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Stefanie Hessler's Vision for Swiss Institute's New Permanent Bowery Home

The move to 250 Bowery marks a major new chapter for the experimental New York kunsthalle, expanding its footprint and giving it a permanent home for the first time in its 40-year history.

By Elisa Carollo



Swiss Institute recently announced its move to a new permanent home at 250 Bowery in New York City. Photo by Lee Mary Manning. Courtesy Swiss Institute New York.

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Free and open to the public

Over four decades, Swiss Institute has built a reputation as one of New York's most experimental, research-driven institutions, having introduced many international artists to U.S. audiences. Earlier this week, the institution announced its relocation from its beloved longtime home on St. Marks Place in the East Village, following the acquisition of the ground floor and lower level of 250 Bowery. The move marks the first time in its 40-year history that the institution has owned its own space, which will allow for more long-term and context-specific thinking. With a renovation led by Johnston Marklee—the internationally acclaimed architecture firm already behind the Menil Drawing Institute, the MCA Chicago renovation and Marian Goodman Gallery in Los Angeles—SI's new venue will expand its footprint from approximately 7,000 square feet to 11,000 square feet. "The increased square footage will allow us to better serve artists, and the renovation with Johnston Marklee will turn the space into a flexible, sustainable platform for artistic experimentation," director Stephanie Hessler told Observer.

In moving to the Bowery, Swiss Institute joins an expanding local ecosystem of cultural institutions anchored by the recently reopened New Museum, as well as Giorno Poetry Systems, Participant Inc. and other galleries and organizations. "As we're moving closer to the downtown scene, we will also continue our collaborations with partner organizations and local communities," Hessler said. The move will also position SI within the rich artistic history that unfolded on the Bowery, where artists including Eva Hesse, Mark Rothko and Wade Guyton lived and worked. "David Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983) was staged on the Bowery; Nan Goldin, Martha Rosler, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and so many others have made work in the vicinity."

SI's first exhibition after reopening will revisit a locally rooted artistic project from the 1960s through newly commissioned works by international artists. Titled "The Environment," the show takes its starting point from an art-historical project on the Lower East Side. "In the 1960s, the filmmaker Bud Wirschafter handed 16-millimeter cameras to local communities and asked them to self-document," Hessler explains. "At that time, few people had access to cameras. The resulting films were projected onto building facades, allowing people who were often underrepresented to see themselves and their films shown on a large scale in public space."

Through seven new commissions by contemporary artists, the show will revisit some of the questions raised by that pioneering project of community engagement and co-production, including more critical ones regarding social practice. Some of the works will be moving-image pieces; others will take the form of installations, performances and a video game. "Today, when many people have access to cameras on our phones, the media sphere doesn't lend itself to better representation or a more equitable and democratic shaping of the public sphere," Hessler reflects. "The exhibition centers methodologies of dialogue and negotiation as constituents of the public sphere in a time of deep social, political, environmental, and technological ruptures." The show will be both locally inspired and shaped by an international roster of artists, each contributing new work and translating the globally minded perspective required by today's complex present.

The inaugural exhibition continues Swiss Institute's close engagement with the place and community it inhabits, while connecting those concerns to wider global conversations—something the institution had already explored last year with "Energies," a thoughtful multilevel show that revisited a pivotal history of community-driven sustainability action. During the 1973 oil crisis, one of New York City's first equity co-ops, at 519 E. 11th Street, installed a two-kilowatt wind turbine paired with solar panels. Combining archival materials and works by various artists displayed at Swiss Institute and at off-site locations, the exhibition fostered an open dialogue about potential solutions to the current ecological and energy crises. On the rooftop terrace, Haroon Mirza's large solar panel sculpture echoed the 1970s energy experiment by powering other works in the exhibition, while a monumental mural by Otobong Nkanga engaged directly with the current residents of the building where the original co-op community once stood. A rich, community-wide public program accompanied the show and related initiatives.

A key goal of the relocation, Hessler specifies, is to continue offering an expansive public and educational program—always free—in addition to exhibitions. Swiss Institute was founded in 1986 as an independent nonprofit contemporary art institution with an international ethos, aiming to create a bridge between Switzerland and the United States. From its first location in a townhouse on West 67th Street to 495 Broadway in SoHo in 1994, 18 Wooster Street in SoHo in 2011, 102 Franklin Street in Tribeca in 2016 and most recently 38 St. Marks Place in the East Village in 2018, each chapter has shaped SI's evolving identity.

In more recent years, Swiss Institute has functioned as a globally minded stage for experimentation and research, introducing many international artists to U.S. audiences while engaging with some of the most pressing issues of our time. "Since our founding as an independent institution, this mission has expanded, mirroring the increasingly globalized world and art world," Hessler acknowledges, emphasizing how SI's international identity and its mission of supporting emerging and underrecognized artists have only grown stronger and will become increasingly important in the future. "While we stay true to our history of having been founded by Swiss patrons in 1986, we also mirror the globalized world and negotiate important questions," she adds, pointing as an example to their critical examination of issues of land through the *These Seasons* public program series, as well as questions of public space that resonate here in New York as much as internationally.

To Hessler, the fact that Swiss Institute was founded from the outset as an international institution places it "in a distinctive position to foster international conversations while being locally embedded in the New York art scene." It also intends to grow its partnerships with like-minded institutions, both smaller and larger, as a key strategy for supporting artistic production while maintaining sustainability. SI's artist-in-residence programs further contribute to international dialogue, offering artists a three-month stay in the city that often results in future opportunities. "We'll continue our artist-centered mission and invite artists to shape the institution in the way that we did with the curatorial project *Spora*, which asked artists to change the physical infrastructure and processes of SI to make us more environmentally conscious," Hessler says. "SI is a nimble institution, and the new building will give us the sustainable framework to be responsive to artists and their ideas."

Hessler envisions the institution's new chapter as placing even greater emphasis on timely themes such as environmental questions, while exploring their intersections with social and technological change. "Artists respond to the pressures they're experiencing, and as a contemporary institution, we will continue to support their work," she says, pointing to a recently closed exhibition by SoiL Thornton, "*Metabolizing eviction try, work_mp3 and other games of topping*," centered on the artist's experience of facing eviction and addressing questions of affordability and artist economies that have become particularly pressing in the city. "SI will stay true to its core and our mission of following artists' vision and fostering international dialogue, while also agilely adapting our priorities in the future," Hessler emphasizes.

The plan is to open the new space in spring 2027. While renovations are underway, SI will continue its programming through off-site exhibitions in New York and internationally. In fall 2026, SI will present the off-site exhibition *Kino East* by Rafał Skoczek, transforming a disused commercial space into a site for gathering and exchange—part cinema, part bookstore, part venue. The recently opened *Regift* exhibition, co-curated with John Miller at Luma Westbau in Zurich and also a fundraiser celebrating SI's 40th anniversary, is on view until September 6.

At a time when many art institutions are forced to rethink their role while operating from a particularly fragile position—financially and politically, especially in the United States—Hessler remains persuaded that a *kunsthalle* like Swiss Institute, long characterized by an international spirit, needs to remain a space of open experimentation, confrontation and exchange: "This freedom is crucial for artists, always but especially at this moment."