

Simonds's domain: fragments and secrets of time

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“Time is a game played beautifully by children”

—Heraclitus¹

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins”

—T.S. Eliot²

“Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling.

The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially”

—Martin Heidegger³

What is Charles Simonds’s work about? One way to answer this question is to consider a fundamental influence upon the artist. As a child, Simonds had been impressed by his first encounter with the Native Indian villages of New Mexico. Clearly, the forms of these architectural settlements resonate through the various “dwellings” and “ritual places” that Simonds created, much later in his life, from the 1970s onwards. But rather than stress what is an altogether obvious link, there is more to gain from focusing on the essence of how those ancient buildings might impress themselves upon a modern observer (whether through the eyes of a child or the memory of an adult). Indeed, Simonds here takes his implicit place in an eminent line of artists, including photographers and writers, who have been inspired by the scenery—natural and humanly inhabited or thereafter abandoned—of the American Southwest.⁴ Most relevantly, the Anasazi cliff dwellings of the Canyon de Chelly in particular have become a powerful magnet in the twentieth century for the photographic lens of Ansel Adams and, long before, Timothy H. O’Sullivan. In fact, both photographers chose this identical site to realize two of the most imposing vistas in the medium’s history. Adams’s 1942 picture of the “White House” there was at once a homage to his nineteenth-century predecessor and, through him, to the mystique of the location itself.

1 Heraclitus: *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*, transl. Brooks Haxton. Viking, New York 2001, p. 51.

2 Eliot, T.S.: “The Waste Land”, in *Collected Poems: 1909–1962*. Faber and Faber, London 1963, p. 79.

3 Heidegger, Martin: “Building Dwelling Thinking”, in *Basic Writings*, transl. Albert Hofstadter. Harper Collins, San Francisco 1977, p. 335.

4 Numerous possible examples include painters such as Thomas Moran, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O’Keefe, the novelist D.H. Lawrence, the film director John Ford, the architectural historian Reyner Banham and even the composer Olivier Messiaen (in his 1974 symphonic composition, *Des canyons aux étoiles*).

We might say that O’Sullivan presents a tableau of time in its different aspects. Firstly, time’s impact on human fabrications, transforming them into ruins. Secondly, the immemorial geological duration exemplified by the monolithic cliff. Lastly, a process of complex temporal interactions between past, present and future: the phases of birth, decay and endurance that are fixed in this passing moment, which renders a hierarchy combining the organic (note the foreground trees), the man-made (the central buildings) and the mineral (the sheer sandstone) as a monumental unity. The striking, utter lack of sky even leads the viewer to wonder under what supernal canopy—according to what ordering principle or gods—this drama has unfolded. Overall, we encounter fragments built by a vanished people that are now left half hidden or forgotten, like secrets, within some greater natural or divine scheme extending beyond full human comprehension. Paradoxically, humanity is present here as trace, memory and absence. And this whole scenario, I suggest, is also at the crux of Simonds’s achievement. From such ingredients he has managed to craft a veritable domain that evokes primal beginnings and ruinous endings, artifice and chaos, formal architectonics and formless psychological forces.

However, one further element in O’Sullivan’s photograph beckons towards Simonds: scale. Dwarfed by the towering canyon, the houses become poignant miniatures, a microcosmic stratum.⁵ In other words, the grandeur of the setting goes together with the little, vulnerable things that it upholds. This theme also pervades Simonds’s work under diverse guises.

