



HOUSTON CONWILL WORKS

August 2-October 29, 1989

In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, not only enlivens and transforms this environment but sheds light on some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art—an important aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

Houston Conwill explores the cultural synthesis he feels is central to his heritage as a black American. The Louisville-born, New York-based artist was trained in Texas, California, and the Washington, D.C., area, where Sam Gilliam, among others, introduced him to abstract painting. Reflecting the recent return to subject matter in mainstream contemporary art, Conwill's work has evolved from painting to wall reliefs containing symbolic scrolls to installations evoking church architecture to site-oriented projects relating to the history of black people in America. His intermittent performance pieces, focusing on cultural continuity, have included a time-capsule burial in Harlem to celebrate seven black leaders, among them Washington, D.C., law professor Eleanor Holmes Norton.

Although Conwill has employed diverse forms and media—music and movement through space, animal images on embossed latex, cubic spaces dug into the ground, overlays of pattern and earth dust, glass monoliths inscribed with blues lyrics—his work remains singularly rooted in ritual and the idea of ceremony. *Markings on the Sand*, a characteristic amalgam of African and Western sources, uses potent emblems, inspirational texts, and diagrammatic mapping to direct the viewer through a highly contemplative metaphoric journey—a rite of passage Conwill hopes will lead to spiritual enlightenment.

The following text is edited from a May 23, 1989, interview with the artist.

Sidney Lawrence, Exhibition Curator

Illustrated this page:
Diagram for the Rivers (terrazzo floor design), 1988. A New York City Percent for Art Project to be located at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Collection of the artist.

SL: *What first attracted you to the fountain site at the Hirshhorn?*

HC: The water. It's a cool sort of substance that is also a symbol of life.

SL: *Can you explain the text that surrounds the water and the form it takes?*

HC: The words are fragments from spirituals and blues and critical black voicings taken from black literature that for me signify the transformative voice of black America, calling America toward change and maturity. The words are written along paths or lines, which initially define the movement of the Mississippi River and then direct each viewer through a map of a miniaturized city of Washington that also defines the body of a fish. You walk along the text, where you encounter monuments and finally emerge from the fish.

The fish is a kind of archetypal image of life, a symbol of transformation. One can interpret entering the fish as a journey into the womb—the idea of immersion, transformation, and emergence. You become linked with the past.

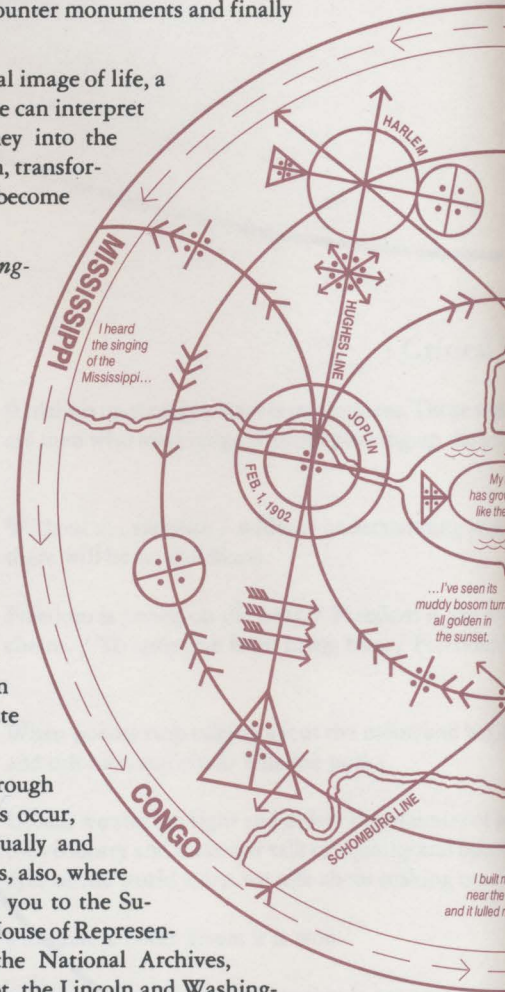
SL: *How does the city of Washington work into this theme?*

HC: I see this city as a sort of microcosm of the continent, in terms of from where the black voice emanates, not just because the city is largely black in population—many made the pilgrimage here from the South—but because Washington is a place where people come to voice their protests if they want attention or to change a certain ruling. In Washington people speak up to legislate change.

