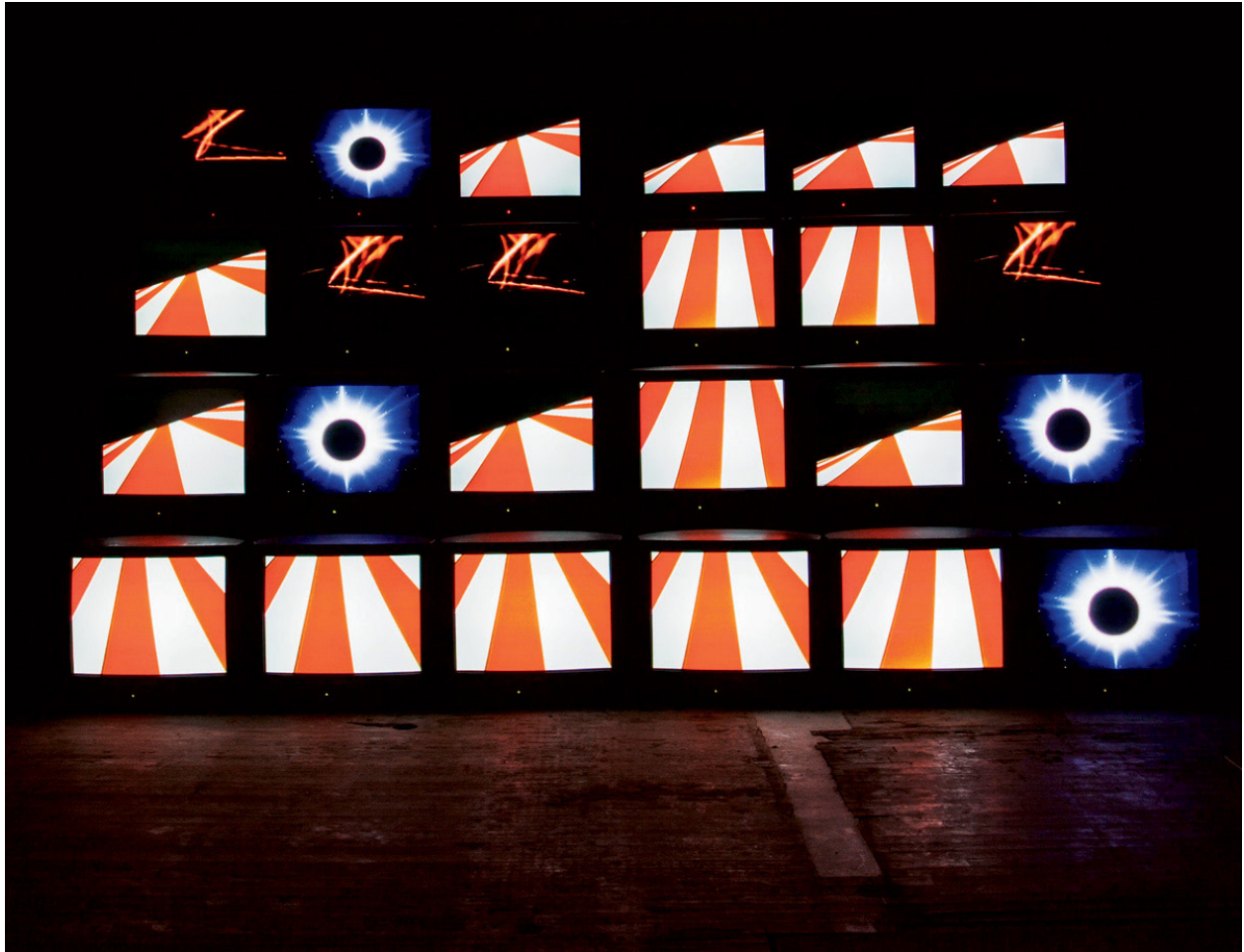


METRO PICTURES

Thomas, Jonathan. "Reviews: Gretchen Bender," *ArtInAmerica.com* (November 6, 2012).

Art in America



Gretchen Bender: *Total Recall*, 1987, eight-channel video on 24 monitors and two rear projection screens, approx. 18 minutes, with soundtrack by Stuart Argabright; at the Poor Farm.

If Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) is less recognized than some artists of her generation, "Tracking the Thrill" should initiate a remedy. Organized by artist Philip Vanderhyden and the Poor Farm (an experimental venue in the countryside of Wisconsin run by artists Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam, now in its fourth year), this exhibition presented a survey of Bender's video work for broadcast television, as well as two monumental, monitor-based pieces of what she called electronic theater.

Bender began exhibiting at Nature Morte in the East Village in 1983. Close with Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman and others associated with the critical strategies of appropriation, she set out to infiltrate the corporate domain of mass-media representation-and the flattening image-flow of television in particular, where politics and entertainment are conflated-so as to highlight the insidious qualities of big business's ideological operations. Her approaches for doing so, as seen here, were abstraction, acceleration and multiplication.

There was an eerie frisson to encountering Bender's work in a bucolic landscape. Filling two floors of an old poorhouse, surrounded by barns, cornfields and the sounds of cicadas, "Tracking the Thrill" was immediately distinguished by its technological glow. Upstairs were music videos Bender edited between 1986 and 1990, for bands such as Megadeth, New Order and Babes in Toyland, as well as two versions of the credit sequence she designed for "America's Most Wanted" in 1988. Uniting these works (all made for television) at the level of form is the cutting procedure: images hit the screen as if fired from an automatic rifle, like a flicker film. The extreme close-up of an eyeball opening the "America's Most Wanted" credits suggests that perception itself is under attack (think *A Clockwork Orange*).

On the main floor were two multi-monitor videos, *Wild Dead* (1984) and *Total Recall* (1987), which have not been seen by an audience in over 20 years. *Total Recall* (22 minutes) was the most compelling work on view. Screened at set times in a theatrical environment, as if it were a performance with the TV sets on stage as actors, the work features quasi-narrative movements of imagery orchestrated across eight channels on 24 monitors and two projection screens. It includes a soundtrack composed by Stuart Argabright (of the electronic band Ike Yard) and animation sequences designed on a flight simulator by artist Amber Denker. In effect, it is nearly overwhelming. On the one hand, slowed down and multiplied fragments of commercials populate the monitors: a happy factory worker at GE who "brings good things to life," high-tech weaponry promoted in military videos, and razzle-dazzle, animated corporate logos. On the other hand, we see commercials for consumer recording technologies (cameras and camcorders) and footage from then-topical Hollywood films such as *Salvador* (1986) and *Under Fire* (1983) about photographers on assignment in places where the U.S. was supporting repressive regimes. As an implicit portrait of the military-industrial-media complex, *Total Recall* confronts the spectator with a mesmerizing critique of the violence of images in a society now predicated on their commodification. In a media culture saturated by corporate self-representation, it is, Bender argued, images themselves that prevent us from seeing the reality of the world we've constructed.