

# **THE LEGENDS OF CHARLES SIMONDS**

By David Colosi

## **REENACTING BIRTH In The Digital World**

Charles Simonds exists to a much greater extent in the imagination than he ever could in real life. He is legendary. His artwork is based on a legend, and his career is built on another one. And there is little to show for it. Few of his objects remain, and those that do, well, you'll have to find them first. And when you do, by that time they act only as objects of entertainment, as triggers to retell the legends. He is one of the few folk heroes the art world will call its own despite his indifference to, and at times disdain for, that world. Though he makes objects – and this is the passion of his labor – the art he gives us exists outside of them. The enduring value of his work – the art of it – comes across in the stories he tells and in the stories others tell about him. Like Robert Smithson, a friend and artist he respected, he embraces entropy. He builds his objects (at least his early work) for destruction, and he takes no measures to insure their survival. He said in the 1980s, “Their effect is enhanced by their destruction and disappearance.”[Simonds & Molderings, 19] If it is their effect that he's after, then we can say that even though he is creating his objects, his

objects are creating his art for him. His Little People do the heavy lifting. In this way, his art is conceptual even though it isn't always accepted in that context. It is ephemeral, fantastical, anthropomorphic, based in mythology, crafty in its use of clay, sexual without critical distance and in the street outside of the white cube. All of these characteristics ran counter to the art in vogue in the 1970s. Minimal and Conceptual artists, though they embraced him, found him to be an oddball. He, on the other hand, outnumbered, found them to be the odd ones out. He was by no means an outsider or an outsider artist (he was entrenched in the art world, friendly with Gordon Matta-Clark, Sol LeWitt, Adrian Piper and Lucy Lippard among many others), but he found few affinities with the work of his fellow artists. His work represented everything their art was trying to strip itself of, so they likewise found few affinities with his. But with these differences, they shared a mutual respect for one another. The more closely we look at his work and career, the more clearly we can see how his ideas about art converged with and diverged from those of his peers and became a unique model of their own.

I'm looking at Charles Simonds' work now for three reasons, but the third is directly linked to the second. Usually we write about artists when they have an exhibition; this becomes the impetus for consideration. A retrospective for a veteran artist like Simonds consolidates the work and packages it for us to see it anew. In this case, no exhibition or retrospective of his work has been mounted, instead Simonds has launched his own website. It includes documentation from 1970 to the present in photographs, films, critical writing about his work and some of his own writing and correspondences, interviews and lecture documentation. For many artists, this material remains splattered around

libraries and the Internet until a scholar decides to collect and interpret it. But as artists we are the stewards of our own archives, and the Internet offers us new possibilities, too. Simonds created his archive as both a legacy project and a digital catalog raisonné. Rather than interpret his career, he exposes it as a user's guide and a gift for the curious. I am one such curious user.

I first encountered Simonds' work in 1988 when he came to lecture at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh where I was an undergraduate student. I was studying creative writing and sculpture, and Simonds was the first professional artist I had encountered in-person with the exception of my teachers. While I was writing poetry and fiction I was also making sculpture and drawing, and I could see my narrative interests coming through my work. I had not yet considered a term like Three-Dimensional Literature – that would come around 1990 at CalArts – but my sculptural work was taking narrative turns away from the formalism that I saw around me. I locked into Simonds, thinking to myself, “If that is what art can be, then that's what I want to do.” These were my formative years when I was making decisions about what I wanted and, more importantly, what I did not want to do as an artist. Around the same time, I had also taken a trip to New York. There I saw Donald Judd's retrospective at the Whitney Museum, and I was so impressed that I bought Barbara Haskell's catalog. I was enamored by the work, but I also knew that Judd's formal and scientific direction would not fulfill me. Simonds' work appealed to the fiction writer in me. So for the next year my work drew some influence from his, and, though less obvious today, it still does. Seeing his new website, and also having the pleasure of meeting Simonds twenty-six years later, I began to ask myself how his work

contributed to what my work has become and also to what today I call Three-Dimensional Literature. So if my second reason for writing this essay is personal, the third is again professional.

## LITTLE PEOPLE

### Stories He Tells Himself

“The Little People exist to a much greater extent in the imagination than they ever could in real life.”[Simonds & Lippard, 37]

Charles Simonds has demonstrated over his forty-plus year career that one doesn't need to leave behind a trail of objects to gain recognition as an artist. A good story is all that it takes. But a story, regardless of how remarkable, only gains credence through those channels that retell it. And Simonds consistently found those. Throughout his career he has had a contentious relationship with the art world, but it was never a world that he wanted to exit completely. He was an artist after all, and rather than change who he was, he would rather change the world so it could fit his work. On a broader level he wanted it to expand outside of its limited antiseptic white spaces – “prisons,” he called them – and offer artists studios, venues and audiences in the “richly textured jungle” of the world outside of them. This was his bigger picture. It took him time to find his way, and it is a story worth retelling.

Simonds opened a lecture at the Studio School in New York<sup>1</sup> by addressing the students first – because, as he told them, he was a student once (he received his BA from University of California at Berkeley in 1967 and his MFA from Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1969) and he gave them what he called an offering: “I spent most of my time in the beginning of my work trying to forget everything that I learned.” He explains how he eliminated all of the “art things” he had been taught, and he came up with a few simple relationships that became the basis of his work for the next forty years: the earth, his body and time. He built a personal mythology, rituals and a narrative of Little People, and with these blocks he built an art career that has sent him around the world.

Early films document his “origin” story and the origin of his Little People. *Birth*, from 1970, opens with a landscape, and over the course of this minute and a half film we see the naked figure of a man, Simonds, emerge from the earth. In *Landscape <-> Body <-> Dwelling*, from 1973, shot by Rudy Burckhardt and edited by Simonds, we see Simonds, naked, in the clay beds of Sayreville, New Jersey – the source from which he would collect his materials for the years to come – preparing his body as a ground. On top of it he builds a dwelling for his Little People using preformed

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<sup>1</sup> A video of this lecture is available under the Lectures tab at [charles-simonds.com](http://charles-simonds.com). The date is not given, but it seems to be from around 2009. I culled the other biographical information in this section from the Chronology compiled in the catalog *Charles Simonds*, Fundacio “La Caixa” 1994 and also from “Video Interview: Charles Simonds” Bowery Artist Tribute Interview, June 21, 2012, with Ethan Swan, New Museum, New York.

tiny bricks and the clay that surrounds him. In a conversation with Christopher Lyon in 1981, Simonds said,

“The history for me and for them – the Little People – is an endless invocation of *to dwell*, to make homes. Making a dwelling is like building a campfire: you inhabit yourself in one particular place *now*.”[Lyon, 56]

He sees dwelling as migratory, a ritual act of pulling up stakes and reestablishing home in various locations over space and time. In his mythology, the earth is seen as our first collective dwelling place and our bodies are our first individual dwellings. And just as Simonds represented himself as emerging from earth, so too does he use his body as earth for the Little People on which to establish their first dwelling.

After finishing at Rutgers in 1969, he moved to 131 Christie Street in New York – into a building with Gordon Matta-Clark and the painter Harriet Korman – and took a job teaching at Newark State College (until 1971) while his wife took a job as a librarian at Columbia University. (They met at Rutgers and would separate in 1970). He began making his dwellings in their loft, but soon realized that the living conditions of a meticulous librarian didn’t gel with those of an artist building clay, water and dust constructions in their living quarters. To relieve the situation, and to take advantage of the sunshine, he decided to work outdoors.

He had found a new studio, but now he needed new venues. Self-identifying as an artist, he decided to make his dwellings on Greene St. where the new galleries were opening up. He had a college friend on Greene St. who let him build his first dwelling on his window ledge, and from this

beginning his Little People migrated up Greene St. alternating between window ledges and gutters. His narrative at the time involved two warring groups, the ledge dwellers and the gutter dwellers. Along his route, he also convinced two young gallerists, Jeffrey Lew and Holly Solomon, to let him build on their window ledges.[Simonds & Swan]

After this experience on Greene St. he decided, more like a sociologist and anthropologist than an artist, to define a test group for an artistic experiment. He designated several blocks in the Lower East Side, from 14<sup>th</sup> St. to Houston St. and from Avenue A. to Avenue D., as his new studio. The Little People now had a neighborhood, and he had a new venue and, in turn, a new audience.

