

## **The Art of the Double Take: Interviewing the Project Leaders of *Reenvisioning the Homeless***

By Sarah Matusek on May 21, 2015

Earlier this month, I attended an “interactive exhibit and dinner party” at Brightpoint Health in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights neighborhood. Led by Kristin Arnesen, Hilary Krishnan and Eva von Schweinitz, *Reenvisioning the Homeless* celebrated a values-based collaboration with former and current residents of transitional housing with the aim of “interrupting socially prescribed roles and public perception of homelessness.” The project’s creators – all alumni of Brooklyn College’s Performance and Interactive Media Arts program – reimagined classical paintings through street photography to transcendent effect. Equal parts sensitive and rebellious, the photography on view at Brightpoint Health highlighted the artful activism behind each painting’s adaptation.

With the help of funding from Brooklyn Arts Council, *Reenvisioning the Homeless* in Crown Heights was the second performative installment of a project first realized in Greenpoint in 2013. Over a festive homemade meal honoring each contributor, I was moved by the project’s embrace of the local homeless community through empowering each collaborator as an artist. Acknowledged as a spirited success by collaborators and guests alike, Arnesen, Krishnan, and Von Schweinitz have hopes for future iterations of *Reenvisioning the Homeless*. Intrigued, I reached out to the Brooklyn-based trio over email and initiated a group interview. The following is an edited version of our electronic correspondence.

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**Sarah Matusek: As fellow MFA graduates of Brooklyn College, do you three share a history as artistic collaborators?**

**Kristin Arnesen:** The [*Reenvisioning the Homeless*] project began there, and it was our first collaboration among the three of us. Even though it was our first

time working together, we formed a really close working relationship pretty much right from the start.

**Hilary Krishnan:** I think one of the most terrifying things about jumping into a collaboration like that is that you don't necessarily speak the same artistic language. You have to create your own. We would soon find out that we didn't even speak the same actual language as our future collaborators, so we pretty much created a whole new lexicon for this project. As we started digging into this project, I read this great book called *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* by Keith Sawyer— and his bottom line is: the greatest innovation comes from the most disparate ideas. I really latched onto that idea, so anytime we didn't see eye to eye on something, I thought, "something really great is coming to come out of this."

**Matusek: What were the origins of *Reenvisioning the Homeless*?**

**Eva von Schweinitz:** It started out in the spring of 2013 as part of a class [at Brooklyn College] that prompted us to go and work in/with a community, not as social workers, but with our artist identity – the definition of "community" being open to any way of interpretation. Kristin lives in Greenpoint where at the time there was an ongoing controversy around a 10-bed respite shelter that had been opened at Greenpoint Reformed Church just before the beginning of winter the previous year. There was a lot of resistance against it from residents.

Hilary, who works with a group that supports charitable organizations, had also been in contact with the church, and Hilary and Kristin started discussing this, and carried the conversation into the class. I was immediately interested in working on a project around issues of homelessness, which is something that is impossible to be ignored and yet so often looked away from. This particular case illustrated the odd contradictory stance of people's reaction to homelessness:

“Sure, these poor people, they need help, but can it be done somewhere where I don’t need to see it, where I don’t need to deal with it.”

We also wanted to confront the parts within ourselves that would react in a similar way. We began volunteering at the soup kitchen of the church and bringing food to another temporary respite shelter that was flying under the radar in one of the other churches in the area. And we started to talk to some of the men we saw in the street every day. It took us a while though to figure out how to approach the topic and the people we wanted to work with from an artistic point of view. We could tell that there was a strong desire to engage and communicate, to tell stories, to be noticed and to interact. We also found out that some of the men played instruments, so we thought about working on a performance together. But nobody wanted to give us a space to work in. It was around this time that we realized that the street was going to be our venue. We had brainstormed several ideas, and restaging classical paintings was one of them. After we took the first picture, we knew that this was going to be the project. It immediately made so much sense in so many ways.

**Krishnan:** I work with a charity organization called The Barman’s Fund, a group of bartenders that donates one shift’s tips to charity. We pool the tips and buy things for local non-profits in need. It’s really simple. The whole idea is that you don’t have to be a social worker or a doctor to do good. It’s connected me with a lot of really interesting organizations, and sparked an interest in me to explore different types of relationships with those groups. You don’t have to be trying to evoke great social change to make art with a community in need. You can just make some art and see how it changes perception.

**Matusek:** Two years later, how did you all reframe *Reenvisioning the Homeless* for the Crown Heights version?

**von Schweinitz :** The project in Greenpoint was very much about interrupting the flow of the streets, about undoing the way people saw the men they walked by every day. We were taking the photos right on Manhattan Ave. with all the usual foot traffic going. So more than being a photo project with an exhibit following, it was also a performance that focused on changing the perception of other people about our homeless collaborators, as well as the image of our collaborators about themselves. Through the photos they were able to take on a different role. This time, in Crown Heights, we worked with people who have been through very rough times, but are at a much better place in their lives now. They have overcome drugs, time in prison, and have a solid place to stay. This time the project was more about celebrating their transcendence, about pointing out and emphasizing their strength and resilience – and recontextualizing their bodies on the streets in that way. We spent more time working together to decide on images that carried all the values that were important to them individually.

**Matusek: Why the medium of photography?**

**von Schweinitz:** The camera was an instrument of documentation, but taking the photos was also very much part of the performance. We weren't doing a play turning out toward the passersby and addressing them with thoughts about homelessness. We were an unusual group immersed in working together and focused on a real task. This is a project about ways of seeing. Whatever a lens is pointed at renders value and importance to the subject that is being photographed. So naturally, the presence of a camera and the big circle silver reflector we were using drew attention. Now, you see models and actors getting their headshots done in front of a Brooklyn brick wall on a daily basis. So this one was somewhat a double take for people, because in this seemingly familiar scene, the subjects who were being photographed looked different than usual. And this combination of two things that normally don't go together, created exactly the confusion, surprise, question mark that we are interested in. People couldn't help but respond.

