

Planned Effervescence

Atlanta's World of Coca-Cola Pavilion

KARAL ANN MARLING

ATLANTA has yearnings to be a world-class city. Its successful bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics, topping off the Cinderella sensation of the 1991 World Series, puts it in the running for at least two more weeks of international fame. Meanwhile, there are – or were, until August 1990 – serious impediments to Atlanta's becoming an all-American city, too, something more than a regional business center or an appendage to an airport. The city had no landmarks, no symbols, no tourist magnets to speak of, unless you counted its tree-lined streets. Atlanta used to be mighty proud of its foliage. All the promotional brochures mentioned the abundance of trees, along with the 23-story lobby-atrium of John Portman's Hyatt Regency Hotel and the Allman Brothers. Nature and culture.

A survey taken among prospective visitors by the state tourism bureau a few years back listed Tara (from *Gone With the Wind*), the Underground (a retail and entertainment complex tucked under the railroad viaducts constructed in the 1920s to ease downtown traffic congestion), and something having to do with Coke as prime tourist attractions. But Tara existed only in the imagination of Margaret Mitchell, Underground Atlanta was temporarily defunct, and the last visible symbol of Coca-Cola's contribution to the economy of Atlanta and the genesis of the New South – a giant neon "spectacular" affixed to a nondescript building in Margaret Mitchell Square in 1948 – had winked out forever on New Year's Eve 1980.

Thousands gathered that night to say goodbye to the old red sign in what had been Atlanta's own Times Square, thanks to the elegant pinwheel of light – the place where friends met for lunch, where out-of-towners were directed to turn to get to the capitol. The sign was the city's most important landmark. But neon was too old-fashioned and tacky for a hustling, bustling city of 23-story hotel lobbies that was pining for municipal stardom. So the Coca-Cola sign came down. The bits and pieces that were left after the wrecking crew had finished were encased in blocks of Lucite and sold as souvenirs.

The fact that somebody had turned a profit on the deal is not out of character for Atlanta. A Minnesota Twins fan in town for the third game of the 1991 World Series was appalled to find that "you win in Atlanta and you sing 'Taking Care of Business.'" Business (or "binis") is the heart and soul of Atlanta and has been since the 1880s, when the town threw off its agrarian past (except for all those trees) and created the modern, entrepreneurial New South on the ruins of its real-life Taras. Coca-Cola was invented by druggist John S. Pemberton in 1886 as a nerve tonic and general pick-me-up for Georgians still shaken by

the fall of the Confederacy. At Jacobs' Pharmacy in downtown Atlanta, a soda jerk mistakenly mixed the greenish Pemberton syrup with carbonated water, and a soft drink was born. It was wildly successful and became the South's first national and international consumer product. Coke was, in other words, just about everything Atlanta aspired to be: up-to-date, famous, profitable. "Coca-Cola," wrote Marshall McLuhan, "is known to more people than any other man-made [thing], including the Eiffel Tower."

Atlanta sorely needed an Eiffel Tower in the 1980s – a Times Square, a big neon Coke sign. But throughout the decade the city's best-known corporation, the owner of the best-known trademark in the world, was all but invisible in the symbolic life of the community. As it turned out, the Coca-Cola Company's iconographic withdrawal lasted only as long as it took to design and fabricate the best electric Coke sign ever built – a revolving neon circle, 23 feet in diameter, bearing the familiar brand names and encased in a latticework globe programmed to spin in the opposite direction at one-and-a-half revolutions per minute. The hegemony of multinational cola, the glitzy splendor of modern Atlanta: Coke's extravagant gesture said it all.

The piece had also been planned with the corporate history of Coca-Cola and its advertising firmly in mind. In scale and complexity, the new sign rivaled the legendary electric billboard that had hung above New York's Times Square, at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, since 1920. Its use of an animated pinwheel pattern behind the script of the Coca-Cola logo alluded to the beloved old sign in Margaret Mitchell Square. Set in motion on 7 May 1990, with a speech by the mayor and all due civic solemnities, the new 13-ton, 830-square-foot colossus also came attached to a ready-made Atlanta tourist mecca called the World of Coca-Cola.

