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**Between Here and There: The Ambiguous Ecologies of Charles Simonds**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Scott Volz**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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**Master of Arts**

in

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Abstract of the Thesis

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**2014**

At the start of the 1970s, Charles Simonds began constructing miniature architectural ruins, what he calls dwellings, on the streets of New York City. They were fragile, temporary, and site specific. Occupying windowsills, wall crevices, and street gutters, the dwellings transformed their spaces from liminal to distinct. Over the course of the decade, Simonds built hundreds of dwellings in the Lower East Side alone, and they consequently developed a strong connection to the neighborhood. This essay addresses the dwellings as sites of makeshift ecologies. Looking at the reflexive relation between Simonds' sculptures and deteriorated living conditions in the Lower East Side, I argue that the dwellings carved out zones for reciprocal flows of communication and exchange between people. Unhinging Simonds from the binary structures that have come to characterize his work, I contend that his metaphysics of subjective experience is instead rooted ultimately in plays of ambiguity.

## **Dedication Page**

For my parents, without whom this would not have been possible.

## Table of Contents

1. The Little People.....	5
2. Reflexivity.....	8
3. Time and Space.....	14
4. Scale.....	19
5. Conclusion: Eros and Thanatos.....	22

“*I have always lived in many worlds*”  
– Charles Simonds<sup>1</sup>

In 1970, Charles Simonds began constructing miniature, site-specific sculptural installations that resemble ancient architectural ruins, he referred to as “dwellings,” in and around the streets of New York City.<sup>2</sup> Starting in SoHo, he relocated east in 1971, leaving Greene Street and settling among the dilapidated tenement buildings of the Lower East Side. In the years to follow, he would construct hundreds of dwellings, predominantly between 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Houston Street to the north and south, and Avenue D and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the east and west. Each dwelling was built using tweezers and tiny, unfired clay bricks, which were rolled and cut by hand in Simonds’ nearby apartment. Atop a surface of freshly packed, raw clay, he nestled the sculptures into derelict walls, windowsills, and gutters—nooks exposed in the seams of the neighborhood’s surrounding architecture. Negligible spaces were temporarily reconfigured into distinct sites, and the dwellings became invisibly interconnected through Simonds’ mythology of their nomadic occupants, called the “Little People.” Telling of a culture always in flight, the Little People wandered the city endlessly, constructing and abandoning dwellings as they went—the ruins that remained serving as indexes to their peripatetic existence.

Extremely precarious, the dwellings were almost always imminently destroyed, often only within hours of their construction. Neighborhood children “playing bombardier,”<sup>3</sup> the natural elements, and attempts to remove the work for private possession all contributed to their

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa Millet, “Interview with Teresa Millet, *Charles Simonds* (Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2003), 152.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of site specificity see, Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); see also Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4-12.

<sup>3</sup> Such is the recurring phrase that Simonds uses to characterize one mode of interactive play the dwellings encouraged. It can be found in a number of texts and interviews; e.g., Daniel Abadie, “Charles Simonds, Interviewed by Daniel Abadie,” in *Charles Simonds* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1977), 7.



generally short lifespan. Nevertheless, Simonds' sculptures harbor a deep historical connection to their larger urban context. For the duration of his career he has gathered his material from the Sayreville, New Jersey clay pits, an abandoned industrial site formerly used by the Sayre and Fischer Brick Company.<sup>4</sup> Once the largest brick manufacturer in the United States,<sup>5</sup> the company was a major supplier of material used in construction projects within New York City.<sup>6</sup> It was declared officially defunct the same year that Simonds began his dwellings.<sup>7</sup>

From an art historical vantage, Simonds' work strikes familiar chords. Emerging at the close of the 1960s within the context of Conceptualism and the early Land Art movement—inaugurated at the Dwan Gallery's 1968 *Earth Works* exhibition in Manhattan—the dwellings engage many of the artistic strategies advanced at the time: flight from the gallery, the expanded field of sculpture, and the use of degradable material. Nonetheless, Simonds deviated from current trends in other ways. With the paradigms for art production established by Minimalism in the 1960s still looming large on the horizon, his resort to clay, architectural form, and fantasy bewildered most—as his practice was perceived to be diametrically opposed to Minimalism's stringent logic.<sup>8</sup> As a result, he caught the attention of artists and dealers in New York City's burgeoning alternative art scene, and during the early 1970s he worked and exhibited in the

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<sup>4</sup> John Hallmark Neff, "Charles Simonds's Engendered Places: Towards a Biology of Architecture," in *Charles Simonds* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), 21; Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser, *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012), 233.

<sup>5</sup> "Sayre and Fisher Brick Company," <http://www.sayre-fisher.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Neff, "Engendered Places," 21.

<sup>7</sup> "Sayre and Fisher Brick Company," <http://www.sayre-fisher.com/slides/023.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Simonds often describes his development of the dwellings as having taken place at the height of Minimalism. While Minimalism's landmark exhibition, "Primary Structures," preceded the first appearance of the dwellings by four years, in 1966, James Meyer writes in his seminal account of the movement that its canonization came to fruition only two years later. That same year saw major retrospectives of its practitioners, the publication of Gregory Battcock's famous anthology, and an intensification of political critiques of the movement. See James Meyer, "1968: Canonization/Critique," in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 247-270.

spaces belonging to Christo and Holly Solomon at 98 Greene Street and Jeffrey Lew at 112 Greene Street.<sup>9</sup> Simonds circulated with other young artists, such as Gordon Matta-Clark, George Trakis, Richard Nonas, Suzanne Harris, Keith Sonnier, and Philip Glass.<sup>10</sup> In art historical accounts, however, Simonds is typically considered among the posterity of Land Art; if only as a more historically minor figure in comparison to its canonical icons, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter de Maria. Despite the fact that Simonds did not formally affiliate with Land Art as a solidified artistic movement, his explicit concern with earth (as ecological medium and as artistic material via clay), habitation, and land use lends to historical accounts that include him within the its legacy.<sup>11</sup>

