A Nomad in the City

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When Charles Simonds embarked on his artistic career between 1969 and 1971, he operated in a setting that lay outside the traditional bounds of art: the street. He immediately sought to make his interventions burst from a context experienced and shared by others, by people outside of the world of art. His intention was to create art everywhere, in all kinds of settings. Ever since his first interventions in the streets of New York (1972, facing page and top right), he has managed to avoid the distortions of the pristine and aseptic space of the gallery or museum, creating works that have blended into the landscape of the city—a setting where the public is not inveigled by the communicative power of the sacred place, which makes the artistic object a separate entity; where instead the work is immersed in the chaos of life; and where the poetic and visual impulse is entrusted to its autonomous power of persuasion, without any defense. Urban space, with all of its communicative characteristics, is taken on for its centripetal force, prior to any artistic intervention.

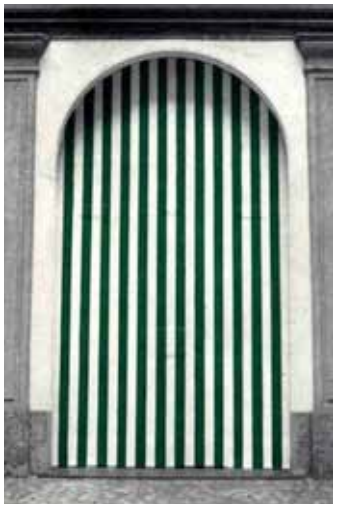
Simonds chose the urban landscape for its tension and its secret power, which is not the repetitive power of the "white cube," but one of drama and tragedy, of magic and singularity. His choice, which he shared with artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark (bottom right), questioned the abstract and ideal dimensions of minimal art.[1] His aim was to reject the environmental homogenization of the intervention and to enter the reality of the urban and architectural configuration, thus introducing the notions of hazard, risk, and chance and plunging into real life. To understand the boldness of this move away from the lifeless event and toward a regenerative immersion into a territory where forces come from below, it is necessary to describe the minimalist tendency, with its mystical fascination with the absolute dimension of forms and materials, of lines and colors.

The advent of minimalism in 1963–64 marked the first attempt by artists to undermine the idea of the object as an entity connected to the subjective impulse, typical of both nonrepresentational and figurative art after the Second World War, and to transfer it into a limited processual territory reduced to its specific terms.[2] Responding to a belief that the acquisition of personal values is fundamental to understanding the motives of the artifact, minimalism presented a technique of verification that followed the logic of construction alone. Part of this constructive procedure was the control of the whole of the environment, whether inside or outside architecture, which spurned any reference to the real and everyday context in order to determine its spatial logic operationally. While deriving from the self-evident truths of the architectural, volumetric, and superficial data, it treated them as only part of a reductive and elementary process of formation. Thus minimal research concerned the factual and primary analysis of space.

Investigation was carried out by detailing, in a logical and rational manner, concrete entities concerning, first (in the period from 1964 to 1969), the location of the works of art, and later, the structure of the setting itself, understood as a place with four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. The definition and practical enumeration of the volume, color, surface and support, and material and process of construction led to the cognitive formulation of a series of fundamentally aniconic settings. In a period still dominated by the chaotic assemblage and the free gesture, as well as by the pop use of imagery, the minimal artists—whether sculptors or painters—rehabilitated a rigorous formalism, impersonal simplicity, and tightly controlled technique. Their adoption of formalism and their reductive attitude shifted the focus from what was made and found to the construction and formation of an object, while their choice of simple and monolithic forms was a move away from the haphazard fragmentation of their surroundings.

The move from symbolic and metaphorical composites to constructive ingredients and from complex results to elementary entities was inspired by the ideas of John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who applied empirical and logical methods instead of romantic and abstractly irrational ones. The analytical tendency of minimal art coincided substantially with empiricist tendencies, restricting its investigations to observable facts and to the relation among those facts. For the minimalists, the only way to intervene in the material was to consider it from the perspective of quantitative measurement and logical structuring. This structural reading takes into consideration the possible linguistic "intersections" of the individual setting and the systems of subdivision and partition, which are determined by its own two- and three-dimensional characteristics, and applies them to the given space, so that

every spatial or artistic practice has to be studied in situ. The minimalists sought a greater critical awareness of the phenomenon of the "environment" seen as a monolithic whole. Between 1967 and 1970, the environment was defined through a series of new terms, which established an equivalence of significance between architectural structures and artistic compositions. This procedure is illustrated by works set in environments by Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt (installation at Saman Gallery, Genoa, 1975, facing page), and Richard Serra in the United States and Daniel Buren (installation at Galleria Apollinaire, Milan 1968, top right) and Blinky Palermo in Europe. Alternately, the definition was established with descriptive enunciations of environmental structures already in use. Examples of this practice, which is based on the tautology between artistic intervention and the factual truth of the architectural space, are provided by the creations of Michael Asher, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, Bruce Nauman, Eric Orr, and Maria Nordman.



