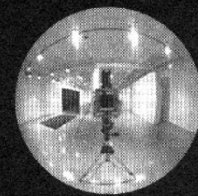


**Title** Interview with Iran do Espírito Santo  
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**Author** Monica de la Torre  
**Artist** Iran do Espírito Santo



## Interview with Iran do Espírito Santo

**Mónica de la Torre**

<b>Title</b>	Interview with Iran do Espírito Santo	<b>Author</b>	Monica de la Torre
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*Iran do Espírito Santo, born in Mococa in the state of São Paulo in 1963, launched his international career in 1991 with an exhibition at Plug In Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada. Since then, he has had solo exhibitions at Galeria Luisa Strina, Galeria Camargo Vilça, and the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago and the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. He also participated in InSite 97 on the San Diego/Tijuana border, and represented Brazil at the 48th Venice Biennale. He has exhibited widely in Brazil, Europe, and the United States. His work is a meditation on surface, material, and formalism. From May through July 2001, he exhibited at The Americas Society, and presented a new series of wall paintings as part of the five-month "Forma:Brazil" series.*

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Some of your artworks were presented in the exhibition "F(r)icciones" at Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum last December. The show featured artists from Central and South America whose works embody a friction between fiction and reality or representation. Which of your pieces were included, and how did they relate to the overall curatorial concept?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

One was *Divider*, a simulated wall made of lacquered MDF blocks that functioned as a real wall within the exhibition space. I also showed the pieces *Keyhole* and *The Night*, my version of the Brazilian flag. And I made functional sculptures that people could sit on. Maps, the city, and labyrinths were the exhibition's focal points. My works are very distinct from each other, but they all deal, in a fictitious way, with different notions of space and domesticity as well as with the concept of nation.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Could this play with the idea of functionality be related to your fascination with Brasília as a child? You've mentioned that when you saw photographs of the city's buildings, you thought they seemed like sculptures.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I can't make a direct connection between that and my art now. Maybe inadvertently I developed a particular disposition. Brasília was very extreme. In São Paulo, for instance, one often sees lots of buildings under construction, mere shells that may stay unchanged for years. The way they interact with space changes one's perception. One sees structure preying on function, the different stages between the conceptualized project and its materialization. I believe that my works have something to do with this; they alternate between the concrete and the abstract.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

What about your installation at Plug In gallery in Winnipeg? Your placing a green room with round holes in the walls within an old meeting hall called more attention to the hall's details than to your own piece. It seems that you engage in all sorts of disappearing acts. You leave very few traces of yourself as an individual—your art blends entirely with its surroundings and commands the viewer to pay more attention to the environment than to the art.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I tend to dislike art that looks too much like art.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Why?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I like work that looks at or comments on reality and becomes a part of it, yet I'm aware that art has a different status from ordinary objects. It'll always be that way. Anyway, I aim to have my works play consciously with real life and real space.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Do you prefer any specific spaces? Are you comfortable with the white cube?

