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Airport 'X-ray art' courts TSA trouble

['Net Buzz](#) By [Paul McNamara](#), Network World
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Techno-artist/open-source developer Evan Roth has a message for the [Transportation Safety Administration](#) -- several messages, actually -- about what he considers excessive airport security "theater." He also has chosen an intentionally provocative method of delivering those messages: the TSA's own X-ray screening machines.

Here's Roth's plan, which he calls "TSA Communication" and tells me has already made it successfully through three trial airport runs: Take a metal plate, stencil and cut out a message -- words or an image -- place the plate at the bottom of your carry-on bag, and watch what happens as the TSA employee operating the airport X-ray machine notices . . . or doesn't notice.

The cut-out images, which could be anything, currently range from the benign: an American flag; to the smart-alecky: "Nothing to see here;" to what some might find offensive and a TSA agent somewhere is bound to cause a fuss over: a silhouette of a box cutter, which Roth calls "the exact opposite of a box cutter."

Best known for co-founding the [Graffiti Research Lab](#) -- "Dedicated to outfitting graffiti artists with open source technologies for urban communication" -- Roth and I have been swapping e-mail about his TSA project. I've also consulted an expert on airport security screening to get that point of view. Roth first, then the expert:

Are you serious about doing this?

"So far I have traveled with the plates three times (I'm actually answering these questions in the Hong Kong airport, having just passed security 20 minutes ago) and I plan to continue doing so.

"I fly all the time, and a big part of doing this project is simply so I have something to look forward to when I go to the airport. I hate flying, I hate airports, I hate security, I hate wasting time, and most of all I hate being forced to play a role in the theater of security.

"Of course having to take off my shoes and throw out my 4oz Jell-O isn't the end of the world, but by passively going along with it I feel as if I am agreeing to take part in the ruse. Taking off my belt is not going to make flying any safer. . . . I would rather go through the dance of airport security as an active participant rather than a passive one."

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The advertisement features a blue border. At the top, the text 'MORE PEOPLE CHOOSE EMC BACKUP' is written in large, blue, sans-serif capital letters. Below this text is a black and white photograph of several hands of various skin tones raised in the air. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a blue horizontal bar containing the text 'IDC shows why >>' in white on the left and the 'EMC²' logo in white on the right.

Are you at all concerned about the obvious risks associated with joking with airport security?

"Legally I don't think I'm breaking any laws by carrying the plates in my carry-on bag. I've read the TSA's list of prohibited items, and while a 4-ounce container of yogurt might pose some problems, "TSA Communication Plates" aren't currently on the list. I would, however, consider it my crowning achievement as an artist if they added "TSA Communication Plates" to their list of prohibited items (I'm not holding my breath).

"And while there is a certain amount of humor in the project, I wouldn't be doing this if it was only intended simply as a joke."

Are you concerned about what others might do if your idea catches on?

"I am excited by what others might do if this catches on. I think if we all got a little more accustomed to creatively talking back instead of following instructions, the U.S. would be in much better place.

"People have been sending me lots of good ideas (for plates), for example the 4th Amendment, "(TSA Administrator) Kip Hawley is an idiot," and, "Put me in the slow lane where you hand search everything I'm carrying."

What has happened on your trial runs?

"At the Amsterdam airport I went through security with the box cutter plate (which I'm calling "The Exact Opposite Of A Box Cutter"). They asked me what was in my bag and when I reached to open it up they got a little jumpy and told me not to touch it. They swiveled the monitor around to show me the item in question and I was happy to see that the resulting image showed up almost exactly like the concept images I had made up. After I told them it was an art project they relaxed and allowed me to take it out of the bag, at which point they let me go (you have to love the Netherlands).

"Then today I took the American flag plate from Hong Kong to Bangkok, and they didn't notice."

As Roth's project has started to get a bit of attention on the Internet, it's been suggested by many that he is simply begging for trouble. We already know what happens if you try to go through TSA screening -- say at Boston's Logan Airport -- wearing a pin that looks like a bomb.

Coincidentally, I happen to have a reliable source -- OK, he's my brother -- who works for a company that provides screening equipment to airports, military installations and the most security-sensitive of government facilities. (He has Secret Service clearance and I could tell you the famous place where he was last week, but then he'd have to kill us both.)

I sent him the link about Roth's X-ray art and asked whether he thought this would a) work as the artist intends, and b) go over very well at your typical airport security station. His reply:

"It is beyond me why anyone would do anything that would increase their likelihood of being selected for more intensive screening. It's a funny concept, but a very bad idea in practice.

"Yes, it's very doable -- we do similar things for testing, like cut a hand-grenade silhouette out of a thin sheet of lead. If anything obscures the imagery of the bag, the screener will certainly be more likely to perform additional screening."

And you don't have to have Secret Service clearance to know what "additional screening" can mean. Roth says he doesn't like flying now? I'm thinking he's going to be liking it a lot less before long.

Skip the metal plates and e-mail your comments to buzz@nww.com.

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