The fish offers a journey through the areas where those actions occur, where the black voice is actually and symbolically heard. Sometimes, also, where it is ignored. The path leads you to the Supreme Court, the Senate and House of Representatives, the White House, the National Archives, where the Constitution is kept, the Lincoln and Washington memorials, Constitution Hall of the D.A.R. [Daughters of the American Revolution], Ford's Theatre, and so on. The fish's body, in effect, represents the spirit of black America.

SL: *How does this symbol tie in with the other symbolic element of your piece, the Mississippi River?*

HC: The Mississippi River signifies a common experience that holds black America together. It runs through black America's cradle and crucible territory. In the 1950s and 1960s the voices of



protest and confrontation in this area brought America's attention to its own conscience and to the injustices perpetrated on black citizens of the South. So the contradictions in the federal justice system and those of the states were pointed out. The groundwork for change in the United States actually started in the South. The same people who moved from the South to the North to seek opportunity and education brought with them memories of their southern experience and a determination to bring about change. Their determination was actually born in the South, as Robert Stepto has written in his book *From Behind the Veil*. Some have returned down South to experience a rediscovery of their sense of self—a coming home.

SL: Does this process of self-discovery relate to your use of the ground as a kind of staging area for your art?

HC: Yes. In this and other works such as *The Rivers* and *The New Cakewalk* [currently touring nationally], I'm interested in the notion of ritual ground as a sort of process of empowering and re-empowering cultural memory and of coming to grips with a sense of one's heritage and one's self.

The use of the ground comes from my very sculptural preoccupation with mapping journeys, not mapping journeys to anywhere, but mapping journeys with a purpose in mind, to involve the person who travels with a vehicle and path for transformation and for going to certain territories.

What's important is the notion of becoming, of transforming.

What I'm concerned with is a path connected by significant points along specific and particular stations, which awaken the imagination and bring to mind a flood of images, memories, and insights. What is rendered visible is a path of song to connect the viewer with an experience of the continuum.

SL: There's an almost religious connotation to what you say. I know that you were raised as a Roman Catholic and for a time attended the seminary [in Indiana, 1963-66]. Has the church affected your thinking as an artist?

HC: One of the things Catholicism has given me is a means of expressing a system of order. But the African-American Catholic perspective is doubly empowered because it incorporates the importance of the black church as a place from which the critical conscience of black America has developed. Even though mine is a Catholic vantage point, my soul is rooted in the black community.

Spirituals are God-seeking. The African-American community has produced a unique music that expresses at its base a philosophy of survival rooted in the blues legacy. This music reflects an attitude of triumph over a tragic predicament.

There is a sense of journey in the African perspective, too. I am constantly gaining knowledge about it. In the four moments of the Sun—the Kongo cosmogram used in mystic ground-drawings by the Bakongo people of central Africa*—the traveler moves through the maze from points along the diamond or the circle from birth to life to death and then finally to rebirth. It marks a journey to a common meeting ground for humanity.

SL: Is your art committed to bringing about a kind of cultural awakening?

HC: Yes, in a sense. One of the most important things about the kind of work that I'm doing—and this is true of many black American artists—is that it expresses a renewed interest in cultural content, in memory and in history. This kind of attitude is also coming from other communities: the Latino community, for example.

An awakening is happening outside the United States, too. Anselm Kiefer, whose heroic vision I admire, has taken on the history of his country. He really intends to transform Germany's mind. I think he's making visible an issue that was heretofore not acknowledged. Joseph Beuys, Kiefer's mentor, had the same sort of agenda. There are many artists working toward transformation. I really relate to the transformative intentions of people from the feminist camps, for example.