It was into this climate of research that Simonds entered, understanding, in part after his encounter with Christo, that art is not a free zone, an antagonistic space wedged into the social organism, an almost magical hollow, or a limbo that grows out of and feeds on "another" breath, as proposed by minimal art. Rather, art is something that concerns a total spectacle of life and that avoids the absolute and virtual space in order to come into direct contact with a more real reality. It is a coming into the world that starts in the bowels of the earth, as exemplified in *Birth* (1970) and *Landscape/Body/Dwelling* (1973, right). These works are permeated by a passion for location and by an energy and force of gravity that nails the artifact (the artfully made object) to the ground. The birth, in order to take place, has to emerge from the womb of a specific place; it formulates an attitude that avoids the inhuman, that is, technological and scientific, sources of minimalism.

When an artist is invited by a museum or an institution to exhibit one of his works, he is provided with a series of "prepackaged" settings and times whose meanings are complex and varied—they are metasigns of the artistic sociocultural system. Normally he neither questions nor considers them; he passively and simply places and arranges within them a number of aesthetic and linguistic fillings, often of an architectural character. He displays his work in accordance with the prearranged grids and, even if he alters the microstructures of the artistic object with minimal variation, he does not disrupt or question the generalized and approved macrostructures of the given spaces and times. Only Daniel Buren in France and Michael Asher in California—who were conscious that it was not just the theory and practice of art that organized and produced linguistic modifications in its context, but also the plane of the environmental and temporal arrangement and location of

the work—rejected the passive role and proposed a process that, utilizing spaces and times (although in an altered sense), brought into question the prefigurations imposed by the art system as a social and cultural, as well as ideological, framework.

They systematically refused to submit to configured environmental schemes and temporal processes. Instead of passively accepting an operative vision and practice that had been shaped over the years by exhibition venues, these artists cut down every established environmental system, breaking it to continually weaken the constituted norms and to leave room for alternative uses. The breakup was achieved by making the relationship between the environmental structures and the variations of forms and sequences dialectical, so that they could circularly impose their logic on the preexistent architectural configurations. In this way, in relation to the different architectural and chronological conditions, a preestablished definition of the work of art cannot exist. Each intervention and location is dialectical. Unlike the disintegrating hypotheses and practices, they occupy an environmental space and a time, but are simultaneously occupied and determined by them.

Since 1969, Simonds has also made his action hold a dialogue with context. But his action is not projected onto the traditional system of art—the museums and galleries, with their ascetic and metaphysical approach that negates the desire to interact with the real and the everyday. From 1971 onward, he opted instead for the jagged landscape and the urban ruin, starting with the Lower East Side in New York, a tragic and ruinous theatrical setting where life was scarred by violence and poverty. Here the artist entered into dialogue with the worn and flaking walls of decrepit buildings, with their walled and neglected gardens. He made reference, with his imaginary civilization of Little People, to the kids of East Houston Street, and he tried to communicate to everyone the unprecedented and magical character of his microconstructions of villages and houses, which were the quintessence of and a metaphor for a nomadism that also defined the artist himself. And while he has continued to create sculptural "islands" on which he erects fantastic buildings, his action has always been centered on the street. In 1975, he infiltrated areas of Genoa with bad reputations as haunts of prostitution, while in Paris he marked his passage onto the decaying scene of the Passage Julien Lacroix and the Rue des Cascades.

He has also ventured into the American landscape, erecting several dwellings and a *Growth House* (page 19) at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, in 1974, and agreeing (though only rarely) to make use of the environmental panorama offered by museums and institutions such as PS1, Long Island City (left), or the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1975. While doing so, however, he tried to break out of the traditional exhibition scene. He displayed

the constructive energy of his Little People on an open part of the terrace at PS1, and he found a way of emphasizing their nomadism by locating their dwellings in a recess of the inner staircase, outside the galleries, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1976, at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, he established a relationship with archaeological and historical objects, such as models of Aztec temples, presenting the "'Linear People,' who live in a line and leave the past behind like a museum." Alongside them were the "'Circular People,' who live in a circle, excavating the past and rebuilding it into their present," and the "'Spiral People,' who bury the past and use it as building material to try to make their dwelling higher."[3] Yet the course he took was not always so official. In 1978, he went to East Berlin to create clandestine artistic constructions, as the city was still under the control of the Russians and the sway of a realist art, an expression of ideology and the state.

