

The Weight of Form

The Graphic Design of Carlos Cruz-Diez

March 12 – June 11, 2021

Museo Reina Sofía, Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre, Space D

Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Carlos Cruz-Diez (b. 1923, Caracas; d. 2019, Paris) was one of the most significant geometric abstract artists of the second half of the twentieth century, known above all for his *Fisicromías* (Physichromies), major contributions to the history of Western art and a contemporary example of the age-old technical, aesthetic, and philosophical debate between the proponents of line and color.



Alfredo Silva-Estrada, *Trans-verbales 1* (Trans-Verbals 1), 1969. Design by Carlos Cruz-Diez

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Less well known is his production in the field of graphic design. He played an important role in the development of the Venezuelan publishing industry, helping it to progress from a technical enterprise of typographers, layout editors, and printers to one where design contributed the formal and chromatic sensibility of the artist. His case was similar to that of many artists in Latin America who worked simultaneously as artists and designers, such as the Concrete artists Hércules Barsotti from Brazil and Tomás Maldonado from Argentina. Common to all of them, and to the processes of professionalization affecting the Latin American graphic industry, are the contributions made by a large number of European technicians and artists after World War II, especially Spaniards, Italians, and Germans. In the particular case of Venezuela, important roles were played in this respect by Paco Fernández de Alaña (influential on Cruz-Diez), Gerd Leufert, and Nedo Mion Ferrario.

If there is one thing that characterizes both Carlos Cruz-Diez's graphic design and his artistic work, it is precisely a sometimes obsessive reflection on what we call "the weight of form." This weight is at once semantic and structural, positive and negative, liberating and oppressive. In his work as a designer, the search for simple and effective solutions was based on the ordered and symbiotic coexistence of form, color, and content. In his work as a visual artist, on the other hand, it seemed that form was there only to delimit an area of chromatic interaction that would not detract from the luminosity and immateriality of the color.

The works he made in his childhood and youth already reveal an early vocation as well as an unusual interest in the world of printing and the mechanical reproduction of images. The drawings he did as a child, the small diaries he created at primary school, and his first work experience creating comic strips all display formal characteristics that would remain present—and discernible—in the language of his mature production.

Extensive study and introspection led to his realization that, in the art of his time, color still awaited a solution that would make manifest its changing and luminous nature.



Carlos Cruz-Diez in his design studio. From the magazine *Momento*, Caracas, 1957. © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez / Bridgeman Images, Madrid, 2021



Robho, no. 5–6, Paris, 1969. Cover designed by Carlos Cruz-Diez © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez / Bridgeman Images, Madrid, 2021

The languages he set in play in order to achieve this, essentially the juxtaposition and superimposition of colored overlays, came directly from printing, where the reproduction of a color image is also achieved by the superimposition of four color screens—yellow, magenta, cyan, and black—at different angles of inclination. In this way, Cruz-Diez managed to define his own problematics in the universe of abstract art, creating both his first *Color aditivo* (*Couleur Additive*) and his first *Physichromie* in 1959. For this reason, his artistic work and his design work are intimately linked.

Boosted by the oil industry, Venezuela’s rapid economic growth demanded of Venezuelan publishing houses a knowledge of visual communication that they did not then possess. In those years, graphic design did not exist as an independent profession, and publishers sought the aid of artists like Carlos Cruz-Diez, who opened his own design agency in 1946 owing to the plentiful work available in the field. After embarking on his mature work, Cruz-Diez settled in Paris in 1960, where he continued working as a designer, first out of economic necessity, and after 1967 as a sideline for himself and his friends. Among other jobs, he designed the magazine *Robho* and the posters and catalogues for the Centre Noroit in the north of France. His graphic language became progressively more refined and direct.

In 1973, Cruz-Diez opened another studio in Caracas. He secured major projects for artistic interventions in the city’s architecture and urban layout, such as the *Ambientaciones cromáticas* (*Chromatic Atmospheres*) for Maiquetía International Airport and the Raúl Leoni Hydroelectric Power Plant, but he did not abandon his work as a designer, which he pursued essentially in three formats: posters, exhibition catalogues, and editorial production for the Venezuelan photographer and intellectual



Carlos Cruz-Diez, illustration showing Surrealist influence, 1950
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Alfredo Boulton, for whom he contributed some of his most polished designs.

This exhibition shows the production of Carlos Cruz-Diez in the field of graphic design from 1930 to 2015.

The Weight of Form: The Graphic Design of Carlos Cruz-Diez is organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in collaboration with the **Archivo Fotografía Urbana** and the **Cruz-Diez Art Foundation**.

Curator: Ariel Jiménez

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