

## These Five Groups Are Helping Keep the S.F. Art Scene Alive

By Matt Haber  
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**To survive in post-boho San Francisco, artists are banding together – and so are the organizations that support them.**



Photo: Zohar Lazar

organization to organization,” says Courtney Fink, the former executive director of Southern Exposure. “I’m a true believer in this model.”

While they may gravitate toward different types of art or keep themselves alive with differing fundraising models, the following five groups have each shown a commitment to helping one another while also helping themselves.

### Root Division

This survival story comes with a plot twist. Started in 2002 by a group of graduates from San Francisco Art Institute, Root Division provided subsidized studio spaces for artists, who in turn volunteered to teach art to school-kids throughout the city. The group was housed in a 7,000-square-foot space in the Mission that accommodated 18 artists. Then, in 2013, the organization’s landlord informed executive director Michelle Mansour and her board that the rent for their space would be going up significantly. Complicating the narrative is the fact that the landlord wasn’t a rapacious management company or out-of-town speculator: It was another nonprofit, 7 Tepees, which served kids and had partnered with Root Division in the past. While it wasn’t exactly

**How tough is life** for a San Francisco artist in 2016? Just ask Raphael Noz, a 51-year-old painter, sculptor, and performance artist. “At the risk of controversy, it’s like going through the AIDS crisis again,” he says. He likens the threat of displacement to “this big scary thing that was affecting everybody in your community. When it came, they were gone. You prayed that it didn’t happen to you.”

That’s one similarity. But another is the banding together of community organizations that are determined not just to survive—but to fight back. Across the Bay Area, arts groups are lashing their lifeboats together to weather the storm. Even as competition (for apartments, childcare, seats on BART) has come to define life for many, these groups are showing that cooperation may be the only way to survive. And, amazingly enough, it’s working—at least for some. “There’s an ethic of mutual support that goes

an eviction, it was an unfortunate turn of events, to say the least. “We were so angry and so upset, and it was really emotional, but it was like, OK, this is a teaching moment on how to model behavior,” says Mansour, whose mantra became “stay positive, stay positive, stay positive.”

During the group’s search for more permanent housing, Southern Exposure opened its doors to Mansour and her team the way one might allow a friend to crash on the couch after a bad breakup. Amy Cancelmo, Root Division’s arts program director, remembers the two weeks they shared offices as a spirited time: “There was solidarity there. They were like, ‘We’ve done this, we know what you’re going through.’”

Positivity paid off. Today, Root Division is housed in a light-filled 13,000-square-foot multistory SoMa building that was once a sewing machine manufacturing and repair shop. When the basement is completed, as many as 22 studios will be available to artists at between \$140 and \$450 per month. On the second floor, where the already-built studios are located, windows allow for natural light to pour through. In one space, conceptual artist Susa Cortez, who serves as an outreach and program assistant, has built a wall-size replica of the sort of dirt-and-clay house her great-grandmother lived in in rural Mexico. To make it, Cortez, 26, gathered backpacks full of dirt from Bernal Hill, which she says has a texture and consistency that reminds her of her hometown in Mexico—a melding of material and memory that could have only happened right here.

### **Southern Exposure**

Before stepping aside after 13 years at the Mission-based experimental arts organization, Courtney Fink often found herself working 60-hour weeks. For many of those years, Southern Exposure was “nomadic,” which is a nice way of saying “homeless.” Now it has a handsome building anchoring the corner of Alabama and 20th Streets. How did Fink, who is currently working on a research residency in Los Angeles, keep it going? “Sheer willpower,” she says. “It’s not just your job. Thousands and thousands of people are looking to your organization to be there for them. You’re serving a cause.”

Started in 1974, Southern Exposure exists to help contemporary artists make and display their work. Fink is most proud of Alternative Exposure, a program started in 2007 that hands out more than \$70,000 annually in grants to artists and other groups. “The idea was investing in grassroots projects that would help us and everybody,” Fink says. “At first people thought it was counterintuitive to give money to people you’re ‘in competition’ with. We’re not in competition with them. We’re all trying.”

To date, Alternative Exposure has given out more than \$600,000 to individuals and other arts organizations. “I’ve lived in the Bay Area for 21 years, and worked in nonprofit art the entirety of that time,” Fink says. “Everyone is friends, everyone is borrowing chairs and equipment.”

