

Anna Denejkina

Viral artist Jesse Willesee wants to legalize marijuana—and become the next Andy Warhol
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Sitting on a vintage couch in his manager's apartment in inner-city Sydney, Australia, Jesse Willesee is awkward and patently shy, a stark contrast to his carefully cultivated online persona. As he chops, rolls, and smokes, I'm hoping to avoid a contact high as the rosy-eyed pro-marijuana activist, viral artist, and all-around renegade eases into discussing how he uses online culture and social media to not only challenge the definition of art but to confront your inner prude—and his.

Willesee, a 28-year-old American-Australian, is best recognized for his arrest at Sydney's Town Hall, in a [marijuana legalization protest-turned performance-art piece](#). Following a photo essay of him [smoking weed outside of five Australian police stations](#), and the [Parliament of New South Wales](#), he arrived at the Sydney's city center April 20: 420, the counterculture holiday celebrating cannabis. Plagued by heavy wind and incessant rain, the day was grey, wet, cold: exactly what Jesse didn't want. But as a small crowd built up on the steps of Town Hall, and 4:19pm clicked over to 4:20pm, Jesse swung onto the pillars, lit a joint, took a hit, and was promptly arrested.

"I thought it was ballsy. I somewhat admired him in putting his own reputation at stake to promote the greater cause," says Nicholas Stewart, partner at Dowson Turco Lawyers, who represented Willesee on a pro bono basis.

The police called Jesse by name; they'd expected him thanks to massive online promotion of the protest via [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), and a wave of mainstream attention garnered by his photo essays. As the storm, the crowd of onlookers, and his arrest came together, his arrest became a piece of performance art distributed through the media. This was what he wanted people to see: the government denying him a natural substance improving his life.

The arrest was predictable, but not certain. "They just came out of nowhere," Willesee recalls. "When I did get arrested, I knew that it was peak for that idea. What could be the craziest thing that could happen was that the police would arrest me, and that's what happened."

His idea may have peaked, but the consequences were still to follow. He faced a serious charge of administering a prohibited substance, which includes a maximum penalty of two years in prison. "Everyone kept saying 'Don't worry, even if you get arrested it won't be anything serious,' but that's not true," he says. The very real possibility of jail time frayed his nerves.

Luckily for him, he walked away with a 15-month good behavior bond. Not jail time, but not a complete exoneration either. He still had the threat of punishment hanging over his head. "I didn't get a recorded conviction," he says, "but I'm on a good behaviour bond, and that comes up—if I get in trouble for something else, I'm in more trouble. It's not good."

But he doesn't say he's going to stop.

As a kid, Jesse Willesee suffered from ADD and ADHD. At 23, he first smoked a joint. He then read [JT LeRoy's Sarah](#), cover to cover. "This was like this moment where I had the concentration to read a book," he says. "And I've never had that. Ritalin didn't give me that, nothing worked like that. And from pretty much that day on, my life started improving." He could concentrate, and he started seeing himself as an artist, working in ink (and as a Bukowski-inspired poet) before he shifted to his social media rabble-rousing. And he began his fight for marijuana legalization.

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He had his first brush with the law in 2012, for an art show collaboration with filmmaker Daniel Havas called [22 Girls Smoking Weed](#). The exhibit collected pictures posted to [Tumblr](#): young men and women in DIY-styled shots smoking pipes, bongos, and joints.

Willesee felt he was breaking new ground, having found a truly new subject for his art. “I feel like you almost instantly make art that is more relevant when you deal with new subject material that hasn’t been dealt with as much,” he says. The police disagreed, and shut it down.

Part of Willesee’s project is to take art out of the gallery and distribute it, through social and traditional media. He wants to go to the audience, rather than make the audience come to him. And he wants to see people look at art differently, as not bound by medium or museum walls, as potentially limitless in its reach.

To that end, he’s produced works like his [Camera Club](#) installation, which in its second installation spanned seven rooms of an old Sydney pub in a highly sexualized, candid affair. In response to the [uproar around Richard Prince's appropriation of Instagram photos](#) that he then reprinted and sold for almost \$100,000 a piece, Willesee offered *Richard Prince Goes Back to Art School*. He placed three Instagram-famous characters on four chairs in a room: They were the art, to be photographed and shared under the [#cameracub](#) hashtag, distributed on the winds of social media.

