



RECLAIM THE BRAND NAME

Rikke Andreassen



It is not the product itself which carries value, but rather the brand name that comes with it. Brands –protected by copyrights laws– represent financial and emotional value. People wanting to create social change therefore need to look beyond the product and focus on the brand instead. In order to change, go for the brand.

SUPERFLEX IN BRAZIL

In 2003, the Danish art group *Superflex* was invited to Brazil by the São Paulo-based art organization Extra Arte and the Amazonian government. Superflex was to do a residency in a town located in the central part of the Amazon region, called Maués. Some months prior to Superflex's arrival, a group of Maués farmers had decided to organize themselves in a cooperative as a response to their increasingly hard financial conditions. During Superflex's one-month's stay with the farmers in Maués, the foundations of the Guaraná Power project was established.

GUARANÁ

The Guaraná Power project is closely connected to the guaraná plant. Botanically, the guaraná plant (*paullinia cupana*) is a woody liana that can be cultivated to grow as a bush. Guaraná plants have been cultivated by the indigenous people in the Maués district through generations. The fruit of the guaraná plant is a red coloured berry known for its high quantities of caffeine. The effect of the guaraná berries is quite similar to that of coffee beans, but lasts longer. Traditionally, the locals have used the berries for medical purposes: guaraná is known for its analgesic and diuretic qualities. They have also used guaraná for its stimulant and energetic effects, caused by its caffeine content. Caffeine is known for its properties: it is said to improve physical capacities, prevent drowsiness, suppress hunger, etc.

Furthermore, guaraná berries have been used in Brazilian-produced soft drinks for decades. During the past two decades, not only Brazilian but also multinational soft drink producers have seen the financial potential in producing drinks from the natural, yet multi-effective guaraná berries.

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Guaraná soft drinks are popular and well consumed throughout Brazil as well as in northern America and Europe. Soft drink producers have therefore increasingly been the buyers of the Maués farmers' guaraná berries, and more and more guaraná farmers have oriented cultivation to meet the demands of soft drink producers.

In the beginning of the 21st century, X and XX, the two main Brazilian companies producing commercialized soft drinks, merged. A few years later, the resulting new company, XXX, merged with the European company XXXX, in order to form an even larger inter/multination company, XXXXX. Unfortunately, it is not possible to name the multinational companies here. Due to the risk of facing law suits –there is already one in progress against the Guaraná Power project– Superflex has decided not to mention the actual names of the multinational companies. The corporations are all well-known in the field of soft drinks production and distribution.

After the above-mentioned merger, the multinational corporations producing guaraná soft drinks established agreements among themselves, which function like a cartel. Therefore, they are not competing against each other in their purchase of guaraná berries any longer. As a result, they have been able to drive the prices of berries down almost 80 percent over a few years, from \$25 per kilo to \$4 per kilo. At the same time, the prices for their soft drinks have remained stable, which has increased their profits. Consequently, the farmers and local communities producing the guaraná berries, and depending on the income from the sale of the berries, have been left in a situation of increasing poverty and deprivation.

VALUES IN PRODUCTION

In April 2003, Superflex organized a workshop for the Murés guaraná farmers with the aim of coming up with solutions for their current situation. The farmers' goal was to resist the multinational corporations' financial exploitation as well as the corporations' attempt to monopolize the purchase, trade and use of guaraná berries.

Traditionally, development dependency theorists have argued that a central means to development was for producers in so-called developing countries and regions to be independent of other nations. On a local or national level, this could be done for instance by owning the means of production. This idea lays behind several contemporary fair trade development projects. The basic concept is that if the means of production are in the hands of those who laboured in the production, labourers can thus experience development and improve their condition. This approach to development was connected to the industrial era, when owning a factory or farmland often was key to producing surplus value. It was also connected to a time in which nation states operated more independently

of each other than they do in today's globalized world ^[1].

The result of globalization has not only been that nations are interwoven financially, economically and culturally. Furthermore, the means of production no longer represent the main source of value. Instead, less material goods such as brand names, patents and intellectual copyrights have become increasingly valuable. Traditionally, one could have argued that farmers should build their own soft drink factory and themselves be in charge of the production and distribution of the guaraná drinks. In that way, they would be able to control the prices for the berries and benefit from the surplus from the production.

