



# Sarah Morris All Systems Fail

# Sarah Morris

## All Systems Fail

The solo exhibition “All Systems Fail” by the internationally renowned American artist Sarah Morris (b. 1967) surveys thirty years of her prolific practice. Since the 1990s, Morris has created a multi-layered oeuvre featuring paintings, drawings, films, sculptures and site-specific works. Presented at Haus Lange and Haus Esters by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and at the KWM, Morris’s work traces her interest in the vocabulary of infrastructures, networks, architecture, cities, and even the commercial form. The touring retrospective features over 100 works — on loan from internationally-celebrated collections — many to be shown in Europe for the first time.

Morris is known for her diagrammatic paintings, using color and form to create what could be forms of cognitive mapping. Similarly, her films capture late capitalism in the digital age. Influenced by American Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism, Morris incorporates her graphic forms with references to multinational corporations, serial production, transportation networks, technology, among others. Her work — a compendium of reflections on the city, media images, globalization, and power structures — resonates with Mies van der Rohe’s architectural vision for domestic modern life. Social, economic, and political systems are embedded within Morris’s bold geometry — surfaces are never simply what they appear to be.

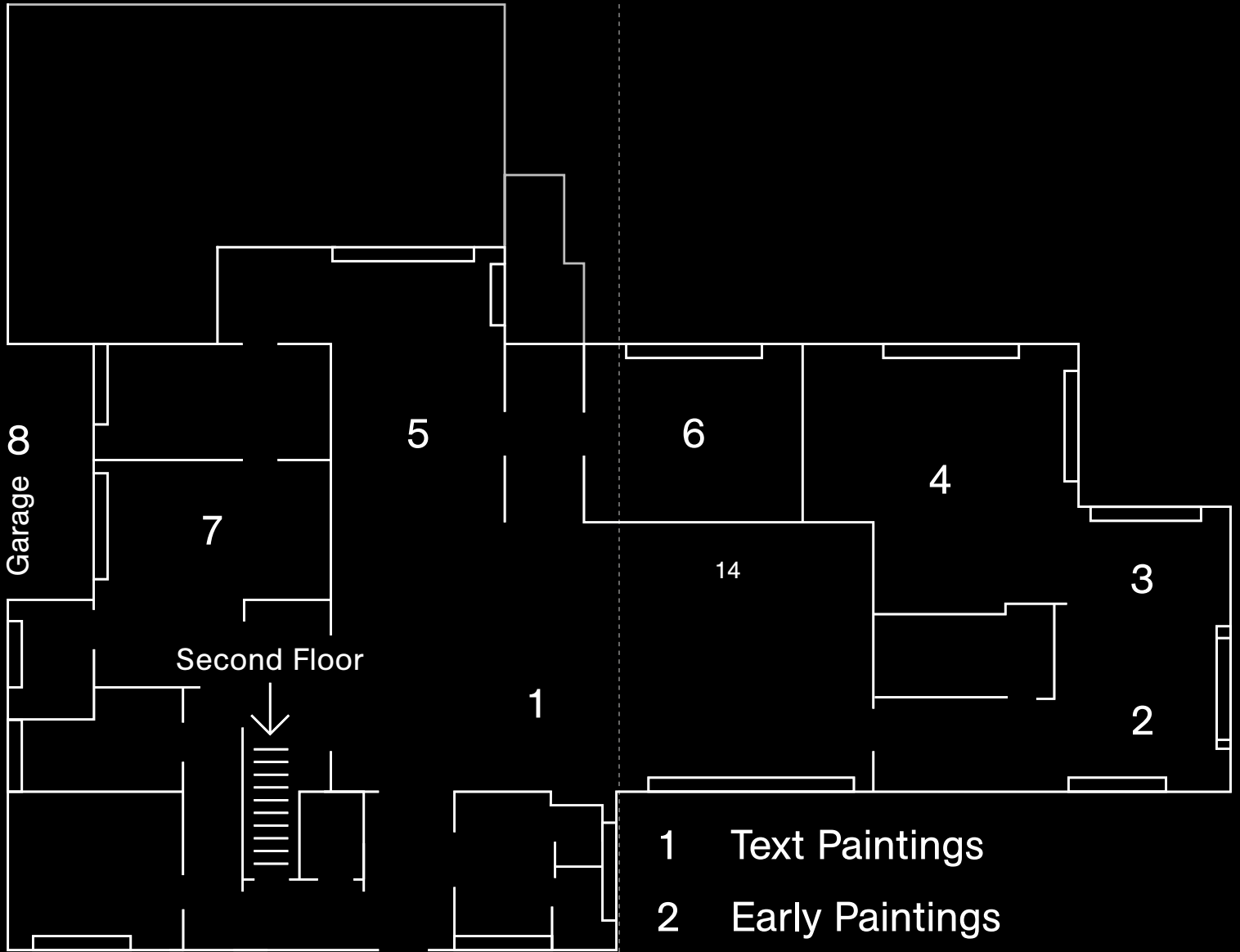
“All Systems Fail” at Haus Lange and Haus Esters, key sites of modernist architecture, with the KWM, offer a unique iteration of Morris’s touring retrospective in Krefeld. New works are presented for the first time, including a site-specific wall painting and an exclusive silkscreen edition. In the KWM, Morris’s cinemascope films are situated in a large-format installation.

