

Charles Simonds

Age

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The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

1071 Fifth Avenue

New York City 10128

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D.W.

Age. 1982-83
Clay, plaster, wood, 26' diameter
Courtesy Castelli Feigen Corcoran, New York

Charles Simonds

Since 1970 Charles Simonds has been constructing miniature clay-brick dwellings to house his imaginary Little People. These transitory structures of unfired clay, which to date number over three hundred, were initially made in New York; more recently, Simonds has executed his houses in such diverse locations as Paris, Berlin, Dublin, Venice, Shanghai and Guilin, China.

Simonds envisions his Little People as a migratory tribe that lives "in gutters, on window ledges, in niches in walls, under loading platforms, in vacant lots...."¹ and divides them into three categories: those who live in a line, those who build in a circle and those who construct spirals. For him the Little People embody primordial parallels between man and dwelling, between man, dwelling and the earth. Although the Little People are nowhere in evidence, the traces of their migrations, indeed the history of their existence, are documented in these structures. As Simonds says:

Each dwelling is a different scene from the Little People's lives. They have particular beliefs which form, or inform, that space. Some are religious places; some are ruins; some are reinhabited ruins; some are just houses and settlements.²

As Simonds has peopled SoHo and the Lower East Side, Europe and the Far East with this swelling race of phantom populations, so he has allowed for their existence within the realm of fantasy and of ordinary life. For Simonds, these dwellings signify the concept of origination; like man they are born of the earth, made of its same clay. Thus they function on many levels: evoking ancient civilizations now lost to us at the same time they represent actual houses for a race of imaginary people and coexist with the life of the street. The newly invented microcosm of the Little People becomes a metaphor for civilization as a whole and speaks to the viewer of Simonds's concern for the social, cultural, metaphysical nature of existence.

For Simonds, the form that best expresses man and his civilization is his dwelling. The distinctive styles and shapes of Simonds's structures reflect the particular characteristics of different cultures. But while they are reminiscent of ancient archaeological sites, of Egyptian and Pre-

Columbian or American Indian forms, Simonds's sculptures are also organic in nature and erotic in form and content. In this respect his work recalls that of Claes Oldenburg, whose concept of eroticizing the environment was considered highly innovative in the 1960s. But whereas Oldenburg's fantasy took shape in the form of large-scale monuments, Simonds's visionary buildings are for the most part small or even miniature. Nonetheless, like Oldenburg, Simonds exploits abrupt shifts in scale, juxtaposing large and small forms for dramatic effect. Similary Simonds's structures, like Oldenburg's, evolved out of performance, developing specifically from *Birth of 1970* and *Landscape/Body Dwelling*, first presented in 1971. Simonds speaks of these as follows:

One of the original connections between the earth and my body is sexual. This infuses everything I do, both the forms and the activities. In my own personal mythology I was born from the earth, and many of the things I do are aimed at refreshing and articulating that awareness for myself and others.

Landscape/Body Dwelling is a process of transformation of land into body, body into land. I can feel myself located between the earth beneath me (which bears the imprint of my body contour) and the clay landscape on top of me (the underside of which bears the other contour of my body). Both *Birth* and *Landscape/Body Dwelling* are rituals the Little People would engage in. Their dwellings in the streets are part of that sequence.³

Simonds's sculpture is a product of the aesthetic attitudes that were in the process of formation in the late 1960s and reveals affinities with other work that emerged during this period. Like many of his contemporaries, Simonds was seeking an alternative to the concept of painting and sculpture as a precious object. Earthworks, which came into prominence at that time, offered such an alternative: they represent an art of rebellion, whose purposes and spirit were antithetical to the narrow goals of the gallery, an art of the environment, subject to the dictates of place rather than the demands of the consumer. Art became a reflection of a time, a place, a site. Materials and process were as fundamental as concept. The Earthwork artists expressed a nostalgia for the



past which was reflected in the ancient forms they admired and adopted in their work; they also identified with the most radical art of the present. The resolution of this dichotomy was central to the development of Simonds and other artists working in this milieu.

