

John Malpede - WHY I DO WHAT I DO?

In 1972, while teaching myself to be an artist, I spent a year making an (8' x 8' x 7') human powered music box, built of scavenged wood. When completed, I straddled a bench and pumped back and forth on a pole, as if rowing a boat. This lever was attached to a drive-shaft that turned a large, upright, wooden gear, which in turn moved a second spoked gear. This gear meshed with a 4' diameter platform with 48 protruding wooden spokes. When I sat on the bench and pumped, the apparatus would engage and a very modest (14") rag ballerina danced and the platform spun, several bells would be struck by the small mallets, and an entirely underwhelming music would play.

During 1984, I began working with poverty lawyer Nancy Mintie, and other housed and un-housed activists for homeless people, in skid row Los Angeles. In 1985 I started doing performance workshops with homeless people. Performance, an idiosyncratic and transparent medium for the personality and being of the artist, invites democratization.

Nancy Mintie offered me a job as a welfare advocate. An ideal, schmooze job, I traveled LA county in my '76 silver-blue Buick Regal with the white landau top, spending days at welfare offices in Watts, South Central, Hollywood, East LA, Downtown, or back in time, to the land of the 5-cent parking meters and \$2.50 stuffed deli sandwiches: Long Beach. I'd sit down in one of the 200 mustard or pea-green plastic chairs, in the back of the smoke-filled waiting room, in a tee-shirt, blue jeans and hi-tops, I loved to see those county workers in their suits, running to accommodate my clients...

The Los Angeles Poverty Department, grew out of the performance workshops. Last June, eighteen of us performed on Athieves corner, one of the most notorious blocks of skid row. We assembled on the sidewalk and hung with other people we knew from the neighborhood; people who use the corner park, live in Florence, Russ or Panama hotels, people waiting for a bed at the LA Mission, people dealing drugs in front of the park. We performed a movement ritual, evoked from group member Ron King's story, about the vastly comforting experience of standing on a chair, inhaling and tasting, as his mother made shrimp jambalaya. Each performer contributed solos of their own savored contentments. Our gradually emerging performance temporarily stood the edge of the jumpy life of the street and lingered in the air as a narrative jambalaya.