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Explores the Power of Community
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'Energies' at Swiss Institute Explores the Power of Community

The exhibition features influential historical works and new commissions that explore the ways people come together to tackle ecological and socio-political challenges.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 10/12/24 8:00am





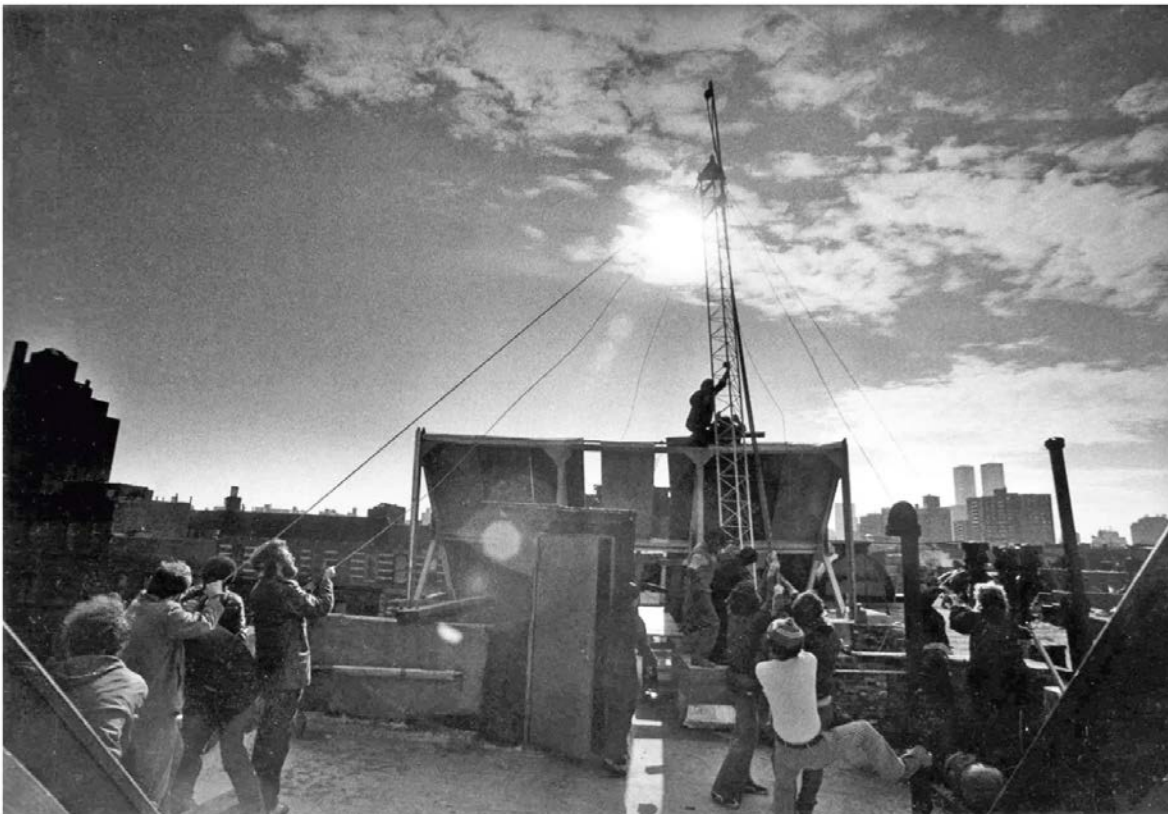
“Energies” is an international group exhibition at the Swiss Institute and numerous partner locations in the surrounding East Village community. Photo Daniel Perez

At a time when the climate crisis dominates public discourse but concrete solutions remain elusive, a new exhibition, “Energies,” at the Swiss Institute in New York revisits a pivotal history of community-driven sustainability actions that made a real impact in the neighborhood. The exhibition centers on an episode from the 1973 oil crisis when the city’s first equity co-op at 519 W 11th Street installed a two-kilowatt wind turbine paired with solar panels. This setup not only powered the building but also fed electricity back to the grid in a moment of continuous power cuts. Con Edison (ED), seeing this as a challenge to its almost absolute monopoly, threatened legal action, but with support from the Attorney General, the co-op unexpectedly won the case. This victory forced all utility companies to accept decentralized energy production, reshaping the rules for energy generation.

“We felt it was very visionary, not only for the time, but also being in this very urban context of New York, of the Lower East Side, or what is now known as the East Village,” Stefanie Hessler, one of the exhibition’s curators, told Observer. Hessler, alongside the team at the Swiss Institute, found people involved with this history and unearthed extensive documentation, including lawsuit files and letters from Con Edison, which, as she notes, “made concessions, but reluctantly.”