Like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, Simonds wanted to move his work out into the real world. But the urban landscape of the city, rather than the rural environment of the desert or salt lake most appealed to him. Like Heizer's *Double Negative* and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Simonds's structures are often predicated on the notion of temporality. Few of the works that he created for sites in SoHo or on the Lower East Side exist today. More important to Simonds than their permanence was the activity of making art for the street. The interaction between his dwellings, the life and the decay of the city, the reaction and even participation of his audience, the creation of forms that were inevitably altered by the environment were of greater consequence to him than the finite nature of his work. Like Heizer and Smithson, Simonds accepted the alteration of form and the ultimate destruction of the work by the inevitable process of erosion. The factors of chance and of time, the phenomena of nature and the elements became integral parts of the dynamic of the sculpture. Although the majority of his dwellings have lasted only a few days, others exist for a longer period as installations or indefinitely as individual works. Among the larger installations are *Circles and Towers Growing*, a series of twelve landscape sculptures, both of 1978, and *House Plants* of 1981, a group of three pieces that combines plant, architectural and anatomical forms.

Age, Simonds's largest work to date, is approximately twenty-six feet in diameter. Conceived for the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, it spirals from its base to a height of just over nine feet at its center. The work was constructed in Simonds's studio, dismantled, removed to the Guggenheim, reconstructed and finished in the Museum. Simonds laid the bricks with a pair of tweezers and bound them with Elmer's glue thinned with water. Built in seventy-two parts on an armature of wood overlaid with chicken wire, which is then covered with fabric dipped in

plaster, it incorporates both miniature and life-size forms.

Age began as a spiral: inspired by both the inverted spiral of Frank Lloyd Wright's pioneering design and Simonds's preoccupation with the rich expressive potential of the form. Simonds states that the people of the spiral "aspired towards an ecstatic death. Their goal was to achieve both the greatest possible height and to predict the very moment of collapse, the moment when the last of their resources would be consumed and their death inevitable."⁴ Thus, the spiral is a death image. However, as the work evolved it began to assume the shape of a whorl, which, according to Simonds, differs from a spiral in that none of the arcs complete a total revolution. For Simonds the whorl is a more encompassing image than the spiral and draws different kinds of time and space into its structure. It evokes, in a non-narrative manner, the ages of man, man's origin from the earth and the origin of the dwelling from man.

Age, like all of Simonds's work, is made of clay. Simonds has worked with the material since childhood, when, together with his older brother, John, he studied clay modeling with John De Marco and Claire Frezano, New York sculptors who specialized in traditional church sculptures. His talent for modeling and attraction to clay were immediately apparent; there was never a question of what he was going to do nor with what medium he would work. He uses the same clays in all of his sculpture. Often he obtains these from a location near Sayreville, New Jersey, but when he works far from New York he uses materials from the vicinity of the site. Most are not homogenized or cleaned and in many cases they are recycled from earlier street sculptures that have either disintegrated or are left over from temporary installations. The color of the material is important for Simonds, who uses both red and gray clays in *Age*. The artist explains:

The red has a thousand moments. It's extraordinary for its fleshiness. It's rubbery; it almost springs back when you touch it. For me, its association with the body is inescapable. The gray suggests stone, blocks or rocks.



From these two basics it is easy to project a larger series of associations. It all has to do with how you use the clay, the history of what you remember it having been.⁵

In *Age*, as in many of his other sculptures, Simonds has sprinkled a variety of sands over the clay to bring color and light into the work. In many of his pieces Simonds surrounds his small brick dwellings with larger mounded forms. Here, however, there are two separate faces: the dwellings constitute the major image on one side, while on the other face the biomorphic mounding forms predominate. The majority of Simonds's work is site specific and the sites fall into two categories. Works are either placed in a wall that is relatively neutral or into sites that are ambiguous in nature. In the volatile street environment for which many of the works were created or in the rich organic structure of the Guggenheim Museum, Simonds's sculptures take on additional levels of meaning. Not only the colors of the clay but also the forms into which it is shaped evoke organic and inorganic allusions: it is shaped into both male and female forms, phallic shapes, swelling breast-like protrusions and brick dwellings. Thus, like much of his other sculpture, *Age* is the result of a "process of transformation of land into body, body into land." In giving life to clays Simonds is recreating the origin of man, of civilization, of the world of the Little People. He has transformed his private mythology into a cosmos that touches upon all of life, all of creativity.

Diane Waldman
Deputy Director

Footnotes

1. Lucy R. Lippard, "Microcosm to Macrocosm/Fantasy World to Real World," *Artforum*, vol. 12, Feb. 1974, p. 36
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Charles Simonds, "Three Peoples," in *Charles Simonds*, exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1981, p. 37
5. Phil Patton, "The Lost Worlds of the 'Little People,'" *Art News*, vol. 82, Feb. 1983, p. 88



Age in progress in Simonds's studio







Cover photo by Carmelo Guadagno and David Heald
Black and white photos by David Heald