



CHARLES SIMONDS

Interviewed by
DANIEL ABADIE

Dwelling on East Houston St., New York, 1972

ABADIE:
Before the dwellings, what kind of artistic activity did you have?

SIMONDS:
That was a whole four years' work and would be very complicated to explain, but basically it was the following: an elaborate project that transformed my loft into "stations" using clay, my body (hair and fluids), fantasy images, and art historical and architectural image quotations, as a means of creating a fantasy history of a thought. The ingredients were in all different scales; there were fragments of "the colossal dream," small biological specimens, child-like paintings, shadows made with hair, broken and bandaged timbers, tadpoles in various stages of growth, sculptured reliefs of a voyage to Cythera, figures with birdheads, sacrificial columns, fragments of a large stairway covered with plasticene, and all sorts of other things.

ABADIE:
What is the origin of the Little People?

SIMONDS:
In the beginning, I laid down a piece of clay and sprinkled it with sand and it was a place. First there were objects – different ritual places, then slowly the notion of a people developed and the earth was populated. As landscapes, the pieces seemed most natural outdoors, as part of the real landscape. The Little People began migrating through one street. At this time (1970), there were actually two different peoples who were warring with each other. There were cliff dwellers (hunters) who lived on the walls and ledges of buildings; and

there were herdsmen who lived on the plains of the street – in the gutters and against the bases of buildings. The cliff dwellers periodically descended to raid the plains people. Finally the two peoples merged through conquest and assimilation.

Internally the Little People's origin lies somewhere among my childhood visits to the Southwest, running away from my parents while I was there, my upbringing as the son of two psychoanalysts trained in Vienna, having 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.

ABADIE:
Why did you choose to work in the streets?

SIMONDS:
My house was filled up with fantasy places and it seemed so easy just to make them outside, where more people could see them. The street was exciting and adventuresome. The Little People were met with such good will there that they stayed and grew. The architecture of the city is filled with strange crevices, cliffs and ledges that could be endlessly explored. The dwellings have a peculiar way of transforming a man-made space (such as niches of broken bricks in a wall) into a natural landscape, a cliff where a dwelling can be built. It was also fascinating to confront people's proprietary interests in the street. What seemed like open and vacant space was really charged with territorial energies. I worked in SoHo in the beginning (1970-72), at a time when the area still had many laborers. The Little People made contact with two audiences

there – the art people and the regular workers loading trucks. Generally, the art people's reactions were predictable and also inhibited by social conventions that made them try to attach me to their context – the art world. The workers reacted spontaneously with excitement and comments certainly as profound as the art people's. They picked up on many of the associations I found most interesting.

Thinking of this, I decided I wanted to explore one neighborhood of the city – a coherent geography and sociology with which I could work over a period of time. That way the Little People could establish a history and mythology of their own in relationship to one group of people. I wanted a neighborhood that had an active street life, and the Lower East Side seemed right. Many of the workers in SoHo had been Black or Puerto Rican. Actually it was curiosity that brought me to the Lower East Side – the same kind of curiosity that makes me want to explore reactions to the Little People in foreign countries.

I did the first dwelling on the Lower East Side with some trepidation, feeling like an outsider, not really knowing the structure of the neighborhood. I did it on Avenue C – the Broadway of that area. Many people gathered and it was an ecstatic day for me. Little children climbed all over me; policemen, plumbers, junkies checked me out; a storeowner brought me coffee. I was convinced I should stay, and now I've one or more dwellings on every block in the area – about 200 of them, most of which have been destroyed, either by little kids playing bombardier or people trying to take them home.



People Who Live in a Circle, 1972, 30" diameter
Collection Lucy R. Lippard

There is a pattern of reaction to the destruction. Because people see me spending a long time making the dwellings, and because they were so intricate and fragile and beautiful, they are viewed as very precious. Because their image is so strong, when they are destroyed there is a tremendous sense of loss. The dwelling belongs to everyone on the block as long as it is possessed by no one in particular. As soon as someone wants to possess it or take it away, they destroy it.

