

PLACE

*“I don’t think I can ever produce something which is not influenced by my surroundings; I am a product of the environment I am living in.”—Iris Eichenberg in Roberta Bernabei, *Contemporary Jewellery: Interviews with European Artists* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011), 95.*

Eichenberg has always searched for her cultural identity in the physical or what she calls the “outer” landscape that surrounds her. She imbues her objects with decorative arts/design affinities that often reference the domesticity of these localities. She also seeks out reality, pursuing beauty in decay and deformity as well as in the ideal and the poetic.

In her 1994 graduate exhibition at the Rietveld, Eichenberg chose to work with knitted wool and silver, adopting materials and processes associated with her childhood in Germany. In retrospect, this may have been one of the first manifestations of her quest for self-fulfillment. Fifteen years after relocating to Amsterdam, she produced the poignant *“Heimat”* series, which celebrates the Germany of her grandmothers. Patchwork-quilt fields bordered by forests, the ancestral timber farmhouse filled with warm, welcoming evidence of hard-working women, and old family photographs provide recurring motifs for works that range in scale from amulet-sized brooches such as *Duitse Velden* to the reflective, multimedia installation *Loss* created in 2004 for the three-person exhibition organized by the highly respected curator Marjan Boot for Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum.

In 2006, during her first months living in the United States, Eichenberg spent her days at New York’s Tenement Museum, researching objects previously owned by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants to this country. *Chatelaine “2007.00.20,”* part of the “Tenements/Timelines” series, consists of overlapping, stylized, metal hands and tags, reminiscent of keys on a ring. It connects her physically and emotionally with the multitudes who earlier experienced similar uprooting. Once in Michigan, however, in the “New Rooms” series, Eichenberg tried to demystify American culture as well as the Arts and Crafts and modernist aesthetics of Cranbrook. Surrounded by buildings designed by architects Eliel Saarinen and Albert Kahn, she initially found their styles alien to her Old-World sensibilities.

SELF

“I am constantly making portraits, whether its portraits of myself, whether it’s a portrait of the society or the context I am in: portraying my life through different bodies”—Iris Eichenberg in Roberta Bernabei, *Contemporary Jewellery: Interviews with European Artists* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011), 95.

The notion of self has always been a concern for Eichenberg, both as a German and as a queer artist. As an emigrant Eichenberg has felt a particular need to define herself in each of the unfamiliar environments she inhabits. She prefers to do so in ambiguous terms, relying on the sensorial language that is an outgrowth of the materials and processes she employs.

Portraiture is a given within Eichenberg’s storyline. Inspired by antique miniatures and locket, Eichenberg, early on, adopted the oval to epitomize this genre; however, her representations never contain human features. Over the years, the motif has assumed a variety of formats, ranging from the simple oval form of *Brooch* (c. 1997) to the elliptical jump rings of *Neckpiece* from the “Strange Bird” series (2013) and the framed elements with and without imagery of *Real* (2015). Eichenberg also uses mirrored glass to ensnare the viewer.

Most jewelry artists are concerned with the body and its relationship to the jewelry placed on it. Eichenberg deals with its shape and function as a physical entity; she uses it to make statements about today’s most relevant social issues. Over the past twenty years, the artist increasingly has turned to more explicit images of women’s sexual organs. While she has always employed banal forms as a starting point, in earlier pieces such as *Untitled Flower* from the “Flowers and Birds of Michigan” series (2010), the forms serve as metaphors. The series “Pink Years Later” (2009), however, introduces a new level of intense albeit poetic physicality, which assumes even greater sensuality in the subsequent “Setting the Table” series. *Finger* (2013), a wall-mounted grouping of elongated polymer digits, celebrates touch and her queer identity.

SELF AND PLACE

“I used to identify myself as a Dutch artist, deeply entrenched in Dutch tradition; I thought I had a certain taste. Luckily, we do not sign a taste contract. Being uprooted and rooted again does not happen without pain but having the chance of becoming within and through different cultures and languages has been the biggest gift.”—In conversation with Iris Eichenberg, Winner of the 2021 Susan Beech Mid-Career Artist Grant, <https://artjewelryforum.org/in-conversation-with-Iris-Eichenberg>, accessed January 30, 2022.

