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Museums & Heritage // News

## Whitney Museum pauses Independent Study Program amid accusations of censorship

The cancellation of a performance addressing the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza has also sparked an open letter by alumni of the programme



The Whitney Independent Study Program at the Roy Lichtenstein Studio

Photograph by Max Touhey

Benjamin Sutton

4 June 2025

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The Whitney Museum of American Art announced on Monday (2 June) that it has suspended its highly regarded Independent Study Program (ISP) for the forthcoming academic year. The decision comes amid accusations of censorship from the ISP's current cohort, after the museum cancelled a performance addressing the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

In a letter addressed to the “Whitney ISP Community”, published on Monday, the museum’s director Scott Rothkopf wrote that following “much consideration with colleagues and with a deep sense of responsibility to the program’s legacy and future, we have made the difficult decision to pause the ISP for the 2025-2026 academic year”. Rothkopf’s letter frames the decision primarily as a result of the retirement in 2023 of Ron Clark, the programme’s longtime director, writing that the subsequent “leadership gap has strained both the strategic vision and day-to-day operations”.

Rothkopf’s letter does not directly address the museum’s cancellation last month of Fadl Fakhouri, Noel Maghathe and Fargo Tbakhi’s performance, *No Aesthetics Outside my Freedom: Mourning, Militancy and Performance*. However, it does allude to “recent developments” that “underscored the need to further consider the nature of the relationship between” the ISP and the museum.

In a statement provided to *The Art Newspaper*, a spokesperson for the museum added: “The Whitney remains deeply committed to the ISP and recognises its importance in the broader field as a space for experimentation, critical thinking and interdisciplinary practice. We recognise the ISP has faced challenges transitioning from Ron Clark’s direction of the programme for more than 50 years and moving into its first permanent home, closer to the museum.

“Given the effort participants make to travel from across the world to join the ISP, we believe it would be a disservice to welcome a new cohort in September with the present gap in leadership. We think the most responsible approach is to take the coming months to hear from our community, reflect on the ISP’s tremendous recent growth and change, and find a new long-term director to lead the programme forward.”

In an open letter [↗](#) published on 2 May and signed by more than 360 alumni, faculty and “friends” of the programme, the signatories state they “unequivocally support the 2024-25 ISP cohort who were censored when presenting work in solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian freedom”. The letter continued: “We uplift their efforts to create and debate art while reckoning with political violence and institutional coercion, and affirm our shared solidarity against the ongoing genocide in Gaza.”

Signatories include many leading contemporary artists, curators and scholars, among them the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, the artists Andrea Fraser, Alfredo Jaar, Deborah Kass, Walid Raad, Dread Scott and Louise Lawler, and the curators Sara Reinsman and Sarah Lookofsky.

“The canceled performance, scrutinised 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,” the collectively written letter continues. “If the Whitney Museum denies the ISP the ability to independently persist as a site of critique over an ongoing genocide, then the Whitney Museum loses all claim to uphold the very values it cites as its guiding principles.”

### What is the Independent Study Program?

The ISP was founded in 1968. Each cohort consists of three tracks—for artists, curators and scholars—who participate in the programme for roughly the duration of a school year, from September to May. Since 2023, the programme has been operated out of the former studio building of Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, located in Manhattan’s West Village just a few blocks from the Whitney Museum building.



Museums & Heritage

### Artists accuse Whitney Museum of censorship for cancelling pro-Palestine performance

Gabriella Angeleti

The performance event planned by Fakhouri, Maghathe and Tbakhi, which the Whitney cancelled for allegedly containing “exclusionary and inflammatory” content that violated the museum’s policies, was to be part of a capstone event for the 2024-25 ISP cohort. The artists and prominent freedom-of-expression organisations criticised the decision as an act of censorship and drew parallels to efforts to suppress dissent by the administration of US President Donald Trump and authoritarian regimes around the world.

