

The Snuffing of Sniffy

An interview with Rick Gibson

On January 6, 1990, an angry mob of animal lovers and local media chased artist Rick Gibson down Burrard street just after he announced that he was NOT going to execute a rat in front of the Vancouver Public Library. Everyone involved in this scene was participating in a performance art piece called *Sniffy the Rat*; a piece that TV broadcast round the world.

Sniffy the rat was the culmination of Gibson's artistic career. Born in Montreal 1951, but raised in Ontario, Gibson moved to B.C. in 1969 to study psychology at the University of Victoria. After graduating in 1974, he enrolled at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr) to study graphics and holography, quitting after three months because the facilities were, he felt, inadequate. In 1975 and 1976, he both studied under and assisted holographer Al Rizzutus. This lead, in 1977, to his receiving a Canada Council Grant that allowed him to set up his own holography studio.

According to Gibson, holography exposed him to techniques of freeze-drying flesh, which he began to experiment with as a form of sculpture. This resulted in a 1982 Pitt Gallery exhibition of his freeze-dried sculptures entitled *Dead Animals*. Example exhibits were: *Some career options for chickens* (three freeze-dried baby chicks in an Ernie's take-home container); *A Biology Class at the Back Alley School of Abortion* (a pregnant cat undergoing a back-alley abortion); and *I own a uterus with a paint job* (exactly that - "a crowd pleaser" according to Province art critic Art Perry). The exhibition was controversial; hence, received much publicity. Gibson charged admission and - a novelty for modern artists - made a profit.

In 1983, Gibson moved to London, England, where he re-opened *Dead animals* at the Cuts Gallery ("the door prize was a human geriatric skull"), but he was not able to generate effective publicity, so few saw the show. Disillusioned with gallery exhibiting, Gibson, over the next few years, began experimenting with performance art, some highlights being:

- ***Pain Dispenser*** (1984) a coin operated electric shock machine ("insert 5p and you get a shock") that Gibson took into London nightclubs; it was such a hit that Gibson was able to live off it for awhile.
- ***Obtaining Art Supplies*** (1986) Gibson traversed Brighton walking a dog that was wearing a sign saying: "wanted legally preserved human fetuses." The police arrested and charged him with "behavior likely to cause a breach of the peace."
- ***Insect Vest*** (1987): the artist went on a pub-crawl wearing a see-through vest filled with live locusts.

In 1987, Gibson became the focus of controversy when the ***Young Unknowns*** gallery of London exhibited his piece ***Human Ear-rings***: two eight-centimeter long, 12 to 16 week, human fetuses made into ear-rings and hung from a mannequin's ears. Public anger led Scotland Yard to seize the exhibit

and charge Gibson with "outraging public decency." Under the spotlight of international media attention, Gibson explained that he saw: "nothing wrong with using human tissue as an art supply" and that the purpose of his piece was to "provoke discussion about a very ill-defined area of morality." He was tried in 1989, found guilty, and fined the equivalent of \$1050 Canadian dollars. As a corollary, Gibson was also condemned by Feminists who felt that using a female mannequin made the piece sexist. To emphasize that his concern was "biology not sex," Gibson responded with the performance piece *Carnivore* (he ate a testicle) in April of 1989.

In June of 89, tired of moving around, and missing the beauty and climate of the West Coast ("I love hiking and camping"), Gibson returned to Vancouver. Immediately back to work, he re-produced the testicle piece (renamed *A Cannibal in Vancouver*) at the Pitt Gallery, but was foiled when police seized the testicle and charged him with "exhibiting a disgusting object in public" - he wasn't prosecuted.

In late December of 1989, Gibson sent out press releases announcing that he would execute a rat in front of the Vancouver Public Library on January 6th, 1990. When interviewed, Gibson justified the execution with the phrase: "It's art."

Media build-up fueled public outrage, so much so, that an angry crowd of 300 gathered in front of the library on the day of the performance. When Gibson arrived to announce that it had been canceled because his execution device (a mechanism that dropped a 25 kilogram cement block) had been stolen by animal-rights activists that morning, and that Sniffy had, hence, been returned to its pet-store home, the angry mob responded with cries of "Kill Rick" and pursued the artist into the Vancouver Hotel, where he remained until police escorted him away. The whole strange episode was recorded by local television and soon appeared in Ripley-like news-items in news-shows all around the world.



