

Charles Simonds: The New Adam

Best known as the peripatetic architect of miniature clay "Dwellings" for a mythical, migrant race of "Little People," Charles Simonds has been described as an archeologizing fantasist, as an urban populist and as the maker of sexually symbolic sculpture. Below, Simonds's microcosms are seen in their macrocosmic aspect.

BY TED CASTLE

Charles Simonds is a creator, a philosopher, a progenitor, a guy who works with clay like a kid plays in the mud, kind of a god for a whole ecological system he has created in order to understand nothing less than the nature of life. It is appropriate to make large claims for serious modern artists; their pretensions are great and we have to bestir ourselves from petty concerns if we even want to tune in to their wavelengths, leaving aside the whole question of completely understanding things that even they are not entirely certain of. In the case at hand, I want to emphasize the grandiose aspects of Charles's work precisely because its scale leads one, deceptively, toward the reassuring conclusion that it is really just a doll's house that he's making.

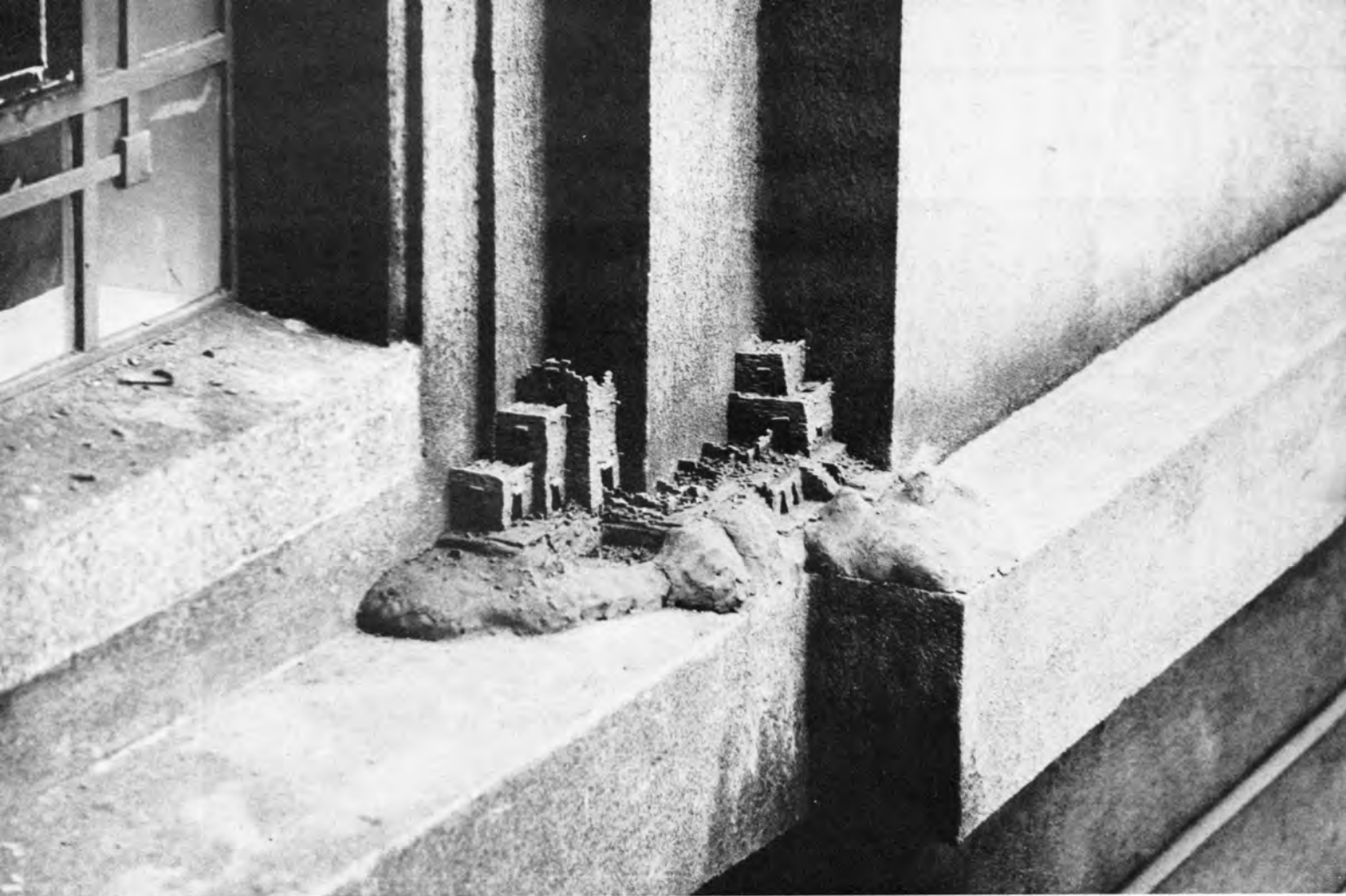
I think of him as somewhat like the God of Genesis, although modified by Christian influence and much more androgyne and epicene than good old God the dad. Simonds has become famous in different circles all over the world for the generation of a whole world for an imaginary race called the Little People. Unlike God, however, Simonds stops short of creating the Little People themselves. He just makes their world, a vacant world populated by vanished fantasies and characterized by remnants of civilization. In November

1981, Charles Simonds opened a large exhibition of souvenirs of travels at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago where John Hallmark Neff and his staff produced a handsome book to commemorate the show and accompany it on its anticipated travels to Los Angeles, Fort Worth, Houston, Omaha, Denver and New York.¹ I went to Chicago to see the exhibition in its largest version (a few things won't travel and one "Dwelling" was built into a wall at the museum). Later I talked with Charles, whom I've known for ten years, about issues largely concerning meaning in his work. The meaning of his work is so near to the bone of meaning in general that it is often, even usually, overlooked in favor of the superficial charms of the little environments themselves. I want to drop excerpts from the conversations into sections indicated only by italics so I can get to the root of the matter without editorial mechanics getting in the way.²

I'm much more interested in my thinking than in my things. The things are extrapolations from what I think. Some of them are more or less economical in terms of getting what I want done. In a sense it's sort of a replacement for writing. I don't think of myself as able to write. When I do write, it's more like assembling thoughts than writing. . . . My work is not generated by art.

