



Text from  
a conference  
organized on  
February 23, 1996,  
at Centre d'Etude  
de l'Expression,  
Clinique des  
Maladies Mentales  
et de l'Encéphale,  
Centre Hospitalier  
Sainte-Anne, Paris.

# Earth and sanity

BY C. SIMONDS

## RESUMEN

### Barro y salud mental

Desde hace muchos años, Charles Simonds, escultor norteamericano, modela el barro. Durante su estancia en Francia, mientras exponía sus obras en la Galería Nacional del Juego de Pelota, quiso trabajar, en un ámbito diferente al suyo, con personas que modelasen la arcilla. El taller terapéutico del Centre d'Etude de l'Expression, dirigido por Claire Verdier correspondió a su deseo. En varios encuentros con el artista, se habló de diferentes técnicas: las que podrían ponerse en práctica en taller de terapia por el arte como las utilizadas por este escultor amante del barro desde hace veinte años. De dicho intercambio nacieron un proyecto y una creación. Durante dos meses, una decena de pacientes, el terapeuta, especialista en terapia por el arte, y el escultor, trabajaron en la realización de una obra compuesta por una ciudad, casas y una montaña imaginarias. Charles Simonds participaba en las creaciones individuales pero no las dirigía. Los diferentes trabajos fueron montados sobre un soporte con el objetivo de poder conservarlos y de presentar la obra colectiva en una de las salas del hospital. "Se pudo constatar un verdadero entusiasmo tanto en los pacientes que participaron en esta creación como en Charles Simonds, quien dijo haber aprendido mucho en este intercambio. El proyecto presentaba un carácter más educativo que terapéutico. Los beneficios obtenidos por los pacientes fueron diversos. Aparte de su carácter estimulante y gratificante desde un punto de vista narcisista, la calidad de los vínculos que se establecieron y el efecto socializador se revelaron esenciales.

## RESUME

### Terre et santé

Charles Simonds, artiste américain, travaille la terre depuis de nombreuses années. Pendant son séjour en France, parallèlement à l'exposition de ses œuvres à la Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, il a souhaité travailler avec

des personnes qui modèlent l'argile dans un cadre différent. L'atelier thérapeutique de modelage du Centre d'Etude de l'Expression (Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encéphale), animé par Claire Verdier, pouvait répondre à sa demande. Au cours de plusieurs rencontres avec l'artiste, les différentes pratiques, celles d'un atelier d'art-thérapie, celles d'un sculpteur passionné depuis vingt ans par la terre ont été discutées. De ces échanges sont nés un projet et une création.

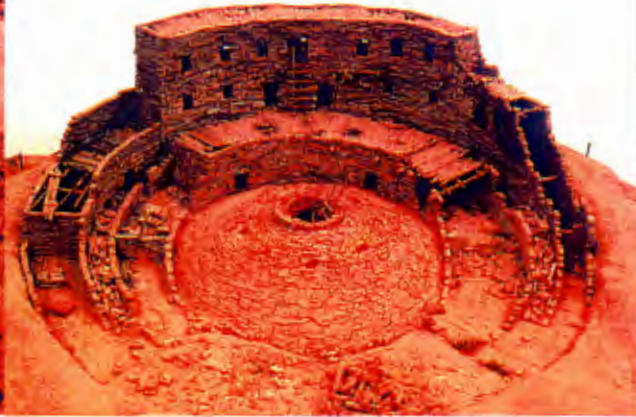
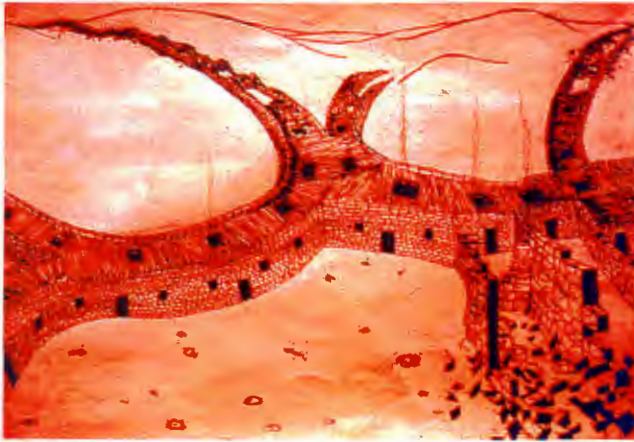
Pendant deux mois, une dizaine de patients, l'art-thérapeute et l'artiste ont travaillé autour de la réalisation d'une ville, de maisons et d'une montagne imaginaires. Charles Simonds était présent pour participer aux créations individuelles, et non pour les diriger. Les différents travaux ont été assemblés sur un support afin de les conserver et de présenter l'œuvre collective dans une salle de l'hôpital.