In his film *Birth* (1970) Simonds emerges, naked and helpless as a new-born baby, from a primordial mud as epic in its connotations as the waters of Genesis. In a sense, this was a 1970s performance-type equivalent—laden with that period’s aesthetic preoccupation with materiality—to the selfsame opposition of sacred *terribilità* and human frailty that, to cite a textbook prototype, Michelangelo had portrayed in *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine vault. Subsequently, the dwarf edifices that Simonds erected in Manhattan and other cities around the globe were a quiet reply to the huge scale of the skyscrapers and other outsize pretensions of twentieth-century architecture and urbanism. In later sculptures, such as *Head* (1993), the physical dimensions may remain quite humble but the changes of scale are vivid. Exquisitely crafted little bricks grow from a head fallen on its side whose grotesque coarseness recalls antique fragments akin to the colossal visage of Constantine on Rome’s Capitoline Hill and the apotropaic Gorgon’s countenances (also respectively on their side/inverted) upon which rest two of the Byzantine columns in the subterranean Basilica Cistern in Istanbul. Always Simonds hints that the scale of imaginative thought runs to juxtaposed extremes that comprise an alternative reality.⁶ On the one hand, he conjures the fantastically large—as with the *Floating Cities* concept of 1978 and the soaring *Three Trees* that were made to pierce the floors of Basel’s Architekturmuseum in 1985, latter-day descendents of the World-Ash of Norse mythology.⁷ On the other hand, the whimsically shrunken—as with the Little People whose tales Simonds fabulated and the Lilliputian enclaves of the *Dwellings*. Such magnifications and miniaturizations are as ancient and universal symptoms of human imagining as, to take two disparate examples at random, the Tower of Babel and, at another extreme, the fairy realm of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Nevertheless, a specifically American context seems to offer the most apt perspective.

5 The extreme planarity of the photograph’s composition also foretells in a vertical axis the (horizontal) cartographic aspect—the “flatbed” look—that Simonds employs.

6 Simonds remarks that there is only one scale in his work, “the scale of my vision.” Quoted in Neff, John Hallmark: “Charles Simonds’s Engendered Places: Towards a Biology of Architecture”, in *Charles Simonds*. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 1981, p. 12. In effect, his imaginative “vision” thus straddles the macro- and microcosmic.

7 Certain distant similarities may exist between these concepts and those of the Archigram and Archizoom groups and other architectural fantasists of the 1960s.

Gigantism has been by turns a perennial myth, fact and ideological tendency of the United States. There, everything is supposedly bigger than it is anywhere else. Often this is really so. Witness the array of natural and artificial landmarks that runs from Niagara via the Grand Canyon to the Empire State Building. Such grandeur can easily shift to self-aggrandizement, as already noticed in the 1830s by the French statesman Alexis De Tocqueville: “The American people sees itself striding across these deserts [...] The magnificent image of themselves [...] follows each of them in their least as in their principal actions.”⁸ The most forthright statements of America’s gigantic aspirations (apart, that is, from its latter-day imperialism) have yielded what has been called “the technological sublime”. Exemplars of the technological sublime—awesome feats of scientific and constructive enormity—typically include the first transcontinental railroad, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Hoover Dam and even the atomic bomb.⁹ At the environmental level, the technological sublime merged with the advent of a more everyday hallmark of American identity, the skyscraper. In the post-1945 era the skyscraper itself proliferated into the countless high-rise boxes that by the 1960s had begun to dominate New York and most American cities. Although Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building remains one of the first and finest examples of this trend, it is for that very reason also the clearest herald of a Zeitgeist—sleek, corporate, impersonal and technocratic—that represents a background to Simonds’s vision. A background, that is, insofar as almost everything in Simonds’s sculpture would appear to counterbalance its impulses. Thus a comparison of the two may prove instructive.

If the Seagram Building soars aloft, rigid and rectilinear, from its Park Avenue plinth, Simonds’s various towers either wilt (as in the eponymous 1984 piece) or spread entropically about their bases or come undone with their bricks scattered around them like leaves (again a 1986 title). While Mies elevates geometry and grids to a totalizing principle, Simonds suggests an organic, malleable universe. Underlying Mies’s concept were notions of “universal space” that reach back, by way of Descartes, as far as Plato: space as absolute and impersonal.¹⁰ By contrast, Simonds’s spaces are orientated along existential axes that link the human presence on earth to the cycles of nature, growth and transience. Whereas the Seagram Building is machine-honed to look as though it will last forever, Simonds’s structures submit themselves to elemental erosion (literally in the case of the dwellings situated in the mean streets of the Lower East Side and similar locales) and the forces of gravity or anatomical movement (metaphorically in the trio from 2001 entitled *Pulled, Stretch and Torn*). In opposition to Mies’s glass, bronze and steel, scarcely a single mechanical or metallic motif occurs throughout Simonds’s entire output. This leads to perhaps the most telling contrast of all: the use of materials. Simonds’s crucial reliance on clay epitomizes everything that International Modernism in architecture was not: archaic, tactile, modest, metamorphic, artisanal and opaque.

