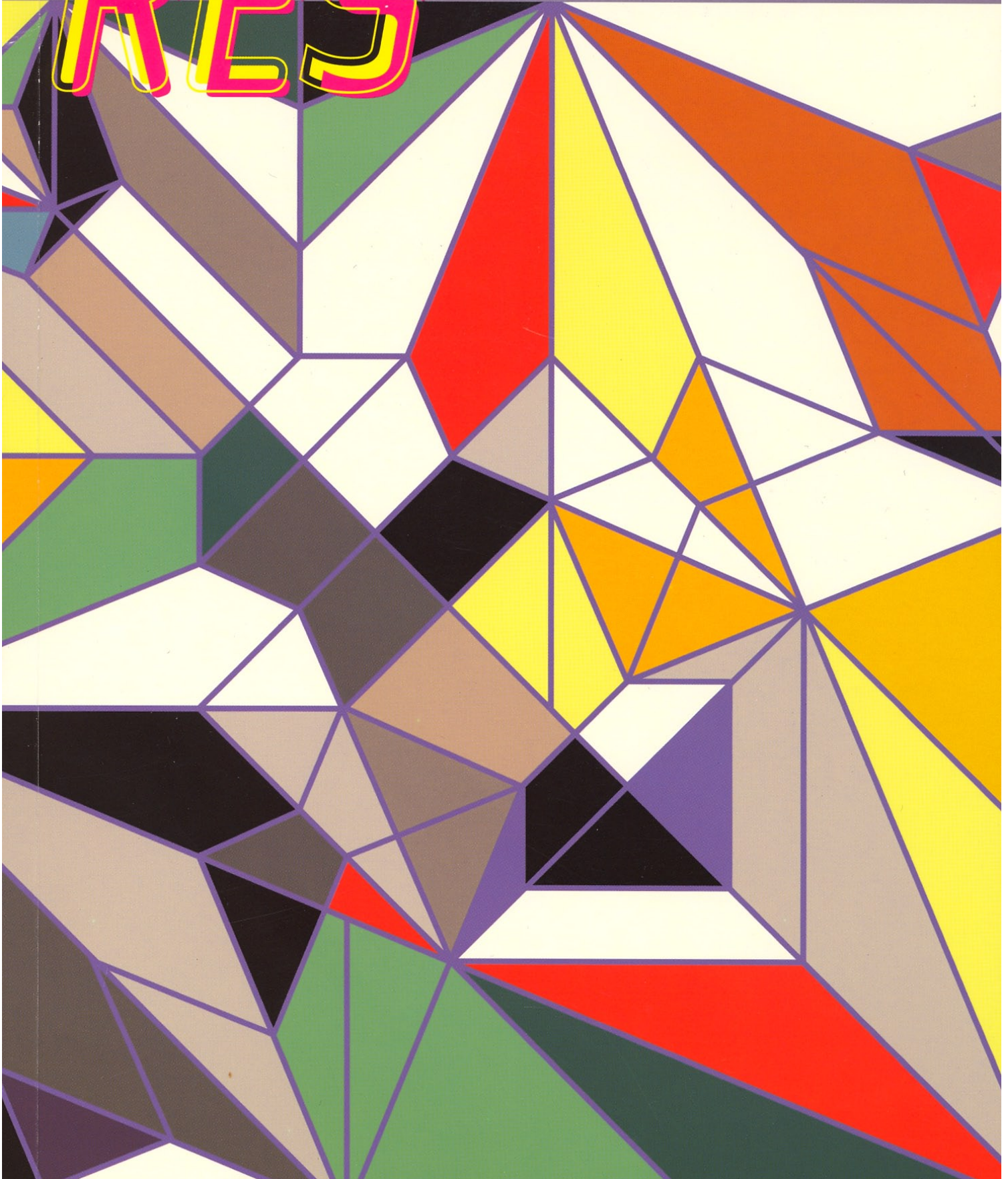


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INTERVIEW WITH SARAH MORRIS

KENAN ERATALAY

When I first contacted Sarah Morris' manager Robert Schmaltz, I told him the dates that I was going to be in New York, and he invited me to the Guggenheim Museum where Ms. Morris would be holding a conference and meeting for art aficionados. This was part of a program the Guggenheim Museum started in order to bring the artist and the public together (a great idea). There were at least 100 people in the lecture hall, each having paid \$10. Ms. Morris talked for almost one hour about her art, her films, and also about her building projects; the result was a wonderful experience. After the talk I met Ms. Morris and Mr. Schmaltz over cocktails and we set an appointment for next morning. We met at Milkshake, a very nice café, and I put the tape recorder on table. I rarely found the need to interrupt Ms. Morris as she talked - she was so natural and expressed her thoughts so clearly that I wanted to write the interview all in her words and expressions. As far as I am concerned, I would have talked with her for another four hours easily, but she was on her way to her summer house and had to go, leaving me with a share of the excitement she has for her work.

SARAH MORRIS I am shooting a film in Beijing at the time of the next Olympics so that is why I've been repeatedly going there and also I have a series of new paintings about Beijing.

KE Those rings?

SM Yes, the rings. Also this idea of the history of origami interested me because everybody assumes it is Japanese and it is actually Chinese. I liked the idea of origami because it parallels the history of the advent of paper. There are contentious theories about where it actually developed but they do assume it developed at the beginning in China. I also like this idea that with a limited actual formal piece of paper you can create a very complex form. There was a very intriguing article in the New Yorker magazine a couple of months ago about how origami is used now for scientific solutions to do with a heart valves, for instance. They use this idea of folding something that can then expand into something else in another situation and be sterile at the same time; you know no one touches it. This is very interesting to me. I also like the idea of origami as a sign of something to come. Cinematically, it is always used as a sign. You're not really sure of what and I feel like that's very similar with Beijing or China, in general. Everybody wants to be optimistic and think progressively, but I'm not really sure that we should be celebrating this form of capitalism. It's up in the air. When you go there, even with this concept of congestion and the city, there is a slowness there, which actually saves the city. If it was like New York City, with this level of mass, it would be intolerable. But there is something that is balanced there in the sense that the speed of the city is very slow. It is almost static!

The mass there is overwhelming. People, bicycles, cars, buildings, etc. It really feels so multiplied. I can only speak about it in this effect. We went to scout in a place in the center of the city where Rem Koolhaas was supposed to redesign this building and the plan fell apart. It's called the Beijing Books building and it's a building from the 1980s located on the main street. There are so many people there rapidly consuming books. It's a frenzy. You go in there and you feel overwhelmed. You are in the mass.

