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Art in Review

Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester

'Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State'

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street, Chelsea
Through June 18

If you're moping about missing the opening of the Venice Biennale this weekend, cheer up. Thanks to the Kitchen, there is an outstanding example of full-blown festivalist, biennial-style installation art to be seen without leaving town. This is "Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State," a five-screen video collaboration between the American artist and filmmaker Matthew Buckingham and the Danish artist Joachim Koester. The cool dark spacious gallery, spiffed up at the behest of Debra Singer, the Kitchen's new take-charge director, could almost be the interior of some national pavilion in the official, if dusty Biennale giardino on the eastern tip of Venice (to be exact, the Danish Pavilion, whose exhibition this year will include work by Mr. Koester).

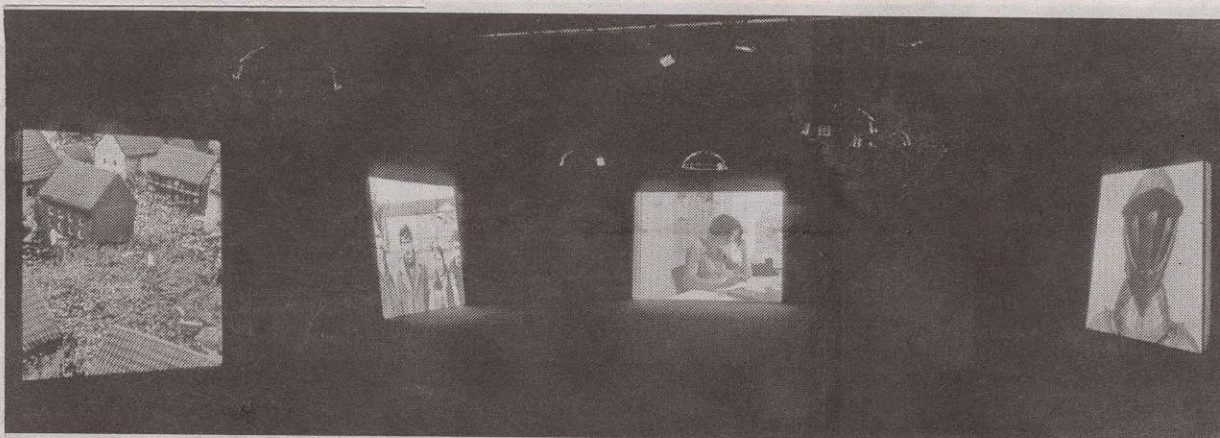
Quietly lyrical, richly illuminating, "Sandra of the Tuliphouse" is the fruit of four years of work by the artists. A walk-in documentary, it combines the offhand, ruminative voice-over and hand-held camera of 1960's French cinema (especially Godard) with the spatial, perceptual characteristics of installation art. It keeps the viewer drifting among images, and also narratives, because of dome-shaped speakers that create slightly overlapping but distinct pools of sound in front of each screen.

The images and voice-overs convey a first-person narrative about a fictional woman named Sandra who sets out to explore Christiania, the famous squatter's colony in Copenhagen that evolved starting in 1971, when Danish housing advocates breached the fences of an abandoned fort. But as she delves into the personal and communal histories encompassed by Christianiã, Sandra branches off naturally into the related histories of free cities (like Copenhagen), international trade, utopias,

harbor fortifications and armor, which, we learn, determined the way men's shirts button from the right. As she goes, Mr. Buckingham's meandering shooting style mixes with pre-existing photographs and images of works of art, maps and architectural renderings.

The work is gently delirious in its mix of personal and political, factual and metaphorical, mundane and extraordinary, past and present. There is no beginning or end, no correct order; the juxtaposition of images and sounds changes as you move. Instead, history is portrayed as a kind of immersive chaos, knowable only in part, a series of events and actions — the winning of a battle, the fastening of armor, the closing of a fort — whose reverberations down through time never cease. Every single thing has effects, and they go on forever.

ROBERTA SMITH



A view of the video installation "Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State," at the Kitchen.

David Allison/The Kitchen