Charles Simonds – Clay as a Transformer

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A photograph taken on the Apollo 8 Mission in 1968 depicts our planet as a luminous blue and white orb with its lower half in shadow. This iconic image signals a shift in consciousness, a self-differentiating global perspective, as well as burgeoning, intensive ecological debate. Yet Charles Simonds has devoted himself in his work to this Earth with both feet planted firmly on the ground, his preferred materials being diverse, versatile and richly complex clays, mud, and sand. Indeed, natural materials of this kind found increasing use in the arts from 1960 onwards.[1] However, whereas American land artists, such as Michael Heizer or Robert Smithson deployed heavy industrial plant or even explosives in order to realise their large-format projects in remote areas, Simonds has instead taken the ecofeminist critique of such treatment of our environment to heart. In his 16 mm film *Birth* (1970), shot in a deserted New Jersey clay pit, the artist's body is covered with reddish-brown, sandy clay and can scarcely be made out from his immediate surroundings as he gradually morphs out of a soft sandy mound. Earth is a modest material, yet it plays a role in numerous creation myths that tell of humankind being fashioned out of clay by the hand of a deity.[2] Consequently, artists have staged themselves as the masters of this plastic, highly malleable material. In 1955, Shiraga Kazuo, an artist related to Gutai, used this cultural charge for his performance *The Challenge of the Mud.* [1] Shiraga wrestles in the open with an obdurate mass of cement and clay;

[1] Shiraga Kazuo: *Challenge to the Mud (Doru ni idomu)*, 1955, *1st Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ohara Kaikan Hall, Tokyo

far from yielding to the artistic process, the material asserts itself as an equal within the radius of the action. Whereas Robert Morris thought of the clay used in *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969) as repulsive and even referred to it in a diary as "brute dirt",[3] Simonds by contrast enjoys a close, even intimate contact with his material—in particular the tactility and the aroma of clay. This aspect is further highlighted in another film, *Body <–> Earth* (1974), in which the artist bathes in mud like an African lungfish and attempts to embed himself in the aqueous, slippery earth. [2]

[2] Cover of *New Seed: The Voice of Natural Living*, 1976

A third film, *Landscape <–> Body <–> Dwelling* (1973) depicts Simonds prostrate on the ground and applying wet red clay to his naked legs, torso and genitals; he then sprinkles yellow sand on his body which becomes the ground or foundation for a dilapidated ruin (earthwork) which he constructs using tiny dark grey clay bricks while his own physical being is gradually transformed [3].[4]

[3] Charles Simonds: *Landscape <–> Body <–> Dwelling*, photograph, 1970

The dwellings do not spring forth as a "brainchild" from the mind of Zeus. They sprout out from and on the body of their host, whereas Simonds, for his part, seems like the vulnerable larva of a sediment-dwelling caddis fly that builds cases from stones and other materials. [4][5]: The cooperation with the non-human plays a central role within

[4] Hubert Duprat:
Trichoptera Larve with case, 1980–2000

this intense form of body art.[6] When a student at the University of California, Berkeley, Simonds was involved in the Free Speech Movement—and this freedom to express one's opinions also holds for his artistic materials. Simonds, for whom "clays are living entities," has to adapt to the materials he uses, because they have a life of their own—they ferment, they decompose, they transform while moving from wet to dry and articulate thus their own peculiar languages.[7] And so that these languages could be heard, the artist began to build his sculptures not only in the clay pits of New Jersey, but in the urban context as well.

