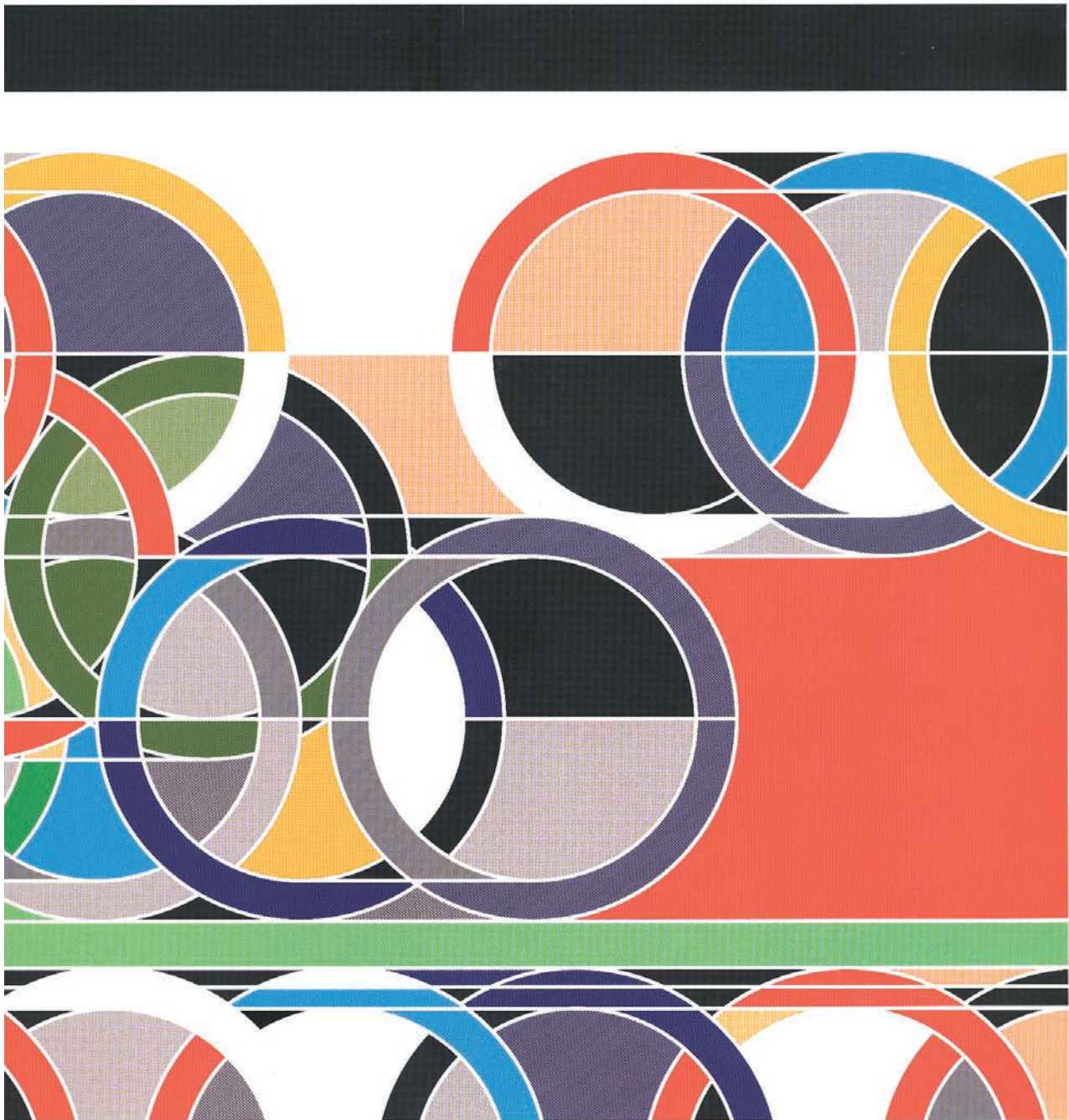


Sarah Morris
'1972 (Rings)'
2006
Household gloss paint on canvas
289 x 578cm





Sarah Morris Rings, *Origami, Beijing*

A special project, plus a conversation with the artist

by Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Cristina Bechtler



Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Cristina Bechtler, *Sarah Morris Rings, Origami, Beijing*,
in *Arena Homme +*, n°29, Summer/ Autumn 2008, pp 258 - 266

Sarah Morris
'2002 (Rings)'
2007
Household gloss paint on canvas
209 x 209cm



Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Cristina Bechtler, *Sarah Morris Rings, Origami, Beijing*,
in *Arena Homme +*, n°29, Summer/ Autumn 2008, pp 258 - 266
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Rem Koolhaas: Your work deals with power. Although I see that it does, I'd like you to specify in what ways, and what your interest is there. I know it's a very open question...