He wrote his first literary document (in the traditional sense) around this time. According to his chronology, in 1972 he wrote *Three Peoples*, which coincided with *Life Architectures/Living Structures: Linear, Circular and Spiral Dwellings*. In 1974, when he was invited as an artist-in-residence at Art Park in the Niagara Gorge in Lewiston, NY, he was introduced to the “little people” from Iroquois legend and from Edmund Wilson’s book titled *Apologies to the Iroquois* from 1959. He acknowledges in a letter to Linda Nochlin, “I had the good fortune of discovering this and serendipitously joining my “Little People” with [the Iroquois’] as the first artist to be invited to Art-park.”[Nochlin] *Three Peoples* was published for the first time in 1975 for an exhibition in Genoa. He wrote this text for his own creative development, not as a handout for his curious street audience, but later it would serve him and his growing art world audience well.

The three peoples live linearly, circularly and spirally. These patterns reflect their lifestyles spatially and temporally and are reflected in their architecture. Running the risk

of writing longer descriptions than Simonds' own, I will synopsise their characteristics, but the reader is welcome to read Simonds' *Three Peoples* for him or herself.<sup>2</sup> Their clan names were marked by a symbol well before ♀ did this.

✂ are obsessed with the present. They progress along a line, away from the past and toward a future. They are preoccupied with cultivation and decisions about the next direction their dwelling might take. They abandon their dwellings such that when a traveler encounters one, he could see, depending on when it was abandoned, either the homes and personal effects in museum-like order or the ceilings caving in and dirt accumulated in the corners. They left their dwellings to erode back into the earth, never turning back to rebuild them. As there are several groups who live linearly, in different directions, it is common for their paths to cross. At these crossings, cities form where the different communities mix, intermarry and trade traditions, stories and pasts. But just as soon as they settle, they each continue along their respective linear paths except for those who intermarried and redirected. Though their obsession with the present keeps them moving forward, they do look back but not without risks. The past is both a temptation and a curse. These junction points become the source of pleasurable reminiscence. Their historians, archeologists and sociologists investigate their past in order to better understand their genetic, religious and cultural makeup. And they do so with traditional cautionary tales: all attempts to reconstruct the past have ended in jumbled confusion. The individual who goes too far and travels back in space and

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<sup>2</sup> See "Three Peoples" tab on his website.




time – in reverse of the line – risks getting lost in a confusion of pasts and finding himself with no past or present and a bleak future. These people are the most pitied because they sacrificed, against their natural course, everything to remember or relive the past, and in doing so they led lonely lives disconnected from their line.

○, by contrast, are obsessed with the past. They also have a cautionary tale of a child who was born unhappily spinning toward the future instead of clockwise to the past. He died a horrible lonely death. They have two primary characteristics. First, they spend their days reconstructing their dwellings from the remains of their old ones. They actively sort and merge their past with their present to create an ongoing saga, fusing their memories into myth and history. The second revolves around a ritual that eschews time in an attempt to reenact their origin through a sexual ceremony. Their central gathering place – the womb where this ceremony takes place – is in the center of the earth and is only accessible from a descending ladder. They form their dwellings in two concentric circles around the womb. The first one, a single story tall, contains their cooking and eating quarters, and the second, usually two or three stories tall, contains their living quarters. A passageway links them. They build laterally around these rings at a rate of one unit per year, and when they progress to the next section, they abandon the previous one, sealing it up to deteriorate. When they complete a full revolution they reopen the units from the past and build them anew. Rediscovered relics and mementos are incorporated as building blocks to new dwellings, literally either as bricks or figuratively as decorations, weaving the past into the fabric of their present. In doing so, they face again the bones and memories

of their pasts and devise rites to deal with their recurrent traumas or pleasures. When a unit is completed, each dweller advances one unit forward toward his distant past. They rotate their crops similarly. Their architecture functions as its own clock marking time with space, and the completion of a unit coincides with the winter solstice and their origin ceremony. Meanwhile in the center of the womb, and according to a regular rotation, they maintain a continuous meditation chant. Their sexual lives, by bureaucratic order, are repressed to taking place only once a year at the winter solstice, and their dwelling shift coincides with their origin reenactment ceremony. Few obeyed the sexual restriction decree. Stories of clandestine sexcapades animate their lives and never cause any controversy unless a birth resulted. All, except the most fundamental, understood this as an exciting act of rule-breaking and swapped tales of their risks. Finally, on the solstice, the creation reenactment begins with each member descending the ladder into the womb and taking a log and their clothing and throwing them on the fire. They then dance in a frantic circle until the fire goes out and finally indulge in an incestuous orgy. Once they are spent, they ascend the ladder and return to their regular daily lives until the next year.

, in contrast to  and , are obsessed with the future and building ever higher. They are motivated only by their wills and their ascending ambition. The focus of their labor is building the tallest tower known to man. They build their homes on the periphery with a ramp extending to the tower. Their social stratum parallels the peaking spiral, trimming as it grows those less useful to the task. The mathematicians and engineers occupy the top of the hierarchy, and everyone has optimistic faith in their cal-

culations and predictions. Neighboring  compare their towers and take pride in their own accomplishments. Their goal is not only to build as high as possible, but, as failure is inevitable, it is also to predict the moment of collapse. They live by the anticipation of their ecstatic death. They deplete their resources without any care for conservation, renounce their personal possessions, and as the tapering height no longer requires as many workers, those less necessary willingly sacrifice their bodies as building blocks for making the structure ever higher. After a collapse they begin again, building on top of their past failures an even wider spiral with more mathematical precision. They have no concern for their past except one: they constantly hone their mathematical and engineering skills, learning new calculations from their failures yet all the while showing an ever diminishing concern for their resources. The inevitability of a collapse and failure produces an irreconcilable depression that wears on them and eventually leads to their imminent extinction. Their dwellings in ruin remain as a testament to their downfall.

### AGENT, FOLLOWER, REVEALER Stories to His Audience

These are the mythological tales that have fueled Simonds' creativity for forty years. Since 1975 his Little People have evolved and so has their architecture. He has added labyrinths, pyramids and fortresses. His narrative is not restricted to these rough sketches. He created an ever-evolving cosmos and mythology with an anthropological

understanding of the Little People and the way they live, and he does this through their architecture. By looking at each of his objects we can see which type of person lived where. One can see from the openness of these legends, also, how Simonds could expend endless amounts of creative energy living vicariously through them.

Begging the obvious, he said this about his relationship to the Little People.

“When I’m working, I never see Little People. I’m not insane. But I do think about them. What are they doing in that corner? It’s a place you let your mind relax into. Then you fill in what happened in that place. I don’t think about the Little People. I think about me in there. It’s a mental positioning inside. But I also think of them – they’re incorporeal, but they’re quite alive. It’s tricky because since I’m not crazy I don’t live like they live; they do things I wouldn’t do. They drag me into different situations. They also take me all round the world. But there is a separation and I’m not crazy enough *not* to realize that they come from my imagination.”[Castle, 101]

From this description, we can see the paradoxical world Simonds has both invented and lives in. This is more a statement about his creative process than it is about his sanity or the life of the Little People. He is letting us drink the creative juice that sustains him. Written into these tales are the blueprints for the objects he builds. The parallels between his actions and the actions of the Little People are evident in his working process. Each of the three peoples is nomadic just as Simonds is nomadic. He built around 200

dwellings in the Lower East Side over the course of roughly seven years. The Little People built their architecture in the cracks of the architecture of Simonds' New York. And the niches they chose largely determined the designs of their buildings: an enclosed crevice became a residence while a larger expanse became a landscape. This is how Simonds enacted his mental positioning. No one ever saw a Little Person – they were just that little. And only a few people saw Simonds as he worked. Many people saw instead the dwellings or the ruins that remained, abandoned by both the Little People and Simonds. Both dwelled in them only as long as they were being built and vacated them upon their completion.

“When I first appear they are beginning to build, and by the time I leave they’ve lived a whole life cycle. The dwellings have a past as ruins and they are the past of the human race, a migration.”[Simonds & Lippard, 38]

This begins to describe Simonds' relationship to entropy. Like his Little People, he is working linearly in the Lower East Side and also circularly within its confines and spirally striving to build a structure better than the last with the constant reminder (and hope) that he is bound to fail. In this way we can see his detachment to objects and how this reflects his sensibility as an artist.

