

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.





Fred McDarrah's "Celebration After Riots Outside Stonewall Inn, Nelly (Betsy Mae Koolo), Chris (Drag Queen Chris), Roger Davis, Michelle and Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt, June 1969" (1969).

Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images, courtesy of Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York

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 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."

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An installation view of works by Chitra Ganesh in "Stonewall 50" at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2019. Portrait courtesy of the artist. Artwork photographed by Emily Peacock

Chitra Ganesh, b. 1975

I am grateful for the rich role of the anecdotal in queer activism and life, for the collective memory that keeps our stories alive regardless of their inclusion in the official record. I remember hearing about Stonewall from friends and community elders as a young queer person, not just about the riots but about Stonewall's role as a refuge, a place that turned away no one. Whether you drank or not, you could spend the whole night there for the democratic price of \$3. It has always been a space where many precarious subjects — including people who are poor, of color, gender nonconforming, young and homeless — could find shelter. This aspect of Stonewall serves as a signpost for me and many other queer folks of my generation (people who came of age in the '90s) as we made space within the mainstream gay movement for diverse sites of action and community such as the Audre Lorde Project, the Clit Club, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as well as groups like South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) and Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY).

As for Stonewall legacies now? I am excited to see so many diverse and rapidly growing queer communities — the landscape is profoundly different from what I was able to access 25 years ago. It's amazing that there are queer elders and queer children who are active and visible agents of change, and that there has been so much language, organizing and community built around trans sexualities. So there is growth, but it is equally important for me to remember that the Stonewall riots happened during a time of widespread social movements in the United States, a time that was in many ways far more open than the present. These events represent a shrinking space we need to fight for. They remind me of the importance of the convergence of multiple uprisings, of allegiances across gender, race, class and sexuality. I trace the lineage of my own encounters with the breadth and texture of femmeness, its material and visceral resonances, to this time. All of this is at the heart of our work and play as we move forward.