All these people using it as a library in the true sense that this moment of browsing is this consumptive act and it's obviously very progressive because this has been historically denied to them. The books are there, you see everything from Marx to Don DeLillo.

KE Did you go to Big Wall?

SM Yes. It seems that there is an idea in China that through this mass you can achieve anything. If you can organize this mass and get it into a momentum there are no limits. This is something that I was introduced to probably when I was a kid by my father speaking about China. I mean, this is not always good and not always progressive because you can have very highly developed situations where a mass of people is working around the clock on all of these building projects and one of the architects there told me that it was okay that all of these workers were being paid the equivalents of 2 or 3 euros a day. Another person I know told me that this was a gross exaggeration of what they were actually being paid. But again, it is relative in terms of how much their needs cost. There is a very different economy there. But really it is the idea that if you can move a mass and move it into momentum, you can achieve anything. You can build a building that looks like it is falling down. You can kill out a whole beetle population, kill off an insect if you wanted to, get rid of pollution, etc. In a way, there is something parallel to that in the idea of approaching art as a system that is an open structure. Umberto Eco talks about it in *The Role of the Reader*, that you create something that is an open structure that is larger than yourself. Larger than your intention. A lot of art does function like this, and some more than others. You have an open structure that almost moves in its own momentum. That's how I feel like my work develops. You come up with a set of rules for yourself on how you're working and how you're thinking about things and how you're codifying things and reducing things. For instance, with the films I only use people as citizens, I don't use actors, as actors, there's no drama involved, there is no script involved. It's all cinema verite, there is no lighting, there is no script. There are rules that I have in place that are actually much stricter than anything that developed years ago with Dogma in Holland. It is completely different than that. When all of my films shown in the Rotterdam International Film Festival, and I was the guest of honor, of course people talked about this idea of Dogma, and actually their films were very interesting but this is different. To me that is acting, you're still coming up with a script, you're still directing in a very concrete way. With my films there are only narrative possibilities because you're creating fragments of narrative scenarios through situations, through reality. I liked what Robert Towne said to me which I showed the other night during the Guggenheim talk, which was "your job as a director is to appreciate the situation as fast as possible". That is completely what I try to do. I try to enter situations that I know are already happening. To be in Beijing in August 2008 or to be in Los Angeles during the Oscars or to be in Clinton's White House Cabinet Room at the end of an epoch, the end of a particular administration. You place yourself at the particular coordinates which are not simply geographical coordinates of a specific time and it reveals a complex form. You obviously can play with these scenarios later on or heighten them or undermine them but you know that the scenarios are there. They're part of our popular vocabulary, they're part of our consciousness.