Through time, my role has changed. At first I was just a crazy man to the people on the Lower East Side, stripped of identity as a person. I was a phenomenon, an anonymous vagabond who made visionary things. As time passed, I became first a folk hero, then an active member of many community groups, especially the Lower East Side

Coalition for Human Housing, with whom I've worked for several years on *La Placita* (the park playlot) and a number of other projects.

ABADIE:

Do you refuse the usual social channels of art, such as commercial galleries?

SIMONDS:

In some instances I do actually refuse the traditional social channels of art; in other instances I just choose other means of pushing my ideas out that seem more appropriate to their content. Most museum-gallery contexts eliminate the most important aspects of my work, such as direct contact with audience, my role and identity as an active individual in the world at large, allusive qualities of time and space related to the real environment, political activity and beliefs. Museums and the art world are governed by a strong predetermined consciousness. The dwellings in the street are happened upon, as a kind of apparition – a dream hole in reality. Being able to affect someone unexpectedly, someone just walking along in his daily life – that's a powerful tool. Thinking about the ways my thought can enter someone's consciousness is one reason I work in the street.

Certainly my role on the Lower East Side is not so peculiar when you look at the role of artists in other societies. There is a difference between a competitive aggressive context and one that preserves a sense of shared humanity and community in a struggle. Crossing social, economic and ethnic lines has been taboo in the art world. I think the fact that my art has become more meaningful and

effective through just that is tremendously important. It could indicate possibilities for other artists. So much art is the unwitting servant of an elite. This is not necessary to affect people's beliefs and values. There are also external aspects that force me to avoid some situations – thoughts about an object's consumption. The transforming of my work into

