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Former Dean of Academic Affairs at SFAI Okwui Enwezor dead at 55

SFAI remembers his legacy

San Francisco, CA, March 15, 2019 — Okwui Enwezor, Dean of Academic Affairs at San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) from 2005-2009 and globally influential curator and scholar, has died at age 55 following a battle with cancer.

“Okwui was a brilliant, energetic revolutionary working at the intersection of art, ideas, and social change,” says SFAI President Gordon Knox. “He had an urgent vision of the role of art and artists as they challenge the status quo and open new avenues for social organization. He also transformed the way exhibitions themselves are assembled, turning them into an active working platform for the circulation of ideas.”

Enwezor served at SFAI under then-President Chris Bratton, ushering in an ambitious global artistic agenda and programmatic expansion. At the time he joined SFAI, he shared that what attracted him was “the great intellectual openness at the school.” He said: “I felt this sense of open inquiry among both the faculty and the students. SFAI is an experimental environment, a good home for my own intellectual curiosity and sensibilities. I see the practice of art in the broader network of knowledge production. So, for me, the challenge is not just whether the Art Institute can train artists of the highest quality but also if it can enable artists for their larger role in the community and the world.”

Under Enwezor’s leadership, SFAI launched new BA/MA programs in the History and Theory of Contemporary Art and Urban Studies, a new MA program in Exhibition and Museum Studies, and an MA/MFA Dual Degree program in 2007. He also brought other accomplished artists and curators to SFAI, including Hou Hanru as Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs and Renée Green as Dean of Graduate Studies.

This expansion of SFAI’s academic programs was and continues to be central to the understanding of the role of contemporary art in a global world, the potency of art as a form of critical dialogue, and the importance of a rigorous interdisciplinary education for emerging artists and scholars.

SFAI Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs Jennifer Rissler, who worked with Enwezor throughout his tenure, says: “Okwui’s curatorial methodologies – his steadfast commitment to presenting a plurality of voices and polyphonic layerings of non-Western and non-Eurocentric narratives – translated into a profound reorientation of SFAI’s pedagogy. His imprint is and will continue to be reflected across our curriculum. Okwui’s enduring legacy is his belief in the force of artistic practice to contest, reshape, and animate our relationship to the world. He has changed the condition of being here.”

Upon leaving SFAI, Enwezor served as the director of Munich's Haus der Kunst from 2011 until last June. His important curatorial efforts throughout his career include the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, Documenta 11 in 2002, and the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, among many others. At SFAI, he organized the 135th Anniversary exhibition *Work Zones* in 2006, which presented the work of 15 SFAI alumni from the late 1960s to the late 1990s whose impressive artistic careers have been critical in redefining the field of contemporary art.

About San Francisco Art Institute

Founded in 1871, SFAI is one of the country's oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher education in the practice and study of contemporary art. As a diverse community of working artists and scholars, SFAI provides students with a rigorous education in the arts and preparation for a life in the arts through an immersive studio environment, an integrated liberal arts and art history curriculum, and critical engagement with the world. Committed to educating artists who will shape the future of art, culture, and society, SFAI fosters creativity and original thinking in an open, experimental, and interdisciplinary context.

SFAI offers BFA, BA, MFA, and MA degrees, a dual MA/MFA degree, a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate, and a range of exhibitions, public programs, and public education courses. Notable past faculty and alumni include Lance Acord, Ansel Adams, Kathryn Bigelow, Enrique Chagoya, Angela Davis, Richard Diebenkorn, Paul Kos, George Kuchar, Annie Leibovitz, Barry McGee, Manuel Neri, Catherine Opie, Peter Pau, Laura Poitras, Clyfford Still, and Kehinde Wiley.

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