KE Do you digitally change things while you are editing?

SM No.

KE Colors?



Sarah Morris, 1976 [Rings], 2007
Household gloss paint on canvas 60 1/16 x 60 1/16 in. (152.5 x 152.5 cm)

SM Color, yes. Absolutely, there's color correction. Another thing that I didn't really go into is that by using these parallel worlds to art, whether its politics, entertainment, journalism, the literary world, graphic design, behavioral psychology, if you use these other worlds you can possibly learn something. You can actually learn something that's very interesting. You can pick up certain vocabulary, a way of thinking about working, a way of thinking about process and I find too often that these arenas remain too isolated, whether it's science or literature. But we know experientially that they are not really isolated at all. Definitely I want to be involved in all these different worlds. I guess that goes back to when I stated that it's not like someone starts just in art....

KE You plan a lot of things in advance because you can't make a mistake later on. And in your work I see that sort of detailed preplanning. I see your paintings, I examine the lines carefully, there are no shades in colors, and everything looks as done at once. That's what it looks like anyway.

SM Well it's a series of steps. Both of my parents are from science backgrounds so I grew up going to my dad's laboratory and seeing the whole system of how they code all the tubes, how they work from theorems and reduce the impossibilities, ultimately how they have a system for interpretations the world. Science doesn't exist just by itself. I was very well aware growing up how the funding of science is extremely political, how the grant writing system works, and how the publishing of writing influences what you can do. This arena fascinated me, also through its fallibility, the limits of science. For instance the idea of science and capitalism heading in the same direction instead of as a challenging force in the culture. When I was studying I was very interested in theories of science, like the idea that you can't prove anything, all you can do is go through a series of disproof's. I like this idea a lot. This was Paul Feyerabend's in *Against Method*. It's actually very parallel to Frank Stella and the idea that you have what you have. A particular American form of materialism...You can't really prove anything except for the facts or the reality that you have. I'm very captivated by science fiction, in particular the work of J.G. Ballard. Going back to this issue of reality there is almost no reason to create fiction because there are so many unresolved scenarios that we witness daily and that we know how to read as fiction or as narrative that absorb us and then we lose the thread. It happens with journalism all the time. There are stories that become very powerful in the popular imagination and then they disappear. It is tragic and beautiful.

KE You said you didn't go to art school, and you opened your first exhibition in Saatchi & Saatchi?

SM No. That was a group installation called the "Young American" in 1997.

KE Which school did you go to and what did you major in?

SM I went to Brown University and I majored in a department that was at the time called Semiotics which was basically cultural theory, film theory, political theory taught on an undergraduate level, a very interdisciplinary approach to the text whether it be literary, film or art. But it was the only



Sarah Morris, 1988 [Rings], 2007
Household gloss paint on canvas 84 1/4 x 84 1/4 in. [214 x 214 cm]

program in the country at the time that functioned like this on that level. I went to this program because putting together politics, literature, art, film and looking at it in almost Marxist reading of how to look at things in a context seemed very stimulating.

