

# LIVING IN THE WORLD

By JOHN PRUITT

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 his films from a stultified academicism, that quality which pervades so many avant-garde films today. It is somehow reassuring that Gibbons never finished college (though he tried to more than once), never got an M.F.A., and isn't now teaching filmmaking in one school or another. In fact, at present the man is in virtual exile in Boston. He doesn't make 16mm films on a Steenbeck, but works in that eternally half-established format, Super 8. In a sense Gibbons is a throwback to a time when American independent filmmakers were working outside accepted institutionalized modes. There are more filmmaking students now than in 1965, more screening venues, and a larger grant-giving structure, but there has been no real increase in the number of interesting or even imaginative filmmakers. That fact is nothing special; it wouldn't necessarily make better sense were it otherwise. But there are some younger filmmakers worth paying attention to, and happily Joe Gibbons is one of these.

This is not to say that Gibbons is a *naif*, completely unaware of the great tradition of American avant-garde film with its attendant burden on a beginning filmmaker. For one thing, Gibbons was briefly a student of Tony Conrad's at Antioch. His early concerns in the mid-seventies were predictably along formalist lines, presumably in the spirit of Gehr, Snow, and Frampton. But in the film *Spying* (1977-1978), 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, eventually, the kind of film he wanted to make, and not a pale shadow of what he felt ought to have been made. Fred Camper has wittily described examples of distilled Brakhage, distilled Breer, etc., films made by derivative artists who at some point or another seem to have mistaken a film teacher's woeful description of a masterpiece for the real thing. It does nothing to diminish the necessary mission of the academy (an easy target) to say that its effective influence on artists is minimal. Filmmakers worth watching are, after all, way ahead of the professors. Even the most intellectual art is primarily experiential in nature—or to put it another way, a cherished work of so-called formal abstraction must contain the element of *lived* reality, an entity heralded in the very title of Gibbons' latest film.

*Living in the World* can be described as a linear, comic narrative, ostensibly about a young man, Gibbons himself, who for quite understandable reasons, would rather not work. Having to work for a living is the imposition of an unjust world. So he quits his job at Blue Cross/Blue Shield and starts living off his savings, but only briefly, for the bills begin to mount up. Besides, certain luxuries like eating well are hard to forgo. Gibbons decides finally to do the inevitable, that which he would rather not do at all, that is, break the



From *Living in the World*.

law. Somehow, and we never know the exact circumstances, he gets the money to pay his bills, buy food, and continue his "research" (Gibbons' own mock-serious euphemism for filmmaking). We are warned, moreover, not to inquire about how he makes his living in the world. But despite financial security, our hero feels restless, like a drifter banished to Boston where everyone else is occupied with a job. He takes a nostalgic trip back to San Francisco, to glorious California where one can do nothing and not feel guilty about it. This too proves empty, and Gibbons soon returns to Boston, where he finds a new pleasure in acquiring materialistic goods, as he mimics the values of the rising Yuppie class. All the while he is making money through means unknown to us and continuing his "research." The film ends with purposeful inconclusiveness, for there seems to be no solution to the general weariness and *ennui* of worldly existence. Things just go on.

*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 Fun* 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 Ondine'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 one such performance, in part by disguising the fact that he was a fellow artist. Clearly there are precedents for what Gibbons does in *Living in the World* and *Confidential* (1979-1980), but these two films strike this viewer as original in manner, and, in light of Gibbons' natural sense of humor, hilarious. Gibbons creates a forceful vision mostly through the sheer domination of his personality, rather than through innovative intellectual and formal concerns. His spiritual ancestors are Broughton, Peterson, MacLaine, Nelson, et al. It is perhaps no coincidence that Gibbons' coming of age with *Spying* occurred 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 best exemplified in one of the first shots of the film. 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

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everyday world in his modest apartment in Boston. Gibbons then destroys the sense of apparent unself-consciousness by picking up a microphone, already placed in the bed, and complaining about the fact that he doesn't want to go to work this morning. The gag is at first a cinematic one, the breaking of the illusion of unstaged reality. Gibbons tells us that he doesn't want to get up out of bed, yet doesn't bother to disguise the fact that he has already gotten up, set up his camera and microphone, and for the sake of narrative continuity, has taken the trouble of getting back *into* bed. Here, as in the rest of the film, Gibbons is shrewdly aware of the fact that the humor depends in part on his never mentioning that ever-present and intrusive phenomenon, the actual making of this particular film. Whether in a group or totally alone, Gibbons always talks to his Super 8 camera as if it were the most natural thing imaginable. Its presence never breaks the spell of his improvised monologues, and therein lies the exquisite tension of the film. Though obviously artificial, the scenes are not usually staged. Gibbons simply takes his camera out into the world, to his desk at work, a restaurant, a family dinner, his psychiatrist's office, etc., sets it up, starts talking to it, and sees what happens. One doesn't get the feeling that Gibbons scripts his lines; he lets moments invent themselves and then edits out those shots that don't work. Thus, while Gibbons' style does not try to hide the unnaturalness of every shot (looking directly into the camera is the great taboo of orthodox illusionism), his films are made up of actualities, highly cinematic in nature. As I see it, this is the major aspect of his work which separates it from performance art *per se*. The camera's indestructible ability to record impassively what lies before it is the true performance here. To be effective, I suspect that Gibbons' work needs the vivid and direct presence of the filmic image as opposed to the relatively remote video screen.

