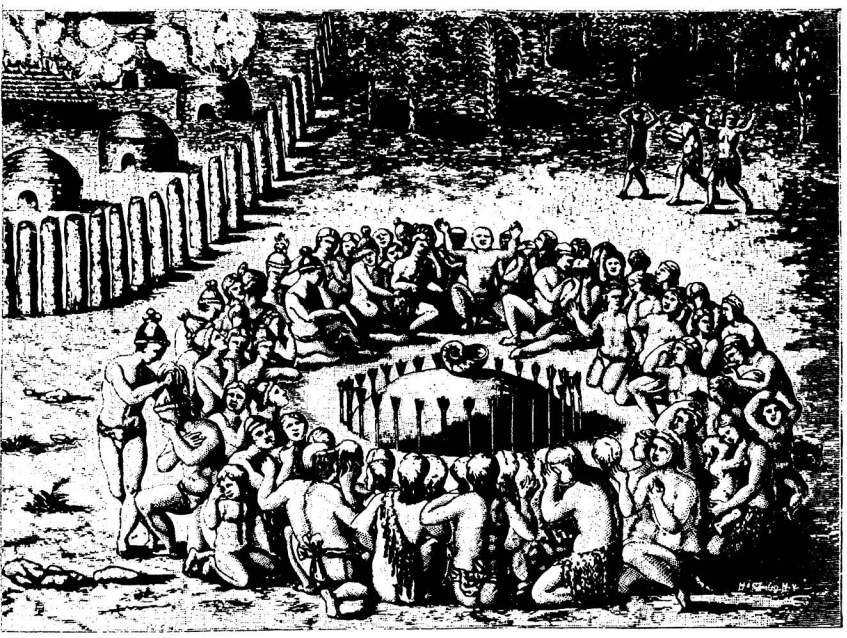


An Indian burial mound; steel engraving by De Bry, from the *Fifth Annual Report of the United States Bureau of Ethnology*, 1887
Coll: New York Public Library

Keeping Time:
some notes on Reinhardt, Smithson and Simonds

DALE McCONATHY

"*Nature is on the inside.*"
CÉZANNE
"*The eye sees the world, sees what inadequacies keep the world from being a painting . . . .*"
MERLEAU-PONTY

Like Hermann Hesse in *The Glass Bead Game*, like Jorge Luis Borges, like Vladimir Nabokov and like Italo Calvino, Reinhardt, Smithson and Simonds have invented fantastic academies, stocked imaginary museums and – in the case of Simonds – even spun out three or four civilizations. The function of these artifices, as dissimilar and as related as the three artists, is to hold up a glass to the world, to catch by reflection some hidden polarity, to enlarge in reverse some otherwise imperceptible quality. And, in so doing, to expand the claims of the artist-thinker.

Of the three, Ad Reinhardt is the most exhaustively definitive in his vision of an anti-world, a renunciation of *the* world for art. Artist-philosopher, Reinhardt constructed an anatomy of the art-world opposed to the life-world, carefully delineating styles and types in sprung caricatures that pitted his contemporaries against art historical universals. Filled with Swiftian laughter, Reinhardt's collages for *P.M.* and *Art News* – swept up from the debris of a print-littered, cerebral environment – at first may have seemed occasional, brilliantly witty, despairingly punny. Now, the visual jokes take on some of the multiple dimensions of what Joyce attempted on a larger scale in *Ulysses*. Elaborate and excoriating, tied inextricably to a specific moment, the sight gags become a caustic chronicle of a passed time.

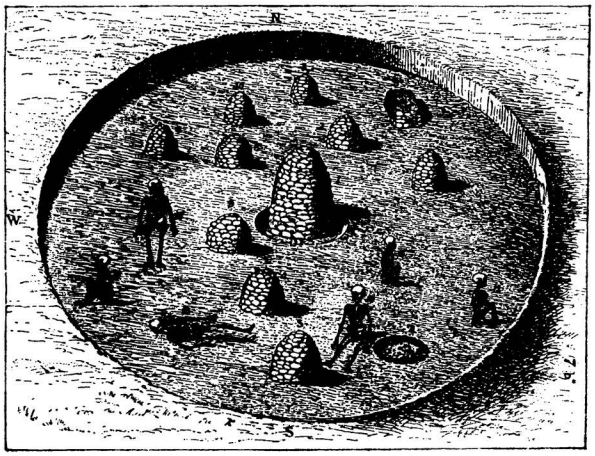
Those eviscerations, as carefully pinned and classified as the efforts of any prosy lepidopterist, led the way to later, even grander classifications. A book-armoured traveller, Reinhardt snapped art as others snap scenery. His Ektachrome recollections grew – carefully composed, photographed frontally and symmetrically, preferably at high noon with no shadows. Breasts joined buttocks; hands heads in dizzying orchestration with lintels and columns – style played against style, epoch against epoch in a proliferation of images. In his hoarded boxes of slides, Reinhardt composed his museum without walls. At the blackboard, Reinhardt confounded his students with false dates and false schools; told them to devise their own chronologies. On the lecture platform, the famous "rules" for art and artists, delivered with ominous glee, sounded as if they might have been cribbed from some unusually recondite Silk Route scroll. For Reinhardt, history revealed and it disguised, but it was unfailingly corrective.

