

METRO PICTURES

Cameron, Dan. "Gretchen Bender: So Much Deathless," *TheBrooklynRail.org* (May 2019).

BROOKLYN RAIL



Installation view: *Gretchen Bender: So Much Deathless*, Red Bull Arts New York, 2019.

If relatively few of the many people captivated by Gretchen Bender's brash entry into the art world's awareness in the early 1980s knew of her background as an activist and maker of feminist graphic art, that's in large part because her "mature" work merged so effortlessly with the cool, appropriationist aesthetic of the Pictures generation. It is that same chameleon-like quality that may be why *So Much Deathless*, the current overview of Bender's career at Red Bull Arts New York, feels essential right now. Her groundbreaking works of 30 years ago seem to dovetail just as effortlessly with a contemporary interest in activism and ways that artists can deploy new developments in technology and communication without becoming subsumed by a consumerist ethos.

Like her contemporaries and friends Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler, Bender used humor to sweeten her jabs, seeming to take nothing seriously and everything seriously at once. In a group show at Artists Space in 1982, she one-upped the still nascent appropriationist movement by swiping the works of red-hot male artists of the moment—the likes of A.R. Penck, Julian Schnabel, Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, Robert Longo, and Sandro Chia—and incorporating miniature versions of them into her multi-panel wall pieces like interchangeable accessories. Later, she would mock the solemnity of minimalist art with a series of works represented by a large brushed steel plate attached directly to the wall, whose placid surfaces are interrupted by a tiny rectangular hole at the center, from which a single tiny backlit vinyl word—*Revolution*—peeps slyly out. Perhaps most significantly, Bender spent much of the early 1980s—pre-MTV—transforming herself into a whiz at video production and editing during a time when most studio-trained artists still didn't see much of a future in the medium.



Gretchen Bender, *Still/Here*, 1994. Choreographed and directed by Bill T. Jones. Visual concept and environment: Gretchen Bender.

As Max Wolf, the curator of *So Much Deathless*, lays out in meticulous sequence for first-time viewers of Bender's work, her output as a video artist quickly differentiates her from her peers and offers the most convincing case for her historical legacy. Beginning with her prophetic 1983 single-channel video *Reality Fever*, in which rapid-fire editing technique breaks down the possibility of coherent narrative, Bender emerges as single-mindedly devoted to using this still fairly new medium to pry apart the codes of broadcast television's most manipulative tendencies, laying them bare for the viewer's edification. In *Wild Dead I, II, III (Danceteria Version)* a year later, she demonstrates an early, preternatural mastery of the visual vocabulary of music video, enlisting frequent musical collaborator Stuart Argabright and fellow musician Michael Diekmann to produce an industrial-tinged soundtrack for three short films, which were edited into a two-channel work that was in turn presented on four monitors which could be arranged and configured according to the setting. The works also show her apply her provocative acts of appropriation to video, for example, by taking a photograph of AT&T's logo and brief snatches of David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* and incorporating them into a sequence.

In true activist fashion, one of Bender's most effective strategies was her simplest. In 1986, she introduced live TV feeds into a group show at Metro Pictures gallery, but transformed their content drastically by placing vinyl lettering over the screens so that the names of artists like Jenny Holzer and Sherrie Levine were superimposed over whatever scenes happened to be playing. Intended to underscore the artificially constructed nature of all televised content, Bender updated the proposal in 1990 with a similar installation (also on view) that layers short phrases, like "body ownership" and "living with poor," onto the TV screens to conceptually frame the image beneath.



Gretchen Bender, *Total Recall*, 1987. 11-channel video installation on 24 monitors and 3 projection screens, 18.2 minutes, with soundtrack by Stuart Argabright.

In terms of sheer art world impact, Bender's biggest success was *Total Recall*, an 11-channel installation that she categorized as "video theater," and completed and shown in 1987. Arranging 24 monitors and three projection screens into a roughly pyramidal formation, the installation intentionally collapses the public space of the cinema and the intimate space of the living room into a shared observation zone, nudging the viewer to regularly adjust perspective and viewing distance while taking it in. Although the video content varies widely within the dense thicket of occasionally slow-motion images, by editing her 11 sources to synchronize the content across all the screens, and again commissioning the score from Argabright, Bender's result takes on the trappings of an 18-minute technological opera—its purely sensual impact lingering longer than the critical distance the artist invited us to maintain by noticing "the space in between" the images. At one point, Bender appropriates a scene from *Salvador*, Oliver Stone's 1986 film about the US-fueled civil war in El Salvador, that shows a photojournalist making his way through the aftermath of a massacre. But she has slowed down the action so that it starts to look as sentimentalized as the adjacent TV footage.

To its credit, *So Much Deathless* resists the understandable temptation to bundle Bender's trajectory as a fine artist with her "commercial" work, which, among other achievements, includes the opening credits for the popular TV show *America's Most Wanted* (1988–1990), and music videos directed by Robert Longo for New Order, R.E.M. and Megadeth. Instead, the exhibition ends on a beautifully poignant note with a room-scaled projection of her documentation for choreographer Bill T. Jones's 1994 dance *Still/Here*. At the time it was made, Jones's life partner and collaborator Arnie Zane had recently died of AIDS and Jones had received a HIV-positive diagnosis. The loosely edited work reveals an intensely personal integration of Bender's video imagery with the body in motion, in a hint of what might have been had Bender's own life not been cut short at the age of 53.