However, this is not possible. The guaraná farmers in Maués were not able to challenge the multinational corporations on the level of the means of productions. However, another solution was feasible: farmers could challenge the multinational companies in relation to less material sources of power; namely, to challenge the brand and trademark of the multinational XXXXX guaraná drink.

COPYING AS A STRATEGY

Prior to Superflex' stay in Brazil, the group had been living South East Asia for a while. There they had researched the South East Asian copy culture and done projects related to this culture of copying. The copying of products in South East Asia can be understood in a twofold way. Firstly, it is an economic strategy, i.e. a means to make a living. Secondly, it is a cultural strategy, where the copying functions as a way of bouncing the normative power of brands and products. When a person copies, he/she shows that he/she is able to reproduce the object of desire. In the copying process, the copyist might change the product a little and embed it with his/her own identity or add a message to the product.

Inspired by this strategy, the farmers and Superflex began to develop ideas for alternative guaraná products that would challenge the multinational corporations. Superflex had previously produced several objects inspired by this copy strategy, which they showed to the farmers during the workshop. A similar example of using copy strategies, namely the Mecca cola project, was also discussed among the farmers.

Mecca Cola was introduced by a French Muslim company as an alternative to Coca Cola in 2002. Mecca Cola resembles Coca Cola in colour and design, but carries the slogan "*Pas buvez stupide, buvez engage*" ("No more drinking stupid, drink with commitment"). The producers of Mecca Cola explain the rational behind their project as follows: "Following the example of business activities started by charitable associations – 'the charity-business' – we considered the idea of launching a new concept,

namely that of putting the economy to work in the interest of ideology” [2]. Ten percent of the profit from Mecca Cola goes to charity activities in Palestine, and another ten percent to charity in Europe. On Mecca Cola’s website, one can see photographs from the Palestinian intifada indicating Mecca Cola’s stand in the current conflict on Palestine. Mecca Cola’s material form – resembling, copying and parodying the classical Coca Cola – signals that a coke is never simply a coke. Coca Cola is not just a drink; rather, the brand Coca Cola carries with it a set of values, associations and a history. Mecca Cola makes its buyers explicitly aware of the fact that consuming is not a neutral act. Together with this awareness-raising, Mecca Cola encourages its buyers to be political conscious consumers [3].

BRAND NAMES AS RAW MATERIAL

Superflex and the guaraná farmers believe that global brands can be used as raw material. The international profile of a certain brand, i.e. all the (positive) attributes associated with it, can be exploited, just as the multinational corporations can exploit the raw material of the guaraná berry. The farmers and Superflex decided to participate in what they call an active counter-economic position by using the most valuable item that the multinational companies have – their brand. Superflex and the farmers designed a new soft drink called Guaraná Power. They designed a label for the new guaraná drink that deliberately played upon XXXXXX’s logo. The new label looks like XXXXXX’s logo with a black label on top, which blocks out the ‘original’ logo. The black label carries the words “Guaraná Power”.

*The
guaraná
power
drink.
Photo:
Jens*



Gudmunsen-Holmgren.

This design is a critical comment on XXXXXX's products. The new label also contains images of the guaraná farmers. Their situation and aim with this new guaraná soft drink is briefly described on the back of the bottle. The top of the bottle contains a small label stating "For energy and empowerment".

This new guaraná soft drink seems to argue that the consumers should buy the farmers' drink instead of the multinational corporate drink. The underscoring of empowerment is two-fold. Buyers become empowered by the caffeine in the Guaraná Power drink and farmers become empowered by the Guaraná Power project. Farmers are, so to speak, trying to take back the 'content' of the guaraná, including its name, from the multinational companies, which took the guaraná from the indigenous people in the first place. Farmers are re-claiming the guaraná.

A central part of re-claiming the name of guaraná and branding the new Guaraná Power soft drink is advertisement and commercials. Farmers could not afford a traditional campaign with advertisements and TV-commercials. Instead, they recorded their own commercials. The commercials were very simple: A member of the guaraná farming

community sat on a chair in the Amazon woods and described in her/his words the content of the commercial.

