts with something from art history, a painting, an image, or an idea from a book.

MR. MUELLER: Yes. Well, art history has been a great source for my work. And when I'm not sure what to do, I go into my kind of a, you know, artistic scribble—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —as kind of warm up—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —and the art of language just—and then once I'm warmed up then sometimes it's just sort of following my own, I guess my own inner voice.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And these wall and corner pieces were kind of all, you know, whatever configuration they took, whether they were just abstract or they were kind of based on punctuation or language. That was all mine, I mean I didn't—

MS. RIEDEL: So it was a corner punctuation series?

MR. MUELLER: Well that one was done in the relation to the first showing of the Jim Robischon, in Denver, CO, based on 9/11. And they were supposed to go on the outside of a building.

MS. RIEDEL: The big question mark.

MR. MUELLER: The big question mark. So, you know, about 9/11.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And so, that piece was probably made in 2002.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: If I'm not—I think 9/11 was 2001?

MS. RIEDEL: I think so, yes.

MR. MUELLER: Yes, so this show was probably the following year.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: But I had done other just abstract constructions that went on the outside corner or the inside corner.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. There are a number of forms that fit in those corners, right?

MR. MUELLER: Yes, yes. One almost looked like a comma—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —which Kate kept. It was a little, but I mean it was interesting, kind of went; it was negative rather than positive, and just black and only about half of an inch deep. And I actually that was a discovery that

I enjoyed. It was very simple constructions with one color. And then I began to put down color and then cover it with white enamel and rub though it with automotive body compound and I also—it was sort of the last step, and I started to use the automotive body compound on the oil paint to kind of break the surface a little bit, and sometimes using more than one color of a particular hue, like three different colors of a particular red.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: So as you break through, it gains a little bit of dimension, and it has more surface energy because there's a few colors there, but very subtle. Because sometimes using titanium and unbleached titanium white, so the unbleached is slightly, kind of discolored. I mean the—

MS. RIEDEL: I think a number of those wall instillations were [like that –MR]—so much of the pure form in color. I think [of the Cerulean piece and I think the bright red piece –MR] is the one you're describing now.

MR. MUELLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: There's that variation in tone, it's subtle but [noticeable especially in comparison with the other pieces, which were much more monotone. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: And I don't know it's something, I guess it doesn't faze me. I don't know what the reaction was. I mean, they were sold or I enjoyed sort of the challenge of trying to come up with things to make and I know maybe I made a few a couple of years ago with this eye problem, and I don't know, I think it was just me not doing them and trying to actually force—they're not very good. I mean I don't really care for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And so, I think it requires a certain amount of patience and time and thought, like anything. I don't have that magic touch. I wish I did, that everything I touch was just, you know, it worked.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I don't know if anyone has that. It's a great thing to think you have it, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Or not.

MR. MUELLER: Or not, yes, or not, yes. I mean I guess I'm—it kind of gives me a sense of contentment doing my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I don't have as great desire as some of my friends, who actually work all the time, to go on vacation, because I'm doing what I really would like to do. I'm not trying to get away from anything. I'm trying to tell that to my friend Carole, who has a very demanding job, and really looks forward to vacations. And I never really had that kind of a job. I mean teaching allows you to do things creatively, which are problems to present to the students. And, in my case, it allowed me to have a small income, so that I could perpetuate my own work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And that was ideal. And I think that the most important thing for me is freedom. I mean, I don't like being restrained, and I enjoy pleasure and the work certainly provides pleasure, food provides pleasure. So, and then I need my health. If you don't have your health, you don't have much. But, it's very easy to be relaxed, I think, if you're actually doing what you enjoy, and the days can be fruitful. It may be not one day but maybe, you know, you put a few days together, and all of a sudden you have a piece of fruit, you know, that you've made and so I think that's why I said yesterday, I never lived with my work before. And so, it's an interesting experience. If I was really driven, I would love to be able to design a house or design a space but—

MS. RIEDEL: Well you raise a point that I wanted to touch on, which is travel. We talked yesterday about all the back and forth with the German jewelers, and certainly one would look at the list of places that you've had residencies or been a guest lecturer. [… –MR] You've traveled a lot. Did travel affect the work at all in any way other than working with the artists themselves and what seeing their work? Were the places significant?

MR. MUELLER: It had to have affected. I mean, no I went there, I was already in my 40s—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and 50s and so I—

MS. RIEDEL: When you first went to Germany?

MR. MUELLER: In my 40s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Maybe in my 30s, well probably 39 or 40.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: But, I think I was very curious about—wow, wait a minute—yes, yes, because I met Claus when I was about 36, and I went to maybe Pforzheim was the first place, and then Pforzheim isn't much, but I mean I think I mentioned yesterday, I had never seen work—

MS. RIEDEL: Like that?

MR. MUELLER: —like that before.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I mean first of all, the quality of execution of craft was superior.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And there are, I mean there's no ideals, but the Society of North American Goldsmiths is kind of a club you join. And for the most part, the members want, they want recognition, they want the magazines to basically support them and show their work. It was Europe, which was intriguing—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —and not America.

MS. RIEDEL: And in particular, European work or—

MR. MUELLER: I mean meeting Hermann and I have no idea what the academy was like, but it order to get in to the academy, you had to have quite a substantial technical background.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was in Munich, the Academy of Art?

MR. MUELLER: Correct. And, also it was free, and RISD is far from free.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So that in itself, that's a very big fence to hurdle, wall, because Karl Fritsch wanted to come to RISD. He came over for an interview and he loved the school and the equipment. But there was no way I was going to be able to get him, you know, 50 grand. And, over there it's pretty wide open, this school. I mean it's not open 24 hours a day, but you can come and go as you please. There aren't any classes really, unless Hermann set up a meeting. And you can have a job. A lot of the students worked for Hermann and, you know, they were paid, and they learned, they did his work. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Is it more of an apprentice system?

MR. MUELLER: Well, the apprentice system comes prior to the academy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Where some people did do apprenticeships for commercial jewelers and jewelers in general. So they really knew the skills of the trade of a goldsmith.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And then, I mean, Hermann would set things up, arrange the whole thing. So then we'd have to basically put it together. And Otto worked for Hermann, Terese his wife. I mean a lot of them worked. You got a lot of work done that way. You know, and they were all really Cracker Jack jewelers.

MS. RIEDEL: Terese, sorry, is who?

MR. MUELLER: Hilbert is Otto's wife.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So he was raising her work?

MR. MUELLER: Well, Terese worked for Hermann.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Terese worked for Hermann.

MR. MUELLER: Otto worked for Hermann.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I mean a number of the students that came through there did.

MS. RIEDEL: You've taught at a number of different places though, it wasn't just Munich. You were in Prague. You were in London—

MR. MUELLER: I was in Prague with—wow what was his name? London?

MS. RIEDEL: Caracas.

MR. MUELLER: It was in Sheffield. Where?

MS. RIEDEL: Caracas.

MR. MUELLER: Oh, wow 1991, Caracas. Now that was an invitation by an architect named Emilio Vestuti.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And that was in—I mean I was in Caracas for two weeks, at—and he—I went down there to talk about basically—

MS. RIEDEL: Simon Bolivar.

MR. MUELLER: Oh, Simon Bolivar, wow, University.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: So he wanted me to go down and talk about my furniture and lighting.