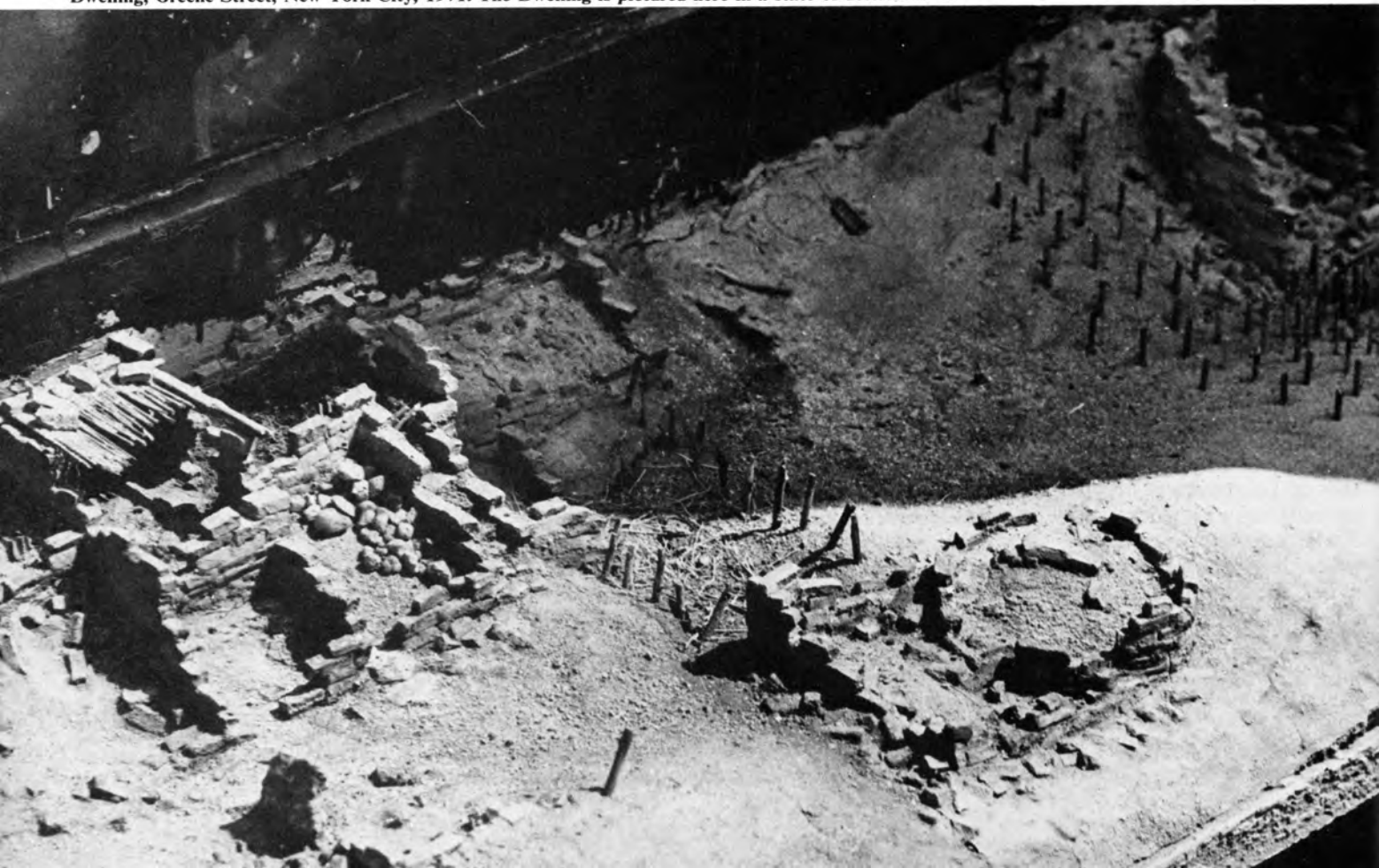
When I'm thinking about things, I'm not thinking about art. Which is to say I think about life, I think about how organisms go through changes. But I grew up as an artist, from very young. My brother and I were very adept at making portraits in clay when we were young, so we got quite a lot of attention for that. My parents sent us to study with Claire Fizano and John DeMarco, who did church reliefs. Then my brother went away to college and left some clay. So I took this clay and I made this figure with all the muscles and everything. I couldn't believe that I had made this thing, because it was very realistic. I didn't know that I could do that . . . my frame of reference for myself from then on has always been of myself as an artist. Making that thing solved the issue of what you do. I discovered that I could do that, work clay. This was always the thread that linked everything together, dealing with clay. I studied with these sculptors who did church sculpture. A lesson was working in their atelier. I'm very good at angels. There are a thousand ways to touch clay, a million. They're all expressions of love or intention.

What Simonds fashions now are what he always calls either Dwellings or Objects. The Dwellings are not all houses; many are ritual places where he imagines, I think, that the Little People create vegetables and flowers, the sexual organs and offspring of inanimate forms of life, in some mystical process analogous to alchemy (the cairns look a



Charles Simonds: Dwelling, Dublin, 1980.

