

Students, graduates, artists oppose the closing of the San Francisco Art Institute: Part 1— “What happens to the human spirit over time?”

David Walsh
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On July 31, the WSWWS posted an article on the July 15 announcement that the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) would “cease operations, no longer offering courses or degrees.” We characterized the closing of the 150-year-old art school, in one of the cultural centers of the US, as a significant and telling event.

Not only was SFAI going out of business, its disappearance had not provoked substantial outcry or protest, certainly not from the city’s fabulously wealthy layers. We pointed out that the six richest individuals in California all resided in the Bay Area and were collectively worth one-third of a trillion dollars.

American capitalism has no use for the fine arts in so far as they play no role in pushing up share values or assisting the top one percent of the population to accumulate further personal wealth. The ruling elite is proving itself incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of artistic tendencies that in any way correspond to our times. It genuinely dreads “every new word,” in Trotsky’s phrase, for fear that new artistic developments might arouse criticism of or even pose some ultimate threat to the present organization of society.

The WSWWS article struck a nerve. It was widely read, by students and faculty at SFAI, as well as alumni of the school and many others. We heard from numerous angry and concerned graduates of the school, as well as students whose programs were cut short by the closing.

Last week, the WSWWS spoke on a video call with Kristen Gundlach, Bianca Lago and Grey Day, members of Students for Action at SFAI, a group, in its own words, devoted to the effort “to rescue SFAI from closing permanently.”

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David Walsh: I’d like to ask each of you what the closure of the San Francisco Art Institute means to you personally or professionally, and what you think it signifies about American society?

Kristen Gundlach: This is something that I’m still trying to process and understand. It’s gone through various stages.

When we were first responding to the situation back in May, when we were supposed to be merging with USF [University of San Francisco], our first reaction was, well, everyone needs to know about this, because there’s no possible way that if people knew about this, that it could happen.

We were working off the belief that the school represents a value that everyone has and everyone shares. We just need them to know about it. And, in part, that is still something that I believe or hope—that if the right people were to know about the situation, people that held the same values that we hold, that there is a way to actually fix this. In any case, not to let the school drown completely. That was kind of the first stage, and we

were in that stage for a long time, just trying to spread the word.

I’m still trying to process if that’s even a truth, collectively within our culture. This is the richest city in the United States, with all these billionaires. The world is watching San Francisco—we’re the ones who step up and we show the world how to behave. San Francisco! We’re going to allow the oldest art institute to just drown! I’m not sure how to process that.

If that’s true, and that is actually what happens, well, it is staggering. I’m not sure how to hold that as a truth. I suppose how I process it involves problem solving, trying to get out there and getting the information out, with the hope that that’s not actually where we are as a culture.

I came to SFAI for my MFA in painting, but I am also in sculpture. I completed the first year of my MFA, so I’m right in the middle. I’m in limbo, we’re all in limbo.

Bianca Lago: I agree with what Kristen said about “problem solving” as a means of processing this situation. I think that’s what the three of us were gravitating toward, because action felt better. Each moment I think, OK, this is when I can start the grieving process, but then something else happens. No, you can wait another week, another month. I’m just trying to practice “non-attachment.”

When I’m thinking of it on a personal level, it doesn’t bother me as much as when I’m thinking of it on a societal level. Because, personally, I feel as though the job of artists is to constantly reinvent themselves, to adapt. The artist’s life is not a steady course, so you get accustomed to that, to changes and difficulties. But when I look at things globally and the trends that are happening, it’s very sad. How is this possible in San Francisco, a city that has so much wealth? How did the city get to this place?

It hasn’t been lost on us that this is really a microcosm of what’s going on in the world at large. So, it’s a lot to process. I don’t know what more to say other than that I’m taking it one day at a time. There are some students in the MFA program who have worked hard on transferring and they’re starting other programs this fall. I decided I needed time regardless of what happened with our efforts. I just needed to catch my breath a little.

KG: My first vocation was medicine. I’m still in medicine, but I moved into art. In reflecting on the different postures that are valued in our culture, the ones that promise quick answers are the most valued. More valued than living in a way in which you’re asking questions. Something has shifted in our landscape, so that asking questions or proceeding in a philosophical or reflective manner is not as valued as having fast, hard answers. Something has happened to our collective social consciousness

so that's considered the higher ground, as opposed to stepping back and truly evaluating and asking about what's in front of you.

Grey Dey: I just want to comment on the relationship between where San Francisco got itself to through opportunist capitalist development and how that affected the art institute. I'm realizing that the greatest threat to the art institute was its inability to attract the right professionals to run the school administratively, because we couldn't offer the kind of salaries that it requires for these people to be interested in living in San Francisco and holding that job.

The entire decision-making body of the institute became a volunteer board of trustees who were not qualified, who were over their heads. ...

DW: Amateurs swimming in a sea full of sharks.

GD: ... So, there was this conundrum of people who had a certain passion to help the school but didn't have the funding to pay the right people to come in and organize the logistics and the operations. So, we were very "wealthy" in faculty and in support staff and in curriculum—and appeal.

Many people would rather go to San Francisco Art Institute than anywhere else, but very few real artists—and that includes kids with rich parents—could afford to go there. The art institute was up there with Yale and other very expensive schools, so that was a huge problem. That's why Students for Action proposes or envisions a tuition-free future, which of course would not happen for some years. This is something we were working toward. Why couldn't that exist in San Francisco, where there are so many of the people who claim to want to be part of a more equitable and just future, various corporations talking about equity and inclusion and opportunity and all of that?