### **Intersection for the Arts**

“Artists know how to make their work, there’s no question about that,” says Randy Rollison, executive director of the 50-year-old Intersection for the Arts. “We’re trying to supply them with the basic business sense to develop sustainable practices.” Rollison, who is 60, came up through New York City’s art scene of the late 1970s and sees many parallels between San Francisco in this decade and the days when SoHo and Tribeca went from grotty artists’ enclaves to gilded luxury aeries. “What’s happening here is pretty much a mirror of what happened there,” he says. “I don’t know what you can do to stop it. No matter what, it’s a capitalist market, and we’ll always be subject to it.”

The goal, says Rollison, is not to be a victim of capitalism, but a beneficiary of it. Among the programs that Intersection offers individual artists and smaller organizations is training in how to turn an art practice into a viable enterprise. In addition to receiving coaching on creating a business plan and pitching themselves to funders and collaborators, artists can access Intersection’s co-working space at significantly below market value. For as little as \$300 a month for a desk, groups can move into a professional setting, get an official address, and use the free printers and Wi-Fi. But what they really get, according to Rollison, is a sense of shared purpose. “It’s so encouraging on so many days when somebody’s got something going. You pick up the energy on that,” he says. “Sometimes, it’s really about feeling less isolated.”

### **Flight Deck**

For some artists who feel that the game is permanently rigged against them in San Francisco, Oakland offers a small reprieve. Flight Deck grew out of the Ragged Wing theater ensemble to become an arts venue that opened downtown in 2014. With a white-wall gallery in the front and a black-box theater in the back, the Flight Deck space sets an example for how to use commercial real estate to promote the arts, says executive director Anna Shneiderman.

If Shneiderman had her way, any shuttered storefronts that once housed priced-out mom-and-pops would be filled by pop-up galleries and artists' installations. "There's tons of these stores available" in Oakland, she notes. "Can we take the things we've got and rethink them?"

To that end, she says, arts organizations have to begin to make peace with the real estate market. "We have to reach out directly to developers," Shneiderman says. "Business and arts communities have to work together." Case in point: a 33-story condo building that's been approved for the same stretch of Broadway as Flight Deck's storefront. "Change happens," Shneiderman says. "My attitude is, OK, there's potential risks of that, but probably these folks can be our partner. If we can get past the knee-jerk reaction of polarization, how can we build alliances between the arts and business sectors?"

### **Minnesota Street Project**

One answer to that question may be found back in the city. Over at Minnesota Street Project, which launched its phased rollout in March, independent galleries, as well as the San Francisco Arts Education Project, are seeing if they can succeed by pooling some infrastructure and working together.

Conceived as a self-sustaining visual arts hub by Deborah and Andy Rappaport, the block-long art corridor has a refreshingly collectivist ethos. Across the street from the main gallery building is a warehouse that will house more than 30 artists in studios priced at below-market rates. (More than 300 artists applied for the slots before construction was even complete.) In the center of the cavernous space will be a communal area for meals, socializing, and special events.

Communalism also runs through the galleries themselves. According to Shannon Trimble, manager of Anglim Gilbert Gallery, the sense of collegiality shared among the galleries makes the nascent Minnesota Street Project special. "You don't feel that in a gallery downtown," Trimble, 54, says. "We're all really excited to be working with each other. We're planning programming, coordinating events with each other."

Two doors down at Rena Bransten Gallery, director Trish Bransten explains that part of what makes the Rappaports' plan so unique is the way it allows each gallery to support the others. One example: Rather than each taking up valuable square footage for a packing room, the galleries share one. "We as a group always recognize that there's a synergy created when galleries work together," Bransten, 57, says.

Whether or not communalism will bring out the best in everyone is yet to be determined. Bransten lived in a commune back in her days at Berkeley and chuckles at what she calls the "pluses and minuses to any model that requires grown-up behavior." That said, she notes that "the question all of us seem to have for each other is, What can I do to help you?"

Which is a nice throwback to a kinder, gentler San Francisco, though a very 2016 question remains: Can anyone in the art world—gallery, nonprofit group, artist—make a living long-term this way? "I think we can," Bransten says. "I really think we can."

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