In 2017, convinced at the time of the futility of “longing for belonging,” Eichenberg created for a one-person exhibition at Detroit’s Simone DeSousa Gallery her masterpiece *Kein Ort Nirgends*, which translates to *No Place Anywhere*. Exhibited here in an abridged version, this installation juxtaposes two references to home with a monumental, photographic detail from an abstract wool rug that suggests drab mountainous terrain. The schematic wood model references Eichenberg’s ancestral farmhouse; the other, a minimal, cast-iron house, epitomizes her quest for Heimat. Placed far from the wall, it strains against the pull of a taut rubber band. With each element of the installation isolated from the other, the potential for dialogue about warmth, domesticity, and human connection is overpowered by a powerful sensation of alienation and displacement. This profound emotion is typical of Eichenberg’s oeuvre that runs the gamut from intense sensuality to darkness.

In retrospect, this work has brought partial resolution to Eichenberg’s quest for identity. She now realizes that America offers her greater freedom to experiment than Europe ever did. Working and living on the Cranbrook campus with “history in each nook and cranny” has led her to embrace a more minimalistic aesthetic. She now credits her life at the Academy and extensive travels elsewhere for reinforcing her ties with her Germanic background.

COMMUNITY

In this phase of my life, trust is still a core value, trust in others and trust in me. This is a very fragile and vulnerable dance, and I am still learning the steps. Having partners in this process is grounding even if it happens somewhere else in the world, in a place where I am a stranger... My work often revolves around the notion of belonging and loss.—Iris Eichenberg, email to Davira S. Taragin, March 5, 2021.

Integral to her career-long search to find *Heimat* and fulfillment through personal relationships is Eichenberg's desire to comprehend the essence of interaction between individuals, especially couples. This theme appears repeatedly in her oeuvre starting with the groundbreaking *Wolleherzen* installation of her 1994 graduate exhibition at the Rietveld. There, a group of handmade human heart-like forms, which are included in this exhibition, were placed on a windowsill with a tiny aquarium pump hidden nearby. Knitted by various people including her mother and friends from her German hometown, no two hearts are alike. The sound of beating hearts, produced by the working pump, resounded throughout the silent exhibition space. During the first months of the pandemic, Eichenberg returned to this theme in *Wool Hearts Revisited* (2020), this time knitting larger hearts as a way of overcoming the loneliness brought on by Covid.

Seeing relationships as a “dance” that requires its own lexicon, Eichenberg has adopted a wide vocabulary of forms as symbols. Often branchlike, they range from the “bronchial” tubes of the “Weiss” series to actual cuttings of branches and twigs, some of which she cast in silver, to denote family trees and personal ties. Hands have special significance. Bough-like in form, they symbolize making, doing, and above all, connecting, as in the recent *Hand Medal* project that honored healthcare workers during the pandemic. Lifeless bird forms that she depicts outside the context of their natural environments are metaphors for lost love and the physical and emotional wreckage of rejection. More recently, ex-votos and objects with ecclesiastical connotations have come to perform similar functions.

BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised on a farm on the outskirts of Göttingen, Eichenberg initially followed expectations and trained as a nurse. After practicing for several years, she decided to pursue a career in art. Eichenberg moved to Amsterdam and, in 1988, enrolled at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, where she found herself in an open, creatively tolerant environment surrounded by students, some of whom have become leaders of Dutch design, craft, and art. In her 1994 graduation exhibition, she set forth her mature aesthetic: silver and knitted jewelry that address the body and life. One of the first jewelers to utilize wool yarn forms, she subsequently became adjunct professor at the Rietveld, then full professor, and head of its jewelry department from 2000 to 2007. In 2006 Eichenberg was named Artist-in-Residence at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, a position that she still holds today. She divided her time between the two schools until 2007 when she established her residency at Cranbrook.

Museums have been interested in Eichenberg's work since the beginning of her career. In 1966, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum acquired its first object by this artist; it now owns numerous examples dating from her years in The Netherlands. Today, her work is included in such notable public collections as CODA Museum (Apeldoorn, the Netherlands), Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (New York), Die Neue Sammlung (Munich), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the Museum of Arts and Design (New York), The Mint Museum (Charlotte, North Carolina), The Museum of Fine Arts Houston (Texas), the National Swiss Museum (Zurich), the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), and the Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim (Germany). Eichenberg has organized numerous exhibitions, lectured extensively, and conducted workshops worldwide, influencing countless international jewelry artists.