

Interview with Charles Simonds

by Teresa Millet

*"I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.
I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top. [...]
I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself. [...]
I am for an art that comes out of a chimney like a black hair and scatters in the sky. [...]
I am for an art covered with bandages. I am for an art that limps and rolls and runs and jumps. I am for an art that comes in a can or washes up on the shore. [...]
I am for the art that comes up in fogs from sewerholes in winter. I am for the art that splits when you step on a frozen puddle. I am for the worm's art inside the apple. I am for the art of sweat that develops between crossed legs."¹*

Charles Simonds, born in New York City in 1945, creates miniature landscapes and buildings with reminiscences of the geology of the rocky mountain area and the constructions of the Pueblo Indians in the state of New Mexico. Clay, often unfired, is his "signature" material, which he has been using since the years when he was studying at the University of California at Berkeley and at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. During this period Charles Simonds was an active student, and receptive to the university protest movement that emerged in the mid-1960s in universities in the United States and also in the university milieu in Europe. It is particularly noteworthy that one of Simonds's first sculptural activities was developed in the street, in abandoned premises and on building lots in the Lower East Side and in New York's SoHo district. The *Dwellings*, as these pieces came to be called, were the homes of an imaginary and tremendously elusive nomadic population, the Little People, whom Charles Simonds created in his imagination. "These works that the artist creates *in situ* are not produced in order to be sold, and it is not even possible to appropriate them because, as he himself says with malicious glee, anyone who tries to move them immediately destroys them."² Simonds has moved on from his reflection on the structures of human thought to wonder about the relation between the work of art and the artist, gradually introducing the human figure into his creations. The following interview aims to help the reader to get closer to the figure of Charles Simonds, who perhaps is not as well known as he should be in this country.

¹ Oldenburg, Claes: *Store Days*, New York, 1961.

² Lambert, Jacques: "Las construcciones del espíritu. Entrevista con Daniel Abadie", en *Charles Simonds*. Fundació "la Caixa", Barcelona 1994, p.15.

3 The Zuni people—the word *zuni* means “flesh”—live near the pueblo of Zuni, the largest of all the pueblos in New Mexico. They are known for their animal fetish carvings, jewelry and pottery. Their language is not spoken by any other tribe and is of uncertain linguistic affinity, although inclusion in Uto-Aztecan has been suggested. The Shalako is one of the most important events in the Zuni religious calendar and is undoubtedly the pueblo’s most famous ceremony. It is named after certain spirits, the “great couriers of the rain gods”, who are impersonated by *kachinas* or dancers. The participants in the ceremony practice their duties for a full year, and new houses are built to welcome the Shalakos. The ceremony is held near the winter solstice and is the time when the spirits of all the Zuni who ever lived are believed to be present in the pueblo. The *kachinas* of the Shalakos bear offerings to the ancestors, asking for their help in bringing rain, long life and peace to the Zuni people. The ceremony brings the old year to a close and welcomes the new year.

4 By Ivy League schools the artist means those famous universities located on the East side of the United States, such as Brown University, Columbia University, Yale University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, University of Penn and Princeton University.

5 Automobile dealerships that once thrived along Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco. In this case, a non-violent, direct action strategy brought about equal employment opportunities for minorities.

6 In 1964, student activists returned to college from a summer of civil rights protests in the American South, to come into conflict with administration officials at University of California, Berkeley, over their right to use University facilities for their campaigns. The resulting confrontation marked the beginning of a new wave of student protests as civil rights took a back seat to the antiwar movement. The first drama peaked in December 1964, when over 800 students were arrested for occupying the UC Administration Building, the largest mass arrest of students in US history up to that time.

Teresa Millet: *Do you still remember the journey to New Mexico that you made when you were only six years old? Is it true that you have often gone back to the same place? And how do you think those experiences later affected the development of your work?*

Charles Simonds: I have vivid memories of my childhood trip to New Mexico, particularly of Frijoles Canyon. I went back almost every year during the 70s to observe Indian dances, and often to the Shalako Festival at Zuni³ because it celebrated and consecrated newly built homes each year. Visiting the South West certainly provided a place where my brother and I, who were growing up playing cowboys and Indians, could very powerfully invest an actual environment with our fantasies. Those fantasies had an influence on my work.