Sarah Morris: I guess I would have to say that in my work probably power is a subject, but it's also just a methodological approach to place and gaining access to various images that I want to have access to. So for instance with (Morris's work) 'Capital': if an artist wants to put a camera on the table of the Cabinet Room in the White House, can one do that? There is a certain rhetorical device and there is a certain practical issue of getting into situations that I want to get into. So power for me is possibly like a process, but it's also an end.



Can you give some examples apart from 'Capital'?

Well, you're a good example. In the sense of the project that I'm doing about China, I came to you, because you're doing a very big project there (the Central China TV building), but you also are a portal into that city. You're being sort of used for another agenda. That for me is very interesting. It's interesting to understand that set of relations, so for me those people - whether it's a film star or an architect or a politician or a graphic designer - they're interesting because of the set of relations that comes with them. To me it's like an investigation.

Is your interest in power dictated by this sense of that power is changing or that there are different ways in which it is exercised or that traditional ways of interpreting power need to be expanded more?

It's definitely like a desire to change it and reinterpret it, going back to the example of 'Capital' and also with Los Angeles, there's a desire to play with the contradictions that are there, that are given. And the only way that you can do that is by approaching those subjects which are actually very mainstream and previously considered not to be the subjects of art: politics, graphic design, industrial psychology, sports, architecture - whatever they are, they were previously considered too mainstream for art.

But you could also say that they have always been the subjects of art.

Not really. No, I don't think so.

Like in the Renaissance?

I don't think that they're the subjects of Cy Twombly's art, for instance. These are subjects that I think my generation are very interested in as subjects, but also as a way of learning. For instance, by looking at film or commercial filmmaking - obviously you can be very arrogant about it and look down upon it. But maybe there is something interesting to be learned by the way they in the industry talk about the future or the way they conduct phone conversations. It's always about the future - there is no present.

The process of learning is very exciting. It's not that you know that much but that we need to know much more. We're all in the same situation - a kind of explosive mix where we are in the same kind of permanent learning process.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Before we talk about China - I think it's very interesting that you tell us more about your work in progress, which is this kind of portrait of the becoming of the Olympics in Beijing - before that I'm curious to know a little bit more about this idea of the portrait and the city. In one way or another we've been discussing here all through the summer the impossibility of a portrait of a city. So I was wondering to what extent your Los Angeles movie is something to do with that.

The impossibility of the portrait of a city?

Can one have an image of a city by any means?

It's interesting that you ask that because I think it's very... A lot of people think that my work is very objective or somehow automated - I see it as the opposite, I see it as very situational, in a way it's almost a situational fantasy, like playing out various narratives that exist in one cinematic experience... just ideas or sketches of places that you want to be in. It goes back to this issue of in terms an unresolved portrait - obviously there is no way to be democratic in a portrait.

Moving on to China, the whole conversation between you and Rem started with this investigation of the power structure of the Olympics of Beijing, and this also has something to do with the incredible transformation in preparation for the Olympics... Could you tell us how this started and where the project right now stands?

I'm not really sure how it started, but I became interested in China, and in particular this moment when China is building for the Olympics in 2008, because I see it as very interesting - particularly for me coming from this investigation of and involvement with Los Angeles - this idea of the city as a televised moment, that you have an event that actually isn't an event, it's a deadline, and thinking about the nature of time and the frequency that this capital moves through a space before this deadline, and also who are these people who decide - this fascinates me because they remain faceless. So I started to think about this and to map out the various bureaucracies that could possibly lead me to an image - I mean, this is what it's about, it's about producing images. For me people and institutions are the same things - they are possible conduits to a future image that hasn't been achieved so far.

I think what is interesting is that previously artists might have wanted to infiltrate the system whereas you want to record it officially, getting permissions to do certain things that took you all the way into the White House. How far have you been able to infiltrate the Chinese - what permissions, what forms of access?

Well it's still completely in flux. On the one hand - you know China much better than me - what's interesting about China is that you have kind of this Kafkaesque series of bureaucracies, like boxes within boxes within boxes. So when I was there in June for instance, when you were there, I had meetings with the IOC (International Olympics Committee), with the Beijing host committee, which is a different entity that is supposed to function under this other structure, and then there are people who just do film - I was meeting with a production company that is going to help me. And all these people have different access: one person says actually it's no problem, one person says actually you have to go to Switzerland. And so what do me and my assistants do? We try to pursue every conduit so that we don't end up in a situation where we can't function or create an image.