MS. RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MR. MUELLER: So—

MS. RIEDEL: You stayed there for two weeks showing slides—

MR. MUELLER: They gave an apartment in a building, showed slides, talked a bit with—had a translator. You know, drove over, rented a jeep, went over the mountains to a beach. It was unbelievable.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. MUELLER: And it was—I forgot about that. That was wonderful. I mean, now you couldn't go back to—I mean there were people on the—I had, what did they call them, these [inaudible]. There were guards on all the supermarkets with shotguns. I went to a couple of salsa clubs dancing where they start like at midnight, and the little waiters have these Eisenhower jackets and these turquoise tufted boots, and they come over and ask because they asked me what I wanted to do. And I said I would love to hear some music. So they had two bands. But you can buy like a liter of vodka, a liter of gin, a liter of rum, and that because I said, "I'll have a glass of white wine."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: You know, rum or vodka sounds—so I had rum and then you get a mixer and an entire—so—but in Sheffield, which was probably around 2005, maybe ‘04 or ‘05, I don't know if that's in the resume anywhere, Sheffield, England, or not?

MS. RIEDEL: There aren't any dates on Sheffield, England—

MR. MUELLER: Maybe not.

MS. RIEDEL: I see London. I don't see Sheffield.

MR. MUELLER: Well I did a two-week—a former graduate student, Stephen Bottomley—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: —was there and he invited me.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And then he invited me to Scotland, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MUELLER: And that's not there either?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MUELLER: That's later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: But I remember, he was running this program and he invited people from—mostly Europeans. I think I was the only American that got invited. So Sheffield was a big silversmithing town, once upon a time. And there was one, I think there was one small factory still left, and we were allowed to—people that were participating in this workshop which was two weeks, or a week. I remember there was a Swiss man there. I can't remember his name. He was a real talker. Said his family is silversmiths, everything he put together he glued.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: But, we had an afternoon to go into this silversmithing factory, and we were given a box, and we could just take, you know, fill the box up and then go back to the metal shop, studio, whatever it was. And then we had a week to build some pieces with what we took from the—

MS. RIEDEL: The factory.

MR. MUELLER: —from the factory. So, I remember I made five fairly substantial pieces—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —you know, just silver soldering and I wanted to paint them, and I had a name for them. They had something to do like guardians, but anyway, I left them with Steven. But I mean what am I going to do with them? Because everybody packed their stuff. I thought I made them there. Why not leave them there? And then Stephen Bottomley was hoping that he would get the job at the Royal Academy in London.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: Which he didn't get.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: But he did get a very prestigious job at Edinburgh College of Art, in Scotland, replacing a woman who always liked me. I don't even remember her name, but she was an enamelist, and I doubt if I remember her name, I'll holler it. But so, Steven invited me to come there and do a two-week workshop with the class. And in his office were these five pieces. And so, I gave a project, and it's so different at these—you know, first of all, Steven has to be in there every day. Oh, the English, they drive you crazy with paper work. So I gave the students a problem with the word ism. So I said, "I want you to make a piece that has something to do with an ism." So, one girl came up with schism, which was, you know and so they had these two weeks, and I actually even took pictures of all the things which I think are somewhere on a, you know, I could look, a digital card. And I don't know. I mean it was a very different approach to what they were doing, and what they, you know, had done. And so, while they were doing, you know, their ism pieces, you know, whatever they wanted to put a prefix for ism. And I think it had to be a ring, if I'm not mistaken.

And then Steven wanted me to come back and that's when I think my [inaudible] went on the fritz because I participated. He did another project, which was the closing of Woolworths, Woolworths in London. So he sent me the catalogue, so I picked a few things. One were these plastic drains, and so I actually made a pair of eye glasses just out of round wire, and they were set so they kind of looked like kaleidoscopes, and set them like stones and, you know, so I sent and painted them black. So I sent those to Steven because they did a catalogue, and then I made a pair of red plastic shears, very cheap. I had a stand that I made a little box, a little

bowl, that fit because it was triangular and fit in the—so I sent it out to him. And then, I was going to make—I had a cheese grater. I invested a lot of time in these. I was going to make a lamp, and I started this over there, or actually started it in Providence, and it was going to be a wedge of Swiss cheese constructed out of bronze and then the cheese grater was to shave.

But it was a very ambitious project and so he writes and said, "You ever finish that?" But the Woolworths show was long, you know, a long past. And I think I did an exchange with Otto's class and RISD class where we exchanged sketchbooks and I think I still have one. I think I got Karl Fritsch and he got, you know, so we were supposed to make a piece based on the drawings that were—that they didn't—nobody—it didn't work. Nobody really—the German students didn't really follow through. But we had a crypt. A number of my students wound up going over there to study with Hermann and then with Otto. And then things just kind of—that was in the very beginning. I mean, when Hermann was there it was good, and then I think I said Otto got a little [inaudible] with RISD. So—

MS. RIEDEL: You've taught at so many different universities, especially in Europe, dozens really. Were there certain things that you always tried to get across or frequently tried to teach [during –MR] these shorter teaching stints, or would it vary [with –MR] who was teaching in the back and forth conversation with them?

MR. MUELLER: I usually try to present a very simple problem, which was really sort of thought-based.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And then pretty open-ended, and leave it up to them.

MS. RIEDEL: You were working with graduate students?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. And I don't know what—a lot of the European schools weren't really problem-oriented.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: They are more do what you want to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And so, I think we had very interesting discussions. I know, in Scotland, when I did—I mean the slide presentation. Steven's students were, you know—in a way they—I don't know what one of the girls said was—I mean they really liked. And I showed more jewelry than anything because that was the nature of the program, jewelry and holloware. But, it was unique for them because in a way it's sort of American.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes absolutely.

MR. MUELLER: But, the reception was really, really positive and strong and so—

MS. RIEDEL: Now there is a narrative quality to a lot of your jewelry which I think of as being much more American than European so I can see how that would—

MR. MUELLER: And you just said, you know, a lot of American symbols.

MS. RIEDEL: Icons, sure.

MR. MUELLER: Which are—and, you know, I did well in Holland.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: You know, Rietveld and Ruudt Peters was another one who had come over, I mean, Bernhard Schobinger was another one from—I mean the list of people that I brought was quite extensive.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And my whole goal which, and I tried to get this across to some of my—what would you call it—competitors or, you know, colleagues in other schools.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I wasn't doing this to poopoo them, or negate America. I mean it didn't do anything personally for me. It didn't help my career as an artist. I mean it was strictly for the school and the students. I thought it was a really interesting and excellent idea in terms of exchanging information, learning. It had everything to do with education. One of the things I learned early on in teaching, at least from my point of view, is that you look

far better if you're judged by bringing in the very best people in your field than by bringing only people below you. And I know I had a real disagreement with Jackie Rice in ceramics, and she just brought three of her students to teach and never brought anybody of any consequence.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And what is there to be afraid of, if you bring in people that are far more successful than you?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: I mean it says something about what you're teaching, nothing like it's a job.

MS. RIEDEL: And there was no interest in bringing in somebody like William Harper for what he was doing with enamel, or Bob Ebendorf with found objects?

MR. MUELLER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing?

MR. MUELLER: No, they don't do, I mean, nothing.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing.

MR. MUELLER: I mean Bob Ebendorf did come.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: Jack brought him. He got up on the bench and sort of like an obelisk lying, I mean, it was kind of stupid. Nnd no, William Harper's things are clunky.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I mean, you know, clumsy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I mean he showed with Franklin Parrasch where I showed, and Franklin sold the things very well and, you know how it is, $75,000 for a gold and it's not my sensibility.

MS. RIEDEL: Well it's interesting that you're training was primarily European really, Hans Christensen and then Jack—

MR. MUELLER: Jack, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and at the same time, then, what was going on in Europe in contemporary work was much more conceptual than a lot of what you were seeing here. So, in many ways, it almost feels like you were part of the European tradition, at least as much as the American, if not more so.

