Dwelling as a World

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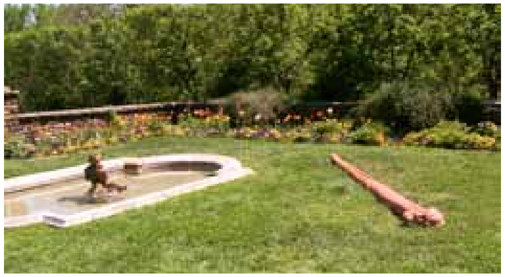
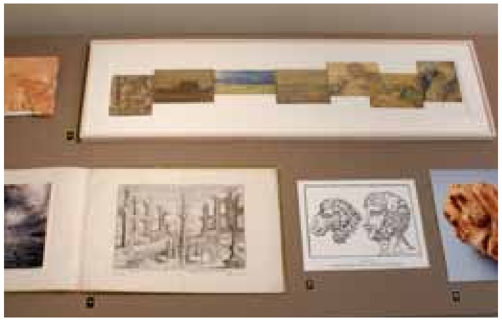
> The significance of cultural behaviour is not exhausted when we have clearly understood that it is local and man-made and hugely variable. It tends also to be integrated. A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society.
>
> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*[1]

Charles Simonds builds little worlds out of clay and other malleable materials. These worlds consist of carefully detailed miniature buildings or more elaborate, often quite fantastical, architectural and landscape environments. He also creates rather unconventional self-portraits by manipulating his facial features into more generalized or grotesque masks. Scattered throughout the indoor and outdoor spaces and amid the different collections at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum and Gardens during his exhibition *Landscape Body Dwelling*, these miniature worlds and portrait heads slipped into their chosen surroundings, becoming almost at home there. In some instances, individual works were so compatible with their environments as to be initially difficult to discern; in others, an initial surprise encounter led to a deeper appreciation of the preexisting formal, aesthetic, emotional, or pedagogical terms of a work's surroundings. *Mental Earth*, a large landscape of twisted rock formations punctuated with small, intricate dwellings, was suspended from the center of the ceiling of the Orangery, filling this space and echoing the large, creeping fig vine that extends up and along all sides of the room. A long staff with the distorted image of the artist's head emerging from one end lay on the grass within an elegant terrace complete with two shallow,





cartouche-shaped pools. The fountains in these pools, which consist of a single putto embracing a large fish that spews a thin, steady, vertical stream of water, provided a humorous contrast to the menacing figure emerging from the horizontal staff (top left). Installed among the collections in the museum galleries, Simonds's clay *Pyramid* and *Rock Flower* suggested didactic models of the hypothetical dwellings of the peoples whose cultural objects surrounded these miniature structures. His *Y,* a crossing of two long, three-dimensional, amoebalike forms whose surfaces are covered with tiny gray bricks studded with spiky or pimply orange protrusions, bore no immediate formal resemblance to the objects surrounding it in the Byzantine gallery, but its anthropomorphic visceralness nevertheless echoed the stark religiosity and faith in the transubstantiation of the flesh that many of the Byzantine objects on display were originally made to serve.

What Simonds refers to as his "cabinet of curiosities" appropriately occupied a space adjacent to the Rare Book Room (bottom left). This collection of small objects, images, and texts from a wide variety of time periods, some made by the artist and others photocopied from books and magazines, provided a specific set of historical and visual precedents for Simonds's work and, at the same time, demonstrated that his imagery and central concerns are part of a historically and culturally broad yet finite set of visual archetypes or perhaps, to use George Kubler's terminology, part of the replica-mass of a limited set of panhistorical prime objects. Kubler's prime objects consist of the singular, key monuments in the history of art, such as Stonehenge, the Parthenon, and the portal statues at Reims Cathedral. Few remain in completely manifest form, and most are known only through countless copies, what Kubler calls the replica-mass of each prime—"the entire system of replicas, reproductions, copies, reductions, transfers, and derivations floating in the wake of an important work of art."[2] Some replicas in this mass reproduce the prime completely, while others alter it slightly so that, in time, what Kubler refers to as the replica's "drift" from the prime is recognized by a particularly perceptive artist, who then imposes a new scheme on the mass of replicas that more directly corresponds to its current historical moment and circumstances.[3] Simonds engages with his chosen primes and their trailing replica-mass in such a manner by extending their legacy and subsequently shaping it to accommodate new historical circumstances and exhibition contexts.

