

Title	Idea as object	Author	Enrique Juncosa
Date	2006	Artist	Iran do Espírito Santo
Publication	COLOMBO, Paolo; JUNCOSA, Enrique; TONE, Lilian. <i>Iran do Espírito Santo – Irish Museum of Modern Art</i> . Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA); Rome: Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI); São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2006.		

idea as object enrique juncosa

Title	Idea as object	Author	Enrique Juncosa
Date	2006	Artist	Iran do Espírito Santo
Publication	COLOMBO, Paolo; JUNCOSA, Enrique; TONE, Lillian. <i>Iran do Espírito Santo – Irish Museum of Modern Art</i> . Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA); Rome: Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI); São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2006.		

"Broadway is a street; it is also
a neighbourhood, an atmosphere".

Truman Capote¹

"My love taught me to be simple
Like the atrium of a church
Where there is not even a bell
Nor a pencil
Nor a sensuality"

Oswald de Andrade²

In a letter from Dan Flavin to Mel Bochner, the American artist famous for his use of neon lights explained to his colleague the reasons for his interest in the medieval English philosopher William of Ockham, a Franciscan monk who rejected the doctrines of St. Thomas Aquinas, opposed Pope John XXII and was thus imprisoned in Avignon. To quote Flavin: "He [Ockham] argued that reality exists solely in individual things and universals are merely abstract things. This view led him to exclude questions such as the existence of God from intellectual knowledge, referring them to faith alone". In the same letter, Flavin quotes one of Ockham's most famous aphorisms, one which, according to the artist, he had carried with him for many years: "Principles (entities) should not be multiplied unnecessarily";³ Ockham's metaphysical theories, which are known as Nominalism, have a special relevance in the work of Dan Flavin, who has reduced his vocabulary entirely to the use of fluorescent lights, following, among others, the idea that "less is more". Iran do Espírito Santo's use of forms in his work which are recognisable—such as boxes, candles, coins, neon lights, bricks, light bulbs and tin cans—but treated as abstract ideas, and finished with what we might call a minimalist aesthetic, as we shall see, carries on to some extent Ockham and Flavin's ideas, in considering that in some ways, abstract art implies the faith of the viewer and because of this, it is not a tool entirely suited to detailed speculation. Espírito Santo is not, however, an artist who uses illusionistic representation; he is a conceptual artist who goes beyond minimalist formalism in order to explore purely conceptual questions which have to do with our perception of reality and of language. In any case, one can say that Espírito Santo's work is directly related to the principal ideas which sustained Minimalism in the United States. To begin with, his aesthetic is one which could be described as cold, given his preference for clarity, simplicity and objectivity. Also, his palette is reduced, using almost exclusively, white, grey and black. In producing his work, Espírito Santo prefers mechanical cre-

ative processes and repetition, often working in series and editions. Also, his work is primarily concerned with the physical, rather than the metaphysical. His themes are conceptual or linguistic in nature; the idea that gives rise to each specific work is clear. However, having said this, it would not be fair to describe his work as minimalist, given that, as we shall see, it is not merely concerned with formal ideas. For the minimalists, who pursued a certain idea of purity, the significant was literally the signified. In their work, there was no room for ideological and metaphysical possibilities, for example, their works were open to easy understanding. Despite all of this, and perhaps paradoxically so, the presence of pure forms (cubes, rectangles, triangles, monochromes, etc.) in striking formats in the immediately symbolic space of the gallery, suggested the possibility of some sort of interpretation, as well as approaching the idea of the transcendental. This is something which Duchamp had already understood, presenting his famous "found objects" as art and thus making them sacred. Espírito Santo, to return to him, distances himself from strict dogmatic rules. He understands and makes use of the expressive possibilities of ambiguity.

In effect, Espírito Santo bases his work on many of the ideas mentioned above. However, he also adds to the discussion that these ideas generate, the contemplation of the relationship between everyday objects and the representation of their ideal form, situated in such a way in space that we can see them as representations of objects before they become representations of ideas. Also, architecture and light become key elements in this conceptual game. It is true that we might see, at first glance, some of the objects offered by the artist as archetypal forms or essences, however, they suddenly evolve into something more complex. *Untitled (Keyhole)*, 2002, for example, is a spherical visualisation of a keyhole in black basalt. Its surface reflects its surroundings, but we are of course, denied the possibility of delving into its interior and have to content ourselves with mov-

Title	Idea as object	Author	Enrique Juncosa
Date	2006	Artist	Iran do Espírito Santo
Publication	COLOMBO, Paolo; JUNCOSA, Enrique; TONE, Lillian. <i>Iran do Espírito Santo – Irish Museum of Modern Art</i> . Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA); Rome: Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI); São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2006.		

