

FREE BEER AND ENGAGING TOOLS: CHAINS OF ANALOGIES IN SUPERFLEX

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This paper presents an analysis of art collective Superflex' FREE BEER project; a beer brand and an art work that seeks to promote a critical understanding of free creativity and intellectual property rights by inviting beer enthusiasts to brew their own beer. The paper seeks to demonstrate how the project contributes to Superflex' profile as contemporary avant-garde artists and how their work has contributed to the field of design. More specifically the paper seeks to demonstrate how the FREE BEER project succeeds in establishing a context of meaning that involves a political as well as a business dimension, and which makes possible the exchange of values to and from these dimensions as well as that of art. In the paper, this context of meaning is constructed in terms of a complex chain of analogies by means of which amateur beer production and beer consumption becomes an expression of the belief in art as an institution and the free

exchange of cultural symbols and other references, that is, in contrast to ever stricter copyright laws.

INTRODUCTION

FREE BEER is a beer brand that seeks to communicate the principles of free software, free creativity, and intellectual property rights as an urgent political issue by comparing a beer recipe with a piece of software. FREE BEER invites possible beer brewer enthusiasts to use and refine a special recipe containing guarana bean extract and to share his or her new beer knowledge—and indeed, his or her newly produced beer—with the world. In this way it contributes to the a political movement that holds that neither software development nor indeed any creative activity should be inhibited by unnecessary, intellectual property rights; that the development of quality is optimal and the cultural value the strongest if software—like recipes for food and drinks—is given free for others to use and modify on various conditions. The brand name, FREE BEER thus ironically yet wholeheartedly puns a quote by Richard M. Stallman, the founder of the Free Software Foundation, who states that the “free” of “free software” should be understood in terms of ‘free as in free speech, not as in free beer.’ In other words, it seeks to communicate the idealism of the free software movement and political movements like the Pirate Bay that are currently fighting strict intellectual property rights by inviting anybody to produce, share, and consume a product, beer, that most people can relate to, and which contrasts the immateriality of software and law.

FREE BEER was originally developed by Danish art

collective Superflex along with graduate design students at the IT University of Copenhagen in connection with Superflex' affiliation as artists-in-residence during Fall Term 2004. The author of this article invited and hosted Superflex at the IT University and served as a supervisor for the students' projects. Since then, it has been brewed by politically informed and art loving beer enthusiasts all over the world in a "2.0", "3.0", and recently also in a "4.0" version, thus again mimicking the language of software development. In this manner, FREE BEER has taken part in setting the agenda for the public debate on free software and free creativity versus ever stricter legislation within intellectual property rights. At the same time, however, Free Beer has been used to address a number of additional, related political issues in various local contexts such as the right to produce home-made beer in Taiwan (FREE BEER Taiwan 3.0, 2008), the promotion of mushrooms in drinks and food (FREE BEER 3.3 Everything Mushrooms, Knoxville, Tennessee, 2008), or simply to celebrate and attract public interest to local art exhibitions (e.g. FREE BEER 3.0, Codename: ARTSPACE, Auckland, 2008) or global conferences with a related theme (e.g. FREE BEER 3.0 iSummit 08, Sapporo, 2008). Moreover, FREE BEER is a spin-off of Superflex' soda brand, Guaranà Power!; a project that seeks to create an alternative, global fair-trade market for independent guarana bean producers of the Manaus region in Brazil. In this manner, the FREE BEER "brand" and recipe engage beer loving audiences to get involved in political issues of free creativity by inviting them to experiment with the art of beer brewing and the use of guarana beans which provides the consumer an energising experience similar to caffeine. Beer brewing thus becomes a political act by means of art.



Figure 1: FREE BEER bottles from different breweries and political contexts around the world.