MR. MUELLER: They sort of accepted me, all of those people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I wasn't trying to become one of them. I just wanted to, you know, try to understand what they were about. I wanted to be able to share what they had, but the place that I was teaching. And, I mean, I found that to be more—I mean I also learned something. So I found it more enjoyable than just bringing another American with a big ego.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: An ego about what? Making jewelry, you know. Ego should be—you know, you should feel confident enough about what you do that you don't need to wear, you know, a badge and always need to be, you know, reassured that you're—if you don't feel good about yourself, but I think sometimes if you don't have confidence, then you're afraid of things.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And as I said to a lot of the people, like Jackie, it's a teaching job, you know. Your career isn't on the line if you're work isn't any good. It has nothing to do with the people that you hire or bring in as visitors. So

—

MS. RIEDEL: And, again, I am struck by the parallel between Pilchuck and Dale and what was going on in the back and forth with Murano and Venini and the exchange between the Italian glass [world and the emerging American glass field. –MR] In many ways, you were doing something comparable—

MR. MUELLER: Well Dale was a very good influence on me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [He encouraged you into the art. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: Dale was. Nobody has done more for me than Dale Chihuly. I mean Dale was—I mean, still is a wonderful friend, very generous. I mean, I never realized how. I mean these early days with our friendship, how determined he was to sort of have an empire. Because we were both sort of pining over broken hearts. And then he started to accumulate by 19; he liked having people. He liked being able—as a friend of his, Paul Inveen, from Tacoma said, " Dale would get a job, you know, mowing the lawn for a dollar and hire a friend for a quarter to do it."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And so he has a real sort of entrepreneur—he is a great problem solver. So I've watched him. He was a teacher. I was a student. I watched how he dealt with professional practices, just bringing other people in. With him, it was so he wouldn't have to teach, so he would say—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: —to me, "Take over the class and," you know, "I'll take you to dinner tomorrow." But, the idea of actually bringing other people in and still being there presented a great idea for me in terms of something to deal with in the future. I don't know how much the school would go to costs, and we would put people up, you know, whether it was another faculty or a student. But I think it was invaluable, you know, what it represented. And he was unique in all of, you know, the kind of history of American and jewelry and silversmithing. There wasn't anything else, and I don't think anymore—it's really truly kind of faded. I mean—you know, actually hand work has really been replaced in a way by talking or what they call conceptual jewelry, new materials. Because what I tried to explain once to Jack at a talk and he had gotten—he was so tough on me, and then he got so soft and he said how tough I was. But, I tried to explain that, you know, Hans came from Denmark. Jack, well actually, was here until he was 10 years old, and then because of the depression they moved. His mother was from Europe, his father was from Denmark—moved back for the company to Copenhagen. But, a lot of the people that were now teaching were strictly products of American teachers.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Stanley Lechtzin, you know, Heikki Seppa, on and on and on even though I—and so, every successive generation with this information is watered down.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And what Jack and Hans had to go through for five and half years, or six years at an apprenticeship, working five and half days a week, and just doing what you were told, is very different than a kid in an American school taking classes two or three days a week, maybe for three years, and, you know, sort of indulging themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And, you know, Jack could make tea pots, bowls, casseroles, you know, [trays –LM], all kinds of stone settings and that, you know, that just doesn't happen in a college. And for the people to think an apprenticeship—because he used to talk about this, it's such a great thing. He'd just—

MS. RIEDEL: The apprenticeship is a great thing?

MR. MUELLER: No. Well, they think, you know, that's the way to learn. But he said you wouldn't, you know, all he did his first year was sweep floors, clean up stakes, you know, it was strictly maintenance. And he said that his big freedom, his last year there was he was allowed to rearrange the rose pattern that he was chasing in a chaffing dish.

[Audio break.]

MR. MUELLER: That was just so. But it, you know, it sets a certain kind of state of mind if you have to do things so specifically.

MS. RIEDEL: So do you think about your work in terms of an American tradition, or an international tradition, a European tradition, where would you place it?

MR. MUELLER: Well, you know, the influences come from both continents. And I think that my first real influence was pop art.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And Pop Art is so obvious and so accessible. You know, it's graphic design. You look at it, the label—Campbell's Soup. Art, you know. So I thought my freshman year, I've found the light, I can do this forever, this is like a bottomless pit of inspiration. But, after a couple of years, you know, it becomes very mechanical and then I think—very far away I discovered surrealism.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And sort of more through writing and then not even knowing why I was attracted to Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Max Ernst and, but I was intrigued by the novelty of these people, this and the Dadaists, and this man named Arthur Cravan who was very, very—supposedly the nephew of—who wrote Picture of Dorian Gray? Oscar Wilde. Supposedly related to Oscar Wilde, 6'3." Anyway, he staged and did a poster in, I think, 1917 in Barcelona. He was a fighter, he was a Dadaist, with Jack Johnson at the time, the heavy weight champion of the world, and he was knocked out in 30 seconds. And he, I don't know whether he was married to or had a child with Mina Loy, who wrote a book called *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. And so, in 1919, I think he disappeared off the coast of Mexico in a boat never to be heard from again. But there is an interesting book called *Five Dadaist Suicides* and his is one that's mentioned. And I think there was another, maybe Vaché, [Jacques –LM] Vaché, who as kind of an act of surrealism, talked unknowing to friends into taking overdoses of opium, and one lived. And then there was another one where this man, he committed suicide, and just pinned the sign "Disgusted" to his lapel.

And I thought, I mean, things like that were extreme, but they were kind of really quite different than Pop Art. And then I think, as then the doors opened to my curiosity about art history, I began to take as many classes in Rochester as I could, which weren't very you know, they start way, way back, so by the time you get to the 20th century, it's just the beginning of the 20th century, so you're left to your own devices to find out, you know, what happens after cubism. And, you know, there was futurism, and there were so many—I mean, because at that point in time, it was so easy to make discoveries because everything was really based on kind of figuration. And the camera came along and sort of changed the nature of representational art. Because now you could take a perfect representation of someone, just snap a shot. And so people like Malevich and El Lissitzky was brilliant, brilliant. And I mean, so many of these people, in the beginning of the 20th century, were breaking so much ground. But you had still in New York there was the Ash Can School with John Sloan. And I noticed in the book you have Charles Burchfield and Steward Davis and, I mean Steward Davis was great, anyway.

The armory show which they just reenacted at the New York Historical Society under 100 year anniversary 1914. It's interesting to see. I joined just to go to that exhibition so I wouldn't have to pay admission more than once. But the difference between the European sort of version of painting and sculpture in 1914 and the American, and someone like Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove and then Albert Pinkham Ryder. I mean Albert Pinkham Ryder, I mean he's another one I discovered in my senior year in art school, unbelievable. I mean, and then I started to really become seriously attracted to painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And the quality of, you know, drawing and painting. And then, you know, with just—and I think my first three summers in Rochester, I remembered this yesterday, I spent up in Provincetown, and there I met Leo Manso, who had a school, a summer school, and actually his wife Blanche, who was the curator of decorative arts at the MET. And I wound up doing a lot of jewelry with him and her at the MET [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. And then finally she said, "I can't hire you anymore, you are not charging me enough money." But they wanted to try and help me kind of meet, which I never—I didn't. Anyway that was, being in Provincetown those three summers, was fun, and the real eye opener to some of the kind of at that time, 1967, '66, '67, '68; all of the artists that were living up there in the—Walter Chrysler had his museum in the church then, Tirca Karlis had a gallery there. It was like a little piece—

MS. RIEDEL: So much time.

MR. MUELLER: But I think that's when I began to. I mean Hans was pretty inflexible then, anything but silversmithing. Jack wanted me to spend time at the bench. But fortunately I had Richard Merkin, I had Dale; and Richard was a real fan of my drawings, as had been some of the people that I had dealings with in the gallery. So I had to then follow my own heart and soul and voice, because I thought the drawing was really important and had much more flexibility than, you know, making those things in metal. There's nothing wrong

with that but it wasn't enough for me and so—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talks about your exhibitions over the years, because we really haven't touched on that at all [… –MR]. You certainly had long-term relationships with a few dealers, I think of Helen Drutt in particular and Franklin Parrasch. How have those relationships been for you over three or four decades now? Have they been satisfactory?

