

# In between days

A video at the Kitchen minds the gaps between fact and fiction—and war and peace **By Andrea K. Scott**

In 1971 a group of hippies broke into an abandoned 85-acre military complex in Copenhagen and declared it a free state. Today, a thousand people squat in the self-governed community of Christiania, on land that belongs to the Danish Defense Ministry (and has since the 17th century). The history of this anarchic social experiment—and the construction of history itself—is the subject of the five-channel video *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State* (1997–99) by Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester at the Kitchen. (The once-grungy second-floor gallery has been spruced up and feels like a fledgling Kunsthal, thanks to the Kitchen's director, Debra Singer, who also curated this show.)

*Sandra of the Tuliphouse* marks the only time that Buckingham, a New Yorker, and Koester, a Dane,

work, the artists interlace the military and utopian histories of Christiania with tangentially related fact and fiction—the relationship be-



Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester, still from *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State*, 1997–99.

tween armor and men's shirts, how heroin was invented (would you believe cough syrup?), an excerpt from *Beowulf*—to underscore that meaning resides in the relationships among details, rather than in the details themselves.

The layout of the installation mirrors its circuitous, fragmentary content. Five screens ring the space, each playing a 15- to 20-minute-long loop. Imagery alternates between color footage shot on location (primarily in Christiania and Copenhagen, but also at an airport in France and a snowy plain in Minnesota) and black-and-white archival photographs (including soldiers at the barracks in the late 19th century and four fresh-faced squatters in 1971). Only one scene appears on all five screens: a jump cut of the fictional character Sandra, riding her bike

have collaborated. Buckingham typically combines film and installation in layered investigations of culture and history (past subjects include Darwin and Poe); Koester works in both video and still photography (in 1996 he photographed Christiania using a day-for-night filter). What unites the artists is an interest in dismantling the illusion that history is linear or that documentation offers an objective account of events. In this nonnarrative

down an overgrown path, then sitting alone at a table. Sandra is a temporary resident of Christiania, who presumably lives in the titular Tuliphouse. (Among the work's many cryptic elisions, which can grow annoying, the house is never identified and there isn't a tulip in sight.) The woman who plays Sandra is not an actor, and her self-conscious performance helps blur the line between documentary and narrative.

There is almost no dialogue. Instead, the visuals are accompanied by Sandra's voiceover narration, a mix of diaristic anecdote, historical detail and philosophical aside. It takes about 80 minutes to watch all five projections, but there is no beginning, middle or end to the installation. The structure of the piece, which reflects the complexity of lived experience, encourages viewers to drop in and out as they want. The artist's intentions are embedded in a story Sandra relates about a man she meets on the road. She asks for the time and he answers "It doesn't interest me."

Sandra's transient status—the repeated information that she's just passing through—underscores Buckingham and Koester's implication that meaning lies in between rather than within. If Sandra's five bike rides down a leafy road to nowhere don't drive home this point, there's always the flag of Christiania, whose emblem is three dots. They're intended to symbolize the three *Is* in the state's name, but they also represent an ellipsis, the grammatical mark for a pause.

The pause at the heart of *Sandra of the Tuliphouse* is the ultimate failure of Christiania, which is depicted more as a ramshackle ghost town than a socially engaged community (and which the Danish government will dissolve in 2006). Though the installation dates from the '90s, its inquiry remains chillingly relevant, if stubbornly elliptical, as the artists unravel an intertwined history of the military and the utopian—and by extension the interdependence of war and peace. Buckingham and Koester's project recalls Walter Benjamin's claim that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Those who view art as a refuge from the machinations of war may be disheartened to learn, in one of Sandra's many history lessons, that the U.S. Army helmets in World War II were designed with the aid of Arms and Armor curators at the Met.

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## Review

**Matthew Buckingham/  
Joachim Koester, *Sandra  
of the Tuliphouse or How  
to Live in a Free State*  
The Kitchen, through Jun 18  
(see Museums).**

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