

Translation in Space and Time

By Tony Beckwith

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The speeches were over and the exhibition was officially open. I weaved my way to the front of the gallery and approached the Maestro. We had just met an hour or so earlier and he greeted me with a smile. I laid my copy of the catalogue on the podium, open at the first page, and, with a flourish, he dedicated it to me: *A Tony, mi traductor, gracias, Carlos Cruz-Diez.* We shook hands and I tried to explain how much I had enjoyed being in his world, in his mind, for about eight months as I translated the book. He smiled and nodded and seemed to be saying, “Yes, it’s fun in here.”

It all began, as most projects do these days, with an e-mail; in this case, from colleagues at the Museum

of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). I had worked on translations of their catalogues over the years, as one of a small group of freelance translators assigned to the task. This time they wanted just one voice, and I was the lucky one chosen to provide an English translation of the catalogue for a retrospective of works by Carlos Cruz-Diez. It was to be a 500-page book of historical and theoretical essays, interviews, architectural proposals, technical explanations, and a collection of superb photographs of his pieces.¹

Carlos Cruz-Diez is a Venezuelan painter and visionary artist. He was born in 1923 and has lived in Paris for many years. The retrospective exhibition of his works at the MFAH presented his research and showed how he expressed his discoveries in a variety of forms, most of which require the interaction of the viewer and in some cases are constructed as

street installations designed for foot traffic. He has been a prolific artist his whole life.

One of the first sections to be translated was an essay by Héctor Olea, the Mexican art critic and co-editor of the catalogue, entitled “The Dialectics of Chrono-Chromatic Space.” Some expect essays of this kind to be turgid and recondite—the proverbial impenetrable thicket—and think that the main challenge for the translator is to stay awake. But in this case, there were attractions that helped me keep moving: interesting subject matter, new ideas to consider and explore, and a theatrical tone and style that helped illuminate the author’s descriptions. One particular sentence that conveys something of the dramatic style to which I am referring is: “From its utopian view, the seminal function of the avant-garde was to shut down traditional concepts of art.”

An essay of this kind is written in a serious mood that is accentuated by the formal language. When the writer is not talking about “the seminal function of the avant-garde,” he is discussing different moods and periods in art history, expressing himself in the theoretical language of art (which is never in a hurry) as he gradually zooms in on the work at hand. Scholarly and insightful, the material is unavoidably dense, so the translator must keep an eye on the smoothness of the flow while searching for exactly the right word. Here is a sample: “Is it possible that this proposal contains the beginnings of a dialogue between the ‘provocative aspects’ of constructed formalism and a subjectivism of perception?” At the end of the essay, there is a photograph of two men astride a black motorcycle. The caption reads, “The author of this essay, Héctor Olea, and Carlos Cruz-Diez parking the motorcycle at the door of the artist’s workshop at 23, rue Pierre Séward, Paris, France, April 2005.” They have evidently just enjoyed a very good ride and are smiling and laughing into the camera.

The next section of the catalogue was entitled “Four Situations Involving Color: A Conversation,” in which the exhibition’s curator, Mari Carmen Ramírez, interviews Cruz-Diez about his life and work. The mood here is very different from the previous essay, and the translator must make appropriate adjustments to his own perspective—going from analytical to interactive, conceptual to sparkling, academic to conversational. One of the many challenges and rewards of a project of this nature is that each section of the catalogue allows the translator to be a different kind of writer. The previous essay required the skills of an art history scribe, but now the translator becomes

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a memoirist. The interview begins at the beginning, and the Maestro is soon recalling events in his childhood that influenced him in one way or another: “I have several childhood memories in which color plays a leading role.” Cruz-Diez’s father owned a bottling plant near Caracas, and he remembers that one day at the plant “the sunlight from the windows streamed through the bottles of red liquid, casting colored shadows on the floor and infusing the space with color.”