A lot has to do with gaining access and also a relationship of trust, of these protagonists in Los Angeles and now in China. Are there any unrealised projects where you didn't gain access as you'd wished?

It's interesting because there are a lot of things that happen when I'm actually filming, things that come up. This question is very interesting to me. This is something that I have come to realise through Los Angeles particularly, where there are people who are too vain to be filmed without their own cinematographer, too vain to be filmed without their own make-up artist. One of the people who was very interesting

in discussions about Los Angeles was Warren Beatty who is very involved in it, who is definitely a portal into Los Angeles - I mean Shampoo is one of the quintessential films about politics in Los Angeles and the image of celebrity. But he would not let himself be an image. If you think about it, most actors or actresses know the scripts, they know the producer, they know the director, they have the screenplay, they know the budget, they know the cinematographer - they have control of all these elements. But working with me they have to have incredible trust to let go of that, to let go of their image. In the end for me that wasn't a failure, what was interesting was this idea of somebody who doesn't want to be an image. I respect this very much. Actually there are a lot of people who are involved through conversations that influenced the work in a very serious way, even when they are not in the work. Maybe art is actually about conversations. Yes, you are producing images that have never been made before, but actually it's about conversations.



One of the links between you and Rem is the interest in the China Central Television tower. Maybe it's the moment to talk about CCTV now. Why are you interested in that building?



Well, it's a fantastic building and it remains to be seen how you can understand this in relation to the means of production as they are in China and also with Rem's agenda. It's a very interesting contradiction and on top of this there is this issue that he's building a building which is a broadcasting vessel. It goes back to the idea about art being about conversations - it's open to interpretation in the same sort of way.

You mentioned the future, and it's also interesting to talk about memory - and this is sort of a return question. I am very curious to know what have been your toolboxes from the past that you find most useful at the moment, because all the protagonists in the interviews have brought up influences from different fields; they have been indebted to other fields. Who have been your heroes?

Oh, that's so hard, this is a really hard question... I don't know, in the relation... I mean, I never studied art history - that is an important thing I have to add, I didn't study art, I sort of learned about things through magazines, reproductions in magazines, film. I would say, it's Warhol, Judd, Richter. Going in another dimension, Joan Didion. I also think Robert Towne is somebody who's very interesting, who redefined the role of the author in relation to film and invented this idea of a script doctor, which really fascinates me at the moment, and I'm talking to him about doing a project. There are so many people...

I'm also curious about your interest in Kurt Vonnegut, which is a recurrent interest.

Well, I had the idea of trying to make a short portrait of him, but he's actually not so well, so this is definitely an unrealised project.

The first work I saw of yours was a painting of the United Nations, and I recently saw your installation at Lever House passage... How do you relate that work to the much more complex or seemingly more complex films that involve many more people?

I guess on the one hand painting is very slow, monotonous,

serial, and this creates a very open structure for me to be able to do these other things. So the two activities, paintings and films, are very dependent on each other in terms of time and practice. It allows me to do everything I want to do. For me it's like an open image, a certain nexus of relationships.



We wanted to understand also how an artist runs a studio. What is your infrastructure and how permanent is it, how many people does it involve?

That's a really hard question. There's a lot of people involved who are not necessarily present. The studio, that is for me the boring side of things, I mean that's like asking you how many people are working for you in Rotterdam.

That would still be a very important question.

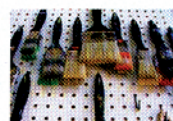
OK.

My life is kind of a daily struggle in...

...management?

Yes, in management.

Well, the painting are always happening. Right now I just started a series in relation to Beijing. There are people always in the studio, working, helping me achieve everything from the composition of the paintings on the computer, to mixing the colours, to stretching the canvas on support. And then in parallel with the films I work with the same group of people every time. So we're always in dialogue, but obviously they're not always there.



Cristina Bechtler: I was wondering whether there is a 'Chineseness' - do you feel that they are very orientated towards the West already, do you investigate that?

I'm not sure I understand the question.

Well, do you feel there is a sort of way of treating things there that is different from the West? Or is there an orientation now towards the Western style?