T. M.: *Why did you go to study at the University of California at Berkeley? And what are your main memories of that period of learning?*

C. S.: Rebelliously, I went to Berkeley as an adventure and to avoid Ivy League schools.⁴ My girlfriend had chosen Stanford, so California was appealing. It was before 1968. I attended 1963–7. I joined the “auto-row” sit-ins⁵ and the Free Speech Movement,⁶ many of my friends were veterans of voter registration drives in the South, I was caught up with them. I learned that one could participate in real events of an historical dimension and actually have an effect on authorities: in that case, the administration of the University of California and the State government. I learned that being arrested for what one believed was right was not a crime but an issue of conscience. It gave me license to follow my own way even if it contradicted conventions. It schooled me in activism.

In my studies of art at Berkeley I was strongly influenced by James Melchert, who opened my eyes to the possibility that clay could be anything, even a zipper; and by Harold Paris, who made soft, eroticized rubber sculptures. I shared with Stanley Fish his discovery of how to understand Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and to think on an epic scale.

T. M.: *You came back to the New York area to continue your studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Had you had enough of “the Berkeley years”?*

C. S.: I chose Rutgers over Yale for graduate school because it appeared freer, more open, and Yale’s sculpture studios had low ceilings. Rutgers allowed and insisted that one work out one’s ideas oneself, closer in atmosphere to Berkeley, less professorial with a strong dialectic. Also, I came from New York so it was natural to return there. I missed the changing seasons in the East.

T. M.: *When did you decide to become an artist?*

C. S.: When we were young, my brother and I both had natural gifts in sculpture. He was very adept at making clever, expressionistic portraits and stole my girlfriends with them. In high school, I was accelerated and encouraged to pursue my interest in mathematics. But one evening, when I was fourteen years old, I took some clay my brother had left behind when he went to college and I made a figure of a wrestler—actually I had made many figures when I was much younger. It was very realistic, with articulated musculature. I couldn't believe I'd made it, as if I was witnessing something my hands could do that I hadn't been aware of. I brought it to school in a shoe-box and no-one at school believed I had made it either. So before their eyes I destroyed it and remade it. I dropped mathematics and tried to take on the responsibility of what I could do.

T. M.: *I've read that you very much enjoyed what Claes Oldenburg was doing in New York in the late 60s. Could you tell us something about this?*

C. S.: Oldenburg was a tremendous influence on me—liberating. His and his wife Patti's soft sculptures that eroticized and animated the "built" or given environment were key. The Store, as an idea of entering social structures, of sliding into the real world with art, with both its humor and subversive activism, rang true to me. His proposal "monuments" were absolutely present in my mind when I conceived of making my dwellings in the street. Specifically, his monument for Broadway and Canal Street identified the street as a possible substrate.

T. M.: *What sort of relationship did you have with Gordon Matta-Clark when you were neighbors? And what about your relationship with Robert Smithson?*

C. S.: Gordon and I were very close. We began our friendship in 1969, renovating lofts in the same building at 131 Chrystie Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. We then helped each other with projects around the city and at the clay pits in New Jersey where I dig my clay (projects such as *Jacks*, *Fire Boy*, *My Tarot Cards*, films produced by Holly Solomon.)

We developed a metaphoric language that often left listeners dumbfounded. We both found support from Holly and Horace Solomon and Christo and Jean-Claude. Gordon and I traded and shared many ideas, as we were in each other's lofts daily. Conceptualizing and objectifying architectural details and "house" were thoughts that Gordon and Alan Saret exposed me to. Our working together in the city, almost like a game of pick-up basketball, accustomed me to working outside, away from galleries and white spaces. Gordon's interest in the Lower East Side, Loisaida, and other community groups were areas I brought to his attention and helped him with.



Dwelling (Morada), en 112 Green Street, Nueva York, 1971

Dwelling, at 112 Greene Street, New York, 1971



La Placita, solar de juego realizado por "jóvenes neoyorquinos" y Simonds, 1972-75

La Placita, playlot executed by "Young New Yorkers" and Simonds, 1972-75

It was Gordon's bumpiness, his impetuous energy, his derring-do and risk taking that attracted me. Gordon was always running red lights and didn't care. As they built the World Trade Center we conceived and practiced a north face ascent of the Empire State Building to bring it back to honor. I felt Gordon to be a very best friend, a rivalous, dearly loved brother. Although I have often dreamed Gordon to be alive, my last memory of him was of being taken, after he had died, to visit his *Office Baroque* in Antwerp. I noticed a pair of boots worn down by Gordon's impatient and awkward stance. I picked them up and found a piece of blue chalk inside ... whenever we cut off work for the day we'd always leave the chalk in our boots so that we could find it in the morning.

