

MICROCOSM TO MACROCOSM / FANTASY WORLD TO REAL WORLD

CHARLES SIMONDS

*What do you do? **

1) *Birth*: In 1970 I buried myself in the earth and was reborn from it. This exists as a 16mm film and a double series of 24 time-lapse color photographs.

2) *Landscape/Body/Dwelling*: (First done 1971). I lie down nude on the earth, cover myself with clay, remodel and transform my body into a landscape with clay, and then build a fantasy dwelling-place on my body on the earth. There are two films of this (1971, 1973).

3) *Dwellings*: Since 1970, most of my time has been spent going around the streets of New York building clay dwelling-places for an imaginary civilization of Little People who are migrating through the city.

4) *Project Uphill*: For the last year I have been working with the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing and the community on East 2nd Street, designing a park-playlot — a hilly landscape between Houston and 2nd Streets, Avenues B and C; construction begins in the spring.

How do all these things relate to each other?

I'm interested in the earth and myself, or my body and the earth, what happens when they become entangled

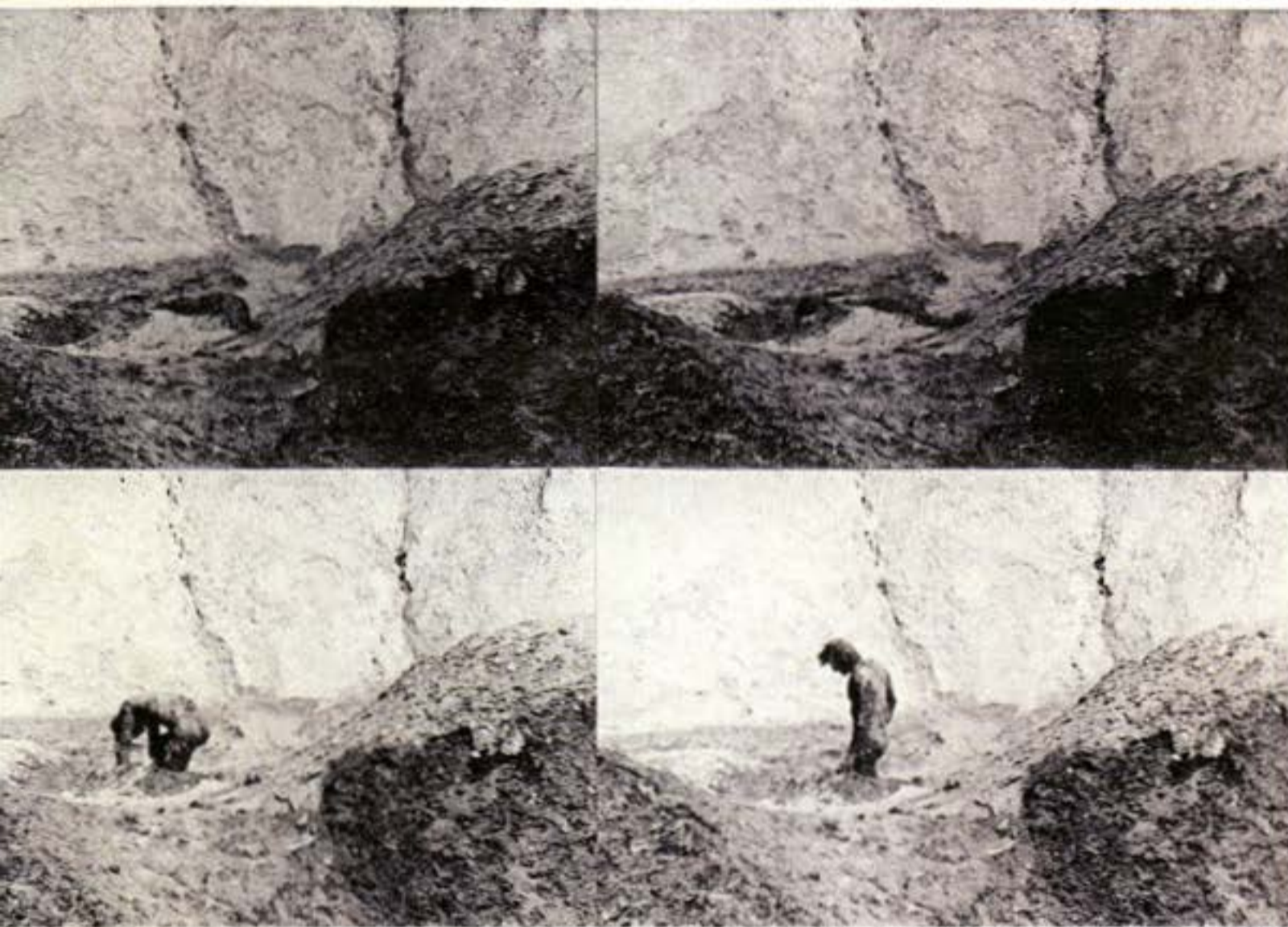
with each other and all the things they include emblematically or metaphorically; like my body being everyone's body and the earth being where everybody lives. The complexities work out from this juncture. One of the original connections between the earth and my body is sexual. This infuses everything 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. It's the origin myth — the origin of the world and of man and of the people. This progression establishes beliefs and relationships at the very center, at the very beginning, in a physical way. Then I am free to go and spread these beliefs, into the world as a fantasy through the Little People, and into the world as a reality through the park.

