



# dirty little things

exploring the ob/scene

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## Person for a day

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Capturing the essence of Diane Torr's art in ninety-six minutes is not easy. But Katarina Peters did it. *Man for a Day* (presented in the Goethe Institute and the National Cineteca in Mexico City, as well as in the Cineteca of Monterrey, during the queer film festival) is a documentary about Torr and the workshop she's been giving since 1990, through which women become men, at least for one day. There is no avoiding the premise of the film, the workshop, and most of Torr's life's work: that the most important differences between men and women are not provided by nature, but are produced socially. Being a man and being a woman, rather than being something inherent to the body, is fundamentally a *performance*: an idea that day by day, act by act, step by step, gesture by gesture, outfit by outfit, is materialized in the body until it is transformed. The documentary, directed by the German artist Katarina Peters, portrays the metamorphosis of the workshop attendees, proving at what point—paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir—one is not born a man, but rather becomes one.

### Diane Torr and her Thinking Body

The idea of the *performativity* of gender is one that, at least in academic circles, is attributed to the philosopher Judith Butler and her *Gender Trouble* (1990). It is a notion that shook—as few others have—most feminisms since, in the end, they still talked about *men* and *women*: the privileges of the first, the lack of rights of the second; the domination of the former and the submission of the latter. In the academy, Butler posed the question Torr had been raising on the stage for years: what if men and women do not even exist?

Diane Torr is, first and foremost, a dancer. Her exploration of sexual difference cannot be understood without referencing this fact: her body has been her primordial tool to understand and change the world. That does not mean that behind her work there is a lack of intellectual research or of a deep theorization on gender. It only implies that the questions she poses and the answers she gives are always processed through *her* body.

There's one anecdote that perfectly portrays how Torr functions: In the 1970's, the Scot moved to New York to further pursue her dance studies. She fell in love with the city and remained there, becoming involved in the artistic scene. Like many others, she had financial troubles at the start of her career, which she solved by working as a gogo dancer. In *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles*, the autobiographical book she published in 2010 [1], she narrates how she had a crisis of conscience when she entered this world. She was aware of the feminist discussions regarding sex work that were hot at the time and she worried: was she perpetuating the exploitation of women by dancing in such a way for money? In order to better understand the problem, she got *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, the monumental work of one of the most important anti-pornography feminists of the time, Andrea Dworkin [2]. She read it on her breaks, locked up in the bar's bathroom. She danced, and with the sensations still fresh in her body—men's gazes still undressing her, the lights burning her skin, and the inertia of her movements still commanding her—, she conversed with the piece. She returned to the stage with new reflections the text brought forth, questioning her every move and the audience dynamics, figuring out how she could change what went on in each interaction. Her body informed her mind, and her mind, her body. Because Torr is just that: a *thinking body*. [3]

Her time as a gogo dancer also marked the moment in which she became aware—a least more acutely—of how gender is an act, more than a fact. Night after night, she saw how she transformed herself in the stage to fit into her clients' fantasies: to *be* the woman that *they* wanted her to be. One of the most interesting questions that emerges from reading Torr and watching the documentary is not just, "What makes a man a man and a woman a woman?" (and the ensuing "What moves did the clients want? Which outfits? What gestures?"), but also *who* defines those terms. [4] Now, if being a woman or a man is a *performance*, Torr also posits that the script can be changed. And, if we follow *her* example, that *we* are the ones that can change it.

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*Arousing Reconstructions*, [5] a dance she designed and presented with Bradley Wester in 1982—featured in the documentary—is particularly ideal to further explain her conception of gender. Wester was a man that sort of looked like Torr: they had similar hairdos and their bodies were alike in shape and size. During the performance, they dressed identically: a fabric covering their genitals and only one breast. They executed exactly the same movements. Some were stereotypically male, some stereotypically female. Watching them dance is amazing: although there are differences between them, they are practically irrelevant [6]. Now, of course they exist and Torr does not deny them. But do they justify *all* the divergence men and women experience in life?

### **The Workshop: Provoking Experiences**

The workshop “Man for a Day” is not about women *becoming* men, [7] but *living* what being a man in today’s world allows or hinders. Torr also organizes a workshop for men to experience being women for a day with the same purpose: that they live things that have been denied to them or that they simply have not had to deal with, because they are men or because they are not women.



Diane Torr in drag. Photograph by Annie Sprinkle.

It was Torr's own personal experience that thrust her to create the workshop. One day, after a photo shoot in which she was dressed as a man (mustache included), she wandered the streets of New York—including a party at the Whitney museum—in full drag. What surprised her most was how people moved out of her way when she walked in order to accommodate her. As a woman, she writes, this had never happened to her: that a space—the world—opened up because of her sole presence, to let her move in *peace*.

In the workshop, women choose what type of man they want to be. They choose their own clothes, hairdos, facial hair. Part of the work is in the transformation of the *outfit*. But another great part of what they have to do is to go out into the street and observe the men themselves, so they can appropriate the moves. How do men walk, smoke, sit, stand? The documentary is almost comical in this portion: it follows the women following the men in the street. One after another after another after another, it's amazing how patterns are repeated. In between takes, Torr states: «Men are quite an easy spectacle because they are not used to being watched. They are used to being the spectator.»

