

# The New Criterion

## Features

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### Why the art world is a disaster

by [Roger Kimball](#)

On a visit to Bard College in the Hudson Valley.

*It is now that we begin to encounter the fevered quest for novelty at any price, it is now that we see insincere and superficial cynicism and deliberate conscious bluff; we meet, in a word, the calculated exploitation of this art as a means of destroying all order. The mercenary swindle multiplies a hundredfold, as does the deceit of men themselves deceived and the brazen self-portraiture of vileness.*

—Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*

*Some of what she said was technical, and you would have had to be a welder to appreciate it; the rest was aesthetic or generally philosophical, and to appreciate it you would have had to be an imbecile.*

—Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*

Last month, a friend telephoned and urged me to travel to Bard College to see “Wrestle,” the inaugural exhibition mounted to celebrate the opening of “CCS Bard Hessel Museum,” a 17,000-square-foot addition to the college art museum. It sounded, my friend said, spectacularly awful. She’d just had a call from her husband, a Bard alum, who had zipped through the exhibition while doing some work at the college. Huge images of body parts—yes, *those* body parts—floating on the walls of a darkened room, minatory videos of men doing things—yes, *those* things—to each other, or to themselves, all of it presented in the most pretentious fashion possible. It really was something ... *special*.

Well, these folks are not naïfs. They’ve both been around the avant-garde block and back a few times. If they said an exhibition was ostentatiously horrible, then it was likely to be something worth taking some trouble to avoid—unless, that is, your job description includes regular stints as a cultural pathologist, in which case it is something that duty requires you to inspect, docket, and file away for the instruction and admonition of future generations.

This is my unhappy position. So, one fine May morning I motored up to lovely Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, home of the elite, super-trendy Bard College. Bard is one of those small educational institutions whose ambient wealth has allowed them to substitute avant-garde pretense for scholarly or artistic accomplishment. If your bank account is healthy (tuition and fees for first-year students: \$47,730) and young Heather or Dylan is “creative,” i.e., not likely to get into a Harvard or Yale or Williams, then Bard is a place you can send them and still look your neighbor in the eye. The college is probably best known for its baton-wielding president, Leon Botstein, who conducts orchestras in his spare time and whom the music critic Tim Page once described as the sort of chap who gives pseudo-intellectuality a bad name. Bard also has the

distinction of being, as far as I know, the only college in the United States to honor the memory of Alger Hiss, the perjurer and Soviet spy, by establishing a chair in his memory.

It had been a long time since I had visited Bard. Back in the early 1990s, I ventured into its sylvan purlieus to write about the opening of the Richard and Marieluise Black Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture. [\[1\]](#) Now here we had, attached to the old edifice, the Marieluise Hessel Museum of Art. Two Marieluses? It turned out to be like the evening star and morning star of philosophical lore, Hesperus and Phosphorus: two names but one and the same orb—in short, as William Demarest put it in *The Lady Eve*, “It’s the same dame.” The German-born businesswoman shed the unfortunate (or maybe not) Mr. Black somewhere along the line. Although married again, she is taking no chances and now endows her endowments with her maiden name. Marieluise has been busy. In the early 1990s, when the Black Center opened, her collection of contemporary art consisted of some 550 items. It has grown to 1,700, of which approximately 200 items are on view in “Wrestle.”

You will not be able to see “Wrestle.” By the time you read this, the exhibition will have closed. But do not pine. You haven’t missed anything. Have I become jaded? Too many close encounters with Gilbert and George, Matthew Barney, and all the other exotic fauna that populate the galleries and art museums these days? Perhaps. In any event, I thought my friends overstated the awfulness of the exhibition. Don’t get me wrong: it was plenty awful. Body parts, “explicit” images, and naughty language galore. The exhibition certainly merited the warning to parents at the entrance. But it wasn’t worse than dozens of other exhibitions I’ve seen, you’ve seen, we’ve all seen.

