

# *BOMB*

Charles Simonds by  
Christopher Lyon

*Learning to dwell in various landscapes.*





*Dwelling with passerby*, East Houston Street, New York, 1972. All images courtesy of the artist.

Since 1970, New York City–based Charles Simonds has created miniature landscapes with meticulously crafted *Dwellings*, as he calls them, for an imaginary civilization of Little People, who are migrating through neighborhoods in New York, mainly the Lower East Side, and appear in other cities throughout the world. He is also known for larger-scale sculptures, installations, and videos.

Last year, Simonds gave a “Modern Mondays” talk at the Museum of Modern Art. Veronika Vogler attended the event, which included a Q&A with Stephanie Weber, then Assistant Curator at MoMA, and Christopher Lyon, now the publisher of Lyon Artbooks. An excerpt of their conversation is below, followed by Vogler’s further questions to Simonds about his *Dwellings* and *Floating Cities*, as well as recent projects.

### **Christopher Lyon**

I’ve always been fascinated by your attitude toward the objects you make. The goal of what you’re doing is not to produce *things*—art objects—but to realize a vision or fantasy, and to create the conditions for the viewer to have a revealing encounter. It’s an odd paradox: there’s this tremendously powerful impulse to make the objects, yet also a kind of startling disengagement from, or lack of interest in, the objects once they are made. I’d like to first talk about your making the objects, in more or less existential terms. You’ve called the process

“making home,” as opposed to being nomadic or wandering, and said, “The making of a dwelling is about being and becoming in that place.”

### **Charles Simonds**

Making a *Dwelling* is a compulsion. It’s about an ecstatic moment: after a day of brick-by-brick building, I sprinkle the wet clay with sand, the colors become vibrant, and the image crystallizes. After that, the Dwelling itself isn’t of much interest to me. The *Dwellings* are an incantation of the Little People, as if I’m building them a nest and inviting them to inhabit it. The Little People arrive once the story I’ve constructed has crystallized enough for them to want to be there. It is also a desperate *gesture* to give them and me a home. When I started making them, for people on the Lower East Side witnessing the drama of them being built, very preciously, only to be later destroyed—often just by children’s curious probing fingers—was a metaphor for a neighborhood in violent transition, where stasis and objecthood were also hard to find. Some people tried to protect the *Dwellings* by taking them home, treating them as objects, and hence actually also destroyed them, and deprived other people of them. They are communal and belong to everyone until one person wants to possess them. They frustrate possession.

### **CL**

One of the richest and most central concerns of your art is the relationship of the work to the audience. Your *Dwellings* and landscapes are incomplete without the psychological engagement of the individual who encounters them. They are transactional, in an important sense.

### **CS**

Absolutely. I exist in this little fantasy world, but I discovered that the street has the benefit of eliciting people’s reactions. I hold hands with my audience, so to speak; often, as I work, I’m listening to their personal stories and tales about the neighborhood. People who work with me, creating their own dwelling, often tell me of the fantasy they are imagining. In other cultures I might be a shaman or trickster—transactional, in the way you’re describing it, rather than an “artist” in ours, where art is meant to be kept and sold. Keeping relics doesn’t interest me. The value of something is not its cost. The *Dwellings* in the street exist as rumor and memory, as a folk mythology, severed from a materialist reality. People even tell me about “*Dwellings*” they’ve seen where I never made one.

**CL**

Just to follow up on that sort of transactional idea, you said in 1976 that you always thought of your work as “transsocial, transpolitical, transsexual, transparent(al).”

**CS**

*Transparent(al)*! Yes, my work is easy, and free. You don’t need a college education to understand what I’m doing. I never thought of “popular art” pejoratively. And my work comes from both my parents, hence is male *and* female—transsexual and transparent(al).

**CL**

Just to take this transactional idea a little further, it’s not simply that the objects are there but that the objects themselves are active—they’re actually doing something in relation to the viewer. And you have said, I think, that the *Dwellings* are a “lever,” and that they conceptualize things for people at a certain moment. We’ve talked about how the works can be a kind of litmus test for people’s beliefs, and you said even in that 1972 film [*Dwellings*] that the survival of the Little People is dependent on the treatment they receive.

