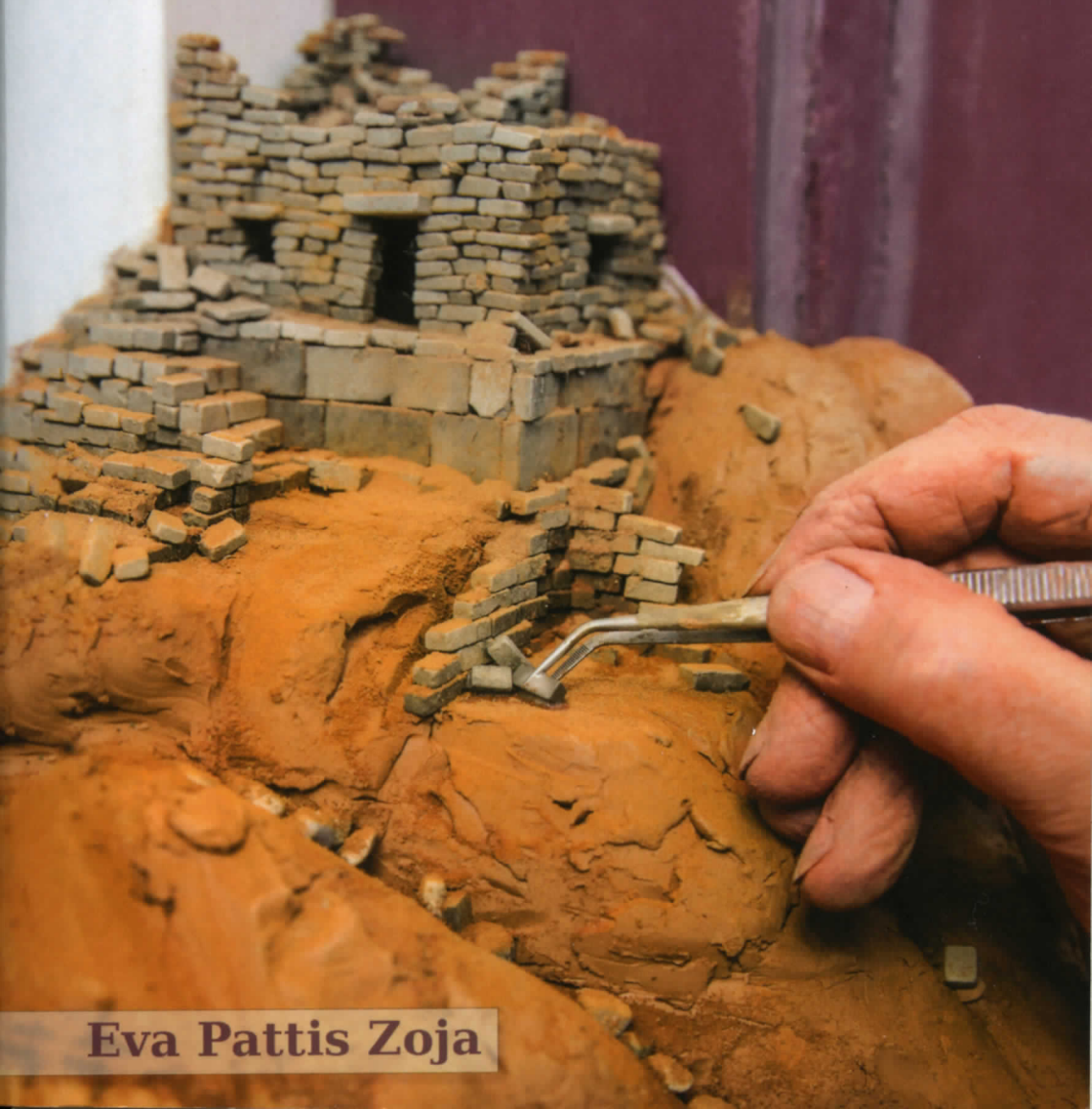


Where Soul Meets Matter

*Clinical and Social Applications
of Jungian Sandplay Therapy*



Eva Pattis Zoja

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By Eva Pattis Zoja

Translated from German by Benjamin Seaman

Zurich Lecture Series in Analytical Psychology

ISAPZURICH



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*"...but often I feel I'm in the role of being
an itinerant bard or shaman."*

(Charles Simonds)

*"I have often encountered motifs which made me think that
the unconscious must be the world of the infinitesimally small."*

(Carl Gustav Jung)¹

Charles Simonds and His "Dwellings for Little People"

Just as I had finished this present book, a friend of mine, an American art critic who knows my work with children in situations of dire social distress, sent me an interview by Irving Sandler with the New York sculptor Charles Simonds, entitled "Dwelling Munich". It described a social project of his in Munich and there were a few illustrations of Simonds' work. I saw for the first time a photo of one of his "dwellings for little people", dating from the year 1969: small lodgements huddled up against each other, inserted into the recess of a window, and leading a modest but unmistakable life of their own. The buildings, with their windows, doorways and steps formed of tiny bricks, made the concrete ledge

