

SARAH MORRIS

AN INTERVIEW BY CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ

Since the mid-1990s, Sarah Morris has exhibited abstract paintings and films that explore the charged psychology of various urban sites, with particular attention to architecture's visually encoded hierarchies and histories.

With two recent films, one about a screenwriter (Robert Towne, 2005) and the other, completed in 2008 and titled *1972*, about a police psychologist, Morris shifts from panoramic views of major cities to intimate portraits of individual citizens. In the following discussion she talks about the relationship between these distinct genres and how her current film, a work in progress about Beijing, led her to Georg Sieber, who is the subject of *1972*. Hired by the International Olympic Committee to be head psychologist of the Munich Police, Sieber was charged with leading security for the 1972 games, and projecting scenarios that could jeopardize their safety.

Ultimately, Morris suggests, the inevitable failure of such Olympian efforts reflects the degree to which contemporary experience mirrors Hollywood versions of history. It is no longer just that "truth is stranger than fiction," as Mark Twain wrote. In our world, according to Morris, truth is fiction.

CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ Each of your films develops around a particular setting and group of cinematographic conventions, formats or genres. You've made a number of city portraits: New York [*Midtown*, 1998], Las Vegas [*AM/PM*, 1999], Washington, D.C. [*Capital*, 2001], Miami [2002] and Los Angeles [2004]; most recently, you made two films that each focus on a single person. How do these portraits of individuals—*Robert Towne*; *1972*, about Georg Sieber—relate to your films about cities and the event spaces where they prop up their identities? Could you talk comparatively about this in terms of your Beijing film?

SARAH MORRIS Because I haven't started editing the Beijing film yet, I'm sort of reluctant to talk too much about it. It could be interesting to talk about the way *Los Angeles* is to *Robert Towne* as *1972* is to the Beijing film. There is sort of a prologue/epilogue dynamic between them—they are almost twin films.

CSR So how does *Robert Towne* act as a precursor or staging situation for *1972*?

SM Part of my work is setting up an approach and then letting it become an open system, letting it run. I had been thinking for a while about the role of characters in my films. Obviously, they're not really characters per se—they're sort of citizens. When I was shooting Los Angeles, where the meetings seemed to go on endlessly, often there would be this moment where Robert Towne would be on the phone [with someone] in an office where I was, or something else would happen that made me very aware of his absence and also aware of his presence.

I was very aware of Robert Towne's history and his role as a script doctor—somebody who improvises deeply but within a very given system. *Shampoo* [which Towne wrote] is almost a history or a story about Los Angeles, as a number of his screenplays are. One thing I learned from *Los Angeles* is the way interdependency—director on producer on scriptwriter on actor and so on—is very explicit. It being so clear the way all these people are involved in the image production, in the making of an entire image, fascinated me as an artist who uses multiple mediums. I think that's something specific to my generation of artists, going cross-media and also cross-disciplines, being able to use everything from industrial design to architecture to politics to the entertainment system to maybe commercial strategies, and not only using those ideas as subject matter.

I had already made a painting titled *Robert Towne*. So, after making the Los Angeles film and dealing with issues of surface, I decided to start a series of films, each about just one person who is a particular citizen of a place, with a very particular historical relation to that place, and basically letting them speak for themselves even if what they said might not prove to be consistent with the dominant story about that place.

CSR So is the same kind of prototypical character to be revealed in *1972*? Is Georg Sieber, a police psychologist involved with that year's Olympic events, the prototypical Münchener? In your film he makes some interesting comments about the Hollywood version of history—what he calls "Spielberg's version . . . the most prolific version . . . a propaganda version." Sieber also says, "the version I'm telling you is not the version that's usually told."

SM Well Robert Towne is basically a storyteller, and so is Georg Sieber. Sieber was the scenario planner for the 1972 Olympics. He was hired by the International Olympic Committee to predict what would happen, and in fact he did do the projections, but when it actually happened nobody listened to him. Both of them are playing with their own versions of reality. Viewers are aware of the storyteller as mythmaker, and I am definitely playing with that. They know not to believe everything they hear.

CSR If *Robert Towne* is an epilogue to *Los Angeles*, is *Robert Towne* also a prologue to *1972*? How does the way Towne is constituted within the structure of *Los Angeles* relate to the way that Sieber is structured into *1972*?

SM Sieber is a little different. *Robert Towne* was done after *Los Angeles*, in retrospect.

What led me to Sieber was, firstly, that I was looking for a second character to continue this series that I had set into motion, the idea of using differ-

OPPOSITE, TWO PRODUCTION STILLS FROM SARAH MORRIS'S *ROBERT TOWNE*, 2006, 35MM FILM, APPROX. 34 MINUTES, SHOWING TOWNE ALONE AND WITH THE ARTIST.