This paper seeks to demonstrate how designers may learn from the FREE BEER project and the general, so-called relational artistic strategies applied by art collective Superflex; a trio of graduates from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art and an internationally recognised example of how contemporary art has taken a special interest in design practice and the cultural celebration of design in order to realise artistic visions of change, innovation, the good life, empowerment, and—in general—how art and design should contribute to

society. During more than a decade, Superflex has thus been setting the agenda for the interplay between art and design and has inspired numerous initiatives from both sides. Their portfolio covers a wide range of very different projects—from soda and beer brands, to mobile bio-gas plants for nomadic farmers, and Internet-based television systems for marginalised social groups; projects that demonstrate that the collective's approach to design is very broad indeed and involves technological innovation as well as industrial design, conceptual design, and communication design. Using art as a "tool", as Superflex has it (Steiner, B. 2003), or a "free-space" in which to "connect people" and "make things happen" that would otherwise have been difficult or impossible, Superflex seeks to "stage" (Johansson 2004), facilitate, and communicate interdisciplinary design efforts as a kind of model of what could perhaps be done in similar contexts elsewhere. In this way, Superflex has managed continuously to form out an inspirational melting pot for all the very different partners and stakeholders, who have been involved over the years.

This paper seeks especially to analyse the way the FREE BEER project connects such different topics as beer brewing, software development, new technologies, guarana beans, and art, and how these associations together form out a politically engaging message that invites the art loving beer enthusiast to get involved in beer brewing, free software, free trade, as well as free creativity and art. It thus appears that in FREE BEER, beer brewing stands for software development, and software development in turn somehow stands for free creativity and culture, the application of Superflex' "tools", and the making use of art by means of design. This paper seeks to analyse these associations in terms of a chain of analogies which connects the FREE BEER project to a cluster of related Superflex projects, lets the values of each domain (beer brewing, fair trade, free software, art, etc.) support each other while at the same time catering for very different local political causes. Still together this cluster makes out a "super flexible" context of meaning that can attract and engage very different interests to field of design in the name of art. In FREE BEER, beer brewing is not only constructed as an analogy to software production; free software does in turn reflect the fight for a free trade market for the guarana beans farmers in Manaus and the general fight against ever stricter intellectual property rights and their threat to the unlimited creative use of common cultural references.

Drawing upon French art theorist and critic Nicolas Bourriaud's conceptual development of a relational aesthetics (2002), the paper thus seeks to demonstrate how this chain of analogies seems to address three important aspects of fine art operating in the field of design, namely an empowering function ("hey, you can brew your own beer", "guarana gives you more energy", "Art motivates you to be creative yourself"), a reflection-inducing function ("how did Art make me do this, and what does it mean?"), and a "cultural function" by means of which art audiences may lend fine art's double position in modern society as a disengaged,

neutral “in-between” and at the same time a highly valued and highly dedicated cultural producer and representative.

In the first part below I seek to characterise Superflex’ general artistic profile in respect of their facilitating and questioning contribution to the field of design. This profile is outlined in terms of Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics and how Superflex actualises an avant-garde approach to the field of design and its doubly engaged and disengaged profile, that is its social and political engagement versus its observing and documenting practice. In the second part I analyse the FREE BEER project with special reference to its chain of analogies and how it constructs a sense of empowering freedom to beer brewing and thus implicitly to art in design. This section will also include a reflection on the origins of the project at the IT University. However, I will not include a discussion of my own role in the project since I have already analysed my general approach to Superflex as a researcher and a project partner previously (Johansson 2004, 2009).

MICRO-POLITICS: SUPERFLEX’ RELATIONAL DESIGN TACTICS

The Superflex art collective is based in Copenhagen. It emerged on the international scene of the art world in the mid-1990ies as part of a “Scandinavian wave” of socially engaged artists (Larsen, L.B. 1997, 2000). Artists like Superflex, Elin Wikström, Olafur Gíslason, Roi Vaara, and many others, distinguished themselves by a renewed political interest taken by art in local places, communities, and living conditions around the world. Abandoning seemingly the grand ideologies that had previously dominated political art, these artists rather sought to study social life by staging and modelling it in order to document the results before the art world. This decade thus saw an apparent return to the historical avant-garde’s ideal of annihilating the division between Art and Life and let Art serve Life (cf. Bürger, P. 1984), but in a distinctly new and innovative way and with a tactical approach whose potential still today seems far from exhausted. Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) has designated this type of art as “relational” in the sense that it seeks to make social relations as its artistic material, that is to establish and explore social relations as models of human interactions and possible human organisations. The relational artistic approach thus lend from socially interventionist traditions in art such as Joseph Beuys and his concept of social plastics (“sozial plastik”), the Fluxus movement’s experiments with event and performance as means to approach, confront, and question society, and the situationists’ use of urban environments as stages for the exploration of mental, cultural geographies and critical practice (hence concepts of “*derivé*” and “*detournement*”). What characterises Superflex’ work is the ability to facilitate interdisciplinary design processes, that is, to make such processes “easier”, by initiating them and staging them before the public sphere of the art world (Johansson, T.D 2005, 2009). This facilitation seems to

