

Free as in Free

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This talk explores ideas of free software and open source as an area of contemporary art, and in doing so, aims to provide a context for SUPERFLEX's FREE BEER project, exhibited at Tate St. Ives and within the Public Realm as part of the Projectbase-curated Social Systems exhibition, 2007. SUPERFLEX were formed in 1993 by founding members, Bjørnstjerne Reuter Christiansen, Jakob Fenger and Rasmus Nielsen and they live and work Copenhagen, Denmark (www.superflex.net)

DIY art practices

Within certain conceptual and post conceptual art practices it is possible to discern the influence of open source and free software methods and philosophies. These practices engage – directly or indirectly - with new forms of labour , known variously as flexible labour and open/libre ways of working that are emerging in contemporary capitalism. Unlike object based art, there are strands of contemporary practice that deal with that which is invisible - processes, relations, networks, and systems. Sometimes with this kind of work, all that can be seen are the 'instructions for participation', the 'rules of engagement', the 'protocols'. With SUPERFLEX's FREE BEER project the recipe is visible, as is the end product – the beer, but many of the other elements are not directly visible to the viewer. The 'viewer' becomes the participant who engages in the work through action: the work is not perceivable through sight alone.

These strand of contemporary practice - variously known as interactive, participative, socially-engaged, relational - often emphasises certain values – cooperation, sharing, and participation, and they aim to engage with active and creative audiences through events, situations, encounters and performances. Attention is given to developing aspects of DIY – do it yourself – in which participants are encouraged to make their own version of things from material that is readily available to them.

Artists devise frameworks within which others participate. It is perhaps the case in some instances that the frameworks become the 'form' of the artwork and the participation becomes the 'content'. What many of these practices have in common is a desire to resist

the processes of commodification and colonisation of contemporary capitalism. The complexities of contemporary capitalism, though, means that artists are continually re-assessing their strategies and practices and re-evaluating their effectiveness as capitalism finds new ways of commodifying common culture and the everyday. The question of whether FLOSS is an adequate alternative to capitalism or the manifestation of new labour patterns emerging from the network society has resonance for those of us considering our role as participant in socially engaged art practices: what are the conditions and relations of our engagement? Are we fodder for another's project, helping him/her to accrue cultural capital, or are we participating in a genuine encounter that is mutually beneficial? The answer is probably a combination of both. However, what is clear is that an ideology of freedom saturates these contemporary art practices, and in SUPERFLEX's FREE BEER project a rhetoric of freedom is evoked in this bottle of beer itself.

Constituent elements of FREE BEER

Because we are dealing with an artwork that perhaps is not immediately recognisable as 'art', it might be useful to start by identifying the various elements that make up the FREE BEER project:

- Recipe on the wall
- The process of making the beer
- The collaboration with St.Austell Brewery – experts in brewing
- FREE BEER for sale in the café
- A FREE BEER intellectual property pub quiz that was held in the Tate St Ives café with SUPERFLEX on 8th July 2007
- The SUPERFLEX-designed label that adorns the bottles

Although not strictly constituent elements of the work, it might be worth considering also the following elements:

- Documentation of the project on the Projectbase website that includes images of (one presumes) members of SUPERFLEX: one is dressed as a large bottle of beer, and another as a copyright sign. The one dressed as a bottle of beer is carrying a placard that reads 'copyright is preventing access to knowledge'
- Invitation on the Projectbase website to download the recipe, make your own beer and send in your adapted recipe to info@projectbase.org.uk
- Artists' statements about the work

SUPERFLEX, *FREE BEER*

SUPERFLEX often talk about their projects as tools, products or systems. They don't see these projects as being the exclusive property of the artists, instead they believe that their works only make sense when they are being used or adapted independently by others. This idea of

being used or adapted independently by others is a key tenet of free software, and something that I'd like to return to later in the talk. SUPERFLEX can be seen in the context of contemporary art practices and strategies that engage with new forms of labour and new form of production - free, libre, open source software (FLOSS)

What is FLOSS?

