

declaring an exigency 'indispensable' which consists precisely of *dispensing with it*, dispensing with a careful consideration of all its implications and consequences -- by the acknowledgement accorded it in order to move quickly on to 'something else'. Now I believe that the only way we can hope to reach a real knowledge of art, to go deeper into the specificity of the work of art, to know the mechanisms which produce the 'aesthetic effect', is precisely to spend a long time and pay the greatest attention to the '*basic principles of Marxism*' and not to be in a hurry to 'move on to something else', for if we move on too quickly to 'something else' we shall arrive not at a *knowledge* of art, but at an *ideology* of art: e.g., at the latent humanist ideology which may be induced by what you say about the relations between art and the 'human', and about artistic 'creation', etc.

If we must turn (and this demands slow and arduous work) to the 'basic principles of Marxism' in order to be able to pose correctly, in concepts which are not the *ideological* concepts of aesthetic spontaneity, but *scientific* concepts adequate to their object, and thus necessarily *new* concepts, it is not in order to pass art silently by or to sacrifice it to science: it is quite simply in order to *know* it, and to give it its due.

April 1966

page 228 [blank]

page 229

Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract

As I was standing in the hall at the Venice Biennale in which Cremonini^[1] had exhibited some fine canvases, two Frenchmen came in, glanced

quickly round and left, one saying to the other, 'Uninteresting: expressionism!' Since then, I have had occasion to read the same words from the pen of art criticism. Applied to Cremonini, the term 'expressionism' is a striking indication of a misunderstanding. All in all, it is the misunderstanding of all critical (and therefore of all aesthetic) judgement, which is no more than a commentary, at best a theoretical commentary, on aesthetic *consumption* : the ruling misunderstanding in contemporary art criticism, which, when it does not dress up its 'judgements' in the esotericism of a vocabulary communicating no more than the complicity of accomplices in ignorance, but consents to speak a plain language, reveals to one and all that it is no more than a branch of taste, i.e. of gastronomy.

1. Leonardo Cremonini was born at Bologna in 1925. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna and at the Brera Academy in Milan. Since 1951, the date of his first one-man exhibition at the Centre d'Art Italien, he has divided his time between Paris and long stays at Forio d'Ischia, Douarnenez, Panarea, Palermo, Forli, or in Spain. He has participated in exhibitions at the Tate Gallery, at the Biennales of San Marino and Venice, at the Rome Quadriennale, at the Paris Musée d'Art Moderne, as well as in Pittsburgh, New York, Beverly Hills and the Galerie du Dragon, Paris.

page 230

In order to 'see' Cremonini, and above all to talk about what he makes visible, we have to abandon the categories of the aesthetics of consumption: the gaze we need is different from that of desire for or disgust with 'objects'. Indeed, his whole strength as a figurative painter lies in the fact that he does not 'paint' 'objects' (those dismembered sheep; those tortured carcasses; that stone; those plants; that 1900 armchair), nor 'places' (the sea, seen from the heavy articulated skeleton of an island; seen from a window open to the air; that balcony hanging in the sky; those rooms with polished wardrobes and beds; that dubious washroom; that compartment on a night train), nor 'times' or 'moments' (the morning at dawn; the night, high noon in a courtyard drenched in sunshine where little girls play hop-scotch). Cremonini 'paints' the *relations* which bind the objects, places and times. Cremonini is a *painter of abstraction*. Not an abstract painter, 'painting' an absent, pure possibility in a new form and matter, but a painter of the real *abstract*, 'painting' in a sense we have to define, real relations (as relations they are necessarily *abstract*) between 'men' and their 'things', or rather, to give the term its stronger sense, between 'things' and *their* 'men'.

To 'see' these relations in Cremonini's canvases is simultaneously to enter into other relations: those that obtain between the 'artist' and his 'work', or rather between the work and *its* artist. Here too, modern art criticism too often thinks these relations in the mysteries of the subjectivity of the painter, who inscribes his 'creative project' in the ideal materiality of his 'creation'. The aesthetics of consumption and the aesthetics of creation are merely one and the same: they both depend on the same basic ideological categories: (I) the category of the *subject*,

whether creator or consumer (producer of a 'work', producer of an aesthetic judgement), endowed with the attributes of sub-

page 231

jectivity (freedom, project, act of creation and judgement; aesthetic need, etc.); (2) the category of the *object* (the 'objects' represented, depicted in the work, the work as a produced or consumed object). Thus the subjectivity of creation is no more than the mirror reflection (and this reflection is aesthetic *ideology* itself) of the subjectivity of consumption: the 'work' is no more than the phenomenon of the artist's subjectivity, whether this subjectivity is psychological or transcendental-aesthetic. Cremonini leads us to the idea that the 'mystery' of the 'inwardness' of a painter, of his 'creative project', is no more than his work itself, that the relations between a painter and his 'work' are nothing but the 'relations' he 'paints'. Cremonini makes us see the relations between things and their men. At the same time, he makes us see, not the relations between the painter and his work, which have no *aesthetic* existence, but the relations between a 'work' and *its* painter, which are at the same time the relations between that work *and us*.

