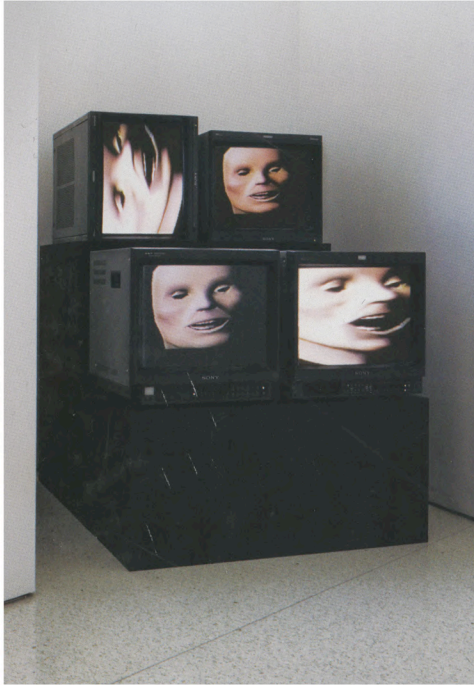


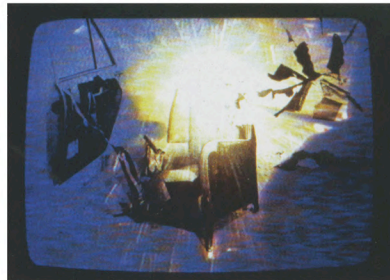
METRO PICTURES

Relyea, Lane. "Review: Gretchen Bender," *Artforum* (May 2019): 272-273.

ARTFORUM



Left: Gretchen Bender, *Wild Dead I, II, III (Danceteria Version)*, 1984, two-channel video, CRT monitors, color, sound, 6 minutes 50 seconds. Soundtrack by Stuart Argbright and Michael Diekmann. Below: Gretchen Bender, *Reality Fever*, 1983, video, color, silent, 6 minutes 20 seconds. Right: Gretchen Bender, *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant* (detail), 1990, live television broadcast on eight monitors, digital video (color and black-and-white, sound, 19 minutes 41 seconds) on four monitors, vinyl lettering. Soundtrack by Stuart Argbright.



Gretchen Bender

RED BULL ARTS, NEW YORK

Lane Relyea

GRETCHEN BENDER MOVED to New York in 1978 and had her first solo show there in 1983, when she was thirty-two. She fast became a fixture of an East Village art scene centered on the Nature Morte gallery and the tireless publishing and curating efforts of Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, a milieu that featured artists such as Sarah Charlesworth, Jessica Diamond, Kevin Larmon, Peter Nagy, Steven Parrino, David Robbins, and Julia Wachtel. Perhaps not all of those names ring a bell, and it's likely Bender's wouldn't have, either, only a few years ago. Which raises the question, Why was she almost lost? And why has she now been suddenly rediscovered?

As her posthumous retrospective at Red Bull Arts New York testifies, Bender pioneered new ways of using information management as an artistic medium. Starting out in Washington, DC, as a member of a Marxist-feminist print-making collective, she quickly expanded her arsenal to include electronic as well as other types of screens. She worked hard to locate her art on the cutting edge of video technology, hanging around the labs at the New York Institute of Technology and researching the latest in vector graphics and computer animation. In her electronic works, she graduated quickly from single-channel, single-monitor video, as in *Reality Fever*, 1983, to pieces that deploy several channels across any number of screens. Bender's most elaborate version of what she dubbed "electronic theater," the eighteen-minute long *Total Recall*, 1987, not only spreads eight channels across twenty-four monitors but also includes projections onto three large screens.

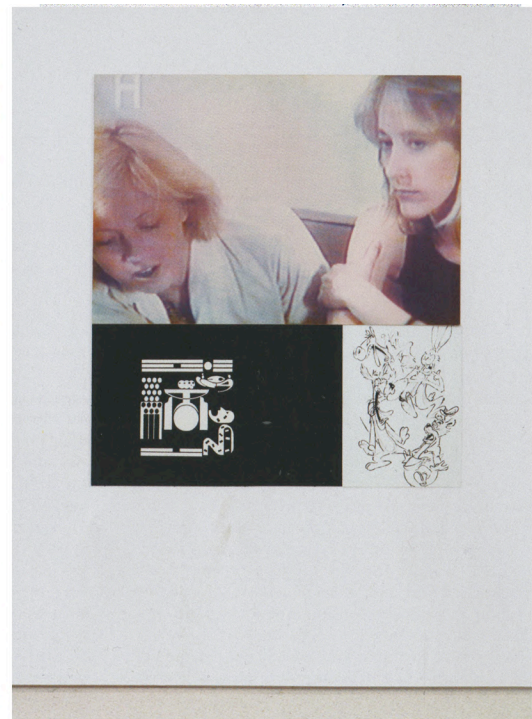
The Red Bull show is split roughly between static wall works and Bender's progressively more expansive video pieces. Half the galleries are filled with laminated color photographs mounted on Masonite or tin and arranged in different groupings. Bender's stark juxtapositions pit sci-fi movie stills against grisly war-correspondent photos and shots of advertising spokespeople next to notable artworks of the time (by the likes of Jonathan Borofsky, A. R. Penck, or David Salle). Most of the other rooms resemble televisual Laundromats, each lined with a phalanx of TV monitors on which tumble talking heads, narrative fragments, sales pitches, live news segments, athletic matches, ecstatic game-show revelations, and twirling computer graphics.