MR. MUELLER: I think being sort of very innocent on one hand because of the way I was brought up, as an only child, very protective, you know, having a show—and Helen would write to me, because we met when I was a graduate student, and then she said, you know, I would be "honored," that was her word, to show your work. And so, and then she wrote to me in CA and I said, "Helen, I don't have anything to show." You know, I don't know. I think, the sneaker and maybe Kishi, I mean, Ruth—Kishi was saying, you know, you're here; your work is interesting, you have to find a gallery. And I had this exhibition at the Isabel Percy West Gallery, and there were just these little constructions. They were very architectonic, but that's what I had done up to that time, and then drawings. And the whole faculty really, they really responded. Somebody even stole a little drawing off the wall. But the response was very positive. The show with Ruth, there were drawings and this—and some little, she didn't even know how to classify these little, you know, silver constructions.

MS. RIEDEL: Ruth Braunstein?

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And the sneaker. And then I left. I think Rena had the sneaker for, you know, 10 years. They turned it into a bed, I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And then, I think I had a show, in 1976, the next year, at Dominican College. Kishi gave me this entire exhibition space, and there was a very nice review in the San Rafael paper and illustrations of—I did. I don't think anything was really very good but—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —I had made a piece I constructed out of sheet lead with the glass base that was painted inside, and a lot of drawings. I don't really remember what else was there. And then, I think I juried an exhibition with Daniel Rhodes for the Richmond Art Center out there and—

MS. RIEDEL: What a dynamic exhibition history for a full-time professor, both solo and group exhibitions.

MR. MUELLER: Well my first love was my work, and I thought if I wasn't connected to that, I had nothing to bring to class. And so I wanted my students to believe through my own experience that it was possible to study what you're studying and have it as a profession, and it's a lot of work. You have to really be driven. But I think, and I moved east, and, I mean I was in the faculty exhibition, which was small. So I had started to make these little constructed tables, so this was sort of a milestone, getting away. I started the first ones, and they were dreadful, in Berkeley. I mean, because I was still holding on to this premise that I got from Jack and Hans about technically challenging and I was trying to make them big, and I just didn't have the skill. They were really clumsy, formally clumsy. So I made this. I thought I'd take the table as a vehicle.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And, again, I think because of Max Ernst's endeavor, the table took one section. Anyway, they were far too complicated, just lack of visual experience. But I had this first faculty show, I had a table and a drawing, and I had at that time I started to paint very energetically, so that the frame was included in the actual picture. And it was almost like a quilt, it was like poor play like broken up into grids and then the grids were more soft pastel. And, I don't think that in 1980 Dewey said, you know; make lamps because Harden Industries said make lamps. So, I remember giving a couple of lamps to Michael White and he was showing them. I don't know what happened to them, but they sort of vanished. And then I think I had my first show—I agreed to have my first show with Helen Drutt on Walnut—was it, the very, her first, or maybe 1625 maybe Walnut Street, her first little gallery. So, there were probably five or six of these tables, some little 4 x 6 inch prints, you know, entire prints that were hand-colored that I had taught at the museum school for one semester and I cut a—

MS. RIEDEL: In Boston?

MR. MUELLER: In Boston. I cut up these plates, 4 x 6 inch plates, 180 of them. So I would put ground on them, and while I was sitting up there, I did 180 drawings and then etched and printed them, five of each, and that

was, anyway so some of these hand-colored prints, some drawings and these five freestanding pieces. And Helen sold some of these things which I was just—this guy named Marvin comes up in a black Rolls Royce and buys a piece for, you know, $4,000 or $5,000. So, and I was, again I was sort of—I wanted some of my friends to show and tell and I wanted to help them, but it was so naive about really who Helen was. And this was a new experience for me. I mean, I was proud of my work since undergrad. Once I made this stuff in undergraduate school, I always liked having it shown. That's a bit egocentric, but I think being an artist is kind of selfish I guess, because all your time is yours. And then I think I was living in SoHo maybe, or maybe I wasn't.

MS. RIEDEL: You were saying that you lived in New York and commuted to—

MR. MUELLER: I moved to New York in 1980—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Before that, I had two studios in—well, one I had worked in this six-bedroom house—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —and I worked in a carriage house. And then I had a studio in the CIC Building, which was where Claus Bury was. And then, I moved to New York to 718 Broadway, which was around 1980 or '81. And so I had worked and lived in there. And then, when I moved to 114 Mercer Street, that's 1982, then that's when Bobbie Goldberg and Terry Dintenfass came over a couple of times. And then, I don't know how many exhibitions I had with Helen but Spruce Street, Walnut Street, Cherry Street, quite a few, and it was jewelry, lighting, drawings. And I think Helen was best, with the exception of Wayne Higby; Helen was always Helen's best exhibitor. Helen did very well for Helen, and I just wasn't—

MS. RIEDEL: And did you do well as well?

MR. MUELLER: Well, she sold quite a bit. But I think there was never a whole lot of—I mean so I had heard from Franklin later.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: But, and I take everything with a grain of salt. But Helen was always very devoted. And I used to tell Helen, you know, "Self-deception is your biggest enemy," because Helen sort of lived in a dream world. You know, she meant well. She would say, you know, "This is sold" and "This is sold," and she bought a lot of the things herself. And I think it was her dream that this stuff would sell. But I think the shows with Bobbie Goldberg; I actually hoped and dreamed that she would do a lot better. But then once she got married and I think I had five exhibitions with her and there was a little—on the very first exhibition, there was a write-up in *ARTnews*. And then I think there was a show in Pittsburgh in 1986 with a catalogue at the Society of Arts and Crafts with Linda Metropolis. And then, I used that catalogue, I sent out a little note. I said, "This is a long shot, but would you be interested in exhibiting my work?" And then, a gallery on West Broadway above O.K. Harris, and he had a name like an Italian producer, and I can't remember what it was. But these were these little bronze table releases and these kind of pastel drawings. And I went in there—Di Laurenti Gallery—and here's this Italian and he's talking to a friend and they had given me this kind of space to drawings, and this, you know, and they looked really—this really classical-looking stuff that I made, kind of from the '30s, like these little Noguchi things. And so this guy said to DiLaurenti, "Where did you find this guy?" and that's all I remember. I mean, they didn't sell anything, and I think that gallery closed. And I found another gallery called, something in Arizona.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh Joanne Rapp?

MR. MUELLER: No, that was another one. This was Radix.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. MUELLER: Radix. So, and she loved my drawings. But she and her husband, there was a big brut. Anyway, that was one exhibition and out. And we got along very well, and she seemed to be, you know, a kind of shaker and mover, but I didn't always make good decisions with romance or galleries.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And then through Joanne Rapp, there was an article in a magazine, actually with Krazy Kat on the cover, about, you know, two pages. And then she got me this commission for the AZ parks, so there were these —and Helen got me the Braceland Arch Commission in Philadelphia. And then Joanne got me commission for Hyatt Hotels to do some public pieces. And then through Joanne and this article, Jim Robischon called me from Denver, and he came, and at that time, that was probably 1990, 91 or '89, I was living in the Singer Building on

Prince and Broadway. And so Jim came to visit me, and he wanted to know would I show with him, so yes. And so I sent him five of these small pieces, he sold them all. And then he still has some work. I was in a show there about three years ago, with Peter Millet, who I went to school with, who's work is very similar. But then, you know, I ran in to him at a Cy Twombly show at the Whitney and his wife, and he's a character. I liked Jim Robischon and that's a great gallery but he said, you know, "I don't know if I can sell your work. There's no horns," you know, "there's no lassos." But he has, you know, fairly substantial names, like Judy Pfaff and I. Where did I go? Well so, from Joanne to Jim and then, I think I don't know if I had a show with Helen when Ed Roberts was the Backroom, New York in 1988, and then Ed sort of got rid of Helen, and that was the end of her gallery. And then, I think I had a show with Bruce Helander, with a poster that Malcom Grear did, and I think that was in 1994. It was in SoHo. And then, there was the *Pet Show* with Helander when he was on West Broadway. That was a group show. I mean there were—

MS. RIEDEL: Were any of the galleries more successful for you than others? Were they all fairly honest and punctual in terms of payment? Did everything run fairly smoothly?

