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in New York City

Latest News and Views

6.26.13 — A TREE GROWS IN SOHO

Topics: Babs Reingold, ISE Cultural Foundation

“What do you imagine the Easter Islander was thinking when he chopped down the last tree?” If he were an artist, he might have imagined more.

Babs Reingold does not have need to rely on genetic sequencing or even basic horticulture to create her own. She transforms a gallery into a brooding field of stumps, using little more than silk and human hair. They could be savagely cut off or coming rudely back to life. And presiding over them all is a solitary last tree.

Reingold finds inspiration in that quote from Jared Diamond. The scientist and author has long insisted that the environment guides the fate of civilizations, more even than genes or culture. In *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, he points to twelve devastating issues for the planet, starting in fact with deforestation. His question, though, puts them in thoroughly human terms, as well as in the form of a mystery, and so does Reingold’s *The Last Tree*. At the **ISE**



Cultural Foundation through June 28, she sets out a regular array of one hundred ninety-three buckets, one for each member nation of the UN. Each serves ambiguously as a planter or final resting place for a tree.

They are convincing trees at that—and not altogether dead. Their irregular shapes include tendrils, often punching right through the side of a tin bucket as if on their own. The artist stains silk organza with tea and rust, sews it, and stuffs it with hair, collected over time from hair salons. Additional dark hair lies to all sides within a bucket. Spirals of lace and thread on the top of a stump bring out the creative process and a sense of growth. The single taller tree seems to stand from the force of its stuffing alone, but it has an assist from a clothesline above.

Reingold offers a **natural history** of the earth, but also a **personal history**. The fragile materials and sewing testify to a human life, while each lock of hair has its own DNA and its own history. The artist notes the Victorian custom of preserving hair in lockets, as reminders of love and death. Perhaps the clothesline reminds her of life in the projects,

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where she passed part of her teens. One more human presence enters on video, chopping down a tree but seen only as hands, her husband's. It looks like hard work, too, on unresisting wood, even with a nasty two-bladed axe.

The Last Tree serves as both performance and installation, like the uprooted tree bursting into a gallery skylight by **David Brooks**, his **machine in the garden**, or the layers of earth in photography by **Letha Wilson**. The Minimalist geometry of rows on the floor and their organic form also recall **Eve Hesse**, who knew how to give one the creeps. As with Hesse, too, or **Louise Bourgeois**, the materials and their physical presence relate at once to Surrealism and a woman's art. You may not yourself figuratively save a tree: Reingold sees the installation as a totality, like the planet, where another artist might sell individual buckets at the end of the show. Who I am to say which approach best preserves and disseminates the work in the world?

One can argue with Diamond about the fate of Easter Island. After all, he can hardly ask the statues on Easter Island—or their offspring by **Ugo Rondinone** in Rockefeller Center plaza this summer. Scholars have laid the blame on simple overpopulation (one of the twelve points on his list) or to disease-bearing Europeans, neither one a simple matter of blind choices and material exploitation. And population growth has little to do with an alarming twenty-first century spike in consumption, pollution, and global temperatures (another of Diamond's talking points). In the end, his answers are a bit all over the map but mostly about home in the West today, and one could say much the same about Reingold. *The Last Tree*, even at its most threatening, describes not an ending, but memory and growth.

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