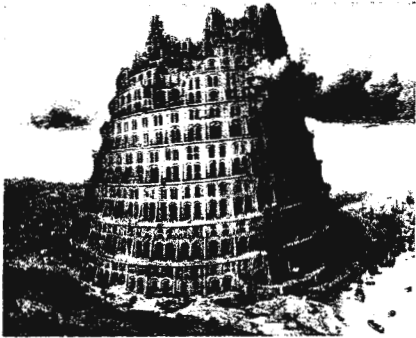


Charles Simonds's Engendered Places: Towards a Biology of Architecture

By John Hallmark Neff



Charles Simonds has been exploring his imaginary civilization of Little People for over ten years—first privately in his studio, then publicly in street pieces, and now increasingly in works which combine aspects of both, in installations or cycles of portable works intended to be seen by people who visit museums. At the same time Simonds continues to make his temporary Dwellings out in the community, while pursuing opportunities for developing his art in new directions through permanent installations in public buildings and private homes. He directs his energies (in a way both obsessive and remarkably unassuming) to working out the most promising of limitless possibilities open to his tiny, imagined culture. Every aspect of his work seems to be another means by which to understand the Little People's ways.


The films in which Simonds has collaborated, for example, make his essentially private rites available to more people than could have attended them in person and also serve "as the records of rituals belonging to the underlying mythology of the Little People."¹ Miniature dwellings and the full scale projects they inspired (such as *Niagara Gorge*, pl. 24, and *Growth House*, pl. 28) make it possible for us to share Simonds's involvement and concern with the facts of habitation, how people live and "how this affects the structures in which they live: with the way people's beliefs are reflected in what they build."² In the process we may wonder whether it is we or the constructions that have changed in size, but for Simonds they are all one and the same: there is, he says, only one scale in his mind, "the scale of my vision."³ He projects himself into each of his works regardless of actual physical dimensions, whether literally to re-enact the Little People's rituals as in the full-scale works, or to invest them with his imagination. Each detail is a living place in which he has been, spent time, and come to know well.⁴ And in the process the very notions of "public" or "private" have become so blurred as to beg

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Flemish, c. 1525/30-1569).
Tower of Babel. Panel; 60 x 74.5 cm (23³/₈ x 29³/₁₆ in.)
Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (inv. no. 2443).

the question, just as formal analysis alone can only inadequately account for what we feel his landscapes and architectures actually mean. The genesis of *Circles and Towers Growing* (pls. 32-43), although more complicated than most, reflects Charles Simonds's working methods for his art as a whole, the objects as well as the underlying ideas.

One can make the case that each of his pieces, whatever its size, in itself implies the entirety; that each part of the sequence (an open-ended, expanding class as opposed to the closed grouping of a series)⁵ deals only with the same work in a different moment. The elaboration of the idea into various landscapes, and new kinds and combinations of structures, enriches our understanding but is, strictly speaking, conceptually unnecessary. Each additional piece, however, adds to the possibility of new audiences and variations through which one might be better able to enter into Simonds's art. As Simonds said regarding *Circles and Towers Growing*, "Nothing but time prevents me from going back to fill in all the between. Even in a microsecond there are thousands of ideas for different states between the 12 actual works."⁶ In fact, the cycle can be read as several cycles reading at different speeds, laterally as well as in linear branches (see below, *Circles and Towers Growing, Commentaries*). Given the circumstances of its making, this should not be surprising.

The cycle came into being at a time when Simonds was in a position to consolidate a busy year of work. While in Berlin in 1978, taking part in the international artist-in-residency program known as DAAD (Deutscher Akademischen Austauschdienstes), Simonds built nine of the cycle almost entirely in numerical order, the Circles (*Numbers 1-5*), then the Towers (*Numbers 7-10*). The final two Towers (*Numbers 11 and 12*) were built in the fall of 1978 when Simonds returned to his underground studio at 152 Wooster Street, New York. The cycle was completed by the addition of another Circle (*Number 6*), which Simonds literally removed from his room-sized 1976 installation *Picaresque Landscape* (cover ill.), then stored in 23 sections in an adjoining room. This piece was itself a variant of an earlier portable object, the important 1972 *People Who Live in a Circle* (pl. 14). Simonds decided simply to use the variant once again rather than build a third version.⁷ These three "New York" pieces were then sent together to Germany to join the nine "Berlin" works to unite the cycle physically for the first time.

The clay for the nine pieces made in Germany came from the recycled "  " installation which had filled a medium-sized upper gallery in the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel during "Documenta 6" in 1977 (pl. 21). Colors ran the spectrum—black, gray-green, red, yellow-orange, yellow, and pink. At the conclusion of the summer-long exhibition, the landscape and its intricate structures were reduced to raw clay and shipped to the artist in Berlin. In addition to the multicolored clays from near Kassel there is also in the *Circles and Towers Growing* a yellow clay from Berlin and the red and gray clay from Simonds's primary source in Sayreville, New Jersey. The sand also came from near Kassel and the various sticks, chicken bones, shells, pebbles, or other materials from friends (who are always on the lookout for tiny specimens of all sorts) and the artist's own far-flung travels.