**CS**

I’ll give you some examples that might be useful. I worked for a year in Germany, during the Baader-Meinhof time, mind you, so police came with machine guns, and with a “What’s this terrorist doing?” mentality. Although what I do appears much the same wherever I go, reactions are very different.





*Dwelling, Rue des Cascades, Paris, 1976*

**CL**

You've also talked about how people encountering them project the *Dwellings* into their own culture. If they are American, they think of the Southwest Indians, but if you're from Turkey—

**CS**

Living in Berlin's Kreuzberg, as a guest laborer, you see it as part of Turkey, or in Paris if you're North African, you think of it as Morocco. But it's interesting because Americans seem to think so prejudicially that it's an Anasazi recreation, which it's not. It's just a primitive way of building, and it's a fantasy so ... they're not recreations or models of any particular time or place.

**CL**

You have talked about your attraction to extremes; I'm thinking of mountain-climbing, sailing, and long hours making your work in difficult conditions. You also are attracted to materials with extreme properties, as in your work at Sèvres. I'm wondering if you could talk about that a little bit more?

## CS

I happened to go to Sèvres to repair a sculpture I had sent to France for my exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. I started to play with porcelain, and that fascinated me. Normally, I have a very, very clear and articulate a priori mental vision of what I want to make. But my work is always about disappointments, because the material never fulfills what I actually see in my mind's eye. Sèvres porcelain seemed to offer a fineness that promised to resolve that for me. For instance, they make little figurines there, and I said, "Okay, bring me some casts of the pubescent legs of some sort of running forest nymph, and I'm going to make encrusted chicken pox pustules covered by drying wet silk." (*audience laughter*) I wanted to challenge this porcelain to appear to be covering something that's dry and encrusted, with wet silk. I mean, porcelain is remarkable, you can whisper on it, and it will take a form at a certain moment, but that window is very, very narrow. If it dries too much, it just turns into chalk, essentially, and it's a disaster.



*Life, With Thorns*, 2011. Porcelain. Created at Manufacture Nationale de Céramiques, Sèvres, France

I made a work called *Tumbleweeds* and, later, one called *Life, with Thorns*. They are attempts to try to realize very particular images for me: an image of something growing and wilting, and regrowing again—with thorns. These works carry certain kinds of meanings for me, and they came as visions in a way. And the porcelain promised a resolution to that, so that's actually what attracted me to it. But there's a wonderful saying at Sèvres, "Porcelain is like an old lover and you somehow didn't notice that you had said something that offended them. And when they go in the oven, they're going to come out and break because of what you said. " Something like that ... (*laughter*)

Arthur Danto picked up on another aspect of this, operating at the opposite extreme: my interest in primitive gestures and the ways of touching clay. Since I dig my clay, it is unprocessed, and each batch has a million moments going from wet to dry, a million moments between being wet and sexy, to fleshy, to stiff, to hard and obdurate, to being rocklike. Each moment provides a different

way to caress, seduce, cajole, or aggress it, from the most tender touch to the most brutal pounding, carving, cutting, or breaking. And each of those moments has an associated sound that it makes in response to being touched. It speaks back.

### **Stephanie Weber**

The context within which you choose to place your work plays a crucial role. Who are you addressing it to?

### **CS**

Yes, it's essential. I've sought contexts for my work that can expand its audience, its effect, and what I can learn from doing it.

### **SW**

Could you give a few examples?

