Morgan, Tiernan. "Disinformation and the Death Star: The Legacy of Gretchen Bender," *Hyperallergic.com* (July 12, 2019).

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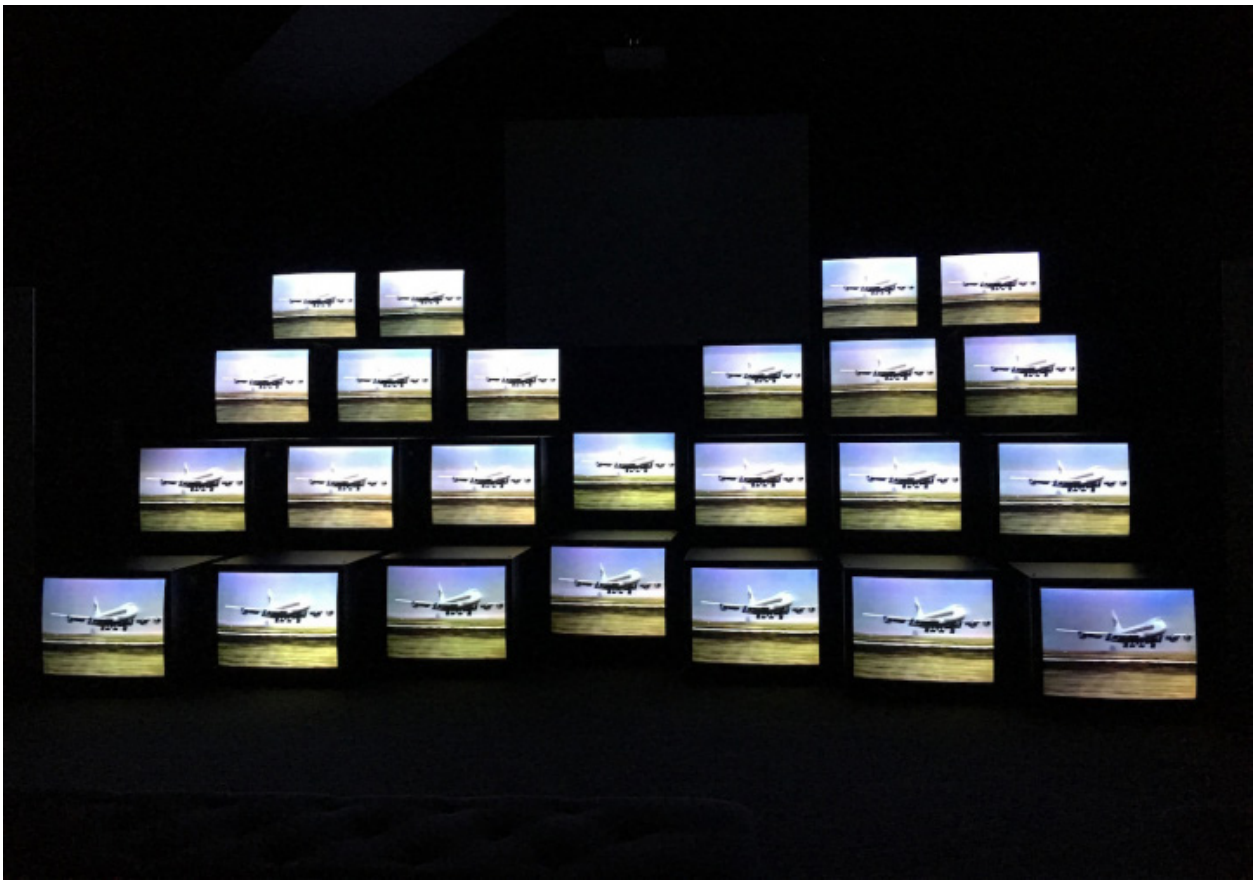
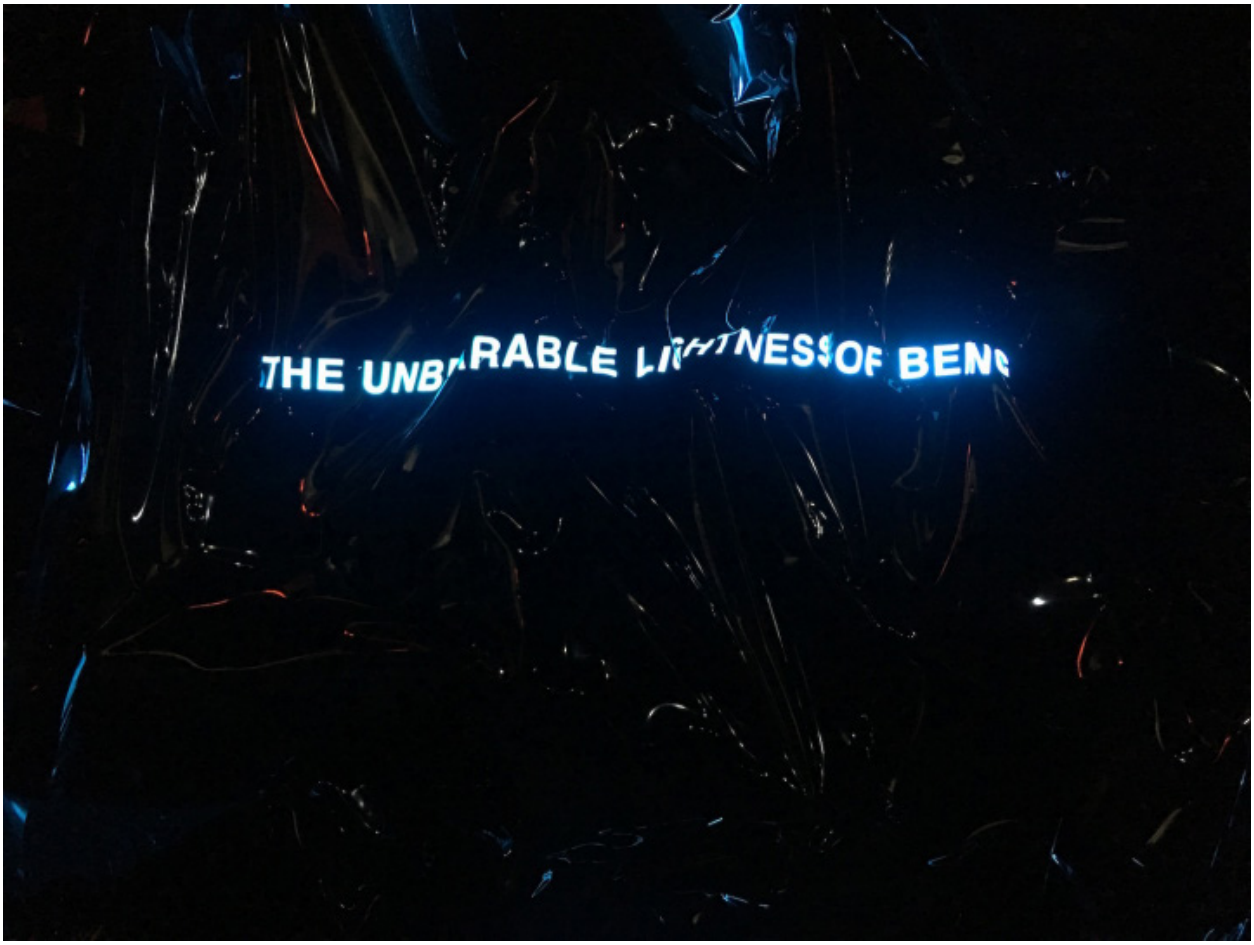