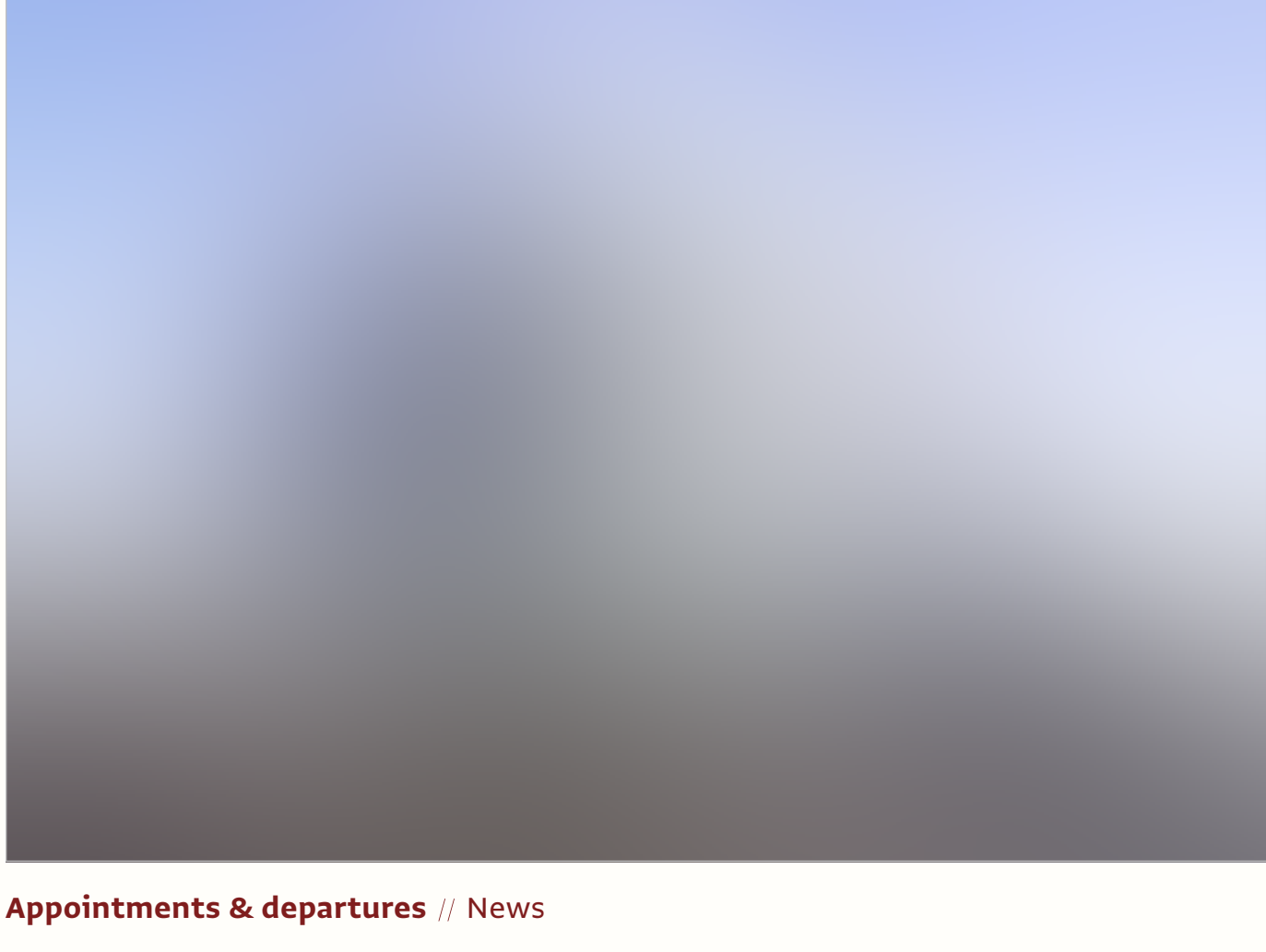
Following the performance’s cancellation, protesters staged an action in the Whitney Museum’s lobby during its admission-free Friday evening hours. The protesters criticised the museum over board members who they allege are “tied to genocide, militarism, and apartheid”, according to *Hyperallergic* [↗](#), and accused it of “policing artists”.