Contrasting Simonds against the ethos that the Seagram Building has come to symbolize indicates that his roots were very much in tune with the counter-cultural mood of the 1970s which critiqued the hegemony of corporate America. To be sure, Simonds in that period followed a recognizable persuasion. His 1974 interview, “Microcosm to

8 De Tocqueville, Alexis: *De la Démocratie en Amérique* [1835], vol. 2, part 1, ch. 17. Quoted in *Cosmos*. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal 1999, p. 92.

9 Nye, David: *American Technological Sublime*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1994.

10 Cf. Jencks, Charles: *Modern Movements in Architecture*. Penguin, London 1973, p. 105: “To see the striking relevance of this Platonic belief in universals for Mies’s work, one should remember that Plato put above the entrance to his Academy a sign that Mies might have placed above all his entrances: ‘Nobody Untrained in Geometry May Enter My House’ ...”.

Macrocosm, Fantasy World to Real World” refers to “short-sighted capitalism” and the technological exploitation of the land, he began living with the feminist critic Lucy Lippard then and came to know, among others, Robert Smithson, who had an acute sensitivity to ecological issues.¹¹ Moreover, in light of Simonds’s adoption of diminutive dimensions, we should not forget that the 1970s was the decade when 1960s underground values such as “small is beautiful” had become so axiomatic that the Establishment adopted them as marketing slogans (“Mr Ferrari drives a Fiat”).¹² Despite these initial affiliations, it would be absurd to portray Simonds’s efforts as a mere sculptural projection of the sensibility of ’68, Woodstock, the Sierra Club, Flower Power, and so forth. On the contrary, his endeavours have proven adept at touching upon far more intricate patterns in American thought and, reaching beyond the limits of even that broad framework, appear remarkably manifold in their scope.¹³

Consider, for instance, Simonds’s frequent exploration of the theme of ruins and abandonment. The curator John Hallmark Neff has rightly noted that the nineteenth-century painter Thomas Cole had already traced the narrative implications of this subject in his series *The Course of Empire*, depicting the rise and eventual ruination of imperial aspirations.¹⁴ From here one could speculate further and argue that America was founded upon a dialectic of building and desolation. According to biblical typology, the first Pilgrims sought to establish their New Jerusalem and City on a Hill on a continent which, simultaneously, they perceived as a “howling wilderness”.¹⁵ Ironically, too, forlorn as this wilderness might have felt to its first European settlers, it already contained about one million native inhabitants, many with their own distinct societies and architecture.¹⁶ That these were mostly laid waste in the “progress” of the westward thrust of Manifest Destiny also lends a special perspective to Simonds’s narratives of vanished Little Peoples and their relation to the land.

Moving from a distant past to the twentieth century likewise reveals other intersections. Long before Land Art, a concern with the earth had been pivotal for numerous American artists and thinkers—never more so than during the Great Depression, when the venerable stereotype of the country as a New Eden, a terrain of limitless agrarian bounty, abruptly threatened to regress to (man-made) wilderness. Accordingly, the paintings of an artist such as the relatively little-known Texas Regionalist, Alexandre Hogue, foreshadow aspects of Simonds’s thought. Like the latter’s equation of the earth with the body in *Temenos* (1977) and similar landscapes of the following years that sprout breasts, orifices and so on, Hogue’s *Erosions No. 2: Mother Earth Laid Bare* is an anthropomorphic allegory where anatomy becomes the earth’s crust. Nor was Hogue the only such American figure to explore this ancient metaphor. Slightly later, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi also anticipated Simonds in *This Tortured Earth* (1943), a personification of the land as a scarred, sentient being. Pushing the same identification much further away from figuration, the abstract expressionist Clyfford Still’s central ambition evinced comparable parallels with Simonds’s strategies. Still’s paintings fuse a geological aura with animism.

11 Lippard, Lucy: “Microcosm to Macrocosm, Fantasy World to Real World”. *Artforum*, no. 6, New York 1974, pp. 36–39.

12 Gordon, Lois & Gordon, Alan: “1970”, in *American Chronicle: Year by Year Through the Twentieth Century*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999, p. 665.

13 He is also incidentally among the first figures to anticipate the contemporary craze for art conceived as a toy-like arena (e.g., Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Hell* [1999–2000]).

