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Interview with etoy - part 2

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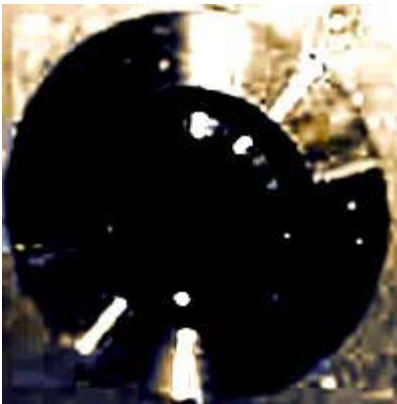
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Geri Wittig on Jan 20 2000

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Switch interviews etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER - part 2

GW: How's the lawsuit affected etoy.SHARE-VALUE?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: First of all it crashed totally because we lost our domain. Of course when people saw that we weren't around a lot of them thought that we were gone. Some people thought that we had been bought out. The eToys stock value was at 67 dollars a share when the preliminary injunction was signed at the court in L.A and if you check it right now, the value is at 45.43, so that's really nice.

GW: And the etoy.SHARE-VALUE, has it gone up?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: Yeah sure. We had 47,000 hits in one day on the TOYWAR site and a lot of people are subscribing and spreading this media virus around the world and mailing to their friends, the eToy's executives, CEOs, and shareholders. This mail is posted all over the net. People post their messages, and it's really good. In terms of our SHARE-VALUE of course, we are more famous than ever before. The idea is really traveling through the net, so that's a good thing.

GW: When the IPO was released in '98 there was a lot of trading activity, but in '99 it kind of leveled off. So do you think this is actually a beneficial thing for the etoy.SHARE-VALUE - a shot in the arm for the SHARE-VALUE?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: We always sold shares, but this summer more people were interested in the etoy.SHARE concept. Now we're overloaded with requests, because people are really starting to understand what this is all about - that this is a comment about the world and the situation on the Internet (startup companies, speculations, NASDAQ, etc.) There was an exhibition planned, but we couldn't do it because we didn't have time. But now it's definitely interesting because of the huge impact it generates and we also stopped working on everything else. We've also hired people to work on this. So we've put it all on this situation, because it's costing us a lot of money anyway. This lawsuit is super expensive. eToys wants to destroy us, but during the last few weeks we found solutions to finance our defense and it's a huge risk for us. But it's also a very good chance to affect something that can really have a huge impact on the world. We don't like the idea of being totally isolated from the rest of the world as artists. We don't want to just work in our room and do something that is totally cut off from the world. So this will be a really interesting thing. Plus it's the hottest topic - NASDAQ and all these companies - their and our aesthetics and our culture, counterculture. We don't like the idea to just have something like a counterculture that is isolated somewhere in a cave - featuring a few bars and music and whatever. We want to really have an impact and change this whole thing.

GW: So where did you find financial backing?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: We sold a lot of shares during the last week. People really are supporting us. The share is now in the center again. Lots of people see that it's not just a certificate, that it represents something absurd. It's somehow absurd, but at the

same time it's real somehow and also surreal on the other side. That may be very important if you want to describe etoy. We always try to take a situation or a code or whatever, or a platform and use this platform to really turn it into a surreal thing, to blur the lines between reality and virtuality. Virtuality is also surreal somehow, not just virtual in a digital sense; it's also surreal. Certain things become surreal. And we are working with this and if you take the hijack for instance, this is not just a story it really had an impact. I mean we hijacked one and a half million people on the net and these people saw this product and these people were confused and had to think about the way they navigate on the Internet and how they use search engines. It really had an impact, yet on the other side it was totally surreal because how could you get hijacked on the Internet? The same thing with the etoy.CARGO-TANKS. A major slogan was "etoy - leaving reality behind" and a lot of people were totally confused. We got a lot of critics who said, "Yeah and why are you now producing cargo containers? You're moving ten tons of steel around the world if you say you're leaving reality behind?" But that's just another thing which fits definitely into the etoy concept. We want to turn this situation into a surreal thing and of course if we became bigger and bigger we have to have offices, but it's not that funny if we invite people to a standard office in Zurich or when we were in San Francisco in San Francisco. So it's much better to show in a very direct way that our offices are totally surreal - our offices are these cargo containers, these orange boxes without windows, just cables going in the containers, bringing light and electricity into the container, nothing else - no windows or anything, just a door.