Throughout his installation, Simonds highlighted the central terms of his art—landscape, body, and dwelling—by calling attention to overarching patterns of shared motifs and ideas through subtle associations and contrasts between his objects and the objects and environments surrounding them. As a result, Simonds's works in this exhibition not only literally represent miniature worlds but also function as dynamic visual, conceptual, and emotional catalysts for imagining many different worlds simultaneously within the preexisting contexts—natural and man-made, historical and geographical—at Dumbarton Oaks.

Imaginative world-making has been central to Simonds's practice from the very beginning, but his dwellings for the Little People, which he began to make in the early 1970s in New York and continues to make whenever he travels to a new city, are emblematic of this process and provide many of the foundational terms for his art and his ongoing approach to exhibition design, as demonstrated at Dumbarton Oaks. Although the urban situations for his early dwellings couldn't be more different than the exhibition spaces at Dumbarton Oaks, a consideration of these dwellings, several films that were made about them, and aspects of the larger historical context for both illuminates the fundamental terms of Simonds's ongoing commitment to creating worlds that are simultaneously imaginary or utopian and real, materially present and yet physically highly unstable, miniature and life size, timeless and timely.

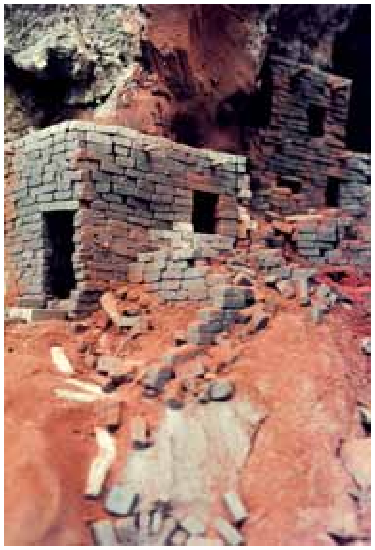
Around 1970, Simonds began making miniature clay dwellings on Greene Street below Houston in New York. At the time, he was sharing a large loft space on Christie Street with Gordon Matta-Clark, not far from Greene Street. His initial motivation was to make a home, to feel at home in a city that was, in fact, his hometown—he was born in Manhattan in 1945—but yet in which he felt like a migratory orphan.[4] He created these dwellings for himself but also for a fantasy community that he called the Little People. At the time, he conceived of these Little People as divided into two groups: the Plains People, the farmers and shepherds who lived at street level in potholes and along curbs (right); and the Cliff-Dwellers, the hunters and nomads who made their homes on the window ledges of the buildings facing the street.[5] For each group, Simonds constructed environments that included dwellings made out of tiny clay bricks loosely modeled on ancient architectural forms, including early Native American cliff dwellings. In all cases, these dwellings appeared to be abandoned or falling into ruin. The two tribes, according to the scenario Simonds developed for them, were culturally polar opposites, and thus constantly at war with one another. But the bigger enemies they both faced were the weather, since the unfired clay bricks out of which their dwellings were made melted in rain or snow, and the passers-by, who either inadvertently destroyed their dwellings, by stepping on them or trying to dislodge them from their surroundings in order to take them home, or willfully destroyed them by throwing stones at them.

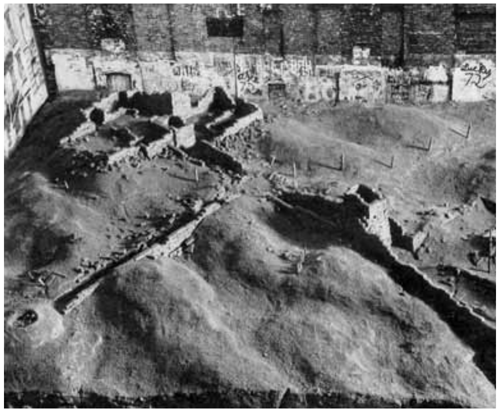
In the early 1970s, artists had already begun to occupy and refurbish portions of the increasing number of empty warehouses and commercial buildings that filled the area between Houston Street and Canal Street west of Broadway. This part of town was not yet the SoHo dominated by commercial art galleries, shops, and restaurants that it came to be by the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it was already an area in transition. Due to its transitory status, the streets were primarily occupied by two distinct groups of people: the increasing numbers of artists who lived there, and the workers and truckers who didn't live there but who were in and out of the area daily, delivering, manufacturing, or picking up goods at the buildings that were still in commercial use. According to Simonds, the artists, his own peers, had little to no interest in what he was doing, and, in some cases, were contemptuous of his activities. But the truckers and workers quickly and enthusiastically engaged him in conversation, took up his stories about the Little People as a matter of course, and began to look for him and his dwellings when they were in the area. This disparity in responses prompted Simonds to look for a neighborhood in which the residents might be more open and willing to engage with him and his Little People. And once he found it in the far East Village, between 14th Street and Houston and Avenues A and D, he traveled there every day on his three-wheeled delivery bicycle filled with supplies, selected sites, and made his dwellings, like an itinerant laborer (left and facing page).

