

# Students, graduates, artists oppose the closing of the San Francisco Art Institute: Part 2— “The roots we’ve been growing individually and collectively have been ripped apart”

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On August 15, we posted the first series of interviews with students, graduates and artists on the shutting down of the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI).

Below we continue this discussion, with three further interviews on the closing of SFAI and its broader significance.

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*Whitney Humphreys is a San Francisco Bay Area artist and teacher and a recent graduate of San Francisco Art Institute’s Dual Degree program, earning an MFA in Studio Practice, with a focus in printmaking and sculptural installation, as well as an MA in the History and Theory of Contemporary Art. She has exhibited throughout the Bay Area during her career as an artist, muralist, designer, maker, event coordinator and instructor.*

David Walsh: You graduated from SFAI in 2020 or so, what was that last year like, what with the pandemic and everything that was going on?

Whitney Humphreys: It was wild, it was very intense, unexpected. A lot of things that had a lasting impact.

DW: What was overall experience at the school like?

WH: The overall experience was so multifaceted, honestly. Even though it kind of ended in burning flames more or less, it still was absolutely the right place for me, regardless of the turmoil.

I am eternally grateful for the experience I was able to have. It was a really special place. I had the opportunity to do my graduate program in a lot of different schools around the country, but this was the one where I wanted to be and I’m so glad that I was there.

DW: Can you expand on why it was so extraordinary?

WH: I’ll try to find the words. My art practice involves placing myself and the things I’m making in a continuum of legacies. I use historical imagery and historical processes as a way of tapping into these legacies that have layered connections across generations. They still impact us today.

Something of that resonated in my being at the school, with its long history. Being there somehow mirrored my own art-making process, due to the art institute’s own history. I felt as though I were tapping into or having some deep connection to a space that had fostered absolutely legendary hallmarks in the art world for a century and a half. That place was this breeding ground of so many historically significant artists, projects and movements. Being physically present there felt as though I was able to connect to the legacy in some way.

Sometimes, you know, for better or worse, the art school has a reputation for holding on to archaic values in terms of fixed ideas about what art should be. It’s hard to put into words why it felt so special, but I felt like the community of people that were drawn there formed an

enriching experience for all of us. It was amazing to be in a space where everybody cared as much as I did about making art.

DW: Others have spoken in similar terms. So, this closure means presumably that other people in the future will not have this experience.

WH: No, they won’t have it any more, this intense and enriching investigation of your work and why you should be making it and how to make it. It felt like the school had been there so long, it was so established, that it would last forever. It felt like something untouchable, for some reason.

On the community level, it’s hard to wrap my head around that. It means that the continuum has been severed, at least in this space. On the personal level, it’s been two years of preparing for this or mourning, or processing, because it’s been two years of “it’s true, no, it’s not true.” It was sort of crumbling as I was graduating and trying to stay involved in the preservation after having been so involved in student leadership. It felt very close and personal, like a loss.

A huge part of attending an institution like this, at least from my perspective, is about building your community and establishing a connection to a place and to those who are leading and making and teaching. The pandemic changed the situation for everybody. Everything was magnified tenfold with the potential closing and then finally, the real closing.

The community ties have been severed, sliced, the roots we’ve been growing individually and collectively have been ripped apart. We have to build new ones. You see, these were the promises that we made to ourselves and that had been made to us: when you’re connected to this community, you’re always connected to it, and you can draw on its resources. Now it’s been ripped up. Or, the connections are still there, but they’re like ghosts.

As your article pointed out, if a place like this, with its history, can’t make it ... what does that mean? There’s an utter lack of appreciation for the process of making fine art and why it’s important for the entire society. There’s an effort to instrumentalize art practices, to view them only as a means to an end, not to appreciate them as something vital to our survival.

I’m a teacher, and the main lesson I try to leave with my students is that it’s valuable to be creative. Period. It’s a valuable thing to do, and even now I’m struggling not to use the capitalistic language, “appreciate” and “value” and such. But that’s the language we have to describe why things matter.

I decided to do a graduate program for a lot of reasons, but a big one was I felt like I needed to be challenged intellectually.

What SFAI did at least do was absolutely shatter your preconceived

notions, it absolutely shatters your assumptions. Everything you think you know and could rely on is blown to pieces, and it's devastating and invigorating. But then you're provided with tools for understanding the world through a creative and critical lens: for example, how information is communicated, how we communicate with each other, and why it's so important to examine what you've been told and who that information is serving. The education you receive from going to art school, at least this art school, was intended to prevent things like fascism, to examine how that even happens and why thinking in ways outside of normative lenses is so necessary.

