

## **Gretchen Bender's Aggressive Witness— Active Participant**

By Bill Horrigan

Live American cable television is the feed source for the eight domestically scaled monitors in Gretchen Bender's 1990 *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant*. Interspersed among the wall-mounted TV sets are four identical screens on which a 20-minute clip of computer-generated imagery (state of the art circa 1990) is played out, forming and then dissolving into a species of exhausted abstraction. Responding to one aspect of the multichannel piece overall, Bender described the sound design (by her frequent collaborator Stuart Argabright) as being "rather sci-fi, like biogenetic fly sounds or maggots munching, and I think it accentuates the sense of a controlling grid that underlies even the seemingly random spontaneity of television."<sup>1</sup>

The soundtrack, and its pulsating audio dimension, thwarts viewers' capacity to hear what's being said or sold in the television footage. That distancing effect is made more emphatic by the graphic overlays Bender has placed on the surface of each of the eight TV screens: vinyl filters identifying points of resistance within spheres both personal and global. On any of the eight television streams, viewers might be seeing sports or commercials or dramas—the depressive, mundane enactment of the days of our lives. But laid over those images, physically placing an optical

barrier between the televised spectacle and viewers' visual purchase of it, hovers the artist's insistence that there is a world elsewhere, condensed into global and ethical claims often registered by commercial television as being simply too tasteless or inconvenient to address.

Those claims, as Bender articulated them in 1990, walk this way:

LESBIAN AND GAY RIGHTS

BODY OWNERSHIP

LIVING WITH THE POOR

DEATH SQUAD BUDGET

NUCLEAR WARHEADS

NO CRITICISM

PUBLIC MEMORY

CLASS, RACE, GENDER

These flashpoints register as no less urgent thirty years down the road than they did in 1990. As Roland Barthes remarked (in a different context), "I was about to say: there is no longer an Inquisition. This is wrong, of course. What has disappeared is the theater of persecution, not persecution itself."<sup>2</sup> For Bender, that "theater" was centralized in cable television. Although that sector, in 2020, retains powerful sway within opinion-making, product-developing, and information-distorting domains, the internet has effectively

canceled the discrete and discretely authoritative agency television once had in constructing and regulating the making of Americans. Thirty years ago the indomitable global monolith, television has since mutated into merely one within the multiple chains or strains of commercial image-making, and that development contributes to *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant's* poignant status as a historical work.

Born in 1951, Bender came into prominence as a visual artist in the 1980s and was often considered a member of the “Pictures Generation” advanced by Douglas Crimp in 1977 (a group including Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer, among others, all of whom were part of Bender’s extended circle). Uniquely among that cohort, Bender would come to focus on moving images, using their tools and tendencies to turn television’s deafening bullying back on itself. Although she had a formative background in silk-screening techniques, Bender increasingly gave the form and the scale of installation to her artworks. That commodity-agnostic practice perhaps accounts for her being less well-known than her contemporaries until recently. Her superior editing skills, however, resulted in striking and widely viewed music videos for REM, New Order, and Megadeth (some made with her then-partner Robert Longo), not to mention the title credits for TV’s *America’s Most Wanted* in 1988.

Bender was an engaged player in New York City’s downtown art scene, including collaborating with

choreographer Bill T. Jones, with whom she developed the projected visual elements for *Still/Here*, his landmark 1994 stage-piece centered on the experiences of people confronting life-threatening illnesses. Their team (later to include musician Vernon Reid) traveled throughout the country to host videotaped “survival workshop” sessions, and Bender fashioned the resulting footage into a central component of *Still/Here*’s theatrical version. She also supervised the PBS television version of *Still/Here* and won a “Bessie” award for her innovative use of projected imagery within a live performance. The Wexner Center’s Film/Video Studio Program, then under the direction of Melodie Calvert, supported Bender’s and Jones’s residency as they collaborated to transform the often-painful personal testimonies into moments of transporting lyricism.

“Lyricism,” though, for then and for now, would be a condition lazily placed in characterizing *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant*. It’s angry, uncompromising, and ferocious, and perhaps those dispositions align uncannily with the present moment, the declining months of 2020. But that’s not the push behind the Wexner Center’s current revival of it. The less ignoble force is that by the end of calendar 2020, the acknowledgement of our 30th year of programming is winding down, and in glancing or staring back over our three decades, some occurrences bracingly interrupted the flow.

