

John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)

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We are in the middle of a huge empire where all the resources are going in the wrong direction. The long-term goal is to change the direction. This is a sleep walking democracy.

— John Malpede

In 1984, John Malpede traveled to Los Angeles to research homelessness for a performance project that was to take place on the world's most expensive piece of real estate in the making: an alchemical Hudson River landfill project that would transform the dirty and dilapidated port area of downtown Manhattan into Battery Park City. A director, actor, activist, and writer based in New York City, Malpede had been making socially and politically engaged performance for more than a decade, including a series of political monologues performed at renowned alternative venues throughout downtown (The Kitchen, Artists Space, Franklin Furnace), as well as a series of site-specific and street works. But he had grown disenchanted with the New York City art scene and wanted to “inform his big ideas with on-the-ground reality.”

In Los Angeles, Malpede connected with “on-the-ground activists” who were organizing to protect the civil rights and improve the living conditions of homeless people. At the time, the homeless community was in an elevated state of alert. Los Angeles was conducting massive sweeps against people living on the streets in an effort to beautify the city in the lead up to the 1984 Olympics. Organizers, led by homeless people and legal advocates, had devised a multi-pronged strategy that included class-action civil lawsuits, grassroots organizing, and demonstrations. Their goal was to raise the monthly relief stipend available to homeless individuals and ease the punitive conditions of the California workforce program. Malpede began volunteering his time to these efforts and within six months he was offered a job as an outreach paralegal by the Inner City Law Center. In a matter of months, he began offering free and open performance workshops to homeless people at the law center. This was the beginning of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), the first performance group in the nation made up principally of homeless and formerly homeless people.

LAPD was founded in 1985 to “create performance work that connects lived experience to the social forces that shape the lives and communities of people living in poverty.” Since then, they have created numerous productions that have toured nationally and internationally, receiving critical acclaim for both their artistic quality and social impact. Rooted in Los Angeles’ Skid Row neighborhood, LAPD’s performances reflect the “realities, hopes and dreams” of the people who make up this community,

giving them a way to raise awareness about social and political issues and create opportunities for people to intervene in policy decisions that affect their lives.

In the early days, LAPD's performances embraced the "wild and chaotic situation" in which its members lived, by creating work that was largely improvised. *No Stone for Studs Schwartz*, a performance about a union organizer on the run from the Teamsters, reflected this early aesthetic. The performance recreated the energy of Skid Row, with audience members interrupting and jumping into the performance in unpredictable ways. Consequently, *No Stone for Studs Schwartz* was less about the story and more about the energy; "people came away with a visceral experience of what it was like to be a vulnerable person living in a dangerous place," Malpede says. Over the years, LAPD has matured and its members have become more focused. This has enabled the group to explore other approaches to making work that draw more heavily on imagery, as well as on scripted and found text.

In the 23 years since LAPD has been working in Los Angeles' Skid Row, the challenges facing homeless people in this community haven't changed much and, in some cases, have only gotten worse. Changes to state and federal policies have hindered the ability of legal advocates to file civil action lawsuits on behalf of homeless people, while the assaults the homeless face have only intensified. Malpede points to the recent, highly publicized arrest of 600 "drug dealers" in downtown Los Angeles, as an example of the kind of symbolic warfare the political establishment wages against poor people living on Skid Row. These tactics aim to demonize poor and homeless people in the eyes of the broader public and to strip them of their right to live in the area, which is now coveted by high-end developers.

LAPD's work is integrated with the grassroots concerns of those living and working in Skid Row. In the early days, many LAPD members were involved with grassroots organizing efforts and civil action lawsuits that sought to improve the living conditions of homeless people. As part of these efforts, LAPD presented its early performances at demonstrations and rallies that were part of these struggles. Over the years, LAPD has partnered with numerous advocacy and service organizations including SRO Housing, Inc., LA Community Action Network, Catholic Workers, The Downtown Women's Action Coalition, St. Vincent DePaul Center, The Salvation Army's Women's and Men's drug recovery programs, and the Inner City Law Center. These partners have provided LAPD with space in which to rehearse and perform. In addition, LAPD has collaborated with many of them on specific projects. An example of this is *Agents & Assets*, a performance that addresses the social and political dimensions of drugs and drug policy, which LAPD developed in collaboration with the Drug Policy Alliance and members of the Los Angeles recovery community, including the Safe Harbor Recovery Program.

LAPD has worked with a wide variety of Skid Row recovery programs over the years, leading performance workshops with program participants who often become permanent members of the group. While the recovery programs have different perspectives and take different approaches to recovery, they share a common concern for the individuals struggling with drug addiction and a commitment to creating a treatment

climate in society. An important principle of recovery is that individuals need to take personal responsibility for their actions. During their work with people in recovery, LAPD found that there was little or no recognition of the social and political dimensions of the drug problem. They created *Agents & Assets* as a way to address these concerns.