[video#1](#) | [video#2](#) | [video#3](#) | [video#4](#)

The commercials (images courtesy of Superflex).

The commercials were showed at various art exhibitions that Superflex was invited to, and they were also distributed as press material by Superflex. These commercials later gained a more independent existence. They have been invited to various film festivals, where they have been shown as films almost independently of the Guaraná Power project.

ART FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Superflex is an internationally well-known art group. As artists, they have presented the Guaraná Power project on various exhibitions, including the prestigious Venice Biennial (2003) in Italy, the Danish Design Centre (2005), Riksstillingen in Norway (2005), Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theatre in the USA (2005), and Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art, in Finland (2006). At these exhibitions, the farmers' commercials, printed posters of the new Guaraná Power soft drink and actual Guaraná Power drinks were shown. At the Venice Biennial, a Guaraná Power bar was created and Superflex served the new soft drink for the Biennial visitors.

Superflex calls their art 'projects for tools' ^[4]. The Guaraná Power project is an example of such a tool. The projects are not the fixed property of the artists, a museum or an art buyer; rather, they come into existence when they are practically used by people.

Currently, the Guaraná Power project has taken various different forms. A group of people in Denmark has constructed a mobile Guaraná Power bar, which operates independently of Superflex and the farmers in Brazil. The bar consists of two carrier bike cycles, two parasols with guaraná power slogans painted on them, and several guaraná power drinks. The bikes bring the parasols and drinks around the city where the bar is set up –i.e. the parasols are unfolded– and drinks are sold from the bikes' carrier at various political meetings, demonstrations or music events. Guaraná Power bars have been set up in Copenhagen, Malmö and Oslo.



The Guaraná Power Bar. Photo: Superflex.

Furthermore, Superflex views the established art world and the art community as tools. They can use the art institutions, museums, galleries, art magazines, etc. as tools for creating social changes outside the art world. Superflex'

art practices are great examples of art for social change. It is a strength of Superflex' art projects that local participants are directly involved in the projects. It is fundamental for Superflex that a project should be able to survive without their involvement; projects should be sustainable on their own.

As I write this article, Superflex is in Brazil, participating in the prestigious art Bienal of São Paulo. The biennale takes place from Oct. 7, 2006 to Dec. 17, 2006. Superflex was invited by the curators of the 27th Bienal of São Paulo to show their work, including their Guaraná Power project. However, the President of the Bienal Foundation, Manoel Francisco Pires da Costa, chose to censor Superflex. He claimed that the group could not be allowed to show anything related to the Guaraná Power project and did not let them mention the multinational soft drink companies XXXXXX either.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

At the art Bienal in Brazil, Superflex is currently showing posters of the soft drinks censored by black squares. Outside the biennale, the Amazonian farmers have been handing out free Guaraná Power soft drinks. Inside, Superflex is also showing other works that confront issues of copyrights, trademarks and intellectual property. These works focus on the power issues related to the international laws protecting copyrights, trademarks and intellectual property.



Exhibition at the Bienal de São Paulo, 2006. Photo: Superflex.

Intellectual property rights are protected under the so-called TRIPS agreement (Agreement on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). This agreement demands WTO members to protect intellectual property rights. This means that no one is allowed to copy XXXXX's name or label for his or her guaraná soft drink because XXXXX has patented this name and label. Many multinational corporations have patented their products, designs and knowledge behind the production of

their products, whereas many indigenous communities have not patented their anciently held knowledge of plants, herbs, medicine, etc. In practice, according to the existing international law, this means that the guaraná farmers in Maués do not hold any rights to the guaraná plant or its use despite the fact that their communities have used this plant for generations. Pushed to its logical conclusion, this means that corporations like XXXXXX can copy the farmers' use and knowledge of guaraná plants whereas the farmers cannot copy XXXXXX's use and knowledge of guaraná products.

The Guaraná Power project is a direct comment on this international property law, which favours so-called developed countries' technological and cultural products on behalf of so-called developing countries' natural and cultural products ^[5].