KE What is it that moved you towards art?

SM All of my friends at school were making films. I never really made films at that point because it was way too expensive. I just read all the magazines...It was through the reproduction of art that I became involved.

KE You call them films or movies or...?

SM Films.

KE Installations or films?

SM I would say that I'm an artist and I make paintings and films. And if someone asked me to be a bit more specific I might say I make short films.

KE That is the kind of films you make. I'm talking about the context. You don't have any script, you change places, you have a music that is composed without seeing the movie. Do you put the music and film together yourself afterwards?

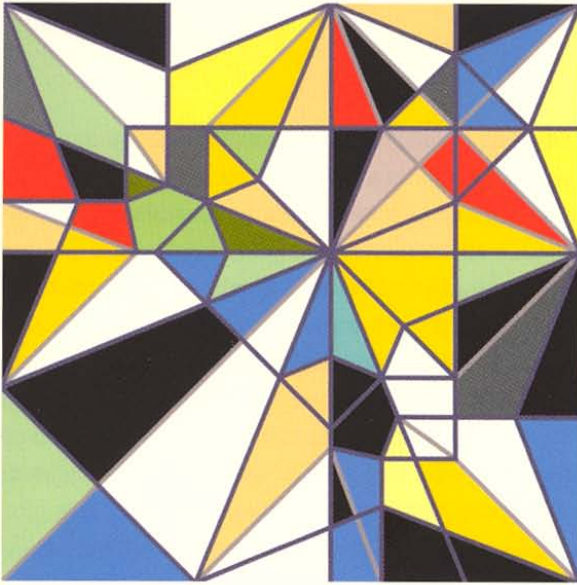
SM Yes, I do that. Usually what happens is that it's like a vocabulary of different sounds and compositions that are the audio and these obviously have very different meanings and very different nuances. What I'll do is I'll take those 50 components and I will place them in various alignments with the image. But sometimes I will do something to undermine the image or the music itself. It's not always that I'm using one thing to heighten the other. I'll sometimes use it in a contradictory way.

KE So you use it as a tool. The music is sort of a tool in your films.

SM Yes.

KE And who makes the music?

SM Liam Gillick. He usually knows the subject matter well because I've spoken about it enough and there's usually a point as I said before. I use my filmmaking as an excuse to get to know something that I don't know about or I want to be involved with. I did a talk with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rem Koolhaas and they said: "So you're saying that art could be defined as some sort of exploratory learning process?" The answer in short is yes. A politics of engagement. But to use something as an excuse to be in a certain situation, to meet new people, to see situations that I would normally not see as an artist and not just be exposed to them visually and aesthetically. For example, to look at the way Beijing is structured, the colors, how everything looks mute there, the colors look very bright but at the same time they look like they're in a desert, they look sun blasted, sand blasted and sort of faded. There's something faded and second hand about the place. Even though they make it shiny and new it's to do with the dust that is constantly coming from the desert and it's also to do with the pollution. It's also to



Sarah Morris, *Rabbit [Origami]*, 2007
Household gloss paint on canvas 48 1/16 x 48 1/16 in. (122 x 122 cm)

do with the economic forms, like what happens when you have rampant, out of control capitalism, what does that look like? This is very interesting. It goes back to science fiction and time being accelerated. But also trying to expose yourself to something that you would normally judge... Los Angeles may be a better example that you have a city that is represented internationally by this one industry, the film industry. Whether it's right or wrong, who cares? That's what Los Angeles is represented by; this export that it pumps out to the whole world, controls everybody's dreams, attempts to control everybody's idea of beauty and desire, controls different narratives, everything...But this idea is very easy to critique.