Robert Smithson, a generation younger than Reinhardt, was more interested in science than art, so he said. *Kunst* smacked too much of decadent Western civilization – and life. For him, world was mind. He rattled through his 35 years as if he had been happily trapped in a cabinet of curiosities. Notions were picked up and put down at random, the dustier the better. Madness had a particular glitter for him, as did religion.

He was, by turns, engaging, irritating, and also a little woolly-headed. That diffuseness, however, was a diversionary tactic to cover his intellectual tracks. He particularly fancied his ancestor Smithson who had founded the Smithsonian. There was the precedent for his cast of mind and the prototype for his room when he was growing up – a Rutherford, New Jersey branch of the Ashmolean. Then, his familiar had been a snake, many snakes, and forever after he saw himself as reptilian, cold, earthbound.

Smithson also had a wild, ingenious way of appropriating scientific terms such as "entropy" that he would use in an extravagant, poetic way, staunchly defending his often doubtful phrasing. His thought came out of an autodidactic restlessness, an eccentric attempt to re-write natural history with his own specially created, exemplary artifacts.

Because of his scientific bias, he particularly abhorred all the creative metaphors handed down from the Romantics and thought his crystalline comparisons far more apt. Once,



Excavation of an Indian burial mound; steel engraving from the *Fifth Annual Report of the United States Bureau of Ethnology*, 1887
Coll: New York Public Library

CHARLES SIMONDS
Cairns constructed on the Niagara River at Artpark, 1974
stone, 10″ to 8′ high
Photo: Russell Drisch, Buffalo

AD REINHARDT
How to Look at a Spiral, 1946
a collage prepared for *P.M.* as part of a series on how to look at modern art
Coll: Rita Reinhardt

when the fire department came by his loft to make a safety check, he raged for days at the question, "Who lives here?" Life wasn't a concept that readily fitted his mind-world view.

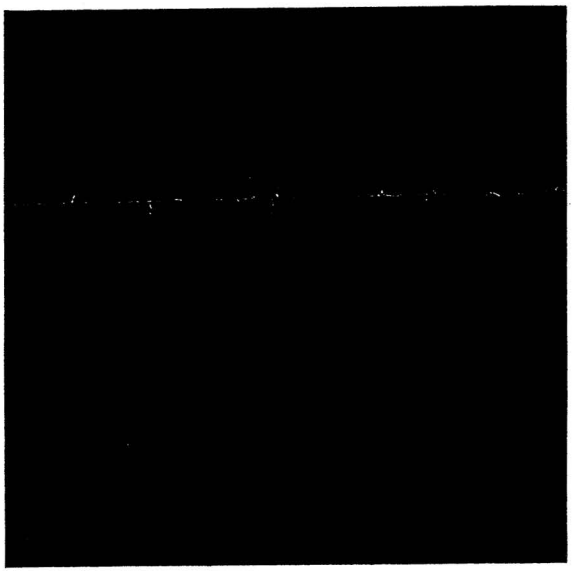
Of the three, Charles Simonds has worked the most directly with time. His work contains his theories. For the past few years, he has been working on Manhattan's Lower East Side, building – with the help of the locals, notably children – small villages of tiny clay bricks. These structures that sometimes look like the scaled-down habitations of the cliff dwellers of the Southwest cling to the walls of tenements or sprawl in vacant lots.

The "life" of these imaginary buildings is a carefully established bond between Simonds and the people who choose to work with him. The structures are the remains of a civilization of "little people," who in their displacement and chance-ridden existence, reflect their larger counterparts. The style of their architecture, the pattern of their lives, echo the destiny of the American Indian but in another place, another geography. With other materials, perhaps these houses would assume other forms. The significance of the lives of the "little people," their meaning, is the subject of spontaneous yet profound meditation on the part of those who participate.

