

METRO PICTURES

Russeth, Andrew. "'Gretchen Bender: Tracking the Thrill' at The Kitchen," *Observer.com* (September 3, 2013).

OBSERVER



Installation view of *Total Recall*, 1987, at The Poor Farm.

Nine years after her death at age 53, Gretchen Bender's art is having a moment. Twenty-four television monitors and three projection screens are sitting in The Kitchen's black-box theater to present the 1980s video-installation pioneer's piece *Total Recall* (1987). Every hour on the hour through Sept. 21, the lights go black, and the screens hum to life. And then, for 18 minutes, there is mayhem.

Corporate iconography cascades across those TVs—NBC's Olympic rings logo, the swirling globe of ABC News—along with computer graphics, the titles of Hollywood films, snippets of Oliver Stone's based-on-real-events thriller *Salvador* (1986), *The Shining* (1980) and other movies. There are also clips from TV commercials: people smiling and interacting politely, a jumbo jet hovering in midair. A booming electronic soundtrack by Stuart Argabright sends long drones and pulses through your body as your eyes try to track the action to keep up with and dissect the snippets on the screens.

Watching *Total Recall*, you might feel a bit like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, strapped down in a movie theater, at the precise moment when the psyche-altering medication begins to take effect and his pleasure in raw visual stimulation transforms into terror at its content. Through careful editing and repetitions, Bender lays bare, with great force, the falsity at the heart of corporate messaging, and the sinister excess of television itself. Each time the logo for GE floats by in a new form—sometimes accompanied by its tagline, "We bring good things to life"—it takes on a new and alien look in this dread-inducing atmosphere.



Still from *Total Recall*, 1987.

Bender once said that she wanted to “make it so that when you see familiar images you’re unable to think of them in the same familiar way,” and, in this menacing, masterful work she succeeds. This makes it shocking that she is not better-known today. She was close to, and shared the concerns of, many of the 1980s Pictures Generation artists, who aped and appropriated images from popular media, though she started exhibiting her work in earnest a few years after them. Following a 10-year survey at Syracuse’s Everson Museum in 1991, though, and until the end of her life, she showed less frequently.

The Kitchen’s exhibition, “Tracking the Thrill”—a phrase Bender used to explain her work—provides a welcome reintroduction to her formidable powers. Originally curated by Philip Vanderhyden for The Poor Farm, an alternative space in Little Wolf, Wisc., it is presented by Lumi Tan and Tim Griffin at The Kitchen, once the site of many of Bender’s projects, like the installation *Dumping Core* (1984). The multiscreen work is shown here in the form of a single-screen documentary video that Bender made. It’s missing her sublime onslaught and is the show’s lone weak point.

Also here is her 1984 installation *Wild Dead*, a montaged blast of sound and video arrayed across 33 screens that lasts less than two minutes but is almost as overpowering as *Total Recall*. Its centerpiece is Saul Bass’s ATT logo, which Bender fondly referred to as the Death Star.

The rest of the too-small show is devoted to shorts, including music videos for bands like R.E.M. and Megadeth that Robert Longo directed and Bender edited with staccato cuts, seemingly testing the limit of viewers’ attention spans. (In the book’s rich catalogue, Mr. Longo movingly equates watching her exacting edits to experiencing her nervous system.) She also edited two opening credits for *America’s Most Wanted*, producing a compelling jump-cut collage that apparently served the beast even as its tropes—a 911 call, a detective sporting a gun harness—mock the genre’s clichés. That feels like prime Bender: simultaneously seducing and subverting.

The show could hardly come at a better moment. Artists from Seth Price (whom Mr. Griffin cites in his essay) to Sturtevant are looking at today’s vast flows of media and information, and NSA revelations continue to confirm that telecommunications giants are as banal and complicit as ever. As streams and networks of data multiply, Bender’s absence burns. Just think what she might have done with YouTube, Google Doodles and that delicious slogan “Don’t Be Evil.”