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Village via the Swiss Institute  
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**'Energies' and Beyond**  
**Exploring the East Village via the Swiss Institute**

John Hill | 13. September 2024



New Affiliates built a wall from discarded architectural elements sourced from exhibitions across the city to display archival materials in the Swiss Institute's first-floor gallery as part of *Energies*, September 11, 2024 – January 5, 2025. (All photographs by John Hill/World-Architects)

***Energies*, the new exhibition that opened at the Swiss Institute in Manhattan's East Village on September 11, invites visitors to explore other parts of the neighborhood related to the exhibition's themes of “ecological affordances and effects, social formations, and political arrangements attached to energy past and present.” World-Architects visited a day after the exhibition opened.**

Curated by Swiss Institute (SI) director Stefanie Hessler with a small team of SI curators, *Energies* was inspired by something that happened nearby more than fifty years ago. In 1973, in the midst of the oil crisis, inhabitants of the once torched and abandoned building at 519 East 11th Street, just a few blocks east of SI, installed a two-kilowatt wind turbine and solar panels on the building's roof. Notably, the turbine was the first to be installed in New York City and the building became one of the first sweat equity co-ops in the city. More important to

history and the current exhibition is the fact Con Edison, the near-monopoly provider of power in the city, sued the co-op — and lost, forcing Con Edison to buy back electricity generated at the building and forever changing US energy regulations.



519 East 11th Street and its side yard today

The turbine and solar panels are gone, but the building on East 11th Street is marked with a plaque to educate passersby about the important role its occupants played in local and national history and the way the installation fit within the larger countercultural ethos of East Village and Lower East Side residents. Furthermore, a wall at the back of the building's side yard is the setting for a mural by Otobong Nkanga, installed as one of the partner events accompanying *Energies*. A visit to the group exhibition, which occupies all three floors of SI as well as its rooftop, is rewarding, but it is incomplete; one does not fully grasp the show's message without exploring other parts of the community. In the words of the curatorial team, “The exhibition sprawls from SI into the East Village, sending metaphoric electric impulses through the neighborhood.”



Otobong Nkanga's mural, *Social Consequences I: Segregation – Encroaching Barricade – Entangled – Endangered Species – Rationed Measures – Intertwined*, is visible from the street but can be seen up close on selected Saturdays in September.

I tackled *Energies* in something of a reverse order, using a PDF of the exhibition guide to take in some of the listed partner sites before ending up at the museum. I started at the residential building at 519 East 11th Street, on one of many tree-lined blocks in the now heavily gentrified yet still artsy East Village. Although its side yard was closed when I walked by, it will open to the public on Saturdays in September, and guided tours of the rooftop will also be held in conjunction with the exhibition. The plaque on the front of the building explains that some of the burned beams from the building were reused in a nearby community garden — one of many that dot the neighborhood — and points out how the 1970s renewable energy project was part of the “Loisaida movement for cultural and social empowerment” that was made up of numerous groups, including CHARAS, the arts nonprofit that, among other doings, actually built a geodesic dome on a nearby vacant lot in 1972 under the guidance of R. Buckminster Fuller. (The dome, like the wind turbine and solar panels, is a thing of the past.)



*Returning CHARAS Back to the Community* is a small exhibition presented alongside numerous permanent exhibitions at the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS).

A few blocks away from the residential building that inspired the exhibition is another partner site, the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), located in a storefront space on Avenue C. Without its name, one would have a hard time describing the storefront space and its crowded basement as a museum. The small CHARAS exhibition, for instance, is mounted on a wall and door at the rear of the shallow storefront space in a manner that is more akin to a middle school presentation than a museum. Downstairs, the permanent exhibitions on community gardens, bicycle activism, Occupy Wall Street, and other related subjects are not much different, with color printouts, wall text, and occasional artworks covering the brick walls, doors, and even stair treads. But it works: it is entirely fitting the museum's grassroots, community-activist subject matter as well as the neighborhood it sits within. (Coinciding with *Energies* is MoRUS's 12th Annual Outdoor Film Festival, which highlights urban grassroots efforts toward creating a sustainable city and combating climate change. The film festival takes place September 19–22 at various green spaces in the neighborhood.)

There are two other partner events in the Alphabet City side of the East Village, but since they weren't open yet I cut through Tompkins Square Park — often described as the heart of the

neighborhood — in the direction of the Swiss Institute. Even before reaching the park, I came across a few of the beautiful community gardens the neighborhood is known for. Two sizable ones are within a block of MoRUS: the 9th Street Community Garden is right across the street and La Plaza Cultural de Armando Perez Community Garden is a half block down Avenue C.



Nearby MoRUS is La Plaza Cultural de Armando Perez Community Garden. In 2003, La Plaza was renamed in memory of Armando Perez, a CHARAS founder and former District Leader of the Lower East Side who was killed in 1999.

But before ending up at SI, I stopped off to look at another green space, at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, the 1799 church that was the setting for a small artistic intervention by Gordon Matta-Clark. In 1972, the artist known for cutting holes in the sides of derelict buildings placed a rosebush in a specially created steel cage as part of the church's Preservation Youth Project. While the intervention seems minor, the youth project involved the larger, much-needed clean up of the church's grounds and eventually led the artist to propose *A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida*, which “sought to establish a community center for youth to learn about architecture, systemic issues concerning housing equity, and environmental challenges,” per SI, which displays Matta-Clark's proposal in its second-floor gallery.



Gordon Matta-Clark installed *Rosebush* near the front steps of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery in 1972. For *Energies*, the rosebush was replanted in Matta-Clark's custom steel enclosure.

*Energies* includes work by nearly twenty artists spread across three floors of its building and its rooftop. As the Matta-Clark piece indicates, the work is not all contemporary; much of it is, but some of it dates back to the 1970s, contemporaneous with the turbine installation. The first thing museum visitors encounter is actually archival research — photographs, newspaper clippings, drawings — related to the rooftop at 519 East 11th Street. Fittingly, the materials are mounted on a wall that New Affiliates made with architectural materials discarded from exhibitions around

New York. So, although the theme of the exhibition and the artworks on display are global, its roots are local and are clearly expressed across this wall. “In our current moment of ecological crisis marked by record-high rates of carbon emissions, habitat destruction through fossil fuel extraction, infrastructure disruptions due to extreme weather, competing geopolitical interests, energy poverty, and contentions around green colonialism,” the curators write, “*Energies* explores global issues related to energy through a specific lens rooted in local history.”



Haroon Mirza's *Oscillations for Caduceus* (2024) on the rooftop of the Swiss Institute as part of *Energies*.

The nonprofit Swiss Institute occupies a building from 1954 that was formerly a bank and was transformed by Annabelle Selldorf in 2018. It is on the rooftop terrace where the exhibition's most interesting contribution is found. Haroon Mirza's *Oscillations for Caduceus* is a sound installation but also a solar sculpture, with solar panels serving as the energy source for an adjacent sound device. Akin to the 1973 rooftop infrastructure, which sold energy back to Con Edison, the excess energy from the solar panels feeds an installation by Ash Arder on the second floor, in which a small refrigerator houses a sculpture made from shea butter. It is clearly ironic

that sunlight, which would normally melt the butter, is harnessed to help the sculpture keep its shape, but so is the way a piece of infrastructure — solar panels — is seen into art. And while the solar panels and wind turbine at 519 East 11th Street are long gone, solar panels and other green infrastructure like that on the SI rooftop are in abundance. So, while *Energies* is an invitation to explore the East Village, it is also an invitation to imagine, in the curators' words, “cautiously optimistic, community-driven energy futures.”