



WHERE
ACTIONS
SPEAK
LOUDEST

Julia Von Eichel
lets her work
do the talking

Words Alex Vlack

Photography Jason Schmidt

Early morning mist
seen from the porch of
the former stable, a
beautiful spot to gather
during long summer
days and nights.



Above: Von Eichel pushing toward new horizons. The silo from the original farm.
Opposite page: Von Eichel in front of a work in progress.



When we first came here it was dark and terrifying, a place of pain and suffering. The land itself breathed with life — fog pulsed through the valley like the exhalation of a thousand birds at once — but the building had been a veal barn, crammed with tiny stalls and heavy machinery. It had never been a slaughterhouse, but it felt like death. The farmer who'd built it had blocked out all the windows — to keep the calves cooler, he said. I pictured rows of them imprisoned in darkness, short life after short life. Snakes slithered through cinder blocks. Wasps built nests the size of medicine balls. Spiders wove epic webs. Broken glass and shreds of foam insulation clogged troughs in concrete slabs. The first Christmas we spent here, I bought Julia a bundle of sage, and our kids held their tongues as they watched me open her gift to me: a bundle of sage.

We jackhammered concrete, dug holes, planted. To be fair, mostly she dug holes and planted. She'd always been a gardener, but this was something different; this was on a grand scale, in physical space but also in time. She contemplated the future, looked at the hillside and pictured it in five, ten, forty years, when it would come to fruition. Her hands grasped not only the tools in her studio but the shovel, the San Angelo bar, the roots of trees that had begun as weeds. Her knuckles became caked not only with paint but with dirt, her palms cracked and hardened from every stone she wrested from the unforgiving ground. Shale morphed, hole by hole, into soil. Grass grew. Birds came, and butterflies, and the cacophony of bees, swirling through the Russian sage, as soothing as a mantra.

She has always been a creature of the land. Her studio blossoms into landscapes of impossible places: tide pools at once in and yet impractical within nature; clouds made of cracked bones that float into the corners; planes of light visible only via the depressions of a blade; splashes of fluid trapped in mid-air; enormous dimensional magnifications of microscopic universes. Through all of it a tension courses, something that feels familiar, visceral, organic — yet only possible as the child of her brain. It's nature, but it cannot be. What tangled collection of synapses could make these tangled things?

Twenty-eight years ago, I shook her strong, uncompromising hand for the first time. How odd to think that there was a moment in my life when her hand was new to me, that all I knew was what I saw before me. I took her number on the pretense of wanting to come see her studio; more than anything I needed to see her again. I left the coddled comfort of a college campus to come to the sculpture department of SVA and found her in a 6' x 8' box, which they called a studio, surrounded by tar and wax and paint. Her hand was barely fit to be shaken but she wiped it off on her jeans and offered it again. That grip. She showed me her work. I took her in.

On the train back to my world, so separate from hers, I rubbed my fingers together in the place her hand had been. Shortly thereafter a poem arrived in her mailbox — not her inbox, we didn't have those yet — with images of wax, of calluses, of gunk under her fingernails. My world was replete with

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transmitted too much electricity. We could stand it no longer. We acquiesced.

I went through phases and, of course, she did too; but there was no phase for her to evolve into or out of with her art. Yes, she moved from series to series, her work changed. But from apartment to apartment, studio to studio, the first child, the second child, deaths in the family, the (first) unmaking of the world order and the (current) unmaking of the world order, her powerful hands threaded, chipped, pulled, pinched, and danced beauty out of nothingness.





The pool area designed by Von Eichel and her husband, Alex Vlack. Commuting to her studio — country style.
Opposite page: In her hilltop studio, amongst work in progress. On the left, hangs *Chamber*, 2018. **Below:** Von Eichel surrounded by her work.





The L-shaped home sits on a hillside overlooking acres of fields and hill tops. The wood stove plays a central role in the open-plan living room. A Biedermeier cabinet next to a Børge Mogensen sofa and chairs and a Artemide floor lamp. On the wall, Eichel's work in progress.

Relentlessly. When she'd only been a mother for a few weeks, she'd leave after being woken at 5AM, nurse, bike the few miles to her studio, and come back eight hours later to nurse as she massaged her aching hands. All day they etched, they burnished, they swelled. They grew stronger and rougher from exertion and turpentine, more tender and magical as they cradled a newborn.

She sculpts forms, then often leaves them for a month, or a year, or two. They pile up around her like saplings. She stares at them as the light hits them at different angles and in different seasons. She waters them, prunes them, her hands continually coaxing something new into being. A curator once described her as the kind of artist who needs to invent technique. Her trick is to create a method and then become its master, its only practitioner.

