

This conversation between Lucia Koch and Iran do Espírito Santo took place in June 2026 and was translated by Miguel Nassif.

LUCIA KOCH: Most of my questions come from our previous conversations. You mentioned that *Compasso* (2025) stands at 1,80m tall, which is the height of a man, so to speak, a sort of Modulor. Is this an update of Le Corbusier's Modulor or of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man? Because to me this relationship seems more ironic than affirmative...

IRAN DO ESPÍRITO SANTO: More ironic. I wasn't thinking about the Modulor, I thought of the Vitruvian Man. I had read a book about it a while back, which is a strong reference in art history and architecture. But this reference wasn't a programmed thing. One day I was using a drafting compass and I had the idea of enlarging it to a human scale, because of its anthropomorphic quality. Almost everyone who has ever handled a compass has played with that at some point. Its legs look like... well, "human" legs.

LK: Or two arms opening.

IES: I think more of legs, there's also this type of compass called a "ballerina" compass, used to draw smaller circles.

LK: The Vitruvian Man is a drawing made with a compass. It's a tool that is actually used in the drawing. The movement of the legs echoes the Vitruvian Man's arms and legs.

IES: For a long time I've been making sculptures that are highly accurate, technical representations of specific objects. More recently I've started introducing a certain degree of functionality—a light bulb that fits perfectly into a socket, for instance, or *Porca e Rosca* [Nut and Bolt] (2015), which is constructed exactly like an ideal nut and bolt, without any manufacturing flaws.

LK: The first time you told me about *Compasso*, and showed me an image of it, what struck me was when you said: "It's identical to a compass." That word *identical*, suggests an idea of precision, which made me think about all the precision instruments you've created, and also about the fact that you draw in order to draw. You design an instrument that you'll then use for drawing.

IES: Yes. In the case of *Compasso*, it's much more complex because of the number of components, which made it extremely difficult to produce.

LK: You have this recurrent idea of reproducing an object that's identical to another familiar, recognizable object—something you've explored in the light bulbs, the shoeboxes, and countless other works. *Compasso* follows that logic, but it seems a

little different to me, because it isn't just any object. The compass and the ruler are drawing instruments. They trace, they measure; in every sense they're precision tools. That made me think of *Untitled (Alambrado)* [Chain-Link Fence] (2007–2026), where the drawing is guided by a tool, a ruler that you designed yourself...

IES: It's a template—a ruler/template.

LK: Exactly. A ruler/template that you design and have fabricated, entirely defined by you. It seems to lend the drawing a certain objectivity, as though it could be replicated by anyone, *ad infinitum*. In principle, a template would eliminate any inconsistency or accident, any possibility of something unexpected happening.

IES: In theory...

LK: Yet it doesn't matter if there's a ruler involved—you can still tell that someone drew it. That's the only reason it exists before us as a reality: because someone made that drawing. So it's never completely free of subjectivity. But there are other works in which you use rulers, sometimes of your own making, sometimes not—for example, the series of curtain drawings¹, where you use a felt-tip pen that gradually runs out of ink as you draw. The ink running out creates the impression that the pen is failing; there's a recurring sense of imperfection. That rhythm, that cadence, is what generates the undulation across the surface. And that's the only reason you're able to evoke the image of a curtain. Then you create a precision instrument in order to make use of the imprecision it inevitably produces. You could try to maintain consistency, regularity, but it's impossible. Every line is unique, and the resulting image is always different.

IES: I've been obsessed with that for a very long time, ever since I was young—the relationship between repetition and particularity.

LK: And difference, right? Because repetition is precisely what creates the conditions for difference to become visible.

IES: Yes. It's an obsession that extends to identity itself. Identity in a broader sense, the identity of things.

LK: Yes, but I think it also has to do with subjectivity.

IES: Going back to what you were saying about the compass being an instrument for drawing and measuring: about twenty years ago I made a sculpture of a pencil called *Lápis Prateado* [Silver Pencil] (2010), based on a real pencil and maintaining its exact proportions. It's a hexagonal prism. That form, incidentally, recurs in several

¹ Reference to works from the *CRTN* series, begun in 2004, made with permanent marker on paper.

works. The pencil has this particular characteristic of being a prism intersected by a cone, which is what defines both its shape and its identity. Those underlying geometric qualities of objects often go unnoticed.

