New York Calling

This conversation between Sarah Morris and Luiz Roque took place on October 10, 2026, on the occasion of Morris's exhibition *Lady Snowblood* at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, Barra Funda, on view from November 12, 2026, to January 30, 2027.

Luiz Roque: Sarah, the political situation now in Brazil, it's like… It's beyond. I know you live in the US, so you are someone that definitely has a sense of what is going on...

Sarah Morris: Well, it's so extreme here. I mean, there's going to be a very big march today in New York because of the ICE shooting this week. They shot into a man's car with his 5-year-old child in the back seat. There's an incredible anger and disgust with what the country has become, and these people who are saying they have authority to behave like this. People are very upset, quite rightly so. But this week, an assistant of mine was asking why I like Brazil so much. It's a very complicated answer, right? There are personal reasons, but also you have been living in this post-military dictatorship situation for basically my entire adult life, right? And this is very striking to me, that you have all of these paradoxes and alliances with America, but also an estrangement at the same time.

LR: Yeah, but even in this big hole we're in right now, there is something happening: you mentioned this huge march in New York, then there are protests in France, and tonight the students promise to march all over Brazil. I really don't know what will happen in the next round of the election, but the damage is already done, because the Senate and Congress are, you can't imagine... Well, I know you follow Brazilian politics. It's difficult to understand how we ended up here. If you look at the numbers under Bolsonaro, the economy was bad, unemployment was higher, and Lula's numbers are much better. But a friend made a very interesting point: the left doesn't sell the idea of financial heaven, and the far right does.

SM: Faced with that promise, people end up aligning themselves with their oppressor, right? I mean, it happens here too. But can anyone prove why, scientifically, people would vote for force? I mean, just on the issue of gender alone, why on Earth would women vote the way they did in the last election? It makes no sense at all. But this can be explained on many levels. It's some sort of identification with patriarchy, with capitalism and its functioning. Even if you're particularly repressed or suppressed by it, these forces of advertising and propaganda, and

these sorts of male identities parading are clearly very attractive to people. You can't make sense of these things through logic, because it's irrational, right? The ways people identify with these figures are fundamentally irrational.

LR: Well, that said, this is the context of the country where you're having a show. When was your first show in Brazil, Sarah?

SM: Well, the first solo show would be in 2015, when I showed with Fortes and White Cube in São Paulo, it was a double show, titled *Galeria do Rock*. I mean, I've known Márcia [Fortes] forever. She came to my first studio, annoyingly it must be said, in Times Square on 42nd Street, because she was curating a group show in Brazil. I was in the middle of doing these pieces that I called *Character Sketches*, which were these singular words that would make up the identity of one man. And they were usually from *The New York Times* articles that I would read about specific people who had somehow lost their minds. So, Márcia comes to the studio. And there were all of these portraits made out of singular words. Anyhow, she did not put me in the group show, which of course annoyed me because I was like, why not? But then we became very good friends. It didn't make sense for me to be in that particular group show as it turned out, but it did annoy me at the time.

LR: Was the *Guilty* (1995) painting there?

SM: Yeah, I believe so. The first time I properly showed in Brazil was at the Bienal [de São Paulo], in 2002. I remember the shippers in England sent the wrong painting and I got really upset. Luckily, there were a number of other paintings, but I remember this incident, which was sort of ridiculous.

LR: So, the beginning of your relationship with Brazil was annoying in a way, but here you are.

SM: Yeah. Most good things are annoying or false. You know, the idea of false starts.

LR: The paintings you're showing next month reminded me of the first works of yours I ever saw, in one of those Taschen books, like *Art Now*. You know, before the internet… Those books were everything to me. For someone from the countryside in southern Brazil, they were like a portal.

SM: Yeah, of course. It was a road map of sorts. It was also quite funny, because if you were asked to be in one of those books, you felt you'd made it.

LR: Exactly. I think there was a time when those Taschen books were a huge reference for us in Brazil. I see you've started using words again, in your paintings, which you hadn't done for some time. I was curious to know what led you to reintroduce words in your work?