In 1981, he halted his descent into the negative and the vacuum of the city in an attempt to construct something that was not threatened from the outside. Instead of accepting the transience and the fortuitousness of his locations, Simonds "cut" his landscape into walls and settings, so that it no longer appeared to be a lost power but aspired to be a power that remained. On the wall of the cafeteria—an "off space"—in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, he created a canyon, where the architectural traces of the imaginary civilization of the Little People became permanent; this creation marked a shift from the fleeting to the lasting that seemed to be a metaphor for the oscillation between death and life, a coming and going between the two. As an effort to take on the world without submitting to it—to consent to a reappropriation of his work so as not to leave it to others or in an unknown elsewhere—this led the artist to enrich his production of islands, on which pyramids, ritual towers, fortresses, mazes, and wilted towers appeared. These elements were no longer related to the desolate landscape of streets and stairways—filled with the sinister and violent, the troubled and precarious life of the city—but embodied "organic" life. From *Priapus* (1984) to *Succulent* (2001, right), seething energies of a markedly erotic character began to appear that conditioned the bustle of the architectural movements of the Little People. Compared to the more controlled and arid constructions of the 1970s, these dwellings seemed to have taken on new life. Having passed through a process of settling into and interacting with the frenzied urban scene, they now focused on themselves in order to incorporate the psychological and orgiastic aggregates of a different way of being in the world. From *Pod No. 1* and *Pod No. 2* (1984) to *House Plant No. 1* and *House Plant No. 2* (1998), erotic exultation became manifest. Inner drives were reflected, as fertilizing forces, in the articulation of the architecture, and the plunge into the sensual and sexual evoked a vortex that permeated the fabulous life of the Little People.

A JOURNEY BETWEEN PSYCHE AND HISTORY

Simonds does not oppose his practice to the tradition of sculpture in a simplistic manner, but cultivates it with the idea of a living and mobile mode of action that contrasts with the inactivity and immobility of objects produced as art. His work draws its life from the pneuma of the setting and the animating power of the location, as can be sensed from the fact that his dwellings have a lifetime related to the social life of the city. Far from forming absolute and eternal entities, his constructions are linked to the flow of public reactions to them. Sometimes defended and preserved by locals and sometimes obliterated by locals because of their desire to possess them, the dwellings register both an attraction to magic and a yearning to destroy.

In both cases, the public brought the constructions to life. If this was an essential part of the practice of art, then it was inevitable that Simonds would make his architectures breathe by giving them a carnal and a human dimension. Starting with *Head* (1991), *Singing Monkey* (1991, top left), *Head (from I, Thou)* (1993), and *Man and Fish* (1993), he transformed clay into flesh, crammed with portions of body, head, and mouth and congealed to frame a movement of dance and contortion. This phase no longer dissociated the presence/absence of the bodies of the Little People, but gave them concrete form in landscape and architecture. In 1995, he eliminated the double of the artifact so as to let the public speak and express themselves. At the Centre d'Étude de l'Expression, Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encéphale in the Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, the artist created a sculpture in collaboration with the patients, jointly constructing a sort of clay "cake" with imaginary figures (bottom left). It was another way of holding a dialogue and bringing art into life, thereby obtaining an identity that was neither fictitious nor unfounded, but rather linked to the flow of a different energy that found power in its larval character.

In rejecting the false reality of art, Simonds passed through the threshold—be it a school, a city, a hospital, or a park—that the nomad crosses to enter the world. His work relied on the pact of mutual involvement that was established in the interval between the two territories and environments. In the new landscape that was opened up to the gaze, it is not hard to see the mixing and interweaving. Everywhere fragments of constructions and mountains, of panoramas and valleys, of dismembered organs and figures, of rocks and plants form extensions, flames, and eruptions that spurt from the ground and wall. They are stalactites and stalagmites—dispersions of a curious ambivalence formed out of love and sensuality as well as rigidity and aggressiveness—that pour out of their settings, rending the

air and space. Swollen and protuberant islands, sparkling with their structural and naturalistic details, they work their way into houses and rooms, museums and galleries, to present themselves as combinations of the volatile and fixed, as places that are magnets for energy and the gaze (top right).

