
etoy

Jeff Howe on etoy

"ARTISTS? That's a bad rap. We are business people," Agent Zai says while patrolling the perimeter of Postmasters Gallery Manhattan, in response to the question of whether he or the six other digital provocateurs known as etoy consider themselves artists. Zai wears a safety-orange bulletproof vest over his starched white shirt and tie. Logos of etoy's corporate sponsors and cryptic military insignia built from Legos are affixed to the vest. Outside the gallery a forty-foot cargo container houses the etoy "tank," or mobile corporate office, where Zai and three other agents are living for the duration of etoy's first big-time gallery show. Zai's insistent avoidance of the moniker "artist" seems a little disingenuous. Why else would he be sleeping outside a gallery?

The exhibition at Postmasters, on view until May 11, is a bit of an event, offering the art world its first chance to view physical evidence of the cultural phenomenon that is etoy in the art world's favored setting: the white cube. The show consists of sixty photographic prints -- etoy "share certificates" -- and a contamination tent (also safety-orange) housing Web projections from the etoy site. Founded in 1994, etoy spent the next few years pulling pranks, refining its brand of cross-disciplinary irony. The group attained brand-name status after on-line toy seller eToys.com sued them in a trademark dispute last fall. etoy declared war and countersued in the court of public opinion, initiating a global performance piece that rallied netizens far and wide. eToys, which incorporated two years after etoy, soon found itself the victim of negative press and e-terrorism, including denial-of-service attacks, or bogus requests to its site that wound up blocking legitimate requests. In the two months that followed, eToys' shares dropped from \$67 to \$15. Bewildered and limping, in late January the toy store dropped its suit and paid off etoy's legal fees. etoy calls it "the most expensive performance in art history."

In its insistence on dissolving the border between art and commerce, etoy leaves the cash-crazed New York art world staring uncomfortably at its own reflection. "This is an overt retail operation," says Suzanne Meszoly, who curated the Postmasters show.

"It demystifies the art gallery as a rarefied palazzo for culture." While you can't exactly collect etoy, you can "invest" in it. A share in the company costs three thousand dollars and entitles the buyer to one of the lushly designed, high-definition photographic prints of orange-suited etoy agents engaged in such faux-cloak-and-dagger acts as reconnoitering on mountaintops from helicopters. As

Zai admits, if etoy is a business, it's also an art business. And it's a good thing, because the aesthetic of etoy -- what New York Times art critic Roberta Smith calls "Devo crossed With Neo Geo mixed with a dash of James Bond" -- is at least as interesting as its work as a "global media virus." Through the group's fascination with branding and corporate identity, etoy manages to critique and celebrate the new economy at the same time. Buying an etoy share allows the shareholder to own part of a company whose product is its very existence. Trés pomo, non?

What emerges is a portrait of the artist as a corporate entity. There's a tendency to dismiss this as a marketing gimmick, but it's one frustrated by the knowledge that etoy uses marketing gimmicks the way other artists use oil paint. Zai, who is in charge of the etoy "corporate identity," says an artist's duty is to reflect the times -- and from this time-honored perspective, etoy is only utilizing the tools society has left at its disposal. Jeff Howe is a frequent contributor to The Village Voice and Time Out New York.