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**To Offer/To Exchange**  
A conversation

LAUREN VAN HAAFTEN-SCHICK & CHARLES SIMONDS

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Charles Simonds, *Dwelling* with passers-by, East Houston Street, New York, 1972, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

Since 1970 Charles Simonds has been making miniature clay *Dwellings* for an invented civilization of 'little people'. Sited in the margins of urban public space such as crumbling building exteriors, windowsills and gutters, they appear as playful and generous interventions in decaying and chaotic city landscapes. Passers-by stumbling upon these structures often linger to observe Simonds' slow and measured work and sometimes take it upon

themselves to watch over the Dwellings, caring for 'theirs' as a cherished part of a neighbourhood. Beginning amidst an artistic climate of experimenting with alternative exhibition models and an ethos of democratic circulation – as in conceptual art's various 'dematerialized' practices and in earthworks – the Dwellings take on the issue of dissemination by proposing that they be encountered as 'a gift, free and clear'. What sets Simonds' practice apart is his priority that the work exists as a public good. That intent is reinforced by the work's very materiality, for the inevitable crumble or erosion of clay renders the Dwellings so fragile that moving them would destroy them, ensuring that they can never be privately owned, but can also never be preserved, 'whether motivated by a heartfelt, helpful desire to protect them, by greed or personal gain, or simply by the innocent desire to have one for himself' (Simonds 2015: 34). That is not to say that the Dwellings leave nothing to be possessed – what *can* be kept simply does not resemble familiar objects of property. Instead, the works are carried forward as memory or embodied archive by those who have experienced them. Most importantly perhaps, these aspects of the work demand, in perpetuity, a wholly different notion of exchange that is more akin to an *offering*, and, indeed, to a *gift*, in all valences of the term. These observations are the springboard for a series of conversations between Simonds and van Haaften-Schick in 2016 and 2018.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, East Houston Street, New York, 1972, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**Charles Simonds:** There's a moment when I'm making a Dwelling, placing the bricks, when the children watching (sometimes adults) will reach a state of complete calm. They look on as if they're wondering if the next brick is going to fall, or if it will be placed where it's supposed to. The moment is full of empathy, as if they are also doing what I'm doing, becoming immersed in the fate of these little bricks, taking part in the actual experience of making.

Did I ever tell you this story? I was the first artist to do a project at Artpark.<sup>1</sup> At the forty-year anniversary symposium this guy – looks like a kind of failed banker, mis-shaven and so on – gets in my face and says, 'I want to kill you.' I'm the son of two shrinks, so I'm all ears and say 'Well, tell me about it.' He explained 'When you came here my children participated in your workshop of making little bricks and dwellings. But from then on we never got to see our children again when we were at our summer house, because as soon as we arrived they would run down to the shore to make dwellings for little people. And now their children do the same thing.' The compulsion to make them completely took over their lives. I hear this a lot – the Dwellings stay in people's minds.

**Lauren van Haften-Schick:** I love that story, because this child-like way of being immersed in the making of something feels so anathema to the way we are used to engaging with art, which can disregard pleasure as a valid experience or way of knowing and really devalues –

**CS:** – general experience. Or human experience.

**LVHS:** When did we all become such masochists?

**CS:** Or fearful.

**LVHS:** Maybe that's it.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling with passers-by*, Shanghai, PRC China, 1980, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**CS:** The particular version of 'art' that our culture tends to imagine is very weird relative to what is created across all

<sup>1</sup> Charles Simonds, *Dwelling Places for Little People*, 1974, Artpark, Lewiston, New York.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Joseph Kosuth, *I. Existence (Art as Idea as Idea)*, 1968, published in the classified sections of *The New York Times* (5 January 5 1969),

cultures. Modernism is really a strange set of beliefs, or a very peculiar kind of idea about believing. How is it that what happened at the edge of the canvas, or how a painting is made, or how the paint went on can be the basis for an entire history of criticism, and with that, a schema of cultural value that includes a puritanical positivism to boot!? It's sort of frightening to me. Here the actual consumption of art and writing about artists is a very esoteric thing. The function is so different in other cultures where art is seemingly attached to belief in a substantive way, or performs some reinforcement of belief, either as ritual or something else. I always had this problem with the myopia of contemporary art.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling with passers-by*, Guilin, PRC China, 1980, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**LVHS:** The reliance on criticism can have this effect too, so that textual interpretation can come to be privileged as the primary way to engage with work, jettisoning or diminishing any other type of experience: haptic, tactile, even visual.

