

Sarah Morris

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Interview
by

Éric Troncy,
portrait

by

Orson
Gillick Morris

o you come from an artistic family?

Yes and no. I come from a medical family, my father was a research scientist, and my mother was probably a frustrated architect who became a nurse. On her side of the family, there were maybe two or three painters. My mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother painted, but it wasn't as a profession. It was clear to me that science is fundamentally creative.

— Where did you grow up?

Well, I was born in England. As I said, my father was a scientist, he was working for a pharmaceutical company in England, but there were always plans to go back to the United States. So I was born in England and maybe when I was less than two, we moved back to the United States, where I really grew up, in New England.

— And did you go to any art school there?

No.

— What did you study then? And what was the plan for you, in your mind?

I always knew I was going to be an author, that was very clear. There was a very good art school that I was aware of, which was

Rhode Island School of Design—but that was not a possibility. I thought about it for a split second, and then I was like, no, there were too many things I needed to read and learn before I started making work. You have to remember, this was the 80s, it was quite academic in a way. My idea was to study political philosophy. I ended up going to Brown, studying political philosophy and semiotics. The political philosophy degree, I completed in the first two years, but I was focusing on semiotics. Then I went off to Cambridge, where I had a fellowship. I was studying at Cambridge in the SPS department, which was sort of a new department that was created in the late 60s, Social and Political Sciences. There, I really was fascinated and studied the Frankfurt School. There was a guy, a very young professor who was 25, or 26, his name was Dr. Graham McCann. He wrote an amazing book about Marilyn Monroe, and he was also teaching Frankfurt School. This was really interesting, because this was the first time I was really expected to read not just a fragment or chapter but all of Bourdieu, all of Marx, all of Adorno. You were encouraged to even read stuff that wasn't translated. I tried to learn German at one point in order to translate Adorno. I had a German boyfriend (This was handy). The Adorno text I remember, was about "Freizeit", a theory of free time—of course it's fictional, free time isn't really free time, it's time to consume or it's time for culture. This essay that Adorno wrote was never translated. And I remember reading that and finding that very esoteric at the time, that this is what I wanted to do. I didn't want to start making work. I wanted to read at that point, like learn the map before I started making work. I did meet a number of people in Cambridge though. I met Allen Jones, which blew my mind.





— *How did you meet Allen Jones?*

Well, it's a really crazy story. I was brought to a party.

— *Oh, it's not through the school.*

No, it's not through the school. No, no, I went to the party in London with my German boyfriend.

— *So you went to a party and he was there?*

Yeah. I'm probably like the Tom Hanks ("Forrest Gump") of the art world. Since that, I've been everywhere. I met Allen Jones when I was still an undergraduate, I met Gerhard Richter when I was still an undergraduate. You know, I've met a number of people just through traveling, talking to people, meeting some interesting people along the way. It's a chain. I remember sitting next to Gerhard Richter at a dinner—I was telling the director in Krefeld that I had been to Düsseldorf once before in 1988, it was for a birthday party of my friend's mother. The mother knew I was going to be an artist, and she sat specifically next to Gerhard Richter.

— *What do you mean, she knew you were going to be an artist?*

I was extremely curious, I was asking a lot of questions. I had a certain attitude and I think somehow she knew that I was going to take this path.

— *When did you take the decision?*

Probably around that time, because then I went back from my final year at Brown and I published a manifesto myself, called "Defunct!". It ended up in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, it was a bit notorious. Imagine the semiotics department of Brown gets a call from *Rolling Stone Magazine* to speak to Sarah Morris. To them, that was sacrilege that anybody had left the university and was even trying to do anything else. Even though Todd Haynes and Christine Vachon had been in that department, years before me, and they had clearly gone to Hollywood. You know, if anybody was making anything, it was going to be film. If you're going to produce, if you're going to make anything, it was not going to be art, it was going to be film. That was the spirit of the department.

— *So when you say "I knew I wanted to be an author," it was more movie oriented.*

No, I mean, author in the widest sense. If I was reading, I wasn't quite sure where I was going to park it, whether it was going to be film, writing, or making work. I knew when I was younger, 16 or 17, that I was interested in creating something, creating something, having a position, having a life, some sort of fantasy.