LK: You take an object that has a practical function, a utilitarian object, and make its essence become its form, while its function becomes almost a poetic dimension. In other words, recognizing it as a pencil is what carries a certain poetry and the conceptual charge of the work. But the object's essence is translated into form. It feels like a reversal.

IES: Yes, I think that's an interesting observation. But something else that's important to me is the relationship, or the duality, between concrete reality, which includes functionality, our everyday existence, the daily confrontation with the practical world, and the abstraction that's implicit in everything, especially in everything created by humanity.

LK: Maybe that's why you're drawn to essences, to qualities that reappear in different contexts. In *Compasso*, for example, the scale of the body and the scale of architecture coincide. It's the size of a human body, but it seems to refer more to architecture than to drawing understood as design. It belongs more to the real world, to built architecture. At that scale, when we encounter it leaning against the wall, it's as if it were waiting for an action to take place. At rest, but ready to be used. On the other hand it almost seems like the very subject that draws, as though, even standing still, it possessed a kind of *anima*. It's as if the possibility of drawing were already inscribed within it. It's almost a creature: closer to the hand and the mind that draw than to an instrument to be held in the hand.

IES: I'd never thought of it that way. But in that sense we could also draw a parallel with ourselves, with those of us who draw. We're instruments too.

LK: By shifting the place of the compass, we also shift our own. I'd also like to think with you about the template you designed to make the chain-link fence wall drawing. Sometimes it seems that the reason for using a ruler is that it allows you to recreate a pattern in another context, at another moment, in another place. So is it the place and the context that call these works back into being when they reappear? *Untitled (Alambrado)* [Chain-Link-Fence] was first shown in your exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2007. It's been almost twenty years. Is the work in Venice the same as the one in São Paulo?

IES: It's almost the same work because I used exactly the same template I used in Venice. The current drawing has almost the same proportions, though it's slightly smaller because I wanted it to fit a specific wall in the gallery's new space, which has a lower ceiling. It also has the particularity of occupying almost an entire freestanding

wall. I'd made this work three times before. The first was at the Venice Biennale, then in the United States, and later in Calgary, in an exhibition devoted entirely to drawings and wall paintings. I'd never shown it in Brazil. I'm at a point in my life, and at an age, where I'm looking back at things. What really triggered this more recently was my last exhibition in Italy, at Galleria Mazzoleni, where I decided to put together a sort of mini-retrospective. It was also a reaction against this constant demand for novelty. I'm quite tired of that.

LK: That's partly driven by the market logic that expects every exhibition to present a completely new body of work, one that begins, ends, and is shown in sequence. But although you say this has to do with where you are in life, and with growing weary of that cycle, you've always made exhibitions that weren't simply the presentation of a single series with a beginning, middle, and end.

IES: That's true. In museums, not so much, but galleries always expect new work. At a certain point in life, that starts to lose its meaning.

LK: Yes, but at the same time I keep thinking that retrospective exhibitions—which are more common in institutions than in galleries—carry another implication: they tend to assume a kind of...

IES: Evolution.

LK: Exactly. And it's not about evolution. You don't think in terms of beginning, concluding, and presenting a resolved series of works. It also occurred to me that you keep returning to ideas you've already explored because they aren't exhausted by a single work. They continue to engage you—not as old works, not as references or origins. They don't feel previous to the newer pieces surrounding them.

When you make *Linha e Sombra 4* [Line and Shadow 4] (2013/2026), the nature of the line and its shadow are the same. It's as though you're saying, "They're the same thing. It's all virtual. It's all thought."

IES: Yes. While making it, I began to realize that I absorb, in a way, what people tell me about the work, what they perceive in it. I made that painting intending to refer to a space beyond, one that doesn't exist, but I hadn't imagined that it would also be read as an illusion.

LK: In many of your works, you give us two things that initially appear the same, and it's precisely in the ways they aren't identical that we're compelled to think. It seems like you're simply repeating something, which in itself wouldn't be new within conceptual art—the idea of reiteration or tautology. But you gradually undo that understanding. When you see *Untitled (Alambrado)*, you read it as a fence, as wire mesh. And when you move closer, it's identical to a fence—but it isn't. It's a drawing.

I find it very difficult to achieve that effect through drawing, especially using such reduced, economical representations of things.