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*Keyhole*, 1999

Stainless steel

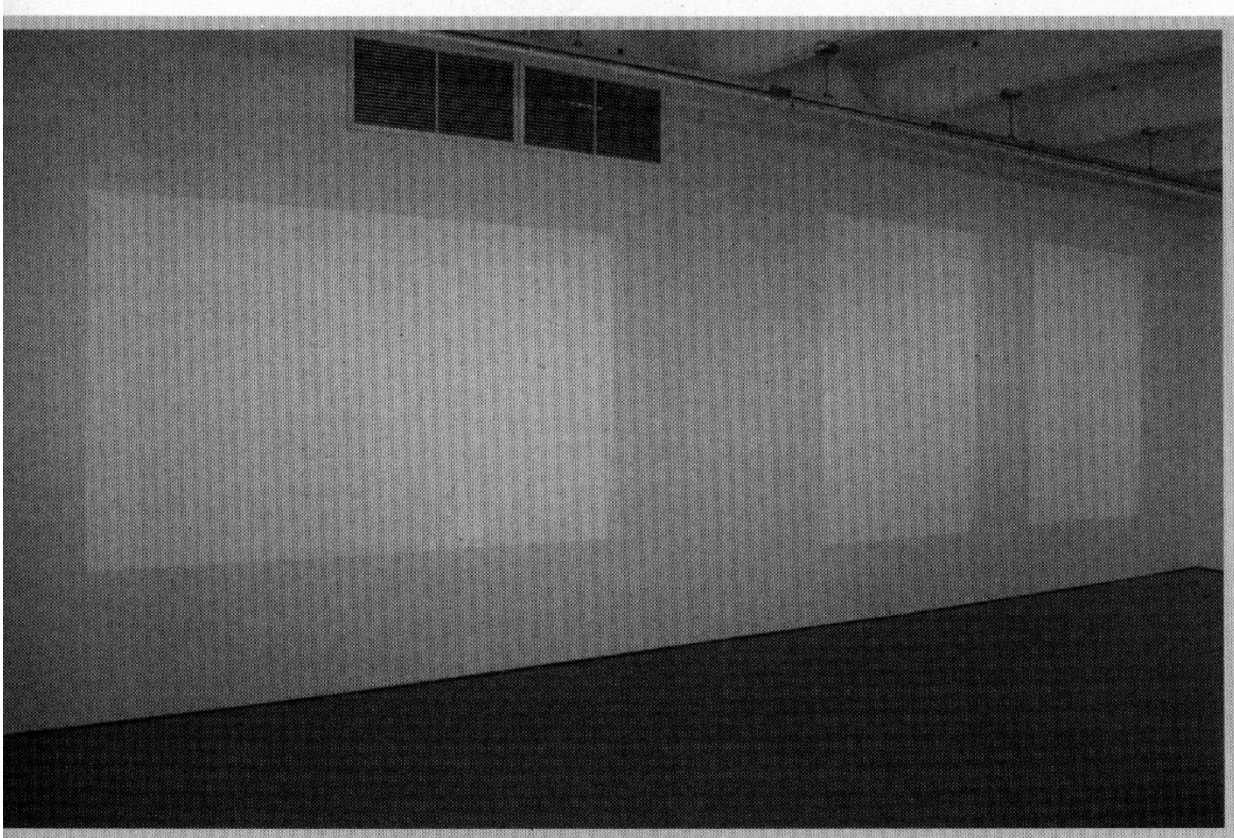
3 1/8 x 1 3/8 x 3/4 inches

Collection of the artist



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*At The Galleries #2, 2000*  
Latex on wall  
dimensions variable

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IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I like white cubes, but I also like other spaces. The installation at Winnipeg did not take place in a white cube at all. Neither did the dice piece I did for InSite, the biannual contemporary art project that takes place in San Diego and Tijuana, which was meant to interact with the environment.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

What was your project's relationship to the issues that InSite deals with, mainly those related to the border between Mexico and the United States?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I had the idea to make solid dice, I couldn't think of anything else. I arrived in San Diego and drove to Mexico. I never imagined the border to be like that. It was so intense, so physical. I thought that the transition from the States to Mexico would be gentler. That was certainly not the case. It actually looked like a game board to me. That's why I thought of the dice; they represented the abolition of chance. Everything about my project was predetermined. I arbitrarily placed the dice in 20 different places, 10 in each city. No one could see all of them at the same time; they could not be experienced as a whole. Sometimes they would even go unnoticed. They were neither gigantic nor monumental; they had a discreet presence instead.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

What about the sites where you chose to place them?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

Some places were anonymous: restaurants, schools, hospitals. The art crowd never visited them. I put the dice there to create a kind of strangeness. No sign or plaque was placed near them to inform the viewer that the dice were art.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Were you able to see people's responses?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I left soon after I had installed them. Actually in some cases I did see people's reactions. A few of the dice were stolen! I wonder what would have happened had they been in a different context.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Which reminds me of your wall painting of bricks at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

That was a funny experience. Imagine having this enormous piece done with latex paint, inside a museum, and people not noticing that what they were seeing was an artwork! I find lack of attention really interesting. Some art needs to be signaled; there almost needs to be a sign saying, "This is art," so people can grasp it. Maybe that explains why there's very "avant-garde" art that calls attention to itself by shocking the viewer. I avoid trying to shock.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Is that the way in which your art is political? By making us aware of our failure