Sarah Morris, born in 1967, lives and works in New York and is internationally known for her geometric abstractions and films. After completing a degree at Brown University in 1989, she began to create her first paintings, which were inspired by texts from newspapers and advertising. In the same year, she participated in the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her works have been shown in numerous solo exhibitions, including Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2018); Kunsthalle Wien (2016); MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (2009); Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel (2008); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2005); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2005); Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC (2002); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2001); and Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1999).

The exhibition tour is organized by the Deichtorhallen Hamburg in collaboration with the Kunstmuseen Krefeld, the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, and the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

# Haus Lange Ground Floor and Garage in the basement

Garden



Garage ∞

Second Floor

Garage accessible from outside

Entrance / Exit

- 1 Text Paintings
- 2 Early Paintings
- 3 “Realistic Pro 35”
- 4 Midtown
- 5 Capital
- 6 Films 1998–2017
- 7 Anna Gaskell “Echo Morris”
- 8 Film “Points on a Line”  
in the garage  
Screenings at 12, 2 and 4 pm

## 1 Text Paintings

## 2 Early Paintings

In the mid 1990's Morris begins creating large-scale text paintings that appropriate sensationalist news stories. She produces single-word paintings using the vocabulary of magazine headlines and commercial signage. Words such as "LIAR" and "NOTHING" fill the frames. Through the usage of such vocabulary, Morris expands her survey of symbols of power and control to the realm of mass media. Other early paintings such as "Bully Nurse", based on a newspaper photograph, or "High Heels (Purple)" show the influence of American Pop Art on her work, as well as the artist's interest in colorful delineations of contemporary moments.

## 3 "Realistic Pro 35"

In the mid-1990's Sarah Morris rents a cheap studio at 42nd Street, near Times Square, where the contrast between shady nightlife and the glossy facades of big US-corporations is everpresent. Morris surveys the tension-filled district with her camera, collects fragments of architecture and translates them into paintings. The gridded compositions of Midtown's buildings stay apparent, while the glossy colour adds a psychological reading of the architecture.

## 4 Midtown

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## 5 Capital

Morris's "Capital" paintings expose the forms that underscore the daily functions of Washington DC. Each work carries a title that relocates the viewer to specific spots around the city (such as "Capitol Hill" or "State Department"), while the paintings render these sites barely recognizable. The complex abstraction does not mirror facades anymore, rather it provides a look through the artist's lens upon a political center of power.

## 6 Films 1998–2017

The following films are presented in a looped video installation.

### Midtown (1998, 9:30 min)

"Midtown", the first film by Sarah Morris, was shot in New York during a single day. The artist hired a news crew to film a specific list of coordinates in Manhattan. The film depicts the power of the corporations, that is reflected in the architecture, but also the anonymity in the streets of the city.

### AM/PM (1999, 9:36 min)

"AM/PM", taking its title from an all-day/all-night convenience store, examines the famous Las Vegas 'Strip'. The film shows the city as a disorienting landscape of neon signs, hotels and casinos.

### Capital (2000, 18:18 min)

Sarah Morris made the film "Capital" in Washington D.C. during the final days of the Clinton administration. Her exclusive access to the U.S. president provides a behind-the-scenes look to the political center of power.

