

English

EXHIBITION BOOKLET



RAUM  
HALTEN  
HOLDING  
SPACE

JULIA STEINER

*10.07. – 04.10.26*



## Villa Merkel

Galerie der Stadt Esslingen  
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Tues/Wed/Fri 10:00 am—6:00 pm

Thu 2:00 —8:00 pm

Sat/Sun 11:00 am—6:00 pm

Julia Steiner

## RAUM HALTEN—HOLDING SPACE

10.07.—04.10.26

Swiss artist Julia Steiner is staging her exhibition on the ground floor of Villa Merkel, with the show combining drawing, video and sculpture. Her works, some produced in situ, revolve around themes of passing away and disappearing. Exploring transience in relation to nature and the human being, the artist also forges links between inside and outside. The works focus on contradictions between holding on and letting go, giving and taking, fullness and emptiness, presence and absence, beauty and transience, and the perception of body, space and time.

Julia Steiner (\*1982 in Büren zum Hof, Switzerland) studied at Bern Academy of the Arts from 2002 to 2007, going on to study Art History at the University of Bern and Fine Arts at Berlin University of the Arts. From 2018 to 2019 she was interim professor at Braunschweig University of Art. Her solo exhibitions include Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven (2023), Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern (2020) and Kunsthaus Pasquart Biel (2011). She has received the Swiss Art Award (2009) and the STRABAG Art Award International (2017). After extended stays in Beijing (2009/2010 and 2014), Julia Steiner currently lives in Basel.

01

## BODEN/OBEN

2026, Wood, acrylic, paint, cushion

The piece on show in the glass-covered courtyard of Villa Merkel can be used by visitors, inviting them to stay a while. The drawing constitutes an introduction to Julia Steiner's work, mingling with the surrounding space and the two storeys. At the same time, visitors are encouraged to take a seat or lie down, look up and engage with the works of Olaf Holzapfel and Raul Walch along with the architecture and, symbolically, with the sky.

02

## HEMISPHERES

2023, Brass, two parts

The two hemispheres of different sizes are positioned so as to appear as a single object when viewed from a certain angle. While the outside of the large, closed bowl bears an engraving of the northern hemisphere of the Earth, the smaller, hollow bowl displays a mirrored map of the southern hemisphere on its inside. As a result, the spheres can be read as a reference to the unequal distribution of power and goods in the world. In addition, the piece questions the relationship between two poles, between inside and outside, full and empty, open and closed.

03

## STILLE WASSER

2026, Ceramic, glass, 31 parts

*Stille Wasser (Still Waters)* consists of thirty-one ceramic vessels. The rough bowls differ in height and are filled with bluish green glass. This creates a contrast between the rough outside and the shiny surface within.

For Steiner, working at the potter's wheel is a meditative exercise that combines concentration and repetition. She sees each vessel as an open space. The glass points to different aggregate states, a reminder of something liquid and mutable. The bluish green colour evokes associations with water, depth and movement.

Together the objects form a three-dimensional structure that itself has the quality of a vessel. Reminiscent of globes, the bowls betoken inside and outside, collection, reflection and transformation.

04

## CONDENSATION (DIFFUSION)

2026, Gouache on paper

The drawing recalls a landscape space, without depicting a concrete natural setting. Top and bottom, horizontal and vertical seem to be constantly shifting. All sense of direction is lost, perspectives collapse into one another. This creates a sense of motion, as if space itself were in circulation. Associations with water and natural elements abound. The surface of the drawing is reminiscent of waves, reflections or sedimentary deposits. Rather than as a motif, water appears as a state: fluid, transformative and never entirely tangible.

05

## CIRCULATION (MUTUAL GROWING)

2018, Brass

06

## INNE HALTEN

2026, Unfired clay, approx. 50 parts

Arranged in a circle, the little clay objects hang suspended from the ceiling. They are impressions of the hollows of the hands of people close to the artist or who she recently had dealings with. In this way, Steiner adds a societal dimension to the exploration of presence and connection in the preceding series of works. The gesture makes reference to the practice of *gassho*, which in Japanese translates to “palms pressed together”. In Buddhism, this gesture symbolises composure, gratitude and unity. Often accompanied by a bow, *gassho* embodies the unification of opposites. The right hand stands for Buddha, the left for the human being. The process of making the works is equally informed by personal closeness.

The artist accompanied the creation of each person’s impression, also producing one of her own. The artist’s own palms appear multiple times in conjunction with the other people.

Despite the combined arrangement, each object remains distinct. Visitors are invited to enter the circle and become part of this community.

07

## INSIDE/OUT (VAGUS)

2026, Gouache on paper

08

## ROOT X

2022, Gouache on paper

09

## HERE NOT HERE

2026, Cellulose, steel

The piece takes the form of the outer shell of a bodily space: a black, voluminous form based upon the dimensions of a human body and the immediate surrounding space. It is possessed of its own spatial presence, a radius reminiscent of the distance between people that serves to respect their personality. This gives rise to a push and pull between closeness and distance, presence and withdrawal.

The figure has a quality that is at once corporal and indeterminate. It evokes a sense that someone or something is present, without revealing who or what might be within. The piece shifts between presence and absence, between visible shell and invisible content. It is precisely this lack of clarity that gives rise to a peculiar sense of intensity in the space.

