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Booklet

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Strange Magic

Since the late 1990s, Sarah Morris has devoted herself to painting and film, media she believes are independent, and yet complementary on a contextual level. Her main focus is on architecture and urban development as representing social and political systems, as well as today's semiotic system, marked as it is by the signatures of capitalism.

The intensely coloured geometric paintings she creates are derived from the abstractions of classic Modernism and especially from Piet Mondrian's grid compositions, which she transfers to a language adapted to correspond with the dynamics of contemporary urbanism and the overall acceleration of perception. In her filmic works, Sarah Morris translates these abstract symbols into rapid image sequences and thereby transforms the observation of seemingly superficial events into a visual psychograph of the cities she portrays.

The exhibition at the Kunsthalle Wien focuses on Morris' filmic oeuvre and presents ten city portraits in the broadest sense: *Strange Magic*, a film about Paris as the centre of the luxury industry, will be screened for the entire duration of the exhibition and supplemented by further film works on five evenings.

Banco Aliança [Rio] from 2013 serves as a striking example of her painting. The abstract work in radiant gloss colours brings new life to a reduced formal language with its dynamic composition and intense saturation,

and is reminiscent of the buildings in which the corporate need for representation finds contemporary expression.

Morris uses the camera to capture the psychology, architecture, and aesthetics of the urban sphere in her characterisation of a metropolis. The fascination with power and its modes of representation is a recurring theme in her work. Instead of following a clear storyline, her films present short scenes in rhythmically structured sequences: architectures and landscapes, people engaged in their activities, interiors and exteriors. Morris looks behind the scenes at the Oscars, the White House, and the Olympic Games in Beijing. She creates highly aesthetic images accompanied by expressive sound collages which reveal the true nature of things and events while appearing to reflect only the surface. *Strange Magic*, the artist's most recent film, is not only a 45-minute insight into the imperium of the luxury conglomerate LVMH, but also an unconventional portrait of Paris.

The Eiffel Tower marks the beginning: a symbol of technological progress, an emblem of emergent globalisation, a tourist attraction, and an image presented in every book, film, or television feature about Paris. The French philosopher Roland Barthes described the Eiffel Tower as the "spectacle of a function," despite not actually having one. "Its simple, primary shape confers upon it the vocation of an infinite cipher: in turn and according to the appeals of our imagination, the symbol of Paris, of modernity, of communication,

of science, or the nineteenth century, rocket, stem, derrick, phallus, lightning rod, or insect, confronting the great itineraries of our dreams, it is the inevitable sign.”¹

Strange Magic starts with impressions of the Eiffel Tower by night and gradually approaches the iron structure until people climbing its stairs enter the picture. This was another aspect that fascinated Barthes. Due to its openwork construction, he characterised the Eiffel Tower as an “empty and depthless monument which might be said to consist entirely of an exterior substance.”² Consequently, visitors glide “along the periphery of its emptiness” without ever being encased by it. This lack of an interior, this empty core makes the Eiffel Tower a token of modernity par excellence – an infinite generator of meaning, a crystalliser of dreams.

The Eiffel Tower as an opening for a film about Paris complies with general expectations, and yet in Sarah Morris’ rhythmically orchestrated montage of different impressions of the city as the heart of the luxury industry, this landmark acquires an additional meaning. *Strange Magic* juxtaposes the classic symbol of modernity with contemporary variations whose effective structures radiate openness. These edifices and products also function like wishing machines and invite an array of interpretations.

The film, which Bernard Arnault (chairman of the French luxury items group Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy)

commissioned for the opening of his private museum, focuses on the building designed by Frank Gehry in Bois de Boulogne and on perfume production, an important segment of LVMH. Above all, we see the workers behind these products: rose pickers, perfumers, construction and factory workers, architects. Only Frank Gehry, the architect, and Bernard Arnault, the head of the multi-industry company, stand out against the anonymous background as identifiable personalities. All the others move to the rhythm of a both efficient and optimised production chain.