Setting the tone, the next-day's Province head-line was: **Would-be killer Escapes By A Whisker**, and during the following week local editors debated: some saying that Gibson had asked for it, others expressed shock at the hypocrisy of harming an artist for the sake of a rat. Sniffy was purchased by an animal-right's organization, whose spokesman said that they would find the rat "a proper home in the valley," as well as a "rat companion."

Oddly enough, throughout the affair, Gibson's claim that Sniffy's execution was an art-work received almost no attention. The only time he was asked about it, the reporter quoted Gibson's cryptic response: "I want to see what I can do using this new technique and this new medium." - and left it at that. The media's art critics took the - standard - line that Gibson was "a shock trooper of the avant-garde tradition" (*Globe and Mail*) who "gave us much to talk about, think about, and question. And that, surely, is a hallmark of art." (*The Province*). In essence, the critics uncritically assumed that Sniffy the Rat was art, whereas the news reporters almost always put the word "artist" in quotes whenever it was used to label Gibson. All of this intrigued the Vancouver Review, so we arranged to interview Gibson - one year later - to find out what kind of an "artist" he really is.

VR: Why did you create the Sniffy piece?

GIBSON: I am interested in the discrepancy between popular morality and the law. My testicle piece was a case of that. There is no law against cannibalism - provided you don't injure anyone - yet we have this big social taboo about it. I was able to find a way to legally get a hold of human material and do an act of cannibalism - becoming Vancouver's first cannibal to go public. The Sniffy piece was the same. I was looking at a moral problem in animal rights. I'd read a lot of their literature and I sympathized with a lot of what they espoused. But in the writing of many animal rights philosophers, there is a problem about killing: you're supposed to treat the animal humanely, yet you've also got the right to just go out and kill it. This was the moral problem: if you kill something in such a way that it doesn't even know what happened to it, is there anything, not so much immoral, but unethical about it. The animal is not in pain, is under no stress, and it has no idea of what is going to happen to it. And Sniffy was a look at that problem. I mean I had looked in the law books and I could see no law against killing a rat.

VR: According to the SPCA, rats are one of the animals humans can legally kill.

GIBSON: I even wrote the SPCA telling them what I was planning. But the SPCA were the worst hypocrites of all. Here we have people who daily put down dogs and cats, and yet they have the audacity to attack me... I just found that ridiculous.

VR: Do you know why they attacked you?

GIBSON: Yeah! So they could jump on the media band-wagon. All the animal right's group saw an old-fashion clear-cut situation that could be reduced to black and white with me painted black, them white, and the fund-raising money could pour in. There was a fund-raising brochure that went out to people shortly after the Sniffy thing. It was a two page thing about me, with the message: "send your money to this address and we'll stop these kinds of things in the future."

VR: With Sniffy, how did you handle the media?

GIBSON: I sent out press releases; I send them out for all the things I do. I believe that that's part of the business of being an artist. I see so many artists who put on exhibitions in art galleries, with no publicity, and at the end of 3 weeks, 17 people have seen it - and then it goes into their basement where it lies till it rots. With Sniffy, handling the media was very

easy, I just told the truth and kept the story simple.

VR: Could you describe the press release?

GIBSON: It was two pages describing exactly what I was going to do and how the machine was going to work - along with a photograph of it, sent out a week and a half beforehand.

VR: When the press got the press-release was that when the fuss started?

GIBSON: Yes, but the only press that picked up on it was the Province - they got the story going, right away.

VR: Essentially, just saying that you were going to publicly kill Sniffy was a story in itself. After the Province wrote it up, did you start getting more media attention?

GIBSON: Yes, and it was because of the Province. I was accused of media manipulation, but that's bullshit. The Province got the whole thing going. They were the ones who decided to make Sniffy into a story.

VR: Were you concerned about how the media would portray you?

GIBSON: No, not at all. The headache with Sniffy was the pressure groups. I've never dealt with pressure groups like that before.

VR: Pressure groups, meaning animal rights groups like the SPCA and LifeForce.

GIBSON: They were going to slap a legal injunction against me, and that was the trying experience - NOT BACKING DOWN. I wasn't concerned with what the media was up to. I had experience with the media, dealing with the fetus ear-rings, so I knew what phases the whole thing could go through. I was watching what these pressure groups were going to do.

