



ART & EXHIBITS

# San Francisco Art Institute launches 150th anniversary in year of tumult and upheaval

Sam Whiting | June 12, 2020 Updated: June 15, 2020, 1:23 pm



The tower at the San Francisco Art Institute will be lit by film projection Saturday night, June 13.  
Photo: courtesy SFAI

The San Francisco Art Institute opens its 150th anniversary celebration Friday, June 12, with “Tunnels of the Mind,” a riveting video montage of short films projected onto the tower of its historic campus on Russian Hill.

The show will close the following night.



In May, all 69 adjunct faculty members – the majority of the teaching staff – were laid off. Their severance pay ends on Friday, June 19, though seven will teach online through the summer, including Orit Ben Shitrit, chair of the film department, who created “Tunnels of the Mind.”

Already gone is **Gordon Knox, who resigned May 1** after three years as president of SFAI. Gone, too, is the **graduate campus** at Fort Mason Center for the Arts & Culture, which opened in 2017 after a \$14 million makeover of a historic pier on the Golden Gate National Recreation Area site. The stunningly remodeled facility is closed and available for sublet, with 50 years left on a 55-year lease.



Gordon Knox resigned May 1 after three years as president of the San Francisco Art Institute.  
Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Also gone are 175 students who have put in for transfers. The rival California College of the Arts has accepted 128 of them to its campuses across town, and in Oakland. The students had no choice but to leave when it was announced this spring that SFAI would not offer a degree program this fall, or in the spring of 2021.

Soon to be gone are 16 tenured and tenure-track faculty who say they have received notice that they will be laid off in September but have filed multiple grievances to protect their union contract and jobs. The administration maintains that negotiations are ongoing.



and staff to form what board Chair Pam Rorke Levy calls “the Committee to Reimagine SFAI.” To which critics, and there are many, are wondering what remains of the **inspirational institute** where **Ansel Adams**, Dorothea Lange and Richard Diebenkorn all taught to be re-imagined.

“From our perspective, if you lay off all of the faculty and staff, transfer the students and stop offering any credit or degree program, that is a closure,” said San Francisco comedian Nato Green, whose day job is negotiator for the adjunct faculty, who belong to SEIU Local 1021.

SFAI still has a presence online. For starters, 35 students who are a semester from graduation will earn their final credits in a digital three-month summer course. Come fall, continuing education classes will be offered online, with hopes for some live classes at the Chestnut Street campus.