— *When did you sit in front of a blank canvas for the first time? How did this happen?*

I think I sat in front of a blank canvas in Times Square. I had a studio in Times Square because several friends of mine told me about this building that was called 233 West 42nd. It had appeared in the movie "Slaves of New York," it was a famous studio building, and it was very cheap because for a long time there was a plan to destroy Times Square and redevelop it. So if you had a studio in that building, it was extraordinarily cheap, because you had no lease and you didn't know when that was going to end and

so on. There was a very old-fashioned sort of analogue porn industry going on all around, you know, peep shows and magazine shops, and then there was the Port Authority on the other side. It was like the "Sweet Smell of Success" around the corner, there were these very cool bars, boxing bars, like the places that had had some glamour at one point but no longer, and on the other side, there was the Port Authority.

— *You decided to rent a studio there not knowing what you would do.*

No, I knew I was going to use it for painting. I had been to the Whitney program already. When I did my manifesto, I met Hal Foster, because I had read "The Anti-Aesthetic", a book he wrote, and I reviewed a book he published, called "Vision and Visuality". I met him and he asked me, "What are you doing next year?" I said, "I don't know but I'm moving to New York." He said I should apply to the Whitney Program. I had never heard of it. Nobody at Brown went to the Whitney Program. Also they tended to accept people who were out in the world for several years. I was only 22. So I moved to New York and then I got the studio. That was the first time I was in front of a blank canvas. At that point I was making the text paintings. I was using stencils. I was making those paintings vertically. Those paintings are horizontal but due to space constraints I made them vertically. I had been thinking about using silkscreen. It seemed it was an easier, cleaner way to go, but I ended up rejecting it because it was too expensive. It was too flat and it was probably too Warhol.

— *The text pieces, as you call them, are the first things you've been doing with the intention to exhibit them?*

Yeah. I tried a number of things before that, I remember thinking I had to reject the hand, so there were a number of things I tried to do using my hands that I thought were too subjective. I was working for Jeff Koons when I first moved to New York. He did a project for "Defunct!," my magazine. When I moved to New York and was in the Whitney Program, I asked him if I could help him because I needed a job. He wasn't really in New York at the time, he was finishing the "Banality" series in Europe, and he was starting to plan "Made in Heaven". This was a perfect opportunity to me, so I had a job with him. He brought me one time to Lichtenstein studio in the West Village. That was really amazing, incredible. He was working on the "Living Room" series. At that point things accelerated and I think I threw out a lot of things that I was trying to do. I was trying to come up with a language and I knew it wasn't right and then I was in front of a blank canvas again. I had been in front of blank canvases before but the most important blank canvases were those text paintings: LIAR, GUILTY, HELL, NOTHING, DONUTS, PLEASE.

— *So here you go again, in front of a blank canvas after the visit at Lichtenstein's studio.*

It was around that time. It gave me the guts to just throw a number of things away and streamline it. I admired silkscreen, I admired the simplicity of silkscreen and the digital reproductive aspect of silkscreen, but ultimately, it was too flat, and it wasn't seductive enough. As I said, it was also too expensive. Too Warhol. I still love silkscreen. I love packaged things, I love books, I love lithograph, I love all things printed, I like the printing process. In a way, the way I make paintings, there is a sort of printing or reproductive element to it because it's quite slow and I don't see the paintings until the very end of the process. When I remove the tape, it has a sort of photographic element to the way I paint.

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— *Were you, at the time, part of a group of artists or part of a scene?*

I was friends with Rita Ackerman, Rob Pruitt and Jack Early, Karen Kilimnik. There was a whole scene indeed, Bernadette Corporation, Art Club 2000, Rirkrit Tiravanija. Colin DeLand and Pat Hearn used to come around to the studio, but also I used to curate shows and Colin would always show up.

