

# ART VIEW; AN ARTIST EMERGING FROM THE 60'S COUNTERCULTURE; CHICAGO

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Ten years ago, or thereabouts, there arose among certain artists of the younger generation a strongly held conviction that art, in order to remain spiritually uncontaminated by the evils of a wicked society, must henceforth take only the most perishable forms. It was assumed, of course, that ours was an especially wicked society, and the whole notion of producing a durable art object, such as a painting or a sculpture, that would, if successful, take its place as a valued part of an established cultural tradition, was therefore rejected as a morally odious compromise with a corrupt and moribund system. Permanence in art was judged to be incompatible with the ideals of the social revolution that many of these artists professed to espouse.

To implement the desired new agenda for art - an agenda more in keeping with the values and outlook of the radical counterculture that had nurtured this rejection of permanence and "success" - various alternatives to the despised conventions of bourgeois art were quickly pressed into service. It was then that Conceptual art, earthworks, on-site improvisation, certain modes of video and performance art, and sundry other "alternative" movements of the period won their place on the art scene.

It is worth remembering, too, that it was in this period that "dropping out" acquired for many of the young - and most especially, perhaps, for the offspring of the comfortable middle class - the status of a moral imperative. For it was in these "alternative" movements that many fledgling artists of that class found an opportunity to "drop out" while at the same time remaining professionally engaged in some sort of artistic pursuit. Whether or not these artists actually believed that society would be brought to heel by digging a hole in a prairie, or videotaping a cross country hegira in a VW van, many of them acted quite as if they did. It was a period rich in the rituals of radical

credence.

This, in any case, is the background that it is essential to bear in mind in approaching the Charles Simonds exhibition that John Hallmark Neff has now organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (through Jan. 3). Mr. Simonds is an artist whose entire outlook has been shaped and stamped by the ethos of the counterculture that emerged in the late 60's. He in fact belongs to the generation and to the class that proved to be especially susceptible to its beguilements and especially successful in making them the basis of an impressive art world success. Indeed, Mr. Simonds's whole career offers us a particularly vivid example of how much can be achieved in our culture, at least as far as reputation and renown are concerned, by appearing to reject the fundamental tenets of the culture itself and adopting in their place a scenario of adversary intransigence.

Here, in Mr. Neff's lucid account, is the biography -or "Outline of Events," as it is called - that the artist has chosen to disclose to us on the occasion of this solo exhibition, his first in an American museum:

"He was born Nov. 14, 1945, in New York, the younger son of two Vienna-trained psychoanalysts, and raised on the upper West Side. His grandparents had immigrated to the United States from Russia. He attended the New Lincoln School in Manhattan, then the University of California at Berkley where he majored in art, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967. He married in 1968 and attended Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., earning his Master of Fine Arts in 1969. From 1969 to 1971 he taught at Newark State College, having moved back to New York where he shared a building at 131 Chrystie Street with artists Gordon Matta-Clark and Harriet Korman. He began in 1970 his ritual Mythologies in the Sayreville, N.J., clay pits and other impromptu street activities with Matta-Clark around New York and the vicinity. At this time the first Dwellings were made outdoors.

"From 1971 to 1972 Simonds lived in a building on 28th Street owned by his brother, who managed rock bands which occupied the other floors. First in Jeffrey Lew's loft at 112 Greene Street and later at 98 Greene Street, Simonds joined friends in informal, experimental art

activities and performances. In 1971 he met art historian and critic Lucy Lippard, with whom he has lived on Prince Street since 1972. In that year he came to know Robert Smithson. During the 1970's, as his work became known beyond a small group of friends and critics, Simonds traveled widely as a visiting artist or participant in group exhibitions. Since the mid-1970's he has been included in most of the major international and national invitational exhibitions and his works have entered the permanent collections of museums here and abroad. He has recently started work at a new studio on East 22d Street and still conducts his affairs without a gallery or agent. As this catalogue goes to press, he is exploring the possibilities of a visionary, environmental museum of natural history."

I have quoted this account at length for two reasons -first, because it offers some essential clues to the understanding of his art; and second, because it so graphically conveys the atmosphere of self-importance and historical self-consciousness in which the art has been created. Not since Picasso, I suppose, have we been vouchsafed the addresses of so many studios and residences associated with an artist's career - and Mr. Simonds, let it be recalled, has just turned 36! It is almost enough to make one believe that the much-discussed housing crisis for young artists desiring to live and work in Manhattan has been greatly exaggerated.