### Miami (2002, 27:30 min)

"Miami", the fourth film by artist Sarah Morris, is operating between a documentary, the biography of a city and a form of non-narrative fiction. It shifts between sites of production, leisure and work, which interweave in a driving sequence of cityscapes to form a new ultra-version of Miami.

## Chicago (2011, 68:21 min)

“Chicago”, Sarah Morris’s tenth film, investigates the psychology, architecture and aesthetic of the US-American city. The film captures the varied layers of a complex metropolis without verbal commentary or narration; “Chicago” exploits the boundaries of documentary and fiction and collides the city’s everyday moments with issues of social power and representation.

## Finite and Infinite Games (2017, 40:19 min)

With “Finite and Infinite Games” Morris shifts her lens to Alexander Kluge, the legendary German theorist and writer. The film stages a philosophical conflict as Morris uses the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg as setting for the dialogue between Kluge and the artist herself about James Carse’s seminal text, “Finite and Infinite Games”.

## 7 Anna Gaskell “Echo Morris” (2014, 22:56 min)

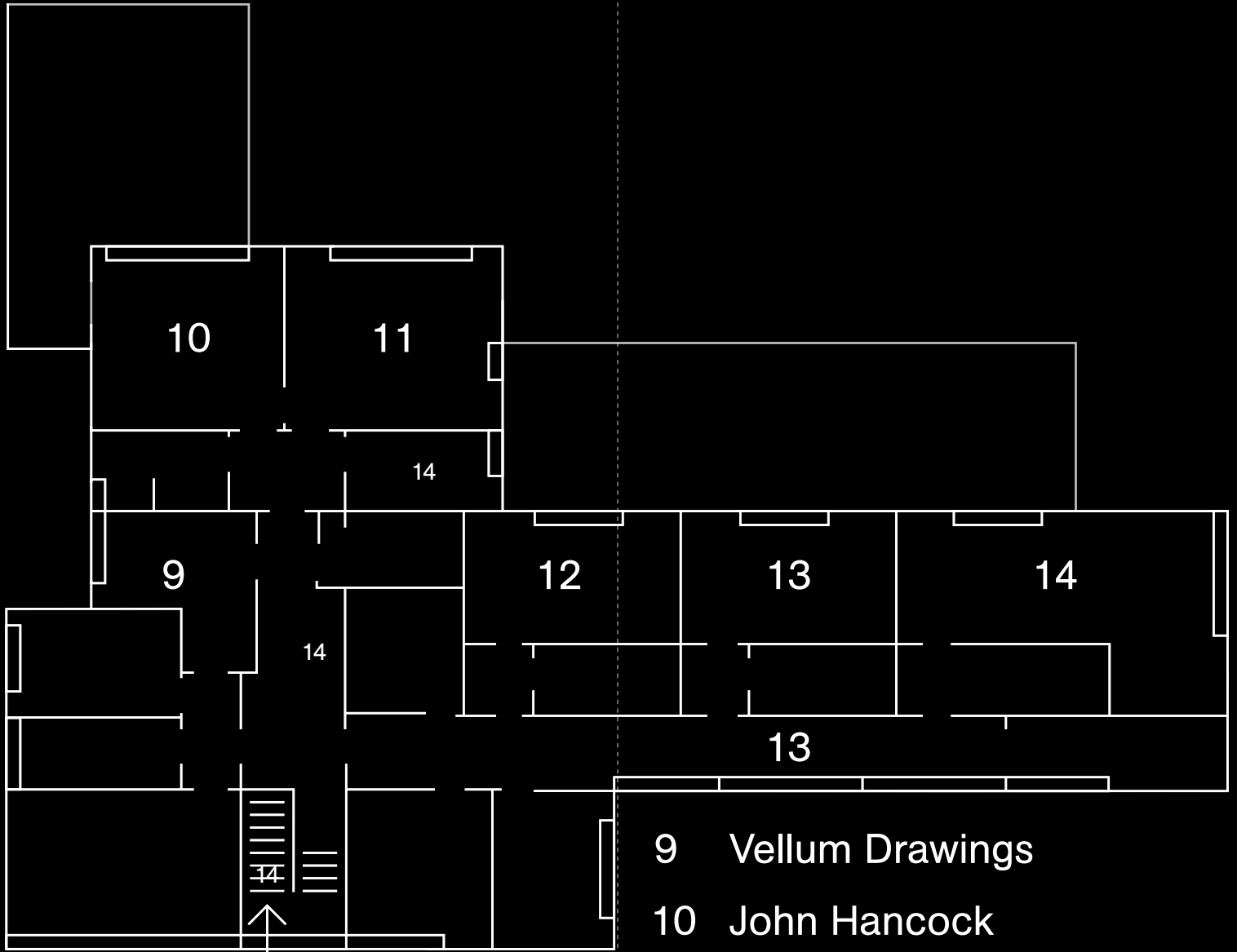
In the film “Echo Morris”, artist Anna Gaskell, a close confidant of Sarah Morris creates a portrait of the artist by mimicking the style of Morris’s own films. The film uses Morris’s cinematic style with its use of the city, fast pace, and hypnotic soundtrack. Gaskell films the artist in various international locations such as New York, London, Chicago and Paris. By voyeuristically filming the artist in private and public, “Echo Morris” plays with the idea of the image of the artist as a persona.