### **CS**

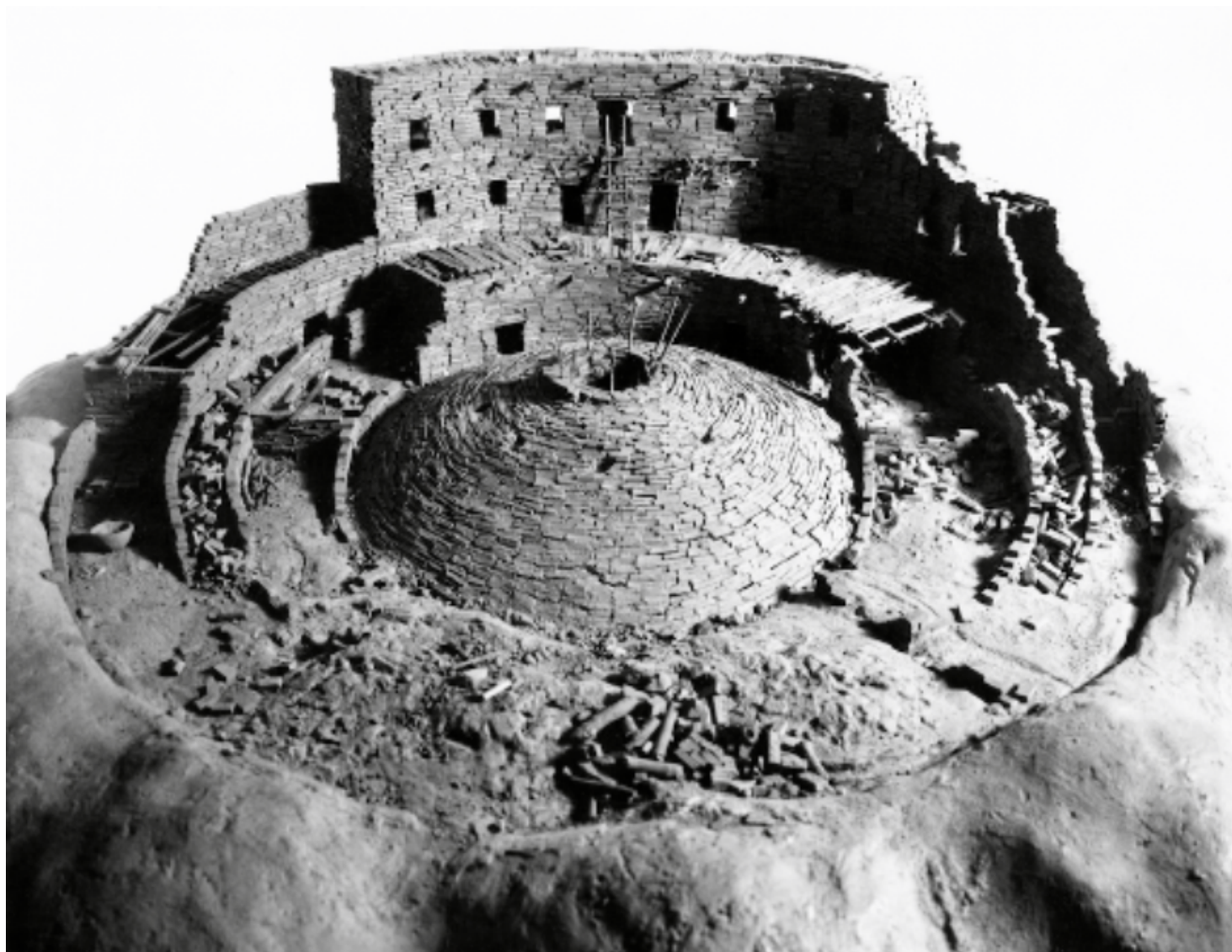
In the '70s I worked on the Lower East Side, during the drug plague there. I did an illegal exhibition in East Berlin when the Wall still divided the city. In 1980, I worked in streets of Shanghai and Guilin, China, just after the Cultural Revolution had subsided. In Paris, I worked together with mental patients at Hospital Sainte-Anne—where Antonin Artaud was incarcerated—on a communal clay sculpture. They saw my *Circular People* (1972) as ego reconstruction and said, "Oh! That's just what we're trying to do, reconstruct our lives from the ruins of our past!" Every architectural element they created—walls, doors, stairs—was perceived as excruciatingly existential.

When I made *Dwellings* in the Old Port area of Genoa, also in the '70s, a frizzy-haired Fellini-esque prostitute became a great protectress of the Little People, placing candles around a Dwelling that she believed was a religious shrine. Between tricks, she would bellow "*Non toccare!*" to anyone who approached it.

In 1975 I met Josefa, a ten-year-old from Spain living with her aunt in Belleville, Paris, who, upon discovering my Little People, explained to me all about hers. In her world, if you ate something and didn't share it, it turned to poison in your mouth. She then told me all about the disappointments of a child's fantasy world when meeting the reactions of adolescents and adults around it—these are feelings I share and experience as an ultimate pathos in my work. She accompanied me for most of the month that I made *Dwellings* there.



