"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition
Today, mostly sunny with a comfortable afternoon, high 79. **Tonight,** clear, comfortable, low 64. **Tomorrow,** warming up, mostly sunny, high 88. Weather map, Page B7.

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Art? Life? Must We Choose?

CHRIS KENDALL

From the "Philippe Parreno" show, "June 8, 1968" (2009), a film work closely based on photos taken by Paul Fusco on the day the train carrying Robert F. Kennedy's body made its way to Washington.

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College here may or may not have intended a pair of summer exhibitions on view at its CCS Galleries and Hessel Museum of Art as a parable for the ideological rifts that characterize our artistic moment. But that is the combined effect of "Philippe Parreno" and "At Home/Not at Home: Works From the Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg."

On one side, in a spare, slick show of work by Mr. Parreno, a French post-Conceptualist, art objects are kept to a minimum and spectacle prevails. The presentation consists mainly of wide-open, red-carpeted spaces — nearly 10,000 square feet — punctuated by two immense video screens, each playing, in alternation, one short video. Born in 1964, Mr. Parreno has since the late 1980s been a mover and shaker in the artistic development known as relational aesthetics. In this realm, artist-orchestrated social exchanges, situations and communal experiences are generally preferred to art objects, which are seen at best as optional — props whose formal qualities are almost beside the point — and at worst terminally corrupt in their role as art-market commodities.

On the other side, in the Eisenberg exhibition, art objects are rampant, domestic in scale and often overtly handmade. The show — which has been selected and expertly if rather too densely installed by Matthew Higgs, director of the Manhattan alternative space White Columns — presents around 150 works by 106 artists, most of them dating from the last decade. Painting, sculpture, photography and their hybrids and derivatives dominate here, along with various forms of drawing and a couple of videos.

Seen together, these shows seem to argue about a familiar litany of issues: Is making art objects régressive? Does making work that sells amount to selling out? How valid is self-expression in

Continued on Page 25

On View at Bard

WHAT *"Philippe Parreno" (until Sept. 26) and "At Home/Not at Home" (Dec. 19).*

WHERE *Center for Curatorial Studies Galleries and Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; (845) 758-7598; bard.edu.*

Art? Life? Must We Choose?

From Weekend Page 21

art? Is there nothing left to do but appropriate, restage and rearrange? Has art become primarily a mirror of larger contexts, whether social, historical or architectural?

Luckily art is more about questions than answers, and in any case cultural clash is always invigorating — especially if it reduces the penchant for simple dualities and oppositions. What at first appears to be an either-or choice in these two shows starts to blur once you spend time with them, as the underlying messiness of both art and life seeps through.

Mr. Parreno's exhibition, characterized as a retrospective, originated at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It seems to have progressively slimmed down and also to have been continually rethought by the artist as it moved on to London and then Dublin and then here, for its fourth and final "iteration." This one, which has been overseen by Maria Lind, who was until recently the director of the graduate program at the center, unfortunately will not teach the uninitiated much about Mr. Parreno's art. But the two videos, separated by nine years, nevertheless trace what may be the essential trajectory of his development, from hermetic and dryly cerebral to less hermetic and more accessible and emotionally layered.

The first, "Anywhere Out of the World" (2000), stars Annlee, a female character. Mr. Parreno and the artist Pierre Huyghe purchased the rights to use Annlee

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS KENDALL

Rirkrit Tiravanija's "Untitled 1993 (shall we dance)," includes a record visitors can waltz to. On the shelf, puppet figures of Mr. Tiravanija and other artists.

from a Japanese Manga agency and then made the character available to other artists to work with. (The arrangement has a slightly sordid comfort-woman tinge, even if one or two of the artists were women.) Like a flatter and less compelling version of the androids in "Blade Runner," Mr. Parreno's Annlee laments her existence as "no ghost, just a shell," a vessel to be filled with narrative, but she's as interesting as a blank canvas.

Across a connecting lobby, an alternate universe of art.

After her video ends, the second screen shifts into action that is much closer to reality, and to life, with "June 8, 1968" (2009). In lush color and alternating waves of tumultuous sound and wind-blown quiet, this film piece restages scenes from the summer day when thousands of people gathered along the railroad tracks to pay last respects as the train carrying Robert F. Kennedy's body made its way from New York to Washington for burial. The scenes are closely based on photographs taken by Paul Fusco, a photojournalist who was aboard the train and show Americans of different ages, races and

"Youth Fenced In," front, a sculpture by Matthew Monahan, and "Untitled" by Ruby Neri, at Bard College.

table and record that visitors can play, waltzing to the Rodgers and Hammerstein song from the album (vinyl) of "The King and I." Also in the first gallery is a cohort of five puppets commissioned by Mr. Parreno and Mr. Tiravanija that portray the artists themselves, along with Mr. Huyghe; the artist Liam Gillick; and one of the group's most vocal advocates, the critic and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who is now the director of the Serpentine Gallery, a noncollecting exhibition space in London. Like many puppets, they exude an inanely cheerful self-satisfaction.

