

Oakland Tribune



Spoken-word performer Copernicus appears at Club Boomerang in San Francisco on Saturday.

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There is no you. There is no newspaper. Nothing, in fact, of what you recognize as physical reality actually exists.

At least that's the way it is if you believe Copernicus, the spoken-word performance artist who appears Saturday in San Francisco.

"People define themselves and their universe by what they perceive with their senses, and that's fundamentally wrong," says Copernicus, the alter ego of 55-year-old New York landlord Joseph Smalkowski.

"Basically, we're made up of atoms in constant motion. We don't stay the same from one moment to the next. To say 'I exist' means you are in a state that doesn't change, and that's just not true.

"In reality, there's nothing but this chaotic atomic change. In reality, you can't perceive anything."

That theory forms the basis of Copernicus' work, collected on five self-released albums and presented in apocalyptic performances at New York underground clubs and European art festivals, where he is a cult favorite.

Copernicus used to be something of a musician, performing with an ever-changing band that reeled off improvisatory jazz-rock soundtracks while Copernicus ranted at the top of his lungs. The philosopher-poet recently dumped the music in favor of simpler — and quieter — spoken-word performances.

"Working with the musicians, I was always in conflict, fighting to make sure my voice was heard over all this sound," he says. "I don't know why it took me so long to learn that things can be even more powerful at a lower volume, as long as you don't have the distractions."

While nonexistence seems like a dismal basis for a life's work, Copernicus says he's far from a nihilist.

"If you believe this, it takes a lot of weight off your back," he says. "You're totally free. You immediately have this cosmic and microcosmic view of yourself. You stop defining yourself, think of yourself as so very important, and from that, many things will follow.

"You'll be liberated from violence. You will stop chaining yourself to the world of the senses. You can be anything if you accept nothingness."

Copernicus admits, though, that he hasn't really worked out the practical aspects of his philosophy. Should everyone stop eating nonexistent food? Stop paying rent for nonexistent homes? Not buy his nonexistent CDs?

"In the work I've done thus far, I've been struggling to establish this idea," he says. "Now I'm dealing with the consequences of accepting it.

"I still eat and have a home and fly around the world, so to say that I'm totally free because of what I believe is obviously not true. But that may happen some day."

Copernicus will perform at Club Boomerang, 1840 Haight St., San Francisco. Tickets for the 8 p.m. show are \$6. Call (415) 387-2996.

— Dave Becker