Gretchen Bender, "Total Recall" (still) (1987), 11-channel video installation on 24 monitors and 3 projection screens, 18.2 minutes, soundtrack by Stuart Argabright, dimensions variable

Gretchen Bender wanted to make a work of art that was so cutting edge that it told the future. It was the mid-1980s, and Bender's then-partner, Robert Longo, had recently shot to art-world stardom. Their apartment in Lower Manhattan was littered with state-of-the-art video equipment and stacks of *Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety*. The trade publications announced the titles of projects seeking financing or entering pre-production.

Bender culled 90 film titles from their pages and incorporated her selections into a 50-foot installation entitled "People in Pain" (1988/2014), a forbidding, crinkled mass of jet-black vinyl. She stenciled the titles onto the vinyl's surface and lit them from behind with fluorescent neon light. By the time the work debuted, many of the films were on the verge of theatrical release. A few became cult classics (*Withnail and I*, *Full Metal Jacket*), others were mediocre or have since faded into obscurity (*Real Men*), and many never made it to production (*The Advance Man*). Phrases that initially read in the work as ominous, compelling, or disjointed almost immediately became familiar cultural referents. By comparison, young contemporary audiences — especially those unfamiliar with the films that Bender cites — will likely experience "People in Pain" in much the same way as the work's earliest viewers.