IES: I think my work engages with the possibility that perception can fall apart, and that causes me a certain amount of anxiety. That's present in all these works. The glass that's formed by concentric circles can dissolve, its meaning can dissolve. For me, that's a profoundly human drama. At the same time that we're confined to our physical bodies, we also have a mind that seems immaterial, a mind that operates through concepts. I don't think even the most advanced neuroscience has managed to define what the mind actually is.

LK: Yes, but what I see in your work is this clear understanding that perception is not only active rather than passive, but that is constantly shaped by thought and speculation.

IES: By experience too, isn't it?

LK: Yes, but experience is always also reasoning, it takes place within experience. And that's you're provoking, not merely optical illusions.

Speaking of freedom, I was thinking again about these templates and about the irony that the instruments you create also end up producing imperfections and inaccuracies. It's as though you're telling us that drawing is always subjective, whether it's made directly on paper freehand or with tools. I started thinking about other artists concerned with drawing—artists who expose the conditions of drawing, its instruments, its meanings. And I thought of Regina Silveira.

IES: Of course.

LK: She made a series of works about the act of drawing itself—those works in which she uses figures that resemble those in drawing manuals. Of course, your approaches to drawing are different. Earlier you mentioned freedom, and it reminded me of Regina's opposition to the notion of "good drawing." We call drawings "freehand" when they're made without tools—without rulers, erasers, compasses, or the templates and devices that you deliberately build and embrace. So is drawing really freer without those templates? Or do those templates actually give you access to a form of drawing that's freer in another sense?

IES: That's a good question.

LK: Because they free you from other things. They free you from style, for instance. There are many things you're released from by using a template.

IES: I've never really thought about freedom in relation to these particular drawings. As I said, I came to art through drawing. As a child I drew compulsively. All I wanted to do was draw and build three-dimensional things. I was interested in every kind of representation, and in non-representation too. Even abstract things I didn't understand fascinated me and made me want to copy them. I drew constantly, really constantly—the human figure, oddly enough. I even studied anatomy from a medical textbook. Not anatomy scientifically, but the anatomical illustrations.

LK: I have the impression that the works in the exhibition speak to one another quite strongly. You see *Compasso* and you think of *Estudo para Copo* [Study for Glass] (2014); the template can also be understood as a drawing instrument, so it naturally gravitates toward *Compasso*. But the giant nut on its pedestal strikes me as different. It remains somewhat opaque. You can build interpretations around it and connect it to the other works, but it never fully yields to them. There's something that remains irreducible about it, as though the piece insisted on its own presence and says, "I am just this. I'm here." "I have no function, nor am I the size of an actual nut."

IES: Yes, the nut is the most tautological work.

LK: In fact, that became even clearer to me when I started thinking about what I wanted to ask you about it. It was almost as if it resisted becoming the subject of a question—as if it were really opaque.

IES: It comes out of that earlier work I call *Base Fixa* | *Fixed Base* (2016), which consisted of four large nuts and bolts arranged on the floor to form a square.

LK: Yes, I see that within the larger body of your work it isn't isolated. But here, in the exhibition, it feels deliberately solitary.

IES: There's another aspect that interests me, which is sculptural as well: the possibility of looking inside, of examining the interior of a screw thread—that industrial microworld humanity has created. I once had an exhibition of drawings called *Não Escondido, Porém Despercebido*,² [Not hidden, Yet Unnoticed] which dealt precisely with these kinds of objects.

LK: Yes. Once you enlarge them, you begin to see all sorts of things that normally go unnoticed. But again, it's interesting that you describe this as sculptural. I understand exactly what you mean. It feels as though you're uncovering the object's essence, which is its form—*what it is* before *what it's for*.

IES: It's a form. It's an ordinary object, yet at the same time it's incredibly complex—that spiral, that thing which is potentially an infinite structure. When I first

² An exhibition by Iran do Espírito Santo at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, 2017.

looked at it in isolation, I thought, "I have to use this." And because it's an object with a hole in it, it also has to do with directing the gaze, something that's already present in the keyhole.

LK: I hadn't thought of that—that you look through them, whereas you don't actually look through your keyhole sculpture.³

IES: Exactly. There are lots of connections you can make. It's different from *Compasso*, which consists of more than twenty enlarged parts. Here it's just a single thing.

LK: In *Linha e Sombra 4*, it's almost as though you're saying that a line and a shadow are the same thing. But what intrigued me most is that it seems you're telling us everything is a projection. Is that right?

