

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS WASHINGTON, DC

Office Space: Two Artists Build a Secret Bureau

Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe's fictional field station makes us "either victim or accomplice"

Von Ammon Co.

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View of "Jonah Freeman + Justin Lowe", 2026.

Ongoing installation—A two-minute walk from the Executive Branch, a private club cofounded by Donald Trump Jr. in a Georgetown shopping complex, von ammon gallery's whitewashed basement space glows like a half-submerged aquarium. For those intrigued enough to come in, they will find, in the gallery's back room, complete temporal and sensory disorientation.

In "Spider Wave" (the title of both the exhibition and the sprawling installation of which it is comprised), Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe have transformed the gallery's private viewing room and adjoining corridor into the abandoned field office of a fictional, interdisciplinary research organization: the Signal Ecology Institute (SEI). According to the artists' elaborate backstory supplied in two versions of the press release (one of

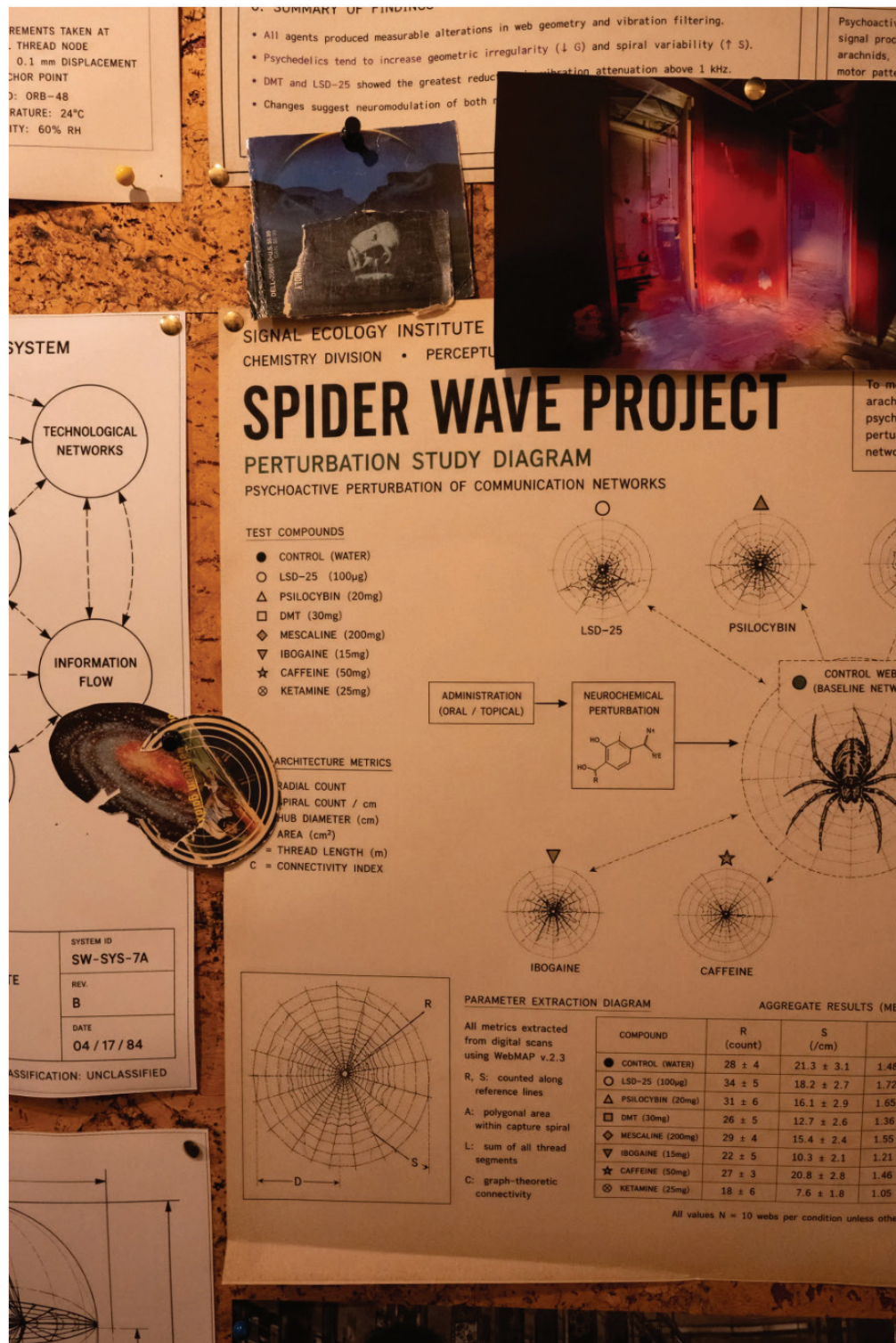
which is a memo transcription from an anonymous former branch officer), SEI was founded in early 1969 in Palo Alto, California, as part of a constellation of Cold War laboratories around Stanford University. The institute's mission to study communication networks across organisms, environments, and societies—with the hope to instate greater ecological balance between them—was deeply entangled with political interests emanating from Washington, particularly with those of its neighbors at the RAND Corporation in Arlington, Virginia, and the Pentagon.