consist in the attraction of public interest and the inspiration of collaborating partners to dedicate themselves to a common cause, to experiment with their professional roles, and to reflect upon their contribution. Contemporary artists’ design facilitating role has already been addressed and analysed by leading curators in the field (e.g. Nacking, Å. 1999, Jacobsen, H.P. 2001, Billing, M. 2007, and Coles, A. 2007).

One of the main reasons why design-oriented tactics have become important among artists today seems to be the belief that design may have a more direct impact on the social sphere, on people, than fine art with its traditional institutions. This belief usually manifests itself by means of a very concrete involvement in cases with an interest taken in particular persons, particular places, and particular living conditions. This focus on the particular distinguishes itself from historical avant-garde, which often subscribed to various ideological projects and thus typically were much more general in its scope.

Bourriaud seeks to explain the motivation for the approach to the particular with reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard who, in *The Post-Modern Explained to Children*, bemoaned post-modernist, post-ideological architecture by observing that it was:

‘condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose modernity it inherits, and abandon an overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind.’ (Lyotard, J.-F. 1992; quoted by Bourriaud, N. 2002: 13; italics suspended).

Bourriaud, however, sees this “condemnation” as a “historical chance”; ‘a “chance” [that] can be summed up in just a few words: *learning to inhabit the world in a better way.*’ (ibid.) By intervening in particular living conditions, artists seem to stress the idea that their work makes a significant difference to other people’s lives: That art, by means of design, may empower people. Hence the notions of *micro-politics* and *micro-ethics* which have often been used to characterize the particular ethos of the relational avant-garde. Whereas such interventions may often be said to have a very narrow effect as it deals with particular, local places and persons, relational artists often compensate by means of communication, making use of the art world’s traditional institutions (institutions of exhibition, criticism, theory, etc.) to present their work before a global art audience. Apparently, this communication between audiences, artists, and critics seems to imply the belief that although interventions only apply to particular cases, they do have a political significance that exceeds those cases and which often associate such interventions with a certain utopian character albeit a ideological foundation seem to be lacking. Bourriaud suggests the notion of *micro-utopia* to capture this idea. In his correspondence with Philippe Parenno, he claims that

‘Artistic practice ... demonstrates our right to micro-utopia, the “dolce utopia” that Maurizio Cattelan were spoke of: a utopia without teleology, without grand

speeches, one that refers to everyday life.’ (Bourriaud, B. 1995: 34)

The focus on particularity is about “little stories” rather than the so-called “grand narratives” of modern ideologies. It has demonstrated how artist and curators have thus sought to construct a sense of periphery in order to establish these micro-political perspectives (Johansson 2007); a peripheral position that matched Scandinavian artists like Superflex well as they got introduced to the global art world. Some artists like Swedish Elin Wikström preferred to construct this sense of periphery by including her own home or local community as a setting. Superflex, however, belonged to a different trend among these artists where peripheries were to be found abroad; areas that were peripheral as regards global markets and were exposed to the dominance of great market players.

One of the main reasons why the staging of particular cases seem to gain broader significance despite the apparent post-ideological, and hence thus non-teleological condition identified by Bourriaud and the preceding post-modernist critique is thus that these “little stories” are not just little stories. In Bourriaud’s attempt to include a concept of avant-garde in the context of his relational art scene, he outlines a topology that draws on that of the avant-garde itself while sets the stage for a distinctly new role for the relational avant-garde artist:

‘Today’s fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday’s, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties (*bivouac de certitudes*). Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world; today it is modelling possible universes.’ (Bourriaud, B. 2002: 13)

