

## The Ruin Reappears

- By Maibritt Borgen

“The trees lined the entire park [...] to shield the buildings and wall off the outside world. Rare trees were planted there to create an environment with a sense of mystique...”

Beyond the waving fields of grain and after passing through the surrounding woods, the imaginary “I” crosses into the peculiar universe of the manor park. Here, nature stands untamed and magical, reflecting the visions of those who once walked these grounds. Step by step, this wandering “I” in *As I Wander Through the Park* pieces together the story of Decenter, the art centre once found at Marienborg Manor on the island of Møn. The title points simultaneously towards the I reading the book and towards artist Bettina Camilla H. Vestergaard’s (b. 1975) *I*, whose steps we follow through the park.

Decenter was the brainchild of social commentator and author Elsa Gress (1919-1988) and her husband, the American artist Clifford Wright. Vestergaard’s work revolves around the manor’s main building, which housed Decenter together with the forest supervisor’s residence (where Elsa Gress and her family resided) and some of the manor’s other vacant buildings. The main building, a castle in the Italian style, was demolished amidst great controversy in 1984, marking the end of Decenter.

In *As I Wander Through the Park*, the divide between then and now collapses. Photographs of the manor park represent a “now”, while a collection of statements written by Vestergaard on the basis of conversations with surviving “Decenterists” outlines the contours of the activities and community of a bygone era. The images reflect an enigmatic sense of decay: the slow fade of memories and the sprawling grasp of nature encroaching and enveloping the park’s original grounds.

The serial montage of text and images gradually conjures the park’s history. The statements depict Decenter as a vanished empire of lore, where splendour and decay coexisted in enchanting harmony, shaping a narrative in sharp contrast to the

barren landscape of the pictures. We hear of those who sought out ghosts in the summer night, rediscovered long forgotten footpaths and danced among the trees. As the interplay between text and images erodes the boundary between past and present, it seems as if the *I* walking through the park is also traversing the ruin of a castle that no longer exists. Decenter rises from the ashes as a frame – or an imaginary film set – in which the reader becomes the agent. What was Decenter actually, and where should we position the story of Decenter today?

## **Decentred**

Vestergaard’s exploration of Decenter began in 2009 in the basement storeroom of the museum Kunsten in Aalborg, where she discovered a painting of a woman in a blue dress with a parrot on her shoulder. The painting was a portrait of author and social commentator Elsa Gress; surprised that she had never heard of Gress, Vestergaard set off to investigate the story further. It was through this process that she learned of Decenter.<sup>1</sup>

Though largely overlooked today, Gress was a riveting, prominent and fiercely independent cultural figure in her day: social commentator, playwright, columnist, novelist, translator and essayist. She analysed the contemporary political consensus, good taste and its definition of the morally permissible from a perspective she defined as “seeing outsider”. Her outspoken views garnered Gress labels such as “shrew” and “Denmark’s only angry young man”.<sup>2</sup>

Gress defended the absolute freedom of the individual above all, a belief shaped by her personal experiences. In the years prior to World War II, Gress travelled around Germany, where she beheld the rise of the Nazis first hand.<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, she travelled to the United States on a work grant, where she was confronted with McCarthyism’s fear of communism and was perhaps a victim of it herself when

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<sup>1</sup> The portrait of Elsa Gress was painted by her daughter, Barbara Gress (1957-2001).

<sup>2</sup> She uses the term “seeing outsider” in the essay “Det begynder i sproget” [“It begins in the language”] in *Fanden Til Forskel* [One Hell of a Difference] 1979, p. 8. Renowned Danish author Klaus Rifbjerg dubbed Elsa Gress an “angry young man”.

<sup>3</sup> During the German occupation of Denmark, she was an active participant in the resistance movement.

her application for a visa extension to stay in the US was inexplicably rejected.<sup>4</sup>

In 1959, Elsa Gress and Clifford Wright, together with Elsa's oldest son David and their two children, Barbara and Jonathan, moved from Copenhagen to a former school building in the village of Åsø in western Sealand, where they founded the original Decenter. In 1972, threatened by financial problems and facing a foreclosure sale of the school building, the family moved to Marienborg Manor on the island of Møn, taking Decenter with them. The Count of the manor, Peter Moltke, had been a frequent guest in Åsø. Moltke himself was a bohemian who enjoyed surrounding himself with artists. The fact that he allowed artists to live at Marienborg without paying rent made him the most important patron of the couple's activities. On their first evening at the manor, Moltke symbolically presented Gress with a key to the castle on a red velvet pillow as a sign that she was free to use the castle at her whim.

Much as Gress insisted on maintaining an intellectual position as a "seeing outsider", she founded Decenter as a cultural centre with significant physical and mental distance to the established cultural milieu in Copenhagen. Gress and Wright had met at the artist's colony Yaddo in upstate New York. Decenter drew heavily on their international network, becoming a setting for concerts, theatrical performances, film productions, art exhibitions and literary symposia with an international bent; meanwhile, the numerous unused buildings at Marienborg Manor were transformed into artist studios for guests stays of varying duration.<sup>5</sup> The castle and the forest supervisor's residence served as venues for protracted collective meals and subsequent discussions stretching late into the night, where Gress's convictions dominated and often controlled these exchanges on art, politics, philosophy and literature.