Was my home going to get broken into? Was I going to be beaten up in an alley?

VR: Did you receive violent threats?

GIBSON: Yeah, some were reported through the media. This was my concern: how wild is it going to get? I was nervous, but I was not going to back down.

VR: So, you returned Sniffy to the pet store that morning, and then went to the library to tell the crowd that the performance was canceled.

GIBSON: Yes, and the reason I canceled was because LifeForce more or less ambushed me: they took my equipment as I was loading it in a truck at my home.

VR: Did they physically attack you?

GIBSON: No, because I didn't put up any resistance. I was outnumbered about five to one, so I just went back into the house and phoned the police. I called the piece off because from day one the only way I was going to kill that rat in public was if I was 100% confident that I could kill it without causing it any pain. With the equipment gone, I wasn't 100% confident.

VR: The SPCA spokesman I talked to had trouble with your motive - he couldn't understand your calling it ART. Similarly, most of the articles that I read about you always put the word ARTIST in quotes...

GIBSON: Yeah, but that's the great B.C. tradition of dumping on the artist. It's a significant cultural factor in this province. Emily Carr put up with it for years.

VR: I think it's more than that. A lot of people DO have trouble conceiving of you as an artist. Now, I don't - as far as I'm concerned, if you say

you're an artist, you're an artist; if you say you're a cop, that's different; I want to see some ID.

GIBSON: I don't care what the label is - you can put my name in quotes if you want to. What I'm doing is exploring some ideas about life. Sometimes I wonder if I'm an artist or a philosopher, because I'm sure as hell not interested in decoration or entertainment - that doesn't interest me in the least. I think people generally associate the word ARTIST with doodlers. I'm not one of them. One of the things that came out of Sniffy was Peter Hamilton's [of Lifeforce] notion that we should not use or exploit animals for entertainment, and I just find that incomprehensible. Medical people will say: "We're using animals in experiments to help humans"

VR: For many of us, that is a legitimate motive, but to kill an animal for art - people have a problem with that.

GIBSON: I consider the medical profession's motive bullshit. In fact, when dealing with animals any human motive is totally irrelevant, as far as the animal is concerned. And that's where I tried to go with Sniffy - let's try to figure out how this rat sees things. I mean, that rat had no idea of what was going to happen. When it did happen, he wouldn't know what hit it. I was offering the rat the best option out because its other option was to be eaten alive by a snake or die of old age.

VR: It struck me that if you had said that you were just going to kill a rat, you wouldn't have got as much attention, as you got by saying that you were going to kill SNIFFY.

GIBSON: Yeah, I know.

VR: A rat's just a rat, but when you give it a name it becomes a pet. And that is what

people saw on TV. - someone was going to kill Spot and they thought ...

GIBSON: Again. Our motive when dealing with an animal is totally irrelevant. A lot of Spots are put down by the SPCA. It's all utterly irrelevant. You have to look at it from the animal's point of view. If that animal is in a research lab helping humans by undergoing a very painful experiment, there is still no justification for that, it's just outright torture, that's all there is to it, as far as the animal is concerned.

VR: The justification is human betterment.

GIBSON: Which is, I find, very weak and I just throw it in the garbage. How does that animal perceive it. The only way you can do that is by trying to understand that animal's perception of things. What we had in the early history of the animal rights movement, we had a lot of people who had a look at a lot of hard core scientific evidence; in fact, they were going through the journals and using the scientist's observations to build the philosophy. Now all we've got is a bunch of dogmatic politicians whose science is weak - and these people are polarizing everything into black and white to make the fund-raising easier, when in reality the black and white extremes of the issues are just 5% of what's going on; the majority, 95% of it is messy and grey, and I think that if you read any of the good animal rights writers, they'll acknowledge that it's messy, messy, messy.

VR: What was your goal then with the Sniffy piece?

GIBSON: Raise debate. Get people talking to each other.

VR: You succeeded.

GIBSON: Yeah, I heard people in restaurants having arguments about it, at dinner parties

arguing about the fate of a rat. When it reaches that point; when the media picks up on it and decides to convey, it's because the idea has been distilled to a point that can be described in one sentence at a popular level. And that is when the media picks up on it and it goes around the world.

VR: Was your goal with the Sniffy piece to use the media to change human behavior?

