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## Q&A: John Malpede on Skid Row

Posted by Sam Bloch on May 19, 2014

| Tagged [John Malpede](#), [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#), [Mike Kelley](#), [Mobile Homestead](#)



Los Angeles Poverty Department founder John Malpede and Bill Gordh performing *Dead Dog and Lonely Horse* in the L.A. River, 1978. Photo by Jerri Allyn.

Mike Kelley's public art project [Mobile Homestead](#) makes its first Los Angeles appearance this Saturday, May 24 as part of *Walk The Talk*, a biennial Skid Row parade by the [Los Angeles Poverty Department \(LAPD\)](#).

Performance artist and LAPD founder **John Malpede** met Mike Kelley on a California tour in 1978. Then based in New York, Malpede and his collaborator Bill Gordh performed as *Dead Dog and Lonely Horse* at Kelley's studio in Santa Monica for a sparse if influential audience of local artists. Twenty years later, Malpede was among seven artists invited by Kelley and Paul McCarthy to present time-based work in the visitor's gallery for MOCA's 1998 exhibition [Out Of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979](#). Based on a monologue by Malpede and a group performance developed by LAPD during a residency with homeless people in Helena, Montana, *Inappropriate Laughing Responses and a Sigh (Of Relief)* (1998) situates fathers in the constraints of childhood.

LAPD has been working in Skid Row since 1985, leading performance workshops for the largest homeless population in the country. At the time of its creation, LAPD was the first theater troupe of its kind. Malpede directed solo and group performances, including songs, skits and monologues, in mission lines, art spaces and downtown theaters. The goals of LAPD were political and an outgrowth of the area's activist tendency.

Performance was a space for a historically disenfranchised population to communicate the hardships of life on the streets.

As the neighborhood has developed, the group's focus has shifted to integrate historiography into their practice of community building. Like *Skid Row History Museum* (2008) and *Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere* (2013), *Walk the Talk 2014*, the second installment of the LAPD biennial, contributes to the group's developing narrative of the neighborhood as an incubator of activism and social engagement. The biennial comprises a community conversation event, a residency in Kelley's [Mobile Homestead](#), and as its centerpiece, a second line parade that wends through Skid Row and incorporates aspects of music, performance, visual art and public education.

I spoke to Malpede about *Walk the Talk* and the history it documents.

Sam Bloch: Los Angeles Poverty Department celebrates the people who live and work in Skid Row. Who is in *Walk the Talk 2014*?

John Malpede: *Walk the Talk* calls attention to the fact that there are all these social visionary and artistic things that have happened in Skid Row, and it's a real community where one good thing begets another. It has important values for itself and for all of Southern California. At our [Come Together](#) event, we heard a presentation from Rory White, who started the Lamp Art Project in 1998. It's a visual arts studio for people living on Skid Row. We heard from three people from the [Weingart Center](#), which operates the former El Rey hotel. That used to be the biggest and most notorious of the Skid Row hotels in slumlord hands. Now virtually all the hotels are owned by nonprofits and have been turned into safe and affordable housing.

SB: As the neighborhood has changed, LAPD has concentrated on developing its social visionary history. This ongoing project seems like a direct response to what happened in Bunker Hill, where a similarly disenfranchised community was unable to articulate their own history. With the exception of John Fante, and some old noir movies, it was razed along with the landscape.

JM: Yes. It's preventative medicine. If Skid Row could be knocked down or redeveloped, it could release a lot of value. Before the real estate bubble burst, there was talk among the Board of Supervisors to relocate services to the far edges of the county. So that's what the project is about: shining light on the people who have done things, and highlighting the value of what does exist. Why shouldn't everybody in L.A. County say, we've done a cool thing here?



Los Angeles Poverty Department performs a scene celebrating Dr. Dennis Bleakley at John Wesley Community Health Institute during Walk the Talk 2012. Photo by Austin Hines.

SB: The issue of housing is key to understanding the neighborhood.

JM: In the 1970s, after Bunker Hill was rebuilt—which is to say, what was there was removed, and the city recreated it as a redevelopment zone—the additional taxes from that development didn't go back into the general fund. It was allocated for further development, including the creation of low-income housing. At one point there was something called the [Silver Book plan](#). It was going to basically level everything in Skid Row and turn it into a redevelopment zone, like what happened on Bunker Hill.

But some people, including [Jeff Dietrich](#) from the Catholic Worker, somebody from the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and a group of designers from the Los Angeles Community Design Center, stepped in and offered an alternative plan. Instead of building new housing here, which was not likely to happen given the expense, the plan proposed to preserve and restore what was in these fifty square blocks. It was embraced by the Tom Bradley administration and passed [in 1977]. It's been the official plan of the city of Los Angeles ever since.

That created the unique community that is L.A.'s Skid Row. That plan preserved the housing and created an opportunity for a community to reinvent itself. In other cities, homeless communities have been completely displaced. Skid Row is a unique and important spot. It was the result of direct engagement in the planning process.

SB: You describe the parade at the center of *Walk the Talk* as a second line, which is the form of a funeral procession. Is that important to LAPD?

JM: No. What's important to us is the rockin' music. Nothing funeral about it. It's about animating everybody.



Walk the Talk 2012. Photo by Austin Hines.

