

Sept. 25 - Dec. 5, 2025 Monday - Friday, 11am - 6pm

Mishkin Gallery Baruch College (CUNY) 135 E. 22nd Street New York, NY 10010

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Christian Hincapié DECISIONS AT A DESK

Encompassing drawing, printmaking, and sculpture, this exhibition emerges from Christian Hincapié's extensive research across municipal archives and site visits throughout New York City. Expanding on a project Hincapié produced between 2018 and 2019, the works on display investigate previously unstudied decorative motifs installed in the Harlem section of Riverside Park—in particular, four shackled monkey statues that were installed at the entrance of the 148th Street playground's restrooms. These architectural details date from the playground's development in the 1930s by Robert Moses, the longtime Parks Commissioner and unapologetically racist city planner. The monkey statues remained in the park for nearly a century until their removal by the Parks Department in 2023, following internal discussions. In Hincapié's project, these statues are a prism to understand the subtle and oblique ways that pernicious ideology is designed into the built environment.

In the 1930s, Moses spearheaded the development of Riverside Park as part of the West Side Improvement Project to provide residents of the Upper West Side with access to the Hudson River waterfront. Under pressure from Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who sought to quell racial tensions after the Harlem Riots of 1935, Moses built the north portion of the park, in the burgeoning Black neighborhood above 125th Street, using a lower standard of landscape design that included cheaper building materials, unfinished amenities, and pointedly, the four shackled monkey statues. Hincapié began visiting the playground in 2018 after reading about the statues in *The Power Broker*, the expansive 1974 biography of Robert Moses written by legendary historian Robert Caro. He began documenting the statues' material presence in the park and searching for official traces of their existence and provenance in various city archives.

In this exhibition, Hincapié engages with his research subjects as material, employing methods that produce indexically-derived latent images. These include inverted photographic diazotype blueprints, monumental site-specific rubbings, and a negative impression of one of the monkey statues captured in a sunken relief sculpture made from kneaded eraser putty. This freestanding mass documents the statues by capturing the negative space around them in a gesture that conjures their eventual removal. A twelve-foot-tall rubbing made on site in Flushing Meadows Corona Park from a

circular mosaic that depicted a grimacing Robert Moses is installed across from the kneaded eraser sculpture. This mosaic was recently removed after falling into disrepair. In the gallery, Hincapié's two works, each a record of a now-absent monument, stare at each other in silent standoff.

In a series of diazotypes, Hincapié pays close attention to both official and unofficial containers of memory; adopting the visual language of architectural blueprints, he recontextualizes found archival materials to contend with social and material histories of the built environment. In a pair of large-scale blueprint scrolls depicting a grid of pages from a Parks Department spreadsheet cataloging all the artworks under the city's purview, he makes visible an underlying absurdity in the byzantine infrastructure of bureaucratic recordkeeping. Keenly attuned to the whims of public discourse and social memory, Hincapié has assembled a counter-archive through which to contend with the afterlife of these now-removed statues, as well as the larger landscape of racialized urban planning.

Decisions at a Desk is Hincapié's first institutional solo exhibition, marking the first time this project is presented in New York.





Mosaic with Park-goers at the Entrance to Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, NY 2019

Diazotype

Diptych, 24 x 36 inches each

Shown here are two diazotype blueprints made from photographs of a city-commissioned mosaic of Robert Moses that was, until 2025, located at the entrance to Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, NY.

Robert Moses was an infamous and controversial builder; the so-called "Power Broker" of 20th century New York City. His long reign of power lasted from the mid-1920's through the late 60s and incorporated at least twelve different municipal positions. He played the dominant role in countless city and state projects, including the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway, the Triborough Bridge, the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the Verrazano Bridge, as well as the beaches at Jacob Riis Park and several public housing developments under his slum clearance and urban renewal plans. Moses loved cars, and is largely responsible for promoting the cardependent infrastructures that defined the U.S. in the 20th century. His vast vision of a modern city aggressively shaped New York's infrastructure and urban development. He was famous for his power, which he accumulated without ever holding any publicly elected office. His public projects infamously contributed to a modern blueprint for injecting racism into the public sphere, systematically excluding poor residents of the city from his more pleasant and leisurely projects, while dividing up neighborhoods and communities of color through extensive highway construction (and in turn sickening these populations with emissions and pollutants). One such famous example is his destruction of San Juan Hill, a formerly Black and Puerto Rican enclave of the Upper West Side, in order to construct Lincoln Center.

