

# Art in America

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## WHOLESALE MEMORIES

by William S. Smith



When Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) premiered her multichannel video work *Total Recall* (1987), she beat Paul Verhoeven to the punch by three years. Bender's work was completed and made public before the director's 1990 Hollywood blockbuster, which the artist read production notices about in movie industry trade papers and from which she cribbed the title. As originally installed at the Kitchen in New York, Bender's *Total Recall* comprised a bank of 24 monitors arranged in tiered rows and flanked by three larger projection screens. She described the work as a "performance" rather than an installation because, at set times, all the screens showed a coordinated onslaught of video imagery edited together at a fast staccato rhythm. Flashing by were Bender's 3-D computer animations and images culled from the mass media: fragments of television advertisements, clips from movies and short loops showing corporate logos.

Speed is an important part of Bender's aesthetic: the speed of network transmission, of viewing images, of technological obsolescence and of cultural change. Working in New York in the early 1980s, she aimed to "infiltrate and mimic the mainstream media," critiquing the spectacle of for-profit entertainment by assuming its forms.<sup>1</sup> Bender's

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Pictures Generation peers, like Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, shared this mission but largely focused on deconstructing the codes of comparatively "old" media, like print advertisements and movies. Bender's videos, films, performances and installations attempted to grasp the contemporary cultural logic of television and computers without getting lost in their seductive veneer.

"Infiltrating" corporate-financed mass culture on its own terms was, of course, always going to involve a game of catch-up for an individual artist. The production notices in *Variety* provided some fast breaks—a way to get out ahead of the culture industry, if only by a few years or months. At one point in Bender's *Total Recall* the names of dozens of then-unreleased action movies appear on the screens. For the work's first audiences, these titles were still just texts—"open signifiers," to use the parlance of the time—and the phrase "Total Recall" itself did not yet conjure an image of Sharon Stone sucker punching Arnold Schwarzenegger.

When *Total Recall* was recently restaged as the centerpiece of the Bender retrospective "Tracking the Thrill" at the Poor Farm (an art venue in rural Wisconsin) and the Kitchen (through Oct. 5), the monitors and projectors Bender originally used were replaced with newer models. But Bender recognized that the subversive qualities of her work could have a far more limited shelf life than any piece of technical equipment. After a corporation purchased one of her installations—ostensibly a critique of corporate culture—Bender declared the piece "a carcass," its critical potential dead. The reality, in her mind, was that oppositional subcultures, the art world included, could maintain, at best, only fleeting pockets of resistance to the mainstream. "Style gets absorbed really fast by the culture," she told Sherman in an interview, "basically by absorbing the formal elements or the structure and then subverting the content."<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Crary, a keen critic of Bender's work in the 1980s and '90s, proposed a way out of this relentless cycle that saw appropriation artists' imagery always on the verge of being appropriated in return. By the 1980s, it had become commonplace to bemoan television's anesthetizing effect on the public. Wired into a for-profit transmission network, viewers were thought to simply absorb the reactionary messages beamed into their homes. According to Crary, *Total Recall* stood against this model on a phenomenological level: "Bender's setup forces us to become active, critical viewers whose eyes continually move from one screen to another, never resting, never becoming hypnotized."<sup>3</sup> By forcing viewers to construct their own meanings from fragments of appropriated imagery, *Total Recall*, Crary suggested, casts the spectator in a critical role.

While certainly breaking with the conventional model of the TV spectator, the active viewing Crary envisioned also sounds like good training for a life in front of a Bloomberg terminal. Indeed, the perceptual mode Crary found potentially liberating has arguably been absorbed back into the dominant culture as fast as any appropriative stylistic gesture. As artist and curator Philip Vanderhyden points out in the excellent catalogue for "Tracking the Thrill," "Steve Jobs made his fortune not by peddling spectacle to a zombified public but by mass marketing devices to "thinkers" and "creative-types,"

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who would certainly identify themselves as Crary's "stimulated, alert, and analytical observers."<sup>4</sup>

If *Total Recall* anticipates a screen-saturated world, the initial terms of its critique have also been folded back into everyday life, where "the spectacle" remains as seductive and insidious as ever. It is quite possible that Bender's work, which critics once lauded for its sense of immense speed, feels slower now. Yet even at a pace that could be quickly overtaken by fiber-optic transmissions, *Total Recall* is far from a "carcass" of the '80s.

For one thing, new audiences are going to be far less likely to associate the bulky boxes and choreographed imagery with television, a medium that today is increasingly "on demand" and indistinct from other flows of visual data. Watching *Total Recall* in a darkened gallery is more like going to a movie, and the piece remains compelling as a nuanced meditation on Hollywood's myths. If Marshall McLuhan argued that television absorbed the conventions of the movies and radio into a new medium, Bender's work suggests that the resulting message could still be conflicted and schizophrenic. The titles of pumped-up action movies appear on-screen, but so, too, do shots of a specific breed of antihero: Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* and Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*. These are presented against network news images showing brave-looking soldiers at war and flashy taxpayer-funded ads seeking a "few good men" for the Marines. As the images collide, Hollywood's post-Vietnam depictions of broken men come across as subversive counterpoints to Reagan-era TV heroes.

Throughout the work insipid television clips are set against movie excerpts that hardly seem to need much additional "critique," including scenes from *Salvador*, Oliver Stone's passionate box-office bomb about left-wing revolution in Central America. Instead of globbing together a homogenous culture industry, *Total Recall* seems to map a space for oppositional culture within the movies themselves. Viewed in this light, Bender's choice of title, rather than merely an act of ironic appropriation, may be a prescient alignment of aesthetic sensibilities. Verhoeven's movie, based on a Philip K. Dick story, can itself be understood as a parody of genre codes, especially in its depiction of masculinity. Schwarzenegger plays a muscled-up construction worker and interplanetary spy, but he also cross-dresses and spews campy lines. ("Get your ass to Mars!" shouts the soon-to-be governor of California.) It is, of course, important to watch Bender's *Total Recall* in light of the rigorous theoretical regime that developed around 1980s art. But it may be just as fruitful to keep in mind those eruptions of irrational excess in Verhoeven's science-fiction masterpiece—and its depictions of police brutality and corporate greed—which already seem to defy explanation within the terms of commercial entertainment.

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