

# interview · · · · ·

We're sitting at home in our fucking pajamas, talking to the world.

JOB SMEETS



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THE ART OF ASSET MANAGEMENT



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**»We're sitting at home in our fucking pajamas, talking to the world.«**

***Mr Smeets, I understand you are in confinement with your partner, Rebecca Sharkey. How are you coping with the situation?***

»The situation is critical and unprecedented and there will be a »before« and an »after« corona. We are currently writing history. People are dying from the virus just about everywhere. My sincere thanks go out to medical personnel who are currently fighting relentlessly to prevent the situation from worsening. The latest figures coming for example out of Milan are indeed encouraging.

Rebecca and I moved to Milan to live and work in 2019. We were now lucky enough to leave Milan in late February just before the city locked down completely, witnessing the collapse of the Italian health system. This was far from being a relaxing situation as Rebecca is nine months pregnant. We are since then self-isolating at our house in the South of Holland where I'm from. Our son is expected to be born on May 1st and will thus become one of the first members of Generation C, the Generation following the Millennials, born during and after the corona pandemic.

The current situation naturally also has its advantages and optimism is key to remaining mentally sound. What could be better than spending quality time with your partner, without the necessity to rush to the next meeting on the other side of the city or continent? Or let me put it differently: we're sitting at home in our fucking pajamas, talking to the world. Let's enjoy this beautiful, bonding experience. Don't get me wrong, if you hate your wife, this is hell. Luckily that's not my case.«

***What impact could the virus have on society?***

»I believe the pandemic will produce long-lasting positive effects. The lockdown that we're living through accelerates change in many areas of society that sucked already for years.

The representative of Generation X that I am was in fact until recently caught up between two worlds. For representatives from my generation this meant living a double life, resulting in increased stress and strain levels. We were on the one hand living by the formalism of our parents, constantly rushing in a rat race between meetings, business, social and family obligations, while we only occasionally used readily available communication technologies introduced by the internet revolution at the beginning of this century.

The confinement we're going through makes us discover that video conferencing and conference calls are really efficient tools to interact at a distance. What a surprise, that's what they were invented for! Home office as well seems to work better than the average chronically mistrustful CEO used to believe. Communication technologies will thus offer us more time that we will be able to use better than spending two days a week in an airplane or several hours a day in traffic jams.



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We will indeed become more critical with regards to the optimum use of our times. Isn't this fantastic?

Look also at the breathing space that the lockdown is currently providing to nature. Air pollution has dropped, and nature is claiming back its rights. I truly hope that the lifting of the current lockdown will not take away our current focus on taking the right long-term decisions for our Planet. After all, we know where it hurts. The attractiveness of living in city centers has already dropped. Many of my friends are now considering buying a property in the countryside. What's the use of the nicest penthouse in downtown New York when you cannot enjoy it?

Of course, as a designer I'm really glad that the lockdown finally forces people to enjoy their houses and their interiors in which they heavily invested!«

***You are not just an artist but also a successful entrepreneur. Any tips on how to navigate the economic downturn?***

»I have witnessed many crises since I launched »Studio Job« in 1998. The first crisis I lived through was the attack on the twin towers. Then came the wars in the Middle East, the subprime crisis, then Brexit and now corona. Crises come and go just like there are soft and harsh winters, good and bad summers. You however need to be financially prepared to stick with discipline to your long-term vision. Crises are obviously much more of a problem for people who already live financially on the edge in normal times.

Just like with every crisis, there is currently of course a lot of drama out there that is amongst others fueled by fake news, fear merchants and populists. My main message here is to take the long term as a horizon and go about as conservatively as possible with regards to the cash management of your companies. This includes monitoring your debt levels, diluting your shareholdership as little as possible, as well as constituting cash safety nets that you are able to invest in bad times in your businesses. Time has proven to me that to remain on the safe side these cash reserves should be 20% higher than your worst nightmares.

The current economic crisis will doubtlessly lead to many companies dropping out of business, being sold or merged into bigger conglomerates. Old systems conditioned by artificial hierarchies and heavy administrative processes will wash out. The same goes for companies running outdated business models. Government programs will help some companies, whereas it will be too late for others.

Luckily, »Studio Job« is a no risk company. It has full order books for over two years to come and will not need to apply for government help. I am a 100% shareholder of my own company and am close to debt-free. This is why I am confident for the 20+ staff I'm employing, but also for Rebecca, our son and myself.«



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***What about investment opportunities in the stock market?***

»This is the right time to take revenge on short-term speculators! Crises create wonderful opportunities for careful, conservative asset management, if you have long term cash reserves to commit and thus to invest in companies at huge discounts. However, I recommend you don't rush in and invest cash that you need in the short- to mid-term. Stock market investment is a long-term operation. My experience is that you nearly always win if you are patient enough.

But you also need to go back to basics. As an artist and designer, I prefer to focus on what I do best: creating for my clients and running my company. I don't have any hot investment recommendations with regards to stock X or Y, as this is an expert's job. This is why I work with my trusted financial advisor, to whom I delegate the management of my investment portfolio. He acts in line with my personal attitude to risk, as well as my life goals. So far, he has never disappointed me!

At the end of the day, it all boils down to one word: expertise.«

***How is the corona pandemic influencing art and designer creation?***

»Art and society are closely intertwined and what may be acceptable today may not be tomorrow. We are writing history. The current crisis is shaking the fundamentals on which the babyboomer society was built. Here I'm talking about human values and not financial market fundamentals. I would go as far as saying that Humanity already learnt more from the corona crisis today than from the subprime crisis motivated by greed and market deregulation. As a consequence, the way art and design will be perceived will evolve as there will be less space for sarcasm and cynics in artistic creation.

From a financial angle, the art market will see similar effects to those witnessed during the subprime crisis. A series of galleries will disappear and art collectors in financial difficulty will flood auction houses. This will put pressure on the evolution of art prices that performed well over the last decade.«

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