Un enthousiasme réel a pu être constaté, tant chez les patients qui ont participé à cette création que chez Charles Simonds, qui dit avoir beaucoup appris de cet échange. Le projet avait un caractère plutôt éducatif que thérapeutique. Les bénéfices que les patients en ont retirés furent très variés. En dehors de l'aspect stimulant et narcissiquement gratifiant, la qualité des liens qui se sont noués et l'aspect socialisant sont apparus comme essentiels.

### Charles Simonds is an artist who lives and works in New York.

Since 1970 he has spent much of his time creating dwelling places for an imaginary civilization of "little people" in streets and neighborhoods throughout the world. During his exhibition at the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris (December 1994 - January 1995),

he proposed a communal sculptural project for a group of patients at the Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encéphale (Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne) with the assistance of Claire Verdier, art therapist. The project was sponsored by Pfizer Pharmaceuticals.



1 - C. Simonds,  
"Linear People"

2 - C. Simonds,  
"Circular  
People"

**C**harles Simonds, an American artist, has worked with clay for many years. During his stay in France, at the time of the exhibition of his works at Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, he wanted to work with those who had modelled clay in a different context. The therapeutic modelling workshop of the Centre d'Etude de l'Expression (Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encéphale), run by Claire Verdier, answered his request. Through several meetings with the artist, the different practices, those of an art-therapy workshop and those of a sculptor fascinated by clay for more than 20 years, were discussed. These exchanges led to a project and a creation.

For two months, some 10 patients, the art-therapist and the artists worked on the production of an imaginary town, houses and a mountain. Charles Simonds was there to participate in the individual creations and not to direct them. The different works were assembled on a support in order to preserve them and present the collective work in a hospital ward.

Real enthusiasm was noted from both the patients who had participated in this creation and from Charles Simonds who said he had learned a lot from the exchange. The project had an aspect that was more educational than therapeutic. The benefits for patients were very varied. Other than the stimulating and narcissistically gratifying aspect, the quality of the ties established and the social aspect appeared as essential.

**A**s you can see I have no white coat. I am not a doctor. I am an artist. I am an artist who works with himself, his body, his heart and often with other people. I didn't ask to do a workshop at Sainte-Anne's Hospital, I responded to a question put to me by Daniel Abadie, director of the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, he asked if I would be interested in working with patients at a mental hospital during the retrospective exhibition of my work there



3 - C. Simonds,  
"Spiral People"



4 - C. Simonds,  
"Justice" 1981,  
clay, wood  
and bone,  
24 x 75,8  
x 76cm,  
Collection  
Harold R. Handler

in 1995. I agreed to propose a project. I should point out that I had no a prior theory of mental "illness" nor of art therapy. I had no intention of "curing" or of even offering "help" to anyone. I was extremely curious, fearful, but courageous. I wanted to see if anything I could offer would be useful, to see what the response to my thoughts and work might be, and to see what my project might provoke. I had, in fact, no agenda and I must say I wasn't altogether sure what it was about my own life's

5 - C. Simonds,  
"Age" 1983, clay,  
310 x 800  
x 840cm,  
Collection Foster  
et Monique  
Goldstrom



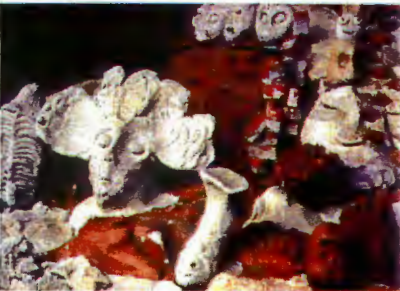
6 - "How to  
make bricks"