“I don't see any reason to leave behind ‘things’ which lose their meaning in time, or even exist as a symbol of meaning at a given time past...” [Simonds & Molderings, 8]

By this admission, we can see how he aligns himself with the thinking of many of his fellow artists at the time, like Sol LeWitt who suggested that the work need not be built to function (sentence #10 from his “Sentences on Conceptual Art”)<sup>3</sup> or like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Alice Aycock or Nancy Holt who built projects so deep in the landscape that it was unlikely, if not unnecessary, that anyone would travel out to physically see them. And as they existed remotely from the white cube of the gallery, they eroded back into the earth they were dug from.

“Conceptually as well as physically,” [Simonds said] “the dwellings fall apart when thought of as objects that can be taken home. They lose all their spatial and temporal expansiveness.” [Ibid]

Where Simonds differed from his peers was in scale, ephemerality and fragility. Simonds dealt with imaginary little people, clay, tiny bricks, cups of water and tweezers; Heizer dealt with monolithic objects that required back-hoes, bulldozers and cranes. Though some eccentric and enterprising collector could acquire *Double Negative* or *Displaced/Replaced Mass* for his personal ownership, the sheer size and locations of Heizer’s work discouraged this. On the other hand, Simonds’ works were small, local and seemingly acquirable. But because he built them as gifts to a community and not for rich patrons, his objects became

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<sup>3</sup> Though, opposing LeWitt, Simonds’ objects needed to be built to function, they just didn’t need to exist afterwards to continue to function.

just as unattainable as Heizer's (Heizer's actually proved easier to own because of their immovability).<sup>4</sup>

The moment a person tried to pry one of Simonds' dwellings out of its niche, the object self-destructed. It was built of unfired clay, water mixed with glue, and dirt. He said, "The dwelling belongs to everyone on the block as long as it is possessed by no one in particular." [Ibid, 17] And once it is destroyed, the person who cherished it enough to try to own it feels the loss, and so does the community when they notice its absence the next day. And this is what Simonds means when he says, "Their effect is enhanced by their destruction and disappearance." [Ibid, 19] His effect was not to build objects or even *art* objects. Instead it was to implant an idea or cultivate a memory within a community, and the loss of the object only makes that memory stronger. In the tradition of the best storytellers, Simonds created a unified legend of him and the Little People that the people in the Lower East Side could gravitate around and yearn for while at the same time collectively mourn the absence of its evidence. Just as novels leave no residual objects behind, the stories that Simonds tells gain their form in the collective imagination and are passed along in the same way that we discuss books.

Simonds described himself and his role for the Little People as their "agent, follower, a kind of medium, a chaser (I'm always chasing them), a revealer. I meet them. We have meetings. That's what happens: I invoke them." [Lyon, 59] Notice that he does not call himself their creator. They

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<sup>4</sup> The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, "owns" *Double Negative* as a "gift" from Virginia Dwan, and though *Displaced/Replaced Mass I* no longer exists, a second and third version are privately owned.

preexist him, and his job is only to bring them into the light, to set them in motion.

In literature there is a longstanding notion that some authors indulge themselves in that once a novelist starts writing, his characters take control of the plot, setting and themes, and whisper the rest of the novel into his ear. The writer is merely a transcriber at the whim of the character, and, as if possessed, his fingers peck away.<sup>5</sup> While this claim sounds mystical, and many writers scoff at its pretension, there is actually a salvageable bit of practical truth to it. For fear of digressing too much into the field of reader-response theory, I'll simply introduce it and refer you elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The explanation lies in "possible worlds" theories of literature and the limits that texts impose on readers. While readers are responsible to interpret the behaviors of characters within boundaries – characters must act 'in character' – similar limits impose themselves on writers. The text tells us what actions and behaviors are possible for the characters. Any contradictory behavior must be justified or backed up within the text. These limits are more severe for readers since the characters and the book are inalterable – the character can only do what she does. The facts are fixed. As readers we can play and interpret what the character *might* do in certain hypothetical situations outside of the boundaries of the text, but to make these claims we have to

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
<sup>5</sup> Orhan Pamuk discusses this notion in connection with E.M. Forester's *Aspects of the Novel*. See Pamuk, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> I've discussed this in-depth in other essays, but my sources are always located in Umberto Eco. See *The Limits of Interpretation, Interpretation and Overinterpretation* and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*.




base the possibilities on evidence imbedded in the text. We cannot force the character to act ‘out of character.’ (Even in the case when a character is defined by his unpredictability, we cannot then attribute predictable traits to him. If his unpredictability becomes predictable, then we can only add to his personality the potential for paradoxical behavior. There is no end to the type of characters authors can create). The writer, as the character is being built, also must operate within the boundaries established by the text. The writer must keep the character ‘in character.’ If an extreme shift occurs that shows the character breaking character – acting ‘out of character’ – this usually marks a significant moment in the text, and the writer must justify it within the plot to show how it remains ‘in character.’ And here the pressure applied by these limits differs between readers and writers. The writer, because the book is still being written and the character is still developing, can make the character act unusually or unpredictably. The writer is always empowered to redirect his protagonist, and in this way he or she controls the bully. The mysticism goes ‘poof’. The reader, on the other hand, is stuck with a bully. The book is written; his fate is sealed.



I will give one concrete – or clay – example and play with Simonds’ stories, for this is what he hopes from his audience. If a pedestrian – here also a reader – stumbles upon a dwelling with two partially constructed concentric circles surrounding a womblike center with a ladder sticking into it, he can freely and safely interpret it to be a dwell-


ing of . If, instead, he decides to claim that it was built and dwelled in by , then he must come up with some evidence within the object itself to defend his interpretation. There are all sorts of imaginative ways he could try,


but, in the end, the object always contradicts his claim. There is no denying the insistence of the object. The interpretation may have been fun, and short of calling it wrong, we can at least call it uneconomical. The better interpreta-

tion is to say that it was built by .

On the other side of it, let us hypothetically say that Simonds – here as writer – while he is building his dwelling

decides to have  build a dwelling in the style of .

– or said in a way Simonds might prefer:  decide *for*



*themselves* to build a dwelling in the form of . He is welcome to introduce the contradiction and do this. His story is still being written. But if he does this, and wants this to be known by his pedestrians/readers, then he must justify the contradiction and introduce some other marker to make it known. Without that marker, the pedestrian/reader will not know to read the object for the opposite of what it is. He will not recognize the parody. In this case, the object will always contradict Simonds' own interpretation of it because nothing within the object supports it. He must build the interpretation into it in order that the pedestrian/reader can see it. And this is how the limits of the text are stronger than the limits imposed on it by the author or the reader. If Simonds, as writer, wants to make a character shift – one so drastic as to contradict the very thing that defines his character – he must make the extra effort to show that such a shift remains “in character.”

To continue to play with Simonds' stories – we big people are too quick to jump outside of his narrative world and justify his work in our world, so let's stick to it a little longer – we can compare this to Simonds' work on Greene



*dwelled* on the window ledge. The very nature of who these people are might deny such a possibility. The location, not the style of architecture, tells us who the builders are, so there is no way to say who built or destroyed what. Though warring gives the creative interpreter a little leeway, there is still no denying the most economical interpretation: the gutter dwellers live in the gutter, and in the gutter we see a ruined dwelling therefore the dwelling is the work of gutter dwellers and its destruction is either the work of their enemies, the window ledge dwellers, or the result of their abandonment.

Likewise from the other side, taking Simonds as writer again, if he chose to have the gutter dwellers build a dwelling on a window ledge – or, if, as he was working, the gutter dwellers whispered in his ear that they wanted to build on a window ledge – such a decision is justified by our knowledge of war – war includes the seizure of territory. Shifting the emphasis away from the location and anchoring it in the plot justifies the contradiction. In the previous

scenario of the  and  people, the plot was embedded in the design of the architecture and there was nothing in the story to carry the new weight. Here, the plot of war takes the weight and allows the shift.