Smithson was an already recognized artist and thinker when I met him in 1972. He received my work with an openness and interest that was validating for the "young" artist I was. He supported me with letters for grants for a community playlot I was organizing, and he understood the conceptual nature of allowing people to realign socially and politically the meaning of a piece of earth in the city.

He was provoked and intrigued by the overt eroticism of the works I was doing with my body and earth. The crystallinity of his intellect as opposed to the stickiness of mine was made visceral to us by a day we planned and spent together. In the morning we went to my wet, pink, soft clay pits in New Jersey, walked around and became muddy, wet and encaked in clay. Then we had lunch in his favorite NJ diner. He then took me to a rock quarry above Monclair, NJ, where the ground was hard, dark, dry and geometrically cut. It made clear to me the intellectual and conceptual dominance in his work over the sensuous and experiential, and my more compelling interest in the visceral, sensual and ritual. I think we worked on similar issues from different ends at the time. Although his was rural and mine urban, we both viewed the earth in time, the city as conceptually articulated earth in long-time. I viewed his work as two-dimensionally design orientated, rigorously conceptual, distanced from his materials in time and space. *A* conceptual reverie. My work was enmeshed in its materials, immediate, socially, politically and personally process engaged. I cried on learning he had died, kneeling in the mud flats of Maine (where he had visited), holding a small spiral shell in my muddy hands.

T. M.: *How did you develop the idea of the Little People series?*

C. S.: The "little people" evolved from making imaginary places as sculptural objects. First of many different geographies, reflective of the behavior of the clay and earth I was using. Some were fertile with seeds that grew, some dry and cracked. Soon I developed a brick, and with that came a particular primitive architecture and sense of time and place, and quickly also a narrative; certainly harking back to memories of visiting the South West as a child. On a spring day working inside, with the sounds of the street coming in the open window, I thought, how stupid to be working



Dwelling (Morada) y transeúntes, en East Houston Street, Nueva York, 1972

Dwelling and passersby, at East Houston Street, New York, 1972



Dwelling (Morada), en East Houston Street, Nueva York, 1972

Dwelling, at East Houston Street, New York, 1972



Dwelling (Morada), en 98 Greene Street, Nueva York, 1971

Dwelling, at 98 Greene Street, New York, 1971

alone inside when I could be outside sharing it and the exuberance of spring with others. I began timidly on Greene Street (pre-SoHo at that time, with just artists living and a few galleries).

The first dwelling was on a friend's window ledge, then another in the gutter. Soon I had the idea of two peoples—cliff dwellers on window ledges and herders, on the valley pavements below—engaged in a combative migration northward up the street. I was stunned by the differences in the reactions of the truckers and workers in the neighborhood and the “artists” who had leisure and felt that they needed to “place” this peculiar behavior. At that time minimalism was in full sway and my fantasy behavior looked bizarre and ridiculous to some. The workers, however, jumped in and loved it, it lightened their day, and the spontaneous joy of their reaction to my explanation that I was making dwelling-places for an “imaginary civilization of little people” convinced me that I should try to find a coherent social and geographic neighborhood that I could “infest” with a continuous story and mythology of little people. I wanted to preserve the narrative sense I had developed that each dwelling was a different time and place in the little people's world, and that they could become a mythology for a group of people living together.

I returned to the neighborhood I was living in, which was part of the Lower East Side, and very quickly had a large audience, some of whom became so involved in the fantasy that they would claim to have seen dwellings even where I hadn't made them. Eventually I became involved in community issues, Sweat Equity projects, playlots, community organizing. I served on the Board of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing.