This interplay, apparently fleeting, seemingly insubstantial on the surface, is of much greater consequence than the actual fate of the dwellings that by their nature must perish at the hands of the weather and the unreflecting.

In the scale of these structures, Simonds has located a psychological turn that rebounds on vast questions of time, constructing in the midst of the city itself a curious analogue for that aspect of human experience that symbolizes itself most fully in the collective. A meditation on time as "the spirit's body," Valéry put it.

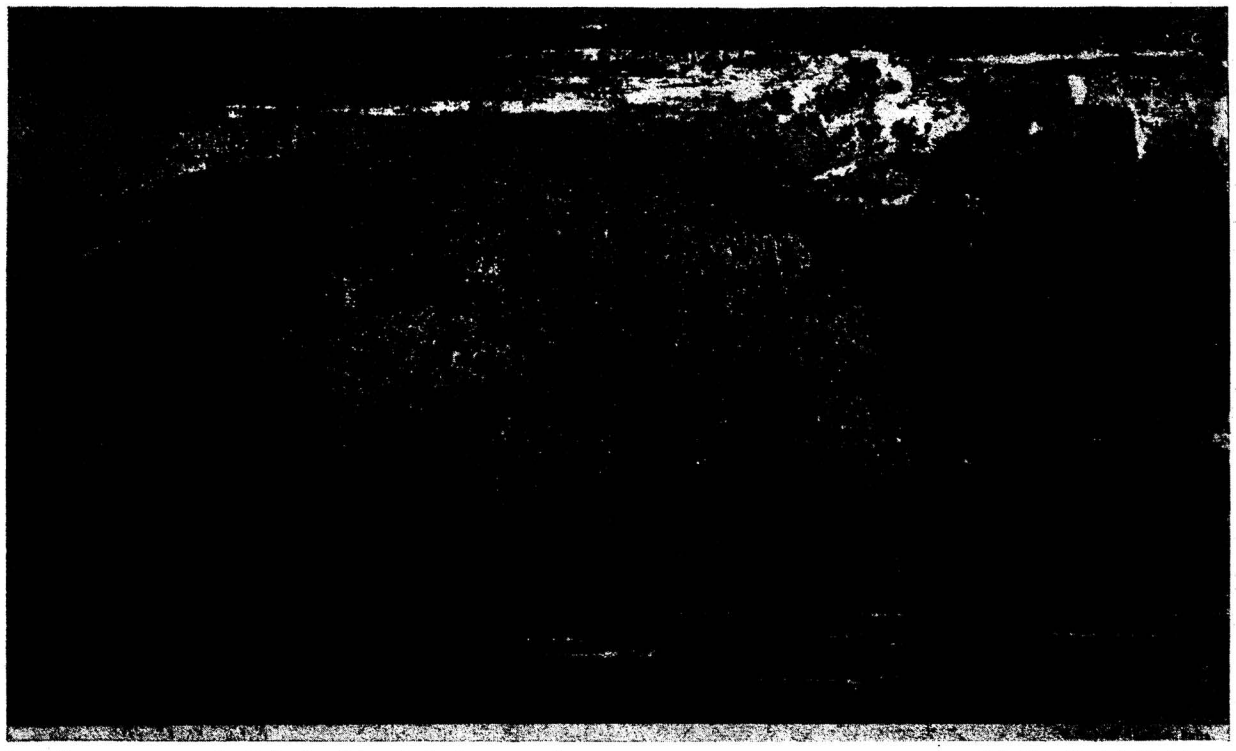
The sources of Simonds' work are not as clear as those of Reinhardt and Smithson. Simonds seems to exist outside the usual definition of art. The embodiment of his ideas seems to have most in common with the method of the old-style novel or the poetics of Claude Lévi-Strauss. But in Simonds, as with Reinhardt and Smithson, there is the spiral of return and the noble, renewing memory.



AD REINHARDT
Abstract Painting, 1960-61
oil on canvas, 60″ x 60″
Coll: The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

CODA

During August, 1881, Nietzsche announced in *Ecce Homo* he had realized the importance of the idea of Eternal Recurrence. For him, as well as for the artists and thinkers of the century following, the significance of the idea was largely an aesthetic one. He first sensed the theme in his study of the Greek dramatists, an intuition prompted amusingly enough by love of Wagnerian music and his attraction to Wagner's wife Cosima. From her perceptions came other insights: Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal*, Malraux's *Museum without Walls*, Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, Santilla's *Hamlet's Mill* and so on.



