

THE KITCHEN
NEW YORK CITY'S CENTER
FOR EXPERIMENTAL ART
AND THE AVANT-GARDE
SINCE 1971

For Immediate Release
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THE KITCHEN PRESENTS HARMONY HOLIDAY'S BLACK BACKSTAGE, MARCH 21–MAY 25

Considering the Market Demand for Black Performers' Self-Mythologization, Holiday's Immersive Exhibition Replicates a Physical and Non-Physical Backstage, a Site of Artistry, Collaboration, and Expression Never Meant to Be Seen or Heard

The Kitchen presents Harmony Holiday's *BLACK BACKSTAGE*, an immersive exhibition transforming The Kitchen at Westbeth (163B Bank Street, 4th Floor Loft) into a hybrid, liminal space that quotes the aesthetic of backstage spaces, March 21– May 25. *BLACK BACKSTAGE* builds upon the artist's latest book, *MAAFA* (2022), which deals with the archetypes and sounds that form in and of the ruins after genocide and displacement. Here, Holiday continues to examine the ways Black music is often born in these aftermaths, and becomes the archives of their ruins—brought to the stage, to broadcast, and the album as necessity and commodity. Harmony Holiday: *BLACK BACKSTAGE* is organized by **Legacy Russell**, Executive Director & Chief Curator, and **Angelique Rosales Salgado**, Curatorial Assistant, with **Tsige Tafesse**, 2023-24 Curatorial Fellow.

The exhibition comprises a short film, prints of new writing, a sculptural sound installation, and a series of live programs, the first of which launches *BLACK BACKSTAGE* on March 21. This event brings Holiday and award-winning writer **Margo Jefferson** into conversation to reflect on the histories and traditions of Black performance, memory, and critique. ([Tickets](#): sliding scale, \$5-15.) Additional programs will be announced.

The environment of the exhibition evokes the practical, immaterial aesthetic of a makeshift storefront church, revival meetings, faith healings, public squares and fields as stages, and other underground and improvised modes of instilling Black sacred and everyday rituals within the spectacle of performance. It also investigates how black performers look away and invent new paths to privacy, either by self-mythologizing or refusing to perform. *BLACK BACKSTAGE* draws an intentional contradiction between the neglected spaces of black private life and those that are cared for because they support the sale of Black spectacle.

Describing the foundational ideas that coalesced into the exhibition, the artist writes, "Rehearsals and what happens backstage or in the studio are the closest approximations we have of...Black interiority in music-

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making and modes of relation that do not build up around a potential sale, that are more attentive to the artist than to the audience, stops when it's ready, doesn't circle claps and finales, or appraise the volume of cheers when deciding whether or not to encore."

The short film at the exhibition's heart, collaged from archival material layered beneath Fred Moten's voice-over of a text written by Holiday, is a meditation on Black artistic identity before fame and the onset of consumer demands for self-mythologizing and self-performance. Piecing together fragments of four years in groundbreaking musician Thelonious Monk's life prior to becoming a signed artist, the film encapsulates Holiday's conception of the "backstage" as it peers into a soon-legendary artist's time in a liminal space of discovery. Opening outwards from these ideas and the specificities of Monk's life in less visible spaces, the exhibition builds a site — within The Kitchen's own transient environment in Westbeth — that explores artistry removed from institutional narrative and expectation, performance stripped of calculated performance.

Holiday says, "One of the things I think about and work with a lot is the idea of oral history in the context of Black music—the stories that are told publicly, even in biographies or interviews, versus those told backstage or in private rooms, and versus lived experience. The film works through the archetype that is Thelonious Monk, of the Black performer and reinstates the hero's journey of the Black performer as one that is defined by unseen glories, not spectacularized ones"

Holiday, the daughter of "Black musician Jimmy Holiday," grew up immersed in and observing the spaces where invented selves slip away—spaces where a more expansive self both reemerges and prepares its own subjugation. In a *Los Angeles Times* account of her experience of her father's legacy and its multiple and fractured, public and private forms, she wrote, "When I wasn't preoccupied deciphering received narratives about my father's experience navigating [Hollywood], that land of appropriated lyricism, I could sense the mask he had to put on to survive it." Through Monk, and her own work *MAAFA*—which culminates within a "Paradise of Ruins" the artist describes as encompassing "the gestures, murmurs, shouts, and reversals or underground sensibilities that go unexplored outside of what is called our archives"—as generative foundations for the exhibition, Holiday pulls ideas resonating throughout her practice and life into a physical and theoretical "backstage."

About Harmony Holiday

Harmony Holiday is a writer, dancer, and experimental filmmaker whose work surveys music, ancestry, death and rebirth, and celebrity. She is the author of 5 collections of poetry, including *MAAFA* (2022), and also curates an archive of griot poetics and a related performance and conversation series at LA's 2220Arts. At the core of her practice is a pursuit of visual and literary vocabularies that might best express the melancholic

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hope endemic to Black American social life. As Holiday navigates the depths of Black remembrance and loss, she sets her sights on the relationship between “the new,” “the archival,” and the spaces between them that defy linear time. She treats these energies as collectively improvising ensembles in which prose and poetry sit by turns comfortable and chaotic, next to images cribbed from Black artistic and private life. Most recently she has received awards from the Silver’s and Rabkin foundations, and is completing a memoir, *Love is War for Miles*; a biography of Abbey Lincoln; and a collection of poems.

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About The Kitchen

Founded in 1971 as an artist-driven collective, The Kitchen today reaffirms and expands upon its originating vision as a dynamic cultural institution that centers artists, prioritizes people, and puts process first. Programming in a *kunsthalle* model that brings together live performances, exhibition-making, and public programming under one roof, The Kitchen empowers its audiences and communities to think creatively and radically about what it means to shape a multivalent and sustainable future in art. The Kitchen seeks to cultivate and hold space for wild thought, risky play, and innovative and experimental making, encouraging artists and cultural workers alike to defy boundaries and sending them into the world to remake art history and catalyze creative change.

Among the artists who have presented significant work at The Kitchen are Muhal Richard Abrams, Laurie Anderson, ANOHNI, Robert Ashley, Charles Atlas, Kevin Beasley, Beastie Boys, Gretchen Bender, Dara Birnbaum, Anthony Braxton, John Cage, Lucinda Childs, Julius Eastman, Philip Glass, Leslie Hewitt, Darius James, Joan Jonas, Bill T. Jones, Devin Kenny, Simone Leigh, Ralph Lemon, George Lewis, Robert Longo, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sarah Michelson, Tere O’Connor, Okwui Okpokwasili, Nam June Paik, Charlemagne Palestine,

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Sondra Perry, Vernon Reid, Arthur Russell, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Spiegel, Talking Heads, Greg Tate, Cecil Taylor, Urban Bush Women, Danh Vō, Lawrence Weiner, Anicka Yi, and many more.

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