There are more elaborate and equally witty examples of the same kind of cinematic humor. One of my favorites comes in that section of the film when Gibbons is basking in affluent leisure as he sips a drink poolside. The humor is contained on many levels. We appreciate the clichés so insouciantly parodied, and enjoy the irony that Gibbons seems oblivious to the precarious and painfully temporary aspect of his "success," to say little of the fact that there is more than a hint that this particular vacation was paid for through illegally gained funds. Yet the best joke comes in the shot

where we see Gibbons' head in close-up as he swims on his back, telling us that "this is the life!" In that shot, the irony of the circumstances reaches an hilarious peak, for Gibbons is taking time to show us how genuinely relaxed and contented he feels, yet he never mentions the obvious fact that he is struggling terribly to make the shot in the first place, holding his camera above the water, swimming on his back while trying to look and talk into it. Gibbons is working awfully hard to convince us of the joys of not working at all. If he is indeed so happy, why does he bother to continue the arduous task of making a film?



From *Living in the World*.

Were Gibbons merely producing a slick, fictionalized account using the same basic format, a scene like the one mentioned above would not have the same effect. There is a roughness to the continuity and to the camera-takes themselves which help define the necessary sense of autobiographical truth. Some scenes meander or end only with after-

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, hesitate a moment and then shut the camera off. He was wise to let such awkwardnesses remain. *Living in the World* may not impress us with its photography (sometimes the camera is on automatic!) or its editing strategies (usually quite elementary), but it is here that one has to credit Gibbons with genuine filmic insight. Throughout the work the indifference of the world and of the camera itself deflates Gibbons' attempts to find apotheoses for his life. In another notable instance, Gibbons is seen talking to his dog, lyrically comparing its life and his own. He strives to extend the familiar metaphor as well as the feeling of intimacy and connection with his "friend," only to have the dog casually walk off screen before Gibbons has finished his monologue. The exalted moment is thus awkwardly interrupted, becoming comically and ironically insufficient.

At times, the filmmaker's willingness to exploit the authentic circumstances of his own living situation borders on the outrageous, and these sections are almost always successful in their impact. As in *Spying*, Gibbons shows no compunction at adopting a voyeuristic approach. During the course of the film, we actually witness Gibbons' phone conversations when he quits his job, or holds off an impatient bank employee. Gibbons takes his camera to work and discusses his dissatisfaction with the life of an employee, while his co-workers are right there, walking by, looking briefly and curiously at the proceedings. We see Gibbons talking to the camera as he is having dinner with his relatives, who appear to be wholly oblivious to what he's doing or saying, even when he castigates them for neither understanding nor caring about what happens to him. Gibbons' own psychiatrist is deliciously ill-at-ease in front of the camera; true to type, he barely says anything. Gibbons will even begin a monologue in bed with his girlfriend asleep beside him at 5 in the morning. The secret is that Gibbons approaches each event as being quite normal in its self-consciousness; he doesn't strain for effect, for shock. Most of the people in his film seem to have gotten used to Gibbons' idiosyncrasies. The film rises above the somewhat similar instances, for example, in *David Holzman's Diary*, Jim McBride's fictionalized parody of the obsessions of *cinema verite*. Gibbons' humor has little to do

with the mere appropriation of a clever gimmick or a carefully planned stand-up routine. As I suggested 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 daring diaristic filmmaker, Andrew Noren.

*Living in the World* does contain, however, moments of performance *per se*, whose feeling is quite unlike that established in the earlier film, *Confidential*, which is intensely focussed on the cinematic issues of Gibbons' private "relationship" 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 ostentatiously 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 will perform "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 camera. This is during a Christmas sequence when the filmmaker wishes everyone a general "Merry Christmas," even the inanimate figures in a local nativity scene and the souls of the dead in a graveyard. With regard to its feeling of premeditation, the sequence is a curious exception to the rest of the film. Yet it works, as do the number of wholly silent and symbolic shots of Gibbons jogging *on the railing* of a highway overhang or, at the end of the film, in a park while snow is falling. Here, though it is not as obvious, Gibbons has also had someone else behind the camera (he didn't want it).

Through these rare examples of play-acting, Gibbons unmasks the self-aggrandizing motives behind the film's most

maker is a very funny man. And this is not to overlook the fact that the film's storyline, with a few conventionally handled flashbacks, is quite straightforwardly presented. Indeed, there are times when the filmmaker seems so casual, one wonders where his artistry lies; Gibbons' best subject remains his own personality. What I sense in Gibbons' work is an attractive resolution on his part to make films at any price, and not to care too much whether they'll be mentioned



Photo: Joe Gibbons

From *Living in the World*.

in the presumably inevitable chapter dubbed "The Eighties" in the 1991 edition of *Visionary Film*.