MR. MUELLER: Bruce.

MS. RIEDEL: Not so good?

MR. MUELLER: No, when—I mean, I ultimately—there was a gallery. Well Jeanine Cox in FL, that was a disaster. That's a Bruce Helander connection. There's another gallery that was in FL, and they actually lost a piece of a piece that was a lot of work and then never did anything about it. But he was a truck driver and Boone, I think his name was Boone, and he was married to the woman who owns Habitat in FL, but I can't remember his first name but, and I don't remember the truck driver. They were nice guys, they didn't belong in the gallery business, and I should have never given them my work. And I eventually, you know, Daphne was such a fan of mine and she liked Franklin. It's funny, there was Franklin's card was on the answering machine on the phone in Providence. And I came home one day and this message from Franklin and it says, "Maybe we should do a show." So the gallery was in SoHo and I had gone to a show there of Ken Price's. So, I went in to talk to him and, I mean, that early stuff was Ken Price's, you know, that's beautiful. The little, you know, those architectural things. And he sort of resurrected Ken Price, Franklin.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: You know Franklin is strictly for Franklin, his wife and his two kids, and money. Because I got it from Giampaolo Babetto, his show there and he just undersold, I mean, he would sell whatever he could get for it, kind of. But I did get a couple of reviews in the *New York Times* from a couple of shows there. And, you know, he set things up very beautifully, you know, really minimal. He liked the work. He inspired with furniture and photography. He was just determined to succeed. I mean, and we spent quite a lot of time together traveling, delivering pieces, going to dinner, cooking at his house, and then I think things just sort of—

MS. RIEDEL: Growing apart.

MR. MUELLER: —growing apart. He was. He's just only now in kind of a secondary market, California art, and only painting and sculpturing. And, so I think the last show I had with Franklin was maybe 2004, 2005.

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe in general your relationship with dealers over your career?

MR. MUELLER: Way too innocent.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I never pushed for anything. I was happy to have a show. Happy to sell something.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I'm very naive about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: You know, I went to school with the people that I studied with. Nobody was a successful artist. I mean Hans and Jack were both silversmiths, and Hans had no, whatsoever, no background. He was against these silversmithing competitions for students, and he thought, you know, everybody was taking advantage of everybody. So I mean he had his teaching job, he would make these bowls as rewards, you know, that was his income. Jack basically kind of took it easy. He liked to have his summer off. He liked to drink. He liked to sit out by the pond and do his work, but he didn't really want a whole lot of pressure. And, you know, Richard Merkin was a different story. Richard tried very much to get me with Terry Dintenfass in 1978, but I didn't have enough there of any consequence for her to be interested. He actually knew, you know, and he knew. I mean it's

funny, because Richard stayed with me for 13 years in the house in Providence every week. It was also a free room but Richard would have done anything to help me. He wrote introductions to catalogues. I mean, he hooked me up with Tom Wolff and Bobby Short and all kinds of, you know—he lamented the fact that he had a very, very strong start as a painter right out of graduate school. And then he opted for kind of society life here. And he wanted to be a Yankee or a WASP whatever it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: He was a Jewish guy from Brooklyn. And so—but a wonderful guy. I mean, he took me in with no credentials whatsoever, but that was sort of Richard, like Dale, just they were genuine about their interest in friendship, which isn't that common. And so I tried to treat a lot of these. I like Jim Robischon, I liked Franklin, I liked Helen and, you know, I trusted them. I'm not. Some people are really good, and carnivores, and they know exactly how to take care of themselves. But I don't have any regrets about that. I'm still alive. Anything is possible as long as you're breathing. So, and I'm still able to function and do what I do. And probably, I mean, I'm slow, and it's taken me this long to learn, let's say in the last 10 or 15 years, to actually feel better about the work that I'm doing, you know, I think that it's finally become mature and content is more intelligent. A lot of the things were exercises in trying to understand what I was looking for. See I'm making mistakes, and plotting, you know, trying to get the equation right. Not that it's right, but I think, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Are there pieces or series that you think of along those lines, that you think have really been done right?

MR. MUELLER: Well I think early on, I mean early on, these little boxes that I did as a senior in RISD and the first year a graduate student, it's like a little city of these little architectural—and actually, Mark Harrison, who was then in ID [Industrial Design], did a poster of them to advertise the industrial design department at RISD. And I like the way he put these five or six little structures together for a black and white photograph.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And in some ways, these things—

MS. RIEDEL: —in a way go back to these very simple silver constructions.

MS. RIEDEL: So these are these wall mounting—

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —abstract pieces or punctuation pieces.

MR. MUELLER: And this, you know, in the search to try and do sculpture, I did a lot of, you know, crap. I mean I taught myself how to work in a larger scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

MR. MUELLER: I adapted new tools so that I could work more efficiently. So that was all learning. And so, not necessarily doing what's right with the tools, but they sort of abbreviated the work process, and that was good.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And, I mean, trying to change and discipline, or add to it, because I had a certain amount of facility for technical skill.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: But I didn't have a lot of discussion about content. And so, those were things you pick up intuitively. You go and see things, and there's a response until you try to remember what it is about that response that triggered something and see if you can get that response in your own way.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. MUELLER: Whether it's, you know, a simple design element to see that it's visually pleasing and that it functions, or if it's just, you know, cacophony.

MS. RIEDEL: How's your work been received over time? It seems like it started off fairly strong and has been consistently that way. Does that feel accurate to you?

MR. MUELLER: It's funny. Artists, you know, like because I worked with Benny for a long time, and I would fly out

there to have glass blown. And I would set up a hollow door, and I would send out, ship out paper and pastels. And I remember I did a drawing of Goofy because I can draw quite accurately. I mean, and, you know, everybody wanted these drawings so I'd take—Dante got this, no Paul, I don't know. Robbie Miller and I did a drawing of sort of Donald Duck being pinned by a bunch of toilet plungers. And, I mean, it's a pretty big drawing. So I did some, and I would give some away, but that's how I occupied my days when I was—they were blowing glass, I would be drawing. But they all—they, I mean the response to everything that I did by then, the whole group was really favorable. Especially Dale. Every time I had a show out there, he would buy something, and he said, "You won't see work like this on the West Coast." And, so if friends of mine that were artists liked what I did, that some of the faculty at RISD really liked what I did and I was one of the few that was working at that time. But I, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Daphne Farago [has –MR] been a client for decades.

MR. MUELLER: Oh yes. For a long time. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: An enthusiastic supporter.

MR. MUELLER: Daphne Farago would do anything in the world to help me. Anything. I mean, I sort of became as, you know, some of the kids say, "her good son." Because I did so many repairs for her, I never charged her anything, and I looked after her. I introduced her actually to European jewelers because she was, as Peter would say, "In the crosshairs of a whole bunch of dealers," and buying. I mean just a lot of—I don't know the first thing she bought was maybe Gerd Rothmann. But then she really took a liking, and she had Gerd do quite a few things for her and Babetto made a bunch of things, Otto Kunzli. So, she was a little hesitant there in the beginning, because they were certainly romancing her, these Americans. A lot of the things—

MS. RIEDEL: How do you feel American sculpture and jewelry compares with European work?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I think American painting and sculpture is pretty strong. I think that maybe some American jewelry, since I'm not in that arena anymore, that has improved but I don't really know. A lot of things I see are kind of flimsy.

MS. RIEDEL: Any American jewelers that you favor doing strong work or metal smiths [… –MR]?