Unlike clay, the role of color in Simonds's sculpture, often rich and complex color, has been little discussed, although there is no critical question here of his decorating structure: in clay, color and substance are one and the same. Simonds's increasing interest in color can be traced from the earliest Dwellings to the most recent installations, developing from the basic red clay (which Simonds identifies as sensuous, malleable, plastic, connoting flesh, growth, and by extension, the body); and the gray (more quartz content, hence harder, mineral, "stone," and things built); to the broad spectrum which appeared in the later 1970s. In each instance he uses the colors of his clay symbolically to allude to the generic identities of the major sectors of his landscapes, such as yellow (neuter), pink (female), gray (male). In simpler works the color distinctions may be more basic—red clay (flesh, landscape), gray clay (stone, architecture); here the shape of the structures themselves helps to identify the gender.

Color is also used as a simple metaphor for the passage of time and the changes of state substances undergo as they age or grow. In *Circles and Towers Growing*, the most developed example, we witness the evolution of the 12 landscapes through a chromatic sequence in which the dominant colors in each work change from yellow to pink to red and red-orange to brown and pale gray. Here yellow denotes the wet flatlands from which pink landforms swell. Poured onto the work as a thick soup to fill "rivers" and "swamps," the yellow clay is also used as dried bricks in constructions of many colors which symbolize for Simonds a literal "mixing of ingredients" from the various regions into one unified culture. The number of colors, the complexity of design, and the levels of structural or stylistic sophistication achieved imply the relative success or failure of assimilation (see *Circles and Towers Growing, Commentaries, Number 5*). Thus for Simonds, color is an integral part of his conception for each sculpture, establishing a cast of characters with multiple roles; roles that derive both from traditional usage and Simonds's own intuitive mythologies; roles, moreover, which he feels free to modify—even reverse—should the colors begin to appear only as fixed and inevitable accompaniments of form.⁸

Although Simonds has discussed his work in terms of all the above, it would be misleading to read into these images a rigid code. On the contrary, the imagery and many of its subtle (and not so subtle) associations are generated not from formulas but very much from the materials immediately at hand—as when the first idea for making his landscapes came to him from a casual, suggestive working of some clay.⁹ It is fair to say that Simonds thinks in clay the way other artists might think with pencils, unconsciously, instinctively. It was clay that most intrigued him as a child, and with exceptions (see pls. 28, 30), he has avoided making drawings, a process that he finds personally uncomfortable and something of an ordeal.¹⁰ But with clay Simonds is at ease, literally in his element.

As a sculptor he appreciates clay's fundamental simplicity. This is in the sense of clay as material as well as for its unparalleled richness of associations (Adam: "born of red earth"; the most primitive art material, etc.).¹¹ Inexpensive and easy to store, capable of receiving the most sensitive pressures from the artist's hands, clay functions as form, color, texture all in one. Using only water, Elmer's Glue, and simple tools, Simonds transforms the clay in his

miniature landscapes into an instrument of illusion, creating brick, stone, and a veritable atlas of landforms. The degree of fantasy conveyed through these tiny environments is not unlike that which we traditionally associate with painting, a sense of fantasy that is extremely difficult to evoke convincingly in three dimensions.¹² Yet everything is clay and natural materials (even the slips used to decorate the Little People's abandoned pottery are mixed from colored earths): no artificial substances are used.

Simonds's personal identification with the earth (evident in his early rites such as *Birth*, pl. 1) extends to his pleasure in working it. This experience is frankly both sensuous and sensual and most profound when the clay is moist and wet, most intensely red or pink, its particular smells distinct. These are the moments when for him the clay is most responsive and alive. It is not surprising that he is more engaged with a kind of physical intensity while giving shape first to the landscape than during the obsessive placing of tiny bricks; that his emotional involvement with a work is in direct proportion to its immediate, physical presence, and that it diminishes as the clay dries, fades, hardens, and ceases in his mind to grow. Like a flower that loses its color after pollination, the finished sculpture for Simonds loses much of its attraction.¹³ The landscapes, particularly those in series, can be reworked in response to one another; but the overwhelming feeling of Simonds working is one of absorption in the process of making—as though the activity as well as the clay lends the necessary unity to each work and links it to those that came before.

The mixing of earths gathered from different sites, each corresponding to present or previous projects, is thus both ritual and economy, the literal genealogy and unity of "The Work,"¹⁴ one piece feeding directly or indirectly into the next, a genetic pool through which each landscape, each moment in the history of the Little People, finds its place. At the same time Simonds appreciates the simple pleasure of being able to recycle his sculptures with water, regenerating the clay and beginning all over again the ritual of chaos and order, construction and destruction, soft to hard, and wet to dry. Simonds's work thus operates on a principle of remarkable utility in form and content, each aspect reinforcing visually and intellectually what he conveys through the "emblematic" architecture¹⁵ of his invisible medium, the Little People.