Although avant-garde as a category may seem somewhat unfortunate among the scene of artists that Bourriaud describes (I shall return to this below in my elaboration on Superflex), he does himself recognise a re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies in the sense evoked by classical modernism, that is a sense to be associated with emancipation, enlightenment, and social engagement. Yet, the story of the post-ideological, relational avant-garde is a “little story” about artists and people; artists dwelling temporarily among people rather than distancing themselves from them in order to explore the borders towards unknown territories. The bivouac metaphor does not only outline a topology of the relational avant-garde, it visualises actually a possible plan for these type of art projects. Hence Elin Wikström, who brought a bed to a local ICA supermarket and stayed there for three weeks to explore the social relations developed by her actions (“What would happen if everyone did that?” (Sweden, 1993). This “little story” is thus not only a story; it is also model of what is possible in a particular case; a case which is given by being staged by the artist. What is important is not an underlying political agenda, but what actually happen when the artist does this or that,

and what the artist tells afterwards. Hence the title of a major exhibition of relational art in the late 1990ies; the “What if ..” at Moderna Museet in Stockholm (1999): What happen if we do this, what happen if we do that. Bourriaud’s post-ideological avant-garde artists could be characterized as an immanent avant-garde in the sense that these artists do not have recourse to ideology to construct a negative sense of utopia to strive for—like artists sympathising with the ideological project of communism during the world wars, where the communist state forms out the transcendent, negative utopia of a communist revolution or of a socialist state gradually seeking to develop into communism. Rather, utopian ideas seem in relational art to be founded on an immanent principle inherent in the approach to society, where artists both forms part of society’ exchange of goods, money, and information and forms out a kind of neutral “in-between”, or “interstice” (cf. Bourriaud, N. 2002). Hence Bourriaud’s concept of a “utopia without teleology”, Catellan’s “sweet utopia”, or various notions of instant utopias”.

Bourriaud’s immanent avant-garde artists show up in the “middle” of society, in everyday life, and make use of everyday life situations as an artistic material. Moreover do Bourriaud’s artist “scouts” seem preoccupied with what in other respects could be identified as the “middle”, or the “foundation” of society, namely communication and money; the exchange of value, goods, and information. During the late 1990ies, Superflex was thus especially preoccupied with Internet technologies, which seemed generally to be ascribed with positive qualities but also the object of a critical alertness towards the power exercised upon the Internet “protocol” as the increasingly important software that tied together the emerging global Internet society. At the time, two out of the group’s three main projects made use of the Internet (Supercity and Superchannel). Both projects emphasized the empowering perspective of this new technology: empowerment of endangered or marginalised social groups as well as creative people wishing to connect with each other and share their ideas.

In the case of Supercity, the empowerment applied to both an entire city facing change and to the fate of individual inhabitants of the city, some of whom lost their jobs and had their identity seriously challenged. In a similar way, Superchannel, a web-based television system, sought to aid social groups exposed to a threatening change, e.g. retired seniors in a Liverpool tower block doomed to demolition. In this period, the Internet became exemplary as a “tool”—firstly, because of its socially connective qualities—this type of art was precisely identified as “social” or “relational” art (Bourriaud 2002)—,secondly, because of its ability to shape a “free space”—like the space of art itself—in which artists could stage and model visions of change, and thirdly, because the Internet made it possible for Superflex and others to easily communicate their activities to the public without the interference of e.g. curators, agents, or gallery owners. Thus, the Superflex website (<http://www.superflex.net>) became pivotal as a site for documentation, information, and the

construction of a common identity. For Superflex, the Internet became an exemplary “tool” by means of which the collective were able to stage, model, and analyse social relations. Moreover, the Internet formed out an ideal tool because the collective found ways to actively experiment with software development in both Supercity and Superchannel. It was thus possible for Superflex to appropriate the Internet as one of those free-spaces or in-betweens from which relational art could operate in order to establish instantaneous utopias. In other words, they succeeded in making the Internet into Art; to make the art world “grow” into cyberspace. When Bourriaud described art as a “network or relational universe” and stated that ‘current art is composed of these mental entities which move like ivy, growing roots as they make their way more and more complex’ (Bourriaud, N. 1995) he invited to make an obvious parallel between art and the emerging network society which found the Internet as its ideal medium.

Described in these terms, relational art demonstrates a striking resemblance with strategies applied among designers involving user participation in design processes, and it would certainly be worth while to discuss whether the experiences gained within relational art may contribute to the understanding of participative methodologies in design. Still, this is not the aim of this paper. What I have been occupied with so far is how the context of design-in-art is constructed among relationally oriented artists; a context which is dominated by notions of micro-politics, micro-utopia, and the modelling of possibilities.