— *You used to curate shows?*

In the 42nd street studio building, there was like a travel agent in the studio building, Jack Pearson was there, Christian Marclay was there, Rita Ackerman, it was a bunch of people. There was an empty space, and I got the landlord to give us the empty space for six months. A friend of mine and I curated a number of solo shows and a group show of British artists, which is how I met Jane and Louise Wilson, Sam Taylor Wood, Gary Hume and so on. I also curated a show called "B Movie," in a San Francisco motel; I curated a show in my apartment on 10th street called "Home Alone." There was a lot going on, because, you know, there was no market. There was nothing. But I do remember hearing about your show "No Man's Time" in 1991 at the Villa Arson and I remember being jealous. I knew several people who were in it and I was like, who is Eric Troncy? I'd like to meet him. The idea at that point, of somebody actually traveling to a show was beyond anybody's economic reality or anybody's activity. There was no traveling the way it is now, and there was no cellphone, no internet.

— *International phone calls were super expensive!*

I remember them talking about your show and I remember them going. I remember them coming back. It shows how everything seemed very far away: you heard about everything, you knew about everything going on. Cologne, for example, seemed extraordinarily important, but very far away. At that time it seemed there wasn't anything happening in London other than

some shows in warehouses. There was the Saatchi space but it didn't really seem like London had that much going on at the time, which of course was wrong. This is what happens when you have a lot of distance between places. You have an impression and maybe your impressions are more important than reality.

— *So it's the beginning of the 90s, you're in New York, you're in this building with many artists, you sometimes curate shows and you do the text pieces. What was the next step for you?*

Well, I got a letter at one point, which was the letter we all didn't want to get. Time Square really was getting redeveloped and we had to move out of this fabulous place. I'd been dreading this moment of having to leave this building. We all knew it would happen, but it happened sooner than we thought. I think it happened at some point in the winter of '95. Of course, I found another studio, it wasn't the end of the world but that location was crazy important because of this feeling that you were at the epicenter of the city. Now you don't have this in New York, a center the way it felt then. But at that point, it really felt it was in the center, where it should be. Art, not at the margins, but at the center. I got a studio on 28th Street, which was fantastic too. Of course it was more expensive. The text paintings were completed there. Around that time I met Jay Jopling at a party with some friends. Several friends of mine were talking about Mike Tyson, and about going to Las Vegas because Mike Tyson had just gotten out of jail and he was doing a fight that weekend. Jay said he was going, asked if we wanted to go and we said yes. We met him at the airport, we had no airline tickets, we had no tickets for the fight and we all got on a flight at LaGuardia Airport to Las Vegas. We got there. We had no hotel. Nothing was planned. And during a fight night, the city is totally different than any other time, it's like on crack! Everybody's on edge, and the lights mean something different on a fight night. We got rooms at the Golden Nugget and checked in. This is the time when "Leaving Las Vegas" was made, I remember Nick Cage, checking in at the same time as us and he was pretending he was really drunk. I remember there were David



Hockney prints everywhere. We went to scalp tickets. We were successful. We saw the fight. We came back to New York after this crazy adrenaline of watching that fight, which, of course, was over before it started. Then maybe about three months after that Jay came to the studio on 28th Street where I had all the text paintings. We had made an appointment that he comes over the day that the clocks changed, so I was waiting and I didn't know what the time was, because it wasn't automated and something amazing happened. I was in my studio, I knew we had an appointment, but he wasn't there. I was thinking, "What time is it?" He eventually came to the studio and he was absolutely silent and so was I. He wanted to buy everything in the studio. I said, "Well, I can't do that. We can only do that if we schedule a show." I was very covetous of my work, as a younger artist, I was constantly holding it, storing it, waiting for the right moment. I was very protective of the work for good reason, because there's a lot of bad situations that can happen, but in a way, it was too much, I was like a bird in its nest. As a younger artist I was constantly holding off, I wanted to have meetings, I wanted to talk to people, I wanted people to come over to the studio for sure. I had tons of studio visits where I didn't even have anything in the studio to show. I loved meeting people, I loved talking to people, but in terms of showing I was holding off—until that moment, probably October of '95. We scheduled the show for February '96. I went to London via Berlin, if that makes any sense. I arrived in London and I sort of had a feeling I might be staying for a long time. Jay said, "You should really live in London. You'll love it. It's fantastic. It's so much better than New York at the moment." Actually New York was really fun. We were going out all the time, there were parties all the time, nightclubs all the time. So it wasn't that it wasn't fun, but the problem with New York at that time is there was no market for younger artists. There were several really good galleries, for sure, but there was a hierarchy in New York that seemed very stratified. In London there was no previous art world, it was super open and there was nothing that came before, or let's just say what came before was in the '60s and '70s. Richard Hamilton loomed large but that was it. London felt much more

pluralistic and definitely more fun. There was a party and openings almost every night for six or seven years.