The circular mosaic shown in this diptych was the only literal monument to Moses himself within city limits, aside from his gravesite in Woodlawn Cemetery. After falling into disrepair, the mosaic was removed by the Parks Department in 2025. One could argue that the vast network of parkways, bridges, and parks are also monuments to Moses. I certainly see them this way, and I often think about the famous epitaph of British architect Christopher Wren: "if you seek his monument – look around you."

- Chrisitan Hincapié, 2025



Layout Diptych (Left: Page 560 of Robert Caro's "The Power Broker" Shown Over a Plan of the 148th Street Playground of Riverside Park. Right: Perspectival View of Comfort Station at the 148th Street Playground with Detail of Double-Faced Monkey Statues Installed as Decorative Motifs of Said Structure)

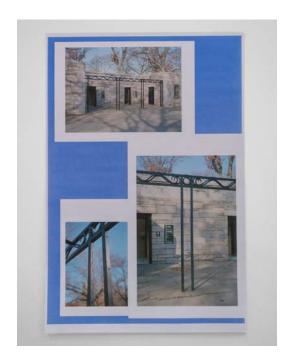
2019

Archival inkjet print on diazotype Diptych, 24 x 36 inches each The print on the left of this diptych includes page 560 from *The Power Broker*, in which historian Robert Caro mentions the existence of monkey sculptures used as decorative motifs at the 148th Street playground of Riverside Park. This is the earliest recorded mention of these statues I have found, written 36 years after their installation in 1938 (when the playground was under construction) or 1939 (when the playground opened). This page is superimposed on top of a facsimile blueprint of the playground in question, obtained from the Parks Department Map File Archives. The blueprint was drawn in 1997, and is likely the only such plan for this playground. In an October 1939 memo found in the NYC Parks General Files at the Municipal Archives, parks officials mention never receiving the plans for this playground from Madigan-Hyland (the private engineering firm frequently contracted by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses), who were responsible for designing and constructing the West Side Improvement Project, which included Riverside Park and the adjacent Henry Hudson Parkway.

The monkey statues, shown on the right, are double-faced metal casts that were attached to a dilapidated pergola that is part of a comfort station in the 148th Street playground of Riverside Park, now known as "Ten Mile River Playground." Upon encountering them in 2018 after reading Caro's passage, I became fixated on their origins and who may have sculpted them. The only clue as to the person who made them is the Art Deco style they are sculpted in, which was typical of the time. The Art Deco style that appears on much of New York City's most prominent architecture frequently uses highly symbolic imagery to promote a notion of greatness, wealth, and prosperity, almost always on the backs of colonialism, imperialism, and racism. Here, a crucial detail of the monkey sculptures is that the monkeys were shackled in chains to the trellises of the comfort station. In addition to being a common racist trope, the image of a shackled monkey (an animal not native to North America) has roots as a colonial symbol used to celebrate the dominance of the West over objects, animals, and people in the tradition of exoticization, exhibition, and display—a feature of the British colonial mindset that Robert Moses embraced following his studies at Oxford in the 1910s.

The individual artist who sculpted these monkeys remains unknown. They were likely a WPA worker, whose labor was conscripted under the New Deal in response to the Great Depression. The individuals whose names I do know who are responsible for the design of the park and its details are landscape architects Gilmore Clarke, Michael Rapuano, and Clinton F. Loyd. At the time, Loyd was the Madigan-Hyland's lead architect, and likely signed off on any original architectural drawings pertaining to this playground, including all play features and decorative motifs.

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Perspectival Views of Comfort Station at the 148th Street Playground of Riverside Park After the 2023 Removal of the Shackled Monkey Statues Installed as Decorative Motifs of Said Structure

2023

Archival inkjet print on diazotype 24 x 36 inches

The photographs arranged in this print show the comfort station bathroom immediately following the removal of the monkey statues in late 2023.