These situations give a reflection back to me that tells me something about who I am, what I'm doing, and the effect I might hope to have. That's existential, philosophical, and personal, by turns.



*People Who Live in a Circle. They Excavate Their Past and Rebuild It into Their Present. Their Dwelling Functions as a Personal and Cosmological Clock, Seasonal, Harmonic, Obsessive.,1972. Collection MoMA, New York.*





*A Stairs made to provide a place to scream from.* Patient's work at Hospital Sainte-Anne, Paris, 1996.



Simonds and Josefa. Rue des Cascades, Belleville, Paris, 1976.

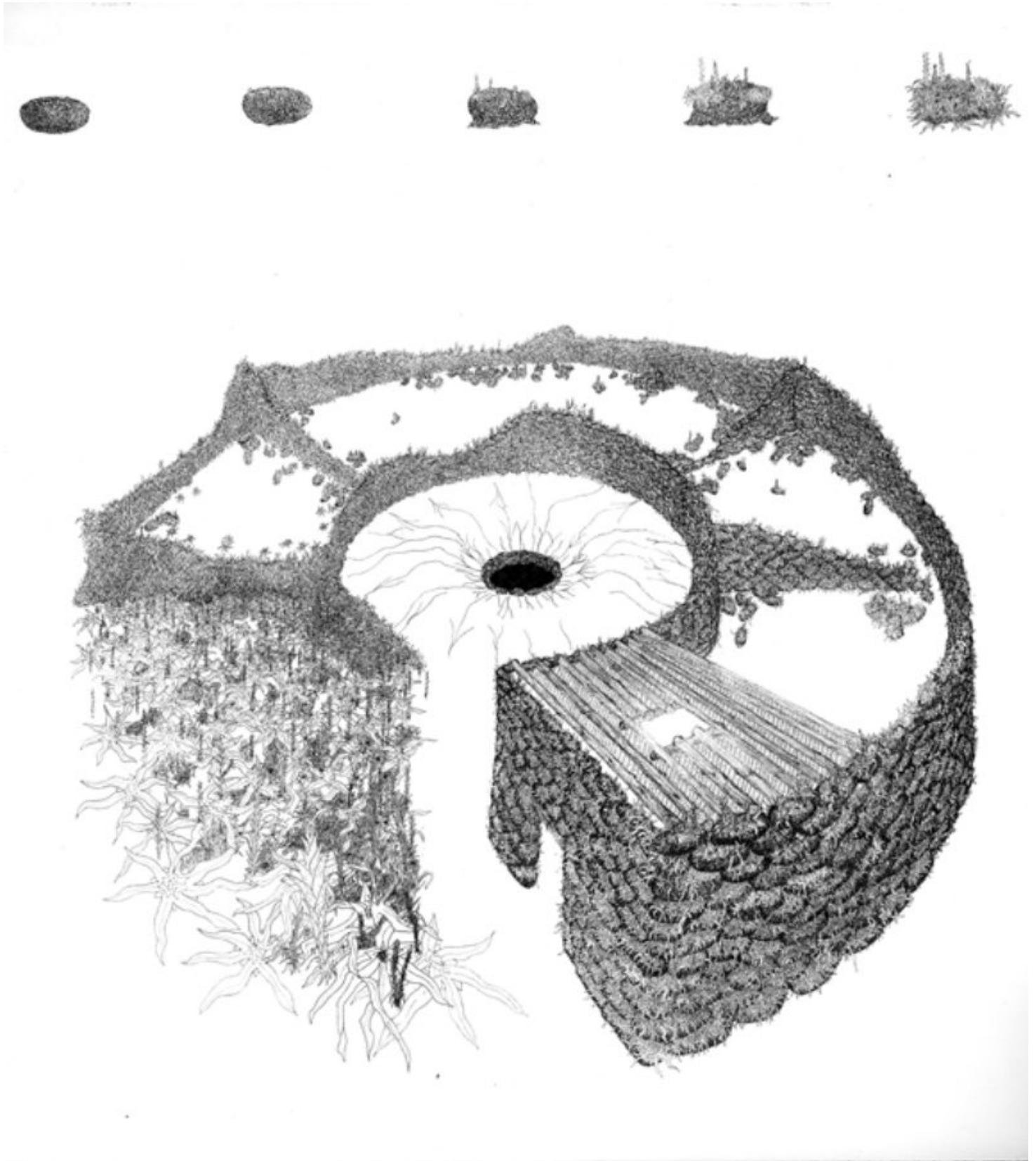
## SW

You posited the possession of the *Dwellings* as destruction. That segues into questions of feminine and male forms. We talked about this at some point, and discussed Lucy Lippard's and Judy Chicago's writings at the time, in which they defined a female imagery with which your work, formally speaking, shares attributes: circular forms, voids, spills, and so on. Your work could be read in relation to this theory of female imagery, unlike that of Smithson or Matta-Clark, for example.

## CS

I haven't thought about it that way. My mother, Dr. Anita I. Bell, was a psychoanalyst who schooled me in the psychosexual stages of child development, with a decidedly anti-Freudian, feminist stance. My perceptions

and formal vocabulary were set long ago.



*Growth House*, A seasonally renewable dwelling made of earthen bricks with seeds inside. As the seeds sprout, growth transforms the built structure, the dwelling is converted from shelter to food and is harvested and eaten. Pen and ink, 1975.

Gender does play a central role in my work. I often describe my Growth House (1974, 1994, 1994–95) as a hermaphroditic structure, marrying building and growing, shelter and food, and the male and female. At its core there is a transformative process, of material and gender. More than feminism, my sources are Jung and alchemy. Other works of mine that explore mixed metaphors of building and growing, architectural and plant forms—such as *Wilted Towers* (1984), *Rock Flower* (1986), and *Growing Towers* (1998)—also invite gender associations, but biological, vitalist, theosophical, and religious perspectives are their sources, more than thoughts about gender forms. Social and political concerns are sources too. The son of two psychoanalysts, I think cross-culturally and am interested in metaphors, memory, and process.