By connecting with various real contexts, Simonds counters the unreality of art, seen as an illusory and fictitious entity with no aspiration to establishing a relationship with the circumstances and situations in which it finds itself operating. He continually gets in direct touch, without mediations and without filters, with the concrete and sociocultural entities of a place. As a consequence, his response has always been to take a stand with regard to the given situation—often doing so outside of the traditional art world. Frequently risking the solitude and isolation that stem from an independent operation that does not pass through the gallery and the art market, the artist is almost always attracted not by the display of his works but by their integration into a specific context that is not the "white cube." Thus, when invited to present his work at Dumbarton Oaks, he had to deal with its history and its character as a museum—as a splendid historical complex with grounds laid out by Beatrix Farrand, with nineteenth-century buildings standing alongside a modern structure by Philip Johnson, and with collections of Pre-Columbian and Byzantine artifacts and an extremely important library of rare and antique books.

As in his other interventions in situ, Simonds tried to communicate directly with the cultural and social character of this prestigious location, developing angles of approach in such a way that his work was perceived as an element unified with the buildings and their natural settings. He sought this connection so that his art would not appear as separate and different, but as a full participant in the historic complex of Dumbarton Oaks. He did not isolate himself, but worked in a location that—owing to its character as a "nomadic" complex, spread out in time and space—seems to have been deliberately created for his sculpture. The result was that his installation shared in the conditions of existence of the architectural and natural ensemble, and the two never stopped echoing and responding to one another. The artist, in fact, looked for a correspondence between his figures and the forms hidden among the lawns, hedges, fountains, paths, and flowers; he inserted himself with the urban articulations of the Little People into the real topography of the environmental routes. He made his work the meeting place from which to read the visible and invisible of Dumbarton Oaks in a different way. He revealed the coincidences and intersections of signs and images inscribed in the collections and in his sculpture. All of this turned into a fusion that, in the Orangery, took the form of *Mental Earth* (bottom right), a climbing sculpture that

blended into the plants and creepers growing inside the conservatory. Like a cloud of mist that floated, poised in the air, without touching any of the walls, it mixed up their reciprocal textures. An airy architecture in which faces and masks, pieces of body and architecture, were merged, it was a sort of "dream material" that created a tension between natural and artificial, as it seemed to tackle the discontinuity between nature and the imaginary activity of the Little People, who are also a metaphor for human civilization. This process of osmosis was repeated with *Growth* (top left) in the wisteria arbor, where the flows of the branches of the old vine found an extension in the mixture of nodes and joints, the mixture of plant and architecture, with which Simonds sought to demonstrate that the coexistence of art and nature is possible, without either predominating over the other. Then the dwellings became acts of a singular anthropology of inhabitation. They strolled about in the ramified city and consented to contamination by the ancient and profound branches of the vine. It was a way of treating nature as if human beings and landscape were one and the same, forming a new whole that represented a new civilization.

Locating the sculptures on the grass or on branches was also a way of neutralizing the narcissism of the artist, whose presence disappeared in order to propose again a full condition of creativity, between the natural and the artificial. In this sense, a walk around Dumbarton Oaks was also an exploration of an alternative vision of its existence—one that was not only historical, but contemporary. It could be said that Simonds set out to give the place an anthropomorphic connotation in order to construct a human image of it, so that its physiognomy would assume the character of a body in flesh and blood. In addition, by scattering figures with a ruddy surface that had organic connotations—such as *Stugg* (1991, bottom left), on the Fountain Terrace, with its almost sexual coupling of petals, body, and head, itself a mixture of mask, phantom, and goat's head—the artist invited an almost erotic interpretation of the water and the fountain, turning the garden into a territory of desire. Elsewhere, he introduced a grim and menacing presence into the route through the garden by having a head peep out unexpectedly from the bushes in the Rose Terrace (facing page, top); he uncovered the gloomy nature of the place, which is revealed to be the location of a cemetery where the ashes of the Blisses (the creators of Dumbarton Oaks) are buried. By making the real world of Dumbarton Oaks and the imaginary world of the Little People coexist, the artist misdirected the traditional systems of perception and made the environment poetic, relating it to a different civilization of dream and thought.

But the quest for a correspondence between the imagery of the place and the artist's sculptural interventions (which were linked to his "conquest" of Dumbarton Oaks) has a