The manual labour contrasts with a form of capitalism which is more geared towards generating needs than goods, and defines the core of the luxury industry: items that promise prestige and a certain lifestyle. Morris lets her viewers take part in this exclusive world by providing a glimpse behind the scenes. The production of objects and interiors, the development of brands, the creation of art is juxtaposed with the equally important production of immaterial goods, of dreams, needs, yearning, and desire. Time and again, very real materials appear – grapes as the key ingredient of champagne, cinnamon roses pressed to extract perfume, bottles and vials, steel and glass amalgamating to form the almost unreal components of Gehry’s structure. But in the end, manual and mechanical labour alike are absorbed by luxury which transcends materiality.

As in her other films, the focus in *Strange Magic* is on the hidden

side of a public event, in this case, the opening of the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris – and the preparations leading up to it. The edifice, which is often emphatically praised as a “glass cloud” or a “steel nave”, not only serves the purpose of displaying Arnault’s expansive art collection, but also reinforces the city’s reputation as the capital of culture. However, one can only surmise from Morris’ film that the building comprises eleven galleries within an exhibition area of 11,000 square metres: the view of the structure is limited to its façade. Just before its completion – the planning phase lasted seven years – the building appears as an artful steel and glass construction, which must have been just as much of an engineering challenge as the Eiffel Tower was at the time. From this implicit parallel the actual theme of *Strange Magic* evolves: the quintessentially French as an equivocal interplay between elegance and luxury, and art and power.

Morris assembles scenes and impressions which provide an insight into the fabrication of cultural capital in the shape of luxury items. The shots of grapes, flowers, leather, fabrics, pigments, glass, and machines appear in a rhythmic montage: roses are picked, pressed, and liquefied as perfume. Film stars present the perfume. A huge filling plant fills countless vials, and seals and packages them.

The documentation of these very real mechanisms that support the commercial generation of wishes and desires is partly inspired by

the aesthetics of advertising, which is why they do not seem entirely affirmative. The seductive images Morris creates cannot truly hide the emptiness behind them. Moreover, the image-based fantasy of a luxurious life undergoes a visual recoupling with a real production chain which is not necessarily glamorous.

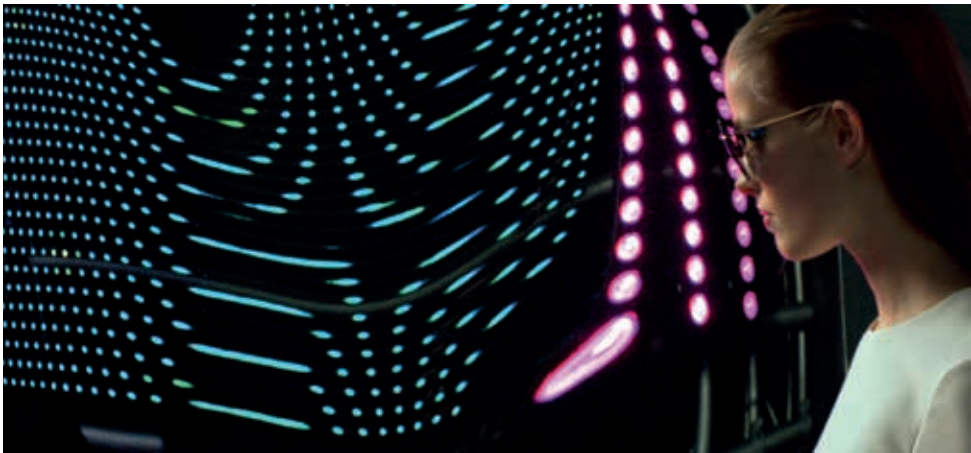
Sarah Morris is an informed observer of contemporary life who shares her knowledge with the viewer. By precisely analysing its mechanisms, she places the feeling of “must have” with all of its conscious and unconscious consequences in a global context.

1. Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), p. 1
2. *ibid*, p. 10

Sarah Morris
Strange Magic, 2014
Red Code/HD Digital, 45:08 min.
© Sarah Morris

Sarah Morris
Banco Aliança [Rio], 2013
Household gloss paint on canvas
152.5 x 152.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris





Films

Mon 12/12, 7 pm

Midtown

1998, 16mm/DVD, 9:36 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

Midtown was shot in New York during a single day. The film brings together sequences showing the streets of midtown Manhattan, combining the anonymity of the crowded sidewalks with the power of the buildings that frame the everyday movements of the city. Almost a catalogue of peripheral actions, gestures that take place in nearly every film, it explores the narrative possibilities inherent in the simplest actions, and the typical activity of the street. The fragmented narrative emphasises the structure of modern life as well as creating a space in which the viewer takes an extremely active role.