Mr. Simonds made his artistic debut in the early 70's with films that focused entirely on himself. These he calls, not inappropriately, his "Mythologies," and what they record is the artist's naked body - Mr. Simonds is a good-looking young man with an attractive physique - in the process of acting out a succession of self-contrived rituals of rebirth in the unappetizing clay pits of Sayreville, N.J. In the first of these films, called "Birth" (1970), Mr. Simonds is shown slowly reemerging from what can only be described, I suppose, as the primieval slime. In others -"Landscape - Body - Dwelling" (1970) and "Body -Earth" (1971) - the same naked body reclines and/or writhes in the slimy clay landscape in a further elaboration of the same self-invented and self-aggrandizing ordeals.

Videotapes of these and other films, showing Mr. Simonds at work on his "Dwellings," are included as part of the present exhibition, and

there are also enlarged stills from them mounted on the walls for the benefit of viewers who may wish to study their finer points at greater length.

The bulk of the exhibition, however, is devoted to the miniature "Dwellings" that have been Mr. Simonds's principal preoccupation for the past decade. These are tiny, quasi-primitive structures made of unfired clay bricks so small that they can only be put in place by using metal tweezers. Paint is then applied to these clay surfaces, and the look that is obviously aimed for is that of a ruin, or survival, of a lost, or at least a threatened, primitive civilization. Mr. Simonds conceives of these "Dwellings" as the habitations of an imaginary race of migratory "Little People." He does not actually show us this race of miniature beings, however. Presumably they have been driven from their "Dwellings" by the pressures and cruelties of the modern world. The "Dwellings," too, are thus a species of "Mythologies."

At the outset of his work on these "Dwellings," Mr. Simonds was content to think of them as throwaway creations, more or less in keeping with the cult of perishable art that flourished in the early 70's. He is said to have constructed some 300 of these works in the crumbling walls and on building ledges and window sills in neighborhoods where he had every reason to expect that they would be destroyed, and most of them have been. They did not go unrecorded, however. In one of the films we are shown at the museum, we see Mr. Simonds at work on location in an urban slum, looking rather like a missionary intent upon bringing the gospel of the "Little People" to a neighborhood where, as Mr. Neff puts it, "the concerns of both museums and the art market are worlds away."

Still, life in our wicked society being what it is, the concerns of the art museum - and even, alas, the art market - could not, apparently, be permanently resisted. And so Mr. Simonds has lately taken to giving his "Dwellings" a more permanent and - dare one say it? - a more saleable form. They are now constructed as tabletop landscape sculptures, and very pretty they often are, too! I am not too keen on the 1978 series that are made to look like landscapes consisting entirely of female breasts - and painted a very fleshy pink, lest we miss the point! - but the landscapes adorned with towers and toy-like

fortresses and settlements have an undeniable child-like charm. Their contribution to the art of sculpture may be nil, but they have a certain visual interest, all the same, and they have much to tell us about the appeal that archaism, regression and the romance of primitivist sensibility continues to exert on the contemporary mind.

And this, in turn, brings us back to the ethos of the counterculture of the 60's from which Mr. Simonds's art derives. As we can see in his early films, that feeling of nostalgia for mud and dirt - what the French call *la nostalgie de la boue* - was especially strong in Mr. Simonds, a telltale sign of an immaculate, urban middle-class upbringing. (No one brought up on outdoor toilets, rural poverty or the care of farm animals would be likely to share this feeling to anything like the same degree.) And in Mr. Simonds's "Dwellings," this same nostalgic impulse is projected into a fantasy-rejection of the entire civilization that has produced him.

Yet how appealing this radical rejection continues to be to the culture, to the class and to the institutions that are ostensibly spurned in every detail of its vision! Mr. Simonds is no longer the mendicant-missionary so lovingly depicted in his films. He is now one of the darlings of the international museum world. Much of the work that we see in Chicago has already been the subject of exhibitions in Cologne and Berlin, there are essays in the catalogue written by museum curators in Washington and Paris - in addition to Mr. Neff's own contributions - and this exhibition will travel to still other museums in Los Angeles, Fort Worth and Houston.

And for Chicago, Mr. Simonds has now executed an ambitious series of permanent "Dwellings" that occupies an entire wall of the Museum of Contemporary Art - the wall, as it happens, of the museum's cafe, where visitors can relax over coffee and pastry while they ponder the artist's dreams of cultural regression. And private collectors, too, are eager to have specially executed "Dwellings" for their posh middle-class residences, and Mr. Simonds is no longer, I gather, reluctant to provide them. It would all be a wonderful tale of success triumphing over modesty and adversity if, in what it tells us about the state of our cultural life, its implications were not so dreadfully creepy.

Illustrations: Photo of artwork