mirrorlike effect. When exploring the museum's architecture and rich collections, Simonds's gaze inevitably fell on archaeological objects of Pre-Columbian cultures (from the Maya to the Aztecs), on Christian jewelry, and on Byzantine mosaics. This led him to examine the similarities between his action and a range of iconic histories, discovering complexities that opened up unexpected and surprising analogies and relationships that are not immediately decipherable. The artist assembled them in a cabinet of curiosities—a series of display cases in which he juxtaposed postcards, artifacts, small sculptures, catalogues, and copies of illustrations from old books that he collected over the course of his career. The cabinet of curiosities was another "situation" that opened up in front of the artist, as if it was a further territory of movement and settlement for the Little People. Only now the journey was inside the world of Charles Simonds, whose artistic life has been permanently cultural, where the traces of the present and the past are mixed up, becoming vestiges and remains, steeped in ideas and psyche, the social and the political. Entering Dumbarton Oaks was analogous to being invited to adopt a philological and iconological attitude to his own work. It was another construction of the memory of forms and figures that, though latent and unconscious, survived to become the fundamental premise of his action. His pioneering research into its singularity involved the use of a method that unconsciously followed in the footsteps of the great art historian Aby Warburg; the method entailed the construction of tables based on the iconographic interweaving of repetitive images of gestures or actions, of motifs or decorations, that, even if apparently discontinuous and anachronistic, represented a symptom of historical knowledge (bottom right). This method has been described as a "psychotechnics" of history, in which the historian becomes a seismograph and a "sensor of the pathologies of time—without distinction between the latencies and crisis—a researcher guided by scientific self-denial" (*wissenschaftliche Selbstverleugnung*), a thinker attentive to the unity of the "basic problems," a scientist alert to the specificity of individual objects.[4]

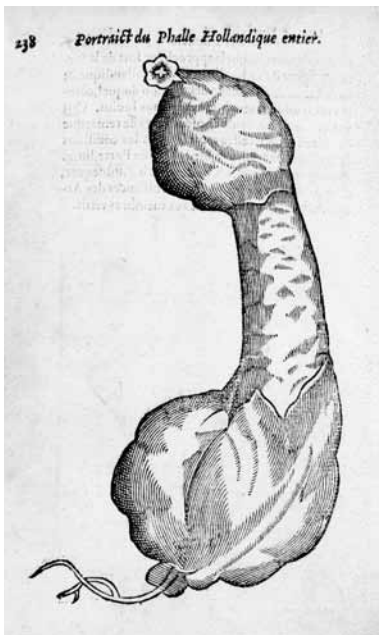
Thus, the entire course followed by Simonds can be seen as having been touched by history, as a deluge of energetic and iconic moments that form a spiral harking back to the tradition of ancient art. The various interventions and symbologies to which the Little People have had recourse are revealed to be caught up in the vortex of past civilizations, almost becoming elements of a transmission of remote polarities subjected to the metamorphosis of contemporary language. *Mental Earth* can be understood as an artificial mimesis of natural truths, as an illusionism turned on its head. It represents the revival of a "naturalism" of the visual arts, dear to the painters and sculptors of the sixteenth century, reexamined the other way round: the reemergence of a vegetable aspect through a material,

clay—a material dream. Installed in a "hut," surrounded by vines, the sculpture leads into a world of naturalness that is typical of the sixteenth-century rustic style.[5] An exaltation of sturdiness and strength, of humility and simplicity, that invites art to be less concerned with the decoration of the middle-class home, a setting that feeds the art market, and to see itself instead as a possible intervention in the context of the real and the natural, one that set out here to create a delicate balance with urban ruins and the sublime layouts of the garden. A search for equilibrium that modestly and simply considers the artistic intervention as an intellectual distillation and a metaphorical instrument of a reunion with the identity of places. In *Stugg* and *Growth*, this harmony between natural and artificial can also be seen in the coherence of the nodes and the veins, between the vine branch and the crust of the Little People's landscape, which are both pervaded by endless bumps and cracks that make explicit their origin in the same universe. They almost seem to be offspring of the same culture—the interwoven and heavy culture of agricultural and pastoral civilization that is stifled by the advent of urban culture.

The meeting that takes place between art and nature is represented in the relationship between art and history, which finds an amalgam in the rooms of the Main House, which contains the Byzantine Collection, the Garden Library, and, in a wing designed by Philip Johnson, the Pre-Columbian Collection. Here, the artist brought together distinct realities and practices, placing his sculptures in relation to the historical artifacts or laying out in display cases the possible iconographic resemblances between his representations and the documents produced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century artists/scientists, from Francesco Colonna to Claude Duret and Giambattista della Porta, on the themes of the similarity and the connection between nature and the human figure.

The ritual and ceremonial products of Byzantium—especially the bowls, dishes, basins, and monstrances with crosses—are associated by the artist with *Y* (2001, left). The sculpture stems from the same erotic and sensual motivations as *Head (from I, Thou)* and *Succulent*, but takes on an ambiguous connotation that connects it to the other objects on display, so that it looks like a pregnant cross whose body is covered with a mixture of blisters and small bricks in the form of cactus thorns. It seems to bring about an identity of opposites, sacred with profane, logical with illogical, male with female, becoming a sacred receptacle, almost a cathedral with a long nave and two transepts, that is brought to life by sexual potencies. A relationship with the architecture of life as well as death has been present ever since his first sculptures, including *Pyramid* (1972), which was displayed nearby.