That's the big loss, this hub providing young people with means to understand the world around them.

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*Nando Alvarez-Perez is a native of Buffalo, New York. In 2014 he graduated from SFAI, where he received the Master of Fine Arts Fellowship in Photography. He uses his work "to investigate the boundaries between the personal and the political, the fitness of psychology for ideology, the discrepancies between history and biography, and the relationship between memory, meaning, and place." He is a founding director of the Buffalo Institute for Contemporary Art and editor-in-chief of Cornelia, a visual art review published three times a year.*

David Walsh: Could you explain a little bit about your history and about your art work, your professional work?

Nando Alvarez-Perez: I am a photographer and teacher. I was born and raised in Buffalo, New York. I went out to the Bay Area for grad school at SFAI and was there from 2012 through 2014. I remained in the Bay Area until the beginning of 2018, teaching, working in tech, exhibiting my work, and experiencing all of the many hats it takes to be an artist.

Then I moved back to Buffalo with my wife, Emily Reynolds, who graduated from SFAI's exhibition and museum studies program, also in 2014. We currently run an institute for contemporary art in Buffalo and I also still teach at universities in the area.

DW: It's difficult to make a living as an artist, especially in America.

NAP: I think in the "less industrialized" arts it's even harder. It takes a lot of other jobs to make it work.

DW: How did you end up at SFAI?

NAP: I found the school through US college rankings back in 2010 or so. In 2011, I was applying to grad schools because I knew that you needed an MFA to teach, and I wanted to teach full-time. I was drawn to SFAI at that time because the photography department was very well ranked, very well regarded historically, and the photographer Henry Wessel was out there.

DW: What was it like?

NAP: The school was a total mess, but at the time it was kind of a beautiful one. We knew that there had been financial mismanagement and other problems, but at the time it seemed like the school was getting back on its feet.

We always describe it as a place that taught you how to be an artist in the sense that we were handed almost no resources, no easy access to what we needed, and although the battles between the students and the administration were toxic, they built camaraderie. We were forced to work out for ourselves if we wanted to have an exhibition or to create stronger connections with students at other art programs in the region—how do we make this work? My wife had similar problems in her exhibition and museum studies program. The students weren't really given professional curatorial experience, nor the opportunities to critique, understand, or exhibit with their cohort's work, as they would in the real world.

It was a scrappiness that forced us to realize that our greatest resource in the art world is going to be our community of peers and colleagues.

DW: Was it a matter of budgets or just organizational chaos?

NAP: I think primarily organizational chaos. In any case, when I was

there, I was far less aware of the budget issues and what was going on behind the scenes.

DW: But was it an interesting organizational chaos?

NAP: Yes, and I think it drove the students together, so it was interesting, yes. The unhappy part was discovering, like all schools, how top-heavy the administration was. It always felt like there were never enough teachers, but they themselves were great. I can't think of one bad one; they were all very committed people.

DW: Were you shocked at the news this spring or the summer that it was closing?

NAP: Not at all, no. I was paying attention back in 2020 when they closed the first time.

DW: Because of COVID?

NAP: Well, it wasn't clear. They said it was due to COVID, but they announced they were closing for good. There were all these other issues. I should also say that it was after I graduated in 2014 that they started to have the conversations about leasing space at Fort Mason, which was extraordinarily expensive and dependent on having a much larger student body. There were also conversations about student housing. They had invested in this building that undergrads would come and be expected to pay \$1,200 a month in rent.

Tuition is now almost \$50,000 a year. Obviously, there are people on scholarships, loans and grants and so forth, but still \$50,000 a year in the middle of San Francisco, with all the additional rent and the expenses ...

DW: It is a very difficult situation for arts education in general in this country, probably every country. No one came in to rescue the school, with all the money washing around. I can't help but believe that there are people hovering around now who look at that space in downtown San Francisco and think it must be worth tens of millions of dollars.

But putting aside all the immediate difficulties and no doubt mistakes, I do think it says something about the society that one of the oldest art colleges in the country disappears without a protest, without an outcry, in a city packed with billionaires who have the kind of wealth you and I can't even imagine, and yet for the arts, there's almost nothing. How do you see the situation?

NAP: Pretty much as you do. One of the things that was most unique and compelling about SFAI was that they went against the grain and insisted on not having an architecture or graphic design department, those departments that act as major draws to new students and might actually get you a job.

So. I have mixed feelings. It was not practical, but it was also very cool because it felt like we were living through this mess of how to be artists together, assembling a meaningful creative life in freefall, which certainly turned out to be closer to reality than some of us expected.