GIBSON: No, I'm not a politician or a leader of a pressure group.

VR: You're satisfied if you get debate going?

GIBSON: Yeah, I'm satisfied if the image gets out and gets debate going. Who knows what happens after that. You see, pressure groups try to manipulate change. I take a more shotgun approach: you just blast an image out there and see what happens, you have no idea what it's going to turn into. For example, I did a lot of research on euthanasia and animal killing, and I doubt that the people who wrote these articles and compiled the data, thought that one day an artist would be using it as an integral part of a performance. Once an image or some information goes out there, you have no idea how it's going to be used, or by who. Peter Hamilton of Liferforce said that I wasn't an artist because I didn't have any control over what I was doing. Well, he's talking like a pressure group politician: they want to have complete control over what they do.

VR: You did have some control: you defined and organized the event; you named the rat, built the execution machine, sent out press releases, etc. I thought that the whole thing was well staged. Still, you can't control how the audience will interpret it.

GIBSON: And to me that has always been the most exciting part. When I did Dead Animals, I had seen those pieces so many times that I was

tired of them, but by putting them in the gallery and charging admission, I could sit at the desk collecting the money, and when people walked out, I would ask them if they had any questions, and we'd have a little discussion, and that was fascinating. I was bored with the art in the gallery. But talking to people and listening to their interpretations often gave me ideas for new pieces - new lines of research.

VR: How did you get involved in performance art?

GIBSON: The art market drove me into it. I'm really just a nice artist, who would love to do nothing more than exhibit in a nice, clean climate-controlled art gallery. The problem was that the art market cooled off and became progressively more conservative, galleries no longer wanted to show controversial works. I had controversial stuff

VR: Like, Dead Animals

GIBSON: Yes, and I was constantly having problems getting it exhibited, and I wanted to start using live animals in art. How does that stuff get exhibited? Art galleries are absolutely conservative. They say: "Well we can't sell that kind of thing - it's too weird for us." So, it looks like I'm going to have to start renting my own gallery, self-producing, and there are just so many headaches associated with that. In London, I was hanging around performance artists; they were the only intelligent artists alive; everyone else was just a bunch of doodlers and entertainers. They keep their costs so low, that they can be spontaneous and do stuff like go onto the street and do public actions, raise challenging issues. And I said "Yeah, this is the kind of thing I want to do." It's exciting. The rest of the art scene is boring. And that's how I wound up in performance art. Because the art market gave me no option: It

was either give up art and do something else or get costs down and go out on the street.

VR: How much did the Sniffy piece cost you?

GIBSON: About \$300. Now, that was the direct cost. If we look at all the money and time I spent on art to get me to the philosophical point where I could do Sniffy, then we're talking thousands.

VR: How do you make a living?

GIBSON: Like a lot of artists, I'm, sometimes, a parasite on society, living on welfare and unemployment. At the moment, I'm doing art administration at a local Gallery.

VR: You say that you do your pieces to learn things; What did you learn from the Sniffy piece?

GIBSON: The nature of pressure politics: how everything gets reduced to black and white. There's no room for greyness because that muddies the fund-raising message.

VR: You've had a lot of run-ins with the law; what do you think of the Canadian legal system?

GIBSON: It's a hell of a lot better than the English system. Canada has a written constitution, England doesn't, and embedded in that constitution is a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Canada also has a written criminal code that, up to a point, clearly spells out what you can and can't do.

VR: So, for example, with Sniffy, you could read the criminal code and find out how far you could go before you'd gone too far ...

GIBSON: That's right. In England you can't. Lawyers can charge their clients thousands of

dollars if they want to, because the client has no way of looking it up himself.

VR: So you feel you have more artistic freedom living in Canada?

GIBSON: Definitely more artistic freedom.

VR: Do you feel that you have sufficient artistic freedom in Canada?

GIBSON: Yes, because I believe artists shouldn't have more rights than non-artists. We should all have the same rights and freedoms.

VR: When you did Human Ear-rings in England, did you know that you were going to be arrested?

GIBSON: No. No one did.

VR: They actually have a law against using fetuses in art?

GIBSON: It's called outraging public decency, an old common law. It wouldn't be allowed in Canada, or at least I wouldn't have been caught by surprise, even the lawyers were caught by surprise by this piece of common law they dredged up.

VR: Could you do Human Ear-rings in Canada?

