

Dear

My name is Bettina Camilla, I'm a visual artist who lives in Copenhagen. A year ago I was roaming around in the storeroom of an art museum conducting research for an exhibit. Here I met the author Elsa Gress for the first time, through a portrait that her daughter had painted of her. It sparked my curiosity and took me on a long journey into her life and view of the world. During this journey I discovered that she'd setup an international artists colony by the name of *Decenter* on the island of Moen south of Copenhagen. I've had to piece together an image of what kind of place *Decenter* was by reading Elsa Gress's books, looking into archives and by talking to her family and friends. So far my research has yielded a photographic installation that I've exhibited at Kunsten Museum of Modern Art Aalborg (DK). Since then, I've been given an opportunity to further develop the project about *Decenter* – on behalf of an invitation to participate in TUMULT, an international art festival, that takes as its outset, the public space of the Femern Belt region this fall.

It is in this context that I would like to invite you to participate in a "decentered workshop" that I'm setting up at Marienborg Manor on Moen 19.08-22.08. 2010. As a participant you will be credited in TUMULTS catalogue, and press about the project.

Project description

The idea of a "decentered workshop" is a historical reference to Marienborg Manor, 1972-84. During this period the Danish author and debater Elsa Gress (1919-1988) and her American husband the artist Clifford Wright (1919-1999) lived at the manor. They called their home *Decenter* and extended in shorter and longer periods of time their family with Danish and foreign artists. Here they lived by invitation of Count Peter Moltke, who idealistically functioned as their patron. They used the main building, an Italian renaissance castle, for communal dining, exhibits, concerts, readings and theatrical plays. Moltke and Gress' shared ambition (dream) was that the castle would one day become a permanent cultural center for the island of Moen, an idea that enjoyed broad support in Danish cultural circles in the 1970s. But due to several reasons the story ended tragically and the castle was demolished without prior notice in 1984. Shortly hereafter *Decenter* ceased to exist and thereby also a story that in many ways is characteristic of the 60s and 70s experimental art scene. Today the castle is replaced with a large empty lawn that, like another 'ground zero' is a site that begs for action, for something new to happen.

The ideas that *Decenter* represented were anchored in Elsa Gress's humanistic ideals. Throughout her authorship she defended a democracy where all have the right to be different, rather than a duty to be the same. In this she believed that art played a crucial role and that art expanded societal consciousness by its ability to move conventions, expand our emotional register, work through sorrows and generate new ideas – so that a fear of the foreign or unknown would be unable to set society's agenda. This kind of art, she believed, had to be created outside established art centers, away from the choking effects of the market, the system and categorizations. This is why she established *Decenter*, as a place for radical and uncompromising thoughts and actions, a place where art could be created within an informal setting and in interaction with others. She believed that artists had a responsibility and likewise that society had a responsibility towards the arts. Drawing on her own experiences of Nazism in Germany and McCarthyism in the US she was constantly on guard from those who sought to limit artistic freedom. She therefore often retorted these tendencies with broadside attacks on both the right and left sides of the isles, and against those she deemed to be bidding a totalitarian agenda. She writes about intolerance and xenophobia: "when the weak marginal groups become scapegoats – artists and intellectuals in the one end of the scale, and ethnic 'foreign elements' and dissidents of all sorts in the other end", and when this denigration goes hand in hand with "respect for the strong – for the financial bureaucrats, economic growth, the national product, the rat race, and the military industry, then even the most democratic societies are ripe for dictatorship." She wrote this in 1977, but would she have written this differently today? *By creating a place for free thoughts and actions, Elsa Gress took on a responsibility that in the long run aimed to create a more humanely oriented society, a responsibility that she in essence meant that we all have.*

This is why I've chosen to reactivate Marienborg as a place of creativity. Today Marienborg park lies dormant, as an unwritten sheet without any trace of *Decenter* and the castle, which would have been a monument to Elsa Gress's (and Peter Moltke's) humanistic ideas. My project is to make these ideas visible in the park as it stands today – not by presenting them through a sentimental view of the past, but by reinterpreting them into a contemporary societal context.

