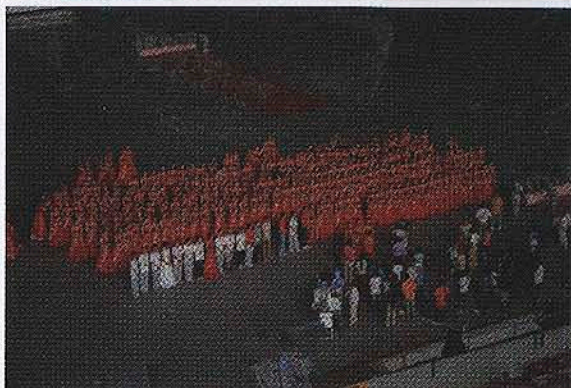


# Empty Nest

TOM VANDERBILT on Sarah Morris's *Beijing*



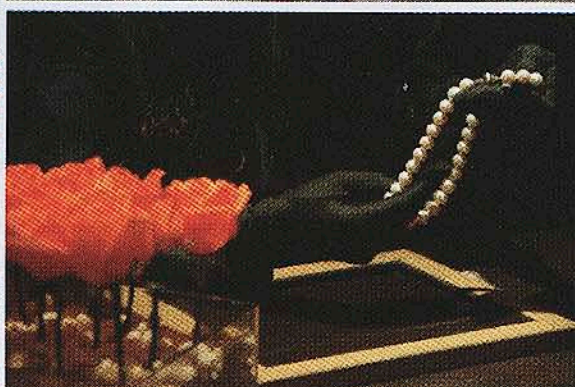
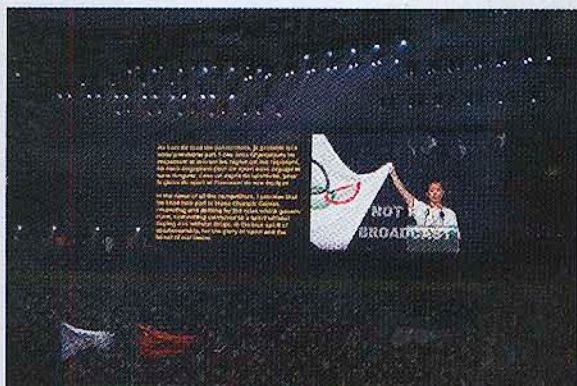
"WHAT INTERESTS ME ABOUT BEIJING is that it's not resolved in any way," says artist Sarah Morris, looking at a monitor in her studio, on which clips from her upcoming film, titled after the city, are playing. "Or, more precisely, that China is a paradoxical state. Is it hypercapitalist? Yes. Is the government a supreme authority? Yes. It's not yet certain what the country will become, and so today it is not even clear just what we are seeing when, for instance, we look at something like Rem Koolhaas's tower for China Central Television." Morris has executed cinematic portraits of urban landscapes in the past, skimming their architectures and cultural scenes—from the sidewalks and skyscrapers of Manhattan to the red carpets and surgical theaters of Los Angeles—to compose chains of discrete, nonlinear episodes, many of which suggest unprecedented access to the back corridors of overmediated events. *Beijing* features a similar approach, but only while imbuing images with a uniquely rich tension, whether Morris is framing the complex infrastructure of the Beijing Post Office, or a speech by Sino-icon Henry Kissinger during a forum called "What Makes a Champion?" (a talk she says bristled with startlingly reductive nationalist tropes), or a duck farm whose swarming avian numbers are suggestive of the mass forms that pervade the city, or, in an image that reveals instantly that Morris was filming during the summer of 2008, Michael Phelps in a warm-down pool. Most evocative in this regard, Morris notes, were the ubiquitous "countdown clocks," which seemed to provide the city with a narrative drive toward some grand, decisive moment. "There was a palpable anxiety," she says of Beijing during the Olympics—though the phrase is as apt for her own project—"a sense of making a form and yet not knowing what's going to go on within it."