I began to produce this project as an alternative archive in 2018, documenting the previously unstudied history of these monkey statues' presence in the playground. I wanted to expand the discourse around public monuments that had begun after the Charlottesville Protests of 2017 to include the hostile histories of public architecture and infrastructure I encounter in New York. By the middle of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement had escalated rapidly; the resultant discourse broadened these conversations to critique a wide range of objects symbolic of systemic racism and injustice. These monkey statues were a longstanding cipher, a poignant crystallization of Robert Moses' aggression towards nature and the public as he shaped his influence on the New York landscape.

A Parks Department spokesperson has stated publicly that the statues were subject to internal debate for decades, however their removal was only initiated in February 2023 after Stephanie Ashley Caban, a Riverside Park staff member, presented her higher-ups with pertinent sources, including this project, that argued for their removal. That September, viral social media posts by Shiloh Frederick further thrust the issue into the public sphere. Shortly thereafter, City Council member Shaun Abreu, whose district includes the playground, requested the statues be removed as part of a plan to upgrade the north waterfront of Riverside Park. In October 2023, the monkey motifs were finally removed after more than 80 years.

According to the Parks Department director of Arts and Antiquities, Jonathan Kuhn, the now decommissioned statues are currently held in storage, where they will remain indefinitely as publicly held assets under the city's purview.

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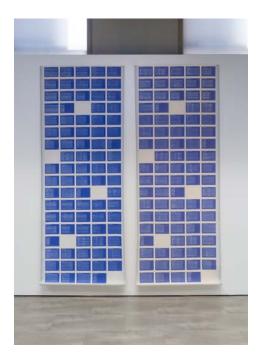


Flatfish, Curling Wave, Spiral Shell, Aquatic Plants 2019 Four rubbings, wax on architectural vellum 13 x 16 inches each

These four rubbings are taken from nautical themed WPA-era reliefs carved into the granite stonework of the 79th Street Boat Basin in the southern portion of Riverside Park. Indicative of the quality and design details of the Upper West Side portion of Riverside Park, these pleasant subjects contrast with the severity of the monkey motif in the Harlem Playground.

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Grid Sheet 2 of 22 [Decomposed and Recomposed Spreadsheet titled "NYC Parks Monuments" (Courtesy of NYC Parks Department Division of Arts and Antiquities)]

Grid Sheet 3 of 22 [Decomposed and Recomposed Spreadsheet titled "NYC Parks Monuments" (Courtesy of NYC Parks Department Division of Arts and Antiquities)]

2019 Diazotype 42 x 112 inches each In my efforts to trace the provenance of the monkeys, the Parks Department provided me with a publicly accessible PDF from the Division of Arts and Antiquities, headed by Jonathan Kuhn, a preservationist who calls himself "Mr. Memory." This document lists all publicly recognized art works within the New York City Parks Department Jurisdiction. It includes everything from large monuments to small plaques placed on trees that commemorate individuals. It also includes decorative motifs and architectural details found throughout the parks. This document is exactly where the city and Mr. Memory would typically acknowledge the existence of the monkey statues at the 148th Street playground, however they have never been included, either before or after their removal from the park in 2023.

The document is difficult to read in the form in which it was given to me, in that it is a lengthy, horizontally-oriented spreadsheet with many columns reformatted into a 1,836 page PDF that comprises more than 2,000 entries logging publicly owned objects held by the Parks Department. Its many columns are intended to organize information related to object provenance, location, size, materials, specifications, etc. In this diazotype, the structure and composition of the document is reorganized into a grid format that, in my attempt to make legible its contents, would yield 22 large scale scrolls, mimicking the experience of studying history. Incomplete narratives are built and fall apart in the various forms in which we gather information. While there is an appearance of structure or underlying logic in the grid that can instill in one a sense of authority or completeness, this structure may ultimately be arbitrary, flawed, downright false, or some combination of all of the above.

There is a sense that the grid (or history) is *readable* due to its inherent and rigid compositional logic, and that all the answers to *the present* can be found within its predefined structure. However, in these scrolls, missing spaces point to gaps in knowledge across the various archives I have spent many hours immersed in. Documents that one feels ought to exist, don't; information that one wants to see as a data point may actually exist as a much more foggy, fluid, and hard-to-pin-down reality. *The spaces in the grid are reality nonetheless* is the point I think one must always come back to, even if they are not, or cannot, be contained in the supposedly complete, rigid, logical, organized, readable device of the grid. In a sense, by reinterpreting sources and images through art-making, there is the possibility for the real subject of my project to emerge from the gaps between data points, anecdotes, hearsay, images, experience, or memory—all of the forces that cumulatively form a notion of "history," and by extension, the present.