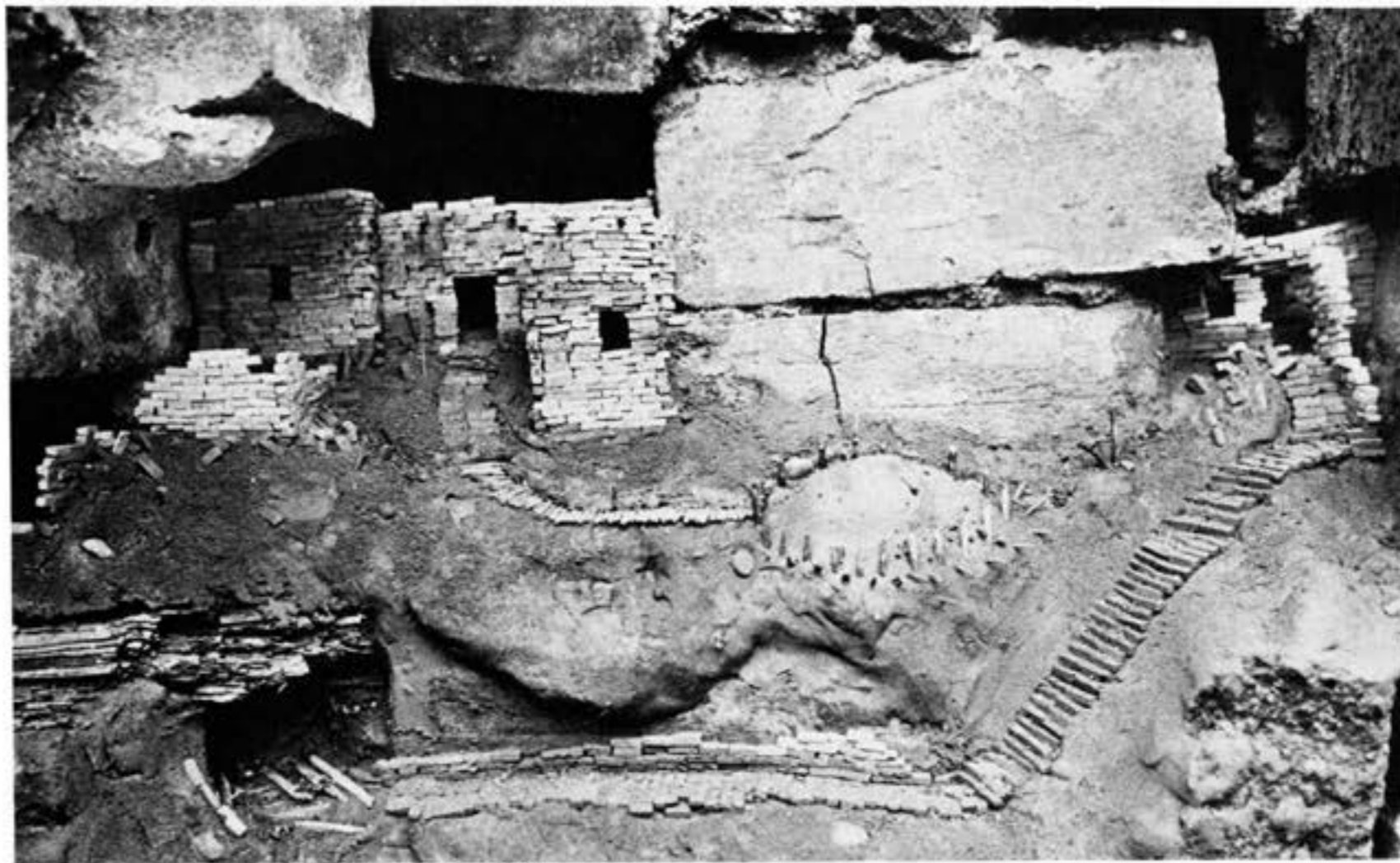


Spiral Dwelling (detail), 1974, 30" diameter.

relics for investment by the rich is less interesting even than the consumption by destruction on the Lower East Side. At least there they are engaged in a stimulating social dialogue so long as they survive. Once I was told by a person on 2nd Street that the first time he saw me working he was on his way to kill someone with a knife and he came upon me and got so cooled out that he stopped and watched, and didn't go on. This means a lot to me.

I do feel a commitment to making ideas available to as many people as possible, including art people, even if only as films, photographs, and other "reflections." So I know I'm juggling contradictions (though at least it's not the radical chic of pseudo Marxists and Maoists who spend their time raging in an intellectual teapot). I worry about trading on one situation to nourish another. But I am far more interested in taking what knowledge and understanding I gathered from art out into other contexts than I'm interested in dragging a part of the real world into the art world to make it into "art," as has happened so often in the last decade — like Pop Art, "earthworks," "street-works," etc. The change must lie in a change of audience — not bringing "new goods" to the same old people.

My time is primarily spent on the Lower East Side, working with the youth and community agencies to deal with housing and rehabilitation of open spaces. This cannot be separated from the overall reality there, since it is a prominent part of life in that neighborhood; most of it is falling down and the City refuses to help rebuild it. The art world



Dwelling on East 4th Street, New York, 1974

only seems able to consume ideas in a very limited way. This is especially true when one steps outside of it. In the art context, my activity is interpreted so bizarrely, so differently than it is seen on the Lower East Side, where most people don't even know there is such a thing as an art community — as media or geography. If they knew, I doubt if they would care. But they feel very strongly about what I do anyway; it's part of their lives, and I

have a complete identity there. That gives me great sustenance.

ABADIE:

Do you mind children and people watching you while you're working in the streets?

SIMONDS:

No. Making a dwelling in the streets is like holding hands with your audience. The dwelling becomes

the medium through which we talk. The Little People are suction on people's psyches. They elicit all sorts of comments. This is how *La Placita* started. Someone came along and said why don't we fix up this lot – a thought I'd already had. The dwellings also provoke great flights of fantasy in the audience. Children physically add things to them. I give them bricks and show them how to make more and we stand around working together. Some of the other things I do are very private, intimate, and personal experiences – *Landscape ↔ Body ↔ Dwelling*, for instance. If there are people there when I do it, I position myself so I don't see them. As I begin, they usually recede entirely.

