



Simonds' audience, Shanghai. Photo: Passerby.



Charles Simonds *Dwelling*, 1980, Shanghai. Photo: Passerby.

## WORKING IN THE STREETS OF SHANGHAI AND GUILIN

### Charles Simonds

For the past ten years I have constructed dwellings for an imaginary civilization of Little People in the streets of different cities around the world. In January of this year, during an art group tour of the People's Republic of China, I took time off from planned activities to build two "dwellings" in the streets of Shanghai and Guilin.

I worked in the old section of Shanghai—a district the tourist is warned not to enter without a guide because of the small labyrinthine streets which make getting lost inevitable. It is a neighborhood of fantastic intimacy, and the life lived in the street is unparalleled.

The day before, I had explored and chosen three likely spots to work: what I estimated to be a fairly protected "semi-private" window ledge, the blank side of a wall of an inhabited building with a hole in it, and the wall of a completely vacant lot adjacent to a construction site. I was determined to work in China no matter what happened (official sanctions, etc.) but decided to approach the situation cautiously. Being a guest and sensing the general warm greetings wherever I went as an American, I didn't expect any resistance, but I decided to ask if it was alright to work at the first site. (Normally I just begin to work, and I've never been prevented from continuing, although responses range from ecstatic excitement to an accusative "Who gave you permission to do that?"—typical

of my experience in Germany). Since any Westerner pausing in the street in China draws a crowd and creates a potential traffic jam, I thought it prudent to ask. Armed with written phrases in Chinese, a handful of small bricks, and a photograph of what my dwellings look like, I paused at the first site and indicated to the crowd by sign language what I wanted to do. Soon, someone went inside to ask. In the interim, a French-speaking Chinese arrived and I explained to him what I was up to. He confirmed that permission from the "boss" was necessary; I had in fact parked myself in front of what I would not have guessed to be a factory. The boss soon arrived and in perfect English told me No, he didn't think it was a good idea for me to work there. He said, "We don't want any trouble here," (did I just imagine a note of fear in his voice?) and that I should apply to the central office, which was a great distance away.

I was a bit crestfallen as I really felt I was giving a gift to the Chinese people, but I said "Well, of course, if you don't want me to work there I certainly won't," and moved on to the next spot. Here sat an old man I recognized from the day before. I waved hello, as he obviously remembered me. I pointed to the hole in the wall and to my paper. After some confusion and sign language his face showed that he understood, and with what I felt was unnecessary force, he gripped me

above the elbow and moved me in the direction of the street. Clearly I wasn't going to work here either.

I felt more desperate now. I was willing to deal with whatever happened, but I started to imagine possible official problems. Would I be arrested, cause embarrassment or trouble for the tour? Walking to the next site, I decided that perhaps it wasn't much different from other situations. If you ask permission it's tantamount to indicating that you don't have the authority to do something, so anyone is free to say no. If you just begin to work, it implies that you *do* have the authority and only someone who *is* sure he has more authority will challenge you. With this in mind, I planned how to get to work very quickly at the next site. Putting the first bricks on the wet clay landscape is a crucial moment of contact with bystanders, because until that point it is unclear to anyone what I am doing. (In Bad Godesberg, West Germany, it took some explaining to two policemen that slapping clay on the wall was not an act of terrorism.)

I did all my preparations far from the site. Mixing my water and glue drew a curious and befuddled audience, as did unpacking my clay and putting my tweezers in a handy pocket. I walked quickly across the vacant lot to my wall. It was obvious to all that I was up to something, and I could feel the excitement of the people following me and the chatter as word was



Passerby, Portrait of Charles Simonds Working in Street, Shanghai, 1980.

passed through the streets. As soon as the red clay hit the wall, a roar went up. My hand was shaking, I was a bit dazed, but I concentrated all my energy on setting to work. I didn't look up, fearing that the next minute someone might grab me from behind and cart me off. I worked for some time to continuous yelling and then, realizing that everything was O.K., I looked up. Every window of a six-story school building some distance away was packed with children screaming and waving; the outside stairways were filled. When I turned around, I saw the entire lot was full too. I was surrounded with a crowd 30 to 40 people deep. To my right they were standing high on piles of sand, and during the next three hours this group periodically came tumbling down in giggles.

Working was fine as I was left just enough room to turn to my bag for more bricks and sand. No danger of my watercup being overturned. The crowd always magically parted. (Unlike Kreuzberg, in Berlin, where it finally took 14-year-old Mendelez drawing a line in the sand with a big knife to arrange by height the endless children who climbed on me.) Generally, spirits were high. As usual there was one person who singled himself out to explain to the others what I was doing. What he said, I don't know, as the only English he knew, and repeated often, was "very good." Yet by sign language and pointing at broken walls and the new buildings, it was clear that he saw some relationship. He did a charcoal drawing of me working and presented it to me (thus surpassing the dinner on a cloth-draped tray that I was once given in Belleville, Paris—a typical gesture of the care and contact generally extended to me in the street). I also passed him my camera and he took some photos.

I left wistfully, wondering how long the dwelling would remain. Two hours later I returned with a friend and it was gone, almost without a trace.

Working in the street was slightly different in Guilin, an isolated provincial town set among the amazing karst formations that epitomize the Westerner's view of traditional Chinese painting. Our wonderful tour guide, a woman named Gu Yang, accompanied me.

She was curious about what I was up to and I also wanted to see if she could translate some of the responses. Pouring rain often interrupted me until a Chinese man came and held an umbrella over us. The crowds were smaller and quieter than in Shanghai, but patient. Gu said she had known they would respond differently. She thought they were shy and a bit stunned by the experience, not sure what to make of it, that it was beautiful, but they didn't know what it was for. I felt a little reticence or lack of spontaneity on their part that may have been the result of an official presence. In this, I felt confirmed in my choice to go it alone in Shanghai.

An hour after I left, this dwelling had also disappeared. In retrospect, it is hard to decide if the dwellings vanished so fast because there is little waste or surplus in China and the clay was put to more utilitarian purposes, or whether they were appropriated as private property, or perhaps as souvenirs.

I didn't have any specific expectations about working in China. Of course making two dwellings gave me only shadowy impressions and the language barrier made communication spotty. I also consciously suppressed some of the erotic elements in my work in deference to what I detect as a general puritanism in contemporary Chinese art that is only occasionally belied by the depiction of exotic ethnic minorities and some recent paintings of nudes in a realist vein.

Except for Socialist realist statuary or posters, we didn't see any "public street art" in China, so my activity must have appeared quite peculiar. I have spent time in the Soviet Union and East Berlin and investigating the possibility of working in the streets there struck me as positively dangerous. Not so in China. I had the feeling of a happiness and curiosity among the people—a certain freedom, over which was clearly layered a structure of official or social sanctions. It seemed alright for me to work in the street as long as I wasn't in any way seen as under anyone's auspices. ■

Charles Simonds is an artist.



Simonds' audience, Guilin. Photo: Gu Yang.



Charles Simonds, Dwelling, 1980, Guilin. Photo: Gu Yang.