

For the first two years of my transition, I received laser hair removal treatments on my face and neck every six weeks. At each appointment a bored RN would guide me into a treatment room the temperature of a walk-in freezer and ask me how my day was going. Then she'd turn on the TV and begin to treat my face, administering blistering heat to each hair on my face, zap by zap by zap. Breathing in the smell of burning hair and trying to distract myself from the painful stings of the laser, I tended to turn my attention inwards.

At my second to last session, however, the nurse turned the TV on not to the usual *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* or *The View* but instead to a rivetingly weird show about house flippers. I couldn't help but turn my attention away from my grounding exercises and instead to the homes being appraised, demolished, renovated, and sold on screen. The show was called *Windy City Rehab*. Each episode tracks the transformation of a different fixer-upper in Chicago. Essentially an advertisement for gentrification, the show began to resonate with me in my Xanaxed-out state. After my initial shock, I really settled into it. After all, what was my body but a fixer-upper? I had good bones, but there was plenty of demolition and construction left before I could consider my project of transition finished. Laying on my treatment table and waiting for my second-to-last round of zaps to start on my face, I could see that my renovation project was far from finished.

Andy Warhol once wrote that he was fascinated with female impersonators "because they have to work so hard—double-time—getting rid of all the tell-tale male signs and drawing in all the female signs." He's right: it is hard work. *Windy City Rehab* gave me a visual for that work, as I watched the host gleefully hammer through dividing walls, rip down façades, dig out basement floors. Breathing through the pain of the laser, I closed my eyes and focused on the host's voice. There was a calming quality to her ruthless assessments.

"I like the frame, I like the history. There's history under all this ugly."

"I usually see *something* to save or restore. Here, there's nothing."

“This unit has not been taken care of. The door is rotting out, you can see here.”

“Everything has to come out.”

*Zap. Zap. Zap.*



In the lower left corner of the screen, expenses – the house’s sale price, materials, labor, staging – tally throughout the episode. The host explains that she has borrowed the capital needed to buy and renovate her latest house. Under the expense tally floats the hopeful resale price of the house, allowing the viewer to calculate the project’s potential profit. Unforeseen repairs, faulty materials, and other setbacks mean greater financial losses. At the start of each episode she always visits two potential homes to flip before weighing her options: should I buy the newer house with less square footage, or the four-unit rental building sagging on its foundations? What combination of removal, restoration, and construction work does the property require? What expectations of beauty must the house meet, based on the other houses on its block? How much might it be worth, based on size and location? A particular mix of aesthetic, financial, and historical factors sway the particular decisions made in each episode.

My transition began as a deeply inward-focused process: before anything else, hormone replacement therapy brought about a change in my mental state. But as I struggled to make these changes visible to others, a more practical, seemingly superficial, range of decisions had to be made. With limited resources of time and money, I had to decide what to do to my body first. And my inner calculations looked a lot more like flipping a house than I had expected. Becoming *the woman I was born to be* (imagine I released a crate of doves as you read that) wasn't supposed to come down to the choice between two colors of brick.

Speaking of, the episode on that day in the laser hair removal clinic had a lot to do with brick. Renovating a cinder block building to look more "historic," the host of *Windy City Rehab* had chosen to face it with the bricks known as Chicago Commons, bricks fired from the clay of the Chicago River after a fire destroyed most of the city in 1874. They are known for a rough, authentically weathered look. "Brick" is intra-community slang for trans girls who don't pass, originally used in queer Black communities on the east coast and now widely used thanks to the influence of Black slang on the Internet's gay and trans communities. Listening to the host go on and on about "her buddy who knows bricks," I had to hold back my laughter.

"The brick's in good shape!"

"We're painting this brick so it'll look perfect."

"We're really getting that antique look with this brick."

This lecture is about bricks. Well, more generally, it's about passing. Passing means being trans without being treated as such. Trans women who pass are called traps; trans women who don't are called bricks, among other things. "Passing" is a super fraught piece of vocabulary, but it is particularly striking for just how low it sets its expectations for trans life. Yearning to pass means yearning to pass as cis, unremarkable, unmarked. We aspire to become passersby, to fade into the background, to become scenery. Just passing through. Passing is, for many, the most

important objective of medical transition and its many procedures. As Sandy Stone put it in the 70s, “The essence of transsexualism is the act of passing. [...] I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing.” I couldn’t have said it better myself.



