

## Press Release

### Gretchen Bender

*The Perversion of the Visual*

May 24–August 10, 2024

Public Reception: May 23, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

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Gretchen Bender emerged in the early 1980s in New York as a contemporary of the Pictures Generation. A commentator on the age of television, her work continues its relevancy in today's privatized and multi-screened cultural landscape – in many ways, even predicting its development. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present *The Perversion of the Visual*, Bender's second exhibition with the gallery and her first in Los Angeles since 1989. The show focuses on her efforts to break into mass media's attempt to gloss over the severity of cultural events and depictions of violence.

1984 marked a transition in Bender's career; the focus of her critique shifted from recontextualizing images by her art-world peers to targeting broader cultural issues and the corporatized media landscape. As she once remarked, "I'm trying to examine what it is we're really promoting to ourselves – the cultural lies, the cultural anxieties, the cultural truths."<sup>[1]</sup> She adopted cutting-edge technologies, moving from silkscreens and photographs to video, broadcast media and computer graphics, ensuring her work was never a step behind. This allowed her to subvert the culture as it was developing. Her early use of video quickly evolved into a multi-screen approach: the initial two-monitor work *Unprotected* developed into the four-monitor *Wild Dead* and soon after that into the thirteen-monitor *Dumping Core* (all 1984), the first of her two career-defining "electronic theater" works.

Titled in reference to the documented memory retained after a hard drive crashes and also alluding to nuclear fears from the then-recent Three Mile Island accident, *Dumping Core* combines computer animations created with Amber Denker, corporate logo graphics pulled from broadcast TV, and images of the Salvadoran Civil War with an original soundtrack by Stuart Argabright, Michael Diekmann and Shin Shimokawa. As Jonathan Crary noted during the premiere staged at The Kitchen in New York: "Bender is not simply celebrating some idea of image chaos and overload. She seems quite aware that while any image can be absorbed into an undifferentiated flux, it can also conjoin with rigid structures of hierarchy and control."<sup>[2]</sup>

Through her obsessive sampling of broadcast television, Bender became aware of the psychological implications of corporate logos and branding (GE, AT&T, CBS, and NBC). These corporations were using the most advanced technologies to not only claim authority over the content being presented but also seduce the viewer into a passive state: "I think that corporate computer graphics take these abstract, idealistic, deathless images and use them in a way that makes us feel enthralled when we watch them on TV. Somehow, they're outside of us and

they're bigger, more powerful, more eternal than we are, even though these logos represent corporations that are made up of human beings. In some ways, these logos can depict surrogates for our psyches, abstractions that make death more surreal and less real in our imaginations.”[1]

Her early investigations into these state-of-the-art graphics can be seen in *Ghostbusters* (1984), where she has combined two computer-generated heads that also appear in *Dumping Core* and her earlier video, *Reality Fever* (1983), together with an image of her friend Cindy Sherman. The portrait image is a precedent to the short film *Volatile Memory* (1988), written and directed by Bender and Sandy Tait, whose William Gibson-inspired plot features Sherman as a cyborg protagonist. In *Untitled (Daydream Nation)* (1989), Bender assembles a group of computer-generated fractal images facing forward in a psychedelic landscape, only revealing on the backside a photograph of a Tangiers cityscape.

Also in 1984, as *Dumping Core* was developing, Bender encountered the photographs compiled by Susan Meiselas in the book *El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers*, which depicted the horrific violence of the US-backed Salvadoran Civil War. The undeniable horrors in the photographs by Meiselas and her peers, like John Hoagland, have an urgency and viciousness that are impossible to ignore. For Bender, the images laid bare the real-life tragedies that popular television and media was trying to diminish.

