

From the book "Synthetic Times" by Fan Di' An and Zhang Ga, MIT Press / National Art Museum of China

AFTERLIFE

Mission Eternity has another way of dealing with the anxieties of death. Understanding that human religion is social software for negotiating between finity and infinity, the artistic/technical collective etoy has produced a comprehensive alternative:

MISSION ETERNITY is a religion without a god but a massive back end—built on thousands of hours of aesthetical, social and technical research: an infinite chain of commands, orders and dependencies—visions, failures, speculations and drama . . . DECAY and all its risks/chances: bankruptcy, divorce, death, reincarnation, the big jackpot . . .²⁷

Dead serious with their killing wit, the *Mission Eternity* team participates in the age-old utopian dream of the avant-garde, announcing that their project is "far away from a commercial need or a market." At the same time, its agents know enough about televangelists, Raélians, sperm bankers, cryogenic hucksters, and crystal-peddlers to couch their aspirations in irony: "MISSION ETERNITY is . . . an arcane network of computers, mortal remains, human emotions, cargo containers, scientists, artists, lawyers and hackers—a technical, as well as an organizational and economic nightmare . . . everything, nothing, forever . . ."²⁸

The goal of this elaborated structure is to perform one of the oldest functions of art—memorialization—in the guise of "an information technology-driven cult of the

dead." Memorialization functions through traditional material (ashes and "mortal remains" that will be mixed with concrete and cast in the form of 16x16 "pixels" for insertion in the sarcophagus display), as well as virtually through "digital fragments of the life and 'soul' . . . [enabling] humans to maintain an active presence post mortem: as infinite data particles they forever circulate the global info sphere—hosted in the shared memory of hundreds of networked computers and mobile devices such as cell phones" or other data ports²⁹. So far, only four "pilots" have been designated—true pioneers of the information age, in the lineage of Buckminster Fuller (who's listed in the "inspiration" section of the website credits page). The "Arcanum Capsules" for these unnamed individuals have not yet been launched, for they have yet to cross the "deadline" into the ultimate virtual space that etoy's agents hope to explore.

The preservation of a human being (in image, symbol, monolith, mummy, or decorated remains) has fueled aesthetics at least since the pharaohs and Agamemnon. The eternal mystery of where we are before birth is utterly swamped by our obsessions with where we go after death. What we leave behind can be described as "mortal remains and a massive body of information," according to the fiercely secular *Mission Eternity* team³⁰. Approaching its multiple audiences through diverse platforms, the artists, engineers, and hackers in the twenty-plus person "M∞" group provide a mobile installation unit (the "Sarcophagus"), a data-entry protocol (the "Arcanum Capsule"), roles for participants ("Angels," "Agents," "Pilots," and regular folks who might want to be "M∞ Users" or "mortal remains couriers"). Although the humans to be memorialized ("Pilots," whose eventual demise is being anticipated with elaborate digitization and storage of their data essence) are only those

25. 0100101110101101.org, "About" <http://0100101110101101.org>. For their interest in hysteria, see this description of the virus as a "performance . . . revealing how media hysteria can be theoretically provoked and raised. Following the spreading of the virus, Symantec Corporation, world leader in Internet security technology, detects Biennale.py and starts the hunt. Eva, 0100101110101101.org's spokeswoman, says: 'As part of an organization that produces art, my only responsibility is to be irresponsible'" ("Projects," "Biennale.py" <http://0100101110101101.org/>

home/biennale_py/index.html).

26. Synthetic Times website <http://www.mediartchina.org>.

27. etoy, *Mission Eternity*, "Disclaimer" <http://missioneternity.org/disclaimer/>.

28. Ibid. Of this list of creative religious types, perhaps the only category needing explanation are the Raélians: this sect, founded by the French racing journalist Claude Volhan, liberally pinched from Judaism, Christianity, and sexual cults to preach "Intelligent Design" and eugenic

rare individuals who have been deemed heroes of the computer revolution, the M ∞ website also offers downloadable forms for preparing your own data capsule, or for entering the distributed intelligence of M ∞ as an “Angel” hosting 50-megabyte chunks of “Pilot” information³¹.