But it can be argued that Simonds' work is more categorically recalcitrant than this, reflecting in a discursive capacity his affinity for the nomadic. His concern is as much with social relations and the forms of life they constitute as it is with ecological factors underpinning them. His move from the pristine walls of gallery to the cluttered streets of a disparaged neighborhood never materialized as a final departure. While Simonds maintains that during the 1970s these areas were irreconcilably separate, each with their own distinct norms and ways of living, his artistic practice engages paradoxical processes of negotiating spaces more than sealing them. In addition to circulating among artists, critics, and dealers, his work returned to gallery settings periodically throughout the decade. In 1971, for instance, Simonds constructed a dwelling on the interior window of the 112 Greene Street gallery. Four years later, he installed a

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Abadie, "Chronology," in *Charles Simonds* (Barcelona: Fundació "la Caixa," 1994), 131.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, John Beardsley's 1977-78 exhibition, "Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects," situated Simonds among a predominantly male grouping of contemporaries, including the late Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Michael Heizer, Richard Long, Harvey Fite, Richard Fleischner, James Pierce, and Charles Ross (with Nancy Holt as the show's sole female artist). For other examples, see: John Beardsley *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998); Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1983).

small plaque in the 1975 Whitney Biennial, announcing not a work in the show but the existence of dwellings in the streets outside. Furthermore, over the course of the decade and into the next, Simonds produced a series of standalone dwelling landscapes, which were meant for conventional purposes of collection and exhibition. As recognized in a 1974 publication of the alternative art magazine, *Art-Rite*, the stakes of Simonds move to the street were not in refuting the art world's cultural dominance, but in facilitating wider audiences.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis aims to elucidate the conceptual and historical ambiguity of Simonds' work, to map the dynamic lines along which the dwellings unfold. It is divided into five parts, starting with an analysis of Simonds' notion of the Little People. To address problems of primitivism, I look to the eclectic array of possible sources behind Simonds' use of the term. This eclecticism broaches the central arc of the essay: namely, that Simonds' work enacts a number of passages between different registers, which reciprocally structure his project's metaphysical framework. Past critics, such as David Anfam, John Beardsley, and Germano Celant have tended to polarize Simonds as one side of a Manichean dichotomy, in confrontation against any number of oppositional ends—organic growth versus the rigid city, tiny versus immense, interior versus exterior, street versus artworld, and “primitive” versus modernity. While these readings are certainly important in many ways, they are lacking in other respects. The essay's second part concerns the reflexive relation between the dwellings and the systemic deterioration of the Lower East Side. In the following section, I shift towards a discussion of time and space, in order to clarify the ecological aspect of Simonds' metaphysics. Calling on Smithson's entropic theory

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<sup>12</sup> Edit deAk, “Vernacular Myth,” in *Art-Rite*, Summer 1974, 9-11. The relevant passage reads: “Simonds is free of anti-art polemic. He is an artist, but he is not involved in working in a non-esthetic context as an attack on the existing art/system. He has found an area where his energies are not destructive or on the offensive against a contaminated situation. He has dropped the system and wastes no energy confronting it... This is not to say that Simonds does not have much to offer to the art world. After all, he has achieved the esteemed status of not being called an artist in the real world while consistently making art productions.”

of landscape, I trace heterogeneous strands of temporality that emerge from Simonds' dwellings. This leads into his treatment of space and the manner in which Simonds evades old categories of spatiality. The essay's fourth part concerns his use of scale, in order to call attention to the structural ambiguity at the root of Simonds' project. Finally, I conclude with an examination of sexual nature of the dwellings, as thematized in his films, *Mythologies*. Using German philosopher Herbert Marcuse's theory of Eros, an emphasis on the sexual in Simonds returns to his ecological metaphysics in a way that better articulates their political stakes. An organic unity binds the different projects that comprise Simonds' oeuvre, such to the point that each one can be seen as a single instantiation of the whole.<sup>13</sup> This body, therefore, entails proliferate permutations between the diametric terms in which Simonds is so often framed. Janus-faced and a-morphological, Simonds' body traverses phases of growing, shifting, sliding, and mutating. Thus, the dwellings function metonymically to disclose an ambiguous ecology of passage.

### **I. The Little People**

In Simonds' own words, the disparate spaces of gallery and street through which he circulated constitute social worlds.<sup>14</sup> While the term world is commonly used in conjunction with art to encapsulate the globally expansive network of people and institutions involved in relations of art production, distribution, and preservation, Simonds' use of the word evinces another side of things: a plane of different social spheres and their elaborate microcosmic structuration. During the 1970s, the world of the Lower East Side and the world of art were at extreme social incommensurability. Simonds articulated as much years later, in a slight targeting Carl Andre, wherein he dryly states: "For the man in the street, bricks are still only good for making houses,

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<sup>13</sup> Neff, "Engendered Places," 13.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Simonds, interview by author, New York, NY, April 17, 2014.

no matter how self-righteously they lie on the floor.”<sup>15</sup> Against what he perceived to be the mainstream art world’s removal from contexts outside itself, Simonds moved the dwellings and the Little People to the Lower East Side with the intention to engage other audiences.<sup>16</sup> In a 1975 *Artforum* article, art critic Carter Ratcliff called the artist’s motives into question on two fronts.<sup>17</sup> Making the case that Simonds overvalues lay spectators for their supposed cultural naïveté, Ratcliff argues that he, wittingly or not, condescends to his spectators in the street. On the same note, he rebukes Simonds for employing architectural forms reminiscent of Southwestern Native American cultures as emblems of the “primitive,” claiming that “[t]here is something close to 18<sup>th</sup> century sentimentality about the noble savage in Simonds’ work.”<sup>18</sup> Ratcliff is indeed right to draw attention to the potential problems of primitivism in Simonds’ sculptures. But he overlooks the *mélange* of different architectural styles taken from around the world that factor into the dwellings. Both historic and prehistoric, Western and non-Western alike, his influences range from Hopi villages to Scottish brochs and Greek beehive tombs.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as Simonds recounts it, it was his positive interactions with nearby workers when building the first dwellings in SoHo that impelled him to find a particular neighborhood in which he could establish them in extended number.<sup>20</sup> It is not the case that he prizes naïve assumptions of non-art world audiences, but that divergent contexts offer insights not available in conventional artistic spaces,

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<sup>15</sup> He adds shortly thereafter: “I’ve learned more in the street from and given more to Josefa (Paris), Cucho and Hollywood (Lower East Side) and Mendelez (Berlin) than from or to the artworldly.” See Contribution to “Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience,” *Artforum* January 1980, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Abadie, “Interviewed,” 7.