Over the decades, we watched painters and sculptors and video artists rely on the patterns of existing forms, and then add statements — political, sexual, self-reflective — which were as much the point as the craft. Much of the time, the entire point, the only point. She would never go there. It felt too false to her to describe what the work meant, what it was trying to say; that's never been who she is, never who she was interested in becoming. Artist's statement? Right there, in front of you, in silk and thread. My whole life is words; her ability to communicate without them, eloquently, is a revelation.

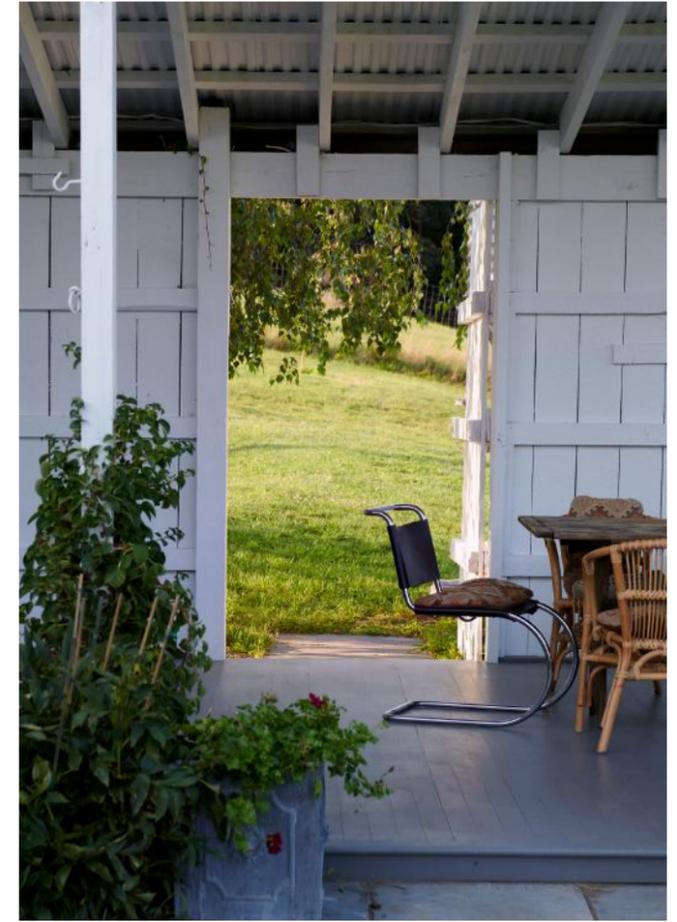
She foregoes the need to make a statement here, too, on these hillsides. Her synapses see shale and see the grass it will be, she looks at blankness and dreams of its emergence into life. With her bare hands, she transforms everything around us from fallow to fecund. To watch her rip a stone from the earth is to watch her in her studio. And to watch her in the studio is to watch her vision of the earth unfold.

She once titled an exhibition *Scream in My Throat*. It alluded to a feeling of anxiety, pent up. But doesn't it describe the entire act of being the type of person she is? The world, which can be dark and empty and incomprehensible, builds screams in our throats, and some people have the power to turn those screams into songs.

One often takes for granted the act of creation involved in a relationship. She was able to see the nothingness that was the two of us, and then shape a life from it. Without her realizing it, I, too, was a material. I was shaped, over time, by her example — living proof that art never needs to be anything more than invention, that your environment can be the result of your vision, and that we — she and I, but all of us, everywhere — are the outcomes of what we do more than what we say. For all those lessons, I have always, and will always, put myself in her hands. ■

Von Eichel's work is on view May 7 – June 11, '22, at Visitor Center gallery, Newburgh, NY. Alex Vlack is a writer and filmmaker. Still Bill can be seen on Amazon and iTunes and his new film, Four Writers, is in production. He's also Julia's husband.

Jason Schmidt is a photographer and director specializing in documenting artists and cultural figures, as well as architecture and interiors. His books, Artists and Artists II, were published by Steidl. He is currently at work on his first documentary. ba-reps.com



Above: On the porch, an MR side chair by Mies van der Rohe. Beneath the suede Barcelona chair by Mies van der Rohe lies a perfect hang out for Bean, the lop-eared bunny, Left: Under Bruised, 2021, by Von Eichel, sits a LC-1 armchair by Le Corbusier next to an Empire secretary inherited from her late father.