



# Il gesto delle mani

## Hand Gestures

Francesco Clerici

**Producer** Velasco Vitali, Matteo Visconti de Modrone.  
**Production companies** Velasco Vitali (Bellano, Italy); Fonderia Artistica Battaglia (Milan, Italy). **Director** Francesco Clerici.  
**Screenplay** Francesco Clerici. **Director of photography** Francesco Clerici. **Production design** Velasco Vitali. **Sound** Michele Brambilla. **Music** Claudio Gotti. **Sound Design** Mattia Pontremoli. **Editor** Francesco Clerici.

DCP, colour & black/white. 77 min. Italian.

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**World sales** Jon Barrenechea

A bronze foundry in Milan. Hands that shape, knead, model, mix, repair, sand and polish. Work carried out on matter and fire, out of which the bronze figure of a dog by artist Velasco Vitali will ultimately emerge. The Fonderia Artistica Battaglia was founded in 1913 and is one of the oldest and most important artistic foundries in Italy. It produces bronze sculptures using lost-wax casting, a founding technique that dates back to the 4th century BC and is still done in much the same way today.

The film draws on a purely observational mode. It takes note of the workshop and its equipment, the peeling posters on the walls showing how long people have been working here. The sounds of work blend into the noise of the radio and the conversations in the background. The camera's concentrated, patient gaze corresponds to the handwork being carried out. The individual stages in the creation process are interspersed with historical images of the foundry, revealing a continuity that spans decades. It is the hands and their gestures that link us to the world and create a connecting line from the past to the present.

*Annette Lingg*

## The artisan's rituals: the Fonderia Artistica Battaglia in Milan

*Il gesto delle mani* wants to be both scientific and (in particular) narrative. It describes life and work within the Fonderia Artistica Battaglia, a historic place in Milan that is currently under the management of the FAI, the Italian Artistic Foundation, which looks after historic and artistic sites. This film describes the noise and the passing of time during a working day at the foundry. The artisans who work there are depicted only through their work, their faces and their movements.

### Like an ancient holy ritual

The process of 'giving birth and re-birth' to a dog sculpture, which refers to the process of the red wax dog turning into the bronze one, is fascinating to me because it looks like an ancient holy ritual in an old church; an abstract gospel dedicated to life and to birth. Velasco Vitali's sculptures of dogs are famous in Italy, and to me they seemed a perfect vessel by which the viewer can travel through the process of their creation. This journey is possible thanks to these artisans' culture, knowledge and love of their craft. As the Italian sculptor Giacomo Manzù once said, 'Sculpture is not a concept. Sculpture is the hand gesture; a gesture of love. In the gesture of the body lies the relationship with the world, the way you see it, the way you feel it, the way you own it.'

### Story of the production

After five years of working with Velasco Vitali and constantly sharing ideas, I decided to shoot some footage at the foundry. He loved the initial edits, so we decided to create a feature documentary based on capturing the various artistic and scientific processes. Velasco supported me in various roles on this film – as producer, advisor, sculptor and 'actor'. In the beginning of the process, everything starts from modelling the dog sculpture in wax and ends with the finished sculpture joining a 'pack' of other dog sculptures. This film is very much a 'family business' production, with a very low budget and a very high level of cooperation. We refused to give the project to bigger film companies that were interested. The production started in February 2013 and was finished in November 2014. I didn't want to provide narration or any chapter interruption (as production companies would have asked me to). I wanted the story of the 'birth' of the bronze dog to pass in front of the spectator as a unique flow, where this process becomes an abstract presence lost in the gestures of the job and in this medieval location. We didn't want to disrupt the artisans' work, so initially I shot footage alone. After spending several days at the Fonderia Battaglia, I wondered if I should stop shooting and apply for a job, as I was completely hypnotised by the rhythm of their gestures whilst working.

### Director's choices

Stefano Crespi, an Italian art critic, has said of the workers at the Fonderia Battaglia: 'Unforgettable workers, wrapped in austere silence inside their own rite.'