THE new Coca-Cola "pavilion" (so called in the official corporate lingo) opened to the public in August. It occupied a onetime parking lot along Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive, with the revitalized Underground Atlanta to the west and the dome of the Georgia capitol to the east. Shoehorned in between the after-hours fizz of the nightclub district and the massive neoclassical dignity of government, the ambiguities of the site reflected some of the contradictions inherent in the very idea of a World of Coca-Cola. On the one hand, this was intended to be a major-league, 45,000-square-foot museum, displaying more than 1,200 items of rare Coke memorabilia and tracing the history of the company's rise to global prominence. The nature of the product, however, meant that the usual

objets d'art on view in conventional museums were doomed to be in short supply: the story of Coca-Cola called for ads, real soda fountains, vending machines, radio jingles, and TV sets. So, while the Coca-Cola saga was serious business, especially to Atlantans, the pop-cultural artifacts necessary to sustain the narrative were of the type usually dismissed out of hand as Madison Avenue kitsch – or worse.

Nor were there workable models for such an enterprise within American business culture. Some companies, including Coca-Cola's Atlanta offices, had set up small displays of product-related material in their lobbies or waiting rooms as a kind of corporate decor. The bottling plant in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, claimed (and still claims) to house the largest private collection of Coke paraphernalia in the world, accessible to the public at \$1 a head. When such quasi-museums were more than a distraction for salesmen cooling their heels in the lobby, however, they tended to be waiting areas for visitors beginning a plant tour. And by 1978, according to Jane and Michael Stern's compendium of roadside amusements, the days of the factory tour were already numbered.

Apart from a couple of sawmills and quarries, and the Ohio assembly line where the Etch-A-Sketch toy was put together, only the food industry still routinely admitted the curious to see how beer, candy bars, cheese, pretzels, sausages, pepper sauce, cereal, frozen cheesecake, and maple syrup were manufactured. Fears of industrial espionage and ruinous lawsuits filed by non-employees claiming injury on the premises led most big firms to rethink company policy on tours in the 1970s, despite the public relations benefits attached. General Mills abandoned the practice after the 1978 season, for example, although the tour of the Betty Crocker Test Kitchens had become a Minneapolis institution. Other businesses opted to replicate what the factory did for a postindustrial audience weaned on theme parks.

A case in point is Chocolate World in Hershey, Pennsylvania, dating from the mid-seventies. The plant itself, on Chocolate Avenue (where the street lights look like Hershey's Kisses), no longer welcomes guests. But the nearby visitors' center simulates the process of making candy in an amusement-park-style ride beginning on an African cacao plantation, complete with jungle sound effects. There is even an interlude called "You Be the Cocoa Bean" in which the tourist is roasted and toasted in a hot, red tunnel in a make-believe chocolate plant. The finale is, of course, the gift mall, full of Kisses and apparel decorated with them. Cranberry World in Plymouth, Massachusetts, inaugurated in 1977, has no ride but does demonstrate the ins and outs of growing, harvesting, and



Anthony Frederick

Canned videos.



Anthony Frederick

Sign of Good Taste: Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates, architects, Coca-Cola Pavilion, Atlanta, 1990.



Anthony Frederick

The Pause That Refreshes.

processing cranberries in a series of dioramas, cut-aways, and model bogs. The bogs surround a bilevel structure the Ocean Spray cooperative describes as a pavilion, built both to give something tangible back to the community and "to enhance the understanding of the cranberry."

What Hershey and Ocean Spray understood was the fascination of moving parts and processes; discarding the manifest inconveniences of the genuine article, they kept some of the kinetic energy of the factory, the syncopated sound and motion that had mesmerized onlookers since the dawn of the industrial age. Working machinery had been a high point of American fairs and expositions since the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, at which all manner of goods, from woven carpeting to souvenir bookmarks, were cranked out as a form of entertainment, celebrating the bounty of piston and gear. Wandering through the world's fairs of the late 19th century, Henry Adams was tempted to trace the decline of Western civilization to the rise of the mighty Corliss

engine, but promoters noted that the largest crowds inevitably gathered around exhibits from which a finished product, borne aloft by a welter of clanking mechanical doodads, emerged triumphant. Thus at Chicago's Century of Progress of 1933, the New York World's Fair of 1939, and the 1958 Exposition Universelle in Brussels, Coca-Cola set up as promotional displays actual plants that filled and sealed the famous "Georgia green" bottles to be sold to fairgoers. Despite occasional deviations – the futuristic Coca-Cola building at the 1964 World's Fair in New York housed a "Global Holiday" exhibit re-creating exotic spots around the world (each with its own distinctive scent) where Coke could be found – the model factory, or off-site factory tour, became the norm for local trade fairs and international expositions alike.