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to pay attention to the world around us?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

My work can be political, yet some pieces are more so than others. The dice project, for instance, is called *Drops* and comments on a particular sociopolitical situation by making an analogy between the arbitrary border between the two countries and a game board in which two forces play against each other. Yet there's no play; the dice are solid and cannot roll at all. The outcome of the game is predetermined. The most political piece I've done so far is my version of the Brazilian flag, which is a response to my growing up during the dictatorship. The green in the flag is switched off, the piece is black and is called *The Night*. Other works are political on a different level; they criticize institutions. Some of my pieces may not have a direct political content, but my body of work and my position as an artist I do consider political.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

So you don't feel a need to be more directly political? I am thinking about issues such as political corruption, the gaps between Brazil's social classes.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I have thought of addressing those issues directly. Yet I think sometimes political art can be extremely hypocritical in the sense that one creates an object labeled as "art" that will sell for thousands of dollars. Once, at a collector's house, I had a horrible feeling. There was some highly "political art" hanging on the dining-room walls; the images showed corpses of people killed by the police. The collector was able to live with it and find it "cool."

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Does your position relate to your resistance to approaching issues that have a certain political currency? I'm thinking of your piece *Currency/Recurrency*, consisting of coins that have been effaced and thus are devoid of value as currency.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I work to fulfill my needs, to respond to what surrounds me. I find it strange when an artist specializes in one subject. I understand obsessions, but not specialization. I suppose it happens because art institutions and the market need art to be easily identified. I think my work resists this. I work on different fronts all the time.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

You probably have to experiment with many different materials until you achieve the effect that you want.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

In a sense my work is very experimental. It doesn't look that way, but it is.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

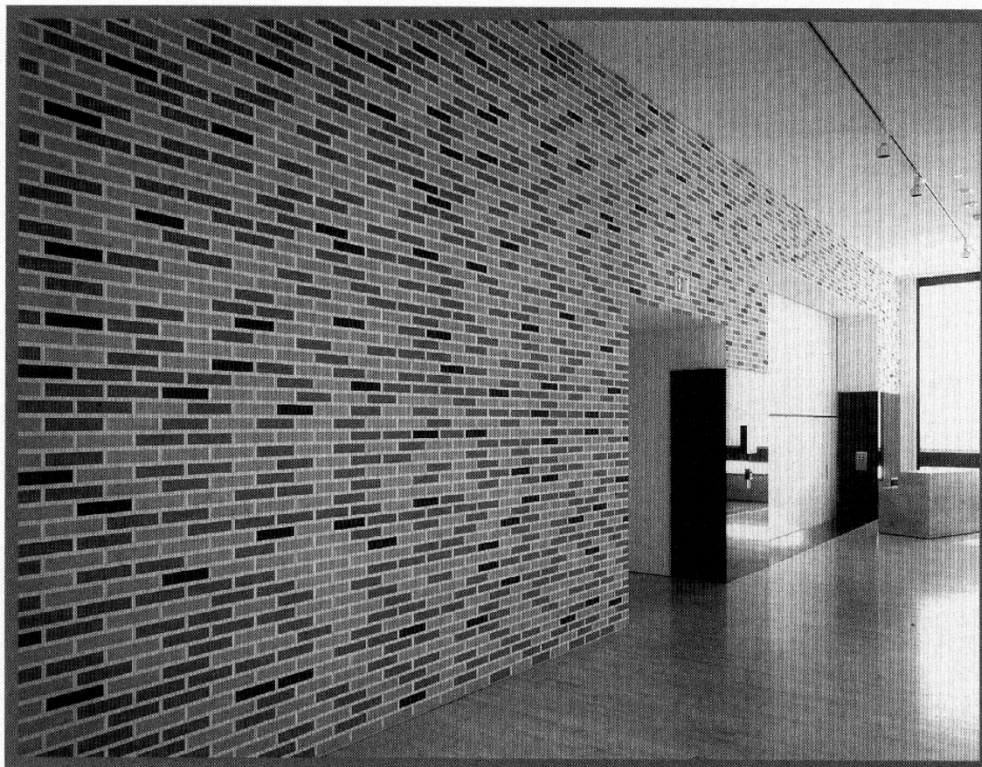
You were painting at some point. Why did you leap from canvas to the wall?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I have little experience as a traditional painter, but I have drawn obsessively since I was a child. I was always very attracted to walls, so it was more a move from the pages to the walls. The move wasn't conscious. I felt this urge to go big and liked the potential of a large image so closely attached to its surroundings.