Agents & Assets premiered in Los Angeles in 2001, after a yearlong creation process that coincided with the successful campaign to pass a ballot initiative— spearheaded by the Drug Policy Alliance— favoring treatment over incarceration for non-violent drug offenders in California. Malpede describes the performance in three parts. First, there is the performance of the text, which is literally the transcript of a Congressional hearing on CIA involvement in trafficking crack cocaine in Los Angeles. The performance of words originally spoken by affluent politicians and policy-makers, by a cast of people whose lives have been detrimentally affected by the crack epidemic and the so-called “war on drugs,” reveals the social chasm between the political elite that creates social policy and those who are most immediately affected by these policies.

The second part of the performance is a panel presentation by scholars, recovery professionals, drug policy reform advocates, journalists, and community organizers. The presentation lays the groundwork for the third and final part of the performance: an open conversation between performers, panelists, and audience members, during which everyone has the opportunity to ask questions, make statements, and lead the discussion. The idea is to create an environment that engages the lived experiences and expertise of community members, a place where “anyone in the room, as a citizen, can get up and say what they want.”

Given the success of *Agents & Assets* in Los Angeles, LAPD decided to remount the performance in communities where similar ballot initiatives were taking place. With the guidance of the Drug Policy Alliance, LAPD identified communities where similar initiatives were planned, and developed relationships with advocacy groups in those areas. In the months preceding the 2002 elections, LAPD did a month-long residency in Detroit, in order to elevate the conversations engendered by the project into the broader discourse surrounding a ballot initiative on a treatment vs. incarceration. LAPD focused its energy on developing strong relationships with the local community and building a constituency for the performance. LAPD led performance workshops with the participants and staff at three drug treatment programs, where they recruited half the cast for the performance. LAPD also worked with community-based organizations and advocacy groups, including those spearheading the ballot initiative, on issues related to drug policy.

While people in Detroit never had an opportunity to vote on the treatment vs. incarceration initiative because it got knocked off the ballot, there were other positive outcomes from the LAPD residency. Prior to the residency, the policy advocacy organization leading the initiative in Detroit didn’t have strong relationships with the recovery community and grassroots organizations concerned with similar issues. The residency provided an opportunity for these potential allies to work together and build stronger ties that may prove instrumental in the on-going efforts to change drug policy.

These groups have worked with State Representative Bill McConico to pass a series of drug reform measures in the Michigan State Legislature.

The *Agents & Assets* residencies, which have since taken place in Cleveland and Philadelphia, provide opportunities for everyone involved— whether as workshop participants, performers, or audience members— to learn about the broader social and political context in which the drug problem exists. Malpede has found this to be particularly revelatory for people in recovery, who are often struggling to forgive themselves for the harm they have caused to themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. Placing individual action within the context of history and social policy can make it possible for people in recovery to gain a deeper, more complex, understanding of the problem, lifting the burden of guilt and shame. This can free them to create change in their own lives as well as in their communities.

LAPD is currently developing *UTOPIA/Dystopia*, a public conversation and performance project that will respond to the crisis of gentrification by creating “a multidisciplinary forum for the consideration and articulation of grassroots visions for the city’s future.” Through a series of public conversations, the project will engage the diverse voices of people living and working in downtown Los Angeles, including the homeless and formerly homeless residents of Skid Row, the working poor, immigrants, street vendors, day laborers, and new area residents, who tend to be middle-class and affluent professionals. The public conversations will be followed by the creation of two public performances: an indoor performance that will likely use text and information collected during the public conversations and an outdoor itinerant performance that will travel to various sites in downtown Los Angeles during the course of a day. Recognizing that *UTOPIA/Dystopia* can only do so much to address the immediate threat that gentrification and development poses to poor and homeless people in downtown Los Angeles, Malpede and LAPD plan to use their connections with people in the fields of affordable housing, architecture, public policy, social services, and homeless issues, to develop a strategy to secure affordable housing before developers lay claim to all the property in the area.

Like other performance groups, LAPD is committed to raising awareness about critical social and political issues facing their community in order to create social change. What sets their work apart is that, from the onset, the organization has been integrated into grassroots organizing efforts that address homegrown concerns. These relationships have enabled LAPD to be strategic in linking their performances to grassroots organizing efforts and policy advocacy campaigns. Malpede believes that community arts groups interested in effecting social change could benefit tremendously from cultivating relationships between artists and strategic thinkers. These relationships can provide artists with a deeper “understanding of what it means to be strategic” and the connections needed to have a bigger impact and reach a wider spectrum of people. This requires time and support. While LAPD has managed to sustain its work for more than 20 years on a project-by-project basis, the commitment to “developing the work over time” creates a growing need for financial support. This support would enable LAPD to dedicate more time to the relationship building, organizing, and research fundamental to their work.

While there is no doubt that others could learn a great deal from LAPD, Malpede rejects the notion that it might be a replicable model, proposing, instead, that LAPD can serve to inspire others to create something that reflects their own needs, struggles, dreams, and aspirations.

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