A riddle characterizes all of Bender's output. If TV's deluge of information flattens distinctions and evacuates meaning, folding everything from the most banal to the most urgent into its undifferentiated flow, how is it that this only strengthens, rather than diminishes, its relation to power? Bender was careful to temper desensitizing excess with regular injections of artificial exhilaration. Stupor is countered by hyperbole, courtesy of regularly

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unleashed attention-grabbing techniques: swooping and exploding visuals, music that alternates between the solemn and the frenetic. We see journalists comb battle sites and families celebrate their new breakfast cereal while animated corporate logos repeatedly perform flyovers. Everything is clichéd, yet—like the vitrine-style refrigerators, replete with Red Bull energy drinks, that

Below: Gretchen Bender, *Total Recall*, 1987, eleven-channel video installation on twenty-four monitors and three projection screens, 18 minutes, color, sound. Soundtrack by Stuart Argabright. Installation view. Photo: Lance Brewer.
 Right: Gretchen Bender, *Mid-Effect Hold*, 1983, C-print on Masonite, enamel ink on tin, 52 1/4 x 58 3/4".



dot the exhibition space—also seems geared to accelerate breathing and pulse rates.

Does Bender's work overwhelm and incapacitate or does it spark critical consciousness? In an unsatisfying way, both. Viewers are definitely made hyperaware of just how underequipped they are in the face of torrential corporate-sponsored information. In *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant*, 1990, eight TV sets are lined up on the wall, each tuned to a different live broadcast. On the glass of each set, a phrase appears in vinyl lettering: DEATH SQUAD BUDGET, PEOPLE WITH AIDS, NO CRITICISM. The unmoving, all-caps seriousness of the phrases literally defies the nonstop parade of pedestrian programming underneath. But that's the problem: While there are chance moments when the two seem to syntactically relate, mostly what the viewer confronts is a yawning disconnect between issues of monumental importance and the distraction induced by information's tireless temporal undertow.

Which makes Bender's oeuvre less about television per se than about being constantly targeted by multiple information sources at once. Sound familiar? Right now on my computer screen, there are several windows stacked one atop the other—Word documents, a couple of open folders, available tabs arrayed on my internet browser, some PDFs, my email. I pride myself on being a manager of information, and at the same time feel trapped in a permanent management crisis. In our attention economy of endless scanning and scrolling, information suspends subjects between vigilant attentiveness and numbing exhaustion, evoking the experience not so much

of television as of a later invention: entertainment systems that combine game controllers with interactive video or computer displays.

In the end, this helps explain why Bender could have fallen off the art-world radar in the middle of the 1990s, only to resurface today. As her aesthetic became more high-tech, the art world moved instead toward the lower depths of abjection, scatter art, and slackerdom. Moreover, Bender's view of corporate culture as a homogenizing onslaught was at odds with the premillennial interest in the cultural politics of difference as well as with the consensus view that VCRs, cable TV, and the internet equaled a dawning era of consumer empowerment. Today, of course, information culture is no longer greeted with such across-the-board optimism. Hence the renewed interest in Bender's more blatantly corporate, dystopian vision.

Interesting, then, that it's a corporate sponsor, Red Bull, that has enthusiastically stepped up to not only assemble Bender's body of work but also make the substantial dollar investment in digitally restoring such a complex, multivideo *Gesamtkunstwerk* as *Total Recall*. (Credit for originally unearthing Bender goes not to Red Bull but to the artist Philip Vanderhyden, who in 2012 curated a survey of Bender's all-but-lost video pieces that traveled from the Poor Farm in Little Wolf, Wisconsin, to the Kitchen in New York the following year.) Bender herself was not against working with corporate clients—quite the opposite: She directed music videos for bands like Babes in Toyland and also came up with the original opening credits for the Fox TV show *America's Most Wanted*. "I'm glad if I get corporate support," she told her

friend Cindy Sherman in a 1987 *Bomb* magazine interview. "I'm trying to infiltrate and mimic the mainstream media." That Red Bull in turn has been so welcoming of Bender's infiltration perhaps reflects poorly on her work's critical aspirations. More likely, though, it's a testament to the corporate strategy of embracing critique as a way to accrue cultural capital and "edge."

Sadly, Bender fell victim to cancer the same year that Google made its initial public offering and a year before TheFacebook became facebook.com. What's most prescient about her art is the way it intuited how representation was coming under siege; how the time needed to reflect on the spatial and metaphorical relationship between the manifest signifier and its latent, hermeneutically obtained signified was being paved over by communication's more lateral and metonymic temporality: the fast-paced attention and reaction to its unspooling ticker tape of information. Since then, pragmatics has seemingly overtaken semantics. Beyond readers and viewers, the subjects of culture today are media users. Media now constitutes a logistical system as well as a meaning system, allowing for not just the circulation of content but the organization and management of everyday activities: desktops, contacts, calendars, carts, bookmarks, playlists, wish lists, folders, filters, friends. Not just representing our world back to us, corporate media now seemingly license our actions within it. What one would give to see Bender parse such a state of affairs. □

"Gretchen Bender: *So Much Deathless*" is on view through July 28.

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