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MONICA DE LA TORRE

You've mentioned that you fulfilled your desire to draw by manually creating the effect of wood grain in your panels.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

Yes. I also sketch a lot. Recently I've commissioned others to do some of the work, but I'm quite sure I don't want to lose physical touch with my art.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Looking at the concise diagrams you make for your wall pieces I'm reminded of Sol LeWitt's work. The diagrams and instructions seem like art in their own right. Have you ever written instructions for wall pieces that someone else will execute?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I have, actually.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

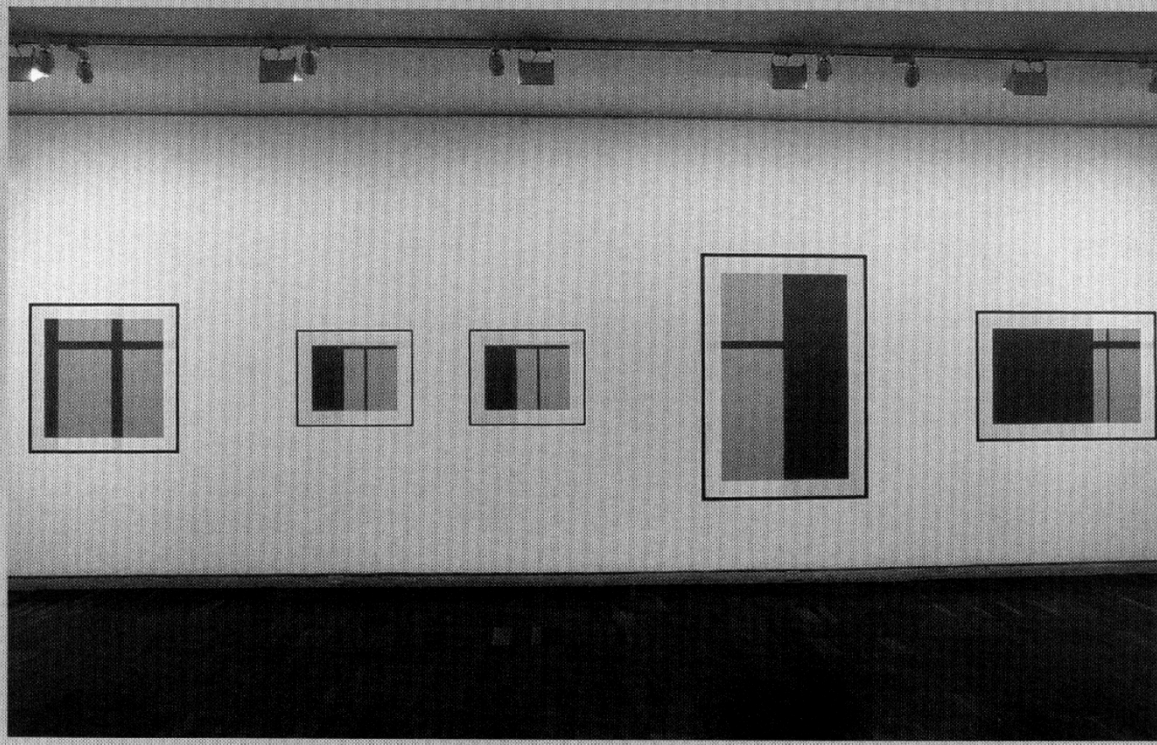
Lets talk more about Brazil. What do you think about the concept of *antropofagia*—the idea of the "absorption of the enemy" as a strategy of cultural emancipation, of an inevitable cannibalization of the political, economical, and cultural products of other cultures, mainly European—as one of Brazil's distinctive traits?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

My objection to it is that the cannibalization of other cultures has been in existence forever; it's not exclusively Brazilian. The idea made sense in the 1920s. The idea of

*Extension*, 1997  
 Latex on wall  
 dimensions variable  
 Installation view at San Francisco  
 Museum of Modern Art.