I wanted to be clear about how the biggest problem with this school, on the immediate level, is this obsolete paradigm—volunteers who are over their heads. Then you have this artist community within the institute chiming in with all these ideas and a decision-making body that doesn't know how to implement them, so it's been a challenge. That decision-making body is experiencing this as criticism, as coming under attack, as their being unappreciated. So, they get more and more insular, and more and more they make the decisions on their own because they're actually afraid and feel bullied by the community—and it's all just collapsing.

DW: It's a very difficult situation. If one of the billionaires were to come along and donate \$100 million or whatever, and I'm not suggesting this is your perspective, then you might have the Bezos Institute of Art or the Musk Institute of Art. That obviously has its heavy price. We've spoken about the return of the "aristocratic principle," in other words, that art or education or medicine continues to function at the whim of the super-rich. They build hospitals or run art schools, but what happens when they don't want to be part of that hospital or art school, when business goes bad? And if some artist at the Bezos Art Institute attacks social inequality or the rule of the oligarchy, what happens then? It's unthinkable to go cap in hand to the billionaires. Society has to be reorganized.

GD: I would agree that we don't want to be in bed with corporate America and still think that we could be an independent fine arts school. They're incompatible in the end.

KG: I just had a thought about how this issue reverberates through our culture and how it affects our society. I have young kids and they're in school. Over the last 10 years, school shootings and other mass shootings have become more and more prevalent. My family is in Italy at the moment. We were in a big courtyard the other day and my 12-year-old pointed to the top of a church and said this is not a safe place, because somebody could be up there and they could start shooting at us.

So I'm thinking about kids in public school, where there is very little if any art left, and I think about what art did for me and what it did for my brother, who is neuro-diverse. I can only speak for myself, but art gave me a place where I could actually experience who I was outside of my community, but also helped me then reintegrate into my community. It helped me find my footing and it gave me my own voice. It also helped

me to develop—perhaps empathy isn't the right word—but it gave me a window through which I could experience other people.

What I'm driving at is the idea that art plays a role in shaping emotional intelligence. It allows us as humans to navigate ourselves, to hold emotions that may not be able to land anywhere else and shape our consciousness in expansive, multidimensional ways.

I wonder about what happens to a culture over many, many years in which children don't even have access to being in touch with themselves, being able to express themselves. Arts education is being removed. You're exploring different things in an art class than in a history or math class. This is one of the ways in which the human experience flourishes. That's been largely cut off. When something like that is slowly eliminated, because your society is saying it doesn't have a value, it can't be measured, we don't need it, so we're not going to make time for it. What happens to the human spirit over time? I can't help but make that connection between that slow death and this immense, confused anger that exists, and the really huge tragedy that's happening with kids.

DW: I think there definitely is a connection, although it's a complicated one. Other processes have also been taking place simultaneously, including endless war, police violence and now fascist provocations.

BL: Art does help you express and get in touch with yourself, but art for me has also been a tool for survival, a way to process really heavy, difficult feelings. Art therapy has become more and more popular over the last decade because people are making the connection. There is enough data now that shows how being able to express yourself visually allows you to reach parts of your brain that you can't access through talk therapy alone. So, if we're thinking about the healing aspect alone, how important art is—on the social level as Kristen was saying, but also on the individual level. If I didn't have art, I don't even know what kind of person I would be.

In terms of SFAI specifically, it's very sad that my experience got cut off, because I was transformed in one year and I can only imagine what two years would have done to me! To have a place where I was taken seriously and pushed in these spiritual and technical ways that I haven't been in any other kind of institution, where I was really starting to feel like myself and integrate all of the parts of me into one cohesive artist ... That's what the school did for me and what it did for all of the people that went to the school before me. As far as I know, everyone has the same sort of experience. You can talk to anybody who's been impacted by SFAI. It's always about something profound and much more than simply art-making. It influences you on a spiritual growth level as well. It does make you realize how important community is, because you can't make art in a vacuum. That sort of collaborative energy is something carried on by alumni after they graduate. So, what happens when that process of individuals bringing this spirit to different places, no longer takes place?

GD: I don't know what happens, but I don't like it and I want to avoid that. I want to throw in something about what's unique about SFAI. It's exclusively a fine arts college, and the difference between a fine arts college and a college of art and design is that the design part of an art and design school gets more support from parents sending kids into the world to get a career. So, what happens is the design side of an art and design college inevitably develops the greater population and resources. It affects the culture of that art and design school toward professionalism, toward careerism and toward capitalism and fitting into a capitalist outlook. The arts get influenced by how success is measured in this society.

For artists, the idea isn't about measurable progress or about quantitative or monetary exchange, it's about insight. What's been said here is that the value of the fine arts education is the insight it can provide into culture and society at large. Bianca has touched on the spiritual aspect of that. But that involves a certain degree of transmission when you're working with a faculty who's dedicated to that. They're trying to inspire the same kind of insight in you. They have the experience to teach you if

you want to use a certain medium, or if you want to go in a different direction, they redirect you to other faculty or they introduce you to a different process.

My teachers introduced me to processes they did 20 years ago, because I'm just getting around to those now. Overall, the goal of that degree program is to cultivate the individual's insight and what the value of that insight would be when shared in a larger forum. When you go to a museum and you look at [painter] Julie Mehretu's work, you're almost overwhelmed at what she's presenting to you visually. She's developed her insight into and introduced into her practice a whole cosmology, which raises all these questions. It certainly answers the question as to whether painting is dead. Your consciousness is shifted simply by going to that show.

So that's what SFAI is doing. I took five classes this spring, but I had about 10 instructors. Instructors would talk to other instructors about what I was working on and all of a sudden they were in my studio offering insight and process and technique. There's nothing like it. In other words, there weren't five classes each of which would have four assignments, so that I would get official credit for each class. It wasn't like that. It was: "Let's see what you're going to come up with this semester, and we're going to pull you in every direction, and throw you back together, and see what you come up with."



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