

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
November 1989

PROJECTS: HOUSTON CONWILL

November 16, 1989 - January 9, 1990

The Museum of Modern Art continues its ongoing PROJECTS series with an installation by New York artist Houston Conwill, opening on November 16, 1989. Organized by Lynn Zelevansky, curatorial assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, PROJECTS: HOUSTON CONWILL combines aspects of environmental, conceptual, and performance art in an exploration of African-American culture. The exhibition, entitled The Cakewalk Humanifesto: A Cultural Libation, is on view through January 9, 1990.

Since the mid-seventies, Conwill has been creating installations that relate to his experience growing up black and Catholic in the American South. Dense with references, his art combines anthropological and theological sources with influences from African-American folklore and contemporary art. Maps, shrinelike structures, and ritual and historical themes run throughout much of the artist's work.

The installation of The Cakewalk Humanifesto is dominated by a window, eight feet wide and over eight feet tall, that is etched with a drawing of a circular dance floor. Inspired by the rose window and tile maze of Chartres Cathedral, Conwill's window

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is reflected on the gallery floor in a pattern of gold discs that mirror the movements of the dance.

The glass is overlaid with a map of five southern cities--Atlanta, New Orleans, Louisville, Memphis, and Tuscumbia, Alabama--that forms the artist's imagined dance-journey. A long narrow table in the center of the gallery, suggestive of communal and religious functions, holds glass bowls that contain earth gathered from four of the sites and water from Tuscumbia.

The Cakewalk Humanifesto takes its name from a dance that originated as a parody of white culture by black slaves and, ironically, was eventually taken up as a dancing craze by white society. Using the metaphor of the cakewalk, Conwill charts a pilgrimage that is central--both politically and spiritually--to African-American culture.

Ms. Zelevansky writes in the brochure accompanying the exhibition, "...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."

Born in 1947 in Louisville, Kentucky, Houston Conwill received his bachelor of fine arts degree in 1973 from Howard University and his masters of fine arts in 1976 from the University of Southern California. The recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and a Prix de Rome, he has had numerous individual exhibitions, most recently

at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and The High Museum of Art, Atlanta. He is currently working on a commission for The Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York Public Library.

On Thursday, November 16, at 6:00 p.m., the artist will discuss his installation as part of the Museum's CONTEMPORARY ART IN CONTEXT program. Also, for the duration of the exhibition, readings from Libations, a book in the form of letters written to Conwill by his sister from the five sites mapped on the window, will be conducted periodically in the gallery by volunteers. In Libations, Estella Marie Conwill Majozo, who turned her brother's dance-journey into a voyage of her own, focuses on the contributions of eight notable black women.

PROJECTS is made possible by a grant from the Lannan Foundation. This exhibition is supported by a generous grant from an anonymous donor. Next in the series is PROJECTS: VERNON FISHER, on view from January 19 to March 6, 1990.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.