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eating something that changes once digested was very appropriate in the context of Modernism, when they tried to define and, let's say, create truly Brazilian art. Brazil is a country that's very serious about not being serious. When something new appears in the United States or Europe it's immediately appropriated in Brazil; it's grotesque sometimes. This is ironic because Brazilian society is very resistant to change, yet, on the other hand, it's always receiving all kinds of influences thanks to massive immigration.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

How do you relate to these influences?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I am very aware of the local and foreign influences I've received. My response could be defined as cannibalization, but that's too dramatic for me.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

What are the influences?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

Well, the most direct in Brazil was from my former teacher Regina Silveira. I immediately identified with her. The school was divided into two groups—one bent on expressionism and the other on conceptualism. She was conceptually oriented but had a passion for the image. I liked the fact that I had neither to be expressive nor a complete iconoclast. Secondly, I was very influenced by Brazilian modernist architecture, its geometry and organization. I liked it even as a child. This is closer to the São Paulo sensibility. Rio is something else. São Paulo is totally different from what Brazil is known for in foreign coun-

*Déjà vu*, 2001  
Installation view  
The Americas Society, May–July 2001.

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tries. It's tougher, industrial, very polluted, and gray. My palette comes from here. From abroad, Minimalism had a lot of impact on me very early on, when I was 16 or so. I don't know why I liked it; I didn't have much information then. I'm thinking of Donald Judd, Carl Andre and later Sol LeWitt. I also liked Magritte, whom I came to understand as a conceptual artist.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Could you talk about your inclination toward Constructivism rather than Expressionism?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I've actually been thinking a lot about this. My conclusion so far is that it has to do with people's personalities. To me an artist who only tries to express himself can easily become too self-involved. I try to avoid any type of narcissism; maybe I sublimate it. Expressiveness can lead to narcissism. I have such a strong reaction against narcissistic practices. I just don't see what their relevance is. I also avoid the whole body thing—the representation of the body and also the work that places emphasis on sensorial experiences—because it became so fashionable. It's somehow become this symbol of Brazilian art.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Do you think that the fact that your work is not Brazilian in this way has influenced its reception in the United States?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

It's too early to say this. The show at the Americas Society is my first solo show in New York. I suppose that my work is better understood here than in Europe. Though sometimes Americans expect to see some Latin American color. I understand the stereotypes—we have the carnival and samba and they're great—but they have little to do with my experience. It's funny to see how ruling countries want underdeveloped countries to have their identities in place after having smashed them. What kind of contradictions are these?

MONICA DE LA TORRE

How is your work received in Brazil?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

People find it interesting but "too difficult."

MONICA DE LA TORRE

It's ironic, your work is very transparent, in a way.

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

For many people art is supposed to have deep psychological meaning and baroque configurations. You just say, "This is about sexual ambiguity," and people go, "Oh, I get it!" It's so much easier to get by saying things like these about one's work.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

How do you feel about New York?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

I have mixed feelings. It's a good place to visit a couple of times a year, but I

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have no intention of living there. I find it too predatory. São Paulo's art scene is much smaller; you can ignore it for long periods and still be a part of it.

MONICA DE LA TORRE

Finally, I was reading a poem by David Antin in which he calls the notion that art is the embodiment of some truth a lie. For him, art is the embodiment of a lie. What is your take on this?

IRAN DO ESPIRITO SANTO

In art there's illusion and reality. This reminds me of a poem by Fernando Pessoa in which he says that the poet is a liar. There's much truth in lies.

*Mónica de la Torre is a poet who frequently writes about art. She has published articles in such journals as Bomb and ArtNews. She has recently translated and edited Gerardo Deniz: Poemas/Poems (Ditoria and Lost Roads Publishers). Her anthology of contemporary Mexican poetry, Reversible Monuments, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press. Her poems and translations have appeared in many literary publications.*