

A Ferocious Dog lives in Rome

By David Austen

I had spoken to a man who asked "did I know that Enzo Cucchi is allowed to smoke in any public bar he wishes to in Rome", flouting the anti smoking laws now commonplace in Europe. I replied that I didn't know this, thought it daft, certainly untrue and hoped, of course, that it was the opposite.

I began to think that it would be a lovely idea to film Enzo Cucchi smoking in a bar in Rome. It would be a continuation of themes I had explored in two previous moving image pieces I had made, *Smoking Moon* and *Crackers*.

I decided that it had to be in black and white, 16mm and shot with a wind-up Bolex camera. It would be called *Man Smoking*.

I remembered as an art student in the eighties when the New Spirit was upon us and we had the New York painters, German painters and the Italian painters all irresistibly young, brash, glamorous, male and rich.

I thought then that Cucchi was my dark favorite. He seemed a bit apart. His paintings and drawings of smoke and skulls and dirty Roman walls, appeared closer to Pasolini, Beuys, Fontana and Kounellis, He didn't have the deftness of Clemente's graphic abilities or Schnabel's lyrical gesture but wasn't so fashionisty either.

But speaking of fashion I still have hold of a special double issue of a magazine published in 1989 by Comme de Garçon. One part is an artist collaboration with Cucchi, the other contains a fashion spread with Cucchi posing in Comme de Garçon clobber with other interesting types such as John Malkovich and John Lurie.

I arranged to meet Cucchi.

He normally has his aperitivo in the Bar della Pace in Rome early every evening, a bar with history and beautiful thin waitresses, one of whom was chatting to Enzo when we met. He is a tall, extremely skinny man with a large head. He has a strong handshake and a confident but diffident persona. He sits cross-legged with his hand holding the cigarette elegantly stretched out. And he chain smokes.

The next evening we walked the streets looking for a location for the film. I wanted something grubby and Enzo thought of junkie bars and dirty corners of the city that might be suitable

And Enzo talked, and talked. He doesn't speak any English and my friend C who was translating couldn't keep up. He leaps from one subject to another, will point to an interesting bar, building, person or fountain positing its history while arguing two disparate things simultaneously either in a poetic, confidential or humorously outraged tone.

When I asked him about contemporary art in Rome he said that a ferocious dog used to live in Rome but had left.

We settled on a stonemason's yard for the morning shoot, an old garage-like structure with a plastic awning to diffuse the intense light. We filmed in twenty second takes over two hours. Enzo was charm itself. He dutifully lit up his cigarettes as the camera surreptitiously creeps up on him. You could see he was simultaneously acting, smoking and being involved with an interior dialogue. And the strain of not talking combined with the intensity of the shoot was leaking out of him in nervous tics and movements.

And on film he looks beautiful. He reminds me both of a Giacometti sculpture, a big lined flat face on a bony body, and a comic Italian cinema actor.

And there is something about film running through a camera, daylight and a man smoking, breathing and thinking that just seems right.