<sup>17</sup> Carter Ratcliff, “On Contemporary Primitivism,” *Artforum*, November 1975, 57-65.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Neff, “Engendered Places,” 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Abadie, “Interviewed,” 7.

given the differing cultural milieus and economic infrastructures that determine contrasting social spheres.

On the development of the Little People as an idea, Simonds attributes it to the initial formation of the dwellings inside his studio, before moving to the street, where two conflicting civilizations of dwellers came into contact with one another. At a more personal level, he insists that the Little People fermented over a long nascent period that starts with childhood fantasies and family visits to the American Southwest, and germinated further under studies in mythology with literary critic Stanley Fish at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>21</sup> This mixture of conscious and unconscious thought was eventually realized on Greene Street in 1970.

Still, it begs the question as to where Simonds' term, Little People, originates. From a contemporary perspective it seems tinged with derogatory connotations, most notably with regards to indigenous peoples of the American Southwest. It has been argued, however, that the Little People's physically diminutive size serves to reflect cellular, insectile, and algal organisms—Simonds having taken great influence from entomology and microbiological sciences.<sup>22</sup> In another vein, art critic Kate Linker writes that Simonds takes the notion from comparative mythology, as “many cultures have mythologies of ‘little people’—the Irish and Southwest Indian versions are examples,” though his use is not directly attributable to any one cultural source.<sup>23</sup> Philosopher Arthur Danto raises the sculptor's literary background, explaining that the Little People are overtly linked to the Lilliputians of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Also, Millet, “Interview,” 148-150; Charles Simonds, “MoMA Lecture 2 of 3,” *Lectures*, YouTube video, 57:10, <http://www.charles-simonds.com/lectures/moma2013/>.

<sup>22</sup> Neff, “Engendered Places,” 18-25.

<sup>23</sup> Kate Linker, “Charles Simonds' Emblematic Architecture,” *Artforum*, March 1979, 37.

*Travels*.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, art historian Ann Reynolds suggests that during the 1970s, the phrase was commonly used by area newspapers to indicate those affected by New York's real estate development plans, as opposed to those in control of them. As a result, she notes, "these groups sometimes even referred to themselves in this way [as little people], if only in an attempt at subversive irony."<sup>25</sup> If anything, then, the ultimate indiscernibility of a distinct originary source for the Little People's conception and moniker illuminates the eclectic array of social, scientific, and cultural fields that inform Simonds' work. Just as the dwellings index the Little People's migration patterns through swaths of urban terrain, their very inception likewise is dispersed across a number of discourses.

While these suggestions are not meant to ignore the history of imperialist violence inscribed in epithets such as Little People, critical potential can be found if focus is shifted towards its ironic employment of the variety noted by Reynolds. The dwellings denote, firstly, a conscious effort on the part of Simonds to raise specters of colonialism. He acknowledges as political the sculptures' ties to the historical impact of American Manifest Destiny upon indigenous populations.<sup>26</sup> Inserted in the context of the 1970s Lower East Side, they serve as beacons for the fantasies and frustrations of an economically underprivileged sector of the city. Such sheds light onto why the sculptures garnered such strong rapport among people in the neighborhood, for they congealed political anger into an iconic symbolic articulation.<sup>27</sup> Deteriorating conditions in the Lower East Side infused the dwellings with a reflexive charge,

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur Danto, "Charles Simonds and the Versatility of Clay," in *Mental Earth, Growths and Smears* (New York: Knoedler & Company, 2011), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Reynolds, "Dwelling as World," in *LandscapeBodyDwelling: Charles Simonds at Dumbarton Oaks*, ed. John Beardsley (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2011), 70.

<sup>26</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and Charles Simonds, "Microcosm to Macrocosm/Fantasy to Real World," *Artforum*, February, 1974, 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

and its residents came to relate the Little People to their own situation in New York's deindustrializing economy.<sup>28</sup>

## II. Reflexivity

The 1970s witnessed a deep plunge into economic recession, first in New York City, and then again on the national level at mid-decade. With New York teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, the city mandated sharp austerity measures in attempt to roll back spending. Deep fiscal cuts were made to social welfare programs and public services, including park budgets, transportation expenditure, and police and firefighting services.<sup>29</sup> Privatized processes of deindustrialization were accelerated, with the objective to increase intercity flows of capital and develop real estate investments that would transform Manhattan's economic center away from industrial manufacturing.<sup>30</sup> Gross levels of economic imbalance were created, embedded in the very machinery of citywide restructuration efforts and the movements of neighborhood flight, displacement, and gentrification. According to sociologist William Sites, the Lower East Side was particularly affected by the crisis. Carved virtually in half, the neighborhood became starkly divided along lines of class and ethnicity. Real estate strategies worked to parcel off specific areas of the city for concentrated investment, often at the cost of neighboring communities.<sup>31</sup> While the Lower East Side's northwestern area, the largely white East Village, began experiencing increased development over the course of the decade in order to inflate housing

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See William Sites, "Public Action: Gentrification and the Lower East Side," in *Remaking New York: Primitive Globalization and the Politics of Urban Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 76; also, William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 21-35.

<sup>30</sup> Sites, "Public Action," 76-78. See also, Christopher Mele, "Neighborhood 'Burn-out': Puerto Ricans at the End of the Queue," in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 126-128.

