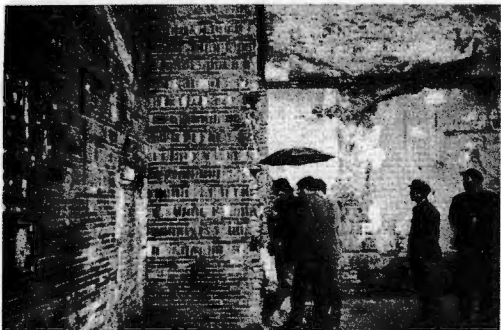


## On the Loose with the Little People: A Geography of Simonds's Art

By John Beardsley



Much recent art has demonstrated a renewed preoccupation with landscape. Land art, sited sculpture, and certain kinds of performance have added to the traditional forms of landscape depiction in painting and photography a new level of involvement with the earth, its contours and materials. But even those new works most sensitive to their particular physical situations retain with the earth something of the conventional figure-ground relationship that characterizes images drawn on canvas or paper. While Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* was generated by the topographic, geological, historic, and even mythological features of its landscape,<sup>1</sup> it is nevertheless quite apparently a mark on the ground. It reads as a drawing as much as a landscape element.

Charles Simonds shares in the current preoccupation with landscape, yet in a way that begins to subvert the traditional figure-ground relationship. His work hypothesizes an identity between the landscape, the structures we build on it, and our bodies. Peripatetic, Simonds wanders the urban and natural landscapes of the world, musing, recording, testing his hypothesis. He observes the varying modes of our lives in different landscapes and the ways in which our social conventions, our architecture, and the evolution of our thought correspond to where we live. His works are the physical expression of these observations. In fantasy form, they tell us of the "Little People," of their migrations and their haltings, of their rituals and their beliefs. As the Little People move through a landscape, their beliefs and the forms of their architecture evolve, in part as a response to their physical surroundings. But these miniature landscapes and dwellings also reflect upon us. In encouraging us to contemplate the social and architectural structures of the Little People, Simonds makes us aware by comparison of the structures of our own lives.

This comparison was perhaps most forcefully drawn in a piece that Simonds executed on a rooftop at P.S. 1 in Queens in 1975 (pl. 5). Spread out behind the

Figure 2. Charles Simonds working in Guilin, 1980.

miniature landscape and dwellings was the skyline of Manhattan. One could not avoid comparing the different architectures and the way they related to their respective landscapes. Implicit in the physical comparison was a contrast in the social and economic structures that had generated the architectures. The dwellings of the Little People held to the landscape, while the buildings of Manhattan seemed by comparison emphatic impositions on it, in opposition to the essential horizontality of the earth. At P.S. 1 as elsewhere, the forms employed by Simonds to represent the Little People are technologically naïve, while those of our society are not. The buildings of the Little People suggest in their casual disposition accretive growth, while ours conform to a logical, predetermined pattern. The comparisons are more numerous and the implications more elaborate, but they can be distilled into the assertion that the architecture of the Little People represents a culture that is more responsive to the physical environment than ours. Functioning thus as indicia of how people live, Simonds's works seem more the musings of a cultural geographer than the gestures of a conventional image-maker. The sense of gratuitousness that might at first be felt before the work is dispelled by a more lasting recognition that these pieces are most consciously rendered, and are meditations on the relationship between the physical characteristics of landscape, the body, and architecture on the one hand, and the intangible elements of culture on the other.

The identity between landscape, body, and dwelling was first postulated by Simonds in a series of films made in the early 1970s. *Birth* (see pl. 1), in which Simonds emerges naked from the clay, reveals a belief in the earth as the source of all life. In *Body — Earth* (see pl. 2), Simonds uses the movements of his body to create contours in the ground, suggesting the relationship between earth forms and body forms. And in *Landscape — Body — Dwelling* (see pl. 3), Simonds lies naked on the earth, covers himself with clay and sand, and transforms himself into a landscape on which he builds a group of dwellings that conform to the contours of the body-earth. There is a kind of pathos to these films, as Simonds endeavors to merge his body with the landscape and subsume his male sexuality to the more androgynous character of the earth. Though his union with the earth is thwarted, the attempted conjunction of the body, the landscape, and architecture represented by the private ritual of *Landscape — Body — Dwelling* endures as one of the essential starting points of Simonds's art.