**CS:** Or a substitution of those experiences.

**LVHS:** This recalls certain tensions within some conceptual art, where discourse and criticism were proposed as *being* the work, and yet its 'dematerialization' as 'paperwork' remained deeply material or experiential. The 'democratic' or liberating aim of artists asserting that they could be the ones establishing the meaning and measurement of cultural value (as opposed to museum curators, influential critics, wealthy dealers and so on) still resonates. So does the premise that art could be produced and circulated more democratically if you didn't have to go to see some physical object, or have to enter or have access to a museum. That was a political act. Even, for example, Joseph Kosuth's or Adrian Piper's works placed within ad space in newspapers still look surprising for the way in which they occupied a very different type of 'public space', asking us to think about the difference between a museum and a newspaper as sites of cultural information.<sup>2</sup>

**CS:** The art was slipped into the real world and didn't rely on an art audience for its existence, or its justification.

*Museum News* (1 January 1969), *Artforum* (January 1969) and *The Nation* (23 December 1968); Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being*, *Village Voice Ads*, 1973–5, series of seventeen newspaper advertisements in New York's *Village Voice*.

**LVHS:** And the experience of stumbling upon those works while flipping through a newspaper seems crucial. We become aware of the 'frame' of the institution of art, the 'frame' of the newspaper, the ink on our hands, the smell of the paper, and suddenly a web of associations and questions opens up via this sensorial experience. The work's emphasis on criticism overshadowed those aspects, leaving it esoteric, even though its capacity as a disruption in this 'real-world' space could also be extremely generative. But your work never depended on engaging the establishment of modernist art criticism; it exists within a different and much broader set of references and relations. And in many ways the object, the Dwelling, is more of a catalyst –

**CS:** – to get the ball rolling.

One of the things that I found most profound about conceptual art was its diminution of the preciousness or materiality of the object. In other words, the actual art – like think-in-your-head art, spray the can or don't spray the can – encouraged an expansive notion of being that didn't rest on craft and object, which then enabled a radical kind of dissemination and democratization. I'm in that category in there. My first experience of conceptual art was Seth Siegelaub's 'January Show'.<sup>3</sup> I walked in and Adrian [Piper] (who I knew from high school) was sitting behind the desk in a nearly empty office. She told me, 'This is a conceptual art show. Here's the catalogue.' I thought, 'What is this thing? This is the show?' It was just a stack of catalogues. That was it. It was such a shock to me because I had never heard of anything like that. I remember how completely turned over I was. It was so liberating as a way to present and encounter art, and I shifted into that mental frame. But I retained an interest in preciousness, since I grew up as a modeller.

I got the idea of the little people when I moved to Manhattan in 1969. It was a fantasy I was developing, and it combined with all the ideological possibilities of anti-form and so on. Doing things in the street, being free just to make things ... it was very toxic stuff to get in the same mind, a perfect t, and it led me to the idea that I could just go around and make my imaginary civilization in the real world. Everything else became so ridiculous. Galleries – what for? That interest became rooted in people's reactions to what or how I was making, and later turned towards the political and social issues of the Lower East Side. Through the early 70s most of my time was being spent organizing and sitting on committees to deal with empty lots and housing rehabilitation.<sup>4</sup> The battle in the neighbourhood was all about abandoned buildings and how to get control of them for the community's use or as leverage against the city. When Hans Haacke began making his works on slumlords, announcing their corrupt activities right on the museum wall, it all came

from the same concerns about neighbourhoods and real estate.<sup>5</sup> I understood it as serious political work, and although I read it more as journalism (it's paperwork to me), it certainly had an effect on the art world.

I've just decided to make things that are stupidly or endlessly precious. But at the same time, the preciousness is incidental. I'm very attached to objectness, but the work never ends there; it will not survive and cannot be possessed. I don't want my works to be consumed as objects. Maybe this is where I share some of Seth's ideas within his 'Artist's Contract', which established that as the work goes off into time, artists and collectors have ongoing responsibilities to it.<sup>6</sup> Seth took part in the capitalism of the art market, but he was at least exercising some responsibility towards this culture, saying that the artist has some –

**LVHS:** – rights.

**CS:** And the person on the other end has obligation. That's the important dimension. Those efforts were trying to change the culture, or awaken people to change. But I think I'm on the other extreme end of that. I'm in the street making this work, and you can enjoy it and you can have the effect of it or see the remnants of the effect of it in other people's reactions. *But you can't have it. You can't own the work. You don't own me.* Somewhere inside there's that feeling: I am me, I make what I make and I choose what happens to it. And I don't need you to tell me what it means to me or to other people or what it's worth. It's much more generous towards *anyone* than it is to somebody in particular. No *one* person can claim control over it.