Dwelling (Morada), en Rue des Cascades, Paris, 1975

Dwelling, at Rue des Cascades, Paris, 1975

T. M.: *Your relationship with clay began a long time ago. For how many years were you making these Dwellings in the streets?*

C. S.: Clay. Dwellings in the street 1970 onwards, fewer since 1985 and only when I visit a new city. Each dwelling is part of the story of the little people, a different time and place in their history. Over the years an eroticized and ritualized earth has evolved from sanctified natural forms to architecture that symbolizes those forms and functions of the little people's mythology. Standing back, I believe the dwellings have always functioned for me as a form of activism, a provocation. They are also a gift, the place for expiating personal feelings of orphanness, and an incarnation of how to live, a peaceful escape from chaos, an obligation to find a home for the little people, an incantation, a litmus test to explore the mores of different communities and a metaphoric lever on the existing world's sense of time, space and values.

T. M.: *What was the artistic scene in New York like then?*

C. S.: My friendships were with Gordon Matta-Clark, Keith Sonnier and others involved with Jeffrey Lew's 100 Greene Street alternative space and then with Horace and Holly Solomon's 98 Greene Street loft. We were mostly unrecognized artists who were free to have fun doing what we wanted, with ourselves as an audience. Philip Glass and Steve Reich were giving loft concerts. Bob Wilson was just beginning to attract attention. Alanna Heiss was organizing projects under the Brooklyn Bridge. Later, while living with Lucy Lippard, I bore witness to the ambitions of feminist artists, I learned what a critic does and how her values could evolve. We admired, tolerated and cared for each other. I also became friends with Sol LeWitt.

T. M.: *At a certain point in the 70s your works left the street and became sculptures in themselves. What was the reaction of your followers to this change? I am especially interested in how this change happened in view of your earlier work. It seems that you were against letting any museums or gallery spaces show your pieces, so how did this happen? Also, the abandoned, isolated pieces that you used to do have changed in scale a lot lately, so that many of your pieces now just contain tiny bits of brick inside them, and many of you have left more space, as it were, for the sculptural development of the pieces. What do you think of this point of view?*

C. S.: At first I made imaginary places as "objects", and I still do. I didn't begin working in the street on a soapbox or as a political stance against galleries and museums. Working in the street revealed extraordinary possibilities to me that threw into relief the limitations of timeless white spaces and their inhabitants. I have always lived in many worlds. Just as the community could not really experience the street dwellings as they were intended, so, also, the people in the neighborhood could not really experience the "object" works in their context. My exuberance about the street could become something I wanted to share with the art community. Going from a gutter on the Lower East Side during the



Picaresque Landscape (Paisaje picaresco) (detalle / detail), 1976

day to a dinner party of artists talking about the Marxist implications of Carl André's laborless bricks, placed by someone masquerading as a European laborer, did frustrate me. I tried to point out that there was a different and wonderful world outside, and that I had spent my day very differently than they had. I became more and more involved in the community's needs, and I did function in a political capacity as a member of the board of The Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing to articulate issues towards the city government. The dwellings in the street are a discreet thought; a daily fantasy migrating through a geography, a community's day-to-day life and memory. They are bounded by metaphors of real time and space, extended narrative, a life's story. They are process enmeshed, ephemeral, with a life and death drama of being created and destroyed. They are gestural, about surprise, discovery, provocation and resultant social activism. All these aspects are dropped out and inaccessible to an audience in "white spaces" or going to "see" a dwelling. My attempt to historicize the evolution of the little people is the *Picaresque Landscape*. It brings to one time and place the history of the little people which was being created and destroyed daily in the street.

After working on the Lower East Side for six years I went to Berlin and worked in a Turkish community, Kreuzberg. When I returned to New York, I found the Lower East Side was gentrified and many of the community leaders had left.

The "objects" I make provide other opportunities: detachment from the public, being able to construct something for more than one day, and to work from an a priori mental image. They benefit from a "timeless" white space, contemplative and "art" contexted. I am free to work on what I call more abstract, conceptual thoughts in the object works—mixed metaphors of landscape, body, house and growth. All these are ideas that are not part of the little people's narrative world in the street.

More recently I have addressed people's homes and the identification they have of their house with their body. By breaking and transforming their house I can probe these reactions.

For the past 8 years I have turned more inward, dropping many narrative concerns to allow mixed metaphors of built, grown and visceral images to combine and recombine in privacy. I see these works as more abstract and formal and focused very directly on the behavior of the different clays I use as they go from wet to dry.