The film attempts to present images and sound in this austere silence and those rites in an environment out of time. For this reason I did not use an extra-diegetical soundtrack and favoured a fixed camera (with a few movements that were functional to the rhythm). I tried to use the focus sometimes in an apparently 'wrong' way and to make few 'dirty' shots, alternating them with very precise and 'clean' shots. I also decided to cut out some moments from the 'didactically predictable' chronological order.

There's a moment just right before the foundry phase where I edited the process in a cryptic manner: you'll understand later what happened before. Somehow I tried to create (strange perhaps for a seventy-seven-minute documentary with almost no dialogue and no music) a thriller-like suspense.

### Archive footage

The archive material was found only after the filming of the present-day footage. But once I found it, I was sure it would be perfectly placed in the gestures and rituals of foundry work today. The lost-wax casting method has not changed since the pre-historic period; the process is the same.

The 16 mm footage by TV camera operator Sergio Arnold from 1967 is the only old footage I found about artistic foundry work in Italy. I searched at Archivio Luce, at the Italian Home Movies National Archive in Bologna, and at RAI (Italian Radio and Television) in Milan and Rome: nothing else exists in Italy about this. We were about to give up on the research when I received a phone call from the Battaglia Foundry telling me they had found this 16 mm film in a basement. Not only had this old footage been shot at the same foundry where we had shot, it also showed the same gestures and process.

Arnold's material had no audio, so I tried to insert the soundscape of today's foundry onto the older film, matching the moments of the processes. I showed it initially to friends and no one noticed that the sound was not the original one. It was exactly what I wanted: a clear temporal continuity that creates a sort of 'outside of time' moment. The past and the present are two entities that are completely mixed in the work in the foundry and this is observed in the documentary.

### The coming generation

At the beginning of the shoot, the artisans were suspicious about my presence, even after they if they got to know me. While coming and going from the Fonderia Battaglia, I started to learn about this fascinating process and the history behind how these skills, culture and craft are handed down through the generations. I then shyly started documenting the artisans and they slowly started to accept me; in exchange, they wanted me to give them photographs of them working.

When viewing this documentation, the artisans themselves discovered that their gestures in the images and footage revealed how skilled they looked. After that, we became friends. Lino, one of the artisans, showed me some old pictures of his, and a month later he gave me a DVD he had: this is the old footage from 1974 I edited at the end of *Il gesto delle mani*. The quality was not good enough to be used in the documentary's flow, but I wanted to use it at the end of the film during the final credits, as a summary of something we already saw in 2014 and in 1967.

Lino de Ponti and Mario Conti are probably two of the best artisans in their field. Both of them will retire in the next couple of years and part of their knowledge will soon disappear. Battaglia is now recruiting young workers and making sure that they have enough time to learn the secrets of each process before Lino and Mario retire.

### Underground history of contemporary art

While shooting them they told me many stories about the bronze process and about artists they had met – for instance, about an African sculptor who cooking rabbits in the heat of the foundry during the fusion process; or about Lucio Fontana, Giuseppe Penone

or Arnaldo Pomodoro asking for their advice. Some of these stories were funny and some very interesting and all were historically relevant. They make up an underground history of contemporary art made by artisans. I collected these stories and they will create the foundations for what may become a second documentary, or a book. The artisans' work in this foundry is very important for Italian culture and for all of art history. The artisans at the Fonderia Artistica Battaglia produce art, but the unique gestures they make while producing it deserve to be observed and pondered.

*Francesco Clerici*



**Francesco Clerici** was born in Milan, Italy in 1983. He studied Art History at the University of Milan. Since 2003, he has been a lecturer, presented a film club, and led filmmaking workshops for children. He is currently working as an artistic assistant, writer, filmmaker, and project manager for the Italian artist Velasco Vitali. In addition, Francesco Clerici has published ar-

ticles and essays about cinema and art. In 2010, he made his first documentary, *Storie nel cemento/Cement Stories* (28 min.). *Il gesto delle mani* is his first feature-length film.