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VOICE OF THE OBJECT—CAA CRITICAL CRAFT FORUM

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Dismantling the Patriarchy One Brick at a Time: Voulkos and the Changing Landscape of Ceramics at UC Berkeley

—Or—

SOFT BRICK

I am the Brick. Well, in this case, I am the Soft Brick. You see, I am the Trans Woman who accepted the invitation to the Berkeley Ceramics Program with the understanding that I would access a recently updated facility. I entered this space knowing that changes were underway—and shifting layouts are a regular part of my world view, as temporary, non-static, but also shifting as liminality—liminal as identity. Let me be frank, I'm talking about Bricks here. Bricks like kiln bricks, but in my world, Bricks are also the trans women who don't pass, "a face like a brick" or "square brick shoulders." Often a slightly younger generation than mine, I am just outside these communities of heavily politicized trans folks, gender uid, and disinterested in passing. Brick like "she got a brick to the back of the head" and "put a brick through that window!" I'm not quite one of those older, passing-obsessed transsexuals either. I kind of pass, and I'm the recipient of the legacies of the Queen's Vernacular and Gene Compton's Cafeteria Riot, *and* of tumblr. I am the Soft Brick.

Is passing a liminal state?

It was in the autumn of 2016, amidst the resonant September Berkeley heat, that the old Voulkos kiln was disassembled and brought out to the dumpster. I intercepted the pallet, ushering the elements into my studio, incredulous to how anyone could discard such history-laden materials. But all objects carry with them their histories, no? At what point does the sentimentalist become hoarder? Where do these two identities ssure? Where do they cohere? It was this dusty pallet of insulation, the instigators of *his* legacy sitting quietly, chalky and tired next to me, radiating the pain and pride of getting to be his tool that would inspire this ongoing nagging, and viscous series of reciprocal questions.

You, Bricks, have mostly sat untouched for 15 years, save for the sparse appreciation for your histories, you sit stacked as archival walls of that kiln, parched and exhausted, the char lines and drips of glaze only minimal reminders of the years spent gripping each other swelling and contracting, insulating these walk-in sized gas chambers bringing those enormous objects to life. You were created to absorb all the heat and violence necessary to cultivate those artworks into permanence. You were just doing your job, but were you complicit in his legacy? Voulkos rallied around him all the men he could find. You, Brick, witnessed the late nights, the smoking, drinking, and the studio talk. As the most porous material in the

space, you witness and absorb the breadth of relationships in the studio. As the tool, that is your role and what you were created to do. Do you resent the way you stand idly, Brick?

Is porousness an active or static state of being?

All this talk of function and production reminds me of my undergrad, I was making ceramic dildos in my cluttered, curtained off studio that I called "The Pit" because I would pile collected materials on any surface I could find—crafty, or maybe just scarcity-issues, the studio has always been my refuge. My next-door studio mate was this high femme cis girl who kind of looked trans and would reference that false-legibility in casual conversation. "The hottest transvestite in school" she would inaccurately avow, confessing her fabrication later. She seemed to love the attention and exoticism that came with it, which drove me crazy because she got to pass as trans without the actual violence or agoraphobia that often comes with the persecuted body. She wasn't really a Brick, though she was playing Brick, and perhaps didn't know what a Brick was.

Can one pass and still be a Brick? Can you pass AS a Brick?

One of the painting teachers, probably out of inappropriately directed desire, gave a classmate a stack of "barely legal" straight porn magazines that she could cut out and collage to make watercolors from. These life-size sex-monsters were all jutting appendages and orifices and dripping fluids. Boundaries of the body dissolving right before my eyes, immortalized on huge rolls of paper. Quietly painting dildos, I would take her work in; they were so beautiful and abject. One afternoon I was hanging out and flipping through these magazines, and realized that every single one had a banner in the back advertising images of "Fat Ugly Trannies." That pang of recognition stopped me. Here was a transness that stood so strongly in its unpassability, its Brick-ness, and also the existence of material that so overtly embodies the slippage between desire and repulsion. These are the Bricks I would witness other trans women refer to in chatrooms and message boards, and they were clearly being desired in the back of these magazines. But desired for what? For their *failure* to pass? For their visibility? Does their visibility make them the tool of recognition? The not-artwork? If the Artworks get to exist because the Bricks are doing the insulating and propping and absorbing, do all those condemning, passable trans women get to be "successes," artworks, because the bricks are doing the labor of being visible?

Is Brick/Art a false binary?

As the Soft Brick, my role is evident in everything I do, and yet legibility of this role is so context specific, so deeply relational. Isn't every othered status relational, though? My own connection to this role, no matter its recognizability, often keeps me from entering into well-defined, polarizing spaces, especially spaces like those notorious macho Voulkos cohorts. Even today, my visibility as the Soft Brick initiates the awkward questions and microaggressions resounding like the echo of a lighter sparking the burners at the back of these kilns. All environments are loaded with the violence of gender, though. This trauma seeps into corners and pores, spores dusting nearly everything and eroding the surfaces of these kiln bricks. Brick, your porousness scrapes my palms raw as I situate you around my studio, keeping me keenly aware of the fragility of my skin—the barrier that separates me from the rest of the world. This threat of permeability reminds me of my shifting self, my liminal body. Working in my studio, I'm inhaling Brick and inhaling Art simultaneously.

How does one reproduce beyond biological merging of two bodies? Is it possible to reproduce politics? Ethics? Non-material bodies?

Brick, I can imagine you sitting obediently beside him like you do with me. Am I a Voulkos stand-in, ring huge objects and loving the way they seem to defy their materiality and reference back simultaneously? I hope my often overly soft affect sets me apart from him, from his protégés, but it's often hard to tell when I'm rushing to re my work, blasting that ame into the kiln. It's almost as if you say "here we go again" and you brace each other, preparing for impact. Can you be critical of the Artists' politics and still aid in producing his Artwork? You helped make the Stacks and the Plates and the Ice Buckets, but can only passively witness when the female student is mocked for dropping the sculpture on her toes. I imagine you wince every time she is berated. You are the one listening to the hushed shame of misogyny, while the heat and violence of these kilns, the temperature spike and crash cooling over and over wears away the barriers, the limits of your form. The role of the Brick is, in a sense, to be the receptacle of these histories, entombed repeatedly into the surfaces of these objects.

Is the dissolution of boundaries a morally negative process? In the end, won't everything bleed into each other anyway?

I am the Soft Brick. I feel a dual sense of kinship with, and a distance from these discarded objects. I continue to oscillate between the desire to swaddle their forms, fetishize these gorgeous relics, and prop up my own work with them—a prosthesis and glaze barrier. The itch of misandrist revenge fantasy is so very present when I witness the dripping, caustic glaze eating rough holes through their forms. Here, Voulkos' legacy functions as a stand-in for lifetimes of violence. Is he or the Bricks left behind the scapegoat, though? Is there value in transference of blame?

The role of the tool, the hoarder, the Brick, places one in a state that is, in a sense, liminal at its core. The in-between space, we contain the legacy, we process and facilitate it simultaneously. At what point does collecting and the hoarding of materials cease to function as inspiration and feel burdensome? The weight of these objects inhibits forward movement. Is it possible to learn to live here, though? Is liminality a space to inhabit? What does a horizontality offer? Sitting in my dusty studio, this lens offers a way of seeing these Bricks as an opportunity for expansion, reauthorship. That uid back and forth allows a Brick like me to see not just the char marks and erosion of the bodies of my community as violence, but as a void to step into, the potentiality of power, and the proliferation of life.