The dwellings and the park both articulate the earth, how people live on it, and what they believe about it.

Both focus on the earth as a sensuous experience. 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. The park reinstates an image of the earth which becomes a receptacle for the energies of the people already living there. I'm interested in the sense of values implicit in the notion of hills in a flat area of the city, in how that idea can affect a neighborhood and groups like the Parks Council, the Department of Highways' City Playlots Program, and the Parks Department, so they develop a feeling for the land as opposed to asphalt, hill forms as opposed to flats, and so on. The dwellings are made of soft clay that takes every little imprint; the park is a sensuously passive landscape. I can't determine what people believe about the hills or how they use them, and the survival of both dwellings and park are dependent on the life forces around them.

Have you worked all over the city? Exactly where in the streets do the Little People build?

The Little People first lived in Soho, and then in 1972 they migrated to the Lower East Side. They live wherever the architecture of the city seems to offer them a

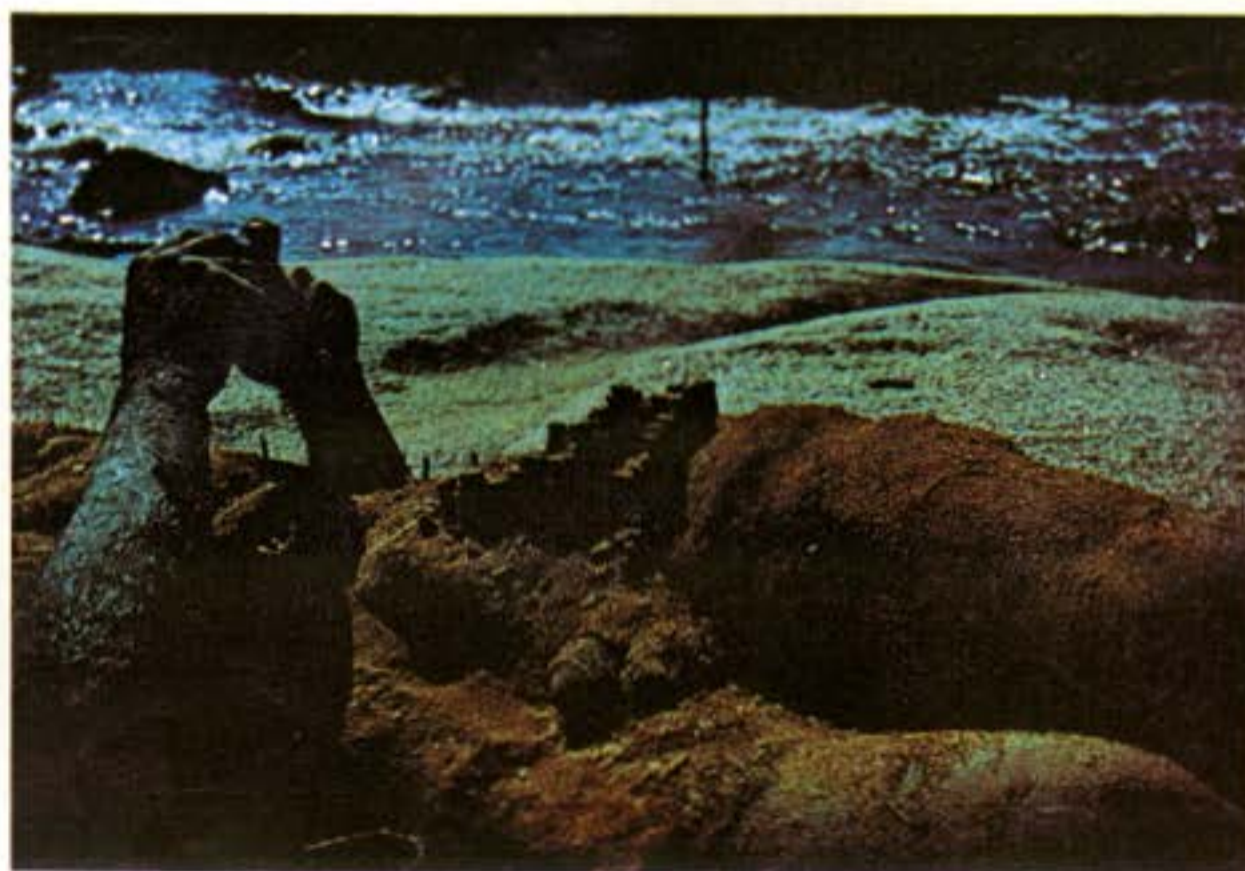


Charles Simonds, *Birth*, 1971, color photographs and 16mm film.