Through archival materials and works by various artists displayed at the Swiss Institute and offsite locations, the exhibition fosters an open dialogue on potential solutions to the current ecological and energy crisis. It also highlights the power of community-driven initiatives. As Hessler recounted, “One person, an architect named Travis Price, was invited to testify before Congress, which helped generate the 1978 Public Utilities Regulatory Policies Act.” She was struck by how this group of activists—comprising recent graduates from Yale and MIT in fields like engineering, architecture, and urban planning—managed to enact meaningful change across the United States.

The exhibition also explores the complex intersections between green energy and social justice, featuring historical works and new commissions that examine the socio-political implications of ecological and energy issues at both local and global levels.



In 1973, during the oil crisis, residents of the sweat equity co-op at 519 E 11th Street installed a groundbreaking two-kilowatt wind turbine, providing electricity and lighting for the community amid widespread power outages. Photo Travis Prince

Atop the Swiss Institute, [Haroon Mirza](#)'s large solar panel sculpture echoes the 1970s energy experiment by powering other works in the exhibition, including Méret Oppenheim's semi-permanent audio installation and [Ash Arder](#)'s ephemeral butter-based sculpture housed in a refrigerator. The piece alludes to the Dyson sphere, a sci-fi concept from 1937 describing a massive sphere in space that harvests vast amounts of solar energy, reflecting speculative approaches to reimagining not just technology but its application.

"Energies" spans local and global concerns, addressing energy inequalities tied to socio-economic dependencies. [Jean Katambayi Mukendi](#)'s *Afrolampe* (2021) highlights the disparity in energy access, using the example of Lumbashi, a copper-rich city that suffers frequent power outages while its resources are funneled to the Global North for renewable energy production, even as Africa deals with insufficient energy provision. Similarly, Ximena Garrido-Lecca, a vocal advocate for Peru's Indigenous culture and well-known for her works tracking the impact of natural resource exploitation on different social groups, explores the devastating effects of foreign mining policies in her two-channel video *Yacimientos* (2013), which documents the long-term environmental degradation and social displacement caused by U.S. extractivist practices.

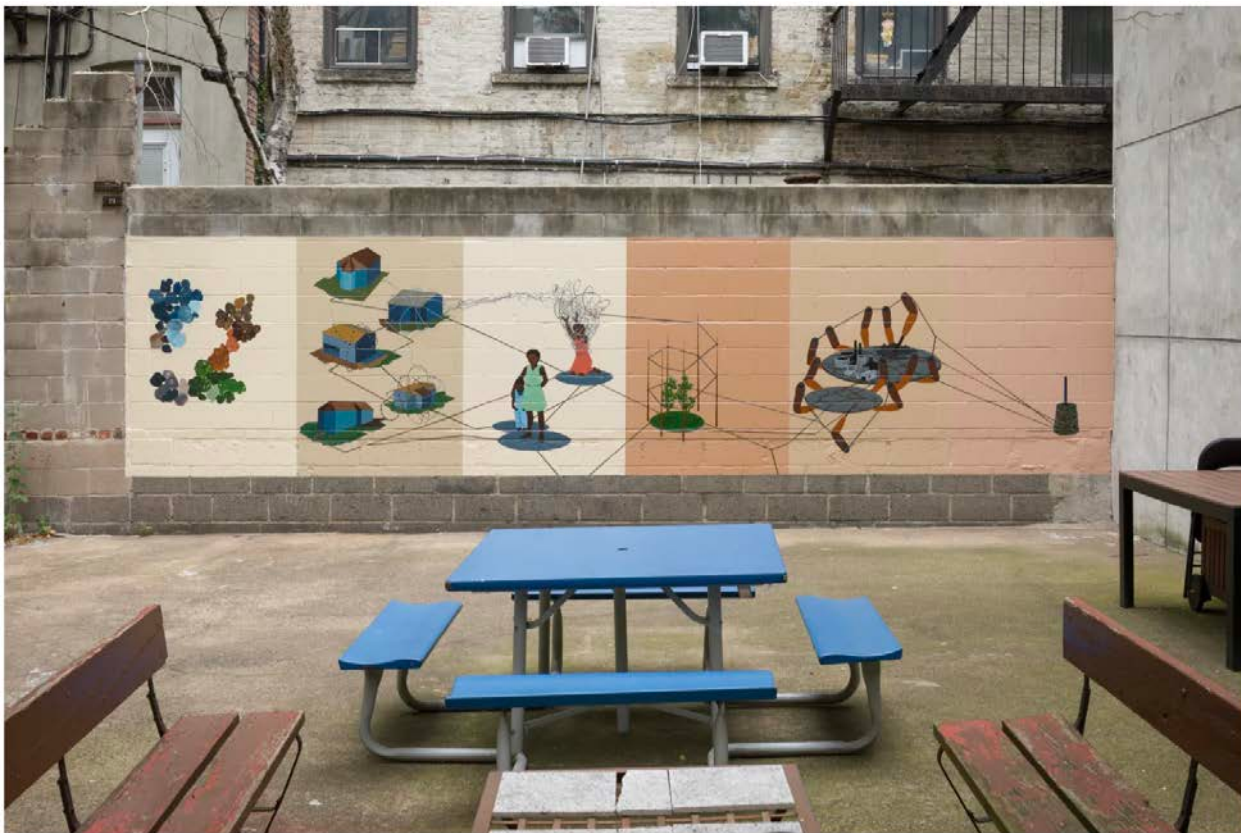
"It was important for us to look both at a very local history and context, the one that we are in at Swiss Institute and to extend outward and connect to other geographies and locals as well," Hessler said. The relations between industrialization, global trade and energy consumption and disruption are further explored in [Liu Chuang](#)'s single-channel video *Untitled (The Festival)*, which portrays the rapid decline of Dongguan, China's "world's factory," as it shifts from traditional manufacturing to high-tech electronics and A.I., with the artist metaphorically depicting its return to primordial energy sources like fire amid abandoned factories. [Vibeke Mascini](#)'s provocative installation *Instar* (2024) makes the energy generated from burning confiscated cocaine and crystal meth in Rotterdam perceptible, critically examining the links between extractive economies and their geopolitical impacts.