¹ (C.G. Jung, C.W. 9/1, & 408)

seem huge and crude. "The little world is the real world!" occurred to me, and I thought of C.G. Jung's description:

"...it seems to me more probable that this liking for diminutives on the one hand and for superlatives – giants, etc. – on the other is connected with the queer uncertainty of spatial and temporal relations in the unconscious. (Jung refers to a Siberian tale in a footnote). Man's sense of proportion, his rational conception of big and small, is distinctly anthropomorphic, and it loses its validity not only in the realm of physical phenomena but also in those parts of the collective unconscious beyond the range of the specific human. The atman is 'smaller than small and bigger than big',..." (C.G. Jung, C.W, 9/1, & 408).

For a long time my gaze remained arrested on the little houses, and I devoured the text relating to them. Apparently there existed a world-renowned artist, Charles Simonds, who since the 1970s had been pursuing something similar to what we were: "we" being a group of Jungian psychoanalysts from eight countries who in the last fifteen years had built up a method of Expressive Sandplay for children in vulnerable situations. Time and again we have experienced how highly therapeutic the creativity of children can be if one can provide them with the chance to build a miniature world within a trustworthy environment. And just like Charles Simonds, we too in 2017 had organised a project for refugee families in Munich. The description of his project, "Dwelling Munich", could have been taken word for word from our Sandwork project, and would have applied exactly to the children who had been labelled hyperactive, aggressive, and socially incompetent, and who yet from the very first minute of sandwork had built away at their little worlds with concentration and dedication, and had emerged at the end of the project able to interact with increased calmness, self-assurance, and social skills.

"...and the expressions on these kids' faces are so beautiful because they're engrossed in the kind of wonderland of fantasy, and they're completely candid.

It's as if they are completely relaxed and their faces become themselves in a tender and poignant way. Kids being themselves, you can't help but fall in love with them."

(<http://dwellingmunich.de/ausstellung/dwelling-munich/>)

It seems that through shaping a little world, the children come directly and instinctively into touch with unconscious energies within and emerge strengthened from the process.

Unconscious, resource-oriented energies appear in the myths and fairy tales of all countries as small, skillful, helpful little people, symbols of one's own creative power, fantasy, and imagination. In the German-speaking parts of Europe there are the "Heinzelmännchen" in the fairy-tales told by the brothers Grimm, and "Erzmännchen" in the Ore Mountains who appeared to miners in distress, and in the regions of the Dolomites dwarves who lived inside the mountains and wrought and forged weapons. Earlier mythological antecedents were the Cabiri (J.W. von Goethe refers to them in *Faust II*) and the skilled Dactyls of antiquity. It is usually considered great good fortune to encounter these little people; they are generous and helpful but can react with withdrawal and even with revenge if they feel unappreciated, offended, or exploited.

"In the same way the archetype of the wise old man is quite tiny, almost imperceptible..." (C.G. Jung, C.W, 9/1, & 408).

That very night I dreamt about Simonds' little houses, the next day I did research on him, and in the evening tried to make some little bricks out of clay myself to see if they would be suitable for Expressive Sandplay – then I got in touch with Charles Simonds.

Who is Charles Simonds?

Born in 1945 in New York “Charles Simonds is an artist who has been making dwelling places for an imaginary civilisation of little people who are migrating through the streets of cities throughout the world. Each dwelling tells part of the story of the lives of these people, where they have gone, what they do, how they live, and what they believe. Usually passersby, often children, join in as Simonds works and he offers them clay bricks and allows them to add to his dwelling or to make make a fantasy dwelling of their own.” (<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/07/art/CHARLES-SIMONDS-with-Irving-Sandler>).

About how his work began Simonds says:

“At a certain moment I figured out what I was about. I imagined a place; an imaginary place in clay that I put down. I quickly had the idea of an imaginary people. This was 1969 and it was springtime. It was stupid to be doing it inside! I decided to go out to make homes for my little people outside.

(<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/07/art/CHARLES-SIMONDS-with-Irving-Sandler>).

When it was remarked in a press commentary on his work that the little dwellings are always empty inside, he replied:

“...I’m “inside” each Dwelling as I make it, and imagine it’s story. They’re really not conceived as small, even though each one is a very small part of an epic story.” (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/charles-simonds/>)

As with every work of art, the associations that arise are inexhaustible, scarcely tied to any historical moment in time, universal. One could begin by describing the discrepancy prevailing between the towering skyscrapers of New York and these self-

contained circular and spiral shaped miniature structures. Patience and technical ability are a prerequisite for every form of art; in these works, however, a touching solicitude on the part of the artist particularly strikes one as, with the help of tweezers, he builds little brick walls that he glues together. This painstaking procedure of Simonds' has to do with the fact that in his peculiar creative process, apart from himself and the material he's molding, there exists an invisible third component that he patiently and persistently invokes: he can never be certain if the little people will actually come to inhabit these dwellings. Simonds' little people are not individuals but rather social confederacies with a history and a trail of ordeals of their own, epochs of growth and decline. They are peoples who make inventions and can celebrate.

