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651 ARTS Announces New Appointment
Introducing Seasoned Arts Leader Monica L. Williams in New Director of Programs & Chief Curator Role

Institution Also Expands Board of Directors Welcoming Three New Members Claude Johnson, Bahia Ramos and Lise Suino

(Brooklyn, NY – July 27, 2020) – As the world continues to adjust to a new normal in the midst of the global pandemic, renowned Brooklyn-based organization 651 ARTS today announced a major step forward in reimagining its programmatic strategy to ensure that the institution will thrive in a post-pandemic arts and culture space with the appointment of Monica L. Williams in the new role of Director of Programs and Chief Curator (DPCC). Additionally, the institution also announced the expansion of its Board of Directors welcoming new members Claude Johnson, Bahia Ramos and Lise Suino.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the Black-led institution, now in its 32nd year, was in the process of a major expansion effort with the organization scheduled to move into its first-ever permanent home in Downtown Brooklyn next year. As productions were halted and the construction postponed due to the pandemic, the organization led by Executive Director David J. Roberts, pivoted and quickly worked to reassess the institution’s programmatic footprint to face these challenges. The 651 team secured a grant from the New York City COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund created to aid nonprofits during the coronavirus pandemic. 651’s award goes in part to support its new digital initiatives through 2020 as it also prepares to eventually resume live performances and presentations. Reporting directly to Roberts, the new DPCC role will allow the institution to more deeply execute on its reimagined program offerings comprised of curated small- and large-scale programs, digital, and live presentations. The DPCC will oversee all aspects of 651’s programs and presentations, playing a primary role in season planning, line producing, and curating education, humanities, and related events.

“We, as a nation, have been deeply impacted by two pandemics - the COVID-19 crisis and the systemic racism that has plagued this country for over 400 years. Since its inception, 651 ARTS has always provided a platform for performing artists from across the African Diaspora. We pride ourselves on being both hyper-local and global - bringing Brooklyn to the world and the world to Brooklyn. We know that our constituents are at the intersection of those most disproportionately affected by these crises. As an arts institution, this was a moment to be both reflective and responsive. This time has allowed us to examine not only how we produce with respect to alternative program delivery but how we think about programming in this new era,” said Roberts. “The new
DPCC role will really allow us to explore innovative ideas around programming in this new terrain. I am delighted to welcome Monica to the team as she will spearhead the most integral piece of 651’s identity – our artistic programs. She is an accomplished and passionate curator deeply rooted in the arts of the Diaspora. The ways in which she centers community to the work, thinks globally, not to mention her deep love of Brooklyn, will transform 651’s programming and serve our larger organizational vision to illuminate the evolving stories and varied cultural experiences. I believe that in Monica we have found the best match for 651 in these historic and future-focused times.”

With more than 20 years of experience as a leader in the arts, Monica L. Williams brings to 651 a unique artistic perspective and a proven track record as a producer, curator and director of the African Diasporic arts.

“I am excited to step into this new role and to join the talented and dedicated team at 651 ARTS. It is an incredible honor to now be part of continuing 651’s long and rich legacy of growing Black arts and Black artists, which has always been the heartbeat of the institution,” said Williams. “Throughout my career, I have been dedicated to amplifying the voices and perspectives of those across the African Diaspora. It is now more important than ever before to meet the challenges of the current moment and sustain and grow institutions like 651 ARTS that are telling our stories. I look forward to working to create opportunities for many in the Diasporic arts, both locally in the wonderful borough of Brooklyn as well as abroad.”

In addition to Williams coming on board, 651 also welcomes three new members to its Board of Directors in Claude Johnson, Bahia Ramos and Lise Suino. All esteemed leaders in their respective areas of expertise, the newly elected members have all been staunch supporters of the arts throughout their careers and represent a wide variety of experience in business, nonprofits, finance, media, education, and the arts.

“An institution’s Board is always one of its biggest assets. It was imperative to us to find the right mix of people who could help guide 651 through these uncharted waters. In fact, I would say it is vital to our mission to have a wide variety of strong leaders serving on our Board,” said Board Chair Yvonne Joyner Levette. “Claude, Bahia and Lise all bring an invaluable wealth of experience, talent, subject matter expertise, and enthusiasm to the table. I look forward to partnering with them and we are very fortunate to have them by our side as we continue to build a sustainable future for our beloved 651 ARTS.”

With Williams scheduled to begin in her role at 651 on August 3rd, the institution looks towards resuming its programming activity which has been in development with a suite of digital and live/hybrid anchor programs and will soon unveil its plans for its Fall 2020 season in the coming weeks. Williams will also oversee 651’s recently announced Artist As Resident Initiative, centered around Brooklyn’s local performing artists and the diverse neighborhoods throughout the borough they represent. The Initiative includes The Neighborhood Project focused on emerging creatives, the Micro-Works Project for online content and community-building, and the Artist As Resident Feature Presentation Series.

Since its inception in 1988, 651 ARTS has become a trusted convener of contemporary African Diasporic artistic expression, a champion and nurturer for emerging artists and their work and a vital cultural resource for its surrounding community. Part of 651 ARTS’s goal is to preserve the legacy of Black culture in Brooklyn, celebrate the eclecticism of Black performance and to pioneer new visions of African Diaspora artists - continuing to lay the framework for the next decade and reinforcing its role as an incubator for artistic innovation in the 21st century.