In the context of free, libre, open source software, the term 'free' is used in relation to freedom and not cost. Within the free software movement the phrase 'free as in speech (or free as in freedom), not as in beer' is often used to mark the difference between the various uses of the term 'free'. Obviously this phrase has some resonance for us here today. And SUPERFLEX are clearly referring to this well known phrase as they draw attention to the fact that their FREE BEER product - which ordinarily retails at £2.40 a bottle, is not 'free as in beer'. There are philosophical differences between Free Software and Open Source, but those are outside the scope of this talk. Within the free software movement (and beyond) the term 'free' when applied to software means that the user can use a piece of software for any purpose, study its source code, adapt it to his/her needs, and redistribute it in either its modified or unmodified form. Contrary to this, proprietary software is software with restrictions on using, copying and modifying as enforced by the owner of the software. Restrictions on the use, modification and copying are achieved by either legal or technical means and sometimes both. Technical means include releasing machine-readable binary code to users and withholding the human-readable source code. Legal means can involve software licensing, copyright, and patent law.

To explain the freedom of free software a little bit more I'd like to refer to the analogy between software and recipes that is often used in open source communities. For example, if you buy a cake (or indeed, receive one as a gift) it is quite difficult to ascertain the precise ingredients and method of making the cake without a recipe. Similarly, if you buy or are given a piece of software, without the source code it is difficult to work out how the software has been made.

When a recipe is made available freely, then it is possible to evaluate the recipe and modify it. The FLOSS community would suggest that having access to the recipe means that not only is it possible to eat the cake that was bought, but also possible to make more. It is even possible to modify the recipe, by adding or removing ingredients. It is possible then, to make cakes from both the original recipe and the modified version and sell or give away those cakes. Furthermore, it is possible to learn from the recipe by understanding the methods and techniques used to make the cake.

The same applies to FLOSS software: particular software features can be adapted by others – in accordance with the licence - if the source code is made available. If amendments were made to proprietary software that would most likely constitute a breach of the copyright.

The FLOSS model means that if an individual or group benefits from the use, modification or redistribution of the cake and the recipe then they allow others the same freedoms as they have enjoyed. In addition, the FLOSS model insists that the originators of the recipe are acknowledged.

Licences

All software has a licence. When software is bought, the purchaser does not own the software because a licence to **use** the software is purchased rather than ownership of the software itself. The freedoms inherent in FLOSS are held within the licence under which the software is received. For example, public domain software allows the user unlimited freedom; proprietary software often has a licence that allows use of the software but limits the user from passing the software to others, from changing the software and from deconstructing the software. Free software allows use of the software, and also allows the user to change and redistribute the software, but it also insists that others are given the same freedoms to use, modify and redistribute as the user.

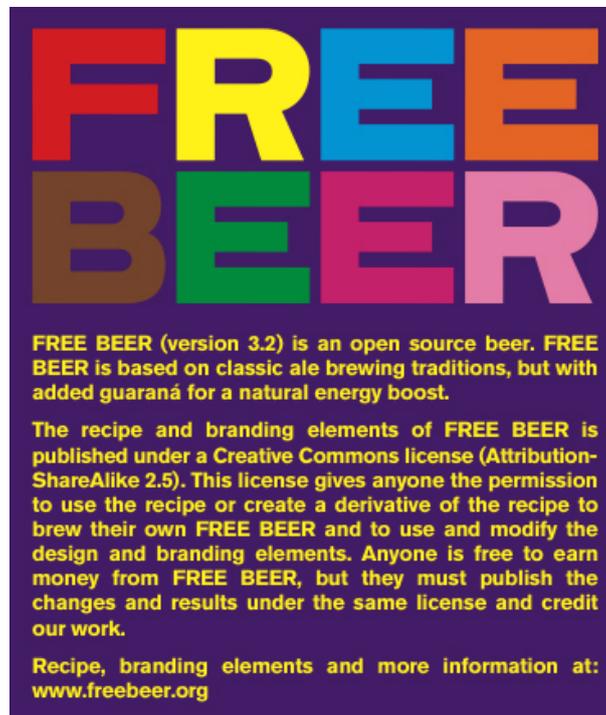
SUPERFLEX's FREE BEER

Here at Tate St. Ives the recipe for FREE BEER is the element of the work that is presented formally to the public. SUPERFLEX say that 'By offering the recipe or 'source code' of a usually highly guarded recipe, the project prompts the consumer to consider the wider possibilities of 'FLOSS' systems from both practical and philosophical perspectives'. In statements about the project, SUPERFLEX state that FREE beer was originally conceived by themselves and students at the Copenhagen IT University (Vores Øl v. 1) So they working within a FLOSS philosophy by acknowledging their co-originators.