Gretchen Bender, "People in Pain" (detail) (1988/2014)

"People in Pain" embraced obsolescence by design, functioning as a self-reflexive meditation on memory, time, and cultural value. Inspired by Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the work is monumental in scale, stretching over 45 feet long. Its glossy, crumpled surface has been variously likened to an oil slick, an ocean of garbage, and a wall of discarded film stock. It literalizes what the interior landscape of a dead computer server might look like: a sea of fragmented data lost in virtual darkness.

Bender appropriated the aesthetic of corporate America — reflective surfaces, burnished steel, and synthetic desire — amplified it, and trained it back on her audiences, exposing its sinister nature. She likened the AT&T logo, a symbol she appropriated often in her oeuvre, to the Death Star. "If Darth Vader made art," Roberta Smith wrote of the artist's work in 1986, "it might look like this."

Bender's cold, detached, and fascistic aesthetic was driven by moral concerns. Her work probed the racism and misogyny of entertainment culture and its relationship to the military industrial complex. She was fascinated with the epistemological changes wrought by technology, particularly the accelerating mediation of culture. Works that incorporate gruesome surgical photos or Susan Meiselas's images of war-torn Nicaragua attest to Bender's fear of a growing numbness and flatlining of empathy in society. "I think of the media as a cannibalistic river … a flow or current that absorbs everything," she remarked in a 1987 interview with Cindy Sherman. "There is no consciousness or mind. It's about absorbing and converting […] We need to stay alert to the political implications of the conceptual evolutions of our newer technologies."

Gretchen Bender, "Untitled (Longo-LeWitt)" from *The Pleasure is Back* series (1982), photo silkscreen on enamel sign tin, 72 x 100 inches

Bender's career trajectory was remarkable. Within several years of moving to New York, she cemented her reputation and obliterated the stigma of being "Longo's girlfriend." She joined Nature Morte gallery in 1983 (whose stable of artists included Julia Wachtel and David Robbins), exhibited at Metro Pictures, and was included in decade-defining group exhibitions, including *Infotainment* (1985, co-organized with Nature Morte) and the New Museum's *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (1986). Like many of her peers who were in these exhibitions, appropriation was the central strategy of Bender's practice, and she channeled it toward critical ends. The artist's earliest works appropriated images by famous male artists (including Longo), pairing them with advertisements and sexualized images of women.

Bender's fascination with the moving image separated her work formally from most of the Pictures Generation, although she was friends with its associates. "I thought in the early '80s you guys had done such important work on the print media — the photograph," she told Sherman. "And it seemed like the next area to similarly deconstruct was television … the way in which TV moves, the current … the movement that flattened content." Unsurprisingly, Bender's ambitions weren't confined to the art world. In addition to directing and editing music videos for acts including R.E.M, New Order, and Megadeth, she also produced the whirlwind title sequence for Fox Television's *America's Most Wanted*. "The whole idea of a traditional path of joining a gallery and having a show every couple of years wasn't something she resented," Jonathan Bender, the artist's brother, later recalled. "But it wasn't that interesting to her."

Gretchen Bender, "Untitled (Narcotics of Surrealism)" (1986), live television broadcast on 14 CRT monitor, vinyl lettering, shelf, 13 3/4 x 14 x 17 inches

In 2004, Bender passed away at the age of 53. For years, much of her work gathered dust at the Mint Museum in North Carolina, where it had been shipped for a possible exhibition. Like many of the films she referenced, her work slipped into relative obscurity. The only known surviving panel of "People in Pain," a fragment that fittingly reads "Memories of Me," is owned by Amber Denker, Bender's friend and collaborator.