<sup>31</sup> Sites, "Public Action," 76-78.



value, the predominantly Puerto Rican enclave to the east, known as Loisaida, plummeted into neglect and extreme blight.<sup>32</sup> With regards to the uneven development of these areas of the

Lower East Side, Sites states:

Driving a wedge between the reviving East Village and declining Loisaida, these policies also unraveled the public-sector infrastructure undergirding the fragile ecology of the *barrio*. This flurry of blows simply devastated Loisaida. Loss of housing and of residents in the Puerto Rican Lower East Side reached astonishing levels. Hundreds of buildings were abandoned by their owners; residents fled, some of them literally ‘torched’ out by fires set by landlords or their employees in order to collect insurance money. In the two most devastated census tracts in Loisaida, the nearly fifteen thousand residents who lived there in 1970 dwindled to fewer than five thousand people ten years later.<sup>33</sup>

But despite the neighborhood’s egregious landscape of housing de-investment, abandonment, and fallout, Loisaida maintained an active cultural fabric—consisting of a large poetry and arts community, youth groups, and grassroots activist organizations—whose busy street life drew Simonds to the area as the geographic arena for his dwellings.<sup>34</sup>

The dwellings thereby possess a reflexive relation to the Lower East Side in two capacities: material and social. In the lo-fi film documenting him at work, simply titled *Dwellings 1972*, an on-screen producer explains “he just goes around the neighborhood and builds buildings for people to look at.” While the filmmaker was speaking offhand to a small crowd of children and teenagers watching Simonds, his words nonetheless provide a more fundamental insight with regards to the dwellings’ place in the neighborhood. He refers to buildings *meant to be looked at* rather than lived in, thereby narrowing focus to opticality over habitability. The typical account of Simonds’ sculptures indicates the mirror relation between their ruinous appearance and the slum conditions of the neighborhood. It can be found, for

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>34</sup> Mario Maffi, “The Other Side of the Coin: Culture in Loisaida,” in *From Urban Village to East Village*, 141-147. Also, Abadie, “Interviewed,” 7-8. Over the 1970s, Simonds became involved in a number of community activist organizations, such as the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing.

instance, in texts from *Art-Rite* editor Edit DeAk, historian Ann Reynolds, and critic Lucy Lippard.<sup>35</sup> Simonds himself explicitly states that “[o]n the Lower East Side, the Little People exist as a metaphor for the life of the people in the neighborhood.”<sup>36</sup> The dwellings play an almost theatrical role, staging the neighborhood’s objective conditions of social existence as a constitutive element in the material understanding of the work. This view has solidified in contemporary art historical narratives. In the exhibition catalog for Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser’s immense 2012 retrospective of land and environmental art, *Ends of the Earth*, the authors proclaim—using Smithson’s language of entropy—that the dwellings “conjure lost worlds while simultaneously refracting contemporary urban development as if it too were ‘ruins in reverse.’”<sup>37</sup>

Since Simonds’ sculptures were usually destroyed following their construction, contemporary perspectives are limited to film and photography. Significantly, aside from material produced by filmmakers David Troy and Rudy Burckhardt—*Dwellings 1972* and *Dwellings 1974*, respectively—majority of the period’s extant reproductions were taken by residents and offered to Simonds as gifts.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the artist recounts taking virtually no photos

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<sup>35</sup> deAk, “Vernacular Myth,” 9; Reynolds, “World,” 70-72; Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 56; See also, Germano Celant, “Charles Simonds’ Anthropomorphism,” *Charles Simonds* (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1994), 18-27.

<sup>36</sup> He adds: “The creation and eventual destruction of the dwelling is seen as emblematic of lives lived in an area where the buildings of the city are undergoing constant transformation. New construction, vacant building, rehabilitated building, vacant lot are mirrored respectively by dwelling, ruin, reinhabited ruin and destroyed dwelling. Slowly the Little People are developing their own history and potential archaeology. (1972, 16mm black-and-white movie by David Troy; 1974, 16mm color movie by Rudy Burckhardt).” Taken from Charles Simonds, “Selected Work,” in *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, ed. Alan Sondheim (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1977), 293.

<sup>37</sup> Kwon, *Ends of the Earth*, 233. For Smithson’s notion of “ruins in reverse,” see his essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey”; for his account of entropy, see “Entropy Made Visible”; both in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For further reference, see Pamela M. Lee, “Ultramoderne: Or, How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art,” in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 218-256.

<sup>38</sup> Simonds, interview. For more information, see Charles Simonds, “MoMA Lecture 3 of 3,” *Lectures*, YouTube video, 39:53, <http://www.charles-simonds.com/lectures/moma2013/>. The two films, *Dwellings 1972* and *Dwellings*

of his work, preferring instead that their documentation persist in memory alone. This added not only to their limited timeframe, but also, paradoxically, to their lasting ubiquity. As Simonds recalls, area residents reported spotting dwellings everywhere, and in many cases they were cited in locations where they never actually materialized. Much to the sculptor's delight, the dwellings took on a profoundly sticky presence, and they circulated by word of mouth with more impact than he felt picture reproductions would allow. In the case of the two films, Simonds' reputation in the Lower East Side had led Troy to approach him for permission to film *Dwellings 1972*. Burckhardt likewise learned of the dwellings from Simonds' growing notoriety in the alternative art scene and requested to document his work.<sup>39</sup> In any event, it is telling that only a limited collection of reproductions can be found in publication in comparison with the hundreds of dwellings that were constructed across the neighborhood.

No doubt tied to his hostility towards the art world, Simonds' refusal to personally document his works places him in a peculiar position between two prominent art historical paradigms of the period. In 1967, Lucy Lippard famously characterized the contemporary rise of ethereal forms of art making as the "dematerialization of the art object." More recent scholarship, however, has called Lippard's concept into question.<sup>40</sup> Instead of merely eschewing material practices for the gestures and ephemera of Conceptualism, Performance, and Land Art, artists simultaneously dispersed art's objecthood across an extensive array of textual formats and media technologies. An effort was made to expand the art object within the discursive field of

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*1974*, emphasize not the dwellings as isolated sculptural objects, but as sites implicating spectators, passersby, tenement buildings, and the street in general.

<sup>39</sup> Simonds, interview; Simonds, "MoMA Lecture 2 of 3."