His chosen neighborhood was occupied primarily by Caribbean immigrants and their children. They lived amid thriving drug trafficking and an urban landscape that consisted of twenty to thirty percent vacant lots or buildings. Most of these vacant buildings were in receivership due to deliberate neglect by their landlords and by the city—the hope being that the city could then reclaim entire blocks for urban renewal at some unspecified future date. The early 1970s was a low point financially for New York, and many sections of the city, especially downtown and uptown above 96th Street, looked the way the Lower East Side did. But the community Simonds entered was trying to do something about the gradual ceding of their neighborhood to the ruin the city deemed a necessary preliminary to its own appropriation, even if the neighborhood's efforts to claim small portions of space for parks, community centers, and housing were only temporary footholds. The constant refrain of neighborhood activists, "every time we do something, it gets broke," was emblematic of the situation.[6] It is significant to note that such local groups were often referred to as the "little people" in newspaper accounts concerning proposed urban renewal plans for the city, and that these groups sometimes even referred to themselves in this way, if only in an attempt at subversive irony.

From the late 1960s into the mid-1970s, conversations about the role of public sculpture within urban development had become quite heated, both as a result of several contemporary exhibitions, including *Sculpture in Environment* in New York in 1967, and because of an increasing number of public commissions tied to new building projects in various parts of the city. What is, perhaps, most remarkable about these conversations from the perspective of the present is the fact that no one writing about the sculpture in these exhibitions and/or works commissioned for public spaces assumed that these works should incorporate references to the specific formal, social, or historical circumstances of the sites they occupied into their design. At a moment when the unpredictable dynamics of urban renewal often dictated the terms, an artist's acknowledgment of site meant creating a sculpture that was either physically expendable or could be moved to another site. In her review of *Sculpture in Environment*, the art critic and curator Lucy Lippard described the situation: "Most of New York's neighborhoods are temporary. We could capitalize on the city's impermanent quality instead of sitting back and deploring it. With buildings cavalierly thrown up and mown down, permanent sculpture is often irrelevant. Good sculpture does not automatically become obsolete, but if its setting is changed, it may become unsuitable."[7] Urban renewal created new opportunities for public sculpture, but, at the same time, it could render an individual work unsuitable for its site, allowing it to be removed or even deliberately destroyed. The precarious, eclectic, and ever-changing nature of the urban environment was thus mirrored in public sculpture's presumably tenuous existence. Both were necessarily impermanent and open to transformation.

In the face of demands for sculptural impermanence and the concomitant spatially and temporally disorienting urban experiences produced by the fluctuating juxtapositions of old buildings, new buildings, and empty lots, a number of artists made what were referred to at the time as "anti-monuments." Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* and Claes Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument*, works completed in 1967 and included in *Sculpture in Environment*, exemplify two general types: an inverted romantic ruin, in the case of *Broken Obelisk*, and a negative and ultimately invisible monument, in the case of *Placid Civic Monument*. For the latter, Oldenburg hired professional grave-diggers to dig and then fill a six-foot-deep rectangular hole behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A few photographs of the workers' efforts exist, but the location was not marked and eventually grass grew over the spot, erasing any physical evidence of the work's existence.[8] By calling a highway construction site in Passaic, New Jersey, a "ruin in reverse," Robert Smithson insisted that urban renewal could also be viewed as a form of time-travel: "That zero panorama seemed to contain, that is—all





the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather rise into ruin *before* they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scene suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other 'out of date' things."[9]

Because of their small scale, precarious locations, and material fragility, Simonds's dwellings for the Little People could be viewed as a type of anti-monument or, because of the way they were constructed, ruins in reverse (top left). And his sculptural interventions were directed at many of the same social, cultural, and material circumstances and effects of urban renewal that Oldenburg, Smithson, and others were engaging. However, Simonds's goal was quite different.[10] In addition to reiterating or commenting on the urban situation on a miniature scale, he offered a life-size alternative that was directed to local communities and not primarily to other members of the art world. In his words, he sought "to make a mythology that existed in real time and space, which members of the community could choose to invest in and make part of their day to day in whatever way they would like."[11] Simonds also invested in the realities of this community by joining their political fights, applying his ideas to more practical built solutions, and inspiring collaboration. Through their gatherings around his dwellings, for example, some residents of one block got the idea to transform a vacant lot adjacent to a Little People dwelling into a playground, which Simonds helped them design and called *La Placita*. As a member of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing, Simonds also helped the community to activate the existing local channels to get permission and some financial support from the city to execute this project. At the same time, he created several fantasy park models for the same space (bottom left).