The individual *history* of Cremonini's painting is simply a commentary on this necessity: a refutation of the pure subjectivity of production, the mirror-reflection of the subjectivity of consumption.

This history is interesting not because it *began with* one 'object' and went on to another, but because of the *problems* confronted, which this history progressively and tenaciously poses, transforms and resolves.

In fact, Cremonini 'began' (one must 'begin' somewhere) with the *geological* : the armatures and articulations, consolidated by weight and history, of the passive body of an island, dormant in the heavy oblivion of the rocks, at the edge of an empty sea, a matter-less horizon. But he is already quite the opposite of a painter of 'objects', a landscape painter. All that he 'paints' about the rocks is what they ignore: their weight and memory (oblivion), i.e. their

page 232

difference from something other than themselves, from what makes them the *ground* for men.

Cremonini went on to the *vegetable* : the sharp growth of a bulb, the long shriek of the dumb stems, the strident outpouring of a flower displayed in the air like a bird of silence. He never 'painted' anything but the absences in these presences: the rhythm, the spurt, the snap of *time* 'depicted' by instantaneous, i.e. eternal, plants -- and the cry of a voice, 'depicted' by something quite different, by gestures, trajectories and suspensions. Cremonini's next step was to *animals* : motionless sheep

whose bones pierce their skin and snap in the paralysis of movement; flocks resembling the rock piles on which they graze; dogs frozen in a bronze rut; dismembered animals scattered among men collecting bony carcasses, men like the carcasses they bear on their emaciated shoulders. All that he 'painted' about the animals were the articulated bones, tailored in the very material of the rocks: articulations of the very livingness of life, but frozen in death -- and the few men he stiffened into the same material. The animals and their men, equally living corpses, circumscribed by the stone that they are, and by the air in which they think themselves free. What did Cremonini 'paint'? Similarities (rocks, bones, animals, men) where there are *differences* -- and by 'painting' these similarities, he 'painted' differences: his animals and men are *distanced* from the nature fixed for them by our 'idea', i.e. by the ruling ideology, of man.

In conclusion, Cremonini came to the 'men' who had already prowled among the animals.

In his *individual* history as a painter, he had traversed and reproduced the whole cycle of a History (rocks, plants, animals, men), but in doing so he had showed that every god, even a painter-god, was absent, banished from it. He had reproduced this History in its material -- or should

page 233

we say 'materialist'? -- order: the earth, plants, creatures, finally man. It is obvious that a certain ideology of the immediate relationship between man and nature provided the inspiration for Cremonini's work from the outset: what still fascinates him individually in the arm of a chair or in a tool is the fact that they extend the joints of the bony limbs of men and animals, and that these joints are no more than further patterns of nature related to the original patterns which made up the relationships of equilibrium and disequilibrium of the weight levers in his rocks. Hence the meaning that he could find in the *order* in which he had reproduced this History while living *his own* history: it could be the order of a *Genesis* (even a materialist one), i.e. of a *descent* from an origin containing the *true* meaning of things, the true relationship between man and nature, and his 'objects', above all the exemplary relationship between the craftsman and his material, his tools and his product.

It is highly probable that this ideological 'project' is what inspired, i.e. haunted Cremonini, and that the illusion it contained was part of the disposition of the means which ultimately produced his canvases and their peculiar history: the *result* (that is all that exists for us: the canvases that we are discussing) is precisely something *quite different* from this 'ideological' project. And the comparisons (the similarities) between the *forms* of the four orders (geological, vegetable, animal, human) are not *in fact* the canvases' *dominant* organizational principle: these comparisons are themselves subject to another organizational

principle: that of the *differences*. At a certain moment, Cremonini might have *thought* he was painting only 'similarities', i.e. the 'isomorphisms' required to elaborate his ideological 'project' of the descent of forms (rocks, plants, articulated skeletons, tools, gestures . . .): *in fact*, these similarities were very soon subjected to a quite different logic: the logic of

page 234

the *differences* which Cremonini has constantly 'painted', and foremost among them, the *difference from this ideological project of the descent of forms*. All this can be clearly 'seen' in the last stage of Cremonini's painting: the 'men'.

