

Press Release

Gretchen Bender

IMAGE WORLD

February 3–March 25, 2023

Public Reception: February 2, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, London

Sprüth Magers

Sprüth Magers is pleased to present a solo exhibition of work by the late Gretchen Bender, an artist who in the 1980s gained renown as a key observer of the effects of capitalist society and mass media on the human experience. Closely aligned with the appropriation strategies of the artists of the Pictures Generation, her emphasis on film and television as her source material ensured she was also an integral part of the video art movement. This is her first solo exhibition with the gallery, having first shown at the seminal *Eau de Cologne* at Monika Sprüth Galerie, Cologne, in 1987.

The show begins, viewable from the street, with works from her *TV Text & Image* series. A number of television monitors broadcast live television, each tuned to a different channel. 24-hour news streams raucously compete with teleshopping, cartoons and mundane sitcom re-runs. Carefully chosen, often politicized, phrases are superimposed over the images, applied to the screen in black vinyl text. NARCOTICS OF SURREALISM. MILITARY RESEARCH. PEOPLE WITH AIDS.

The confusing multiplicity of corporate-sponsored information lacks focus, with the short turns of phrase demanding closer attention and thought. There are moments when the text and image fleetingly relate, but what is also apparent is a disconnect between the all-caps issues of political importance and the ceaseless moving distractions beneath. Passive viewership equals death. Layering text over moving image is as familiar now in memes, tweets and social media posts, the same media channels that have usurped television's dominance, which with their own indiscriminate wealth of perspectives contribute to the banal stream of mass media.

Both realized as single-screen works, which convey an intrusion into domestic television consumption, as well as site-specific arrangements, Bender's *TV Text & Image* series was a major part of her artistic output throughout the late 80's and early 90's. In contrast to her larger 'Electronic Theater' installations where she highlights her skill as an editor, manipulating everyday moving images into aggressive montages, here she allows the cadence of typical broadcasts TV to remain unaltered, allowing the simple intervention of

text to filter the content.

On the first floor of the gallery, *Aggressive Witness – Active Participant*, 1990 combines the live television streams of the *TV Text & Image* works with computer generated imagery. White lines on a black background produce pulsating abstract shapes that form and dissolve across four of the twelve monitors, these choreographed digital designs state of the art in 1990. Their sci-fi resemblances are accentuated with a soundtrack by her musical collaborator Stuart Argabright, his sinisterly crunchy and rumbling soundscape adding a sense of ascending unease. The combination of sound, graphics and the monitors with text upon them further creates a sense of distance, thwarting any ability to cogently digest the multifarious media streams.

The final room of the show presents one of her earliest multi-channel video works, *Wild Dead*, 1984, a four-monitor set-up that prefaces her monumental installations of stacked monitors that she titled 'Electronic Theaters'. The soundtrack by the aforementioned Argabright and colleague Michael Diekmann interposes harsh fragmented synths with yelps and gunshot, as a jarring collage of computer generated graphics and mass media appropriated imagery vie for attention.

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The opening sequence of *He-Man* is swiftly followed by news footage of missiles firing in international conflicts, juxtaposed with corporate idents such as the AT&T logo that Bender likened to the Death Star, and distorted animated heads that contort their way across the screens. Again, the viewer is overloaded with information, subject to the powerfully attractive pull of broadcast media. The work also sets the stage for her later commercial work, including music videos she produced for R.E.M., New Order and Megadeth, each of which transposed the same degree of criticality and disjointed production to the slickness of the then-new MTV.

Simultaneously entertaining and critical, Bender's work foreshadows many of today's immersive installations, and proves to be a prescient voice as we continue to navigate our relationship to screens and content to this day. By eulogizing our rapturous submission to the interminable flow of moving images, she simultaneously draws attention to its homogenizing powers of repugnance.

Gretchen Bender (1951–2004). Solo exhibitions include Red Bull Arts, New York (2019), Everson Museum, Syracuse; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (both 1991) and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1988). Selected group shows include the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2018, 1986), New Museum, New York (2004, 1986), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2012) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1989). Exhibitions of *Total Recall* followed at the Kitchen, New York, Moderna Museet, Stockholm (both 1987), Tate, Liverpool and Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (both 2015). Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and the Menil Collection, Houston.

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