Art group Superflex is thus an exemplary case of artist operating in the context of design; artists who seeks to develop means—“tools” as they have it—in order to empower particular, exposed groups around the world: tropical farmers in Thailand (Supergas) and Brazil (Guarana Power!), elderly working class people in Liverpool, (Superchannel), etc.; artists who seeks to design means to “improve life” (hence the programme title of the first Index Design Awards).

Although Superflex explicitly distance itself from a concept of avant-garde (‘avant-garde is an anachronism, cf. personal information, Superflex’ Jacob Fenger) it is difficult not to identify an avant-garde profile in the way it orients itself towards the field of design to demonstrate a sincere interest in the technical, social, and political matters in which their projects are rooted. Moreover, Superflex’ work should also be understood as an instance of design being addressed to the context of art, for Superflex is nonetheless an art group that draws upon the traditional institutions of the art world (i.e. education, financial resources, exhibitors, critics, etc.). It is obvious that this paradoxical structure of interests between the art world and the field of design should make the critic and theorist reflect a bit on the given traditions and actual construction of context. Is it really the artists who are playing a double game of art and design, or should the critic admit that so-called avant-garde strategies operating in art and design today should be seen in a context of “post-avant-garde”, in which it is no longer relevant to distinguish between the two and

where the interest taken in given, political subject matters should be seen as significantly more important than the question of whether this is art or design. Rejecting explicitly any notion of avant-garde, Superflex seems to point in this direction. On the other hand, this group displays all the traditional signs of an avant-garde project. These references include the consequent use of a slightly modified Akzidenz-Grotesk (developed along with graphic artist Rasmus Koch) and its reference to Berthold’s “classical” modernist type design, the “tool” metaphor, and the explicit wish to let “Art serve Life” (Bürger) had it; to annihilate the difference between art and life. Superflex’ profile could be seen as a peculiar contemporary interpretation of historical avant-garde; a paradoxical “tongue-in-cheek avant-garde” that on the one hand maintains a reference to the art world and a politically and financially disengaged relation to society, while on the other hand seeking to facilitate a political and practical involvement in society by means of art. This is a profile which both consists in sticking to Art’s traditionally peripheral position in society and at the same time seeks to explore society’s most common domains, namely its communication technologies and other tools that we use to make our everyday life easier and more pleasurable. This double role is mirrored locally, that is, in their actual projects, where Superflex’ facilitating role both consists in “staging” interesting project partners and take part themselves on this stage as equally engaged project partners. This chiasmic profile leads Superflex to be able to facilitate innovation and reflection since they not only invites to practical work but also to a more distanced approach by means of which their work could be studied as models of engagement.



Figure 2: Rasmus Koch's label design for FREE BEER (FREE BEER 3.0).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FREE BEER BRAND

In the following section I would like to reflect on the origin of the FREE BEER project; how it started as a student project cluster at the IT University of

Copenhagen and how this circumstance affected the later reception of the project in the world press. I would like to emphasize some of the issues that emerged during the development stage and how I combined an educational project with my own research where I engage in Superflex work as a project partner and simultaneously use their work as a set of cases for my own research.

During Autumn Term 2004 I had the privilege to be able to host Superflex as artists-in-residence and thus to take part in the initial development of the Free Beer project. At the time, I served as an Associate Professor at the Department of Digital Aesthetics and Communication at the then newly established IT University of Copenhagen. In 2004, the ITU had just obtained official status as university and moved into its price-winning new domicile designed by Henning Larsen Architects in the Ørestad Nord, central Copenhagen.

Organised as a collective practice-based study project for some 20 graduate students in digital design, this project was supposed to communicate and critically question the abstract principles of the free software movement and open source software development by letting the same principles be found a beer brand, and thus suggesting a parallel between a beer recipe and a piece of software. The beer was developed as a brand with an underlying set of values and a visual identity, which was expressed through the label and a website with a unique sound design. Appropriating an old Carlsberg slogan, "Our Beer" (in Danish: Vores øl), the concept sought to evoke the social dimension of beer culture by suggesting that everyone ought to be able to brew beer themselves and thus to modify the original Our Beer recipe and its visual identity. The student project focused on story telling, development of beer recipes, audio design, label design, and the graphic design of a web-site and thus resulted in a realised beer brand by the end of the term.