Morris's film, then, is not exclusively about the Beijing Olympic Games. Indeed, as an indicator of the breadth of the artist's investigation, the walls of her studio are covered with sheets of paper, each one bearing the name of an

individual or agency that helped open a channel to a different part of the metropolis. (Even the duck farm had significant restrictions, as Morris was required to wear special gear to avoid any risk of contaminating—or of being contaminated by—this food source.) Yet as Morris's working method dictates that she "let[s] events themselves, and the bureaucratic limits of those events, control [the process]," this particular time and place led her—as it did all of Beijing—to dwell on these Olympics, particularly as they represented the creation of a cultural identity. Curiously, her navigation of labyrinthine bureaucracies extended from the Chinese state to the equally formidable apparatuses of the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne, introducing unanticipated ambiguities as she obtained clearances to film in the (copyrighted) Herzog & de Meuron "Bird's Nest" and other buildings. "It's still debatable whose event it was," she says, "and who was its ultimate author."

The defining moment of the Games was, of course, furnished by the opening ceremonies, which, regardless of authorship, were directed by Zhang Yimou—who appears in Morris's film, rather frantically orchestrating the event—as an epic tale of China. Historian Geremie Barmé has argued that the ceremonies, with their invocations of Confucian philosophy and classical Chinese arts—things denounced for much of the past century in China—represented an attempt by the country's leaders "to present the world with a story of five thousand unbroken years of civilized harmony." In so doing, however, the spectacle fused the idea of people as pixels—a practice originating in the North Korean "mass games"—with actual pixels in the massive LCD display deployed on the stadium floor, creating, in effect, a new medium: a living, digitally augmented *tableau vivant*. (Still another layer of mediation was added in television broadcasts: When computer-generated fireworks exploded in a progression through the "Beijing" that viewers at home were seeing, NBC's Bob Costas rightly





This page and opposite: Sarah Morris, *Beijing*, 2008, stills from a color film in 35 mm. All images © Parallax.

intoned that the city was operating “like cinema in real time.”) For Morris, the ceremonies were “an adrenal event.” Her film—not unlike the photographs of Edward Burtynsky that depict masses of colorfully clad Chinese factory workers diminishing to a distant vanishing point—conveys a sense both of beauty and unease in the spectacle. (And anyone viewing the ceremonies could observe that the similarities between, say, factory workers manning their workstations and the thousands of performers manning their drums are not strictly aesthetic. Zhang himself noted that his production could only have taken place in China, where the rigors of the performance would not conflict with any regulations pertaining to workers’ rights.) As for Morris’s experience in the “Bird’s Nest,” one might say that to film what seems a film itself—one

**Rather than deploy Hollywood’s mechanisms of image construction to reify an entertainment industry or even celebrity culture itself, the Beijing Olympics put such devices in the service of nation-state building.**

complete with lip-synching and other special effects—invokes a dictum from Brecht: “Less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality express something about reality.”

Indeed, when it came to the Games themselves, Morris describes the overwhelming feeling as one of emptiness: “The real story is that there was no one there; it was an event for television.” In this respect, it was comparable to the Academy Awards ceremony that was at the decentered heart of her *Los Angeles*, 2004—only “times one hundred.” But rather than deploy Hollywood’s mechanisms of image construction to reify an entertainment industry or even celebrity culture itself, the Beijing Olympics put such devices in the service of

nation-state building. The spectators were part of the medium itself: a medium whose message to the world was that this unprecedented mastery over technology and large-scale human movement—and even the weather—could only have been brought to you by a powerful state commanding a staggering amount of human and economic resources. (The politically fraught torch run and stridently suasive, stage-managed statecraft on display in Beijing recall the words of Frederick T. Birchall of the *New York Times*: “The foreign reaction was awaited here with a certain measure of trepidation. There is manifest anxiety for once to win foreign praise. . . . They are back in the fold of nations who have ‘arrived.’” His subject was the 1936 Berlin Games.) For all the pastness on display, the future was the real subject, in the Games as in the city as a whole.