Also, at the center of the mythologies I enact, seen in my 1970-72 films *Birth, Body<->Earth*, and *Landscape<->Body<->Dwelling*, are beliefs about, and experiences of, sexuality. Being born from the earth, believing the earth is a body, transforming my body into a landscape and then making it a dwelling, thinking of my body as my first home—all these pass through different gender identifications.

When I began, minimalism, with its big, hard, erect forms, struck me as a comical caricature of “machismo” compared to my soft, pink, vulnerable *Dwellings*. Once I began living with Lucy [Lippard] in 1972, I watched feminism evolve in the arts community, learned about consciousness-raising groups, Judy Chicago’s organizing of collectives, and discussions about what a “female form” is. The obsessiveness with which I make my *Dwellings*, knitting with tweezers, almost, seems feminine next to the big boys’ toys of machines. The Little People coalesce community, provoke activism, and elicit each participant’s own fantasy—I saw the same hopes among feminists. But I was never very concerned about “female forms.” Although my work arises, in part, from meditations about my body, I’m not inclined to define and identify with gender solely through forms that imitate genitalia—a trope frequently employed by both women and men! Sculpturally, that’s certainly formally simplistic to me; as a way to own one’s identity, it appears necessary, but limiting. Lucy and I used to actually joke that the most “feminine” objects in our home were a painting by her father, Vernon, of a Fort Popham, Maine, spiral staircase, and my *Circular People Dwelling* (1972). I am more involved with belief, behavior,



and experience as a way to explore gender.



*Wilted Towers*, 1984.





*Growing Towers*, 1983.





*Tarot Card, Dawn, 1969*

**SW**

Can you speak to the differences that you perceive between your work and that of Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, especially in regard to the different symbolic realms they inhabit?

**CS**

Gordon and I were very close friends, and we both lived at 131 Chrystie Street

1969–71. Perhaps we were the better versions of our brothers to each other. We often worked together, physically helping each other with our projects, he with my *Tarot Cards* (1969) at the Sayreville, New Jersey, clay pits and with taking molds from buildings, I with his *Jacks* (1971) and *Photo-Fry* (1969), among others. His childlike acts of cutting and destroying in the service of creativity struck me as very male.