BIOS

Director of Programs and Chief Curator

Monica L. Williams is a conceptual performance artist and artistic leader who specializes in cross-sector collaborations. Over her 20-year career, she has produced, curated, and directed performances dedicated to the
African Diaspora with major cultural institutions including TEDWomen, the World Famous Apollo Theater, National Black Arts Festival and Brooklyn Academy of Music. Her latest work, In Love and Struggle, produced with The Meteor, is currently streaming on Audible.

She is the creator of LoveHustle, a seven-year exploration of artists work/life balance, and producing artistic director for Bailey’s Cafe As Quiet As It’s Kept. Her design of Kentucky Foundation for Women’s Special Project has received national recognition and philanthropic support for community-based arts with families of the incarcerated. She is the founder of Create Legacy, a creative self-development company and formally full-time lecturer in African American Studies Department at New York City College of Technology. Monica is a 2020 MAP Fund recipient, a 2016 CCCADI Innovative Cultural Advocacy Fellow, a Rockwood Leadership Institute Fellow, a member of Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and a graduate of Wright State University and New York University.

New Members - Board of Directors

Claude Johnson has amassed forty years of experience in the not-for-profit sector in higher education and arts and culture. As an accomplished senior executive, he possesses both advanced technical skills and a proven track record as a fundraiser and strategic planning consultant. He began his career in arts management working for the Rod Rodgers Dance Company and the Negro Ensemble Company; and, most recently served as the chief advancement officer for Friends of the High Line and vice president of development and communications with WNET (Thirteen, WLIW, and NJTV). His career in higher education concentrated on alumni engagement and major and principal gifts starting in the 1980’s as associate director of development in UCLA’s College of Fine Arts. Later, Johnson joined Cornell University's division of Alumni Affairs and Development as assistant dean in the College of Veterinary Medicine. Several years later, he returned to Cornell to restructure the New York regional office into a larger major gifts focused program covering the region from Boston to Washington, D.C., establishing the Northeast Corridor Program, based in New York City. Between his time in Ithaca and NYC for Cornell, Claude founded the inaugural New York Regional Office for Northwestern University.

As a management consultant, Johnson’s portfolio emphasized strategic planning, program assessment, and community engagement with a range of clients, including, The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Rockefeller Foundation, 651 ARTS, Walker Arts Center, and the Northwest Area Foundation. He has a MBA from UCLA’s Anderson School of Management and a BA from the University of Pennsylvania, and serves on the board of directors for Pret a Manger’s Pret Foundation. A nearly 30-year resident of Brooklyn, Claude resides in Clinton Hill with his husband.

Bahia Ramos joined The Wallace Foundation in September 2018 as director of arts. She leads the team responsible for the strategy and implementation of the foundation’s work in the arts. Before joining Wallace, Ramos led the strategy for a $35 million annual investment in arts funding across the country for Knight Foundation as Program Director of Arts. She built national partnerships and initiatives with organizations such as ArtPlace and Sundance, and worked on the local level to bring more high-quality arts experiences to diverse audiences and neighborhoods.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Ramos lived in London for two years, consulting with Man Group PLC in its corporate responsibility department. She has also worked as director of government and community affairs for both the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Children’s Museum. Her work with Brooklyn Children’s Museum helped to double the size of the museum, raising its profile as a world-class institution and improving engagement with the community. Working with Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Ramos garnered government support for a new visitor center, helping the garden reach out into the city to attract more guests, and connecting it with anchor institutions in the neighborhood. Ramos has presented on a wide range of topics at forums across the country, including Grantmakers in the Arts, the Council on Foundations, the Arts & Business Council of New York, Alliance of Artist Communities, and Black Portraitures IV. Ramos received her undergraduate
degree in history from Williams College, and a Master of Public Administration from Baruch College, Marxe School of Public and International Affairs.

Lise Suino joined Houston Grand Opera as CFO in November 2017. Her previous experience includes comparable positions in the performing and visual arts in New York City, as Chief Operating Officer at the Apollo Theater (2002-13); SVP, Special Projects at The New 42nd Street (1993-2002); and Deputy Director of Administration and CFO at the Museum of the Moving Image (2015-17).

Before moving to the nonprofit sector, Lise developed her financial skills in real estate development. After receiving an MBA in real estate and finance at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Business, she started in economic development with the City of New York, and then moved to public/private development projects in New York City and Oakland, CA. She worked in asset management for Citicorp Real Estate, as part of a team charged with repositioning the bank’s commercial real estate portfolio in the western region of the U.S.

About 651 ARTS

Founded in Brooklyn, NY in 1988, the mission of 651 ARTS is to deepen awareness of and appreciation of contemporary performing arts and culture of the African Diaspora, and to provide professional and creative opportunities for artists of African descent.

651’s signature programs have featured pioneering black choreographers from around the world including Germaine Acogny, Nora Chipaumire, Carmen de Lavallade, Diane McIntyre, Bebe Miller, Abdel R. Salaam and Jawole Willo Jo Zollar. As part of its commitment to the furtherance of conversations and celebration of Diaspora music, the institution has presented dialogues and performances by Somi, Hugh Masekela, and Grammy-winning artist Betty Carter, to name a few. Theatrical and text-based works by Anna Deavere Smith, Sekou Sundiata, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Ntozake Shange, Okwui Okpokwasili and Maria Bauman are representative of the hundreds of artists and productions featuring solo creations, collaborations, emerging artists, and works-in-development all produced by 651’s visionary leadership.

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