



# CATASTROPHE

Performance artist Diane Torr takes a

long, hard look at  
power and  
helplessness.

**F**ingers/flies/feces/ food" she chants, twirling in a circle. "Rice/tomatoes/onions/melon" she intones, and adds "eggs" as a cadence. "Bread/honey/yogurt/tea," she remembers. So what's going on? It's Diane Torr, a veteran New York performance artist (originally from Scotland), now amid her first U.S. tour, and these are snippets from *Catastrophe and Beguilement*, a thoughtful solo piece which evolved from her experiences in Afghanistan. In the piece, as in most of her work, Torr combines narrative, movement, music, song, and slide-projection: a cluster of media typical of the hybrid genre termed "performance."

Torr presented her work at two San Francisco venues: New Langton Arts, on May 14, and then at The Lab last Friday and Saturday nights. Four different pieces were

BY RAPHAEL ARDEO

seen in all; it amounted to a significant body of work.

Performance art is ultimately as deep or shallow as the gaze of the artist, and Torr looks long and hard at the subjects that interest her: issues of power and helplessness; the ways in which different social structures channel experience; sexual attitudes and the cultural forms in which they are codified.

In Torr, we find the artist-as-anthropologist. Her work is acutely thoughtful; her analytic impulse sends strong currents through the aesthetic loop. The work's wonderfully succinct density, a touch of whimsicality, a sense of reserve in the face of issues that invite overstatement, and Torr's rich blending of verbal narrative with abstract movement or prop-aided visual gesture, all ameliorate the hint of ponderousness in her performance. Repeatedly, the work's pattern and rhythm move toward a characteristic moment of poignant pause — a kind of reflective cadenza, pregnant with question, ambiguity, meaningful doubt. That's a mark, and surely

a merit, of Torr's method.

Although Torr garnered notoriety for her 1982 piece *Go-Go* (which nearly caused a riot at the Dutch International Women's Festival), there was little that seemed outrageous in her works seen here (notwithstanding the brief go-go sequence included in *Catastrophe*). From the evidence of these pieces, I'd say one might approach Torr as one would a miniature painting; much care has set these fine lines, these bright colors.

Torr's work ultimately has more subtlety than brute impact. One senses that it could hold up under microscopic scrutiny. Her use of projected imagery in *Catastrophe*, for example (as in the Katharine Hepburn-as-a-boy image, seen here, from a sequence exploring notions of acceptable androgyny in Western culture), suggests a mind groping to define and comprehend the dimensions of gender identification. Torr could be called the scholar-with-G-string of performance art; the sex-trade milieu presents one menacing extremity of the bewildering continuum she seeks to limn.

*Catastrophe and Beguilement* focuses on Afghanistan and the implications of the Soviet invasion (termed "the catastrophe" by Afghans). "It's a requiem for a country which doesn't exist any more," the artist remarked, referring to the devastation that land has suffered.

"I spent some time in Afghanistan in 1973," Torr explained, when I interviewed her Sunday in a Noe Valley cottage where she was encamped with her husband and 4-year-old daughter. "Since the war developed, every newspaper and magazine article I've read has really disturbed me, because I knew people in Afghanistan and I wonder what happened to them. I felt pressured into making a piece which is about a personal experience in Afghanistan. The articles you read are very impersonal. They talk about statistics, numbers dead.

That's what *Catastrophe and Beguilement* came out of: a desire to try and reconcile something in myself."

The piece begins with an almost storybook narrative about the family with whom Torr lived in the city of Herat. "There was one place where the men ate," she says, with mimetic gestures and a verbal pause, "and another place where the women ate. As a Western tourist, I could eat with the men or the women."

The sharp separation of roles in Islamic culture spurred Torr to evaluate this theme in our own society — a theme in some ways crystallized by her economically necessitated stint as a go-go dancer in Secaucus, New Jersey. The latter tenure offered a simile for the precarious position of Afghanistan amid the surrounding industrialized countries — like the vulnerable, enticing dancer in a roomful of leering men.

In *Amoebic Evolution* (at New Langton), Torr draws upon her work with a travel service. The setting of that office job appears as an evolutionary culmination of an initial self-replicating cell. (Torr enters by amoebic crawl and eventually oozes her way up to the desk.) Her more recent work at a Kosher nursing care facility in Brooklyn lends other, weird fodder to her cabaret



piece *Pssssssst* (at The Lab). And her experience of pregnancy underpins *Girl in Trouble*, a work exploring the conflict that childbearing can occasion in a woman's life.

Torr thus takes personal experience as the stuff from which to fashion work reflecting broad themes and dilemmas. This *modus operandi* is ubiquitous to performance art; it's one basis of vitality and authenticity for serious work in this complex form.

"I think it's a privilege to have an audience," Torr told me. "I want to present the best or the richest of my ideas, to present them in a way that's really developed, and that will be comprehensible for people. I feel a responsibility about that."

"The thing for me about performance is that it's a way that I can be continually researching subjects that interest me, so that I process an idea and it becomes more tangible through performance."

"Because performance is a physical thing, you are constantly being put to the test, or put on the spot, where you have to come through. You can't be like the student who's perpetually doing his thesis and never finishing. The whole relationship with an audience is a very vital one, too: The idea of being this receptor of all these varying oscillators — you have all these energies that are oscillating in many different directions [in an audience], and you become the force that is bringing all those oscillators together so that they're vibrating in the same rhythm; and then you transform that energy, and send it back."

Torr's current tour has brought her in contact with a wide swatch of the country. "I've been in places, like where I was performing in Tallahassee," she said, "they never see anything there. And people were just so keen, so enthusiastic. I would urge any other performers not to stay at home but to go to these places like Jackson, Mississippi where they never see anything and they're just dying for art."

Torr mentioned the possibility of moving with her family to San Francisco in the future. "I would love to come back here. This seems like a very nice community; there's a lot of support for performance and theater. And there's not that pressure that there is in New York, where it's like, are you in? You're in one year and then out the next year; and I mean, I'm not concerned with fashion, with that idea of success, or whether you're the hot thing or not. I'm interested in making my work and progressing with that." ☺