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Los Angeles Poverty Department



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *State of Incarceration, 2010–*
 Performance view, January 31, 2014.

In 1984, performance artist John Malpede relocated from New York to Los Angeles and took a job as an outreach paralegal at Inner City Law Center. Out of the ICLC's offices on Skid Row, Malpede held theater workshops for the area's homeless population, assembling a core of performers now known as the Los Angeles Poverty Department. For nearly thirty years, LAPD has remained a neighborhood fixture while also conducting residencies across the country. The collective has now received its first museum retrospective, "Do you want the cosmetic version, or do you want the real deal? Los Angeles Poverty Department, 1985–2014," curated by Larissa Harris.

By fortuitous coincidence, the exhibition's opening weekend also marked the close of "Rituals of Rented Island," the Whitney Museum of American Art's astutely kooky survey of 1970s performance in and around the dilapidated lofts of SoHo ("Do you want the cosmetic version" runs until May 11). The overlap underscores how Malpede—who prior to forming LAPD had collaborated with the Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet Theater, and Michael Smith—carried the theatrical tropes of downtown New York into the social context of downtown LA. For instance, video documentation of *South of the Clouds*, 1986, showcases psychologically charged confessional monologues reminiscent of work by Jill Kroesen, and the Living Theatre's prison drama *The Brig*, 1963, clearly informed *State of Incarceration, 2010–*, which LAPD performed at the museum in a gallery segmented by penitentiary bunk beds. That said, "Do you want the cosmetic version" arrived at the Queens Museum less under the banner of theater than via rubrics such as social practice, community-based art, and participatory art. LAPD's founding predates these terms, yet their subsequent popularization has rendered the group's offstage activities newly legible as an artistic practice. Harris here has furnished ample archival material revealing the mechanics of LAPD's outreach, such as DIY-style flyers advertising the talent competitions used to recruit new members and video recordings of rehearsal sessions. Pamphlets and placards from the parade event *Walk the Talk*, 2012, situate LAPD within the constellation of organizations and individual initiatives that have maintained Skid Row's historic character as a support center for the city's homeless.

Malpede acknowledges that the social dimension of LAPD handicaps its reception among the theatergoing public: "Community art is a code word for bad art," he wryly observes. Conversely, there is truth to critic Claire Bishop's tart claim that community-based art risks becoming a smiley face stuck over holes in the safety net. To avoid lapsing into bland celebration, or theater-as-therapy, LAPD trains its attention on Skid Row's internal conflicts and external pressures. Early productions, such as the harrowing and hallucinatory hospital drama *Jupiter 35*, 1989, used LAPD members' direct encounters with institutional power as raw material for their plots. More recently, *Agents and Assets*, 2001–, plumbs entrenched political conditions by appropriating verbatim the transcript from a 1998 congressional hearing over allegations that the CIA was clandestinely complicit in drug trafficking in Los Angeles during the 1980s. (As part of the exhibition, LAPD presented a Spanish-language production of *Agents and Assets* in collaboration with members of Drogadictos Anónimos in Corona, Queens.) Inevitably, LAPD invites comparison to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, or Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. An equally generative analogy might be to what Michel Foucault called in 1977 the "specific intellectual," whom he characterized as embedded in "real, material, everyday struggles" against "the multinational corporations, the judicial and police apparatuses, the property speculators, etc."—precisely those forces that have sought to criminalize Skid Row's population and clear the way for redevelopment. "Do you want the cosmetic version" makes clear that a full account of LAPD's "community art" needs to chart not only its actors and audiences but also its

adversaries.

—*Colby Chamberlain*

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