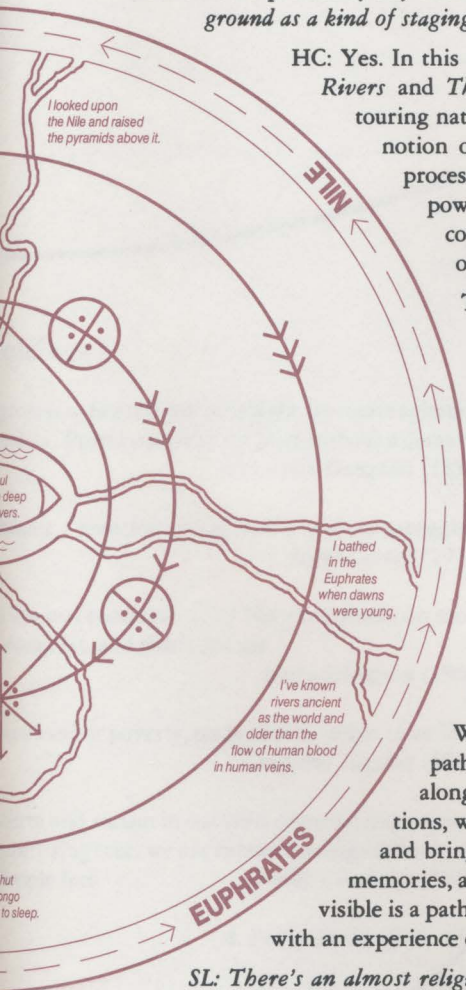
Nobody wants to claim a system that has no values. I refer to the kinds of things expressed from the mainstream of America—the Wall Street rip-offs, for example, whose ends are simply financial gain, with no sense of responsibility. That's only one sort of situation. Another is Exxon taking no responsibility for the Earth and its environment. There's this take-what-we-can-get attitude. It's a mainstream rooted in no values.

SL: So you feel that artists can help reclaim a value system?

HC: We must help reclaim it, if we are interested in the survival of humanity and culture. Each one of us is moving from amid his or her particular cultural circle. One way or another, we will be able to do something that will stimulate change in the mainstream to take us out of the domain of alienation and away from a system that promotes meaninglessness.

SL: How ideally is this mission reflected by your piece at the Hirshhorn?

HC: *Markings on the Sand* traces a line through a city of monuments in order to help people see the monuments differently, to recognize them as symbols of hope, rather than as meaningless symbols of the past that have no usefulness to the present. By exposing these monuments we will be able, at least, to recognize the contradictions. The audience becomes the poet, imagining the possibilities for change and transformation.



*See Robert Ferris Thompson's Vintage paperback, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, especially pp. 103-59.

BIOGRAPHY

Born Louisville, Kentucky, April 2, 1947.

Educated at University of Maryland, College Park, 1967-68; University of Texas, Austin, 1969-70; Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1970-73, B.F.A., 1973; University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1974-76, M.F.A., 1976.

Awards include a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, 1982; Individual Artist Fellowship Grant, National Endowment for the Arts 1982 and 1988; Rome Prize Fellowship in Sculpture, American Academy in Rome, 1984; New York Foundation for the Arts Artists' Fellowship, 1985; Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, 1987.

Lives and works in New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

- 1975 Lindhurst Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, *JuJu Funk* (with performance).
- 1976 The Gallery, Los Angeles, *Recent Works by Houston E. Conwill: JuJu* (with performance); Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, *JuJu III*.
- 1978 Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York, *Houston Conwill: Notes of a Griot* (with performance); Watts Towers Arts Center, Los Angeles, *Steppin' Stones: The Hidden Mystery of the Blues Rag* (performance, written by Gregg Pitts).
- 1979 Space Gallery, Los Angeles, *Houston Conwill: New Constructions*.
- 1980 The Paper Mill, Los Angeles, *Getup* (performance, written by Senga Negudi); Third Floor Gallery, Nexus, Atlanta, *Passages: Earth/Space H3* (performance).
- 1981 P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, *Easter Shout!*
- 1982 P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, *Seven Storey Mountain*.
- 1983 Just Above Midtown/Downtown, New York, *Cakewalk* (with performance).
- 1984 Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia, *Pointing*; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, *The Joyful Mysteries 1984-2034 A.D.* (performance, with the Boys Choir of Harlem).
- 1986 Alternative Museum, New York, *The Passion of St. Matthew: Paintings and Sculpture*.
- 1987 The Kentucky Theatre, Louisville, *Purgatory* (performance, written by Estella Alexander).
- 1989 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, *Art at the Edge: Houston Conwill—The New Cakewalk*, and tour.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts, Lagos, Nigeria, *FESTAC '77*.
- 1978 Space Gallery, Los Angeles, *Houston Conwill/Bob Glover/Diana Hobson*; University Gallery, California State University at Dominguez Hills, Carson, *Metamagic*.
- 1979 Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, *Private Icon*.
- 1980 P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, *Afro-American Abstraction*, and tour; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, *Afro-American Art in the 20th Century: Three Episodes*.
- 1981 Piedmont Park, Atlanta, *Atlanta Arts Festival Invitational* (also 1987).
- 1982 The Sculpture Center Gallery, New York, *Personal Iconography*; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, *Ritual and Myth: A Survey of African-American Art*.
- 1983 Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York, *Projects and Performances*.
- 1984 The Center Gallery of Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, and tour; Owensboro (Kentucky) Museum of Fine Art, *Kentucky Expatriates: Natives and Notable Visitors*.
- 1985 California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles, *East-West, Contemporary American Art*; Trisolini Gallery, Ohio University, Athens, *Beyond 1984: Contemporary Perspectives on American Art*, and tour.
- 1986 Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, *Choosing: An Exhibit of Changing Perspectives in Modern Art and Art Criticism by Black Americans, 1925-1985*, and tour; Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, *Por Encima Del Bloqueo*; Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, Roslyn Harbor, New York, *The Artists' Language: African Traditional and Modern Art*.
- 1987 Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina, *New York/New Venue*; Jayne Baum Gallery, New York, *Past and Future Monument: Six Sculptors*; Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, *The Eloquent Object*, and tour; Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, *Artists Choose Artists*.
- 1988 Art Gallery, Cleveland State University, *Acts of Faith: Politics and the Spirit*; Artpark, Lewiston, New York [site project].
- 1989 Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, *Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture*; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, *Contemporary African-American Artists*.