home — in gutters, on window ledges, in niches in walls, under loading platforms, in vacant lots, and so on: when people ask me what I'm doing I say I'm building a house for Little People. It's such a simple thought that nobody has to go through any contortions to understand it, other than valuative ones about why I'm doing it and not being paid. People reach a juncture where either they believe the Little People are wandering around or they don't. Once they've been in the Little People's places, it's easy to believe in them. They want to add a little tree, more tiny bricks, become part of the fantasy.

Initially I was very excited about the Little People invading a neighborhood and migrating through it, leaving behind a tremendous number of places they'd been. They would become part of your consciousness, always brushing their world against yours. In a sense, it has been a loss that on the Lower East Side the dwellings are destroyed very quickly (mostly by children playing bombardier or wanting to take them home). At first I was upset that I wasn't able to build up a population as I'd done in Soho, but since I can't in fact, I've been able to build up a population in people's minds. The Little People exist to a much greater extent in the imagination than they ever could in real life. Once you've thought about them, they're everywhere. I like the idea that a little kid will come up and say, "I've been thinking about the Little People." People have a vivid image of a particular dwelling at a site where I've made one, even though the thing is no longer there.

Doesn't it bother you that there isn't anything people can look back to from a greater distance?



Charles Simonds, *Landscape/Body/Dwelling (detail)*, 1971.