Superflex conceived the idea of communicating the principles of the free software by means of a beer brand. The students were given the task to develop this brand and thus focus especially on how the parallel between free software and beer brewing could be expressed in terms of story telling and visual identity. Superflex and I then served as project supervisors. During the project period, Superflex organised a series of lectures on intellectual property rights, free software, and beer brewing where members from their network of researchers and political activists were invited to present and elaborate critically on key concepts in the field and how the issue of intellectual property rights could be approached from the field of research as well as activism and art. A senior beer brewing enthusiast assisted the group by teaching them the basic principles of beer brewing and how guarana extract could form part of a beer recipe.

The student project cluster was characterized by a great deal of enthusiasm, which seemed to be brought about partly because of the friendly inviting attitude of the artists and partly because of the suggestive project concept which connected fields that was hyped at the time, namely micro breweries, information technology,

and Superflex.

Superflex asked the students to consider whether guarana extract should be added to the beer recipe and thus whether the beer should be an "energizing" drink with its content of its caffeine-like component. This led to two discussions among students; first an ethical one about the ethical and medical consequences of using guarana in an alcoholic drink; secondly a strategic one about how to include the "guarana story" in the "free beer story. The students decided to add the guarana into the recipe, and the beer ended thus up as an reddish ale type, medium strong beer. The students thus found that the stimulating effect of guarana extract would balance the drowsiness that beer consumption may lead to. They seemed clearly fascinated by this contrast and did not find the use of guarana in an alcoholic drink ethically problematic. Whereas the energizing effect in fact is rather low, the caffeine content in one beer being lower than in one cup of coffee, they did not find the medical issue problematic either. They did however find it difficult to integrate the story of the guarana bean (the free trade, the energizing effect) into the analogy between beer and software, and the final result, that is the "Vores Øl" ("Our beer") brand with its visual identity could thus rightly be criticized for not making clearer the reference to guarana free trade. Whereas they decided to include a picture of the graphically appealing guarana bean on the label (cf. Figure 4), the brand name and the story telling on the website did not make obvious the connection to the bodily effects of the guarana extract and Superflex' guarana free trade initiative. Moreover did they find it difficult to integrate Superflex profile into the brand and subsequently, in their project reports, to reflect on Superflex' role in the project. There is thus nothing in the brand's visual identity that refers to Superflex' work. During the subsequent evaluation of the project, the students moreover found it difficult to relate their work to the fact that it had been initiated by Superflex and thus inevitably refers to their other works, their artistic strategies, and their cultural position. This difficulty could be interpreted both as a reluctance to subscribe fully to an artistic project that was not their own and in terms of not fully understanding Superflex' artistic strategy. Rather, the students decided to use a brand name, "Vores Øl" ("Our beer") that addressed the social dimension of beer brewing and beer consumption. Appropriating an old Carlsberg™ slogan that had been used for the Danish market, the students' choice emphasized the point of reclaiming beer brewing (and thus also software development) from big corporations that would protect their product by means of copyright licences in order to improve the company's commercial outcome. "Vores Øl" suggests a sense of communality to beer brewing that Carlsberg™ obviously also sought to address by their slogan but by the appropriation the pronoun, "Vores" ("ours"), explicates that the beer is "ours and not theirs"; that the beer has been "freed from the commercial exploitation of a big company" and thus is ready to brew and enjoy by the "people themselves." This theme is expressed in the figure below where four hands grasp and display a Vores Øl bottle. Moreover did

they use the IT University's logo and its slightly dusty orange colour (cf. Figure 4), rather than Superflex' bright one, to demonstrate ownership to the concept. It should be noted that Carlsberg™ reacted to the choice of brand name in a friendly manner by means of an informal note that recognised the basic assumptions of the project.



Figure 3: The original "Vores Øl 1.0" website designed by students at the IT University of Copenhagen.



Figure 4: The original label design for "Vores Øl 1.0", the predecessor of Free Beer.