An Indian cemetery on the Columbus River in the Oregon and Washington Territory; steel engraving, 1881

Coll: **New York Public Library**

I

A museum of fine art should be separate from museums of ethnology, geology, archeology, history, decorative-arts, industrial arts, military-arts, and museums of other things. A museum is a treasure-house and tomb, not a counting house or amusement-center. A museum should not be an art-curator's personal monument or an art-collector-sanctifying establishment or an art-history-manufacturing-plant or an artists market-block.

– AD REINHARDT

Ad Reinhardt stressed the risible and the ridiculous in his comparisons of his world and the history of art. "The evolution of art-forms unfolds," he maintained, "in one straight logical line of negative actions reactions in one predestined, eternally recurrent stylistic cycle, in the same all-over pattern, in all times and places, taking different times in different places." Art-philosophically, his emphasis clearly was on "the eternally recurrent stylistic cycle" and on "the same all-over pattern." His predilections by extension were Islamic and Oriental art largely because of their emptiness of meaning. The cycle, he wrote, "always beginning with an 'early' archaic schematization, achieving a climax with a 'classic' formulation and decaying with a 'late' endless variety of illusionisms and expressionisms."

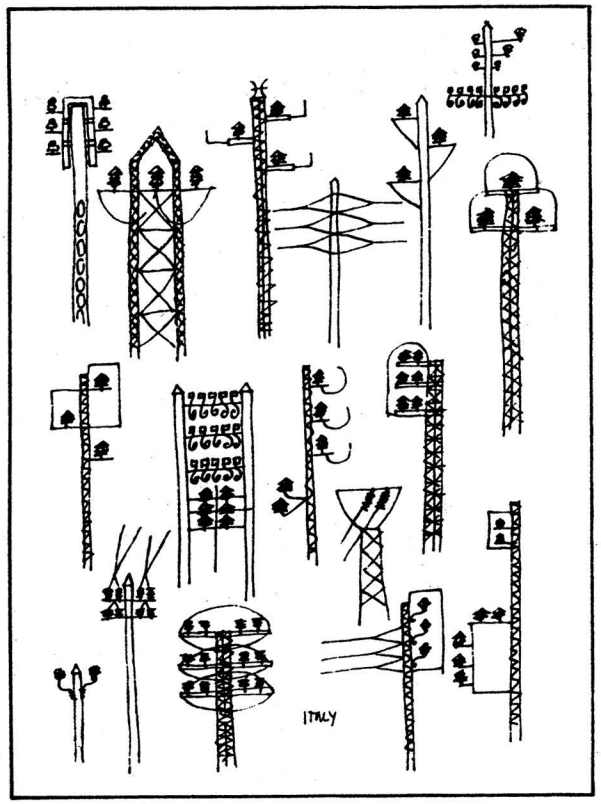
The schematic visual link that Reinhardt often used to identify the universality of these cycles was the interlace, a device that was just as evident in the *Book of Kells* as in the arabesque-filled ornaments of the mosques, in the surfaces of Chinese ritual vessels as in the paintings of Jackson Pollock.

The origins of this pattern were of course in the spiral with its sacred reverberations – a motif Reinhardt examined in one of his didactic art-strips for *P.M.*, the now defunct New York liberal daily. In one of the explanatory captions he wrote in a characteristically well crammed catalogue, "The ancient spiral was a picture of the immortal soul, a palace of the intestines, a dwelling place of a demon. It was a Greek scroll-decoration and a Chinese tiger-dragon, a sign of clouds and thunder and a charm against dark forces of evil. The earth shot off from the sun in a 'logarithmic spiral' and a seventeenth century physicist insisted a spiral be engraved on his tomb as the symbol of 'perpetual renascence'."