<sup>40</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of the Art Object," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 46-50.

documentary materials.<sup>41</sup> In the respect that Simonds' dwellings were always constructed under the shadow of imminent destruction, they do effectuate a certain dematerialization. But the emphasis given to clay as sensual medium and the compulsive nature of their construction expresses an extraordinary sense of materiality. If anything, the dwellings can be considered precious objects, anathema to the ephemeral. Their physical fragility underscores not their own inevitable dematerialization as destroyed objects, but the contextual forces of dematerialization enacted by the street—thus bringing into view a contradiction, a show of materializing dematerialization. “I’ve often sensed the feeling of loss about the brutalization of that fragile fantasy which is emblematic of the lives they [residents of the Lower East Side] themselves lead,” intimates Simonds, “that sense of ‘well, everytime [sic] you try to do something good or beautiful around here, it’s always destroyed’.”<sup>42</sup>

If Simonds knots dematerialization into paradox, his refusal to document his work turns in a different direction. The gifting of documentation taken by neighborhood passersby suggests less a dispersal of the art object into the field of media technologies than it does processes of active exchange between people. Framing the dwellings and the Little People in ethical terms as a heuristic for examining “*how* people live on [the earth]” and the “sense of values,” within a political ecology of urban environments, Simonds ties his work to concerns over the shifting circuits of real estate development during the 1970s and the subsequent effects these shifts had on underprivileged communities, such as the Lower East Side.<sup>43</sup> By transforming previously negligible spaces into distinct sites of social place, Simonds stakes out temporary ecologies of

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<sup>41</sup> See James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014); Yates McKee, “Land Art in Parallax: Media, Violence, Political Ecology,” in *Nobody’s Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2010), 45-59; Andrew V. Uroskie, “La Jetée en Spirale: Robert Smithson’s Stratigraphic Cinema,” *Grey Room* 19 (Spring 2005): 54-79.

<sup>42</sup> Lippard “Microcosm,” 39.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

bidirectional expenditures of information among individuals, which is by no means hermetic but nonetheless maintains certain levels of consistency.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the dwellings foreground circuits of living bodies and flows of communication as the lifeblood of urban environments. His mythology of the Little People reintegrates these movements back into the sculptures themselves. As he states in *Dwellings 1972*: the Little People’s “survival is very much dependent upon the flow of life around them and the kind of treatment they receive.”

### III. Time and Space

Simonds’ decision to build the dwellings within the Lower East Side amounted to what he describes as approaching a “group of people in time.”<sup>45</sup> Time and space together provide the elastic parameters in which he lays the metaphysical ground of his work. Dismissing the Newtonian model of absolute separation between space and time—a view covertly entrenched in the annals of Minimalism—Simonds instead takes up a paradigm of spacetime relativity. It is impossible, in other words, to map the coordinates of his artistic project without activating both sides of the physical spectrum. If mythology synthesizes the terms of his thought into concrete distillations, it is always secondary to the artist’s underlying metaphysics. Where the two horizons meet is on an ecological plane that entangles embodied experience, diverse strands of temporality, and cycles of life. In the following passage, he enunciates this confluence of spatial and temporal registers with existential boundaries:

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.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> On the artwork as hermetic environment, see Nisbet, *Ecologies*, 13-66.

<sup>45</sup> Simonds, interview.

<sup>46</sup> Millet, “Interview,” 154.

These boundaries, with their stress on process and movement, easily translate to ecological terms. In doing so, it is useful to briefly invoke Smithson's writings, as they fall along similar lines as Simonds' project.

That there is much congruence between Simonds and Smithson is not surprising. Evidence of Smithson's influence on Gordon Matta-Clark during the years he and Simonds shared a loft at 131 Chrystie Street is well documented.<sup>47</sup> Sometime later, in 1972, when living with Lucy Lippard, Simonds befriended Smithson and their relationship proved to be artistically edifying.<sup>48</sup> In a 2003 interview, Simonds recounts his trips with Smithson through the clay pits and rock quarries of New Jersey. Summarizing their shared understanding of habitation, Simonds notes: "we both viewed the earth in time, the city as conceptually articulated earth in long-time."<sup>49</sup> For both artists, temporality is inextricably bound to questions of human existence on the earth and its related ecological ramifications, whether in urban or rural environments.<sup>50</sup> According to Smithson, land is never historically neutral, never raw or pristine, but is always already permeated with a deep history of perpetually unfolding change.<sup>51</sup> Radically heterogeneous, sites and landscapes possess myriad deposits of disparate temporalities, which distill its ontological makeup onto a surface of ever-receding prehistories. Social processes of technological mediation inscribe human relations on the land, giving them a spectral presence

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<sup>47</sup> Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Charles Simonds, "Letter to the Editor," *Artforum*, May 1974. Smithson lent written support for Simonds' La Placita park project, which came to fruition in 1975, two years after the former's death.

<sup>49</sup> Millet, "Interview," 148.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. In a 1977 exhibition of land art, curator John Beardsley aligned Simonds alongside Smithson for their common interest in landscapes marked by human presence. "Simonds only involves himself with sites yielding a rich history of human usage," writes Beardsley, noting in the same passage that Smithson likewise prefers "sites with some human or natural disruption." See the show's exhibition catalog, *Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 24.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 157-171.

through which they persist after the fact, therefore further precluding any notion of the eternal or untouched landscape.<sup>52</sup>

Like Smithson, Simonds' work cannot be said to embody a single marker of time, be it prehistoric or otherwise. Rather, he employs the dwellings to open up plays of heterogeneous temporalities embedded in the landscape. Using material culled from the Sayreville clay pits—richly associated with the history of New York—the dwellings synthesize architectural ruin and archaeological site, past and present, with the emblem of archetypal myth, foregrounded by the Little People. In the context of New York's restructuring efforts, the Little People narrativize a dialectics of becoming, which orient past and present along a futural axis. They are caught between existential parameters of a "pathos of something coming to be and being destroyed, living and dying."<sup>53</sup> Such endows the dwellings with environmental cycles of germination, growth, decay, and re-fertilization, while their sculptural repose in the clefts of city architecture renders any one moment ultimately indeterminable. Registering at once markedly different horizons of time, Simonds frays threads of temporality into impossible strands. Temporality is made ambiguous, as he deposits mythical time, historical time, labor time, and lived time in one go.

