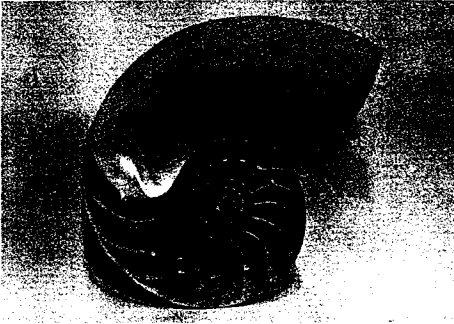


Simonds: Life Built to Dream Dimensions¹

By Daniel Abadie



Some animals secrete their shells, man invents dwellings. The same imperious necessity commands them: to give form to space, to reduce the world to a known object, a possessed object. Because it situates the individual within an environment perceived first as hostile, the architecture of men retraces their vision of the universe: Gothic verticality has heaven as its end, classical space unfolds as the measure of the individual who strives to conquer the world and its powers. Cosmologies inscribed at once on the surface of the earth and in our memories, man's constructions are the lasting record of his passing—his way both of living and of vanquishing death. The first works of Charles Simonds participate in this dual nature; here are the raw qualities of instinctive behavior and the disillusionment of knowledge.

It is from his own body and his own space that the work of Charles Simonds has developed. First in his apartment where, in a series of successive moltings occupying one room after another even to the eventual expulsion of their creator, there accumulated objects and elements of all kinds, made from hair and from mucus, from clay and from dreams. The architecture also took part in the form of columns, stairways, fragments of a fetishistic stage setting for the body. How, raised in a family of psychoanalysts, could Simonds ignore this enactment of a return to the world of infancy? This re-creation—clay, the most malleable of materials which, under simple pressure from the fingers, take form—gave him a dimension at the same time physical and inwardly cultural. To the sensuality of modeling, to its demiurgic quality, is here especially added the primary erotic image of the earth mother, here buried in the most absolute oblivion. Referring to Robinson Crusoe:

She represents a return to the lost innocence that each man secretly mourns. She reunites miraculously the peace of soft womb shadows and the peace of the tomb, one within and the other beyond life.²

Figure 3. Chambered Nautilus shell, cross-section.

This return to the beginning, this participation in the vital principle, Simonds made the subject of his first film, *Birth*. From the uniformity of the clayey earth he slowly emerges, nude and still covered with the original slime, as at the moment of the creation of the world. Beginning with this symbolic rebirth, culture and experience coincide in a totally ritualized universe.

It was in order to obey the implicit dictates of the clay that Simonds's first constructions were of ritual places. He strove to transfer his intimate knowledge of the material to them; to make himself, in miniaturizing them, both their creator and witness. This remote possession is in fact identical to that obtained by the witch doctor from his doll: it tends to confer upon one who at first is a submissive participant, the powers of a high priest. Thus it is not without reason that Simonds has naturally reproduced the successive periods of Genesis: life created from dust, the peopling of a formerly deserted world—and this to the very point of creating a miniature cosmogony. Man forms the link between the infinitely great and the infinitely small, between the universe that surpasses him and that he masters.

In more general terms, the art of the 1970s favored this turning to the miniscule, to the invisible, as if, after the spectacular demonstrations of color-field painting and Pop Art, it was appropriate to abandon retinal evidence in favor of mental acuity, surface for gravity. The defiance of art and its values, a constant for most 20th-century creators, is no longer foreign to this *reduction* that offers the lowest profile and partially avoids for its creator the label of artist. The films, the photographic works, the ephemeral nature of the *Dwellings*, the realizations in the street, spring from the same ethic—what Simonds is dealing with is less the nature of art than its social role. Moreover, this latter concern may seem in the early work to be the essential point of his quest. Simonds was not satisfied with working randomly in the streets. Quickly he concentrated his work in a section of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, bit by bit integrating himself with this community, responding to an unformulated expectation, playing the part of a catalyst rather than an artist. Thus, in the development of the Placita playlot (pl. 25), his contribution is scarcely visually recognizable: it is to be found in the very existence of the project and in the energy necessary to bring it to its conclusion. One might think that his work in the streets, parallel to the development of the sculptures, is in some way alien to them. Yet they are one, for the street works enabled the sculptures to take a new dimension, a mythological amplitude.