"Energies" explores global energy-related issues through a lens rooted in local history. Photo Daniel Perez

Some artists in the show advocate for a return to Indigenous technologies, seeing them as a more sustainable and symbiotic alternative to current development models. Joar Nango, an architect and artist of Sámi descent, exemplifies this with his installation *Skievvar #2* (2024), a structure made of translucent, dried halibut stomachs, a material traditionally used by Sámi communities for its insulating properties in construction. Sharing this belief in ancestral technologies, Cannupa Hanska Luger presents his water shields, first created for a performance supporting the Standing Rock water protectors, used as a peaceful form of protest to defend land. According to Hessler, Hanska Luger plans to further explore this project in the exhibition, placing additional shields around Mirza's solar panel as a speculative way to "amplify" the captured energy. "He proposed using mirror shields to share energy across the neighborhood's rooftops. This is a speculative project, it wouldn't work, but I love how artists make us think differently about what might be possible. Cannupa suggests that a more communal approach to energy creation could reshape how we view building ownership and who can generate energy. It's a very speculative but also very positive approach." The Lower East Side Art Center is currently working on developing Hanska Luger's proposal.

One of the most inspiring aspects of this exhibition is how it extends beyond the Swiss Institute, potentially engaging public spaces and connecting this rich recent history to present-day communities still fighting for these causes. The show also features seminal works by pioneers of “institutional critique” art, such as Gordon Matta-Clark, including drawings from his *Energy Tree* project, which eventually led him to plant a rosebush in an enclosure at St. Mark’s Church as a gesture of land regeneration. To commemorate the exhibition, a new rosebush has been replanted at the original site. “We found the enclosure, but the rosebush was gone, so we replanted it in the churchyard, and we’re also exhibiting his original drawings alongside his 1976 proposal for a Resource Center and Environmental Youth he made for the John for the Lower East Side in 1976, to show his involvement and activation of the neighborhood,” Hessler explained.



Otobong Nkanga, *Social Consequences I: Segregation – Encroaching Barricade – Entangled – Endangered Species – Rationed Measures – Intertwined*. Photo Daniel Perez

One of the major large-scale projects involving the neighborhood, and specifically the current residents of the building where the original co-op community at 519 E 11th Street once stood, is a mural conceived by internationally celebrated artist Otobong Nkanga, titled *Social Consequences I: Segregation – Encroaching Barricade – Entangled – Endangered Species – Rationed Measures – Intertwined* (2009-2024). “We had a lot of conversations with everybody to ensure that what their needs were and what they felt they wanted was being met,” said Hessler. “Eventually, together with the artist, we proposed this mural, and I loved it.” In keeping with Nkanga’s practice, which often reveals complex systems of interdependencies, the mural presents a diagrammatic scheme illustrating the existential links between human systems and nature.

This is just one of many interventions and initiatives in this rich exhibition program, presented in partnership with various local organizations. Another is the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space in a squat on Avenue C, also known as Lozada Avenue, which organized an exhibition documenting neighborhood activism in terms of environmental justice in the neighborhood. “Then there’s another location, the Loizada Inc, a Puerto Rican community center, and their exhibition *Equilibrium* is about citizen engagement and activation of environmental knowledge building in the neighborhood,” Hessler added. “I think it’s essential to acknowledge this and the existing community. A whole symposium and public program are happening throughout the fall, and the program is ongoing. It’s all on our website, and there’s a map in the booklet distributed at the exhibition.”

“Energies” is on view at the Swiss Institute through January 5th, 2025. The entire program is also available on the Swiss Institute website.