In terms of space, by shifting focus reciprocally from miniature dwelling to macroscopic city, Simonds articulates architecture as the mediating term between body and landscape. In his words, the dwellings "throw into relief the scale and history of the city."<sup>54</sup> But rather than breaking city and sculpture apart into hardened opposition, Simonds encapsulates both terms within a unified composition hinged on phenomenological experience. This encapsulation is

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Lippard, "Microcosm," 38.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

made most forcefully apparent in Simonds iconic 1976 photograph of a dwelling built for MoMA PS1's inaugural *Rooms* exhibition. Taken from the museum's roof, the photograph divides its pictorial space into a conventional arrangement of three tiered layers.<sup>55</sup> Simonds' sculpture lies in the foreground, at picture-bottom, producing a shallow and immediate space. It is connected to a flat backdrop—Manhattan's monochromatic skyline—through the museum's neighboring street and low-rise architecture. The city's gray-blue skyline sharply juxtaposes with the lumpy clay mounds and red bricks of Simonds' dwelling. But while these two landscapes seem to be in conflict with one another, their collision of form occurs on the singular surface of a photograph. A transition takes place that compresses the spatial content of the image into the formal structure of the sculpture. The diagonal orientation of the depicted dwelling simulates the slant of its midground, which lies perpendicular to the picture plane at an oblique angle, while its tri-leveled, staggered architecture echoes the threefold layering of the photograph altogether. Furthermore, like any image taken of Simonds' dwellings, the adjacent brick wall of the museum hovers prominently at the picture's right edge. At once, it buttresses the sculpture and links it to the towering architecture of Manhattan. This linkage was apparent, as Nancy Foote indicated in her *Artforum* exhibition review: "The distance between the two cities equalized their scale, a spatial juxtaposition which also managed to join them temporally."<sup>56</sup>

Foote's comment pinpoints the ambiguous structure of Simonds' dwellings. Radical differences in urban architectural formations, spatial distances, and disparate registers of time are made to coalesce within a single body. What belated spectators are given is the photograph,

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<sup>55</sup> The photograph was one of the few in the exhibition catalog not taken by the show's photographer, Jonathan M. Dent. See Alanna Heiss, *Rooms P.S. 1: June 9-26, 1976* (New York: The Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc., 1977). The same photograph was reproduced in the show's *Artforum* review written by Nancy Foote in October of that year.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Foote, "The Apotheosis of Crummy Space," *Artforum*, October 1976, 34.



residue that provides an afterimage of the building process. But what has always remained most important for Simonds is the embodied activity of building, more so than the objects it created.<sup>57</sup> Thus, it should not be forgotten that this process takes place always under and within the looming skyscrapers of New York City, not apart from them. As much is made evident by a photograph featured in the same 1977 exhibition catalog, which depicts Simonds in the process of compiling the rooftop dwelling.

Conversely, art historian David Anfam uses the iconic modernist architecture of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building—characterized as emblematic not just of New York City but also of American giantism and the “technological sublime”—as the foil by which Simonds' can be discussed.<sup>58</sup> Polarizing the sculptor in terms of fluidity, organicism, and entropy, Anfam pits him against the tightly rigid structures of modernist calculation, geometry, and technocracy—with the stakes of this opposition lying in each side's metaphysical implications. For Anfam, van der Rohe's mathematical modernism assumes an abstract, totalized universe, whereas Simonds posits a worldview “oriented along existential axes that link the human presence on earth to the cycles of nature, growth and transience.”<sup>59</sup> Others have raised similar oppositions. Germano Celant speaks of interior and exterior, here and there; whereas John Beardsley recognizes Simonds' effort to efface the institutional boundaries that define art audiences, but maintains the logic of the dichotomy as the artist's undergirding methodology.<sup>60</sup> These accounts tend either to

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<sup>57</sup> Simonds, “MoMA Lecture 3 of 3.”

<sup>58</sup> David Anfam, “Simonds's Domain: Fragments and Secrets of Time.” In *Charles Simonds* (Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2003), 50-75.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Celant, “Anthropomorphism,” 18-27. John Beardsley, “On the Loose with the Little People: A Geography of Simonds' Art,” in *Charles Simonds* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), 27-30. Beardsley's analysis of the PS1 dwelling anticipates Anfam's later description, characterizing it as foregrounding the “contrast in the social and economic structures that had generated the architectures...the forms employed by Simonds to represent the Little People are technologically naïve, while those of our society are not.”

sublate their contraries or to leave them in tension. In any event, they are captured by a logic that evacuates Simonds' penchant for intermediary phases of experience and ecological flows of exchange. Their framework restricts him to sets of pre-determined horizons that impose destinations onto his project's explicitly nomadic ambitions. Old categories, such as nature versus culture, are thereby rehashed, which serves to obviate the play of conceptual ambiguity at work in his dwellings.

#### **IV. Scale**

Always imbricated within their surrounding environment, phenomenological experience of the rigid city, the immense city, and so on, is part and parcel to the effect the dwellings elicit. A preoccupation with the finished sculpture, reduced to its mere objectivity, has led many to bifurcate Simonds' work in terms of the tiny versus the immense. Viewing the dwellings in this way, however, as simply miniature structures, risks a major conceptual misstep—one which overlooks the vast ambiguity in scale entailed by the enveloping of city and dwelling into the same fold. Implied through repeated slippage between sculpture, body, and environment, Simonds thereby enacts a phenomenological ambiguity that confuses the relation between these different registers of size. Here, at this scalar juncture, Minimalism appears prominently in the background. Against the specificity of Minimalist scale—succinctly summarized by Tony Smith, whose 1966 description of Minimal art as neither object nor monument congealed into a maxim of sorts—Simonds' sculptures encompass both values (miniature and gigantic), with the body as their mediating term. In other words, whereas Smith placed the specificity of Minimalism between negative determinations of not-object, not-monument, Simonds flattens these determinations into one glissading spectrum, which he then presents as the entire space of experience. If Smith and his fellow practitioners—Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and