While Mr. Higgs has presented many impressive exhibitions at White Columns, this is his most ambitious on the East Coast. It is interesting to see him spread his wings, even if the crowding is initially off-putting. But conditions improve as you focus, moving from work to work and gallery to gallery, and you start to see that he has often made the best of some outstanding efforts by more and less familiar artists (but for a change, no mega-names).

Certainly he, like the Eisenbergs, is at heart object-oriented, with a highly eclectic sense of formalism. He groups things according to medium, subject, color and texture, revealing all kinds of mutual sympathies and unexpected connections. Into a small gallery dominated by strong pieces

cans of different ages, races and demographics in settings variously pastoral, banal and gritty.

"June 8, 1968" imbues the past with the familiar mediated immediacy of live television, creating memories unfamiliar even to people alive at the time, since the journey was not televised live — unlike, say, the carefully orchestrated funeral of President John F. Kennedy years earlier. Do the color, camerawork and sound — provided by a Hollywood cinematographer and sound editor — make this history real to people who were born later? Does sitting together on the red carpet watching the film provide a momentary sense of community? And does this have the weight of a substantial work or just a well-made, arted-up documentary?

The high production values and dwarfing scale of this work are hallmarks — and often pitfalls — of some of the more recent works of relational aesthetics, which are frequently made possible by enthusiastic institutional support. But here Mr. Parreno gets beyond that easy impact to achieve an emotional resonance that seems light-years away from Annlee. He may go a bit Hollywood — he has before — but he creates moments of indelible beauty and poignancy. Not the least of these is the film's almost silent final shot, in which several people stand along the crest of a slope, isolated from one another above an enormous and gnarled tree — a sign of both endurance and vulnerability.

Across the broad, glass-fronted lobby that connects the Center for Curatorial Studies to the Hessel Museum, "At Home/Not At Home" presents a seemingly alternate universe. Mr. Higgs's selections from more than 2,000 works by 350 artists that the New Yorkers Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg acquired over the last two decades fill no less than 17 galleries. (Mr. Eisenberg is a vice president of Bed Bath & Beyond.)

This array may seem to offer immediate respite from the high-mindedness of Mr. Parreno's show, and yes, these pieces are commodities, among other things. They were made mostly by hand and were bought, taken home and lived with, with the proceeds of the sales going to artists as well as to galleries and their staffs (which often include other, younger, not-yet-selling artists).

But the real difference between the Parreno and Eisenberg shows is not so much nonobject versus object as public versus personal, which is a matter of scale and tone. As if to prove this point the Eisenberg show opens with an early example of relational aesthetics, but a small-scale and intimate one: Rirkrit Tiravanija's "Untitled 1993 (shall we dance)," which consists of turn-

An installation view of "At Home/Not at Home," works from the Eisenberg collection.

dominated by strong pieces about identity by black artists like David Hammons, Rashid Johnson and William Pope.L, he places a large, monochrome black painting by Mark Grotjahn, who is not black. He nominates Alexandra Bircken's 2007 "Spindel" — tree branches held together by knitted squares — as an expansion on Jim Lambie's 2000 "Psychedelicsoulstick #7," a piece of bamboo wrapped in silk thread, by placing them not side by side but in the same corner two rooms away.

In one small gallery works by Ricci Albenda, Mr. Hammons, Shinique Smith and Tony Feher meditate on black, white and transparency in circles, spheres or bulges; Gabriel Orozco demurs with a black-and-white wall piece in nylon mesh and polyurethane foam that is all angles and ooze. Another gallery might be titled More Than Photography. Here the efforts of Wolfgang Tillmans, John Stezaker, Walead Beshty, Shannon Ebner and Michaela Meise push the medium beyond its usual function as a two-dimensional record of reality, into abstraction, seriality, sculpture.

Mr. Higgs draws interesting distinctions between art involved with the figure in art history — like Matthew Monahan's Roman-Egyptian-Michelangeloesque "Youth Fenced In," Anne Chu's riffs on Tang ceramic statues and Nicole Eisenman's painting "Death and the Maiden" — and more visceral evocations of the body itself, as in assemblage sculptures by John Bock and John Outterbridge. Similarly, there is abstract painting as process-oriented image — Mary Heilmann, Richard Hawkins, Josh Smith — and paintinglike abstraction in video performance, installation or wall sculpture — Alex Hubbard, Guyton/Walker and Mr. Lambie. Everywhere there are striking juxtapostions, as with Charline Von

ONLINE: PHILIPPE PARRENO

More images from the exhibition:

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Heyl's weirdly foliate white on black painting and Hayley Tompkins's even weirder wall sculpture made mostly of a branch of dried leaves.

These two exhibitions exemplify the different paths opened up by Conceptual art and its early 1970s offshoots. In tending away from art objects, Mr. Parreno's works perpetuate the sense of historical inevitability that Conceptual art in many ways sought to overturn. In contrast, most of the artists in the Eisenberg collection are using the new freedoms unleashed in the early 1970s as a way to reinvigorate art objects. This show has a great spirit and a sense of artists operating on all cylinders in many different kinds of engines.

It some ways it is easier to sit back and enjoy Mr. Parreno's efforts, with their streamlined confidence that history is on their side. Things are considerably messier in terms of both art and life on the Eisenberg side of the lobby. There you can only take comfort in the feeling that ultimately we never really know whose side history is on.