

The Art of Craft, 1999

Contemporary Works From The Saxe Collection
Timothy Anglin Burgard
Fine Arts Museums Of San Francisco

The ostensible subject of Clifford Rainey's *Fetish* of 1990 (fig. 14; p. 127) is a Coca-Cola bottle, an instantly recognizable and distinctly American icon so internationally pervasive that its multivalent cultural connotations have become nearly transparent. The subject recalls Andy Warhol's silk-screened Coke bottles, which were mechanically reproduced and multiplied in order to draw an analogy between the commodification of commercial products and culture. However, while Rainey's coke bottle is similarly an object of material culture recontextualized within the realm of art, it is a solitary and unique object, cast larger than its real-life counterpart, painstakingly handcrafted and embellished, and physically and conceptually deconstructed.

Rainey's physical deconstruction of the "hobble skirt" Coke bottle's voluptuous curves draws attention to its anthropomorphic characteristics and its potential as a modern metaphor for the human form. The visual resemblance to a classical column that has broken into its constituent segments and rusting iron support rods not only suggest that the Coke bottle is "classic," but that it shares anatomical analogies with the entasis or anthropomorphic curvature of ancient Greco-Roman columns. These anthropomorphic associations are accentuated by the object's "tree trunk" support and its protruding appendage, which is reminiscent of a maple-sugar spout (an appropriate reference for sugar-sweetened soda), or a phallus, symbolizing sexual potency and fertility.

Rainey's conceptual deconstruction of the Coke bottle posits its cultural appropriation by contemporary African culture. The conceit provided the story line for director Jamie Uys's film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1984), in which an Aboriginal culture in Botswana is thrown into turmoil by the introduction of a Coke bottle thoughtlessly jettisoned from a passing private plane. While the protagonists of the film attempt to return the bottle to its rightful owner, Rainey envisions a more probable scenario of reinterpretation and assimilation within an existing cultural belief system.

Specifically, the inclusion of embedded iron nails in *Fetish* and the addition of a small beaded necklace around its neck suggests that the object has been transformed into an African power figure such as a Kongo nkisi nkondi (fig. 15). These carved wooden figures, perceived as living presences and conversed with by clients, play an important role in settling lawsuits or serious disputes within Kongo communities. The accumulated additions are of symbolic importance and include embedded nails representing condensed arguments presented in the course of a dispute or trial.

The original cultural context and purpose of such figures typically were ignored or misinterpreted by colonial collectors, who viewed their makers as "pagan" and pejoratively classified their creations as "primitive" fetishes unworthy of aesthetic consideration. Only in the early twentieth century were these "ethnographic" objects selectively appropriated and redefined as "art" by avant-garde European and American artists, who promoted a perception that the most abstract of these works could transcend their ethnographic origins through their mutually

validating association with modernism. This process of cultural redefinition has facilitated the separation of modernist "primitivism" from its origins in colonialism, as well as from related issues of politics, race, and sexuality.

Fetish dissects and subverts these culturally determined definitions of art and ethnography, primitive and modern, naturalism and abstraction. Applying the sensibility and scrutiny of an anthropologist, the Irish-born Rainey suggests that the Coke bottle might properly be perceived as a uniquely American "fetish" or object of tribal ritual. This startling suggestion facilitates a recognition of other potential "fetishes" in the Western tradition, including "high art" religious subjects such as the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows, a subject that Rainey has metaphorically incorporated into his work as a reference to the martyrdom of Northern Ireland during its political upheavals.

Rainey, who witnessed British political colonialism firsthand in Belfast, Northern Ireland, also suggests that the Coke bottle, the most prominent symbol of the pervasive global influence of American culture and values, represents a new phenomenon - commercial colonialism. This connection is rendered explicit in Rainey's *Africa* (1991), whose central element is a Coke Bottle, a now pervasive element of American "pop" culture in many African countries. While contemporary cultural debate in the United States has focused on the potentially divisive nature of identity-based art and culture, *Fetish* offers testament to the global Americanization and homogenization of culture. This process is likely to accelerate in the coming decades with the continued proliferation of American culture and values through technology, media, and the use of the English (and the Coke bottle) as a global language.

The complex and reciprocal relationship that constitute contemporary cultural discourse - in an era in which people, objects, and ideas transcend traditional boundaries - illustrate the difficulty of fixing the identity and meaning of objects that are continually assimilated and redefined within new contexts. *Fetish* partially replicates the appearance of its Coke bottle model but, distorted and deconstructed in translation, it subverts conventional usage. Transformed into a ritual artifact like the nkisi nkondi, this cultural hybrid serves as a meditating figure for a new global and cross-cultural context.

Rainey's fabrication of *Fetish* from recycled Coke bottles provides an apt metaphor, not only for the recycling of universal ideas and associations that persist over time in collective human consciousness. This conception of cultural conservation is reinforced by the presence of hand-painted petroglyphs of a human figure and cosmic symbols on the inner surfaces of the deconstructed Coke bottle. These symbols resemble another American tradition, the prehistoric Native American petroglyphs (fig. 16) that were carved into the stratified cliffs of the American Southwest. Their superimposition on the stratified layers of fused Coke bottles in *Fetish* provides a cultural core sample that graphically illustrates the timeless human need to create images and objects that express and mediate our relationship to the world.