

New York's Whitney Museum suspends longstanding program in the face of protest over censoring of pro-Palestinian event

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Officials at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City have suspended the museum's famed Independent Study Program (ISP) for 2025-26 confronted with widespread criticism and protest over its censoring of a pro-Palestinian event.

A May 14 performance, connected to the ISP, entitled "No Aesthetic Outside My Freedom: Mourning, Militancy, and Performance," was canceled by the museum on the grounds that during a previous version of the event, one of the artists had asked anyone who supported Israel to leave. This, Whitney's pious leadership declared, violated the museum's "anti-harassment policies."

This is specious and hypocritical. The Whitney, along with other leading New York art institutions, has significant connections to the Zionist establishment and pro-Israeli bodies and individuals in the US. *Hyperallergic* noted that "[ISP's Associate Director Sara] Nadal-Melsió insisted that the ISP had agreed to stage the performance, and not the introduction, but this did not change the museum's decision."

At a protest May 23, sparked by the cancellation of the earlier performance, according to *Hyperallergic*, protesters handed out

600 mock museum pamphlets identifying specific board members and their ties to Zionist, militarized, and surveillance-oriented entities. The tri-folds named Nancy Carrington Crown, whose family members are major shareholders of General Dynamics, the arms and information systems company that has supplied the Israeli military with bombs and ammunition; Estée Lauder heir Leonard Lauder, whose brother Ronald is the president of the World Jewish Congress and a chairman emeritus of the Jewish National Fund; and billionaire Laurie Tisch, whose cousin Jessica Tisch became the New

York City Police Commissioner last November.

Alleged "harassment" is a major issue for the Whitney, association with the Israeli murder machine, however, is not.

In a statement, the artists behind the canceled performance piece, Noel Maghathe, Fadl Fakhouri and Fargo Tbakhi, observed that

In the time since our performance was cancelled by the Whitney, Israel has brutally murdered more than 600 Palestinians, all while continuing to enforce mass starvation and famine as a method of genocide in Gaza.

In the face of this ongoing and escalating brutality, the decision to cancel our performance—a performance whose purpose is to mourn Palestinians martyred in the long struggle for liberation—matters very little. It is an act of anti-Palestinian censorship, yes; an act of cowardice by an institution materially complicit in the genocide, whose board members profit from the bombs and jets committing the genocide, yes; it is also a distraction.

The Whitney's ISP was established in 1968 by Ron Clark. It is a non-degree-granting program, according to the museum's website, that

provides a setting within which students pursuing art practice, curatorial work, art historical scholarship, and critical writing engage in ongoing discussions and debates that examine the historical, social, and intellectual conditions of artistic production. The program encourages the theoretical

and critical study of artistic practices. ...

There is obviously a limit to the degree of “critical” thought and study the museum will permit. This sort of language turns out to be mere window dressing, insincere double-talk. In reality, the Whitney, like every leading institution in the US, throws principles and democratic concerns out the window confronted with pressure from the far right and the pro-Israeli lobby.

The ISP consists of three interrelated parts: Studio Program, Critical Studies Program, and Curatorial Program. ... Many of the participants are enrolled at universities and art schools and receive academic credit for their participation, while others have recently completed their formal studies.

Alumni of the program include artists Jennifer Allora, Gregg Bordowitz, Tony Cokes, Danielle Dean, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Renée Green, Jenny Holzer, Emily Jacir, Glenn Ligon, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Julian Schnabel; critics and art historians Huey Copeland, Miwon Kwon, Pamela M. Lee and Roberta Smith; and curators Carlos Basualdo, Naomi Beckwith and Sheena Wagstaff.

In a strong statement, Catalan writer, curator, and educator Nadal-Melsió, who became the ISP’s first associate director in 2024 and who has now been let go by the Whitney, pointed out that the work of the study program

has always been unapologetically engaged with the politics of its times. The ISP began amid the revolutionary energies of May 68, the movement against the Vietnam War, the state violence of Kent State massacre and fully coalesced around AIDS activism two decades later. Today, this means participants in the Program continue to think for themselves and provoke thought in others about contexts including but not limited to fascism at home and the relentless genocide being carried out in Gaza. And sadly today, this means that we also face unprecedented censorship and a threat to our foundational independence because of our pursuit of the very dialogue that make the ISP what it is.

Nadal-Melsió rejected the “ostensible reason” for the

cancellation of “No Aesthetic Outside My Freedom,” asserting that

the point of artistic freedom has never been that it shies away from controversy or anger. And the point of defending it has never been that we agree with everything an individual says. The point is that we must refuse the right-wing extremism that seek to dictate what everyone is allowed to believe and express. The point is to insist on a free society and to stand in solidarity with other individuals and educational institutions under attack by this newly amplified right-wing extremism.

Over three hundred ISP alumni issued an open letter in May expressing support for the students “who were censored when presenting work in solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian freedom” and affirming “our shared solidarity against the ongoing genocide in Gaza.”

The letter states its repudiation of the Whitney’s censorship, as well as “the financial and sociopolitical entanglements the board of the Whitney Museum holds in relation to this genocide.”

The alumni argued that the

canceled performance, scrutinized artwork and scholarship, and atmosphere of censorship have their roots in a broader political climate of fear and intimidation in the United States, and follow other recent crackdowns on free expression, protest, and speech by artists and scholars supporting Palestine.



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