

ARTnews
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By Maximiliano Durón
June 29, 2026

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Swiss Institute director Stefanie Hessler (left) with her team outside the organization's forthcoming home at 250 Bowery. PHOTO LEE MARY MANNING/COURTESY SWISS INSTITUTE NEW YORK

SI

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Free and open to the public

The New York–based **Swiss Institute** has acquired the ground floor and lower level of 250 Bowery, which will become its permanent home when it opens in spring 2027.

In an interview, Swiss Institute director Stefanie Hessler described the move as a “new chapter” in the institution’s history as it celebrates its 40th anniversary. The organization had been looking for about 2.5 years for a new home while also securing the funds needed to purchase the space.

“We wanted to find a space that matches the profile of Swiss Institute,” Hessler said, noting that it was important that the new location “has that downtown feel and character to it that will allow us to show forward-looking exhibitions and invite artists for their first solos and to really bring those international as well as New York perspectives to the Institute.”

The Swiss Institute’s new location once housed the International Center of Photography and is a few minutes’ walk to the New Museum. “We’re excited to take that space over and, with the remodel, to turn it into Swiss Institute,” she added.

The Bowery site will be Swiss Institute’s sixth location since its founding in 1986 by a group of Swiss patrons and the artists they supported. The organization started in a townhouse in the Upper West Side before moving downtown in 1994, first to SoHo, then to Tribeca, and finally to St. Marks in the East Village, where it opened in 2018.

“For forty years, SI has demonstrated how an independent institution can shape contemporary culture through a deep commitment to artists and experimentation,” Maja Hoffmann, board president and one of the world’s top collectors, said in a statement. “Establishing a permanent home at 250 Bowery secures SI’s position for future generations, creating a lasting space for creativity, international exchange, and community-building. At a moment when cultural institutions are being challenged to evolve, this next chapter reflects SI’s belief in the power of art to inspire new ways of thinking.”

With the move, the aim is to keep up the momentum that Swiss Institute has established in recent years that has made it one of New York’s most closely watched nonprofit art spaces, where exhibitions of “emerging artists and overlooked positions, and experimental, forward-thinking art-making” are at the center, as Hessler characterized it.

The current exhibitions at the St. Marks space, on view through July 5, will be the last in that location, though the organization won’t pause its programming. Earlier this month, it opened a group exhibition titled “Regift” at Luma Westbau in Zurich, and in the fall, it will mount “Kino East,” an off-site project by Zurich-based, Polish artist Rafał Skoczek.

For the next several months, the Bowery location will undergo a renovation by Los Angeles–based architecture firm Johnston Marklee, which has transformed Roy Lichtenstein’s studio into the permanent home of the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, updated the Kunstmuseum Basel in Switzerland, and designed the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston.

The new location will also see its footprint grow by about 4,000 square feet to 11,000 square feet. While that is a benefit of the new space, Hessler said it was most important that the permanent home be “a place that can support an artist’s vision and that can continue to be artist-centric,” as well as a space that could be flexible and reconfigured for each exhibition.

The Bowery space also has a series of large windows that Hessler sees as an “opportunity to engage with the city and with the neighborhood” via artist interventions that can act as a “membrane between the exhibition space and the street.”

Connecting to the local community has also become a focus of the Swiss Institute as of late. In September 2024, Hessler organized “Energies,” which looked at a “largely forgotten yet influential piece of neighborhood history,” per the exhibition description. Its reference point was a co-op in the East Village where its inhabitants installed a wind turbine and solar panels on their rooftop to generate their own electricity during an oil crisis in the 1970s. In addition to the archival research and oral histories produced for the show, “Energies” also featured the work of contemporary artists whose works “think about the social, ecological, technological, political dimensions of energy,” Hessler said.

To inaugurate its permanent home, Swiss Institute will mount a group exhibition titled “The Environment” that will involve a series of artist commissions that respond to a project by experimental filmmaker Bud Wirschafter in which he gave downtown New Yorkers 16mm cameras and he “asked them to self-represent and self-document their environment or what they felt was important about their environment,” Hessler said. “At that time, of course, few people had access to cameras, and so the films that came out of it were really a beautiful testimony to the concerns of people in the neighborhood, but also how they saw their own lives, how they wanted to be represented.” The resulting films were projected on building facades around the community.

“The Environment” will “revisit the methodology” of Wirschafter’s project during a time when “we all have access to cameras,” Hessler said. For her, the question now becomes about what does it actually mean to express what’s important to one’s environment at a time where these technologies don’t necessarily make processes more democratic or equitable.”

Instead, the commissioned artists will work with communities where they are based or in New York to create works in various mediums—moving-image, installation, performance, public art—that “respond to these contemporary questions: What constitutes our environment? Who has access to it? Who shapes it? Whose voices get heard and whose do not?”