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Two Pages from a NYC Parks Department Document Titled "Riverside Park Master Plan" (2016)
2019
Archival inkjet print on diazotype
24 x 36 inches

The document presented here, titled "Riverside Park Master Plan," published in 2016 by the Parks Department Design Bureau, gives an overview of the Park from its original 1870s design by Frederik Law Olmstead, to Robert Moses' Westside Improvement Project retrofitting of the Park in the 1930s, on through 2016 and discusses potential future improvements. Looking at the document reveals how the Parks Department itself views the 148th Street playground. On page 44, the Parks Department readily admits that the playground is built to a lower standard than the southern portion of Riverside Park by stating: the north waterfront playground, comfort station, fields, and landscape are inadequate for the neighborhood between 138th and 158th Streets. Curiously, the Parks Department uses a photograph of the comfort station with the monkey statues included as the representative image to convey the park's lesser quality status. To my knowledge, this photo is the only official public Parks Department image depicting the comfort station before the statues' removal.

The document also has multiple warnings about flooding throughout Riverside Park. Many areas of the park are imminently threatened by climate change, especially those immediately on the Hudson River.

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Letter from 1938 Addressed to Robert Moses by Victor E. Thomas of 191V West 151st Street 2019
Archival inkjet print on diazotype
24 x 36 inches

In this letter, dated July 8, 1938 and found in the Parks General Files of the Municipal Archives, Victor E. Thomas, a Black man living on 151st Street, addresses Robert Moses. In his letter, Thomas describes a group of young white boys who are threatening Black park-goers who enter the 148th Street playground. Notes scribbled on the surface of the pages indicate that Moses forwarded the letter to his aide Allyn Jennings, but the instance of white supremacy described by Thomas was ultimately filed away, unanswered. I presume my resurfacing of this letter and its concerned plea for help from a public official is the first time someone other than Moses and his staff have read it.

Over the years, I have continually returned to the physical, material details that have defined the park itself: the violence implicit in the shackled statues; the physical space that detaches the Harlem waterfront of the park from its Upper West Side counterpart; the underpass one must walk through, under Moses' Henry Hudson Parkway in order to enter the playground after descending the roughly five flights of stairs from the street. According to a 2006 Historic American Engineering Record study, every other underpass in Riverside Park is adorned with Deer Isle granite mined in New England, while this underpass—which Thomas would have had to traverse in order to leave the park after being confronted by white supremacist children—is the only underpass in Riverside Park that is constructed with unembellished, bare concrete. The lack of granite is evidence *in absentia* of Moses' rushed, less-cared-for attitude towards the extended section of the park which serves the primarily Black neighborhood.

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Blueprint (Rubbing of a Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority Police Officer Challenge Coin)
2019
Rubbing, pencil on paper
24 x 36 inches

Out of all the authorities that Robert Moses was in charge of, perhaps the most infamous besides the Parks Department (to which he served as Commissioner between 1934-1960) was the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA). The TBTA was in charge of and collected tolls at all roads, bridges, and tunnels that Moses built, and was famously autonomous from other parts of city and state government. This autonomy was possible due to its funding structure; it was essentially a private corporation, operated under the guise of a public utility. In The Power Broker Robert Caro outlines how Madigan-Hyland, the engineering and architecture firm hired by the Parks Department to redesign Riverside Park, helped Moses devise the complex bond market structure that to this day finances the upkeep and maintenance of Moses' TBTA projects. This blurry financial structure became the blueprint for how city governments finance and upkeep the infrastructure we use today, namely roads and public transit. If you write a letter to NJ Transit or the MTA and ask them if they are a private or a public corporation, there is a good chance they would have no idea how to answer your question as they have a kind of public-serving mandate but are completely indebted to private interests.

The TBTA had so much power as an independent agency that it even established its own independent police force, which still exists today. This is a rubbing of an actual, modern day TBTA challenge coin, given to me by a TBTA officer that patrols the area under the Triborough Bridge in the Bronx where I have lived since 2014.

