

Riff Raff on the art of etoy.AGENTS

What's the Situation(ist)?

Silke Tudor

Over the last few months you may have noticed an intimidating group of very bald men in dark sunglasses and bright orange crew jackets prowling through the streets of San Francisco. They move with great purpose, equipped with hand-held Internet devices and magnetic-strip security cards, making statements like "We are your fashion beta-testpilots" or "We are human Net-agents exploring high-pressure teamwork in uncontrollable environments" or "The popstar is the coder is the architect is the shareholder is the pilot is the designer is the manager is the system is etoy." Despite what you may think, this is not a publicity stunt for *The X-Files*, nor are these intergalactic bounty hunters sent back in time to search for misplaced alien technology (though that might be close). This is etoy, a technological art crew founded in the Swiss Alps in 1994 by seven media artists based out of Zurich. The etoy.AGENTS, as they prefer to be called, circulate between the U.K., the U.S.A., Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Austria, creating art out of corporate aesthetics, Net technology, telecommunications, pop music, security systems, and cyberculture. In the past, etoy has staged digital action shows, live performances, sound productions, and art exhibitions in Vienna, Lucerne, and Tokyo, but their best-known work has existed only in cyberspace with data events and Internet art that, as they put it, "deconstructs the space behind the interfaces of the world wide web." One such piece of Web artistry took the form of a digital hijack wherein the etoy.AGENTS took 1.4 million technology tourists hostage for typing in key words like porsche, startrek, bondage, fassbinder, etc. For this etoy won the most coveted prize awarded to electronic artists at the Prix Ars Electronica held in Austria in 1996. For years, servers in Budapest, Vienna, Zurich, San Diego, Amsterdam, and Tokyo have linked etoy.AGENTS and their art shows on the Net with thousands of art theorists, etoy fans, tech journalists, and etoy.SHAREHOLDERS. (Like everything else, etoy is a commodity with salable shares owned by the likes of pop star Laurie Anderson, actor Rutger Hauer, and art collector Gianni Agnelli.) Now, believing the pioneering days on the Net are over, etoy has decided to return to the material world and, more specifically, to San Francisco, where they plan to make their home inside the etoy.TANK. The etoy.TANK is a bright orange, 10-ton, 40-foot cargo container that combines architecture, performance, music, digital art, and "future entertainment." (It also serves as transport for the etoy.AGENTS and their luggage — etoy.HEADPHONE-SETS and standard-issue F1-overalls with etoy.SPONSOR-LOGOS.) According to etoy, the tank houses Web site stations, servers, a render-farm, a sound studio, a voice box, a conference room, and sleeping quarters. It will become the showpiece of etoy.CORPORATE-IDENTITY and a stage for the etoy.LIFESTYLE. Its arrival in San Francisco will coincide with the reopening of the blasthaus gallery — supposedly the first tech-art gallery in the United States — at its new location at 41 Freelon (in SOMA, near Brannan and Fourth streets). blasthaus, which has been on intimate terms with tech "terrorists" like the Bureau of Inverse Technology, Perry Hoberman, Negativland, Stelarc, and Survival Research Laboratories, will be a perfect new home for the etoy.TANK. Folks wishing to view, join, or buy shares of etoy can attend the blasthaus grand opening party on Friday, June 26; those unable to shift their pixellated gaze can check out www.etoym.com. (S.T.)