One of the most refreshing aspects of Joe Gibbons as a filmmaker is the sense of spontaneity and apparent lack of pretension in his work which frees him from the constraints of an academic tradition. He simply makes films and never really get an M.F.A., Super 8. He seems to be working off his savings, but only briefly, for the bills and the bills and the bills are never far away. Gibbons is working awfully hard to convince us of the joys of not working at all. He is indeed so happy, why does he bother to continue the arduous task of making a film?

Living in the World
By JOHN PRUITT

Living in the World makes use of a characteristic Gibbons technique whereby the filmmaker himself, almost always in isolation, talks directly into his Super 8 sound camera. The film is an assembly of these moments of real time. Gibbons claims that he first used the device in Buffalo Run in January of 1979. He was not the first to do this; two spectacular examples of a roughly similar mode are Brakhage's Blue Moses and Moseley's celebrated monologue near the end of Warhol's Chelsea Girls. Gibbons remembers having seen Blue Moses years ago. He also mentions Tony Conrad and Vito Acconci as conscious influences. Incidentally, when I visited him in Boston, Gibbons went to see Spalding Gray perform at The Brattle Theater. He seemed to take an interest in Gray's autobiographical monologues and especially in the spontaneous pieces called "Interviewing the Audience." Gibbons told me that he once managed to get himself interviewed by Gray during such a performance, in part by disguising that he was a fellow artist. Clearly there are precedents for what Gibbons does in Living in the World and in Conflagration (1979-1980), but these two films strike this viewer as original in manner, and, in light of Gibbons' relatively early position in the avant-garde scene, a forceful vision mostly within the sheer domination of his personality, rather than through innovative intellectual and formal concerns. His spiritual antecedents, however, are surely more important. It is perhaps no coincidence that Gibbons' coming of age with Spring occurring in San Francisco, the same city with which those filmmakers are chiefly associated, and where he briefly attended the San Francisco Art Institute.

Yet Living in the World does manifest a certain structural tension as well. This is both due to an intensity of the first moment of getting up and going to work. The shot initially presents itself as a candid document of Gibbons' own thoughts. A carefully modulated pace may be interrupted by the end of a reel. There are moments when Gibbons runs out of things to say, or feels his thoughts simply winding down. He might look awkwardly into the camera, or try to look and talk into it, and Gibbons is working awfully hard to convince us of the joys of not working at all. He is indeed so happy, why does he bother to continue the arduous task of making a film?

Living in the World can be described as a linear, comic narrative, ostensibly about a young man, Gibbons himself, who feels constrained by the necessity of earning a living in order to pay the bills. Gibbons unabashedly exploited a voyeuristic mode. Most who have seen that work consider it one of Gibbons' best films; it signifies a risk-taking on his part which gives his work an arresting quality. Clearly, Gibbons had the force of personality to make it, and the kind of film he wanted to make, and not a pale shadow of what he felt ought to have been. Fred Camper has vividly described examples of this style as "the great taboo of orthodox illusionism," his films are made without the device in question, and in light of Gibbons' relatively early position in the avant-garde scene, a forceful vision mostly within the sheer domination of his personality, rather than through innovative intellectual and formal concerns. His spiritual antecedents, however, are surely more important. It is perhaps no coincidence that Gibbons' coming of age with Spring occurring in San Francisco, the same city with which those filmmakers are chiefly associated, and where he briefly attended the San Francisco Art Institute.

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We catch Gibbons asleep in bed just before the moment of getting up and going to work. The shot initially presents itself as a candid document of Gibbons' own thoughts. A carefully modulated pace may be interrupted by the end of a reel. There are moments when Gibbons runs out of things to say, or feels his thoughts simply winding down. He might look awkwardly into the camera, or try to look and talk into it, and Gibbons is working awfully hard to convince us of the joys of not working at all. He is indeed so happy, why does he bother to continue the arduous task of making a film?
with the mere appropriation of a clever gimmick or a carefully
planned stand-up routine. As I mentioned earlier, it is quite
critical that he can seduce us with an element of true candor;
In this regard Gibbons demonstrates the courage of good
faith, not unlike a far more diaristic filmmaker, An-
rew Noren.