This isn't necessarily a form but there are elements of it that are actually really fascinating. It is like talking about your friends in movies and how they might talk. The way they talk about the future, the way they talk about their projects, the way that they're constantly in the future. This is very similar to artists because as an artist it doesn't matter how many problems I'm confronted with in the studio, like a problem with a painting, a problem with a contact in a film that might not be returning a phone call... It doesn't matter how many problems that are going on, ultimately you're always thinking about the future as an artist, you're always thinking about the interface between your work and a possible future audience or a possible dialogue that hasn't yet quite become materialized. You are working towards possibilities. So you're working to make this dialogue more clear or simply something that becomes tangible. As an artist that is what I am constantly thinking. With film development, what I observed and absolutely adored, if not fetishized, is the idea of discussion, the idea of projection, the idea of the future, the idea of the multiplicity of projects, co-authorship. You have a basic idea of talking, and they really have a fixation with talking... Even more so than in the art world.

KE You probably spend more time on your films than your paintings in the preparation phase, like set up contacts, arrange everything...

SM If you actually measured it on a timeline, then yes you're right. But then it is hard to measure it on a timeline because there are low level things that are constantly going on while something else is going on. To me it's normal. For instance, we're at a café right now that is putting up a structure and there's another structure behind us that is being taken down. This is a constant thing. This idea of a fetish for the marginal in art, you know it's not the only story of art in the 20th century because you have Duchamp and there are many people who counter that. You are constantly battling the fetish for the marginal or the abject or behavior that basically teaches artists to enjoy being marginal and not being part of a mainstream. I think this is changing for sure but there are obviously norms and conventions in art that are more rewarded than others.

KE When you say "mainstream" you mean for common public right? And do you expect that the common public appreciates your work or is it meant for a certain population.

SM I don't really think about a specific public when I make my work. On some level it is a very selfish

thing that I do. You make your work because somehow it satisfies you. It pleases me, it satisfies me, I like to be in these situations, I like to make this type of work. Again, it's about making a structure that is larger than you that can somehow propel itself forward and then you get a feeling, almost a very transient sort of ephemeral feeling, in the most positive sense of that word. You get the feeling like you're creating something that is lighter than you, that somehow is a vehicle. Not only is art a result of conversations but it is a vehicle for conversations and that is the part that expands beyond you but the initial starting point is "I want to think about this" or "I want to be in this situation" or "I want to make this thing that has a scale that somehow moves one past oneself, moves one past these ideas of 'marginal' being the subject for art, and moves into realms of issues about economy, politics, science, industrial design, behavioral psychology, all of those things that can move." You can start to talk about art as something that could possibly raise issues in a lot of those fields and the idea of making this thing, which in my work is actually literal. With other people's work you can talk about relational aesthetics, for instance, in a way that goes beyond specific practices. You can look at all work as existing in a context, you can look at any piece of literature, any piece of art, as enmeshed in economic, political, and social milieu. Obviously we all know this. But I think my work specifically does this in a sense that it is just one fragment, it's not actually resolved. The work expands in a way completely off the canvas and moves on into the next piece. It really is unending. It is about creating an after-image of these late capitalist forms. But it is an after-image similar to blinking your eye and still continuing to see part of an image or the structures that were in front of you.

KE So you use household paint. And you don't use shades, just red or yellow or white.

SM Well that's not totally true. I'll make a very specific palette and it is mixed by a computer. It is household paint. I'll bring in a predefined paint chip like banana yellow and the computer at the paint store will match the color. I don't mix it in the studio but obviously they make a tint, a hue in the shop. I started working with household paints again because it was the easiest and simplest thing and also I was teaching myself how to paint, so this other stuff was way too complicated. I also didn't like what it was attached to which is this super-preciousness, what I consider craft.

KE Let's talk about the ring paintings. Unlike your building paintings those ring paintings have dynamic sense in them. The building paintings are static, strong, standing. That is the impression I got from your exhibition. Rings are more dynamic, moving.

