

# METRO PICTURES

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## Art in America



View of "So Much Deathless" showing (left to right) *Untitled (Daydream Nation)*, 1989; *Untitled (Landscape, Computer Graphics, Death Squad)*, 1987; and *Spears (detail)*, 1989–91/2019.

Gretchen Bender likely knew better than anyone that her work would be mostly forgotten with time. Erasure was not just her fate, but her subject. The multimedia artist and filmmaker investigated how the violent, relentless stream of electronic moving images was changing the viewing public's sense of space and time, eroding collective memory. She described this as the "flow of the pulse, the permutations that happen daily, in the culture," a flow she tried to intervene in, disrupt, appropriate, and subvert, in order to help people become more aware of the patterns of power and the mechanisms of control beneath their surface.

While Bender was alive, her artwork was written about extensively by Hal Foster. She made films starring Cindy Sherman and edited music videos for New Order and Megadeth. She had shows at the Kitchen and Metro Pictures in New York. But most accounts of Bender concur that she was a pioneer who never got the attention she deserved. When she died of cancer in 2004 at age 53, she had become an obscure figure.



Gretchen Bender: *Untitled—“The Pleasure is Back” Series*, 1982, enamel ink silkscreened on tin, 72 inches square.

Only in recent years has Bender received more widespread recognition. “So Much Deathless,” a retrospective on view at Red Bull Arts New York, showcases the most demanding and ambitious pieces from her thirty-year career. The exhibition takes pains to establish her importance to a wide network of collaborators, curators, musicians, designers, and artists who, through detailed oral histories available at listening stations throughout the galleries, illuminate her artistic rigor and intentions. These audio recordings are a crucial supportive element of the show, of great value to anyone who wants to know more about the artist. Bender left a scant written record: *Culture on the Brink*, an essay collection she co-edited with Timothy Druckrey; some artist statements and project proposals; a couple of interviews.

In 1973, after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she studied printmaking, Bender moved to Washington, D.C., to pursue her passion. She led P Street Paper Works, a Marxist-feminist silkscreen collective, for five years. There, she honed a political and critical position toward what she perceived as dominant images and ideologies. When she moved to New York in 1978, Bender became romantically involved with Robert Longo, and befriended Cindy Sherman, Bill T. Jones, and Eric Bogosian. Working adjacent to this Pictures Generation crowd, she was similarly critical of the sexist, money-worshipping, brand-oriented culture that dominated the art world. Bender worked primarily in sculptures and prints. But eventually she began to experiment with video, mastering her personal style of brutal rapid-fire editing. She did commercial work in the medium, including the title sequence for “America’s Most Wanted.”



Gretchen Bender: *Flash Art*, 1987, C-print on masonite, vinyl, and single-channel video (62 minutes, 46 seconds), 96 by 84 by 19 inches.

Early on, Bender developed a style that replicated the flattening effect of media's standardized formats. Again and again, she placed images of horror alongside banal images alongside those in a joyful register, muting their tonal differences by reproducing them in equal dimensions and mediums. Take the works in Bender's series "The Pleasure Is Back" (1982), images silkscreened on tin, displayed in one of the first galleries at Red Bull Arts. In one, a Sol LeWitt sculpture—representing an artistic "brand"—and a Chanel ad bracket a portrait of Bender by Longo. In another, Lichtenstein "brushstrokes" are framed by panels showing a Dove ad: a woman wild with happiness about soap. They look almost shockingly flat. Among the next room's color laminated photographic prints on masonite is *Terminator* (1985), where Mickey Mouse holds his red penis and gestures beneath a mouth agape in shock and pain, a mouth belonging to a shooting victim in a film still. The meanings of these two images are colored and complicated by a reproduction of a Barbara Kruger text piece: WE WILL UNDO YOU.

Later works in this vein integrate video. In *Flash Art* (1987), prints of David Salle's misogynist representations of the female form—bare legs, buttocks, and abdomens in vulnerable positions—frame a monitor showing a montage of clips of empowered, self-defining, chameleon women like Janet Jackson and Dolly Parton, who play with and appropriate artifice.