The sculpture, read with patience, reveals or evokes much of its meaning. There are, however, other levels of potential understanding less visibly apparent in the work itself that help us to perceive the underlying sense of unity which, to an unusual degree, prevails in nearly every aspect of Simonds's life and his activity as an artist. One can learn much and enhance the experience of viewing the sculpture, for instance, by taking advantage of the fact that Simonds is not afraid to use words. He seems confident that the work can stand on its own, so feels free to expand the potential accessibility of his work in statements, interviews, mythologies (see *Three Peoples* below), titles, and extended captions.¹⁶ Simonds described his new cycle of *Circles and Towers Growing* in a French catalogue in 1979 as follows:

This work comprises a series showing the evolution of a landscape and of an architecture in my imaginary universe. Each work depicts the same place at successive moments in time.

After the third landscape the rest divide into two series with different interpretations.

One employs towers, fire and rituals of sacrifice; the other uses the circle, water, and rites of reproduction, as well as observation of the stars.¹⁷

In his other writings, Simonds here invokes the presence of civilizations seemingly very remote from ours, cultures whose customs we reconstruct from the archaeological evidence of their dwelling sites, specifically those clues imbedded in their architecture. It is from the types of buildings, their stilted construction, apparent demise, and selective re-use that we are led to imagine the civic and religious priorities, the mind-set, the cosmology of these unseen builders whose very invisibility frees us to consider parallels with our own lives and futures.

The imaginary situations Simonds proposes in his landscapes can be seen as related to a variety of fantastic civilizations, contemporary and traditional, utopian and real. The notion of a migrating race of tiny builders is not totally dissimilar to the actual discovery recently in the Philippines and Brazil of small, isolated groups of people living much as they did in the Stone Age. Or, like those experimental communities in the United States and elsewhere established in anticipation of how the rest of us will be living in the next century. One can also compare Simonds's fantasies to those of Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, Jules Verne's *The Floating Island*, the science fictions of his favored Stanislaw Lem, or the poetic reveries of Italo Calvino in *Cosmicomics* or *Invisible Cities*.¹⁸ In each instance other places and other times are explored through the imagination as comparative models, often to suggest alternatives to current practice and ways of thinking. Fantasy and exaggeration—such as miniscule beings or the unexpected application of technology (as in Simonds's own *Floating Cities* concept) are not merely play. By stimulating our imaginations, the fantastic allows us to cut through the detailed complexities of the late 20th century, "to step outside the present and see it in an altered light."¹⁹ The dramatic simplicity of the tabletop environments, where topography and architecture evolve as though in time-lapse photographs, clarifies the consequences of the fictive civilization's operating principles or myths. These histories, however, are invisible (like the Little People), without the freedom and perspective released by fantasy and reflective imagination.

Unlike the 19th-century American visionary painters with whom Simonds shares a certain sense of mission in alerting us to the consequences of our ways,²⁰ he does not moralize. One has to work for the message by a careful reading of the site—its overall schema as well as its details. Each area of the landscape (or "phrase" as Simonds refers to them) has its own story; and everything, as in myth and folklore, is alive and has potential meaning. Simonds makes frequent reference, for instance, to the venerable tradition of the Four Elements—earth, air, water, and fire—alluding to their literal physical properties, but more importantly, to their symbolic meanings and rich associations, as in alchemy. This may seem an archaism on the part of an artist whose futuristic *Floating Cities* is based on current technology and "economic inevitabilities," who works on community development projects, and who reads the business section first in *The New York Times*. But it is consistent with his openness to ideas that he considers useful, whatever their

source. As has been noted in another context, although the Four Elements “are not a conception of much use to modern chemistry . . . [they] are still the four elements of imaginative experience, and always will be.”²¹

In *Circles and Towers Growing*, Simonds contrasts respectively the use of water and fire; but it is here a matter of predominance, not exclusivity. And again he requires us to exercise our imagination in order to see: we cannot literally peer down into the underground chamber beneath the central dome in *Circles Numbers 4, 5, and 6* (pls. 35-37); but we can read in his account of the “People Who Live in a Circle” (below) the role of fire in the annual rites of rebirth. We can also find actual burnt things in many other Dwellings or ritual architecture pieces, implying the past presence of fire just as the prior mixture of water and earth is manifest in each brick. The landscape itself is a living chronicle of the “great cosmic marriage” between Sky Father and Earth Mother (as the Pueblo Indian cosmogony describes it), consummated through life-giving rain.²² Appropriately, Simonds mixes water with his various clays to replicate specific weathering effects: drying swamps, riverbeds, parched deserts. He also orders and domesticates water with constructed sluices (e.g., *Number 5*, pl. 36) appearing in place of natural run-offs, signifying a higher state of evolution and the necessity of controlling water resources for the development of permanent communal societies. Water is a primary index by which we follow the course of the *Circles and Towers* cycle. Yet water itself is never literally present in the finished sculptures. This is one of the reasons that Simonds’s tabletop civilizations transcend the miniature effects of models and dioramas. As we know from Hollywood naval epics filmed on soundstage oceans, water—unlike earth—is nearly impossible to reduce convincingly in scale. Instead, as with so much else in these vivid little worlds that seem at first so overloaded with detail, we must again resort to imagination to infer water from the occasional pottery vessels, tree saplings, and (given the fact of permanent settlements) an agrarian culture.

