Up a winding country highway, past apple orchards and flaxen fields of withered corn stalks, the Bard College campus in Annandale-on-the-Hudson continues to expand its contribution to the Hudson Valley's exhibition of contemporary art. This Sunday, the college's Center for Curatorial Studies will open the Hessel Museum of Art, a building devoted to the public display of Bard's patroness Marieluise Hessel's collection of more than 1,500 works purchased in Europe, Mexico, and America, and now on permanent loan to the college. Ms. Hessel, whose formative years were spent in an impoverished village in post–World War II Germany, worked as a model and actress in the early 1960s. She began buying art shortly after her first marriage, to Egon Hessel, a bicycle manufacturer. Her impressive collection includes many of the most significant artists of the last four decades.

The opening exhibition,"Wrestle,"is a curatorial collaboration between the museum's executive director, Tom Eccles, and a curator for the New Museum in New York, Trevor Smith. It is the largest display of Ms. Hessel's collection yet. Still, the works on view represent only a fraction, less than 6%, of her inventory. The exhibition highlights Ms. Hessel's long-standing commitment to acquiring works of contemporary woman artists, but also includes many familiar powerhouse male painters, video artists, and photographers, particularly of the 1980s and '90s. "Wrestle" is meant to be a provocative, nontraditional reorganization of the art exhibit format. The overriding
theme, as the title suggests, is the self in conflict — both with outside forces and interior compulsions. The works are not grouped historically, through various schools or styles, or chronologically. Instead, the method is juxtaposition. There is a political dimension to some of the art and a graphic sexual dimension to a lot of it. Having integrated artists in unexpected ways, Messrs. Eccles and Smith intend for the works to engage each other — and the viewer — in thematic and formal dialogues. The hostile, yet fragmented rant of painter Christopher Wool's "As If" is echoed in the anxious ramblings of Tony Oursler's video puppets in "Me, Myself, and I." The enlarged photographic headshot of Ana Mendieta's face, pasted with the freshly shorn beard of one of her students, reappears in Rosemarie Trockel's drawing of a woman's face. Her characteristic pencil swirls that delineate the shadowed contours look a lot like Mendieta's borrowed facial hair.

Ms. Trockel is one of only a few artists whose work is grouped together in a single room. Here one can see a sort of mini-retrospective of this important contributor to Germany's burgeoning contemporary art scene, including one of her latest "knitting pictures," entitled "Menopause." Generally, though, diverse artists are grouped together in either obvious or surprising ways. So Nan Goldin's self-portrait after being beaten by her lover shares a room with Paul McCarthy's video of him beating himself to a pulp,"Rocky." As it does for Ms. Goldin and Mr. McCarthy — who become strange, but clearly simpatico, bedfellows — the use of adjacency contributes to a more meaningful understanding of each piece and, sometimes, reinforces its relevancy.

Some well-known images of children are dispersed throughout the exhibition and given fresh examination. In one of the first rooms, for instance, 15 C-prints from Larry Clark's 1995 film "Kids" face off against 1960s photographer Karlheinz Weinberger's black-and-white portraits of a gang of James Dean wannabes in Zurich, decked out in studded leather jackets and flaunting open flies. The elaborately coiffed and costumed boys, like Mr. Clark's pubescent girls floating through the film frames in their cotton undies, send essentially the same timeless message: Teenagers need strict supervision.

Using the same method for Sol Le-Witt and Robert Mapplethorpe, however, underscores the aesthetic connections between the two artists. Mapplethorpe's "Thomas in a Box," when viewed through Mr. LeWitt's sculpture "222, Three Three-Part Variations," accentuates the two artists' shared formal concerns — not least their mutual interest in the cube. Mapplethorpe's photographs are ideally suited to the exhibit's purposes. His work is so heavily weighted to its era that a re-examination of its significance, through its placement with seemingly unrelated artists, is both timely and worthwhile.

The question remains as to whether a visitor who does not have the same breadth and depth of knowledge as the curators do would make the same analytical leaps. The handsome catalog, which includes essays by both curators and an interview with Ms. Hessel, guides the visitor through how the exhibit works. A pamphlet also provides contextual clues to the works' relationships. However, much of the art exhibited speaks so forcefully, one hardly needs an interpreter to get the message.

Until May 27 (Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., 845-758-7598).
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