

## WAYNE ZEBZDA

Born 1956 in Hartford, Connecticut; lives and works in Koloa, Kaua`i

Being “on the street” conjures up an image of social marginality, life that is as unforgiving as concrete, while being “on the road” invokes America’s great romance with the endless highway. Wayne Zebzda, who began his career in the district south of Market Street in San Francisco before its recent gentrification, works at the intersection of those two conceptual trajectories. As both a coastal and a trans-Pacific transplant, he moved initially from Connecticut to San Francisco in 1976 to enter the San Francisco Art Institute, from which he earned his BFA in 1979. He first came to the islands in 1987 at the invitation of Doug Britt, fellow student at the Art Institute and an artist then already living and working on Kaua`i. Zebzda subsequently also settled on that island.

Zebzda recalls that he was a shy child, one who loved to draw and for whom art was his voice. He also found early on that pre-emptive humor could also serve to deflect attention from what was otherwise a reticence to engage socially. It was not until he had to make presentations for his public art works that he developed what now seems a naturally assured presence, and humor, honed early, has continued to serve as an integral part of his creative style.

Zebzda entered San Francisco Art Institute on full scholarship as a painting major. With day jobs in construction, he also developed a facility with tools of a different trade, and eventually shifted to producing sculptural and installation works that ultimately proved the most fertile ground for his emerging vision. Zebzda’s work, then as now, is centered on three key themes or conceptual strategies. First, there is always a strand of social commentary, which may also include environmental or ecological concerns; second, the element of material of conceptual play serves both to convey serious or difficult ideas in a more accessible, even seductive way,

and also often communicates a deep sense of delight in the face of the absurdities of life. Finally, Zebzda understands the essential nature of communication in creating order, a common ground in the human community—and what can happen if there is slippage in that process, as with the mixed messages often conveyed by the titles of his work.

By the time he had completed his work at the Art Institute in 1979, Zebzda had already begun taking his work—quite literally—to the streets. Early public site projects in San Francisco included *Road Signs* (at the Embarcadero and Marin Headlands), *Stenciled Czechs* (a crosswalk installation) and billboards overlooking Taylor and Ellis Streets. While some of the artist's projects might be considered casual aesthetic interventions, Zebzda was also able to cultivate formal support for a number of them. One such project was the *Z-National Forest*, created in 1982, which received both the approval of the San Francisco Department of Public Works and the support of the San Francisco Arts Commission. Working in a triangular traffic island in the city, Zebzda transformed the site into a miniature park, complete with a forest ranger (a plywood cutout of "Ranger Lou") and a pamphlet that explained (with tongue firmly in cheek) the history, geology and special features of the site. This microcosmic juxtaposition of the urban and the pastoral provided early evidence of the artist's ability to distill a number of complex ideas with an economy of means. In this case, *Z-National Forest* spoke about the ways in which urban growth takes over the rural environment, the wilderness which is so much part of the American mythos; the function of the national park system in both preserving but also encapsulating that wilderness; the romanticism that still pertains to visiting such sites; and the sheer surreality of this unexpected (and ephemeral) juxtaposition. This work, as with much of the artist's other work, also had a strongly interactive dimension.

Though Zebzda continued to live and work in San Francisco, he also produced important early work for *Sculpture Chicago*, an annual festival of outdoor sculpture. In 1984, *Public Speaking* was fabricated and installed in an open-air plaza. It consisted of a half-dome shell, from which protruded a large conical amplifying device, much like the early gramophone—and there was even a dog listening to “his master’s voice.” Zebzda intended that members of the public would use the apparatus to speak their minds—and they did. The artist returned three years later to create *A Very Public Shower*, a fully functional facility attached to a fire hydrant. Though he has commented that “Making public art is an awkward dance of aesthetics and liability, continually stepping on each others’ toes...,” Zebzda has continued to find very creative ways to choreograph that encounter.

While there was certainly an undeniable whimsy to this nod to personal hygiene, it also revealed another focus in Zebzda’s work—a concern for the growing population of homeless persons, for whom the public/private demarcations of space and function often collapsed. That theme was also touched on in *Three Square Meals*, an installation at the Co-op Market in Palo Alto in 1988 and the creation of *Wino Village* at the Show ‘N’ Tell Gallery in San Francisco in 1993. A corollary of this social concern for individuals marginalized by urban life was the increasingly dedicated use of materials marginalized, cast off by a culture of consumption.

Zebzda, for whom “ART” is really an acronym for “aesthetic recycling of trash,” helped create and participated for several years in *The Toy Factory*, housed in the San Francisco Artspace. Here, artists created new toys from old discarded ones, and from other odds and ends. The new creations, transformed from toy to art were sold and proceeds donated back to charities. That capacity to see the potential for renewal in the most unlikely fragments of stuff, was an essential part of Zebzda’s sensibility by the time he moved to the islands.

Some might remember his 1997 entry in the Honolulu Academy of Arts' annual exhibition—a suitcase with a small outrigger attached; others might recall *One Candle Power*, his 2005 installation at Timespace Gallery in Hanapepe—a resurrected street lamp casting light each evening with a solitary candle. Most recently, Zebzda has worked on his *Accidental Sculpture* series, which he describes as “Highway art made by second-hand collaboration with the general public.” As an island state, the increasing pressure on our transportation infrastructure is painfully evident. It also seems to be a fact of island life that somewhere there is always roadwork going on. Zebzda has for the last several years been on the lookout for the artifacts of that process, documenting as needed, collecting where possible (and often with the approval of the Department of Transportation.) Since so much of this has to do with elements of regulation—everything from the center lines on roadways to the markers along their edges—he has, still playful in his perspective, become something of an expert in a different kind of “sign language.” We are familiar with the silhouette figure telling us there is a crossing ahead; Zebzda invests him with an incendiary quality in a carbon smoke drawing. We obey instinctively the command to “STOP,” but what are we to make of the *Stopped Sign* whose flight appears to have been arrested by a gallery wall? We are on the lookout for directives that guide our way, positioned at eye-level along the road; who reads the ones posted many feet above our heads? Zebzda continues to produce an evolving body of work that provides both way-markers and warning signs on the ultimate Road Trip of life.