

Etoy at Postmasters

by Cathy Lebowitz

The art group from Europe is etoy, the American commercial concern is eToys. The members of etoy could never have predicted, when they registered the name in 1995 that the Internet toy seller eToys would take them to court for trademark infringement in 1999. The etoy/eToys skirmish is an example of recent intellectual property battles resulting from our digital age.

Before going to court, eToys offered the cyberartists up to \$400,000 to give up their name, but they refused. Last fall, the Los Angeles Superior Court granted a temporary injunction, filed by the California-based company eToys, keeping the European art group from using its own domain name. During the months that etoy was stripped of its Web site and e-mail addresses, they started the Web site www.toywar.com, where real-life "soldiers" received merits for acts of civil disobedience, Internet-style (such as mass e-mailings to eToys in an attempt to swamp them). In February eToys dropped the suit, and etoy was promised some \$40,000 in reimbursement for their legal fees.

Etoy thinks of cyberspace not as a series of Web pages, but as data containers or tanks. They use images of orange cargo tanks on their Web site and, since 1998, have been moving four real cargo containers around the globe when they participate in international events, using them as offices/ studios/ hotels. In 1996 the group was awarded a Prix Ars Electronica for their "digital hijacks"—intercepting some one million Web surfers on their way to popular commercial sites and bringing them to the etoy site.

In an effort to stay true to an art experienced on the Internet, etoy has steered away from gallery exhibitions. However, last spring the group parked a 40-foot-long standard cargo container outside Postmasters gallery for a one-week show. Inside the gallery, viewers could enter a tent housing computers logged on to www.etoys.com and the toywar Web site. The etoy Web site is a labyrinth of information and imagery, from an interactive chart of the group's history to a clock establishing an etoy time zone. Speaking to gallery-goers were several etoy "agents" (one of the terms the etoy participants use to refer to themselves) wearing safety-orange vests over business suits. As a member of the press, I was allowed to climb into the large orange tank outside, escorted by etoys.zai. The long, narrow space offered everything an agent might need on location: sleeping compartments, computers, DJ equipment, etc.

Etoy offers an alternative to the traditional art object in the form of investment. Anyone can buy shares in etoy. If you buy enough, you get a certificate—a 2-foot-square, boldly designed digital print mounted on aluminum; each unique image refers to some aspect of etoy's development. About 60 "etoy.share-certificates" were on the walls. Each panel includes the signature of the seller and the buyer, the number of shares purchased and the date of the "trade." The return on investment in etoy is cultural rather than monetary (i.e., don't put your money here for retirement). While etoy purposely obscures the individual identity of members in a number of ways (including a peculiar manner of preceding all statements with "etoy.fill-in-the-blank"), from the prints, they all appear to be young, white men, like many of the CEOs they are mimicking.

Joining etoy in making art about the global economy and striving for the biggest market share are equally mysterious artists and groups, such as the late Mark Lombardi, the nine-year-old, anticorporate (R)Tmark and NEWSROOM. The irony here is that for all of etoy's subversive or provocative actions, their most successful intervention into the dot-com world resulted from an aggressive maneuver by an e-commerce giant.