

ESCALA

Essex Collection of Art from Latin America

Chromointerference/Chromosaturation

This essay was originally published to accompany the temporary installation of two works by *Carlos Cruz-Diez: Chromointerference* (at the Art Exchange, University of Essex) and *Chromosaturation* (at firstsite, Colchester, September - November 2003).

Carlos Cruz-Diez is one of the most prolific and enduring of a number of artists on both sides of the Atlantic who, in the 1950s and 1960s, began to focus on questions of colour, light and movement. Their experiments came to be known as Kinetic art, so-called for its incorporation of real or apparent movement. One of the key aims of kinetic artists was and is to question the relationship between the viewer and art, which traditionally involved little direct interaction. By incorporating movement into their work these artists hoped to increase viewer participation and focus 'on the relation between visual stimuli and our physical experience of the world' (Camevali, 1993: p6).

Kinetic art was firmly established following a group exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Denise René Gallery in Paris in 1955 in which Cruz-Diez participated with fellow Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto and other artists including Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely, Yaacov Agam and Victor Vasarely. In Venezuela Cruz-Diez, Soto and another artist, Alejandro Otero became the main exponents of Kinetic art, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and was the perfect expression of Venezuela's then rapid economic progress and investment in modern architecture.

From the beginning, however, Carlos Cruz-Diez developed a distinct approach to kinetic art, concentrating on the apparent movement of colour in works that, because of the optical effects they produce, have been described, like those of Bridget Riley, as Op art. Cruz-Diez frequently employs vertical bands of colour in complex and scientifically calculated arrangements that appear to move and change according to the relative position of the viewer and of the light source. Thus the kinetic element is generally created by the movement of the viewer, with the exception of works such as *Chromointerference*, at the Art Exchange, which also includes the projection of moving colour.

Cruz-Diez's study of colour, and its possibilities, has taken him on a fifty-year journey beginning in Caracas, Venezuela, where he was born in 1923. After training as a graphic designer he taught at various institutions and worked for an advertising agency. Here his use of photography and photomechanical processes led him to appreciate the instability of colour and the relative lack of experimentation with this fundamental substance by artists. In the nineteenth century Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet wanted to capture the subtle shift in colours caused by changing light. However, for Cruz-Diez the Impressionists' attempts to reveal the changing nature of colour were ultimately flawed because they only managed to record a single moment in time, fixed for eternity on the canvas. Furthermore, these artists continued to use colour to define the shape and form of people, buildings etc. instead of allowing it to exist as an independent entity.

In contrast Cruz-Diez aimed to create what he calls 'autonomous realities', works in which colour was no longer secondary to form and in which the nature of colour could be appreciated by the viewer in real time and in real space. He says 'I want to bring the spectator to live a changing situation which allows him to discover colour becoming itself, as well as the possibility of finding his own emotional resonance'. To this end Cruz-Diez extended and expanded the work of Josef Albers who, in his book *Interaction of Colour* (1963), explored the 'violent action that takes place at the edge of colour surfaces' (Camevali, 1993: p7). This violent action often takes the form of new, normally imperceptible colours that are created by the viewer's eye as a result of chromatic interference at the interface of two vertical bands of colour. Cruz-Diez calls these new colours 'additive colours', which he first began to experiment with seriously from 1959 in a series of works called *Physichromies*. An example from this series, *Physichromie No. 1270*, forms part of ESCALA (Essex Collection of Art from Latin America). In his *Physichromies*, Cruz-Diez increases the level of chromatic interference in his earlier works by adding vertical plastic struts to the painted background which, depending on the relative position of the viewer, reflect light and colour, creating previously invisible, moving hues.

Cruz-Diez's *Chromointerferences*, which he first began to produce in the 1960s, extend this principle not only by immersing the viewer fully in the work, which is contained in an isolated, darkened space, but also by involving the physical movement of the work itself. In the room, a number of projectors superimpose various sets of vertical lines on angled vertical walls, that shift and are transposed over one another, intensifying the sense of movement and colour. Between the projectors and the walls are three-dimensional objects, including the viewers themselves. In Cruz-Diez's *Chromosaturations*, a series also begun in the 1960s and installed at firstsite, Colchester, the impact of colour on the individual is taken to extremes. In this work the viewer is drenched in colour as he or she traverses three interconnected spaces, one bathed in blue light, another in red and another in green. The opaque walls isolate the viewer from the outside world and transform the *Chromosaturation* into an intense physical and psychological experience. The effect of colour saturation on the brain is something that is still being researched, but is known to be a powerful phenomenon.

While the *Physichromies* encourage a more intimate relationship between the viewer and the work, Cruz-Diez's *Chromointerferences* and *Chromosaturations* awaken people to the potential of art and colour in a more public and collective way. Even more public are Cruz-Diez's many architectural projects that can be found as far and wide as Venezuela, Seoul and London (Bolívar Hall, Embassy of Venezuela). On the surfaces of airports, hydroelectric plants and grain silos, Cruz-Diez has produced monumental chromatic works that integrate art and architecture and extend the boundaries of painting. These works come alive with the circulation of the viewer whose senses are revitalised and who is constantly reconnected to the built environment through light and colour.

Reference

Gloria Camevali, *Cruz-Diez Colour Visions* (ex. cat.) London: Bolivar Hall, 1993.

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