The men: they originally had, and still have, the *form* of their 'things', of 'things'. Bodies and faces of stone, revealing in their objects and gestures their primordial 'origins': precisely those bones transposed into tools, those thin elbows articulated into the arms of chairs, those women erect like the iron balustrades of their balconies, and their diminutive children. The men: beings congealed in their essence, in their past, in their origin, i.e. in their absence, which makes them what they are, never having asked to live, or why they should. The 'things': those tools, those utensils, walls, partitions separating the inside from the outside, the shade from the air, the sombre sheen of worn varnish from the harsh limpidity of the sky. The 'men': fashioned from the material of their objects, circumscribed by it, caught and defined once and for all: faces corroded by the air, gnawed and seemingly amputated (almost *too much* faces), gestures and cries congealed into immutable weight, a parody of human time reduced to eternity, the eternity of matter.

Then, only a few years ago, what spoke, silently, in this History began to appear: the *relations* between the men. It is not accidental that for Cremonini this object took the form of an exploration of *mirrors*, above all of the old mirrors of ordinary homes, the mirrors of shabby 1900 wardrobes: men at grips with their only wealth, the wretched past in which they *look at themselves*. They look at themselves: no, they *are* looked at. It is their mirrors, their wretchedness which fastens them, restoring to them despite themselves, whatever they do, their only inalienable possession: their own image.

Those women at the dressing-table do not see *themselves*

page 235

though they look at themselves in the mirror, even that young woman does not see *herself*, though we see her naked desire *on the back* of the looking-glass she holds in her hand: it is their mirrors that see them, and see the circle of their sight, though their mirrors are blind. The mirrors see the men, even in sleep and love: the implacable reflection,

indifferent to its model, sees for us those beings of flesh, sleep, desire and waking, even in the hanging sky of their vertigo. However, in all these canvases, there are *tall vertical lines* : doors, windows, partitions, walls, in which is 'painted' the pitiless law which governs the men, even in their exhausted flesh: the *weight* of matter, i.e. of their lives.

No one could argue that it is by chance that the great *verticals* of the partitions and walls emerged in Cremonini's work at the same time as he came to paint in their mirrors the inexorable *circle* which dominates the connexions between men, through the connexions between objects and their men. The circles of the mirrors 'depict' a quite different *reference* than that of the similarity of forms in an ideology of *descent*. The circles of the mirrors 'depict' the fact that the objects and their forms, though related among themselves, are only so related because they turn in the same circle, because they are subject to the same law, which now 'visibly' dominates the relations between the objects and their men.

Furthermore, this *circle* really is a circle: it is 'cyclical', it has lost any origin; but along with the origin, it also seems to have lost any 'determination in the last instance'. The men and their objects refer us to the objects and their men, and *vice versa*, endlessly. And yet, the meaning of this circle is fixed, *behind the scenes*, by its *difference* : this difference is nothing but the presence, *alongside* the circle, of the great *verticals* of weight, which 'depict' *something other than*

page 236

the perpetual reference of human-individuals to object individuals and *vice versa* to infinity, *something other than* this circle of *ideological* existence: the determination of this circle by its *difference*, by a different, *non-circular* structure, by a law of quite a different nature, a weight which is irreducible to any Genesis, and haunts all Cremonini's later canvases in its *determinate absence*.

In the latest works, the *physical* presence of the mirrors is no longer required in order to 'paint' the circle. It becomes directly the circle of the inside and the outside, the circle of the gazes and gestures caught in the circle of things: thus the interior of the neighbouring flat seen through a window, while the neighbours look at that other interior from where they are seen; thus the holy butchers confused with the gigantic open carcasses of beef which they are ransacking (circle of man and animal), turning towards the window (circle of the inside and the outside) where prohibition has drawn a little girl who runs away even before she has looked at them (circle of wish and prohibition); thus the game 'without rules' of the children running around the furniture -- without rules, because its rule is merely the law of closure of a closed space, the only body of their 'freedom'. In their 'finite' world which dominates them, Cremonini thus 'paints' (i.e. 'depicts' by the play of the similarities inscribed in the differences) the history of men as a history *marked*, as early as the first childhood games, and even in the anonymity of faces

(of children, women and men), by the *abstraction* of their sites, spaces, objects, i.e. 'in the last instance' by the *real abstraction* which determines and sums up these first abstractions: the relations which constitute their *living conditions*.

