

METRO PICTURES

Schwendener, Martha. "New York Art Galleries: What to See Right Now," *The New York Times* (May 10, 2019): C14.

The New York Times



Gretchen Bender's "Total Recall" (1987), an 18-minute video installation on 24 monitors and 3 projection screens.

Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) was part of the first generation of artists to grow up with television, and she and her fellow travelers in the art world often used television as a subject and a medium for their work. An exhibition devoted to her career was mounted at the black-box theater space the Kitchen in Chelsea in 2013 and now a retrospective, "So Much Deathless," is at the glossier white-box Red Bull Arts.

The "black box" mention is not superfluous. In the early '90s Ms. Bender was in contact with the media critic and philosopher Vilém Flusser, who called technological apparatuses like cameras or televisions impenetrable "black boxes;" the artist's job is to penetrate these black boxes and reprogram their functioning. Ms. Bender did that beautifully, sometimes by simply printing deadpan black text onto a TV monitor and letting broadcast images babble underneath: "Race Class Gender" over cartoons, or "Narcotics of Surrealism" over images of Donald Trump on Fox News.

Lesser-known works are here, like "Volatile Memory" (1988), a 13-minute film she directed with Sandra Tait and starring the artist Cindy Sherman as a cyborg under government surveillance, or laminated color photographs and smaller video sculptures. Also on view is "Total Recall" (1987), an 18-minute symphony of pulsing sound, corporate logos, movie titles and computer graphics spread over 24 monitors and 3 projection screens. One would imagine that "Total Recall" would feel dated, but it remains a brilliant critical look at how media images work, capturing and directing our attention. Moreover, looking around the room and seeing viewers recording the experience on their cellphones felt like a new layer to the work Ms. Bender would appreciate, and perhaps approve.