

Diane Torr - DRAG KINGS AND SUBJECTS

In the creation of my most recent performance "DRAG KINGS AND SUBJECTS," which was performed in various states at Dixon Place, NYC; Performance Space 122, NYC; and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London between 1992-6, I was interested in re-inventing the erotic, questioning notions of sexual identity and conveying the fluidity of gender. As a woman taking on male characters my working focus was to understand the physical-- how the male body carries weight differently, nuances of gesture and motion, ways of looking, how the gaze is directed, creating new facial expressions, and so on -- all the subtle characteristics that go into the creation of a separate identity. I had been observing men (as women and girls do) all my life. As a form of self-protection, growing up, I needed to be ware of my two elder brothers' movements, and what kind of a mood my father was in. I picked up much of the information on male behavior through osmosis, all through my childhood and beyond. As a woman, I never lost touch with the need to protect myself against men, so I was constantly observing them, not in a paranoid fashion, just curious. In investigating various male characters, I found that I already had the observation skills, as they are not accustomed to being the spectacle. They (the ones I watched anyhow) are not self-conscious in the way that women are.



As a performer, I had been creating androgynous roles for myself since 1978. As "Dianatone" in loud pink pants, cowboy tie and black shirt and high-heels, I as the she-male in Martha Wilson's performance band "DISBAND". At club 57, New York, in 1981, I played Prince Andrew in a mock-up of Princess Di's wedding. The performance, "AROUSING RECONSTRUCTIONS" which was created and performed with visual artist Bradley Wester at St. Mark's Church Dansspace, NYC, 1982, defined and androgynous movement vocabulary, which included cross-dressing. "GIRLS WILL BE BOYS WILL BE QUEENS" (1986) which was created and performed with Chris Koeing and Lizzie Olesker, and presented at BACA Downtown Brooklyn; Pyramid Club, NYC; and Franklin Furnace, NYC, investigated the possibility to be more than one gender.



I began teaching a class and high-heels; which in art schools entitled "Gender as Performance Art" in which male students could take on female identities and female students could take on male identities. One time at CALARTS, it became clear that the male students were not really interested in developing female characters, they were happy to have the chance to wear lipstick, dresses, and high-heels; which was fine, but not ultimately interesting to me as a teacher. The women, however, wanted to know how they could actually "pass" as men. They could see all kinds of potential uses-- buying a car; having an alter ego as a male artist; travelling alone though Mexico; going to see rock bands without getting hit on; feeling "normal" with a female lover; going out late at night without the fear of being raped; and so on.



The Drag King Workshop that I began teaching in 1989 and continue to teach throughout Europe and North America was a development from the performance class. The workshop enables women to develop male identities, and to intercept their "normal" female behavior and to expand their repertoire of "performing gender". The workshop culminates in a visit to a space, where the newly found drag kings test their new identities in public performance. Some places we've visited in New York-- Billy's Topless Bar at 25th and 6th Avenue; Baby Doll Lounge on White and Church Streets; The Blue Angel on White Street Circle Line Boat Ride; The Sportsbar on 2nd Avenue in the East Village, THE Bar at East 4th and 2nd Avenue, Crowbar on East 10th and Avenue B; Screaming Nanny's on 7th Avenue in the West Village; a Chinese restaurant in China Town and at a Whitney Museum of American Art opening. I've worked with 100's of women who've attended the workshop. For some, this was a continuation of their own experience, and for others, it was a once only experience. Many who attended Drag King Workshops went on to develop a Drag King culture in their own cities and communities in New York, Boston, Chicago, London, Manchester, Amsterdam, Berlin, Hannover, Zurich, and Bern. I am presently touring "DRAG KINGS AND SUBJECTS" and teaching Drag King Workshops in Germany and Switzerland, and writing a book on the responses of the women in all these different places.