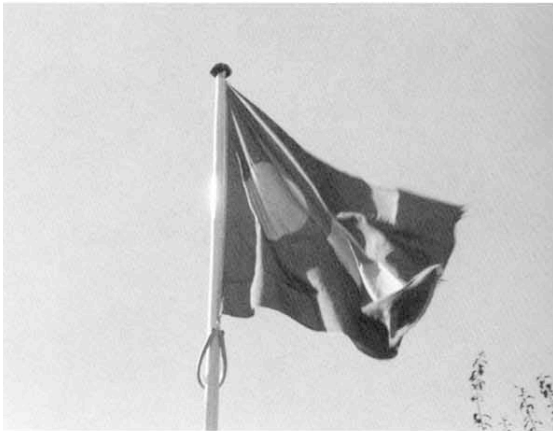


ARTFORUM

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“Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester”
The Kitchen, New York
By Michael Wilson



Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester, *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State*, 2001, still from a five-channel color video, 90 minutes.

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM AND JOACHIM KOESTER THE KITCHEN

Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester's video installation *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State*, 2001, is a ruminative work inspired by the complex history of Christiania, a famous anarchistic community established in Copenhagen in 1971. Divided between large freestanding screens—each accompanied by its own unidirectional speaker to minimize the discordant buildup of sound—*Sandra of the Tuliphouse* comprises five independent twelve-to-twenty-minute video loops that may be watched in any order, in part or (by the more determined visitor) from beginning to end. Making its belated New York debut at the Kitchen, Buckingham and Koester's project feels oddly removed from real time, its ostensible subject an anachronistic curiosity repositioned as a locus for open-ended reflection.

While the project relies on a deliberate blurring of fact and fiction, historical record and self-conscious mythmaking, we are at least fairly certain that Christiania—however unlikely it is sometimes made to seem—is a real place. A self-governing squat located on eighty-five acres of land owned by the Danish Defense Ministry, it is currently inhabited by nearly one thousand people, but is scheduled for government dissolution next year. Buckingham and Koester explore the site and its social, political, and philosophical implications through a suite of meandering narratives related from the point of view of Sandra, a fictional character who moves into the tumbledown “free state” for a summer. Commenting on her situation in placid voice-over, Sandra poses at least as many questions as she answers, moving from accounts and enactments of her daily activities to divergent observations on the very particular context in which they occur.

Resolutely nonlinear and multivalent, *Sandra of the Tuliphouse* exhibits all the pros and cons of dinner-party conversation: Opinions are expounded with unshakable insistence but a dearth of verifiable supporting evidence; allusions and references of questionable provenance and relevance are continually introduced; absorbing problems are raised only to be abandoned unresolved. The work ranges across subjects including the intertwined histories of the libertarian movement and the recreational drug economy, the linked ideas of the frontier and the border, and militarism and utopianism—all presented (nominally at least) in the context of Christiania's shifting fortunes. And just as the community's triumphs and failings are extrapolated into a model for the challenges of idealism in general, its Copenhagen environs provide an opportunity for amiable pondering on the progress of European urban civilization as a whole.

Discussing the origins and meanings of the apparently ubiquitous design of Christiania's flag—three yellow dots against a scarlet ground—*Sandra* suggests that it implies doubt and transition, possibility without conclusion, infinity. If *Sandra of the Tuliphouse* has a critical weakness, it is perhaps a surfeit of interest, a profusion of anecdotal detail that shifts the viewer's response from genuine fascination to a kind of appreciative torpor. The voice-over, at first rather refreshing in its utter lack of drama (the actress who plays Sandra is an amateur), eventually becomes soporific. And as the work's diegetic paths fork and fork again, our compulsion to sort the actual from the fanciful gradually loses momentum. Like Sandra herself, we are immediately compelled by Christiania's insular milieu, but to remain within the orbit of this work for more than, say, half an hour is to feel the pull of one's own world with a renewed intensity.

—Michael Wilson