

# The New York Times

## 13 Artists Reflect on the Stonewall Riots

50 years ago, the Stonewall Inn became the center of the gay rights movement after a series of riots broke out. Its influence on these artists still reverberates.



By Zoë Lescaze  
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The Stonewall Inn, a mob-owned gay bar in New York's West Village, was an easy target for surprise raids in the late 1960s. Busts were common, riots were not, so when the police began making arrests in the early hours of June 28, 1969, no one expected resistance. But that night, the crowd erupted. People hurled insults, then coins, beer cans and bricks. Reinforcements rushed to the scene as Stonewall supporters poured out of neighboring dives to join the melee. Half destroyed, Stonewall reopened the following night. The rioters returned, singing protest songs, and so did the police, armed with tear gas. The clashes, which continued on Christopher Street for days, were barely covered in the news, but they altered the course of history.

The Stonewall riots electrified the nascent gay-liberation movement with urgent, ferocious energy during a time when homosexuality was illegal in 49 states and widely considered to be a mental disorder. Suddenly, what had been a nonviolent push for civil liberties became an uncompromising crusade. The protests catalyzed the formation of radical civil rights groups, in New York and across the United States. A year later, the first pride march set out from Stonewall, growing from several hundred people to several thousand as it moved up Sixth

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Avenue. This year, more than four million people are expected to attend the city's annual celebration.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, T Magazine invited a multigenerational group of artists to reflect on the demonstrations and their legacy. "Today, there's a lot of infighting about who threw the first brick," observes Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, an artist who was at the bar that summer night, in his response below. (Lanigan-Schmidt's work is currently on view in "Art After Stonewall, 1969–1989," a joint exhibition at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art — one of several shows throughout the country devoted to the protests and their aftermath. Others can be found at the Brooklyn Museum and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.) But the riots, he reminds us, were only possible because of the solidarity of the many different groups who joined forces 50 years ago. "Stonewall was very diverse, and it was unified in its diversity."

## **Kiyan Williams, b. 1991**

As a black nonbinary transfemme teenager growing up in Newark, N.J., I didn't know of any other people like me, in real life or history. During my freshman year at Stanford, I took a queer studies course, where I first learned about the Stonewall riots. I was empowered through learning about people like Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and other black and Puerto Rican activists and artists who transgressed normative gender and resisted the forms of oppression that confined their lives. I was especially empowered by learning about their struggles against the carceral system, the police state, economic injustice and trans misogyny. The Stonewall riots and the gay liberation movement were catalyzed by poor black and Puerto Rican folks, people who were referred to as street queens, people who went to bars to get drunk and dance, to find community and joy. These were racial, sexual and gender deviants who were politically and economically disenfranchised, who created networks of care for each other and who took to the street to resist various forms of state violence. Contemporary L.G.B.T. politics often forgets and neglects queer, trans and gender nonconforming folks from the hood, the banji girls, those of us who come from under-resourced communities, who are denied access to health care and affordable housing, and who lack viable means of making income. I am inspired by the vision of those street queens from Stonewall and the gay liberation front who envisioned a world for those of us who are trans/gressive in myriad ways to live multifaceted lives of deep satisfaction, interdependence, self-actualization and profound joy.