As a metaphor “passing” exists outside of a transition narrative, as well. It is a high-stakes metaphor at that, “passing for white” serving as one survival strategy for Black people in America, especially living under slavery. The term passes readily between race and gender, which is something to be held onto, if we are being honest about the tangled, inextricable, and messy relationship between race and gender to begin with. Think, for instance, of Ellen Craft, who famously escaped the South by disguising herself as her husband’s white, male master. The two types of passing – for the opposite sex and a different race – commingle in Craft’s story.



Scholar C. Riley Snorton has traced the strategy of passing – across race and sex – to the slave trade’s application of economic fungibility i.e. interchangeability to human bodies by way of transforming people into property. Property, unlike personhood, implies the existence of a market with its own laws of value and exchange; this opens the door for new kinds of misrecognition and interchangeability to exist more generally. Fungibility enables the logic of passing. Of course, it also creates the necessity for passing, as a survival strategy for maneuvering through slavery and subsequent racial capitalism.

This lecture is also about the Stonewall riots. In case you somehow don’t know, the Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in New York City, and it was run by the mafia, like most gay bars of its time. The bar was often subject to police raids but almost always with warning, due to agreements between mob management and NYPD. One night at the end of June in 1969, an unannounced police raid led to general turmoil and several arrests, which prompted an all-out riot. Forced out of the bar and into a small park across the street, a crowd formed, began resisting police and fighting back. The rest, as they say, is history.

OK. And also, this lecture is also about actual bricks.

In 2018, artist Nicki Green created a pile of tiny ceramic bricks. Each of the fifty bricks are stamped, faintly, with the word Stonewall on one side and signed by the artist, like collectibles. When assembled, the stack is six inches tall. Each brick is tiny. She titled the piece *“Forces of Faggotry” -or- Brick as a negotiation of the precarious duality of being seen and burning it all down.* *Forces of Faggotry* was one of many pieces included in an exhibition called *Consciousness Razing* at the New Museum in New York City, which ran on the occasion of Stonewall’s fiftieth anniversary and was on display from October 2018 until February 2019. The show’s curator, Chris E. Vargas, commissioned eleven artists to create speculative designs for eleven different monuments to Stonewall.



The exhibit was hosted in a small room at the top of the New Museum, and in the center of the room there was a scale model of NYC’s Christopher Park, a slice of open space across from the now-legendary Stonewall Inn. A skinny and triangular open space paved with bricks, Christopher Park houses a few benches, some trees, and lots, and lots, of bricks. The park was recently designated as a national monument in honor of the Stonewall uprising, and it is also home to *Gay Liberation*, a sculpture by George Segal featuring four figures: two women seated, two men standing, each couple touching in casual, small ways.

In my humble opinion, *Gay Liberation* is an astoundingly ugly work of art, and a work that today's queer politics have no time for. Propping up four dour-looking, papier maché ghosts, the piece is literally uncannily white. It displays an equally white historical amnesia regarding the Stonewall narrative. The four Gays and Lesbians Segal represents in *Gay Liberation* look particularly *unliberated*: frozen in time, they are about as far from the anarchic triumph of Stonewall as you can get. Perhaps the most remarkable part of this monument is that it did, in fact, manage to be controversial when it was commissioned for Christopher Park in 1979, ten years after the uprising. For what it's worth, Segal was also straight, with a wife and kids. But, anyways.



Back to the exhibit. In the center of the room stood a scale model of Christopher Park, rendered in the white of architectural models, rather than the goopy white of Segal's sculpture. Complete with trees, trash cans, and fences – but missing the existing *Gay Liberation* monument – this 1:7 scale model served as the home for equally scaled models of speculative monuments created by the exhibit's artists. Different works were placed within the model depending on the day, while the other models rested on a shelf wrapping around the room. Vargas had invited a chorus of queer and trans voices to design their replacement monument for *Gay Liberation*, and depending on which day you entered the room, you would see a different potential monument on display, all conceived to be more ambitious and inclusive than the existing sculpture.

