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An Open Letter to the Cleveland International Film Festival
April 6, 2026

Re-Present Media (RPM) is calling out the Board of Directors and Executive Director of the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF), in solidarity with Head of Public Programs Shakira Refos.

RPM was invited to present a public workshop titled “Centering Care, Consent and Community in Visual Storytelling” at CIFF on Friday April 17, 2026. This workshop focuses on understanding and practicing strategies to advance and protect the human rights of film participants who are trauma survivors. We intend to cancel our workshop at CIFF and host it independently as a free online experience for filmmakers, audience members, and other industry members this summer.

We cannot in good conscience proceed with delivering our workshop with CIFF upon learning there are numerous documented instances of verbal and emotional abuse and violence by the Executive Director towards multiple festival staff, including the following:

- Berating, belittling, and shouting at staff for more than 30 minutes at a time, including using derogatory and denigrating language,
- Medical privacy violations, including inquiring about and then using physical and mental conditions against staff through abusive comments,
- Erratic and chaotic behavior, including affirming and reversing decisions on a whim and becoming angry with staff asking for clarification, and
- Employing a host of other psychological manipulating tactics, including manipulating, bullying, triangulating, retaliating, and gaslighting towards staff.

Ultimately, we hold the Board of Directors of CIFF accountable for an ineffective response that has led to continued staff harm and traumatization from the Executive Director’s violent, abusive behavior. As contractors, the festival staff have little recourse to take action in this environment and have been assigned responsibility for their own victimization as being “resistant to change” (i.e. blaming the victim).

We also stand in solidarity with filmmakers, especially those based in Cleveland, who are screening their films at this year’s festival as one of their strategies to gain support, visibility, and bring together communities for their films.

We challenge the Board to rise to the occasion of this crisis. We believe that those who enable violence while having the means to stop it are as responsible as those committing the violent acts. All staff at CIFF are entitled to the human resources protection and support needed to resolve these harms. We call upon the Board to seek guidance to address this urgent matter with consideration to interpersonal violence along with the historic power dynamics involved.

To the film community, we call upon you to join our open letter in support of the festival staff, filmmakers, and film community at CIFF.

With compassion,

Jennifer Crystal Chien
Director, Re-Present Media

Signers (as of 4/20/26)

Former CIFF Staff and Associates

Andrew Delly, Filmmaker

Colette Taylor

Danielle Davis, Former Programming & Projection Manager

Debbie Marshall, Former Director of Operations & Membership

Kelly Standish, Former Development Director

Kristopher Caccamise

Neha Aziz, Former Features Programmer (2021-2025)

Valerie Temple

Other Supporters

Aaron Lange

Adele Ray, Advisory Board Member, Re-Present Media

Amy Lim, Program Coordinator, Re-Present Media

Chris Metzler, Director/Producer, Tilapia Film

Dave Feiferis

Dominique Oneil

Erin Turney, Filmmaker

Evan A. Lieberman, Associate Professor, Cleveland State University

Greg Andreoli

Jennifer Huang, Director/Producer, Treeclimber Media

Jessica Jones, Filmmaker

JoAnn DePetro, Psychology Professor, Center for Family Solutions

Karim Ahmad, CEO, The Utopia Studio

Kevin White, Executive Director/Filmmaker, Filmmakers Collaborative SF

Lu Mukerjee, Film Curator & Co-Founder, Programmers of Colour Collective

Martine Granby

Melissa Gueneau

Michael Cook

Michael Mitrani, Filmmakers Collaborative SF

Michal Aviad, Filmmaker, Filmmakers Collaborative SF

Miles Iton

Monica Del Vecchio, Project Manager, Matrix

Nat Ruiz, Co-Chair, Board of Directors, QWOCMAP

Natalie Bullock Brown, Filmmaker

Nicole Docta, Producer

Olive Wilson-Blake

Richard Bryer

Riley Patin

Toni Achebe Bell, Impact Producer, Black Cat Impact Media

Vanessa Lange

Walter Wallace, Executive Director, Black Film Guild

Whitney Chitwood