In what way does being a man or a woman affect something as simple as being able to walk on the street peacefully? An uncomplicated stroll, free of fear, cat-calls, *looks*. The documentary renders visible these small daily moments, which, when put together, are what make up life. When Torr begins going over the movements that the women have to master, one of the first things she tells them is that they cannot smile. Men don't smile unless they have to [8]. Another is how to stand: «when you walk, you have a feeling that your foot owns that piece of floor underneath it. This idea of ownership is very much included in the male identity.» I remembered an anecdote Octavio Paz tells in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: one afternoon he heard a noise in the next room and he «asked loudly: "Who is in there?" [He] was answered by the voice of a servant who had recently come to [them] from her village: "No one, sir. I am".» [9] *No one*: what a way to inhabit space, to be a *person*. Or, rather: to *not* be one.

Evidently, men and women *exist*: we walk, talk, fuck, work, love, have children, consume and live *as* men and women. And yes: there are bodily differences. But they don't have to mean what we think they mean. *Man for a Day* questions the limits of these identities: what are we missing out on for being attached to them? What range of emotions, acts, attitudes, what *spaces*, what ways of being in the world?

In many ways, the subject that arises from the Torrian exercise is similar to the one that comes out of post-nationalism: the *person*, beyond body, origin, and class. And the question: why do we keep understanding ourselves in such terms? Forget the losses this brings; what are the gains?

### **From the stage to the screen: the challenge –and success– of *Man for a Day***

I watched the documentary twice in two days. Both times I laughed, and both times I went home, thinking. That is its virtue: posing complex questions in simple ways. On both occasions I remained for the question-and-answer sessions Torr and Peters offered at the end. A constant comment the audience made—both men and women—was regarding their newly acquired conscience about their own behaviors: they *saw* themselves –we saw ourselves– on screen. All the effort that goes into our identities is inevitably uncovered: we *are* performing.

*Man for a Day* is Katarina Peters' second film. Her first was also a documentary, except it was autobiographical: *Stroke* is the story of how she dealt with her husband's stroke and recovery. After it, she told me in an interview, she needed a project that wasn't at all about her. Torr, her friend for over thirty years, became the perfect object of her lens. And I insist on the friendship because the respect, admiration, and understanding between them are evident in the final product. Peters enters the life of Torr as only a good friend can—the film features takes of Torr's daughter as a child and then all grown up, multiple old performances that Peters digitized, and photographs that had to be dug up from archives, all which point to an intimacy that permeates the screen. (I was lucky enough to hang out with them for several days: they are adorable together. It's amazing how they know, support, and understand each other. I want a friendship like theirs.)

The documentary will be presented again in Mexico City in the upcoming months (the exact dates and venues are yet to be confirmed). If you have the opportunity to watch it, do so. Despite the fact that Torr has been giving the workshop for almost twenty-five years, and in more than a dozen countries (this June was the first time in Mexico, by the way), both the workshop and the documentary continue provoking interesting reflections, even if only for the spectators. But that's the point: it is never about the ideas, in an abstract manner, but about how they land in a specific context. *What it means to be a person* matters as long as *somebody* answers it. *Man for a Day* invites us –whoever it is we are now– to respond.

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[1] Stephen Bottoms and Torr herself write the book. She tells her own story and he offers the historical and theoretical context in which her story unfolds.

[2] Dworkin found out about Torr reading her book and sought her out. The telephonic encounter, as Torr remembers is, is a must read for whomever's interested in the clashing feminist perspectives around sexuality and sex work.

[3] Torr was educated in the *release technique* –which she learned from Mary Fulkerson–, which is based, in part, in Mabel Elsworth Todd's *The Thinking Body*. It is a technique, as far as I understand from her explanation, which pushes the dancers to come up with their own movements.

[4] Historians like Joan Scott would add: and *how* those terms –the idea– is perpetuated.

[5] Besides dancing, aikido has been a source of inspiration for Torr's thoughts on gender.

[6] The differences between him and her were as meaningless as most of the differences that one can see when comparing *men* or comparing *women* amongst themselves. What is interesting is how, if two men are physically almost opposites, we are, however, used to *thinking* of them as equals; and if a man and a woman are practically identical, we are used to taking whatever makes them different as being the ultimate thing that renders them *opposites*: men are from Mars, women are from Venus.

[7] There are women that take the workshop because they are considering becoming men permanently. But, as the documentary shows, the reasons to take the workshop are much broader (one of the attendees, for example, took it because she wanted to better understand how to raise her children: *what type of men* she wants them to be).

[8] Women, on the other hand, always have to smile or risk being automatically questioned: why are they mad? *Stop Telling Women to Smile* is a project created by the artist, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, focused on denouncing this practice. This video mocks what it dubs "*Bitchy resting face*".

[9] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash, p. 44.

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