Nevertheless one asks oneself how a grown man, who for all intents and purpose isn't crazy, can stand for days in front of a hole in the wall building tiny houses for imaginary people. The passers-by who gather round him, however, seem to understand what he's doing. One sees on their faces how they inwardly approve: "of course we know this, it's very familiar. We just haven't seen it for a long, long time." And they want to come back and see it again, and recognise it again; and some even want to take it home with them and manage to ruin it as a result. Is this what we call "archetypal"? Simonds' little people are perhaps closely related to invisible buddhistic beings, the "drala's"², who assemble wherever good thoughts, good conversation, and lively exchange of ideas flourish amongst humans, and yet who flee at the first onset of friction, conflict, and unrest.

The essential thing about Charles Simonds' work however is that he treats the little people with respect, leaving them alone in

² Drala (Wyl. "dgra bla" or "sgra bla") or dralha (Wyl. "dgra lha") — dynamically active non-human beings inhabiting the air element, who are usually invisible to ordinary human perception. As Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche makes clear, the inner aspect of drala is connected to the subtle energy system in the body, and the 'secret' aspect to the nature of mind.

their invisibility. He doesn't want to drag them out into the light or into a museum like the curious shoemaker's wife in the Grimms' fairy-tale did with the elves, when at night she secretly scattered peas on the floor to outwit them into being seen. Unconscious creative energies cannot be directly observed and controlled, one can only create for them a framework. This is precisely what Charles Simonds has been doing now for decades:

"The Dwellings are an incantation of the Little People, as if I'm building them a nest and inviting them to inhabit it. The Little People arrive once the story I've constructed has crystallised enough for them to want to be there. It is also a desperate gesture to give them and me a home." (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/charles-simonds/>).

With their close connection to the unconscious, miniature worlds exert an irresistible attraction even to adults, in whom, if they are not in contact with their own creative energy, little worlds awaken strong regressive longings that threaten to drown in malign kitsch. I take "kitsch" to mean any article of cultural heritage that has been torn from its context, thereby being robbed of its ambivalent or threatening aspects. When children on the other hand depict something in a free and protected creative space this is never harmless. In fact it is usually overwhelming, carrying a portion of unpleasant truths, conflict, separation, and death.

Simonds differentiates very distinctly between his own artistic productivity and his socio-pedagogical projects. What the children build is their own art, he stresses. Likewise he has *his* own art and has managed to achieve a degree of acclaim with it. He prefers, however, working "out in the field".

"I'm interested in reaching people who aren't about art, but can think about other things that historically have been the roots of art: beliefs, religion, objects that have a shamanistic power, objects that are interactive, and archetypical narratives. My art is founded by

beliefs; it is the expression of a religion I have invented." (Charles Simonds in: <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/07/art/CHARLES-SIMONDS-with-Irving-Sandler>).

Here I should like to counter that Simonds may well have invented a language of rituals, but cannot — fortunately enough — have invented a religion.

In his embodiment as sculptor, as therapist, as pedagogue, as storyteller and — as only very few amongst the artists of today — as a modern shaman, Charles Simonds holds together an array of divergent identities. Just how determining an impression can have been made on his art by a holiday encounter in early childhood with the vanished Anasazi culture?

And one cannot stop asking oneself from what source his social vision and his insatiable concern for the creative needs of children may have originated. What role did fantasy play in his upbringing? Charles Simonds' mother, the children's psychoanalyst Anita I. Bell³, not only made an incomparable contribution to psychoanalysis but also, with keen and sensitive attention, provided for the masculine *and* feminine needs of her sons, which led perhaps to young Charles's being able to remain naturally and continuously in dialogue with an invisible world. And the little people could thus be conveyed safely into the collective consciousness of our times.

³ *In the 1930s Anita I. Bell dared to propound a notion that challenged Freud's theory of castration and at the same time vouchsafed an insight into the development of the masculine identity as seen from the perspective of depth-psychology. She asked herself -- and together with other scientists explored the topic in a research laboratory -- why in the literature of psychoanalysis one has always reflected on only one part of the the male sexual apparatus, namely the penis; whereas the scrotum and testicles, which physically and symbolically stand for the sensibility, creativity and vulnerability of a child and are associated with its anxieties, receive scarcely any notice; are in fact culturally negated. She can experimentally substantiate that unconscious anxieties become noticeable through subjectively non-discernible movements of the scrotum. Her innovative ideas were decades ahead of their time and however effects on a symbolic level not only the individual but the entire patriarchal structure of society. She met with so little response that she resigned from the Freudian Society in New York.*