In keeping with this, Charles Simonds takes his material from the Sayreville, New Jersey clay pits. Despite the meditative quality of the films, the focus is by no means upon nature as a paradise. Instead, the history of the industrial use of the earth, all the way to its reckless exploitation, is a paramount concern. For the Sayreville clay pits provided the material for the majority of bricks used in the construction of New York City's Lower East Side during the nineteenth century.[8] From 1970 onwards, Simonds has built idiosyncratic, tiny clay buildings, so-called dwellings made from miniature bricks—occasionally no bigger than one's hand—in this very suburb of Manhattan; he inserted them into crumbling walls, onto window sills and ledges, into gutters or overlooked, neglected places, for the most part worlds away from the concerns of any art institution. These alternative architectures with their ritual circles, houses, huts, streets, stairs, portals or rocks—recalling but never directly quoting renowned archaic architectural forms from around the world—are the dwellings for the Little People, wandering itinerants through places and times. We hardly learn anything from the artist himself. Key here is rather the organic structure of the Little People's housing that appear within a day outdoors, but also materialise in other cities across the world, either in immigrant neighbourhoods or in places of urban upheaval. Via his chosen material, clay, Simonds enters into conversations with the people on the streets in these mostly troubled neighbourhoods, crafting material-semiotic knots and creating a narrative spaces for stories and ideas about what "home", a place or a country, can or might mean. "Most people imagine the Little People's dwellings as an image of their own imagined primitive past of their culture."[9] This exchange with the public, reflection upon the urban environment and circumstances in question, its inherent sociological make-up and community, as well as workshops with children, students or people undergoing psychiatric treatment, typify Simonds's artistic practice. These communal structures are—like the works the artist installed himself in public spaces—fragile and temporary, as the clay is never fired. The dwellings exist just as long as the respective communities, that is to say the actual neighbours of the Little People, endeavour to take care of them. No sooner than any of us abandons these Lilliputian urban landscapes than they are lost, ultimately surviving primarily as an oral tradition, as rumour or memory.

Ruins also play a significant role in Charles Simonds's work. Clay is a product of the weathering of rocks rich in feldspar; frequently the houses of the Little People are dilapidated, moreover the dwellings can also be a marker for neglected or deserted buildings. Nevertheless, it is not a wistfully romantic "ruin lust", nor is it about picturesque decay. Simonds's clay dwellings are both dynamic constructs and time machines in the sense of Robert Smithson's "ruins in reverse", places that are still in a process of becoming, that are open to new levels of meaning and interpretation and as a result, allow temporal planes to collapse.[10] For Simonds and his artistic practice, clay has a

life of its own, a dynamic pulse, as the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe it, infused with variability and variation, a movement or flow which can only be followed. 11 Our view of ruins releases us from the logic of chronologies; 12 ruins, like memories, are incomplete. As a kind of interpreter within this chaotic melange in which unpredictable or unintended effects can crop up, such as fissures and cracks in the drying clay, the artist no longer makes any autonomous or free decisions, but is integrated into the materials' discrete ecologies. 13 And these gaps can lodge themselves in life, too, however big or diminutive it might be. Apart from plant life, ruins — be they the result of erosion by the weather, inundations or collapse — are home to bats, owls, snakes, toads or foxes. In addition, decay can also be caused by the infiltration of living organisms, insects or parasites. Indeed, allusions to such animal architectures — beehives, vespiaries, termite mounds or caves — constitute a central point of reference throughout Charles Simonds's oeuvre; 14 via this route, Simonds manages to obviate all mention of the field of technoid engineering. Who actually knows whether the Little People resemble us or termites? And it is precisely these processes that prompt us to determine our own position in the world, which, in turn, is a catalyst for action. They challenge us to transfer the proffered fragments into new assemblages as well as harbouring utopian promise. In the event of encountering a dwelling, reflections about real estate speculation and property might arise: what is the status of Native Americans' rights and other indigenous peoples? 15 Here and there, thoughts of this kind result in concrete actions. For example, a civic action group formed in the mid-seventies in the Lower East Side of Manhattan that transformed a derelict plot of land into a children's playground for the *Placita / Project Uphill* (1973–1975) initiative. 16 Decisively though, Simonds's relationship to his materials is anything but distanced. He views his body as a part of the earth, which is why intimate bodily shapes repeatedly commingle and protrude in his clay architectures. Accordingly, the artist consummates his connection with his "many clays" as part of a set of polymamorous relationships. 17 If Ana Mendieta sought to charge the earth with an expressly feminine quality [5], Simonds wants to depart from this kind of binary: 18 "Being born from the earth, believing the earth is a body, transforming my body into a landscape and then making it a dwelling, thinking of my body as my first home — all these pass through different gender identifications." 17

[5] Ana Mendieta: *Arbol de la vida – Tree of Life* (from the Silueta Series), photograph, 1976
[6] Beth Stephens / Annie Sprinkle: *SexEcology*, photograph, 2017

