

Joachim Koester / Matthew Buckingham
Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State
2001

Section 9/11

Like all pirate cities, Christiania is populated by social bandits, only some of whom are outlaws, and piracy must be considered as a form of social resistance. In 1630 there were four types of cities: national bureaucratic capitals, international trade metropolises, mixtures of these two, and pirate cities. The anarchical military republics on the coasts of Algeria and Tunisia living on plunder—the outlaw cities of the ‘golden age of piracy’—were extreme versions of their contemporaries, the maritime city-states like Venice and Córdoba. Copenhagen was the third type of city—a centralized government combined with salt-water imperialism. To King Christian IV the North Sea was a connection to, rather than a barrier from, the rest of the world—a potential trade highway—so he founded Christianshavn, a tax-free port, autonomous from Danish rule. But this freedom needed protection as well. And so ramparts were built to enclose the new harbor in the protective ring of empty space surrounding the city. These were the ramparts that would later become Christiania. The rifle-houses with their gun-ports, now known as air-condition, autogena, fakir school and cosmic flower, were built on the Bastions originally named after royalty and real and imaginary animals: elephant, lion, tiger, panther, and Unicorn. I find it strange that there was no bastion named for a Bear, but this is probably because the single best-known resident of Christiania for more than a decade was the bear, Rikke.

Rikke was a small bear from Nepal—a type called a Collar Bear, so named for its white ring of fur around the neck. She first appeared in Christiania in the performances of an experimental theater group. Her owner, Jakob Ølkusk, ran a small beer distribution business. He and the bear would ride around the Free City together in a horse-drawn wagon making deliveries to all the bars. In the early days of Christiania, Rikke was well-known for her tricks—opening beer bottles with her paws. She could drink three Portere’s, a very strong beer, in thirteen seconds. She wasn’t considered dangerous, but did have a reputation for breaking into peoples houses to steal food and alcohol—sometimes falling asleep in other people’s beds. She was also famous from her appearances in the front lines of demonstrations in support of Christiania, against the EEC and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Elisabeth told me about a woman named Stine, who knew the bear first-hand. She had actually lived with the bear, or tried to. She and her boyfriend Eik moved into the building known as the Occult School in the north part of Christiania in 1988. The space was vacated by Jakob Ølkusk who had just been kicked out of the community for neglecting Rikke and his horses. He moved the horses to a field South of Christiania, but left the bear, promising to retrieve her later, after he had built a new cage for her.

Rikke lived in a cramped room with one window covered by iron bars looking out on the moat. Stine and Eik had been promised this room would be a part of their house, as soon as Ølkusk relocated Rikke. But Ølkusk complained about doing the work alone, and about his arthritis. When exactly Rikke’s new cage would be ready was very unclear.

Stine told me “It was our dream to turn the bear room into a kitchen. Eik and I had lived without a proper kitchen for a long time—and now we could make the perfect one in our new house. In the meantime we had to get by, as we had in our last place, with only a refrigerator.

No one knew how long Rikke had been living like that. It was awful. Everyone passing by would toss food into the room, so we made a feeding-journal and put it by the bear’s window to try to control how much Rikke was fed, but then the book was stolen.

“One day Ølkusk showed up with a Volkswagen square-back and announced he had come to pick up the bear. He asked Eik to lend a hand. I was upstairs reading. A long time passed by and I went down to see how it was going. When I got to the bottom of the stairs I heard Eik screaming. I ran into the room and saw Eik’s arm in the bear’s mouth. I wrestled Eik away from Rikke and Jakob slammed the door. Rikke had taken a bite out of Eik’s upper arm and he was badly scratched all over. When I called for an ambulance they laughed and said “that’s a new one” and hung up on me.

“Eik was in the hospital for two weeks. In those fourteen days I stayed in the house alone with the bear. Whenever I went to get something out of the refrigerator I could hear her breathing on the other side of the wall.

Later, Ølkusk called and said he would come back and try again. This time I stayed away. I heard he came with ten people and a polar bear cage borrowed from the zoo.

“I actually went traveling after the whole affair and when Eik had recovered we broke up. Somehow the incident with the bear freed us from our relationship, which had not been so good. Even though Eik got hurt the bear made everything a lot easier—I had saved his life and I didn’t feel I owed him anything. We parted ways. Eik still lives in the same house and he got his kitchen.

“Jakob Ølkusk is very old now. He disappeared from Christiania as of that moment—it was the last time anyone saw him here. I never heard about the Bear’s further destiny. We knew where the horses were being kept—I think we would have heard about it if Rikke had been moved to that field.”

I asked Stine if she had ever seen Rikke in the early days, performing tricks or delivering beer? She told me no, that Rikke was already 17 when she first saw her in 1988. She was as old as Christiania.

Byens Lys, Christiania
backstage videoinstallation
August 25th - September 15th 2019