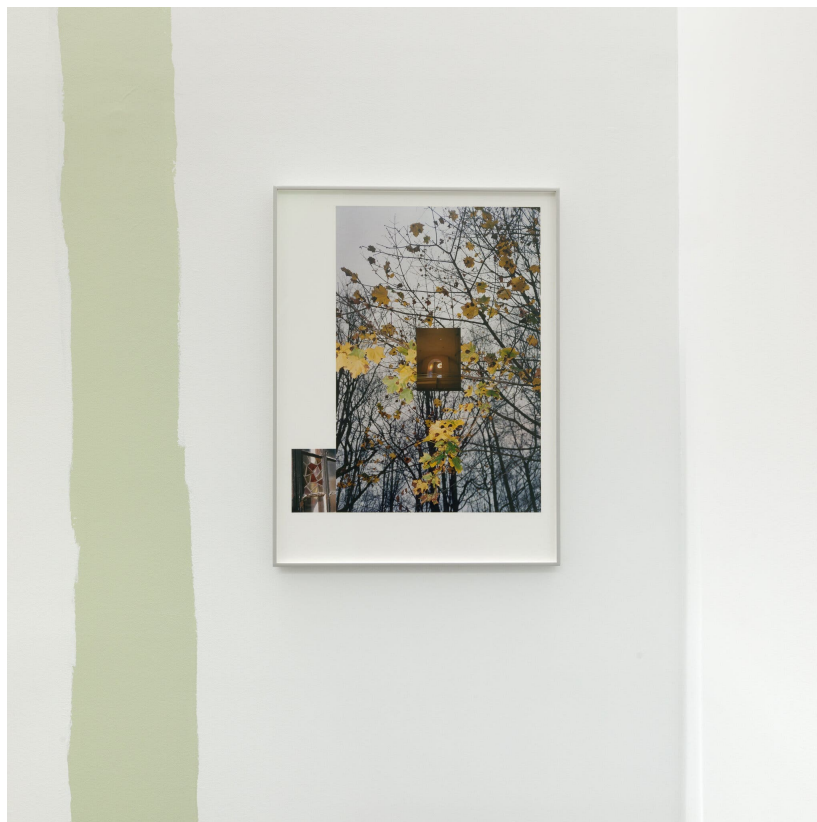


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When All the Art Is Green: Swiss Institute Takes On Climate Change

The artworks in "Spora," a long-term exhibition in Manhattan, are easy to overlook, but they bring an acute awareness to the environment beyond the gallery doors.



Mary Manning's "And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves (For Jenni)" features a photo of a maple tree with fungal tar spots, joined with two images of stained glass. The stripe is from Helen Mirra's "Harmless Mistake," 2023, which uses salvaged "mistake paint" instead of white to repaint damaged walls. Credit... via Swiss Institute, photo by Daniel Pérez

Art cannot save us. This is the problem with art that seeks to address climate change.

Weeks ago, I could feel in my lungs and smell the smoke from fires engulfing Canadian forests thousands of miles away, while walking between galleries on the streets of Lower Manhattan. During this summer that promises to be the hottest on record, the dissonance made me ask the question: How does one look at art when it feels like the world is burning?

"Spora" at the Swiss Institute in the East Village is more of an intervention than an exhibition. The show's co-curator, Alison Coplan, described the project as open-ended. New works and artists will join the international group of five artists debuting the project.

Taking place in the institute's "non-gallery spaces" — like the stairwells, hallways and roof — "Spora" is slow,

provisional and at times easy to overlook. But it does take seriously the climate crisis as a problem. It even succeeds as art.

A few visual experiences pull the viewer in like a bee to a flower. Vivian Suter's untitled wall mural (2023) of orange spheres on a green-yellow ground glows above the museum's roof, visible blocks away, stretching two stories up the side of the taller neighboring building.

Inside the museum, the most arresting visual moment comes in a framed Mary Manning photo-collage from 2023, with the lengthy title "And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves (for Jenni)." It features a large picture of autumnal maple trees and hangs in a stairway beside a series of vertical painted stripes.