## 8 Film “Points on a Line” (2010, 34:44 min)

Morris’s “Points on a Line” examines two significant modernist buildings in the USA and their histories; the Farnsworth House, in Plano, Illinois, by Mies van der Rohe and the Glass House, in New Canaan, Connecticut, by Philip Johnson. The film documents the buildings, but also addresses the idea of the copy and the original and the development of Modernism.

# Haus Lange Upper Floor

Garden



First Floor

- 9 Vellum Drawings
- 10 John Hancock
- 11 Clips and Knots
- 12 Ink and Gouache Drawings
- 13 Lunar
- 14 Film Poster Drawings

## 9 Vellum Drawings

In her early drawings traced on architectural paper, Morris reflects on the experience of the capitalist moment with its signs, advertisements, and narrative images. Many of the drawings point to the idea of private property, consumption and the unrestricted freedom of the individual. The constitutional rights to bear arms and protect private property are explicit in the imperatives “Beware of the Dog” or “Keep out”. With the reduced aesthetic language of signs, originally found in hardware stores, the artist depicts the visual language of ownership.

## 10 John Hancock

Morris uses the series title to refer to the John Hancock Center in Chicago. The iconic building was named through an insurance company, which itself uses the name of the historical figure John Hancock, signee of the US-american declaration of independence. Invoking this parallel, Morris draws a connection between signatures and skyscrapers as symbols of power. Simultaneously, the artists streamlines the corporatization of Hancock’s signature using her own initials in the work, questioning the role of signatures in relation to the “branding” of artworks and its confirmation of ownership.

## 11 Clips and Knots

Forms based on diagrams of knots and paper clips are utilized in Morris’s series “Clips and Knots”. These simple binding and administrative structures suggest a transition from enduring utility and bureaucracy to contingent organization of texts, data and copied material. This painting series was created in response to a 2013 copyright lawsuit over her “Origami” paintings, which are displayed at Haus Esters in this exhibition. Fittingly, paper clips were invented in multiple countries and even patented but developed world-wide simultaneously.

## 12 Ink and Gouache Drawings

Morris’s ink and gouache drawings echo her painting series. On paper Morris explores and plays with the interweavings and spatial effects of her structures in the use of the line.

## 13 Lunar

Morris started the works in the “Lunar” series as a calendar or diary in the times of a global COVID-19 pandemic, in which people struggled to keep their sense of time. The moon cycle serves as a visualization of natural powers and structures, which elude human control, yet influence our life on a daily basis. The series of 12 square-shaped works displayed is representing each month of the 2020 lunar phases. Morris connects the natural phenomenon to the industrial production of vaccines, invoking her imagery of repeated standardized processes and serialization as a form.

While the distinctive forms of the paintings can also be found in the ‘Lunar’ drawings, the watercolors, with its entirely different texture, allow Morris to create a subjective depth and grading which is unique in her oeuvre.

