



Role-Playing the Next Big Disaster

Improv actors are imagining emergency scenes in a New York City art gallery.

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The NYC Office of Emergency Management simulates responding to a nuclear explosion on October 22, 2014. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

"Have you been in close proximity to someone with a fever or cough?"

"I live in New York City. What kind of question is that?"

It's late evening. A policeman with a rattling chest cough interrogates a woman trying to enter the Q train on Canal Street in Manhattan. She's running late; her babysitter needs to get home. But she's stopped at a pop-up checkpoint near the entrance. The policeman instructs her to stick out her tongue. He takes her temperature and examines her mouth for sores. She's good to go.

On a drizzly recent evening, around 7 p.m., spectators crowded in to the apexart gallery in Tribeca to watch this scenario unfold. It was the opening of an [exhibition](#) entitled *Alternative Unknowns*, which imagines what could happen if an unidentified viral pandemic swept through New York City. Men and women in sleek leather jackets and cuffed jeans sipped plastic cups of red wine as improv actors enacted the roles of victims, police, and health department officials.

The installation, which consists of both objects and performances, is more a thought-experiment than doomsday-themed entertainment, the curators say. Back in August, they hosted a roundtable discussion with emergency preparedness experts, designers, writers, and an actor. They were trying to identify a harrowing scenario to explore: something relatively unlikely, but plausible—less common than, say, a flood. That's how they settled on an illness volleyed between riders on public transit.

"The simulator is not meant to be scary—it's meant to put in place something we really could face, and start to work through that situation," says Elliot Montgomery, who curated the show with Chris Woebke. "We see it in a really constructive light."

Montgomery and Woebke aren't emergency planners: they're designers. But as opposed to producing discrete solutions to tangible problems—such as a more ergonomic work station or a safer road—they tinker with abstract ideas. They're the co-founders of [The Extrapolation Factory](#), which they describe as "an imagination-based studio for design-led futures studies." The practice is based on the principles of speculative design.

In their book, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby [write](#):

[Speculative designs] usually take the form of scenarios, often starting with a what-if question, and are intended to open up spaces of debate and discussion; therefore, they are by necessity provocative, intentionally simplified, and fictional.

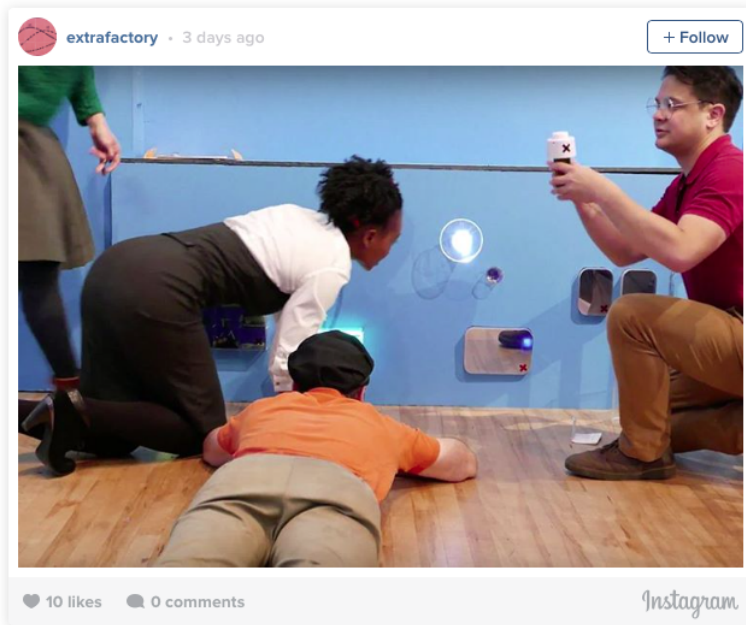
That's what the exhibition aims to do. In a [press release](#), the curators explain:

Speculative designers borrow strategies from think tanks, foresight strategists, forecasters, and trend analysts, balancing those perspectives with design approaches that allow them to develop provocative social scenarios and make the invisible visible.

And that's how we've ended up as observers in the simulation room.

Unlike [flight simulators](#) or [artificial patients](#)—both of which offer goal-oriented, hands-on training aimed at improving performance for pilots and physicians—the simulation in the exhibition has an open-ended intention. The curators hoped that the installation would, as Montgomery put it, help ask "broader questions about the emergency scenario in addition to simple, functional things, like making sure we can get batteries into our flashlights, and electricity and running water." Each performance is an opportunity to collect different viewpoints, they say, to help broaden ways of thinking about possible obstacles and outcomes.

apexart



But the organization still sometimes struggles to get people invested. "The attitude of people here, is, 'I will have enough time to prepare,' or 'This is not going to happen to me,'" says Gencheva. "We're always looking for new ways to encourage people to have some sort of emotional connection with the topic."

Speculative experiments can foster that sense of personal stakes. As Gencheva says, "Really, in New York, everything is possible."

http://www.citylab.com/design/2015/11/the-fun-way-to-prepare-for-a-disaster/414256/?utm_source=SFTwitter

To explore the possible social dynamics at play in an emergency scenario, the improv actors used tools that the curators commissioned from designers, in the photo above. One, a book created by the design duo Lost Cause, imagined what it would feel like to be a black boy singled out during a quarantine. Another imagined analog devices mounted throughout the city, dispensing information about who to contact in an emergency. Montgomery viewed these situations as a chance to investigate alternatives to get-out-of-dodge panic.

"This is not just a scenario for getting out quick or privileging the well-to-do," he says. "We've seen a lot of disasters—Katrina as a pointed example—where social justice was a problem."

Role-playing disasters is a tactic that the city's Office of Emergency Management uses, too. These can range from no-notice roundtable discussions to full-scale exercises involving volunteers and participants from numerous city agencies, explains Iskra Gencheva, Ready NY program manager. One recent activity brought staffers to Coney Island, where they simulated the aftermath of a dirty bomb.

Gencheva says these activities offer a way for the OEM to test out a specific protocol and make tweaks if necessary. (Since being battered by hurricanes and super storms, the city has already [developed a script](#) for these forecasts.)

Plus, they offer engaging, interactive ways to get people interested in disaster preparedness. The OEM disseminates information through a variety of means and media, including workshops with 2,000 citizen volunteers, and sending out newsletters and text messages. (They even have a superhero, [Ready Girl](#), who swoops into elementary schools, cape and all.)