## WRITING WITH BRICKS

Remembering Laurence Sterne who wrote, “Digressions...are the sunshine; ...the life, the soul of reading,” while this digression into Simonds’ narrative world and into interpretation theory was fun, my point was to shine the sun

on the ways in which Simonds' labor is comparable to a writer's. He does not use words and sentences, instead he tells his stories with his preformed  $\frac{1}{2}$  x  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch bricks, a mound of wet clay, dry clay powder, a bottle of water cut with glue and a pair of tweezers. He writes in the moment improvising off of an initial structure like the best practitioners of the oral tradition, jazz and stream of consciousness.

"I'm much more interested in my thinking than in my things. The things are extrapolations from what I think. Some of them are more or less economical in terms of getting what I want done. In a sense, it's sort of a replacement of writing. I don't think of myself as able to write. When I do write, it's done more like assembling thoughts rather than writing.[Castle, 95]

If we look at the two examples of his fiction writing, we can see his point. The character sketches in *Three Peoples* are assemblies of thought. He is more interested in the ideas of the Little People and the ideas about what they do and why they behave in certain ways. He is not interested in his written language, his words and phrases. The same can be said of his text for his Floating Cities project where he proposes a book written as a fictional account of a journalist on a Floating Island of the future. He includes an excerpt in *Floating Cities and Other Architectures*. Whether he is good at writing or not, he is not striving to compete with Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges – two writers that critics often compare his themes to – or Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke whose futuristic Sci-Fi plots sought to point our present in possible future directions. His literary talent instead comes across in the way he tells his stories through

objects. The importance of his statement is the clause, “sort of a replacement for writing.” But I don’t think he has replaced writing; he is just not thinking about writing broadly enough. As he is interested in his thoughts and his things, the words he uses to describe each are negligible. By ‘things’ he means the objects he builds, and it is these objects that he writes into existence. Mimicking the working process of his Little People, when he first appears he begins to build a story, and by the time he leaves, the story has lived a whole life cycle. His walking away is his “The End.” Through these acts of writing we come to know his literary talent. His objects are the books and stories he leaves behind for us to read. And when they are gone we retell them from memory.

Earlier I demonstrated how it is possible to shift the emphasis from character to plot. Here I am shifting the emphasis on Literature away from the use of words and phrases to forms of storytelling that don’t require words. Literature can be written with many tools, and reading is not something that we only do with words. Without ever setting word to page, Charles Simonds wrote his way up Greene St., throughout the Lower East Side and around the globe, narrating his tales of the Little People leaving his “books” for those who stumbled upon them to read.

## STORIES BIG PEOPLE TELL

A story, no matter how good, only lives in its retelling. And Simonds has attracted a large number of retellers. First there is the person on the street. Simonds has many stories of his experiences. Children often climbed around him

while he was working; truck drivers asked what he was doing and returned later to check on his progress. Once when people were crowding him, a man used a knife to draw a line on the ground and forced everyone to stand behind it while Simonds worked. In China he remembers a man who stood behind him the entire time telling others what he was doing. Simonds, not speaking Chinese, never told the man what he was doing. In Germany, a woman affected by the terrorism of the Baader Meinhof called the police on him while he was working in an empty lot. Two rookie policemen came ready to confront a terrorist and instead found a strange American building a house with tiny bricks. Simonds recalled how their young faces melted into smiles, and these police officers encased in official uniforms morphed back into little boys. They, too, returned to see his progress.[Simonds & Swan] On the Lower East Side, some people dove right into the narratives and explored the plots with him. In one case a man told him he was on his way to kill another man with a knife, but once he got involved with Simonds' stories and work, he cooled down and couldn't follow through.[Simonds & Molderings, 20] Others dismissed both his stories and objects as silly. And some stood behind him in silence either not knowing what to say or formulating their own opinions. Simonds negatively associated this latter group with his fellow artists.

The audience on the street accepted his premise and ran freely through the narrative world of the Little People. They spread the word, and Simonds was quickly accepted as a folk figure. He became known endearingly as the crazy guy who builds the Little People dwellings. Others retold stories about him and about the Little People, and neighbors who had only heard the legends anticipated seeing him or finding a dwelling themselves. Word spread, and Simonds had

achieved his desired effect. The legend was implanted in the community regardless of whether he or his objects remained or not.

His second audience was not satisfied with the narrative world and tried to attach relevance for his work in the real world. This group is divided into two subgroups: one from the street and the other from the art world. Before moving to the art world – the group that has spread his legends the farthest – let’s first listen to more stories from the street.

For some of us, stories of little people are not enough. We are big people after all, and we, too, are not insane. For us to agree that the Little People exist, we have to turn the story into a metaphor of our lives and glean some use from it. Unfortunately, this is often our flaw in looking at works of art. We just can’t let them be. An Ad Reinhardt cartoon sums this up well: a painting on the wall retorts to its viewer, “What do *you* represent?” Some people in the Lower East Side needed a practical explanation for why Simonds would spend his days working in the street, build something fantastic, not get paid for it, and walk away and leave it to be stolen and destroyed. With nudging from Simonds, together they began to reflect on their environment and draw parallels from the Little People’s lives. In the film *Dwellings Winter 1974*, shot and edited by Rudy Burckhardt, in one scene Simonds sits on a pile of rubble as men with a dump truck work around him. Simonds works diligently in his niche constructing his own dwelling that has been reduced to a pile of rubble. Throughout the film, Burckhardt shows scenes of the conditions in the Lower East Side. People are happy, living their lives, but all around them, buildings are in ruins. Children play in abandoned lots. In another scene, a car is in flames behind Simonds as he works. In his 2012 Bowery Artist Tribute In-



interview for the New Museum archive, Simonds retells the story of the car. He says that kids used to set cars on fire all the time; it was daily fare. At one point, he told them that if they set that car on fire then the smoke would blow right to where he was working and then he wouldn't be able to continue. So the kids, respecting his labor, moved down the street and set a different car on fire that would blow down wind of him.

Herbert Molderings discussed how Simonds' role in the neighborhood changed.


“...Simonds does not content himself with the conception of fictions, but wherever possible, tries to apply his ideas in practical architectural tasks, as for example in 1973-5 ‘La Placita’ on the Lower East Side of New York. Through the dwellings which Simonds built in that area, the residents got the idea to transform a piece of dead and unused land opposite the Little People’s dwellings into a playlot. As a member of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing Simonds helped the community to activate the existing local channels to get the permission and financial support from the city to execute this project. After years of educational work in the neighborhood and endless errands from one office to the other, children and adults finally built their playlot which took the form of a hilly landscape.”[Ibid, 10]

As he was accepted into the community, Simonds became involved with *La Placita/Project Uphill* from 1973-75. His work then took on a second dimension. The title of

an interview with Lucy Lippard published in 1974 in *Artforum* captured the nature of this shift: “Microcosm to Macrocosm/Fantasy World To Real World.” Over the next several years he attended community meetings, acquired permits and met with development commissions. He spent his days – in addition to building dwellings – advocating with and for the community to build this park. As offshoots of this project, he became involved with other macro projects including *The Stanley Tankel Hanging Gardens* in Breezy Point, NY in 1976 and a proposal for The Tenement Museum in 1982 to cover an abandoned building with Wisteria and fill the rooms with audio recordings of former occupants. *Growth House*, *Three Trees* and *Floating Cities* are other later macro projects that moved away from his Little People.

When he first marked off the Lower East Side as his studio, he was not explicit about his metaphors. His motivation was to conduct an art experiment within a community. His goal was to plant the seed of a story that would then exist in the minds of the residents. And his personal fascination was in the sharing of his creative acts. He was infatuated and absorbed in his own narratives and building process. He wanted to deliver a personal message to an audience outside of the containers of the art world. From the outset he never planned to help the community physically or politically to build a park or to work on any sort of macro level. He was looking for a new studio, a new venue and a new audience. But as all good artists are adaptable, Simonds was open to the possibilities.

But his move into political advocacy and community activism marked a significant shift. It broke from his original intention, and it broke something in his relationship to art and the art world. This new direction didn’t come from him; it was instigated by the concerns of his audience trig-

gered by their question, “Why?” They chose to see the Little People as metaphors for their living conditions and used them as a springboard to create change. Simonds chose to follow their interpretation and broke through his own fourth wall. He went from being an agent for the Little People – their “agent, follower, medium, chaser, revealer” – to being an agent for the people of the Lower East Side, following them, chasing them, revealing them. In doing so, he left his own art project behind and created distance between himself and the art world. Like the , he had become disconnected from his line.