GW: I wanted to ask you something along that line. You speak about it as surreal, but I guess I was thinking about it as etoy projects a certain complexity or ambiguity in your strategy that blurs the line between irony and sincerity. There's a certain level of uncertainty that surrounds etoy actions, because the irony is layered. Just looking at some of the statements that were on Rhizome this week and also the assistant director of C3 in Hungary had the same sentiment, that at first they weren't sure if the lawsuit was a hoax because they expect you guys to screw around with the systems. So how does that affect the way you present that complex balance of meaning? Because in the lawsuit you have to represent yourself as artists and it has to be pretty straightforward, but the way you guys operate is much more complex in terms of what the meaning is. So how does that affect how you project yourself to the world at this point when you're dealing with a lawsuit?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: I mean there are different layers. On one side we have to talk to our attorneys all the time and that's really fucking serious - more serious than we can handle sometimes. We have very very long meetings with our attorneys and there's financial pressure and of course we don't have the resources that these guys the enemies have. We're fighting with really really limited resources against a giant, but we have also decided to fight on the level of the giant somehow. A lot of people said we shouldn't fight against them on their level, but that's exactly what etoy has to do. In a standard situation or in a standard resistance situation, it's always good, if you're the small party, to reject the rules of the giant. Just fight your guerilla fight, and on some level we do that, but at the same time because etoy is built on very different complex layers, there is the serious, professional layer. So we are able to handle levels which another guerilla organization probably has to avoid because it's dangerous. Maybe it's also dangerous for us to start counter suing, etc., but that's exactly what's very interesting from the art aspect as well as from the concept aspect of etoy - that we blur these lines. We don't step back and let our domain name go and then fight back on a total underground level. We also think that we can provoke a precedent setting case and this will totally blur every line.

GW: I noticed in your history that you've had a few personnel crises. How do you avoid job burnout and keep the etoy talent from jumping into what's a really hot market?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: We're better trained now. We have experience in handling these things and we try to manage our resources. But again in the past we also knew that for us there is also a kind of rock and roll aspect, so it's always dangerous and you're always in danger of burning yourself out. There's an edge game here - we're always on the edge of all these things. But that's the thing we do. We try to manage this very difficult game, to travel on this borderline. Yeah somehow we have our problems with that like other people have problems - like selling their toys, whatever. In every job you have your problems of course. We are now in Switzerland because our attorneys are here, but the whole thing is also going on in the United States. I mean the whole media - we give about five interviews a day in America at the moment and during the nighttime we were guests of two radio shows, one for National Public Radio and the other one for Emmanuel Goldstein's show, "Off the Hook". These were live shows, so it's really exciting, but on the other side it's also difficult to manage. But that's what's also interesting for other people to watch. It's somehow an entertainment product, or we turn it into an entertainment product. For us entertainment and art are really close together. Not all the time of course, there is entertainment out there that I would never consider as interesting or as an interesting art thing, but there is also a lot of art

which is not interesting for us. The most interesting art pieces or artworks are also entertaining for us. One person we definitely consider interesting is Matthew Barney and he is on this borderline somewhere between entertainment and something really surreal. We like this approach to art.

GW: Your look and your stance exudes a very stylish, militaristic quick response tactic. How does etoy view control of the information supply lines and how do you know that you don't have double agents?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: Yeah, that's a certain risk. We have certain people subscribed to our mailing list who are employees of eToys Inc. and we know that. They can be spies for us or they can be spies for the enemy. We can't really know that, but it's definitely interesting to work exactly with this thing. I mean for instance the lawyers are also trying to get information and of course we block the IPs. We can see in the log files, which IPs they are using and so we set our system with special HTML documents just for them, so we delivered special documents to them. We just confused them - there are a few people who were checking the site every 15 minutes; do you have any idea what this costs? If a law agency is doing 24 hour surveillance, it's really expensive. We would never work with the attorneys, but with employees that's interesting. Because you can't know maybe they're also spies, we are careful with them, but I mean I'm sure of 400 people not everyone is really 100% loyal there.

