

CHICAGO

Ellen Rothenberg

Vendanta V-1 Gallery
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reviewed by Jeffrey Skoller

Ellen Rothenberg's latest installation *Beautiful Youth* is at once disturbing and deeply moving in the ways in which it engages with the image of idealized womanhood as manufactured in Nazi propaganda of the 1940s. It is structured around a series of 19 found Nazi photographs of young Aryan women from 17 to 25 years old. As a work of art that attempts to uncover a little-known aspect of history, the piece demands to be read with all the complexity of allegory, while at the same time is unremittingly materialist and elemental.

The piece is a play of opposites simultaneously presented: between presence and absence, past and present, individual uniqueness and mass production, nature and culture, and victim and perpetrator. It sets up a dynamic of ambivalence from which complex and often contradictory readings arise. Each photograph used in the installation is a detail of an image of a woman contentedly engaged in "women's work": feeding a baby, churning butter, bundling a sheaf of wheat, typing at a secretary's desk, etc. The photographs are cropped so that the figure is cut off just above the nose, and at the base of each throat is pinned a brooch with a swastika. Rothenberg's severe enlarging and cropping of the image removes the specificity of place and produces an impulse to read beyond the symbol of Nazi Germany and into the present. Healthy, strong jawed, broad shouldered, and white, the women are reminiscent of those seen in Soviet Socialist Realist propaganda or images of all-American Norman Rockwell femininity.

Standing in front of the photos, which are enclosed in heavy rusted steel frames, are two long pine worktables with metal tops. Strewn over one are dozens of wax castings each of women's hands, forearms, and fingers, dyed

in different skin tones, from black to olive brown to cream. The industrial quality of these worktables is seen in light of the swastika brooches, the symbol around which the Germans created its huge industrial machine where human flesh and energy were harvested as material used to further the Nazi war effort. This repetitive field of body parts suggests that women's bodies and their consciousnesses can be mechanically produced, then nurtured and appropriated for their labor potential. Here Rothenberg argues that the training of young German women to conform to idealized notions of femininity is an essential part of a more general transformation of young women into a productive labor force. The severed parts suggest the dismemberment of one body to build another, much the way that forced labor transferred the energy of prisoners to build the "New German" of an imagined 1000-year Reich. The multiple skin tones of the body fragments also raise the specter of similar displacements of human energy in other histories of slavery and exploitation.

In contrast to the mass-produced body parts, on the second table are layers of glassine paper that run the length of the table. With black-ink fingerprints smeared over them they create a palimpsest of ever disappearing human marks evoking the absence of the lost. At the same time the table creates a spectral presence, as the glassine paper becomes a murky pool from which the unique traces of forgotten individuals surface from the depths of history.

Rothenberg's use of a variety of elemental materials is particularly important to the evocation of a poisoned cultural memory. It parallels German artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer for whom specific materials constitute a lexicon—indeed a cosmology—for the ritualized mourning of the loss of a German cultural inheritance in the face of the Nazi catastrophe. In *Beautiful*

Youth, the "alchemical" transformation of elemental material into art—wood, wax, ink, rusted steel, glassine, and enlarged silver halide granules of the photographs—is a central part of Rothenberg's mourning work for her own Jewish cultural inheritance in the face of the same catastrophe.

Perhaps the most disturbing element of the work hangs on the wall opposite the photographs and tables. Five starched aprons on hangers stand ready to be used. The actual presence of these aprons is shocking in relation to the highly metaphoric use of the other objects in the piece. These variously decorated aprons are replicas of designs taken from Nazi propaganda. The differences between them allowed the women to assert—ever so slightly—their individuality. Looking at them against the brick walls, exposed heavy-beamed ceiling, and picture windows of the modern gallery space, one could just as easily be standing in a clothing boutique of a contemporary vanguard designer. This blurring of the lines between high art and high fashion and the current appropriation of the *mise en scène* of contemporary installation art to sell clothes casts these aprons in a highly ironic light. In this context, these old-fashioned signifiers of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity become "stranded objects," which, as defined by the scholar Eric L.

Santner, are elements of "a cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned by an unspeakable horror." These real aprons stand in the present space of the gallery having absorbed the histories that the other elements of Rothenberg's piece evoke.

Here Rothenberg alludes to one of the more controversial issues surrounding the historicizing of the Nazi period in Germany: the complicity of women in perpetuating Nazi crimes. To what extent were German women victims or perpetrators of Nazism, given their relative powerlessness in German society of the time? The richness of *Beautiful Youth* lies in the fact that we are never able to settle into one specific relationship with the spectacle of Nazism or the image of femininity. The piece is self-implicating in the way it refuses to allow the viewer historical distance or a moral high ground above both Nazi crimes and crimes against women. As a Jewish woman, Rothenberg also takes a profound risk by alluding to the possibility of an empathy with German women through a shared subjection to essentialized notions of femininity. Would it be too outlandish to suggest that this recognition may be a seed for possible reconciliation?

Jeffrey Skoller is a filmmaker who writes frequently on experimental film and video.

Ellen Rothenberg
Beautiful Youth
(detail), 2000. Mixed-media installation.
dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist.