We can start to see why at this point he had an awkward time socializing with artists. He would come home to the apartment he shared with Lucy Lippard after a day spent building dwellings or acquiring signatures and permits with Lower East Side residents, and he and Lippard would meet up with fellow artists. After working in what he referred to as the “richly textured jungle” of the city as opposed to the “prison” of the white-walled art studio or gallery, [Simonds & Lippard, 39] Simonds called the concerns of other artists, “bizarre, if not obscene.” [Patton, 89] Considering a gallery space against his open studio he mused, “Why would anyone want that?” [Simonds & Swan]

In the end, artists are people too, big and little, and to have a rich life, one needs more than accolades like prizes and exhibitions; all of our philosophizing about synthetic and analytic propositions, at the end of the day, has to sink its teeth into practical applications. And this is often where contradictions step into the light. Simonds made a connection with the people in the Lower East Side that was more rewarding than his connection with the art community. He found his new audience and created the possibility for a genuine experience with real big people. He took it, and his

life became richer as a result. But his acts of collecting permits and city approvals were no longer art projects, and Herbert Molderings, for one, and others (Robert Smithson and Lucy Lippard both wrote letters of support on his behalf),<sup>7</sup> probably should not have ever called it one. This was not “performance art.” Simonds would be the first to admit this. *La Placita/ Project Uphill* was neither *his* nor was it *art*. It was simply life, and to claim it within an art context insults the nature of the experience. To call it, as we might today, Relational Aesthetics is just as insulting as this is only an art world way to stick a flag in it and bring it into the figurative gallery. And, echoing Simonds, “Why would anyone want that?”

## STORIES ART PEOPLE TELL

When his friend Gordon Matta-Clark and other Earthworks artists cut pieces from the outside world and displayed them in an art gallery, Simonds considered this too arty.[Ibid] As artists they were all, Simonds included, looking for ways to not only reinvent art but also to reinvent the world that presented it. Simonds objected to only the latter. He was interested in finding new studios, new venues and new audiences. The idea of displacing something from the real world and bringing it into an art gallery didn't interest him.

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<sup>7</sup> See website Correspondence tab.

“I know I’m juggling contradictions. [...] But I am far more interested in taking what knowledge and understanding I gathered from art out into other contexts than I’m interested in dragging a part of the real world into the art world to make it into ‘art’, as happened so often in the last decade – like Pop Art, ‘earth-works’, ‘streetworks’, etc. The change must lie in a change of audience – not bringing ‘new goods’ to the same old people.” [Simonds & Molderings, 20]

When he was working in the Lower East Side, he made his disinterest in the commercial art world known, and he met some criticism. In one instance mentioned by Phil Patton in “The Lost Worlds of The Little People”, the sculptor and writer Ira Joel Haber accused Simonds of “a patronizing attitude toward art and the people who make it,” a “superficial approach to poverty, injustice and human suffering,” and “cheap liberalism.” [Patton, 89] Though Haber is jabbing frantically with an inappropriately sharp knife, he is probing at some of these contradictions that Simonds admits to juggling. And Hilton Kramer, characteristically, was not shy in pointing out these contradictions either.

“[His] entire outlook has been shaped and stamped by the ethos of the counterculture that emerged in the late ‘60s. He in fact belongs to the generation and to the class that proved to be especially susceptible to its beguilements and especially successful in making them the basis of an impressive art world success. Indeed, Mr. Simonds’s whole career offers us a particularly vivid example of how much can be achieved in

our culture, at least as far as reputation and renown are concerned, by appearing to reject the fundamental tenets of the culture itself and adopting in their place a scenario of adversary intransigence.”[Kramer]

When he brought his dwellings and Little People to the streets, Simonds gained physical distance from the established art venues, but his interests and motives were still driven by art thinking. He hadn't forgotten *all* of the “art things” he learned in school. Like the painter who tries to make a painting as ugly as possible to reject the notion of beauty in painting, he couldn't escape the cyclical logic, nor did he want to. His dwellings were still art world products because he was still an artist. He rarely passed up opportunities to promote his work in art journals, and he accepted most art invitations that came along. In one instance he modified his invitation to join the Whitney Biennial by requesting, rather than to display his objects in the museum, they include a label directing the audience to the Lower East Side to find his dwellings, a decision he later regretted because it ruined the element of chance discovery. He succeeded in keeping his work out of the white cube and rejecting the art institution, but he kept his name on the roster and took the credibility that came with it. Despite his rejection, he gained, as Kramer said, in reputation and renown. But Kramer is mistaken or at least too far-reaching in his assumption that Simonds is rejecting the culture of the art world. He is instead rejecting the “fundamental tenets” that Kramer ascribes to it. The *status quo* or fundamentality of the world that presents art is the very thing Simonds objects to. He wants to participate in that world, but the apparatus in place doesn't fit the art he is making. By keeping his

name listed as a participant but denying the museum his art work, Simonds is making a statement not against art but against the institution's attempt to claim it.

But something different occurs when he starts working on *La Placita/Project Uphill*. He is no longer trying to change the art world; he is trying to change the world of the Lower East Side, and this is outside the field of art. In the La Placita project he is working for the community and not for himself – or at least not to further himself as an artist. Like the war photographer who decides to set down his camera to help his dying subject, Simonds breaks character and acts outside of his role as an artist. He loses sight of his own big picture and is seduced into choosing to focus on the tasks of his subjects.

The contradiction steps in when he and others talk about *La Placita/Project Uphill* in art journals as if it were an art project. Ira Joel Haber and Hilton Kramer, along with Herbert Molderings, Lucy Lippard and Simonds himself, made the mistake of not recognizing the change of hats. To call it art or consider it within an art context only serves the career of the artist or the career of the critic who chooses to write about it. These are art world concerns. *La Placita/Project Uphill* was of no concern to the art world. It concerned only the people of the Lower East Side, Simonds being one among them. And this is Haber and Kramer's mistake as interpreters. By judging *La Placita/Project Uphill* as (1) a work of art (2) by Simonds they assume that Simonds is motivated to help the community as a way to shine a light on social ills so that a larger audience will become engaged. Simonds never entered the Lower East Side with that intention. He came for his own art-motivated reasons (a new studio, a new venue and a new audience). Once he entered the neighborhood, he loved the character so much he

wanted to become a part of it. He enjoyed his private experience, and the last thing he wanted to do was draw broader attention to it. That would only ruin both his experience and the character of the neighborhood. Just as he denied the curator of the Whitney Biennial, he should have also denied Molderings', Lippard's and his own positioning of *La Placita/Project Uphill* in an art context. When Gordon Matta-Clark expressed his interest in working in the community, Simonds doubted his motives. He didn't doubt Matta-Clark's desire to help; he doubted his ability to leave his art interests behind. Simonds, by leaving his dwellings behind, knew that whether they were physical fragments or ephemeral ideas, an artist couldn't remove bits for personal use or display elsewhere. Everything done for the community must remain there. When he started working on *La Placita/Project Uphill* he knew he had to wear a different hat and leave his art ideas behind, but the publicity he took for it in art journals contradicted his own principles. And as a result he again gained in reputation and renown.

His other macro projects didn't share this contradiction. They remained true to his art motives. With *The Stanley Tankel Hanging Gardens* and the Tenement Museum proposal he also was not motivated to bring attention to social ills. These macro projects were both *art* and *his*, and they fulfilled his desire to find a new studio, a new venue and a new audience. They could be discussed in an art context. Likewise with his global expansion to France, Germany, China and other countries, his end game was not to inspire those communities to rebuild their neighborhoods or renovate parks. He did not want to bring international attention to global living conditions. His art motives from the Greene St. days hadn't changed. He wanted to spread his Little People around the world, to implant a story in the unconscious



of a new audience and to do so by exploiting the cracks and crevices in the architecture of their lives. He was never interested in using his art to send a message in a bottle. The stories of the Little People are so open, from a literary point of view, that they contained no real message. Instead he was always only looking for new places to throw his bottles. And this was always and only an art world concern.

### QUARANTINING A PARK

But quarantining *La Placita/Project Uphill* doesn't get him completely out of his contradictions. From 1978-1983, Simonds' position to museums and white cubes shifted as he got more invitations to show in them. In the catalog *Floating Cities and Other Architectures* from 1978, he was asked about the change of heart in allowing his "street work" to enter the museum.

