

“I WENT TO BEIJING AND THEY IMMEDIATELY SAID, ‘YOU HAVE TO GO TO SWITZERLAND.’” WE’RE IN NEW YORK AND **SARAH MORRIS** IS TALKING ABOUT MAKING HER LATEST FILM, *BEIJING* (2009), A ‘PORTRAIT’ OF THE CHINESE CAPITAL SEEN THROUGH THE HYPERFOCUSED LENS OF LAST SUMMER’S OLYMPIC GAMES. THE REASON IT’S A ‘PORTRAIT’ AND NOT SIMPLY A PORTRAIT IS THAT, LIKE A POLITICIAN FILING EXPENSES, I’M STRUGGLING TO FIND THE RIGHT WORD TO DESCRIBE IT. AND I FEEL THAT I’VE LET OUR EVERYTHING-DEFINED-ON-WIKIPEDIA WORLD DOWN.

words MARK RAPPOLT portrait NICK HAYMES



THERE'S SOME TEMPTATION TO DESCRIBE THE FILM AS A DOCUMENTARY

– in that it's a record of a historical event – and if, somewhat arbitrarily, one were to take Dziga Vertov's suggestion that the documentary tackles 'life as it is' or 'life caught unawares', the fact that Morris's film is centred on an Olympic Games, where life is generally other than it is and everyone's hyperaware of being part of a (globally broadcast) spectacle, would preclude this. Early on we see former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, his regalia some especially curious medallions, addressing the world in front of a giant screen on which he is captured addressing the world in front of a giant screen (and so on). And then Belgian sports functionary, Olympic president and modern-art lover Jacques Rogge and Chinese president Hu Jintao (curiously – and here's why I mentioned Wikipedia earlier – without a commentary, or good celebrity knowledge, you could easily watch this film and have no idea who the hell these people are) having their makeup applied before they take their turn on the big Olympic stage. Elsewhere in the film our attention is drawn to security cameras perched atop digital clocks, billboards featuring sports stars, crowds gathered around the Olympic zone watching something. By the end of it all even an old man riding a bicycle looks 'suspicious' – one imagines Vertov jumping up and down and decrying even this poor guy's presence as an example of 'bourgeois excess'.

But we're getting distracted here (although distraction and the tools used to achieve it are given a starring role in *Beijing*). Morris was advised to go to Switzerland because, in the form of the International Olympic Committee headquarters, Lausanne's the institutional 'home' of the Olympic Games (as opposed to its symbolic home in Athens and temporary camping trip to Beijing). On the wall of her New York studio is a 'map' of the film, more accurately a set of A4 sheets, each printed with a name and sometimes an organisation – what Morris describes as a description of the 'portals' and 'gatekeepers' – among them architects like Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron, artists like Cai Guo Qiang, members of the British Council, movie director Zhang Yimou (who was in charge of the opening ceremonies), Steven Spielberg (who famously dropped out in 'protest' against China's involvement in Darfur), Rogge, a number of journalists, and so on – who had to be approached to gain or facilitate the necessary authorisations for her access-most-areas film to be made. And it's hard not to find this something of an irony in the context of Rogge's pre-Games statement that 'the Beijing Games are much stronger than individuals'.

"This is an interesting thing", the artist says of her 'map'. "You start to question who the author of this event really is. You have people in Rotterdam, London, Switzerland, Los Angeles... It's not necessarily as simple as thinking something is local." And yet the implication of the film's title is that it is.

Beijing is Morris's eighth film, following *Midtown* (1998), filmed in New York, *AM/PM* (2000), filmed in Las Vegas, *Capital* (2001), filmed in Washington, DC, *Miami* (2002) and *Los Angeles* (2004) and then two films focused on individuals rather than locations, *Robert Towne* (2006) and *1972* (2007). Alongside these, Morris makes abstract paintings, many of them exploring the codes and power structures of architecture and other symbolic structures, and examining the themes raised in the films. Recently Morris has suggested that one might look for 'an epilogue/prologue dynamic' between *Los Angeles*, which centres on the Oscar ceremony, and *Robert Towne*, which focuses on



'There are some shots in the film where there's this incredible use of light, all over the city, in a way that just, you know, makes everywhere else look depressed'







'Weenie' is a reference to the sausages used to make dogs jump on cue in movies. Architecturally they're the glamorous buildings that make passersby go 'wow'. And a bird's-nest stadium lit up by fireworks (and then, when they've all been set off, looking like a smoking overcooked doughnut) is not so far removed from Sleeping Beauty Castle.

As much as *Beijing* records some of the city's architectural weenies, in a mirroring fashion it throws up other weenies for the viewer's own script: *aha*, Michael Phelps, maybe he's winning another gold medal! The celebrated Chinese pianist Lang Lang! Yesssss... Jackie Chan! And as if to emphasise the fact that there can be gaps (even, given this film lasts 88 minutes, a sort of planned boredom) or instances of uncertainty in the most controlled and policed of settings, we see the famed architects of Beijing's best-known weenies (OMA's CCTV building and the Olympic stadium) in contexts that place a remarkable distance between themselves and the power of their constructions: a fragile-looking Rem Koolhaas – a scrawny Western alien – wandering the streets like a bewildered pensioner, or Jacques Herzog perched on the tip of his hotel bed flicking through channels via a remote control. It's a particularly weird moment, first given that he's within touching distance of the screen and yet seems intent on making himself 'remote' from it, and second because he's cooped up in a plain-looking hotel room while a stadium built according to his design is the centre of attention.