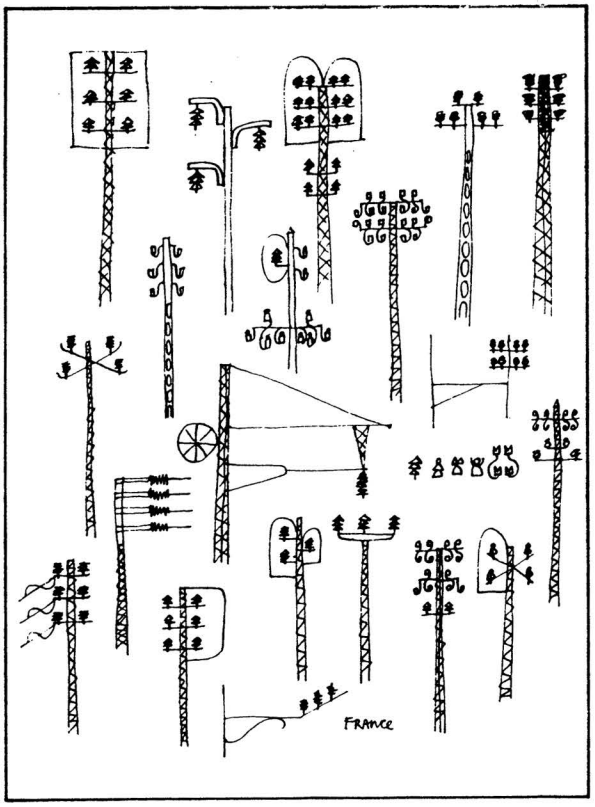
That Reinhardt saw his black paintings as a culmination of the various uses of this visual symbol is not particularly remarkable. But that he also wished to void the all over motif of its religious content is. Supposedly cut loose of their art historical associations, Reinhardt's paintings were to be timeless, part of that mysterious dialogue in which all works of art speak to one another. Art history was a footnote, a very long footnote at that. Forms endured – mute but eloquent. That was the message of Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, a message Reinhardt well understood and eagerly recognized in his review in *Art News*. Silence articulate.

The paradox of those final paintings, "the last painting" as he put it, was not their ambition but their fragility. Because of their delicate surfaces, virtually unphotographable, if they were to survive, they would survive as ideas.

That tenuous existence perhaps only partially intentional, reflects a major aspect of the growing shift of the artist's allegiance from tradition to a larger idea of renewal and the future. In painting "the last painting," Reinhardt, as he understood, was also painting the first painting. On many levels, Reinhardt's work and thought represent the bridge from the Renaissance goal of "immortality" to acceptance of a timeless inevitability. Thirty years ago in his discourse on the spiral, he asked, "The spiral is a democratic thing – anyone can make one – but what exactly does it represent? What has it meant in the past? How can artists use it for the future?"



AD REINHARDT
Electric, telephone and telegraph poles
page from a notebook, early 1960s



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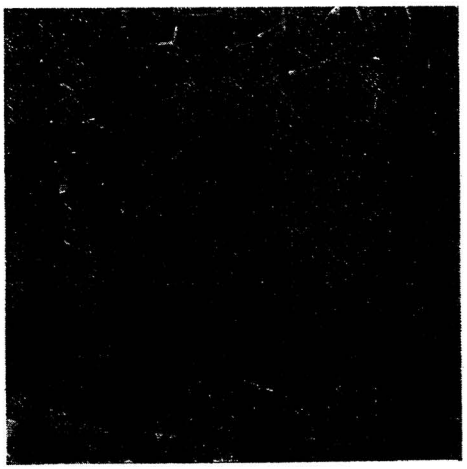


The labyrinth, Crete,
19th century etching
Coll: New York Public
Library

II

"See, as from a tower, the end of it all."

– SHELLEY

The role of tradition in art, however, is not restricted simply to the choice of problems or the selection of themes. The past exerts its pull in deeper layers of thought and making where it is not so easily recognized or dealt with. While there is no question that pastness plays an essential part in the formulation of art ideas, pastness can exist, as well, in a negative sense. It can also happen that traditional themes have been exhausted and that the thinker must turn to other problems. That re-thinking of art is one major consequence of Robert Smithson and his work.

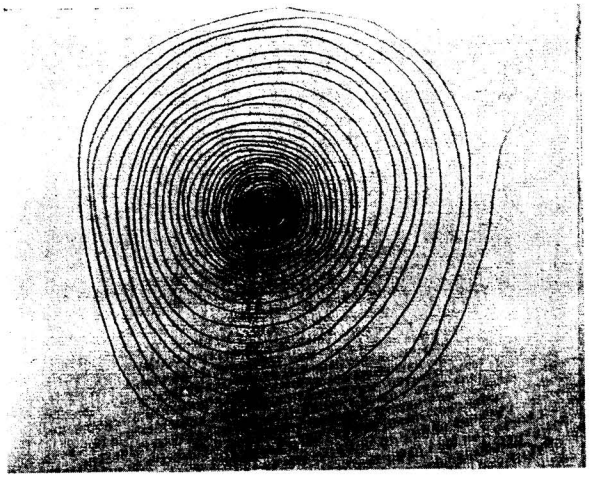
Smithson's first published piece of imaginative writing, *The Crystal Land*, appeared in May, 1966. It was a travelogue – written as most of Smithson's pieces were written with a stubby pencil on lined paper – about a trip to New Jersey, an itinerary, that presented a highly subjective reality shot through with ideas from science, the New Novel and the rock sensibility. It was clearly a new way of looking at nature – beyond Walden and *en plein air*.