"Dwelling," a word that can function as a noun and as a verb, reflects Simonds's dual engagement with his chosen community on the Lower East Side. A dwelling can be a physical space in which to live or a description of the temporal experience of dwelling—both can be imagined or real. Simonds describes: "When I'm working I never see Little People. I am not insane. But I do think about them. What are they doing in that corner? It's a place you let your mind relax into . . . I don't think about the Little People. I think about me in there. It's a mental positioning inside. But I also think of them—they're incorporeal, but they're quite alive."[12] And, for Simonds, these modes of spatial and temporal, corporeal and mental dwelling that one can relax into define a particular kind of social interaction and role for him as an artist, one associated with a set of responsibilities rare in twentieth-century urban environments, but quite common in earlier cultures, particularly those possessing vital, communal traditions. Simonds states: "The people on the Lower East Side see me as a kind of folk figure who comes and delivers the Little People. It's not like I'm making things. It's like I'm the carrier, the harbinger. Conceptually, as well as physically, the dwellings fall apart when thought of as objects that can be taken home. They lose all their spatial and temporal expansiveness."[13]

Simonds has also described the dwellings as "the medium through which we talk," and a series of short films made by Simonds and Rudy Burckhardt from 1972–74 elucidates through sound and image how this worked as a form of storytelling.[14] In these films, the people who gather around Simonds while he is making the dwellings express most of the artist's ideas; they become participant-observers in the process by telling the story of the Little People to each other, sometimes becoming the spokespersons for them or for the artist, whereas Simonds is mostly silent or even absent. I think this is a deliberate decision on the part of the filmmaker and the artist, even though, in reality, Simonds directly engaged with his audience while working (right). Because Simonds's voice is absent from the collective conversations in these films, the viewer becomes more aware of the basic ideas and information concerning the Little People as a story that is being told and retold in slightly different ways, even though it is clear that the experience and its perimeters are mutually acknowledged by all of the participants.

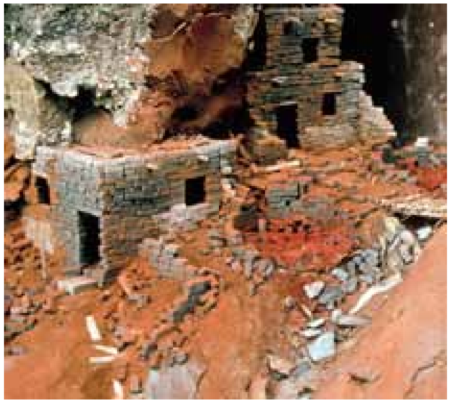
In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin describes the storyteller as a historically situated figure from the past, one who was able, along with the community he served, to exchange experiences and provide social counsel. Whereas increasingly, Benjamin claims, experience itself "has fallen in value" because it is no longer collectively shared:

> Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn . . . there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. Each of these tribes preserves some of its characteristics centuries

> later. The actual extension of the realm of storytelling in its full historical breadth is inconceivable without the most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types. Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly in the Middle Ages in their trade structure. The resident master craftsman and traveling journeymen worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been a traveling journeyman before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.[15]

Through the two archaic types of the seaman and the peasant farmer, the resident craftsman and the traveling journeyman, home and away are combined. This is reflected in Simonds's sense of himself as a native New Yorker and as an orphan, an itinerant carrier or harbinger. He comes from somewhere else, but becomes a committed member of the community through his daily presence and his eventual participation in community groups, projects, and politics. He is also both a master craftsman, with a finely honed set of skills, and a journeyman traveling on his bike. What he brings along with his stories of the Little People, their dwellings, tools, games (left), and temples is an eclectic set of images of built environments and descriptions of a way of life from an unspecified distant past and an equally unspecified distant place. The almost mythic timelessness that these environments and descriptions suggest through their incomplete, abandoned, or ruined conditions and their lack of historical specificity oddly mirrors and, at the same time, provides a striking and illuminating contrast to their broader, urban surroundings: a neighborhood struggling to establish itself, even if temporarily, amid an environment of seemingly immutable ruins, yet one shaped by the specific political, social, and economic terms of urban renewal in New York in the early 1970s.

