

Los Angeles, Venice / Jacki Apple

The definition of what is or is not performance art is getting fuzzier and fuzzier, and with good reason. On one hand, producers and management (we call them presenting organizations) are packaging glamor spectacles featuring the stars, prestigious venues, dazzling technology and high-powered promotion that draw big audiences and media coverage. On the other hand, many artists are creating low-budget, solo performance pieces that they can take on tour, works that often appropriate or simulate various popular entertainment forms such as TV sit-coms, talk shows and nightclub acts. Some performance artists are now working with directors. Still others are doing long runs in little theaters. In view of Laurie Anderson's success, many young artists aspire to "crossing over" into media stardom.

All of this raises a new set of unanswered critical issues. Last year everyone was asking, "Is it theater, dance or performance art?" Perhaps the key word now is not *performance*, but *art*. Today's question is, "Is it art or entertainment?" And what is the difference? In the areas of performance and media, should art be defined solely by intention and not by context or form? And how does this affect the artist's autonomy and control? After all, one of the advantages of being an artist and presenting work in the art world is that, at least in theory, you can do and say anything you want to in whatever manner you choose, uncensored by accountants, ratings and marketing strategies.

For performance artist John Malpede, these concerns are good subject matter. In *No Frills: A Generic Performance*, presented at Beyond Baroque, Malpede promised us "a good basic performance at an affordable price." Performed without technical accompaniment in a basic "generic" performance space—white walls, columns, folding chairs—for an audience much smaller than he deserved, Malpede delivered what he promised and more.

Malpede's piece is about performance, perception and packaging, and he appropriates a popular entertainment structure—the talk-show format—as the means for deconstructing his subject matter and presenting his esthetic, sociopolitical commentary. Like any good late-night-TV host, Malpede delivers his monolog, engages in repartee with his audience and interviews four guests, all of whom he also portrays.

They include two "audience members"—a chicken salesman from Vermont and a duck-and-rabbit sexer from Maryland—who talk about the same, but differently; a professor with a Jimmy Stewart-like voice who is the author of a new book, *Packaging and Self-Esteem*; and Chickey, a carnival "dunk" artist with the body language and New York street accent of an Italian construction worker. Malpede wryly explains the elements of performance art and demonstrates "object manipulation." He discusses the difference between brand and product, reminding us that these are "times of diminishing expectations" and that we must go for nutritional value. The professor spouts pop psychology and self-improvement bromides while promoting his book. Chickey tells us his hard-luck stories and that his solution for success is a type and a con. "I got my own business—'Sink a Sucker,'" he says, daring the audience to dunk him by hitting a target with baseballs. The apparatus is, of course, rigged.

Although this performance is successful and satisfying, Malpede is walking a fine line. Ironically, his performance raises the question, "Is he a viable entertainment product?" Malpede is an extremely attractive and congenial performer, easygoing, affable and witty, with just the right kind and right amount of sex appeal and personality to succeed in the very medium he has taken his style from and comments upon. If late-night TV can be done as art, can art be done as late-night TV?

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