

# METRO PICTURES

Schwendener, Martha. "Past and Future, Scrolling By," *The New York Times* (September 6, 2013): C26.

## The New York Times



Monitors are central to Gretchen Bender's "Total Recall" installation at the Kitchen, in Chelsea.

The Pictures Generation of artists from the 1970s and 1980s extended Pop art's fascination with mass-media images to show how sophisticated and seductive they could be — and how, despite the supposed divide between high art and mass culture, the two were frequently made by the same people. "Tracking the Thrill," at the Kitchen, a selection of works by Gretchen Bender (1951-2004), makes this explicit by exhibiting her artworks alongside music videos she edited for bands like Megadeth, R.E.M. and New Order, and the credits she created in 1988 for the Fox network's "America's Most Wanted."

The central work in the show, however, is an ambitious art installation: "Total Recall," an 18-minute, 24-monitor onslaught of images, sound and computer animation that was shown at the Kitchen in 1987. The title comes from the movie "Total Recall," directed by Paul Verhoeven and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, which was in production when Bender made this installation work (she pulled the title from announcements in "Variety" magazine), but did not appear in theaters until 1990. The movie is based on a 1966 story by the science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick.

Described by Bender as “electronic theater,” the installation merges the immersive theater or film experience with the consumer one of standing in a big-box store in front of a bank of televisions. Held captive by the spectacle, your eye wanders over the multiplicity of moving images. Clips sampled from the Oliver Stone movie “Salvador” (1986) alternate with abstract animations and the corporate logos of GE, ABC News, CBS, TRW, Rockwell International and the Olympics, which look in this context like fragments from modernist films or paintings.

In terms of art history, Bender’s work points backward, forward and sideways. Black-and-white graphics recall Man Ray, Hans Richter or Marcel Duchamp; color graphics recall the paintings of Bridget Riley, Victor Vasarely or Kenneth Noland. There are links to early computer art and the light environments of James Turrell or Dan Flavin. Bender’s works also predict the appropriations of Cory Arcangel, Christian Marclay and Candice Breitz.

There is also the *gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) of the 19th-century composer Richard Wagner, the effects of which linger in blockbuster movies with surround-sound and special effects. Bender merely repurposed the bombast of Wagner and the movies, transforming it, as the title “Total Recall” suggests, into a vaguely menacing video science fiction. (In the catalog, Lane Relyea writes that Bender liked to call AT&T’s spinning globe logo, which appears frequently in her work, “The Death Star.”)

Bender’s comments, quoted in the catalog — unfortunately, she didn’t leave behind a body of writing — are often as interesting as the works themselves. “Style,” she once said, “gets absorbed really fast by culture, basically by absorbing the formal elements or the structure and then subverting the content.” But this process of assimilation didn’t flow in one direction; artists were equally susceptible, she said, to making “new technologies look like old art.”

You see her grappling with this in “Wild Dead” (1984), another immersive work — this time with 33 monitors — in which appropriated media images, corporate logos and computer graphics are edited into a delirious new configuration. In the catalog, Philip Vanderhyden calls Bender a “pioneer in high-speed barrage editing,” and this is also evident in the single-channel music videos she edited and directed. Filled with images of riots, warplanes and politicians, the videos are often radical in their social and political critiques. Alongside these, however, run the credits for “America’s Most Wanted,” a project that is harder to redeem as an artwork, but nonetheless reveals how many contemporary artists work inside the very culture their artwork criticizes.

And here, perhaps, is the crux of the show. More than one writer has called Bender a “fearless” artist. It’s not just her work that is intrepid, but the way she pointed out the compromised position of late-20th-century artists. Dominated by “critical theory” in the post-1960s, the reality and efficacy of art production were often elided.

A text Bender wrote in 1984, printed on the wall in capital letters (as Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger would do), comes close to addressing this: “We live in the Memorex life in preparation for accepting expanded mental, emotional and physical visual concepts. The short-circuiting of reality by the media no longer applies. We manipulate the manipulations of ‘reality’; skillfully depicting a society already living outside its own reality. This double-distancing allows a criticality that frees us to exchange one present tense for another.”

If Bender’s work feels both dated and freshly contemporary, it is in this approach, in which images provide a bridge between an undead past and an uncertain future. Within this framework, we all become artists; we are all implicated. She wrote: “We run interference patterns in order to perceive structures; in order to transcend them; in order to explore fascisms. By short-circuiting reality, our culture at large participates in its own dismantling.”