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**651 ARTS Celebrates Black History Month
With the Second Season of its Original Docuseries**

Virtual Griot
651 ARTS: The Past and Future of Culture Architects

**The Four-Episode Series Explores 651 ARTS' Origin Story and
Journey as a Premiere Black Arts Institution**

**651 Will Also Host a Special Conversation to Celebrate the Season
Finale on February 29th
At the Center for Fiction in Downtown Brooklyn**

(BROOKLYN, NY – February 12, 2022) – In celebration of Black History Month, 651 ARTS, Brooklyn's leading institution for the African Diasporic performing arts, presents the second season of its original docuseries *Virtual Griot* which features creatives in the role of Griots as they relay the stories responsible for keeping history, tradition, and culture alive. Titled ***651 ARTS: The Past and Future of Culture Architects***, this season of the series explores 651's origin story as told by the powerful Black women who have spearheaded it throughout its history and is running weekly over the course of four episodes. Additionally, 651 will host a special conversation – “The Art of Making Space” to celebrate the season finale free and open to the public at the Center For Fiction in Downtown Brooklyn on February 29th at 7pm.

With its own legacy serving as the focal point of this season's *Virtual Griot*, 651 hopes to reinforce a key part of its mission to preserve Black culture in Brooklyn and to pioneer new visions of African Diaspora artists. Since its founding 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. Now in its 36th year, the venerable institution is preparing to move into its first-ever permanent home located in the heart of downtown Brooklyn later this year and is making major strides in its continued growth and expansion. However, as with many Black-led cultural institutions, the story of 651 ARTS has often gone either undocumented or without a platform reflective of its true impact which is indicative of a deeper and systemic issue around erasure. *Virtual Griot* presents

an opportunity to finally tell the 651 story and explores why access to history and context is an institutional, personal, and spiritual requirement.

Featuring some of the performing arts world's most dynamic leaders including **Mikki Shepard**, **Maurine Knighton**, **Shay Wafer** and **Toya A. Lillard**, this iteration of *Virtual Griot* was directed by **Elisha Lawson** – who also directed the series' inaugural season - and is narrated by **NSangou Njikam** - who wrote and starred in the first season. A nod to the Sankofic practice of looking backward to inform how we move forward, **651 ARTS: The Past and Future of Culture Architects** serves as both a collective memory and as a blueprint for the future.

“2024 is a year of great transition for 651 and as we reflected on what that means for us as an institution; we realized just as important as planning for the future is taking an opportunity to take stock on where you have come from, how far you have come and where you are going,” said 651's Executive Director, **Toya Lillard**. “*Virtual Griot* pulls from the age-old practice in our community of passing down our histories and our stories. So many of our traditions – like recipes for example - leave with the elders if we do not take the time and care to remember and to reclaim them. Using that same concept, we applied it to this season and engaged founders and former leadership to help us comprehensively tell the 651 ARTS story. We are so thrilled to share this project – which has been such a labor of love – with our audiences.”

651 ARTS' new home is located at 10 Lafayette Avenue in Downtown Brooklyn and will be comprised of 12,500 square feet of office, rehearsal and production space. The institution is scheduled to move into the building later this year.

For additional information and to watch episodes of **651 ARTS: The Past and Future of Culture**, please visit: www.651arts.org

Virtual Griot Season 2 - 651 ARTS: The Past and Future of Culture Architects Episodes

Episode 1: Foundations

Date: February 8, 2024

Foundations introduces 651 ARTS and its co-founder **Mikki Shepherd** as she recounts the organization's origins, from conception to realization. Arts leaders **Shay Wafer** and **Maurine Knighton** (who also led the acclaimed institution) discuss the history, influence, and very necessary presence of organizations like 651 ARTS in Brooklyn then and now.

Episode 2: Get with the Program

Date: February 15, 2024

Get with the Program explores the cultural and programmatic contributions made by 651 ARTS both institutionally, as well as the distinct individual contributions made by each leader. Through groundbreaking programs in theater, dance, music, and festivals the landscape of the performing arts was redefined, whilst paving the way for the remarkable programs that have since emerged from 651 ARTS.

Episode 3: Money Mountains

Date: February 22, 2024

The obstacles faced by 651 ARTS were not unique or unknown to any cultural institutions of color. Specifically, the pursuit of financial support from entities who were more inclined to back predominantly white institutions, looking to cultivate Black audiences. Overcoming systemic barriers by means of partnership, relationship and community is a timeless strategy for folks of color, and one that allowed 651 ARTS to continue its mission of promoting black artistry and cultural exchange.

Episode 4: Pioneering the Future

Date: February 29, 2024

What does the future look like? 651 ARTS current Executive Director, **Toya A. Lillard** talks to us about the full circle moment that finds her leading an institution in which her predecessors are also her mentors. Embracing the Sankofic principles of looking to the past to build the future, Lillard considers what it means to be a living archive for our community, and to uphold legacy whilst forging new ground, in a new building and a new Brooklyn.

About 651 ARTS

Since its founding 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. As it moves forward, part of 651 ARTS' mission 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. This year – the transition year – is integral for the institution as it continues to lay the framework that will further help to reinforce 651 ARTS' role as a leader of African Diasporic culture while also establishing it an incubator for artistic innovation in the 21st century.

651 ARTS' programs are made possible by gifts from generous individuals and grants from the Altman Foundation, Baisley Powell Elebash Fund, The Bay and Paul Foundations, The Black Seed, Booth Ferris Foundation, Burberry, Con Edison, Doris Duke Foundation, Ford Foundation, Howard Gilman Foundation, Lambent Foundation, Mertz Gilmore Foundation, Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York Community Trust Mosaic Network & Fund, and Wallace Foundation. 651 ARTS is supported, in part, by public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in Partnership with the City Council, and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature.

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