Régine Debatty

FLIGHT MODE
Régine Debatty

FLIGHT MODE

Until some charitable soul comes up with a reliable and affordable teleportation system, airports will be the bane of travelers’ existence. No matter what in-flight magazines try to hammer into our heads, there’s nothing remotely glamorous or relaxing about taking the plane. Most of us accept the ordeal and resign to careful packing, queueing, queueing again, security screening and double passport control without ever daring to raise our head.

Not Evan Roth. Since 2008, he’s been repeating a kamikaze performance that takes on the one organization no one would ever dare provoke: the Transportation Safety Administration. For *TSA Communication*, the artist cuts messages out of sheets of stainless steel, places them inside his carry-on baggage and leaves home to catch his plane. The regular X-ray screening process at security reveals more than the usual content of a traveler’s bag. They delineate clearly the messages that Roth has left to security agents. The content of the plates varies according to the destination and mood of the artist. It includes “Nothing To See Here”, “Thanks for Being You!”, “Mind Your Own Business”, the TSA’s emphatic mission statement “I Am the Frontline of Defense, Drawing on My Imagination to Creatively Protect America from Harm”, and my very favorite “Your Message Here”.

Roth further pushes the boundaries of what no one in their right mind should do during a security screening with *See You See Me*, in which he uses a digital camera to record the X-Ray passage in various international airports.

For Roth, the thrill of getting up in the morning and wondering how these little acts of defiance will be received are enough to justify the trouble(s) that might ensue. However, the main aspiration behind these projects is to achieve “an active voice in the theater of security” and claw some power back from
an otherwise dehumanizing experience. “My primary interest in airports are as microcosms of society under total and complete control,” the artist wrote me in an email exchange. “It’s easy to forget that there are other options within these systems besides just following the prescribed path from point A to point B. Airports were a bizarre creative dead zone in my life, but I realized at one point that this was a limitation mostly in my head.”

And believe it or not, Roth never ran into serious difficulties while juggling with the regulations that govern the control of movements inside an airport. “After going through security close to 50 times with the TSA plates, I’ve had relatively few interactions where the security workers even acknowledge them directly,” he explains. “Of the ones that did, there was a range of reactions from pointed questions to laughter (my favorites being the latter). I was usually more nervous about the recoding process than the plates, but I’ve
only ever had one security worker (in Newark) ever figure out that I was filming (and she just told me to turn it off). The best reaction I’ve ever had was at LAX when the security worker started laughing very hard and ended up calling over the rest of the TSA staff to see for themselves (there was a mixed reaction from the rest of the staff). The other great reaction to the piece was actually on the TSA’s official blog. The comment thread, which ended up being shut down after 195 comments, gives a more robust overview of the range of thoughts that the security staff had about the piece. That page is still online and is my favorite documentation of the project.”

The artist’s traveling party continues after take off with Skymall Liberation, a series of collages using Skymall magazine, a gloriously decadent mail order

---

catalogue that you can peruse from the comfort of your own cattle-class seat. *Skymall* is found exclusively on American flights, and flipping through it is quite the adventure as it will lead to anything from a “porch potty” complete with scented fire hydrant for your dog to pee on to a Darth Vader toaster, from an Alien Flying Saucer Statue with which to adorn your courtyard to a magnificent set of CarLashes and Crystal Eyeliner (to doll up your car’s front grill headlights with, of course).\(^2\) When he’s done reveling in what looks at times like a capitalist version of the Japanese art of Chindogu,\(^3\) Roth cuts out as best as he can (sharp objects being strictly forbidden on board, unless you’ve bought them in the duty-free area of course) the images of artifacts and people appearing in the brochure. He then thematically organizes them on his tray table, dividing them into what he accurately calls *ethnographic data visualizations*. The most revealing of them is “White vs. Non-White”, where he puts on one side Caucasian faces featured in the publication and, on the other side, the heads of people from any other ethnic group. The result holds a depressingly cruel mirror up to a society that resembles more the Johannesburg of the 1980s than a contemporary “Western” country. Incidentally, Evan’s been repeating the exercise since 2007, and there doesn’t seem to be any improvements in the overwhelming preponderance of little pale faces aggregated on his tray table.

Another “in-flight” work is *For Your Safety*,\(^4\) a short animation that uses dozens of the board safety cards we all thought we knew by heart and meticulously constructs a lively narrative in which the otherwise hapless figures of passengers do a jerky, manic dance of the well-known “Brace! Brace!” positions, inflate their life jackets with gusto, hysterically open emergency exits and bounce merrily down the toboggan. You won’t look at the safety card the same way next time you’re on a plane.

These last two works might make you think that it’s jolly good fun to be

\(^2\) I had a look at what was on offer in the catalogue for the sake of researching this article. I will never get that hour back! Do spare yourself and take a short-cut to more jaw-dropping items with “The Very Best and Worst of *Skymall*”, skymall.tumblr.com/

\(^3\) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chind%C5%8Dgu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chind%C5%8Dgu)

\(^4\) [http://vimeo.com/63951858](http://vimeo.com/63951858)
sitting next to Evan Roth on a flight. Beware of occupying the seat in front of him, however, as you may become the victim of the artist’s extremely simple and cheapo intervention How To Keep Motherfuckers From Putting Their Seats Back. The short video tutorial is available online and teaches you how a mundane zip tie can become the ultimate weapon against one of the little vexations of economy class. The intervention is part of a “Lazy Like a Fox” series that astutely demonstrates that you don’t need to buy 3D printing machines or be versed in the art of coding to be a hacker, and that you can be efficient, prove your point and slightly alter larger systems using a piece of equipment as mundane as a piece of plastic.