"I use documentary the way somebody uses a red crayon. I don't feel any obligation to stick to the truth."

ent characters. And secondly, I was already doing research into the Beijing film. I was having lots of discussions with the International Olympic Committee in both Lausanne and Beijing, and I was talking to a lot of people about how to go about making this film in China. Everywhere, I confronted these enormous bureaucracies, and it was impossible to figure out how many people actually were involved or the bureaucracies' relationship to a place. Indecipherability and the idea of not being able to perceive depth goes along with the idea of parallax [also the name of Morris's studio]. Actually, the International Olympic Committee is a Swiss organization, and it has very little to do with Beijing. I had to figure out how to navigate through this.

I thought very much about the idea of failure, not only my own in dealing with these entities, which were pretty confounding, but also failure in terms of the Games. I wondered, will it be a failure if nothing happens during these Games? Will it be a failure if something happens during these Games? Like what? It just seems you can't talk about Beijing without talking about failure, and I realized that before shooting the Beijing film I wanted to deal with that specifically in relation to the past, which brought me to the idea of Munich, the biggest failure in terms of Olympic Games.

In a way, it gets down to the failure of system planning in general, which is a much more interesting topic. Even if you hire a very interesting progressive thinker who is a psychologist to come up with ways to respond to possible scenarios, it doesn't mean they'll be implemented. You can have all the plans and ideas you want, but between planning and implementation, or projection and implementation, is a gap—the gap between reality and the idea, the ideal. I mean that's what artists are dealing with all the time. That's what I'm dealing with.

CSR Can you say something about the documentary approach in both *Robert Towne* and *1972*?

SM I use documentary the way somebody uses a red

crayon. I don't feel any obligation to stick to the truth, and I've been playing with documentary form for at least 10 years, even in *Midtown*. There is not one scene in any of my films that doesn't actually represent a real person moving through space and time in a way that is simply captured on camera. I can't say that they're not aware of the camera and that they might not decide to represent themselves slightly differently. The term *cinema verité* could be critiqued from that perspective. It's like a film of Robbe-Grillet, who uses repeating serial facts to unfold an issue. It makes one doubt exactly what's going on. It becomes fiction in the end.

CSR You have commented that in Beijing the Olympic rings relate to the highway rings around the city, which create a disorienting inability to position oneself. Does the medium of a documentary style, or a *verité* style, include the way a camera is positioned, its distance from the subject, the stillness or the not-stillness of it? Are all these part of the medium for you? When I say medium, it's in the sense of a red crayon.

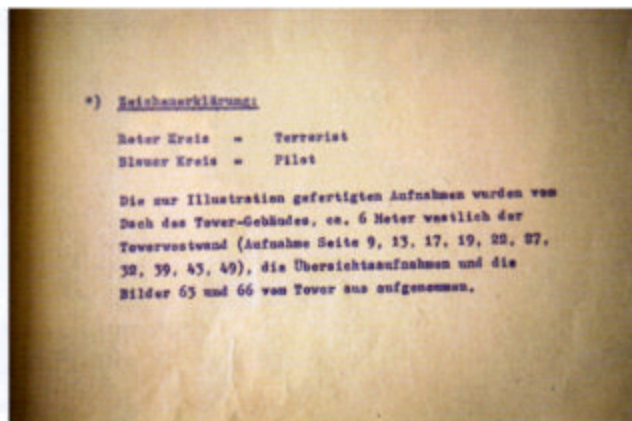
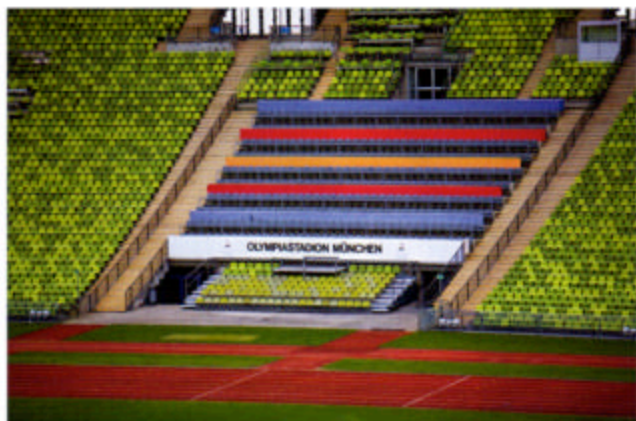
SM There is a scale of different angles and shots we use in the films. There are some sequences in the films which are filmed in a very unorthodox way, like in *Capital*, where Clinton goes across the South Lawn whistling, but then there are other standard shots, like when the White House press secretary is filmed from a straight angle to mimic the standard headshot, CNN style of cinematography. There's always a flickering in the films between the spectacle as it's normally consumed and played out, and points of view where there is clearly no distance between the spectacle and the thing that's somehow recording the spectacle—the camera, the artist.

CSR Could it be that you are developing a language that gets more refined with each of your films?

SM There is the seriality of this Olympic event that's staged again and again every four years, or every two years, depending on how you're counting—basically, all the details are completely separate and yet there's this sameness, almost monotony. It's clear that if you have seen someone like Sieber in *1972*, obviously it's going to completely shift the way you interpret someone like Henry Kissinger when you see him in my Beijing film.