I do not mean -- it would be *meaningless* -- that it is possible to 'paint' 'living conditions', to paint social relations, to paint the relations of production or the forms of the class

page 237

struggle in a given society.[2] But it is possible, through their objects, to 'paint' visible connexions that depict by their disposition, the *determinate absence* which governs them. The structure which controls the *concrete* existence of men, i.e. which *informs the lived ideology* of the relations between men and objects and between objects and men, this structure, *as a structure*, can never be depicted by its presence, in person, positively, in relief, but only by traces and effects, negatively, by indices of absence, *in intaglio (en creux)*. This intaglio (*creux*), which 'depicts' a *determinate* absence, is very precisely inscribed in the pertinent *differences* which we have been discussing: in the fact that a painted object does not conform to its essence, is compared with an object other than itself; in the fact that the normal connexions (e.g., the connexions between men and objects) are inverted and dislocated (*décalées*); lastly, in the fact, summing up all the others, that Cremonini can never paint a *circle* without simultaneously painting *behind the scenes*, i.e. alongside and away from the circle, but at the same time as it, and near it, something which rejects its law and 'depicts' the effectivity of a *different* law, absent in person: the great *verticals*.

Lastly, the final effect of this necessity, of the effectivity of the *abstract relations* which are the absent object of Cremonini's painting: what happens to human *faces*. It is these distorted and sometimes apparently monstrous, if not deformed faces, that have evoked the cry of expressionism. Those who have raised this cry still hold to a humanist religious ideology of the function of the human face in art, and at the same time to an idealist ideology of *ugliness* (the

2. In my opinion, this is Planchon's error in his staging of Molière's *George Dandin*, at least as I saw it at Avignon in July 1966: it is not possible to stage social classes *in person* in a text which only deals with certain of their 'structural effects'.

page 238

aesthetic of ugliness is the ideology of expressionism), which confuses *deformation* with *deformity*. The humanist religious ideological function of the human face is to be the seat of the 'soul', of subjectivity, and therefore the visible proof of the existence of the human *subject* with all

the ideological force of the concept of the *subject* (the centre from which the 'world' is organized, because the human subject is the centre of its world, as a perceiving subject, as an active 'creative' subject, as a free subject and hence as responsible for its objects and their meaning).

Given these ideological premisses, it is obvious that the human face can only be painted as an identifiable and therefore recognizable individuality (certain individualizing *features*), recognizable even in the variations of its *uniqueness* (certain feelings which 'express' the religious quality and function of this subject, the *centre* and source of its 'world'). The aesthetic of *deformity* (of ugliness) is not in principle a critique and cancellation of these humanist ideological categories, but merely a variant of them. That is why Cremonini's human faces are not expressionist, for they are characterized not by deformity but by *deformation* : their deformation is merely a determinate absence of form, a 'depiction' of their anonymity, and it is this anonymity that constitutes the actual cancellation of the categories of the humanist ideology. Strictly speaking, the deformation to which Cremonini subjects his faces is a *determinate* deformation, in that it does not replace one identity with another on the same face, does not give the faces one *particular* 'expression' (of the soul, the subject) instead of *another* : it takes *all expression* away from them, and with it, the ideological function which that expression ensures in the complicities of the humanist ideology of art. If Cremonini's faces are *deformed*, it is because they do not have the *form* of *individuality*, i.e. of *subjectivity*, in which

page 239

'men' immediately recognize that man is the *subject*, the centre, the author, the 'creator' of his objects and his world. Cremonini's human faces are such that they cannot be *seen*, i.e. identified as bearers of the ideological function of the expression of *subjects*. That is why they are so 'badly' represented, hardly outlined, as if instead of being the authors of their gestures, they were merely their *trace*. They are haunted by an absence: a purely negative absence, that of the humanist function which is refused them, and which they refuse; and a positive, determinate absence, that of the *structure* of the world which determines them, which makes them the anonymous beings they are, the structural effects of the real relations which govern them. If these faces are 'inexpressive', since they have not been individualized in the ideological form of identifiable subjects, it is because they are not the expression of their 'souls', but the expression, if you like (but this term is inadequate, it would be better to say the *structural effect*) of an absence, visible in them, the absence of the structural relations which govern their world, their gestures and even their experience of freedom.