Well, some of the effect of the things I do is strengthened

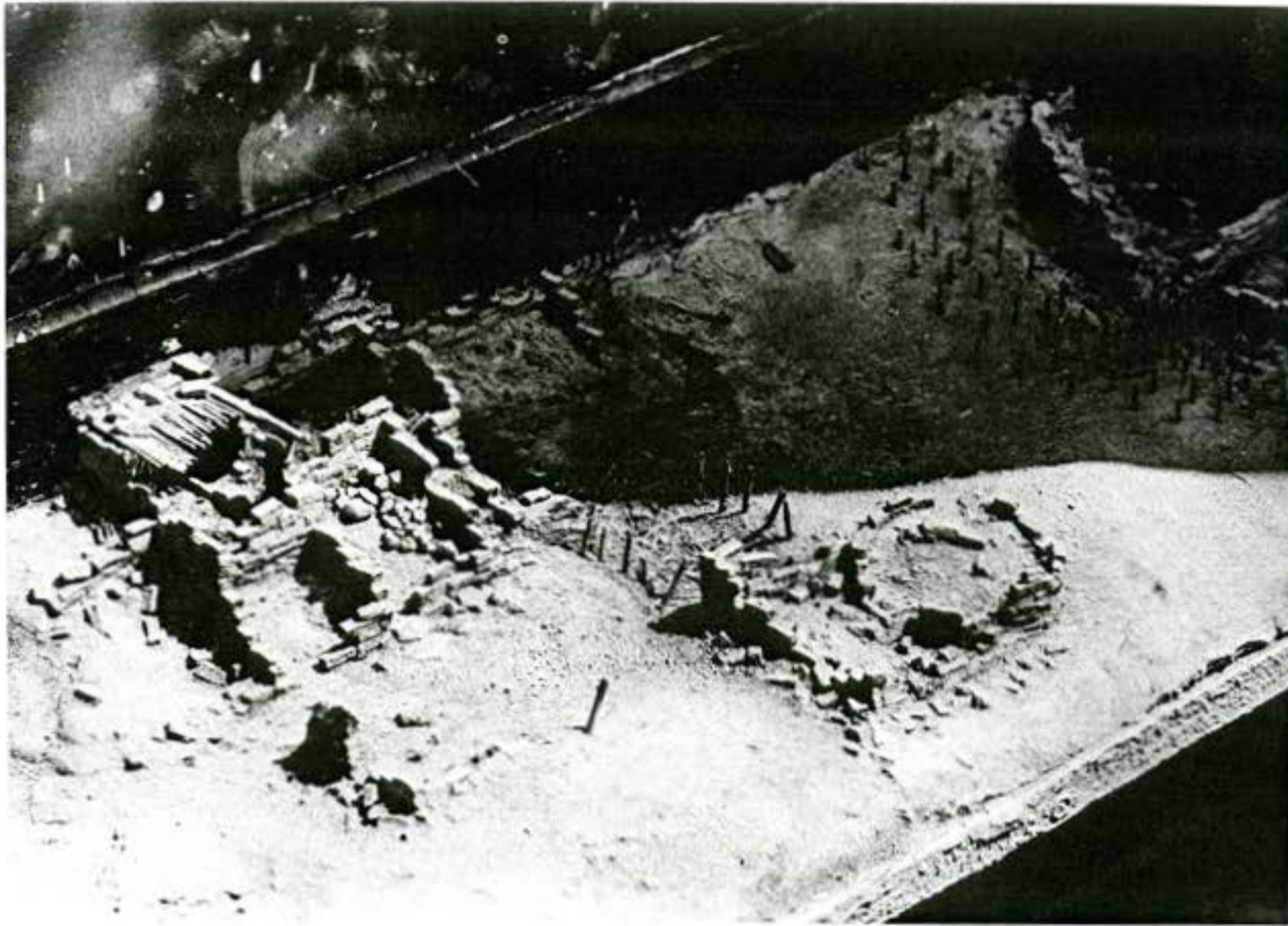


Charles Simonds, *Dwelling and Passersby, Houston Street, 1973.*

by the fact that they're ephemeral. If you leave thoughts behind you that other people can develop, you've had an effect on how the world looks or how it's thought about. I don't see any reason to leave behind "things" which lose their meaning in time, or even exist as a symbol of meaning at a given time past. The few objects I do make each year, also landscapes with life architectures on them, are much more conceptualized — one thought brought to one place in one form, while the Little People are more flowing, moving in and out, migrating around. The things in the street are less things than experiences, gestures, a bit of small-scale landscape splattered on a large-scale landscape. The people on the Lower East Side see me as a kind of folk figure who comes and delivers the Little People. It's not like I'm making things. It's like I'm the carrier, the harbinger. Conceptually as well as physically, the dwellings fall apart when thought of as objects that can be taken home. They lose all their spatial and temporal expansiveness.

For myself, I think of them in terms of making. Their high point for me is the moment when I finish them, when the clay is still wet and I'm in control of all the textures of the sand and the colors, when earth is sprinkled on the clay and it's soft and velvety, very rich. As they dry, they fade, and cease to be as vivid for me. Actually, I'm constructing a little world of my own, allowing part of me to make a place to be. It's a very calm feeling. Even when I'm surrounded by lots of activity, my focus is on this very small world. The Little People, as they inhabit that space, take on their own energy and draw me along.

I think of the dwellings in a very narrative way. It's the story of a group of people moving through life and the possibility of their survival as a fantasy in the city. The meaning comes only through seeing more than one in relation to another. There is also a sequence of events within each dwelling, each scene; the pathos of something coming to be and being destroyed, living and dying. The dwellings exist as something from the past, remnants of another people's existence frozen out of some memory or internal image and then laid out in real time. There's a telescoping of time and space. When I first appear they are beginning to build, and by the time I leave they've lived a whole life cycle. The dwellings have a past as ruins and they are the past of



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling, 98 Greene Street Window Ledge (detail), 1971.*

the human race, a migration. They throw into relief the scale and history of the city. You have that feeling of falling into a small and distant place which, when entered, becomes big and real — a dislocation which gives it a dreamlike quality.