A CONVERSATION WITH SUPERFLEX

As follows, I transcribe a conversation that I (RA) had with Rasmus Nielsen (RN) from Superflex after the opening of the art Bienal in São Paulo, Brazil. We talked about the Guaraná Power project, the censoring at the Bienal, post-colonialism and art as a tool for social change ^[6].

Censorship

RA: Superflex has been censored at the art Bienal in São Paulo in Brazil. Can you tell me more about this censoring and its results?

RN: It was the president of the Bienal who censored us. We were invited to the Bienal by the art exhibition's curators, who wanted us to exhibit our current project; namely, the Guaraná Power project. During the spring of 2006, we were planning the exhibition in close co-operation with the curators, and the plan was to show the processes of the Guaraná Power project. During the summer, the president for the Bienal found out what we were planning to do, and he stepped in and prohibited us from showing anything related to the Guaraná Power project. He argued that our Guaraná Power project might upset third parties.

RA: Does "third party" refer to the multinational company that you are criticising?

RN: Well, we do not know exactly whom he is referring to because he has refused to be more specific about whom this third party is.

RA: Is it possible that the president himself has commercial interests in

the multinational company XXXXX? Or that his is closely connected to some soft drink producing companies?

RN: We can only speculate. We do not know anything for sure. All we know is that we were censored. The president also argued that we were censored because our project was commercial, and commercial projects did not belong on an art exhibition.

RA: *That is an interesting argument because taken to the extreme it would mean that no art from the exhibition could be sold.*

RN: Furthermore, it is interesting because a lot of work that we consider art, and highly estimated art, was created for commercial purposes. The composer Bach for instance composed commercially; he wrote music on commission. Yet, we recognise his work as art. If we were to exclude all fine art, music, film, etc. that has been made with commercial interests from the category of art, there would be very little art left.

RA: *How did you react to the censorship?*

RN: During the summer, we considered what to do with this imposed censorship. We were considering withdrawing; we were considering exhibiting some other works of ours, etc. Finally, we decided that since we were not allowed to mention guaraná, we would do an exhibition about copyright and trademarks. So, we ended up showing posters where the Guaraná Power logo was completely crossed out and figures of guaraná berries with signs commenting on the lack of free speech, copyrights, etc. The description of Superflex in the Bienal catalogue was totally crossed out. The president's censorship backfired on him: the Brazilian press was very interested in us because we had been censored.

RA: *That is an interesting strategy: to cross completely out what is censored. It results in making a very visible reference to what cannot be mentioned.*

RN: It functions like an ideological striptease: It is like when you cover something to draw attention to the fact that there is something behind. At the press conference, at the opening of the Bienal, the first question from journalists was why guaraná was not allowed at the Bienal. In the end, this censorship has turned out to benefit us. We have gained more attention by being censored than we would have otherwise. The guaraná berry farmers came to the Bienal and were handing out guaraná soft drinks in front of the Bienal, and they were interviewed by various Brazilian newspapers. The theme of the Bienal was "How to live together", and suddenly these

farmers represented an answer to that question. They were examples of how to react when one's living situation is hardened by global capitalism. They became representatives of a constructive countermove to global capitalism. However, it is important for us to underscore that the central issue here is not the censorship but the Guaraná Power project. The censorship has just been a way to gain focus on the Guaraná Power project.

RA: The censorship can also be seen as an example of the Guaraná Power project's extent. The Guaraná Power project is also an illustration of how powerful and influential global trademarks are in our societies today. Criticizing the label and the trademark is only dangerous because the label represents so much value.

RN: Mark Getty, the grandson of the oil tycoon J. Paul Getty, has described intellectual property as the oil of the 21st century. Value is within copyrights, patents and trademarks. Coca Cola's value is not based on their ownership of soft drink factories but on the ownership of the trademark. The standard way of approaching any kind of, or right to, property – be it material or immaterial – is to think that where there is value there is rights. So naturally the domain, or let's say regime, of what can be copyrighted is constantly expanding. In this case, with Superflex at the Bienal, the fear of what we would do in an art exhibition caused the censorship. The fear that we might upset a particular brand caused the censorship. This is a clear example on how copyright limits freedom of expression. We have to challenge this. Instead of being passively upset or depressed about this, we need to actively challenge it. The trademarks are currently colonizing our desires. We need to reclaim the trademark and one way of doing that is by trying to use the opponent's own medicine. It is like jiu-jitsu. In this martial art, one needs to turn the adversary's own momentum against him/her. Similarly, copying and modifying the trademark is a way of bouncing the economic and cultural pressure of the market.