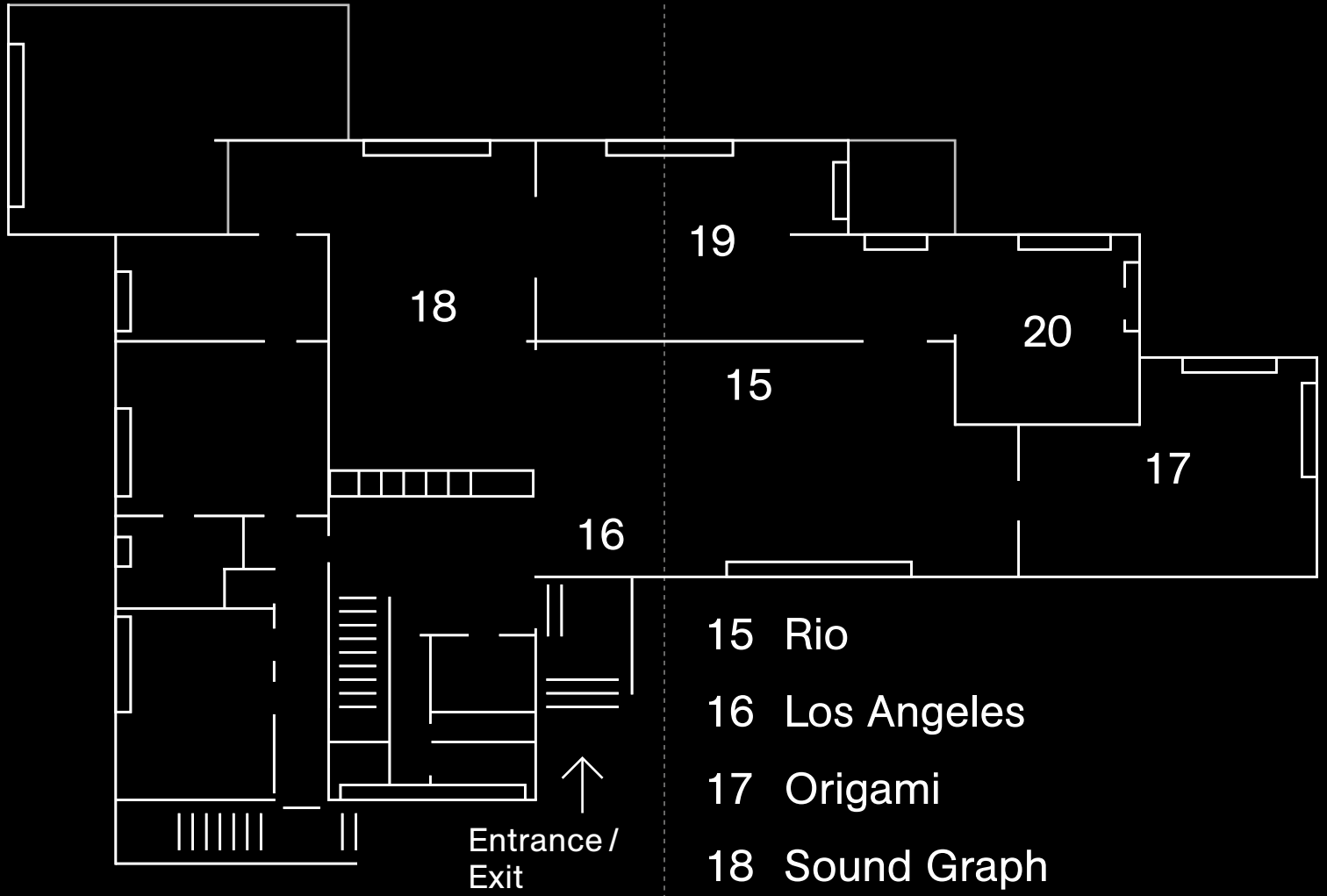
## 14 Film Poster Drawings

“The notion of paper is itself a circulating distributed commodity with its own value. The paper in the case of my art is film posters from all over the world. It is a literal network of meaning, time and production. The vintage film posters and all of their narrative possibility becomes the actual surface for a series of drawings where I play out compositions and colors for future paintings. They are a currency. I covet the history of this paper; The time it was made, the film it supports, the direction and use I am taking them to. It is a recycling.”

Sarah Morris

# Haus Esters Ground Floor

Garden



- 15 Rio
- 16 Los Angeles
- 17 Origami
- 18 Sound Graph
- 19 Spiderweb
- 20 Wall Painting  
"Society is Abstract  
Culture is Concrete"



Morris's painting series — accompanied by graphics and films — explore the complex conversation between culture, architecture and power in different metropolises. With her works, Morris continually develops the exploration into the essence of geographic place, economy and politics.