Living in the World does contain, however, moments of performance per se, whose feeling is quite unlike that estab-
lished in the earlier film, Confidential, which is intensely
focused on the cinematic issues of Gibbons' private "rela-
tionship" with the camera. By his own admission, Gibbons was trying for something new and accessible in Living in the World. The film opens with Gibbons, decked out in a tux,
portraying a combination piano-bar singer and jet-setting
Hollywood filmmaker. As he introduces the film, he osten-
tiously assures us that he practices his art at great personal
expense, both monetarily and otherwise. It is here, as well,
that we are first introduced to the film's absurd theme song,
also called "Living in the World," which Gibbons' viewers
form "badly" in different variations during several crucial
interludes in the narrative continuity. In a similar vein, there
is one obvious moment when someone else is behind the came-
ra. This is a Christmas sequence when the filmmaker
wishes everyone a general "Merry Christmas," even the in-
animate figures in a local nativity scene and the souls of the
dead in a graveyard. With regard to its feeling of premedita-
tion, it makes perfect sense, given theIdiavable face of Gibbons suppresses any literal reference to art or filmmaking, an
avant-garde filmmaking lies
of external circumstance. Through his highly rhetorical
maneuvering, an individual posture so closely aligned to the
emotional effectiveness of the film, Gibbons also scores
his major aesthetic triumph and makes his "revenge" doubly
successful. The comic pessimism is an ineluctable part of his
manner as a person, and he has necessarily chosen a cine-
matic form in which this manner can make its presence most
felt. One is forced to think of two other filmmakers who we
know primarily through the power of their own voice: Chris-
topher Cordero, who is thinking of The End and Jack Smith
(I'm thinking of Ken Jacobs and Bob Fleischer's Blonde Color).
The efficacy of their artistic individualism rested in part
around the backdrop of fifties America. For this reason, it is
appropriate that the setting for Living in the World is Boston,
puritan-founded, "straight," college-ridden Boston, doing
what it does best, Gibbons being quite obviously apart. And
it makes perfect sense, given the relatively respectable face
of avant-garde film today, that one of its compelling practi-
cions would reapropriate the ambivalent stance of the
outsider. We pay him a tribute of sorts, if we say we can't
necessarily take him at his word.

Gibbons' latest film, then, displays a brilliant double-edge
in the presumably inevitable chapter dubbed "The Eighties"
in 1991 edition of Film. Gibbons' film is not las; it takes up the
weirdly aesthetic stance of anti-aestheticism. It should be borne in mind that
Gibbons began practicing his art in the wake of a school of
filmmaking which tried to efface the personal and heroic
through a radically reductive method of purported formal
(i.e. aesthetic) purity. What does a young filmmaker do when
faced with the formidable successes, say, of Ernie
Gehr? Living in the World is a film made by someone shrew-
dy enough to realize that he has been backed into a corner
with no rescue left to him but simply to turn the camera on himself
amidst the unpredictable, indelible contingencies of the
world. In effect, Gibbons is aggressively asserting that not
being able to live in the realm of high art, he'll live some-
where else. If he can't compete with a particular mode of
filmmaking, he'll simply deny it outright. Witness the harsh
and admittedly immature mood of the following passage,
part of a polemical statement he published in Canyon
News in 1977, just prior to the completion of Spring.
It is unclear how much irony is behind these words:

Avant-garde film should be exposed for the tired body of pre-
masticated aesthetic dead (issues left over from some mori-
bour, more venerable artistic traditions that it requires.
The social significance of avant-garde filmmaking lies
precisely in its inconsequentiality, its triviality, its marginality.

Gibbons' latest film, then, displays a brilliant double-edge
in the sense of personal isolation and frustration it expresses,
and actually makes for a more penetrating manifesto than its
written counterpart. Gibbons recognizes only too well, that, in one respect, he has been "robbed" of a career: his sus-
pended unwillngness to work carries with it a deep and even bitter perception that he can't attain the not in the way that he had
originally planned. Small wonder that during the entire
course of the film (with a couple of minor exceptions), Gib-
bons suppresses any literal reference to art or filmmaking, an
omission which, considering its context, is significant in itself.
As it is a Dunsehore this vision of creative and social de-
ploration, the film neatly begins and ends in winter. The per-
vading negativity usually takes the guise of black humor, which
penetrates and turns sour even those moments of ap-
parent hope. For example, the film contains a parodic pasen
springs in which Gibbons apostrophizes to a bed of tulips,
telling them to enjoy the blessings of the season. Neverthe-
less, he can't resist emphasizing the emptiness of his remarks by

reminding them again and again that they'll die soon. His
ode to spring becomes, in effect, a death knell. In another
scene, Gibbons is soliloquizing about the glories of New
York City, to which he is en route to get some money to lift
him out of his financial hole. He beautifully appropriates a
filmic "accident" by turning the camera to the side of the
road where there is a car wreck, and turns his good spirits
around by coyly remarking, "I hope that doesn't happen to
me."

Ultimately Gibbons' black humor must be considered a
positive force, since, by generating laughter, it facilitates a
kind of revenge, albeit a conditional one, on the unfairness
of external circumstance. Through his highly rhetorical
maneuvering, an individual posture so closely aligned to the
emotional effectiveness of the film, Gibbons also scores
his major aesthetic triumph and makes his "revenge" doubly
successful. The comic pessimism is an ineluctable part of his
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