

# seeing red


An artist and filmmaker takes her camera behind the scenes of the Summer Olympics' biggest event: China's play for global respect. By Eric Banks

It's a surprisingly clear day in Beijing as Sarah Morris tuk-tuks in a hired SUV through the poky traffic, a relief from the usual choking scrim of sour pollution that burns your eyes and makes your throat feel as if you've just gargled with Tabasco. Despite the environmental aggravation, Morris's spirits are up, since

soon she'll be getting inside Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's nearly finished Olympic Stadium. The Bird's Nest, as it's been nicknamed, is crucial to the big bet Beijing has made on avant-garde design. The city has gone all in, and done so without much regard for preserving its traditional architecture or taming its air quality, and without paying much thought to urban planning and its massive automobile congestion. Morris is here to map out a movie she'll produce on the Opening Ceremony, and she's focused on the part architecture is playing—how it's a stand-in for power, and how it might even bring a whole culture to the brink of collapse. That dark view is a recurring subject of her paintings and films.



Photographed by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin



**BITTER SWEET**

PTW Architects' translucent Water Cube, home of the aquatic Olympic contests, opposite: Sarah Morris scouts a Beijing candy shop in a district where one can also find Cartier diamonds and fried sea horses.

The first order of business for Morris is a meeting with a prim, ponytailed woman named Zhang Xun, the president of the government-run China Film Co-Production Corporation, who has been offering Morris tips on securing permits, getting permission to shoot the candy stores and ping-pong parlors she's interested in, and navigating what should be catastrophic traffic. But practical considerations take a weird turn when Xun, speaking through her young interpreter, describes the CFCC's interest in providing security for the crew. An American curator helping Morris summarizes for us: "Their job is two parts, to protect the security of the crew but also to stop us from taking shots of images that they don't want us to take shots of." The interpreter responds, "Right. Destroying the image of China."

Maybe something got lost in translation, but the sentiment conveyed is clear: Image is everything here, and the Chinese are supersensitive about it. During our visit, before the tragic earthquakes in the Sichuan Province, an Internet-fueled wave of anti-Western nationalism is cresting, and the *China Daily* is inveighing against those who would dare tarnish the state's reputation and dampen the spirit of the Summer Games.

The façades of respectability do seem more important than what is going on behind them. In the Wangfujing Dajie district—surely the only place in the world where a shop-

per can frequent a Cartier store and a food stall featuring fried sea horses on a stick within a block of each other—a worker dutifully mops off the shiny metal on an overhead outdoor clock, a Sisyphean task given all the dirt in the air. Near the American Embassy, Morris points out the just-erected Jackie Chan billboard reading PROTECT THE MOVIES,

SAY NO TO PIRACY, on the front of the Silk Street shopping center—the Barneys of counterfeit designer brands, where a fake Paul Smith shirt will set you back 70 yuan, or 10 bucks.

ool, hard-edged paintings and a series of six films in which she insinuates herself among powerful, seemingly inaccessible company, have won the 40-year-old Morris acclaim since she finished the Whitney

Museum's Independent Study Program and emerged as an artist in the nineties. The films are unnarrated, impressionistic montages of banal scenes and local architecture interspersed with shots following her subjects—presidents, movie stars, and producers—as they go about their daily routines. Morris, a one-time assistant to Jeff Koons, lives



#### RING CYCLE

Sarah Morris's 1932 (*Rings*, 2006). Her hard-edged paintings and her film projects cross-pollinate one another.

#### SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Construction cranes and smog overwhelm the skyline as Rem Koolhaas's CCTV building, first from left, makes its bid to become the icon of a new Beijing.



in New York with her husband, the artist Liam Gillick, and their five-year-old son, Orson. Her studio in Chelsea's Starrett-Leigh Building consists of a back room where assistants wearing surgical masks execute her paintings and a tidy, office-like front room. It's called Parallax—the reference is to Alan J. Pakula's Watergate-era film *The Parallax View*, in which Warren Beatty becomes enmeshed in a massive political conspiracy. Like Beatty's character, Morris presents raw evidence for viewers to sift through.

One project made explicit the connection between her paintings and her film work: In 2006 Morris painted the underside of the Lever House, Gordon Bunshaft's gray Manhattan masterpiece of the modernist grid, with multicolored lines and intersecting hexagons alluding to Los Angeles's fluid, uncentered power dynamic. She named it after Robert Towne, the screenwriter of corruption noirs like Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* who, it turns out, also did some uncredited work on *The Parallax View*. "The films and the paintings are parallel productions; they're going on simultaneously," Morris tells me. "Painting is pretty slow, pretty monotonous. You fill the time with a lot of 'What if?—What if I had a camera in the White House? What if I got on the set of this or that? Painting cross-pollinates the films, and vice-versa."

