



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *The Robert Chapter*, from *LAPD Inspects America*, 1988. Performance views. Left: John Malpede. Right: Carl Graue, Jazzmin, and Kevin Williams. Photos: Dona McAdams

Artforum  
Feb. 1989

## LAPD INSPECTS AMERICA

### EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

Beyond the big orange sign where the word "NOT" had been inserted between the words "MEN" and "WORKING," a few traffic safety cones dotted the stage. Indeed, the audience would witness a few wrecks and some de- (not re-) constructions during this performance. *LAPD Inspects America* shattered boundaries with the grace of a runaway garbage truck, making it difficult, first of all, to know even when the show had begun. A prerecorded voice described the act we were about to see as "a delicate balance between a volatile street lifestyle and the actors' tender hearts," while a couple of those actors fidgeted and jabbered in the front row, disrupting the piece from the start. The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) creates political theater by and about the homeless, and doesn't clean up its subject matter. The result is irritating, inept, raw, and very real.

LAPD emerged from a workshop set up on L.A.'s Skid Row in 1985. Performance artist/organizer John Malpede still directs the group, which now includes both artists and transients. Their *LAPD Inspects America* project has taken them to other cities to meet with street people, and the episode presented in New York

(*The Robert Chapter*) chronicled a trip to San Francisco. Wearing a wig and a housedress, Malpede played the central role of Robert Clough—a "crazy" black transvestite and sometime member of LAPD. (Clough is currently in prison.) Robert became the focus of the San Francisco trip when he scared the group's would-be benefactors with his wild unsocialized behavior. What should the group do with Robert? This became the play's ragged plot, as Malpede walked through other actor's monologues, talked to spectators, shrieked, ran in and out of the room—just one of several unpredictable elements. As another performer put it: "Just because we think we're the craziest motherfuckers in America, we give ourselves special largesse." So, shortly after the show started, a pizza was delivered onstage and shared. A fight broke out. Someone marched up the center aisle and translated the scene-in-progress into Spanish, making it impossible to hear the English version. Meanwhile, another actor was playing the role of director Malpede; other actors also traded identities. The disorientation they created was appropriate to the subject, of course, but I became uneasy as the piece built more and more of an equation between homelessness and craziness. (That seems to be George Bush's equation.)

Still, this was some of the most uncompromising political theater I've seen. Certainly, LAPD would be easier to like if it used the familiar tool of personal testimony. ("I'm human too, and here's how I landed in the gutter.") But the characters don't explain themselves. They aren't pitiful, and sometimes they aren't very nice. They immobilize any do-gooder impulse in the audience. In fact, LAPD makes a liberal response to the issue of homelessness look feeble and completely inadequate.

—C. Carr