All of 'man' is certainly present in Cremonini's work, but precisely because *it is not there*, because its double (negative positive) absence is its very existence. That is why his painting is profoundly anti-humanist, and materialist. That is why his painting denies the spectator the complicities of communion in the complacent breaking of the humanist

bread, the complicity which confirms the spectator in his spontaneous ideology by depicting it in 'paint'. Lastly, that is why his painting itself prevents him from recognizing himself as a 'creator' and *rejoicing* in the pictures he paints: for these pictures are the refutation *in actu* of the ideology of creation, even in aesthetics. This dislocation prevents Cremonini from *repeating* himself, i.e. from rejoicing in this

page 240

recognition, and he cannot repeat himself because his painting denies him this recognition. If he constantly *discovers* and therefore changes, it is not, as with others, for reasons of taste or to test his skill, but because of the very logic of what he has been doing *from the outset*, despite his starting point, and the 'ideological project' with which he began. That an individual can abstract himself from his painting to this extent, i.e. can reject in it all the advantages of the complacency of self-recognition, that painting can to this extent abstract from its *painter* (i.e. refuse to be his own ideological mirror, the reflection of an ideology of 'aesthetic creation') are facts profoundly linked to the *significance* of this painting. If Cremonini does 'paint' 'abstract' relations, if he is the painter of abstraction I have tried to define, he can only 'paint' this abstraction on condition that he is present in his painting in the form determined by the relations he paints: in the form of their *absence*, i.e. in particular, in the form of *his own absence*.

It is precisely this radical anti-humanism of Cremonini's work which gives him such a power over the 'men' that we are. We cannot 'recognize' ourselves (ideologically) in his pictures. And it is because we cannot 'recognize' ourselves in them that we can *know* ourselves in them, in the specific form provided by art, here, by painting. If all that Cremonini 'paints' about 'man' is his reality: the 'abstract' relations which constitute him in his being, which make even his individuality and freedom -- it is because he also knows that every painted work is only painted to be seen, and to be seen by living 'concrete' men, capable of determining themselves practically, within objective limits, determined, in their freedom, by the very 'sight' of what they are. Cremonini thus follows the path which was opened up to men by the great revolutionary thinkers, theoreticians and politicians, the great materialist thinkers

page 241

who understood that the freedom of men is not achieved by the complacency of its ideological *recognition*, but by *knowledge* of the laws of their slavery, and that the 'realization' of their concrete individuality is achieved by the analysis and mastery of the abstract relations which govern them. In his own way, at his own level, with his own means, and in the element, not of philosophy or science, but of painting, Cremonini has taken the same road. This painter of the abstract, like the great revolutionary philosophers and scientists, would not paint, and would not paint the 'abstraction' of their world, if he did not paint for *concrete* men,

for the only existing men, for us.

Every work of art is born of a project both aesthetic and ideological. When it exists as a work of art it produces *as a work of art* (by the type of critique and knowledge it inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see) an *ideological* effect. If, as Establet has correctly, but too briefly, noted in a recent article,^[3] 'culture' is the ordinary name for the Marxist concept of the *ideological*, then the work of art, as an *aesthetic object*, is no more part of 'culture' than instruments of production (a locomotive) or scientific knowledges are part of 'culture'. But like every other object, including instruments of production and knowledges, or even the corpus of the sciences, a work of art can become an *element* of the *ideological*, i.e. it can be inserted into the system of relations which constitute the ideological, which reflects in an imaginary relationship the relations that 'men' (i.e. the members of social classes, in our class societies) maintain with the structural relations which constitute their 'conditions of existence'. Perhaps one might even suggest the following proposition, that as the specific function of the work of art is to make *visible* (*donner à voir*), by establishing

3. See Roger Establet, "'Culture" et idéologie', *Démocratie Nouvelle*, no. 6, 1966.

page 242

a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology (of any one of its forms), the work of art *cannot fail to exercise* a directly ideological effect, that it therefore maintains far closer relations with ideology than any other *object*, and that it is impossible to think the work of art, in its specifically aesthetic existence, without taking into account the privileged relation between it and ideology, i.e. *its direct and inevitable ideological effect*. Just as a great revolutionary philosopher, like a great revolutionary politician, takes into account in his own thought the historical *effects* of his adoption of a position, even within the rigorous and objective system of his own thought -- so a great artist cannot fail to take into account in his work itself, in its disposition and internal economy, the ideological *effects* necessarily produced by its existence. Whether this assumption of responsibility is completely lucid or not is a *different* question. At any rate, we know that 'consciousness' is secondary, even when it *thinks*, in the principle of materialism, its derivatory and conditioned position.

August 1966