I thought about this as I picked my way through the galleries at the Hessel Museum. A “video installation” by Bruce Nauman in which a man and a woman endlessly repeat a litany of nonsense, tintured here and there with scatological phrases. Been there. Photographs (in four or five different places) by Robert Mapplethorpe of his s&m pals. Very 1980s. Histrionic photographs by Cindy Sherman of herself looking victimized. Been there, too. Nam June Paik and *his* video installations. Done that. A big pile of red, white, and blue lollipops dumped in the corner by ... well, it doesn’t much matter, does it? Any more than it matters who was responsible for the room featuring images of floating genitalia or the room with the video of ritualistic homosexual bondage. Ditto the catalogue: its assault on the English language is something you can find in scores, no, hundreds of art publications today: “For Valie Export, the female Body is covered with the stigmata of codes that shape and hamper it.” Well, bully for her. “As usual with Gober, the installation is a broken allegory that both elicits and resists our interpretation; that materially nothing is quite as it seems adds to our anxious curiosity.” As usual, indeed, though whether such pathetic verbiage adds to or smothers our curiosity is another matter altogether.

No, the thing to appreciate about “Wrestle,” about the Hessel Museum and the collection of Marieluise Hessel, and about the visual arts at Bard generally is not how innovative, challenging, or unusual they are, but how pedestrian and, sad to say, conventional they are. True, there is a lot of ickiness on view at the Hessel Museum. But it is entirely *predictable* ickiness. It’s outrage by-the-yard, avant-garde in bulk, smugness for the masses. And this brings me to what I believe is the real significance of institutions like the art museum at Bard, the Hessel collection that fills it, and the surrounding atmosphere of pseudo-avant-garde self-satisfaction. The “arts” at Bard are notable not because they are unusual but because they are so grindingly ordinary. Leon Botstein described Marieluise Hessel as a “risk *giver*.” An essay in the *Bardian*, the college magazine, elaborates on this theme:

She was drawn to work that challenged and subverted the status quo, work that flaunted [the author means “flouted,” but, hey, this is Bard] and struggled with urgent, utopian notions of gender and identity, feminism, and the politics of AIDS, among other issues.

Mr. Botstein and the *Bardian* have it exactly wrong. When it comes to art, Ms. Hessel is neither a risk taker nor a risk giver. Like Bard itself, she simply mirrors the established taste of the moment. Far from “challenging” or “subverting” the status quo, the 1,700 objects she has accumulated *are* the status quo. And far from “struggling” with questions about gender or feminism or anything else, she has simply issued a rubber stamp endorsing the dominant clichés of today’s academic art world. “Academic,” in fact, is the mot juste: not in the sense of “scholarly,” but rather in the sense that we speak of “academic art,” stale, conventional, aesthetically nugatory. A wall full of photographs of two girls does nothing to “interrogate” (a favorite term of art- and lit-crit-speak) identity any more than a mutilated doll forces us to reconsider our usual notions of whatever-it-is those odious objects are supposed to make us reconsider. Really, the only thing exhibitions like “Wrestle,” or institutions like the Hessel Museum, challenge is the viewer’s patience.

Ms. Hessel once enthusiastically recalled her introduction to contemporary art as a young woman in Munich: “It was like entering a cult group.” That cult has long since become the new Salon where the canons of accepted taste are enforced with a rigidity that would have made Bouguereau jealous. The only difference is that instead of a pedantic mastery of perspective and modeling we have a pedantic mastery of all the accepted attitudes about race, class, sex, and politics. Since skill is no longer necessary to practice art successfully, the only things left are 1) appropriate subject matter (paradoxically, the more *inappropriate* the better) and 2) the right politics.

Again, my point is not to deny the repellent nature of much that was on view in “Wrestle.” It deserves its “X” rating, all right. But it has been a long time since shock value had the capacity to be aesthetically interesting—or even, truth be told, to shock. Decades ago, writing about Salvador Dalí, George Orwell called attention to, and criticized, the growing habit of granting a blanket moral indemnity to anything that called itself art. “The artist,” Orwell wrote,

is to be exempt from the moral laws that are binding on ordinary people. Just pronounce the magic word “Art,” and everything is O.K. Rotting corpses with snails crawling over them are O.K.; kicking little girls in the head is O.K.; even a film like *L’Age d’Or* [which shows among other things detailed shots of a woman defecating] is O.K.