The red clay used by Simonds is vital, connoting flesh and growth, and as such, is endowed with a more feminine resonance; the grey, quarziferous variant is harder, with a higher mineral content and stone-like, hence more masculinely imbued, whereas neither of the two substances are industrially processed and therefore contain impurities. Both materials coalesce in Simonds's work and generate a multiplicity of gender identifications. His relationship to the materials earth, sand, mud and clay prefigures the ideas in Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle's *SexEcology* manifesto, which proposes an alternative understanding of the Earth, not as mother (Gaia), but instead as a — queer — lover, thereby subverting heteronormative patterns and expectations. Accordingly, the duo proclaims [6] that "we are everywhere. We are polymorphous and pollen-amorous. (...) I promise to love, honor and cherish you Earth, until death brings us closer together forever." 20 The reference to death also reminds us that, in mythology, bodies typically emerge from the earth but are duly macerated and returned whence they came, reconstituted as humus and dust by earth's less conspicuous inhabitants — maggots, cockroaches, millipedes and arachnids. In this sense, the dwellings prompt us to reconsider our identities experimentally, as well as the relation between the human animal to the earth with all its life forms, plants or materials.

As the philosopher and historian of science, Donna Haraway recently put it: "(...) human beings are not in a separate compost pile. We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman." 21

1 Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*, (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2002), p. 114 ff.

2 Ernst Kris / Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch* (1934) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 79; John Hallmark Neff, "Charles Simonds's Engendered Places: Towards a Biology of Architecture", in *Charles Simonds*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (Chicago: Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), pp. 12–25, here p. 14, also footnote 11, p. 21.

3 Robert Morris quoted in Dietmar Rübel, *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2012), p. 246 f.

4 Charles Simonds, *Dwelling* (Cologne: Walther König, 2015), p. 10.

5 "And I've learned more from watching the small-brained genius of the Caddisfly larva building its house by attaching blade after blade in an ascending spiral around its body as it grows than by studying the works of large-brained architects." Charles Simonds, quoted from "Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience", in *Artforum* 18, 5 (January 1980), 22–29, here 29.

6 Cf. Petra Lange-Berndt, ed., *Materiality (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015).

7 Conversation with the artist, Munich 29 September 2017.

8 Simonds, *Dwelling*, p. 8. See note 4.

9 Charles Simonds, "Munich Dwellings", in *Habt ihr die Little People gesehen? Sagt ihnen, ihre Häuser sind fertig!* Landeshauptstadt München, Kulturreferat, und Kunstraum München e.V., ed. (Munich, 2017), p. 3. View at http://www.dwellingmunich.de/publikationen/. Last accessed 23.10.17.

10 Robert Smithson, "Fahrt zu den Monumenten von Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in Smithson *Gesammelte Schriften*, Eva Schmidt / Kai Vöckler, eds (Cologne: Walther König, 2000), pp. 97–102, here p. 100.

11 Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: continuum, 2004), p. 451 ff. Originally published as *Mille Plateaux*, volume 2 of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Edition de Minuit, 1980).

12 Brian Dillon, "Introduction: A Short History of Decay", in Brian Dillon, ed., *Ruins, Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 10–19, here p. 11.

13 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: *A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press and London, 2010).

14 Cf. Neff, "Charles Simonds's Endangered places", p. 18 f. See note 2.

15 Charles Simonds, Interview with Lucy Lippard, "Microcosm to Macrocosm / Fantasy World to Real World", in *Artforum*, 12, 6 (February 1974), 36–39, here 38.

16 Herbert Molderings, "Kunst als Gedächtnis", in *Charles Simonds: Schwebende Städte und andere Architekturen. Floating Cities and Other Architectures*, exh. cat., Westfälischer Kunstverein (Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1978), pp. 7–13, here p. 11.

17 Conversation with the artist, Munich 29 September 2017.

18 "I've always thought of my work as transsocial, transpolitical, transsexual and transparent(al)." Simonds quoted from "Situation Esthetics". (See note. 5). Also quoted in Neff, "Charles Simonds's Endangered places", p. 19f. See note 2.

19 Charles Simonds Interview with Christopher Lyon: "Learning to Dwell in Various Landscapes", in *BOMB Magazine* (2 October 2014), http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000266/charles-simonds. Last accessed 10.10.2017.

20 Beth Stephens / Annie Sprinkle "Ecosex Manifesto", https://theecosexuals.ucsc.edu/ecosexualmanifesto/. Last accessed 15.10.2017.

21 Donna Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene", in *e-flux journal*, 75 (September 2016), 1–17, here 11.