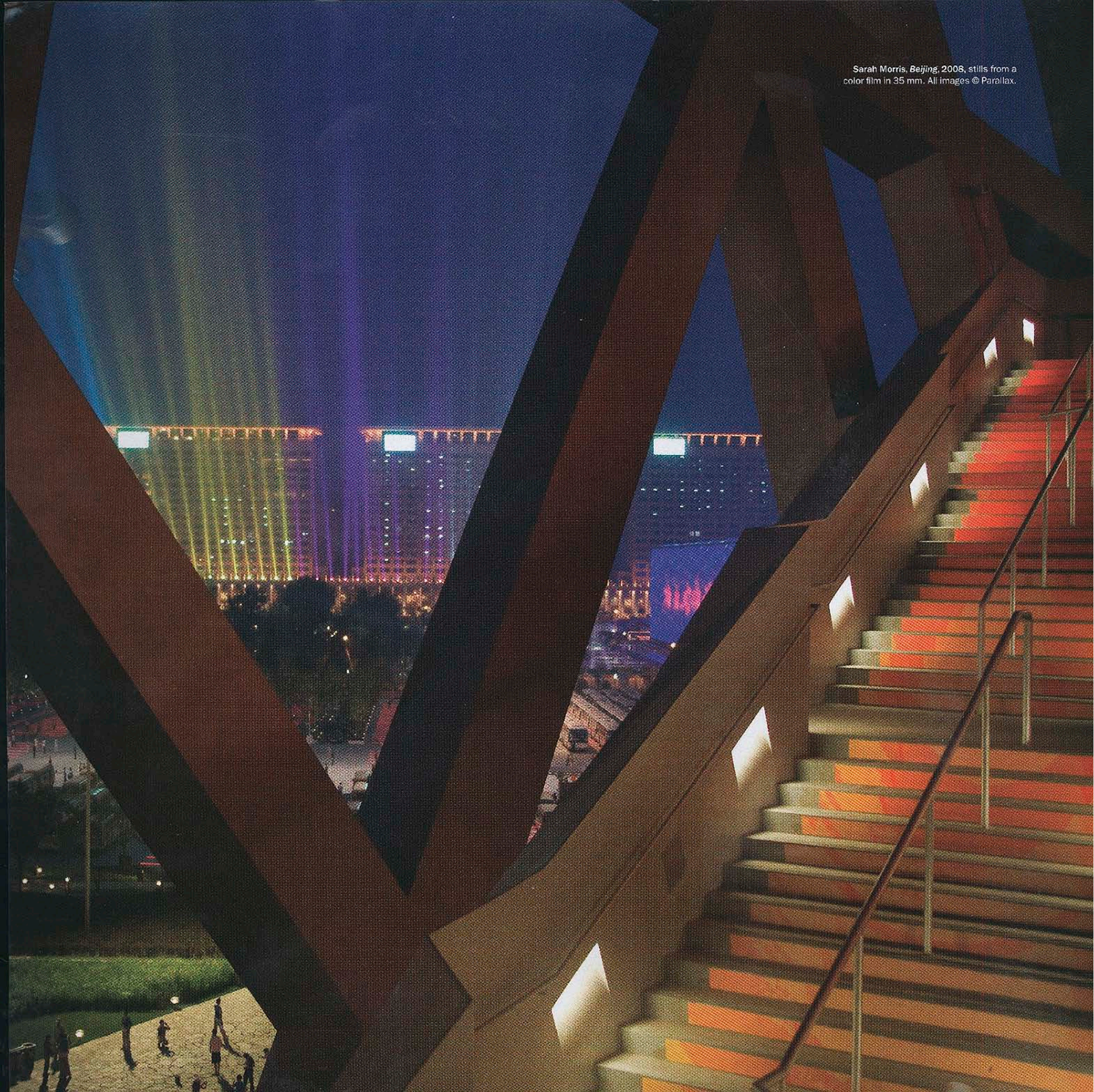
“That level of optimism about the future is there; it was really clear,” Morris says. “Whether or not you want to recognize that, or think that’s deluded, it’s there, it’s palpable—it’s definitely in the film.”