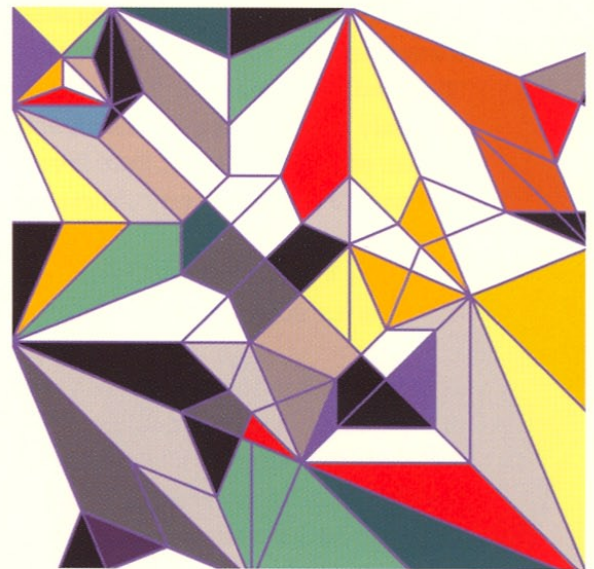
SM It's funny because I just got this request the other day to be in a show in Basel. This idea of machines. With the machine people always think of Warhol, the desire of being a machine. I don't have the desire to be a machine but I have the desire to be part of a machine. It goes back to this idea of a large structure or large mass in momentum. In the ring paintings there is something very fragmentary and in motion. It is like taking a stop motion fragment of a system in work. Right now I think there are 6 ring roads in Beijing and they are huge, something like 6 lane highways that create the system of Beijing. Unless you are driving you don't really realize it. Otherwise you don't even think about this. It is a series of rings and they have three more rings in development and on each side of the highway there is something like 6 lanes. These are huge, massive roads. This isn't Munich or Frankfurt, these are enormous rings that make the city. It is actually very hard to have a proper sense in these rings because of what rings do. Frederic Jameson discussed this in relation to the Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles. The level of disorientation in relation to the self. That's why perhaps after they complete some of the architecture there, maybe the buildings will become markers in the city where you'll be able to

orient yourself. Obviously the grid is much more straight-forward, it's much more condensed. Beijing is a very decentered place. You've got Tianenman Square which is like the heart of the onion but there are all of these rings. If you came to the studio, and looked at the wall of the studio now, there is a map of Beijing made up of names, names of institutions and names of people. We have the International Olympic Committee and then we have the Beijing Host Committee, then we're working with another group called the CFCC, which is the China Film Co-Production Corporation, and all of these bureaucracies are so Kafkaesque. It goes back to the way the city is actually planned, like something within something within something and the idea of no one person taking responsibility for it at all. Again, this lightness and mass in motion that is equally fascinating and frustrating from a Western position of trying to get things done, because you're completely not used to this way of working or this way of abdicating responsibility. Everything about the Enlightenment or Rousseau forward is about the social contract of responsibility and the individual. It is so contrary there that you really have to stop thinking this way to get anything done. You just have to accept that this is the way this system works. And it does work..

I am really trying to have conversations with the Olympic Committee and it is very difficult right now because they really look only towards the news or media. Art is not a media for them and I don't know who is responsible on an international level in Switzerland for this idea of appreciating art and the Olympics. Because I need to find out who will be the best person to have a conversation with, I wrote a request to the president of the IOC. He is a doctor and his name is Jacques Rogge. His office wrote back to me and said, this is very Kafkaesque, they said: "Really you should be going to Beijing, BOCOG (Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games) should handle this." I had a meeting with them and they had already told me that I have to go to Switzerland for this type of request because I am not paying millions of dollars to broadcast something. They sell the image of the Olympics. The filming rights is a big business. So there's a very special exception that I need to have them make for me and of course BOCOG said "We can't make this decision, you have to go back to Switzerland." I went to Switzerland and Jacques Rogge's chief of staff said "You need to go to BOCOG" and we're trying to say to him "BOCOG already sent us to you!"

KE You should go to the company that bought the TV or the image rights for the Olympics because they sell them. Someone buys it for NBC or ABC.

SM Two or three people have said this to me now. The American people are the NBC and the British people are the BBC and BBC is much more interested in cultural production and arts. I've been on a number of their programs so we're talking to the BBC right now about this sort of strategy. Going back to your idea about going in with somebody else who has already bought the rights is a very good strategy but it might be more interesting and more rewarding if I could just get the International Olympic Committee to recognize me and say "this is a special exception, the film that this person is making will have a life way after NBC and BBC stops reporting... it is promising for us to have this document".



