

Hand Gestures

Italy 2015

Director: Francesco Clerici

Reviewed by Alex Dudok de Wit

Hand Gestures opens, after brief expository titles, with a shot of a lifesize pink waxwork of a dog lying on a table. It closes with an identical canine sculpture, this one in bronze, being laid to rest among a pack of similarly fashioned metal pooches. This fly-on-the-wall documentary tells the story of how master artisan Velasco Vitali and his colleagues turn the former sculpture into the latter within the confines of their rugged foundry in Milan. We watch them as they go through the motions of a casting process that – as those titles tell us – hasn't much changed since the Bronze Age. The camera stays fixed for the most part, focusing on the artists' hands at work; there is no voiceover or non-diegetic music; the subjects are not interviewed.

This is observational filmmaking at its most fundamental. It is a far cry from those documentaries that try to flesh out the interest of an artisanal craft by profiling the people who practise it, such as *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011). No effort is made to place the profession in a social context, unlike, say, Georges Franju's 1949 abattoir-set *Blood of the Beasts* (which this film sometimes resembles visually). By stripping away almost all context and sticking to a simple linear narrative of creation, *Hand Gestures* lends itself rather to mystical interpretations. Crucially, the only information we are given refers to the long tradition of Vitali's method of casting, passed on unchanged from one generation to the next. A more fitting reference point is Michelangelo Frammartino's docu-fiction *Le quattro volte* (2010), in which the workaday routines of goatherds and charcoal-burners in southern Italy form a picture of cosmic continuity behind the human life cycle.

By this point, some readers will hear alarm bells ringing. When this magazine's Nick James bemoaned the ascendancy of a ponderous, minimalist style in arthouse cinema five years ago, his comments triggered a backlash against the so-called Slow Cinema that continues today.



In their element: Velasco Vitali

The question at stake is to what extent a film should be allowed to try the audience's patience – by downplaying plot and keeping to a measured pace – for the sake of effect, whether aesthetic or political or otherwise. If your answer is "not at all", then *Hand Gestures* is not for you – you're unlikely to last beyond the early shots of plaster drying.

It should be noted that, given its approach, *Hand Gestures* is not particularly slow. It clocks in at a lean 76 minutes, the editing is snappy and every scene demonstrates a crucial part of the process; there are no redundant shots, no Lav Diaz-style ten-minute takes. Director Francesco Clerici, an art theorist with only one short documentary to his name, has a knack for homing in on revealing details: the safety signs that suggest nasty occupational hazards, the hand tucked behind the back that speaks of a strict professional protocol. He is a very efficient filmmaker.

Hand Gestures, then, is an already condensed account of an impossibly time-consuming procedure. Whether it could have been even shorter is a moot point; what's certain is that every minute shaved off the running time would have lessened the almost physical impact of the last scene, in which the finished sculpture is placed in its proper context. The bronze dog is silent and inert, yet to us the animal is alive, because we know how each chink in its hide and each fold in its limbs came to be. This is the strange thrill of the creative process that *Hand Gestures* seeks to convey, knowing full well that any attempt at explanation would only detract from it. 🍷

Credits and Synopsis

Production

Velasco Vitali

Filmed by

Francesco Clerici

Edited by

Francesco Clerici

Original

Soundtrack

Claudio Gotti

Sound Editing

Michele Brambilla

Fortuna Fontò

Francesco Mangini

Mattia Pontremoli

Emanuele Pullini

Production

Companies

Velasco Vitali,

Fonderia Artistica

Battaglia present

in collaboration

with Comune di

Milano, FAI Fondo

Ambiente Italiano,

Fondazione Cologni

dei Mestieri d'Arte

Production: Velasco

Vitali, Fonderia

Artistica Battaglia

In partnership

with Comune di

Milano, FAI Fondo

Ambiente Italiano,

Fondazione Cologni

dei Mestieri d'Arte

Executive

Producers

Jon Barronechea

Era Dozo

Matteo Visconti

di Modrone

In Colour

[1.78:1]

Subtitles

Distributor

Hand Gestures Films

Italian theatrical title

Il gesto delle mani

Hand Gestures

This documentary tracks the creation of one of Italian artist Velasco Vitali's renowned bronze dog sculptures in his Milan foundry, the Fonderia Artistica Battaglia. The sculpture is made by the millennia-old technique of lost-wax casting, whereby the bronze is cast using a plaster mould modelled in turn on a preliminary wax sculpture. We witness the mould being made and used to fashion a ceramic shell replicating the wax original; this is then filled with liquid metal, which is allowed to cool before the shell is hammered off, revealing the rough casting. The casting is smoothed with a hot metal iron until the sculpture is ready for display. The film shows the procedure objectively, without voiceover narration or interviews. Although Vitali and his colleagues are present in most of the shots, their conversation is limited to a few terse instructions.