The significance of *The Crystal Land* was that it proposed a total, uncharted world for the artist to consider. Spliced with overheards from the car radio, the brief article introduced the Smithson style with a flourish. Natural history and its uneasy adjunct human history were treated anecdotally, idiosyncratically – a research in all sorts of time past. Geological strata and suburban detritus were jumbled with significant abandon.

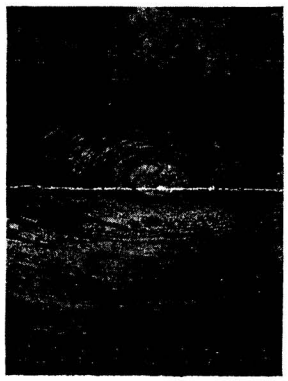
The junket became a basic part of Smithson's method. The tour in *The Crystal Land* had been undertaken with sculptors Nancy Holt and Don Judd and dancer Julie Judd. These excursions are among the great remembered moments of the '60s art scene with Smithson expounding his theories, clambering through quarries and meandering through the Jersey Barrens – documenting it all with postcards, rock specimens and Instamatic snapshots.

Importantly, those field trips revolved around Smithson's New Jersey childhood – the "Big Bang" theory as much a part of his re-thinking of natural history as his Catholic boyhood. Somehow, in his telling, the remembered incense became as redolent of evil as the smell of sulphur in *Faust*.

Many of his ponderings about mutability converged in the literary landscape that surrounded the falls of the Passaic River at Paterson near where he grew up. Foaming over with detergent suds, the waterfall represented the fate of that small industrial city – Paterson had been styled "the silk capital of the world" because of its factories. Walt Whitman had written a poem about the falls a century before and William Carlos Williams, Smithson's baby doctor, an epic



ROBERT SMITHSON
Spiral, 1970
pencil, 19″ x 24″
Coll: Nancy Holt
Photo: courtesy John Weber Gallery, N.Y.



Passaic River, N.J.

ROBERT SMITHSON
Bingham Copper Mining Pit – Utah, Reclamation Project, 1973
20¼″ x 14″
Coll: Nancy Holt
Photo: courtesy John Weber Gallery, N.Y.

Paterson – also with the falls at its center. That locale was a nexus of associations in Smithson's mind, a spot for irreverent pilgrimage, a token of nature's unhappy fall. After all, Smithson explained, "Man made nature."

Smithson intended his view to be comprehensive, vast and synoptic like Borges' Library. His opinions were pieced together out of random reading of science fiction, thermodynamics and gargantuan false histories. The carapaces of theories, the relics of ideas with their whispers of lost civilizations and hints of abandoned secrets delighted him. The null drew him on, he confessed. And entropy was the first law of his dynamics. The entropic was his fascination with *Salammbo*, Flaubert's lifeless novel about the ancient world, engorged with years of tedious research, set in an immense fictional vacuum.

His favorite image was the mirror, a symbol for him of the mind and the void. As his work took shape, it possessed a strange cosmic perspective. Like immemorial earthworks and ruins seen from outer space. And the forms of his imagination echoed the cosmological maps of the labyrinth, pyramid and ziggurat – the world-mountain. The *Spiral Jetty*. The *Amarillo Ramp*. *As above, so below*. His search for precedents reflected, perhaps unwittingly, the same universe that belonged to the ancestors – one external fact pertaining to all ages.

III

"We must live in the world of the living."

– MONTAIGNE

Simonds' mode is quite different from Reinhardt's self-enclosing spiral, the Museum Without Walls, or Smithson's world-as-mind, the Cabinet of Curiosities. The time equation for Simonds is a more immediate one. It is a matter of duration – how long it takes to build a building, how long the building lasts. That is the substance of the ritual of the buildings he erects on his body. He is born from the mud. They are born from him. They perish. He perishes. All passes. Time is self-contained; the making of bricks, the construction of buildings, the cycle of seasons, sunrise to sunset.

For Reinhardt, the past is art. For Smithson, past is charged with abandoned meanings. Simonds' "little people" seem to feel no regret. They accept the passage of time as a reflection of their nomadic existence. It is their nature. For Simonds, time is an integral part of making/being. His "little people" *are* their art. There is no intellectual dissociation or worth-making. Their history is what they do.