Neither does Simonds show us tiny figures frozen in games or meditation, casting shadows. As in so many photographic “portraits” of contemporary buildings, there are no people present to distract. He tells us the buildings are abandoned, but for five minutes or five centuries, he does not say. We have only the heights of doors, the distance between rungs on ladders, and similar subtleties as clues to the Little People’s stature and thus the prevailing scale. Like fire and water and the underlying meanings of these deceptively simple works, the Little People themselves are quite invisible without the magnifying powers of imagination. And it is for the sake of imagination that they are *not* there.

Everything depends upon our willingness to open up ourselves and mentally engage the vistas, bits and pieces, constructed by the artist. Imagination is simply the key to participation.²³ That is one reason why Simonds’s architectural references are indirect, never precisely reconstructions of Hopi pueblos and kivas, pre-Columbian terraces, Egyptian mastabas, Greek tholos tombs, or Iron Age brochs. Rather, his buildings and sites are evocative of all of these and more, together with their unavoidable associations of mythic prehistory and archaeological interpretation. He calls these references “impressionistic,”²⁴ yet the allusions are to histories we understand were real, to the rise and fall of civilizations. Simonds appeals to our sense of historical fact—the meticu-

lous details suggest that his vision is authentic—but he does not specify when and where. He insists upon, if not free, then unencumbered associations, studiously avoiding analogies with the Roman Empire, for one, whose infamous decline has been so often cited as to preclude the imaginary reconstructions his sculptures really demand. He leaves to others the weary clichés of catastrophe—the broken Corinthian columns, Ozymandian hulks, and Rivers of Blood.

But certain of his earlier structures, particularly those of the Linear, Circle, and Spiral Peoples (pls. 12-14) do attain something of the nature of archetypes themselves despite their small size. It is clear that these three buildings are direct communal and systematic expressions of belief, like medieval cathedrals.²⁵ In this important respect these tiny buildings can be compared to the great archetypal monuments such as the Pyramids, or particularly, the Tower of Babel (fig. 1), which is also a construct of oral and written histories, existing ruins, and above all the imagination.²⁶ Simonds compares Babel (perhaps the single structure most symbolic of human aspirations in architectural form) with the Spiral People who build until their edifice crumbles beneath them, a parallel others have drawn with contemporary urban life. He sees these structures as “emblematic,” embodiments of both ideas and what he calls “certain biological aspects of life and the body’s functions: Thus the labyrinth approximates a seduction, and the incinerator digestion, and the mastaba—death.”²⁷

In 1972 Simonds began a series of clay object sculptures which he called *Life Architectures/Living Structures*, an idea he expanded in *Three Peoples*, a short book of “fictional ethnography,” whose text is reprinted below. From the early 1970s onward, however, Simonds has shifted the emphasis in his sources from anthropology and the social sciences to nature. What interests him most in these living models are their various kinds of social organization, specifically their methods of growth and adaptation.

Most recently this interest in simple life forms has been directed to flowers (pls. 44-46), but Simonds finds his inspiration in fauna as well. He has referred to his fascination with the economy and beauty of animal architecture, to the termite and the caddis fly.²⁸ Here he finds the original vernacular architecture, adaptive and economic dwellings that succeed without architects.²⁹ Within “the specialized cellular organizations of simple aquatic organisms (nervous, digestive, reproductive systems, etc.),”³⁰ he finds analogies to the economic and social configurations that he elaborates in his model of *Floating Cities/Maritime Communities*. His reading and interests, his lifelong education in the Museum of Natural History in New York, and his explorations of models of life forms that “grow, evolve and change according to need,”³¹ take Simonds far beyond traditional notions of sculpture or architecture or even definitions of what artists do.

But it is in this preoccupation—trying to find insights and alternatives to very pressing contemporary issues—that Simonds also finds the potential means to extend our definition of art.³² Or, more accurately, to restore to art the definition which one can trace back to those primal sources evoked by his own miniature encampments and ritual places: to magic—in its basic definition an attempt to understand and control natural forces—a means to deal actively with existence. And, thereby, to restore to art a social function.