“I thought it was awesome, really out there, and really qualified for that shock element and bordered on pornography—but in a way that framed it as art,” says Nicholas Stewart, Willesee’s lawyer.

He’s covered similar ground with his [Cam Girl/Cam Boy art and fashion installation](#), altering five hotel rooms to look like the scenes of a sordid motel, then having his models perform live in front of Web cameras—a studied examination of what it means to display your body online. And his [Dick Pics](#) series questioned the prevalent practice of sending images of male genitalia not only to lovers, but to strangers via Instagram and Tumblr. As part of the work, Willesee reached out to his male fans to debate the issue of nudity and consent.

If viewing nudity is not always voluntary, neither is sharing nudity, as Willesee showed in [“The Government is Watching You Fuck,”](#) a photographer series produced in collaboration with Charlotte McCallum. It called attention to the pervasiveness of CCTV cameras, suggesting that everyday citizens might be involuntarily producing pornography. “This is people who would never give their consent to have sex filmed,” Willesee says, “and yet they’re giving hand jobs in alleyways, and anyone could be watching that.”

Willesee has dubbed this work viral tabloid art: It’s designed to live online—“to be picked up by the media and shared around so as many people as possible can see it.” It’s about the proliferation and distribution of images. It’s omnivorous, taking in all manner of media, just as the Internet generation voraciously devours everything put before it. And it draws attention to the ubiquitous but seldom acknowledged parts of a mediated culture, from dick pics to cam girls and cam boys. It shocks but offers little commentary—that’s up to the viewer, who just as likely may become a participant.

That was the crux of his 420 protest this April: a modern art-protest, its reach amplified by the Web to reach many more than could ever turn up to a demonstration. He needed just one photograph to go viral on social media, then spread to traditional media, to restart the conversation of marijuana legalization within Australia.

As a kid, Willesee attended 12 schools and lived in 20 houses, moving from place to place, from country to country, city to city: Sydney, New York, Perth, L.A., and Sydney again and again. “Every time

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I went to a new school or a new house, or a new area, I would always be like, 'I want to be a completely different person.' I would always change who I was going to be to these people. And that's definitely followed me, the constantly changing myself," he says in his distinctive Americana-meets-Aussie twang.

The constant change helped meld him into a provocateur, and he's never shied from negative attention. "People either love me and think I'm the greatest, or just fucking hate me," he says. The worst thing they can do, he feels, is not talk about him and his art. "The thing is, I remember there was no worse feeling than when no one was writing anything, or talking about it, or focusing on it." With the room now full of smoke, and A\$AP Rocky fading in the background, his unease fades into the enveloping blaze, and Willesee starts talking about what he's really interested in, beneath the collection of personae.

"I actually think that a lot of my stuff is deeper and has more relevance than people give it credit for," he says. There's the shock factor, yes, and he wants to explore our everyday expressions of online sexuality—why sex and nudity are simultaneously banal and threatening. He mentions [Miley Cyrus](#), offering her transition from squeaky-clean youth star to pop-provocateur as a work of art in itself, and offensive to young and old alike. "They're scared of female sexuality, that's the base of the whole thing," he says.

He's drawn to the celebrities that we love to hate and to dark melodrama. From Bukowski to Eminem, Pete Doherty to Courtney Love, Bob Dylan to Tom Waits—"anyone who seems like an outsider to the whole thing," he says in a chuckle. He began as an outsider, working a host of part-time jobs, including bartending, clerking at a news agency, and a stint as a theater usher; he spent two years sleeping on a friend's foldout couch while living off government welfare. Today he's finally able to support himself with his art: a bona fide struggling artist.

But he doesn't want to remain an outsider—or, perhaps like many artists, he wants to be an outsider on his own terms. He wants to be the next Andy Warhol—to reach his fame, his glory, infamy—to be the next artist of our time, and be remembered as one of the greatest.

"That was always the idea," he says. "That was always the idea from the very start."