Because of their material ephemerality, Simonds's dwellings also echo an art historical phenomenon that Lippard described in 1973 as the steady "dematerialization of the art object."[16] At the time, Lippard was positing a fundamental change in the way that many artists were making and disseminating their work. Discrete paintings and sculptures had given way to more ephemeral objects, conceptual and installation-based art, performance, film, and video practices. Lippard characterized this development as a form of institutional and cultural critique of the seeming self-sufficient art object as commodity fetish. Since 1973, increasing numbers of critics and art historians have embraced Lippard's notion of the dematerialized art object to the point that it has become one of the foundational descriptions of artistic practice in the 1960s and 1970s. However, her definition has posed at least two problems for curators: how to represent dematerialized art and its legacy in exhibitions, when, for the most part, exhibitions demand objects; and how to deal with practices, such as Simonds's, that were not initially addressed to art institutions or even the art world in general. One solution to the first problem has been to revalorize some of the objects made by artists during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, no matter how ephemeral or "dematerialized," no matter how slight or secondary to their practice, by displaying and writing about them as if their discrete physical authenticity and appearance are central to understanding this crucial period. This solution also addresses the second problem by sidelining the importance of context to the critique that, according to Lippard and others writing at the time and since, dematerialized objects were mounting. These contexts—and they were plural—were physical and well as experiential; dematerialization expressed a desire for integration into contexts other than art institutions as well as a retreat from the hegemony of these institutions. Negation, as manifested in anti-monuments such as Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument* or in Smithson's conception of "ruins in reverse," was just one approach to the dematerialization that contributed to the object's relinquishment of a hard and fast materiality.



Once a balance between negation and integration is restored to our sense of dematerialization as an artistic practice, we can begin to see more clearly how the legacy for this type of work could include a broader spectrum of contexts and forms of cultural integration that posit subtle critiques of the formal, cultural, and historical terms of an art institution. Through exhibition installations like *Landscape Body Dwelling,* one can appreciate how all of Charles Simonds's individual works, both those made early in his career and those made since, continue to engage with their contexts because they were not made to function in relation to singular historical situations, institutional or otherwise. And even though the early dwellings were fragile and seemingly falling into ruin, they were never truly or exclusively dematerialized in a negative sense. Individually and collectively, they always have the ability provoke the materialization of new and different stories, new and different worlds.

NOTES

1 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 46.

2 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 39.

3 Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 43. For a more extensive discussion of Simonds's practice in relation to Kubler's text, see Kate Linker, "Charles Simonds' Emblematic Architecture," *Artforum* 17, no. 7 (March 1979): 32–37.

4 Charles Simonds, conversation with author, November 9, 2009.

5 Simonds ultimately conceived of the Little People as consisting of three different groups. See his essay "Three Peoples," in *Charles Simonds* (Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2003), 122–33.

6 Charles Simonds, conversation with author, November 9, 2009.

7 Lucy Lippard, "Beauty and the Bureaucracy," *Hudson Review* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1967–68): 656. I want to thank my PhD student Amanda Douberley for this citation. Her forthcoming dissertation, "The Corporate Model: Sculpture, Architecture, and the American City, 1946–75," will provide a detailed discussion of the relationship among urban renewal, debates concerning public art, and what she is calling the sculptural landmark.

8 For a contemporary discussion of this work, see Dan Graham, "Oldenburg's Monuments," *Artforum* 6, no. 5 (January 1968): 30–37.

9 Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 50.

10 Simonds has frequently noted the importance of both Oldenburg and Smithson to him and to his early development in particular. See, for example, *Charles Simonds*, 146 and 148.

11 Charles Simonds, conversation with author, November 9, 2009.

12 Quoted in Ted Castle, "Charles Simonds: The New Adam," *Art in America* 71, no. 2 (February 1983): 101.

13 Quoted in Herbert Molderings, “Kunst als Gedächtnis/Art as Memory,” in *Charles Simonds: Schwebende Städte und andere Architeckturen/Floating Cities and Other Architectures* (Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1978), 8.

14 Cited in Linker, “Charles Simonds’ Emblematic Architecture,” 34.

15 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 1936, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 84–85.

16 Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).