ing around it (although from a distance the works reads like something flat). There exists, moreover, an earlier version of this work in stainless steel, which poses even more questions. The works that make up the series *Restless* are made from a single sheet of glass treated in various different ways, so that the surface, resting on the floor and leaning against the wall is, according to the type of treatment, transparent, opaque and even mirrored, suggesting that we are seeing various different sheets of glass one on top of the other. We can see through these works and we can see ourselves, and the space in which we stand, reflected in them. *Night* (1998), on the other hand, to give a final example, is a black painting on steel which shows a series of stars on a black background. It takes a while before one notices that it is a version of the Brazilian flag in which the colours green and yellow have disappeared. The artist has said that the work is his response to having grown up in Brazil during the years of the dictatorship.⁴

Texture, finish and materials are, as we can see, something of clear importance in the work of Espírito Santo. Among his favourite materials are granite, stainless steel, glass, basalt, aluminium, marble or sandstone. All of these heavy, tough materials help to lend his works permanence and purity; they are more abstraction than representation. The solidity of the works is at times paradoxical in terms of what they represent, i.e. light bulbs, tin cans, or shoeboxes. The functional nature of these objects disappears and they become aesthetic objects. In the series of works entitled *Debris*, we see bricks carved from sandstone, forming little sculptures. The series *Can*, taking tin cans as its starting point, consists of very heavy objects somewhat bigger than what cans normally are, and, of course without labels. The works from the *Corrections* series, on the other hand, present different blocks of granite, whose sides have been planed to a smooth surface following the original contours of the rock, each facet respecting, as far as possible, the boulder's original volume and form. In this way, following a process which is the inverse to that of Michelangelo's slaves, Espírito Santo has discovered geometry and order inside the very material. The rocks have then been placed on the floor to achieve an effect quite similar to that of a Japanese Zen garden.

The use of light in Espírito Santo's work, which has recently been analysed by Wayne Baerwaldt,⁵ also distances his work from the literalism defended by Minimalism, showing a predilection for reflection, shade and ambiguity, and directly engaging the viewer's subjectivity. Of course, paradoxical visual elements already existed in the work of artists like Larry Bell or John McCracken—James Meyer recently demonstrated how these elements of his work separate them from the minimalist canon, but also how

they were at the same time important for later developments known in general terms as "post-minimalism"⁶ Larry Bell's cubes, for example, were both object and reflection simultaneously. The sheets of colour which McCracken set leaning against the wall—just like the sheets of glass in Espírito Santo's *Restless* series—are again something more than mere objects, suggesting at times, something imaginary or virtual. Espírito Santo delves into these questions in his transient mural paintings on the gallery wall. Recently, he has painted works that are reminiscent of the surfaces of different types of wood (in works like *Parallel Forest*, 2000) or works that look like brick walls, exploring every gradation in shade of the colour grey. These installations are intentionally situated somewhere between painting and sculpture, so as to avoid the literal. Another recent series of beautiful drawings made up of repeated vertical lines drawn with a marker and entitled *CRTN* (seemingly an abbreviation of the word "curtain") despite their ordered execution, play with the idea of the sublime and the idea that abstract painting is the threshold to something which cannot be described in words.

It is also possible, of course, to situate the work of Espírito Santo in a Brazilian context as well as a South-American one, which distances it, once again, from Minimalism. The early work of the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García gave birth to a rich Latin American tradition of constructivist art. In the years following World War II, there was a movement, especially in the urban centres of Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil, of different forms of geometric abstraction influenced by European Constructivism (Max Bill), Neoplasticism (Mondrian) and Suprematism (Malevich). In relation to the origin of these trends in Brazil, we recall that Max Bill exhibited in São Paulo's Museu de Arte in 1950 and that he won, in the following year, first prize for sculpture in the city's first biennial, where his work was exhibited again. Shortly after, we find in Brazil artists like Waldemar Cordeiro, Lothar Charoux or Geraldo de Barros in São Paulo; and Ivan Serpa, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape or Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, we see many art veterans of that country, like Alfredo Volpi or Sergio Camargo, becoming influenced by the constructivist tidal wave. Brazilian "Concretism", a word which brings together all of these different strands, showed a preference for—as Minimalism was to do later in the United States—industrial materials, highly finished surfaces, modularity and the triumph of the rational over the expressive. As indicated before, these are characteristics which we find again, although somewhat altered or interrogated in the work of Espírito Santo.