14 Neff, John Hallmark: *op. cit.*, p. 23.

15 Gilmore, Michael T.: *Early American Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1980.

16 Handlin, David P.: *American Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, London 1985, p. 9.

His tactile pictorial fields hewn of cliff-like masses, crevasses and thrusting shapes seem, like Simonds's sculptural plateaus and mountainous vistas, to be alive with inner energies. Still's words also unconsciously prefigure, albeit in melodramatic rather than wistfully poignant terms, the latter's involvement with dualities of decline and growth: "As he himself [Still] has expressed it, his paintings are 'Of the Earth, the Damned and of the Recreated.'" ¹⁷ Similarly, a chance yet possibly significant symmetry obtains between Still's characteristic palette of earth colours and Simonds's gamut of clay tones from grey through yellow ochres to pink and ferrous red. Nor is it difficult to discern a consonance between Still's reputed remark in 1948 that his configurations were "living forms springing from the ground" and Simonds's poetic epithet to his 1984 exhibition of *House Plants and Rocks*: "They are living places". ¹⁸

None of the foregoing, however, should be taken to imply that Hogue, Noguchi or Still were actual influences upon Simonds. This is not at stake. Rather, the wider context behind these potential affinities is the role of myth within modernism. In direct proportion to the degree to which artists have deemed the modern world as somehow spiritually barren, dystopian, technocratic and fragmented, so they have had recourse to countervailing mythologies. In short, fictions of the regenerative earth and bygone ages that counteract the presumed destructive urban forces of contemporary capitalism. The *locus classicus* of this tendency—which could wax conservatively fascist or progressively libertarian, depending upon the individual artist's temperament—was of course T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922). Eliot's poem is based upon myths that had been analysed by the so-called Cambridge School of anthropologists, whose starting-point was Sir James Frazer's encyclopaedic *Golden Bough* and its theory that myth-making (and its gradual shift from ritual into artistic practices) stems from humankind's basic dependence on the earth's fertility. ¹⁹

It would be easy enough to compare Eliot's famous lines about the collapse of imperial civilizations:

"Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers"²⁰

to Simonds's *Wilted Towers* and his legendary people who enact their own migrations and schemes over the face of the earth. But to employ Eliot's narrative as a master template for Simonds's fables amounts to as much of a mismatch as, say, claiming that *Wilted Towers* could prefigure the fate of the World Trade Towers on September 11. To trade in such generalizations is tantamount to arguing along the lines of "what goes up, must come down ...". Instead, Simonds's consummate skill has been to integrate a realm of archaic myth with some surprisingly central tenets of the Western

¹⁷ Quoted by Mark Rothko (1946) in Anfam, David: "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead", in *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944–1960*. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington 2001, p. 44.

¹⁸ Anfam, David: *op. cit.*, p. 38; Simonds, Charles: *House Plants and Rocks*. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York 1984, n.p.

¹⁹ By no coincidence, Still's earlier subject-matter alluded to Cambridge School mythologies.

²⁰ Eliot, T.S.: *op. cit.*, p. 77.

humanist tradition (though their core meanings are by no means confined to the West) and to sharpen these with an existential edge and psychological tensions.

Still, a clue of sorts to Simonds's synthesis may be found in Eliot. At the end of "The Waste Land", the antidote to the shattering of life that the poem has charted hinges, paradoxically, on the acceptance of dissolution as part and parcel of time's process: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins".²¹ Fragments become reparation against fragmentation. In Eliot's later poems, such as the *Four Quartets*, the reconstitution of the self depends less upon imposing ancient myth on modern existence than it does with the recognition that being and time—past, present and future—are a psychological unity. Hence, perhaps, such Simonds titles as *Here, Then, Now, There* (1989)?

When Simonds once wrote of an imaginary civilization that for them "time became continuous" he seems to have voiced a sense of cosmic flux similar to that which induced Eliot to preface his *Four Quartets* with two of Heraclitus's fragments.²² In turn, I know of few better windows onto Simonds's fantasies, which play with time's passage—constructing, multiplying and erasing worlds—with the deep imaginative absorption that children display in their games of make-believe (such as fashioning sand castles or keeping house) than Heraclitus's adage: "time is a game played beautifully by children". Indeed, Simonds remarked of his own practice: "It's a kind of child's play."²³ The key here is that children, archaic or "primitive" peoples, the insane and those highly sage minds throughout the ages who have sought to fathom reality as a whole, often tend to share one trait in common. They are cosmos builders.²⁴