Simonds has incorporated this identity not only into the content of his art, but into the process of his art-making as well. If how we live (as symbolized by the Little People) is an expression of where we find ourselves, then how Simonds's art looks and what it means is conditioned by where it is made. This has given rise to a divergence in the forms of his work as they relate to the miniature civilization. The Little People first appeared in temporary landscapes and dwellings on the streets of New York's Lower East Side; they subsequently found their way around America and throughout the world with Simonds, to Paris, Genoa, Berlin, London and, more recently, Guilin (fig. 2) and Shanghai. At the same time, the Little People have been the subject of temporary works that Simonds has executed for special exhibitions, such as Documenta in Kassel or the Projects gallery of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. They have also been the focus of permanent pieces for museum and private collections. To those observers who would make Simonds the

sole surviving standard bearer for the radical politics of the late 1960s, the divergence between outdoor and indoor works, temporary and permanent, destructible and collectible, represents an irreconcilable moral and philosophical dichotomy. The former are simplistically identified as populist, the latter elitist. The outdoor works are thought to imply a refutation of art world structures and the commodity status of art, ideas of considerable currency in the 1960s. By comparison, the indoor, permanent pieces are seen as pandering to privileged taste. Yet because the audience in each of the situations differs, so does the visible expression of Simonds's art. The various forms can be perceived as efforts to engage a host of different audiences—either personally, as on the street, or indirectly, as in the gallery or museum—in a manner appropriate to the situation.

Simonds embraces some of the attitudes that emerged in the 1960s, particularly the desire to expand the audience for art. As he has explained:

I do feel a commitment to making ideas available to as many people as possible, including art people, even if only as films, photographs and other "reflections". . . . But I am far more interested in taking what knowledge and understanding I've gathered from art out into other contexts than I am in dragging a part of the real world into the art world. . . . The change must lie in a change of audience—not bringing new goods to the same old people.<sup>2</sup>

Simonds's motivation is not exclusively ideological, however. He is sustained by the personal contact with his audience that is attained through his activities in the street. As he works, people gather to watch, prodding him for information about what he is doing and why. These encounters have provided Simonds with an anthology of anecdotes, ranging from one about an irate Berliner who demanded to know who had given him permission to smear clay on a public building, to the story of a youth in Guilin who, though unable to communicate with Simonds through any shared language, stood sentinel by him throughout, explaining his activities to passersby.

For the casual, uninformed observer who comes upon Simonds at work or, still more mysteriously, the traces of his efforts, the fantasy of the Little People must provoke a far greater sense of surprise, dislocation, and pleasure than that experienced by the museum-goer with prior knowledge of Simonds's production. One has the sense that it is provoking this surprise, together with the element of personal contact, that are Simonds's principal incentives for working outdoors, not the notion that he might be subverting institutional structures or the commodity status of art. He is simply pursuing his impulse to work, in the situation that affords him the greatest joy and the most satisfying interaction with his audience.

Simonds's openness to this contact, together with a commitment to improving the urban environment, has led to his involvement with groups such as the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing in New York on a variety of community development projects. Between 1973 and 1975, Simonds was instrumental in the planning and realization of a combined park and playlot between Avenues B and C in Manhattan (pl. 25). Invited by an arts organization to Cleveland in 1977, Simonds chose to work with the residents of the Erie Square housing project on the transformation of a vacant lot near their

buildings into a community park and garden. Simonds met with the tenants and coordinated their ideas for the space. "Everyone wanted to help," Simonds recalled recently. "The only ingredient I brought to the project was the growth brick." He enlisted the aid of neighborhood children to fill burlap bags with earth and seeds, and then encouraged them to use the bricks as building elements. While their parents planted gardens and dug a barbecue pit, the children built cones and forts with the growth bricks. Within weeks, their constructions had come alive with flowers and vegetables. "It was a wonderful project," Simonds concluded. "The tenants organized a great barbecue just before I left."