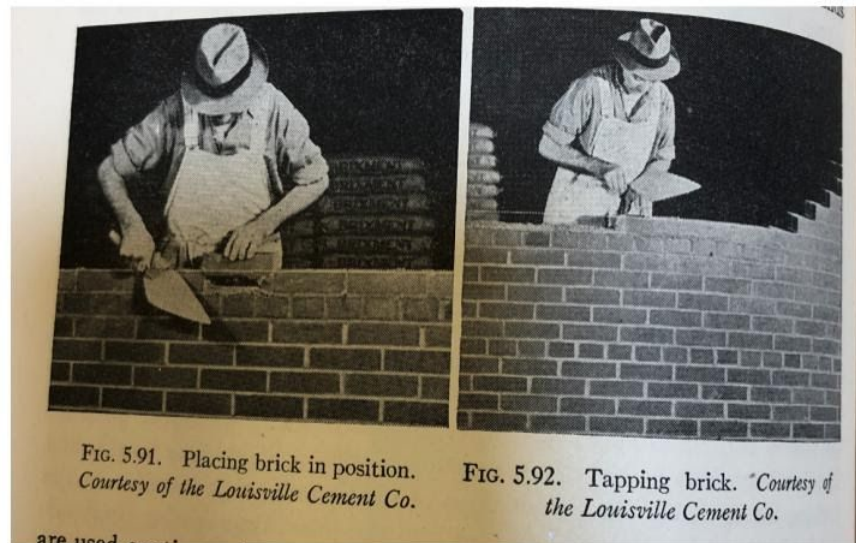
When I visited the New Museum, I was eye level with Nicki's bricks where they lay piled on the shelf. My first urge was to put one in my mouth, like a lozenge. The bricks' proportions and their peachy color, plus the design of the faint "Stonewall" branding on each brick, made me want to suck on one until it disappeared. The spontaneity of that instinct feels very much to the point that Green is making about bricks' instant usability as a tool of rebellion. In her wall text Green highlights "the immediacy in riot tools" reflected in the list of "objects hurled at the police: bottle caps, loose change, cobblestones, bricks." One of my favorite anecdotes from that night is that someone even scooped up some dog shit from the street to throw at a cop, but ultimately, it is the brick that has become the icon for the uprising. A feature of doing work about Stonewall is that there is little to consensus on the actual order of events that took place that night. The broad field of unanswered questions and conflicting timelines have compressed into a sort of meme, the question: who threw the first brick at Stonewall?



Primarily a ceramics artist, Green would be interested in bricks for their place of pride in not only trans history but also in ceramics. The *Home Mechanics Handbook* (1945) defines modern bricks as: "small blocks of clay that have been fired or burned for several weeks at a cherry red heat. The length of the burning varies with the desired strength of the finished brick, and the chemicals in the clay." Other cultures, of course, have their own bricks. Scaled to the size of a human hand for efficient hand-laying, bricks of all stripes, whether air-dried or fired in a kiln, are



one of our oldest building technologies, having been used in different contexts for thousands of years. Of course, today, they are not the cheapest building material, but remain pretty sturdy.



Bricks' size and weight minimize the effort that one worker needs to put in in order to build a structure, yet their strength and durability refer to endless potential, by which I mean you can keep stacking bricks on top of bricks on top of bricks. Sky's the limit. They are considered a permanent building material, and besides their look, they are often chosen for their capacity for insulation and their overall stability. As far as construction goes, the choreography of bricklaying requires both hands but very little strength; with the proper preparation, it is only a matter of placing each brick in the right spot with a trowel in one hand for mortar and the next brick in the tips of the fingers of your other hand. Suffice to say, bricks are easy. Bricks are strong. Bricks are useful. Not only for building, either, as Stonewall taught us – their size and weight makes them an excellent riot tool. Approaching Green's piece depends on understanding bricks as bricks and also as icons of the riot.

Green's artist statement also explicitly links the work to the slang term "brick," a term trans women use to refer to our trans sisters who aren't passing for cis women, or who are just, well, ugly. The term is slang, playful, maybe insulting but not *oppressive*. It's actually, kind of, fun.

The term is still, as Green puts it, “conceptually and materially loaded” – given its use as slang for ugly t-girls and given the relationship of “brick” to “Stonewall.”

As Green puts it:

What does it mean to consider the Brick (person) as also the weapon? The Protester and protest tool. Materially, bricks as building materials today are incredibly frivolous; heavy and small, expensive and inconvenient, but they exist still. They are made of earth, fired ceramic, a material that is permanent. The brick as a riot tool exists so ubiquitously in the oral and textual histories of rising up because of how universal it is. The brick as an afterthought, yet when clutched in the hand of a protestor, becomes ideal for destruction - proportional to the adult human hand (they were designed to be hand-laid, after all), heavy for their size, rigid and indestructible. What would a brick look like if it were designed for a specific riot?