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The Warp on the Loom [Licensed and Partially Licensed Seals Related to The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (Also Known As MTA Bridges and Tunnels)]
2019
Diazotype
Diptych, 24 x 36 inches each

Today, the TBTA does business as MTA Bridges and Tunnels after NY State wrestled control of the agency away from Moses in 1968 and merged it with the transit authority. The headquarters of MTA Bridges and Tunnels are coyly located in Randalls Island's Robert Moses Building. Moses had an office in that building and anyone who wanted to visit him at this remote location had to pay the toll at his Triborough Bridge.

In All That is Solid Melts into Air (1982) Marshall Berman writes:

"The English institution of a 'public authority' had been grafted onto American public administration early in the twentieth century. It was empowered to sell bonds to construct particular public works such as bridges, harbors, railroads. When its project was completed, it could charge tolls for use until its bonds were paid off; at that point it would ordinarily go out of existence and turn its public work over to the state. Moses, however, saw that there was no reason for an authority to limit itself in time or space: so long as money was coming in—say, from tolls on the Triborough Bridge—and so long as the bond market was encouraging, an authority could trade in its old bonds for new ones, to raise more money, to build more works; so long as money (all of it tax-exempt) kept coming in, the banks and institutional investors would be only too glad to underwrite new bond issues, and the authority could go on building forever. Once the initial bonds were paid off, there would be no need to go to the city, state or federal governments, or to the people, for money to build. Moses proved in court that no government had any legal right even to look into an authority's books. Between the late 1930s and the 1950s, Moses created or took over a dozen of these authorities—for parks, bridges, highways, tunnels, electric power, urban renewal and more—and integrated them into an immensely powerful machine with innumerable wheels within wheels, transforming its cogs into millionaires, incorporating thousands of businessmen and politicians into its production line, drawing millions of New Yorkers inexorably into its widening gyre."

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Decisions at a Desk 2019 Mass of kneaded eraser 22 x 57 1/2 x 31 inches



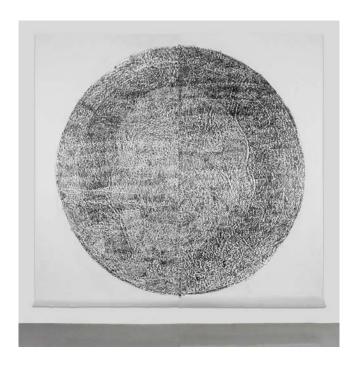
Hincapié (center) with Jonathan Adams (right), working on site at the 148th Street playground of Riverside Park. 2019

This sculpture is a mass of kneaded eraser putty which was pressed into one of the monkey statues at the 148th Street playground prior to their removal, creating a 1:1 negative impression of the statue. When considering erasure in the urban landscape, I ask myself: what does and does not get erased in the world; what still stands; what is visible; and what and who is kept at the margins? Because this eraser sculpture occupies the physical space surrounding the monkey, as a negative mold, rather than as a positive cast, I hope to gather and address the surroundings or the air around it. While utilizing the significance of the material as a literal eraser and at the same time as a mold, I hope this work can hold the need for the object to disappear, but also the impossibility of erasing its mark from memory, history, and the written record.

These monkey statues were somewhat invisible, both in that they continue to be unacknowledged in official documentation by the Parks Department and various archives from the time of the playground's construction, as well as in their (former) physical presence as decorative architectural elements, rather than explicitly demarcated art works or monuments. In this exhibition, by presenting the invisible presence of the monkey sculptures (their negative), alongside the historical context for their existence, I hope to make visible the attitudes that shaped Moses' approach to city planning and all of the racist attitudes that continually shape public space, protected by their invisibility, but leaving marks that are monumental in their effect.

As discourse regarding racist emblems and monuments has escalated in recent years, there has been public debate regarding the appropriate manner of their removal: guerilla-style immediate intervention or destruction, bureaucratic deaccessioning processes, preservationists who promote additional "historical contextualization" instead of removal, and so on. My encountering of the monkey motif with an eraser reflected on the various positions I saw towards living amongst public monuments to dark histories. Now that the statues have been removed, this piece serves as a sculpture-document to the object, and all of the histories it conjures and all it can be symbolic of. When I made the impression, I mulled over the desire to remove the monkey sculptures, reinterpreting them as I seek to unravel the attitudes which are embodied in the object.