Simonds has recently expanded his idea with the models of three other civilizations – obsessive in their forms and meaning. Again, they are on a small scale rather like the exhibits for an anthropological museum. From the shapes of these imaginary cities, Simonds has isolated three types of civilization that seem inherent to his city builders. Although other forms may still be lurking at the edge of his mind, he has described these basic patterns at some length – the first written records of his work he has undertaken. These annals report the lives of the Linear People, the Circular People, and the Spiral People, whose life-styles have generated clay-brick structures in the "shape" of their existences. And they are known by these shapes. The narratives concerning them are mixtures of folklore, reportage and myth. Some excerpts:

The Linear People: Their dwellings make a pattern on the earth, as of a great tree laid flat – branching and forking according to their loves and hates, forming an ancestral record of life lived as an odyssey, its roots in a far, distant past. . . . For most of the Linear People, the past formed a tremendous web on which their lives rested at a point; or it was like a forest with paths by which only to enter an uncharted interior. The past was an adventure and threat, creator of insanities, of endless ruminations and confusions – a mysterious world that might begin joyously at the present in an afternoon stroll, but which stretched endlessly backward into a terrifying miasma, a geneological geography that disappeared over the hill and into the earth.

Life for the Linear People is spasmodic, intermittent, constantly on the move. Of the three peoples, they are the only ones whose artifacts Simonds has visualized in a drawing. Their lives literally run off the page.

Only the Circular People exist within the structure of cyclical time:

The Circular People's lives had two aspects: first was the daily counting and ordering of time, which located events in space and thought, reintegrating past and present to create narrative forms of both sagas and architectures which changed according to the seasons; the second was the concentration of procreative energy into one annual ritual at the winter solstice.

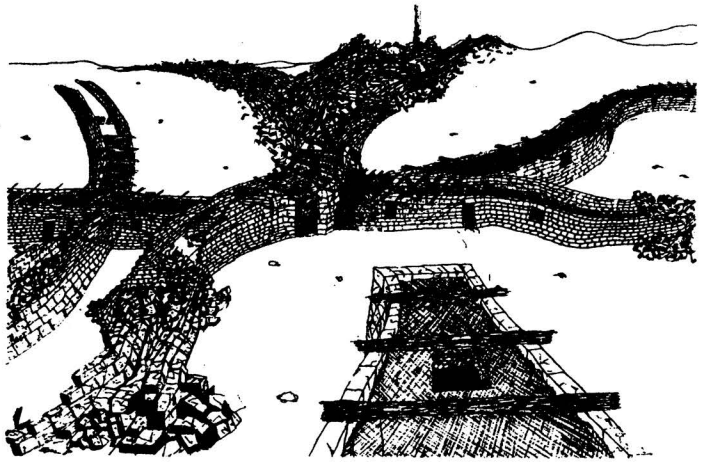
The world of the Circular People is unbroken, a paradigm of all that Western man has sought in the primitive. Whatever the indirect commentary on the real world, the life of the Circular People completely embodies the sacred.

The significance of the structure erected by the Spiral People is even more pointed in its meaning:

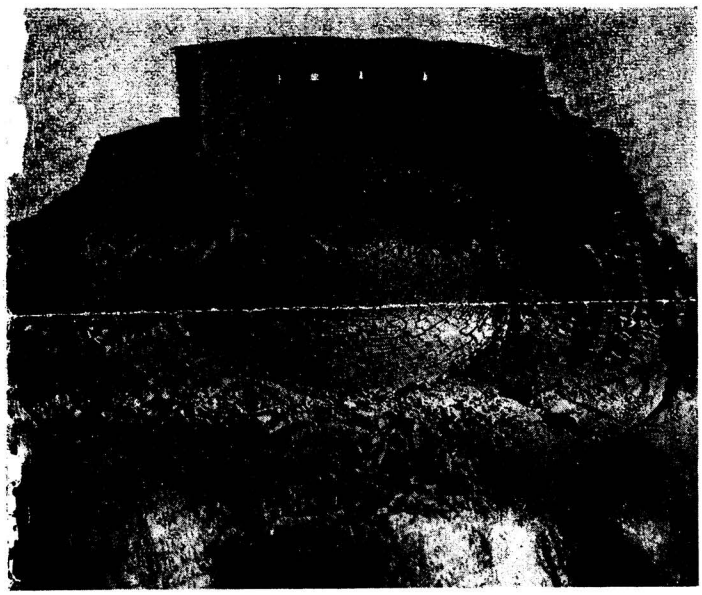
The Spiral People believed in a cosmos determined by their own wills, in which the realities of the natural world were of little if any interest. Their dwelling took the form of an ascending spiral, with the past continually buried, serving as a building material for the future. The people's lives aspired solely towards an ecstatic death. Their goal was to attain the greatest possible height and to predict the moment of collapse, the moment when the last of their resources would be consumed and their death inevitable.