SM: Well, in this particular case, these words are our landscape. The landscape we live in, the brands we live under; the brands we are complicit with, whether we like it or not. And that is our paradox. So it's simultaneously national and international, it's global. You don't even know where these companies—or these forces, I'm going to call them entities—start and stop. Is Telefônica from Spain? I mean, that's what it says, but do they pay taxes in Brazil? We don't know. There are all these different issues with multinationals, right? The building is really a pretext, it's like a Trojan horse. Yes, Banco Safra is located at a specific address. There is a specific place, there's a door, there's choreography, we can go sort of like Jacques Tati and open up a bank account, but that's not really the beginning and end of Banco Safra. These entities are the universe that we also live under. It's more than just Virginia Woolf. We are not just in our stream of consciousness. It's Alexander Kluge, Jacques Rancière… I mean, there are many people I like. I live with their ideas, under their ideas, I sleep with these ideas. But at the same time, there's this other reality, right? And this other reality is also a form of concrete poetry, that is ugly but also allows us to do certain things, and we are complicit in that. And I've always loved the history of graphic design. I love the history of commercial design. By commercial design, I mean the design of computers, vehicles, currency, stamps, all these things. And I don't see making art as separate from any of that. I see myself as also existing in this sea of things, this sea of practices that ultimately end up as objects—whether they are a painting or a book.

LR: In Portuguese we say *design gráfico*, but we also call it *artes gráficas*. So we use the word "art" to refer to it.

Speaking of that, I saw *ETC* (2024). Is that your latest film?

SM: *ETC* is a film about Hong Kong and the sort of eclipse of a city, politically and maybe even capitalistically. And seemingly no one cares, right? It went down, it fell, and yet everybody's sort of pretending it's still there, that it is still the same. But obviously the powers that be have completely changed, right? This was interesting to me. The film was quite a long time in the making. I think I first had the idea around

2018, but then there were the protests to do with the national security laws and then there was COVID. So I think I only shot it in 2023, due to the quarantines, and I finished it in the following year and showed it in Hong Kong at Tai Kwun and M+.

But I also started shooting a film the same year, about the comedian Chris Rock, which is also a study about the city and identity; the voice that talks back to the city.

LR: I've seen many of your films, especially the ones about cities, and they are also about money, right? About products. Because there isn't much nature in them.

SM: Well, not really. I mean, there is… But there are hundreds and hundreds of people in my films, let's call them citizens, moving through space on a march of sorts, trying to just live out whatever narratives they're living out. You don't really know the beginnings or the ends of it. They're fragments of time, a choreography going on in a certain place.

The first film of mine I really saw as a manifesto was *Midtown* (1998). I decided to hire a news crew for a single day in Manhattan, and I had these pulse points, or structural spots, coordinates, of where I wanted to film in the city at very specific times. And whatever would happen would happen, right? I'm not controlling what happens, it's just playing out. So yeah, there are a lot of objects in the films: cars, money, briefcases, buildings. There are a lot of nouns in the buildings, but there's also a lot of action going on. There are airplanes, there's currency moving from hand to hand...

LR: Yeah, I meant more in terms of manufactured things, rather than money in the common sense, because there is not much nature in the films, although in Rio de Janeiro it's impossible to avoid.

SM: There's nature of course, but I mean, the films are urban by design. So obviously nature is controlled in a very different way in an urban grid. For instance, there's nature in the film *Rio (2012)*, even outside of the mayor's office, you see these four cats sort of squaring off. In the film *Chicago* (2011), there's a spiderweb we filmed right outside of the Chicago Tribune printing plant. There are moments in my films where nature shows up in very specific ways. *Points on a Line* (2010) is about the Farnsworth House and the Glass House, and the idea of the copy and the original, and those two homes are situated in nature. Anyway, I believe that human beings are nature. So, to me the films are as David Attenborough as you can get. Humans are nature, and by the way, humans make buildings. I'm not arguing against action on climate change or anything like that, but I do view the city as an organic structure.

LR: Have you ever been to Abu Dhabi, for example?

SM: Yes. I shot a film there in 2015 (*Abu Dhabi*). Nancy Spector asked me if I would like to do a piece there. I filmed around the spectacle of National Day. They have a very interesting sense of national identity because the history itself is so recent. There's all these different factions coming together to create a nation, and the idea of collaborating with corporate entities in order to make a nation…

LR: What you said, about humans being nature, I get that. But when I visited Abu Dhabi, and I went to the Louvre Abu Dhabi, I thought, "How can we make something like this?" Because it's...

SM: It's preposterous. It's totally preposterous in a James Bond way, they'd only need, like a special dock that you can get from inside the museum and head off in a motorboat. I mean, when I first saw the design for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi there was a jetty. I don't know if they've used this design, but I really wanted to do an artwork physically on that jetty, on this breakwater in the Gulf. In the end I made the film, which I really loved making. At first, I wondered if this would function as a piece of propaganda for the museum, for this place. If that's what they want, I'm going to start with the idea of propaganda.

LR: I've spent some time in Dubai making a film as well.

SM: What did you think of Dubai?