By labeling its new World of Coca-Cola building a pavilion, the corporation deliberately invoked the spirit of the fair: fun, razzle-dazzle, a breezy contemporaneity, and high-powered p.r. in the form



Anthony Frederick

Liquid assets.

of an ersatz factory. One of the first interior features commissioned for the Atlanta pavilion, in fact, was a kinetic display titled "Bottling Fantasy" (constructed in part by Coke's own engineering department) – an industrial conveyor that mimicked the bottling process without the fuss and muss of actually making a single ounce of what the 75th Coca-Cola slogan, coined in 1969, called "The Real Thing." But the lineage of The World of Coca-Cola, rooted in neon "spectaculars," working factories, and fairs, also raised questions of decorum, given the civic prominence of the site. Although the company probably had the economic clout in Atlanta to dangle a neon Coke sign over the front door of the capitol if it so chose, the ultimate \$15 million architectural solution proved just respectful enough to reassure legislators, just stuffy enough to elevate Coca-Cola above the level of mere soft drink flackery, and just touristy enough to lure the crowds.

Designed by the local firm of Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates, the

pavilion serves Coca-Cola best through its visual civility, which reinforces a symbiotic relationship between Atlanta and the drink that used to be styled "the holy water of the American South." The new sign, for instance, hangs inside a hollow rectangle that effectively shields it from the view of the government center, while beaming an appropriate promise of pleasure and leisure ("The Pause That Refreshes") straight at Underground Atlanta. The back side of the building consists of four linked rectangles: the empty one, which serves as the entry portico, and three others variously faced in limestone or stucco. It looks museumlike and sober, a neoclassical exercise to appeal to the up-to-date postmodern boardroom. The front, however, is all neon, electrographically enhanced neo-Platonism and semiotic gamesmanship: a red, green, and yellow color scheme alludes to old Coke crates; a series of punched window openings suggests the configuration of the take-home carton; a big red cylinder (a Coke can, perhaps?) marks the door; and a corner of the façade is supported not by a column but, like the company itself, by a



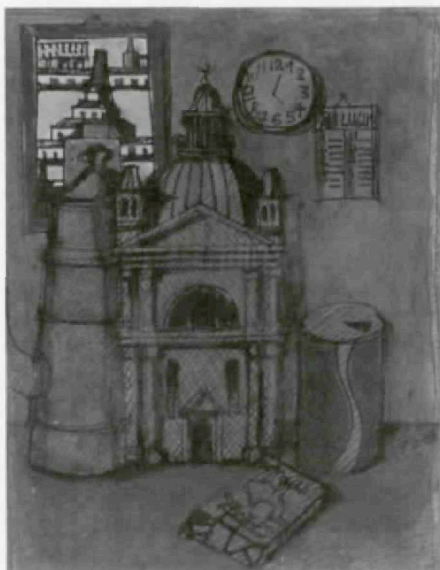
Coke bottle – an 18-foot cubified Coke bottle, made up of lighted slabs of thick green glass in homage to the distinctive hobble skirt bottle patented in 1915 (the prototype rests inside, on the third floor).

The entablature that tops the third-floor level of the museum blocks, tying them into a coherent whole, illustrates the subtlety with which the competing claims of local heritage and corporate hype have been reconciled in the design. Like a classical frieze, the entablature is sculpted with the raised script of the old Coca-Cola logo. By day, this bit of self-congratulatory signage is shadowed and all but invisible, especially on the Washington Street side, facing the capitol. By night, when Underground Atlanta comes alive, the letters are dramatically backlit and visible for blocks around. Hot music. Cold drinks. "Things go better with Coke!"

From the outside, despite its touches of Madison Avenue pizzazz, the building conveys a sense of cubic mass and enclosure. But inside it is a true pavilion – light and airy, a series of open catwalks and rooms suspended in a vast space contained within the four segments. Furthermore, the quadripartite division of the exterior is nowhere apparent. Beginning on the top floor, from which the self-guided tour gradually descends toward the mother of all gift shops at ground level, the visitor passes through a series of variously sized galleries, theaters, and viewing areas (that is, a sequence of windowless enclosures) connected by light-filled ramps and skywalks affording glimpses of the outside world. The effect is quick, episodic, and profoundly contemporary, something like watching a TV program punctuated by commercials just long enough to allow a fast dash to the refrigerator for a Coke.



