Courage in Adversity

LAPD at Highways

BY LITA BARRIE

In his ‘70s manifesto for more experimental forms of socially engaged art, Allan Kaprow made an intriguing distinction between “life-like art” (arising from life’s vicissitudes) and “art-like art” (with a recognizable art-historical pedigree). But the demise of situationalists with the increased market orientation of ‘80s art trends demonstrates the extent to which blue chip “art-like art” is a reflection of today’s conservative demand for art which serves as bullish.

In contrast to self-consciously “political art” (still a sub-genre of what Kaprow described as “art-like art”) which uses pre-established artistic forms, LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department) evolved as an experimental theater which tries to reflect the experiential reality of homelessness. LAPD is truly innovative theatrical performance that exemplifies Kaprow’s notion of “life-like art,” since it encompasses the real-life scenarios of various street people in a mosaic of interconnected multiple voices instead of the usual conventional linear narrative based on a voice-of-God perspective.

The underground performance troupe blurs the usual separation between art and life so convincingly that its scripts often seem to be ad-libbed. The rough-edged power of its performance style retains the raw energy of the struggle for survival on Skid Row. The effect is to implicate the audience in harsh realities of street life which are too often hidden from middle-class consciousness.

Under the direction of well-known performance artist John Malpede, LAPD grew out of workshops for homeless people. Their innovative performance style evolved from experiments of working without scripts, using improvisation to allow each member to have an input. In this way Malpede discovered what he describes as “a real natural connection between street energy and extreme theatrical techniques, cutting edge experimental stuff.”

*Jupiter 35*, presented at Highways, Santa Monica.