Carl Andre—displaced the artwork’s generative point of meaning from within itself to one’s embodied relation within the contextual space of the art object’s physical environment, then Simonds indeed follows suit. But inscribed on the surface of Simonds’ work is a phenomenological dimension that exists only subterraneously in Minimalism: an embellished spontaneity of fantasy and imagination. In order to carry through its blows against the dominant (Cartesian) paradigm of meaning in art, Minimalism had to repress the play of imagination in experience. Posited instead, according to Rosalind Krauss, was a relation of pure surface, deposited in objects of a distinct size, as intended to eviscerate the inside-outside division constitutive of Cartesian subjectivity.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, in Minimalism, the agency of imagination obtained in disguised form through the emphasis on the unstable elements of light and color.<sup>62</sup>

The extreme parameters of Simonds’ scale, on the other hand, converge through the fluidity of the imagination. His expanded network of dwellings map layers of fiction onto the sociological plane of urban geography. For those spectators invested in the myths of the Little People, first hand experience of the dwellings indicated permeability in the boundaries dividing reality from unreality. French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, theorized in 1958 that phenomenological experience at the threshold between micro and macro tends to activate tension between real and unreal, injecting each side within the other.<sup>63</sup> Macrocosmic images of entire worlds come to inundate one’s imaginative experience of the miniature and its structures. And, indeed, whereas Bachelard calls on the botanist’s flower, transformed under the magnifying glass

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<sup>61</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “The Double Negative: A New Syntax for Sculpture,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 243-288.

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Robert Morris’ canonical 1966 essay on Minimalist scale, “Notes on Sculpture” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 222-235

<sup>63</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 153-159.

into “an entire world,” Simonds likewise employs (micro-) biological analogies.<sup>64</sup> Influenced by a wide range of ecological and natural sciences, the dwellings are meant to telescope human social formations against growth patterns of botanical structures, forms of vegetal reproduction, and the “specialized cellular organizations of simple aquatic organisms.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Simonds characterizes the Little People in entomological terms of “infestations” and “swarms.”<sup>66</sup> The fiction of the dwellings thereby serves to confound differences between human and insectile. At macroscopic level, efforts to erode the borders of unreal and real has led Celant to argue that Simonds envisages the city as a embodied schizophrenic entity, “seen as a living organism, with its corporeality and anatomy, its hallucinations and nightmares.”<sup>67</sup> By projecting fiction onto the real at the threshold between miniature structure and towering city, Simonds thereby undermines any attempt to restrict scale within a narrow spectrum. The dwellings turn Minimalism’s logic on its head: against the specificity of the latter, his objects wax ambiguous. This inversion harkens back to the ambiguity of Claes Oldenburg’s absurd public sculptures and monument proposals, from whom Simonds took significant influence, but having reversed Oldenburg’s procedure.<sup>68</sup> Rather than increasing small objects to enormous proportions, Simonds diminishes them in effort to foreground the wide spectrum of scale in which they are situated.

Ambiguity, therefore, provides the conceptual crux of Simonds’ project, as it inflames the precarity beneath all stable positions and instead turns over onto movements of slippage and indeterminacy. As such, inversion can be considered Simonds’ key tactic. Operating not in the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>65</sup> Neff, “Engendered Places,” 18.

<sup>66</sup> Simonds, interview. Also, Millet, “Interview,” 150.

<sup>67</sup> Celant, “Anthropomorphism,” 18-27.

<sup>68</sup> For an account of ambiguity in Oldenburg’s public sculpture, see Julian Rose, “Objects in the Cluttered Field: Claes Oldenburg’s Proposed Monuments,” *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 113-138.

mode of Marxist ideology critique, a methodology aimed at exposing real processes of domination beneath false and often spectacular appearances, used by numerous artists working at the time; instead, Simonds' play of inversion works to unfix structural relations and open up space for passage between identities. His inversions are not governed by a logic of two, revealing one thing to be its opposite. Conversely, by scattering his dwellings throughout the Lower East Side, Simonds disperses their unified idea into a heterogeneity of singular places, which localizes them respectively. Their site compounds itself into a multivalent structure, which is both proliferate and perpetually in the middle. Tucked discreetly into crumbling exposures in neighborhood tenement buildings, caught between presence and absence, construction and destruction, the dwellings are situations always only to be stumbled upon. Characterizing their discovery in terms of surprise, Simonds frames the dwellings' precarity as a capacity to incite anger as much as wonder. He recoups the historical avant-garde's political strategy of *shock*, but as transformed into the phenomenological play of surprise. Thus, with this move towards an aesthetic of surprise (and its implications of the gift), Simonds engenders a potential for both negative and affirmative dimensions in his dwellings. The positive faculty of imagination becomes charged with the destructive drive of negativity, superseding itself into a radical vision of alternatives.

## **V. Conclusion: Eros and Thanatos**

In 1972, philosopher Herbert Marcuse reiterated the Freudian-Marxist position he espoused 17 years earlier in *Eros and Civilization*, this time in an ecological context. Nature "is the source and locus of the life-instincts," he proclaims, "which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction."<sup>69</sup> Life-instincts, or Eros, represent an organism's natural

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<sup>69</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Ecology and Revolution," in *Ecology*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 52.

inclinations towards bodily nourishment. Derived from Freud's pleasure principle, life-instincts are ultimately inseparable from sexual impulses. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse sketches a historical narrative of civilization, starting in the mythical past and continuing over recorded history, which traces the life-instincts' conflict with destructive drives that repress their full realization.<sup>70</sup> One example can be found in the traditional Western conception of reason, which is rooted in the philosophical subject-object opposition and exhorts mastery over the natural world.<sup>71</sup> Logic of this type cleaves humanity from the earth, thereby laying the conditions for systematic environmental domination. Simonds rejects any such metaphysics presupposing ontological separation and expresses instead a sexualized envelopment of both human and nature. Indeed, Simonds inserts sexual energies into the flux of life, molding them into the lumpy, bodily shapes of his landscapes. While the vast majority of dwellings employ basic post and lintel architecture, phallic and vaginal forms commonly supplement them, either in the shape of suggestive clay mounds or in ritual cairns and pit structures. His metaphysics of being-in-the-world, which ties together space and time, is through and through ecological. In three films, produced between 1970 and 1974 at the Sayreville clay pits, collectively known as the *Mythologies*, he intensifies the sexual dimension of this eco-metaphysics. Functioning as the cosmological narrative of the Little People, the films disclose "the origin myth—the origin of the world and of man and of the people."<sup>72</sup>

Comprised in total by *Birth* (1970), *Body/Earth* (1974), and *Landscape/Body/Dwelling* (1973), each film features Simonds as its sole actor. They progress from the mythical primal

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<sup>70</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-126.

