



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

Sarah Morris: Odysseus Factor

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Editorial Contacts:

Basha Liu

+86 10 5780 0259

+86 188 1047 3833

yuting.liu@ucca.org.cn

Carmen Yuan

+86 135 7098 6743

jiamin.yuan@ucca.org.cn

Exhibition Dates:

March 24 – June 17

Exhibition Venue:

Great Hall

Press material also available for
download from the UCCA website

From March 24 to June 17, UCCA presents “Sarah Morris: Odysseus Factor.” This marks the first exhibition of the artist’s entire filmic output anywhere in the world, set within a vast installation comprised of paintings, drawings and a monumental wall painting specially devised for the Great Hall. The fourteen films on view offer open ended explorations of space that emerge through a democratic overview of their architectures, protagonists, situations, and processes, shown at UCCA in a sequence of custom-built spaces arrayed throughout the former factory chamber of the Great Hall. The title of the exhibition might be understood as a reference to Morris’s creative trajectory, which can be divided into several ten-year periods—the same amount of time the Trojan war lasted, and the exact number of years that it took Odysseus to sail home to Ithaca. Morris debuted her first film, *Midtown*, in 1998, went on to shoot *Beijing* in 2008, and now returns, in 2018, to the city which inspired both the film and several of her paintings. Her artistic process, too, is Odyssean, involving journeys to multiple countries, and entanglements with characters and powers that seek repeatedly to drive her off course.

Morris’s paintings run parallel to her films; the artist has described them as two sides of the same coin. They describe urban, social, and bureaucratic typologies with points, vectors, and angles, mapping a set of coordinates onto a two-dimensional surface. Rather than abstractions, it is more apt to view these features as a “glossary...used to depict a visible reality (architectural, social or economic) that capitalism has turned into an abstract painting” (Nicholas Bourriaud). Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Morris will execute an original, site-specific wall painting at UCCA, 57.7 meters wide by 9 meters tall, which will encompass the space in which the exhibition is held.

Like Charles and Ray Eames, Morris combines an attention of detail with a sense of wonder at the physical world. Having grown up in the era of post-Watergate skepticism, she creates films fueled by a tension between paranoia and disavowal, characteristic of the heroes in high postmodernist novels, struggling to make sense of overdetermined systems. Her works are filled with



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the suspicion that behind the surfaces of day-to-day reality lie conspiracies of massive scope. This epistemic unease ultimately wreaks havoc with the genesis of ideas: if late capitalism is a giant playbook, then the boundary between reality and construct is blurred, meaning that, as J.G. Ballard has said, “external reality is a fiction.”

This is the theme of *1972*, made in 2008, a portrait of the police psychologist Dr. Georg Seiber, who, like the Hollywood script doctor who features in Morris’s film *Robert Towne* [2007], writes “scenes”: Seiber was hired by the International Olympic Committee to anticipate scenarios that would jeopardize the safety of the Munich Games. “Scenario # 21” stated that, “a dozen armed Palestinians would scale the perimeter fence of the [Olympic] Village. They would invade the building that housed the Israeli delegation, kill a hostage or two...then demand the release of prisoners held in Israeli jails and a plane to fly to some Arab capital.” The projection was almost identical to what happened in reality: the Palestinian paramilitary organization, Black September, stormed the apartment housing the Israeli team, killing several members, and capturing nine hostages. Resigning immediately after the attack, Dr. Seiber went on to correctly predict that the ensuing events would be “a bloodbath”—the botched rescue operation launched by the Munich Police resulted in the deaths of all the hostages, as well as several civilian and police casualties.

Morris’s films are collections of modular parts, which can be detached and recontextualized in relation to the other films in her oeuvre. Like *1972* and *Rio*, *Beijing* is about an Olympic city; like *Capital*, which captures the waning days of the Clinton administration at work in the White House, it is about a ruling party; like *Abu Dhabi*, it documents capitalism’s flouting of the European and American exceptionalisms from which it grew. If the success of an Olympic Games is determined by its projection of wealth, power, prestige, and identity, then Beijing 2008 was undoubtedly one of the most successful Games in history. Compared to Washington D.C., then home to a government beset by stock market crashes and costly wars in the Middle East, the unprecedented economic growth of the Chinese capital seemed to hint at an eastward shift of the centers of power. Unlike the Rio and Munich Games, in which the



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“officially sanctioned scenario” was hijacked by activists, terrorists, and journalists, the 2008 Olympics seemed, to curious and anxious Western viewers, like a flawless demonstration of China’s newfound might. Indeed, as Georg Seiber told Morris, an attack on Beijing was inconceivable: “the Chinese have too much control.”

