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Etoy: They'll Take Manhattan

By Mark Anderson

NEW YORK -- If Frank Sinatra's signature song holds true, etoy can now make it anywhere.

On Saturday, the Swiss culture-jamming corporation etoy premiered its exhibit "Impact Management: The etoy.CORPORATION in Manhattan" at New York's Postmasters Gallery.

The event, attended by several hundred black-clad New Yorkers as well as etoy investors and stalwarts, was a celebration on two counts.

First, it honored the 1,700 veterans of last year's legal melee with eToys.com -- a fight that began as a trademark dispute and ended earlier this year with a befuddled Internet retailer recoiling from a lawsuit that had sprawled into a global media performance piece.

Second, the event was a release party for the post-eToys CD TOYWAR.lullabies.

On hand to remix TOYWAR.lullabies for the VIP event after the opening was etoy supporter DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid. Bobbing his ski-capped head as he intermixed breaks plundered from the 21-track CD -- including new material by Negativland, Poopoo Varmint, Steev Hise, Mono Pause, and People Like Us -- DJ Spooky recast the music that, as lullabies' liner notes states, "inspired theTOY.soldiers for their infamous operations and evolved into sweet battle hymns hummed by thousands of plastic toys."

"We don't paint; we don't do sculpture," said etoy's president, who goes by the moniker Gramazio. "Our artistic interest is in conceptual works that interact with society, technology, and media."

The only other physical product to have emerged from the etoy virtual experiment -- etoy's share certificates -- were also gathered and displayed for the first time. Detailing the corporation's six-year history via cryptic computer graphics and Kraftwerk-by-way-of-James-Bond photo shoots, each certificate is an original work that represents an etoy investment of \$3,000 or more. (Chris Truax, the lawyer who represented etoy in its fracas with eToys, also attended to accept an etoy share certificate in lieu of monetary compensation for his work.)

Etoy's four agents in attendance mingled with the crowd throughout the evening. The foursome will remain headquartered at the "etoy.TANK" parked outside Postmasters through May 11, when the exhibit ends.

"Each etoy.TANK is a standard-sized cargo container, and that makes it easy and cheap to ship it around the world, wherever the latest etoy action is," said Gramazio. Previously, etoy.TANKS -- Gramazio claims a total of seven worldwide -- have also been located in Vienna, Zurich, Manchester, Monza (Italy), Geneva, Budapest, San Diego, and San Francisco.

While the etoy-curious puzzled over the dozens of shares hanging on Postmasters' walls, etoy.AGENTS also courted potential investors by showing them around the etoy.TANK.

According to an email etoy circulated the day before the opening, TANK7 sustained \$17,000 in damages in shipping from Zurich due to stormy Atlantic seas. Agent Zai, who displayed a military badge made out of Lego on his hunter-orange etoy vest, was also nursing a cut lip from installing barbed wire atop a tent set up in the gallery to showcase etoy's various online projects.

Dancing on the boundary between new-economy avatar and the digerati avant garde -- what author Douglas Rushkoff calls "an entity of human/silicon origin yet with no known biological or technological predecessor" -- etoy are mavericks within every sphere they propagate their identity.

The art world is left to interpret etoy's proliferation of logos and slogans, and its corporate obsession with brand as a sly irony; corporate investors who buy into the "etoy.BRAND" are sold a paradoxical package of counter-corporate pranksterism as the ultimate homage to the bottom line.

"The image that they're trying to convey isn't what they are," Gramazio said of one potential real-world corporate client etoy is now courting. "It's closer to what we are."

He noted that, as a legal corporation under the laws of Switzerland, etoy is also only as protected as its stable of investors.

"The way eToys could have really fucked with us in November is just to have bought a bunch of our shares," he said, adding that etoy.SHARES are only traded through the channels of the international art market.

"What we represent is an abstract idea of value," he said. "It's what people see or think you are."