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- Meo, Yvonne Cole. "Ritual As Art: The Work of Houston Conwill." *Black Art: An International Quarterly* 3 (Fall 1979): 4-13.
- Muchnic, Suzanne. "JuJu Ritual—Cycles of Life." *Artweek 9* (February 25, 1978): 4.
- Wilson, Judith. "Creating a Necessary Space: The Art of Houston Conwill 1975-1983." *The International Review of African-American Art* 6 (1984): 50-63.
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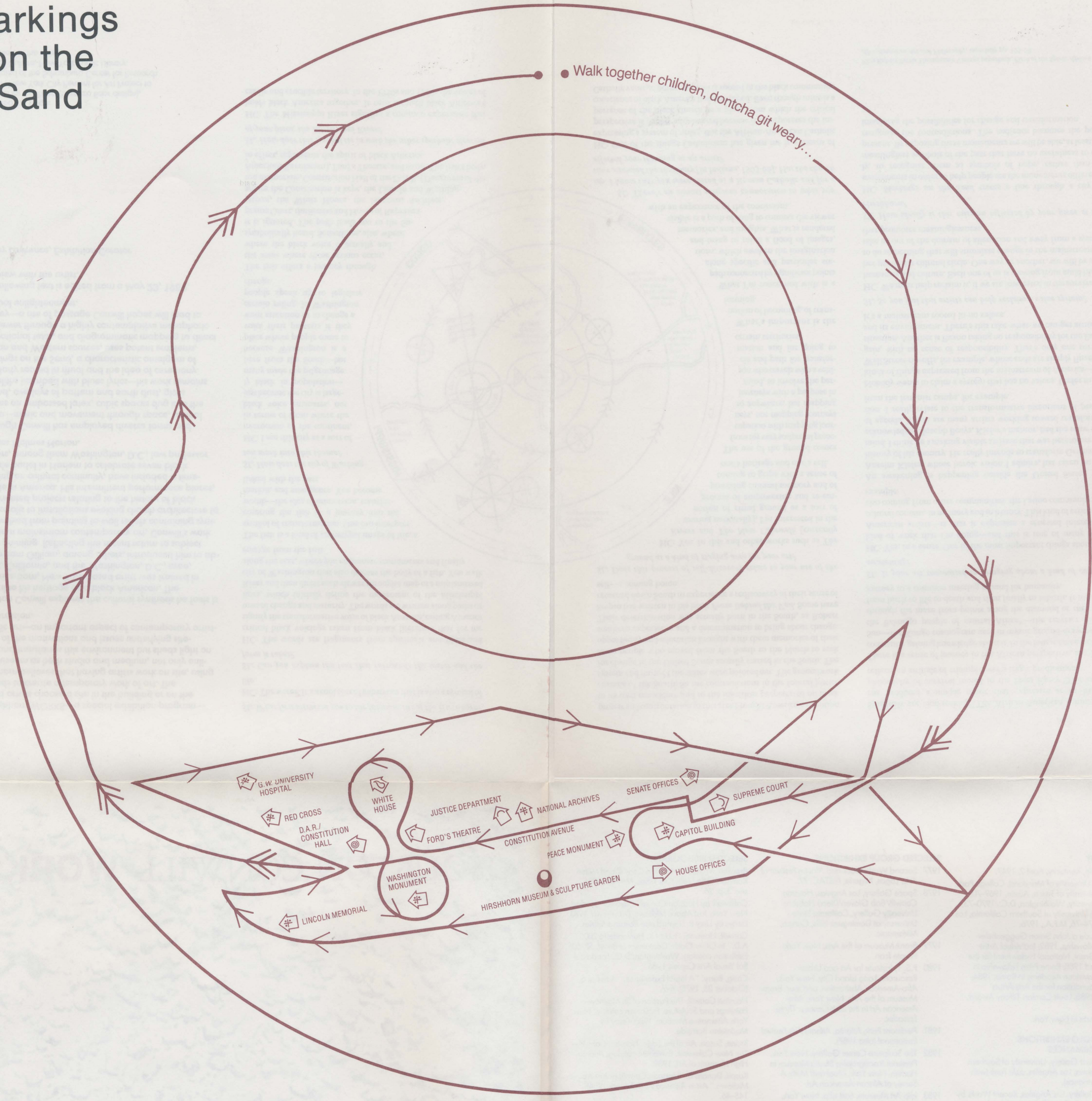
The artist wishes to thank Robert Hall, Jean Blackwell Hutson, and Carlos Juan Ramirez.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution

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Markings on the Sand

● Walk together children, dontcha git weary...



Fragments from Spirituals

Walk together children, dontcha git weary... The strong men
keep a-comin'. The strong men git stronger.

§

I hear archangels a-rockin' Jerusalem, I hear archangels a ringin'
dem bells.

§

I want to be ready, I want to be ready, I want to be ready to walk in
Jerusalem just like John.

§

Couldn't bear nobody pray.

§

Members don't git weary, for de work's most done.

§

Don't let nobody turn yo' round!

§

Deep river, my home is over Jordan, deep river; Lord, I want to
cross over into campground.

§

Wade in the water, wade in the water, children. God's gonna
trouble the water.

§

When you reach the rivah Jordan, You got tub cross it by yo' sef.

§

Goin' to the river, maybe, bye and bye. Goin' to the river and
there's a reason why.

§

I ain't no stranger, I've been here before.

Critical Voicings

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)

Without... sacrifice / without understanding and dreams / emotion and protest / without struggle / there will be no childhood.
Jayne Cortez (1973)

Freedom is sweet, on the beat, / Freedom is sweet to the reet complete... / No more pains, no more chains, / To keep free from being free. / Freedom is sweet fat, and that's for me.
Duke Ellington (1965)

When poems stop talking about the moon and begin to mention poverty, trade unions, color, color lines and colonies, somebody tells the police.
Langston Hughes (1947)

Unless we start to fight and defeat the enemies of poverty and racism in our own country and make our own country and make our talk of equality and opportunity ring true, we are exposed as hypocrites in the eyes of the world when we talk about making other people free.
Shirley Chisholm (1969)

Freedom is never given; it is won.
A. Philip Randolph (1937)

An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.
Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

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 nud puddles, or gibs me any best place! And a'n't I a woman?
Sojourner Truth (1851)

I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother... / I, too, am America.
Langston Hughes (1926)

Fragments from Blues Lyrics

I went down to the river. Sat beneath a willow tree. A dew dropped
on those willow leaves. And it rolled right down on me.

§

I can't refuse your sweet melody. I'll always be by your side when
the evenin' side comes along.

§

Moan them blues, holler them blues, Let me convert your soul.

§

I got the blues so bad one time it put my face in a permanent
frown. Now I'm feelin' so much better I can cakewalk into town.

§

I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log, dan to stay in
dis town, treated like a dirty dog.

§

Deep River, deep river, Mississippi River, so deep and wide my
heart is breaking as I watch the evening side, because my man is on
the other side.

§

Standing at the crossroads, tried to flag a ride. Standing at the
crossroads, tried to flag a ride. Ain't nobody seem to know me,
everybody passed me by.

§

Rise up children, shake the devil out your soul.

§

Let our rejoicing rise. High as the listening skies. Facing the rising
sun of our new day begun.

§

The sun's gonna shine in my back door some day, and the wind's
gonna blow in my back door some day, and the wind's gonna
change, gonna blow my blues away.