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As told to Bruce Nussbaum, 1276 words.

Tips for imagining and building what comes next

How artists, designers, and entrepreneurs can evolve their practices to thrive in a post-COVID world, by writer and NEW INC mentor Bruce Nussbaum.

Editor's note: Last year, Bruce wrote a guide for TCI, called "[How to recession-proof your creative practice](#)," as part of our series sharing practical tips and wisdom from [NEW INC members and mentors](#). Now that we're in an economic downturn, we asked Bruce to write a follow-up piece looking ahead to what's next.

I've been through wars, plagues, floods, and a few choice moments with headhunters in my travels, but nothing like the current disaster we're all living through now. It's a pandemic depression, unprecedented in my life and yours. This morning I put on a mask and gloves, went shopping, and got 1 Bounty Select-A-Size. I haven't seen empty shelves and rationing since I was a kid driving through East Berlin before the Wall came down.

I expect it will get even worse before it's all over. But my real message is this: if you can stomach it, now is the time to prepare for a post-COVID world. Crises accelerate innovation, propel trends, and elevate new leaders. We'll hopefully see an end to this nightmare by fall, and now is the time for artists and creative people everywhere to start imagining and building the post-COVID world.

What will the world look like, once things are back to "normal?"

If we can control our anxiety enough to see it, the contours of a post-COVID world are beginning to come into view. Here is what I am starting to see:

- **First, we have finally arrived at virtuality.** The crisis has pushed everyone into the virtual world and at this point, we're never going all the way back. Mixed realities will be the new reality. I saw one guy in Central Park doing squats in front of his computer that had a live workout streaming. Friends' children are spending hours in front of screens getting their education. Their parents are talking to nurse practitioners, doctors, and therapists online about their medical conditions. Colleagues are tuning in every day for chanting and prayer to settle their nerves. I'm personally experiencing new artists and shows at museums, galleries, and auction houses—all virtually. We did some of this already, and of course the young did it more than the old. Now, resistance is gone and mixed realities are fully integrated.

- As an extension of the above point, we're discovering that **much of today's digital world really sucks**. Our current virtual spaces were built for techies and first-adopters, not for the rest of us. Decades ago, I wrote a cover story for BusinessWeek about the bad design of TV remotes, with their 20 buttons of identical size, shape, and color. Of course, the vast majority of us only use three of those buttons. Similarly, the interaction design of most e-commerce is nearly as bad. Sure, Zoom is workable, but think how much better it could be. When you are ordering or interacting online, ask: Is there any spontaneity? Any joy? Any deep interaction? Any real creativity? To make virtuality truly useful and perhaps even joyful, we need to feel that we are in the room, on the stage, at the store, with our friends and family. We had Zoom Seders for Passover and Zoom Easter dinners that lifted our isolation and allowed us to connect to loved ones. But it was clumsy and often unsatisfying. We need to create much better virtual spaces and platforms that blend different realities more seamlessly.
- **We're rediscovering the vast importance of the natural world.** The more time we spend in the virtual world or confined in our homes, the more we need to connect to something real, something alive. I birdwatch in Central Park three to four hours a day to center myself (it's also the beginning of migration season, and the birds are moving north to start their families). I'm not alone. The park is now full of people walking slowly, glad to be out of their apartments, noticing the flowering trees and singing birds around them. The natural world is restorative—a quiet place where we can get out of our "selves" and into the beautiful life that's all around us. After this pandemic's months of isolation are over, we will demand even more nature in our lives—and hopefully push to protect what's left of it. This is the time to think about how you can integrate the natural world into your work, your product, your art. What does a restorative museum experience feel like? A regenerative e-commerce site?
- Lastly, we're discovering that **economic and social efficiencies bring fragility and failure**. Both the local gig economy and the just-in-time global supply chain economy are currently crashing, revealing huge holes in our social fabric. Networked economic life could work if we had a national health system and a real childcare system. But we don't. In fact, the pandemic is showing us that most of our social and political systems are really, really broken. The process of voting? The electoral college? Public health? Public schools? Our low-pay, outsourcing economy? Banks that trade with algorithms instead of investing in new enterprises? It's all starting to feel ridiculously antiquated and obscene. This is a time for imagining new realities and finding ways to make them real, through creative projects, organizing, entrepreneurial work, and anything else you can dream up.

What will *your* practice look like in a post-COVID world?

How can you personally reimagine your own practice for a post-COVID world, and how do you get there? Here are five exercises you can use to position yourself for when we enter the new "normal"—just a few months from now, for most of us.

1. Harness your isolation, and learn from your habits. Pause and deeply examine all the systems and products you are using right now in your quarantine. Disaggregate how you work, shop, workout, learn, communicate, love, enjoy.
2. After you do the above, examine your list and for each item, ask "how can I make this better?" You can ask this on a personal level (what you can change in your own life to make these systems work better for you, while doing less harm in the world), and on a larger scale (how you might be able to improve these functions in ways that others could benefit from, too). For entrepreneurs and artists, ask: How can you use what you already know how to do, to make a difference?
3. Imagine more integrated digital/physical realities. Then ask, "Does my creative practice work in this world?" If not, how can you adapt and position yourself for success in this more digitally integrated world?
4. Assume a deeper longing for nature. The end of our isolation will unleash a huge rush to restore

ourselves by connecting to life. How will you bring yourself and your practice into a greater balance with the natural world?

5. Plan new systems. The fragility and inequality of so many economic, social, and political systems was laid bare by the pandemic. How can you contribute to building new ones? Who can you organize with, where can you volunteer, and how can you best channel your energy? If you aren't sure how to help plan new systems, find people who are already doing this, and then help them.

Creative people know how to navigate uncertainties and articulate futures.

As spring brings us new life, this is the time to begin constructing a future we desperately need as we remake what has failed us. It is extremely hard to harness a crisis, but it is an opportunity that we must not miss.

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