Her interest in behind-the-scenes machinations took her to Oscar week in Los Angeles and the inner sanctums of Washington, D.C., before it led her to Beijing. But as she stewed over the present-day complications, she got caught up in a parallel obsession with the Summer Games in Munich 1972—when 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team were massacred by Palestinian terrorists—which came to shade her view of what we're

seeing in all the futuristic jewels around us: "Somehow the '72 Olympics was always etched in my mind—how it looked, the colors, the graphic design, the failed utopian moment. When I was thinking about this whole issue of failure—the failure of system planning in Beijing, the whole thing—I started thinking about Munich again. It came up as I was working through this quagmire of what this place, Beijing, means."

Morris wound up finishing her film *1972* first. It includes interviews with the police psychologist for the Munich Games, her own matter-of-fact shots of Günther Behnisch's radically amorphous stadium, and archival footage. The Games had been planned as an expression of openness, with the color green—symbolizing democracy—used in almost every aspect of design, from promotional posters down to the stadium seats. If Munich was all about the optimism that color suggests, Beijing on the eve of the Olympics is awash in a massive burst of red—strange, since despite the

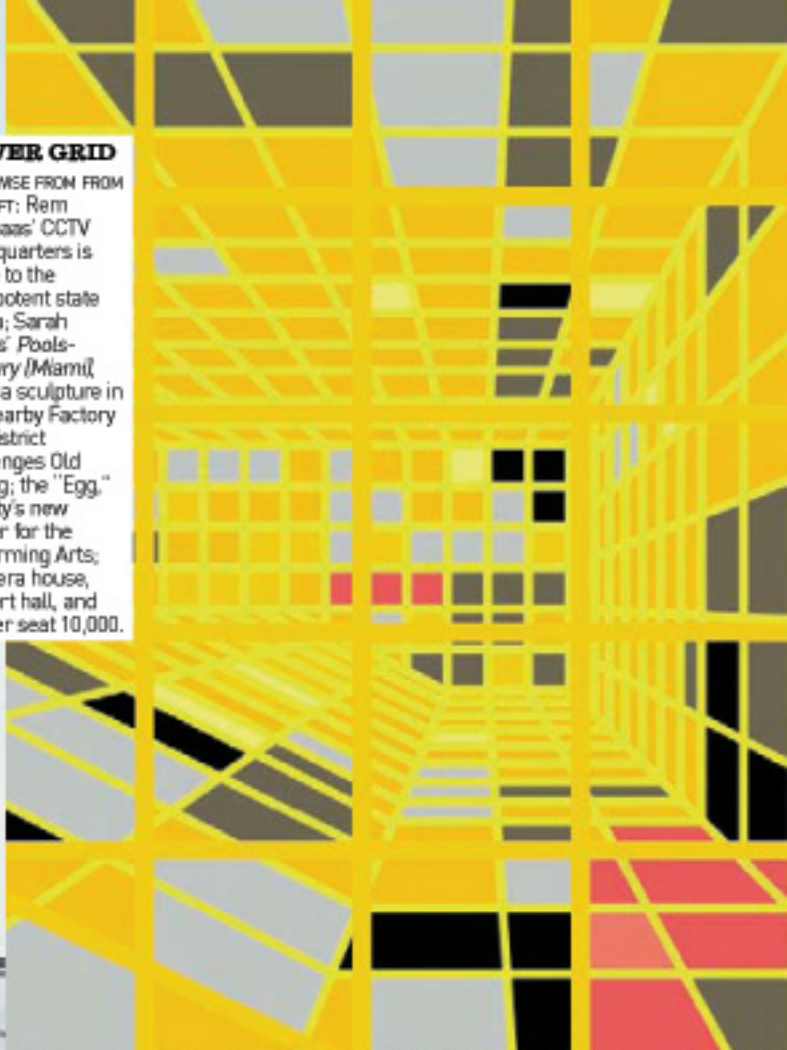
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treachery, official theme of this year's Games, "One World One Dream," the color scheme can't help but highlight nationalism and Chinese muscle. How Morris got the access for this project, despite a labyrinth of Chinese bureaucracy and Swiss stonewalling, says a lot. It involved a Towne-worthy chain involving Jacques Herzog, Sid Gannis (head of the Oscars), Hans Ulrich Obrist (of London's Serpentine



## POWER GRID

CLOCKWISE FROM FROM  
TOP LEFT: Rem  
Koolhaas' CCTV  
Headquarters is  
home to the  
omnipotent state  
media; Sarah  
Morris' *Pools-  
Century* (Miami),  
2003; a sculpture  
in the nearby  
Factory 798  
district  
challenges Old  
Beijing; the "Egg,"  
the city's new  
Center for the  
Performing Arts,  
its opera house,  
concert hall, and  
theater seat 10,000.



Gallery), and Uli Sigg (the former Swiss ambassador to China). Finally, Morris was beckoned to a January meeting at the IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland—an invitation that coincided with Steven Spielberg's withdrawal from his role as artistic adviser for the opening and closing ceremonies to protest China's business relations. Still, Morris adds: "Even Spielberg being

hired to work on the Opening Ceremony—who asked him to do that job? Nobody can really tell you who is orchestrating these decisions."

