Stephanie Weber in Conversation With Charles Simonds

Stephanie Weber:
Charles, could you talk about the first dwelling you built in 1970: Where did you build it and what did it look like?

Charles Simonds:
The first dwelling I built outside was on Ted Victoria's 2nd floor window sill. He was a friend and an artist who I went to graduate school with and was also a fellow professor at Newark State College where I taught from 1969 until 1972, I believe. He lived on the corner of Greene and Grand Streets in Manhattan in a building that also had the filmmaker Jack Smith as a tenant at that time. It was in "pre Soho" Soho. I had been making dwellings for my imaginary civilization of Little People as sculptures in my home on Chrystie Street since 1969 and I was full of excitement to share what I had discovered with everyone. I imagined populating the world with the Little People. The first dwelling was simple, almost timid, with a home and an active, cared for ritual place that resembled a parted pair of speaking lips on a breastlike mound. It was not photographed although it remained there for a number of years. Afterwards I continued making dwellings on Greene Street, migrating the Little People north, in the gutters and on window ledges, including those of 112 Greene Street, an underground gallery/workspace run by Jeffrey Lew, and the second floor window ledge of 98 Greene Street, Holly Solomon's first gallery.

How did the civilization of Little People first come to your mind?

It was simple and quick. Spreading some clay out flat and sprinkling it with sand I saw a place. Seeing a place, I inhabited it imaginatively, creating dwellings of varying kinds there. Making the dwellings led to making bricks for them, which in turn led to an architecture, and this allowed me to imagine a people. Once I had a people I began to imagine their beliefs and how they lived, and then their history as well ... Imagining the Little People as peripatetic, wandering through time in a linear fashion, abandoning their past, inevitably led me to imagine other peoples who might have a different relationship to their past. From this came the concept and the book, *Three Peoples*, a fictive ethnography about people who live in a line, leaving their past behind, people who live in a circle, excavating the remains of their past and reintegrating it into their present, and people who live

in an ascending spiral, who bury their past and use it as a building material.

What kind of work did you do before the dwellings?

Before making the dwellings I was engaged in an elaborate project that transformed my loft into 'stations'. I used clay, my body (hair and fluids), fantasy images, and art historical and architectural image quotations, as a means of creating a history of a thought, an allegory of sorts. The ingredients were in all different scales; there were "Fragments of the Colossal Dream," small biological specimens, childlike paintings, shadows made with my hair, broken and bandaged timbers and 2×4s, tadpole biological specimens in various stages of growth, sculptured reliefs of a *Voyage to Cythera*, by Watteau, figures with bird heads, sacrificial columns, fragments of a large stairway covered with plasticine, forms made from molds taken from the balustrades of the Manhattan Bridge and all sorts of other things.

You have mentioned several times that, as a student at the University of California in Berkeley, you were deeply impressed by the Free Speech Movement, whose epicentre was on the university campus. Could you talk about one moment or impression in particular from that time in Berkeley.

There were many moments that affected me during the Free Speech Movement, since it was largely a political process and I participated in many events and also as a member of its steering committee.

If I had to single out a few, it would be our surrounding of the campus police car to prevent Jack Weinberg[1] from being arrested and taken away for handing out political leaflets at the entrance to the campus and the subsequent use of the car as a podium for speeches. This culminated in Mario Savio's[2] speech on the steps of Sproul Hall, the university's administration building that shared the plaza, and the subsequent march of 1000+ students into the building to the sound of Joan Baez singing *We Shall Overcome*. The other striking event was the wrestling off stage of Mario Savio by the California Highway Patrol as he attempted to present a petition in the form of a large scroll to Clark Kerr, the chancellor of the university, at the Greek Amphitheatre above campus, and then the ensuing riot that spread into the campus below.

Did the experience of the Free Speech Movement impact your way of thinking about art and if so how?

Not about art at that time, but about activism, that one could challenge authorities, particularly in a public space. It showed the possibilities of political street theatre since many of the events were orchestrated very carefully by the students for their dramatic impact. Later, when I began making dwellings, it gave me the liberty to imagine working in the street and seeing the city as theatre.

