

Whitney Museum suspends Independent Study Program

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The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2015 © CC 4.0. Photo: MusikAnimal

The Whitney Museum of American Art has suspended its Independent Study Program (ISP) for the 2025–2026 academic year. The announcement comes amid ongoing backlash over the museum’s cancellation of a performance, *No Aesthetic Outside My Freedom*, by artists Fadl Fakhouri, Noel Maghathe and Fargo Tbakhi, originally scheduled for 14 May.

The artists stated that the event was to be ‘founded in the struggle for Palestinian freedom’. The museum claimed the piece violated its policy on harassment and discriminatory behaviour after viewing a video of a previous iteration of the performance, in which Tbakhi asks those who support the

concept of Israel or America to leave the venue. Critics have condemned the cancellation of the performance as censorship, while a demonstration was staged at the museum on 23 May in protest.

Sara Nadal-Melsió, who was appointed the ISP's first associate director in 2024 after former director Ron Clark retired in 2023, will not continue in her role. Nadal-Melsió publicly criticised the museum's actions, describing them as 'thoughtless violence' against the ISP community.

In an email to ISP participants, museum director Scott Rothkopf cited the search for a new director as a reason for the programme's suspension, as well as the need for 'greater reflection regarding the ISP's new circumstances and future', but made no direct mention of the outcry over the cancelled performance.

'The Whitney affirms its commitment to the ISP as a vital space for artists, curators, and scholars, and recognizes its tremendous importance to the broader field beyond its participants and faculty,' Rothkopf wrote, highlighting recent investments such as a new permanent home for the programme in the former studio of Roy Lichtenstein and the introduction of stipends for participants.

A few hours after Rothkopf's email, an [open letter](#) was published, signed by over 300 artists, scholars and ISP alumni, decrying the museum's actions and a broader climate of political suppression. 'The Whitney Museum's stated mission and core values are grounded precisely in its acceptance of dissent, reinvention, and activism,' the group stated. '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.'

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