

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
SPECIAL REPORT, September 2025

THE LITTLE PEOPLE DON'T CARE

by David Dixon

The (art) installation demonstrates the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it installs everything that otherwise merely circulates in our civilization.

-Boris Groys, *Multiple Authorship*



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, on East 4th Street, New York City, 1974. Courtesy the artist.

I teach at Pratt Institute, and I always like to conclude my undergraduate Professional Practices Fine Arts seminar with a final celebratory day of watching Rudy Burckhardt's film *Dwellings* (available on the Metropolitan Museum's website) documenting Charles Simonds installing his miniature village street art, brick by little brick, in the East Village back in 1974. I follow this thirteen-minute experimental film with my preferred Sotheby's contemporary art auction that was first broadcast live (and then recorded) on YouTube during COVID. I prefer this auction because Sotheby's really pulls out all the stops, not being able to have a live audience and not having had a live auction for a

year, they hire a stage designer and producer to amp up the game show-like entertainment value of this international, live simulcast connecting New York, London, and Hong Kong. For the students, this compare and contrast is meant to draw out the differences, in dramatic fashion, between qualitative and quantitative value in art. Simonds, of course, falling on the qualitative side and Sotheby's, with its auctioneer's manic stream of ever escalating numbers, on the quantitative side. I illustrate it like this on the chalkboard: Sotheby's = \$ Simonds = ♡.

Like most overly dramatic assertions, these stark categories probably won't hold, especially now that Sotheby's, with a newfound art vision, has purchased the Whitney Museum's former site, the Breuer building, which until recently was also a branch of the Met and then the Frick. Within this historic, iconic Brutalist "inverted ziggurat" sits one of the only original Charles Simonds villages remaining intact, famously installed in the building's stairwell. Now that Sotheby's has subsumed the Simonds, is the equation \$ > ♡? Many in the art world today might think so. However, Simonds, who has been one of the most market evasive artists of his generation, of any generation, is, as of fall 2025 when this new location opens, permanently installed and not for sale at Sotheby's! In a conversation with Simonds and art historian Ksenia M. Soboleva in October 2024 on the Brooklyn Rail's New Social Environment #1104, I asked him this very thing: Do you think it's ironic that your piece is now going to be permanently installed at Sotheby's? His response, in terse fashion: the Little People don't care.

Sotheby's

Current Bid

USD	32,000,000
GBP	22,763,200
EUR	26,505,664
CNY	206,608,160
JPY	3,509,359,872
HKD	248,509,760
CHF	29,081,632

NEW YORK LONDON HONG KONG

4. Andy Warhol
Elvis 2 Times
American Visionary: The Collection of Mrs. John L. Marion
Estimate: 20,000,000 - 30,000,000 USD

Current Bid

► \$32,000,000
\$33,000,000

LIVE from Sotheby's New York, online auction screen grab, May 12, 2021.

A bit of recent art history may be necessary to clarify the radicality of such a statement. Charles Simonds came into notoriety in the 1970s, in the era of installation and earth art, by making miniature villages, which he calls "Dwellings," built by an imaginary civilization called the "Little People." These "Dwellings" were in the form of abandoned ruins reminiscent of ancient constructions, built into the exterior cracks and crevices of similarly abandoned and dilapidated East Village buildings. His "Dwellings" could be discovered here and there, say on East 4th Street, in some proximity to each other as if these Little People had been migratory, a developing society expanding in occasional clusters down the street. Hundreds were built, eventually in multiple cities around the world, each village-like arrangement different. If one studied a "Dwelling" long enough, the design would imply certain kinds of use: here must have been the granary, here must have been where the Little People slept, here some sacrificial altar, etc. What is potentially radical about these constructions, and the point of this qualitative/quantitative compare and contrast, is that they were a gift to whichever neighborhood Simonds was building them in, no commissions, no grants, no sales, no questions asked; he would just find his location and start making. Additionally, this ethos of gift ran so deep that neither would he document them, i.e., no photos, ergo, no photobooks to sell. Considering this, it's something of a miracle that we have the Burckhardt film onto which to hang this discourse, especially considering, too, that these detailed and lovingly produced miniature outdoor sculptural installations were made out of unfired clay, which would, over time—and rather quickly depending on the chosen alcove or crevice—dissolve.

It took the Whitney curatorial team several asks before Simonds finally acquiesced to a Biennial request in 1977 to install a "Dwelling" inside the museum. The current, remaining "Dwelling" is not that one, however; it is rather the result of a rare commission from the museum made a few years later in 1981. Officially, the Whitney still owns the piece, yet the site-specific nature of the installation prevents it from being moved. Hence, it remains in place, protected as much by love as by law, in the former museum's stairwell by a window in a nook in the Breuer design that, per Simonds's original demands, is well outside of the standard exhibition galleries. Those in the know also know that this stairwell "Dwelling" has a companion "Dwelling," barely viewable from the adjacent window, across Madison Avenue outside on a second-floor windowsill of a Beaux-Arts building that was originally built to be a US Mortgage & Trust Bank in 1922, which merged to become Chemical Bank in 1929, which merged to become Chase Bank in 1996, but now is an Apple store. Those really in the know also know that there is more "Dwelling" up on the roof of this building, on top of a chimney, out of view to anyone except those who might happen upon it up there. This complex of "Dwellings" was one of the only built inside and/or under a cover, hence they remain—unlike some of those banks—solvent to this day. Materially, they have stood the test of time, and

Simonds does go on to make sculpture that is shown in more traditional gallery situations. Yet time has remained a subject for him, a thing tested, time in its various forms both known and unquantified, both experienced and imagined, both given and taken away.

Well before the Banksy game of the disappearing auction piece, Simonds has been playing with art's relation to permanence, immediacy, memory, and ownership. In a culture where art in the museum exists in a quasi no time of the eternal present and in the auction house as a commodity that is always on the move, Simonds's Little People, with the traces they've left behind, remind us that art, and the life that art emulates, is a gift that functions well beyond these real and imagined limits. Indeed, one might say that life as lived by the Little People, and us parallel strangers, is an irreducible miracle of coincidence and defeat. A bank, a museum, an auction house, a tech store: the Little People do not care, their qualitative value remains untouched.