

Gretchen Bender

Political Entertainment

November 14, 2025–April 4, 2026

Public Reception: November 13, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

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“Are we content with the aestheticization of the political that is leading us to a fascism of and through entertainment?”[1]

Sprüth Magers is pleased to present Gretchen Bender’s series *Top Ten Grossing Films of 1988*, shown for the first time since their 1989 debut. Ten sculptures, made of black crumpled heat-set vinyl, backlit by neon, feature the titles of 1988’s highest-grossing films, such as *Die Hard*, *Coming to America* and *Crocodile Dundee II*. Compiled by Bender during her constant scrutinising of Hollywood production dailies and magazines, these titles represent that year’s cultural identity as defined by box office success.

When researching the film industry, Bender discovered that what was portrayed as an “entertainment” industry was in fact driven by political and financial interests. In this context, the ten titles are revealed not as cultural success stories but as the most consumed products of those influences – reflecting both corporate control over production and audiences’ uncritical consumption. As Bender once explained in a discussion with Cindy Sherman, “We recognize the film industry as a very important part of our culture economically and aesthetically and I think it’s a whole area that should be provoked more. Film and its invocations are much more powerful instruments economically and politically in our lives than we seem aware of.” She noted how corporations own “the world – the mechanisms that make the world run.”[2]

Bender was consistently driven to keep her artworks one step ahead of mass media, aware that corporations constantly absorbed new ideas and technologies. She ensured that when her artworks were premiered, they were hyper-current and able to drive the cultural conversation at the same time as critiquing its consumption. This ambition also shaped her approach to the works featured here. *Top Ten Grossing Films of 1988* was created directly after she finished her fifteen-meter-long installation *People in Pain*, which was shown as part of the 1989 exhibition *A Forest of Signs* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. Concurrently, Bender presented the *Top Ten* series – the works whose neon glow illuminated Hollywood’s biggest commercial hits – in a solo gallery exhibition in nearby Santa Monica.

Although *Top Ten Grossing Films of 1988* was fabricated from the same material and in the same style as *People in Pain*, the two series were conceived with distinctly different conceptual approaches. For *People in Pain*, Bender researched Hollywood dailies – *Variety* and *The Film Journal's* “Blue Sheets” supplement – seeking industry production notes about upcoming films before they were completed, or often before they even went into production. This resulted in a crumpled black mass containing 105 titles – a monument to current and future cultural production. As Bender described it, “In *People in Pain* there is the suggestion that you’re standing in an ocean of garbage – a fifty foot wide by seven foot high wall of crumpled film frames. As you walk along the wall, you get a sense of the throw-away quality of the film continually churned out by the film industry.”[3] When first exhibited in April 1988, many of these titles referenced films that had not yet been released. By the time it was installed at MOCA, just over a year later, it had become a memorial to that same cultural production, now mostly “old news”, demonstrating how fleeting cultural currency can be. In contrast, the *Top Ten* works capture the most consumed films rather than the most anticipated. Where *People in Pain* emphasised the ephemerality of Hollywood’s churn, *Top Ten* reveals what audiences paid to see and therefore what corporate and political interests successfully sold to the masses.

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As in 1989, the vinyl works are presented alongside a brushed steel and film sculpture from the same year, *Untitled (X Floor Piece)* – all shown here for the first time since their original exhibition. Utilising the brushed finish and hard geometric forms of corporate architecture, Bender created compelling steel pyramids, which she then buried under a pile of discarded 35mm film – presciently symbolising a civilisation drowning in content.

Over thirty-five years since their inception, these works remain urgent in their interrogation of how culture is produced and consumed, now amplified by the political shaping and censorship of programming within corporate media. As Bender stated, “I’m more interested in revitalizing issues around the politics of memory without forgetting that all visual production is a form of propaganda. I have to continually remind myself that there is no pure space of production.”[4]

[1] Gretchen Bender, “Political Entertainment,” in *TV Guides: A Collection of Thoughts about Television*, ed. Barbara Kruger (New York: Kuklapolitan, 1985), 27.

[2] Cindy Sherman and Gretchen Bender, “Gretchen Bender,” *BOMB*, No. 18 (1987): 20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40423435>.

[3] Gretchen Bender, interview by Peter Doroshenko, in *Gretchen Bender: Work 1981–1991*, by Peter Doroshenko (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1991), 9.

[4] Gretchen Bender in *Ten.8, Digital Dialogues: Photography in the Age of Cyberspace*, Vol. 2 No. 2 (1991), 96.

Gretchen Bender (1951–2004) lived and worked in New York. Solo exhibitions include Sprüth Magers (2024, 2023), Red Bull Arts, New York (2019) and Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY. Recent group shows include Cantor Arts Center, Stanford (2024), Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Menil Collection, Houston, Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth (all 2023), UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2022), The Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. (2018), Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2018), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014), the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (all 2012).

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