Dwelling, Greene Street, New York City, 1971. The Dwelling is pictured here in a state of deterioration.



bit like beehives and a bit like ovens). The Dwellings, to be definite, are always in a particular place. The Little People have always already left them to deteriorate. The Dwellings, of various forms, are always made of little unfired bricks about half an inch long and otherwise proportionate. Charles makes the bricks out of clay which for this purpose he rolls out like cookie dough and slices up with a knife before letting it dry. He puts the bricks in plastic bags to tote to the site. The site can be literally anywhere. His largest Dwelling work was done over a period of several years at a few hundred sites in part of New York's famed Lower East Side, the ghettos of successive waves of cheap immigrant labor that were melted down into raw material for the voracious suburbs to swallow up in succeeding generations of outward and upward social mobility.

The Lower East Side Dwellings are, I should say *were*, the most important and the most enigmatic of their creator's works so far. They exist only in the past, very few of them ever even having been photographed or written up. They were everywhere and nowhere. They were underfoot and up in the sky, on ledges, nooks and windowsills. They were in gutters, sheltered by a curbstone, or just anyplace that looked like a good place to put one. At the same time they were invisible. Rushing by, you would completely miss them. Parking your car, you could smash one in a millisecond. But out looking around, enjoying the weather, feeling the world, you might chance on a Dwelling being made. There was a guy there with long chestnut colored hair wearing a green shirt or jacket, working fast to put in place an already abandoned earthen hut, usually surrounded by children, mostly little boys, sometimes girls and young men, and, occasionally, a unique individual such as yourself.

Making the Dwellings, Charles Simonds is like a clown of a builder working furiously to finish the concrete work before the frost hits. One brick at a time, he fashions fantasies of times that never were nor will be in an activity as lengthy as time and as unfinished as the world itself. He still makes these Dwellings everywhere he goes. The way he sees it, however, the Little People transport him with them rather than the reverse. This is a kind of modesty that most artists express in some manner when they realize, in the course of their work, that creation is always a



Detail of Dwelling, Chicago, 1981, at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

One brick at a time, Simonds fashions fantasies of ages that never were nor will be. His activity is as lengthy as time and as unfinished as the world itself.

vast undertaking and that one would be bragging against luck to say that one does it oneself. The Dwellings have been made in lots of places, and none of the ones in the Lower East Side or China, Germany or Paris still exist, except for the few that were made in Zurich and Chicago and New York as specific permanent installations in museums.

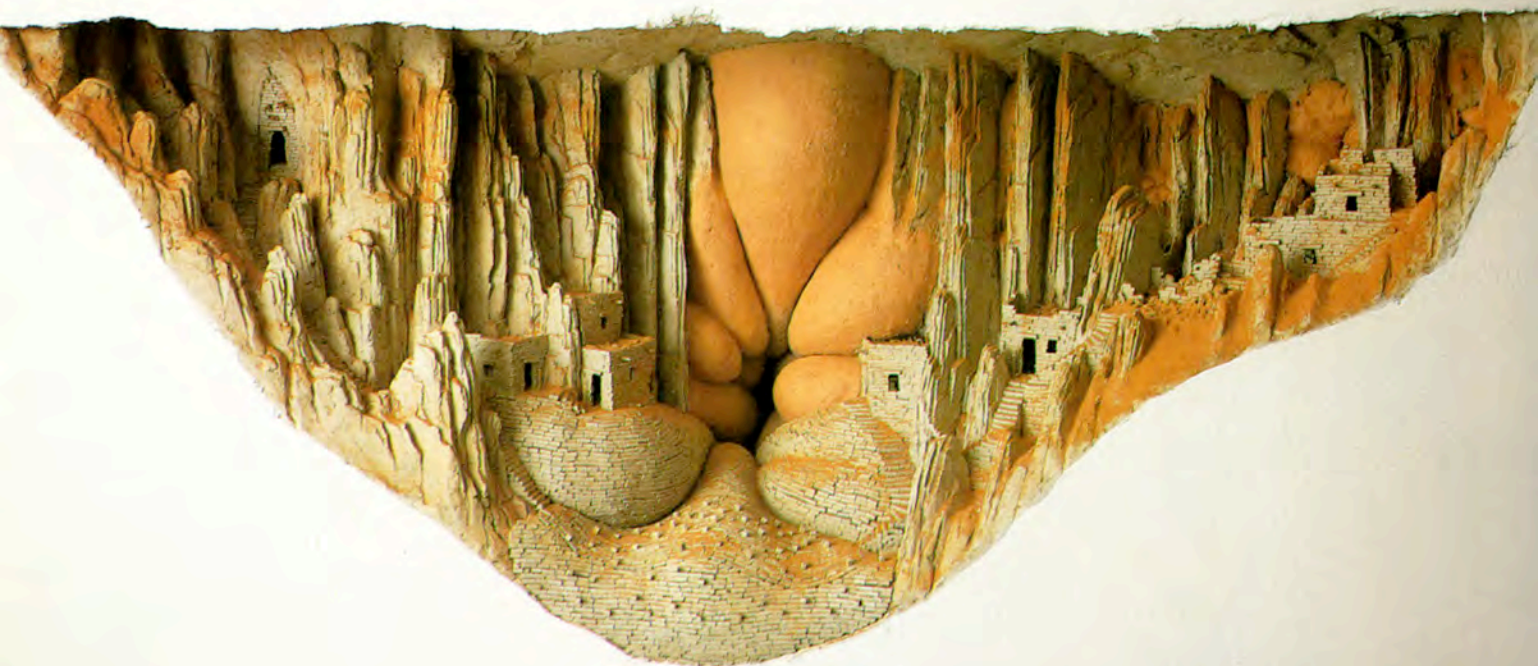
The Kunsthau in Zurich is like a bunker, it's solid concrete, thick. Even if I could have made a hole in it, it would have taken a week to make the hole. So I went looking for a place to work. I got very anxious and started to measure the thickness of the walls, going behind and going in front, measuring the room widths and everything, and I found this place where it was uneven, and nobody knew about this, and I tapped and I found this wall that used to be a doorway that they didn't even know about. The doorway was bricked up and on the other side they had shelves. So I said here's where we cut and we did and it came out right on a shelf; I didn't even have to build a support in the back! After I built it, everyone loved it so the museum bought it, but I built it in such a shoddy way that now I have to go