This distance from the establishment brought with it a great creative freedom for many of the manor's guests. Whether on a short or extended stay, a visit had the

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<sup>4</sup> Gress herself wrote that despite not being a communist herself, she may have been "guilty by association" given her social circle.

<sup>5</sup> The diversity of guests ranged from figures such as author Henrik Stangerup and the experimental theatre troupe La Mama from New York, to Queen Margrethe of Denmark herself, and her husband, Prince Henrik.

power to “decentre” and extract them from their familiar and often static environs.<sup>6</sup> Elsa Gress called Decenter an “artistic recreation with content”, which took place “outside of the specialist boxes that also mark the art world”.<sup>7</sup> Decenter thereby stands as a veritable Gesamtkunstwerk for the 1960s and 1970s, where art and life transcended all boundaries between the artistic professions: a fact that makes it all the more remarkable that Decenter has vanished from established narratives on the period.<sup>8</sup>

Elsa Gress and Peter Moltke dreamt of making the castle a permanent cultural centre on the island of Møn. The Count’s plan was to transform the manor into a foundation and devote the proceeds from the manor’s farming activities to supporting the visual arts; however, the plan failed due to inheritance law provisions following the premature death of the Count in 1984.<sup>9</sup> The passing of Gress in 1988, four years after the demolition of the castle, further erased the imprint left behind by Decenter; meanwhile, the sense of failure at not being able to prevent the demolition of the castle came to largely dominate the surviving narrative on its significance.

### **Inadequate systems**

In *As I Wander Through the Park*, Vestergaard invokes text and images as two systems anchoring one another in their respective interpretations of reality. The project shares a bond with the American artist Martha Rosler’s work, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-75), in which Rosler exhibits photos of empty storefronts on the New York City street Bowery. Known for its bums, alcoholics and slum hotels, Bowery was an oft-sought subject of photojournalists and others

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<sup>6</sup>The composer and pianist Ilja Bergh describes the encounter with Decenter as having rescued him from a creeping depression and succumbing to the precepts of the Danish cultural phenomenon of *Jantelov*, which holds that no individuals should feel themselves to be better than others or special in any respect. Jytte Abildstrøm, a renowned figure in the Danish theatre world, also described Decenter as a haven for cultivating her imaginative fairy tale theatre without the constricts of the prevailing aesthetic demands of the time, which called for what she found to be a cheerless and rigid social realism.

<sup>7</sup>Elsa Gress, *Compañía II*. 1976, p. 73

<sup>8</sup> For example, not a single mention of Decenter is to be found in a leading tome on the period, Tania Ørum’s *The Experimental 60s [De Eksperimenterende 60ere]*, published by Gyldendal in 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The Count’s plan was limited by regulations on the use of farmland and provisions restricting the conversion of a manor into a foundation. The premature illness and death of the Count, combined with the subsequent inheritance tax to be paid by the manor’s heiress, his 18-year-old niece, ultimately rendered the project impossible.

seeking photos of social decay. Next to each photo, Rosler lists a variety of slang terms for drunkenness. The “inadequate systems” of the title refers to fact that neither text nor photographs can adequately describe the street or the social ramifications of alcoholism.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, one could question whether the text or photos presented to the reader can come close to telling the story of Decenter.

The American theorist Rosalind Krauss writes that photography serves as a reference to the real, to an act which cannot be sustained.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the statements and photos in Vestergaard’s project represent two inadequate testaments to the ability to document a history that no longer exists.

Vestergaard employs these tactics to bring the hidden authority of photography to the fore: A photograph subjectively reflects reality, but presents it as objective.<sup>12</sup> Photography’s surface, in the terms of Krauss, is a void that the words fill with meaning.<sup>13</sup> Concurrently with her exploration of Decenter, Vestergaard created the work *Notes On the Most Beautiful* (2011), which explores this same text-image relationship in the public spaces of Cairo. During a prolonged stay in Cairo, one of the world’s most densely populated cities, Vestergaard experienced first-hand how the city’s green spaces were fenced, guarded and/or inaccessible to the public. She therefore asked residents of the city to describe in words the public spaces they found most beautiful. The work juxtaposes transcripts of these interviews with photographs she subsequently took of each location. Whereas the text highlights the personal significance of each location, the photographs document the artist’s subjective interpretation of an unfamiliar city. This dialogue on Cairo’s public spaces unfolds in an open field between these two inadequate systems. Vestergaard’s photo series, *Fragments and Rearrangements (The Global Plant Elite for Public Spaces)* (2013) similarly provides a direct commentary on the formal attributes of photography. In a series of photographed arrangements, Vestergaard maps out the geopolitical life of a selection of prominent ornamental plants. She follows the plants on their travels

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<sup>10</sup> Rosler describes Bowery as a favourite subject for students’ photo projects, a phenomenon she called “find a bum”.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Krauss. “Notes on the Index: Part 1” in *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 68-81.