MR. MUELLER: Well Mielle Harvey went—and I don't, I mean she went to RISD and then she went to the academy. There was another one.

MS. RIEDEL: The academy in Munich?

MR. MUELLER: Munich. There was, oh what's her name? Maybe Hannibal, that could be wrong, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Sandra Enterline?

MR. MUELLER: Sandra Enterline, yes. She just wrote to me, or actually her assistant wrote to me. She's making very nice work. I still keep in touch with her. I mean, she was here about three and half years ago, her and Dan Jocz, for some wine. And I just ran in to him at NADA here, I didn't even recognize him. He didn't look very good. And Dan Jocz had made some interesting things, these enamel things. My problem [was] being the head of the jewelry department, and not that interested in jewelry. I mean I liked jewelry sort of in my own vocabulary to make something that's sort of an object or narrative.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: But not really jewelry in the sense of the gold smith.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Very much about something else.

MS. RIEDEL: How about someone like Lisa Gralnick?

MR. MUELLER: Well, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Not RISD but—

MR. MUELLER: No, no, neither is Dan Jocz, he's not. The last thing I saw of Lisa Gralnick's was in SoHo, which Kate dragged me over to see. She thought I would like it. It was sort of plaster-of-Paris, and gold.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And I think that some of the things, like the sink, she needs and this is important, to pay attention to detail, because you see the entire thing and yet the trap and everything else was just, it wasn't there. And I think all things and some when you choose a subject like that need to be considered.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So any other—

MR. MUELLER: And I think Lisa Gralnick, some of things prior to that were really competent. She had an affair with Otto when she was here. You knew that? You did know that? From her?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] We'll talk about that after.

MR. MUELLER: No, no, no that's okay. Anyway, but she did some very interesting constructions in plastic, very accurate, I mean intelligent. She's very intense.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think you would be interested in [her work because it's … technically extraordinary and conceptually strong. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: Those things with, and I don't remember them well enough, with plaster and gold—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right, right. It's a whole series.

MR. MUELLER: Some things I thought better than the others, but I didn't think it was as strong as her jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes, yes. Anyone else American that you think is strong?

MR. MUELLER: I'm trying to—

MS. RIEDEL: [… You seem to have more respect for Europeans. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: I loved someone named Falco Marx who died. He was a real maverick. He lived in Cologne. I think he was addicted to opiates. He didn't make a lot but he made some beautiful things.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: And he was in a couple of the shows that I'd done. He had a very deep voice. I never met him, just talked with him on the phone. And I know I've forgotten some of the people that have come over here, not that that's so important. I think the idea with students in presenting either side is to the idea of flexibility, to have an open mind, which a lot of people don't have. A lot of people are in. They look for familiarity and comfort. There's nothing wrong with that. But sometimes, you know, tension is important, even if, you know, create your own picture and ask your own questions.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: Some people are really satisfied with anything they put their mark on. That's dangerous. I mean, I think it's dangerous.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you think of as your most important commissioned works?

MR. MUELLER: Oh, I don't know. I made these tables for Charlie Cowles. There were three tables. And that was around 1987. And I wound up having them made by somebody I went to graduate school named Harold Lehr maybe in New Rochelle [ph], and he had a machine shop, and all I did was make a quarter scale maquette, which I gave to him. And then I cut all the pieces and I had them marked because it was one inch square tubing. I had to mark each where each miter came. I had to mark, you know, that because of he had to make the thing. It was going to be fit together with press fit, no heat. So he wanted to know exactly if these two pieces were, if it came from here he wanted to know A. A so he could use that to the same inside dimension. And, so I learned something from that. And then he also used these interior angles, and just pressed everything together. Then through that, Joanne Rapp got me a commission for a house that was being built in Arizona by an Arizona architect whose name [Antoine Predock –LM]—fairly well. So I built a table in conjunction with—and that was an interesting project. Then I did a teapot for—it's a food corporation up in Rye Brook, NY. Anyway, I made a teapot. Boy that was a stretch and around based on this Kevin Roche. So what can you—but out of Charlie Cowles' tables—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: —I went to visit him, and he said, "You have to go to." Do you know who Jackson Pollock's nephew was? He has a gallery in the Ford Building. Jason McCoy. He said, "They flipped over your table." So, I'm sort of dressed like this, I go to Jason McCoy and there's the middle of an opening, everybody's dressed fancy. And

so this Diane Burroughs, Jason McCoy's wife, says, "That's the most beautiful table I've ever seen. You know, "I want you to make one for the gallery." So that, I mean—and this is a very upscale gallery. Anyway, it didn't go anywhere. I mean I made the table and and they came to a couple of studio visits, her and a friend, nothing ever came of it. And then she and her husband got divorced. Jason's still—I don't know what a minute I've done. I mean they're all sort of a challenge, you know, it's like getting a project or a problem as a student—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: I like the idea of solving a problem. If it's my problem that I present to myself and that's, you know, I just remember starting as a freshman given a problem, whether it was two-dimensional, three-dimensional, given a problem and trying to think, I used to spend Sundays devoted to trying to solve problems that were due on Monday. And I always enjoyed—it's almost like a light lights up. You go through all these various exercises until that's it, and so, and I remember in this one course taught by Dr. Barkin called Creative Sources at the—it was a whole year. At the end of the year he had like—and I had so many of my projects come up as slides in the solution for—that he liked. And I actually remembered my friend Jack Amendt who couldn't do things. He was a freshman. I was a sophomore. And I, again, he would bring over this project, he's like, "I can't figure this out," and I would gladly, you know, do it for him, then he would take me to class.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: And so I mean I think those things. It's like solving a mathematical problem in a way. And when you figure it out, it's very satisfying. And hopefully, I mean, I would figure things out that I was very satisfied with. Not always but sometimes I'd say I know this, you know, this is a good solution. Anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because the way you're describing it sounds as if there's not such a huge difference between the way you approach a commission and the way you approach your own work [—it's all about problem solving. –MR]

MR. MUELLER: No, it's all mine.

MS. RIEDEL: Some people really are not fans of commissions, but it makes sense why you've done so many so successfully over decades, because it's really not so different from your own working process.

MR. MUELLER: No, well it is my work, but it's somebody presenting. I told you this chandelier in Sun Valley is just the bomb. I mean it sometimes when I'm working in an arena that I've never done before, especially if it's really big, it's a real crapshoot. And then, because they say you have a year, which maybe turned in to a disaster anyway, but sometimes if it's a short window, it's very different actually.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this a collaboration with Benjamin Moore?

MR. MUELLER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What about it doesn't work? What about this one is so unsuccessful to you?

MR. MUELLER: It's just clunky.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MUELLER: It's clunky. And I had never done a chandelier before. And the one they wanted it had to be quite big and I had to pack it from the East Coast and ship it there. I mean, well that had nothing to do with it being successful or not, that was another problem. But then we had to go there and hang it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: We did that on a couple. I mean I learned early on in doing these pieces. This is in the '80s, in working with glass, it was better to use a smaller scale, you know, play down the material, my material, and also try to introduce color. Sometimes just patina and brown, it was just too dead against the glass. And Benny's not a fan of really, you know, bright ugly colors. So we did a very nice chandelier for a house in Seattle, which was a very, very simple square that I made, and it just used three colors of sort of clear and white, and just a black wrap, and it was very elegant. And the very first one looks like a dish rag for rugs .And it was so much work. I had set up, I have all this glass, and, I mean, we're shipping, you know, a few hundred pounds of glass back and forth FedEx, it's costing a lot of money. But I made these rails, so all this glass bolted to it either way, and then it hung from aviation cables from the ceiling. And so, you really needed to look at it from the side. Looking at it up, you just see the edges of all these [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh yes.