Certainly Simonds seeks to undergo in his shamanistic Mythologies the same kind of ritual death and rebirth that initiates experience in tribal ceremonies: being one with the earth, in harmony with the universe. (This is not simply a "performance" in the 1970s sense of the term.) But he is also a realist about the possibilities of art transforming the world. Thus he feels free to imagine, to reject nothing of potential use, whether from modern science or myth. Simonds functions comfortably and with a surprising sense of overall plan in this amalgam of the rational and the less rational, the systematic and sheer intuition. The model for *Floating Cities* is the result of one such hybrid, a concept connecting today's seagoing factories to the mythologies of Atlantis or the *Odyssey* in a model for a sea-based economic community structured upon patterns of blue-green algae, one of the most primitive and simple forms of life.³³

One can readily see that in Simonds's universe there is considerable flexibility. Priorities are the acceptance of all possibilities for mutual adaptation between an organism and its environment, the two-way communication he himself encourages in his neighborhood street pieces.³⁴ For Simonds, learning is a means to survival. There can be no advantage in rigid formulas, simplistic and deterministic definitions of either/or. As he has stated: "I've always thought of my work as transsocial, transpolitical, transsexual and transparent(al)."³⁵

Consequently, while one can read Simonds's sculptural forms as male or female, it is more accurate to see them often as somewhere in between, sharing characteristics of both sexes, more one than the other according to circumstances. The *Growth House* (see pl. 28), for instance, Simonds calls hermaphroditic because it combines construction (a male principle here) with growth (a female principle): the earth bricks are laced with seeds. In fact, it seems that Simonds actually uses two related concepts and terms interchangeably, androgyne and hermaphrodite. Both are fundamental to our understanding of the various levels on which each of his works can be interpreted.

Today, for example, we tend to associate androgyny with asexuality, rather than its original sense of both sexes in one, a universal symbol of unity and wholeness.³⁶ Likewise with the hermaphrodite, we fix on its literal aspects—the presence of both male and female sexual characteristics in one organism—and forget entirely its significance as a symbol. Both androgyne and hermaphrodite have been used traditionally to represent other pairs of opposites, dualities such as sun/moon (male and female respectively), fire/water, heaven/earth, odd/even numbers, right/left, up/down, light/dark, ad infinitum. This quest to unify or harmonize opposites within oneself, to attain a oneness of mind and body, is a familiar theme to students of comparative religion or psychology; so, too, are the related subjects of sexuality and fertility.³⁷ Working with these archetypal images and ideas, Simonds mixes them in his erotic landscapes to create highly charged and recognizable symbols for the evolution of his imaginary civilizations. Landforms and architecture alike take on the physical forms of a human sexuality, thus simplifying comparison of the changes which occur from one sculpture to the next. Despite daily confrontation with sexual stereotyping, it is initially surprising to see these symbols used here so directly with their original meaning undisguised.

If the primary images in Simonds's works are sexual, however, their full meaning is in terms of basic function: to engender the capacity for growth and change and therefore to mark the passage of time.³⁸ And time—as something fluid, amorphous, without specific geologic or historic reference—is central to an understanding of what the art means. To establish the cultural relativity of time, Simonds invented the distinct temporal modes in *Three Peoples*, together with their appropriate architectures; that of the *People Who Live in a Circle* (pl. 14) even functions “as a personal and cosmological clock, seasonal, harmonic, obsessive.” To represent multiple, even simultaneous moments in sculptural terms, he also devised two basic types of narrative, one which he calls the “picaresque,” the other typified by *Circles and Towers Growing*.³⁹ In addition, his films, photographic montages, books, and other sculptural works also impart (and assume) their own pace and rhythm. His intricate sculptures express within themselves the time it required to make them. Yet it is their identification within a particular context, whether vacant lot or museum, which determines their duration or fate.

Simonds moves freely through time within his works. The archaeological references are more than a nostalgic invocation of simpler epochs or an escape from contemporary issues, however. The vistas into past and future all ultimately focus in the present. Everything in his work is predicated upon our reading of it in the present tense, upon that critical activity we consciously undertake in the here and now.⁴⁰

If we tend to see the past as something that slowly grew, or the present as a blur or interminable, it may be more often the case that we are so busy living that we do not think about time at all. Simonds gently and provocatively pries us out of our habits to experience briefly the possibilities of existence through new eyes, minds, and times. In the process, he reveals the growth which we perceive as changes of form and color and style—of relationships—between a landscape becoming architecture. He makes no distinctions between them in their recurrent cycles of life and death, and so suggests thereby the underlying unity of all things. The idea is very simple. And the sculptures are, for their timeliness, no less magical as art.

Footnotes

References to sources included in Bibliography are indicated as Bib. followed by section, year, and author or location of exhibition.