Orwell was writing in the 1940s. Already that attitude was old hat: it had definitively entered the cultural bloodstream with the Dadaists shortly after the turn of the last century. What those folks didn’t know about “challenging” and “subverting” conventional taste and attitudes wasn’t worth knowing. In essentials, they pioneered all the tricks on view in “Wrestle”—the sex, the violence, the tedium, the presentation of everyday objects as works of art. The difference is that Duchamp was in earnest: “I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into to their faces as a challenge,” Duchamp noted contemptuously, “and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.” No wonder he gave up on art for chess. Duchamp mounted a campaign against art and aesthetic delectation. In one sense, he succeeded brilliantly. Only the campaign backfired. Once the aloof and brittle irony of Duchamp institutionalized itself and became the coin of the realm, it descended from irony to a new form of sentimentality. I do not have much time for Marcel Duchamp; in my view his influence on art and culture has been almost entirely baneful; but it is amusing to ponder how much he would have loathed the contemporary art world where all his ideas had been ground-down into inescapable clichés, trite formulas served up by society grandees at their expensive art fêtes in the mistaken belief that they are embarked on some existentially or aesthetically daring enterprise. Perhaps Duchamp, aesthete that he was, would have savored the comedy. I suspect his *amour-propre* would have caused him to feel nausea, not amusement.

Why is the art world a disaster? The prevalence of exhibitions like “Wrestle,” of collectors like

Marieluise Hessel, of institutions like the Hessel Museum and Bard College help us begin to answer that question. Their very ordinariness enhances their value as symptoms. In part, the art world is a disaster because of that ordinariness: because of the popularization and institutionalization of the antics and attitudes of Dada. As W. S. Gilbert knew, when everybody's somebody, nobody's anybody. When the outré attitudes of a tiny elite go mainstream, only the rhetoric, not the substance, of the drama survives.

That's part of the answer: the domestication of deviance, and its subsequent elevation as an object of aesthetic—well, not delectation, exactly: perhaps *veneration* would be closer to the truth. But that is only part of the puzzle. There are at least three other elements at work. One is the unholy alliance between the more rebarbative and hermetic precincts of academic activity and the practice of art. As even a glance at the preposterous catalogue accompanying “Wrestle”—accompanying almost any trendy exhibition these days—demonstrates, art is increasingly the creature of its explication. It's not quite what Tom Wolfe predicted in *The Painted Word*, where in the gallery-of-the-future a postcard-sized photograph of a painting would be used to illustrate a passage of criticism blown up to the size of its inflated sense of self-worth. The difference is that the new verbiage doesn't even pretend to be art criticism. It occupies a curious no man's land between criticism, political activism, and pseudo-philosophical speculation: less an intellectual than a linguistic phenomenon, speaking more to the failure or decay of ideas than to their elaboration. Increasingly, the “art” is indistinguishable from the verbal noise that accompanies it, as witness the little red band that surrounded the catalogue for “Wrestle.” This “work” was by Lawrence Weiner and read: “An Amount of Currency Exchanged from One Country to Another.” The point to notice is the usurpation of art by these free-floating verbal clots, full of emotion but utterly lacking in what David Hume called “the calm sunshine of the mind.”

A second element that helps to explain why the art world is a disaster is money—not just the staggering prices routinely fetched by celebrity artists today, but the bucket-loads of cash that seem to surround almost any enterprise that can manage to get itself recognized as having to do with “the arts.” The presence of money means the presence of “society,” which goes a long way toward explaining why yesterday's philistine is today's champion of anything and everything that presents itself as art, no matter how repulsive it may be. If tout le monde is going to an opening for Matthew Barney at the Guggenheim, you can bet your bottom black tie that the nice lady next door who gave MOMA \$10 million will be there, too. The vast infusion of money into the art world in recent decades has done an immense amount to facilitate what my colleague Hilton Kramer aptly called “the revenge of the philistines.”

A third additional element in this sorry story has to do with the decoupling of art-world practice from the practice of art. Look at the objects on view in “Wrestle”: almost none has anything to do with art as traditionally understood: mastery of a craft in order to make objects that gratify and ennoble those who see them. On the contrary, the art world has wholeheartedly embraced art as an exercise in political sermonizing and anti-humanistic persiflage, which has assured the increasing trivialization of the practice of art. For those who cherish art as an ally to civilization, the disaster that is today's art world is nothing less than a tragedy. But this, too, will pass. Sooner or later, even the Leon Botsteins and Marieluise Hessels of the world will realize that the character in Bruce Nauman's “Good Boy, Bad Boy” was right: “this is boring.”

## Notes

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1. “‘The Present Is History’: Conducting Culture at Bard,” in *The New Criterion* for May 1992. [Go back to the text.](#)

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