The landscapes and dwellings that Simonds creates outdoors reflect the conditions of their making. They must be executed quickly, often in a day or two. As a consequence, they must be small in scale and relatively uncomplicated in form. Being impermanent, they often function as quick studies of ideas that Simonds is developing. With the indoor works comes the fuller, more elaborate, and generally larger-scale elaboration of these ideas. *Picaresque Landscape* (cover ill.), executed for the Museum of Modern Art in 1976, measures 16 x 19 feet and includes a large, walled village in a mountainous landscape and the ruins of linear, circular, and spiral dwellings. It was formed in sections over a period of several months with the components worked together *in situ*. The piece created for Documenta in 1977 (pl. 21) was composed of ruined villages and triangular dwellings in a contorted landscape of red, gray, white, and yellow clay. And the pieces that make up the present exhibition, the *Circles and Towers Growing* (pls. 32-43), are in a sense the culmination of years of speculation about the Little People. These works are the expression of a vocabulary of forms that has been over a decade in the making.

But the *Circles and Towers Growing* have a purpose other than a purely formal one. They are emblems of the pieces that Simonds executes on the street, and serve to inform the art audience of the concerns addressed by the outdoor works. In a current project for the Whitney Museum in New York, Simonds will place a group of dwellings on a window ledge inside the museum, another on the outside of a building across the street, and a third farther down the block. Here, the deliberate juxtaposition of indoors and out, private and public, forces the art audience to acknowledge that these works have an extra-esthetic function: to draw us into contemplation of the physical environment and how we live in it. At the same time, Simond's willingness to work in the museum is an admission that it is the art world's recognition of his stature as an artist that not only keeps him fed, but also provides him with the opportunities to participate in community improvement projects such as the one at Erie Square in Cleveland. The art community also provides him with useful critical responses:

I've never labored under the delusion that the art world could offer me the quality of emotional or ideological experience that I get from the anonymous person in the street. (But) there are aspects of my work that are more accessible to an art, architecture and anthropologically-educated audience and are thus more clearly reflected back to me through a situation such as a museum.<sup>3</sup>

Simonds's manifest preference for the direct contact with the public afforded by working in the street does not, then, preclude an interest in engaging the art audience. Indeed, his involvement with the latter goes beyond museum works. Almost since the initial appearance of the Little People, Simonds has been making pieces for private collections. Many of these are executed on the spot, the first under a piano in a New York apartment in 1971, and one of the most recent in the stairwell of a house in Belgium. Simonds is motivated to make these pieces in some cases out of affection for the recipients, in others because of an interest in the possibilities of the particular physical situation. The Belgian family gave Simonds the liberty of removing part of a wall beside the stairs, permanently altering the interior of their home.

If, finally, the dichotomy in Simonds's work between public and private, outdoor and indoor, destructible and collectible pieces seems irreconcilable, so much the better. It is refreshing to encounter an artist who embraces ambiguity, who, in aspiring to a wider audience, is not at all anxious about appearing inconsistent. The many forms assumed by Simonds's art and the many situations in which it is made, represent his best efforts to address the broadest possible public in the situations and the vocabulary most appropriate to them. Yet within the work there is a unifying logic that withstands these variations in form and audience. It is a logic based on Simonds's beliefs in the identity between the landscape, the body, and architecture, and in the relationships between where we are and how we live. These convictions help reconcile the works with their settings, reducing the figure-ground duality, and bring Simonds into closer contact with his audience. Compelled by his instincts as a cultural geographer, Simonds applies these ideas to every situation in which he finds himself. The result is an art of ostensible whimsy and ultimate gravity.

#### *Footnotes*

1

For the artist's description of the genesis of this work, see "The Spiral Jetty," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Nancy Holt, ed., New York: New York University Press, 1979, pp. 109-116.

2

Quoted in Bib. I 1978, Simonds and Molderings, p. 20.

3

*Ibid.*, p. 21.