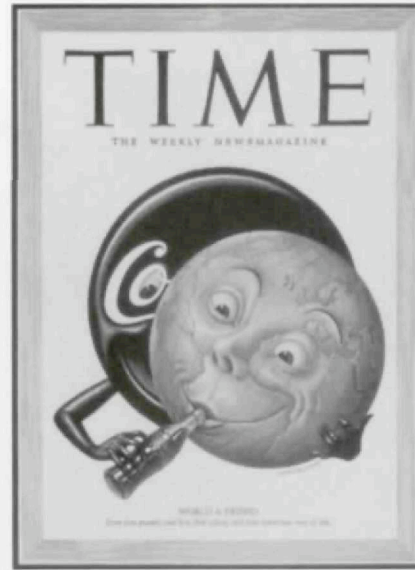
Jean Lagarrigue, *House of Glass*, 1975.



Aldo Rossi, composition from *Il Libro Azzuro*, 1981.

The architecture presumes a short attention span on the part of the MTV generation and relieves the tedium of learning about the genesis of the original formula or the evolution of the bottle by alternating short "bites" of enclosure and information with movement through empty connecting spaces defined by light and by the refreshing absence of didactic content.

This is an interesting reversal of the strategy lately adopted by the Disney theme parks in the holding areas for too-popular rides such as Star Tours. There, impatient tourists are placated by short, intense bursts of dramatic entertainment (enacted by audioanimatronic robots) separated by periods of quick physical movement up or down ramps through less interesting scenic environments. The difference, of course, is that the Star Tours layout presumes the real interest to lie in the story, whereas, with the exception of a couple of stunning interactive displays, the exhibits in the World of Coca-Cola are less interesting than the fun of



Boris Artzybashoff, *World & Friend, Time*, May 1950.

dashing from one experience to the next. That is certainly true of the earliest material, on the third floor, including Pemberton's formula book and patent application, the first Coca-Cola calendar (1891), the original bottling contract, and the model for the 1915 bottle Raymond Loewy once called "the most perfectly designed package" in the world. All these items and more are crammed into glass display cases lining the walls of a cramped, dark room. Within the cases, the artifacts are explained by mounted photo blowups and texts forming dense, planar clusters. In the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, where this same technique is used for displaying cultural artifacts of the industrial age, the didactic panels are much larger, much better lit, and generally placed in unglazed, freestanding arrangements that approach the condition of sculpture. In Atlanta, everything has been flattened and shrunken, resulting in a museum so conceptualized, miniaturized, and sadly diminished that key items, such as the talismanic bottle, are all but lost in the murk.

To be fair to Staples & Charles Ltd. of Washington D.C., Coke's exhibition designers, a high percentage of the memorabilia in the corporate archives was two-dimensional, small in scale and all the same color, hardly the stuff of boffo show-biz displays. And when I took my tour of the upper reaches of the building, the "Bottling Fantasy" was temporarily boarded up for repairs, while a reportedly hilarious introductory film on the history of humankind's quest for the perfect beverage, starring comedian Dom DeLuise, was nowhere in evidence. That left the patent, the contract, the formula, the bottle, and lots of dense text as the principal attractions, along with a video of Coke factories around Washing-

ton, D.C., Coke's exhibition the video of Coke factories around the world (surprise, they're all pretty much the same!) shown on a television set inexplicably located behind a structural pillar. Put back the noise and the color framing the artifacts, and corporate history may be a little easier to swallow.

Walt Disney built his parks on the "weenie" model. He located the castle at the end of Main Street, he said, as a kind of visual reward, or "weenie," to move the sightseer pleasurably along toward the center of his Magic Kingdom. The World of Coca-Cola seems to work along the same lines when all its constituent parts are functioning. Great and serious moments in company annals are introduced and then topped off by bubbling doses of pure enjoyment, ranging from the DeLuise



Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*, 1964.

burlesque to a real, old-fashioned, working soda fountain, the largest high-definition TV screen in the United States, a Star Tours-style soda fountain of tomorrow that shoots jets of Coke 20 feet in the air, and Club Coca-Cola, where free samples of soft drinks popular in other countries are dispensed. In the old-time drugstore, alas, the customers can't drink the soda jerk's concoctions, but they can play a jukebox stocked with excerpts from old radio commercials and promotional songs (the best of the lot a 1909 ditty titled "When the Do-do Bird Is Singing in the Coca-Cola Tree"). The international soft-drink samples – a cloying, flower-scented beverage from Japan, and Beverly, a bitter,



Walker Evans, *Coal Miner's House, Scotts Run, West Virginia*, 1935.

medicinal brew from Italy, assault the taste buds with special vehemence – are just awful enough to prove that Coke may actually be “the sublimated essence of all that America stands for,” as Kansas editor William Allen White, another enduring American institution, proposed in 1938.