If the whole place was becoming cinema in real time—Morris says video screens were as pervasive a building material in Beijing as drywall, and indeed, the very lip of the stadium, the “membrane,” was a screen, as if it were a hermetic seal on the structure’s contents—this artist’s film of the film is like some metaphoric pinhole photograph. Her images were gathered through the small, shifting apertures of security clearances. And like an athlete, she was working, as the sportscasters say, against the clock—in this case, against the omnipresent countdown clocks that were ticking toward the Olympics, and toward the zero hour of fixed meaning. □

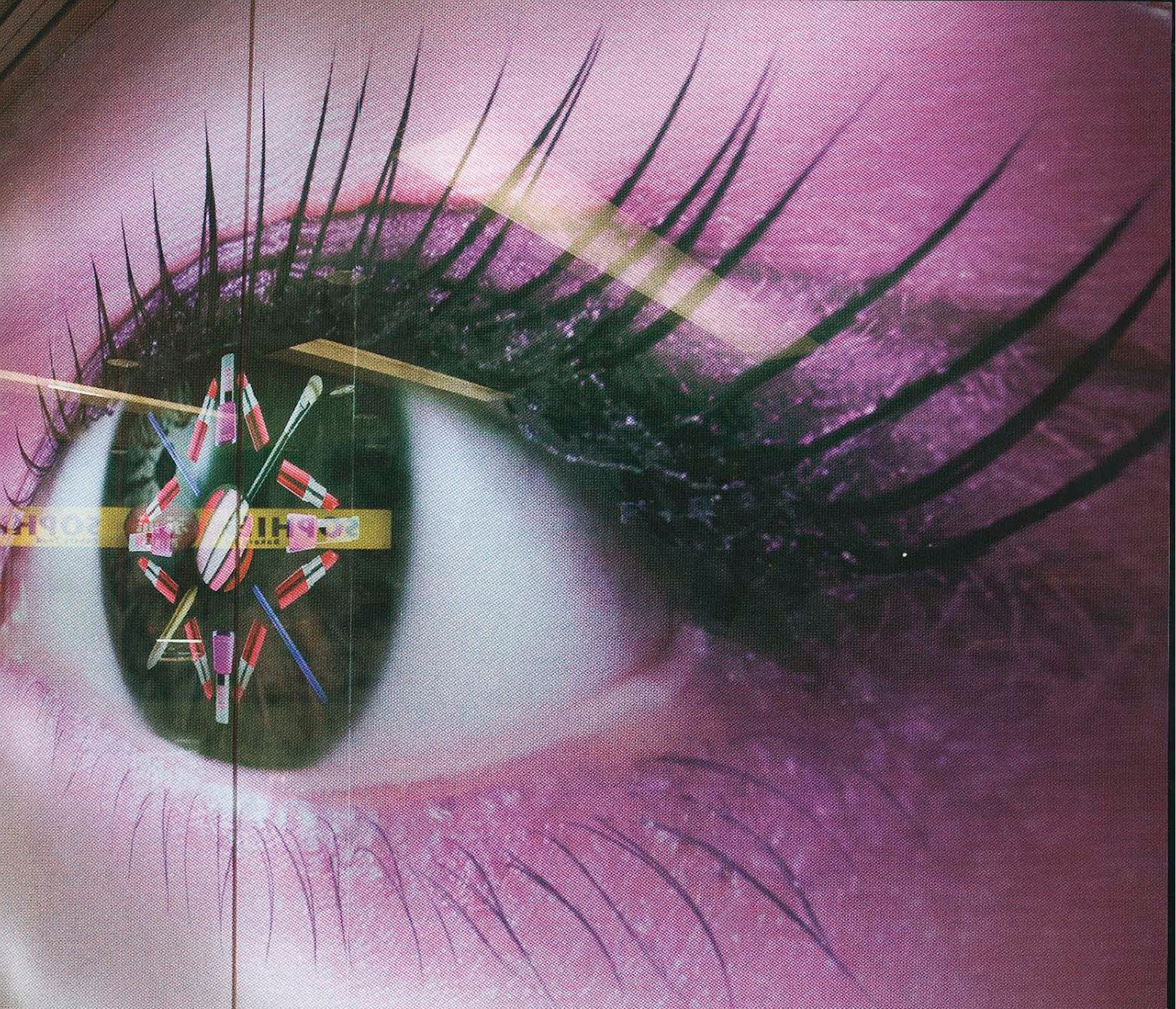
TOM VANDERBILT IS A WRITER BASED IN NEW YORK.



Sarah Morris, *Beijing*, 2008, stills from a  
color film in 35 mm. All images © Parallax.







