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Mona Filleul: *Sissy Institute*  
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Art & Photography / Q+A

### This 'Sissy Institute' show explores early trans internet culture

Held in the basement of New York's Swiss Institute, Mona Filleul's Sissy Institute exhibition is a sensitive ode to the artist's community the aesthetic codes of smartphones



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Text Emily Dinsdale

## Mona Filleul, Sissy Institute



GALLERY / 13 IMAGES

In the lower ground floor of New York's Swiss Institute, artist Mona Filleul has built her own edifice – a world within a world within a world. Drawing on the aesthetics of “cute imagery” and “early-transition trans internet culture”, her exhibition, Sissy Institute, is a painstakingly detailed architectural structure embedded with precious artefacts, audio testimony, and artworks augmenting her ever-growing visual language of trans and queer representation in art.

*Sissy Institute* is a landscape, a refuge – a haven from the “increasingly policed expression of queer and trans subjectivities”. Constructed from industrial aluminium studs, the proportions of which echo the dimensions of an iPhone, the exhibition invites visitors to move through and around it like a maze. If anything, it also recalls the grid layout of New York itself and the sensory and emotional experience of moving through a city, encountering its cultural geography, its embedded memories and associations, the images we encounter, the fragments of overheard conversations.

The framework of this architectural labyrinthine structure is filled with insulation panels, which also house treasures – sculpted and painted images, LED lights, selfies, anime characters, stuffed toys, and more, housed like votives in a shrine. Everything is meaningful, everything is considered. “It’s touching. Because everything here is very personal, it’s really about her, and also her relationship with other people, friends. I think that really transcends the work. It’s also really vulnerable and fragile, and there’s a sense of humour in it,” says Stefanie Hessler, the Institute’s director, on a tour of the exhibition.

“She integrates all of these details. You see these little electronics here? And these blinking lights? She makes everything herself; this is really important to her practice. Every single thing here is made and decided by her,” Hessler explains. “Even the insulation panels are from her apartment when she was living in a community of about 30 people in Brussels. It was really cold in the winter, and so she used these panels to insulate the space and then decided to incorporate them into this work. That’s representative of a lot of her practice, where all these layers come from her own life.”

Below, we talk with Mona Filleul about how she incorporates the aesthetic codes of smartphones and social media with a sense of the sacred into her work, adding to trans representation in Western art history, and the deep care and thought she brings to every detail of her practice.



Mona Filleul, Sissy Institute  
Courtesy of the artist

**How did the idea for this exhibition develop and what was the guiding principle behind it?**

**Mona Filleul:** *Sissy Institute* brings together works that document a complete cycle spanning the past three years of my personal life. It begins in a moment of vulnerability and transformation, before gradually opening toward more expansive, collaborative, and welcoming forms. The exhibition shows how a practice can evolve alongside a life cycle, from withdrawal to openness, from the need for refuge to the construction of structures able to hold other stories, images, and presences. *Sissy Institute* unfolds within this continuity: a space that materialises an ongoing reflection on how we build our own architectures, whether physical, emotional or communal.

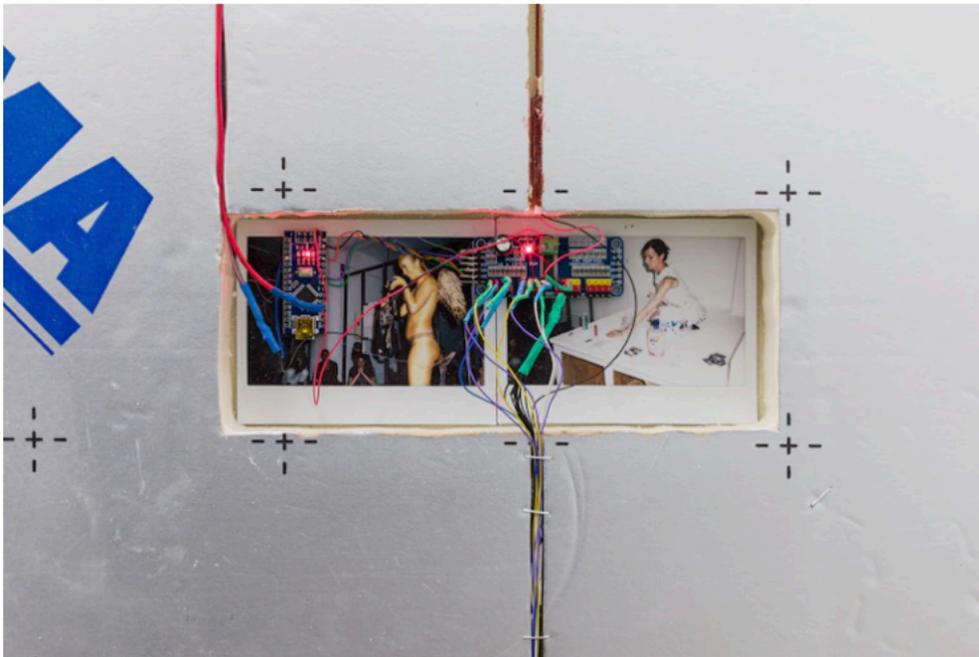
**How did the idea respond to the space and to New York itself?**

**Mona Filleul:** In earlier versions of the project, presented in 2024 at Krone Center in Switzerland and later at Air de Paris with *Air de Tranny*, the structures were inserted into warmer, almost domestic architectures, where they evoked fragments of everyday scenes. At the Swiss Institute, the context is completely different: the lower-level gallery has a starker, more oppressive presence. I took this raw quality as a starting point. The organisation of the space, as well as its location in New York, also resonates with the logic of the Manhattan grid and the very direct rhythm it imposes.

