

METRO PICTURES

"Gretchen Bender by Cindy Sherman," *Bomb* (Winter 1987): 20-24.

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Sensurround, 1983, photosilk screen and c print on tin.

Gretchen Bender has just returned from Boston where she presented her electronic performance *Dumping Core* at the ICA. The following interview took place in late November in the evening at Cindy Sherman's loft. Gretchen had just completed editing a rock video for the thrash band Megadeth's song, *Peace Sells But Who's Buying*, directed by Robert Longo.

Cindy Sherman: It seems as if your critical target is Corporate America because your work isolates and diffuses corporate logos and television advertising. How do you feel about a corporation buying one of your works?

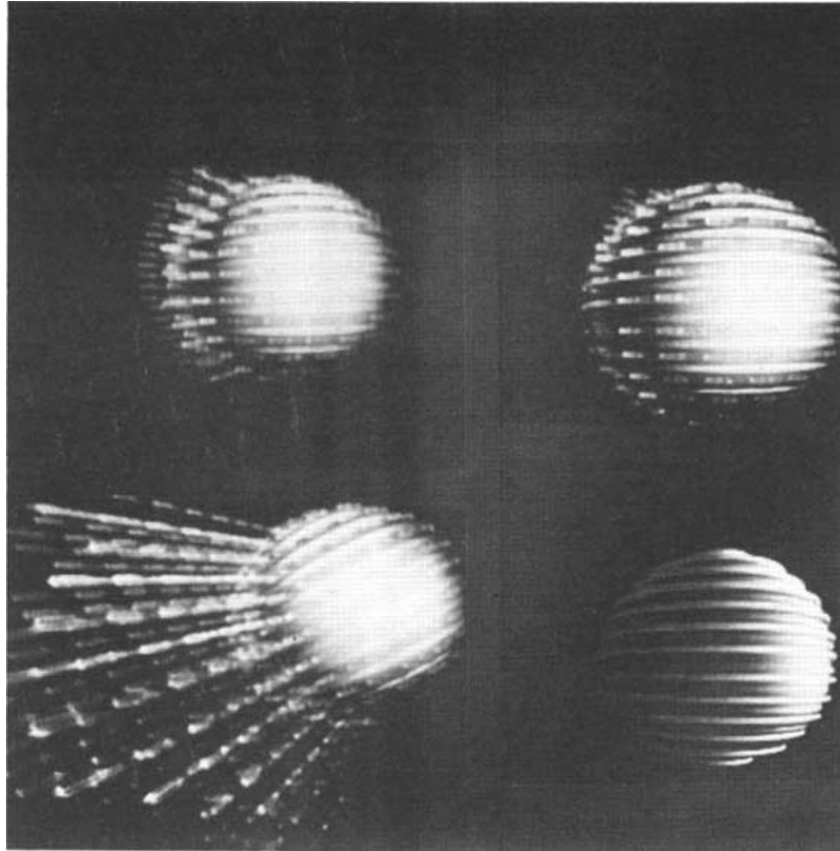
Gretchen Bender: I'd feel fine about it. I think it's to their great credit that one corporation has bought my work. Didn't Reagan say the corporate sector ought to support the arts? I'm trying to infiltrate and mimic the mainstream media. I'm glad if I get corporate support.

CS: Do you think the work will enlighten them?

GB: I think that maybe some of the people who work in the corporation might actually be surprised. But I am not that optimistic. I think, basically that by the time a corporation has decided to buy my work, that it is a carcass. The effectiveness of the work has already left it and only the structure remains. It's already been neutralized. In general, I assume corporations buy work once it is politically neutralized.

CS: How does it become neutralized? Time?

GB: Time—like after ten minutes! I think that the time limit to media-oriented artwork is an element that many media involved artists are unwilling to confront: art as I practice it or develop my ideas or aesthetics, has to do with a temporal limit to its meaningfulness in the culture—and that's real tough. It's hard to make art through the use of guerrilla tactics, where the only constant to the style you develop is the necessity to change it. Style gets absorbed really fast by the culture, basically by absorbing the formal elements or the structure and then subverting the content. You have to make some kind of break or glitch in the media somewhere else with a different style and shove your content into it there. It's constantly having to accept the fact that your work will lose its strength. You just go on, learning to vary strategies; to recognize when to go underground and when to emerge.