To look at one dwelling on a formal, art-informational level is a mistake. It's more fruitful to relate them to the American Indian image they recall because, like the Indians, the Little People's lives center around belief, attitudes toward nature, toward the land; because of their vulnerability but persistence taken against a capitalist New York City. The earth that the Little People live on is very free. It just appears under them, and they can nestle up to it or make their bricks from it or bury things in it; they can wander about and be wherever they want to be on the earth. The park reflects the same thoughts in real space, the difference being that in the city, land is worth money, and political power is needed to free it. I'm interested in finding out how a capitalist society, the city bureaucracy, and the communities have articulated a piece of land; what are the wrinkles in that system which allow for that land to have another life, a different function, a different way for people to relate to it, and a different form.

The city has to do with a concept of nature that exploits, pictorializes, steps outside of nature and tries to superimpose on it both an abstract ideal of "good design" and/or a short-sighted capitalism. By working on land that's already ruined, you're hopefully preventing what could happen in the future by working with what did happen in the past. Right now, given the

state of the city, the park's undulating hills are a superimposition, the same way the little landscapes are drawn onto the architecture. The park can be seen as a montage of horizontal landscape on the vertical axis of the city, but this site is most important to me because pedestrians can also walk through it. It's a passageway of real earth forms, a respite from the city, not like those vest-pocket parks which are like stage backdrops, or dead ends. To bring the relationship of city to land form more into balance, many vacant lots and odd pieces could be landscaped to create a meandering web of hills flowing throughout the city, a continuous reminder of the earth's contours beneath the asphalt.

Robert Smithson's idea of dealing with mining companies, with the real world that is visually and conceptually and economically concerned with the earth, focuses on the relationship between an esthetic consciousness and reality. Strip mining is based on what is the quickest and least expensive way of ripping up the earth and taking out of it what is wanted. Smithson was trying to find ways that his work could profit from the amount of energy and earth-moving actually employed, and at the same time, ways he could restructure the strip miners' thoughts to include other values not strictly capitalistic. That's very important, that idea of moving out into the real world, attaching your ideas onto an already strong process and having them change that process. Vacant space on the Lower East Side represents a kind of devastation of the earth similar to a strip mine. Poor planning has made that land un-

productive, i.e., unprofitable. A raped piece of land has no life left in it, attracts no life to it. Last week a dead dog was found in the lot where the park will be.