**The structure of the exhibition – the way it invites you to move around and explore all its elements – is so exciting. Could you tell us a bit about this aspect?**



**Mona Filleul:** With *Sissy Institute*, it's the first time I'm presenting a complete cycle of work. I conceived the whole exhibition as an archival space, almost like sections of a library. The works, embedded into insulation panels, are dense with materials, elements, and narratives, and their strict presentation makes it easier to read the whole. Each structure includes two listening booths equipped with headphones and MP3 players integrated directly into the installation. The walls of these booths are the artworks themselves. The idea that my pieces physically become the support for the voices being played is something I deeply care about. The booths sometimes face each other and sometimes turn their backs, creating a slightly labyrinthine circulation. This configuration puts visitors in motion and leads them to cross paths or exchange a moment. It's a slightly romantic and naïve vision (٧٧)⌘.



Mona Filleul, *Sissy Institute*  
Courtesy of the artist

**The audio component of *Sissy Institute* adds a whole extra fascinating dimension. I could've spent hours listening. Could you tell me about your interest in these recordings and their inclusion?**

**Mona Filleul:** In every iteration of the project, I invite five to six people from the local trans community to contribute. In previous formats, this included performances during openings or works integrated into the exhibition itself. For the Swiss Institute, I wanted to centre this presence on audio. I organised a reading night ahead of the exhibition at Hive Mind Books, a queer bookstore in Brooklyn, giving carte blanche to six trans artists, writers, and theorists based in New York: Arthur K, Emily Zhou, McKenzie Wark, Mohammed Zenia, Nuri Patricia, and Slant Rhyme. Recordings from that evening form the core of the listening stations in the exhibition.

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Mona Filleul**

**I love how every detail of the exhibition is considered, and so much is handmade or carries its own story; even the insulation panels have their own history. Could you share some of your most treasured details?**

**Mona Filleul:** I try to bring a very tender and sustained attention to every detail. For example, most of the physical objects that aren't handmade are gifts from very close friends, a pendant, a guitar pick, a ring, a doll... Each one is a fragment of affection and support.

I also care deeply about the braiding of electrical cables that travel through the works and structures, like veins carrying energy to the LEDs that animate the warm tones of the images and bas-reliefs. The Polaroids document performances staged in previous versions of the project. Some insulation panels come from a squat where I lived alone for four years in Brussels. It was a very cold place, and I built a small shelter inside using insulation boards I found in the basement. It's also where I began my transition. I often feel like I died there one night and was born again the next morning.

### **How does your work relate to the online world?**

**Mona Filleul:** Many of the images present in this body of work draw on the almost stereotypical aesthetics of early-transition trans internet culture, with a strong connection to cute imagery. The works often adopt the proportions of an iPhone, and I use Instagram Stories extensively to create constellations of images. In a way, these pieces are attempts to materialise aesthetic codes that were born on social media and smartphones.



Ix Dartayre, *Untitled (for Sissy Institute)*, 2025  
Courtesy of the artist



### **As an artist, what would you say obsesses you?**

**Mona Filleul:** I'm obsessed with attention to detail and the emotional charge embedded within it, and more broadly with the presence of the sacred in art. That's what led me to painting, with a strong attachment to religious forms. I also have a deep relationship to the question of trans representation in art, undoubtedly because it's so painfully absent from Western art history. I'm happy to contribute to building a visual language that supports this presence, and I feel I still have so much to explore, morally, technically, and visually.

### **What do you most hope visitors take away from *Sissy Institute*?**

**Mona Filleul:** The work of other trans women deeply supported and inspired me at a crucial moment of my life ♡, and I hope this project can offer that same momentum to others. I've tried to develop a singular visual language using materials from fast-track construction, such as insulation panels, drywall or metal studs.

From there, I worked with the ways we collectively inhabit, build, and move through the world, contrasting them with more intimate, almost old-fashioned techniques like egg tempera, beeswax painting, handmade paper, or outdated electronic components. This encounter creates a deliberate dissonance, an essential tension that I want visitors to feel.

These dissonances are especially visible in megacities shaped by architectures of power and oppression, like New York. Within these imposed orders, it's often the blind spots, the gaps, and the cracks that become living spaces, zones of invention and resistance. 🌱👉

*Sissy Institute* is running at the Swiss Institute, New York, until 4 January 2026.