Yet Morris’s 86-minute 35mm film, shot in China’s capital, challenges the stereotyped image of the country as monolithic force. The recurrent motif in *Beijing* is that of series of rings, connected metonymically: the five-ringed Olympic symbol, the concentric circles that radiate from the Forbidden Palace, and the bureaucratic hoops through which the artist had to jump to capture the city at this monumental juncture. In her quest to acquire filming rights, Morris approached officials in the Chinese government; Herzog and De Meuron, the architects who designed the National Stadium; and Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China, who directed her to the International Olympic Committee. After a series of lengthy negotiations, the IOC agreed to give her permission. Her itinerary—full of accidents and contingencies—and her dealings with multiple gatekeepers, often at odds with each other, reveals the complexities behind the Games. Similarly, some of the most compelling footage in the film was discovered fortuitously: an argument in a subway station; a card game whose every permutation seems invested with meaning; and surprise speeches by Henry Kissinger and Jackie Chan. Perhaps the most arresting scene is one in which a group of women rehearse ribbon spinning in a square. In *Beijing*, as in all of Morris’s films, this most mundane of details takes on an ominous significance if looked at closely enough. Suddenly, the whorls of gaudy cloth appear to be another series of rings, prompting the viewer to question—out of paranoia or curiosity—whether someone is behind the metonymic chain.

Connections proliferate between Morris’s films. *Finite and Infinite Games*, the most recent film in the exhibition, records a conversation between the artist and Alexander Kluge, the writer and director once employed as attorney for the Frankfurt School. Together, they explore the differences between ideas underpinning the culture industry and poststructuralist *play*. This transition between modernism and postmodernism is also explored in *Points on a Line*,



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which juxtaposes the Farnsworth House, designed by Mies van der Rohe, and the nearly-identical Glass House, designed by Philip Johnson, complicating modernist notions of originality and authorship. *Chicago* explores the architecture of the city to which Mies fled, during World War II, where he founded the “New Bauhaus.” *Los Angeles*, like *1972* and *Robert Towne*, unpacks an obsession with performance, exploring Hollywood’s psychological landscape and the ambitions of actors and actresses who, even “off set,” still play versions of themselves. *Strange Magic* starts in Frank Gehry’s studio, and moves to the streets of Paris and the construction of the Bois de Boulogne.

Challenges to Morris’s journey to create her films are, in another sense, the very objects of her search. This is perhaps why, in *Finite and Infinite Games*, she describes the artist’s duty as one of being open “to possibly being used by a force that is larger than you, that might corrupt your meaning.” Unlike the epic—or, indeed, the modern—hero, Morris has not chosen to go forward or onward, but inward: her work evinces the belief that the smallest image, voice, or event, can provide the key to understanding.

About the Exhibition

Support for this exhibition comes from Vispring. Genelec is the exclusive audio equipment sponsor. Secoo Lifestyle has provided special support.

About the Artist

Sarah Morris (b. 1967, England, lives and works in New York) has presented solo exhibitions at the Espoo Museum of Modern Art (Finland, 2017); Kunsthalle Wien (2016); M-Museum Leuven (2015); Kunsthalle Bremen (2013); Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio, 2012); Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Dusseldorf, 2010); Museum für Moderne Kunst (Frankfurt, 2009); Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna (2009); Lenbachhaus (Munich, 2008); Fondation Beyeler (Basel, 2008); Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (Rotterdam, 2006); Kestner Gesellschaft (Hannover, 2005); Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2005); Moderna Museet (Stockholm, 2005); Kunstforeningen (Copenhagen, 2004); Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin, 2001); Kunsthalle Zürich (2000); and Modern Art Oxford (1999). Her work has also been included in the São Paulo Biennial (2002) and the Tate Triennial (2003), and has been



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collected by museums including Centre Pompidou; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; MoMA; Museum für Moderne Kunst (Frankfurt); Neue Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin); Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Tate Modern.

About UCCA

UCCA is China's leading independent institution of contemporary art. Founded in 2007 out of a commitment to bring Chinese contemporary art into global dialogue, it has since become a cultural landmark for Beijing, a conduit for international exchange, and an incubator for new talent. Located at the heart of the 798 Art District, it welcomes more than one million visitors a year. Originally known as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, UCCA underwent a major restructuring in 2017 and now operates as the UCCA Group, comprising two distinct entities: UCCA Foundation, a registered non-profit that organizes exhibitions and research, stages public programs, and undertakes community outreach; and UCCA Enterprises, a family of art-driven retail and educational ventures. UCCA's work grows from its core belief that new art can change lives, broaden perspectives, and enrich the conversation between China and the world.

www.ucca.org.cn

798 Art District
No. 4 Jiuxiangqiao Lu
Chaoyang District
Beijing, P.R. China 100015
T +86 10 5780 0200
F +86 10 5780 0220
www.ucca.org.cn

北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号
798艺术区
邮编100015