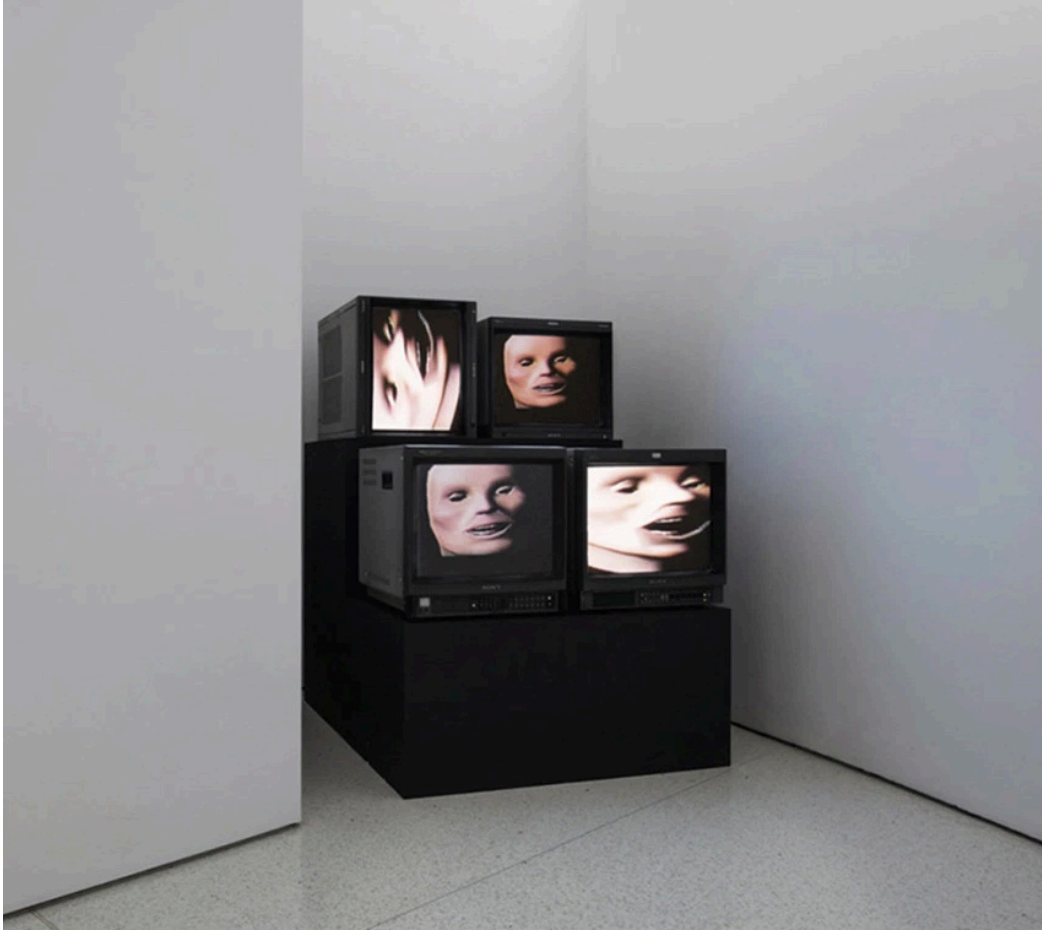


Gretchen Bender: *TV, Text, and Image (Metro Pictures Version)*, 1990, live television broadcast on nine monitors, vinyl lettering, and shelves; in the exhibition "Gretchen Bender: So Much Deathless" at Red Bull Arts New York, 2019.

The centerpiece of "So Much Deathless" is *Total Recall*. First shown at the Kitchen in 1987, it was restored for a 2012 exhibition at the Poor Farm, an alternative art space in rural Wisconsin. The piece is a prime example of what Bender called her "electronic theaters," multichannel works distributed across many screens in intriguing formations. *Total Recall* features eleven channels playing on three projection screens and twenty-four monitors stacked in a pyramid. At Red Bull Arts, the work is presented in a curtained space with timed entry, where the viewer can be subsumed by its hypnotic symphony of images.

Through significant installations like this, Bender offered a critique of the mindlessness of media. In response to Cindy Sherman's query about whether she wanted to see the media affected by her work, Bender said: "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."





Gretchen Bender: *Wild Dead I, II, III (Danceteria Version)*, 1984, two-channel video on four monitors.

In tandem with her critique of media, Bender pursued a strategy to subvert it. Speed and scale were her primary tactics to push her viewers and their vision, to test what and how deeply they could see.

*Wild Dead* (1984), another piece of electronic theater, had multiple iterations, one of which involved thirty-three screens at the Kitchen. At Red Bull Arts, it is presented in a small two-channel, four-screen version, as *Wild Dead I, II, III (Danceteria Version)*, and jammed into a corner of a side hall. The glitching swirl of the banded globe in the AT&T logo, sometimes couched within funny wireframe graphics by Bender's friend and collaborator Amber Denker, appears between snips of the title sequence of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. Bender called the AT&T logo the "Death Star," and used it as a symbol of the centralized control of media. She said she would never trust the swirling "earth in bondage."