Art as a tool for social change

RA: The Guaraná Power project is an example of art for social change. Art is here being used as a tool for social change. As artists, you have been involved in various projects using art as a tool for social change during the previous decade. What are the strengths of this field, of using art as a tool for social change?

RN: Well, hopefully art provides a space where we are not obliged to produce bottom line results, be it economic or academic. I appreciate the freedom to ask stupid questions without necessarily having to produce

answers. Art is a reflection of society, but we should also allow ourselves to enter this reflection and transform things: not as a demand, but as a possibility.

RA: *Art for social change is also about transforming art so that it is no longer an end in itself but rather a means to a larger end.*

RN: I would prefer speaking about possibilities instead of ends. We produce possibilities, not ends. On the other hand, I would not like to demand that all cultural productions should be tools for social change. That would be a Stalinist approach. Copying is a strategy to survive the power and oppression that the trademarks and multinational corporations represent. By copying, one makes the trademark one's own. Like the Mecca cola project, in which they copy Cola Cola's trademark and then throw the soft drink back on the market. The real struggle takes place on the market, and one needs to enter the struggle on the market. So if you want to be where meaning is being produced you have to enter the market.

Post-colonialism

RA: *From a post-colonial perspective, one can criticize the Guaraná Power project and argue that this is yet another example of white, middle-class, European, privileged males going to the so-called third world and 'helping' the people there become developed, i.e. dictating how to live their lives.*

RN: A post-colonial understanding must not prevent us from taking action. Our understanding of power relations should not make us passive. The Guaraná Power project is not only about third world relations, it is about global capitalism. The project is about how to deal with global capitalism. We are attacking global capitalism, and that is as important in Europe as in South America. We need to react against the current global capitalism. We need to react against the dominance of the trademarks. We need to demand our right to re-use the trademarks, to re-produce them, and use them as we want.

RA: *One can also argue that since the Guaraná Power project is directed against a European owned company, it makes perfect sense for Europeans to criticize it. It is a European enterprise making money on the guaraná farmer, and therefore it is our business, as Europeans, to challenge the enterprise.*

RN: Yes, and it is important to point out that everything –from the commercials to the design of the label, etc.– has been carried out in co-

operation between the farmers and Superflex. Furthermore, we have established a foundation, the Power Foundation, which can run this project without Superflex' involvement.

New meanings

RA: *The Guaraná Power project combines the fields of communication, development, and art. There are several strengths in this combination. For one thing, it seems like these individual fields are taken further through their combination. Moreover, new fields develop via such combination. The combination opens for new possibilities that are beyond the sum of the three fields.*

RN: In our times, there is a tendency that we all become more specialized. And that might make our work more effective, but it also makes our work more dull and the results more dull. When it is suddenly farmers who are standing in an art setting and handing out soft drinks, it becomes hard to determine whether this is about development, or communication, or freedom of expression, or art. But the point is that it is none of the above. This is not an either or question. This is not development or art either; rather, it is the combination of several fields, and when they are combined they create new meaning. It is because of this new meaning that people remember this project.

[1] Jan Servaes & Patchanee Malikhao, "Participatory communication: the new paradigm?", in *Media & Global Change. Rethinking Communication for Development*, eds. Oscar Hemer & Thomas Tufte, Göteborg: Nordicom, 2005, 91-105, 92.

[2] Company statement published on Mecca Cola's website: <http://www.mecca-cola.com/en/company/company.html>

[3] For more information on Mecca Cola see <http://mecca-cola.com/>

[4] Babara Steiner (ed.), *Tools* (Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003). [5] Anupam Chander, "Guaraná Power to the People".

[6] Superflex consists of three artists: Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen and Bjoernstjerne Reuter Christensen.

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