ABADIE:
By the destruction and disintegration of the dwellings in the streets do you intend to assimilate time into the work?

SIMONDS:
"I" seem to "intend" very little as regards the Little People. They intend and I follow. Standing outside the work, after the fact, I would say that time is captured by the Little People as part of their existence. First, they have their own internal history, their migration, which might be elucidated by an archeological excavation of various sites, piecing together the events of their past. Second, they have a history as objects within a given community; on the Lower East Side, one dwelling will call forth memories of others. Third, each dwelling has a peculiar time sense of its own – a dislocation from the moment it is being seen. The image itself is one

of a past moment, a part of America's past, like the Pueblo Indians, and a place that the Little People have left – an abandoned city or house. Each dwelling is a scene, a moment from the Little People's lives; each one goes through a birth, life, death cycle.

ABADIE:
Why did you start making films?

SIMONDS:
Because few of the things I was doing were available to other than the direct audience that experiences them. I was interested in making them available to



Abandoned Observatory, 1975, 30" diameter

Collection Musée national d'art moderne, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou

more people as examples of an activity that might affect other artists. The films *Birth, Body ↔ Earth* and *Landscape ↔ Body ↔ Dwelling* are records of rituals from the underlying mythology of the Little People, and I wanted that information out.

ABADIE:

How do you contribute to the realization of the films?

SIMONDS:

Often I edit them; I also work with the filmmaker beforehand to figure out the overall concept and specific shots.

ABADIE:

Does the realization of monumental projects like those at Artpark go against the secret and hidden aspects of your work? Is the miniaturization of your work the constant and *Niagara Gorge*, the *Growth House*, and *La Placita* the contradictions?

SIMONDS:

Somewhere in my mind everything is only one scale – the scale of my vision. I don't think about something being small or large. I'm in a dwelling down there just as I'm in the full scale work. Miniaturization exists in one realm of my thinking as a tool – an economy of means. The small dwellings are most economical in terms of the time and space demanded to make them. They are not hermetic so much as they are intimate and self-contained; they are hidden only in contrast to the street's scale of publicness. But the miniature pieces and the full scale ones share my involvement with habitation – how people live and how their values affect their living places. *Niagara Gorge*, for



Park Model - Fantasy (detail), 1974, clay and photographs, 20 x 30". Collection Lucy R. Lippard



Park Model - Fantasy (detail), 1975, clay and photographs, 20 x 30"

instance, by excavating an architectural fragment rife with history and associations, and inhabiting it, awakened a large chunk of emotional history residing in the landscape and made it available. It shared with the Little People's dwellings the quality of re-inhabiting an architectural fragment.

La Placita is a large project sharing with the dwellings an interest in the political articulation of the earth. A vacant lot in a city is a piece of earth which had been given form by habitation and then was returned to ground level, approaching its primary state. Just as the Little People slide through the reality of the city and transform small pieces of

real estate and consciousness into other attitudes about the earth, so does *La Placita*. The park is primarily an expression of a group's involvement in the part of the earth they inhabit. In this case my role has been merely to focus this involvement and give the people a channel to express their collective values instead of my personal or unconscious ones, as in the Little People.

It would please me greatly to have structures like the Circular People's house made large scale and inhabited by a given community. The *Growth House* was an attempt to make a microcosmic sociology for the town of Lewistown, whereas the

Niagara Gorge dwelling was closer to a Little People's dwelling full scale. I could step into it and enact the Little People's rituals.