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Bender initially combined Hoagland's photograph from the El Salvador publication in her work *Gremlins*, which was included in 1984's multi-venue project *Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America*. Later, in 1988, in her exhibition at Metro Pictures Gallery, she included images by Meiselas in her works *Relax* and *Open the Door*. For the exhibition, she licensed photographs from the library of Magnum Photos, though without a clearly defined purpose. It was an anomaly for Bender to seek any type of permission; perhaps it was the severity of the context that made this an exception. By then, it was known that many of the photographers in Meiselas' book were included on "death lists" by Salvadoran paramilitary groups.

Her attempted deference to protocol stopped as soon as she had access to the images, and outside of Magnum's and Meiselas' expectations, Bender blew the images up and showed them alongside broadcast television sets and computer-generated graphics. By combining the corporate-funded graphics with images of US Government-funded violence, Bender was, like in her video work, confronting the numbed viewer with an undeniable reminder of the real world while also implicating the sources of the deception. As her friend and collaborator Denker noted: "By taking the sexy graphics of whirling international corporate logos and interjecting them with images of the consequences of policies that were tooled for such corporations' gain and profit, she questioned what America was about.”[3]

In Bender's works *Hell Raiser* (1988–91) and *Gremlins* (1984), the use of John Hoagland's photograph *Two young girls found alongside the highway to Comalapa Airport* (1980) is now shown with the permission of his family. Hoagland was killed in 1984 during an ambush in El Salvador by a bullet from a large-caliber M60 machine gun, same as those supplied by the US Government to the Salvadoran Army.

Another image from the El Salvador civil war, by an as-of-yet unknown photographer, is presented in the work *Untitled (Landscape, Computer Graphics, Death Squad)* (1987). As the artist herself puts it, "The work is about how we allow ourselves to see and, simultaneously, not to see the socio-political landscape we've created for ourselves. We know we fund death squads in El Salvador, but we never have to see the dead bodies, or we see the aestheticized versions of them through photographs. I want us to feel how disturbing it is that we flatten our politics of death through visual representation“.[1]

[1] Interview with Peter Doroshenko in *Gretchen Bender: Work 1981–1991* (Syracuse NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1991).

[2] Jonathan Crary, “Gretchen Bender at Nature Morte,” *Art in America* 72, no. 4 (April 1984).

[3] Amber Denker in *Gretchen Bender: Tracking the Thrill* (Wisconsin: Poor Farm Press, 2013).

Gretchen Bender (1951–2004). Solo exhibitions include *Image World*, Sprüth Magers London (2023), *So Much Deathless*, Red Bull Arts, New York (2019), *Gretchen Bender: Work 1981–1991*, Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (both 1991), and *Total Recall*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1988). Selected group shows include the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford (2024), Blanton Museum of Art, Austin (2023), The Menil Collection, Houston (2023), Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth (2023), UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2022), Kunsthalle Basel (2020), Museum of Modern Art, New York (2023, 2019), Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2018, 1986), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2012), New Museum, New York (2004, 1986), and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1989). Her major installation *Total Recall* has been exhibited at The Kitchen, New York, and Moderna Museet, Stockholm (both 1987), and Tate, Liverpool, and Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (both 2015). Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and Menil Collection, Houston.

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# THE PERVERSION OF THE VISUAL

*Gretchen Bender*

**WE LIVE 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.  
THE SHORT-CIRCUITING OF THE MEDIA BY REALITY 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.  
THE PRESENT CONTAINS OPTICAL TOOLS TO IGNITE INNER EXPANSION THROUGH EXTERIOR MANIPULATIONS.  
ARTISTS WHO CARRY A BELLIGERENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE PRESENT MAKE NEW TECHNOLOGIES LOOK LIKE OLD ART.  
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.  
NOT ONLY IS THERE THE STRUGGLE FOR MENTAL SURVIVAL IN ADAPTING TO THE FUTURE, THERE IS THE RUSH TO SECURE THE POWER OF MENTAL EXPANSION.  
THE CULTURE ACCEPTS THE PRESENT THROUGH SPECIAL EFFECTS: THEATRICAL SPECIAL EFFECTS, AND OPTICAL SPECIAL EFFECTS.**

**1984**