Sarah Morris, *Cat [Origami]*, 2007
Household gloss paint on canvas 84 1/4 x 84 1/4 in. (214 x 214 cm)

KE It is an art project too. It is not TV.

SM Yes, and it does not compete at all with what they've sold because I'm not going to broadcast.

KE The Sydney Olympics brought 92 billion dollars to Sydney, including everything. It's a big business, so every photograph of an athlete running belongs to the companies who bought the rights. Even a piece of paper produced has a copyright. So you cannot reproduce it, you cannot use it.

SM There are several strategies for a Trojan horse.

KE You said in your conference that your works were political. In what context are they political?

SM Imagine if you saw a piece of paper describing a synopsis of someone's activities and I said to you that somebody makes paintings that use the titles of the institutions and corporations of the West. Even without telling you what anything looks like, that in itself becomes political. It's like a game of Monopoly. You are appropriating social forms that are not yours. They are mine in the sense that I view these things as public. The paintings are made by me. Authored by me. If I want to make a piece called "National Geographic" or "Department of Energy", I will. The boundaries between public and private, I certainly don't respect. I think all of these forms and all of these images are public and there is a certain provocation about that. If you go to these structures, these institutions, there is a physical sign that says "Private Property". These institutions are not public at all. I mean, Revlon, UBS... these are not public institutions.

KE So you are sort of protesting?

SM I'm not protesting, but there is a certain rhetorical function of titling things in this way and also doing it in an accumulative, serial way that somehow lessens these structures at the same time making it clear to you. There is a book called "No Logo" by Naomi Klein, which is a very good book. It is about the World Economic Forum and late capitalism and how these corporations are basically governments. She has a very structuralist viewpoint on the forms or organizations that are in power. These are the people who are making legislation, making decisions, "we are not in a democracy...", and so on. But actually I think things are more fluid than that. I think there is a space, there is a cultural space and a political space where people can change these institutions or can change the perception of an institution in the blink of an eye. The French writer Louis Althusser wrote a lot about these structural forms and how they create a hegemonic force with no way out, no theory for cultural change. Suddenly Al Gore makes the film "The Inconvenient Truth". Suddenly there are five million feature articles on 'going green'. You have the world's most famous movie star under 40 posing with a polar bear. This sounds really absurd and trivial but what I'm really trying to say is that everything is just perception and in constant flux and it is up for grabs. Appropriation is not just about Richard Prince appropriating a Brooke Shields photograph. It can be saying this zone over here is actually ours. It is a political act to say that. Even the United Nations... For the last couple of years the UN park has been closed and it's been upsetting me because that's ours. That's a public park. And it was shut because some guy jumped over the fence and shot at the UN and it became a security concern of the park for a while. These things are ours, yet they are all up for grabs. I think even looking at this notion or thinking about how that could become a cultural form or an artistic form or could make an artistic practice, that itself to me is political model.

KE What about Middle Eastern culture and art. Are you interested in that?

SM Yes, I am very interested. I'm not that knowledgeable. I had a very good friend who was in the Mujadin in Afghanistan. I know a bit from friends of mine who have very captivating lives and trajectories. Like this friend of mine, we always had a joke that he was brought over to Harvard by the CIA. This is all pre-"9/11". I don't know that much, but it's obviously very interesting because it's completely intermeshed.

KE Are you interested in buildings? Because in the Middle East there are different buildings.

SM If I was not shooting this Beijing film, it would be in the Middle East. But I wanted to do this now because the Olympics are so fascinating an event. There is a very capitalistic form, which is the IOC, which is very extreme as you were saying, the image as a commodity, the information as a commodity, the information being highly controlled and distributed. But at the same time it is a public world event of politics and unification and so on... This contradiction is thought-provoking so I have be involved now, but I am very interested in the Middle East. I've been thinking about it for years... ■

Sarah Morris, Swan [Origami], 2007
Household gloss paint on canvas 84 1/4 x 84 1/4 in. (214 x 214 cm)