<sup>12</sup> The American artist and theorist Alan Sekula formulates the view that photography produces a representation of the story (interpretation) as documentation of the story (truth). Allan Sekula, *Photography Between Labor and Capital*, p. 447.

<sup>13</sup> “A meaninglessness surrounds [the photograph], which can only be filled in by the addition of a text.” Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 1” in *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 68-81.

from the countries of origin, where they grow wild, to colonial powers where they are sold as seeds, then back again, where they are used to decorate parks and gardens in accordance with European ideals. Some of the photos depict a number of ornamental plants in various constellations, while others piece together whole plants using multiple photos. Each work comments on the way in which every photograph extracts elements, selects and reorganises visual material.

### **Decenter in history**

Like many experiments in the art world of the 1960s and 1970s, those of Gress unfolded collectively, making Decenter a product of its times, yet one that stood in stark contrast to them. It was a place marked by Elsa Gress's faith in the imagination, the sublime and art above all: views that were considered reactionary and perhaps contributed to Decenter's position on the margins of art history. In her eyes, the politically motivated social realism that permeated art of the 1970s was grey and devoid of emotion. Even more importantly, it represented a departure from the role of seeing outsider, which she upheld as the most important function of the artist. Gress wrote:

“It is ... an important form of radicalism to pedal against the new orthodoxies before it all becomes petrified, and to show correlations – for example, between the hatred of art and the fear of emotions, ideas and imagination in general, including the fear of emotions between the sexes (sex is ok as long as it is free of emotion!) ... idle dogmas, anti-art, shoddy language, anti-thinking and anti-feeling.”<sup>14</sup>

Gress felt that orthodoxies and -isms created “false communities” or “small nationalisms” that locked participants into a position of them against the world. In her eyes, true communities could not be divided by borders, e.g. between the sexes, which she said “must and will work it out together and not separately”.<sup>15</sup> Gress saw her views as being in fierce opposition to the feminism of her time and she felt persecuted for her reticence to topple the patriarchal society.

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<sup>14</sup> Elsa Gress in *Blykuglen [The Lead Bullet]*, published in 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Elsa Gress in *Fanden Til Forskel [One Hell of a Difference]*, 1979, p. 89.

Her insistence on the radicality of upholding the individual's happiness and imagination as the basis for community opens new narratives on the art of the 1960s and 1970s. A 1970 issue of the magazine *A+B*, published by a group of artists who had also been active in another collective called "Ex-school", speculated on the philosophical genealogy between the early history of anarchism in Scandinavia and the political collectives of the 1970s. According to the magazine's foreword, the anarchistic thirst for freedom in itself is a collective action that goes "beyond the individual, its reactions and needs" to "a collective need that precedes all political action".<sup>16</sup>

Rewriting the history of *Decenter* is a way of rewriting the history of a strong woman who went against the tide, but it is also an account touching on essential themes relating to the history and continued relevance of feminism. If *Decenter* were related to a revolution and to a certain type of feminism, it would be to the uninhibited revolution championed by the exuberant anarchist Emma Goldman, in spite of the certainty that Gress herself would object to such a correlation. In her autobiography *Living My Life* from 1931, Goldman describes how a male anarchist at a social gathering admonished her for dancing frivolously, complaining that such behaviour was unbecoming of a future leader of the anarchist movement. Goldman retorted:

"I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. ... 'I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things.' Anarchism meant that to me."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Troels Andersen "Indledning: Hans Skjæbne er dig bekendt" ["Introduction: You Know His Fate"] in *A+B* No. 4, 1970, Copenhagen. The editorial staff included Troels Andersen, Henning Christiansen, Poul Gernes, Per Kirkeby and Bjørn Nørgaard, all of whom were involved in the Eks-skolen collective, as well as Erik Hagens, Ole Strandberg and Allan de Waal. *A+B* was published from 1970 to 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, 1934, p. 56.

Goldman's words echo the same insistence on the bodily, on festivity and love, as that embraced by Gress. In Vestergaard's work, feminism is not a matter of "us" and "the others". Keeping in the spirit of Gress, it is a critical approach to all existing hierarchies, where those who stand on the right side of history today may find themselves on the other tomorrow.

Decenter's community was rooted in a faith in the liberating potential of the individual and of art – a faith that often proves difficult to maintain in our times, under the constant barrage of global capitalism. Yet Vestergaard's project resonates with the same great faith in humanity that Gress held so dear.

Decenter never became what Moltke and Gress dreamt of: a lasting cultural centre with programmes, budgets and annual plans. Who knows if the untamed energy of Decenter could have endured had it lasted? Instead, Decenter lives on in the narrative we shape in the space between ourselves and the pages of this book.

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