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In between these big, high-tech gulps of multimedia fizz come little sips of Coca-Colacized history, dispensed from tall red-and-white cans disguising interactive video displays that document five-year snippets of the past, from 1886 through 1990. Step inside a can, touch a screen, and pick a time. See film clips showing women going to work (1920? 1945?), great inventions,



Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism*, 1990.

or the nation at war (1945 again? sometime in the sixties? 1991?). These “Take 5” videos – a pause for history – are the means by which the encapsulated narrative unfolding thorough the various Coke signs and ads and coolers in the display cases is supposed to intersect with real time and great national events. But it doesn't actually happen that way. Micro- and macrohistory fail to mesh, in part because the diffuse internationalism of the exhibits makes it difficult to identify specific items with familiar historical landmarks, in part because most of the juiciest moments in the Coca-Cola saga have been omitted in the name of corporate decorum.

A 1950 cover of *Time* magazine showed a perspiring globe gulping down a Coke. The accompanying story stressed the postwar ubiquity of Coca-Cola: a Coke stand in front of the Sphinx, a Coke truck parked in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Coke delivery vans zipping past the Eiffel Tower and the Houses of Parliament. The green bottle with the Spenserian script, *Time* concluded, “is . . . simpler, sharper evidence than the Marshall Plan or a Voice of America broadcast that the U.S. has gone into the world to stay.” So closely was the product identified with Americanism that European Communists had taken to denouncing the drink as “vile, imperialistic and poisonous,” a symptom of creeping “Coca-colonialism.” Although Coca-Cola's presence on the international scene was by no means new – its foreign division was founded in 1926 – the firm's determination to supply GIs overseas at stateside prices meant that new bottling plants had been built in the several theaters of operation during World War II. So, when peace came, Coke was the first

American company prepared to do business as usual. It is this global aspect of its corporate life that Coke chooses to highlight in the World of Coca-Cola – not the anti-Coke

sentiments rampant in the 1950s, to be sure, but a kind of

bland, upbeat one-worldism best expressed in the 1971 “Hill-top” commercial that produced the hit song “I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing” (the subject of a video presentation near the exit from the historical exhibits).

Yet Coke remained rooted in the American experience. Boys from Georgia and New Jersey and Wyoming had all gone off to fight for Mom, apple pie, the girl next door, and Coca-Cola. Around the world, Coke had rightly come to stand for Americanism: by virtue of its sweetness, its success, even its sinister dominance of global markets, Coke was a reflection of the national character, an icon of America, an emanation from the native soul. This all-American, sometimes vulgar, quasi-folkloric aspect of Coca-Cola is precisely what is missing from the sanitized precincts of the Atlanta pavilion. What about those traces of cocaine in the original formula? Why did Southerners persist in calling it “dope” through the 1920s? Any truth to those persistent teen-age reports on the hallucinogenic properties of an aspirin dissolved in a frosty Coke? Were they totally deluded, those several generations of kids who made Coca-Cola the collegiate contraceptive of choice?

And then there are the movies, full of telling Coca-Cola melodrama. The steamy Carroll Baker of *Baby Doll* (1956) sips the stuff for breakfast and complains that her husband has left her without a spare bottle in the house. The ebullient Jimmy Cagney of *One, Two, Three* (1961) plays a bottler up to his eyelashes in Atlanta honeychiles and Berlin

Howard Finster,
The Endless Circle,
1990.