# Beijing, Not for Broadcast

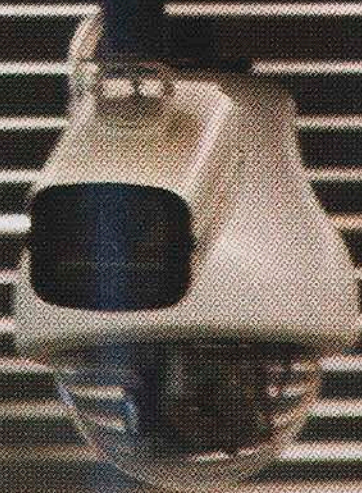
Selected stills from an upcoming film by SARAH MORRIS







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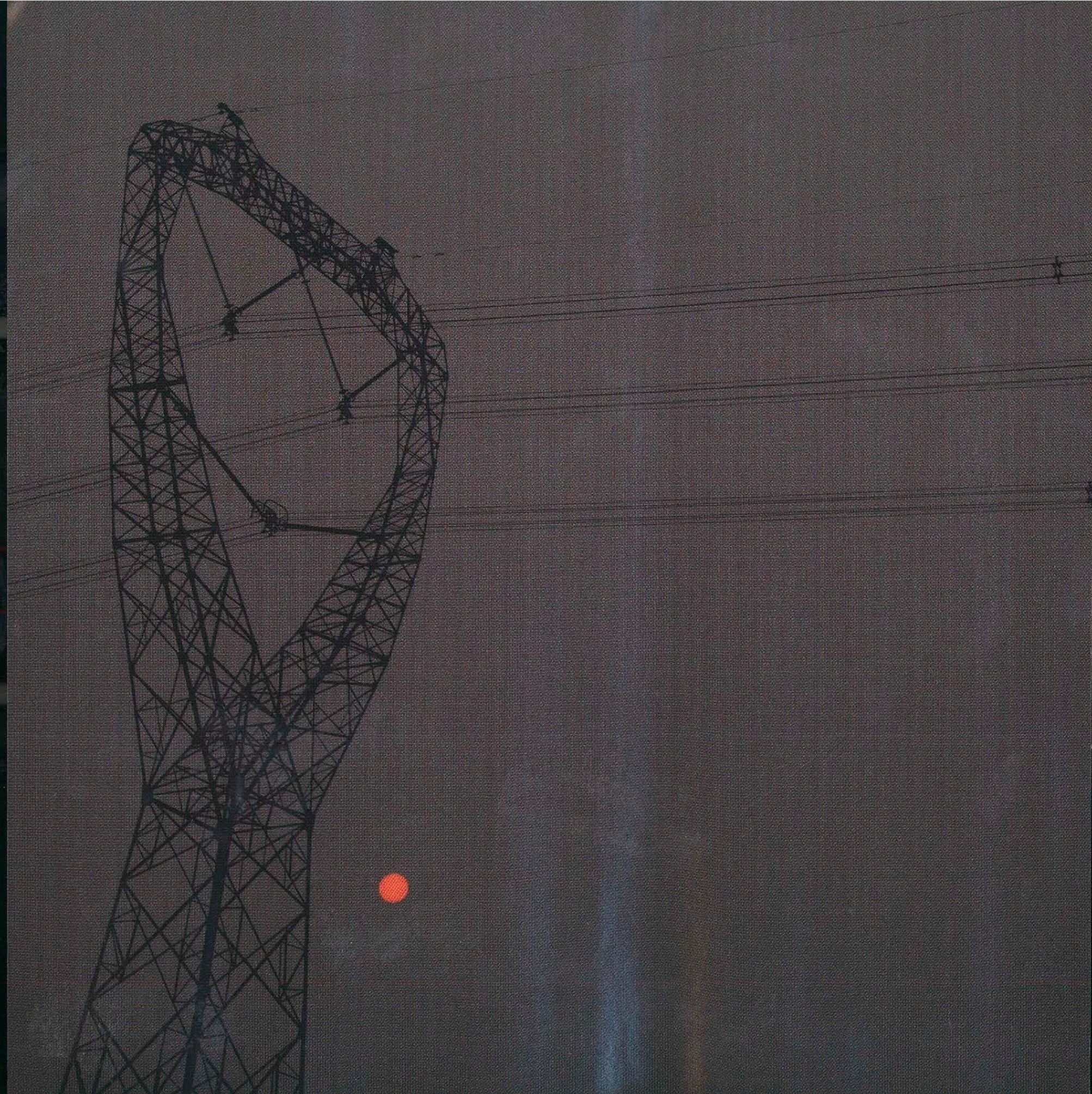