## 15 Rio

In her “Rio” paintings, we find the artist's reoccurring abstract compositions, or what Morris refers to as “diagrams”. Her canvasses are made up of vivid compositions whose curves, vectors, and interlocking spheres reference a way of perception as well as the sharp contrasts of Rio de Janeiro's many social forms. The works draw references to a wide range of sources around the Brazilian metropolis, such as architecture, literature or design.

## 16 Los Angeles

Morris's “Los Angeles” series is based on the city's unique and spectacular architecture, it's sprawling, de-centered urban plan and most importantly, its role as a center for the motion picture industry. The paintings form a point of departure for Morris, the grids are more fragmentary, seemingly more open and radical in their complete and hermetic abstraction, with their internal vortex-like spaces working to pull the picture beyond the reality of the canvas as a two-dimensional object.

## 17 Origami

The “Origami” series coupled with the “Rings” paintings focuses on the city of Beijing, the site of extreme capitalist development alongside the 2008 Olympic Games. The “Origami” paintings were based on ready-made instructions for how to fold paper to make origami creatures. Origami uses the simple process of folding paper to create a complex form, similar to Morris's work. The artist unfolds these structures, while deciphering a cultural landmark — much like in her cityscapes. “Rings” takes the city's increasingly congested traffic arteries known as the “Ring Roads” as its main point of reference. The roads may be seen as analogies to the Olympic rings and the upcoming event that rapidly changed the face of the city.

## 18 Sound Graph

Sarah Morris's “Sound Graph” paintings continue to utilize the language of American Abstraction, of minimalism and pop, while their forms are derived from

the artist's sound files, using the speech from audio recordings as a starting point for the compositions. Featuring hard-edged geometric shapes, the compositions in the paintings progress and recede in patterns that appear to fluctuate across the canvas, creating a sense of volumetric build-up and release — like a visual analogy of coding.