T. M.: *Tell me about the relationship with nature and landscape that you want to show in many of your pieces. To which artists in the Land Art movement do you feel closest?*

C. S.: It is not so much show as believe. Land, body, self and house are one.

I have never felt to be part of anything. Of the work of "Earth Artists" I feel closest to Smithson and furthest from Heizer.



(Morada), P.S.1 Long Island City, N.Y., 1974



s con niños construyendo *Dwelling* (Morada),
 enplatz, Berlin, 1977
 s and children constructing *Dwelling*, Marianenplatz,
 1977

T. M.: *In the kind of work you're doing today, what can we find that recalls your first Dwellings? Perhaps, among other things, the very small bricks that you still use?*

However, I also see many relationships between your work and nature: rocks, mountains, rivers, bodies; the actual material and the main material you use, clay, is part of the earth, the growth of things, not just the "house". I find all these things/subjects in your work. Could you explain this further?

C. S.: *My work shuttles along a continuum bounded by contrasting states: nature-civilization, grown-built, process-object, chance-intention, childhood-adulthood, infantile smear-brick architecture, unconscious-conscious, subjective-objective, bearing witness-acting, earth-body-house.*

The work comes metaphorically, imagistically and actually from interweavings of the above.

T. M.: *What was it like to live in Berlin for a year? What are your main memories?*

C. S.: *I found Berlin similar to New York in the complexity of its multicultural issues, but powerfully overlaid, at that time, by global political agendas. The mystery and anxiety created by the wall colored every day. I had a clandestine exhibition in East Berlin curated by Jürgen Schweinebraden that was so well attended, I couldn't mount the stairs to enter. The no-man's-land between the two walls, which was constantly surveilled by machine guns, was inhabited by rabbits (fertility) and doves (peace). I saw this as an appropriate image of nature's reaction to the absurdity of a strip of land so distorted by fear and anger.*

T. M.: *You have taught several times, at Newark State College and at Cooper Union. How did you like the experience? You have also worked with patients at the Centre d'étude de l'expression, Clinique des maladies mentales et de l'encéphale, Centre hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Paris, on a communal sculpture. What was the experience like?*

C. S.: *I feel art to be a personal exploration, so teaching was only a way of offering a perspective.*

I was invited to work at Sainte-Anne at the suggestion of Daniel Abadie during my retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1994. I proposed a project to a sculpture atelier run by Claire Verdier at the hospital. Each participant was invited to make a fantasy dwelling-place on a mountain structure. It allowed each a personal space and the possibility of connecting theirs to others by trail, etc. Much of the symbolism of ground, brick, wall, house, and ruin was cast into excruciating existential idioms by the participants. Walls were to "protect or imprison," as was the wall surrounding the hospital perceived, "who's in who's out". Who is protected from whom, oneself from oneself. Life perceived as a trail of ruins left behind, rebuilding the present from the past. All were expressed. The group also interacted physically,

massaging each other's backs, helping in fragile moments, connecting fantasies. The finished work was exhibited in the entranceway to the hospital and was the source of much pride as an individual and communal work by collaborators.

T. M.: *Could you explain more about the Instant House project you did in Iowa in 1980?*

C. S.: *Instant House* worked on the margin between the built (made) and natural phenomenon to create "house". These works, *Three Trees*, *Floating Cities*, and *Instant House* spring from the *Growth House*, which attempts to marry building and growing, shelter and food, hermaphroditically as a dwelling process. They lean towards exploring ideas of "instinctual" dwellings; the equivalent of nests, shells, cocoons—unconscious, non-cultural architectures. They are also directed towards primitive building strategies for Third World environments.

T. M.: *Finally, could you tell us about the relation between the Dwellings and the pieces that are closer to the human form?*

C. S.: The human form is ever present, in the land as body forms, in cliffs as grotesqueries. The overtly human figure works were an inversion of emphasis. The human figure became "text" and the dwellings and earth "subtext". As they are all one to me, inversion may happen frequently.

T. M.: *How do you see the art scene right now?*

C. S.: I don't see much. Much looks cyclical, but I am endlessly, childishly optimistic. I am an enthusiastic pluralist.



Instant House (La casa que crece) (detalle),
Artpark Lewiston, Nueva York, 1975
Instant House (detail), at Artpark Lewiston, New York, 1975



Instant House (La casa helada), Iowa City, Iowa, 1980