Green’s monument thus smushes brick (the person) together with brick (the construction material slash riot tool). There is a certain trans poetics here, knowing that the protesters at Stonewall pulled their bricks from an unfinished construction site next to the park, rhyming the kind of endless potential that unfinishedness holds with the endless potential of any given transition or trans person or, well, brick; before it’s a building, it’s just a bunch of bricks, and bricks can be anything.

To discuss what kind of technology a brick is, we can borrow a useful set of vocabulary terms from Heidegger. He drew a distinction between technologies that are *ready-to-hand* versus *present-at-hand*. Something like a brick is typically considered from the attitude of *ready-to-hand*, which means that we use it unthinkingly, without theorizing it. We just use it. We lay it, we build it, etc. As in the case of a hammer or a pen, a brick’s legibility lends itself to routine, practical, unthinking action. Readiness-to-hand is contrasted with *presence-at-hand*, which means an attitude of analysis, reflection, thought, comparison. A functioning hammer is

most often viewed from a ready-to-hand point of view, and a broken one is considered present-at-hand, since we have to figure out how to fix it, use it differently, or throw it away.

Green's bricks – by virtue of their teeny-tiny size, their Stonewall branding, and their context within a monument – ask us to slow down before jumping to a ready-to-hand stance on bricks. Stonewall itself enacted a transformation of the brick, from building block to riot weapon. Green adds to the equation the brick, both “the protester and the protest tool.” If we are being brutal, brickishness means failure. A brick has failed to pass, failed to make herself legible to the world. She has attracted attention, which means attracting violence, as well.

In this piece, Green uplifts the bricks of the world, thanking them for their work questioning and dismantling the punitive system of gender trans people are forced to navigate. More often than not, however, the work of the brick is done unintentionally. Like a broken hammer, the brick has tried to pass, tried to function within a ready-to-hand framework. But through no choice of her own, her transness has been clear, and the hammer has snapped in two. She is now at a standstill, a present-at-hand standstill of unwanted scrutiny. Like grabbing a brick from a construction site for riotous self-defense, medical transition is a way of making do with what you've got. It's at once a home improvement project and a radical insurrection, requiring a constant toggling between practical actions (ready-to-hand) and thoughtful analysis (present-at-hand). It requires trying things and seeing if they work, subjecting yourself to society's evaluation, allowing yourself to be picked up and used. It demands that you fit your body, as a building block, into the gendered scheme of the world, passing unnoticed yet useful through it. Bricks have failed, or refused, to pass as such.

It may be helpful now to return to the subtitle of Green's work: *Brick as a negotiation of the precarious duality of being seen and burning it all down*. Green's tiny bricks dramatize the way we bricks, in being seen, burn it all down. We jam up gendered vision and gendered language, not through intentional protest or heady theoretical intervention, but simply existing in public.

Earnestly attempting to pass, and yet not passing, bricks rest in a certain uncanny valley that leaves others at a loss as to how to look at, talk about, or interact with us.

Fear of brickishness often delays a transition. Eventually the misgendering of pre-transition life gets unbearable enough to make one go ahead and seek out transition, the hope being that living a properly gendered life at least half the time will make one feel better. As Snorton puts it, transition occurs when “a mind’s view of the self has yet to become legible on the body” for others to see. Long before I changed my name or pursued hormone replacement therapy, I lived with the knowledge of my trans-ness quite clearly. Scared of what I would look like and scared of taking up too much space, I allowed those around me to act on the assumption that I was a man. The pain of misrecognition was far harsher when it came from strangers and institutions than it did from my closest friends and partners. My loved ones were familiar with my inner life, no matter what they called me. But in public, with strangers, I was the wrong kind of cog in the machine. I wanted to be anonymous and instrumentalized as a female citizen, not a male one. When the pain of the mismatch I was experiencing became great enough, I had to make it legible on my body. If I could have found another way toward happiness, I would have taken it. Transitioning is really annoying and difficult and unpredictable. Depending where you live, it can be very expensive, or dangerous, as well.