**LVHS:** And for someone to take a Dwelling as a particular gesture or experience *for themselves* is an act of violence, because it takes it out of the realm of experience for *everyone*. Though if an artist wants to destroy their work they should have every right to do that. If they're okay with it disappearing, then it's their right to let that happen. I think of Kafka – he's always the first example to be cited when people talk about 'recovering' artists' or writers' works, and that if he had succeeded in destroying his writings the Western canon would be all the poorer.

**CS:** We would just have a different canon. The corollary argument is that all these other people are writing great things and nobody's reading them.

**LVHS:** Exactly. That kind of thinking can just reinforce the canon and enlightenment notions of genius and propriety. There's a deep arrogance behind the impulse to preserve things that an artist never wanted to be preserved, or to

<sup>3</sup> 'January 5–31, 1969' was a seminal 'catalogue-exhibition' organized by Seth Siegelaub that was accompanied by a physical exhibition at 44 East 52nd Street, New York, NY (Siegelaub 1969). The artists included were Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner.

<sup>4</sup> Simonds became a member of the Board of the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing and was involved with other housing activist groups.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Haacke's 1971 solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York was cancelled over controversy from three sociologically engaged

works, two of which mapped the real estate holdings and speculation of New York slumlords.

<sup>6</sup> Siegelaub, Seth, and Robert Projansky (1971) *The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement*, New York: School of Visual Arts. 'The Artist's Contract', as it is commonly known, is a boilerplate agreement for artists to use when selling their work, and includes controversial terms for an artist's resale royalty and exhibition veto rights.

monetize and fetishize that which they wanted to safeguard from the institutional or market systems of art.

**CS:** Underneath that is a primary issue. If I made it, it's mine to do what I want with it. I believe that.

**LVHS:** 'I keep' and 'I destroy' but it's the right to destroy and who says.

**CS:** Yeah, I own myself.

**LVHS:** Or it's my personal property; an extension of my personhood.

**CS:** And being.

The making itself is a joy and a power. My Dwellings in the street have many levels of meaning but in a certain way they're very childish; they are creating one's own little world. The ecstasy or phenomenality of doing it – this feeling that all of a sudden you've created a live animal (like a child making a little farmyard animal model) and projected into it is its animation, like [Alexander] Calder with his circus – gives it such meaning. The haptic experience of holding and caring for something is a kind of self-confirmation, and making something that has value to you, which you can then give, carries an immense power because it self-identifies you, it confirms your existence within the social and physical world.

The part that I want to examine is the quality of putting something into the world, which then can be given and the important distinction between given versus bought, taken or made for yourself, and fundamental feelings about creating something, making something.

**LVHS:** We're developing some interesting binaries: given versus taken; given versus bought; kept versus destroyed; preserved versus consumed ...

**CS:** Also given versus made for yourself. In other words, the power of making something that has some value to you, that you can then give, because then it self-identifies you.

**LVHS:** Gifts can also be seen as giving the self to the other.

**CS:** That's the next step. Once you realize that you have the power to make something of *value* (not monetary value) that self-identifies, then you can offer it to someone else: *Here's part of me*.

The gift aspect is rooted in a realization that one has the power to do something, and then you choose to exercise that power or not to. I can make it and give it to you or make it and not give it to you, or not make it and so on. So it's about control, but I choose to give them. I'm offering what I have to give and in that is a confirmation of who I am. *I offer me to you*.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, Kreuzberg, Berlin, Germany, 1978, clay sand and wood, marbles added by children. © Charles Simonds

There was a moment, somewhere along the way, where I realized that what I had made had some value to *anyone*; it could have meaning for anyone, not just an art audience. It made people think about things. From every level of just looking at it to wanting to take it or wanting to play with it or anything else. It's something given anonymously, but also completely to an anonymous receptor. In other words, it's not for you, it's for 'us' or 'them' or 'we'. It's different than when an artist gives something to a particular person, or when something originates from a certain artist-author. I also make things that are objects that can be owned and I like to give away things I make as presents, too. But in the street, the work is just from some anonymous nut, and it has no value to me once I've made it.

