

No one wants to be defeated

*Much of what I do in my work is about trying to achieve the unachievable, and about surpassing expectations.*¹ - Kate Gilmore

Aggression shapes much of the way we speak about success in the music industry; *smash* records, radio *impact*, *hit* songs, *pop* music. Released as the third single off his 1982 album *Thriller*, “Beat It” helped further propel Michael Jackson towards complete cultural and market dominance of the music industry. The musician, the album, the song, and the music video all coalesced into one gigantic pop juggernaut not only capable of selling *Thriller* to over 42 million consumers worldwide (far and away the best selling album of all time), but so powerful (and pleasurable) that it could unite rival gang members of the Los Angeles Crips and Bloods to, literally, dance together in the streets - as seen in the iconic music video accompanying the song.²

Thriller was Jackson’s second album as a solo performer, and he was already firmly established as a star. Yet, the second act or sophomore album is always said to be the trickiest for any performer.



Was initial success a fluke? Is the performer capable of longevity? One hit wonder? What else you got? Will the public interest hold? Well, it did, and then some.

Over thirty years later, while either in proximity of Kate Gilmore’s *Beat It* video or the corresponding installation-for-performance of the same name within her H&R Block Artspace solo exhibition, its difficult to imagine anyone not

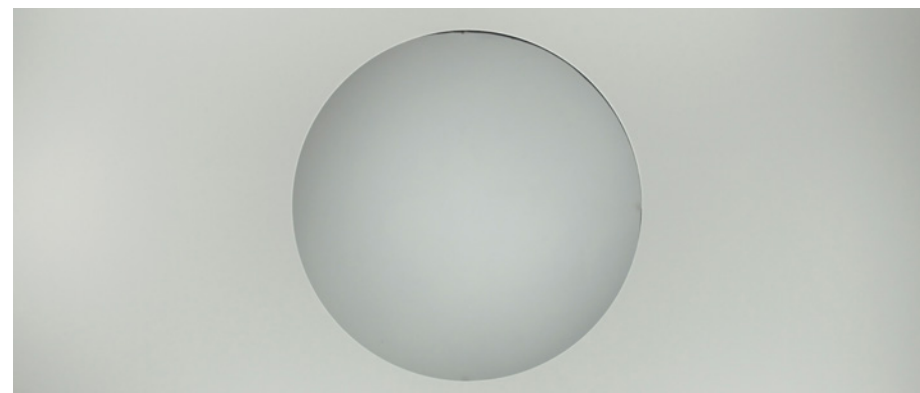
hearing Jackson’s shrill “beaaaaat it / beaaaaat it!” on repeat in their own brain when encountering this work. Repetition figures prominently in the material remnants, the digital video, and the audio soundtrack that resulted from Gilmore’s labor. There is the text “beat it,” (comma included) printed over and over again on what remains of the wood and drywall structure Gilmore destroyed and transformed. There they are again, slowly revealing themselves to viewers in fragments and over time in the video, shot from above, that captures Gilmore’s signature process of creative destruction-creation. And, there is the thump after thump field recording of the very real beating

Gilmore gave that fabricated form itself.

Gilmore’s appropriation of “Beat It” comes at a remarkably well-timed point in her own career. Quite frankly, Gilmore is no longer the artist emerging into stardom, an emergence parodied in her earlier work *Star Bright, Star Might* (2007), in which she dangerously forces her face, *using* her face, through a narrow star-shaped plywood portal. After a considerable number of museum exhibitions, Biennial inclusions, provocative public art commissions, academic lectures, critical consideration, and commercial gallery representation - Gilmore needs no longer worry about becoming a star, or knowingly satirize such accompanying sensations as struggle, desperation, and ambition. She’s a hit.

As such, Gilmore now works within the institution or gallery. Much of her work before 2010 was recorded by the artist within her own studio, and the lo-fi quality of these earlier works assisted in legitimizing the authenticity of her actions. Both then and now: there are no smoke and mirrors, the action is very real. However, the institutional support and setting of her more recent projects has certainly upped Gilmore’s production value, as trained video specialists (in the case of *Beat It*, filmmaker Caitlin Horsmon) are procured to assist in rendering the lush vividness of Gilmore’s often painterly gallery interventions in gorgeous high-definition (i.e. 2011’s *Built to Burst* and 2013’s *Love ‘Em, Leave ‘Em*).

While the increased institutional support might seem like it would ease, and therefore compromise, Gilmore’s often grueling and laborious ways of making, it actually produces the opposite effect. The stakes are higher, the pressure is on. What has been added to our empathetic understanding and vicarious *feeling* that Gilmore might do herself some serious bodily harm



while we watch her, for instance, alone in her studio attempting to free her foot from a bucket of hardened plaster with a self-wielded hammer (2004’s *My Love is an Anchor*), is the surplus sensation of scale.

Captured in one long-take, there are no do-overs in Gilmore’s work. Ever. Never rehearsed, only plotted, the big, anxiety-inducing question of “*what if...?*” now is not Gilmore’s alone - it courses through the shared atmosphere of these larger projects. Yet, it never seems to be Gilmore that is worried. She has proven to be a skilled improviser capable of squeezing her way out of the most impossible of circumstances. Her commitment to completing her tasks, irregardless of time or hardship, is not only well documented, it is the basis of her art.