Thus M ∞ proposes a final journey “beyond” the body—the ultimate virtuality “beyond the deadline” into the condition of death itself. But death is followed by a kind of afterlife, an after-body scattering into a vastly distributed materialized host that has memories, traces of actions, knowledge of the past, and many images. The final “body” of the host might well be understood, for these Swiss-based post-Christians, as the Host (the Eucharistic wafer that symbolizes the eternally resurrecting body of Christ)—here the lively, silicon-based wafer driving the organism of the web itself. Although this can certainly be understood as an interconnected virtual space where individuals are no longer “real,” the web can also be seen as a rematerialized body comprised of plasma-destined bits, magnified LED pixels, hard-drive polarized magnetic particles, and etched micro-circuits channeling electron flows. This all becomes manifested in the interior “cave” of the M ∞ Sarcophagus. The word “sarcophagus” derives from the Greek for “flesh-eating”—in the hands of the M ∞ designers, it becomes a cave we willingly enter to become blind to this world and to open ourselves to visions of another one. Aiming to be “smart dust in art history,” the M ∞ team needs their data and materials to be stored and distributed via educational, library, and curatorial institutions³². In return, they offer a compelling conceptual artwork, a deeply engrossing website, and a physical, mediatic screen inside

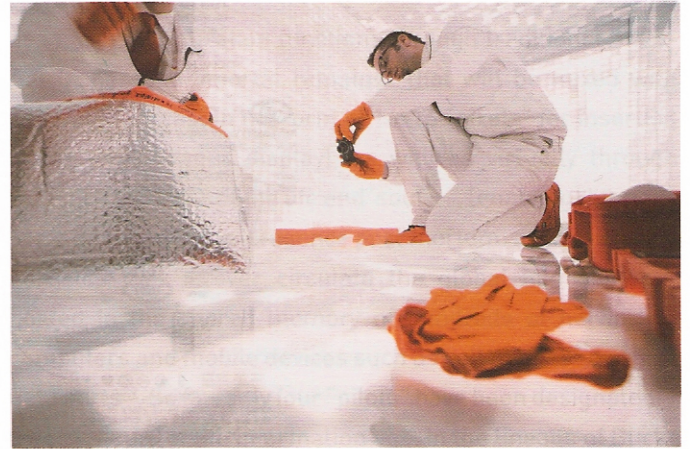


图14: etoy, 《永恒的使命》——石棺内部。Figure 14: etoy, *Mission Eternity* Sarcophagus interior.

the “dumb” box of their sarcophagus. The entire interior surface of this sepulchral flesh-eating cave flows with pixel-encoded information. It is extremely low-resolution (a cluster of pixels in “original” data are grouped, averaged, and rendered in 16x16cm squares of LED light or darkness). This imperfection is engineered: “To remember is at least as much about forgetting details as it is about storing data . . . The pixel images allow the brain to project, refill, expand, reminisce, and reverse³³.”

So the meat goes on. We come full circle, as if this essay were an Ouroboros, to the flesh-powered machines we still rely on to supply the dynamic energy for human cognition, memory, aesthetic appreciation, humor, and creative flow. There is no going beyond the body. But there are many, many trips on which it can take us through this ever more fragile material world.

populating of distant planets by anointed geniuses. See the group’s website: <http://rael.org>.

29. etoy, *Mission Eternity*, “Summary” <http://www.missioneternity.org/summary/>. One of the “mortal remains” material pixels will be engraved with an easy-to-read code that opens onto the data presence of the individual on the web.

30. Ibid.

31. “The first fully developed unit enters the social memory system at

the moment the first fully trained and encapsulated M ∞ PILOT crosses the deadline” (etoy, *Mission Eternity*, “Arcanum Capsule” <http://missioneternity.org/arcanum-capsule>).

32. “The artistic quality and cultural relevance of all MISSION ETERNITY components is a key to the success of the foolhardy operation. The plan to survive is to hack deep into culture” (etoy, *Mission Eternity*, “Data Storage” <http://missioneternity.org/data-storage>).

33. etoy, *Mission Eternity*, “Bridges” <http://www.missioneternity.org/bridges/>.