View of "Jonah Freeman + Justin Lowe", 2026.

The end of SEI's activities in 2008 suggests either that its dream of improving humanity's future through technology had been thoroughly compromised or that it had succeeded so completely that its influence had become "indistinguishable from the environment it helped produce," as one file noted. This ambiguity, together with the installation's immersive setting and sense of voyeuristic intrusion, implicates the viewer in SEI's ongoing aftermath, as either victim or accomplice.

Visitors access Freeman and Lowe's presentation via a human-size hole blasted through the entry wall of the main gallery space (which houses a separate exhibition of work by Borna Sammak). Shelves of labeled binders containing materials from the artists' vast image archive, old books and DVDs pasted over with invented titles, and lab equipment line the walls, clustering around resin-cast computers, phyto-crystal sculptures, and mosaics of salvaged cultural artifacts. Visitors are allowed to sit on the creaky desk chair, peruse the binders, and puzzle over the books, whose nonsensical titles include *Crazy Eddie Bath Time* and *High Entropy Breakfast*. The installation's interior, built out with reclaimed hardwood, conjures a domestic atmosphere, while the rainbow-colored, crystalline ceiling evokes the futuristic structures of Buckminster Fuller. The spirit of bricolage gestures to Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–72), a magazine and product directory that circulated information about DIY-tools, books, building methods, and technologies. The *Whole Earth* community also helped shape the utopic idea of the internet as a place for individual and collective empowerment. For the artists, this history reveals the interconnections between subcultures and the mainstream postindustrial society they opposed.



View of "Jonah Freeman + Justin Lowe", 2026.

On the walls hang three framed works comprised of various materials including glazed ceramic, ink, acrylic, and sanded grout—*Hypha Signal Flow (A whisper in the kitchen)*, 2019; *Hypha-Signal Flow (AM/FM spike)*, 2019; *Hypha-Signal Flow (Metro Pacific Surp)*, 2019; and *Vortice Sun (King Gordon is run by children who cut in line)*, 2018—inspired by web patterns created by spiders exposed to drugs in government-funded

experiments during the past century, including one run by NASA in 1995. The titular “Spider Wave” thus encompasses these paintings and refers to a subdivision of SEI that studies the effect of psychoactive compounds on biological, technological, and social systems.

To the side of the main room is a dimly lit corridor collaged with archival images and cutouts documenting SEI’s research activities. Classified diagrams and reports illustrate the eight divisions of the organization’s program, though their absurd titles (“Meow Meow Ocean Burst,” “Night Nurse Safari”) clash with the semblance of scientific and institutional authority. Real and fictional narratives, including SEI’s history and anthropologist Margaret Mead’s utopian project to expand collective consciousness with psychedelics, are trafficked into the space like rumors that haunt the viewer’s experience but refuse to cohere or take sides. Not surprisingly, the passageway leads to a dead end. What ultimately dominates any experience of the installation is a pervasive sense of being overwhelmed in the face of an infinitely receding chain of references—a feeling familiar to anyone who has recently scrolled the news. Citing the Situationist International as a precedent, Freeman and Lowe unsettle the history and logics of science via speculation, drawing attention to the murky interests and forces shaping stem research and its applications—and to the goings-on inside Washington’s Brutalist office buildings.