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The Boys Behind Etoy

by Steve Kettmann

There was plenty of confusion among etoy's own neighbors in a part of Zurich that taxi drivers offer warnings about. The Turks selling doner kebab in a shop on the corner always assumed that Zai and Kubli and Gramazio and Mono were pimps or drug dealers.

"Then one day they saw us on a TV news program and then every time we came in it was 'Boss!'" explained Zai.

The night after etoy and eToys finally cut a deal that will -- eventually -- dissolve the "hold" placed on the www.etoys.com domain name and give etoy US\$40,000 in expense money, the four celebrated by heading to a nearby Spanish restaurant. The proprietor greeted them warmly, and asked, jokingly, "Pistol?"

A little while later, a Swiss television program reported on the victory over the big toy retailer and the proprietor was back. "Big project? Big project?" he asked, genial in his bewilderment.

That's exactly what etoy wants to do: keep people guessing, make them take a step or two toward a new position. Sly laughter has been the hallmark of its war with eToys -- and now Network Solutions, which has yet to restore its domain name.

Zai (they still don't use full names) studied media art in Vienna and was among the etoy agents who spent time in San Diego and San Francisco. That was where etoy built its container -- 12 tons of steel, self-contained, and puzzling to anyone trying to figure out why anyone would build such a thing. The main spokesman for the group, Zai also turns out to be one of the key strategists.

Back in the early days, all etoy agents were interchangeable -- bald, wearing sunglasses and life-vest orange jackets. They used to make a game of starting and finishing each other's interviews without an unsuspecting reporter even noticing. It was one of their concepts, the relativity of identity -- especially in the Internet context -- where everyone chooses whom he or she wants to be.

But these days, Zai wears his dark hair in conservative, medium-short style, and looks much like, say, an architecture teacher, which is what his father is.

Gramazio, the Italian in the group and the other key figure in the fight with eToys, wears his hair buzzed. He studied as an architect and brings to etoy a love both of design and conceptual thinking. He has a way of staring straight ahead when he speaks with a look of almost surreal alertness, like a character in a Japanese cartoon.

Kubli, in his Buddy Holly glasses, was working at a law firm through much of the fight and did not put in as many 18-hour days as the others. He's the droll character in the group, who often appears lost, although he has hundreds of phone numbers memorized and never lacks for something to say -- once he's had a moment to ponder.

Mono, the only one in the core group who was not involved from etoy's beginnings in 1994, came out of the punk scene and opts for an attention-getting haircut, shaved on the sides, exotic-plant look up top. He brings eagerness, an expertise with computers, and also a reverence for what Zai and Gramazio and Kubli have done over the years.

Etoy may seem to have established a new identity as guardians of Internet freedom, destined now to hang out at the restored www.etoys.com site, helping others strike back. But that's just what etoy doesn't want. Unpredictability is one of their operating principles.

"We can think of doing something different, but it will always be connected to this," Zai said. "We are not anti-corporate. That's something people don't understand. We are an overdrive corporation with surreal goals. We sell nothing except ourselves. We don't promise any revenues other than cultural revenues. There are other corporations that don't have any revenue. We don't promise any revenue, except excitement and maybe a little bit of confusion."

The battle with eToys appeared to be over last week when a deal was finally reached. EToys promptly faxed Network Solutions to inform it that "the parties have reached a settlement of their dispute" and to request removal of the "hold" on www.etoys.com.

But so far, nothing has happened. Network Solutions claims it was "ordered" by Shook to put the "hold" on etoys.com, but even eToys admits that the earlier action came at its behest -- when it contacted NSI.

"Network Solutions will release the name once the court orders Network Solutions to do so," NSI spokesman Brian O'Shaughnessy wrote in an email. "As you will recall -- NSI was ordered to put the name on hold by a court. We complied. We will -- therefore -- comply with the court to remove the name from a hold."

As a result, etoy has again decided to whip up its followers into a frenzy -- and declare "DEFCON 1" and rage cyberwar against both NSI and eToys until the matter is resolved.

"THIS IS BULLSHIT!" screams the latest mass mailing. "THE REMOVAL OF THE etoys.com DNS ROOT ENTRIES IN DECEMBER WAS ILLEGAL! THE JUDGE DID

NOT SIGN ANYTHING RELATED TO THE etoy DOMAIN! etoy WAS TOLD NOT TO OPERATE THE WEBSITE (!) www.eto.com (till the situation is clear) BUT THE etoy.EMAIL AND OTHER RELATED SERVICES (like broadcast.eto.com) WERE NOT INVOLVED! NSI DID NOT HAVE AN ORDER TO PUT etoy.com ON HOLD! BUT NOW THEY NEED AN ORDER TO INSTALL OUR DOMAIN NAME WE PAID FOR! THIS IS JUST RIDICULOUS."

"Big project? Big project?" you can almost hear the proprietor of the Spanish restaurant asking.