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 scrols 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

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.

BIOGRAPHY
Born Louisville, Kentucky, April 2, 1947.
Lives and works in New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES
1975 Lindhurst Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Juku Funk (with performance).
1976 The Gallery, Los Angeles, Recent Works by Houston E. Conwill: Juku (with performance); Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, Juku III.
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.
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
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.
1981 Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Atlanta Arts Festival Invitation (also 1987).
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.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
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 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution

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Walk together children, don'tcha get weary... The strong man go down.

I hear archangels a-rockin' Jerusalem, I hear archangels a-rangin' dem folks.

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

Can't hear nobody pray.

Members don't get weary, for we work most done.

Don't let nobody turn you round.

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

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

When you reach the Jordan, You got to turn around by y'elf.

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.

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 conceded without a demand is the unction of slavery.

Frederick Douglass (1857)

Crisil Voicing

I went down to the river, Sat beneath a willow tree. A line dropped on three willow leaves. And it sailed right down on me.

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

Mean them blues, roll them blues. Let me consent to your soul.

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

I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log, dan' to stay in the 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 tide, 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. And nobody seem to know me, everybody passed me by.

Rise up children, shine the devil out your soul.

Let our repining 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 change, gonna blow my blues away.