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Conwill, Houston, 1947-

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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
November 16, 1989–January 9, 1990

projects: houston conwill

It is much to be lamented that no person has taken notice of [the Constitution's] total silence upon the subject of...an office for promoting and preserving perpetual peace in our country. *Benjamin Banneker (1793)* Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gibs me any best place! And a'n't I a woman? *Sojourner Truth (1851)* If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground...Power concedes nothing without a demand. *Frederick Douglass (1857)* It is much to

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houston conwill
the cakewalk humanifesto
a cultural libation

Houston Conwill's work is complex and challenging. It is dense with references, combining anthropological and theological sources with influences from African-American literature and music, and modern and contemporary art. It embodies a mix of cultural forces that is at the core of American history and life. In *The Cakewalk Humanifesto*, the artist charts a pilgrimage that is both political and spiritual and, at the same time, explores the very nature of acculturation.

This installation takes its name from a dance that became a national craze in the 1890s. The cakewalk was probably originally performed by slaves for slave owners in the antebellum South; tradition has it that the best dancers received a cake as a prize. The slaveholders seldom realized that the dance parodied what the slaves saw as the affected manners of the white upper class. Blackface minstrel shows featured the cakewalk in the 1870s and black entertainers often included it in their acts as well. In the 1890s, vaudeville teams so popularized the cakewalk that towns and cities throughout the country had cakewalk contests. The dance was also done by the wealthy and fashionable, a fact noted in the society pages of the daily press; there was even a report that William Vanderbilt had done the cakewalk at a ball. The dance that originated as a parody of white culture by black slaves was eventually taken up by the very members of white society the dance first satirized.

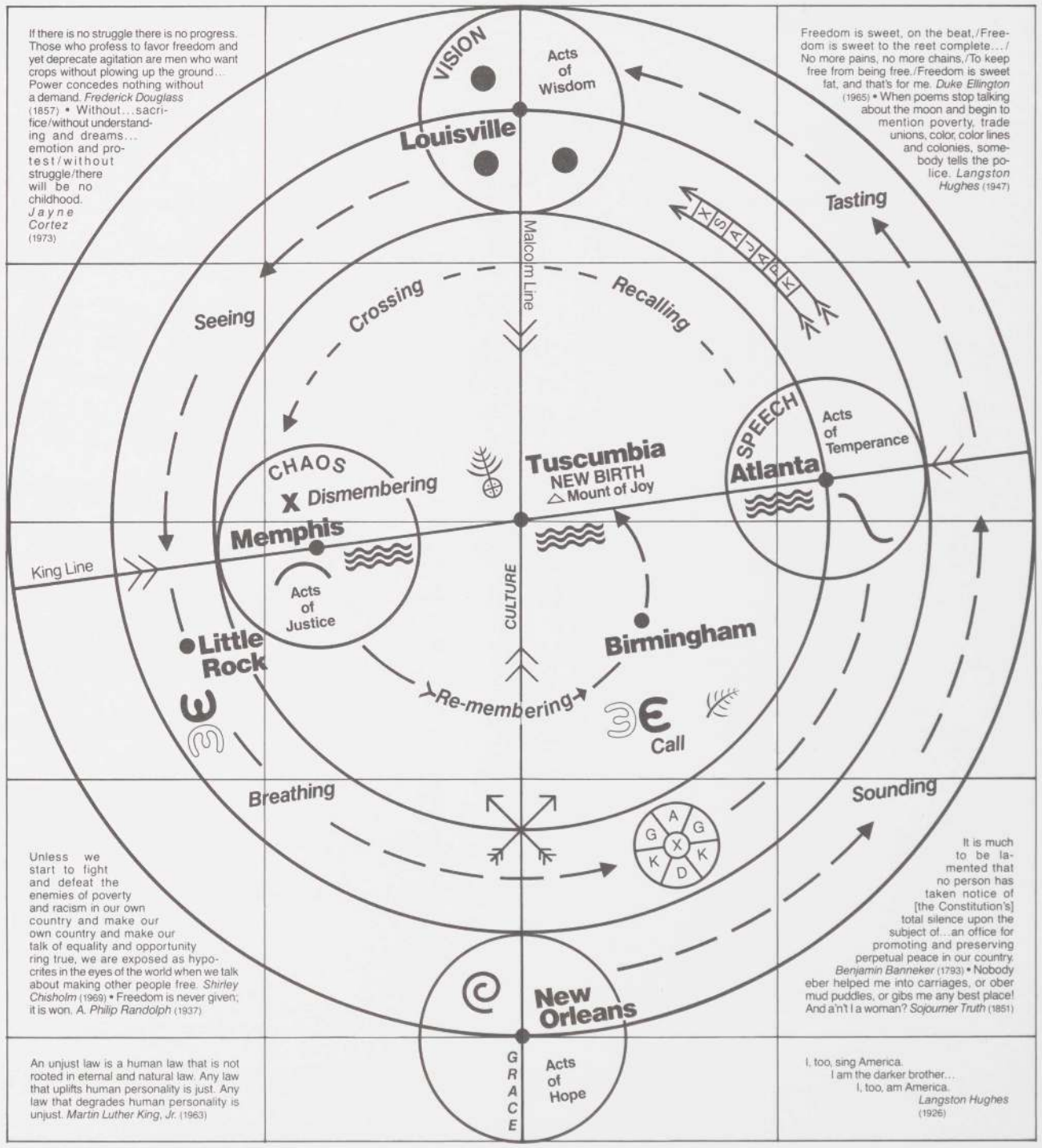
Clearly, irony plays a part in *The Cakewalk Humanifesto*. However, as in all of his art, Conwill engages in social critique, but then moves beyond irony and alienation toward something approaching resolution. The metaphors of the dance and dancer, essential to the installation, are traditionally optimistic and lyrical. Dancers, evoking a sense of vitality, are found in art from prehistoric rock engravings and Etruscan wall paintings to works by modern European artists like Henri Matisse. Conwill believes that the concept of dance informs and shapes much African sculpture as well, intensifying a sense of aliveness that is characteristic of different African cultures. Similarly, *The Cakewalk Humanifesto* reflects the spirit and vitality of African-American life. It is a "rechoreographing" of history that traces the struggle for social and political change, at the same time seeking to perpetuate black culture. It is, in effect, a "dance" of remembrance.