A sure sign of the expressive richness of Simonds's art is therefore the ease with which it manages to overarch cosmologies of otherwise very disparate ancestry—ancient, Renaissance and modern. Underlying them is a faith of an almost archetypal cast in the body's centrality to such systems. Daniel Abadie summarizes this tenet well when he writes that "to place his body between the infinitely large and the infinitely small are, for Simonds, much more than simple actions; it is a programme of thought and his oeuvre will attempt to place it in a context and understand what is at stake."²⁵

Simonds has rung ceaseless, ingenious variations upon the body-as-centre principle. At the outset, the artist (in his own words) turned himself into a house, placing clay and minuscule brick structures upon his torso in *Landscape<->Body<-> Dwelling* (1970). Later, the ground plane of the several series of 1978—the "ritual gardens", "ritual towers" and "circles and towers growing"—itself mutates into a somatic state, pregnant with bumps and openings, and organized around central markers or foci. In *Dwelling (Mural)* (1982), this locus resembles an internal organ or membrane nestled amidst a troglodytic cleft.²⁶ Eventually the body parts may sometimes disappear: then, instead, they are registered metonymically by gesture (*Smear*) or ellipsis (what do the two heads of *I, Thou* cry out for if not a body to share between them?). These multiple approaches to a single equation deftly subsume at least three separate cosmological traditions.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²² Simonds, Charles: *Three Peoples*. Samaneditzioni, Genoa 1975.

²³ Castle, Ted: "Charles Simonds: The New Adam". *Art in America*, no. 2, New York 1983, pp. 102–103. An ideological way stage between Heraclitus and Simonds occurs in Nietzsche, for whom the child represents the innocence of becoming (as in Zarathustra's first parable). Indeed Nietzsche derived the trope from Heraclitus.

²⁴ For example, the artist Alfred Jensen was another quintessential cosmos-builder who shared Simonds's preoccupation with ancient peoples, rituals and edifices, belief systems, creation myths and cyclical patterns. See *Alfred Jensen: Concordance*. Dia Center for the Arts, New York 2003.

²⁵ Abadie, Daniel: "Les constructions de l'esprit", in *Charles Simonds*. Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris 1994, p. 14.

²⁶ An echo, doubtless as unconscious as it is distinct, of Gustave Courbet's rocky cavern-cum-vagina in his depictions of the source of the Loue river. An art historical commonplace links these to the real female sex organs of Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866).

Furthest back in time stretch the associations stirred by the aforementioned earthscapes from 1978. As the title of their forerunner of the previous year, *Temenos*, could signal, we confront here a dramaturgy that I would regard as uncannily reminiscent of the field of Cambridge School anthropology. Specifically, Jane Harrison's *Themis* (1912) delves into an age of archaic Greek religion that Simonds might almost have sculpted. In *Themis* the earth is animistic, keyed to rhythms of generation and sterility and embodied in such cult objects as the *omphalos*. Held to be sited at the centre of the world, the *omphalos* metamorphoses in ritual lore from a sacred stone to a navel (its literal meaning), a phallus, a grave mound and a symbol of the earth mother Gaia.²⁷ A cone, the *omphalos* virtually mimics the shapes of Simonds's "ritual towers" of 1978. *Themis*, too, surveys an archaeological panorama in which fragments hold secrets from time long past.

Secondly, a less archaic yet equally pertinent precursor to Simonds is the anthropocentric philosophical world-view that came to the fore in the Renaissance. Abadie's summary of Simonds's intention quoted above is foretold nowhere in more relevant detail than when God addresses Adam in the Italian humanist Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1487):

"We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior order whose life is divine."²⁸

This eulogy conforms with Leonardo's famed drawing of *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1492), whose outspread arms and legs demarcate ideal proportions linking the body to the universe. The implications of that harmony were still alive in the early twentieth century when Geoffrey Scott wrote *The Architecture of Humanism*.