1

See Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, pp. 10-11. Translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. Bib. II 1977, Buffalo printed a revised version of the original statement in English which had been translated into French for *Art/Cahier 2*. An edited version was excerpted and combined with Bib. I 1974, Simonds and Lippard, also updated, in Bib. I 1978, Simonds and Molderings, in German and English.

2

Charles Simonds, statement in Bib. II 1980, Daval, p. 121.

3

Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 11.

4

"I think of the dwellings in a very narrative way. It's the story of a group of people moving through life and the possibility of their survival as a fantasy in the city. The meaning comes only through seeing more than one in relation to another. There is also a sequence of events within each dwelling, each scene, the pathos of something coming to be and being destroyed, living and dying. . . . When I first appear they are beginning to build, and by the time I leave they've lived a whole life cycle. . ." (Bib. I 1974, Simonds and Lippard, p. 38).

5

George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 33-34.

6

In conversation with the author, June 13, 1981. Unless specifically noted, quotations from the artist in conversation are from notes made from September 1979-September 1981.

7

Should the *Picaresque Landscape* ever be acquired, *Circles and Towers Growing* would theoretically require a replacement. This could be a different kind of work and still keep the overall sense of the cycle intact.

8

Simonds's normal use of red and gray is inverted, for example, in *Ritual Garden* (pl. 19). Associations are tied to certain places, certain forms, so that different materials or colors allow him to renew the forms, changing "what it means and how it gets to you" (conversation with the author, June 13, 1981).

9

". . . he began playing around with wet red clay, building up shapes that evoked images of various body parts and fantasies about bodily functions. One afternoon, he sprinkled white sand on top of a slab of wet clay and was struck by the 'geographical' effect. 'The sense of a particular place came to me,' he told us. 'Not an object but a place—something you could fall into. . . .' (Bib. II 1976, Jonas, p. 39). See Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 5 for Simonds's account of his work of the late '60s, particularly the transformation of his apartment into "fantasy places," and Bib. I 1978, Simonds and Molderings, p. 16. Simonds sees almost everything he has done over the last decade as "an extrapolation of three or four simple thoughts, all of which I had in a few days" (Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 13 and in translation [see note 1]).

10

See the large pen and ink drawings from 1975 for the *Linear People* (Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 50) and *Growth House*, and *Growth Brick*, *ibid.*, pp. 68-69. A sketch for *Birthscape* (pl. 23) is reproduced in Bib. II 1978, Amsterdam, beneath Simonds's statement (n.p.).


11

Simonds recalled the influence of "an older brother who worked realistically in clay at home—and my own interest in clay as the most traditional art material, and as a *prima materia* of life" (Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 5, and the translations). The origins of Adam in the red earth is discussed in Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971, pp. 56, 85. See also the discussion of "Red Adam" in "Jorge Luis Borges," *Writers at Work, The Paris Review Interviews*, 4th Series, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 119. Simonds also appreciates the irony that his tiny bricks are made from the same New Jersey clay that provided the building materials for many of the older buildings in New York.

12

See Lucy R. Lippard, "Max Ernst and a Sculpture of Fantasy," *Art International* 11, 2 (February 20, 1967), p. 27.

13

Conversations and Bib. I 1974, Simonds and Lippard, p. 38: "For myself I think in terms of making. Their high point for me is the moment when I finish them, when the clay is still wet and I'm in control of all the textures of the sand and the colors, when earth is sprinkled on the clay and it's soft and velvety, very rich. As they dry, they fade and cease to be as vivid for me." Also see Alec Bristow, *The Sex Life of Plants*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978, p. 200. Simonds is interested in the various kinds of reproductive behavior in plants and animals and has books on the subject, including this one. One can find numerous passages in Bristow that evoke Simonds's sculptures, cf. the signs of female arousal, p. 26, and the landscape in "  " *Early*, 1977, Coll. Walker Art Center, ill. in Bib. II 1977, Minneapolis, p. 62.

14

"The Work" refers to *The Great Work* of the alchemists, the quest for the *Materia Prima*. Alchemy is of some interest to Simonds, though not in the misunderstood sense of a naïve attempt to transmute lead into gold. Alchemy was as much a spiritual discipline as a material procedure, the goal of which, in very simplified terms, was "to know the centre of all things" (Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy, the Secret Art*, New York: Avon, 1973, p. 8). Simonds's interest in the subject can be traced in part to C. G. Jung's epic study, *Psychology and Alchemy* of 1944, translated 1953, Princeton: Bollingen Series. For Jung, alchemy was of interest as a parallel to early Christianity, specifically as a compensation for "gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites" (p. 23). As a means to attain wholeness of being, alchemy is analogous to efforts of modern psychology to reconcile the inner and outer man. The images are a virtual encyclopedia of medieval lore, including the Four Elements and the Hermaphrodite discussed in the essay. Given the intimate conceptual and physical relations between the entire range of Simonds's art works and his other activities, the idea of "The Work"—the ongoing quest—seems appropriate; Simonds agreed. Simonds was also interested in the idea that the cells in all organisms have both male and female chromosomes, "a physical image of man's psychic 'bisexuality'" (discussed in C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, Garden City: Doubleday/Windfall, 1964, pp. 30-31).