You mentioned that the few artists you met in New York in the early 1970s thought you were a loonie of sorts. There were however a few artists who shared your interest of working out in the streets such as your friend and former studiomate Gordon Matta-Clark, to name but one example. So, there was an understanding between a few artists that there was a necessity to work out and about rather than inside one's individual studio even if the forms of these interventions in public space varied.

Yes, at that time there were artists working outside, but I think that most of their efforts were still directed back towards the art community, and the content of their work was art-related, in sculpture, mostly departing from Minimalist ideas. So probably the work didn't have much meaning to normal people who might happen upon it. They were largely bringing an idea or an image of public space back into the art context. Their audience was still primarily artists and the art community. Perhaps their work appeared radical and avantgardist to the art world but to me it appeared a bit like radical chic, just bringing goods that had the image of the outside world back to the same old audience. I was seeking validation for my work in an audience outside the art community, seeing if it could find roots and meaning in a different social and political context, in people unaware of contemporary art concerns. I had come to see those art concerns as essentially esoteric and I wanted to expand the domain of art by expanding its content, its audience and its effect socially, not just where it was made. Perhaps within the art context those artists's work expanded some academic definition of sculpture, but to me it was still just time bound sculptural art.

Speech plays a crucial role in your work and in the context of the dwellings specifically.

There is an inherent narrative and fictional element in these works: what kind of people inhabit or have inhabited this or that dwelling, what does the landscape look like, what might have taken or will take place there. A description of a dwelling will almost inevitably morph into a story of sorts.

Yes, reflectively, I believe that narrative plays a big role in my work. But I think its role is complex and can be approached in many different ways.

First, internally, at its most 'abstract' level, I am aware that the images I see in my mind's eye—the visualizations of my beliefs as ideas, the initial embodiment of them as mental images that ask to be made as actual material creations—are largely the product of what I might call 'abstract narratives.' Different ingredients, such as my body, the Earth, time, building, plant growth, and history, are combined and recombined endlessly revealing their interrelationships. They engage in a play, a mental theatre that I observe, which allows the actors to change their dramatic roles, to give prominence or stridency to one particular aspect as opposed to another or to incorporate one aspect within another, sometimes because they are complementary. Time, for instance, in an individual fantasy, can be stressed by stretching it, increasing its duration, making an image appear more ruinous or further in the past, fainter and less vivid. Or a complement of time, as ruin, can be expressed in the degree of wiltedness of a plant. *Growing Towers* (1983) and *Wilted Towers* (1984), for instance, incorporate thoughts (images) about plant growth and body forms into an architectural image with the addition of varying amounts of time. This narrative aspect of my work is in constant flux and adjustment as I imagine and discover secrets of my vision. It is the kaleidoscope of my, and implicitly of the Little People's, beliefs and explores the possible ways to use them to effect the world outside. Narrative changes can also be made to address a given external political, social, historical or even physical reality. Parenthetically, none of this activity involves any "formal" considerations as I see them generally defined in abstract art or Modernism. The forms of the dwellings are driven by this transformative narrative manipulation, not by any "art" formal content ideas.

Moving into the extant work, the actual dwellings for the Little People and the sculptural objects I have made, there is always a very particular story that informs each one. Specifically, in the street dwellings, each one is an incidental narrative part of the Little People's endless story, part of an historical narrative, which is metaphorically without end. The dwellings tell where the Little People have been, what they've done, and what has actually happened in each dwelling. This is a projection of my own interior personal fantasy, a daydream that evolves as I form the landscape and build each dwelling. Sometimes I share it verbally, as a story, but rarely, and never in the detail in which it exists in my mind. Often I actually imagine a generic "they," including thoughts about how they behave towards each other, probably similarly to how a child imagines when playing with a doll house.

One critic once said he thought that my sculptures were a substitute for writing. I tend to agree, since I feel inadequate to express myself with words and writing the story of each dwelling would be very tedious. I rarely divulge my story which inhabits a dwelling, simply because it is mine.

In addition to these narratives, there is actual speech as a result of your work process out in the street: passersby interact with you, talk to you, ask questions.