MR. MUELLER: So, again all these things are kind of a learning process.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MUELLER: And it's just like I don't have a favorite anything I told you, except my daughter. So a favorite commission; the bad ones I learned something from, and the good ones I'm pleased with.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And the Reeve [ph] commission which was really a—that was wacky because I flew out to see—this was a $175,000 or $200,000 commission or something, a lot of money. So, I fly out there to this house up on the hill, outside of Seattle overlooking the Sound, and look at this house that's just framed, take some photographs, and come back to Rhode Island, to try and come up with an idea. So, I built these maybe seven, what looked like kind of truncated triangles, ladders. And then, they were supposed to go hang in the entranceways like this, going this way and this way. And then, they would be on what looked like umbrellas hung from all in these various rungs, so that sort of lined the ceiling with all of this glass. And then there was this whole corridor of these lights that go like Japanese lanterns and these things are like mattresses. They're gigantic. And they were all packed up and shipped out, and when I got to Seattle to install this, I got nervous because I had no idea if this would even work.

And these people were great. I mean they had so much money. They had a team there. They put up staging, these people mounted everything, you know, according to my—so they overlapped. We had one extra part. It was, like, amazing. It all went together, and Benny's going into Seattle and he's saying, "He's a genius, he's a genius," and it was just purely, I mean, really luck. I mean it. Everything fit and it worked, and I don't care for it. But mechanically, you know, it went together. And I think I would've liked it better if I had known that about how to use, you know, make like a decorative head for it, for these machine screws to attach the glass, because the glass was held in by these little, looked like little brass, it's a nut but it has a half sphere on the end, and then a metal little washer. It's no great shakes with them, but it's not bad. I mean it's not, anyway, I made it. So I think there's all—

[END OF CARD NUMBER FOUR]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Louis Mueller at the artist's home in New York on June 25, 2014, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number four. When the last card ended, we were talking about commissions and—

MR. MUELLER: Correct. And I think—commissions my work—I mean one of the things that I discovered in the course of teaching that I thought was an important point to make to students was the importance of time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And that each of us only has so much time, and not to waste it but to take advantage of it, because you can't reclaim it. And so in a way, all of these things represent a way for me to—I don't know if it's capture time, but they represent a particular time in my life. So, whatever that particular thing is. So it's not just, you know, watching TV. I'm not against anything, but for some odd reason, I guess the way I was brought up is, you know, not to be lazy, not to waste time. And it's—in a way, a gift to myself, to be able to make something. And, you know, musicians leave things for posterity on record so whatever happens to whatever I've done over the course of time, it's there. And it does represent me and time spent on the planet. So, there's something about, I think, once I discovered visual art and, sort of, decided it was the right thing for me to pursue, the idea of a lifestyle, which is all about that very thing. That creativity appealed to me about living exactly the way you want, without a whole lot of rules, without a whole lot of regulations. Just like you would do, you know, in a drawing. You know, so you, sort of live the way you think. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: The things that you eat out of, the things you drink out of, the things you sit in, things you wear, what you eat. It all requires a kind of, a very conscious place to be. It can be spontaneous, because you've done it for a long time. But you, sort of, acquire a kind of sensibility about all the things that you've learned to think are important to your life. And so, that's a very conscious position for me to take. And so, it's made making decisions for me not so much, not so strange. I began to understand what I like, what I don't like and who I am. And I think that was an important lesson for me to learn. And so I pass this on to friends now, if I go to Brooklyn and work, come back, you know, the what I did represents that day. And it isn't just, you know, breathing. And, I guess there's something about that concept that I appreciate.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: I think a lot of what I do, you know, nobody actually sees it but me. But it satisfies a certain need or desire, or something like it. And this commission for this Hope Barkan in Boston, was brought about by Franklin Parrasch and I. Franklin was never one to give anything away. And he called me, oh, it must be 10 years ago, and he said, you know, "I want you to call this woman, and I've given her your name. I said you're the perfect person for what she wants."

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And so, he said, you know, "She needs somebody with a good eye to look at her collection." So I called her up. She lives on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, and I had no idea what I was getting into. Franklin just said, "Just smile and be pleasant." And I said, "Well, what kind of money; what should I charge her?" And he said, "Well, charge her $50 an hour." And so, I called Kate, and she says, "That's preposterous. You charge her $100 an hour and, you know, driving each way, will be another $100." And I didn't even—and so I go up. And I meet this woman in this 3,000-square-foot apartment, which is kind of brown. And so, she said, "So what can you do for me." You know, I said, "I don't know, what" —you know, so she took me on a tour of the apartment. She's a ceramic collector. And asked me what do I think. Well, you know, "What would you do?" She actually wants me to—this was a job sort of like, curating, or editing her collection.

So, I said, you know, "Doesn't it bother you that you have a ceramic figure in front of a Chuck Close drawing?" "I never thought of that." I said, "You know, everything's 3-D, you have." So, we're sitting in her library and there are all these door pulls that are reflected and I said, you know, "Don't these bother you?" And she said, "Please, please, let's take it. Let's talk about something else. I don't care about the knobs." So, I talked for a little while, and her husband came in, and really, in crude language, you know, told him, "Get out." And I don't even know these people, and, you know, it's a little—so, she said, "Okay, let's see what, you know, go to work." So, I start moving things around, you know. And so after about four hours, you know, she said, "This is—I like what you're doing. This is good." So she said, "When can you come back?"

So, and we're still 10 years later. [Laughs.] So I have become, like I don't know, she thinks I have some magic touch, but it was cluttered. And so they have things, like on the piano. And I said, you know, "Doesn't this bother you, that there's so much clutter?" So, I started making these bronze stands. Very, very simple. I patinaed it. Some have a color top. So, I did endless, and then, you know, suggesting this, suggesting that. Just keep—she was providing me with all kinds of entertainment and organizing her collection. And, like Daphne, you know, something would sort of slip back. Some colors are hard for them to, kind of—you know, send them into exile. It's not right. So, she kept saying, "I have no more space, no more space." And then, she would call and say, "We just bought," "can you figure," "can you come up and figure something out?" So, and I actually made a coffee table that I liked very much for a Ken Price piece, which they weren't sure about. And so, I mean, some of the things that were given as problems, again, they and I sort of came up with happy solutions for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And, I think, poor Mel, the husband. He takes—you know, ultimately, the place looks less cluttered and cleaner. And so the last thing I did was four or five of these tables. And I don't know if they'll be anymore, but it's interesting, because she tried to introduce me to three or four galleries in Boston. And the last one I went to, the woman said, "Do yourself a favor. Disconnect from her. She is like a—" and I'm the only person that really gets along with her now. But I have no interest in confrontation with anybody. I mean I didn't talk to her. I couldn't deal with her after a while. And, unfortunately, I ran into her at the Armory and SOFA Show, and I had to, sort of, feign being sick—"Things weren't well with my daughter." And then there I am back, again with some of the commissions, and the people you meet are kind of—people with a lot of money can be—"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: You know, I'm nobody's pet. I don't—no one owns. You know, I'm happy to have work, and do things, sort of, according to what I would like to do. Make some spending money. And I think when I disconnected, I think that changed the whole relationship, maybe for the better.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you still work with her?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I just did these things and delivered them about three months ago. And she writes to me, you know, "How is your eye?" You know, "When are you coming to Boston?" She doesn't understand, Boston isn't really in my trade route.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. MUELLER: But I would go up there and visit, I suppose, if I were in Providence. I don't know how much more that I can add. You need some light. You have these, like, triple drapes that keep everything very dark.