The brand was anchored by a website at the location <http://www.voresoel.dk> (which however currently is not accessible albeit referred to in various media). The website featured a unique sound design based on the sound of bubbles from beer brewing, the sound of a person drinking a beer, and a light electronica theme. This site was designed with the same colours as the label, including a dark reddish colour which referred to the red ale style beer. The website made available the recipe, the background story, a downloads section where

users could access the visual and graphic elements, a guest book for facilitating a debate, and the rules that should be followed in order to use and modify the brand. The students decided to protect their work by means of a Creative Commons licence which implied that other parties could use and modify both the design and the recipe, that it should even be possible for other parties to use the recipe and the brand to profit economically by beer production but that the brand and well as the recipe cannot be protected by stricter rules following common intellectual property rights. The reactions from the press was quite overwhelming for the students. Superflex brought forth the Vores Øl as a contribution to the debate on intellectual property rights, and they thus managed to attract not only the national press including the main television networks' news sections but also Wired magazine and the IT sections of BBC, Der Spiegel, and CBC. Soon after students saw examples of local beer brewers in USA that offered the Our Beer for sale in North America via Internet distribution. An important theme in the news media's reception of Vores Øl was that the brand had been developed by IT students at a university. This of course emphasized the concept's analogy between beer brewing and software development and added a "David and Goliath" sub-theme, where sympathy is attributed to the weaker part. And the beer brew bubbled on around the world—from the elevated cubicles of the atrium at the IT University of Copenhagen to CNN's London office, where journalists also wanted to exercise the noble art of beer brewing. Paradoxically, it happened to be the journalists, who forgot that beer—like speech—should be set free. The sealed plastic keg exploded and left the CNN office covered with half-fermented wort.

BEER AS ART: CHAINS OF ANALOGIES

Later re-labelled as Free Beer with a separate visual identity developed by Rasmus Koch, the "2.0 version" of the brand demonstrated a closer affiliation to Superflex' other works by using the standard "Superflex" type design and by becoming included in the portfolio of Superflex projects that are displayed at their website. Using a manifold of bright, contrasting colours for the types as well as the background (e.g. yellow, teal, light green, etc., on a violet background, with a number of variations, cf. Figure 2), the new label and visual identity reflected the manifold of local, political contexts around the world where the beer became brewed. This design was also protected by a Creative Commons licence in a way where the FREE BEER brand should be credited for the concept, the basic label design should be followed, and where changes to the recipe should be published. Other parties are still able to use and modify the recipe even for commercial interests, and the beer is now being mass produced by Danish micro-brewery Skands. The FREE BEER website, <http://www.freebeer.org> serves much the same purpose as the original Vores Øl site but also includes documentation of the numerous examples where the

concept has been taken up around the world. Moreover does it include a debate section with interviews with Richard M Stallman and Lawrence Lessig, and set of resources for free software and Creative Commons activists.

In contrast to the original Vores Øl, the FREE BEER brand seems more easily to be able to accommodate not only the guarana free trade issue but also the various local causes that has been addressed by beer brewers from all corners of world. An interesting parallel is Superflex itself whose portfolio is characterized by a common approach to very different social and cultural contexts by means of very different media and technologies. Like Superflex itself, the FREE BEER brand is in this sense “super flexible”: Recognizing that beer consumption is—and beer brewing could be—a popular social activity that forms part of what one could consider culturally fundamental, FREE BEER thus presents itself to be lend and used to facilitate social gatherings where ideas and creative communities could be celebrated and inspired to engage in further involvement. This could be the involvement in a particular local cause and/or in the general issue of free software and creativity addressed by FREE BEER. For Superflex, FREE BEER thus forms out a suitable analogy to their own profile as artists and to the role of art that they are promoting. The initial analogy between free beer and free software, which forms out the brand’s main “story”, could thus be extended in a way where free software becomes an analogy for free creativity and “free culture” or “permission culture, a concept suggested by Lawrence Lessig to capture the free distribution and motification of art works via e.g. the Internet, that is a state in society where intellectual property rights have either been given up or become significantly more liberal than today. Free creativity and the fight against overly restrictive copyright laws in turn mirror Superflex’ empowering “tools” in general whereas these “tools” are supposed to represent a sense of empowerment (free trade, free creativity, etc.). Freedom and empowerment facilitated by tools thus becomes associated to Superflex by means of another analogy, which again would represent Art.