"I actually think", says Morris, "that through observing something, or through appropriating something, you change something – whether it's making a series of paintings, appropriating various names of corporations or by recontextualising the Oscars [in *Los Angeles*]. You can change the meaning of something." The artist says that "meaning isn't fixed at all. If you do accept that it's fixed, then the problem becomes how do you have a theory for change? It's impossible. If everything's so fixed and it's all got these multinational corporations behind it, then yes, then we're all screwed and then we wouldn't be making art, because there would be no point. There would be



'I was talking a lot about an idea, almost like a matrix or a structure, that can open up and lead you to an image in the city, that I want to capture'

the celebrated Hollywood script writer, and between 1972, essentially a monologue delivered by Dr Georg Sieber, the head psychologist of the Olympic and Munich Police, in which he considers the events of the ill-fated Munich Olympics and his role in them, and *Beijing*.

Both *Robert Towne* and *1972* deal with the matter of scripts and scripting (in the case of *1972*, Sieber was responsible for plotting worst-case security scenarios around the Munich Olympic Games). For all that it chronicles one of the modern world's most choreographed events, *Beijing* is a film without words (just a musical soundtrack) and is constructed, as many of Morris's paintings appear to be (particularly her *Origami* works), out of a series of seemingly fragmented but strangely coherent parts. In one of these, a couple in a subway station are having an argument. Rendered mute, they are literally arguing about nothing, waiting, perhaps, for the viewer to add some sort of commentary on their behalf. "It's the ultimate act of control to remove somebody's speech from the image", Morris says. And it's something that's particularly emphasised in *Beijing*, in which a number of celebrity dignitaries are captured silently mouthing speeches to the world.

As Morris's camera spins you through the ring roads of Beijing, passing illuminated stadiums and shining office blocks, you can't help thinking of Walt Disney's famous maxim for the construction of Disneyland: 'There's got to be a weenie at the end of every street.'



nothing shifting. There would be no flux whatsoever. And I don't think you have to go to the point of thinking like that. Speaking to a number of the architects who have been occupied or engaged with China, I like to hear their pessimism in their critique. I don't just want to hear sound bites of PR for China."

One of the criticisms of this film might be that, for all its access 'behind the scenes', it's a superficial, touristic view (and Morris doesn't attempt to deny the fact that she approaches her subject as an outsider rather than as an expert). That it focuses on the surface of things and that even when it delves deeper it's only to look at the ways in which that surface is prepared (scrubbed, vacuumed, made up, rehearsed). Perhaps the counterargument to that might be something along the lines of the French writer Georges Perec's advice on approaching a description of a city: 'There's nothing inhuman in a town, unless it's our own humanity'; or one of the conclusions Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour arrived at in *Learning from Las Vegas* (revised edition, 1977): 'Formal languages are inevitable and good, becoming tyrannies only when we are unconscious of them.'

"I was talking a lot about an idea, almost like a matrix or a structure, that can open up and lead you to an image in the city, that I want to capture", the artist explains. "Or a bureaucracy that I want to capture, but sometimes there are situations where it does not lead to that image; rather it leads to something else, an approach." She continues: "There definitely is a connection between Las Vegas and Beijing. And you will see it in the film because there are things there that are highly, highly planned out: ideas of employing distraction as a motivating principle as you move through the city. You could talk about the ring roads, but you can also talk about the way the lights are used on the buildings and even in the underpasses. There are some shots in the film where there's this incredible use of light, all over the city, in a way that just, you know, makes everywhere else look depressed. There is that sense of an employment of that strategy that reminds me of Las Vegas."

In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), his famous study of the great American city, the English architecture critic Reyner Banham recalls a particularly revelatory moment that occurred when he observed that the city's women had a habit of

pulling down an automobile sun visor and fixing their hair every time their cars pulled onto the off-ramps of the freeways. His conclusion: 'coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors'. Is there a similar 'eureka!' moment to be experienced in *Beijing*? Perhaps not. Unless it's this: in *Beijing* there is no outdoors; everyone's always in. There's no distinction between glasses of champagne being prepared for a reception and neon lights illuminating a strange piece of architecture – in one sequence of the film, mirroring Kissinger being filmed in front of Kissinger being filmed, even the illuminations are illuminated, the streetlights lit up by pulses of variously coloured neon. As you meander round Beijing's endless ring roads, the city and its people are being 'fixed up' at all times.

"When I first shot *Midtown*", Morris recalls, "I hired a news crew to go out with me for one day and shoot film at different, very specific coordinates in the city. That was basically the only sort of treatment or idea that I gave them. They kept on saying to me, like, right, that's private and this is public and we can't cross that line. I had no idea that there are these little brass lines in the sidewalks, in New York, around Chase, around certain co-op buildings, literally just a tiny little insert in the sidewalk. It's incredibly discreet – you would never even notice it. I don't really think there is any boundary between private and public. I think it's all public. If you can consume through your perception, or your vision, then you're more than halfway there." •

Beijing is on show this month at MAMbo, Bologna, and MMK, Frankfurt. See Listings for further information

WORKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Five stills from *Beijing*, 2008, 35mm, 86 min, © and courtesy Parallax, New York

2002 (Rings), 2007, household gloss paint on canvas, 289 x 289 cm

1980 (Rings), 2009, household gloss paint on canvas, 214 x 214 cm

2028 (Rings), 2008, household gloss paint on canvas, 289 x 2312 cm

all paintings © and courtesy the artist