

Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 25:4 · Laurie Doctor teaches a workshop at Cheerio · Calligraphy rekindles a love for literature
Mike Gold and Judy Melvin on the spontaneous art of collaboration · An interview with Julia Vance



STANDING IN THE NEED OF PRAYER · Timothy R. Botts



\$14.50





The sculpture of Julia Vance explores letterforms in three dimensions, playing with language, letters, and bold abstract forms. This piece, *To*, combines the letters T and O into a sinuous whole.



AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA VANCE



Julia Vance is a Norwegian sculptor who maintains a studio in Pietrasanta, Italy. Her work grows out of her training as a calligrapher and stone cutter. Letter Arts Review interviewed her by e-mail.

LAR: From your CV, I see you trained on a sailing ship. That sounds very exotic. What was that about? Does that experience feed into your current work?

JULIA VANCE: I didn't really know what to do after art college, so I went off on a huge full-rigged sail boat for a year. We were almost one hundred people on board living more or less on top of each other, which has been useful later on in life. In the studio now there can be huge swinging cranes and lots of noise around me, and I can mentally block that all out and work peacefully without being disturbed! Of course I learned about sailing and machinery too, and even had my first try with a huge angle-grinder. Today I use an angle-grinder daily. I guess I've got five or six of them! It's fantastic how the strangest experience or skill becomes useful later on in life.

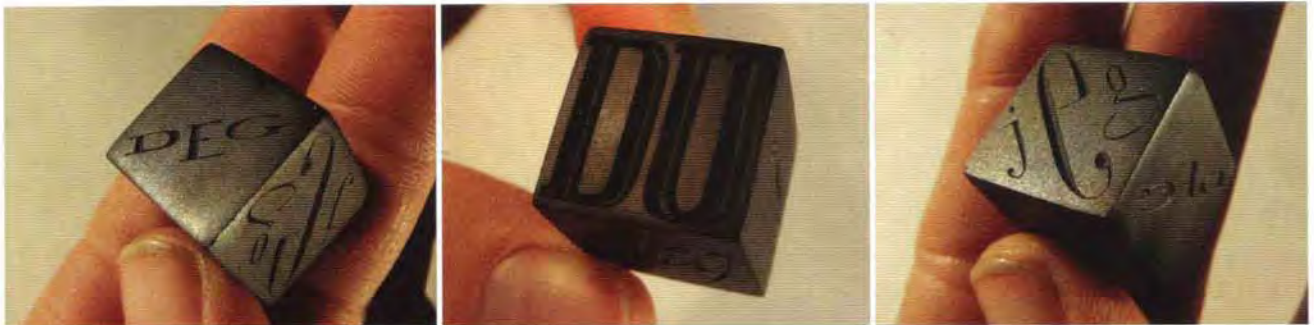
What, exactly, is an angle grinder?

It's a hand-held electric machine with a fast-

Left:
MOR
From outside you read "MOR," the word for "mother" in Norwegian. The R is backwards, suggesting you can go inside the sculpture. From inside, the word reads "ROM," the Norwegian word for "room" or "space."
White Afyon marble, 2006.
H 69 x W 41 x D 54 cm.



Smestad school 65 years
 Children and helicopter, 2002.



Love-die
 On each side of the die is carved a word: I, me, you,
 you, love and an exclamation-mark. Throw a love-
 sentence!
 Slate, 2001.
 H 1.6 x W 1.6 x D 1.6 cm.

moving diamond disc about 15-25 centimeters in diameter. You cut stone with it like slices of bread.

You studied with the English letter carver Tom Perkins at London's Roehampton Institute, and later as an apprentice. How did he influence you, and what are the most important lessons you learned from him?

At Roehampton, Tom Perkins taught us about the outline of the letters' body, really looking at every single letter as a self-living figure. And later on, staying up in the house he shares with Gaynor Goffe outside Cambridge, he let me understand more about the carving and shaping of these symbols. He showed me how by altering the highest point of a curve just a tenth of a millimeter the line can change from being just OK to becoming full of ZEST!! To meet someone who can spend hours on shaping one single lettershape, this pure focusing—this excited me, and still does! I had felt working on paper was too "sweet," whilst the carving and physical volume had more temperament. I also learned from Tom how less decoration makes less confusion for the eye. If there is a kind of decorative part (a ligature or such) it should be for a reason. Tom's work is very "to the bone," where no part seems unnecessary. And this is really what I try to do in my sculptural work today, both in the forms, but also in cutting down the text to only one single word. It's an interesting mental journey to work for a month or two on a sculpture based on just one single word!

You work with very heavy tools. Where else did you train to do the carving you're doing now?