LR: How can I say… I spent three months there. I enjoyed it, I think everybody should go at least once. Because in terms of what we can build as human beings, it's crazy. I'm not saying I like it or not, but it's a kind of fantasy.

SM: Well, it's very *The Truman Show*. It's living in a place which is very orchestrated, and even its history is full of pageantry. Which is very cool in a way, I love the jeeps, the sand, the falcons, the clothing, the cars. I mean, there are so many elements that are fantastic and phantasmagorical.

LR: I understand. But then, when you look beneath the surface, even if you were born in Dubai, for example, that doesn't necessarily mean you can get an Emirati

passport. So you can be born there and very easily become a geopolitical ghost. It's crazy, because you end up not belonging anywhere.

SM: Yes. It's very strange in terms of passports and nationality. It's very tightly controlled.

LR: There's something that I've always wanted to ask you. Of course, a lot has been said about movement in your paintings and I won't ask you about it, but I love the train[1] and the sailboat that you painted[2]. For me, it was like, "now I know what she's talking about". Also because it's more or less how I work, because I don't move my camera very much. I prefer to keep it still and let things move. Did you think about this, about the fact that they are moving surfaces, when you were invited to develop these projects? Do you think of them as façades?

SM: Well, I think about the movement of everything, all the time. I went to the post office today, right? And I love going to the post office. For one thing, because it's a brutalist, hardcore building a few blocks from my house in Midtown. I have to mail a couple of things and there's such a level of fraud in America that unless you bring your mail directly to the post office, it's not safe. I've learned this many times. And I refuse to let this system die, because it is a public structure that allows the movement of letters, of checks, of all types of things. I feel a strong alliance to it. I love stamps, I have collected them since I was a kid.

Anyhow, that's just one form of movement. But I also think about the movement of light. I think about it a lot when I look at Times Square. But I also think about the movement of my thoughts, of cognition itself, of how my eye moves on a canvas, how my brain moves as I'm captured by certain things, or try to repel others. Like, what do you allow in? What do you not allow in?

LR: This reminds me—because I'm a huge fan of Alexander Kluge—of a show of his at argos [centre for audiovisual arts in Brussels] about his *Minutenfilme*. They're video sculptures, sometimes barely more than one minute long. Do you know them?

SM: Yeah. I love Alexander Kluge. I met him in 2016, and we became very good friends. Actually, in a few weeks I'm going to give a lecture at Princeton. They are

[1] Morris's *Monarch* (2017) is a 54-meter-long train unveiled in Gstaad, Switzerland, in 2017, which carried commuters and tourists along the railway line connecting Montreux and Zweisimmen for four years.
[2] Morris designed a 400-square-meter hand-painted spinnaker sail for the racing yacht *Malizia – Seaexplorer.*

organizing a symposium on him, and they asked me if I would join. Of course I would love to, because I wasn't able to go to his funeral. He was such a special person. He was like a time traveller, he really was. He had a very unusual ability to go right to the point while maintaining the political history of all moments.

LR: And talk about very complex things in a very simple and understandable way. Which is very difficult, because sometimes someone tries to explain a super complex idea, but the way they present it is so boring, so academic. And I think he refuses the academic look.

SM: Yeah. The first time I met him, I asked him to be in a film of mine called *Finite and Infinite Games* (2017), which I shot at his studio in Munich, near the ARRI film factory, and lastly in the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, designed by Herzog & de Meuron. I was asked if I wanted to shoot something in that building before it opened and I thought, “This is a terrible idea.” Like, who wants to be in another Herzog & de Meuron building? Anyway, I went to look at the building and I loved it! Every single inch is designed for sound and when I was in there, I immediately could hear a voice in my head warning about our entire society. I wanted a male German voice to do this warning. At first, I was going to use Werner Herzog and I realized maybe his voice was a little too comic and too recognizable, and it would overpower the idea of the film. When I told Hans-Ulrich Obrist what I was up to, he said, "Oh, you should maybe think about using Alexander Kluge's voice." So we started talking, then I met him one night and filmed him the next morning. He was very good at it, so fluent. He said, “I'm not an actor”. I said, “Of course you're not an actor. I don't want an actor”. I've never used actors, and if actors appear in my films, it's because they are operators of a very specific place and industry. He read the script and then he went off script. I told him, “Go off script whenever you want”. And to this day, I don't know when he is on, or off script. It makes no difference, because he wove this very amazing tapestry, this fabric, that was speech, image, philosophy, narrative, history and myth. That is so enticing, so interesting. And yet his short stories, I don't know if you've read them, but they're all very tied to legal structures, to the capitalist landscape that we're in.