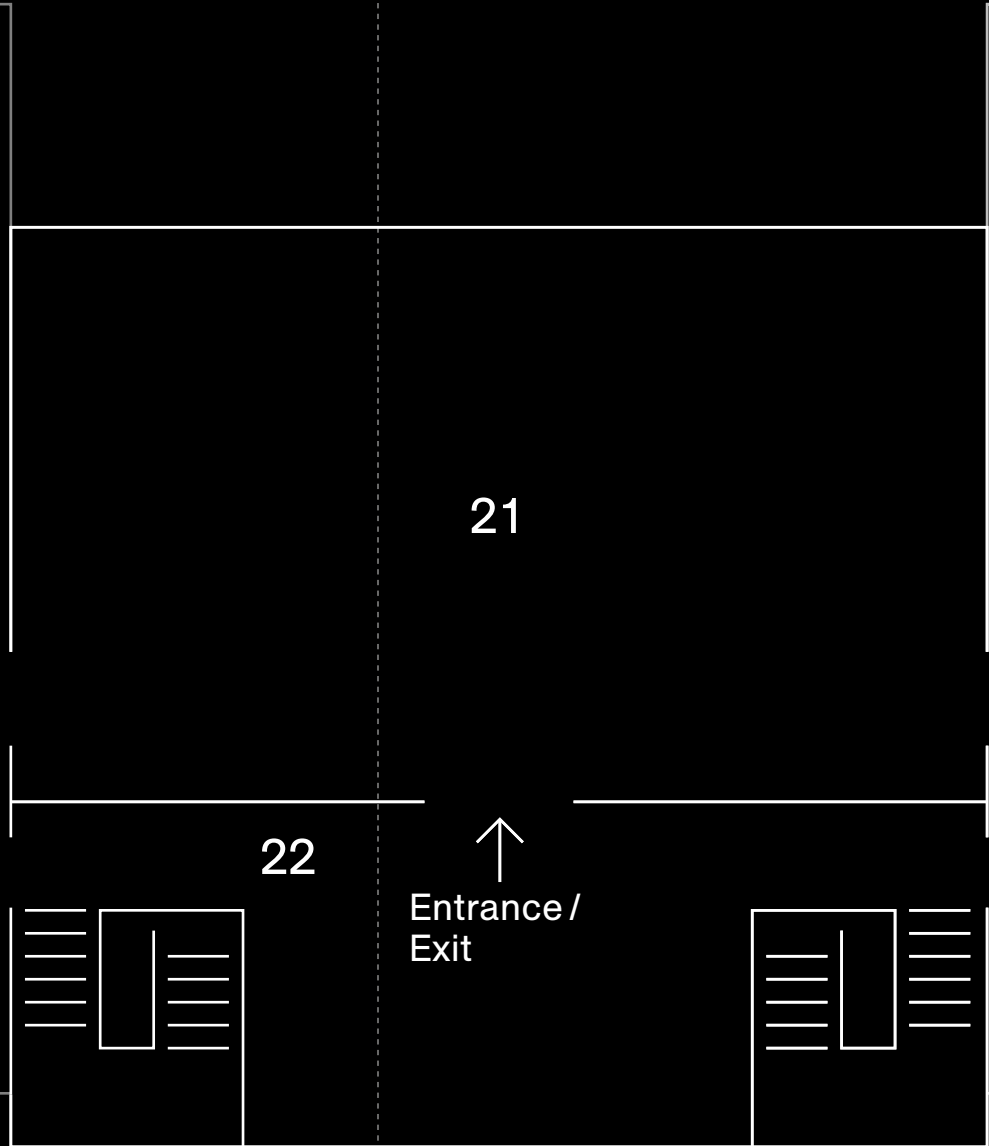
## 19 Spiderweb

The “Spiderweb” series draws on the experience of enforced restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic that has resulted in an abrupt shift in temporal focus and social habits. Taking the organic structure of a spiderweb as their starting point, the paintings' arrangements of lines converge and fragment, creating shard-like shapes and dots of varying sizes. Rendered in Morris's recognisable palette, the paintings explore spatial disorientation, perception and cognition.

## 20 Wall Painting “Society is Abstract Culture is Concrete”

Morris created an exclusive wall painting “Society is Abstract Culture is Concrete” for Mies van der Rohe's Haus Esters, which references the “Sound Graph” series. The painting also takes inspiration from Morris's film “Finite and Infinite Games” from 2017 which features the German filmmaker and theorist Alexander Kluge. Morris and Kluge discuss the philosophical and political significance of gaming in James P. Carse's book “Finite and Infinite Games”.

# KWM First Floor



21 Films 2004 – 2018

22 Film posters  
in collaboration with  
M/M (Paris)

## 21 Films 2004–2018

The following films are presented in a looped video installation.

### Los Angeles (2004, 26:12 min)

With “Los Angeles” Morris investigates the psychology, architecture, and aesthetic of the city as a center of the film industry. The film investigates both the surface of the city – its architecture and geography—as well as its ‘interior’; the psychology of inhabitants, that live and work there.

### Robert Towne (2006, 34:26 min)

“Robert Towne” is a portrait of the legendary Hollywood script-writer, director, producer and actor. In Morris’s film, the lens shifts from a wide view of a city to an intimate portrait of the portrayed. Thus she examines Towne in reference to his work, which reveals the dark underbelly of the shiny surface of the modern United States.

### 1972 (2008, 38:12 min)

With “1972” Morris created an idiosyncratic portrait of Dr. Georg Sieber who served as the head psychologist of the Olympic Police, who was present on the tragic morning of September 5th, 1972, when members of the terrorist group “Black September” attacked and took hostage the members of the Israeli Olympic Team. The film with its complex interview of Dr. Sieber, investigates the failure of plans and the occurrence of warning predictions. The film exposes a new perspective on the events of the 1972 Olympic Games.

### Beijing (2008, 84:47 min)

“Beijing” deals with the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, one of the biggest international media events of the time. Morris’s film is a surreal portrait of an authoritarian state under turbo-capitalism at a time when the International Olympic Committee had effectively assumed sovereignty over China’s capital. “Beijing” shows a hitherto closed country in a moment of apparent theatrical openness.

## Rio (2012, 88:33 min)

Sarah Morris’s “Rio” continues her investigation into urban psychological landscapes, this time moving her focus to the Brazilian metropolis. The film is a dark but celebratory tale involving the history of Twentieth Century architecture, communism, and eroticism present in all areas of life.

## Strange Magic (2014, 45:08 min)

“Strange Magic” follows Frank Gehry’s process during his planning of the new Fondation Louis Vuitton building. The film interweaves images from two metropolises: Gehry’s working environment in Los Angeles and the context of the new building in Paris. Morris’s style is unmistakable. Atmospheric shots of the cities meet detailed views of the newly constructed building.