Beijing provides a lot of material to work with—perhaps too much. Has there ever been this much construction in one place, involving so much money and so many laborers working on so many four-star projects? The show starts just as soon as you

step off the airplane and walk through Norman Foster's newly opened Terminal 3—the over-10-million-square-foot arrival terminal in the Beijing Capital International Airport. Designed and executed in a mere four years, the terminal will accommodate 50 million passengers annually—and is twice the size of the Pentagon. Traversing the terminal,

you feel like a jet-lagged ant.

The structure furthest from completion on the eve of the Olympics is also the hardest to get into—Rem Koolhaas/OMA's China Central Television tower, the masterstroke of the Beijing Boom. Two miles from the tower, Morris, who save for her magenta ballet slippers doesn't look like a "creative type," and her still photographer Sean Dack, are scampering along the sloping roof of a brewery turned museum trying to get an angle on it. From here, Koolhaas's half-finished hulk, crowned with five cranes, looks like a crazed titanium version of the Devils Tower of *Close Encounters* fame, but Morris still hopes to get inside, to experience up close the burning odor of a megalith going up.

The \$800 million home of CCTV, the state-run news agency, will boast five million square feet in its 54-story-tall interlocking Zs. It's already being touted as the future icon of Beijing. And though locals whisper about how offended they are that it looks like a squatting figure, it is as emblematic of the city's 21st-century culture and ambitions as the Forbidden City was in the 15th century or Mao's Tomb was in the 20th. Where dynastic power and communism were the respective earlier motors of Chinese culture, today media plays the central role.

At the Frieze Art Fair in London last year, Morris was on a panel with Koolhaas that grew slightly rancorous over the question of what architects were even doing in Beijing. "There was one point in the conversation where they were interviewing me, and then Rem said something like 'The West is disappearing'. And I said, 'Well that's just non-

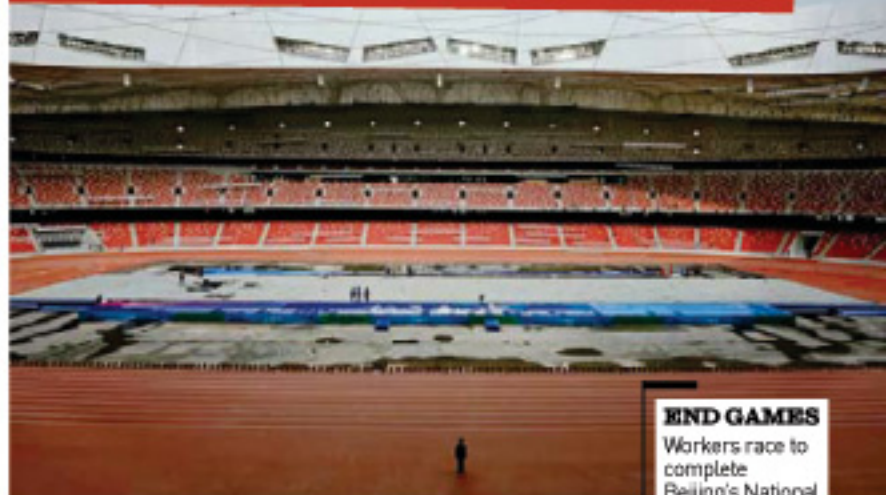
sense,'" Morris says as we look at his new work in progress. "I mean, come on. I just said, 'That's not true. Then why would the East be appropriating Steven Spielberg, Rem Koolhaas, and Herzog & de Meuron?'"

"The architects," she continued, as we crossed the street to examine a trio of fake palm trees, "are in strange, complex relationships with the nation-state. I've felt they weren't being taken seriously on some level because, from the perspective of the International Olympic Committee, the whole role of architecture is as a utilitarian tool. I'm grateful to Jacques Herzog for supporting my project—but on the other side of the table are the people who are in power."

At least one Chinese artist and architect involved in the design of the Bird's Nest, Ai Weiwei, was troubled enough by Beijing's use of architecture as a sham bit of P.R. rebranding that he has since denounced the stadium. The former artistic consultant for design told Reuters last year that he would boycott the Games: "I would feel ashamed if I just designed something for glamour or to show some kind of fake image."

The older Communist architectural symbols—which face Tiananmen Square like obdurate ghosts, guarded by stern-faced guards in ill-fitting green suits and ringed by security cameras—have seen better days, and tufts of weeds sprout out

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#### END GAMES

Workers race to complete Beijing's National Stadium, known as the Bird's Nest, in time for the opening ceremonies.

from the front steps. Amid Beijing's new spectacles, Mao's Memorial Hall and the Great Hall of the People feel like embarrassing tourist traps, as enervated as the discredited ideology that built them. A stroll through the traditional alley-like *hutongs* behind the Memorial Hall—where half-torn-down buildings are the backdrop for impoverished merchants hawking candies, Peking-ducks-to-go sold in packages resembling Durafume logs, and Mao paperweights—adds a screechy, melancholy note to the upbeat jingle of the new Beijing.

Just off Tiananmen Square, I ran into Sam Orlofsky of New York's Gagosian Gallery, who admitted to scouting potential locations for an expansion of the Gagosian brand into the white-hot Chinese market—PaceWildenstein had just announced it was

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