During the parade, we're carrying portraits of the people we're honoring. Those portraits, made by Los Angeles-based artist Brian Dick, and the portraits from the first biennial made by Mr. Brainwash, will be

on view in *Mobile Homestead*. We also have a history timeline that we developed for the *Skid Row History Museum* at The Box and updated for our survey at the [Queens Museum](#).

SB: Other than the portraits, are there objects or other documents of that history?

JM: When we did The Box show we put in three objects that were made by people in Skid Row as political statements but operated just as effectively as design objects. One of those was the Catholic Worker shopping cart, which was a hugely brilliant strategic thing. People's belongings have been taken from them and thrown away, including their shopping carts, which were said to be stolen from grocery stores. So the Catholic Worker bought shopping carts and placed a statement in front that explains its status as property of the Catholic Worker that was given to this person for use. There are hundreds of them around. In the parade, we use four of them to transport our tech stuff, like the generator, microphone stands, and water for the performers.

SB: I'm curious about the parade format, as opposed to a block party, or a neighborhood-wide celebration. [41.18\(d\)](#), the law that prohibits sitting or sleeping on sidewalks, has a clause which exempts parades. So is the parade a form that critiques this notoriously anti-homeless law?

JM: We have critiqued 41.18(d) at other times. But no, we hadn't thought about that. That's a good connection. That law was written in the '60s to keep the hippies from sitting around on Hollywood Boulevard. But it was dusted off and used for Skid Row later. The first time we held the parade, nobody sat around and watched. They got up and marched down the street with us. So we didn't need to invoke the exemption of 41.18(d)!



Installation view of *Do you want the cosmetic version or do you want the real deal?* Los Angeles Poverty Department, 1985-2014, Queens Museum, 2014. Photo by Henriëtte Brouwers.

The way the parade works is we make stops at seven different locations, where we talk about seven different initiatives that have been important in the community. It starts at Gladys Park. At that location we're drawing attention to the work of "[General](#)" [Jeff](#), a neighborhood resident who managed to spearhead an effort to get the Parks Department to do a major renovation at the park. LAPD will perform a ten-or-so-minute scene about the initiative and the person. Then the band will play and we'll go on to the next location.

SB: How are those scenes written?

JM: All the scenes are created from the words of the people who led these initiatives. At the last parade, there were super important people, like [Tanya Tull](#), who started Para Los Niños, and [Alice Callaghan](#), who started Skid Row Housing Trust and Las Familias Del Pueblo. When we started making scenes about them, we invited them to rehearsal, interviewed them at length, and distilled something out of their words. We didn't want to create something that was misrepresented them. We use their words to construct the scene.

SB: I look at your process through the lens of community organizing. Or at least through its strategies: you assemble a group based on a shared interest and then leverage that to create awareness or enact change. And typically that follows one of two models: either a community independently susses out their common interest, or that community is following the interest of a leader or recruiter. I suspect LAPD began one way and evolved into another.

JM: I was a performance artist living in New York. I was doing something with Creative Time on what's now Battery Park City but at that point was a landfill, where the city was pouring sand into dirty Hudson River water and poof, creating the world's most expensive real estate. It was alchemy. This was in 1984, right when homelessness was first showing up in New York. I happened to be in L.A. right before the Olympics and went to government hearings about the conditions of the hotels on Skid Row. I met these activists from the [Homeless Organizing Team](#) who were testifying to the L.A. County Board of Supervisors, and I started volunteering for them. Because of that I was able to write this very accurate but hallucinatory thing about evicting the homeless before the Olympics [*Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles, 1984*].



Installation view of Skid Row History Museum, The Box, Los Angeles, 2008. Photo by Henriëtte Brouwers.

The people were so compelling. I came back around Christmas 1984 and volunteered at the Inner City Law Center. We wrote a grant to the California Arts Council, which at the time had a really good artists in community program. Months later, after they offered me a job as an outreach paralegal, we landed the grant and started doing the theater workshop. At night we pushed the desks out of the way, when the lawyers weren't there, and started doing these workshops for anybody in the neighborhood. A lot of the original participants were my clients.

The goal was always to capture everybody's input who was in the room. But this is L.A., right? A lot of people were showing up with the twelve rap songs that no one had ever heard, the film script that no one had ever read. People were eager to share their contribution but didn't have the patience to hear someone else. I had done a lot of totally improvisational, collaborative work in New York, so we started making up shows that weren't written down, and that were jammed on by everybody. That way everyone could feel they had some authorship in the show. And everyone, including me, was confused as to what they had contributed and what somebody else had contributed.

SB: In an [interview](#) with Harrell Fletcher, you talk about Simone Weil's experience of quitting teaching to work in a factory. Weil had a social concern in her work, and needed firsthand exposure to what was going on. That's not exactly what you did. But you embedded yourself in this community. You got a job helping the people you wanted to make art about. That is such an inspiring alternative to the narrative we now hear, all too often, of artists moving into low-rent neighborhoods and [negatively affecting the community](#).

JM: The reality was, I didn't know what I was doing exactly. I didn't know if I was falling off the end of the art world. I didn't know if I was going to keep making art or not. I thought I might write a book about homelessness. California and Vermont are the only states where you have to go to law school in order to read the law, like Abraham Lincoln did, so I thought I might become a public interest lawyer and realize my mother's dream. But it just sort of happened that LAPD took off. I was following my nose and holding my identity very loosely.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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