I find it hard to valorize bricks the way Green does. Passing matters to me, a great deal; playing the same game as the women and men around me at the bar, the post office, or the park matters to me. Those moments when I am recognized as a woman by others have an outsize importance in my own experience of myself. As Andrea Long Chu writes in *Females*, “gender transition begins, after all, from the understanding that how you identify yourself subjectively—as precious and as important as this identification may be—is nevertheless on its own basically worthless.” Self-identification without recognition begins to feel a lot like delusion.

Green’s artist statement uplifts “the Bricks, those visible queers, who fought for their and ultimately our lives that balmy night, expressing a collectivity that is continually evolving,

shifting, spreading. [...] A pile of materials with which to build, sure, and also a collection of objects ripe for revolution.” Her resolve gives me shivers, it makes me feel so bold, so grateful, so happy, to be trans that I could cry. But frankly it’s hard, as a brick, to love bricks. Society as a whole is unprepared for women who don’t look like women. I am society. I am no exception. I can be unkind to myself, and I can be unkind to other bricks, too. Green’s pile of bricks resonated with me in their joy of redefinition and endless potential, but most days that kind of joy remains an aspiration. Her bricks were cast at 1/7th of their true size due to the constraints of Vargas’ exhibition, but their tininess resonates with me, too: they are icons of struggle and resistance, but at that scale, they are ultimately small and, in case of an actual riot, worthless. As a Brick myself, I can relate to that: we swing on the same pendulum between brave-and-bold and small-and-worthless.



Despite the lengths I have gone to, and have yet to go to, in order to reconcile my outward presentation with my gender identity, intellectually I lack the conviction that I am a woman. Most days I love being a woman, and I love being a brick, even, or I prefer it to being a man, at least, but most days I feel certain that no matter how well I pass or think I pass, there will always be something to make me feel like a man, a cross-dresser, a brick. It might not feel like this forever, but right now it seems certain like I will never feel wholly normal or perfect or honest.

Wallowing in my bricky, self-pitying truth feels cowardly and small compared to Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and the bricks of Stonewall.

There is a relatively limited number of gendered markers that we look at before determining whether we'll refer to someone as a man or a woman. I think here of Wittgenstein's language games, a concept developed from observation of how people actually use language in real life, rather than sweeping universals about language and truth. Like Heidegger and Nicki Green, construction and its metaphors were, somewhat satisfyingly, on Wittgenstein's mind in looking at the way we use language. To explain his notion of language games, he writes of a simple language two builders might use. So when A shouts out the name of a stone, B brings him that stone. A shouts "SLAB!" and B brings him a slab, for instance. Wittgenstein calls this "a complete language" in itself, and points out that in *this* particular language, streamlined for the ease of these builders, "slab" really means "bring me a slab." "Slab!" is thus a stand-in for "bring me a slab," in this language-game – the same way "everything will be all right," when your mom says it, is *really* a stand-in for, "I am here for you no matter what."

Here, Green is playing two or more language-games at once within her stack of bricks: the intra-community slang game ("what a brick"), the ceramics history game ("bricks are fired earth, proportional to the human hand"), and the game of historical iconography ("who threw the first brick?"). When you use the same word as someone else but you each mean different things, it's a case of conflicting language-games. We know that the same words can ring differently in different contexts; these are simply different games. This variety of meaning produces the pleasure of puns as well as the difficulty of miscommunication, two qualities on display in Green's tiny bricks.

Taking off from Wittgenstein, me and Nicki Green are wondering, "if you shout 'brick!,'" what do you really mean? What do you really mean if you say "woman!" or "she"? What do you really mean? Because if I pass – if I win the language-game, so to speak – and convince you that I am a woman, I'm still not, necessarily, a woman. Not because trans women aren't women but

because – who is? Living in the last days of empire, we struggle to fit present-day reality – including our very bodies – into imperfect, inherited categories.

Green invites us to dream outside of those categories, outside of respectability and incrementalism. *“Forces of Faggotry” -or- Brick as a negotiation of the precarious duality of being seen and burning it all down* is an invitation to riot, to be seen *and* burn it all down. To throw a brick, or be a brick, or love a brick and, in so doing, embody a politics of refusal. To refuse to pass (to pass on passing) and to imagine instead new languages, new practices that can exist beyond the fear of violence and survive beyond the systems we live within today.