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Robert Moses Rorschach Test 2018 Rubbing, oil on paper 141 15/16 x 141 1/8 inches



Hincapié working on site at the Robert Moses Mosaic, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, NY, 2018. Photo by Robert Mulero

This rubbing is taken from the mosaic depicting Robert Moses that was once located at the entrance to Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, NY, seen in an earlier work in this exhibition with the title *Mosaic with Park-goers at the Entrance to Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, NY*.

The mosaic itself is strangely labeled "Robert Moses by Artist Andy Warhol 1964," alluding to Moses' disapproval and subsequent censorship of Warhol's submission to the 1964-65 World's Fair. While Warhol had no role in the creation of the mosaic, which was installed in the 1990s (the mosaic's precise designer is unknown to the Parks Department), the image of Moses appears to be borrowed from a portrait Warhol created in response to the censorship of his work *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964). This work depicted men from the NYPD's most-wanted list, creating a homoerotic innuendo that Moses and then-New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller objected to and consequently removed from the fair. Warhol responded by creating a series of silkscreens of the Parks Commissioner, using a menacing image of his likeness which had been featured in a 1962 *LIFE* magazine article.

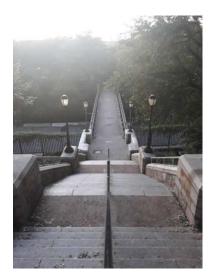
I first photographed the mosaic and took this rubbing of its surface in 2018. At that time, the mosaic showed some signs of wear but was still fairly intact. I returned over the years, and observed how the mosaic—and Moses' face—had suffered significant damage. Parks Department staff attempted to repair the mosaic with concrete patchwork. I had the thought that my rubbing had unwittingly become the only 1:1 representation of the mosaic prior to its degradation, which was likely caused by extreme temperature shifts in winter months and the expansion of water as it had frozen in the small spaces between the tiles that make up the mosaic. I see some irony in climate change wrecking the image of the city planner who thought car-centric cities were the way of the future. Here, the planet bites back, making a ruin of his vision visible on the surface of his likeness.

In 2024, the Parks Department had decided that the set of World's Fair-themed mosaic medallions (that this Robert Moses depiction belonged to) was beyond repair. By September 2025, the entire set of mosaics had been removed.

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Names Inscribed on October 2, 2000 at the Entrance to the 148th Street Playground of Riverside Park (Johann, Domica, D.B., et al.)
2019
Rubbing, oil on paper
81 3/8 x 106 5/8 inches



Looking west towards the railroad overpass connecting Riverside Drive to the playground at 148th Street.

Looking at buildings, or looking at bridges, or looking at roads in order to consider the legacy of power in the built environment reveals *one* reality. But it is sometimes easy to forget ourselves and the people that have to deal with these environments daily, living in the shadows of infrastructure or conditions of power determined by individuals veiled in bureaucracy. In my site visits to Riverside Park and specifically the 148th Street playground, I found this location: a landing on the stairs on a bridged access point to the playground. Here, people had written their names into the wet concrete of the overpass bridge after it was refinished, on October 2nd, 2000. I know this specific date because people who passed by the playground left their names and dated their inscriptions. When I saw these markings, I thought about my search through various archives and libraries for the provenance of something like the monkey statues, and how I was unable to find any direct information regarding their origins. In contrast, it was so easily transparent to see the names of real-life people, here written into stone, who at some point had used this playground, and I can exactly date the presence of Johann, Domica, and D.B. as they exited or entered the playground.

In this piece I consider the contrast between unsanctioned and sanctioned marks left in the world and the varying layers of authorship in public space. Individuals make marks on their environment just as bureaucracies do, and spaces can be reimagined or reinterpreted to make visible the presence of the individuals who inhabit them. One has to always contend with the power structures under which one lives. The preeminent author who defined these structures in modern New York City was Robert Moses. His power is imbued into things, as all power is siphoned into everything, but there are always moments of reimagining and reinterpreting the materials of the built environment in order to begin to wrestle away from the world as it is designed *around* the public, but not *for* the public.

- CH

CREDITS

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