

THE RAINBOW SOULCLUB: IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTISTS SASKIA JANSSEN AND GEORGE KORSMIT

A “Free Advice” performance in which the audience asks advice from a homeless person, a free working method where there is no pressure and “nothing is necessary”, the Rainbow Soulclub is a creative collective that turns the tables. Visual artists Saskia Janssen and George Korsmit explain how the Rainbow Soulclub offers mutual opportunities for friendship and creativity, and contributes to unravelling prejudices.

[The Rainbow Soulclub](#),¹ an initiative of visual artists Saskia Janssen and George Korsmit, was established in September 2005 and involves weekly meetings and collaborative projects between artists, art students and clients of [De Regenboog Groep](#)² (The Rainbow Foundation). De Regenboog Groep provides shelter and care for homeless people and hard drugs users in Amsterdam. The encounters of the Rainbow Soulclub take place in the foundation's drop-in centers and drug consumption rooms³ and have spawned a whole spectrum of activities over recent years: painting, drawing, pasting up posters in the city, altering street nameplates (albeit illegally), making pottery, shooting videos, hypnosis sessions, providing opportunities to write letters, to cook, to design new fonts, record music, make costumes, drive campaigns, and even transmit cosmic energy.



For FEANTSA's Spring Magazine, I talked with Saskia Janssen and George Korsmit about their unique art project at the drop-in centre for homeless (addicts) in Amsterdam.

1 See also www.instagram.com/rainbowsoulclub

2 See also <https://www.deregenboog.org>

3 In Dutch this is called *een gebruikersruimte*. Not to be confused with coffee shop. It is a secluded part of the drop-in centre where it is tolerated to use hard drugs under controlled conditions, (i.e. safe and hygienic manner).

What is the Rainbow Soulclub?

"The Rainbow Soulclub is a collective that meets regularly to exchange ideas and collaborate in all kinds of areas. The starting point for these meetings is a mutual curiosity about each other's lives. We strive to do things together that we cannot do without each other. All ideas - from various angles - are seriously examined and, if possible, actually implemented together. In the past years, this has resulted in a wide variety of projects. We regularly go on field trips. We visit museums and exhibitions and we even made trips to Ghana and Suriname, where some of the members have their roots. Above all, the Rainbow Soulclub is a club based on friendship, respect and solidarity. Because we have known each other for so long, the group has a solid basis of trust. Trust is something that certainly had to grow in the beginning. What we have now is the result of long-term and constant involvement. The work of art is not the primary goal. Being together and doing things together are paramount."

What project did you like most, or was most meaningful to you?

"In 2011 we made a trip to Accra, Ghana, that was very special. We traveled with 11 Soulclubbers to help the Bokemei Foundation. The foundation built a school and knowledge center for disadvantaged children in a suburb of Accra. Just before the school opened we painted it and also made various murals. For some Rainbow Soulclub members it was very valuable, to swap roles and become the helper instead of being the 'client' or somebody in need of help. The idea to travel to Ghana came from Rainbow Soulclub member Ebby. He was born in Ghana but lived in the Netherlands for many years and wanted to do something for his country despite his addiction."



What can people with homes learn from homeless people?

"Homeless people, or rather we say "people experiencing homelessness" are good at improvising, going with the flow and adjusting plans when needed. They have to, because often they live from day to day or week to week. They do not have the luxury to look at life with a long term perspective. And they are good at putting things into perspective. Something that seems a huge disaster to us, is only 'a minor issue' for them. There are worse things in life.

Furthermore, we find that prejudices evaporate when you meet people in person and actually talk to them. When students or other guests enter a drop-in centre for the first time, they often feel a bit uncomfortable, or wary, or maybe even a little scared. That is especially true about the drug user space, but usually they get a warm reception. Clients of the drop-in center are good hosts. They offer coffee and a chair and are surprisingly open to conversation. We like you to experience first and foremost that homeless people are like you and me. People who have taken or had to take a turn somewhere in life. This often puts them in a place where it is very difficult to return from.

We have a performance explicitly about "learning from the homeless" that we perform on a regular basis. It is called *Free Advice*. Members of the Rainbow Soulclub are seated somewhere with two stools and a *Free Advice* sign that invites you to take a seat at the empty stool. Once seated, individuals from the audience are offered a free "advice session". You can get free advice in various areas: about life in general, but also, for example, financial advice, about love, or philosophical questions. Different members of the Rainbow Soulclub each have their own specialties, expertise and life experience. The underlying idea for this performance is both simple and effective: we



We strive to do things together that we cannot do without each other.”

again turn the tables. A homeless person becomes the ‘counsellor’, you take part in the conversation as the ‘client’. There is a lot you can learn from a homeless person. Although these conversations are completely confidential, we regularly get great feedback from the public that the free advice they were given was food for thought. When you look at all the [pairs] exchanging matters of the heart, as an outsider you can no longer see who is homeless and who is not, and that it doesn’t matter what you are, it’s about the conversations.”

What are the most important lessons the two of you learned from Rainbow Soulclub members?

“Saskia: I had more than one insight, but the first thing that comes to mind is the following: Rainbow Soulclub member Govert made a beautiful book himself. It contained hundreds of pages of meticulously handwritten texts and drawings. It was a whole system. It was really beautiful, a life’s work that he had been working on for years and which he had carried with him every day. One day it disappeared from the table in the drop-in centre when he went to the toilet. It

was taken or thrown away by someone, we still don’t know. For a moment the grief was great, but after a day Govert decided that it was as it was and that there was nothing else to do than just let it go and start over with good courage and without a trace of bitterness. It was letting go with a capital L!

“George: One of the things that always strikes me is the solidarity within the group. I have seen so many times that when someone who is in a very difficult situation himself has the strength to do something for someone else. For example, to share a last plate of food or to give away a nice coat. We also sometimes hear from clients that they experience more solidarity now than before they were in this situation. Even if you have little, even then it is possible to share with those who have even less.”

What advice would you like to give to people who want to use art as a method to come into better contact with homeless people and want to make the world more inclusive?

“The most important thing you have to be aware of, is that it is necessary to commit to a group of people or a location for a longer period of time. Building mutual trust and friendship is of key importance and cannot be done in a short time. You have to be open minded, non-judgmental and you have to leave your agenda behind. Do not try to reach any goals. These people already have so much to do and so many things on their mind. Take the time to find out together what special things can happen and always listen carefully to the ideas that come from the clients, even if they seem impossible to implement.

We would also like to stress that we are not social workers or caregivers. We are not the managers of the Rainbow Soulclub and we do not want to be managers. We do not sell paintings of the homeless. And although we are both also teachers at art academies, our role is not to teach art in the walk-in house. We do not have the intention to teach anyone anything and we do not expect to get anything in return.

Nothing is necessary. There is no pressure and there is no purpose behind the Rainbow Soulclub, also very importantly, there is no agenda. The Rainbow Soulclub is about making contact, real contact. And that takes time. It takes as long as it takes for one to change their perceptions of people without homes from strange 'homeless addicts' into 'people just like us'."

www.instagram.com/rainbowsoulclub

A short film about and by the Rainbow Soulclub can be seen at:
<https://vimeo.com/465708622>



“One of the things that always strikes me is the solidarity within the group. I have seen so many times that when someone who is in a very difficult situation himself has the strength to do something for someone else.”