Cruz-Diez tells Mari Carmen Ramírez about his schooling and how he became disappointed in his early paintings of landscapes and more traditional subjects. As Cruz-Diez describes his subsequent evolution, he explains how he was “trying to decide where I was going with regard to color and the artist’s social responsibilities.” Along the way, he mentions some extraordinarily interesting things—the translator’s lagniappe, as it were. “One day, when I was reading a book about [Diego] Velázquez and his times, I looked closely at his works and compared them with those of his contemporaries. It was clear that it wasn’t just about painting well; it was also about *inventing* painting. *Las meninas* [The Maids of Honor] was an invention, another point of departure. Until then, everyone painted from the outside looking toward the canvas, but this one was painted from the canvas looking out.”

When I Googled *Las meninas*, I saw what he was talking about, and felt that I had just understood something important about the implications of a major landmark in the history of art. It occurred to me that Cruz-Diez’s point was, in a way, relevant to what I was trying to do as a translator—looking at his words from the inside out, trying to see what he was seeing through his eyes, and then describing it in English.

The catalogue’s narrative arc now swooped in closer to the man himself in “The Early Work,” an essay by the artist. Here he is speaking in the first person (“Ever since I began my adventure as a painter...”) about his beliefs and principles and his evolution as an artist with a social responsibility—now the translator is a diarist/autobiographer. “I spent years painting the extreme poverty of the marginal barrios of Caracas, sublimating my angst and my expressive potential in the face of a reality that, as a painter, I was powerless to change.” Translating passages like this one created images and feelings that began to ease me into the artist’s mind as I shared his experiences, sensing his emotional reactions and following his lines of thought.

The next section of the catalogue returned to the interview between the artist and the curator, and in “Situation 2: Color into Space,” Cruz-Diez explains that, “I wanted to find a



way to use color so that it was not a painted testimony but a reality that expressed its own condition—that is, the reality of light.” He experimented with light until he was able to project color into space to create art with no support of any kind. His research into kinetic art led him to build structures that showed how color can change according to the position of the viewer. He discusses the process involved in the creation of his works: “...the edges of the perpendicular planes are painted white on one side and red, green, and even black, on the other. This treatment makes the first one appear pinker, the second one greener, and so on. My intention was to produce nuances that would reveal the subtle ranges of reflective color.” Again, these are dense texts, crammed with a great deal of information, so the translation must help the reader navigate the inflow by arranging the elements in reasonable, understandable sequences.

The lengthy interview takes a graceful stroll through the Maestro’s history. As it moves on from his early life and experimentation, he talks about technical matters, which were always an important part of his work. “During this period, polyester rollers were replaced by a technique involving the use of an air brush and lacquer, which achieved more consistent and even textures.” Some of the descriptions are a little reminiscent of industrial text translations, and the terminology is occasionally what one might expect to hear in a metallurgical workshop. He also talks in great detail about his process. “An intermediate space is created between the layers where light changes and in turn enriches colors and forms, encouraging the transition from a two-dimensional plane to the expression of a latent volume.”

Everything must have a name, and Cruz-Diez explains how some of his

works got theirs. “The first name I gave them—I don’t know if it is written down somewhere—was ‘false prisms’ because, as an opaque support, they produced chromatic effects that were similar to prisms.” Where the writer goes, the translator must follow, with eyes and ears wide open. His voice was becoming familiar to me by now. I could hear his cadences as I read his words, and tried to keep something of those rhythms and tones in the English version. He is a thoughtful man, a contemplative man, one who explains things as he sees them in his mind’s eye. “And so begins the myth-making process that all elemental experiences stimulate. Everyone tries to find meaning for what he or she cannot explain, and this quest leads to many levels of thinking, including ‘the aesthetic’.”

He first went to Paris in 1955 and loved it. “Things are neither too big nor too small. The streets are neither too wide nor too narrow. I can see people, I can see in detail what is behind or in front of me.” When translating his references to Paris, I wondered if it helped that I had been there. Though hardly a critical factor, I decided that it certainly could not hurt, since it is always helpful to be able to picture the subject of the translation, to have a background to scour for shades of meaning that can be

passed from one language to the other.