IES: I don't know.

LK: Is everything drawing?

IES: I began making the *Linha e Sombra* works as graphite drawings. I made a whole series in graphite, and another using carbon paper. That one was almost a degree zero of drawing: one heavy line and a lighter one, one standing for the line and the other for the shadow, yet both really being the same thing. The shadow is also a line. Then I had the idea of bringing that into space. I did several variations in an exhibition in Scotland. It's a very abstract line—it could represent a rod or something similar—but...

LK: ...but it remains a line. Except that in your version it also becomes an object, because it casts a shadow.

IES: Exactly. It's this combination of immateriality and supposed materiality that creates a strange kind of illusion. I had one installed here at home—it isn't there anymore, but it used to be on this wall—and people thought there was actually something there. I find that fascinating about representation. Sometimes almost nothing becomes "a thing."

LK: You belong to those who think through drawing, even when you're not actually drawing. Even when you're making a three-dimensional object, or making stone pieces in Pietrasanta. And for someone who draws, there's always a projective dimension.

³ Reference to one of Iran do Espírito Santo's seminal works, *Untitled (Keyhole)* (2003), a three-dimensional enlargement of the silhouette of a keyhole. The work is part of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)'s permanent collection.

IES: That's because I—and I imagine most artists—live by drawing mentally. I'm constantly drawing in my mind, constantly drawing and imagining. And there's this enormous number of things we can create in our imagination, most of which we'll simply end up taking with us to the grave.

LK: Yes, but in your case, the drawing becomes something in the world.

IES: What do you mean?

LK: Your drawing ends up becoming a thing in the world. Of course it still belongs to the realm of the virtual, but it also becomes an object, an event. I think that's different from simply representing something.

IES: It operates in a space between the virtual and the real. It's not a world of dreams, although I often associate my obsessions with recurring dreams. We've talked about almost all the works in the exhibition—they're not many—but I think it's worth emphasizing that, to a large extent, it's an exhibition about drawing, though not only about drawing. It was really set in motion by the proposal to show a recent sculpture.

LK: A sculpture that seems to want to contain many things.

IES: But it isn't a desire to mystify sculpture—I don't like that. What does matter is the technical challenge. It took seven years to complete that work. I think it's the work I've struggled the hardest to make.

LK: But there's something I think is important to say, and it has to do with how your work is read. What strikes us—especially artists, who understand how things work, how machines, materials, and tools operate—is the technical precision and sophistication involved in the making of these objects. But when we stand before them, what can truly astonish us, what can captivate us, isn't exactly that. It's their presence. It's the way they are and what they are, rather than how they came into being.

IES: The effort that's embedded in them...

LK: They don't captivate us because of virtuosity. Rather, through the rigor of their making, they acquire a particular kind of force.

IES: Because if there is any virtuosity, it's conceptual virtuosity.

LK: Yes. Because things only become this precious in the realm of ideas. Precisely because they're perfect—or identical—or possess all these qualities that emerge

through such rigorous production, they seem somehow more ideal. It's as though we gain access to that realm through matter, and that's deeply compelling.

IES: I don't know whether it's implicit or explicit, but something that's very important to me is that there's also a kind of technical virtuosity embodied by anonymous people who made these works possible...

LK: Which isn't yours alone, of course.

IES: Not at all. This knowledge has been developing over centuries, leading to these machines. Then there's the worker who knows exactly how to operate them, which I find extraordinary. That's the world I constantly confront. I remember the first time I walked into a metalworking shop almost trembling, afraid to present a project to a company that manufactured drilling equipment for Petrobras. And what I brought them was the drawing for a little table lamp.⁴ It's a very masculine world, isn't it?

LK: It's a bit like going to Pietrasanta to make a shoebox.

IES: Exactly.

LK: But they must enjoy it eventually, don't they? It must seem slightly absurd to the people involved...

IES: At first I sensed some resistance. But after a while they began to enjoy it.

LK: Because the challenge isn't technical—it's conceptual.

IES: I find that relationship interesting, that coexistence with industry, with the "craftsmanship" embedded in those practices.

LK: I think that's incredibly important because, once again, you move toward an objective realm, yet there's still a person operating the machine. So you're not the only subject. The compass becomes a subject, the machine becomes a subject—but so does the person running it.

⁴ *Abat-Jour* (1996), stainless steel sculpture, 34 x 17 x 17 cm