Scott's thesis was that building and the body were inseparable: architecture is imbued with the organic logic of our own limbs, symmetry, mass, weight, dynamism and so forth. If this theory of empathy was the mainstay of the classical tradition in architecture, neither is it remote from the continuum between nature and anatomy, flesh and rock, that Simonds posits and to which his work nevertheless gives such new twists. As the artist explains that his challenge is "how to keep the natural part in the architecture, how to make a natural event become architecture", so the touchstone for such a dialectic might be traced back to Scott and his sources in avowing that "Vasari was nearer the truth when he said in praise of a building that it seemed 'not built but born—*non murato ma veramente nato*'."²⁹

27 Harrison, Jane E.: *A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* [1912]. Merlin Press, London 1977, pp. 364–444. Fascinatingly, Harrison argues that "themis" ultimately comes to signify abstract ideas such as the social order and justice ("the right thing to do"). Aptly, Simonds titled a 1981 sculpture *Justice*.

28 Quoted in Turner, A. Richard: *Inventing Leonardo*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1992, p. 157.

29 Beardsley, John: "Charles Simonds: Inhabiting Clay". *American Ceramics*, October–November 1994; John Scott, Geoffrey: *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* [1914]. W.W. Norton, New York 1974, p. 164. Note especially Scott's conclusion (p. 177): "The centre of that architecture was the human body; its method to transcribe in stone the body's favourable states [...]"

The conjunction of mind and matter anticipates my conclusion. From Heraclitus to Freud, thence Heidegger and beyond (Sartre is one natural successor in this genealogy), the secrets locked in the recesses of the mind have been conflated with human anxiety at unravelling greater secrets, pre-eminently that of the cosmos. A historian of science succinctly phrases the lure of this enigma: “Cosmology has the ability to grab hold of us at a deep, visceral level because an understanding of how things began feels—at least to some—like the closest we may ever come to understanding *why* things began.”³⁹ For Simonds, this big “why” is unconscious: “The forces of life from the point of view of organisms in time relative to the environment are not conscious.”⁴⁰ In other words, “Things keep their secrets”.⁴¹

The startling change in Simonds’s production around 1990 reciprocates his scrutiny of the secrets of things. At a personal level, a subconscious trauma concerning his father evidently influenced the direction of these new departures.⁴² On a broader front, the closer the substance of existence is examined, the more aware we become of its potential for entropy, decay and transmutation. An earlier artistic instance of this phenomenon will suffice. Max Ernst in his “Forests” contrived a standpoint that, as Simonds’s often does, interweaves the very distant (the solar discs) with the very close-up (the infrastructure of the forest). The outcome is a *horror vacui* obsessed with materiality as Ernst’s *grattage* technique erodes the differences between animal, vegetal and mineral forces.⁴³ A larger order coexists with the minutiae of decay.

As Midas Dekkers observes in his study of the metaphysics of decay, *The Way of All Flesh*, this ostensibly repulsive predicament in fact constitutes a vital step on the stairway of existence. While the grand design—of buildings, bodies and providence—may look immutable, the smallest organisms are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, forever nibbling away at its edges.⁴⁴ Horror can be the undertow of uplift. Although the reduction of mental energy to gestural marks in Simonds’s torqued *Head* (1991)—midway between satyr and scatology—may defer to Pollock’s black-and-white pourings, where formless splurges effloresce into recognizable features, Simonds’s latest creations exude the strange volatility of fractal geometry: a momentary poise between random disarray and some secret telluric plot. *Wall Dwelling* (1999) and similar roving sculptural glimpses compress the mind’s emotions into stark fragments that unwind through time and, at the last, our own consciousness:

“O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall,
Frightful, sheer, no man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Greene, Bryan: “Their Extravagant Smallness” in Danielson, Dennis R.: *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking*. Perseus Publishing, Cambridge MA 2000, p. 508.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Castle, Ted: *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴¹ Heraclitus. *op. cit.*, p. 9. Heidegger triangulates the notion: “The earth is the locale of concealment, of sanctified in-habitation” (according to Steiner, George: *Heidegger*. Fontana/Collins, Glasgow 1978, p. 129).

⁴² Beardsley [1995], *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁴³ Simonds [1975], *op. cit.*: “The past formed a tremendous net on which their lives travelled; or it was like a dark forest into which there were many paths.”

⁴⁴ Dekkers, Midas: *The Way of All Flesh: A Celebration of Decay*, transl. Sherry Marx-Macdonald. Harvill Press, London 2000.

⁴⁵ Hopkins. Gerard Manley: “No worst, there is none”