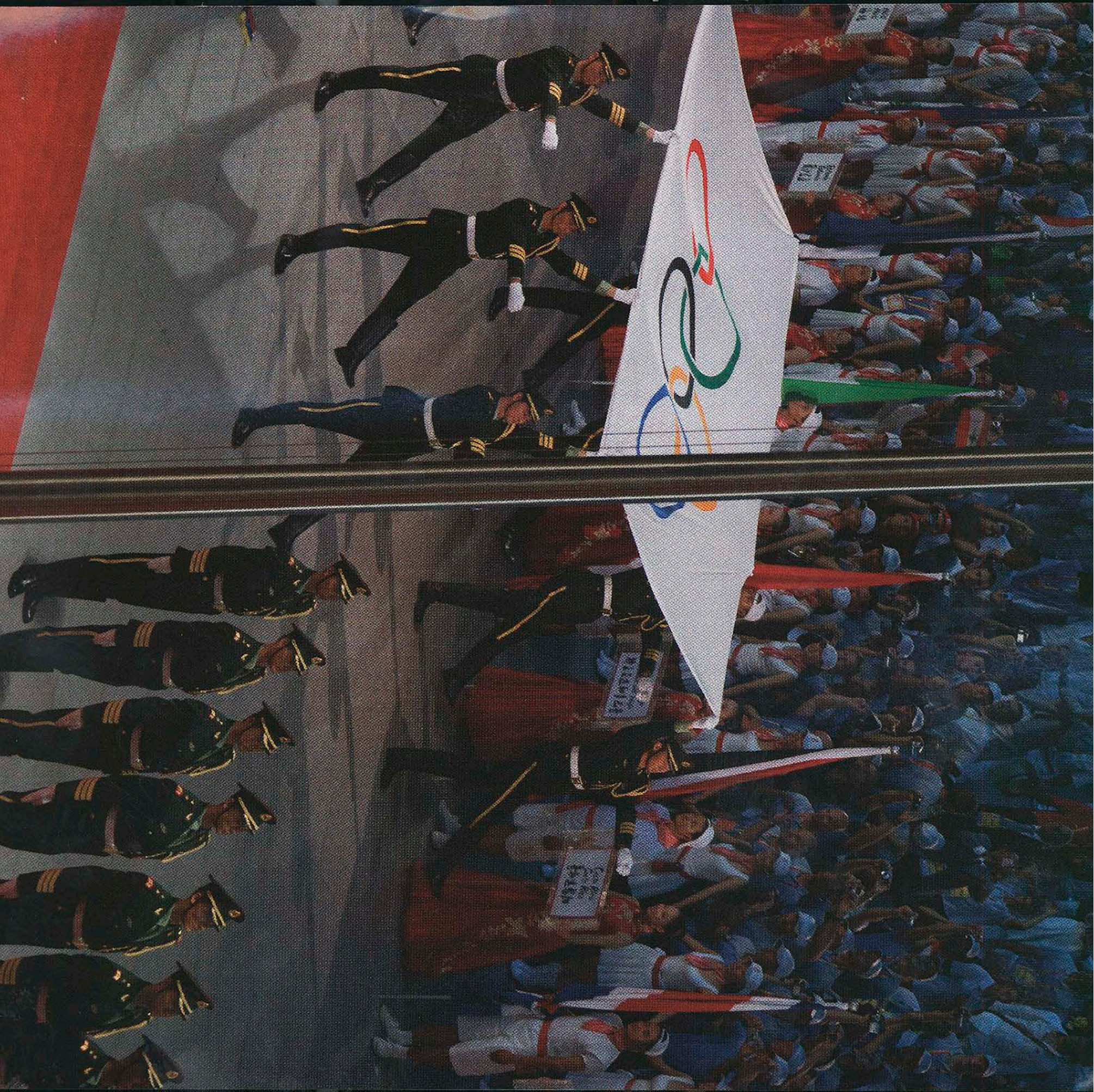














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