AT&T in slow motion, 1984, photographs off television.

CS: Second guessing.

GB: Accepting the fact that your work is going to become neutralized—faster than you ever dreamed. It's a really weird feeling but it's a given, for me, at this point, so I'm just going with the given in that situation and trying to think on my feet.

CS: I remember seeing the piece you did with all the movie titles on it.

GB: None of the films had been released.

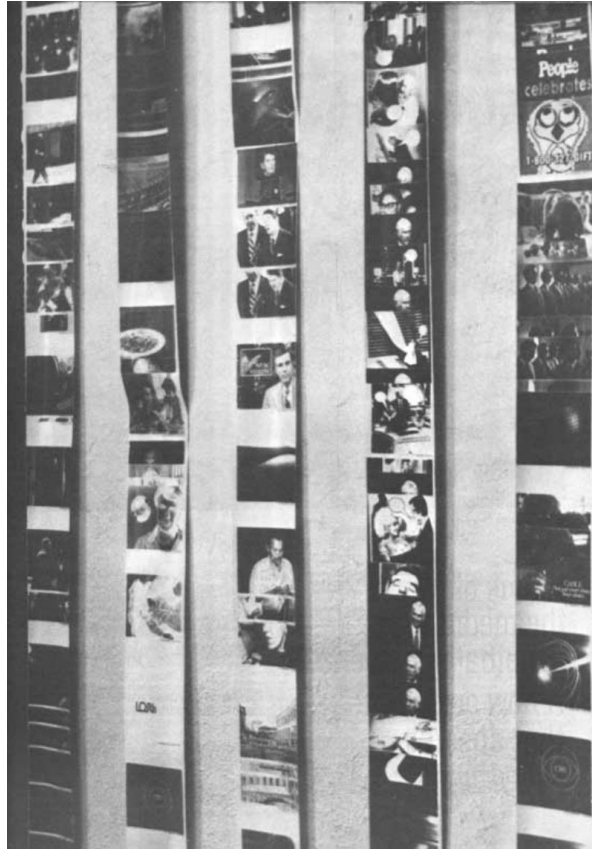
CS: At the time, none of the titles made any sense to me. Later I saw the piece and it was, "Oh, yeah, I know every one of those movies!" At first viewing the titles sounded unbelievable, ridiculous.

GB: There was a built in obsolescence to that work, a definite time limit. When I showed it *after* the films came out the reaction was already, "Did I see that movie? What is that title? Do I remember that?" Another level that sculpture was working on was the anticipatory quality—you're going to learn something, or this movie is going to mean something ... you want to know you have a desire—and the piece promotes these anticipations.

CS: Just through the titles?

GB: Yes, and I put special effect sparkles on it to heighten the anticipatory quality. The film industry has ad campaigns and gossip column items, to give you that anticipatory quality which I made more visually concise with the sparkles.

CS: Did you randomly choose titles?



Untitled, 1985, Mitsubishi print-out strip off television.

GB: No, I got a list from *Hollywood Reporter* or *Variety*—the release dates for the next six months of all the films from the major film companies. We recognize the film industry as a very important part of our culture economically and aesthetically and I think it's a whole area that should be provoked more. Film and its invocations are much more powerful instruments economically and politically in our lives than we seem aware of. We say we're aware of it, but in a glib way.

CS: Especially since most of the corporations who own movie companies also own TV stations and radio stations ... and oil.

GB: Own the world—the mechanisms that make the world run.

CS: Do you choose the visual images for your work, for instance the strips from the TV printer that you used. Is that also arbitrary?

GB: It's not quite as arbitrary as it looks. I tend to want to depict all the computer graphics that are on the television because I think the next area of visual expansion and psychological repression is there. Also, *Return of the Living Dead* was a piece I did that included a video printout of the evening news the day Reagan visited Bitburg in 1985. The TV graphics on the newscast depicted stun gun torture by the police; child abuse by daycare center workers; Vietnam Memorial services and of course Reagan laying a wreath on the gravesite of German SS dead.

CS: A storyboard.

GB: Yes, it gave me pause.

CS: When the space ship blew up about a year ago you were taping everything on television. Did you ever use that?



Untitled, 1985, computer generated graphic documentary photo.