For me it seems important to make reference to Brazilian Concretism, and modern Brazilian architecture, be-

Title	Idea as object	Author	Enrique Juncosa
Date	2006	Artist	Iran do Espírito Santo
Publication	COLOMBO, Paolo; JUNCOSA, Enrique; TONE, Lillian. <i>Iran do Espírito Santo – Irish Museum of Modern Art</i> . Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA); Rome: Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI); São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2006.		

cause it needs to be stressed that Espírito Santo's work is not derivative of North American art. It so happened, nevertheless, that the aforementioned artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, quickly abandoned Concretism in the 60s in order to explore, within highly experimental parameters, certain types of poetic art related to performance and the body. These have become representative of Brazilian art, obscuring in our memory the great explosion of formal art in the 1950s. This great period, which culminated in some ways with the ambitious project to construct Brasília as the new, centrally located, capital of the country produced two of the greatest figures in Western modern architecture: Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx. Already in 1943, MOMA, New York staged an exhibition of Brazilian architecture⁷ and in 1956 one of the most incisive chroniclers of modernity, Sigfried Giedion, wrote: "Compared to the United States (...) Brazil is discovering its own architectural means of expression with astounding speed".⁸ In any case, Niemeyer and Burle Marx are not isolated figures, and we can cite other important modern architects such as Gregori Warchavchik, Luiz Nunes, Lucio Costa and Lina Bo Bardi. This small digression seems important, given that modern Brazilian architecture has had a marked influence on Espírito Santo's concept of space. One of the characteristics of Brazilian rationalism was the defence of the integration of plastic and applied arts in constructing the built environment, another was a rigorous attention to detail; ideas which we can undoubtedly trace in the work of Espírito Santo. In addition, the poetry of Oswald de Andrade, the first poet in Brazilian modernism, is characterised by its constant leaning towards objectivity, employing simple words and imagery with visual impact far removed from abstract or over-elaborate metaphors. De Andrade was also concerned with the visual typographic presentation of text, which reminds us in some ways also, of the carefully assembled constructions of Espírito Santo.

Thus, it is clear that in the artist's work, there is a will to develop an individual and organic poetic art which is in dialogue with the Brazilian vanguardist tradition. In his case, there is no attempt to proclaim some new dogmatic vision of the world which sets out to establish a new order, rather, he speaks with a unique voice which exudes pleasure and a sense of humour. The imagery used by Espírito Santo suggests to us a whole constellation of meanings. Normally, he finds these images in the forms of certain artificial objects which we come across in our daily lives. Some of these forms are containers for objects, like the shoeboxes or the tin cans, which suggest that something is inside, although their most important feature for the artist seems to be their mere form.

He has also made sculptures, as previously mentioned, derived from the cavity of a keyhole, which we can view from every angle but cannot open. And, he has made numerous works with objects that illuminate –light bulbs, candlesticks with candles, neon lights or lamps– but do not, however, produce light. On other occasions he uses forms derived from building materials such as bricks and glass, converting them into modular type sculptures which can be read as a metaphor for a particularly rational way of contemplating the world. To finish, it should be mentioned that he has also made dice, which from their extremely rational form suggest a sense of chance and playfulness. Jasper Johns, who treated his canvases as objects, creating them through analytical processes, produced in 1960 various bronze sculptures in the form of bulbs, beer cans or tins filled with paintbrushes. Espírito Santo continues this analytical tradition, but in doing so manages to create, by drawing the surrounding architectural space into his sculptures, a poetic atmosphere that transcends the merely conceptual or formal, strategically integrating the natural (light, subject, materials) with the artificial.

1 Truman Capote, *Summer Crossing*. New York: Random House, 2006, p.24.

2 Oswald de Andrade, *Obra Escogida*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, p.15.

3 Dan Flavin, "fluorescent light, etc.", from *Dan Flavin*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1969, pp.204-6.

4 Iran do Espírito Santo, interviewed by Mónica de la Torre, in *Review – Latin American Literature and Arts* 64, Spring 2002, pp.51-60.

5 Wayne Baerwaldt, *Desert of Reflections*. Rome: MAXXI, 2006, pp. 62-3.

6 James Meyer, "Another Minimalism", in *A Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958-68*. Los Angeles: MOCA, 2004, pp. 33-50.

7 P.L. Goodwin, *Brazil Builds. Architecture New and Old, 1652-1942*. New York: MoMA, 1943.

8 Siegfried Giedion, "Brazil and Contemporary Architecture", preface to H.E. Mindin, *Modern Architecture in Brazil*. New York: Reinhold Publishers, 1956, pp. 17-18.