back and fix it. When I work in the street, I never pay any attention to the issue of drying. I just do it. The clay dries, and it becomes stable once it's dry and you sort of orchestrate how it goes to that point, so that you don't have any major disruptions—cracks—where you don't want them—so buildings don't separate from the landscape and things like that. It's all a process of movement, it's like catching something on the run. In the street it doesn't matter because two days later it's going to be wrecked. If you're making it as an object in the studio, you have all the time in the world to let it sit, each part can dry before you move on to the next step. In a museum, where there's time pressure, you can't. The piece in Chicago is still shrinking, so I've arranged to go back there and fix it up. You fill the cracks, then they dry, then you fill them again. I know where they're going to be, it's like a calculus. When I called them in Zurich they said there's nothing wrong with it, but I know there is. They don't see it, but I can even see it in photographs.

The works in the streets, which Simonds continues to do in all the cities he visits in connection with museum shows such as the present tour, have a performance aspect. Usually a young man or a boy will begin explaining to all the people who gather what is going on. In Paris, not long ago, he was assisted continuously for several days by a young girl whose parents felt compelled to forbid her to go out because she was getting so involved in the project. In China, where he attracted one of the largest crowds with his "illegal" activity, he was unable to communicate with the man who took responsibility for



*Detail of Dwelling, Chicago, 1981,
overall length 44 feet.
The Museum of Contemporary Art.*



Dwelling, Kunsthaus Zürich, 1981.



Dwelling, California State College, Los Angeles, 1980.

explaining the work. Simonds says that during his years of working this way on the Lower East Side, he always talked to people while he worked and he got to know many of their life stories and made quite a number of friends. As a result, he became involved in various community issues, such as the use of vacant lots, one of which he was able, with the neighborhood kids, to convert

into an indigenous recreation area that many people called Charles's Park. In this way, the work in the streets is a kind of research, an occasion to find out how people are and what is happening in unofficial worlds, unhistorical locales where the peripatetic artist follows this imaginary flock of Little People through vicissitudes and disasters and fantastic developments.

The museum installations, the few there have been, are related to the street works in that they show developments and declines in different parts of the civilizations of which there is no chronicle. These, combined with a few installations made in people's houses, are possibly the most exciting of Simonds's works because the time pressure combined with the possibility of permanence gives greater range to his imaginative constructs, which are also bigger and in most cases better built.³

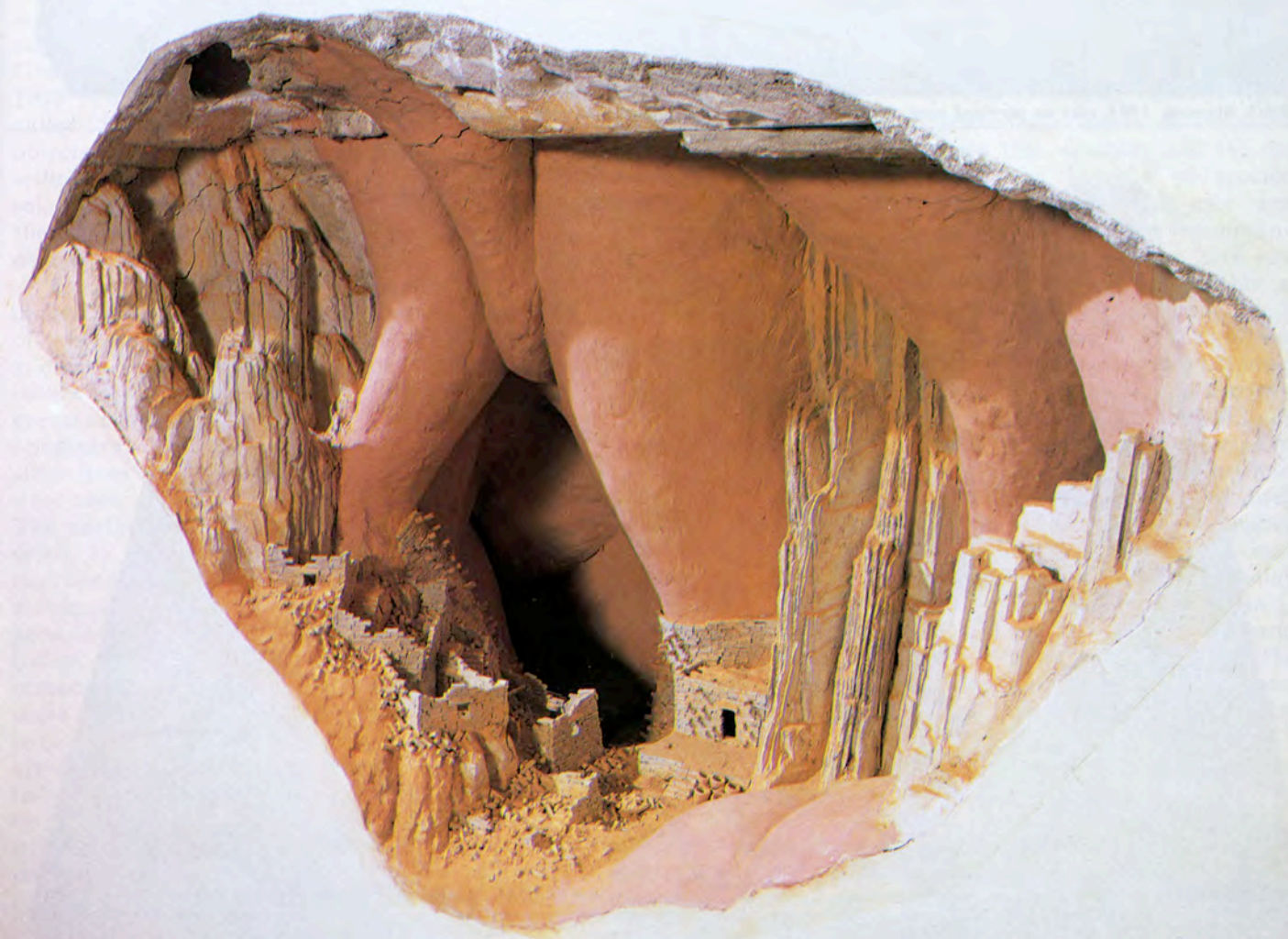
I'm very interested in how we live, or how one lives, which is to say the relationship between your being and your dwelling, through time, relative to your life. There is a realm of things which are not in our consciousness in a way that we can use them as tools or conceptual aids for understanding how one actually goes about living, both what one builds and how one relates to the environment, whatever it is. The forces of life from the point of view of organisms in time relative to the environment are not conscious. I'd like to be very aware of these things, which I think are important for understanding life right now.