It is in this context that I'm inviting you, along with 12 other artists to, in the spirit of *Decenter*, live and work in the park. In this period the park will function as a workshop, where the following questions will be explored and acted upon: What forms, actions and enunciations does Elsa Gress' ideas about art, society and our collective responsibility create today? What does the place that we create tell us about our own time, and in what way does it differ from the era of *Decenter* - an era we're all children of? *The intent is to create a temporary memorial site for Decenter and the humanistic ideas it represented, and to explore the relevance of those ideas today.*

You are invited, with your contribution, to create a place that reflects on these ideas, and to live and work in the park in a period of 4 days. Its up to you what you want to contribute; it can be a prior project, a new idea or something totally different. The only requirement is that you take the history of *Decenter* into consideration. You'll be able to work in and access all of Marienborg's park. Where the castle once stood will be a platform, a scaled down version of the castles foundation. The platform functions as the gathering point of the workshop. Here you'll find books written by Elsa Gress, photographs of *Decenter*, etc. The first day we'll meet at the platform where I'll start by giving a presentation of the history, followed by a round of introductions.

The aim is to create results that we can show Sunday afternoon 22.8 where an audience will be invited to the site.

The four days will be documented with video, which will then be edited to a short presentation to be shown on TUMULTS website. The documentation will primarily emphasize the dialogue and activities initiated by the story and how these interact with the park setting.

On a more practical level the format of the workshop suggests that we work in media that are immediately accessible, including those you choose to bring yourself, and on a limited scale there is a budget for buying material. Accommodation wise tents will be available for all in the park, as will access to toilet bath and indoor spaces in one of the manors adjacent buildings. Breakfast, lunch and dinner will be served on site and you'll be reimbursed for transport to and from Marienborg Manor.

The other invited artists are: Skylar Haskard (US), Tori Wrånes (NO), Berit Nørgaard (DK), Lillian Fellmann (CH), Lasse Lau (DK/BEL), Tomas Lagermand Lundme (DK), Line Skywalker Karlström (DK/SE), André Amtoft/Arendse Krabbe (DK/US), Mille Rude (DK), Fredrik Strid (SE), Karoline H. Larsen (DK)

I sincerely hope you want to participate in the project. Please send your response (ie. catalogue, etc. is going into print) by June 27th at the very latest. You're more than welcome to contact me if you have any questions at mail@bcvestergaard.com or by phone +45 61 3003 61

All the best

Bettina Camilla Vestergaard
/ www.bcvestergaard.com

About TUMULT

The idea behind the festival is to find ways to reflect the contemporary through historical inquiry, and through this ask questions about the future identity of the region. The exhibit is curated by Christian Skovbjerg Jensen and it will happen in the period August 21 – October 24 2010. Among other artists participating with site specific works are Aleksandra Mir (S/US), Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani (D), Frans Jacobi (DK), Katya Sander (DK), Thomas Kilpper (D), Danh Vo (DK/VI), A Kassen (DK), Parfyme (DK), Wooloo (DK), Superflex (DK), Marie Lund (DK), Mark Dion (US) m.fl.

Decenter archive



Elsa Gress (in the chair) and Clifford Wright (behind the painting) in front of the manors castle.



Count Peter Moltke to the left, composer Ilya Berg in the middle and Elsa Gress to the right



Theater in the park



Communal dining at Elsa Gress' place



Clifford Wrights studio

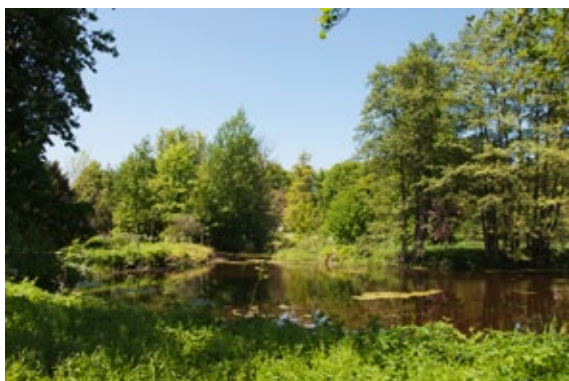


Performance in the park



The demolition of the castle

Marienburg gods i dag



For the break... 6 km from the manor.