In 2014, the artist Philip Vanderhyden painstakingly recreated the work for the Whitney Biennial with Longo's financial backing and the support of curator Michelle Grabner. Vanderhyden — who was only 10 years old when Bender debuted the work — articulated his fascination with "People in Pain" in the show's catalogue:

The more I learned about People in Pain*, the more interested I became in the moment of its reappearance versus the moment of its original existence, and how this time envelope complemented the piece itself. One could remake a lost work by any artist and it could potentially be interesting, but* People in Pain *is about the time envelope in which our cultural experiences live and die [...] I was amazed at how prescient [Bender] was in her emphasis of circulation and distribution [...] the piece came and went and is now back. It's just like the movies.*

Vanderhyden, Grabner, and Longo are part of a larger contingent of friends, associates, and fans who have sought to rehabilitate and nurture Bender's work in recent years. All three contributed to *Tracking the Thrill*, a 2012-13 survey of her work jointly held at the Kitchen and the Poor Farm in Wisconsin. In the accompanying catalogue, Grabner described Bender as a "critically astute and fearless artist," and lamented her status as an "unexamined footnote to the Pictures Generation."

Gretchen Bender, "Untitled (Daydream Nation)" (1989),
12 laminated photographs, 40 x 120 x 60 1/2 inches

Tracking the Thrill effectively paved the way for *So Much Deathless*, currently on view at Red Bull Arts New York. Bender's first retrospective since 1991, it includes over 30 works created between 1982 and 2001. The show's overall scope, design, and ambition are extraordinary. It has been curatorially calibrated for maximum viewer engagement. Discreet touchscreens peppered throughout the show present concise oral histories by Denker, Longo, Vanderhyden, and many others. Burnished metal wall labels mirror the aesthetic of Bender's steel sculptures, their fonts sourced from the artist's exhibition materials.

The highlight of the show is *Total Recall* (1987), a thundering, body-shaking contemplation of mass media that ought to be as renowned as Christian Marclay's "The Clock" (2010). The installation, which Bender described as "an anti-spectacle spectacle," is an 11-channel, 18-minute film screened over 20 stacked television monitors and 3 projection screens. Its score was devised by Stuart Argabright, another of Bender's regular collaborators.

Dizzying and frantic, *Total Recall* is a deliberate assault on the senses — a warning about how technology is outpacing our sensorial capacities. Distinct narrative threads become clearer upon multiple viewings. Footage from Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986) is interspersed with advertisements for General Electric, slick computer graphics, corporate logos, and heightened visions of US military might. Stone's protagonist, a photojournalist named John Cassidy, raises a camera to his face, but Bender repeatedly interrupts the clip before the act is completed. A tool of perception is thus rendered an encumbrance, a barrier by which experience is visualized but not felt. *Total Recall* presages a world in which pleasure and violence are mediated to the point of meaninglessness. The artist remixes Stone's film (among others) to underline the literal and perceptual distance between the American dream and the foreign horrors that are perpetrated to sustain it. Anticipating "People in Pain," Bender culled the work's title from her magazine collection, completing the project three years before the release of Paul Verhoeven's eponymous 1990 blockbuster. The title is a nod to both appropriation (Verhoeven's film is an adaption of Philip K. Dick's 1966 short story, "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale") and the manipulation of consciousness, which is central to the film's plot.

Installation view, *So Much Deathless* (2019). Back: Gretchen Bender, "Hell Raiser" (1988-1991), two laminated photographs on Masonite, 92 1/4 x 71 inches. Front: "Spears" (1989-1991/2019), steel rods with laminated color photographs, transformers, and fluorescent lights, 93 x 20 x 40 inches each

Bender later described the work and her process to Peter Doroshenko, the curator of her first retrospective at the Everson Museum of Art:

I wanted to present a conceptual landscape and to use the media against itself — to have it be entertaining and critical simultaneously. And I wanted to see how far I could push using the seduction of the imagery from television and computer graphics without going over the edge…by having multiple channels in Total Recall*, I started discovering things that we were saying to ourselves — about a nostalgia for an American heartland that never was; about a simultaneity of the past, present and future; how nothing ever dies.*

No matter how fragmented it is, TV seamlessly promotes its fiction as politics and its politics as entertainment.

Bender's concerns about the mediation of reality have never been so acutely relevant. Fictions are peddled and contested through the news cycle, disinformation has destabilized democracies, and social media has simultaneously connected and atomized communities. Media literacy has plainly struggled to keep abreast with corporate social engineering and technological innovation. Over 30 years ago, Bender visually heralded the epistemological dangers of mass media, principally its cumulative amorality and vested power dynamics. For now, at least, her vision is far from obsolete.