At the end of our first day filming, he said to me, “You remind me of this girl who's in one of my short stories”. “She’s Jewish, and during the Spanish Inquisition, she and her father are put on a ship to Turkey to be sold as slaves.” So, he’s saying I remind him of this girl, and I’m waiting for the punchline, right? She’s on the ship with her father. This is the normal course of things for Jewish people during the Spanish Inquisition. And Kluge then said, “Every night, she would go up on deck and play chess with the pirates of the ship. By the time they arrived in Istanbul, she had secured her own freedom and her father’s.”

LR: Like Scheherazade, more or less, right?

SM: Yeah. And then he said, “She was the maker of an improbable accord.” Anyway, I love this story. Of course, he's referring to me and him, but he's also referring to this political history of freedom. There's a gender element in there, too. But there's also an element, that it’s an improbable accord to even make art. And this goes back to [Theodor] Adorno's ideas, how can culture go on? I don't know, I'm an eternal optimist. I can't live with this Adorno brick wall end, and neither could Kluge. He tells the story of how Adorno tried to stop him from making films by sending him to work for a commercial filmmaker, who was Fritz Lang. But it didn't work, did it? Adorno's attempt to shut down or stop Kluge's career as an artist, or stymie it. It actually only led to a much more advanced understanding of what film could be. Anyhow, I love this story, because I do feel that, as an artist, you're up against all these forces all the time, not just in the subject matter of your work. They're there in the work, these sort of despicable yet enticing forces, like a beautiful elixir we know we're not supposed to drink, but we drink regardless. I mean, it takes a lot of willpower to make art, right? It takes an enormous amount of energy, as I'm sure you know, to make work and see it go out in the world, to know when to let go, when to control. You're constantly playing chess with pirates.

LR: I gave a talk to students recently. At the end, they were asking questions about my practice, and I said, “Don’t try to cover every angle of something.” You have to understand what you’re doing, but at least try to leave one blind spot. Otherwise, you’re not making art, you’re writing a thesis or something. That’s how I think. Of course, I get very obsessive when I’m researching something, but I always try to keep one blind spot. When I film people, for example, I almost never do castings. I kind of fall in love with someone, then I approach them and introduce them to my work. So there’s also a lot about these people that I didn't know beforehand, things that aren’t in the script, that they bring from their own life experiences and become part of the film. And that’s exactly what makes the films what they are.

You've shot a lot on film, right? More recently, I think you’ve been shooting digitally, but the earlier films, like *Midtown* (1998), were shot on 35mm, 16mm…

SM: I shoot with an ARRI Alexa. My camera is so ridiculously huge for what I do. I mean, if you saw it. You need at least two people to carry it. I sometimes shoot with these CinemaScope lenses... You're not supposed to shoot documentaries or live footage with this type of a camera and lenses, but it works for me because it brings

me back to this whole idea of public space, private space, and whether there's a line between the two. I think as an artist, a lot of making art is about trespassing. And we need to make sure to live in a society where that's okay. I don't want to live in a society that's so bureaucratic you can't have a camera that does that, or where people are so scared of the consequences that they won't take risks. Because even when you're filming a person, there's obviously the public façade of a person who's walking in public space, out for a stroll or going to work or doing something. And then there's a flicker on their face that's very private, a moment of privacy that leaks out. These little moments are actually very beautiful, where you have private space entering public space, or vice-versa.

The other night I was watching one of the earliest pieces that I was cognizant of, and that really influenced me, a William Klein film *Broadway by Light* (1958), which is all about Times Square. And I think my studio was already in Times Square when I first saw it, but I can't remember exactly what came first. It could have been simultaneous, or maybe I watched that movie and then got a studio in Times Square, I'm not exactly sure. But it's a beautiful film, and I saw a small show of his at SFMOMA and it really did inspire me, the same way Charles and Ray Eames' films inspire me. Who says you can't make a film for a company like IBM? Of course you can make something significant for a corporation. It's not like corporations can't be used in return, right? Like the idea of repurposing something in another direction.

LR: Now that you've mentioned how big the camera is, it makes sense to me that there's so little camera movement in your films. The weight of the camera, that relates to what you're filming.

SM: I have to think seriously if I want to take my camera to a certain spot, because otherwise my crew is really going to dislike me, which they probably do sometimes, frankly. In any of my films there might be like 150 locations, we're constantly in motion, all day long, doing different setups with a very materially present camera.

