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ART IN REVIEW

Weekend FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New York Times

etoy.com

Postmasters

459 West 19th Street, Chelsea
Through May 10

Some consider the cyberspace antics of etoy.com to be hacking, others call it art. Either way, this well-known dot-com arts collaborative, which describes itself as an "experimental corporation," is making its first Manhattan gallery appearance.

The group has existed since 1994 but came to World Wide Web attention late last year with a trademark battle it subsequently won against eToys.com, a giant toy distributor. Although etoy chose its name first, the battle dovetailed perfectly with the collaborative's mission, which seems to be to disrupt, mimic, parody and partake of Internet commerce and speculation. Think Devo crossed with Neo Geo mixed with a dash of James Bond, and you've got an idea of the etoy visual style.

Its seven male founders favor shaved heads, reflective sunglasses and bright orange decontamination suits. The latter match the big orange shipping containers, called etoy.TANKS, that take the etoy show on the road. One is parked in front of Postmasters.

Meanwhile inside the gallery you can review the Toywar, purchase etoy shares and look at the slick laminated stock certificates that are as close as etoy gets to art objects. They're not worth much and certainly aren't traded on Nasdaq, but they come with voting rights. The certificates come with purchases of a minimum of 1,800 shares (\$3,000 for 1,800 for individuals, \$5,000 for corporate buyers).

The certificates, which feature unique images that the buyers select, show etoy.AGENTS in action, guarding containers, appearing on talk shows and so on, as well as the owner's name and the number of shares purchased. (The high-tech, logo-happy self-reference recalls Ashley Bickerton's early work.)

The group's anonymity, lack of physical product and combination of explicit parody and implicit idealism seem typically avant-garde, and the "boys just want to have fun" spirit is as old as the hills. What is exceptional, however, is the skill with which etoy melds different spaces — cyber, actual and Conceptual — into genuine, if artistic, liquidity.

ROBERTA SMITH