The stripes, found throughout the building, are the result of an instruction piece by the conceptual artist Helen Mirra, dictating that all repainting and touching-up of the once-white walls must now be done instead with remaindered mixed paint. The work makes visible both the ongoing use of paint as well as the labor of painting by museum workers. It is one of two pieces in the show that update the ethos of "maintenance art," which emphasizes work that is essential, hidden and often domestic, developed by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the onetime artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation.

Looking at Manning's photos beside Mirra's lines, I realized that Manning's images, which I've never thought of as ecological, are in fact documents of a hyperlocal environment. Light through the yellowed leaves of a tree relates to the stained glass windows seen in two smaller images in Manning's assemblage. Set within the tree photo is a snapshot-size print taken inside St. Mark's Church as Manning left the memorial for the artist and curator Jenni Crain (to whom the work is dedicated); another similarly sized photo to the left of the tree shows a detail of stained glass taken on the Bowery. Manning's work is explicitly urban but brings an acute awareness to the environment just beyond the gallery doors.

The visual seduction of "Spora" mostly ends with the work of these artists, but the museum itself comes more fully into view as a hive of activity. On the roof, in gleaming chrome, the Finnish artist Jenna Sutela has constructed "Vermi-Sibyl" (2023), a sculpture-as-compost bin like a garden's oblong, oversized gazing ball with about 1,000 worms in its belly.



Mary Manning's "Lifes Rich," 2023, without a plant in sight, documents a performance on the streets of Chelsea during Printed Matter's 2022 NY Art Book Fair, staged by Pageant, an artist-run performance space.

Credit... via Swiss Institute, photo by Daniel Pérez

Powered by an “earth battery” of organic decomposition, “Vermi-Sibyl” speaks in a voice adapted from Marjory the Trash Heap, a character from Jim Henson’s 1980s television series “Fraggle Rock,” and fed regularly with the collected food scraps of the Swiss Institute’s workers. Environmental factors like temperature, humidity, and bioelectrical activity from the composting process are programmed to alter the sound it produces.

Similarly not much to look at, a glass-fronted refrigerator at the top of a stairway holds transparent bags of mushroom spores and sawdust, materials to be used by the Indigenous artist and ethnobotanist T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss for a yet-to-be-realized sculptural work, called “wa lúlem ta ts’áytens tl’a stéwa kin (The mushrooms are singing),” that promises to use “biosonic synthesizers” and may (or may not) eventually involve a carved elm log.

In another context the unfinished quality might seem like a failing. But here it is a glimpse at a still-running experiment, part of a continuing attempt and invitation, with roots that extend deep into the functioning of the Swiss Institute itself, with seeds of future artworks still germinating.

In my conversation with Stefanie Hessler, the Swiss Institute’s director, she referred to “ecological institutional critique,” adapting the phrase used to describe conceptual artists of the late 1960s, like Hans Haacke, who made the ideologies and power structures of museums the subject of their art. (Hessler organized “Spora” with Coplan, senior curator and head of programs.) But the question is: Are institutions capable of doing that work themselves?

In response, I was given extensive spreadsheets of energy audits going back to 2019, documenting energy consumption, shipping costs and individual airline flights by everyone associated with museum activities, noting whether this travel was first-class or coach, using the Gallery Climate Coalition’s calculator application to track the institute’s carbon footprint. (The Swiss Institute is a founding New York member of the coalition.) The data show a reduction of 44 tCO₂e, or metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, from the year 2019 to 2022.

It’s admirable, to think of an institution taking a deeper look and attempting to quantify its climate impact. And “Spora” nudges the viewer throughout to look at systems: How museums as buildings exist in the context of cities. How museums are places of work for both artists and museum staff.

But what would an accounting look like, that looks at the greater art-world ecology of international art fairs, global mega-galleries, auction houses and art storage facilities? And who’s going to convince the billionaire collector class to stop flying their private jets?