GIBSON: I might get away with it. What would probably happen is that I'd be charged with the same thing they were going to charge me with over the testicle thing: Section 163.2b of the criminal code, the public exhibition of a disgusting object. Still, you know that it's on the law books, so you know that you could get arrested for it. So you sit down, weigh the pros and cons, maybe talk to a lawyer or two. And then you go to court, and there you can pull out the Charter and start to argue. The lawyers were thinking of doing this with the testicle

piece; challenging that section of the criminal code as being unconstitutional. A layman can understand that, you can go and look it up; in England you have no idea of what's going on.

VR: So when you did Sniffy, did you get together with some lawyers?

GIBSON: No, I did it all myself. Just before Sniffy, the Humane Society's lawyers sent me a letter saying that they were going to take out a civil injunction to stop me. So, I went to the law library at UBC and looked it up and I figured, no, they can't do it to me with that. And sure enough they didn't. I called their bluff. They hoped to intimidate me by threatening court action; they hoped that I would go to a lawyer and start running up a bill, and I just said, I think they're bluffing. And sure enough they never took an injunction against me because I knew it would cost them \$10,000 to go to court and their case would be weak. Maybe that's something I've learned from Sniffy: there's a lot of bluff that goes on out there.

VR: I suppose knowledge of the law is as important to a performance artist as knowledge of perspective is to a painter.

GIBSON: No kidding. I keep a copy of the criminal code at home, which I use all the time to look stuff up, and I'm becoming familiar with statute law, provincial law, municipal law - finding out what I can and can't do in the streets of Vancouver.

VR: Do all performance artists do this?

GIBSON: No, this is something I do. A lot of performance artists get in trouble.

VR: Challenging the legal system is your forte - are you be willing to go to jail?

GIBSON: In London, after being found guilty for outraging public decency with Human Ear-

rings, I wanted to eat the testicle, but my lawyer said to me: "Don't do it. You'll go to jail." I said, "I'm going to do it"; you see, the law was unclear, so I did it, more or less giving the finger to the English legal system at that point. And nothing came of it.

VR: Some of your pieces, such as Human Earrings and Sniffy, strike me as more successful than others because their concepts are very precise, for example, using fetuses as decorations. Is that your artistic goal: to distill a problem into a precise image or event?

GIBSON: Yeah, that's if I am going to communicate with the popular media - television and the tabloid press. You see, I think one of the most important aspects in a artist's job description, is that you've got to be an exhibitionist. You've got to want to get the image out there. With Dead Animals, I realized that galleries are probably the worst place for exhibiting, no one goes to them anymore; the vast majority are dull boring places. So, if you want to reach a larger public, and get that idea or image out, you've got to start using different communication techniques, not just plunking a sculpture in an art gallery. You've got to get it to the media, so that more people will see that image.

VR: The problem with art galleries is that their audience is the same audience over and over again - they don't bring in new people.

GIBSON: Art-gallery people have trouble communicating. They speak a jargon that no-one understands, not even the art critics who write the stuff. And someone like me who takes an idea and tries to popularize it - I'm accused by the art establishment of being populist, and my response to them is "piss off."

VR: When a painter has created something, there's an object you can point at and say:

"There's a hunk of art"; When a performance artist is done, is there a piece of art?

GIBSON: No. But why does that painter produce that painting and why does the painting look like it looks: most painters make a painting because there is a well-established marketing structure that will sell that type of object. So the artist makes that object to raise money to pay the rent, and quite often the image on that object is a marketable image. I mean this is the whole New-York thing - the major art movement of the 80's is careerism, producing images that sell. What performance artists do - and this is why I think that performance art is one of the most exciting forms of art - is by keeping overheads very low, you can make images that are not popular, that are challenging, that raise questions, that cause controversy, nothing is for sale. Nothing is expected to sell - but you're not much out of pocket at the end of the day.

VR: Leonardo da Vinci is the traditional ideal of an artist: what do performance artists have in common with Leonardo da Vinci?

GIBSON: OK, well, I love Leonardo's drawings, but his paintings - even the Mona Lisa - I find really boring. What I have in common with him is his sketch books, his scientific investigations, his careful study of nature, and his philosophical ponderings. That's what I like about Leonardo, and appropriately enough there is a magazine called Leonardo - I think it's out of Europe - that's devoted to art and technology, of which Leonardo was a forerunner.

