

Projects 19 : Houston Conwill : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 16, 1989-January 9, 1990

Author

Conwill, Houston, 1947-

Date

1989

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2119

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

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 ever 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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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 Tusculumbia, 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.