Does it have to be art that restores that devastation?

That's just it. Seeing it as art is totally irrelevant in terms of what we know art's relationship to the real world to be right now. You want to affect the consciousness that's actually chewing up the earth. What those people end up doing to the earth is what we will ultimately experience the earth to be. That great gash in the middle of the country is what comes back to us as a visual image, a gesture, a concept.

Who is us?

Everybody, as opposed to an art audience, a small group of people enjoying that image in a very specific context. If you deal with a broader range, the focus is less tight. It may be less immediate, but the effect may be greater. I choose to work on the Lower East Side as an example to other consciousnesses. I couldn't have dreamed from working in Soho what it would be like on the Lower East Side, where the people are forced to be concerned with the ingredients I'm involved in. The meaning of the dwellings comes more to be there. In Soho I felt a kind of stillness; things just sort of sat as objects, a world unto themselves. On the Lower East Side I work at the vortex of an endless stream of passersby who energize me and are excited by the Little People. The art people in Soho had to go through elaborate circumlocutions to get at that kind of spontaneity. If I have to "show" the dwellings to somebody,

the experience is completely altered. The whole notion of surprise, of stumbling upon a civilization of Little People, is lost. And certainly to put the dwellings in a gallery would be to destroy them. The art world is very small compared to all the different situations I'm entangled with, the different consciousnesses I'd like to affect. After all, the art world is only part of the real world. Art can, or should be able to enter the flow of life. Most art is meaningless to most people. It's insanity to exist only within four white walls and a sociological framework confined to narrow commodities and values. It's foreign to that world that someone can call himself an "artist" and make art not involved in that framework. Like here we sit and make some tapes, a verbal connection between those two experiences — art world/Lower East Side — but it doesn't convey the situation on the street at all.

Then what does the art world have to offer?

There are perspectives that the art world has that no other world contains — a belief in freedom, in individual expansion of consciousness. Even the fact that the art world is not what I am articulates some things I believe in. I'm trying to point out that there are possibilities open to artists that can be meaningful to the world. Most artists can't find a supportive structure for their beliefs outside of their social group. To leave the art world is viewed as going to an absolutely barren desert. From my standpoint to leave the art world is to go from a prison into the most richly textured jungle. I think of the things I do and the ideas I'm involved in as important in the context of what art has been

historically, which is drastically different from what we think of as art right now.

Then your art is basically political, when aimed at the art world and in the streets?

Yes. The streets are really where my work finds its meaning and direction, in people's reactions to it. When the Little People get destroyed, people start to think. I've often sensed the feeling of loss about the brutalization of that fragile fantasy which is emblematic of the lives they themselves lead, that sense of "well, everytime you try to do something good or beautiful around here, it's always destroyed." It awakens and politicizes that consciousness. The park is a gathering of those energies and a channeling of them through existing community organizations so they have a positive result. That's a political act. It's intended that way. The most exciting thing over the last year has been to watch reactions to the fantasy world of the Little People develop into the idea, or fantasy, of the park, which in turn has developed into a reality through the use of exactly those politicized energies. The reality of the park is the result of two fantasies — mine and theirs, which met through the Little People. Other than the dislocation from the city, the images of the Little People are not overtly political; it's the most innocent little world. But its ingredients, for instance the American Indian reference, which is emblematic of an oppressed people, are political, though not slogan-political. It is political the way it's related to what it does, which is more to the point. ■

*This text originated as taped conversations with Lucy R. Lippard.



Charles Simonds, *Project Uphill*, 1973, photomontage of park looking from Houston Street.