This installation is dominated by a window that is eight feet wide and over eight feet tall. Etched into the glass is a circular dance floor overlaid with a diagrammatic drawing of the southern United States. Conwill melds the cakewalk with a pilgrimage (which becomes a dance) through four cities of great importance to African-American history—New Orleans, Atlanta, Louisville, and Memphis. These locations are transformed into centers of hope, temperance, wisdom, and justice, respectively. On the window, Conwill has drawn the "Malcolm Line" and the "King Line" (named for Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.), which connect these cities vertically and horizontally, crossing at Tuscumbia, Alabama, the culmination of the dance-journey. Tuscumbia is the birthplace of Helen Keller, whom the artist sees as a modern symbol of communication. The name given by the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes of Native Americans to a village once located where Tuscumbia now stands is "Oka Kapassa," meaning "cold water." Therefore, water—in many religions a symbol of purification—is, literally, at the center of *The Cakewalk Humanifesto*.

The window's quartered circle, a symbol for a crossroads (the intersection of paths) derives from what art historian Robert Farris Thompson terms a "Kongo cosmogram."* The traditional Kongo civilization encompassed modern Bas-Zaire, along with some neighboring territories. For the Kongo people, in addition to signifying a crossroads, the ideogram's horizontal line divided the living from the kingdom of the dead. According to Thompson, the crossroads has been a powerful symbol in African-American folklore as well, and many folk healers were familiar with the image of the quartered circle.

The Cakewalk Humanifesto was also inspired, in part, by the relationship between Chartres Cathedral's rose window and the tile maze on its floor. The

Diagram of the window from *The Cakewalk Humanifesto*. 1989. Courtesy the artist



maze was designed to be walked as a symbolic pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and can be seen as representative of the struggle on earth, while the rose window symbolizes heavenly perfection. Correspondingly, the window in Conwill's installation occupies a perceptual, ethereal domain, while on the floor, golden discs that mirror the movements indicated by arrows on the window make the dance floor accessible, part of the human sphere.

Conwill's concerns are temporal as well as spiritual. The presence of a long, narrow, glass table within *The Cakewalk Humanifesto* suggests that the installation is a habitable space and implies communal social and religious practices. On the table are glass bowls containing earth from New Orleans, Atlanta, Memphis, and Louisville, and water from Tuscumbia, Alabama. Also resting on the table is a text entitled *Libations* by Conwill's sister, Estella Marie Conwill Majozo. It contains letters to Conwill written from the five sites mapped on the window. Majozo has turned Conwill's dance into her own pilgrimage and has recorded her voyage, impressionistically focusing on the contributions of eight famous black women: Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, and Zora Neale Hurston. Volunteers will read aloud from the book, starting at the beginning and continuing sequentially, for as many days as are required, until the end. They will then begin the text again. This performance element reinforces the importance of the social role that *The Cakewalk Humanifesto* is intended to play. The participants are male and female, of varying ages, and are not professionally trained: Conwill's message is addressed not to a select group of cognoscenti, but to the entire community.

For some, however, Conwill's work may be difficult to approach, as it demands that viewers enter another's personal, multilayered cosmology. As such, it is part of a modernist tradition that can be traced to the complex, hermetic systems created and elaborated by Marcel Duchamp. In addition, Conwill's art, with its concentration on generative ideas, incorporation of mythology and anthropology, and integration of word and image, has been influenced by Conceptual artists like Robert Smithson. Arguably, it is less connected to much current mainstream art. Conwill does not appropriate the forms of past masters or of commercial art; he makes few references to mass culture, and employs none of the blunt simplification that characterizes a good deal of recent work. Although he toys with the irony associated with much postmodern theory, ultimately he rejects it as a central concern. For Conwill, *The Cakewalk Humanifesto* is an act of faith.

Lynn Zelevansky
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture

*Thompson, Robert Farris, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 108–131.

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Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by a grant from the Lannan Foundation.

biography

Born Louisville, Kentucky, 1947
Resides in New York City

education

University of Southern California,
Los Angeles. MFA, 1976

Howard University, Washington, D.C.
BFA, 1973

selected individual exhibitions

1989 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
*Houston Conwill: Works**

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta
(traveling exhibition)
*Art at the Edge: Houston Conwill**

1986 The Alternative Museum, New York
*The Passion of St. Matthew: Paintings and Sculpture**

1983 Just Above Midtown/Downtown, New York
*Cakewalk**

1982 P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York
Seven Storey Mountain

selected group exhibitions

1989 Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
Traditions and Transformation: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture

1988 Artpark, Lewiston, New York
*Stations**

Cleveland State University Art Gallery,
Cleveland, Ohio
*Acts of Faith: Politics and the Spirit**

1987 Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York
Artists Choose Artists

Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma
*The Eloquent Object** (traveling exhibition)

1986 Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana, Cuba
*Por Encima del Bloqueo**

1985 School of Fine Arts, American Academy in Rome, Italy
*Annual Exhibition**

1984 The Center Gallery of Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
*Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art** (traveling exhibition)

1982 The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
*Ritual and Myth: A Survey of African American Art**

*A publication accompanied the exhibition.

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