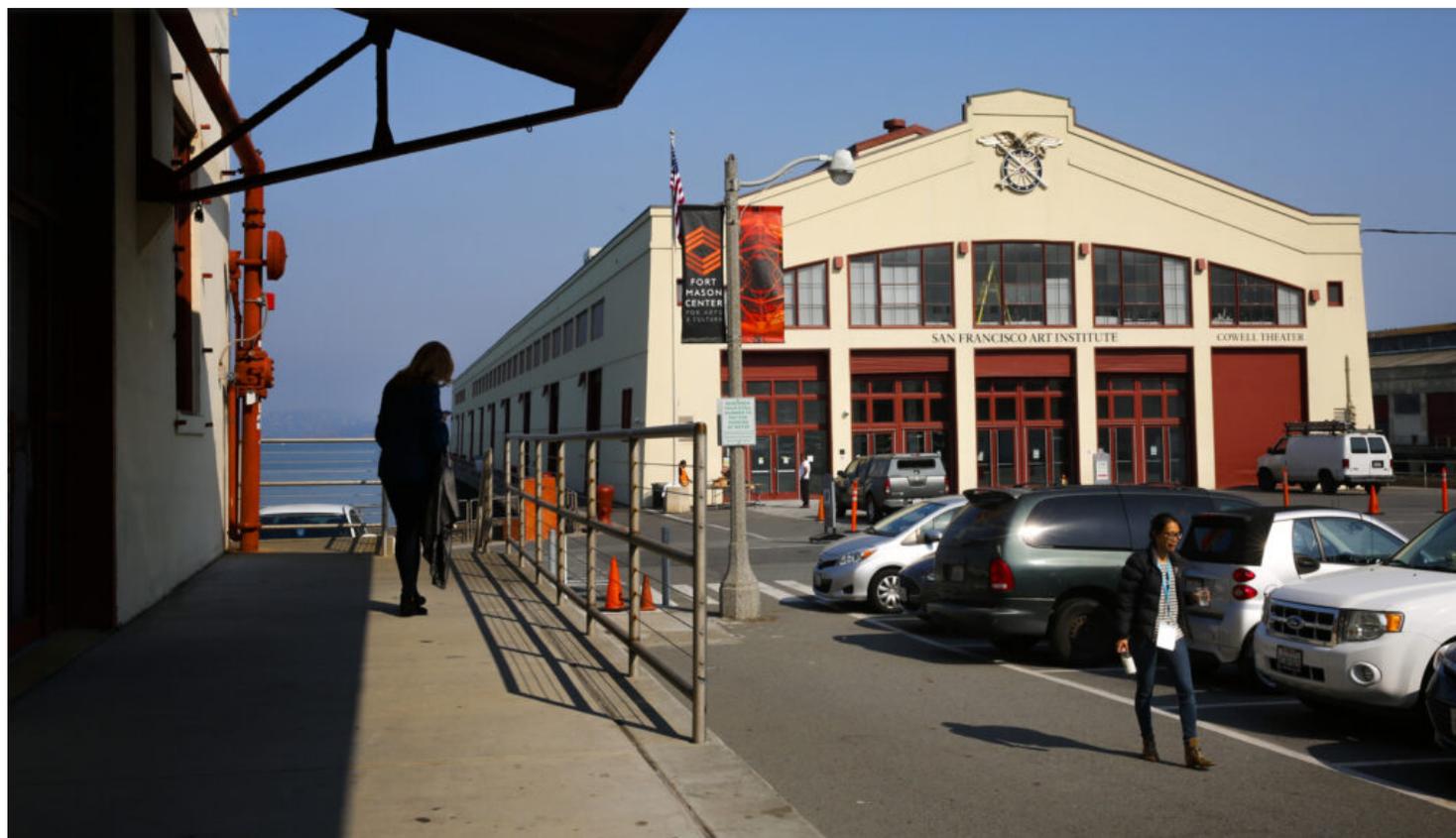
On-campus classes are a top priority because the land is held in trust for SFAI by the University of California, and the trust stipulates that the Art Institute may continue to utilize it free of charge only as long as it is in operation.

“If we stop teaching art in some form then the campus reverts to UC,” said Levy. “It is one of the motivations to offer community classes there.”

This complicated arrangement goes back to 1893 when the Nob Hill mansion built by railroad magnate Mark Hopkins was donated by its owner, Edward Searles, to the University of California to be operated as a school by the San Francisco Art Association. The Hopkins mansion burned to the ground in the conflagration of 1906. It was eventually sold and rebuilt as the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

In the 1920s, a steep parcel with bay views was purchased to relocate the art school from Nob Hill to Russian Hill. UC still owned the land, but the Art Institute put up the buildings, first a Mediterranean-style compound in 1926, then a Brutalist addition in 1969.

Levy can envision a campus community of 250 to 300 students in those buildings, though some of these students may be studying in partnership with other arts organizations. That’s all part of the re-imagining.



The San Francisco Art Institute occupied Pier 2 in Fort Mason in San Francisco, as seen on Oct. 13, 2017.  
Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

The board's immediate goal is to raise \$2.5 million to lift SFAI out of the depths hit in late March when efforts to merge with USF fell apart.

"Had that gone through, there would be a very different story for both the future and the present of the San Francisco Art Institute," said Knox. "The culture of those two universities would have reinforced each other and given the Art Institute another 150 years."

That collapse of the deal, which was largely due to the complications of having a third university as landowner, sent Knox off on a leave, never to return. At the time of his departure, SFAI had one month of operating income left.

