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passages

[Gretchen Bender](#)

WHEN DAVID ROBBINS made his signature 1986 piece *Talent*, a lineup of eighteen black-and-white head shots of very fresh-faced artists of a certain notoriety at that time in New York, he presented a giddily ironic vision of unbounded optimism. The photographs were taken—staged and lit, processed and retouched—by a professional portrait studio off Times Square. They were not made in the *style* of actor’s publicity shots; they were the real thing. It was the artists who were faking it. (As one of the subjects, I remember the experience well, feeling too imperfect, too corporeal somehow, before the appraising gaze of the photographer.) We all understood that art had become inextricably entwined with mass media; that the spectacle of everyday life, and the power of the technologies used to represent it, had become so overpowering that art’s challenge to the received ideas of mainstream culture had been sidelined to a complicit wink. It was a moment of collective paralysis, signaled by the name chosen for the gallery in which many of these artists exhibited, Nature Morte, and by the title of the 1986 exhibition catalogue we all read and carried as a talisman, *Endgame*. Robbins’s piece comes to mind now because suddenly and inexplicably two of the artists in it, Gretchen Bender and Steven Parrino, are dead. They died within weeks of each other, Bender of cancer on December 19, Parrino in a freak motorcycle accident on January 1.

Bender and Parrino confronted the same issue, the problem of art in mass society, but from diametrically opposed positions. Parrino worked from a rejectionist nihilism. Bender, who began her career working in a feminist-Marxist silk-screening collective in Washington, DC, took a more actively subversive role. The evidence is in the *Talent* head shot: With her megawatt smile and glamorously upswept hair, Gretchen is the beauty most willing to face the beast.

Although I now see she was my age, I thought she was a little younger. She was a relative latecomer to the New York scene, arriving in the city in 1978, a year after the “Pictures” show had signaled the debut of a new generation with new interests. Introduced through the social milieu that centered on Robert Longo’s studio (and immortalized in one of his iconic drawings of

the period), Bender soon became a prominent part of the group that included Longo, Eric Bogosian, and Cindy Sherman. Her first show came in 1983, at Nature Morte, and featured works that collapsed imagery from myriad sources—glossy ads, news photos, abstract paintings—which were silkscreened onto white tin tiles arranged as a series of little crosses. It was already clear that conventional wall work was too restrictive for her, and within the year she presented a multimedia spectacular, *Dumping Core*, at the Kitchen. This piece, with its apocalyptic title recalling both the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island and the Orwellian fears of the sudden pervasiveness of digital information tracking that flowed over us in 1984, bombarded its viewers with multiple projections, video, and sound.

Living out the contradictions and confusions facing artists in the mid- to late '80s—the questions relating to the ongoing validity of art in the face of the AIDS crisis, the Reagan administration's illegal support of terrorist groups in Central America, the explosion of a glamour-fed, fashion-conscious art market—Bender continued to oscillate between the desire to show within the gallery structure and the urge to reach beyond it to a wider audience. She had an exhibition at Metro Pictures in 1988 in which she sought to build an essay on the politically numbing effect of saturated media coverage that inevitably mixes horror and banality, consequential news and Hollywood gossip, scientific progress and government surveillance. The work seemed heavy and static, unlike her second Kitchen production, *Total Recall*, 1987, a blowout “sense-around” (her term) panorama comprising twenty-four monitors displaying eight channels of video, including computer-generated graphics and live TV, and three film screens, spilling a barrage of everyday images that could be said to construct the idea of “America.” Interviewed several years later by curator Peter Doroshenko for the catalogue of her midcareer survey at the Everson Museum of Art, in Syracuse, New York, Bender said of *Total Recall*, “I wanted to present a conceptual landscape and to use the media against itself—to have it be entertaining and critical simultaneously.”

After the success of *Total Recall*, Bender used her skills to insert her vision into the very media stream she wished to critique. She produced, directed, and edited music videos for Babes in Toyland and Martha Wash, and edited others for New Order, Megadeth, and REM. She designed the credits for the TV series *America's Most Wanted*, creating the machine-gun style so familiar in current movies and television. A natural operator in the media, she succeeded in slipping her vision into the mainstream, unannounced.

Not all her work was this kind of white-hot intervention in cool media. She was also capable of working on a more empathetic level, with direct access to emotion. In 1994 she collaborated with dancer Bill T. Jones on *Still/Here*, part memorial to Jones's longtime partner Arnie Zane, part hymn to the fortitude of those living with chronic disease. The dance unfolds as a dialogue between the real-time movement of the dancers in front of large projections of body parts—heads, hands, hearts—an affecting tribute to the fragility of human life.

[*Thomas Lawson*](#) is dean of the School of Art at CalArts, Valencia, CA.

MEDIA PLAYER

THOMAS LAWSON ON GRETCHEN BENDER

PASSAGES

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Top, left and center: Gretchen Bender, *Dumping Core*, 1984. Installation view, the Kitchen, New York. Top, right: Gretchen Bender, *Total Recall* (detail), 1987, steel, fluorescent lights, and laminated filmstrip, 72 x 72 x 4". Bottom: David Robbins, *Talent* (detail), 1986, 1 of 18 black-and-white photographs, 10 x 8" each.