With Tom I learned to work with hand tools: mallets and chisels. I still work by hand on smaller details because that gives me full control. Then, in 1993, I began working on and off in a granite studio outside of Oslo. I turned up with my hand-tools for soft slate and had a commission in quite hard granite. So in order to get the commission finished on time, they showed me how to use the air-hammer—and I just got on with it! An air-hammer speeds up carving and also makes it easier to work in harder stones. Then when I had a block ready for my first sculpture, a colleague came and gave me a one-hour crash-course in doing the roughing-out with an angle-grinder. And then the rest has been watching whilst others work, trying out techniques, exchanging tips and advice with colleagues. It's very special how we stone-people learn from each other. I've really met so much generosity, and later you pass the knowledge on



Tid
Norwegian for "time."
White marble, 2010.
H 102 x W 74 x D 22 cm.

The sculpture is shown above in the process of being carved.



Annerledes
 Commission for Larvik Kommune
 (County of Larvik)
 Granite, 2009.
 H 100 x W 350 x D 145 cm.

The sculpture is shown on these pages in various states of completion. Opposite, top left, the sculpture in its final position.

to someone else. I get excited if I meet someone who really shows a real desire to learn to use tools! Some people think using power tools is cheating, but for me it's just another tool. I know I could have made my sculptures totally by hand, but then I would work slower and get a lot fewer sculptures made. I have too many ideas that need realizing!

Why do people say that using power tools is cheating? It seems to me that working in hard stones like granite simply requires power tools (That's why granite tombstones didn't start appearing in our cemeteries until the late nineteenth century, when power tools became available).

I've met some people who "talk" with the stone they're carving, or who only want to use hand tools. It's all a personal choice.

I enjoy the bold beginning of a piece, whilst cutting and hammering off big chunks, getting gradually closer to the form. Then, with finer tools, I will work slower and more precisely to get to the "last skin." I use the tools which can help me get to the forms I want, whether pneumatic or electric. But having said that, my forms with large planes with slight curves and precise tapering lines and corners actually require a lot of handwork.

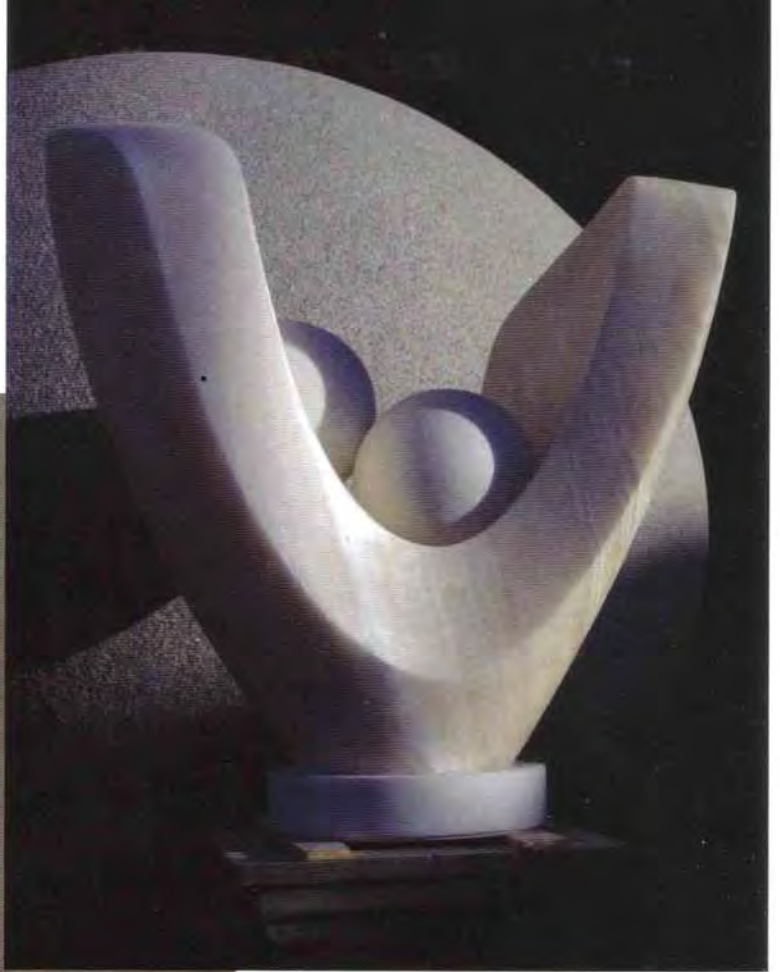
You've worked as a graphic designer and as a calligrapher for hire. What kind of work did you do in that vein? Did you like working in graphic design?