Bob and I were friends, and I know that the overt eroticism of my work fascinated him. For a while he had an image of *Landscape<->Body<->Dwelling* that I'd given him up on his wall. We once planned a day together to explore our varying "source" landscapes. First we went to my soft, wet, pink, sticky, quicksand-filled Sayreville New Jersey clay pits—with the top of a sunken nineteenth-century steam shovel sticking up, which pleased Bob immensely—where we became encrusted in clay. Then we went to his hard, black, geometrically cut stone quarry above Montclair. Right through our feet, this made clear to us the intellectual and conceptual dominance in his work, compared to the sensual, experiential, and visceral in mine. I viewed his work as two-dimensionally design-oriented, and distanced from his materials in time and space: a conceptual reverie.

Bob's non-sites and Gordon's extracting of parts of homes, brought to a gallery, to an art context, seemed headed in the opposite direction from mine, and also a bit naive, oblivious to some basic social and political realities outside the special world of Art. It was a way to rethink art and architectural issues, but still seemed "culture bound" and insular to me. Once, Gordon asked me to introduce him to some of the community groups I was working with on the Lower East Side, and I did, but I was reluctant, since one of the primary efforts in the neighborhood was to secure city funding to seal up abandoned buildings with cinderblock before squatters had a chance to torch them, hoping for an eventual Sweat equity rehab. Thinking of Gordon cutting them up to transport fragments to a gallery seemed a bit like slumming, a bit rapacious, and ultimately an *épater le bourgeois* gesture. The issue in the neighborhood was what could be brought into it, not what could be taken from it. Bob's romanticizing of New Jersey's industrial landscape, finding the sublime in it, is beautiful poetry, but, to me, had an inescapable detached irony within. Contexts skew perspectives.





Still from *Landscape<->Body<->Dwelling*, 1970.

### **Veronika Volger**

What is the significance of scale in your work? In your talk at MoMA you said that you are not involved with scale, even though your *Dwellings* are very, very small and you place the bricks with tweezers.

### **Charles Simonds**

I don't think in scale. Some works I make are larger or smaller in size, or longer or shorter in duration, depending on the situation I'm addressing. My work is the result of visualizing imaginative images in my mind's eye—these don't really have a scale. I can think of the street *Dwellings* in terms of scale, but only conceptually, in terms of how they affect people. They're very efficient, leveraged in scale, and are able to touch a large group of people in time and space (in a given neighborhood and through memory) with a small expenditure of mass and energy. They have a kind of elegant, political physics of scale, given

their location and effect. But I'm "inside" each *Dwelling* as I make it, and imagine its story. They're really not conceived as small, even though each one is a very small part of an epic story.

**VV**

How relevant is it for the viewer to know the story behind each group of Little People? You mentioned that there are things that you do not reveal about them. Are these secrets changing or are they constant?

**CS**

There's usually a fairly elaborate story that allows me to inhabit each *Dwelling* as I make it, but the story is my own. It's quite personal and idiosyncratic, and is not a secret—it's simply mine. I've often found, working in the street, that if I tell my story, it crowds out passersby's projections. I'm reluctant to reveal it so as to allow others to imagine their own stories of what may have happened in a particular *Dwelling*.

**VV**

I would like to discuss the process of *Floating Cities*, especially in the context of space as well as late capitalism. In today's world we long for something like them, but they seem even further away than when you originally conceived them.

**CS**

Much of my work derives from thinking about how people and organisms live in time and space, and how their dwellings reflect their beliefs and their behaviors. The *Floating Cities* come from these thoughts. The original idea was provoked by seeing a drawing of a park on a barge by Bob Smithson. In 1972, while I was working to help create La Placita, a community park on East Second Street, he and I discussed parks and land use in the city. He helped me fundraise for the park with a letter of support. *Floating Cities* came from my desire to provide everyone with their own imagined ideal, movable dwelling place. It was a reflection upon the dwellings of my peripatetic fantasy Little People, community housing advocacy issues I was involved in as a member of the Board of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing, my critiques of our society's conception of property, the effects of real estate speculation and development, and even problems of cohabitation with my spouse! So, for example, if you wanted to live in an English countryside, and I on a South Sea



Island, I could provide each of us with barges embodying those fantasies. We could attach them, live as neighbors, and then, if we no longer wanted to live together, we could detach and go our separate ways. I was trying to use some of my ideas on time, space, evolution, social organization, and property in proposals for emblematic, larger scale, interventions to critique existing political and historical conditions and ideologies. Incidentally, I used the differentiation of simple cellular organisms on a metaphoric level, to analyze and humorously caricature contemporary architectural styles in my *Floating Cities* model. So certain nerve cells corresponded to administration, factories, digestion, and so on. And MacMansions were fat cells, for instance.