7 - Centre  
Hospitalier  
Sainte-Anne  
(Paris),  
Patientswork  
(detail)



8 - Centre  
Hospitalier  
Sainte-Anne  
(Paris),  
Patientswork  
(detail)



9 - Centre  
Hospitalier  
Sainte-Anne  
(Paris),  
Patientswork  
(detail)



agenda that made me any different from the patients I would meet. I think it is important to keep in mind that the image I presented was that of a non-authoritative, non-judgemental presence and I think this was underscored for everyone because I only spoke French with a child's vocabulary. It didn't surprise me to learn that the participants had christened me "petit Charles". I think this personal interaction is a good indication of the freedom the patients felt. I would like to describe the evolution of the project in the following manner : first I will tell you a little about my work. We shall take a glimpse at those parts of my work that are directly connected to this project. We'll also look at an example I construct between verbal fantasy and physical image. Then I will describe the proposed project, how it was presented, how it evolved, what the physical results were, and finally the participants verbalizations and interactions. Most of the last thirty years of my life has been spent constructing dwelling places for an imaginary civilization of "little people". Each dwelling tells part of the story of

the lives of these people. Where they go, what they do, and how they behave. You never see the people themselves only their dwellings. I have done this all over the world and since it is done in the street it often involves interaction with other people. Children add their favorite toys, some people try to protect the dwellings, some try to take them home to protect them, but break them in the process which generally provokes a lot of discussion about the neighborhood they are made in.

Some of the things I create are about images of time, where we are ? where we are going ? where we have been ?

Here are what I call "linear people", people who live in a line and leave the past behind like a museum.

Here are "circular people" who live in a circle, excavating the past and rebuilding it into their present.

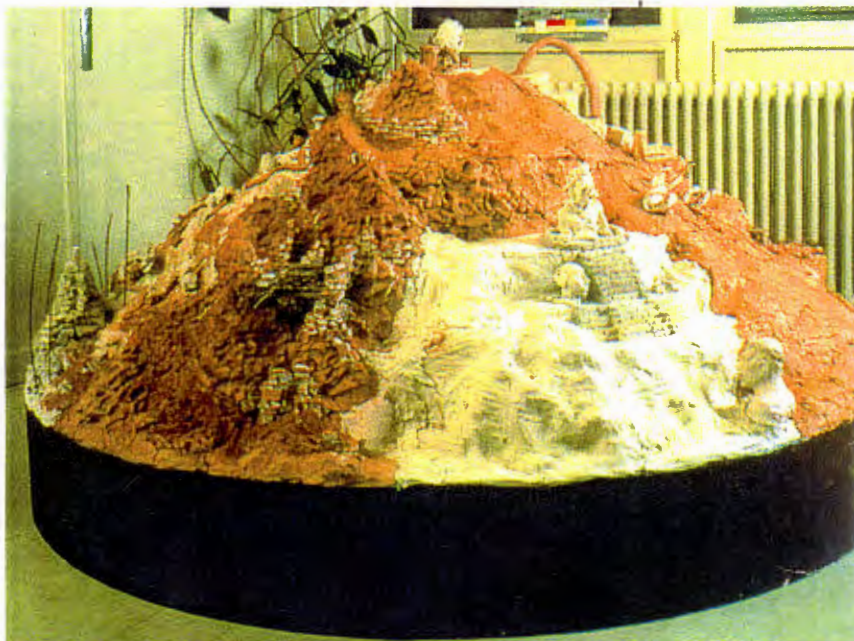
Here are "spiral people" who bury the past and use it as building material to try to make their dwelling higher.

