



John Zerzan, a noted anarchist writer, reflects in front of a statue across from the New Day Bakery on Van Buren street in the Whiteaker neighborhood on Saturday. Tim Kupsick Photographer

Writer John Zerzan critiques importance, origins of art

The controversial writer discusses his essays, his philosophy and problems of symbolic representation

By Aaron Shakra
Pulse Editor

John Zerzan is no stranger to controversy. The Eugene resident and anarchist writer is the author of three books, including "Elements of Refusal," "Future Primitive & Other Essays" and "Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization," which espouse perspectives directly contradicting almost every norm of Western civilization. He hosts "Anarchy Radio," which airs Sundays at 11 p.m. on KWVA, and is a frequent contributor to the public-access series "Cascadia Alive!"

In his essay "The Case Against Art," written in the mid-1980s, Zerzan critiques art as the creation of a symbolic culture alienated from the natural world.

"Art anesthetizes the sense organs and removes the natural world from their purview. This reproduces culture, which can never compensate for the disability," he writes. "The primary function of art is to objectify feeling, by which one's own motivations and identity are transformed into symbol and metaphor."

Later, he asks, "Why then would one respond positively to art? As compensation and palliative, because our relationship to nature and life is so deficient and disallows an authentic one. ... (A)rt, like religion, arises from unsatisfied desire."

Zerzan notes the piece "was probably the most attacked or controversial essays of mine out of all of them."

Emerald: What is the definition of

art you're using in this essay?

John Zerzan: It's representation, most basically. That urge or desire to represent reality. Art is just part of the symbolic culture, symbolic communication.

Emerald: That seems to be describing it from a materialistic standpoint. Like art as the creation of an artifact, or as a materialistic thing.

JZ: You could describe it in different ways. You could talk about it in a more spiritual way, too. That's an open question, too. I don't claim this is some absolute right answer or this is the truth — it's more of an exploration. It just makes it a question rather than a given, like "Well, you've got to have art. We all love art. How could you question art?" It's just the fact that, well, we've gotten along without it, and what kind of life was that where people didn't seem to do that.

Emerald: Do you think that's a place we need to return to?

JZ: Maybe there's a time when once again, it wouldn't be needed. With this essay and some other ones, what I was really trying to do was link it up to the development of becoming estranged from the natural world, and noticing that as this kind of estrangement develops, and maybe tensions in certain societies develop, such as inequalities, then you start getting these new things, and some of them are trying to heal the problems by ritual and so forth; they're an attempt to address these problems that evidently, didn't exist before. So the question is, can you heal social problems by the means of the symbolic? And I think the answer is no. Other people disagree.

Emerald: Have you rethought any of your perspectives since you originally wrote the essay?

JZ: Yes. It's important to stay open,

because it's just speculation. It was part of a series of so-called origins pieces. I just wrote a new one about the origins of gender and what that has to do with the movement to the symbolic. One thing is, of course, it has a very provocative title. But actually, it is trying to show that the reason why art comes along as part of the whole movement into the symbolic realm is interesting. Not to condemn it in some abstract way, like "I hate art" or "down with art." It's just to show like with religion and other things, there was a time when evidently, people didn't need it, and then it comes in as an interesting kind of consolation or compensation. It's not an eternal thing.

For example, one thing that really struck me, is some of the anthropological data, for example that we were cooking with fire almost 2 million years ago, and doing other interesting things. Another recent thing is, they've determined that humans were able to navigate the open sea 800,000 years ago. And yet, art is very recent. Art is only like 30,000 years old. So people were obviously intelligent for a couple of million years, and they didn't seem to need art.

Emerald: Do you feel that art in popular culture is a tool of social control?

JZ: One of the things popular culture strikes me as is a kind of loss of faith in art. When pop art comes along starting in the late 1950s — especially the post-modern which starts up a little later but is part of that whole trend — the distinction between serious art and pop art becomes dissolved. It doesn't look like serious art anymore, and in a way it isn't. I don't know if it's so much a matter of control. You could write a piece called "The End of Art" and certainly various people have. A lot of people thought art was

Turn to **ZERZAN**, page 12

Adult Shops

New Releases weekly VHS & DVD
5-day Rentals Over 3,000 DVDs

- Arcade
- Novelties
- Games

ADDITIONAL 25% OFF on selected DVDs

ADA accessible

HE & SHE I
290 River Rd., Eugene 688-5411

HE & SHE II
720 Garfield, Eugene 345-2873

ALBANY
I-5 EXIT 233, 3404 Spicer Dr. 541-812-2522

WE SHIP APARTMENTS.

Moving? Bring your furniture, your clothes, and everything in your apartments to us. We'll pick it up, pack it, crate it and ship it anywhere in the world.

Contact us for Moving-Out Special

1056 Green Acres Rd, #102
Eugene, OR 97401
Phone: 484-6353
Fax: 431-4942

PAKMAIL
You've got choices!

1292 High St.
Eugene, OR 97401
Phone: 343-1313
Fax: 687-0809

Brails Restaurant

We offer American • Breakfast • Lunch

Rice & Noodle Bowls \$6.25
Chicken, Beef & Tofu
also featuring Korean style ribs and spicy pork

Ask about our daily specials!
We serve breakfast anytime!

Best Breakfast in Town!

Daily Breakfast Specials \$3.95 (7-11am)
Weekly Omelette Specials \$5.95

Try our biggest & best
Pancakes & Omelettes!

Open Daily 7am-3pm • 7 days a week
We take reservations for parties up to 25
343-1542 • fax 341-6437 • 1689 Willamette

Oregon Gallery

NORTHWEST MADE

- Photography
- Gifts
- Wall Decor

Ask about our student discount!
Best framing prices in town!

Picture Framing • Gifts & Oregon Food Products
199 E. 5th St., next to Steelhead • 684-0045
FREE PARKING BEHIND OUR STORE

Musique Gourmet

Classical Music
Opera
Broadway
Filmscores

CD's
SACD'S
DVD'S

Open Noon - 5:20
Sundays Noon - 4:00
Closed Tuesdays

Behind Bradfords
Across from Library
942 Olive St.
FREE PARKING

349-0461

VISA MASTERCARD

Stand out from the crowd.

A program by the
College of Arts and Sciences
and the Career Center

Enhance your education with the Professional Distinctions program.

Compliment your liberal arts degree with a specific set of professional perspectives and skills.

For full information go to <https://uodistinctions.uoregon.edu>
or visit the UO Career Center, 220 Hendricks Hall. 541.346.3166