I hope and expect passersbys create their own story from their own encounter with it and from their own life experience. I prefer to avoid having them give preferential, prejudicial status to my story, which will then inhibit their free flow of fantasy. I particularly like to hear the stories passersby project since some of them are extremely intricate and expressive.

Since I have worked in so many different countries, in such a variety of social and political neighborhoods, and over a long period of time, people's varying responses, to me, represent the results of the litmus test of differing individual fantasies and mores that the dwellings perform; mores particularly regarding property, materialism and identification with a community and its history. Given the fact that what I am doing: "Making a home for Little People," is always the same, it is amazing how reactions can vary and what they reveal.

I began by working in pre Soho-Soho, New York, in 1970, when as I mentioned,

the very few artists who encountered me dismissed or ridiculed me. At the same time the workers in the neighborhood welcomed and championed me, they saw my delivery of the fantasy of the Little People as a lightening of their daily routine. We engaged in a lively dialogue and they looked forward to me arriving each day, always guessing where the Little People were going to live next or suggesting what had happened to them during the night before.

Later I went to the Lower East Side of New York where residents embraced the Little People's dwellings as an emblem of their own social and political struggles, fighting for survival, for housing and identity in a community that felt to be at the mercy of the city government and real estate interests. Reactions to the dwellings, such as the oft repeated, "Why can't we clean up this lot and make it into a playground?" drew me into the community's advocacy network as an activist, and I was invited to become a member of the Board of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing. We sponsored community gardens, playlots, Sweat Equity and Section 8 Housing.

Personal reactions and making dwellings together with passersby, extending my landscape and allowing them to make their own fantasy dwelling, usually involved a dialogue in which we could talk about our fantasies and also tell each other stories of our lives and the history of the neighborhood. So making a dwelling usually amounted to a day-long dialogue with anyone who happened by and wanted to engage.

At times a dialogue could become elaborate, and I see as an important measure of my life the extraordinary encounters this activity has afforded me, the amazing stories I have been told. Over time I feel I have become an itinerant trickster figure, provoking people's psyches, sometimes eliciting existential thoughtfulness about the meaning of dwelling, and of one's place in history.

You have worked in Germany several times starting in the 1970s in Bonn, in West-Berlin and East-Berlin and now, in 2017, in Munich. Here you proposed a large project titled *Dwelling Munich* consisting of workshops with young people from around town as well as a few dwellings built by you in "public space". When you were working on your own dwellings in different neigh-

borhoods of Munich, did you feel that reactions of passersby differed from reactions elsewhere?

Working in cities in Germany, and during the Munich project in particular, has revealed some common reactions that differ from the reactions in other countries where I have worked. Normally, I do not ask permission to make a dwelling, and, so far, over the 45+ years I have been constructing dwellings there have only been two occasions when I have I been asked to stop. Once in Basel, Switzerland, a person came along and said "You can't make that mess here." And once in 1980, in an "Old Shanghai" neighborhood, a street vendor ushered me away because I would have interfered with his customers. But even during the Baader-Meinhof time in Germany when police came with a machine gun to check me out to be sure that I was not a terrorist I have been allowed to continue. In fact those police even came back at the end of that day to enjoy the finished dwelling.

But one reaction in Germany that has remained consistent throughout the 1978–2017 time frame that I have worked here, and one that I have come to see as proverbial, is a question usually asked early on during my constructing, and it is one that has never been asked in any other place. It is always: "Who gave you permission to do that?" Sometimes it sounds tinged with a wistful envy, perhaps the questioner wishing they felt the freedom to do something like that; sometimes it sounds like the challenge of someone who is thinking it is not right or normal what I am doing, but at the same time they are unwilling, or fearful to take on the authority to stop me, afraid to be wrong and to have to suffer the consequences. At least that is my interpretation.

Similarly, in Germany, I have always been aware that if I turn quickly away from the wall I am working on and look up I will see a lace curtain fall into place. Someone is always watching me, but not wanting to be discovered doing so.This is also reflected by the timidity of passersby to engage me while I am working, perhaps feeling that it is "none of their business," notwithstanding that once I leave they feel at liberty to have a look.