In *Parkett* [No. 61, 2001], Joe Klein wrote something really provocative about my film *Capital*: "What are they

BELOW, 1972, 2008, 35MM FILM, APPROX. 38 MINUTES. RIGHT, PAGE FROM OFFICIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF EVENTS OF SEPT. 5, 1972. MUNICH ARCHIVES.



carrying in those folders? . . . those men . . . in uniform, white shirts and dull ties. . . . What if the folders they are carrying are, figuratively, empty? What if these men are zealously guarding pasteurized data heaps: crop yields in Kansas, ashtray regulations, papers to be shuffled, stored and forgotten? . . . What if nothing really happens here?" Imagine if you looked at Washington, D.C., and you just thought it was a big nothing, and that actually all of these men with suits running around with briefcases in these beautiful formations actually aren't carrying anything at all and don't have any information whatsoever and it's all Brasilia.

Basically, you can look at information as having dense, compact, historically specific details that need to be unpacked and unfolded—and then you can also look at it as well, actually, no one really knows what the hell they are doing.

CSR Does that mean that essentially Kissinger is nothing more than just a character, a fiction?

SM Well, in creating an open structure like this it's the viewer's perception of those characters or events that becomes interesting. What you lay upon that text or you project onto those images.

I think this film, *Beijing*, is about failure, but it is also about an extreme level of optimism, too. The amount of projection there was remarkable. Again, there are two sides to projection. There's the projection of the West onto this event, which is supposedly in the East—but that, too, can be debated, the question of where the event is actually taking place. And then there's also the projection of the East upon itself, about what it thinks it's achieving. There are always these multiple, vying perceptions of the same moment that can be very much at odds.

The film also deals not only with the role of architecture—of course that's dealt with—but also the role of architects. The role of architects in relation to the spectacle is fascinating, because here you have the "Bird's Nest," which is like the core of Beijing at that moment—and then, well, what will it become? What will happen to that? Copyright-wise? Just physically? What will they use the 80,000-person stadium for? How will that play out in terms of space and in terms of the future? That has yet to be decided, and people have multiple positions. In Beijing meaning is not yet fixed, it's the opposite of dealing with something from the past. It's not yet clear what it means for Rem Koolhaas to build the CCTV building, just as it's not yet clear what it means for Henry Kissinger to be ignored by George Bush there. None of these moments are clear to us yet because it's way too close, it's impossible to decide exactly whether this is the future. That's what makes it ripe subject matter.

CSR You said it's not quite clear where the event is taking place. What do you mean by that?

SM Basically, I was referring to the seriality of the event—in this case, it happens to be the Olympic Games; we could be also talking about the Oscars, the presidential campaign, the elections, whatever—and to the multiplicity of cities in which it unfolds, and the fact that it's structured similarly to something like the United Nations, it's struc-



2008 (RINGS), 2007, HOUSEHOLD GLOSS PAINT ON CANVAS, 9 1/2 BY 28 1/2 FEET. ALL PHOTOS THIS ARTICLE COURTESY PARALLAX.

ured from a body that resides abroad. It's actually orchestrated from abroad. You could even say it's designed from abroad. You could actually argue that authorship of the event or spectacle is multiple, it's not necessarily a Chinese event. That's up for debate.

CSR So, that's also relevant in terms of architects?

SM Yeah, it's clearly like a playground.

CSR Can you say a little bit more about the rings? I know that the Olympic rings are in some recent paintings, but I wonder how they might be used in the film. Do they play a role?

SM In Beijing it's very difficult to place yourself because you're constantly going around in a series of circles on these ring roads that interconnect. You're constantly on an exit from one to the other, and it's constantly expanding. It's a clear model of this decentered city, and of my experience in relation to Beijing. I thought the road system, which has six lanes on each side, was such a fantastically preposterous way to structure a city. It seems very nonlinear, and you stop trying to place yourself, you stop trying to get a hold of things, you just let go in a way. Between that and the level of particles in the air and the opacity, you couldn't really have a vision, you can't really see space. Architecture plays a different role there. It's really about this experience of moving through something and not having a complete vision of what it is you're in.

CSR So you give into it, you stop being concerned about getting outside the rings.

SM I think you have to give into it, otherwise you lose your sanity.

CSR But at the same time, in many contemporary characterizations of the rings there is this idea that with these circular transport routes and viewing possibilities you can be on the outside looking in, and you can be the object to be observed, but the object being observed basically has no validity in the structure whatsoever, it's incidental.

SM It all gets back to the fact that there is no inside or outside, you're just part of it. There is no periphery. There is no being on the edge. You're in this system. That is one of the things I find at moments repulsive and at the same time very empowering, this idea that you're caught within a system that is larger than you. You're aware of it, you're moving through it, but you understand that you are a fragment of this larger whole. To me that's what the films and the paintings aspire to confront. They don't in any way claim to be a resolution. It could go on literally, it could go infinitely, and I'm talking diagrammatically, visually. It doesn't end where the canvas ends, or where the actual image stops. ○