VR: If you asked a non-artist: "What art did Leonardo create?" They would point to the paintings, not the sketchbooks.

GIBSON: We're talking art marketing here. We're talking about the people in the art marketing scene who sold us the Mona Lisa

and sold us Van Gogh; they've sold us all the big names. What we see is the western approach to art marketing. It started in Paris: the first real big art marketing push to sell a problematic product was the Impressionists, because the introduction of photography, had suddenly rendered realistic painting obsolete. Since then it has evolved into the New York art marketing scene, which is a very powerful way ...

VR: Of selling objects.

GIBSON: Exactly.

VR: When you did Sniffy, you didn't create an object - so there was nothing to sell; so I can see why those who sell art it won't be that interested in what you're doing.

GIBSON: Because I don't make objects, I get accused of doing publicity stunts; they say "Well that was just a publicity stunt" ...

VR: What is the difference between a performance art piece and a publicity stunt - other than that you label what you do ART?

GIBSON: Oh, in a lot of ways it is like a publicity stunt, but it sure leaves people a lot to think about. Yeah, it's confusing. Okay, there's a guy - I forget his name now - but in the 50s he was hired by companies to do publicity stunts: he sat on an ostrich egg for 21 days and hatched it; he did another piece where some guy buried a needle in a haystack and he dug through the entire haystack to find that needle, it took him something like 20 days....

VR: So that's how long it takes to find a needle in a haystack.

GIBSON: Yeah, so he was doing fascinating stuff like this. And we've been talking about grey areas this evening - when does a publicity

stunt become a performance art event - you're talking grey areas. It's confusing.

VR: Well, when you call a publicity stunt PERFORMANCE ART - it definitely becomes art at that point....

GIBSON: OK, and politicians do their media events - like Margaret Thatcher putting on a hard hat and driving a tractor, the media just laps it up - that's a publicity stunt. I look at their techniques but I'm not influenced by them conceptually. I've been conceptually intrigued by the pressure groups and the various types of protest they do - they are performing more highly evolved publicity stunts. I was living in England during the miner's strike, and was watching how the media handled the images that the miners were coming up with.

VR: With a publicity stunt, usually you can tell who is getting what: Margaret Thatcher puts on the hard hat to get votes; companies do stunts to sell products; Green peace does stunts to get people to change their behavior - what do performance artists get from their publicity stunts?

GIBSON: I don't get any material rewards like companies get, or want to change behavior like Green peace does; all I am interested in is raising issues and causing public debate.

VR: So lets define a performance art piece as: "a publicity stunt where no one benefits." And this is probably why the people I talked to about you were confused by your mentioning ART. What they are really wondering is: "What is he getting out of this?" and they can't figure it out, other than thinking that you are a some sort of show-off.

GIBSON: Getting back to art marketing and publicity, you hear about these shows called AN ART EXHIBITION FOR AIDS or AN ART

EXHIBITION FOR THE ENVIRONMENT - so we're associating art with purpose. It is difficult for people to realize that there can be art without purpose.

VR: What have you done since Sniffy?

GIBSON: In Performance Art? Well, I went to a park in East Van, collected some dog crap, and through a chemical process turned it into a powder and mixed it with resin. Then I poured it into moulds and made a crucifix, a Maple Leaf, and a Chinese Double Happiness character; then I mounted them on a sign which said ART MADE FROM FECES - PLEASE TOUCH and walked through town with the thing. As usual, I sent out press releases to everybody - but, this time, I got no media response, whatsoever. I don't know how to make any sense out of it, other than, there's a cultural difference between Canadians and Americans. What prompted me to make this piece was the debate happening in the States over art, over things like the Piss Jesus piece by Sorrento.

VR: What's that about?

GIBSON: It's where he's put a crucifix in an aquarium that's filled with a mixture of urine and blood; it's caused protest in the States - Jesse Helms is on to it now - and the image has raised a lot of media coverage, it even made the New York Times. In Canada, something similar, like a feces crucifix, doesn't even get noticed.

VR: Are we harder to offend?

GIBSON: That seems to be the case. The same is true in England. It's not as religious as the States; it's much more laid back and lackadaisical, and that's probably the British influence in Canadian society. We don't take our nationalism too seriously, either - I make a

Maple Leaf out of dog shit and no one gets excited.