Bender understood technology as a progression, as a growing series of effects—a collapse of contexts within concentric rings—and as a medium through which powerful interests increased their oversight. She wanted the viewer not just to *look* but really see beneath the apparatus of mass media. She wanted people sharpen their ability to process such images, to understand how they were selected and framed. In an oral history, Denker describes her and Bender's dismay at the idea we would "want to teach a blind computer to see a tank," and not anything else. The two of them found the central role of the military-industrial complex in driving technological change to be "appalling and sad." Whether in music videos or gallery works, Bender conveyed her politics through her deeply skillful editing and manipulation of images. In one music video for Poi Dog Pondering, she smuggled appropriated images into the background: frames of the introductory sequence she made for "America's Most Wanted," a heavily distorted photograph by Susan Meiselas of the corpse of a woman killed in the Salvadoran Civil War, and footage from a pro-choice march she attended in D.C.

As I walked through both floors of Red Bull Arts in an automatic fashion, my mind started to adapt to the sheer amount of material. Vinyl texts are affixed to monitors showing live television feeds, in the front galleries. The phrase I'M GOING TO DIE is superimposed on a child in *Planet of the Apes*. I saw, out of the corner of one eye, a 3D mask stretched, laughing, its eyes closed. George W. Bush came in and out of focus. In *TV Text and Image (Metro Pictures Version)*, 1986, LOUISE LAWLER and BARBARA KRUGER graced episodes of "Real Housewives" and a BET family drama. The brushed steel armature of *Spiritual America* (1986) encases backlit film strips. The brochure says these are movie titles, phrases, and clips from Bender's videos. But they look like cryptic landscapes and machines, like a vague history of technological rupture. I saw a mushroom cloud.

These multiple feeds cause, Bender said, a "constant state of déjà vu," a blend of time registers. The repetition of violent images creates what Bender called a "deathless" space, one where we become numb to our violent reality. Bender found her own language within the hybrid lexicon of television, video, and computer-generated graphics, to make clear to the viewer how they were embedded and circulated within this system. With her use of live simultaneous feeds, she asked us to be careful, to step back from our own unaffected viewing. The effect of her theaters is to create a space, however temporary, to see past media's deathlessness.

In *Total Recall*, we are still able to parse the image. Beautifully edited and choreographed video clips and graphics spool out. In the first half, a choppy exchange of graphic currents fuse into a single perfect stream. The General Electric logo is intercut with an eclipse. A screw finds a home. The real and the abstract switch places again and again. Golden rings turning on the screen evoke a faint memory of opening credits. We feel ourselves able to flow in turn, tracking and mapping similarities in the dance of sigils and glyphs. Mesmerized, we release ourselves to the current.

About eleven minutes in, the screens start to split into some four or five different feeds: runners down the New York sidewalk, CDs sliding in and clicking, fireworks, all synchronized in a stunning composition that overwhelms and overloads. We are meant to experience the "simultaneity of being that causes an almost hallucinatory state of 'total recall,'" in which we the viewers are also distributed across these twenty-seven screens. We flip more and more rapidly between scenes from *Salvador* (Oliver Stone's 1986 thriller about a photojournalist documenting the Central American civil war), cars' shining chrome, frantic couples running, the corporate logos replicated endlessly into the void, and briefly, so brief we might miss it, Jack from *The Shining*, his head jammed through a bathroom door, grinning.

Bender's early works successfully treated moving images differently from how they operated in media at the time. Her ability to see what she did when she did was uncanny, and to read her through the lens of the present is, of course, wrong. But over the span of time she was working with video, the way images function changed in precisely the direction she predicted. They became even faster, even more violent, all-consuming. The sense of media as flow became even more intense, and the transition between images of violence and images of harmony, even more seamless.

The interviewees in the oral guides at Red Bull Arts take great pains to differentiate between the Pictures Generation and the rowdy punk sensibility of the artists included in the 1985 exhibition "Infotainment" at Nature Morte in the East Village. Jennifer Bolande, Sarah Charlesworth, and others were countering the art market's elevation of the object through their exploration of mass media's aesthetics. It was admittedly difficult to seed oneself and "infiltrate" a medium that conflated and collapsed context so well that any "interruption" would not just replicate the same acceleration. Bender, the only video artist in the show, was acutely aware that artists needed to understand how media spectacle works.