**Arnesen:** The primary happening, or art, happens somewhere between the live embodiment of the scenes of transcendence and acts of compassion (taken on through each person in the tableau) and the act of witnessing this embodiment by the group (and likewise the camera). For each of these tableaux to come to life, and to work, or come through in a photo, they need this symbiotic *enacting* and *witness*. I think it has something to do with the most essential place that we find what it means to be human, and that place is somewhere between our self and another.

**Matusek: How were your collaborators chosen?**

**Arnesen:** In both iterations of the project we found collaborators to work with who just generally shared our interest in exploring and communicating something about a shared human experience. The primary and really only criteria was that these people wanted to work with us, and had an interest in being part of a collaborative art project.

**Matusek: Were your collaborators compensated? What were the dynamics of the exchange?**

**von Schweinitz:** Since we received a small grant, we discussed the possibility of compensation, but quickly realized that we were uncomfortable with that. We didn't want to feel like the money was a means of persuasion for people to participate. We wanted the project itself to convince people that it was something they wanted to do. What we promised them, though, was that they would get a beautifully framed print of a photo we would take with them. None of the people that worked on this project, including ourselves, were compensated. The space of the exhibit was both times donated. Our entire budget was put towards direct expenses, such as the food props, the prints, frames, and the food for the meal at our exhibit.

**Arnesen:** We all feel strongly about the value of art, and the need for artists, their collaborators, subjects, and everyone involved in the creation of work, to be compensated for their contribution. As of yet, none of the work has been available for purchase, but as the project develops, and as it hopefully begins to generate financial support, we will definitely consider how to compensate people for their contribution, while hopefully maintaining the spirit of the project which is based on a creative and personal exchange between people which isn't primarily commercially motivated.

**Matusek:** Like any thoughtful adaptation, each of your photographs honors some original essence and likeness of the paintings, but also brings a surprising slice of contemporary life into frame. How did colorful food find its way into the compositions?

**Arnesen:** We wanted one unifying visual language, and we came around to using food because it's beautiful, colorful, nourishing, and it immediately communicates life, nature and bounty. Like the people who are the subjects in each tableau, the food stands out from the constructed, urban backgrounds of the street in a really interesting and lovely way. The living things kind of transcend the streets and transport us somewhere else, or maybe just create a kind of double-image between the streets and the nature underneath and around them. It has to do with creating that shift in perception and interruption of expectation.

**Matusek:** We see the subjects of your photographs assume power by taking on a role – they copy the posture and expressions of saints and angels, and transformation occurs. As our gaze adjusts, iconography replaces anonymity. What inspired this tactic of perception disruption?

**Arnesen:** When we started restaging works of art with strong and transcendent iconography, we discovered right away that when these people took on the posture, the hand position, the focus of the eyes [of the original paintings' subjects], there was a palpable transformation that took place. It was felt by both

the person embodying the gesture, and all of us witnessing this embodiment. With the elements of “restaging” an often known or recognizable original, where we see the original and the new version of it, and the mythic subjects of the works, where we see the icon and the person embodying that icon, there is an oscillating or doubling of perception that takes place: seeing both things at the same time or shifting from the perception of one to the other.

**Matusek: At the dinner, all guests shared one long table. I love that. More than just an aesthetic move, this mindful decision illustrated how much your team values inclusion. What other values or ethics directed your approach to the project?**

**von Schweinitz:** Agency/Ownership. It was important to us that our collaborators felt that it was their project too, and that they were included in the decision making process not only about what photo we'd take, but on other levels too. We ran things like the execution of the event, for instance, by them beforehand, and it was them who decided together that it should be lasagna and chocolate mousse on the menu (and a Polish menu in Greenpoint).

**Matusek: How have people been responding to the exhibits?**

**von Schweinitz:** The response has been very positive. Both times we welcomed a group of around 40 people to our exhibit and dinner, and within that we were very happy to see different communities overlap and interact, that otherwise would probably not engage with each other – our artist friends, friends of our collaborators from the shelter/housing project, and people from the local community that we were working in. Again, rather than just being a showcase of results, we see the event as part of the art piece.

**Matusek: What's next for *Reenvisioning the Homeless*? And how can others help?**

**Arnesen:** In the long-term, it would be incredible to do that kind of communal dinner one day on an even larger scale if we could maintain the intimacy. In the short-term, we are planning to exhibit all of the work from the Greenpoint and Crown Heights iterations together so a larger audience can experience it. We need: a gallery interested in partnering with the project and representing the work, monetary or in-kind donations to cover the cost of framing our photos from Greenpoint, and to rent large monitors and projectors to exhibit our media works. Also, a larger donation or sponsorship would enable us to produce a new chapter of the project!

**Matusek: You are clearly artists invested in social change. How would you recommend interested parties best support local homeless communities?**

**Arnesen:** Support an organization that is doing incredible work: SUS [Services for the UnderServed], Brightpoint Health, Coalition for the Homeless, and so many more. One great thing about Services for the UnderServed, which is the organization we came to all of our Crown Heights collaborators through, is that some of the work they do is getting people out of homelessness in a comprehensive long-term sense, with housing, healthcare, employment, and dignity. Emergency services are really important too, but helping people get out of homelessness is the only viable long-term solution. Beyond supporting organizations, we need to look at why homelessness is so endemic. From the lack of affordable housing, low and unlivable wages, limited access to quality healthcare, rampant incarceration, and on and on, we live in a society that values other things over people, and that's something that needs to change.