All cities are one city.

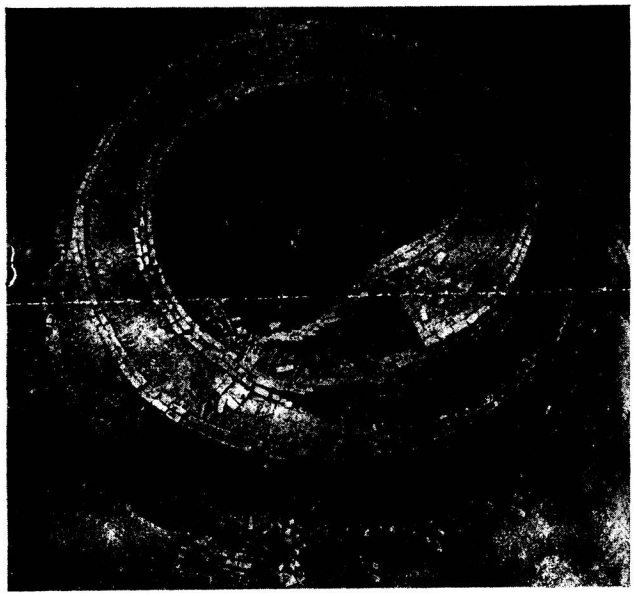
Chartres is built on a site that has been sacrosanct since pre-history. Beneath one of its towers is a labyrinth that was there before the Greek and Roman temples were built atop the cathedral hill. *Vocatus aut nonvocatus, dei exerunt.*



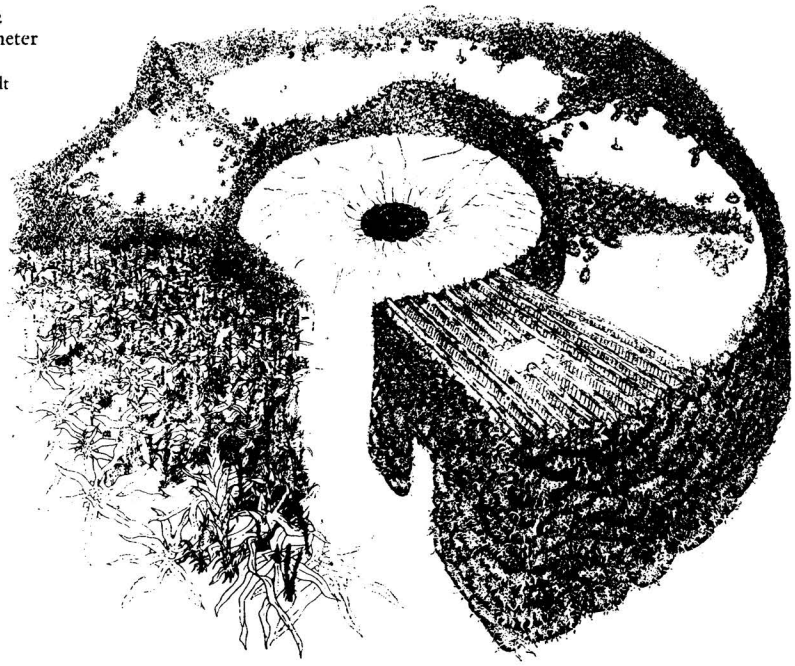
CHARLES SIMONDS
The Linear People, 1975
pen and ink, 9″ x 14″



CHARLES SIMONDS
The Circular People, 1972
red clay model, 30″ diameter
Coll: Lucy Lippard
Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt



CHARLES SIMONDS
The Spiral People, 1974
red clay model, 30″ diameter
Coll: Allen Memorial Art Museum
Oberlin College
Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt



CHARLES SIMONDS
pen and ink, 1975, 25″x 30″, project for Artpark, summer 1975. "The growth house: as the seeds sprout, growth transforms the built structure; the dwelling is converted from shelter to food and is harvested and eaten. The analogous inverse in time and space is the termite." [C.S.]