By investigating the roots of Simonds's early activity, we can sense the unearthed value of a subterranean and ritual quantum that is the lifeblood of all his production: "when this whole thing started with me, I was pretty crazy, and everything that I did was very ritualized and all the behaviors were very esoteric, very strange behaviors. Some of it I don't really need to talk about, peculiar things . . . for instance all the bricks in the beginning had my blood in them . . ."[6] The ceremony of impregnating the architecture of the Little People with his own blood is further evidence of the artist's desire to enclose his action in the space of the body, to bring art into the living core of everyday existence. Testimony to this was provided in the cabinet of curiosities, by *Brick Cutting Board* (1969, page 82), which includes a plaster cast of a relief that held a test tube of the artist's blood. The inclusion of *Brick Cutting Board* in the exhibition, as well as of blood in the bricks, is a declaration of his intent to clear his own narcissism away and to pour his energy into the underground current of an imagination that is not personal, but that belongs to the memory and the social order of a new culture—that of the Little People. It is a metaphor for his desire to give a voice to a society that is weak and fragile as well as an acknowledgment that he (the artist), with his blood, is an integral part of that society. Thus, Simonds opens his gaze to an inner eye; this brings him into tune with the exaltation of the life-giving force of the soul in Byzantine painting and decoration.



Other parallels are found with medieval culture, where it is possible to discern an affinity with the fantastic imagery of the Gothic *grylles*, composite monsters typically made up of heads or faces with multiple limbs.[7] In Simonds's work, there are many weird chimera made up of buildings and heads, human beings and animals, and genitals and landscapes, from *Ritual Garden #9* (1978) to *Head* (1993, top right), from *Priapus* to *Man and Fish*. They form tangled and interlocking entities in which architecture and details of the human body are mixed; they are created by skillfully and expertly adapting the sculptural process, always bold and surprisingly precise, to the anatomy of the living creature. The antagonistic polarities, in which, in the end, we feel the presence of Eros and Thanatos, are also reflections on the religious impulses that have left a mark on his consciousness. Consequently life, and so nature too, instant by instant, threatens to turn into the opposite. Plants are either instruments of positive "insemination" (as seen in Claude Duret, *Phalle Hollandique*, bottom right) or are fertilized by the "negative," regenerating themselves continually by visual metaphors that make them resemble—like mushrooms—sexual organs or snakes. They are, like Simonds's figures, pivots of a dialectic in which what is form or image can be plunged back into the crucible of the vital flow or of mortal opacity. This circular process is symbolized in the display cases by

the Uroboros, the serpent of medieval iconography that bites its own tail, thus alluding to eternal return (left). In addition to representing the coupling and interlocking of figures, the symbol is an indication of a personal participation (his private life) and of the renewal and continual resurrection of the Little People.

Elsewhere it is human beings—in the person of Adam and Eve—who allow themselves to be inseminated by plants or animals, thus becoming doubles who regain possession of another truth. They are "awake" in an erotic and intellectual sense, so that the new material passes through the "door" of the male and female sexual organs as well as the head. This alchemical crossing is depicted in the fifteenth-century treatises, as well as in the books of C. G. Jung that reproduce their iconography. In this sense, if Adam, portrayed as source of both life and thought, is the founder of a new regeneration, then the Little People are symbols of the possible resurrection of our society. This vision, which lies somewhere between the alchemical and the Christian, has been present from Simonds's first work, *Birth*; it is the sign of a journey from the earthly to the radiant spirit of art: "all of a sudden I understood what I believed, about my body, who am I, where am I, what am I, and where do I fit, and at the same time all of it is aside from being now, has to do with time, has to do with being born, living and dying and it's all the same time. And it's all of a kind of birth, life, death, resurrection."[8]

The passage from one state of being to another is also linked with the surfacing of obscure and unconscious forms that are as deadly as they are fertile. Under their deluge, the artist discovers poetry and catharsis. For this reason, Simonds calls to mind the educational and emotional depth of the theoretical and behavioral studies of his mother, Anita I. Bell, who investigated the effects of the scrotal sac and the testes on the psychological development of children.[9] She established a link between the parts permeated by blood and those permeated by the mind, seeking a point of contact and relationship between the impulses that govern the body and those that govern the psychology of the adolescent. She has made an anti-Freudian crossing, with the scrotum and the unconscious exchanging roles in the child, without spilling over into impatience and into mature sexual experience. A fluidization that feeds a fire common to the whole body, and with which her son (Charles Simonds) identifies—to the point of "sculpting" a testicle, also exhibited in the cabinet of curiosities—to convey the intensity of the link between real and imaginary, natural and artificial, unconscious and conscious, mobile and fixed, spirit and matter.