On the other hand, while it's easy to dismiss the creation of departments that are obvious revenue generators—a UX [User Experience] Design program might seem like a cynical moneymaker on its face—but it's a shame not to see the potential for art in those tools, not to mention for organizing and activism.

I know Yale graduates who don't even know how to install their own work. They are inured to the larger problems in the art market and tend to want to follow the traditional track of finding a gallery, doing art fairs, making work that will be enticing for the one percent of the one percent. SFAI certainly didn't prepare us to do that, but it did prepare us to make it work by any means necessary. By and large, I think especially at the graduate level, most schools are not adequately preparing students for what is coming after they leave school, which is rarely that job teaching in college that they hoped for. And even when you do have a job teaching in art schools many people want out, even when they have tenure. Oftentimes it seems like everyone is so bogged down by administrative drudgery that a lot of artists who took the only career that MFAs are supposed to be promised are finding themselves looking for an exit

strategy.

DW: What interests you as a theme or subject matter for your art?

NAP: It definitely has a lot to do with where I am. When I was in the Bay Area, I was thinking a lot about sci-fi techno optimism and dystopianism and the blunt adherence to post-modernism. Now that I'm back in Buffalo, the context of the work has changed and I'm thinking a lot more about deindustrialization and the signs of autumn in American economic power. But in a really practical sense, I'm a photographer. I like to walk around and take pictures and then the content that's coming into the camera has to be figured out.

My work as a founder of a nonprofit is a lot about providing access and thinking about how art can be attentive to the needs of our region and the artists who live here. We established The Buffalo Institute for Contemporary Art in 2018 and we spent a lot of time talking to people about what they wanted in the arts in Buffalo. One thing we learned was that there were no on-ramps for basically anyone under 50. The art audience that emerged in the 1970s had aged with the institutions and there weren't a whole lot of spaces, mentors, role models for younger artists. Another thing we learned was that all of the writing about art had died in the couple years before we moved back there and so we had a friend do an exhibition and a writing workshop that led to a magazine. We are working on the tenth issue now. In response to this educational crisis we're talking about, we've also been piloting a free secondary art education program this summer that's been really exhilarating.

DW: You mentioned in your email response that you'd been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* for several years. What's your impression or what do you find interesting in the website?

NAP: I think that the first things that I read on it were the responses to the 1619 Project. I was just looking for other perspectives on that project because I felt like I was missing something—it seemed so counterintuitively concerned with essences and origins. And then there was Catherine Liu's book *Virtue Hoarders*, which cited the WSW's work several times.

DW: Do you have any other thoughts about the situation or about how can we fight for decent art and arts education for everybody?

NAP: I do think it's important to think about ways to escape the gravity well of the US bicoastal art world, and its incessant pulling of people into the creation of a professional managerial class within the arts—life in these centers makes it very hard to allow for the time to think about ways you can actually change the arts' role in society; you're left with little space to think about anything besides how to be individually successful. And with regards to teaching, I think it's awful that artists are supposed to uproot themselves every two years to find a new job teaching in Washington and then in Alabama and then in New Mexico and are prevented from having any connection to the place where they actually are.

It's very cheesy, but it blows my mind that every time you get a bunch of artists in a room, amazing things happen. They have the ability to see resources and value where they're not easily apparent. Give artists more resources to do the things that their communities need and cut out the middlemen.

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*Colette Standish, a mixed-media artist, graduated from St. Martin's School of Art in London in 1991. In 2019 she was awarded a fellowship at San Francisco Art Institute to study for an MFA in Studio Art. Her work is in many public and private collections.*

David Walsh: Thank you for speaking with us.

Colette Standish: I was actually reading your website before we spoke, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I just wanted to say that I'm from the UK, as you can gather, and I've been a socialist all my life. My family are fourth-generation socialists, so you're in good company.

DW: Are you from the Manchester area originally?

CS: Yes.

DW: You were an MFA student at the San Francisco Art Institute?

CS: That's right. So, a short history. I've been an artist for 30 years. I was living in London, even though I was born in Manchester. I went to art school in London and stayed. I did an art residency and met someone and moved over here. I decided to go back to school, to finish off my master's degree, so that's how I ended up in San Francisco.

DW: What was the experience like at the SFAI?

CS: It was wonderful. You know, despite the politics and everything that was going on at the time, what was incredible was the professionalism of the faculty. They were going through their own crisis at the time and even when they didn't know what was going to happen from day to day, they turned up and did their job. It was remarkable, given the situation. I started there in 2019. There were rumors, but you thought, oh, they'll pull it together. Then, when I graduated in 2021, that was it. It closed.