Now I'd like to present one of my projects called "Justice" and to describe my personal fantasy attached to it. (This is something I rarely do because I am more interested in allowing people to use what I make as a spring-board to excavate a fantasy from their own imaginations rather than give them a prejudicial one of my own). It may also help to understand the relationship between imaginative verbal fantasy and visual image, as it exists for me. It will serve as a backdrop to look at the same themes for the participants in the project here at Sainte-Anne's Hospital. This is a work that I gave to a lawyer friend of mine who is in every way a moral mentor for me. Here in the upper left-hand corner the accused is held in a cell to await his trial. He is led blindfolded to the top of the tower. When he reaches the top he is told that his trial will begin. To his right sit two advocates, one to argue his innocence, the other his guilt. Opposite him sits a jury. Each member of the jury has a yellow ball which at the end of the trial they must either throw away or retain to vote his guilt or innocence. To his left sits a judge. If the accused is found guilty he must voluntarily jump off the tower into some stakes below, where he is impaled and dies. If he is found innocent he descends the tower, passes the judge, shakes his hand and then passes through these symbolic gates to freedom. This should give you a taste of the function of fantasy for me in my own work.

I would now like to describe the project I proposed to the participants here. One of the largest works included in my retrospective exhibition at the Jeu de Paume was Age. It is a large mountain of many different times, habitations

and earth-flesh, which originally filled the Rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. I suggested that collectively, the participants at the workshop construct their communal mountain of fantasy, each developing their individual fantasy landscape-dwelling, working together but allowing (as often happens when I work in the streets) each person to let a path or trail from one dwelling to lead to their neighbors and thereby letting their fantasies mingle and interact. First I showed them a lump of clay, how it could be spread out and sprinkled with sand so that it would appear to be a place. I then showed them how to make bricks and how to begin to construct a wall then an enclosure and finally how to introduce time by making a ruin.

The metaphoric aspects of this dialectic were seized very quickly and powerfully and thrown around the table by the participants. One said "a wall... it could protect you", another said "it could imprison you". Then began a long discussion of the wall here in front of Sainte-Anne's and the function of the hospital protective imprisonment: "protecting who from whom?", "keeping who in?", "who out?" Existential questions of who's in and who's out, one's own imprisonment in oneself. Comments were made "My life has been one of leaving a trail of ruins behind (like the "linear people")." "Everything is in ruins." "That's just what I must do (referring to "circular people") rebuild my present from the ruins of my past". One participant, when presented with the thought of making his own fantasy dwelling place with bricks saw it as an existential impossibility and became tremendously anxious and stressed because his "home" place was actually a cave. It seemed that he had spent most of his active "psychic" life investigating caves and was obsessed with the mineralized "growth" of stalagmites and stalagmites (an analogy to some of my thoughts which I enjoyed!). He could not imagine building such a place. Another worked quickly and obsessively because, as she said, "the earth is seething, volcanic, molten and hot underneath, and if I don't move quickly it will erupt, and it, and my thoughts, will engulf and overtake me". Another developed an elaborate fantasy of a king with three sons. One good one, who had to ascend a mountain of sickness by the most difficult path, past the tongue the monsters, to pick a curing flower in order to descend amidst happiness and goodness to help everyone. Another created a stair that led "nowhere" except to "a place to scream from". "Why does a stair have to lead anywhere?" she asked. Curiously, to me, these verbalizations greatly enhanced the visual information created and I imagine they must have been food for thought for some therapeutic leads which I, as an interloper, had no means of evalua-



ting or developing. But the social interactions I found surprising and touching. Our cold winter studio was often heated by what was described as our "chaleur humaine". On various occasions the participants confronted and comforted each other, massaged each other when their backs were tired, treated each other's fragile work preciously and carefully, when helping to move it about. They worked intensely, almost desperately as though the construction process was self-evidently tied to their own reconstruction, and that the fragility and preciousness of their work was a reflection of how important that metaphor was. They clearly felt useful "utile" as a team, having made something together, "but each with a part that was his or her own". They acted socially together while creating and socially in the context of Sainte-Anne's Hospital when the work was exhibited in the reception room of the hospital. Finally I was personally moved by the comraderie I felt and felt included in it.

I hold as a signature image for myself, a scene of one of the oldest and one of the youngest participants leaving the atelier one evening hand in hand.

## References

GALERIE NATIONALE DU JEU DE PAUME, *Charles Simonds*, catalogue d'exposition, 19 décembre 1994 - 29 janvier 1995, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994.

10 - Centre  
Hospitalier  
Sainte-Anne (Paris),  
Patientswork 1995,  
70 x 200cm