Anxiety and emotions are also brought to light through the decipherment of a "dictionary" of ritual and symbolic objects that the Little People have constructed over time.

Ritual Objects (1987, page 20) is a "palette" on which appear all the "colors" of their life: "This is their world, and this is how I imagine the evolution of the objects in their world. There are knives, games with shells, sexual autoerotic items, bricks and tools." These objects speak to a continuity that is already recorded in Maya and Aztec rituals (page 32) that instilled life into the anthropomorphic or zoomorphic objects used in ceremonies and daily life. An incarnation that speaks of a demiurge "throwing into the world" the human being, who can spring from things as well as from flowers. A manifestation of the inner realm of a world that is no different from that of the child impregnated with the effects of a mingling between scrotum or testicles and torpor or sleep. The figures that are embedded in one another are the same as the ones in *Stugg* and *Untitled (Three Elements)* (1993), in which they reveal a formal or organic, figurative or abstract fullness that is indispensable nourishment for an existence.

The invisible that becomes visible, or the metaphysical that becomes physical, refers in Simonds's work to a raw material and to a depth that becomes the voice of art, an activating principle and a visual inspiration that circulate in human beings as in nature to animate both the social and the personal. In fact, the journey made through the imaginary civilization is a way of using his own creativity (or his own psychophysical capacities) to expel a flow of experiences and images that can lead to a self-discovery. This feeds on the double of art to bring out those feelings that, once transferred into dwellings, give breathing space and inspiration to other reconstructions of himself. Creating architectures and landscapes to merge with his own sap, if not his own blood, as at the beginning, he arrives at a higher edifice that feeds once again on the material of the context and represents a purified condition of the world. In this perspective, the sequence of landscapes from Monument Valley to the Dutch views of Van Gogh (above) can be reinterpreted as a flow of blazing energy that is able to liquefy, and thus to fluidize all together, through the focus of the gaze,

from painting to photograph, the images of the context passed, as vagabond and as nomad, between nature and art. An alchemical transmutation, arranged in succession, that by working on base material—such as postcards—communicates the power to introject opposites that turn into unity. It is on this uninterrupted flow of energy, which appears and disappears, and which is destroyed only to be replaced by another, that the fullness of the Little People is based. Although loath to appear or to be represented, these shadows of art that refuse to yield to the power of the symbolic and the economic are a testimony to a different life: the protest of a nomadic being who, through the misleading power of his fluid and ephemeral action, is able to make the imaginary fit into any context, urban or historic, psychological or social, almost succeeding in taking the place of reality.

NOTES

1 The multiplicity of personal and cultural relationships established by Simonds from 1968 to 1973 included living in a loft on Christie Street in New York with Gordon Matta-Clark, with whom he shared a propensity for finding urban situations in which to intervene and with whom he collaborated on many projects (such as his own *Tarot Cards* and Matta-Clark's *Jacks*). This period was characterized by a range of artistic research that—from antiform to arte povera, from conceptual art to body art, and from pop art to minimalism—brought into question the linguistic and material limits of painting and sculpture. Simonds's attention to these lines of research explains his interest in the writings and exhibitions on the immateriality of art by Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Douglas Huebler (promoted by Seth Siegelaub); in the interventions on desert and snow-clad plains made by Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, and Dennis Oppenheim (published in *Newsweek* in 1968); in the energetic intensifications and performances carried out by artists from Joseph Beuys to Mario Merz, from Michelangelo Pistoletto to Richard Long, and from Daniel Buren to Jannis Kounellis in Europe; and in the sensual, personal, and yielding forms of expression that were introduced by the theories of Lucy Lippard and seen in the works of Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois, and Eva Hesse in the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*. Simonds's meeting and personal relationship with Lippard dates from 1973, when a tour of the *Dwellings* scattered through the streets of Manhattan. In the end, the awareness that it was possible to intervene in the landscape in a soft and ephemeral manner was one of the motives for the artist's reflection on the "sterility of minimalist white spaces contrasted by the excitement and life in the streets." Charles Simonds, conversation with author, 2010.

2 Here I draw on and rework the ideas on the relationship between art and environment first expressed in Germano Celant, *Ambiente/arte dal futurismo alla body art* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977).

