

Chromatic Discourse

Stephanie Straine



Figure 1: Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Induction Chromatique à Double Fréquence pour l'Edmund Gardner Ship / Liverpool*. Paris, 2014.

Almost eighteen months after Franco-Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez (born 1923, Caracas) unveiled his new monument for Liverpool's historic waterfront, we take the opportunity of this special thematic dazzle issue of *Stages* to return to the pilot ship *Edmund Gardner*, and invite Cruz-Diez to reflect on this work, *Induction Chromatique à Double Fréquence pour l'Edmund Gardner Ship / Liverpool. Paris, 2014* – a joint commission by 14-18 NOW: WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, Liverpool Biennial and Tate Liverpool, in partnership with Merseyside Maritime Museum – and its relationship to both its immediate environment and his wider artistic practice.

In a defining statement on his practice, the artist emphasised its perceptual and experiential nature as an encounter to take place in space and time, declaring: 'I wanted my work to be a phenomenological situation where true colour would be liberated from all aesthetic and symbolic meaning, and would therefore reach its maximum potential.'^[1] The location of *Induction Chromatique à Double Fréquence pour l'Edmund Gardner Ship / Liverpool. Paris, 2014* within the Canning Graving dry dock enables viewers to encounter Cruz-Diez's work from multiple viewpoints and perspectives: approaching it from afar as a rupture in the visual field, or experiencing its dramatically hued paint surface up close, as part of a Merseyside Maritime Museum tour of the pilot ship. In both scenarios, the innate physicality of the work's chromatic field has a suggestive power, destabilising our reading of the surrounding environment.

Stephanie Straine: Your commission for Liverpool, which premiered last summer, *Induction Chromatique à Double Fréquence pour l'Edmund Gardner Ship / Liverpool. Paris, 2014* (figures 1 and 2), took its inspiration partly from the practice of dazzle painting navy ships during the First World War, and combined this reference point with your own substantial research into what you have called 'the ephemeral and unstable character of chromatic perception.'^[2] The aim of dazzle painting was optical distortion. Can you explain how you brought these two notions of distortion and perceptual instability together through the use of colour?



Figure 2: Carlos Cruz-Diez with Painters, Liverpool 2014. Photo: Mark McNulty.

Carlos Cruz-Diez: I had a wonderful time working on the *Edmund Gardner* because it gave me a chance to create a chromatic spectacle across a support I had never worked with before.[3] Back in 1987, I had a project to transform a cargo ship into a convention centre, but it never got past the maquette phase. Bearing in mind the extraordinary interventions by artists that took place during the war, my intention was never to replicate any sort of camouflage, but to deploy my own plastic vocabulary and to obtain another kind of visual result coherent with the support of the boat.

SS: In this work, part of your ongoing *Induction Chromatique / Chromatic Induction* series (which has previously featured other interventions in the urban environment, such as the temporary alteration of a Marseille city bus in 1989, figure 3), the investigation into our perception of colour hinges upon the ‘afterimage’, an optical illusion that occurs – often in the form of a residual glow – when an image continues to appear on the retina even once the viewer has looked away. How does the work’s alternating bands of colour produce such an effect, and how do you intend the viewer to experience it, ideally?



Figure 3: *Induction Chromatique à double fréquence*, ephemeral intervention on bus, on the occasion of the event “L’art dans la rue”. Marseille, France, 1989 Copyright: © Adagp, Paris 2015

CCD: The ideal thing would be for the *Edmund Gardner* to actually set sail. That would fulfil my goal to create a spectacle in continuous transformation. That being said, I am more than satisfied with its current location in dry dock, because it acts as a visual reference point and, as it were, furnishes the urban space chromatically.

SS: The exterior of *Edmund Gardner* became the support for your chromatic work. The painting is on the surface of the vessel, coating it like a new skin, but underneath, the boat and its contents remain in the same state of preservation as before, its function unchanged, its original livery beneath the new paint. Do you consider this work for Liverpool to be a sculpture or a painting *on* an object (in this case a boat)? Does your work stop at the paint surface, or does it extend beyond it?

CCD: When you intervene on a support within an artistic discourse, you transcend the support and engender manifold readings. This specific object can not help but remind us of what it used to be, yet at the

same time it causes a sense of amazement because it's not what you expect from a ship. In the event that *Induction Chromatique à Double Fréquence* were to last over time, the *Edmund Gardner* could become an urban landmark for the local community.

SS: Following on from my previous question, how do you conceptualise the relationship between surface and support (or supporting *structure*) more widely in your work, and how does this translate when the support is an independent object with another, totally separate function?

CCD: If a discourse is written, then it needs a paper support and, likewise, if it is visual, it requires space or matter where it can be applied. In the case of the *Edmund Gardner* there was the possibility of creating a frontal view that sets off ranges of colours throughout the ship, evolving as we move. The chromatic discourse is disclosed through the spectator's distance, displacement and angle of vision.

SS: What do you hope that a wider understanding of our experiential and perceptual relationship with colour can contribute to the social and public realm?

CCD: I have always believed that art is communication and that it also has an educational side to it. This work with the *Edmund Gardner* affords another type of information on the nature of colour. It forces us to shift from passive to active contemplation and it shows us colour evolving in time and in space.