**LVHS:** The far end of dematerialization, an anonymous gesture to be encountered as experience.

**CS:** Which is also this terrible wrinkle for all those conceptual artists who ended up making things.

**LVHS:** That's the wall some of it hit, the distinction between communal exchange versus private transaction. A work that existed as an idea could still be put on paper as a certificate of authenticity, or be described in a contract, and then bought and sold. Certificates often serve the purpose of designating an author of a work and recording private ownership, and a contract is an exchange between specific parties; it is always executed in a private transactional manner.

**CS:** Individual to individual, you mean?

**LVHS:** It has to do with ownership, designated private ownership. The degree to which ownership resides with the collector or artist is where things can be complicated. But

your work operates on the distinction between public sharing versus private ownership, and resists certain logics of private property. Although the Dwellings and conceptual art certificates or agreements do not result in a final static object, they are in fact fundamentally different strategies guided by different philosophies and ethics, where one manifests in private agreement and the other in public encounter.

For me the Dwellings raise interesting questions about materiality, ownership, the nature of property and how property relations are performed. Is property a stable thing? Is it defined by the negotiation of boundaries? What determines ownership? What are the obligations of owners to a community? And so on ... I'm currently interested in the theory of 'property and personhood', the idea that our relationships to certain things can constitute part of our personality, our being, our identity, and as such our rights in those things deserve extra protections.<sup>7</sup> That framework has clear resonance with arguments for artists' legal rights in general, and I think also the idea of self-identification in your work. But the desire to determine the fate of your work, 'you can't own it' etc., also reminds me of another (actually quite conservative) idea in property theory, which takes as its foundation the right to exclude and rights 'in rem', as if individuals have absolute and permanent rights in things that are 'good against the world'. I see some of that idea in the Dwellings' self-enforcement mechanism (that they will crumble and self-destruct if moved) ensuring that they remain a 'free' gift, for everyone. The work operates like a boundary. However, that boundary-function is not aggressive; it's protective, in a generous way.

When I bring up property, it's not land in a literal sense. It's the idea of the thing and ownership relations in the thing. It's not necessarily individualistic either.

**CS:** The way a thing can be owned. It gets very philosophical very quickly.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, East 2nd Street, New York, 1971, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**LVHS:** Well that's the thing about property, everyone has a different theory, like with art. I'm also interested in how art

gets conceived as a special, very different kind of property. What defines that special status, or how is the character of that special status defined and expressed? And what different answers arise for different ends?

**CS:** Or even before there are ends in sight, before it's taken into other uses. Which brings me back to this issue of child-like making, and when you make something that has no conventional notion of cultural or monetary value. The only version of property in a child's creation is materiality, something brought into material being, but for a child there is no property issue, it's just 'mine!' And I give it to you, or not.

**LVHS:** The assertion 'IT'S MINE!' is like a property claim. Although for children there is no culturally coded idea of property yet, there is still a sense of wanting a say over the ownership, treatment and future life of what they make, underpinned by a premise of 'I get to say how it's kept or not kept'.

**CS:** Or offered.

**LVHS:** And consumed. But at the base of it is also this sense that 'this is me' and 'this is mine' and 'I have say'.

**CS:** I have control of it. I made it, I am a god to it, in a certain way: I have the ability to create and the ability to destroy.

**LVHS:** And its character gets to be defined by what relations the maker allows it to have.

**CS:** Or prescribes to it ... Or what other people ask it to be.

**LVHS:** Whether that's coming from a place of generosity or from a place of violence.

**CS:** Or from consumption in any form.

**LVHS:** These are the surprising tensions to me, that you have this desire for control over the future life of your work despite the fact that its ideal condition is impermanence. Destruction is built in, so long as you are the one setting the terms for its destruction. You still want to control its destiny. There are rules about what a receiver can do.

**CS:** There are a few.

**LVHS:** But they exist. At the heart of it is this separation: ownership that ends with me, versus an experience available for anyone.

**CS:** We're building some kind of diagram of 'I make', which equals 'I am', and what goes out is 'mine', and 'I give', 'I share', 'I keep', 'I destroy'. And then 'I sell', 'I offer', 'I sacrifice' – going in both directions.

<sup>7</sup> The theory of 'property and personhood' has been articulated by Margaret Jane Radin (1982).



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, East 4th Street, New York, 1974, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**LVHS:** Can you explain the second layer: 'I sell', 'I offer', 'I sacrifice'?

**CS:** If you give something, it has generosity. If you're being paid for what you do then you're a worker. That power of that act of giving resides in knowing that what you're giving is being valued by the receiver not as money, but as a gift: I know so clearly how much more powerful and wonderful it is to give something than to have it bought from me. In other words, when somebody wants something, it is being taken, no matter even if it's been paid for, it's very different than when you give something.