— *You stayed in London after your show?*

I stayed in London. I went with my suitcase for my show in February '96 and stayed. I always kept a foothold in New York but I arrived in London in 1996 and I left in 2002, keeping a place in London until much later. However, my studio moved from London to New York in 2002.

— *You were still doing the text paintings?*

Yeah, exactly.

— *When you say "the text paintings," do you include, for instance, the fences?*

Yeah, the fences, the shoes, got painted the same time as the text paintings. I was already thinking of these as a form of "after images." A narrative that I was trying to compose. The aluminum fence paintings, for instance, were done in London, the "Midtown" paintings were all done in London.

— *I thought you would introduce the first building paintings as a very new step—because you're still painting buildings now but you don't do text paintings anymore. As far as I understand, for you, it seems it belongs to the same idea of paintings as the text painting.*

Yes, imagine I'm in Times Square, I'm hearing this guy on a microphone 24/7 yelling about the state of the world. The text paintings have this volume, this adrenaline of the city, of the newspapers, of this sort of pop psychology that was around us all at the time, and is still, for that matter. Then from that, I went to the buildings, but the "Midtown" paintings I made in London. It was a form of my own identity. Mies van der Rohe made the glass skyscraper in Chicago—a German makes a skyscraper in Chicago,

I was not being commissioned to make a film about the Beijing Olympics. No, nobody commissioned me to do that. That was self-inflicted.

which becomes the identity of America. I did that in London, and maybe it was a form of being homesick. Maybe it was a form of my identity. Anyway, my first text paintings, the paint was rolled on, and then quickly I realized that that wasn't as satisfying as what I wanted. I started using brushes, but to me, the process was the same. There was a flatness, there was a stencil, I was using household paint. To me, there were series, but there were thematic breaks. It was clear to me that I was very happy with the way I was painting.

— *Do you remember what the average price of a painting was when you had your show with White Cube, and did you sell any?*

I don't remember that. I don't know. I'd have to look back, but it must have been very cheap. It sold well, and that was viewed as a negative thing. You have to understand everybody had another job at that point. Everybody in New York, all the people I just mentioned, everybody had another way to live, whether it was they were an art handler, or they worked in a restaurant, or they were somebody's assistant, we all had another economy. Our English counterparts did not have that. In London there was no pressure.

— *When did you think about doing movies?*

Back to the semiotics department at Brown, everybody was making movies, it was the only thing that was considered valid to produce. There were some people who were making art, but that was not really the strong point. I was in a lot of people's films when I was a student, but I never made film. Film was too expensive and I was more interested in contemporary art. I definitely was like looking at Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, and of course, Andy Warhol, Marcel Broodthaers, Donald Judd, Joseph Beuys... I was always

interested in film, so in my studio in Times Square, I made several versions of "Midtown" before I actually shot "Midtown".