Simonds is referring, I think, to the area between the levels of conscious and unconscious and subconscious states of mind, to the synaptic syntax of

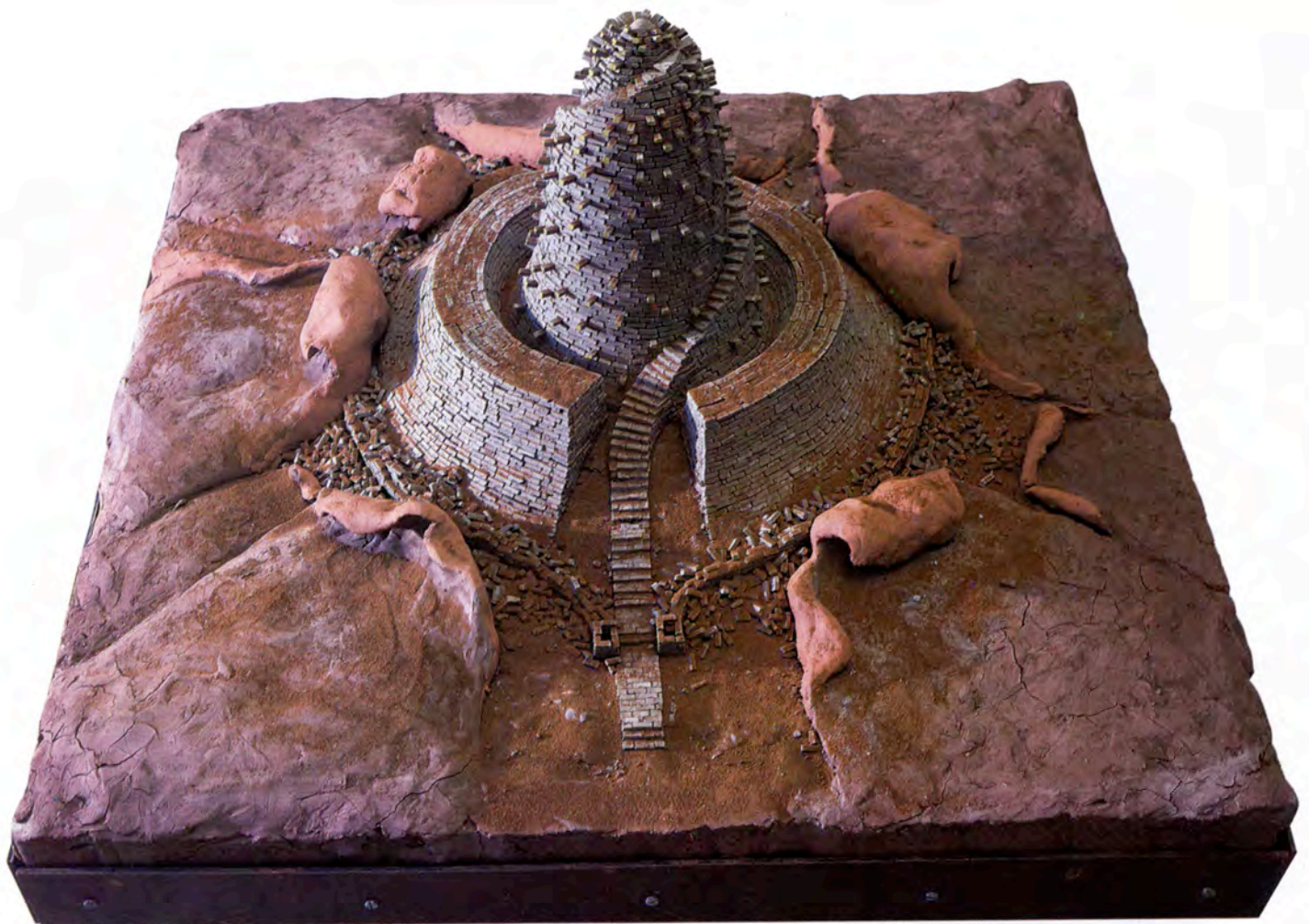
the nature of understanding. He doesn't build a dwelling that bears any comparison to one of our funhouses, or prisons, or one-family palaces. His art is not allegorical or satirical; it is, precisely, analogical. As Gregory Bateson remarked, "It is not that art is the expression of the unconscious, but rather that it is concerned with the the relation between the levels of mental process."⁴ So it is with the relationship between the world of the Little People and your daily life. Like a realized dream, the leftovers of "their world" present a reality that is strange and familiar too. Here are some artifacts that look like flowers. Here are some hills that seem to have penises. Vulvular rivers exude useful materials for the construction of ritual cairns. But it would be another kind of mistake to think that Simonds is showing or portraying a dream or dreams. It is just that his analogies with reality are likewise analogous with