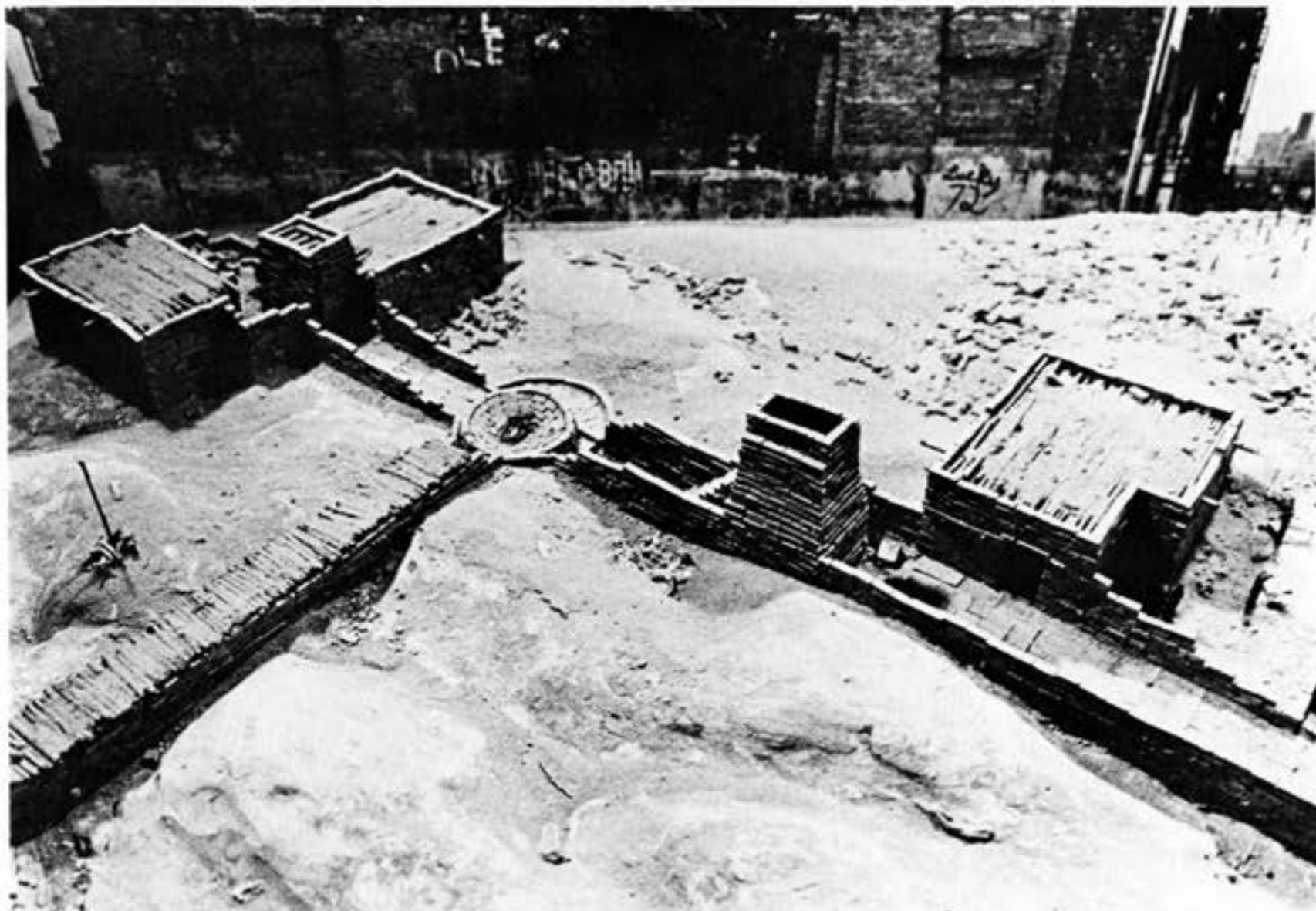
ABADIE:

How does your sculpture belong to your work? What is your aim in using types of symbolic architectures – the labyrinth and mastaba? Don't you think that the specificity of unique works of art goes against the notion of non-ownership of the dwellings left in the streets?

