

NEWS

Whitney Museum Suspends Independent Study Program After Cancelling Pro- Palestinian Performance

Whitney Museum of American Art will not hold a study programme this year which has propelled the careers of important artists like LaToya Ruby Frazier, Glenn Ligon, Jenny Holzer, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres since 1968.

Save to My Ocula

By Elaine YJ Zheng – 3 June 2025, New York

Whitney Museum of American Art will not hold a study programme this year which has propelled the careers of important artists like LaToya Ruby Frazier, Glenn Ligon, Jenny Holzer, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres since 1968.

On Monday, the respected New York institution announced its decision to ‘pause’ the curriculum of the Independent Study Program (ISP) over 2025 and 2026.

This comes just weeks after the museum cancelled a performance on Palestinian grief by curatorial students—a decision met with backlash from alumni and current students.

Scheduled to open two days later, the cancelled performance, *No Aesthetic Outside My Freedom: Mourning, Militancy, and Performance* by artists Noel Maghathe, Fadl Fakhouri, and Fargo Tbakhi, sought to mourn the over 50,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza.

First staged last autumn with East Village initiative The Poetry Project, the work was flagged for its prelude asserting audiences should remain only if they ‘love Palestinians wholly and completely’, and leave if they ‘[believe] in Israel in any incarnation, given its ontological structure as a continual process of extermination, disposition, and daily cruelty’.

Whitney director Scott Rothkopf told *Hyperallergic* the declaration went against the museum’s ‘community guidelines’, and while ISP associate director Sara Nadal-Melsió said this prelude would not feature in the Whitney iteration, the museum kept to their decision.

Around 50 protestors occupied the museum’s lobby last Friday, protesting the museum board’s ties to institutions enabling violence and condemning its decision.

The sentiment was echoed by over 300 alumni and former seminar leaders, including respected artists like Mark Dion, Louise Lawler, and Walid Raad, who signed an open letter voicing their ‘unequivocal support’ for current students and reproaching the institution for ‘censorship’, while questioning the integrity of an organisation whose stated mission and values are ‘grounded precisely in its acceptance of dissent, reinvention, and activism’.

The letter put the decision in the context of a ‘broader political climate of fear and intimidation in the United States’, following recent ‘crackdowns on free expression, protest, and speech by artists and scholars supporting Palestine’.

The three ISP cohorts—curatorial, studio, and critical studies—similarly denounced the institution’s decision in a public statement that framed the act as ‘unprecedented surveillance’ and a ‘denigration’ of the criticality associated with the programme.

A museum spokesperson told *Hyperallergic* this year’s ISP will not take place, citing absent leadership: Rothkopf, who has led the ISP since 2023, transitioned to a director-at-large role in February, leaving the programme in the hands of associate director Nadal-Melsió.

In a public [statement](#), Nadal-Melsió said she disagreed with the museum’s decision to cancel the performance, noting the programme’s integrity has been ‘seriously compromised’. —[O]

Main image: Independent Study Program at Roy Lichtenstein Studio. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Max Touhey.



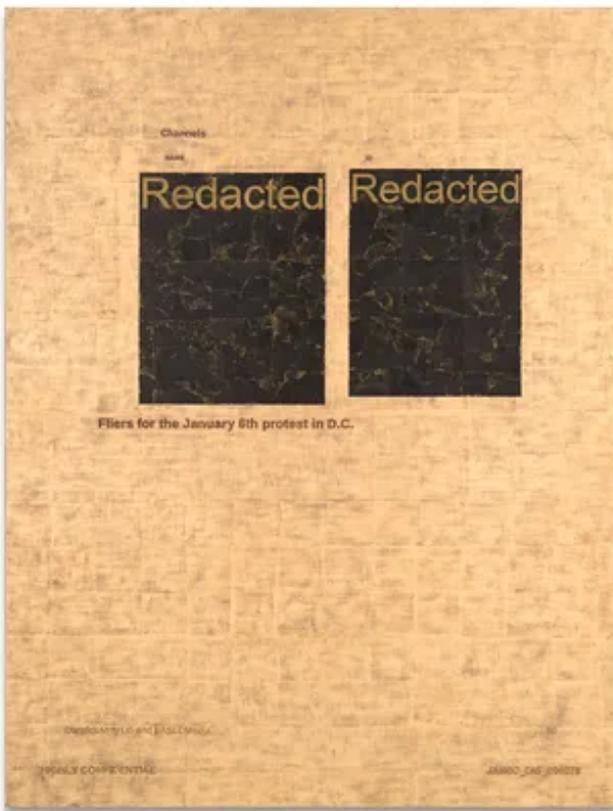
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Elaine YJ Zheng is a writer and editor who follows art news and market developments.

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