

The closing of the San Francisco Art Institute: “The artists can go hang themselves”

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The announcement in mid-July that the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) would cease operations, no longer offering courses or degrees, is a significant and telling event.

Whatever the concrete circumstances and whichever individuals or bodies may bear some degree of responsibility, the shuttering of the once renowned school is a further sign—in the broadest sense—that, in the eyes of the American ruling elite, as we noted in April 2021 in regard to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, “the artists can go hang themselves.”

The situation is extraordinary. Not only was the SFAI one of the oldest art academies in the US, and the oldest in its Western half, it was located in one of the most dynamic cultural centers in the country historically, the Bay Area. In fact, the institute was a focal point of various artistic trends and movements in the 20th century. Now it has disappeared, without substantial outcry or protest, certainly not from the city’s affluent upper echelons.

In their July 15 announcement, Art Institute officials explained that after “many years of austerity measures, challenging fundraising campaigns, and various on and off merger and acquisition negotiations ... SFAI is no longer financially viable and has ceased its degree programs as of July 15, 2022. SFAI will remain a nonprofit organization to protect its name, archives, and legacy.”

The school’s press release, written with a degree of bitterness, noted that as of July 16 “no students or employees will fill SFAI’s historic landmark campus, a beautiful and unique spot in San Francisco with its glorious Diego Rivera fresco ... Instead, a few contractors will manage security, regulatory, legal, and financial matters, and ensure that students and alumni can access their academic records.”

According to the SFAI’s own historical account, “During its first 60 years, influential artists associated with the school included Eadweard Muybridge, photographer and pioneer of motion graphics; Maynard Dixon, painter of San Francisco’s labor movement and of the landscape of the West; Henry Kiyama, whose *Four Immigrants Manga* was

the first graphic novel published in the U.S.; Sargent Claude Johnson, one of the first African-American artists from California to achieve a national reputation; Louise Dahl-Wolfe, an innovative photographer whose work for *Harper’s Bazaar* in the 1930s defined a new American style of ‘environmental’ fashion photography; John Gutzon Borglum, the creator of the large-scale public sculpture known as Mt. Rushmore; and numerous others.”

Following World War II, “the school became a nucleus for Abstract Expressionism.” The first fine art photography department in the US was established at the SFAI in 1946. “By the early 1950s, San Francisco’s North Beach was the West Coast center of the Beat Movement, and music, poetry, and discourse were an intrinsic part of artists’ lives.”

SFAI faculty members have included photographers Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange and Minor White, painters Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko and filmmakers Stan Brakhage and George Kuchar.

The closure places Mexican artist Rivera’s famed work, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, painted at the school in May 1931, in a precarious position. The July 15 announcement explains that the SFAI owns the fresco in its Chestnut Street campus, while the “University of California owns the building. SFAI will lose possession of the fresco if it defaults on or loses its lease on the building. SFAI is actively working with local and international donor communities to protect the fresco.”

The immediate circumstance that brought about the July 15 closing was the failure of the SFAI’s attempt to merge with the University of San Francisco (USF), a private Jesuit institution. The university signed a letter of intent in February 2022 pledging to investigate the possibility of “integrating operations and academic programs in the arts to elevate the next generation of artists.” However, in July USF officials indicated that after five months of “extensive exploration and discussion about a possible integration of arts education programs for undergraduate and graduate students,” the university had informed the art institute that

“a full integration of the two universities is not feasible due to financial and other considerations.”

A combination of processes undermined the art school. The SFAI’s financial difficulties are not new. An April 2020 article by Sarah Hotchkiss at KQED commented that, depending “on who you talk to, SFAI’s problems stem from different causes. Some blame the first dot-com bust. Others, many others, point to the school’s [\$19 million] expansion into Fort Mason. Still others blame the rise in San Francisco’s cost of living, or the difficulty of running a small school without an enormous endowment.”

Declining enrollment did not help matters. Various factors contributed to that, including, according to Hotchkiss, “the Bay Area’s prohibitive rents, the expense of a private college education, the fear of graduating with overwhelming debt.” Tuition for the 2020–21 school year amounted to approximately \$46,000 for undergraduate students and nearly \$48,000 for graduate students. As the same article pointed out, “Ninety percent of SFAI’s domestic students take out some form of loan to pursue their educations, loans that must one day be repaid. Amid the student debt crisis, a nearly \$280,000 art degree [including graduate school] can be a hard sell.”

Moreover, as it has done in so many spheres, the pandemic had a “trigger effect” here too. The new and apparently insurmountable financial problems erupted in the spring of 2020, after the school was forced to close down its operations due to the health crisis. Pam Rorke Levy, chair of the SFAI board, told *ARTnews* at the time that over “the past 149 years, the San Francisco Art Institute has survived crises large and small ... but the uncertainties and financial hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are threatening to take us under.”

Artnet observed in January 2021 that the “nation’s first art academy west of the Mississippi ... where giants like Ansel Adams once taught, has suffered numerous financial crunches over its long history. But as Bay Area real estate prices and cost of living have skyrocketed, the financial situation at the school, which offers only fine-art degrees and no (generally more lucrative) design and architecture programs, has become especially precarious.”

Artnet reported at the time that the SFAI was considering selling off the Rivera mural, appraised at \$50 million, and that one of the potential buyers was filmmaker George Lucas.

The demise of the San Francisco Art Institute is a disgraceful event, which speaks to the general decline of cultural life in crisis-ridden capitalist America. As we wrote after one year of the pandemic, as the disaster for art and artists unfolded, by and large, “global ruling elites view any activity not directly and immediately related to amassing

profits or driving up share values as useless and counterproductive. Worse still, as social tensions mount, there is always the danger that artists may speak impermissible truths and gain a significant public hearing.”

A March 2021 US government report asserted that artists were “among the most severely affected workers by the pandemic.” The update estimated that 63 percent of artists or creative workers “became fully unemployed in 2020 and have lost an average of \$37,430 each in creativity-based income since the pandemic’s onset.” Ninety-five percent of artists reported loss of income, while 78 percent had “no post-pandemic financial recovery plan,” 50 percent had been “unable to sell/distribute their creative product” and 74 percent had “had their events canceled.”

This, of course, came on top of pre-pandemic conditions for the vast majority of artists in the US that were already impossible.

In his book *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech* (2020), William Deresiewicz took note of a study revealing that “only 10 percent of the two million arts graduates in the United States make their primary living as artists, that 85 percent of artists in New York City have day jobs unrelated to the arts, and that the other 15 percent have median incomes of \$25,000.” Meanwhile, in 2018, “just twenty individuals accounted for 64 percent of total sales by living artists.”

Are there resources enough in the San Francisco Bay Area to sustain an art college? It seems so. As of April 2022, according to *Forbes*, the region was home to 116 billionaires, more than reside in any other single state, except New York. The six richest individuals in California alone, all of whom live in the Bay Area, have a collective net worth of *more than a third of a trillion dollars*, reports the magazine. What shall we call them then, “barbarians at the Golden Gate”?



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