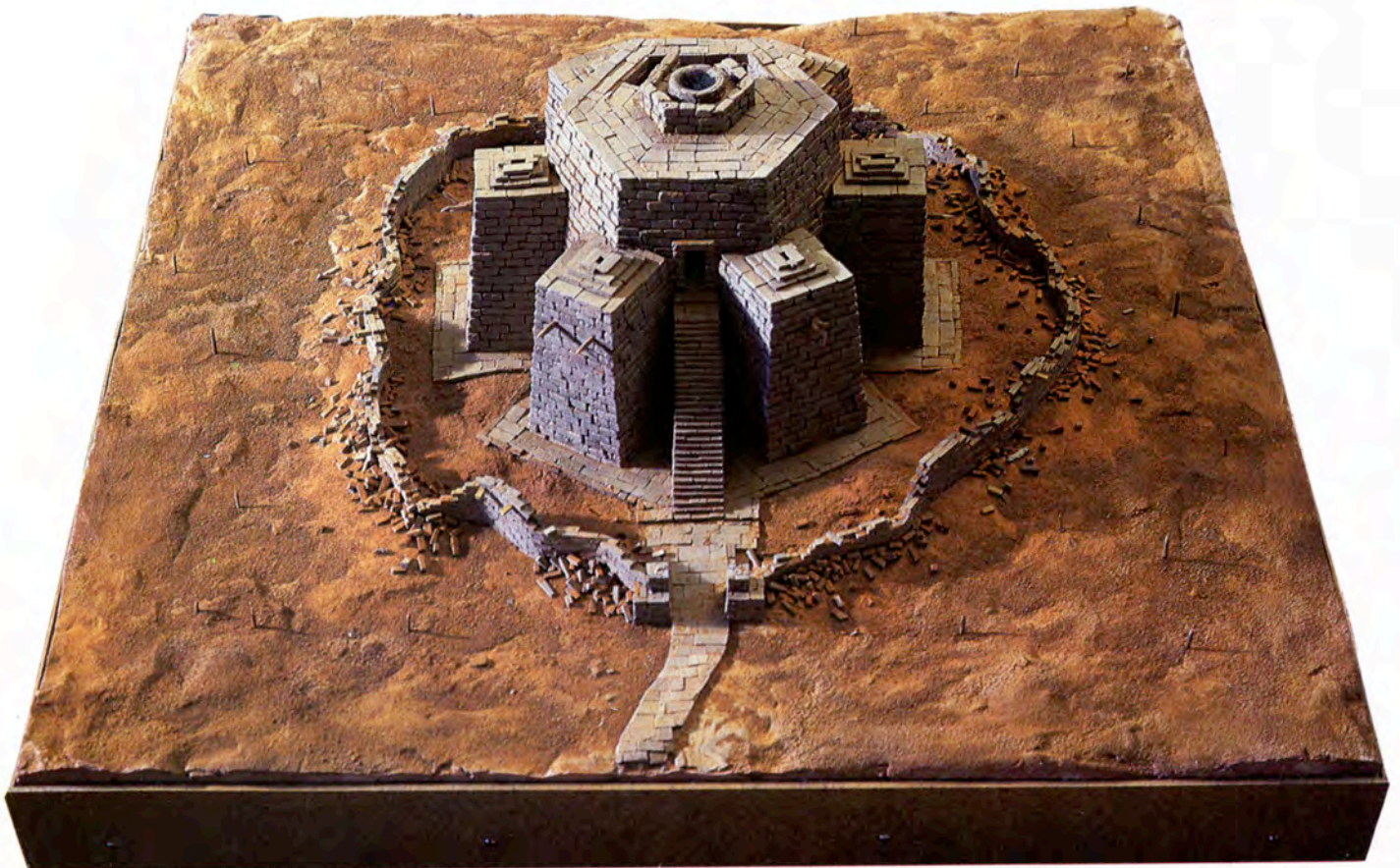
*Dwelling, 1982, 17 by 42 by 15 inches.
Castelli Feigen Corcoran.*



Dwelling, 1981. Collection Lewis and Susan Manilow.



Brick Blossom, 1981, clay on plywood base, approximately 30 inches square. Collection the artist.



Number 11 (Ritual Furnace), 1978, clay on plywood base, ca. 30 inches square. Collection Dr. Jack E. Chachkes.

dreams. The ritual cairns are not like things we know of—they are themselves, and by examination and imagination we can think of what went on in them in a past time that never was.

When I'm working, I never see Little People. I'm 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. Then you fill in what happened in that place. 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. It's tricky because since I'm not crazy I don't live like they live; they do things I wouldn't do. They drag me into different situations. They also take me all round the world. But there is a separation and I'm not crazy enough not to realize that they come from my imagination.