LR: And what are you expecting from your trip to São Paulo? I really wanted to ask you about Ruy Ohtake. I'm a huge fan, he's a postmodern Brazilian architect. He designed this ship-shaped hotel, and also the Instituto Tomie Ohtake. I thought of him while watching *ETC* (2024), when you point your camera at I. M. Pei's Bank of China building. I guess I'm trying to understand how you see Brazil, and what you might want to explore here after *Rio* (2012), which is such a complete film in a way. I don't feel I have much to add about Rio de Janeiro after seeing it. So, now that you're coming to Brazil for your exhibition, what triggers your interest here?

SM: Well, I was going to make a sister film to *Rio*. Somehow it got waylaid, but I always planned to shoot a film in São Paulo. The first time I went to São Paulo, I'd been warned that it's like Tokyo, the density, the mass, the condensation, the congestion. But of course, there are contradictions there, as there are everywhere.

LR: I think MASP is showing one of your works, right? *Com o Supremo, com tudo (gráfico de som)* (2019). When did you first get the idea to make a painting based on that audio clip?[3]

SM: I mean, I've always thought voice and the recording of it were important. You know how David Lynch says you fish for ideas? I think, no, you speak ideas, you eat ideas. Somehow to me the mouth is as important as the eyes, as important as anything else. But after I shot the Kluge film, I started a series of paintings called *Sound Graph*. And they were all based on phrases of speech and the idea of how I would portray that sound, or that speech, the visual representation of it. So the idea really came from meeting Kluge, from asking him to read this text and watching his incantation of it. I decided to donate that painting to MASP partly because of that history. Of course, I wanted to support the museum, but I also liked doing it with this specific work in this particular context.

LR: For this show at FDAG, did you consider showing a film as well? I saw that in your last show at White Cube[4], you showed some paintings and a film.

SM:I like the idea of showing a film in the city, having it become part of it. You have to remember, I make two different types of work, and in a way, I could be two completely different artists… The films have their own sort of temporal reality, in terms of how they're produced and what they require. The paintings, on the other hand, are very slow. I cannot rush it.

LR: Right. I asked to watch your latest film, and then I saw it was about 80 minutes. I thought, “Wow, 80 minutes is a lot.” Because I've never made anything longer than 10 minutes, because for me it’s different, I like the loop, I like the music video format...

[3] “Com o Supremo, com tudo” (“with the Supreme Court, with everything”) is an excerpt from a 2016 phone call in which Senator Romero Jucá discusses arrangements to obstruct the Lava Jato corruption investigations, becoming a symbol of political collusion and impunity in Brazil.

[4] *Snow Leopards and Skyscrapers*, White Cube Mason’s Yard, London, UK, 2026

SM: I understand. But see, I don't mind if someone comes in for only 10 minutes of my film. I don't really believe in requiring the kind of concentration that narrative film demands. So I'm absolutely fine with an audience that's distracted, or that sees a certain progression of propaganda, gets it, and moves on.

You know, I'm not dictatorial about how people watch things or look at things. So even though it's 80 minutes, it's 80 minutes because those are all the situations I placed myself in, right? I mean, I am ultimately seeking these situations. I do think of myself as a situationist.

LR: Historically speaking?

SM: Yes, I do. And I looked at all of those writings and at the idea of maps and the whole idea of the spectacle, which of course I'm very fascinated by. Art is another form of spectacle. It's fast becoming even more and it always has been to some extent.

LR: The idea around this conversation was to talk broadly about your work, and about painting. I'm not a specialist in painting, even though I love it.

SM: Well, listen, I never went to art school. By all accounts, I should not be a painter. But somehow I'm drawn to the physicality of things, the seduction of things, and again, the history of making things. Whether those things be paintings, architecture, movies, objects and all of these things that comprise our living. I don't see art as separate from these elements, I see it as part of this unit.

LR: What I think I like the most about your paintings, to be very honest, is that I see surface. When I look at artists' films especially, for example, I'm constantly looking for the surface because that interests me, I think everything is on the surface. And it's so beautiful to see on the surface, in a world where we are constantly being asked to be deep. I'm not saying it's not deep but it's kind of a skin, right?

SM: Well, there's a history of painting. So this idea of the history of gesture, the history of the subjective self has never quite interested me. I've told you what I studied, what interested me and what got me started, and it was not any of those elements at all. You see, to make a really great painting you are making a psychology, you are making a portrait, a landscape—a manifesto even. My paintings are all of that. I don't really think of myself in relation to the history of painting, but of course it is, this is the history of painting. It's the history of making art. It's not like

trying to separate from that, but if you think about it, what is a painting? Even a [Lucio] Fontana, it's an act of violence, it's a physical gesture, it's a color, it's a seduction. Phenomenologically, it's a thing, right? It's a thing.

LR: Yeah. And the backs, have you seen the back of a Fontana painting?

SM: Yeah, I have. I know, I want to eat them.