GB: That happened when I had a TV piece up at Metro Pictures. There were 12 monitors on the wall, each tuned to a different channel and each stenciled with the name of an artist in the show. When the space shuttle blew up, the piece became a macabre choreography of each network's depiction of the space shuttle disaster.

CS: What timing.

GB: Brought to you by all of the artists in the show.

CS: In that piece you were running regular television. I thought you were taping ...

GB: I started taping when the bombing of Libya happened. It was after the show and I had all the TV's in my studio and a couple of VCR's. I was working in the studio one afternoon and all of a sudden Libya was happening on all the different networks. I started taping that—NBC came on first with the scoop—it was a weird sense of ...

CS: Being right there.

GB: Weird.

CS: Did you first start working with video out of dissatisfaction with the static works? Did they evolve together?

GB: It was a natural evolution going from the magazines and photos of the news. It seemed obvious to me that the next area was television which is an incredible goldmine for the flow of the pulse, the permutations that happen daily, in the culture.

CS: You were using it anyway, taking photographs off the screen.

GB: Yes, I started taking stills, incorporating film positives of popular art over images from broadcasting. I thought in the early '80s you guys [Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, Richard Prince, etc.] had done such important work on the print media—the photograph. And it seemed like the next area to similarly deconstruct was television. I quickly got caught up in the way in which TV moves, the current. The movement, not even the sequence, but the movement that flattened content. From that equivalent flow I tried to force some kind of consciousness of underlying patterns of social control.

CS: It's so strange being on this side of the interview.

GB: I know, I feel I should start asking what you think.

CS: Maybe you've already answered this but would you want to see the media affected by your work?

GB: I don't think the media is something that listens in the way that we're talking about. I think of the media as a cannibalistic river. A flow or current that absorbs everything. It's not "about." There is no consciousness or mind. It's about absorbing and converting.

CS: What if your video tapes were on TV, say PBS, would that be defeating your purpose?

GB: There are some very fine video artists who work effectively on public television. I'm taking a different tact. I'm trying to create an overview of an environment and at this point I'm not able to do it on one channel so I create a theatrical exposition of it with multiple channels. In the past three years, I've surrounded myself and the audience with an environment and then turned up the voltage—to create a criticality. I'll mimic the media—but I'll turn up the voltage on the currents so high that hopefully it will blast criticality out there.

CS: There's an article in an LA paper describing you as a TV terrorist, saying that you can attain a critical edge through overload.

GB: Yeah. There are artists who talk of using silence as a weapon, an alternative and an act of resistance. That's one end of it. I've gone in the opposite direction but with the same desire. I think it's more important to mimic and provoke at this point.

CS: Your theatrical pieces are counterpointed by the tin pieces, which ironically, make objects out of paradigms.

GB: Either way, it's only temporarily effective. Hans Haacke uses part of the dominant high culture to criticize the function of the whole system through his object/displays. The question is—how broadly effective do you want to be? That is a difficult question with artists. Artists can be confused about their situation as a powerless elite. We operate from the protective base of the art world, a situation in which we can develop ideas but a place from which it is complicated to launch media-related art work without it getting co-opted by the very structures it criticizes. Although I use those structures. I'm resisting one channel television because I haven't figured out how to effectively communicate except in a theatrical setting.

CS: You've been criticized for being high tech, which is another way of infiltrating popular culture—using the technology that they use.

GB: It's something visual artists tend to resist although that resistance is steadily breaking down. More artists are figuring out how to use computer technology ... there's so much that's happening visually. It's strange that the art world resists using the visual tools of our time. What's that about? It is scary when you have this heritage that you invoke—art history.

CS: It's supposed to be more pure if you use materials like paint or make it all yourself or use another person to make it for you.

GB: The art world is trying to protect this antiquated territory and what is most disturbing about switching over to the newer technologies is that there is no authority to invoke. There aren't any guidelines to tell you that you're making "good" art. No one knows enough or understands enough. There's so much experimentation to do, so many blind visual forays to risk, so many conceptual implications of the newer technologies to try to comprehend. Many artists aren't willing to take those risks. You don't know if you are going to be effective or not, if you are going to make silly or profound works. I think that's what terrifies most artists and I think that's why the art world is so slow to accept the culture of today.

CS: You have used imagery from other people's art work in some of your own pieces. I interpreted that as reducing expensive works of art by male artists—paintings—to this disposable imagery level.