VR: Perhaps, "Art made from feces" just wasn't as good a piece as, say, "Sniffy the rat"; maybe it isn't as clearly expressed. Have you learned anything from it?

GIBSON: LEARNED may not be the best word. Raised questions, yeah. Sniffy didn't raise as many questions as this piece did.

VR: What kind of questions, for example?

GIBSON: Are Canadians less nationalistic than Americans? Are they less religious? Have I been black-listed by the media? - and the one you raised: was the piece poorly conceived? Philosophically, the piece is 100% solid - I've recycled something, but maybe, people don't care because they're not into recycling absolutely everything these days.

VR: Part of your act is to make people feel shock and disgust. For that to work, you have to deal with something that's going to shock people, right, and maybe Canadians aren't nationalistic enough to be shocked by a feces Maple Leaf.

GIBSON: Oddly enough, the British media made a big thing out of my testicle piece, but the Canadian media wouldn't touch it. So I think a lot of it has to do with cultural traits. Had I done Sniffy in Mexico, no one would have given a damn. With the testicle piece, the media made a big fuss out of it in England, but the legal system didn't; whereas the exact opposite happened in Canada.

VR: A problem I have with performance art is that someone could do some heinous act and then justify it by saying that it was for the sake of art. Are you willing to set limits on what a performance artist can or can't do?

GIBSON: No. If someone goes and shoots somebody and calls it ART, maybe, it is art, but they're still going to have to go to jail. It's as simple as that.

VR: Still, it strikes me that there should be some point where even you are willing to say: "No. This cannot be done for any reason, even for art's sake."

GIBSON: OK, I'm more liberal because I'm not too concerned about the term ARTIST at the end of the day. I'm just concerned with what's legal, what's illegal, and what's grey. That's all I'm interested in when I'm exploring controversial issues.

VR: This bothers me. It's like BENEFIT OF CLERGY - where clerics had a kind of ethical diplomatic immunity that absolved their crimes. And it strikes me that artists want this - they don't want their behavior to be judged by the same standards as the rest of us.

GIBSON: I'm not saying that. Personally, I see it as a non-issue. A guy goes and shoots somebody, let's say, and then says: "It's art"; so then you say OK - go to jail for 20 years.

VR: But it is going to get more outrageous. One of the goals of this type of art is to gain media attention and the best way to do it is to be outrageous - so you've got a dynamic that says the more outrageous you are the more media you get. And eventually someone will, using that logic, say, kill someone for art, and will accept the consequences of going to jail. And this is where I think that artists should set a moral limit; should say, for example: "no, it's not right to take a human life for the sake of art."

GIBSON: Yeah, OK. But I'm not saying, I mean, I'm not going to run out and shoot somebody. It's clearly written that I'll go to jail for 20 years.

I hear that jail's a horrible place and I've no desire to go there.

VR: But it's more than just going to jail; it's wrong to go out and shoot someone. There's the law and then there's the moral law that most people abide by. This is what I find dangerous in performance art: because of this dynamic of outrageousness, it is actually beneficial to the artist to

GIBSON: HOW is it beneficial to the artist? This has always intrigued me. I've reaped no financial rewards from any of my stuff. Actually, the artists who do reap the financial rewards of outrageousness are the ones who CALM DOWN - what they do is use outrageousness to get a name for themselves, and then go off into the gallery scene, and start painting nice pictures...

VR: But that's my point. Some artist kills someone for the sake of art, then he spends ten years in jail and gets paroled. When he gets out, he can get the rewards. You might not be getting rewards right now, but if you become famous enough, you will in the long run. Anyway, I'm raising a question that I

haven't really thought through myself, but I was wondering if you have - is there a limit?

GIBSON: The law's the limit.

VR: OK - anything goes in performance art as long as it is legal.

GIBSON: Anything goes in LIFE, so long as it's legal.

VR: But, What I'm getting at is that I think artists as a community have to say that, yes, we recognize that outrageousness has its rewards and that, yes, it could lead to heinous acts, and, for this reason, we as a group condemn that kind of careerism. You're probably the best known performance artist in Vancouver, I would guess, among the mass public. Are you willing to set a limit to what does and does not constitute art?

GIBSON: I think we're at a point now where we have to call in the art critics. I mean, we gotta leave some work for those people to do.

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