"I have the opportunity to do both now – a broader attack? Neither context is complete in itself, and I basically accept some of the inherent contradictions as being external; interfaces as my thoughts press through reality." [Simonds & Molderings, 21]

His approach, he says, is site-specific in that each context has its own circumstances, and he takes these into account when he is inside one or the other, whether it is the street, a museum or a family home. But even as he recognizes some of the contradictions surrounding *La Placita/Project Uphill*

or those that Haber suggested as external, some of those that Kramer voiced still appear to linger.

“I’ve never labored under the delusion that the art world could offer me the quality of emotional or ideological experience that I get from the anonymous person in the street... Certainly the commercial aspects of galleries interest me not at all.”[Ibid]

Though he is not getting his emotional or ideological nutrition from the art world, he is collecting credibility from it that profits his reputation and renown. He is probably also getting financial support, at least enough to pay for the building of these projects. From my 2013 position in the future, I hear echoes of Elizabeth Warren: “There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own.” We must remember that Simonds got two higher education degrees in art at Berkeley and Rutgers; he taught art at Newark State College for two years; he lived with the supportive critic Lucy Lippard during his formative years; he consistently delivered lectures in art schools and later taught at Cooper Union intermittently for nine years; he sold art to private collectors; all of the grants he received came from art institutions; critics spread his legends in the pages of occupation-specific journals like *Artforum* and *Art in America* where readers could find them and spread them even further; and museums featured his work in exhibitions and produced catalogs to promote his legends. He may prefer to work in the street among the truck drivers and downplay the opinions of his art world peers and reject their bizarre white cube lifestyles, but it is only by their acceptance of his art practice that he did not need to drive a truck himself.

Since richness is not valued in emotional and intellectual stimulus alone, he is still juggling contradictions. “Jenny from the block” didn’t become Jennifer Lopez because her friends told their friends. She worked hard at it, sure, and impressed the right people, but someone cared enough to introduce her to a bigger audience. If Simonds had left his stories to only the audiences that crowded around him on East 2<sup>nd</sup> St., he may have needed that trucker’s license or maybe he would have opened a deli on Avenue B, or, like so many artists, he might have fled from rising urban rents and become another potter in the Catskills. One could argue that he never sought the press or the art world recognition and that it was just showered on him, but he supplied the photos, interviews, writing and requested the letters of support.<sup>8</sup> While the street community gave him the quality of emotional and intellectual experience he wanted, the art community gave him the quality of financial sustainability and professional credibility that the street never could have. And this is the apparent *internal* contradiction: in his consistent rejection of the art world, he is belaboring the delusion that he got where he is without the support of that institution whether he used a commercial gallery to get there or not. This is the juggler’s ball he dropped while he kept the other two in the air.

But it is possible to see this contradiction another way that might also be external. Simonds never denied being an

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<sup>8</sup> With this exception: Simonds did not participate in my essay. I just showered it on him. But I learned everything I know about him through only channels of art world dissemination and the information he provided on his website.

artist or wanting to be recognized as one.<sup>9</sup> He also never rejected other artists; instead he supported his friends. He rejected the commodification of their work and the structure of the world that sought to contain it. And he was dubious of his friends who sought to be contained within it. But he was always trying to be a better artist, so we can only believe Kramer's criticism if we, like Kramer, see the art world or the "culture itself" as fixed. Kramer accuses Simonds of rejecting the status quo, and that is exactly what Simonds is doing as he tries to change the structure that presents works of art. He is never critical of artists or their labor; he is critical of the structures that present and ultimately exploit them. He is trying to upset the very fundamentality of the presentation structure of the art establishment that Kramer defends by fixing it as immovable.

As an interpretive strategy, Kramer is trying to pry Simonds loose from the niche in the art world that he has implanted himself in, and in so doing he risks destroying Simonds for the rest of us. But, remembering words attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent," Simonds has already positioned himself with the upper hand. Just as with his dwellings, which "belong to everyone so long as no one in particular tries to possess them," what Simonds is actually doing on behalf of artists is further illuminated and enhanced by attempts to destroy him and make him disappear. In the counter culture of the 1960s that Kramer refers to, where hippies protested against The Man in the form of the police and politicians,

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<sup>9</sup> Actually he has, but this is often to disaffiliate himself with preconceived notions of what artists are *supposed* to do. He is inventing himself, and, at times to his chagrin, "artist" is the miscellaneous bin he falls in.

we must remember that just because Simonds may have landed in the “prison” of a museum or gallery a few times (compared to other artists, only a scant few), this doesn’t make him, as Kramer would have us believe, a cop. Whenever he put his work in a museum or gallery, he didn’t check his antagonism at the door. Instead he tried to make it work on his own terms. If we are critical of anything, it should be based on the success or failure of his attempt.

## REENACTING BIRTH In The White Spiral

In 1983, during his United States museum exhibition tour, Simonds reflected on his contentious relationship to the art world.

“I probably sounded much more against the galleries than I was. My going to work in the street was not an attack on the galleries, it simply made them look very peculiar and in certain ways ridiculous. The world of galleries was simply of no use to me. You don’t have to attack or fight something that isn’t in your way.” [And he admits,] “I was often more angry then. I would come home from working in the Lower East Side to the house where I lived in SoHo and hear these art people talk about how they had spent their days, which were so different from mine. Their concerns seemed bizarre, if not obscene. Today I don’t feel as exclusivist as I used to. Once I was insistent about working only in the street. Today my view

is not to exclude any way of working. I accomplished what I wanted to do on the Lower East Side, so there was no purpose in continuing. It's not as if you can fundamentally change things there. You can only scratch the surface, and that will always be true." [Patton, 89-90]

Maybe it is true that he could not fundamentally change things on the Lower East Side, but as an artist, he could, with the help of his peers, fundamentally change things in the art world.

Earlier he had rejected his inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, but now when the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago was willing to mount a six-city tour ending at the Guggenheim Museum he was open to "not excluding any way of working" and staging a "broader attack." The reasons for the shift are clear. His interest all along was in finding himself a niche in the art world and his excursion into the street was a means to that end. When he returned from Germany in the 1980s and went back to the Lower East Side, he noticed that Crack and other drugs had overtaken the neighborhood, and the people had become more unpredictable and dangerous. Many of those he had "grown up with" no longer dominated the neighborhood. It had changed for the worse.[Simonds & Swan] After his experience with *La Placita/Project Uphill*, on the one hand, and his experience on his DAAD fellowship in Germany on the other, he had to make a choice: Does he return to the Lower East Side and continue to work in the street and advocate to improve the neighborhood or does he follow the momentum of his art career? The choice was obvious. In 1981 the Whitney Museum commissioned a piece from him that he accepted, this time building one work in the stairwell of the

museum and two in locations in nearby buildings; he began teaching at Cooper Union; and he mounted this traveling exhibition. Arriving in the Guggenheim Museum, he accomplished all he had wanted to in the Lower East Side, so there was no point in returning.

His path to an exit was clear, but he added to it his understanding that fundamental change in the Lower East Side was never possible, suggesting that further advocacy would have been fruitless. He is pulling his La Placita hat off the hook. But *if* the community in the Lower East Side ever did need a helping hand or a broader attack, and *if* more than scratching the surface were ever possible, his moment in the Guggenheim Museum would have been the time to strike. Many of the people he met there remained, unable to leave as easily as he had. They were dealing with crackheads selling and using on their sidewalks, stealing from their stores and tempting their children. Like he did with his first Whitney Museum invitation, he could have proposed a remote project in the Lower East Side with the backing of the Guggenheim Museum. This could have brought attention to the drug problem. Instead, just as he had forgotten the “art things” he had learned in school, so had he seemingly forgotten the “life things” he learned on the street. I say this not to point out a failing or a missed opportunity, I only mean to reinforce that his motives were always only art driven.

He is correct that for an artist in his position and at that time achieving fundamental change in the Lower East Side was akin to scratching the surface. And an exhibition at the Guggenheim doesn't provide any real power, in the way, say, that Bono or Oprah can bring fundamental change through diplomacy and the money it generates. The art world is a vapid place, and museum or not, it has never been

concerned with community outreach no matter how much their underfunded education departments beg to differ. And this is one of the fundamental structural problems that Simonds felt he could change within the museum system.