Capital

2000, 16mm/DVD, 18:18 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

Sarah Morris made the film *Capital* in Washington during the final days of the Clinton administration. It is a record of now unimaginable access to the centers of power. *Capital* continues Morris' investigation of the ways in which we decode and therefore begin to understand the built world around us. *Capital* draws a complex and layered city portrait. The Mall, the White House Press Office, the World Bank, is merged with shots of uniformed members of the Secret Service, the Presidential motorcade, the Watergate Complex, and other significant structures such

as the Kennedy Center, the J. Edgar Hoover Building and the Pentagon. Together with the daily activities of the President, and an overall consideration of the city, the film forms a sequence of reflection points for a revised mapping of power, desire, urbanism and design.

Wed 14/12, 7 pm

1972

2008, 35mm/HD, 38:12 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

1972 is an intimate portrait of an individual in the city of Munich. Dr. Georg Sieber was the head psychologist of the Olympic Police. Sieber was present on Connolly Street on the tragic morning of September 5th, 1972, when members of the terror group "Black September" attacked and took members of the visiting Israeli Olympic Team hostage. Later that morning he resigned from his position. Sieber was hired by the International Olympic Committee and Munich Police to project possible scenarios that would jeopardize the safety of the Olympic Games and prepare the security training that they would require. One of the scenarios written by Sieber was an almost exact prognosis of what was to fatefully play out in reality. In *1972*, Morris mixes police surveillance footage of demonstrators and archival photos of the 1972 Summer Olympic Games, with shots of the Munich Olympia-park and a candid interview of Sieber who has a long-standing career as a psychologist and is an expert on international security matters.

The film, shot on 35mm, investigates the issue of projection and planning, and its potential failures through this specific instance in history. It exposes a subjective parallel view radically different than the widely received ideas surrounding the events of the 1972 Olympics.

Beijing

2008, 35mm/HD, 84:47 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

Beijing focuses on one of the most intricate and ambiguous international broadcasted events of past years – the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The film observes the overwhelmingly perplexing and contradictory economy and authority of China, made all the more resonant in current climate of global crisis. The Olympics – typifying a sense of historical urgency as well as unconditional trust in the future and nationalism – embody a system that marks the modern confluence of capitalism and mass media by means of an unprecedented mastery of technology, the mass migration of people, and a hyper-mediated event culture. In *Beijing*, Morris plays with the notion of duality, coupling the constant presence of the spectacle or the event with its constantly multiple interpretations. Morris' film is a surreal portrait of an authoritarian state of turbo-capitalism, during a period when the International Olympic Committee effectively took over sovereignty of the capital. *Beijing* depicts a hitherto closed country at a moment of apparent and possible theatrical openness, a hidden culture at a moment of extreme

visibility. Consequently – and this is perhaps why we are made to think of conspiracies – the film questions the authorship of the spectacle, who is in control, and ultimately, the role of the artist.

Mon, 19/12, 7 pm

Rio

2012, Red Code/HD Digital, 88:33 min.

© Sara Morris, Courtesy White Cube

In *Rio*, Morris depicts the multifarious and complex layers of this most contradictory of cities, from its highly orchestrated and eroticised surface image, to the infinite realities of its vast urban sprawl, industrial production and the minutiae of its day-to-day living. Johanna Burton has described Morris' films as being characterised by a "pulsing, nervous, chromatic attention" and in this film, her camera wanders flaneur-like through Rio's Ipanema beach, hospitals, iconic modernist architecture, football stadiums, factories and favelas. Filming in numerous locations including the office of architect Oscar Niemeyer just before his death, the headquarters of the Mayor of Rio, Eduardo Paes, the infamous Carnival and its "Winner's Parade", the legendary "City of God" neighbourhood, as well as the inside of the Brahma beer factory, *Rio* focuses on the city's architecture and, in particular, on the way that it engineers social interaction and plays a key role in Brazil's outward-facing identity. With images that alternate between the micro and macro, day and night, Morris' film creates

a hallucinatory space that explores the psychology of this city at a particular moment in its history, and traces how this is embedded in behaviour, signs, surfaces and Rio's complex political history.