What else struck you during your time here?

Certainly working in Munich under the auspicious of the City government necessi-

tated the securing of official authorizations, but it was curious to me how quickly local authorities came to check to be sure that I had such an authorization while I was working. Liability was an issue and avoiding a potentially embarassing nuisance lawsuit limited the possible locations to city-owned property agreed on by all the city agencies that might be effected including offices for public order, the building department and so forth. At one point, we were trying to obtain permission for me to build a dwelling in a pedestrian and bicycle underpass. It was considered too hazardous for one thing, but we were also told that art was meant to be contemplated and that and underpass was not the right place to do so. In another location, I was asked to wear a security helmet and jacket while working.

It was also remarkable how very few "broken" walls there were in Munich and how vacant lots were all secured behind fences. Clearly property and consequent liability issues are considered very important. I wondered if avoiding memories of "broken" and bombed buildings played any role, likewise if the pride of a country made whole by its "Wirtschaftswunder" entered in. Ruins seem to be more acceptable as romanticized castles of yore than as part of the organic process of death and renewal that they play in my world. Munich is not Rome and incorporating parts of its past appears to be ongoing. The dwellings I made in Munich accepted varying fates. The first was removed, "stolen" during the first night, the second was guarded by a shop owner, protected with a plastic cover whenever it rained.

The Kulturreferat in Munich has ample experience organizing big scale public projects, yet, *Dwelling Munich* was certainly a challenging project: spread out over time and space and relying on the participation of minors, their teachers and schools, etc. Could you talk about this intersection of the bureaucratic and financial backbone of the project with its dispersed and non object-based nature?

Yes, it was fascinating to me to discover that what I normally do personally and unofficially, in an activist way, was able to be translated and structured into a group activity through schools and even through a hospital. Seeing children work together in twos and threes, without the example of one of my dwellings to provoke them

makes me think that some parts of what I do could be done entirely without me being present. As if the community awareness aspect could be separated out as a group identifying activity. The tremendous amount of aid in organizing and financing the project was what made it possible and much of the credit for that really belongs to the Kulturreferat and Beate Engl along with the team she assembled.

It was important to you when starting to work on the project to understand and "smell" the different neighborhoods and communities of the city before deciding on which schools to approach about participating. What do you think you learned in the process?

My intention was to find neighborhoods with differing sociologies. It was easy for me to identify the differences, even though they were much less extreme than in New York, or other cities I've worked in.

And what do you think the kids who participated might have learned or taken with them?

Not learned, but I hope that I offered a platform that validated their voices, and gave them confidence in expressing themselves individually.

Certainly some of the thoughts expressed to me by kids from the Willy-Brandt-Gesamtschule in Munich had that quality. One child from Iraq made a dwelling divided by a wall between the ruins of the past and his new present. One girl built a "Panikraum" with no windows and a closed door, allowing her to avoid seeing out or having anyone look in, a refuge when the world became too much for her to deal with. Given that the children were simply offered the possibility to make their own fantasy dwelling, a place where they have lived, or where they might wish to live in the future, I think it was remarkable how some of what they created addressed the concept of dwelling in profoundly existential terms and very personally.

In the Heckscher-Schule, a school affiliated with a psychiatric hospital for children and youth in Munich, children who had barely met before remained absorbed in working together for four hours, helping each other. Perhaps they simply became aware that they could get along and enjoy creating together. Of all the workshops theirs was the most calm and concentrated. For one child the fantasy she created

became overwhelming and she was unable to differentiate it from reality, so she had to take a break. This was similar to the reaction of a patient I worked with in Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne in Paris in 1996. The degree to which one can inhabit a fantasy, how real it is, has always been one of my own concerns and working in Munich with so many different children has presented a great variety. The therapists at the Heckscher-Klinikum said that the experience of the workshop would be a positive one that the children would never forget. Although I can't evaluate if the workshop had any theraputic value I think the construction of one's house or home has a resonance with constructing, or in this case, reconstructing self.

1 Activist and important member of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Credited with coining the statement "Don't trust anyone over 30."
2 Activist and key member of the Free Speech Movement.