But under the other hat he was somewhat mistaken about change in the Lower East Side. Fundamental change *is* actually possible there; it just takes longer-term commitment and a broader attack. Today we see that change *did* come to the Lower East Side and is still coming with rising rents, fashionable boutiques, and trendy galleries and restaurants. But it was the Rudy Guilianis and the Michael Bloomborgs that made it happen, not the Charles Simonds. And despite the safer conditions today of the public spaces that Simonds was in favor of in the 1980s, he considers this to be change for the worse and nostalgically mourns the loss of the vibrancy and character of the neighborhood, burned cars and all.[Ibid] We all understand too painfully that real positive change in neighborhoods only holds value if the residents can benefit from it, and most of the people who could have benefitted from it in the 1970s and '80s were priced out and forced to live in areas where change will only push them further.

But Simonds *did* play a role in that fundamental change, whether he wants to take credit for it or not. Artists in New York have been systematically gentrifying and rejuvenating neighborhoods since at least the 1950s and '60s in Greenwich Village and SoHo by shining the light on their character. This is just as true with my generation in Brooklyn neighborhoods like Williamsburg, DUMBO and Bushwick. *La Placita/Project Uphill* aside, he and his fellow artists active in the 1970s and '80s brought verve to the Lower East Side. The Little People, Warhol's Factory, CBGBs and punk rock contributed to fundamental change by making it trendy



and chic. This is exactly what Simonds feared with his first Whitney inclusion and label. Tourists and the affluent flocked to the area and gentrified and commodified it to the benefit of themselves and the detriment of anyone who lived there previously with fond memories of its past. As an artist attuned to migratory dwellings and the building and leaving behind of ruins, Simonds and his Little People knew these patterns and his contribution to them better than anyone.

Certain contradictions can't be avoided.

## REENACTING BIRTH In The Whitney Museum


In his 2012 Bowery Artist Tribute Interview for the New Museum we can see that Simonds still harbors a negative attitude toward the art world that built his career, and some of his old exclusionist ideals linger. When asked about Rudy Burckhardt's film contributions to his work, he diminishes their importance by suggesting that they didn't capture what was really happening. Yet in every lecture, he uses them to validate his practice. In discussing his friend Gordon Matta-Clark's wish to "engage with the community," Simonds, again, considers those motives disingenuous. A pattern is developing.

After school he landed squarely in what was, unbeknownst to him, to become the center of the New York art world; while he was forgetting his "art things" he saw there an exhibition organized by Seth Seigelaub that he said gave him the liberty to go into the street and do his thing; he started building his dwellings on Greene St. because that's where the galleries were; he moved in with Lucy Lippard;

along with his art peers Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, he rejected the white cube (but he never forgot so much as to completely exit the art world, as did Heizer who chose instead a studio and venue in the remote landscape of Nevada and today shoots at any new or old audience members who even fly over the airspace of his 100-acre studio); he rejected the Whitney Museum's first invitation to show inside their walls, but he took credit for his participation in the Biennial; while he was working on the street in the Lower East Side to get away from the art world, he accepted opportunities from arts organizations in Lewiston, NY, France and Germany; when the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago wanted to mount a six-city touring exhibition of his work, his previous, "Why would anyone want to do that?" turned into, "Well, I can do that, too."

The pattern shows that despite his rejection of the art world, he always remained an artist, and to do that he remembered enough of the "art things" to keep building his credibility and career on his own terms. He did that on the strength of the Little People, on the kindness of his audience in the Lower East Side, from the lens of those who filmed him, the writer's cramp of the critics who praised him, and on the tab of art institutions around the globe. In this light we should not judge his contradictions as callous or under-appreciative; instead we should see this as his orchestration of an anti-establishment persona and ethos as a means to secure him a place as an artist within an art world he was actively trying to change. If anything, we can debate whether or not he succeeded in that change, or if he too was simply consumed by the establishment. His second invitation to show within the Whitney Museum walls might shed some light on this.

On the Guggenheim floor he had seemingly earned himself a position within the very art world he rejected. Apparently now he was getting “the quality of emotional and intellectual experience” from the art community, so he no longer needed the street. With *La Placita/Project Uphill* I said that once he entered the Lower East Side and found himself welcome that he loved the neighborhood so much he wanted to become part of it. Likewise I could say now with this art world welcome, he loved the attention so much that he wanted to become a part of it, too. But both *La Placita/Project Uphill* and the Guggenheim Museum are equal and opposite cul-de-sacs he found himself caught in.

In both situations, like his , he broke from his line by temporarily wearing different hats. These are two spikes in his path to defining himself as an artist and, as such, they might cancel each other out in hopes of finding a baseline. The first is no longer art and the second is too arty. The author has constructed an unpredictable character that is now acting predictably. But since the writer is still developing the character, we must see how he justifies his actions, demonstrating that his paradoxical tendencies remain “in character”. Simonds is both the author and the character of his own making, and for this reason I opened this essay by saying, “Charles Simonds exists to a much greater extent in the imagination than he ever could in real life.” While he was narrating and implanting in us legends of the Little People and building their lives into the niches of our crumbling architecture, he was also inserting the legend of Charles Simonds into a niche in art history. And in this act he never contradicted himself.

In light of this paradoxical pattern, when we look at *Dwellings* 1981, commissioned by the Whitney Museum, we should not see his acceptance of it as a compromise of

his ideals – or as Kramer would have it, as a self-serving gesture of sneaking into the museum through a crack in the architecture. We should see it instead as an expression of the kind of statement he was trying to make all along.

Inside the museum the viewer first has to find the piece. It is not in the rooms where art has been staged for us. It is in a passageway, and more than that, it is on the outskirts of the passageway. A label in the stairwell tells us to look for it. Once we find it, there are two vantage points to view it from, neither of them perfect. One is from below where the label stands, and this also offers a view out the window. We can't make out the dwelling inside the museum because we are too far below it, but, as the label indicates, a second dwelling sits on a window ledge across the street, and – if there is no scaffold in the way – we can see it. The label also tells us a third dwelling is across the street but higher up in a chimney, not so viewable from our vantage point. The second optimal vantage point is one flight up where, even though we can't see either of the external dwellings from here, we can look down on the dwelling in the stairwell. We achieve a better view by both leaning on and over the railing that separates the stairwell from the window or sitting down and dangling our legs under the railing. Now we can see the carefully constructed brick dwellings, the sensitively placed thatched roofs, the sexually suggestive landscape, the paths leading away from the dwelling, and the ruin left as a result of that departure. The Little People, just like Simonds, came and left this behind for us. We can get lost in the narrative that *he* left for us to find.

But while we are lost in this moment of revelry, let us not forget our position, possibly seen through the eyes of a museum visitor descending the stairs. Whether we are standing, leaning over the railing or sitting with our legs

dangling, we have our backs turned to the museum. Our posture stands or sits in opposition to what the institution has spent 99% of its energy and money staging for us to look at. We are like the child with a roomful of toys behind her who gazes yearningly out the window on a rainy day. But it is neither raining nor are we children.

In various interviews throughout Simonds' career he has been asked if he considers his work political. Often the asker has an answer in mind already: either, because his dwellings are wrapped in fantasy and anthropomorphic, they must be escapist; or, conversely, the lives of the Little People are an indictment of our lives, trapped in ruin and migration. Most often the question of politics had come up in the context of *La Placita/Project Uphill*, where, apparently, the political is more pronounced because he is acting between a community and their political leaders. One would think that this dwelling resting in the Whitney Museum is the least political of all because it is locked in a sanitized safe house and off the streets, far from social engagement. But this is one of his strongest political statements, and it is even more so because no one expects it to be. Its effect is reminiscent of the elegance Felix Gonzales-Torres demonstrated in loading the seemingly innocuous with political force.

First of all, it begs the viewer to look at it in isolation. It requires us to focus all of our attention on it and pulls us into an intimate corner and asks us to lend an eye. There is no competition from neighboring works as there is in the exhibition spaces where our eyes hop from a Jasper Johns to an Andy Warhol to a Roy Lichtenstein, each work competing with the next label. Clyfford Still, most adamantly, knew this distraction when he famously required any museum that owned his work not to show it next to any other works by

inferior (as he saw them) artists – museums are supposed to keep his works in micro “Still chapels,” but most, including the Museum of Modern Art in NY don’t obey this requirement (in MoMA a massive David Smith sculpture contaminates the room). Our time is what artworks jockey the most for. This is one reason why people like Ad Reinhardt called museums tombs and Simonds called them prisons: in the crowd, each work can’t get the time it deserves. But in *Dwellings*, Simonds found the ideal circumstance, and he has his viewers right where he wants them.