Wed 21/12, 7 pm

Robert Towne

2006, 35mm/DVD, 34:26 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

In *Robert Towne* the lens shifts from a wide view onto a city to an up-close and intimate portrait of the legendary screenwriter and script doctor, Robert Towne. An interview with the subject covers topics ranging from his Academy Award-winning screenplay for *Chinatown* (1974), the role of authorship, his relationship with colleagues such as Robert Evans, Warren Beatty, Pauline Kael, and the reoccurring themes in his film work – conspiracy, paranoia, corruption, and power.

Los Angeles

2004, 35mm/DVD, 26:12 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

Los Angeles continues Morris' investigation into the psychology, architecture and aesthetic of the American city. It reveals a new cityscape of Los Angeles by tracking its de-centered plan, its complex architectural environs, and most importantly its crucial role as a center of image production. *Los Angeles* is, in part, a film about contemporary commercial filmmaking, following the production and direction of a

movie in an abstract sense – as well as the relations between the studio, producer, director and talent. It also tracks various pre and post-production processes thus creating a sweeping non-narrated image of the mechanisms of filmmaking and how they relate to the identity of a place.

Sun 8/1 2017, 7 pm

Chicago

2011, Red Code/HD Digital, 68:21 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

Chicago explores the American metropolis made all the more resonant in the wake of President Obama's administration. When Mies van der Rohe emigrated to America in 1938, with the help of Philip Johnson, and was established as the Head of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, he not only created an image of America but the reality of the contemporary American society. Continuing to play with duality, Morris' *Chicago* is in tandem with *Points on a Line*, shifting the lens to a panorama of an American city in transition. In *Chicago*, Morris reveals a new cityscape by tracking its modern architecture, the seemingly dead printed world of publishing headquartered there, as well as its industrial role. A century after the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the issues shift from food production to consumption and a struggling printing, publishing and advertising world. *Chicago*

captures the varied layers of a complex metropolis without verbal commentary or narration. It exploits the boundaries of documentary and fiction, and collides the city's everyday moments with issues of social power and representation.

Points on a Line

2010, Red Code/HD Digital, 35:44 min.

© Sarah Morris, Courtesy White Cube

The Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois and the Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut. Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe. Curator and architect. Architect and architect. *Points on a Line* documents a shared desire to build structures that might change the way we think about a house, a form and a context. These two buildings were the result of shared ideas and collective desire. But they also complicate ideas of the copy and the original, and the chronologies of Modernism. The two buildings demonstrate a legacy of focus upon detail and surface – inside and outside. Capturing the tension of ego and authorship in precisely differing architectural statements. By carefully documenting the daily maintenance of these two buildings and lingering over the precise placement of the structures in space and of objects within each structure, we are presented with a clear view of places that have gone beyond their initial modest use. Morris' deployment of cinematic codes in relation to architectural precision produces images that go beyond a record of functionality or the streamlining of needs. These are places that remain elusive despite

their openness – structures that are open vessels where we search for markers of the corporate aesthetic to come and the legal wrangles that marked the struggle to complete and maintain them. Buildings that require constant representation and new documentation in order to recode and understand what came before and what came next. Obtaining complete unrestricted access for each location of the film, Morris has woven together art, architecture and corporate image production with flowers, the behaviour of bees and the patterns of butterflies – window washing, cooking, power-broking and collecting. Morris filmed at both sites over the course of several months, among other locations including The Four Seasons Restaurant, the Seagram Building, Mies van der Rohe's infamous Lake Shore Drive, and Chicago's Newberry Library.

Program

Sarah Morris, in addition to her abstract geometric paintings, regularly films and produces a glimpse behind the scenes of cities or special events. In *Strange Magic* she montages perspectives and impressions together that allow a view of the fabrication of cultural capital in the form of luxury goods.

Every Sunday at 3 pm the Kunsthalle Wien art educators introduce visitors to the work of Sarah Morris and answer questions on the artist and her films. (in German)

Free with admission.

Colophon

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