*Floating City*, photomontage, 1978/2014.



*Floating City*, model configuration, 1978.

So, in response to news of a slump in shipbuilding, my idea of personal fantasies on barges evolved into a proposal for floating cities. First exhibited as *Floating Cities and Other Architectures* at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster, Germany, in 1978, it took the form of a rearrangeable architectural model (a toy), diagrams of possible configurations, photomontages, and a fictive text entitled “Floating Cities/Maritime Communities.” It was widely exhibited and is currently installed at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Siegen, Germany. A section of it is permanently installed at the FRAC centre in Orléans, France.

*Floating Cities* are changing constellations of social and economic land units transferred to a water site. Although planned and managed, these maritime communities have the flexibility of a natural system. They are able to divide and

multiply their configurations as much as an organic, cellular structure. I saw them as futuristic communities, alternative modes of living. Free to travel the oceans, the inhabitants would develop an economy based on their unique relationship to the sea and their transitory interaction with fixed, land-based communities. The *Floating Cities* themselves would alter in time, both reflecting the defining characteristics of the inhabitants and, conversely, shaping those very characteristics as the alteration of the site produced altered states of spatial orientation. I made photomontages of the *Floating Cities* to indicate some of the endless possible arrangements of the units.

Recently, servicing Brazilian offshore oil platforms by boats has become impractical because of the distances involved, so oil companies are building floating facilities on barges attached to the platforms, including soccer fields, and so on. There is now a “seasteading” movement soliciting funds in Silicon Valley to create offshore politically independent countries. Perhaps we are getting closer to, rather than further, from this idea.

## VV

The Iroquois don’t have past or future tenses and they do not have a notion of the past or present. Could you discuss the three variants of time—linear, circular, and spiral—in your work?

## CS

If you are referring to the Linear, Circular, and Spiral Peoples in the “Three Peoples” text I wrote, then the issue is complex. In broad strokes, I see linear, circular, and spiral configurations of time as evolutions of an increasing complexity and differentiation. Abstractly, linear becomes circular, and circular becomes spiral. Linear People leave the past behind, untouched, as a museum. Circular People harmonically resonate on their past, reconsidering it, constantly excavating it, and trying to integrate it into their present. The Spiral People represent an evolution combining both the Linear and Circular. They have an imagined purpose and direction in time and space, a gyre. The point goes beyond mere conceptions of time; these notions are meant to be Swiftian critiques of societal structures—primitive, religious, socialist, and capitalist—attempting to hold up a warped mirror to our present day and to distill all that into dynamic architectural emblems.





Installation view at Knoedler Gallery, 2011. Left: *Arabesque*, 2011; center: *Mental Earth*, 2002; right: *Twist*, 2011.

## VV

Today's culture is more and more dependent on technology. Through the use of various social media channels, more and more people are able to connect to one another, whether it is to support a social cause or to share selfies. Are you at all influenced by the nuances of technical innovation or by the way in which information is being shared? What do you see as the shaping influences within your present body of work?

## CS

Well, I do have a website, but I can't feel or smell pixels. I'm still exploring clay, as a *prima materia*, and through touch and gesture. Cajoling, seducing, or demanding that the clays I dig test their physical limits is a passion. Recently, by

relinquishing the coherent narrative of the Little People, I've been exploring a stream of fantasy unattached to an existing architectonic or historical substrate, in which the clay itself determines a story in response to my body. Primitive smears and childish daydreams, *Mental Earth* (2002) is an example. Perhaps as the world becomes more technological, I'll be more and more a low-tech illiterate, still squeezing my clay.

*Charles Simonds is speaking at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University on Tuesday, October 7, 2014, at 6:30 PM. The event is open to the public. Go [here](#) for more information.*

*For more on Charles Simonds, visit his [website](#).*

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