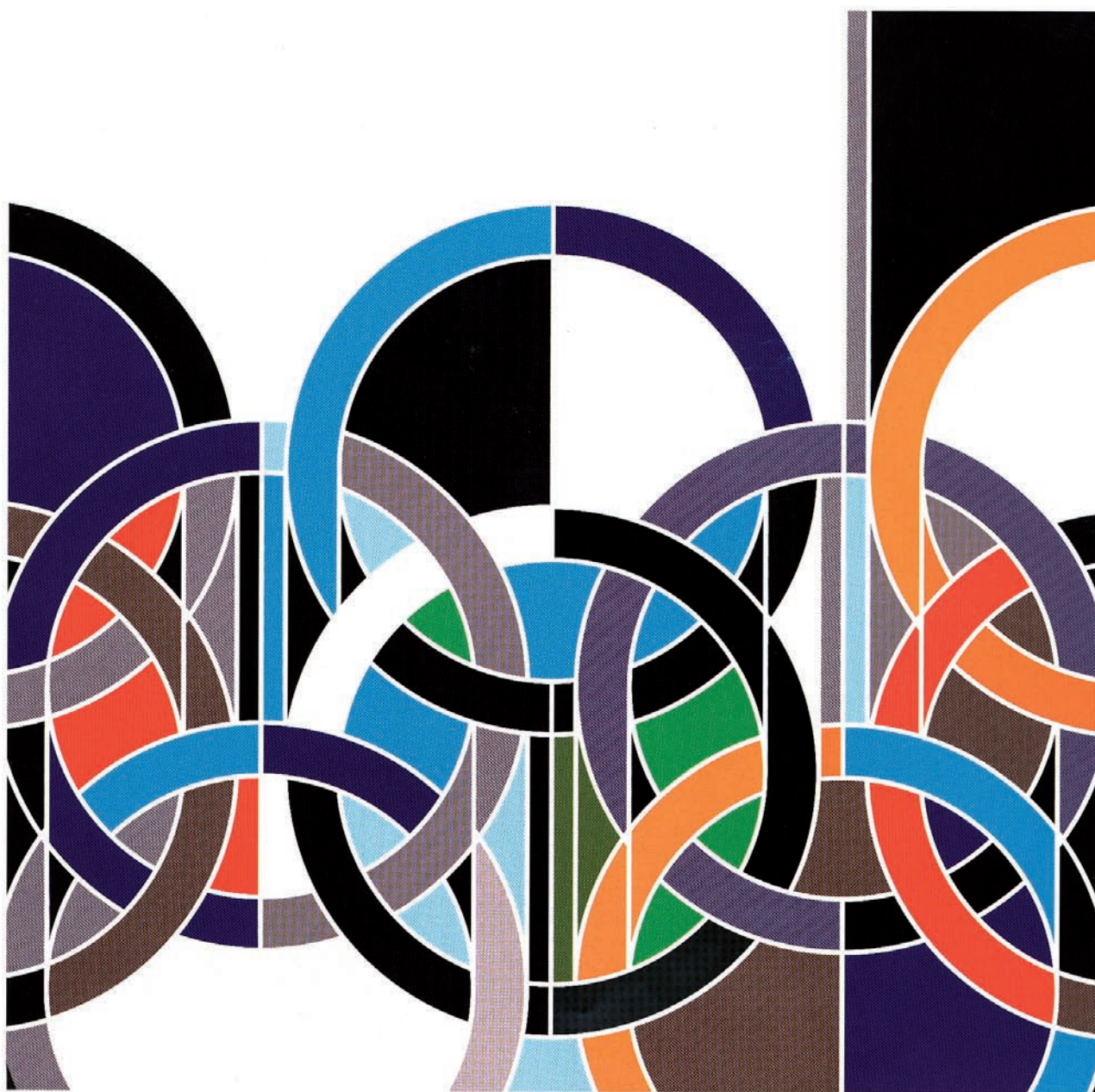
Obviously there is a change happening now - this is why this moment is particularly interesting - but probably Rem should answer that question...

Instead of answering it, I want to question the question. China is no longer orientated towards the West - the West doesn't exist any more, it's divided into different parts. Worlds like India and the Arabic world are equally important to them. We think that we are still in the centre, that anywhere else relates to us. We should stop that kind of thinking (that asks questions like) are they on the way to becoming like us?



I understand what you are saying, but why then are you chosen? Obviously because you are in a central position.

Sarah Morris
'1968 (Rings)'
2008
Household gloss paint on canvas
214 x 214cm



Sarah Morris
'Rockhopper (Origami)'
2007
Household gloss paint on canvas
122 x 122cm

All paintings courtesy of
the White Cube Gallery, London
and Air de Paris, Paris. Conversation
conducted at the Serpentine Gallery
Pavilion, London, 2006