## Abu Dhabi (2017, 67:54 min)

Morris’s “Abu Dhabi” explores the psycho-geographical urban landscape of Abu Dhabi, its rapid growth, the architecture, financial prosperity, history, spectacle and illusion and is capturing on the other hand the situation of migrant workers.

## Sakura (2018, 50:06 min)

“Sakura”, in English ‘cherry blossom’, traces the culture and undercurrents of the city of Osaka – Japan’s original mercantile and cultural capital. The film documents Osakas continual reinvention as a mirror of Japan’s economic and cultural tradition.

## 22 Film Posters in collaboration with M/M (Paris)

Similar to each film created by Sarah Morris, the accompanying film posters explore a city or architectural landscape. Morris designs them with influential graphic designers such as M/M (Paris) and Peter Saville.

The film “Los Angeles” (2005), for instance, explores the image production within the decentered plan and complex architecture of Los Angeles; the poster uses the title of the film as a prism. A similar parallel between the two media is seen in “Points on a Line” (2011); the experimental film is documenting the daily maintenance of the two architectural masterworks Farnsworth House by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Glass House by Philip Johnson. In the poster, drawings of objects and architectural elements merge with lettering to frame the photograph behind them.

## Colophon

Sarah Morris  
All Systems Fail

Haus Lange Haus Esters Krefeld  
and KWM  
15.10.2023–10.03.2024

Director  
Katia Baudin

Exhibition Curator  
Kunstmuseen Krefeld  
Juliane Duft

Design  
Mevis & van Deursen  
mit So-Yeon Kim

The exhibition tour  
“All Systems Fail” is organized  
by the Deichtorhallen  
Hamburg in collaboration  
with the Kunstmuseen  
Krefeld, the Zentrum Paul  
Klee in Bern, and the  
Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

## Visit

Haus Lange Haus Esters  
Wilhelmshofallee 91–97  
D-47800 Krefeld

Kaiser Wilhelm Museum  
Joseph-Beuys-Platz 1  
D-47798 Krefeld

## Opening Hours

Kaiser Wilhelm Museum  
Haus Lange Haus Esters  
Tue–Thur, Sun 11 am–5 pm  
Fri–Sat 11 am–6 pm

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The Kunstmuseen Krefeld are a cultural  
institute of the city of Krefeld.



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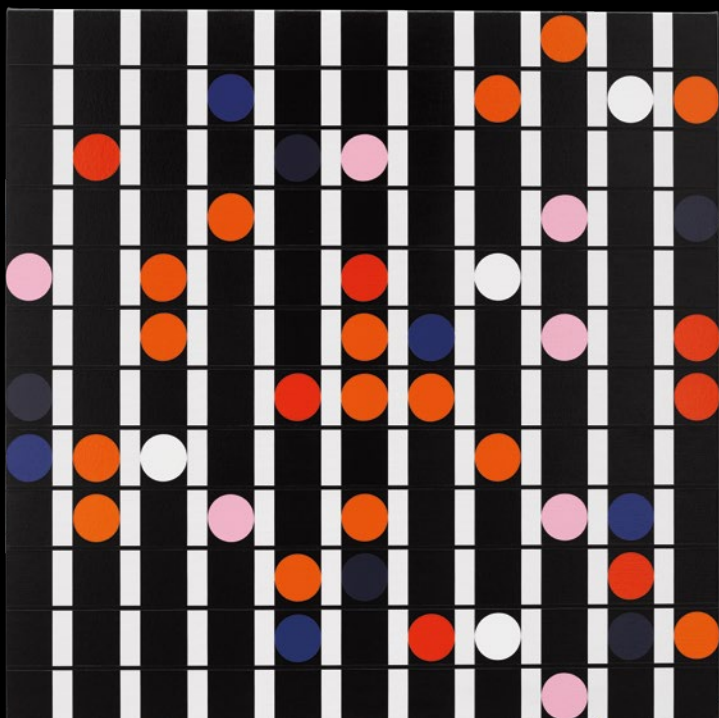
Kunststiftung  
NRW

Leap

Cultural Partner

WDR 3

*Strange Magic*, 2014,  
HD Digital, 45:08 min, © Sarah Morris  
*Deviancy is the Essence [Sound Graph]*, 2018,  
Household gloss on canvas,  
90 x 90 cm, © Sarah Morris



Haus Lange Haus Esters Krefeld  
and KWM  
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