SIMONDS:

Yes of course. If you are considering the "unique works" primarily from the point of view of the specific sociology that consumes them. However, the content and the sources of both the object works and the dwellings begin before the social realities or uses become an issue. The object works are more extravagant in that I spend large amounts of time concentrating on one thought. They attempt to bring to an emblematic state the same thought that forms the dwelling in the street. Thus the Circular, Spiral and Linear Peoples abstract to an object state configurations of philosophical attitudes about time and space in architecture, ways of living. The Linear People are analogous to the migrating, transient Little People; the Spiral People are analogous to the reality of the city in its inevitable self-consumption.

Other object works attempt to bring to that same emblematic state certain biological aspects of life and the body's function. Thus the labyrinth approximates a seduction, and the incinerator – digestion, and the mastaba – death.



Park Model - Fantasy (detail), 1976, clay and photographs, 20 x 30''

The remains of a group of people the geometry of whose architecture was at a 45° angle to the axis of the city. Part of a semaphore village: three models presenting three different periods in its history. The side walls reflect the coordinates of New York and represent a through-the-block lot on East Second Street between Avenues B and C. The dwellings were built along a continuous line of habitation. Signals were sent from house to house by means of a tower, and each family was responsible for the maintenance of its fires. In the first model, (above) the dwellings and towers are functioning. In the second model, (page 11) they are abandoned, and only parts of a ritual place are still used. In the third model, (opposite page) one segment has been reinhabited and the ritual places are fully used.

ABADIE:

Don't you find some sort of regression in the re-creation of imaginary sociologies and mythologies?

SIMONDS:

Absolutely. There is an amazing simple joy in the childlike world of the Little People, a peaceful and untrammled world, almost thoughtless. But the metaphorical aspects of a child's world are also very powerful. The regression allows elements to surface in a way that makes them very clear and malleable for me, and for others entering that world. Most of my thinking takes place on a very simple level. Almost everything I've done in the last five years is an extrapolation of three or four simple thoughts, all of which I had in a few days. These thoughts do have interrelationships that are complex and allusive to me. Taking them and confronting various realities with them also nurtured the complexity.

ABADIE:

Earth is traditionally related to the mother complex. Is there any connection to the sensuality in your work?

SIMONDS:

Clay is a sexual material – symbolically as the earth, and physically in the way it behaves.

ABADIE:

How much do you wish to be related to myths or is it a simple accidental connotation?

SIMONDS:

The development of a personal/universal mythology is a central concern of mine, as is the use of that

mythology as an investigative tool to fracture the present.

ABADIE:

Is your work formal or are you mainly interested in bringing out some scheme of thinking, a set of beliefs?

SIMONDS:

I spend very little time thinking about form. Sometimes in a dwelling's ritual area, forms surface that engage me on that level, but otherwise the general specificity and abstractness of the formal structures I'm working with (such as architectures that follow a circular pattern) are the results of the conceptual aspects which dictate the formal possibilities.

Because I'm anxious to connect my ideas directly with another audience that is unaware of the dialectics of form and content from an art historical point of view, this issue becomes less important to me than those that give the work a look into people's lives. The issue of form is almost inapplicable to *La Placita*, where I was only interested in creating a ground from which a group of people could express their beliefs. The form merely reinstated an image of the earth rising from beneath the city. At first this seemed to require a dramatic landscape of hills, but as it turned out, the land could be politically activated with a much lower profile. A project like this or the *Growth House* really offers an invitation for people to alter or create form through participation and involvement. It points up some of the coordinates of my interests. Certain forms are viable

only when they can be useful, used, as is, by and for other people. Other forms are only viable when they act as vehicles of imagination and transformation for other people's creativity, which might never have surfaced without these forms.

I wish I had more time to indulge my love and knowledge of form-making and eventually, I expect to.



Proposal for Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens at Breezy Point (drawing in process), 1976
ink on photostat, 12 x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$