Gibbons' film is not lax; it takes up the well-worn aesthetic of anti-aestheticism. It should be borne in mind that Gibbons began practicing his art in the wake of a school of

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 coolly 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 release, albeit a condescending 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 manner *as a person*, and he has necessarily chosen a cinematic 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: Christopher MacLaine (I'm thinking of *The End*) and Jack Smith (I'm thinking of Ken Jacobs and Bob Fleischner's *Blonde Cobra*). The efficacy of their artistic individualism rested in part on 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 practitioners would reappropriate 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.

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candid moments. He then disarms us by ferociously poking fun at his own covert ambitions, even in the image of the heroic jogger precariously balanced above a line of traffic. For while this shot relays that sense of inevitable struggle and danger in living on the margin of respectable society, the symbol of jogging seems an ironic trivialization of the intended meaning. Gibbons' success here is his own sense of detachment from his occasional plunges into morbid, irrational solipsism; his particular brand of egotism must inevitably include role playing. The fact that *Living in the World* raises the issue directly, and in a new fashion, indicates that it makes a meaningful break with the method of *Confidential*.

In light of Gibbons' self-mockery, the little mystery of the film becomes acutely significant, that is, the little mystery as to how Gibbons acquires his money, after having quit his job. On one level, the coy allusion to illegal means could be merely a metaphor, as if to say that all means of making money are tainted to some degree—or perhaps closer to the point, that artists are sometimes forced to operate outside accepted social guidelines. More interestingly, the mystery puts the viewer into an interpretative bind. By holding back information, Gibbons seems to be drawing the limits on his autobiographical frankness. Furthermore, we never really believe that he would publicly confess to criminal activity, and thus this unexplained detail raises a great doubt as to whether Gibbons has ever been honest with us. After all, his entire autobiographical document could be one big performance, and how fitting with this in mind, that the issue itself, one of no "visible means of support," hangs on a question of "honesty." But what is most tantalizing (and need I say humorous?) is that there is no proof either way—such is the ambiguity behind all first-person testimonials. For instance, it is entirely possible that Gibbons is telling us the truth when he claims to be breaking the law, but, by "confessing" in a manner which makes it seem as if he is lying, he manages to get away with a public admission of guilt. In forcing complex readings, Gibbons' monologues display an impressive command of verbal strategies.

Whichever route one takes in analyzing this work, one invariably finds that the film's most singular impression remains Gibbons himself, a quirky iconoclast, an "authentic" spirit, if you will. It is difficult to convey just how engaging the film is all through its two-hour running time; its

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 shrewd enough to realize that he has been backed into a corner with no resort to the him but simply to turn the camera on himself amidst the unpredictable, inelegant 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 somewhere 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 Cinemanews* in 1977, just prior to the completion of *Spying*. 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 (t)issues left over from some moribund, more venerable art-making traditions that it recapitulates. 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 supposed *unwillingness to work*, carries with it a deep and even bitter perception that he *can't*, at least 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), Gibbons suppresses any literal reference to art or filmmaking, an omission which, considering its context, is significant in itself.

As if to underscore this vision of creative and social depletion, the film neatly begins and ends in winter. The pervading negativism usually takes the guise of black humor, which penetrates and turns sour even those moments of apparent hope. For example, the film contains a parodic paean to spring in which Gibbons apostrophizes to a bed of tulips, telling them to enjoy the blessings of the season. Nevertheless, he can't resist emphasizing the aptness of his remarks by

## FILMOGRAPHY FOR JOE GIBBONS

- Unnatural Acts** (1975), color, silent, 15 minutes.
- Points of Interest** (1976), color, silent, 7 minutes.
- Punching Flowers** (1976), color, silent, 2 minutes.
- Analogue** (1976), color, silent, 12 minutes.
- Time and Motion Studies** (1976), color, silent, 20 minutes.
- Optics** (1976), color, silent, 20 minutes.
- Spying** (1977-78), color, silent, 45 minutes.
- Weltschmerz** (1978), color, sound, 12 minutes.
- Buffalo Fun** (1979), color, sound, 40 minutes.
- Confidential Part I** (1979), color, sound, 15 minutes.
- Penguin** (1979), color, sound, 12 minutes.
- Confidential Part II** (1980), color, sound, 25 minutes.
- Alex** (1980), color, sound, 40 minutes.
- Small Movies and Sketches** (1974-77), color, silent, 35 minutes.
- Presences** (1976-85), color, silent, 3 hours.
- Man of the World** (1984), color, sound, 5 minutes.
- Living in the World** (1985), color, sound, 110 minutes.

Note: All films are Super 8mm.