One of those stoppages was an exhibition titled *New Works for New Spaces*, which opened in September 1990, organized

by the center's founding curators, Sarah Rogers (now director of the Kent State University Museum) and Claudia Gould (now director of the Jewish Museum in New York), consisting of commissioned pieces charged with "responding to" the building's then-confounding spatial characteristics. Bender's *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant* was a vivid outlier within that exhibition; among other artists sharing gallery space were Barbara Kruger, Chris Burden, Christian Marclay, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Columbus-based artists Malcolm Cochran and Ann Hamilton.

Speaking about *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant* with Rogers, Bender underscored how vital it was for her project to be grounded in an ethic of learning and dialogue:

"As an art center at a university, the Wexner Center offers its community of students a forum for supplanting clichés, which is also what I intend to do. In many ways the work I do strains against the ivory tower, the ivory tower of the university and the ivory tower of the museum. The challenge of this work is to introduce into the museum context a sense of actuality too often absent there. And the elaborateness and complexity of the Wexner Center's architecture may make the clash with media culture seem even greater. Both the project itself and its placement at the center represent and build on contradictions."

Still, in 1990 no less than in 2020, the Wexner Center operates as a "non-collecting" institution. That's an awkward status, since we physically house and conserve

hundreds of artworks that are legal property of Ohio State University, but almost none of those align with the Wexner Center's mandate to support the creation and exhibition of contemporary art in its varied forms. Still, since its beginning, the center, through its residencies and its exhibition strategies, has lent material, technical, and collegial support to artists in the service of new work, which accounts for the creation of *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant*. But commissioning doesn't presuppose ownership, and once Bender's piece closed, in 1991, it went its own way, away from us.

Bender died in 2004, in her early 50s; her work has not been forgotten since then. Although the artist has been included in a number of exhibitions over the years, it wasn't until 2019 that something close to a retrospective was produced, at Red Bull Arts in New York. That's the context in which *Aggressive Witness—Active Participant* was restored and returned to life, which in turn provided the means for it to return to our galleries where it was first seen thirty years ago. Then, it was joined by Barbara Kruger's *Why Are You Here?* mural, an assaultive challenge greeting viewers as they descend the Caligari-like stairs from the upper to the lower lobby, and Chris Burden's *The Wexner Castle*, an exterior intervention adding decorative crenellations to the building's brick towers, themselves a postmodern gesture made by architects Peter Eisenman and Richard Trott to Ohio State's 19th-century Armory, a building that once occupied the present site of the Wexner Center and Weigel

Hall. Summary moments in the Wexner Center's thirtieth-anniversary occasion still to come will be the return of Kruger's 1990 mural next year, along with Burden's *Castle* being resurrected to provide a signature presence within the forthcoming exhibition *Climate Changing: On Artists, Institutions, and the Social Environment*, opening in early 2021.

Organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts and curated by Curator at Large Bill Horrigan.

## **Notes**

1. Quotes from Gretchen Bender are from her conversation with Sarah Rogers in *Breakthroughs: Avant-Garde Artists in Europe and America, 1950–1990* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications in association with Wexner Center for the Arts, 1991), 188–191.
2. Roland Barthes, "The Last Happy Writer," in *Critical Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 1972), 83.

## **Program Team**

Bill Horrigan, Curator at Large

Kristin Helmick-Brunet, Curatorial Associate

Megan Cavanaugh, Chief Operating Officer

Stephen Jones, Design Engineer

Stephen Trefnoff, Audio Engineer

James-David Mericle, Assistant  
Exhibition Designer / Preparator

David Dickas, Senior Installation Manager / Head Preparator

Kim Kollman, Senior Registrar

## **Acknowledgments**

Allison Card, Director, Metro Pictures, New York

Kyle Jacques, Projects and Exhibitions Manager, Red Bull Arts,  
New York

Maurice Schechter, Conservationist, Preservationist, and  
Time-Based Media Engineer, Schechter Engineering

Margaret Zwilling, Registrar, Metro Pictures, New York