

Fragmented Narratives: Artist Sarah Morris Tackles Hong Kong With Her Latest Film, ETC

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After focusing on Rio de Janeiro, Beijing and Abu Dhabi, the artist and filmmaker Sarah Morris has trained her lens on Hong Kong with the release of *ETC*, which captures the underlying interconnections of its people.

Whether gaining access to film inside the White House Cabinet Room, the Bird's Nest Stadium during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Oscars, or even inside Hong Kong's notoriously restricted shipping container terminals, a certain fearlessness is required to be Sarah Morris.

Since 1998, the British-American artist has been creating films about cities in a post-globalised world. Her first, *Midtown*, shot on a single day in New York, introduced her fascination with the psychology of urban environments. Her subjects then expanded further afield to *Los Angeles* (2004), *Beijing* (2008), *Rio* (2012) and *Abu Dhabi* (2017) – and now, with the release this month of *ETC*, she's tackling Hong Kong.



Sarah Morris (Image: Anna Gaskell)

Not mere documentaries, Morris' body of non-linear and non-narrative films explore power structures, the politics of architecture, underlying currents and the interconnectedness of citizens in today's metropolises. All films have music composed by the artist Liam Gillick, which adds a sense of uneasiness to her quietly seductive lens.

Morris initially entered the art scene with her abstract paintings of gridded compositions. Adding film in parallel was a means to explore more avenues for her curiosity. “Painting and being an artist is a relatively solipsistic routine,” she explains via Zoom from her New York studio. “And for me, making films completes this larger picture of the space I occupy, not just as an artist, but as a citizen. How do I see the world? Who do I want to have conversations with? Where do I want to travel? What situations do I want to be in?”

Her latest film, then, provided the opportunity to meet someone she’d long admired, Henry Steiner. Often referred to as the Father of Hong Kong Design, the Austrian graphic designer created the HSBC logo, local currency and branding for many of the city’s major institutions, including the Hong Kong Jockey Club. “He’s sort of the Peter Saville of the corporate world,” explains Morris. “In the sense of essentially creating the image of Hong Kong, I think he was extremely important.”



ETC (2023) playing on the M+ Facade (Courtesy of Parallax, M+, Tai Kwun Contemporary)

Steiner not only appears in the film, captured in the M+ archive, but his designs also inspired its name. “I believe it was the first design and first banking card for HSBC, called ETC, unlike [the US] where they’re called ATM cards,” she says. “I liked the idea of naming it that because of Steiner, the image of Hong Kong as the banking centre and also the notion that all of these cities are all a continuation of somewhere else.”

Co-commissioned by the M+ and Tai Kwun Contemporary, *ETC* is Morris’ 16th film. It premiered last month on the museum’s facade and will show at Tai Kwun Contemporary as part of the exhibition *Who is Who*, which opens on March 15.

The idea arose in 2018 while Morris was in Hong Kong for her solo show *Your Words Become Mine* at White Cube, the gallery that’s represented her since 1996. Fresh from completing *Sakura* (2018) in Japan and an exhibition at the UCCA in Beijing, “Hong Kong was a natural extension of all of my experiences as an artist: of showing, of travelling, and also the image of Hong Kong has been in my mind for so long, through films, through an understanding of the world,” she says. After her speech at the White Cube dinner expressing her desire to make the film, the thought immediately became action.



The making of *ETC* (Courtesy of Parallax, M+, Tai Kwun Contemporary)

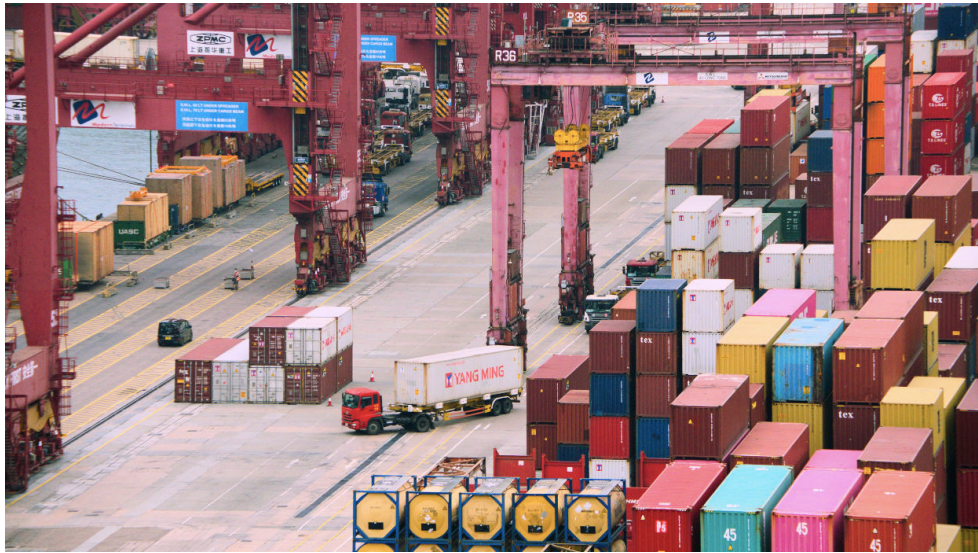
Scouting started right away, as Morris mapped out sections of the city and thought about the locations and buildings she'd like to feature. But then, of course, came the protests, the lockdowns, the travel restrictions; things were put on pause.