I did the normal book-jackets, certificates and logos. And many unusual one-off commissions, like a huge glass inscription for the Munch Museum in Oslo, a plaque with hand painted lettering for a cave somewhere in Africa, huge lettering on walls and banners for the Norwegian Design Institute, hand-lettered the "dialogue-balloons" for comics, consultancy for the Vigeland Sculpture Park in Oslo, and also teaching calligraphy and lettercarving to kids and in universities and even writing on film sets dressed in 1900-era dresses. And recently I was invited to join the Norwegian Bank's Coin Committee where we decide on the design of future Norwegian coins. It's interesting work to combine graphic design and relief lettering.

I enjoyed the graphic work, but it didn't have enough depth for me, either physically or mentally. In many cases I was also just doing a part of a longer work-process. With my own sculptural work it is my idea and my making all the way. In my own sculptural work there are thoughts and philosophy.



U Hold ME
The artist describes this as a
"sculptural sentence."



Nær
The Norwegian word for "close."
Black Ardesia slate, 2001/
H 35 x W 14 x D 2 cm.

A detail is shown at left.





O
 White marble, *Altissimo*, 2009.
 H 45 x W 45 x D 30 cm.

Above, the artist at work on the piece.

What are the ideas and philosophy that inform your sculptural work?

When doing graphic work I was usually given a text to work with. In my own work, I'm the inventor of the whole piece. I'm a minimalistic poet in my word-sculptures. I chose words that are open, that carry many connotations. For instance, the words *we*, *enough*, *mother* or *time*. These words get a physical body that relates to the associations I have of the word. So in creating a third dimension to our two-dimensional world of lettering and words, I seek form for the eyes and food for thought, without distinguishing where the word begins or the image ends.

When we're bombarded with millions of words every day and all day long (newspapers, posters, magazines, text messages, telephones, TV, radio), it's also very refreshing to work with less.

Do you think of yourself now as a fine artist? Or would you characterize your work differently? Your current sculptures look to me on the border of fine art and design—some of the work is for public settings and relates to landscape architecture, other work is sculpture to sit on a pedestal. Do you do memorials and other commissions that serve a defined purpose?

I look upon my self as a sculptor and a letter artist. Whereas a figurative sculptor has "only" the female and the male bodies to work with, I have the whole alphabet. I think of the letterforms as individuals. And in one sense I believe working with letter shapes actually IS figurative work, in that one can recognize the forms. The icing on the cake is that in working with words I am not only making form but am also working on the semantic messages of the words in the sculpture, the philosophical side of a basic word.

For instance in the sculpture "VI:" *vi* means *us* in Norwegian. The two letters in the word *vi* are what this sculpture physically is made up of. The two capitals are for me the two people who together can make an "us." They are not on their own here, but form a unity, slightly overlapping each other, comfortably. The letters are laying down, and their tops (or stems) continue up and around to the marble's "underside" where they grow together into one. As they arrive up again below the letters they are now like a thick blanket covering themselves. They are in themselves protected, taking care of their togetherness. The blanket looks soft but it is also tight, and there is no space for anyone else to slip into this unity.

The unity can be seen from inside or outside. For me it is a great difference in where you are viewing this togetherness from, whether you



are one of “us” or looking at “them.” I have done several public commissions, the latest which was a huge granite sculpture of seven tons outside the Culture House of Larvik. They wanted a word-sculpture which functioned with very particular architecture, was safe for childplay and climbing, and was to spring out of a famous Norwegian poem. It makes my brain work better when there are “needs” like these to work within.

Why did you move to Italy? To be close to the quarries?

I first came to Pietrasanta, a small North Italian town, just to have a look at a marble studio, because I already knew the granite studios of Oslo. But then I saw how the whole of this town was actually full of noisy and dust-making marble studios and stonecarving sculptors from all over the world and above all what possibilities this marble material holds! It can be pulled out and tricked into the most daring thins and elaborations. It shapes very accurately due to small crystals. And even lets the light through if carved thin enough. So I decided to rent a studio space for two months... and now I’ve suddenly stayed for five years.

This little town at the foot of the marble mountains has been a haven and melting pot for foreign sculptors since the 1960s. The local stone masons are incredibly skilled, having passed down the trade through generations. And due to sculpture production the town is also full of foundries, mouldmakers and welders. It’s like living and working in a sweet-shop!

How do you choose the letters or words for your sculptures? Is there any significance, for instance, to your choice of “f”?

The words I choose to work with are summaries of important themes in my life or even words I pick up in conversations or in the news. So it’s not just the little single word on its own. A word for me is a whole story, a whole novel, a long line of thoughts (I believe one can make a summary of a whole novel, narrowed down to one single word).

Take for instance the word *we*: Am I inside a *we* or outside it, or both? What does a *we* look like from the outside? And what is in fact inside a *we*? How many are required to make a *we*? Is *we*, physical? And so on.