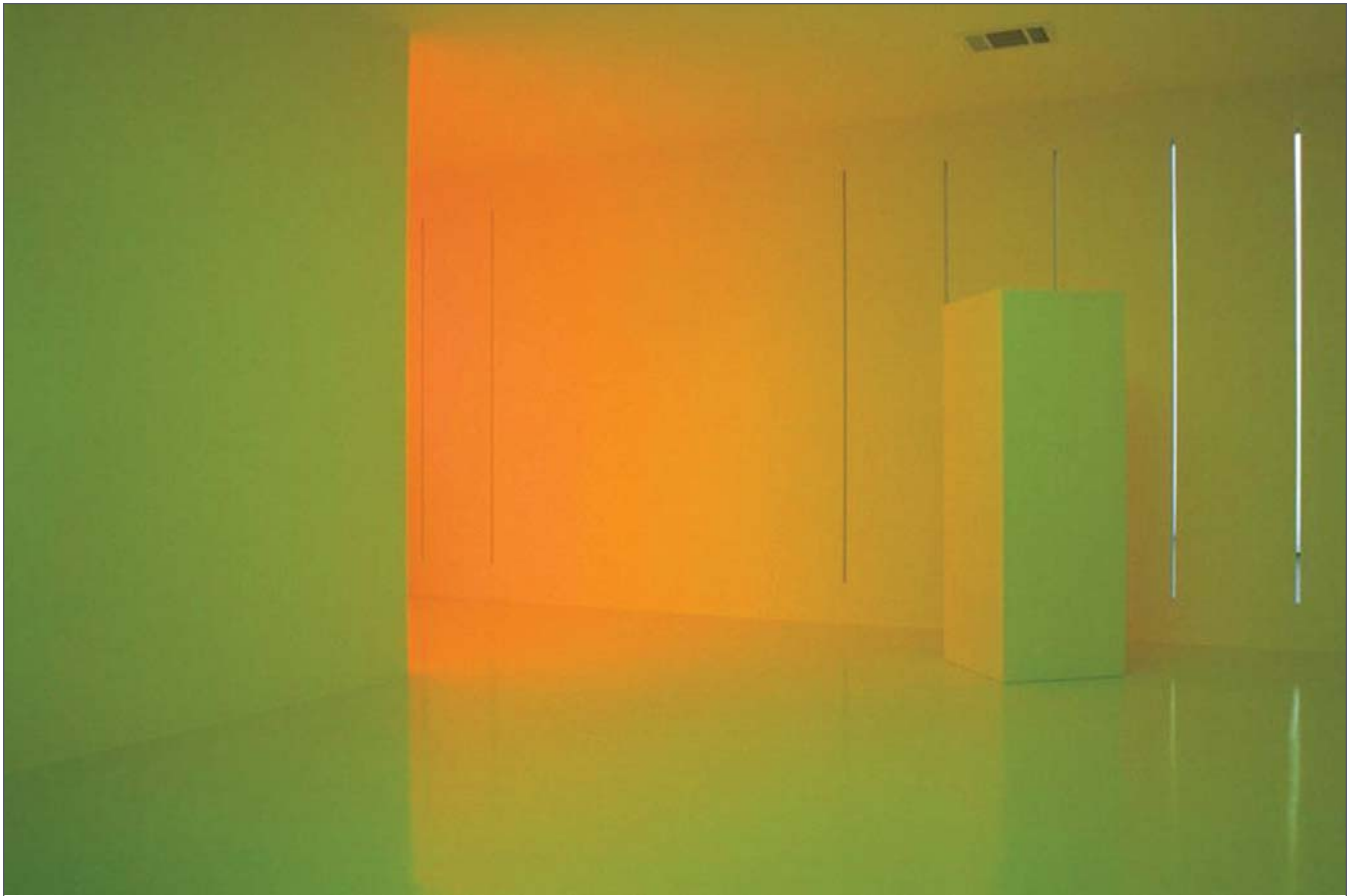
Toward the end of the book is the “Chronology,” which traces the Maestro’s career through a list of very brief facts and descriptions of events that were directly or indirectly involved in his life. Here, more so than in the rest of the book, great attention to detail was required to manage the multiple details and minutia. It was a relief to know that every word I translated would be scrutinized by the MFAH’s Publications Director, Diane Lovejoy. We communicated via “track changes” and got used to talking to each other in the margins of the texts, adding afterthoughts and new suggestions as ideas percolated and stewed over time. In one exchange, the first draft said, “[Certain works] exemplify the process, which allows color to be unencumbered by fixed forms.” My marginal note suggests, “How about ‘...which releases color from the tyranny of fixed forms?’” The accumulated familiarity with the subject matter, absorbed while translating the rest of the book, helped enormously in making sense of each item in very few words and, where possible and appropriate, in using the same mood as the section to which the incident referred.