15

Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, pp. 12-13. Simonds uses the term "emblematic" to describe the relation between his "unique" works, the portable sculptures, and the temporary Dwellings. "The objects are more extravagant to the extent that I devote a great deal of time to one thought. The objects attempt to bring the same thoughts that underlie the street works to the state of an emblem. . . ."

16

See Bib. I. Other particularly useful published statements by the artist are cited in this essay and the *Commentaries*, notably Bib. II: 1978, Amsterdam; 1980, Foote; 1980, Daval. Simonds frequently uses the occasion of catalogues and articles to revise or expand earlier statements, titles, etc.

17

Bib. II 1979, Les Sables-d'Olonne, "Evolution imaginaire d'un paysage" (n.p.).

18

Simonds has copies of Swift and Calvino, the latter suggesting many parallels for Simonds's writings as well as sculpture. One can cite "Olinda," the "city that grows in concentric circles," or "Clarice," which gave up nothing but "merely arranged [it] in a different order . . ."; or "Beersheba," two cities, one "suspended in the heavens," and another, fecal city below (*Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). The last city could be compared to the nests of termites which interest Simonds because of the integration of bodily functions and structure. See also Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, esp. p. 163, for a discussion of early-20th-century architectural fantasies, including Finsterlin's "grown" house and Steiner's "Goetheanum."

19

Bib. I 1978, Simonds and Molderings, p. 23.

20

Compare the themes and narrative devices used in paintings and painting cycles by Thomas Cole, "The Course of Empire," *Past and Present*, among others. See Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978, pp. 17 ff. and p. 13 for a discussion of the popularity of cataclysmic themes in the 19th century.

21

Northrop Frye, preface to Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan G. M. Ross, Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, p. vii. Among Bachelard's other books which stress the value of the "active imagination" is the influential *The Poetics of Space*, which explores the phenomenology of such spaces as the House, Nests, Shells, Corners, Miniatures, and "The Dialectics of Inside and Outside." The reading of this book and Bachelard's *The Poetics of Reverie* are for the author a literary experience comparable to the viewing of Simonds's sculptures. Bachelard's references to Jung take such ideas as the duality in the psyche of animus (masculine, dream, concepts, activity) and anima (feminine, reverie, and repose) and develop them in terms that resonate with Simonds's world.

22

Cottie Burland, *North American Indian Mythology*, London: Hamlyn, 1975, pp. 120 ff., "The Creation of the World." Simonds has said that the Little People's origin "lies somewhere among my childhood visits to the Southwest" (Bib. II 1977, Buffalo, p. 7) and has referred elsewhere to the image of the Dwellings as "of a moment past, a part of America's past, like the Pueblo Indians . . ." (Ibid., p. 10). He also related his Dwellings to "the American Indian," because the Little People's lives also "center around belief attitudes toward nature, toward the land . . ." (Bib. I 1974, Simonds and Lippard, p. 38). Simonds knows the Indian sites of the Four Corners area well and returns for certain rare dance ceremonies. The architectural similarities between Simonds's Dwellings and circular structures and Hopi buildings are clear but account for only some of his many architectures. The dry locale of Simonds's tableaux also relates to the arid cliff regions of the Pueblo. One can also compare the Hopi cosmogony with its account of the four-fold womb ("The Place of Generation, the Place beneath the Navel, the Vagina of Earth, and the Womb of Birth") from which the Hopi gradually made their way to the surface world and undertook a migration in the form of a spiral. See particularly *Circles and Towers Growing*.

23

Bachelard [see note 21] places the powers of the imagination between those of thought and reverie. "And it is here that the intermediary play between thought and reverie, between the psychic functions of the real and the unreal multiplies and crisscrosses to produce the psychological marvels of human imagination. Man is an imaginary being" (*The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, trans. Daniel Russell, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p. 81).

24

In conversation with the author.

25

Kubler's category of "Prime Objects"—indivisible, inexplicable by their antecedents, etc. (*The Shape of Time*, p. 39) is applicable to a theory of archetypal buildings. He notes that "the number of surviving prime objects is astonishingly small: it is now gathered in the museums of the world and . . . it includes a large proportion of celebrated buildings" (p. 41).

26

The Tower of Babel is referred to in the Bible (Genesis 11:1-9) simply as "a tower with its top in the heavens." Herodotus refers to a great temple in the center of Babylon with "a solid central tower, one furlong square, with a second erected on top of it and then a third, and so on up to eight. All eight towers can be climbed by a spiral way running around the outside . . ." (*The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, Baltimore: Penguin Classics, 1961, p. 86). Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted two versions of a *Tower of Babel* in 1563, basing his image on the written sources above and his visit to the remains of the Colosseum in Rome as well as contemporary machines. See H. Arthur Klein, "Pieter Bruegel the Elder as a Guide to 16th Century Technology," *Scientific American* 238, 3 (March 1978), p. 134. In both the "large" and "small" Babels (Vienna and Rotterdam), Bruegel uses color changes to distinguish newer from older construction.