I feel free to use words in different languages in my work. Just like words and thoughts can travel without passports, or you may dream in several languages.

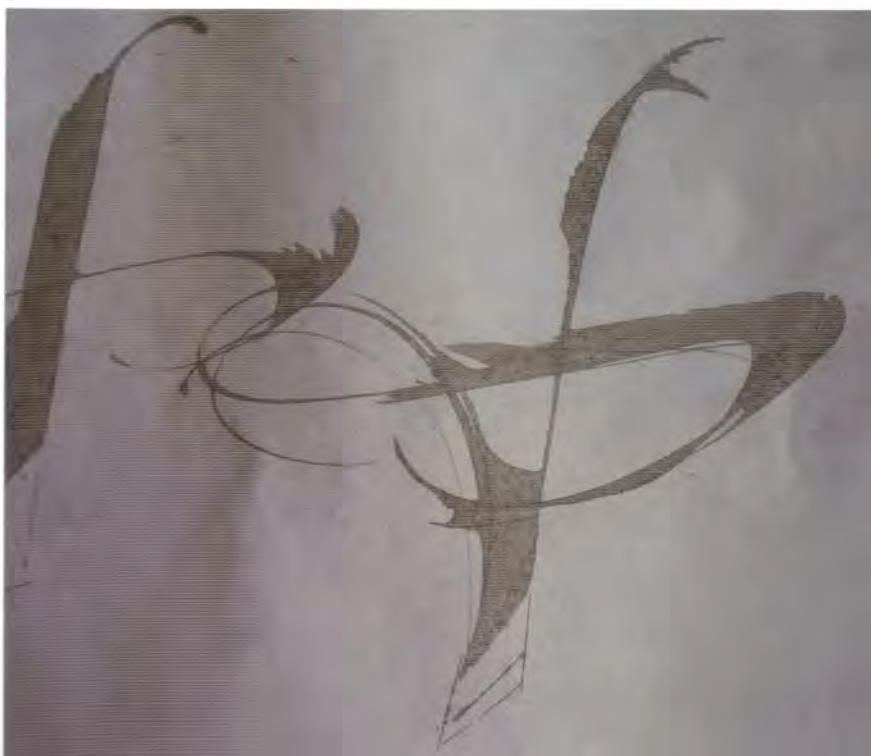
When working with my sculpture “f” I wanted to capture in solid marble the flushing energy



f
In “f” I seek to capture the swaying movement of the hand executing a letter “f,” like the energy of blood rushing through a vein.

White Carrara Altissimo marble, 2006.
H 108 x W 92 x D 40 cm.

Opposite page, two photographs show the work in progress in the artist’s studio. Below, a calligraphic study for the sculpture.





Tenketid
Norwegian word meaning "time to think."
Grey Iddefjord granite, 2005.
H 50 x W 150 x D 45 cm.
The artwork stands in front of the Norwegian
Parliament building.

Two details are shown above. The sculpture is
shown in its final position on the opposite page.



of a hand writing the letter shape quickly and at a large size in the air. This form is for me like a dance step. With my sculpture “O” it was more a search for what’s ‘behind’ and on the other side of this oval. How can the body of this figure continue beyond the flat paper?

What’s with the backwards R in the title of “МОЯ”? Do you render the title that way because in the piece you happened to reverse the letter, or are you using the Cyrillic backwards R?

“МОЯ” means ‘mother’ in Norwegian. On the outside of this sculpture you first see the R as back to front, suggesting that you may go into the piece and read it from inside. From the inside you would read the word mirrored as ROM, which is the Norwegian word for *room* or *space*. We are all born from this physical “room,” and we leave it both in a physically and in also a mental way. Well, some never do! One day I want to make this sculpture big, so big that you can really crawl or climb into this space and exit through the “O” as you wish!

When a piece is finished, how much does it matter that the form is based on a letter or a word? Some of your pieces are such pared-down abstractions that a viewer might not detect a

letterform. Do you want the viewer to “read” the letter? Or is it just a starting point for an abstraction?

I play and use philosophy and humor with the letters that belong to us all. By moving in and out of legibility you might recognize the elements of letter shapes. Just like a eye or an arm in a “figurative” sculpture.

Working with volume and sculpture is beautiful in that it is for the eyes, but you can also see it through your hands by touch. I’m still happy if you can’t read my work. The form itself must be able to carry the sculpture. But in using words in my sculptural work, you may also “read” the sculpture and your thoughts can begin to wonder even further—an extra bonus!

Working on single letters or parts of them, dismantling and recreating them is an exciting investigation. Yes, this is really using them as a spring-point to play with form.

Thank you, Julia. ♦