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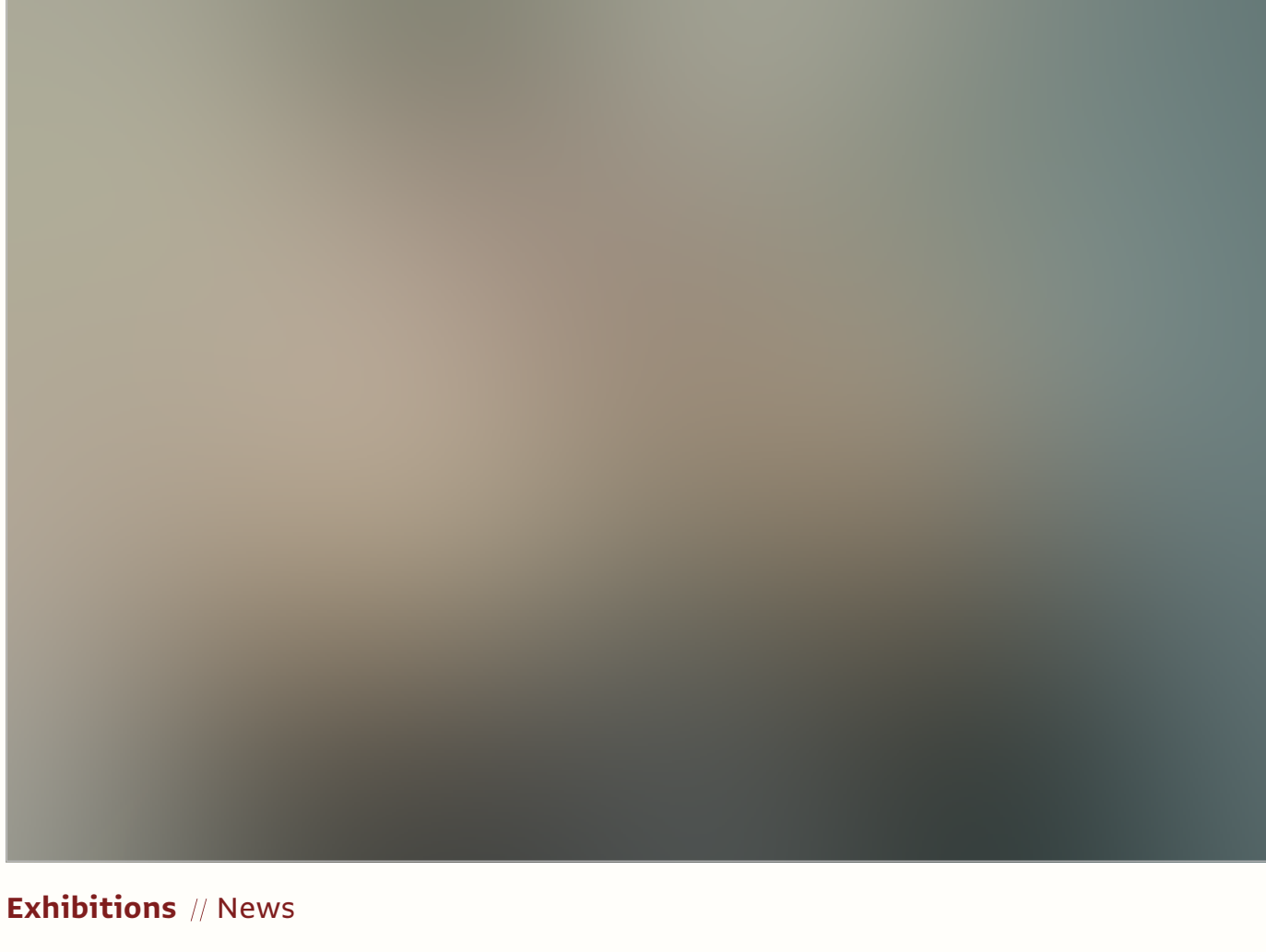
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The building, just a few blocks from the museum, will be renovated and used as a permanent home for the Whitney’s Independent Study Program

Benjamin Sutton



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### Artists accuse Whitney Museum of censorship for cancelling pro-Palestine performance

The artists, members of the institution’s current Independent Study Program cohort, decried the decision as an act of cowardice, while a museum representative said it was “clear and necessary”

Gabriella Angeleti

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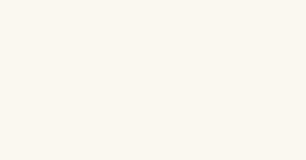
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