The works in which the analogies have time to develop and sometimes literally flower are those Simonds calls the Objects. The largest part of the exhibition which started in Chicago last fall is composed of 16 of these objects, 12 of which are a series called "Circles and Towers Growing," first shown in Europe in 1979. Three more are a 1981 series called "House Plants." It is with these objects that Simonds makes his living, selling as many as he makes to museums and art collectors. It is also with these objects that he has the time to develop his ideas.

"Circles and Towers Growing" chronicles various epochs in the "life" of a bit of earth. Really made of clay and set on pieces of plywood about 30 inches square, these 12 objects refer to events and undertakings that are totally imaginary. They are presented like stills from two or three movies that were never made. There is a beginning. The earth has been flooded and has dried. In the next age—rather in the next one we see—bumps of a somewhat mammary type are beginning to burgeon on the land, some of them smooth (immature?), others with prototypical orifices, lips, nipples. Something obscure but lifelike is happening to parched earth. In the next frame there are unmistakable evidences that an intelligence that walks around and builds things is at work. Seemingly useless sticks humanize the desert in a purposeful manner—though we can't really recognize what they're there for, like lots of art—and the central hillock has been developed or is developing itself. The metaphor of growth, and building as growth, the end of the distinction

between the organic and the inorganic (and the distinction between the animal and the vegetable), is central to Simonds's vision and it is in these works that he has most clearly expressed it. It would take more than 20 questions to sort out the practical meaning of these object-structures, but they are clearly all animal, vegetable and mineral at once. As the "story of civilization" proceeds, it divides into circular and towering variants. It could be that two species of builder with these different predilections succeeded each other in the same place or that one species followed the other, but it makes no difference. The circles come to dust as do the towers. In the twelfth frame there is only chaos and a few bricks on the earth.

The "House Plants" are a far less geological work. In this series, the ground erupts and gives rise to a conical tower with a spiral staircase on it; *Ground Bud*, *Stone Sprout*, and *Brick Blossom* are three of what could be

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thousands of imagined possibilities. It is not clear if they are developments of the same thing or of familiar things, as there are some plants that will present the bud and the blossom and intermediate stages at the same time, but their nature is both architectural and organic. The ground around the plants is curiously fluid, like leaves, like buds, like waves in metamorphosis, as well as like earth. They also resemble what they are—a kind of geography in clay.

When he was beginning to work on the Objects, but before he had started using his characteristic bricks, he wrote three little descriptions of different strains of Little People—those who live in straight lines, those who live in a circle and those who live in a spiral. This often quoted and much referred-to text I find somewhat too definite and clear in its delineation of the possible activities of the Little People. I prefer the enigma of not altogether knowing. When we look at Simonds's work, we are like archeologists on another planet,

or maybe extraterrestrial archeologists here. One could easily imagine a complete misreading of an abandoned site of any human undertaking, particularly if it were overgrown, and we had not the habits of mind that we have.

Daniel Abadie, curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, wrote an essay in the Simonds catalogue, one paragraph of which sums up much of what Simonds is about:

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 is at first 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.⁵

I think it is here, between the scales, between the layers of the mind, between the beginning and the end, between the barriers of species and genres, between the epic and the domestic, between the feminine and the masculine and between here and now that Simonds carries on his unique activities. I imagine that the Little People still have much to do, but Charles is developing what might be called his own work in other ways too. Although he has been asked to do it in situations that were for some reason unsuitable, he wants to continue with ideas for building life-sized dwellings. He started this in his *Excavated and Inhabited Railway Tunnel* made at Artpark, New York State's unique recreation area oriented to art in Lewiston on the Niagara River, during its first summer season in 1974. The following year, on an infertile toxic waste dump in the park, Simonds built a *Growth House*. Burlap bags of earth were seeded with flowers and vegetables; by the end of the summer, some of the resident artists were getting their food from this dike-like house.

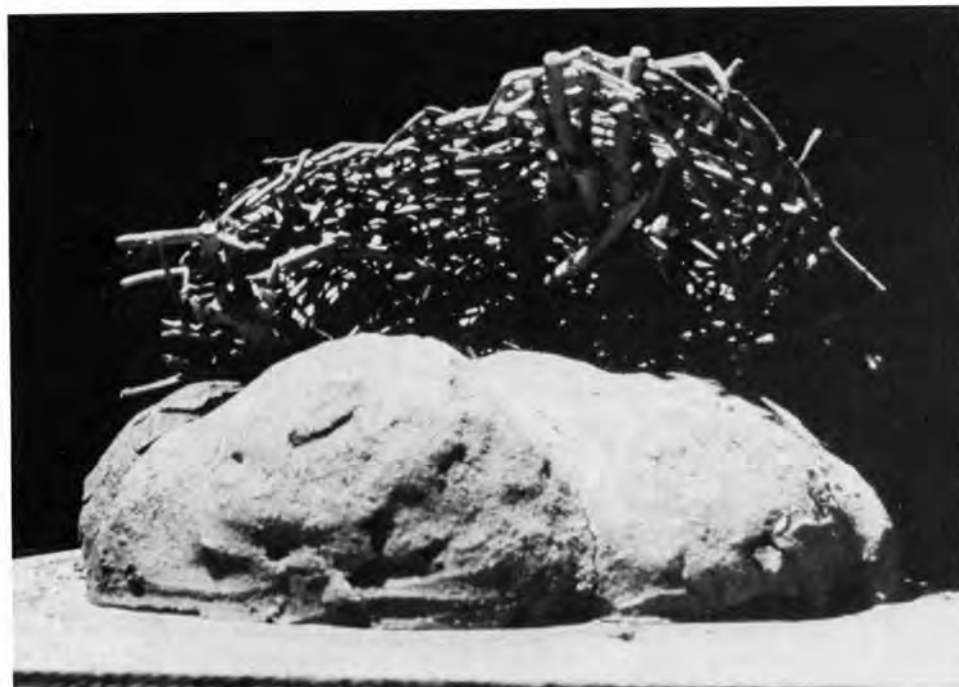
In Banff, Alberta, this past spring, Simonds organized a long-planned event that might be called a house-cleaning. Before arriving at the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff



Untitled house, Feb. 26–Mar. 17, 1982, at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff.