It wasn't until spring last year that filming eventually started, working with Gung-Ho Films, the same production company Morris used for *Beijing*. After the mask restrictions were lifted on March 1, "there was really a feeling in Hong Kong that it was turning a chapter," she reflects.

Although she'd filmed in some of the world's most densely populated cities, navigating Hong Kong's "sheer verticality" posed an entirely new challenge. "It was the most insane shoot, because every single bit of time was crazily allocated; we had to be very lean and very quick. And I think that's due to the use of space, really understanding that time is money and that space [in Hong Kong] is a resource like any other resource, and it has to be utilised properly."

Clocking in at 80 minutes, *ETC* transitions between places of power, such as the inside of the Legco building and the glossy exterior of the Bank of China, to Chanel Boutiques, a VLT production line and street-level scenes of construction workers, buses, trams, the mid-levels escalator, domestic helpers' day off and the Sham Shui Po electronics market. For Hong Kong residents, much of Morris' footage is familiar – you could argue a foreigner might get more from the film – but by linking such diverse levels of activity, it cleverly showcases the interdependence of its citizens.

Aside from Steiner, other notable faces in the film include the Canadian-born architect James Kinoshita, who not only designed Jardine House and the former AIA Building but was also instrumental in creating the pedestrian overpass infrastructure. "I can't think of any city in the world that has implemented that system so successfully," says Morris, "so I felt Kinoshita and that whole history of Connaught House had to be in there."



Still from *ETC* (2023) (Courtesy of Parallax, M+, Tai Kwun Contemporary)

The actress Josie Ho also makes an appearance, filmed in her's car rear-view mirror while driving at night, an eery shot that wouldn't look out of place in a sci-fi thriller. Morris explains, "I liked this idea of having the image of a female, who has this quality, where, yes, you know, she's an actress, she's a film producer and she's also from an influential family, and yet she has her own voice."

Although some faces and places Morris was set on filming, she admits having "a certain level of improvisation" in her process. "My films are very much like road movies: you're in and out of the van, you're on your feet for days on end, sort of hunting; it's like a sort of treasure hunt."

One such improvised location was the Sham Shui Po electronics market, whose inclusion is a comment on the concurrence of Hong Kong's analogue and digital worlds. "I had no idea about the craziness in that market, the magnet lights, the LEDs, the money machines – all of that was condensed into one space," Morris recalls.

Another unexpected scene was the Sunday domestic workers' day off, which she stumbled on during a scouting trip and immediately started filming. "I had no idea what I was walking into; I've never seen anything like it in the world, like this massive repurposing of space." Shots in *ETC* show the camaraderie the street-side picnics, impromptu massage parlours, friends playing card games and singing karaoke. "I also really like the femininity of that repurposing," Morris adds. "It's really fantastic. It's not like a set location, because it happens everywhere. And it's very uplifting to see that use of space."



Still from ETC (2023) (Courtesy of Parallax, M+, Tai Kwun Contemporary)

“And what’s interesting in my films is that you have people who are very well known, but you also have thousands of people who are unknown. That’s the beauty of being in a place called a city where you don’t really know all the narratives that are going on around. You have fragments, you have pieces, elements, and these little elements fit together into this picture of a city, that become a single image and become one’s experience of place.”

What’s compelling about Morris’ work is its neutrality. *ETC* doesn’t offer a positive or negative statement on Hong Kong; rather, it presents the city at this moment in time. At first you might see an emptiness in the skyscrapers or the city’s rampant commercialisation but then feel equally uplifted by certain scenes that show the warmth of culture and community. Such ambiguity mirrors Morris’s own experiences: “It’s a very strange feeling to move through a city. You have all these experiences at once. It’s not one thing or the other. It’s flickering back and forth. And I think this happens in all cities.”

As for interpretations of *ETC*, Morris intentionally leaves it open-ended. “I leave my film as an open letter. I wouldn’t want to prescribe how somebody would feel. I’m sure there’ll be certain people who see one thing, there’ll be another group of people who see another thing. That’s fine to me. They can all coexist. All meanings can coexist.”

Hero Image: Still from ETC (2023) (Courtesy of Parallax, M+, Tai Kwun Contemporary)