MS. RIEDEL: I think we've done a good job of covering [these questions. I have one follow-up question, and a couple of summary questions. –MR] Has technology affected your work at all?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I used water jet cutting, about four years ago for some, you know, to cut some pieces for sculpture, and for these wall pieces with glass. And, in terms of technology, when I first got to RISD, when I would make a sphere, like this, which is two half-spheres, you know, that you would raise—it's very slow, a few days, and then they have to meet. So you have a circumference that has to be—there's a sleeve inside. I discovered spinning. So spinning is really 19th century, but to me, it was 20th century. So, I started to use spinning to make parts, which—tubing, instead of making it. So I think I discovered, because of the close proximity of industry in Providence, you know, to rely on industrial facilities, which I didn't have so much in Rochester. But in terms of technology, the water jet cutting was something. Powder coating—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: —which I did use when I was in Providence, which isn't so advanced.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing computer-based?

MR. MUELLER: No. Well the water jet is all computer-based, but that's all. I don't know that what I do lends itself—I think I did have—I hired an architect when there were some possible commissions, like a mall in NJ, to do a—there were a few projects, none of which came through, which I actually had to have someone with AutoCAD, or whatever it is, to project my idea from a drawing into the site plans. But, nothing ever materialized. So, I mean, I don't know. I have to, you know, change my way of thinking to use computer.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [… –MR] A couple of summary questions now: [What do you see as the similarities and differences –MR] between your early work and your recent work?

MR. MUELLER: Well, I'd say that some of the earliest work, which really is Hans Christensen's work, but the work when I begin to maybe be influenced by the things I saw with Jack's, are more architect, or architect-tied.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: And, young and innocent, just well-made. And then, after floating around, and trying things, which are, I don't know, not so smart, I think that my work and myself have grown up a bit. And so, the work has become simpler. Hopefully, the content is more mature.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: That there's more in it now after, you know, 50 years of investigation. I've—in a very narrow way, have covered quite a bit of territory in my own explorations. But, you know, it hasn't been all over the place. It's sort of contained, and there is, in a way—I'm a Gemini, so there's, you know, it's a cheap way of explaining the difference between, sort of, narrative and abstract. But they both have an appeal. And depending on my state of mind, you know, one will surface or the other.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. MUELLER: And I think as long as they're done with a certain amount of integrity, it's okay. I'm not as interested in developing a recognizable thing and just doing that ad infinitum. It just if I get bored doing 20 of something, I don't know if I could do 200. I couldn't, I mean some people can. And it's an identity and it's an income. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed over time?

MR. MUELLER: They have.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. MUELLER: They have. I, and I don't even know if it's inspiration anymore, but someone like Albert Pinkham Ryder; I couldn't do anything like his. Or Edward Hopper. Just seeing this Hopper exhibition three times and the quality of his drawing, the way the paint is applied, and all these little glitches, mistakes that I found, they were beautiful. And John Singer Sargent's watercolor exhibition. And Thomas Eakins—fantastic American painter. I mean, and then seeing John Sloan, and Henry Bellows at this exhibition. I mean, my early interest as a freshman were completely naïve. I liked everything. And now maybe I like everything, but I like everything with a bit more. Maybe I'm a bit more discriminating. I mean, someone like Philip Guston, he's fantastic. H.C. Westermann. I mean, there is—I'm mentioning the easy ones, but there are so many really significant visual

artists. I mean Morandi, de Chirico, Magritte. I mean it's endless. And then, just the choices I'm making are sort of all over the place. And I like the fact that all these people I've—and Francis Picabia, you know, Man Ray. They've sort of lived the life of an artist. I mean, there life was about their work. And that's what I really appreciate. And some of it, now later, becoming more like show business. Nothing wrong with that, it's just sort of my head and heart are in a different time. And I genuinely enjoy realizing my own ideas. The idea of a factory of assistants would be nice, but does the world need that many of my ideas? I don't know, you know. So —

MS. RIEDEL: A couple final questions. Do you see your career in terms of episodes, and periods that were distinct, or do you see a thread of continuity running through it all?

MR. MUELLER: I think starting in the maybe mid-'80s, I really began to have a direction, and I think that's just continued.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MUELLER: The only time it really faltered, when I tried to do these wall pieces a couple of years ago, having been away from my work for a couple of years because of the lack of one eye, and it just was, awkward. I feel better, much better about the drawings I did during that period, because I never stopped drawing. And so I never lost the kind of continuity, and that's important, I think, with one's work, is continuity. You know, stopping and starting is—

MS. RIEDEL: Finally, how, or where—we touched on this a little bit—do you see yourself fitting into contemporary art?

MR. MUELLER: Hmm.

MS. RIEDEL: It's an interesting question for you. You have such a range.

MR. MUELLER: I don't even know how to answer that question. I mean, the work is certainly, kind of, modern in its posture. Like a lot of the things that I appreciate, like the chair you're sitting in, I don't find them dated. And then maybe I hadn't thought about this, but in a sense, I'm not trying to follow a particular decade. I'm trying to follow my own heart. And so, I would hope that the pieces fit in any particular modern period. You know. But, I don't have any problem when I make things that are utilitarian; being considered a craftsman. But not everything is about utilitarian and function. Not everything really fits into the realm of what, you know, craft is all about. But I do think that professional execution is important, no matter what it is you do. So, even if it's supposed to be a little, you know, sloppy.

MS. RIEDEL: You know it was supposed to be sloppy, you wanted it to be—

MR. MUELLER: Sloppy with a purpose.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MUELLER: I don't know if that's the answer you're talking about, but that's really an appropriate answer, because I think my work fits in with certain categories of sculpture. It fits in with certain categories of industrial design, even though it's not manufactured. And it fits in with certain categories of, you know, drawing impairment. And I don't think it's uncomfortable or it's—I mean I try always to make these things, you know, professionally, so that they don't look amateurish or hacked. I mean I take what I do seriously, because that's really all I do.

MS. RIEDEL: What keeps you going back to it day after day? Do you have any idea?

MR. MUELLER: What else would I do?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MUELLER: Well, early on it saved my life in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: You know, I was headed nowhere. I mean, I was really headed nowhere. And I had no clue that this would be something essentially that would save me, or even give me anything. I was just a naïve kid who wanted to have, you know, jeans and long hair. And I think, once I started studying silversmithing, and actually started to make things with my hands, and then once I had already committed six years in school, I wasn't about to give that up. You know, and it was something I could take anywhere. And it was who I am and so I wouldn't know what else to do. I mean it gave me an identity. It gave me a profession. It gave me friends. I mean, and

it's given me, you know, 50 years of something, and hopefully more. So it was really a gift, and it's something that I've told my daughter, I have no idea how to give you anything because this was something I discovered accidentally. And I wish it for anyone—that someone could find something that they enjoy. It's called work, but it doesn't really seem, although, I mean that's a bunch of crap, it is work. But when you start something, as dirty and as crummy as it is, you know, the goal is to finish it, and then to see what it looks like. And so, when it's all done, you don't think about all the shitty work you did. But there it is. I made it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: And so it can, you know, even—my last year in Rochester, and Hans allowed me to use the shop to finish a couple of pieces. And just, you know, full of buffing compound, and tired. But, you know, I would go home at night and, with this little thing, and it was done. And I was tired but it—you feel really good, and there's no way to explain that. There's nothing that can replace that. It's just, so—you know, that's something you get out, and especially if you're in the process of working on something. I want to go back and do it. And then when it's finished, then you've got to find another reason to get up and go back over there, wherever there is, you know. So, I mean, I lived and worked in the same place three or four times, which I really enjoyed. I don't now, but also because I started doing things bigger and grinding, and then you bring all these metal grindings to bed, and so in a way, it's good to keep things.

MS. RIEDEL: It was a bridge between—

MR. MUELLER: I believe, but I have a drawing table here so I can, you know, I can do that, so—

MS. RIEDEL: And your studio is literally, what? Less than two miles?

MR. MUELLER: One, one-point-two miles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right across the Williamsburg Bridge?

MR. MUELLER: Yes. First exit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MUELLER: Go to an exit, past Peter Luger's, make a right on Berry, left on Grand, and park.

MS. RIEDEL: There you go.

MR. MUELLER: So—

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

MR. MUELLER: You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]