27

Bib. I 1975, Simonds and Abadie, p. 13.

28

". . . I investigate the parallels between the unconscious behavioral patterns (my own, those of humans and animals) and social and environmental forces, as a means of provocation and social change. Through new art and architectural possibilities I am particularly interested in the evolution and psychological implications of sexual interactions between body and earth, house and body and home, building and growing—from the behavior of termites to human social systems . . ." (Bib. II 1980, Daval, p. 121). (See also note 18 above.) ". . . and I've learned more from watching the small-brained genius of the caddis fly larva building its house . . . than by studying the work of large-brained architects" (Bib. II 1980, Foote, p. 29). Simonds admires greatly the beauty and economy of animal structures, from microscopic animals through shells, arthropods, and the vertebrates. He has a copy of the classic study by Karl von Frisch, *Animal Architecture*, trans. Lisbeth Gombrich, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. The first chapter is entitled "The Living Body as Architect—."

29

Simonds's interest in how building reflects living is evident in his work in transitional neighborhoods and his notes about buildings he sees in his travels. With many artists he is interested in the "vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural" structures assembled in Bernard Rudofsky's book *Architecture Without Architects*, New York: Doubleday, 1964, which accompanied an exhibition of the same title at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1965. See also Rudofsky's *The Prodigious Builders*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. An article which expresses an attitude very similar to Simonds's is Richard Bender's study of mud architecture in Morocco, "Dust to Dust—The Ultimate System," *Progressive Architecture* 54, 12 (December 1973), pp. 64-67.

30

Bib. II 1980, Daval, p. 121.

31

Ibid.

32

See Bib. II 1979, Linker, for an extremely thoughtful and provocative discussion of Simonds's art, esp. p. 37, where she concludes: "Instead of extending art into nonart contexts, they [his land projects] propose broader, more flexible definitions of art. And this reorientation of esthetic objectives is perhaps the most important thing that these objects, like Simonds's Dwellings and models, are about." See also her footnote 17 for a proposed analogy between the models for *Three Peoples* and art theories.

33

Bristow, *The Sex Life of Plants*, p. 69, proposes that blue-green algae, pre-dating sex, and therefore death, "can be said to be immortal." He then describes blue-green algae living in the oceans today as "not merely descendants but actual parts of that same (original) organism and so could be described as at least two billion years old." Simonds, understandably, has annotated this passage with an exclamation point.

34

"Certain kinds of machines and some living organisms—particularly the higher living organisms—can . . . modify their patterns of behavior on the basis of past experience so as to achieve specific antientropic ends. . . . The environment, considered as the past experience of the individual, can modify the pattern of behavior into one which . . . will deal more effectively with the future environment . . . seeks a new equilibrium with the universe . . ." (Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1954, p. 46). Simonds has read this and other Wiener books, stressing his interest in their discussion of two-way communications and theories of learning.

35

Bib. II 1960, Foote, p. 29.

36

See Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, pp. 161-162 etc.; and June Singer, *Androgyny*, Garden City: Anchor Books, 1976, esp. Chs. 9, 12.


37

See Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*; and Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, New York: Meridian Books, 1971, pp. 223, 262, 421, 424, etc.

38

"Time, like mind, is not knowable as such. We know time only indirectly by what happens in it: by observing change and permanence; by marking the succession of events among stage settings; and by noting the contrast of varying rates of change" (Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, p. 13). This could serve as a description of Simonds's work as a whole, particularly *Circles and Towers Growing*.

39

". . . More recently I have been working on a series of projects that trace the interior evolution of landforms into architectural forms in this imaginary civilization. The methodology of these works involves either the bringing together of many different imaginary times and places to one real time and place (picaresque) or the investigation of one particular place at many different times. These works are counterweights to the street Dwellings where time and place follow each other in quick succession with the past constantly slipping away into nothingness and death" (Bib. II 1978, Amsterdam, n.p.). In conversation Simonds explained his use of "picaresque," a literary term designating a style of fiction which follows the adventures of a roguish hero. Simonds likens large installations such as *Picaresque Landscape*, ", and *Birthscape* (cover ill. and pls. 21 and 23) to picaresque novels because they are (1) objects, like books, which (2) bring together in themselves—in one place—a variety of different events.

40

"The streets are really where my work finds its meaning and direction, in people's reactions to it. . . . It awakens and politicizes that consciousness" (Bib. I 1978, Simonds and Molderings, p. 23). One can also see in the domed stadiums and office towers around which our cities seek to rebuild themselves parallels to Simonds's *Circles and Towers Growing*, the focal points for energy and resources.