

SEBASTIAAN BREMER

Britanny Joyce, 'Social Design: Two Monks and an Artist Are Re-viving Community in Greenpoint, Brooklyn', *Paste* magazine, 7th March 2017

# Paste



Photograph courtesy of Sanctuary, by Marc de Groot

Dutch artist Sebastiaan Bremer is working to build a sanctuary in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Hailing from Amsterdam, Bremer moved to New York 25 years ago, making it his home. He lives and works in the neighborhood, his studio situated at the cozy intersection of Banker and N 15th. Across the street, sits the San Damiano Mission Church. Originally riding the line between church and community center, one day Bremer noticed the church's old wooden doors were replaced with inviting glass ones. No doubt curious, Bremer walked in, finding two Franciscan monks that are working to renovate the space, as well as bring it back to its initial goal—community.

That's when Sanctuary was born. Bremer, alongside the two monks and entire community, really, has taken over the space to hold a two-week long multimedia event. In tandem with the Armory Show, Sanctuary is a full-blown art experience, featuring films, talks and concerts.

A strong believer in the power of art and community, as well as a Greenpoint resident myself, I met Bremer at the church on a rainy weekday morning. But while I had just

rolled out of bed a few blocks away, I was immediately energized meeting Bremer. And it wasn't just the coffee we picked up across the street at Sanctuary supporter and independent online radio station The Lot Radio. It was Bremer's energy. Day two of the event, the greyness of the day was immediately overturned by artists inside the church working, prepping and playing.

Walking in, I was greeted with an immersive inflatable sculpture by artist Lee Boroson, which we walked through to get to Bremer's workspace. His prints filled the room alongside Catholic figurines, and he added paint to his prints as he excitedly told me what was in store, which included several special things the crew had built in the church's main area. The actual confessionals had been swapped out with restrooms, a makeshift confessional instead built nearby. Just one of the things making Sanctuary unique, the confessional was a collaborative effort between several artists, including The Breeders' Josephine Wiggs, who joined us on our tour of the space. This is where I officially threw all of my stereotypical ideas about a church out the window.

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Instead of finding a priest inside, I found a cozy room complete with a evergreen cot, cream-colored shag rug and colorful faux stained glass windows. Ambient music, composed by Wiggs, played through a pair of locally built speakers, and a video of Muir Woods looped on the ceiling. Bremer explained that the unique confessional was meant to ask questions within yourself, as opposed to another, a priest. Actually, the entire space was filled with self-reflection—an adjacent structure read “Booth for Isolation (One Person) or Romance (Two Persons Tightly) Step Inside and Close Door.” But these are only a few of the boundaries Bremer and the monks are pushing. “Church is only a successful church if used outside of service,” he told me.

It was after checking out the confessional that Wiggs pointed out the transformative power of the space. The church, which was decked out with green and purple lights, could be brought back to “normal” with the flip of a switch, and traditional services could take place. That ability was encouraging, literally illustrating the banner above the door, reading, “Everything, Everyone.” It’s refreshing, especially in the art world, which is so quickly labeled exclusive or pretentious. Sanctuary is none of that. In fact, it fights for the opposite.

After showing me the space, Bremer took me across the

street to his studio. First, he showed me where several of the churches old pews had been moved to make room for a new pipe organ, just one of the renovations taking place at the church. We laughed as he uncovered a lifesize figure of Jesus nearby. “Everything has this symbolic sort of quality,” he said, leading me up the stairs to his actual studio. Stacks of prints sat on a table, photographs were tacked to the wall and a floorplan of the church sat by the door, further illustrating Bremer’s investment in the project. His love of what he does was unavoidable, and he explained that he had made a special batch of prints for the event, proceeds benefitting the homeless program. At one point, he smiled, saying, “Let’s bring the magic back in.” We made our way back across the street to the church where Bremer flipped a switch near the back of the sanctuary. Tiny snowflakes filled the air.

And that’s exactly what Sanctuary’s about. Through the magic of art, Bremer is working to bring all aspects of community together. Sanctuary runs through March 17, and so far, includes a performance by Kaki King, a series of talks hosted by Kickstarter, JoJo Abot (currently opening for Lauryn Hill), multiple film screenings, a comedy night with Aparna Nancharla and Jo Firestone and a Popgun Presents night.