Looking at Bender's work as a whole, one can sense iterative lapses in her critique, which couldn't keep up with the pace of technology and production she was critiquing. When she was swift, she was successful, as with the live television frames, the wild hybrids of corporate footage, and the logos twisted beyond recognition. But equally important to understanding her work are the moments where her critique failed to take hold.



Gretchen Bender: *Military Escalation—Dare to be Stupid*, 1986, computer animation on Spectacolor light board, 20 by 40 feet; installed in Times Square as part of the Public Art Fund project “Messages to the Public.”

Being a contemporary critical viewer allows us to see this dual success and “failure” with a healthy amount of generosity. We might ask, what would a Bender made in 2019 look like? What can we learn from Bender that can help us critique image production within global computation? For one, to see the moving image, to mark its shifting and elusive ideologies, we have to learn to move with it.

Bender understood how each generation’s revolution was subsumed by a new wave of emerging technology. To that end, she took up the strange, new computer effects that were cropping up in advertisements and brand logos. Denker, whose credits as a computer graphics artist include Kraftwerk’s *Music Non Stop* video, describes in her oral history interview Bender’s early fascination with computer-generated art. Denker studied at Carnegie Mellon University in the early 1980s, and was one of the first computer artists with formal training. Bender actively sought her out. At the time, it was rare to find women interested in the cumulative effects of and emerging technocratic control in culture, women fueled by a desire to make real critique.

Stuart Argabright, the composer who wrote the abrasive score for *Total Recall*, describes how hard it was, outside advertising or academic settings, to create art with computer graphics at that time. Bender’s romanticized story makes her seem like a cyberpunk character out of a William Gibson novel; Denker gave her after-hours access to the lab at the New York Institute of Technology, and she shot footage of the screens of supercomputers there.

That was how Bender created her montages of new graphics, scrappily pulling together seconds of reels. She sifted through the emerging visual vocabulary of this very new media to find her own. She was able to use this footage to turn viewers toward the military origins of visual media. (The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency funded early research not only of the internet but of computer graphics.) She realized how the violence of armed control was embedded in the way we see images.

In the 1984 Kitchen press release for the electronic theater piece *Dumping Core*, we learn Bender meant to take on “the corporate desire to exploit the new visual technology as a consciousness-channeling device.” As artist and scholar Philip Vanderhyden says, Bender’s focus on logos (of AT&T, NBC, and CBS) was a product of 1980s media culture, when centralization was easy to see. Now, he says, “It’s harder to pin down who to blame for something.”



Gretchen Bender: *Total Recall*, 1987, 11-channel video installation on 24 monitors and three projection screens, approx. 18 minutes; in “So Much Deathness.”

Even as Bender identified legible corporate forces that could be organized against, she was also foreshadowing a time when their fusion would make an “enemy” of any kind impossible to see. Today, a school board can invest in mutual funds that invest in prison labor, corn futures, drone manufacturing, and sneaker brands all in the course of an hour. The work of media is to abstract what is patently real—through financial markets, through abstract graphics and imagery, through the flattening of both imagery and criticality. Binaries become embedded to seem natural: the normative versus other, the calm of the nuclear family’s unity versus individualist violence and deviance, of perfect control versus excess and chaos and fear.

Through the 1990s Bender continued to explore the same themes. What happens to the mind when it takes in such choreographed and processed images over months, years, decades? How could we remain critical? A fragment of an untitled 2001 installation of white origami butterflies on wooden stakes is saturated with Bender’s fatigue—and shows a hope for some kind of tenderness or lightness or relief in all the visual and emotional violence.

We finally see Bender speaking and on camera in a tucked-away sci-fi film called *Volatile Memory* (1988). Cindy Sherman plays a cyborg working through an underground network to fix her implant while being constantly surveilled by a corporate-government agent. The soundtrack is ominous, sounding like wind rushing through train tunnels at the edge of a city. Bender appears as an agency researcher, talking with Sherman; they stand in moonlight on a roof. She asks to see Sherman’s implant.

“You know, I can modify the repairs,” says Bender’s character, a specialist in wet circuitry. She looks to the side, and we see her in profile, speaking carefully, slowly: “In fact, due to circuits in my program, you could interface with the agency grid. Total neural release, and total agency access. Your unconscious and its consciousness, complete binding. You’ll know what it’s like to be a machine.” It’s not exactly the best film. The acting is often stilted. But Bender’s screen presence is remarkable. She looks down and away from the camera, and seems to be talking about her own work: the seduction of releasing oneself to the flow, and the struggle not to be subsumed by the machine entirely—not, at least, without knowledge of what is lost.