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## **etoy take Manhattan**

Fresh from its successful stand-off with e-commerce giant, eToys, a group of international web-based artists is bringing its witty blend of conceptual, digital and performance art to New York

By Cristina Ruiz

LONDON. Much web-based art is an uninspiring combination of text, flashy images and video clips that crashes your computer and leaves you bored, frustrated and bleary-eyed. But a group of Swiss-based European internet artists known as etoy stands miles ahead of the pack.

Created in 1994 by seven original founders who describe themselves as "sound-producers, artists, designers, lawyers, p.r. and c.i. experts [public relations and corporate identity]" etoy's first project was to merge their individual identities into one digital identity and produce, "the first dot.com brand in the art world."

Speaking to The Art Newspaper, one of the etoy artists who calls himself Zai explains, "The concept of the individual artist does not exist anymore. It has been replaced by the idea of the corporation. If you buy a painting by Picasso you are investing in a brand name that carries enormous cultural significance. This artistic 'branding' sustains the art market. We are trying to over-exaggerate this system."

The seven founding members renounced their personal identities, signed a "complex contract" with etoy.CORPORATION and were "transformed" into etoy.AGENTS. The artists shaved their heads, donned matching orange life-vest jackets and sunglasses and assumed interchangeable identities, swapping names and finishing each others' sentences in interviews to frustrate the media's attempts to figure out who was who.

In February, etoy made headlines around the world when toy retailer eToys dropped its trademark infringement lawsuit for the domain name [www.etoy.com](http://www.etoy.com) and agreed to reimburse the artists up to \$40,000 in legal fees.

It was the conclusion of a four-month battle that began when the California-based retail giant received complaints about "profane language" from consumers who visited the art site by mistake.

In September 1999 Etoys offered to buy the domain name from the artists for \$30,000. "We responded with a smiley face by email," says Zai. "Their offer was a joke." Etoys upped the stakes to \$70,000 and then \$100,000 and "when we refused to accept it, they filed a law suit," says Zai. Another offer of \$160,000 was turned down. "We realised that eToys really wanted this domain name. Our site was receiving about 20,000 unique users a day," says Zai, "and I'm sure a lot of them were trying to buy toys."

"Our lawyers thought eToys would destroy us, but we decided we had to fight. We worked eighteen hours a day: the lawsuit became our art project. We set out to prove that the internet changes the power relations between the rich and the not so rich."

On the eve of the first court hearing, the artists sent out a mass web mailing that was immediately picked up by major internet newsrooms. The following day eToys offered the artists \$516,000 in cash and shares but, once again, the artists declined.

In November 1999 a Los Angeles Superior Court judge issued a preliminary injunction against etoy, threatening the artists with fines of up to \$10,000 a day unless they stopped using the www.etoy.com address—this despite the fact that the artists launched their site in 1995, two years before eToys started online trading.

The artists went into web exile, setting up an alternative site that they used to launch "Toywar", an online crusade to humble the e-commerce site, which saw the recruitment of some 1,400 toy troops. Each supporter was given a toy identity and told to "attack" eToys at predetermined times by sending e-mails. Meanwhile internet news sites carried constant coverage of the artists' struggle. "We adopted the bee-swarm strategy," says Zai, "and it worked."

On 25 January eToys backed down: "We heard from a lot of people and they overwhelmingly urged us to figure out a way to co-exist with etoy, and that's what we're going to try and do," said a spokesman for eToys. At the end of the incident, eToys' shares were down to \$20 from a fifty-two week high of \$86.

This playful subversion of the corporate machine has been at the heart of much of etoy's work. In 1996 the artists won the net category of the Ars Prix Electronica for "digital hijack" a project which involved the infiltration of internet search engines such as Lycos, Altavista, and Infoseek. Instead of finding the websites they were looking for, unsuspecting web surfers who typed in etoy's target words (such as porsche, madonna, penthouse, etc) were taken to a dummy screen which flashed the message: "On the search for 'porsche' you have been kidnapped! You are hostage No. [xxxx]....Come to the Internet Underground....this is not MTV." (A version of "digital hijack" is still online at [www.hijack.org](http://www.hijack.org).)

According to Zai, "digital hijack" was so effective (some one million net surfers were "kidnapped" in the first two months) that a team of CIA agents descended on the artists' offices in Zurich in an international intelligence gathering operation in collaboration with Swiss police. This could not be independently confirmed by The Art Newspaper. A spokesman for the CIA said that information on special operations could not be divulged but that, "It is hard to believe

that we could have seen this gimmick as a threat to US national security." True or not, it is clear that spin and humour are an integral part of the etoy project.

On 29 April etoy open their first gallery show at New York's Postmasters Gallery. It is not a departure into the world of "real" art, but rather a "re-transformation of digital ideas", says Zai. A forty-foot container which serves as a metaphor for the TCP/IP packets (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) into which information is organised so that it can travel on the internet will sit outside the gallery, a tent inside the gallery will be a viewing chamber for Toywar, with screenings of scenes from the cyber front, while etoy.SHARES will hang on the walls. Since 1998, the artists have sold shares in etoy.CORPORATION to investors and supporters, who in turn get voting power to have their say about future projects. "It is totally against the nature of what we do to sell art", says Zai. "What we sell is cultural value".

A forthcoming vote will decide whether the shareholders wish to sell eToys the etoy.com domain name. "The shareholders will decide", says Zai. In his capacity as CEO of etoy. CORPORATION, Zai and his colleague Gramazio (President) will be at the gallery "to explain why buying etoy.SHARES is a sound financial investment" says etoy.CURATOR, Suzy Meszoly. ATM machines on the container outside will provide twenty-four hour news on the performance of etoy.SHARES.

"IMPACT MANAGEMENT: the etoy.CORPORATION in Manhattan" (29 April-11 May), Postmasters Gallery, West 19th Street & 10th Avenue, TEL+1 (212) 727 3323; fax: +1 (212) 229 2829; postmasters@thing.net