

WIREWORLD

DIGITAL CULTURE

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Bruce Sterling
Return of the Blobject

Do Aliens Have Taste?
Sci-Fi Channel's
Todd Mueller
is the X Factor

Free Game Inside
Eric Zimmerman's
Organism



eToys[®].com

TOYS

Zeitgeist and
Blitzkrieg: What's a
Name Worth?



Art is once again fighting for its life in America, but this time not against the Biblebelt mores of closet-case loons like Jesse Helms, and nothing racy or blasphemous is prompting the siege.

Art is now fighting against corporations, which have extended their battlefield against public space into the virtual... as they must.

Now if you call yourself, say, www.PissChrist.com, you have no reason to fear the censors or crazy politicians (Giuliani's lunacy in response to the recent Brooklyn Museum blasphemy resulted in nothing but his own ridicule and perhaps a few added hinterland votes). But God save you if Microsoft, say, spins off a Christian letter-finishing service and calls it www.PSChrist.com: Visitors might be confused, and, cutting into Microsoft's profits, your venerable www.PissChrist.com will just have to piss off, saving Jesse the trouble and Jesus the stench.

Example: eToys.com, a two-year-old online toy retailer recently defended its assault on five-year-old etoy.com, the oldest and most important Internet art group, by insisting that it's only out to defend its interests. "Do you think we're a horrible company that gets up every day thinking of ways to go after artists?" eToys spokesman Ken Ross asks in *USA Today*. "Our only interest in this matter is making certain that there's no confusion in the marketplace. Period."

Ross is correct in saying eToys is blameless. Like the dozens of other corporations laying claim to URLs much older and more interesting, useful, and important than themselves, eToys is doing the one and only thing it knows how to do: blow away whatever's in its path in order to "make certain there's no confusion in the marketplace," "be responsible to the shareholders," etc. In other words, profit.

That's all that the 2-year-old *Leonardo Finance*, for example, is doing by suing the 30-year-old *Leonardo* magazine for its name. *Leonardo*, not surprisingly, is a magazine about art. Its founders and managers never worried about trademarking a name that, after all, they were borrowing from a prominent long-dead Italian—nor, did they have the budget to do so.

Likewise, the HMO Health Net is only defending its profitability, as it is programmed and required to do, by trying to destroy HealthNet.org, which has been used by Nobel Prize-winning cardiologist Dr. Bernard Lown since 1993 to connect health care workers in rural clinics and hospitals around the globe at low cost. This attack, too, is only natural and healthy for the HMO Health Net. To seek profit is all it can do.

The list goes on and on and on and on. Of course, these companies are not "horrible." Like General Motors destroying public transportation, or Monsanto bullying its way through Europe, eToys.com is just doing what it was born to do. Milton Friedman himself, the most recent prophet of economic liberalism, is completely upfront about corporate greed and insists that corporations don't, and should not have any goal other than profit. It's their responsibility not to.

So how are these mechanical entities permitted and even encouraged to fulfill their profit potential, no matter the human, aesthetic, or cultural damage? And how is it—after demonstrating for so long their capacity for destruction of every environment—that these entities of pure greed are now being allowed to do the same thing in the virtual realm?

The answer is that free-market theory, which began as a quasi-religion, still is one. The supremacy of profit is the keystone in an entire cosmology that dates back to the 1700s and has as little basis in reality—then or now—as Jesse Helms' vision of heaven. It is beautiful and comforting and permits one the expectation that, with time and the natural functioning of the basest human drives, all things will turn out for the best. Failures of free trade to determine improvement with any precision are chalked up to impurity, to the incomplete implementation of its principles.

Free-market theory is a beautiful idea, and, like many beautiful ideas, it is potentially harmful—as harmful as greed is base.

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