MISSION ETERNITY SARCOPHAGUS

etoy

INTERNATIONAL / SWITZERLAND, 2006—ONGOING, STANDARD 20-FOOT SHIPPING CONTAINER, HUMAN MORTAL REMAINS, CONCRETE, LED MATRIX, LINUX SOFTWARE

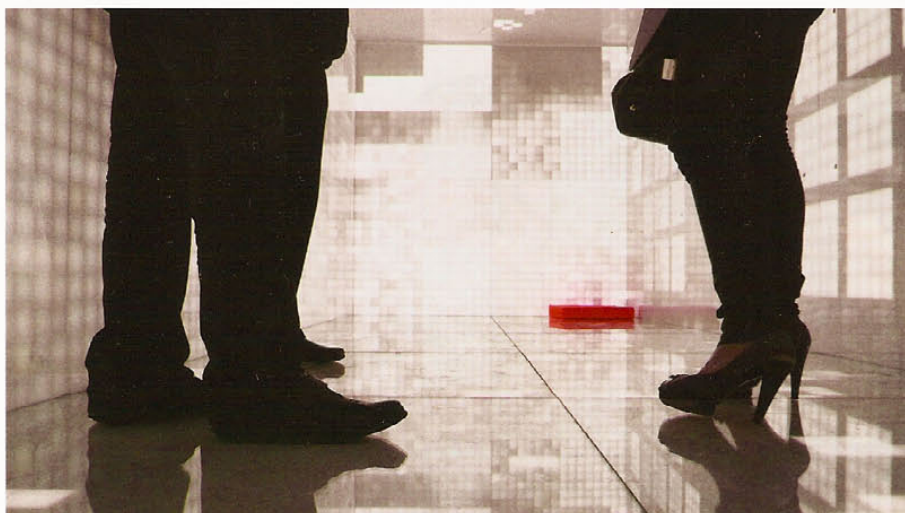
MISSION ETERNITY is the latest project of net-art pioneers etoy. Continuously developed since 2004, it claims to be a cult of the dead in the digital age of information technology. *MISSION ETERNITY* deals with existential topics such as the conservation and loss of memory, the future, the present and the past, life and death. These subjects are transferred into the language and images of information society with a provocative brazenness.

MISSION ETERNITY uses digital media and technology to grant its "pilots" life after physical death and allows them to travel in space and time forever. A comprehensive digitized portrait of the pilots is contained in "Arcanum Capsules," which enclose standard information such as name, date of birth, and legal documents, as well as deeper insights into the pilot's life, biography, consumer profile, and social network. A visual part holds digital photos of the pilot, family and friends, a 360° scan portrait, video foot-

age, and interviews. There are also audio elements such as voice samples of the pilot, his or her favorite music, and so on. Finally, there is a material part that contains certain objects, even the pilot's ashes if he or she wishes so. The postmortem activity plan includes, for example, SMS messages with a sending schedule to recipients of the pilot's choice. The sarcophagus serves as storage and transportation system for the remains of the pilots. It is designed to travel earth forever, together with millions of other containers, unleashed in the physical space of the globalized market like internet packages.

MISSION ETERNITY is both shocking and fascinating—it is extremely unusual in artistic, technological, and social terms. It has a politely anarchic undertone and does not heed established forms of discourse form or content—yet it still has a deeply moving quality.

SUPPORT BY: PRO HELVETIA, LO LISTA OFFICE, SWISS LIFE, MIGROS KULTURPROZENT, KANTON/CITY OF ZUG



不朽的使命——石棺

etoy

瑞士及其他多国，2006-至今，20英尺集装箱，遗物，水泥，LED，Linux软件



这是网络艺术先驱etoy小组的最新作品，并宣称是信息技术数字时代的后生命崇拜。自2004年以来该项目就在不断推进，涉及有关存在的主题，诸如守恒与失忆，未来、现在和过去以及生命和死亡。作品大胆地将这些主题植入数字交流和信息技术的时代无疑是具有挑战性的。

通过运用数字媒体技术，使所选择的“飞行员”在肉体死亡后仍能够在时空旅行中得到永生。在“奥秘胶囊”中存有飞行员的综合信息数字化肖像，从而使他们虽死犹生。肖像由多种元素组成：附加了诸如姓名、出生日期、家庭和法律关系等标准信息，还有遗嘱、合同等法律文件。更进一步的信息深入洞察到“飞行

员”的生活：他(她)的传记、消费模式、社会关系网图示。作品的可视部分包括多种数字照片：“飞行员”本人各时期的生活照、亲友照片、以及360扫描的全息肖像，还有录影胶片及会面场景。这些信息中也有音频部分，诸如本人的声音采样、亲友的声音、最喜欢的音乐等等。而根据发送时间表进行讯息储存等内容也包括在这个计划之内。如果“飞行员”本人希望的话，甚至还可以储存他们的骨灰。

作品既出人意料又富吸引力，它糅合了些许无政府主义的音调，且不遵循既成的内容及讨论的模式——但这具情感飞行器仍然会带给人深深的触动。

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