I appreciated the attitude. "Whatever it is you want to pursue, we'll support you." That is very unusual in art education. Many art schools have a certain structure and approach that they adhere to. I went to Saint Martin's School of Art in London, which was rigid in certain ways. You couldn't move. If you were doing painting, you were doing painting. At SFAI, it was, "You want to do painting? You want to do film? You want to mix it up? Let's do it." No one said no. It was refreshing.

It's actually very depressing what's happened to the school.

DW: So, you were there not only during a financial crisis, but, related to that, the COVID crisis. It must have been very difficult. What was the general reaction of the students and faculty? Were they demoralized, or galvanized by these things, or numbed?

CS: Numbed, I would say. Shocked. Everybody thought the school would push through, that there would be a solution. Many things were going on that I was not privy to. There were meetings, negotiations and so forth. The pandemic hit, then shortly after, the school closed down for the first time, temporarily. For a couple of months, you couldn't even go into the school. You couldn't pick up your stuff. That was hard.

We did have the opportunity to transfer out to different schools. I transferred to CCA [California College of the Arts]. Then SFAI contacted me and asked, did I want to come back, and I did. I finished my MFA at SFAI, which I am very glad about. We didn't have the same facilities as some other schools, due to financial problems, but I had to go back.

Tuition was high, but they were very big on fellowships and scholarships. I had a fellowship. There's only me and my husband, and he's on a low wage. There were other people like me. There was an effort to help the students financially. Most people were on scholarships and fellowships. You had to have to a job or get loans because we live in the world today that demands it. The fellowships and scholarships helped, but you need to find other means of financial support to live, and San Francisco is an expensive place to live and work.

DW: The school was not individually to blame for the tuition, in any case, but it does point to an increasingly impossible situation, both for the administration and the students. How do you survive in San Francisco as an art institution? The answer is, you don't, under the present circumstances.

CS: It's difficult. When I finished my degree, SFAI was in the process of negotiating a merger with the University of San Francisco. It is difficult being a student and artist in the Bay Area. But when has being a student and an artist ever been easy?

That said, there is still funding for the arts in California, particularly in the Bay Area. California tends to be liberal with its economic support regarding the arts compared to a lot of places. We do get help—for example, I have a studio that is rent-controlled and has been for years. It's a shame SFAI didn't endeavor to pursue and research further into what was available out here, and maybe it wouldn't have closed. All I know is

that I'm an artist and I will do what it takes to survive.

DW: What are the broader implications of SFAI closing down?

CS: It's going to have a knock-on effect, that's for sure. I don't think a lot of people yet realize that it's closed for good, because of the "stop"- "start" process. It was almost like the boy crying wolf for a while. The wolf has now taken a chunk out of it all. All I know is that everybody's left, faculty, staff, administration, students.

I'm an optimist. I hope someone with a lot of money will come along and bail us out. But I don't know.

DW: What are some of your artistic themes or concerns? What is your work about?

CS: I work in painting and film. My work is based on the role of eroticism. I'm wanting to push back against the pornographic attitude toward eroticism that we see in today's society. I want to bring the poetics back, especially for our young people. They've been damaged by social media and certain ways of thinking, to a point where sexuality has become almost dehumanized.

DW: You find society cold and alienating in its approach to those issues?

CS: Incredibly so. There is a lot of indifference, mainly due to the lack of human interaction on a social scale. It's obvious to everyone living in the 21st century that social media has made sex so available, not just as a commodity—that's always been the case—but something that can be used and thrown away. I find that very sad. Indifference in regard to any aspect of society creates non-interest, which leads to disintegration and decline. Sex and—particularly and sadly—eroticism is no exception. So, yes, I do think the society is cold. Years ago, you didn't have sex on television. Now, it's everywhere—and nowhere. It loses what it was, it's just a blink of an eye. You can watch it having dinner. A lot of my work is not explicit. I want people to think a little bit more.

DW: I saw a reference to the homeless project you did. How did that come about?

CS: In San Francisco there are homeless encampments all over and eventually they set up camp near my studio. It bothered me that many people were indignant about the homeless, they wanted them out of the city. I did an art installation on the plight of the homeless, which involved the building of a tent. It was like somebody's home. I felt very strongly about it. I went around to all the encampments. There was a homeless artist community, there was even a tech homeless contingent, because they couldn't afford to live anywhere.

Of course, there are encampments that are dangerous and most of the time those involved drugs. Not that I'm condemning that. If I had to live on the street in San Francisco, I would take whatever I needed to survive. But these are real people with dignity, whatever had brought them to this place. I thought I needed to do something about this.



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