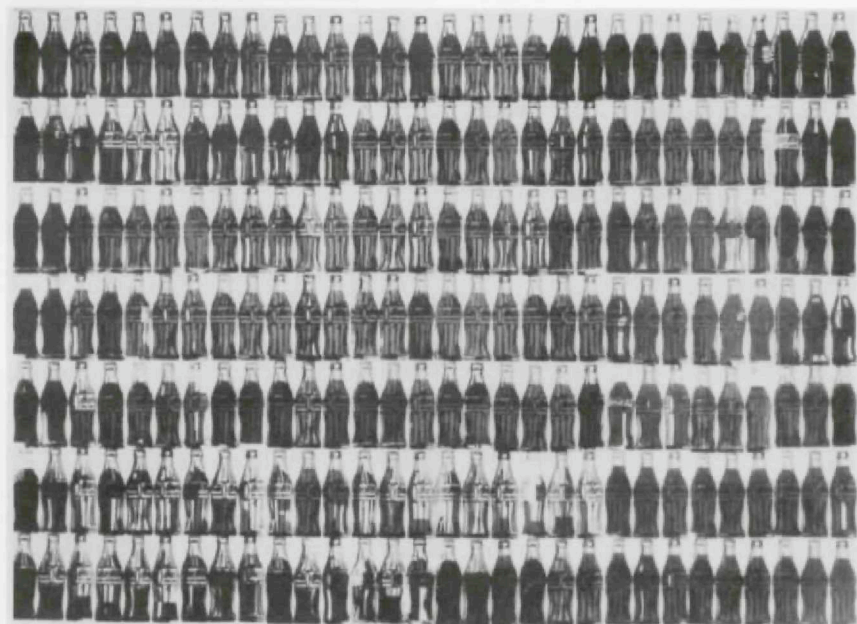
Collection Rem and Eduardo Robles



Robert Rauschenberg,
Coca-Cola Plan,
1958.

© Robert Rauschenberg/VAGA, New York 1992

Cold War intrigue. The bewildered Bushman of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1984) tries to figure out what a sacred Coke bottle apparently fallen from heaven is really for. Finally, there's Peter Sellers, desperate to avert World War III, ordering



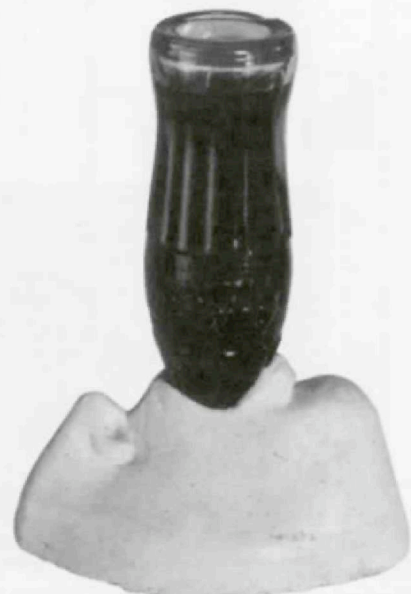
© 1992 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, N.Y.

a truculent Keenan Wynn to shoot a Coke machine for change to call the White House in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). “O.K.,” Wynn finally says. “I'll get the money for you, but if you don't get the President of the United States on the phone, you know what's going to happen?” “What?” asks Sellers. “You're going to have to answer to the Coca-Cola Company!”

In comparison with exotic Coke signs deployed in markets from Athens to Zanzibar, this kind of sexy, funny, home-grown hagiography seems not to matter much to the Coca-Cola Company – with two signal exceptions. One is the Santa Claus display, featuring the original designs for Haddon Sundblom's famous Christmas ads. The array of artwork makes it clear that Coke in the 1930s and 1940s actually perfected Thomas Nast's delineation of the American conception of Santa as the tall, jovial antonym of Clement Moore's

Germanic elf. Moreover, unlike the Jolly Green Giant or Charlie the Tuna, Sundblom's Santa easily made the transition from commercial symbol to benign seasonal icon, without necessarily shedding all connections with the product that spawned him. Coke and Christmastime enjoyed their strange, symbiotic relationship for decades.

Coca-Cola also acknowledges its uneasy relationship to the world of 1960s pop art by spotlighting a quotation from Andy Warhol on a wall adjacent to the area in which great Coke TV spots play in an endless repetitive loop, not unlike a vintage Warhol film. “You know the President drinks Coke,” according to Warhol. “Liz Taylor drinks Coca-Cola, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke. . . . All of the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good.” Except, of course, the short-lived New Coke. But that 1985 fiasco (along with any hint of the ferocious economic energies unleashed in the “cola wars” that led to the ill-fated reformulation of that product's classic essence) has no place in the smiling World of Coca-Cola. Coke calls itself “The Real Thing,” and vulgar realism, like Pepsi, has no place in a museum of global entrepreneurship that puts a slow, sweet spin on the triumph of an all-American company and the ashes-to-affluence city from which it sprang. ■



Marisol Escobar, *Love*, 1962.

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