Cruz-Diez is a thoroughly creative artist. When he could not find the tools he needed to produce his works of art, he invented his own and built them, so

For More Information:

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
www.mfah.org/exhibition/carlos-cruz-diez-color-space

The Cruz-Diez Foundation
www.cruz-diezfoundation.org



All Museum images: Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (www.mfah.org/exhibition/carlos-cruz-diez-color-space/)

there is a section in the catalogue called “Machines and Tools.” Invented tools inevitably lead to new words and new processes to describe, and the translator must be attuned to the Maestro’s sense of technical precision as he discusses his toolbox. “The tape cutter had a scalpel knife mounted on a cartridge on bearings that moved on a tube that functions as a rail. This mechanism, designed to move horizontally, was mounted on a stationary wooden base that held the digital printing plate where the cuts were to be made.” The translator must be able to see this device in his mind’s eye so that he can describe it in English, and must possess the skills of a technical writer in order to do so. This section was actually good training for the “Glossary of Terms” at the end of the book, where everything is explained. “Section Folder: During the early years, the ‘U’-shaped aluminum sections were made with a metal folder, one fold at a time.” The reader may not grasp the specifics fully, but the description of the process must flow smoothly and make sense in the translation.

After eight months I felt quite at home in the extraordinary mind of Carlos Cruz-Diez, having been “on the road” with him, or so it seemed. I now felt perfectly comfortable writing statements such as: “I am a ‘visualizer’ of situations, a plastic researcher, and I believe that all human activity is simple and flows from elementary things; it only seems mysterious when one ignores its mechanisms or its principles.” Then one day I sent in the final revision to the last translation, and suddenly the project was over and out of my hands. Weeks went by and the whole experience slowly moved to the back of my mind. New projects bury earlier ones just as surely as new love edges the old. Winter came, then Christmas.

And then, in early February, my wife Lillian and I were “cordially invited to a reception and dinner celebrating the opening of *Carlos Cruz-Diez: Color in Space and Time*, a retrospective of the artist’s work. We drove to Houston in an exuberant mood and, for me, the rest was history.

Notes

1. *Carlos Cruz-Diez: Color in Space and Time*. Edited by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea. Translated by Tony Beckwith (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-300-16994-2.

The catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition *Carlos Cruz-Diez: Color in Space and Time*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Cruz-Diez Foundation, Houston. The exhibition took place at the museum from February 6 to July 4, 2011. The catalogue was produced by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas and the Publications Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It is distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London (www.yalebooks.com/art).

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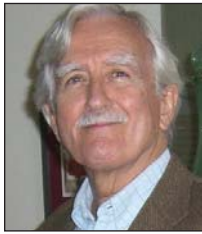
By Susan Welsh

Die Frau mit den 5 Elefanten, a documentary of the life and work of Svetlana Geier, the renowned translator of Dostoevsky and other Russian classical writers into German, holds lessons for translators in any language pair or specialty.

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