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### Virtual Reality: Artist Eric Green

by *Kay Daly*

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Type "[www.Roxi09.com](http://www.Roxi09.com)" into your browser, and enter the creative world of Roxi Hadad, a twenty-something designer based in Chicago. Her Flash-driven, interactive site publicizes a line of ladies' bags, or "practical solutions for living in a fast-paced, digital world." Appealing to the busy woman-on-the-go, Roxi09.com presents a sleek, poppy vision of the future by way of fashion.

Or does it? The fact is, Roxi Hadad doesn't design bags, and the "Chicago-based business" the site promotes doesn't exist. And while there is a real-life Roxi Hadad, she isn't the same Roxi who appears on the site.

Instead, this faux company site is the offering of New York-based artist Eric Green. As a digital artist, Eric dwells in the realm of the "virtual," an online space where the 0's and 1's of computer programming create an on-screen alternate universe. But what sets his work apart is a tension between that virtual, computer-based world and the living, breathing world we inhabit. To enter Eric's artistic world is to enter a world where the virtual world sprouts legs, grows arms and become *embodied*.

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#### Bodies and Big Brother

As the child of a registered nurse, it's perhaps inevitable that Eric's artwork strives to bring embodiment to virtual media. Due to her influence, Eric studied biomedical ethics at Brown University in Rhode Island. During his first summer, she helped him land a job as a medical surgical technician. "I got to assist with surgery and carried amputated limbs to the morgue," he recalls, "things you wouldn't expect 18-year-olds to be able to do."

Eric decided not to stay in medicine, but this early experience seems to have sparked a fascination with the idea of "embodiment," of the ability to make ideas concrete, as real as our bodies. He went on to study theater and digital art, and in these fields began to explore ways to blur the boundaries between a "virtual" medium and real world. Working in "environmental theater," Eric designed productions that expand the world of the play to engulf the viewer. He explains, "A lot of my set designs involve taking over an entire space, whether it's a warehouse or a blackbox theater. Everything is converted into the world of the play."

His most extensive exercise in environmental theater was a production of George Orwell's 1984, which he developed during his years at Brown. To expand the world of the play, he created a set that took over an entire building and even spilled over into the sidewalk. In Orwell's novel, the central government, or "Big Brother," constantly rewrites history and forces citizens to live in a state of continual warfare against constantly shifting enemies. Eric brought this world to life for his audience by dressing his set with war posters that changed throughout the play to reflect Big Brother's constantly shifting version of reality.

To bring his viewers even more fully into the world of the play, he had his audience members sign for tickets when they arrived at the theater. The names were then recorded onto a cassette and played back during the production. "When we moved into a scene set in a prison, we worked the audience names into the roll call of all of the prisoners in order to pull them into the space." By populating his theatrical world with the real names of audience members, Eric forced his audience to question where the stage ended and their "real" world began.

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#### From Roxi to Reiki

After graduating from Brown, Eric moved on to the master's program at the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. At ITP, he continued to study digital art, and it's there that he developed his most slyly humorous piece of digital art, the website [Roxi09.com](#).

Loosely based on his friend and colleague, Roxana Hadad, the [Roxi09](#) site is Eric's attempt to create what seems like a real, embodied personality out of online space. Playing on the idea of the cult of celebrity, Eric was interested in working in reverse: "Instead of working from a person and creating the person as the celebrity, I worked the other way around. Why can't you just create the celebrity and have the face to go with it?"

With [Roxi09.com](#), Eric uses the Internet to explore just what constitutes an "embodied" person. He gives his Roxi a face, using a photo of a friend of his, and an occupation, a hip, twenty-something designer who creates and sells women's handbags. She has a personality; she's a "woman-on-the-go," living a fast-paced, exciting life in a brave, new, technology-driven world. He even gives her a location, a fake Chicago address shown on a Flash-animated map that pinpoints Roxi in geography we recognize. Nowhere on the site does Eric reveal that Roxi lives only in the virtual world.

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#### Life is digital

Ultimately, **Roxi09** makes a point about all of our lives online. "Life is Digital," the site proclaims on its homepage, and Eric points out that many of us actually do have a separate life that is purely digital. When we use instant messengers, participate in chat rooms, launch websites, or communicate by email, we create versions of ourselves that exists separately, as an online entity, Eric explains. A piece like **Roxi09** speaks to how full-bodied these personalities can become and teasingly plays with the idea of a personality who exists merely in the virtual world, though with all the trappings of reality.

Since developing **Roxi09.com**, Eric has continued to pursue this tension between virtual and the corporeal, but in a much more pragmatic direction. Again taking inspiration from his mother, Eric has trained in Reiki, a form of energy work that seeks to create physical and spiritual balance. "Reiki works on the premise that there's all this energy in the universe," Eric explains. "When the body becomes imbalanced in whatever way, due to stress or disease, the entire system is affected."

A hands-on process, Reiki is in the most literal sense a craft of bodily interactions. The Reiki practitioner lays hands on one or more of the 12 spots on the body that serve as key energy points. "Practitioners act as an antenna," Eric explains. "Wherever they put their hands, the energy just flows."

As his final project at ITP, Eric revisited the theme of bringing together the virtual and the embodied by creating an interactive CD-ROM to teach the practice of Reiki. Eric's program guides students of all levels in the techniques, history and philosophy of this healing art, using virtual demonstrations to direct the bodily interactions. He now markets his CD-ROM from his website, <http://reikiproject.com>, and has attracted clients from all over the world.

According to Eric, the virtual world created in his interactive CD-ROM is integral to his program's success. "Because it's a hands-on practice, it's important to know where to put your hands and have that active engagement with the information," Eric explains. "It's one thing to visualize it in your mind, but if you're not seeing how it happens or seeing how it relates to other systems in your body, it doesn't sink in."

But there's also a bit of a return to life lived online with his Reiki Project. In addition to marketing the CD-ROM, Eric's site provides a place for Reiki practitioners and enthusiasts to meet, chat and post messages. On his community boards, users take names like "firedragon" and "skydancer" and post messages about "a strange Reiki experience" and "Reiki for the world's peace." Through the online posts, they live their lives digitally and create a virtual community.

And who knows? Maybe someday **Roxi09** will log on to chat.

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