3 Charles Simonds, "Earth and Sanity," *International Journal of Art Therapy* 1 (1997): 8.

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002).

5 Marcello Fagiolo, *Natura e artificio: L'ordine rustico, le fontane, gli automi nella cultura del manierismo europeo* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1979).

6 Charles Simonds, interview with author, May 2010.

7 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le Moyen Age fantastique: Antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique* (Paris: A. Colin, 1955); and Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

8 Charles Simonds, interview with author, May 2010.

9 Anita I. Bell, "Psychologic Implications of Scrotal Sac and Testes for the Male Child," *Clinical Pediatrics* 13 (October 1974): 838–47; and Anita I. Bell, "Male Anxiety during Sleep," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 56 (1975): 455–64.

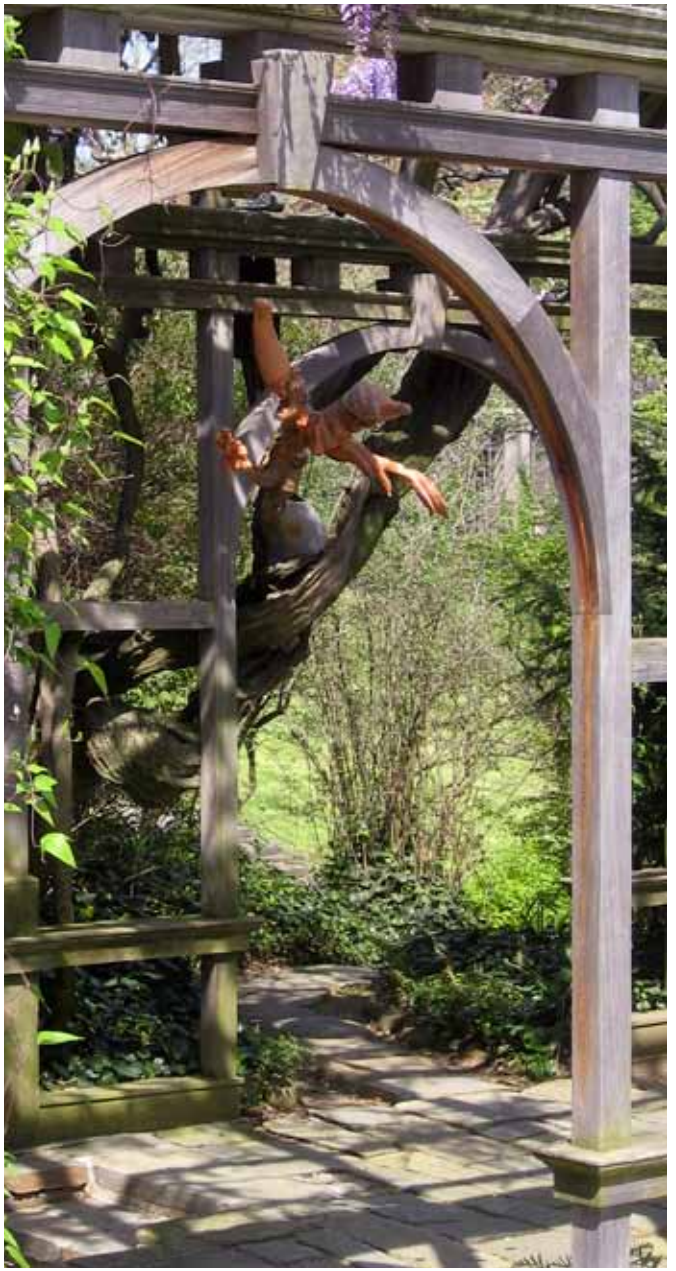
Mental Earth, 2003
Metal, polyurethane, clay, and wood, 89 x 126 x 80 inches
Collection of the artist

Head (from I, Thou), 1993
Clay and plaster,
10 x 34 x 20 inches
Collection of the artist

Views of the Rose Terrace
(this page) and the installation of
Head (from I, Thou) (facing page).

Top left: *Phalle Hollandique*, from Claude Duret, *Histoire admirable des plantes et herbes esmerueillables & miraculeuses en nature* (Paris: Chez Nicholas Bvon, 1605); top right: Maya Jaina-style whistle, 600–900 CE, ceramic with red, blue, and black paint; bottom left: Remojadas "Smiling" Figure, 600–800 CE.

Stugg, 1991 | Cement, 9 x 177 x 15 inches | Collection of the artist



Growth, 2009
Metal, polyurethane, wood, and clay,
28 x 60 x 29 inches
Collection of the artist

The installation on the Arbor Terrace at Dumbarton Oaks.