SUPERFLEX integrate the well-used analogy between source code and recipe into the FREE BEER project. Like the source code of proprietorial software, the recipe for beer is usually not available with the product. You don't get the recipe with your bottle of beer. SUPERFLEX offer the recipe or 'source code' of a usually highly guarded recipe - beer. Open source enables the user to modify, improve or share the source code and SUPERFLEX have modified, improved and shared the recipe of beer brewed by traditional methods. They have modified by including guaraná.

The recipe and branding elements of FREE BEER is published under a Creative Commons (Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5) license, which means that anyone can use the recipe to brew their own FREE BEER or create a derivative of the recipe. FREE BEER Version 3.2 available in the café at Tate St Ives priced £2.95/ Take Out £2.40. Anyone is free to earn money from FREE BEER, but they must publish the recipe under the same license and credit SUPERFLEX's work.

All design and branding elements are available to beer brewers, and can be modified to suit, provided changes are published under the same license ("Attribution & Share Alike")



SUPERFLEX, FREE BEER label

Critiquing Free Beer

If we look at FREE BEER without any contextualisation from the artists then it is possible to situate this project as having an ambiguous relationship with FLOSS - neither advocating it or rejecting it, but working to draw our attention to some of the issues. Although we are given a choice to buy the beer or make our own, most of us will not have the knowledge or equipment to begin brewing. That the artwork raises these questions without proposing a solution, in my opinion, strengthens the work, and prompts discussion of these concerns.

However, when SUPERFLEX talk about the project and contextualise its relationship to FLOSS our understanding of the work shifts. And because the constituent elements of the work are not as visible as object-based work, the documentation and context of the work as presented by the artists becomes relevant to our engagement with it. We are unsure of the boundaries of the work – and so look to all the constituent elements. If we consider the Pub Quiz as ‘part of the work’ for example, then the artists seem to abandon their neutral position and begin to advocate the benefits of FLOSS. They do so without problematising the commodification of the participator and their (and the audience’s) relationship with new forms of labour. In this context then, the difficulties that participants face in really engaging with the work become

more significant. SUPERFLEX have stated that they want their project to be used or adapted independently by others but as has already been discussed there is concern



Kate Rich and Kayle Brandon, CUBE-COLA WORKSHOP (2007)

Kate Rich and Kayle Brandon's Cube-Cola project took an freely available cola recipe and attempted to produce the drink. It took her two years to get a decent brew. She now shares the knowledge of making the cola with others through workshops.



Kate Southworth and Patrick Simons (Glorious Ninth), *Love Potion*, 2004

Kate Southworth, *Free as in Free*, 2007

Glorious Ninth's love_potion also has a recipe freely available, and the website offers guidance on how to make the potion, and how to grow the herbs used in the recipe. In addition, free (as in free beer) aural-visual works are available for download so that participants can make their own DIY installation.

SUPERFLEX devise the framework within which we participate, and we are situated within that framework as consumers. We can buy the beer or make or own, but either way our relationship to the artwork is as consumers. In the Public Realm, the artwork is accessed through consumption: the beer is available in pubs across Cornwall and in the cafés at the various Tate galleries. SUPERFLEX refer to their audience as 'consumers' and Sara Black, Director of ProjectBase the agency that commissioned the 3.2 version of FREE BEER talks positively about the project enabling people to experience contemporary art in their local pub. What she doesn't mention is that they experience the work *as consumers*.

One of the features of the network society is that commodification is not just formal but total, and in many ways this work exemplifies that shift. At Tate St Ives, like some other publicly-funded museums, visitors pay to enter the galleries within which artworks are housed. This arrangement can be seen as 'formal commodification' in that it is clear (if sometimes undesirable) that in order to have the opportunity of engaging with particular artworks we must pay a fee. Once the fee is paid, and we gain access to the place where the work is situated, our relationship with the work itself is situated outside of a commodified relation. FREE BEER is placed outside the fee-paying gallery spaces, within common areas that can be accessed without payment. However, the primary way of accessing the work is by buying the product, and our relationship with the work itself is one of total commodification. To me, SUPERFLEX do not maintain a neutral or ambiguous position to this shift in social relations, and on the contrary they seem to promote and uncritically accept a real world and art world shift to total commodification.

The work is contextualised with reference to critical issues emerging with the rise of the so-called network society, and although this particular work perhaps doesn't prompt a deeper understanding of the complexities involved, it is part of an extensive range of works that attempt in various ways to develop such an understanding. Perhaps one way forward is to develop an understanding of 'the common' as that which is contextualised politically, ethically, aesthetically and technologically. Not just legally.

This 'common' does not concern individual's ability to consume but focuses on relations, life and production in common.