"We had to raise money faster than we ever had and more money than we had ever raised," said Levy, a veteran TV documentary producer and creative director.

Ultimately, \$6 million was secured, Levy said, through a combination of donations and matching grants, pulling \$1.5 million out of the school's \$10 million endowment. More than \$2 million arrived due to fortuitous timing of federal assistance to combat the coronavirus lockdown.

The Paycheck Protection Program allowed faculty to be paid through June, when the fiscal and academic year ends. Levy gives credit for the fiscal rescue to Mark Kushner, whom the board brought in as chief operating officer when Knox took leave in April. Kushner has a background in charter schools for lower education, qualifications that did not sit well with some faculty and students.



Student protest outside the gates of Presidio Terrace where Mark Kushner, interim chief operating officer of the San Francisco Art Institute, lives.

Photo: Cordamom Bloom

In April, student protesters went to the gates of Presidio Terrace, the exclusive San Francisco neighborhood where Kushner lives. They held up two signs on sheets. “Follow the money,” read one, “Disaster Capitalism Killed the SFAI,” read the other.

“Kushner is an outsider who has a hard job to do,” said Levy, “and this is a tight-knit community.”

She acknowledges that there has been a long history of financial missteps, mostly before she became board chair two years ago. Regrettable, from her point of view, was the \$19 million construction loan taken out to develop and operate the Fort Mason campus at an annual rental rate of \$800,000. But she maintains that the yearly outlay will be recouped if the SFAI can make money by subletting that campus. But the pier is shared with Cowell Theater and any new sub-tenant will require approval of the National Park Service.

“It is quite a valuable asset for us,” she said, “and a way that we can support our programs on Chestnut Street.”

Levy said those programs will not likely include any undergraduate bachelor of fine arts program. There may still be a limited graduate degree program, which is a requirement to maintain accreditation. But this comes as news



After a grievance meeting with management Thursday, June 11, the union bolstered its position that it has a contract through the 2020-21 school year. Robin Balliger, union chapter president, said the administration did not provide the necessary three months' notice before the contract automatically rolls over for another year.

"We are disputing the administration's narrative that we have been laid off," said Balliger, who has a Stanford Ph.D. in anthropology and 20 years on staff at SFAI, teaching critical studies at both the undergraduate and graduate campuses.

"Faculty, students and staff won't allow one of the last fine arts schools in the country to become some flavor-of-the-week tech ed platform they falsely rebrand as 'innovation,'" said Balliger. "It's extremely important for the future of the college to have a faculty in place who can build on the 150-year legacy of the school and develop programs into the future."

Levy counters that the future for SFAI is in offering a noncredit arts education and points to demographics she says support that.

"There are fewer and fewer college-age students year after year, and more seniors who want to continue on with lifelong learning," she said. "That is part of our year of re-imagining. We have to tap into that population as students."

Levy also said merger talks with "other prominent and larger Bay Area institutions of higher education," are expected to resume in the fall. She said she expects SFAI to be on solid ground when the 150th anniversary is celebrated at greater length in March 2021.



“Ward of the Feral Horses,” by Orit Ben Shitrit, projected onto Times Square in New York. Photo by ZAZ10TS/Zdravko Cota  
Photo: Orit Ben-Shitrit, courtesy SFAI

“**Tunnels of the Mind**”, the video installation on the **tower**, could be seen as a marketing tool for that. The two-night display in San Francisco, which runs from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday, June 13, will also be seen for five days and nights on a Jumbotron in Times Square in New York. That installation is a partnership with with ZAZ 10 Times Square.

The curator, Ben Shitrit, is proud to be part of SFAI, even though she moved from New York just two years ago, only to be laid off and out of a paycheck come September.

“There are complicated sentiments regarding SFAI,” she said. “But what matters is that it is a magical place. There is nothing like it.”

*Editor’s note: The original story misstated the number of years Pam Rorke Levy served on the board of the San Francisco Art Institute. She joined the board seven years ago.*



Sam Whiting



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