**LVHS:** And payment can introduce alienation.

**CS:** And the problems you're interested in with contracts, residual rights and so on ...

**LVHS:** Yeah, whereas a gift is –

**CS:** – free and clear.

**LVHS:** Or it has the opposite effect, a gift can also demand reciprocity.

**CS:** No, if I give something I don't expect anything in return. A priori the idea of giving takes out any reciprocity, because then you are trading, you are not giving. Sometimes when I'm working in the street, people bring a treasured toy to add to the Dwelling. But that has a dimension of contributing to the communal or public good; they're not giving me a gift as an individual.

**LVHS:** How would they? The structure of the work prevents it.

**CS:** Exactly. There is maybe a selfishness in my giving because of the power it creates. I'm the one who gave, and I gave something that is really valuable, beyond money. That is an ego satisfaction in some way, which goes back to this diagram we've made of 'it's mine', 'I made it', 'and I can give it', 'I can do what I want'.

I would rather go a little farther back and ask why is somebody actually making something to begin with? What different social functions can art have? For example, during the Fallas festival in Valencia, Spain, or the Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Mumbai, the community creates incredibly labour-intensive objects, often over the course of a year or more, for use in a procession or a ceremony, but then they destroy them by fire, or by marching them into the sea. It has nothing to do with preserving the *thing*; the thing is very important, but it is most important when it is gone, when it is given. They are offerings – that is their social function. They're not about property; the object is sacrificial.

**LVHS:** Whereas our culture doesn't have an equivalent. We fear that which is truly ephemeral, that which disappears, even if it signals regeneration. The inevitable crumbling of the Dwelling operates within the sacrificial or regenerative. But we don't have a cultural vocabulary of offering.

**CS:** No. Ours is of transaction.

**LVHS:** An 'offering' would be removed from the realm of what can be circulated or traded as a good, transforming it into the symbolic, or to pure meaning, or another –

**CS:** – realm

**LVHS:** – state.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, Rue des Cascades, Paris, 1975, clay, sand and wood. © Charles Simonds

**CS:** State, yes, another existence. That's what fascinates me. Meaning is independent of monetary value. Experience is

more important than ownership. For me, the process and the making are the things of value and of interest, and what's left after is a remnant of that or a carcass of that. I always have the ability to make another, and the power for me is in my power to make it. The fact that I can do it is an endless confirmation of me, and to that extent it's immeasurably valuable to me in the act of making it, and once it's done I have to go make another in order for that experience to take place again. But the process continues: people's reactions to it, how it exists then as memory, how it exists as provocation or change in behaviour or reflection ... But my relation to that process ends when I leave that carcass behind.

**LVHS:** So the experience of the work is first alive in the act of making, then continues as living memory and gets passed on through others' remembering and retelling. But it also has everything to do with the bricks, maybe not as objects in themselves, but they're the transmission device.

**CS:** The snail that's moving when all this other stuff is flying around.

**LVHS:** There's something about exorcizing memory in all this.

**CS:** There is. As I get older it becomes more intensive, because much of what I think about is in the past. But it wasn't that in the beginning. Thinking about it is an exorcism; doing it is not. It's more about racing to find a new past, trying to catch it. All these memories are very fleeting and all you can do is try grasping them as they go by. But you never really catch them. Like a gnat that's going around the sky. It's about openness too, and acceptance.

Recently I completed a large project working with children in Munich. It involved kids from many different neighbourhoods and of varying backgrounds: immigrant kids, refugee kids, working-class kids, privileged kids and kids in a paediatric mental clinic, all working together making dwellings and having this experience of self-identification through making. One child, Hussein, from Iraq, built his 'home' with a wall down the centre. One side was all destroyed and the other new. The wall has little holes in it, he said, because you can never forget that you were in a war and you will always have to remember what happened.<sup>8</sup> For the last three years I have been working with children in a small rural village school in southern India making Dwellings. At the end of my last visit, the daughter of the headmistress, seeing that everything we made would soon disappear, said: 'In the end all we have are memories' ...



Hussein Abdul Karim, *Dwelling*, Hasenberg, Munich, 2017, clay, sand and wood. Photo Max Geuter

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Simonds and van Haaften-Schick dedicate this text to the memory of Irving Sandler (1925-2018), whose insights into Simonds's work and the complexities of its preservation inspired much of this conversation.

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<sup>8</sup> Reflections by the children Simonds worked with were documented in a subsequent publication (Simonds and Münchner Jugendliche 2017).