<sup>72</sup> Lippard, "Microcosm," 36.

man's natal scene in the earth's primordial sludge to the emergence of early civilization.<sup>73</sup> In *Birth*, the earth begets man from its own substance; he struggles to re-enter it in *Body/Earth*; and lastly, concludes in *Landscape/Body/Dwelling* with his body transformed into landscape, atop of which he assembles a dwelling. The opening shot in *Birth* is desolate, presenting no more than a barren pit. There is a certain awkwardness contained in the image. With only a sliver of overcast sky at the screen's top, dusty piles of dirt and clay occupy majority of the image. Any sense of movement is preemptively arrested, frozen. This absence of motion underscores the film's objective to foster a scene of the mythological primal earth, devoid of life.

Approximately a quarter of the way through *Birth*, the foot of the center mound, situated around midway up from screen-bottom, begins to throb. Alive, the land pulsates and extrudes Simonds from its depths. He emerges in a crawl, his body caked in thick globs of earth; eventually rising to a vertical position just before the scene's close. But *Birth* represents humanity's genesis only on the condition that death prefigures it. "I *buried* myself in the earth," Simonds explains, "and was reborn from it."<sup>74</sup> His description of the film as re-birth implies both recapitulation and transition. Doubling, therefore, as both beginning and funeral rite, Simonds transforms his clay into a contradictory double marker, tomb/womb. It demarcates the *site* of death just as equally as it does the wellspring of life.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, at that moment, the landscape

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<sup>73</sup> Simonds' performances in the films double as spiritualistic rituals, both diegetically and non-diegetically, and were re-performed several times throughout the decade.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Reflecting on his artistic project ten years after the first dwellings emerged in SoHo, he submitted a written contribution to a collection of contemporary artist's statements published in the January 1980 issue of *Artforum*. His brief statement reinforces the suggestion that his work conceives of birth to be always conditioned as return—marked beforehand by demise. In the following excerpt, one can see how his use of metaphor entwines sexuality with cycles of life and death, while maintaining their relation to a larger goal of desublimated inter-subjectivity: "Only when we can envision the sun rising on our transparent plastic plumbing and when we are able to realize how we devour our lovers in the act of mating will we love the person in the street as much as we love our own vainglorious art." With the image of dawn, Simonds solicits a language of beginning hinged on the diurnal repetition of planetary rotation. He minimizes its vast scale in the following clause, where he turns the cycle over once more by associating death with insectile sex and reproduction. See "Situation Esthetics," 29.

itself is reconfigured into a grotesque terrestrial belly—taking on a biological dimension that conflates human body and earth in both micro and macro dimensions.

The subsequent film, *Body/Earth*, opens with a four second shaky handheld still of another area in the same Sayreville clay pit. A high-angled zoom pans rightwards over soft, undulating folds in the earth, emphasizing the ground's materiality with long panning shots and fleshy close-ups—sensualizing it to the point that it becomes superfluous, erotic. From the first close-up of rolling clay, the camera pans left and zooms back out onto the original view of the pit's concave shape, this time over-developed and saturated with light. Cut to another close-up, now of Simonds' right backside mired in viscous muck: wrenching his nude body vigorously against the wet earth, he produces thick, sloshing noises, gratuitously overlaid with heavy breathing. With undeniable sexual overtones, the image recalls the primal scene in psychoanalytic discourse and an Oedipal attempt to re-enter the earth through copulation.

Simonds' sexualization of nature is distinct, however, from the repressive function Smithson refers to as the “ecological Oedipus complex”—an anxiety over the penetration and corruption of pristine “mother” earth, which ironically engenders increased ecological devastation by presupposing an ontological divide between human and nature.<sup>76</sup> By contrast, Simonds' sexuality aims to sensuously enfold the two, enveloping subject and object, dweller and environment. Over the course of this essay, it has been argued that Simonds' dwellings enact temporary ecologies between binary pairs, in ways ambiguous to the specificity of both sides. With an overt sexual dimension informing the dwellings, further developed in their correlating *Mythologies*, it can be said that Simonds' building process engages the libido through acts of

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<sup>76</sup> It is worth pointing out that while Smithson refutes the indictment charging land artists of exhibiting sexually aggressive tendencies by cutting the earth—an accusation that levels them with the destruction wrought by industrial capitalism—he tacitly turns the barrel of the psychoanalytic gun on the accuser: desire for the lost object, in this case edenic nature, impels one to act violently on the body of the beloved.



sensuous and sexualized making. And, as he works, passersby and onlookers are captured in photograph or video; or more frequently, in conversation, memory, and story, which break from the site in entropic drifts, to then reconfigure and disseminate elsewhere. These informational ecologies are engendered firstly by the transformation of a negligible or liminal space into demarcated territory, which then imparts bidirectional patterns of production, transmission, consumption, and recyculation.<sup>77</sup> With the sculptures' reflexive relation to its surroundings, condensing context into work and exploding work into context, they implicate spectators within the a-morphological ambiguity and heterogeneous temporalities of embodied experience. The active co-habitation of living bodies within a mutual space, engaged in reciprocal flows of oral and technological communication and exchange, are consolidated into a fleeting aggregate of inter-subjective relations. If structural plays of ambiguity serve to unhinge Simonds from the concatenation of dichotomies parsed by critics, then the sexual dimension of his work unveils a utopian horizon, which aims to unleash libidinal flows of social energy into his sites of makeshift ecologies.

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<sup>77</sup> These terms are easily transferable into simple cycles of political economy: production, distribution, and consumption.

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