The work raises questions of bodily presence and social connection: is someone automatically present if they are in a space? Or is presence in fact the result of relation, attention and interaction? There is something functional and protective, but also something corporal about the solid, leather-like material. The surface appears sturdy and closed off, almost like a protective skin. The result is an object that may be either shell or counterpart. It is thus distanced and present at the same time.

10

## HOLDING SPACE

2026, Brass, AP 1/1

The title object of the exhibition is based on casts of the hollow of the artist's hand. At the same time, the term "Holding Space" is borrowed from a therapeutic context and describes the practice of creating a safe space in which people can express themselves and their feelings without being judged. The installation entitled *inne halten*—literally "holding within"—in the previous room follows on from this. Additionally, cupping and arching the palms creates a form reminiscent of a bone, skull or prehistoric tools.

At the same time, the title alludes to the artist's spatially sensitive and space-embracing mode of working: inner spaces become outer spaces, immaterial qualities take on a concrete form, and soft folds develop a precise sharp-edgedness.

11

## LOST GLOVE

2023, Silk

The enlarged white glove points to an experience that is familiar to many people. A glove is always associated with its counterpart—only together do they form a whole, protecting and warming the body on cold days. In this piece by Julia Steiner, this motif symbolises the experience of loss, while at the same time representing the idea of searching, finding and remembering.

The starting point for the work was a collection of found gloves, all differing in shape, material and signs of wear. Here, the glove appears enlarged and thus divested of its original function.

The semitransparent silk material shifts between opposites. The surface appears both diaphanous and fragile, but is equally reminiscent of latex or a protective skin. Light penetrates the surface and makes the work permeable and almost ephemeral.

The core theme is the relationship between inside and outside. The glove describes the hollow of the hand, thus referring to the absent body. It becomes the shell of a body, a kind of housing that both enables and substitutes human contact. The piece revolves around the need for contact and presence – touching, holding and letting go.

12

## LICHT UND LUFT

2026, Glass, insects

Dead insects collected by the artist are cast into a solid, heavy glass object. Exposed to the heat, their bodies disappeared almost entirely but nevertheless left behind fine traces in the material. Little black residues, particles of ash and trapped air bubbles remain visible in the glass, a reminder of something that is both present and vanished.

The enclosed air bubbles in particular create the impression of a suspended state. Usually invisible and immaterial, the air trapped in the glass is rendered visible. The glass becomes a repository of time and transformation in which even the tiniest traces remain visible.

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14

15

## SERIES: DER LETZTE RAUM

Three installational works in three rooms of Villa Merkel

Spanning three rooms of the exhibition, the series *Der letzte Raum* (The Last Space) is based on a dream the artist once had. In 2016, Steiner dreamt of a room with a wall drawing and a bed that, in the dream, she had died in. After waking up, she knew the exact dimensions of the room (2 × 3 × 4 m). A few years later, she built a replica of this room at exactly half scale. Building on this piece, she developed a number of works that elaborate on this theme in different materials, media and dimensions.

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## DER LETZTE RAUM (SCHLEIFEN)

2020, Video, 6h 26'

After presenting the model of *Der letzte Raum* for the first time, she spent hours sanding off the drawing inside, documenting this intense process in a video. The process of physical activity and the disappearance of the drawing embody creation and vanishing in the context of making art and as a constant of human existence.

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## DER LETZTE RAUM (GEFÄSS)

2016, Drawing

In the form of a smaller, true-to-scale model the sanded-down space is now upturned and placed in the setting like a vessel open to the ceiling. This creates a link between the model of *Der letzte Raum* and the exhibition architecture. A fine-lined spatial drawing spreads across the ceiling, merging with the surrounding space.

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## DER LETZTE RAUM (HAUT)

2021/2026, Gouache on silk

The painted lengths of silk from *Raum 2.0* (a second version of *Der letzte Raum*) are hung over the outside walls of the exhibition space like a second membrane. Concealing the windows, they play with transparency and overlaying. The space thus becomes a kind of shell and half-world in which the lines between inside and outside, body and space, presence and absence are blurred.

## List of works

RAUM HALTEN—  
HOLDING SPACE  
JULIA STEINER

01

### Boden/Oben

2026

Wood, acrylic, paint, cushion

02

### hemispheres

2023

Brass, two parts

03

### Stille Wasser

2026

Ceramic, glass, 31 parts

04

### condensation (diffusion)

2026

Gouache on paper

05

### circulation (mutual growing)

2018

Brass

06

### inne halten

2026

Unfired clay, approx. 50 parts

07

### inside/out (vagus)

2026

Gouache on paper

08

### root X

2022

Gouache on paper

09

### here not here

2026

Cellulose, steel

10

### holding space

2026

Brass, AP 1/1

11

### lost glove

2023

Silk

12

### Licht und Luft

2026

Glass, insects

### Series:

### Der letzte Raum

13

### Der letzte Raum (schleifen)

2020

Video, 6h 26'

14

### Der letzte Raum (Gefäß)

Sanded-down drawing (gouache)  
on wood, 2021/ 2026 and gouache  
on wall, 2026

15

### Der letzte Raum (Haut)

2021/2026

Gouache on silk

**Ground Floor**

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