When we are looking at this work, our backs are to the exhibition spaces. Our body position is political. It parallels Simonds’ own rejection of the institution (i.e. this is his broader attack). The work invites us to join him in looking elsewhere for an art experience. The location of the work forces us to consider our position in the passageway. We are moving from one staged exhibition to another, following the path the museum has built for us. But we are interrupted. His work is not part of what we have come to see. It is extra. Just like the dwellings themselves, it is leftover, a marker of an exhibition from the past. As such, we must consider how much time it deserves in comparison. We are confronted with a question of value, and in its dormancy the object is insistent. As a remnant of the past, it is permanent. What it has that no other works in the museum have is the requirement that it remain indefinitely. All of the other works have been to the storage room and will go there again; this one has not and never will. In this, Simonds has already changed the terms of the relationship between museum, artwork and artist, and this is politically charged. If the museum tries to remove it, the object will self-destruct just like the works from the street did. Even if a highly paid conservator devises a way to remove it – say to relocate it

and the other two to their new building near the High Line<sup>10</sup> – this will still destroy it because removal from its site destroys its effect. Simonds has forced the museum directors into an awkward position: if they destroy the piece, they are not honoring their commitment to safeguard it, and therefore it must remain on permanent display; likewise for the two dwellings across the street (and someone has built a Plexiglas roof over the one on the window ledge to postpone its erosion from the rain and birds). These are demands that Simonds alone has bragging rights to. He has accomplished through formal strategies what Clyfford Still attempted and failed through legal means. Rarely has an artist wielded so much power over a museum's treatment of his work or caused so much consideration of conscience in their decision to act.

And finally, *Dwellings* asks us not only to look at them but also to look beyond them. The three-object set asks us to see inside the narrative of the Little People and to look for art outside the walls of the museum. We cross the street to see the one on the window ledge, and, if we're lucky, we get a glimpse of the one in the chimney. But our search doesn't stop there. It continues by leading us to the Lower East Side to see if there isn't one left over on Avenue C, diligently preserved by a local resident, or it may take us on a quest to China. But either way, it takes us to the legends of both the Little People and of Charles Simonds. And when we figure out where exactly we have ended up, we

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<sup>10</sup> The Renzo Piano designed Whitney Museum is scheduled to open in 2015, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art is slated to take over the building at 945 Madison Avenue. It will be interesting to see the fate of Simonds' work.

are well beyond the museum walls. And this perfectly mimics Simonds' motives and politics as an artist.

Simonds' contentious position against art institutions manifested itself in his attempts to look for new studios, new venues and new audiences. This is his "big picture," and it is emphatically stated in his decision, this time, to allow the Whitney Museum to include his work inside their walls. In light of the two previous spikes in the construction of his artistic persona – the first in *La Placita/Project Uphill* where he abandoned his art motives to advocate on behalf of the Lower East Side community, and the other where he abandoned his anti-art establishment principles and allowed his work to land on the Guggenheim Museum floor – in the Whitney decision he has produced a balanced statement. And this is perfectly consistent with his first art acts on Greene Street that landed not inside the galleries of Jeffrey Lew and Holly Solomon but outside on their window ledges. One can try to argue that the object now in the stairwell of the "prison" contradicts his principles by merely being within the walls, but once we see how it functions, we understand what he may have meant by a "broader attack." Besides bringing art to new audiences, he could now also bring the old audience out of the old institution so they could find new experiences in the richly textured jungle. For a vacated dwelling in ruins, like a glorious bacterium or mold, his work in the Whitney Museum remains one of the few art objects left alive in the tomb.



## FREUDIAN ENTROPY

Charles Simonds implants a legend in us that we are compelled to repeat. Everything we know about his work exists as legend. Conceptual art, Earthworks and performance art from Simonds' formative decade made art documentation and the ideas of art the new marketable art products. It was no longer artworks that made careers but the rumors and legends about them. Pierre Bayard recently wrote a book called *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. I have not read it. Ninety-nine percent of the art that we talk about we have never seen. Only a handful of people were present at Chris Burden's performances, but we talk about them as first hand witnesses. I was not on the street in the Lower East Side watching Simonds work, yet I managed to write several pages as if it were part of my memory, too. This is the lesson my generation of artists can learn from Simonds: to build a career and position in art history, we need not leave objects in our wake; we need to be good story tellers and inspire others to spread our rumors for us. David Hammons is also exemplary in this regard. Just like the Chinese man who "explained" what Simonds was building in the streets, we too never heard it from him, but still we take over the reigns of interpretation so that he can keep working. Christopher Lyon in his article in *Images and Issues* from 1981, asked Simonds about his work's openness to our interpretations, and Simonds responded that while he is interested in other people's ideas about his work, he takes no responsibility for what they think.

"I never feel any obligation [to believe] that people understand anything. At all. Period. [...] That's all

a coefficient of what they choose to let themselves do. I don't even open the door. I just provide the doorway. *They* choose whether they want to go in or stay out, and how far into the doorway they want to go. So I don't really have any obligation in that, or any control. Or any real interest." [Lyon, 61]

The first page of his website demonstrates his consistency. It is a doorway that leaves the visitor the option to enter it or not. Once inside, he provides the documentation of his work and the interpretive records of others. Though he cares and is interested enough to include their opinions and interpretations, he doesn't provide commentary or criticize his critics. (Kramer's scathing review shares equal billing with the others). And this choice only further parallels his actions in walking away from his dwellings and leaving them for others who will, more often than not, destroy them with their interpretations. But as Simonds knows better than any of us, his work is "enhanced by its destruction," and the narratives are welcome to argue amongst themselves for years well beyond the earshot of the Little People.

Throughout this essay, I have avoided one obvious interpretive strategy that I will introduce here at the end. In Simonds' biography he shares the fact that he is the son of two Vienna-born psychoanalysts. The admission testifies to the importance psychoanalysis plays in his work and his persona. It is most clearly found in his projects documented on film in *Birth* and *Landscape <-> Body <-> Dwelling*. His criticism of object fetishism is built into his self-destructive objects. The sexual references in his objects also link him to his parents, and a psychoanalyst is welcome to have a field day exploring these themes. Arthur C.

Danto, in his 2011 essay included in *Mental Earth, Growths and Smears* starts down this path. He notes that Simonds cites his art as “a footnote to his mother’s career.” His mother, Dr. Anita I. Bell, specialized in childhood development and, specifically the child’s discovery of its body and how its bodily functions affect its psychology, in particular the “confusion in the infant between ascending testicular movements that occurred at the same time as bowel movements.” [Danto, 18] He connects Simonds’ photographic studies of his own feces (a study I don’t think is public) to this work as an attempt to “capture the most primitive gestures. The smear, as in a child’s thoughtless smears (implicitly of its feces).” [Ibid, 19]

There is much to say about this particular path of interpretation, while at the same time there is so little to add. Psychoanalytic interpreters are best known for drawing out the ‘anal’ in analysis, so I will leave that to them. But it may be possible to read in Simonds’ dualistic footnote to his mother and his contentious relationship to the art world a pattern of destroying his precursors that might resemble an Oedipal Complex. But this is not a characteristic of Simonds alone. As artists, we do this from one generation to another. Simonds is more aware of this than most since his work is always about growth and the rise and fall of civilizations. In order to build our own art and ethos, we destroy that which came before us through our own acts of interpretation. This doesn’t diminish the respect we have for those that preceded us or for the friends we meet in the trenches. It only reinforces our appreciation for the ground we are breaking together. Artists, too, live linearly, bonding with new groups at the intersections; circularly revisiting and incorporating our pasts; and spirally, building on top of past failures and learning from the mistakes of others, always with an irra-

tional ecstatic anticipation of our own death. The path of my interest in Simonds' work from my formative years in 1988 to this essay in 2013, participates in this long tradition. And my attempt to plant Charles Simonds in a niche in the architecture of Three-Dimensional Literature may be just as Oedipal, for I couldn't have done it without him.

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Also by DAVID COLOSI

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