GB: I wanted to use the art as signs and not as valuable objects. I decided to combine those found art reproductions as one combines words in a language or even just parts of an alphabet. I saw them as a moving language. I have been working with the equivalent flow of television. Before that, I was actually dealing with the equivalent flow of art objects. What's really being said? At the same time, I realized that because we had gotten so much of our art out of magazines and reproductions, we weren't contemplating art anymore. So I made those tin pieces to be a scan. You couldn't fall into the pieces and contemplate. I go into galleries to see shows, to be aware of what is going on and it takes three minutes to see a show. Where are we? And what are we doing? It's our nervous system—the time we live in—it's not about reverie.

CS: That's a good excuse, I'll remember that next time.

GB: There are some haunting artists, that somehow transcend that, where you can't get away from it. But there's no conducive place in which to view that work. You either describe or analyze an environment. It's a way artists examine what they're doing and why they're doing things—how they're operating. I think a balance between the two would be the most potent.

CS: It's like classical and romantic, those two sides.

GB: Artists using media have taken on a more complicated position in the culture than painters. Painters like tradition. And I think it's a hundred, or a thousand times more difficult for a painter to make politically engaged work. They know that if it smells like art and looks like art and tastes like art—it's painting. There's not much risk in the art world.

CS: Especially now, it seems really dull right now.

GB: At the same time, I constantly examine my ... I'm still operating within the art world. There is that base. Maybe it's a base to reaffirm your goals or your sanity in trying to develop ideas. You do have people who want to see you succeed in producing important work.

CS: Do you get support from collectors, corporate art buyers?

GB: I see very tentative support. And even if I did see a lot more support all that makes me aware of is what I think all artists are aware of; the strength to keep making the art you instinctively think you should make. Just because people buy your art doesn't mean that's the direction your work should take. Do we decide that the collectors are the judges? The people who I respect the most are other artists—more so than critics and I'm sure I'm going to be struck dead for this. Visual artists are working out, intuitively and instinctively, ideas or concepts and feelings that take a while to be digested and articulated concisely. The art writers and critics come *after* the artists. Their work can more fully develop the ground the visual artist has broken. Idealistically, this leads to an exchange of ideas or some kind of discourse between writer and artist. It's gotten really askew again. The art writers and collectors are the arbiters of value and not the artists. That shocks me. My artist peers are my critics and collectors—they're supporting my evolution. To me, collectors aren't buying precious objects, they are supporting a creative mind to continue working. An advertising agency doesn't judge my work as far as art history is concerned. It would just package my work like it would package apartheid. Why are people bowing to this bizarre kind of authority?

CS: Money.

GB: Where is the strength of artists?

CS: People weren't collecting the way they are now. Once so many people realized they could make money collecting, the artists realized how much they could make selling, and it snow-balled.

GB: I know I'm being a little naive. One thing that's come out of this is that artists aren't treated like feral children anymore. Many more artists now aspire to the same lifestyles as their collectors. If you've chosen art-making as a path—I know everyone wants to have everything—it could possibly dilute your fervor. Maybe that's just my romance. There's an ambivalence about success that has to do with self-worth.

CS: Artists have become celebrities which changes things quite a bit. God, I'm so depressed now.

GB: Oh, no!

CS: Let me think of another question.

GB: Why don't we open another can of worms, like wouldn't it be nice if it were the 22nd century and women artists were as important as men artists.

CS: We could, but what can we say that isn't already obvious? Your work in video is one thing, you also work in film—in a more traditional way, with a script and a crew. What got you going in that direction?

GB: It's the other major media besides television. The mechanics of making film shows me how my perceptions can be altered. At one time you asked me if I had a preference for one genre over another. I don't. I want to experiment. In the last few years I've realized the visual art world has to broaden the areas in which it is dealing. As visual artists we don't become "video artist," we don't become "filmmakers." We are still visual artists, but we need to critically interface those mediums in our work. Until there are more artists doing that, oppositional media art could become obsolete.

CS: Noooo.

GB: Otherwise *art* will always be some kind of refined taste.

CS: Like people just into black and white films.

GB: Yes, it's already so elitist it would become even more so—and totally neutral. I would like to see more artists fighting against that comfort, against that haven. We need to stay alert to the political implications of the conceptual evolutions of our newer technologies.