Figure 4: *Color Aditivo*, intervention on four crosswalks on the occasion of the event “El artista y la ciudad”. Caracas, Venezuela, 1975 Copyright: © Adagp, Paris 2015

SS: Many of your projects take place in the public realm, such as your *Color Aditivo / Additive Colour* projects that enact another form of chromatic intervention: transformative pedestrian crosswalks stretching from Caracas in 1975 to Liverpool in 2014 (figures 4 and 5). What do you believe to be the artist's role in society?



Figure 5: *Couleur Additive Liverpool ONE*, Liverpool. Photo: Mark McNulty

CCD: I believe that the public space is the ideal support for an artist to express himself and also to provide information and spiritual pleasure for the human mass that, day after day, passes robotically through aggressive surrounding environs underwritten by behavioural codes.

SS: Can you talk about your relationship to Cubism, and what you took personally from a study of Cubism, given that the movement was one of the key inspirations for dazzle camouflage? Do you consider your practice to have any links with those radical departures in form, colour, perspective and composition first advanced by the Cubists over a century ago?

CCD: My practice is a historical reflection on colour in art. My grounding is in Impressionism, Cubism, Constructivism, scientific theories and industrial processes for the multiplication of the coloured image. The behaviour of painted colour on the static plane in Josef Albers's work was one of the influences that encouraged me to remove colour from the flat plane and take it into space, evolving and in continuous mutation, just like reality itself.

SS: Looking back on your arrival in Paris in the late 1950s, you wrote of the artistic community there that: 'We were all for the destruction of the sacred aura surrounding the romantic artist, for we considered our research of the same nature as that of a scientist. Art had to be in the streets, not only in museums.'^[4] This standpoint seems to echo the position of those artists who were involved in dazzle painting and the war effort. What's your opinion of the relationship between art and science today, and do you feel that deeper collaboration is necessary?

CCD: The relationship between science and art is to call truth into question and to take a leap into the unknown in search of other truths. Either one can reach its goal or wind up in a dead end, but the important thing along this path is to discover, to invent and to communicate our astonishment.

The Franco-Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez (Caracas, 1923) has lived and worked in Paris since 1960. He is a major protagonist in the field of Kinetic and Optical art, a movement that encourages 'an awareness of the instability of reality'. (Jean Clay, 'La peinture est finie' [Painting is Finished], Robho, no. 1, 1967, n.p.) Carlos Cruz-Diez graduated from the School of Visual Arts and Applied Arts, Caracas, in 1945. While still at art school, he worked as an illustrator for popular Venezuelan newspapers and magazines, and from 1946 to 1955, he was the creative director at the Caracas branch of McCann-Erickson, the international advertising agency, and contributed illustrations to the Venezuelan newspaper El Nacional.

In 1956, after a year in Europe making his earliest abstract compositions, he opened the Estudio de Artes Visuales in Venezuela, a visual arts studio for graphic and industrial design. It was during that period that Cruz-Diez started developing the conceptual platform for his work based on optical and chromatic phenomena, a process that led to the creation of his first Color Aditivo (Additive Colour) and Fisicromía 1 (Physiechromie), in 1959. He and his family settled in Paris in 1960, where he met and discussed his ideas with international artists such as Agam, Tinguely, Soto, Buri, Picelj, Morellet, Camargo, Lygia Clark, Le Parc, Calder and Vasarely.

In 2005, his family created the Cruz-Diez Foundation, whose mission is to protect, preserve, promote and research his artistic and conceptual legacy. In 2014, the Foundation published his memoirs, Vivir en Arte, recuerdos de lo que me acuerdo (Living in Art: Memories of What I Remember), and in 2015 Cruz-Diez was awarded the Turner Medal in London.

Translators: Ana Botella (English to Spanish) and Lambe & Nieto (Spanish to English)

[1] Carlos Cruz-Diez, 'Structure and Effectiveness of a Plastic Discourse' (1989), in *Reflection on Color*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid, and Cruz-Diez Foundation, Houston, Texas, 2009, p.146.

[2] Carlos Cruz-Diez, 'History of Structuring a Discourse on Color: Prologue to the Second Edition (2009)', in *Reflection on Color*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid, and Cruz-Diez Foundation, Houston, Texas, 2009, p.12.

[3] The term 'support' as Cruz-Diez uses it in this context refers to *any* material onto which his chromatic works are incorporated, applied or painted (in this case a pilot ship). As he has written of his early career developments, 'I intended to find a "support" through which I could reveal "colour in the process of becoming", continually appearing and disappearing before our eyes.' Ibid., p.15.

[4] Carlos Cruz-Diez, *ibid.*, p.21.

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Stephanie Straine is currently Interim Curator, Exhibitions and Displays at Tate Liverpool, where since 2012 as Assistant Curator she has worked on exhibitions including *Chagall: Modern Master*, *Palle Nielsen: The Model*, *Claude Parent: La colline de l'art*, *Transmitting Andy Warhol*, *György Kepes*, *Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions* and *Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots*. Previously Exhibitions Organiser at The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2006-9), she obtained her PhD in art history from UCL (2013) for a thesis that explored the relationship between drawing and conceptual art in the 1960s.