Untitled house, 1982. Walter Phillips Gallery.



Untitled house, Feb. 26–Mar. 17, 1982, at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff.

Centre School of Fine Arts, Simonds had students collect and sort several grades of detritus—sand, earth, twigs, vines, leaves; foam rubber, fabric stocks, discarded manufactured goods; beer cans, baby carriages, auto parts. Placed in the gallery (which happened to be painted black), this junk was on one side of the space; on the other were 15 pedestals. For 15 days, Simonds skied in the morning and built a house out of junk (as well as his clay bricks

and red dusts) in the afternoon. He said that he was surprised how long it took him to rid his mind of preconceived notions for “houses” as well as for “art-works” while he was engaged in this purge.

All the houses are different, and some of them are conceived as being for particular places. Simonds originally had the idea to do such a thing when building the street dwelling of the Little People ten years ago. He imagined

another race of people who would come along and make places for themselves out of the trash that Simonds always had to clear away from the sites used by the Little People. The houses took him from the sites used by the Little People. The houses took him anywhere from all day to an hour or less to make. “It was conceived as a ritual, a kind of incantation,” he says. By far his most ambitious ritual, however, and one that is still in embryonic form, is his description of futuristic dwellings on the oceans.

The original idea of the Floating Cities had to do with providing everybody with a fantasy landscape. This was ten years ago. If you wanted to live on a South Sea Island and I wanted to live in an English countryside we could construct different landscapes on barges or something, and if we no longer wanted to live together, we could float away. Much later I picked up the Times one day and I saw where shipbuilders in Japan were building these factories and floating them to Brazil. I then had this idea that if these things were tremendously evolved, you could shuffle factories and communities around on the ocean, parking them where they're needed. It's like property without location. It is also a toy for me to explore structural arrangements in society. One of them is a spiral of industry, administration, suburbia and farmland all attached together. It's also a way of making specious analogies between that and simple organisms—different parts corresponding to different kinds of cells. It's a kind of

child's play, the same kind of activity as making a dwelling in the street.

Simonds acknowledges his early interests in Claes Oldenburg's early monumental projects and in the work of Yves Klein. He recalls with pleasure his relation with Robert Smithson, whose mind also ranged far beyond sculpture, and his friendship with Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist whose speciality was making fantastic holes in existing buildings. For several years he lived with Lucy Lippard, a writer and chronicler of various art styles, especially Conceptual art and feminist art. But I tend to agree with those who think that one's work is more or less genetically immanent in oneself, just as stone carvers used to believe that the forms they made inhered in the stone. These metaphysical problems are not germane here, but they arise because life has a metaphysical aspect and when you speak of Charles's work you have to consider everything. As someone who loves to go about the world, both looking at it and creating it, his remake of creation is human and comprehensive as well as mystical and strange. His is

an epic that isn't finished yet. It is a vast thought to realize that everything of any kind is something that comes originally from the earth and will return to the earth in some form, however undegradable it is at the moment. For many years I have loved a few enigmatic sentences once written by André Gide which also inform this brief discussion of Charles Simonds:

*I am torn by a conflict between the rules of morality and the rules of sincerity. Morality consists in substituting for the natural creature (the old Adam) a fiction that you prefer. But then you are no longer sincere. The old Adam is the sincere man; the old Adam is the poet. The new man, whom you prefer, is the artist. The artist must take the place of the poet. From the struggle between the two the work of art is born.*⁶

1. The show opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Nov. 6, 1981-Jan. 3, 1982; it went on to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Feb. 11-Mar. 21; Fort Worth Art Museum, Apr. 13-May 30; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, June 21-Aug. 15; Phoenix Art Museum, Aug. 25-Oct. 10; Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, Dec. 4-Jan. 2, 1983. It is currently at the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Jan. 15-Mar. 6, and comes to New York's Guggenheim Museum, Sept. 23-Oct. 30.

2. All italicized sections in this article are from a version of a conversation between Charles Simonds and Ted Castle on Nov. 20, 1981 in New York.

3. The Dwelling situated in the café wall at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is the largest of the permanent constructions. Two "rivers" of clay meet, one flowing pink and one flowing yellow. At one time (1977) it was clearer that such colored clays referred to neutral (yellow) or female (pink) principles while the predominant gray of the bricks was regarded as male. The wall is used like a range of mountains; Simonds was interested in the fact that the wall concealed chimneys for a bakery formerly located in the building, and he punched holes through into these real archeological elements.

4. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, Chandler Publishers, 1972, p. 454.

5. Daniel Abadie, "Simonds: Life Built to Dream Dimensions," trans. by Terry Ann R. Neff, essay in *Charles Simonds*, Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 32. This book gathers together all facets of the artist's work and contains particularly good color plates.

6. This quotation from Gide is here transcribed from my book *Anticipation* (unpublished, 1966). I believe it appeared in some of Gide's published journals, but I am unable to locate the reference.

Author: Ted Castle is a free-lance art critic and fiction writer.



Floating Cities Photomontage, 1978. Collection the artist.