Analysing this chain of analogies further, it appears that it can be divided into three strings as it were; 1) one that concerns the reference between Free Beer and the Free Software movement and ultimately free “culture”, that is, a *political string*; 2) one that concerns the references between Free Beer, Superflex’ other “Tools”, Superflex itself, and ultimately “Art”, that is, an *art string*, and 3) one that concerns the use of guarana bean extract and hence a reference to Superflex’ Guaraña Power! Project, that is, a fair trade *business string* (cf. Figure 5 below)

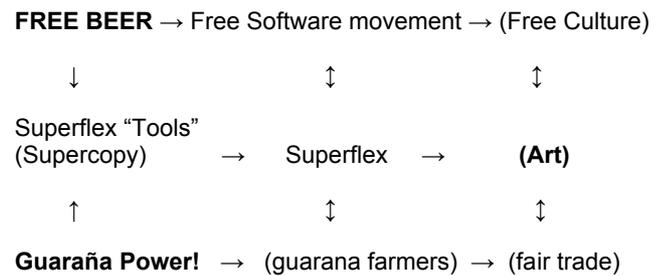


Figure 5: The chain of analogies in a complex with three strings

In Figure 5, these strings have been depicted horizontally with the political string above and the business string below. The FREE BEER and Guaraña Power! Projects can both be associated with the Superflex Tools concept, or more specifically, with the Supercopy tools which according to Superflex’ website is supposed to cover all projects that seek to study and problematise the dominance of intellectual property rights. This vertical reference further implicitly associates Superflex (in the middle) with political movements (above) and the guarana bean producers of Manaus (below). In other words, it integrates a general political dimension and a specific political case with a practical problem into a general complex where Superflex is situated in the middle. This association is mirrored in the right vertical reference between Free Culture (a political goal), Art, and fair trade where Art thus connects two very different domains (politics, business).

This chain of analogies seems thus to form out a central nucleus, a conceptual “umbilical cord” in Superflex’ work and in their tactical approach, where the individual links of the chain depends on each other in a common complex. In this complex, Superflex and their empowering tools seem to lend values from political projects as well as the energizing effect of guarana and the fair trade symphaties that one may have with the guarana bean producers from Manaus. Art and Superflex in turn add values to the guarana free trade project as well as the Free Software movement, and the complex of analogies itself forms out a context where the various elements of the chain contributes to and lends values from each other (hence the double arrows). Moreover does it suggest that Superflex and their tools could mutually substitute each other and that Superflex and indeed “Art itself” could be considered as being nothing but a “tool”. We recognize Bürger’s definition of avant-garde art as the attempt to let Art serve Life and annihilate the difference between Art and Life. This basic chain of analogies thus reflects the paradoxical and ambiguous status of art in Superflex’ peculiar avant-garde profile and its work in the field of design. This is not supposed to mean that Superflex seeks to abandon their connection to the art world. On the contrary, it demonstrates why Superflex’ “tongue in cheek” avant-

garde has been such a successful actualisation of the heritage of avant-garde art. Connecting art with beer, the FREE BEER project can thus both be read in a way where beer brewing lends its empowering powers from the free creativity of art and Art as an institution, but also in a way, where Art and beer could mutually substitute each other: That the work of a beer brewer is just as important as that of the artist, and that art and beer serve a similar function in society, namely as a fundamental “space” where people can connect, exchange ideas, and develop friendly relations.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented and analysed Superflex’ FREE BEER project with special reference to their avant-garde profile, that is, the way they operate as artists in the field of design. The paper has laid out how Superflex’ general artistic tactics and the FREE BEER project in particular relate to what Nicolas Bourriaud has designated as relational art. Moreover has the paper demonstrated that the FREE BEER project establishes a complex chain of analogies by means of which beer brewing becomes associated with a grander artistic and political endeavor. This complex chain of analogies consists of a political string, and artistic string, and a business string that is concerned with Superflex’ fair trade project. In this manner, Superflex’ FREE BEER project succeeds in addressing three important aspects of fine art operating in the field of design, namely an empowering function, a reflection-inducing function, and a “cultural function” by means of which art audiences may lend fine art’s double position in modern society as a disengaged, neutral “in-between” and at the same time a highly valued and highly dedicated cultural producer and representative.

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