And fundamentally that’s exactly what Evan Roth’s work proves: that hacker culture is democratic. It exists both inside and outside computers to question infrastructures and to enable people to circumvent rigid regulations. His pieces are, more than many contemporary artworks that claim to be embedded with a left-wing ideology, about empowering people. They are expressions of what he calls “creative disrespect”, an attitude

---
Evan Roth

*Skymall Liberation (White vs Non-White)*, 2012

Photo: Evan Roth
that can be applied to many aspects of life and in particular to technology.

At this point, it is important to briefly mention the background of Evan Roth. He is a skateboarder, an undergraduate in architecture, a graduate in design and technology, an open source coder, a graffiti artist and a hacker, of course; but what he is not, despite all appearances, is a digital native. Roth belongs to a generation that has experienced both the pre-digital and the digital. People who have lived on both sides of the fence either look at digital technology critically or embrace it complacently. Most people belong to the second group, perfectly happy as they hand all their data and trust to the Fantastic Five: Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft. After all, these corporations are efficient, they make our life comfortable and are inhabited by LOLcats. They are, in a nutshell, “user-friendly”. Roth belongs to the other category of pre-digital/digital people, the ones who know that the place of technology is everywhere but on a pedestal. They realize that a healthy and empowering relationship with the Internet is as admins, not as users. Being at ease with technology should involve being in control of your own pixel existence and that involves running a web server, managing email accounts, taking care of backups. Important tasks that might seem exotic to most of us.

The reality is that, as seducing as they might be, these corporations do not operate for our own pleasure and handing them our electronic life on a silver platter is, at best, careless. A series of actions that Roth created with the Free Art and Technology Lab, the international group he co-founded with his Graffiti Research Lab sidekick James Powderly back in 2007, demonstrated their defiance to one of Internet users’ favourite corporations: Google. Perhaps the most iconic of these interventions is the fake Google Street View car. Members of the F.A.T. Lab drove through Berlin (and later New York) in a rental car surmounted by hastily crafted cardboard cameras and adorned with Google stickers. The driver of the car behaved brazenly: drinking at the wheel, infuriating other drivers, showing his lack of understanding of a map, etc. The

6 “In 2012, it made less and less sense to talk about ‘the internet’, ‘the PC business’, ‘telephones’, ‘Silicon Valley’ or ‘the media’, and much more sense to just study Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft. These big five American, vertically organized silos are re-making the world in their image.” http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/bruce-sterling-on-why-it-stopped-making-sense-to-talk-about-the-internet-in-2012/266674/
goal was to get people’s attention – and indeed, this performance could be subtitled “How to be all over the Internet using only a rental car, cardboard and duct tape” – and from there, to raise attention to the “googleification” of the Internet, the control held by a multinational corporate entity over a large stake in the digital network and public utility upon which we have all grown so reliant.⁷

That is not to say that the members of the F.A.T. Lab entirely shun Google; but they use it judiciously. One of Evan Roth’s most well-known achievements, for example, involves turning his own name and website into the top search result for the online query “Bad Ass Motherfucker”.

Ultimately, however, what his and F.A.T. Lab’s work demonstrates is that even the most slapstick humor can be used as a vehicle to raise a debate, make people think and start a conversation about contemporary issues, whether they involve infrastructures of controls, information monopolies or shopping magazines. A final, key, characteristic of his works is that they herald a new era when free culture finally confronts the contemporary art world. Morally, ethically and economically. Old systems of intellectual property, definitions of authorship and patents are not the only ones that should govern today’s artistic practice. They might still prevail and prosper, but alternatives exist and their future is bright.

Even the EyeWriter project, a DIY but sophisticated eye-tracking apparatus that Roth developed with the Graffiti Research Lab, openFrameworks and The Ebeling Group to allow a graffiti artist paralyzed by Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis to paint by moving his eyes is not a patented one-off. It runs a low-cost, open source technology and it could allow any other ALS patients to express themselves using only their eyes. An instruction set is online⁸ to show you how to replicate the eye-tracker for only $50 dollars should you wish to make a pair for someone you know.

---

⁷ Fuck Google!!!, http://fffff.at/fuck-google/
The art world might be a latecomer to these kinds of open, generous practices, but Roth believes that they are compatible with a fruitful career in art. “I do think it’s possible to have an art career that intersects with the art market while still being an advocate for free culture,” he explains. “Personally, I subscribe to the church of kopimi⁹ and believe that everything digital inherently wants to be copied; that is its natural state. Like water flowing down the mountain, you can try to put up false barriers, but at some point the water always finds the sea. I still freely give (and take) everything digital. This same logic doesn’t necessarily apply to physical objects, however. There are only false reasons for data to be limited to a certain number of copies, but there are reasons for making only three versions of a print or sculpture (usually having to do with real world constraints of time and money related to production). For this reason, I don’t feel that there is a moral conflict in sharing an infinite number of digital files for free and selling a limited number of physical objects for money.”

His words strangely echo a work I saw recently in an exhibition¹⁰ that looked at the impact that left-wing ideas had on the production and reception of art from the French Revolution to the present day. One of the highlights of the show was Jacques-Louis David’s painting *The Death of Marat* (1793–4). The work is famous. What is less known, however, is that the Neoclassical painter granted permission for his piece to be reproduced on other supports in order to assist the Republican cause.

Another revolution, the one called Open Source Culture, is approaching. Evan Roth is one of its most eloquent champions, and I know he will be kinder than the French were to the elite clinging to their old values.

---


F.A.T., Graffiti Research Lab, OpenFrameworks
EyeWriter, 2009
Régine Debatty
FLIGHT MODE

PostScriptUM #14
Series edited by Janez Janša