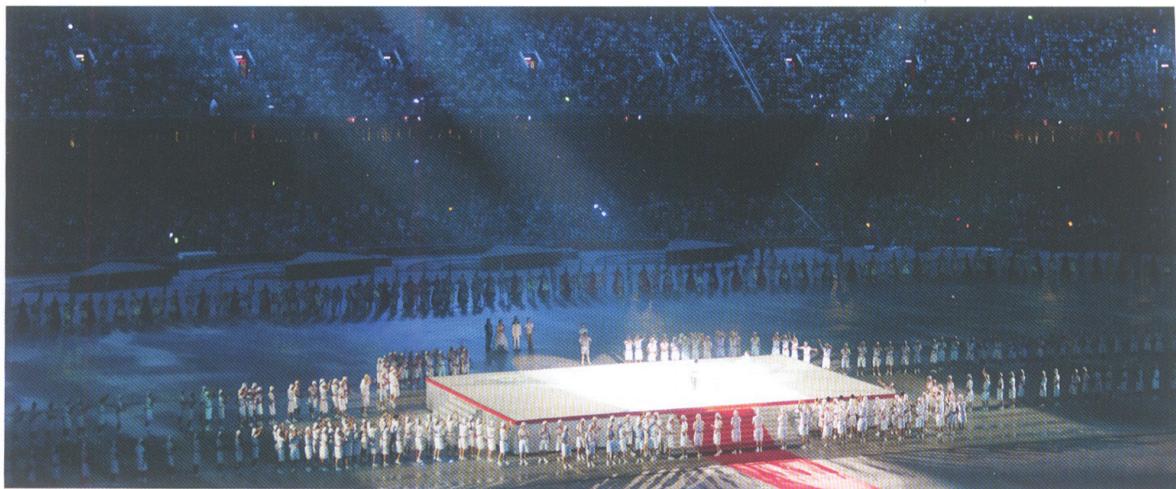
I was then invited to be in a show at the Ludwig Museum, which is called "I Love New York." They wanted several paintings of mine, and the director of the Ludwig came to visit my London studio. I always had an idea to make a short film, to use film as propaganda. To create a series of references of how I felt the work inhabited this world, to make my own set of references, an index. I hired a news group to go out with me for a single day and shoot this map of my world, we shot all of the pulse points; Chase Bank at 10 in the morning, Penn Station, the Seagram Building.

I showed it at the Ludwig Museum. On the one hand, it felt completely normal to make a short film and I was very aware of a lot of artists that had used film. Of course, I knew William Klein's films, Warhol's films and even Polke's. On the other hand, it was a new thing for me, it felt edgy, it felt like there's almost two artists going on inside of one body. It felt risky at the time to do that, but I immediately loved doing it. When I went to China to make that series of paintings and the film people thought I was being commissioned to make this thing. No. I was not being commissioned to make a film about the Beijing Olympics.

No, nobody commissioned me to do that. That was self-inflicted. It was interesting, because I tried to put myself in situations, a lot of times, that are repulsive. I want to learn from those situations. If I put myself in the entertainment industry, if I go to Los Angeles or if I make a series about Los Angeles, there are things you learn about that industry that are not so productive and there are also elements that are very informative.

— *Are the large wall paintings that you do different from the paintings?*
It's part of the same process but in an expanded field. It's like shutting your eyes after looking at the sun, you continue seeing things. For me, when I make a wall painting or do a special project, even a cake or a poster, it's a continuation. I love doing





projects using existing spaces or situations. I don't make wall paintings anywhere; it has to be the right context. Frankly, it's a lot of work. I've realized I've made 30 wall paintings in my life while working on this retrospective. Ironically, most of them have been destroyed.

— *How many people work for you now in the studio in New York?*

That's a very Rem Koolhaas question. He asked me that once. I refused to say.

— *Okay, you don't want to say.*

I don't want to say, but there are very few people around. I don't like having too many people around me.

— *I agree this is not very interesting to know. What I wanted to know is, was it ever the plan to have someone do the paintings for you when you started?*

It was always an assumed thing that you need help in order to handle things, to get things done. I'm thinking about the scale of my work. It's larger than one human. You need to have at least two humans. I don't work any differently than I worked originally. I try

to work with very few people. I like having people around me to talk to, to bounce off ideas, to help organize things. At any point in time, I might be researching two different films. I might be in pre-production with a film. I might be in post-production with a film. I have a series of paintings always in process. There are a lot of things going on, I might even be doing a cake—the infamous Sachertorte. You need to be able to somehow function to accept those invitations, the ones you like, and actually do them and figure out how to make the deadlines.

p.50: "Edward Durell Stone" (2012)

Tulsa, Oklahoma. Colored ceramic tiles on stone

Wall A: 124'-6" L x 20'-0" Wall B: 32'-4" L x 20'-0" H

Photo: © Sarah Morris. Courtesy of the artist.

p.52: Film still image from "Midtown" (1998)

16 mm/HD Digital

9 minutes, 36 seconds.

p.54: Exhibition view "Odysseus Factor" Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018

© Photo Wendy Bowman, courtesy Air de Paris.

p.56: "Beijing" (2008)

35mm / HD Digital 84:47 mins

Courtesy of the artist.