Simonds has stressed how from the moment his work was carried into the street the heroic achievement of the Little People was born:

At this period (1970) there were, in fact, two different peoples who were at war: the inhabitants of the cliffs, hunters, who lived in the walls and projections of the buildings, and the shepherds who lived on the plain of the streets, in the gutters and against the foundations of the buildings. The cliff dwellers regularly came down to raid the plains dwellers. Finally conquests and assimilation united the two peoples.³

The street served as an echo chamber to the summary buildings which at that time Simonds strewed among the jagged outlines of the city walls. There were the comments of the passersby, the neighborhood children, who helped formulate the true mythology of the Little People. The spectators formulated, in a collective projection, the chronicle of this people, explained their cus-

toms, justified their constructions. The freedom of the creator exists in the limits permitted him by this general acceptance. This double relation of the artist to the Dwellings and the Dwellings to the public progressively determined the major characteristics of the Little People's architecture and, initially, its tie to the sacred. Detached from all utilitarianism, the image of the city recovers its original dimension; an image that represents at the same time geomancy, translation of social structures, and delineation of religious and political positions. The differences thusly expressed are no longer based on culture but on behavior.

Thus Simonds was led to distinguish in a series of sculptures and a parallel text, three fundamental categories: people who live in a line, those who build in a circle, and those who construct spirals. Each of these, more than style of urbanism, proposes a moral of existence. For the first—which Simonds experienced in his early works—the rush forward, the willingness to abandon—he wrote that “when they move, they leave everything behind, intact like a personal museum.”⁴ Quite to the contrary, people who live in a circle live a myth of eternal return, of cyclical time, of a present inhabited by the past. Their “irreducible idea of the center,”⁵ is different from that of the spiral people, for whom the progression is important, despite the fact that their fanatic concern with the past links them to what they have lived. But as their Dwellings demonstrate, each in its own way, they all share the common need for a ritualized existence.

At this stage, where every posture is symbolic, earth herself becomes erotic. She swells, revealing in her breast obscure analogies, unforeseeable burgeonings. From 1974 on Simonds's work has taken into account eruptions and turgidities. The constructions are no longer made on the surface of the earth, but are erected out of it, taking form from its most secret depths. The material has become gravid, and it will be revealed in time. This factor, an essential part of Simonds's earlier work, was an intemporal time, a synthetic concept in which were mixed all the stages of the duration. With *Park Model/Fantasy* (pl. 26) a sort of demultiplication takes place: the same site is presented in successive phases, no one phase being pre-eminent. The identity of the site exists only through the sum of its differences, its transformations. Time reveals the true shape of things in the slow process of evolution that makes them what they are.

It is with this series of *Circles and Towers Growing* that Simonds's idea becomes more clearly defined. From the same common trunk emerge two possible developments, that of towers and that of circles; thus within the one family diverse faces are born from the same genes. Only destruction, effacement, eliminates these differences, returning the most elaborated of his constructions to their initial state of unformed material. The history of man is but his return to the earth, in which death traps him.

Simonds's turning away from street works to sculptures was interpreted by some as a renouncement, an integration into traditional art circles. Yet in fact his sculptures form a more elaborated part of the work in the city and lead to a symbolic dimension. Certainly his street works exist in the form of sketches, intuitive notations, and lead to sculpture, but Simonds is also advancing it as a means of contact with the outside, a touchstone of truths. The dichotomy inherent in his work, from social project to the most intimate

piece, is evident in the sudden eruption, in the course of his work, of the *Floating Cities* project. He who tries to interpret it from a sculptural point of view can only be deceived, for *Floating Cities* is a genuine architectural model. Born out of a reflection on the nature of human habitat, *Floating Cities* is presented as a real dimensional project and introduces into its concept the economic and ecological dimensions that are excluded from the universe of the Little People.

Floating Cities reflects Simonds's continual attraction to different forms of life, social as well as biological, his care in apprehending these forms and, through his comprehension, re-creating a new rapport with society. And in this light, the universe of construction with which the name of Simonds is now associated is doubtlessly only provisional, and may well give way, in his work, to any other form of expression that one day seems to him to have the power to express, other than by a fiction, a true insight.

For Charles Simonds, the nature of art is metaphysical in essence. He belongs to the generation of post-minimal artists who cannot content themselves with formalist criteria, but who attempt to discover both the why and the how of art. Today, as for the man who left the imprint of his hand at Altamira, in the motionless movement of art are the same questions, those that Paul Gauguin naïvely wrote on the bottom of his painting: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?"⁶ To these unanswerable questions, life and art suggest provisional solutions, which are all the stronger since we were not expecting them, but with which we seem familiar from the outset. Thus we have been, at all times, contemporaneous with Simonds's Dwellings.

Footnotes

1

Translated from the French by Terry Ann R. Neff.

2

Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1972, p. 112.

3

Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 5.

4

Ibid., p. 61.

5

Ibid., p. 50.

6

"D'où venons nous/Que sommes nous/Où allons nous," 1897-98. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.