GW: Another etoy personnel issue I was also interested in is equal opportunity employment. etoy, in terms of the agents at least, is all male. What is that about? Is that intentional or is that just circumstance?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: This was a certain period. We were working with ideas of virtuality and interchangeability, so it was important that there was a uniform look. We started first as a group of a guys and we also thought about working together or placing women, but then it turned out it was much easier to play this confusing game if everyone looked about the same. We were in the same jacket and the same clothes. This was not just about uniform it was also about being interchangeable. This was a certain period, then about the beginning of '98 when we began the whole share idea we dropped this concept. It was not important anymore who was an agent and who was not, the important people became the shareholders. So etoy opened up, it's more like a corporation now. People are interchangeable because they are employees. There are lots of people involved in etoy now, they are all employees working for the etoy.SHAREHOLDERS. Before we had the whole corporation share thing going on the idea was already very corporate, the style and corporate identity and all that, but the crew was definitely much more important than it is now. It's important to see it's a development - first we just tried to avoid a standard or traditional image of the artist for several reasons. One reason is the artist in a classical sense is often portrayed as an individual genius working alone and is often isolated. We don't like this idea. We think this doesn't fit into our time. If you want to do something that is important for other people today, you have to work with lots and lots of people. You have to work with people who are somehow on the same level. There is not one genius with the rest of the people being there to manage or realize the ideas of the genius. That's totally far away. Of course there are still artists out there who work like this, but we don't think that this is a future oriented solution. If you look at the music scene you have a lot of DJs for instance, who are really stars and are very important for cultural development. But they are not playing on stage, they are closer to the listeners or to the audience. A lot of people don't know the names of these people. I think it is blurring, a lot of very important things come from people who are not that famous. Maybe their project is famous, but you don't know how they look or who they really are. I think there is a stream going into this direction. We are just observing this, working on this, and so the first step in this development was to make a brand name famous and not a single person. No one remembers my name, I guess maybe a few people who are following really close know that I'm related to etoy, but a lot of people if I say I'm from etoy then they know me, etoy's what's famous, not my name. So this is the first step and we think that this was important just to start this idea of leaving this image of the genius artist behind. Just to make clear there is no genius artist. Then on the next step we were bored with that and we were also bored with being these boys. It's too limited. It's good for a certain time, it's like you're playing in a film, but it's very bad to play the same sitcom or same series for the rest of your life. It's also limited in that everyone who enters the group has to look like that. So it makes it impossible for women to enter the group, or for black people to enter the group, because it would destroy the concept. Because of all these things and after we played it really intense for a long time, we saw we could change and opened it up to a shareholder thing. Then we found out that this was even more interesting and fits in better in our time.

GW: I wanted to ask you about two other projects the ZERO GRAVITY and etoy.ETERNITY plan - can you elaborate on these?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: Of course right now we are a bit tied back to reality - virtual

pseudo NASDAQ law agency courtroom reality. It's still something that's there, but it's transferred into something else. TOYWAR is now the operation that is the most important thing that's going on at the moment.

GW: Was there anything in the workings for some kind of etoy.2000 millennial project that has to be pushed aside for now?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: Yes, we planned to produce something like this with RTMark. We sponsored the RTMark millennium project. In Linz, when we invested money in RTMark we invested into a kind of millennium project. But that's now changing a little bit. One thing is that RTMark is working on their own project in the context of this whole etoy case, but we have to be careful there because we want to win in court, so we cannot really be involved in those kinds of operations.

GW: With this issue of Switch focusing on database was there anything else you wanted to say about database and your ideas about database?

etoy.PRESS-SPEAKER: Of course for us database became more and more important, because you can manage huge complex amounts of data and bring them back into a visual form again. One very simple example is the whole etoy.SHARE-VALUE of course. That's basically a huge database project, just to show how different data streams are processed and turned into this etoy.SHARE-VALUE diagram. Of course we have other projects related to the idea, but TOYWAR will really bring it to the point. There you will really be able to see it.



::CrossReference

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