Instead, it is the institution that now shivers nervously in the corners; curators, admins, preparators, film and sound technicians, even observing critics like myself, all wait out of sight and in the wings while she works - startled with each *whack!* of her brutal gestures, the sounds of her



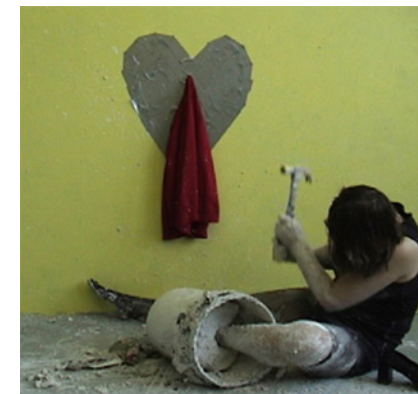
explosive energy accumulating and building tension. Indeed, the mood on set at the Artspace the day Gilmore completed *Beat It* was none too dissimilar from that of filming a high-budget scene in a modest-budget production. In fact, it is the *only* scene in that production. All the work, all the energy, all the preparation, and all the budget, has gone into this one moment. *Break a leg!*

All this is to say that Gilmore, in her multifaceted practice, goes beyond mere institutional critique by developing transformative institutional actions. In other words, Gilmore insists that institutions be brave, and that they take risks.

Artists *should* make an institution shake. Artists *should* produce ruptures and make our institutions more penetrable, more porous, more transparent and alive. This is, arguably, just as much a part of Gilmore’s bluntly stated feminism as is the overstated fact that she often *actually* destroys structures while wearing work-skirts and high-heels, perhaps nodding to the professional drag of

forward-thinking female arts administrators shaking up our contemporary cultural institutions from the inside.³

To deliver a symbolic message through the literal act of transforming, or deconstructing, an architectural form, as Gilmore does in *Beat It*, puts her work squarely in conversation with the legacy of Gordon Matta-Clark. In her essay “Rip it Up, Cut it Off, Rend it Asunder” within the Barbican Art Gallery’s catalogue for their 2007 exhibition *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, art critic Rosetta Brooks takes readers back to the scene of Matta-Clark’s famous site-specific intervention *Conical Intersect*, his contribution to the 1975 Biennale de Paris. Having already



become known for his ‘building cuts,’ in which the artist would remove full sections of a building’s facade, floor, or walls, Matta-Clark cut a large circular hole through the side of the abandoned 17th century townhouse awaiting demolition at the site of the future Centre Georges Pompidou. Brooks reads Matta-Clark’s gesture as exercising “the subtractive power of demolition,” and, perhaps, as issuing a warning to museum developers against the denial of horizontal, democratic transparency in the planning of a new institution, writing; “Only the penetration of the facade opened up the space closed by channeled mobility and by life reduced to an order of functions.”⁴

Gilmore’s *Beat It* video begins with a similarly conical view, yet it takes a few minutes to realize from what viewpoint the camera is positioned, or where the artist is located. The off-white orb within the pristine white rectangle appearing at

the very start of the video offers very little indication of depth or perspective. The vantage point is disorienting, in the way of a James Turrell skyspace or a Robert Irwin disc installation. It is only when scraps of “beat it,” printed drywall begins to collect on the surface of the off-white orb that it becomes clear that we are looking from above, down through a portal, and into a container. It’s as though we are examining the culture of a petri dish with a microscope. Slowly, we realize that Gilmore is breaking her way in. She is punching and kicking her way through invisible barriers,

through walls we can’t see, penetrating the facade and into that once pristine place at the center filled with her rubble and, suddenly, her body. What happens next completely shifts the dynamic.

If, as in previous works using paint, ceramics, and found-objects, Gilmore is said to also be producing abstract, mixed-media paintings or large assemblage installations during her many other performances-for-video; *Beat It* could represent Gilmore’s first foray into collage. The double sided black-on-white and white-on-black rendering of the “beat it,” text only amplifies this notion, as does the paper-like quality of the drywall. Furthermore, as of the production of *Beat It*, text (or text-as-image) has only appeared one other time in Gilmore’s entire oeuvre, in a piece called *A Roll in the Way* (2014), conceived around the same time as *Beat It*, but created just one week prior at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT.

Unlike the many painterly and expressive messes she has left in her deconstructive wake previously; the ultimate composition of *Beat It* is arrived at through a process of construction. The final few minutes of *Beat It* show Gilmore building a rooftop for herself as she lifts and covers the empty, ocular orifice above her with the drywall debris at her feet. Appearing almost in miniature compared to the shreds of oversized text surrounding her, there are moments when Gilmore appears as though she’s within a live-action animation of a Barbara Kruger collage.

Kruger is a master at destabilizing meaning through the technique of re-contextualization, examining our relationships, and particularly women’s relationships, to power through critical and collaged compositions of mass-mediated language and imagery. *Beat It* follows in Kruger’s own wake, as the words “beat it,” begin to shift and take on multiple meanings in these final moments of Gilmore’s video. The words begin to not only reference the Michael Jackson song and direct Gilmore’s action, but also become a message laid out and directed up towards those of us watching the scene unfold from above. *Get! Go! Scram!*

A top-down view is one of power and hierarchy. It is one of management, order, and control. By the end of *Beat It*, just before Gilmore finally disappears beneath her nest-like ceiling of scraps, it becomes clear what Gilmore has been up to the entire time and, indeed, potentially her entire career; working to deny that top-down view from the bottom-up.

Danny Orendorff
Curator-in-Residence and Interim Director of Artistic Programs
for The Charlotte Street Foundation
Kansas City, Missouri
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End Notes

¹ Gilmore, Kate, "The Clintons," *Art in America*, March 8, 2013, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/the-clintons/>

² Ritche, Kevin, "Q&A: Bob Giraldi on Directing 'Beat It,'" *Boards*, July 7, 2009, accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.true-michael-jackson.com/true-stories/bob-giraldi-on-directing-beat-it/>

³ Art historian Julia Bryan Wilson examines the legacy and labor of female arts administration in the chapter "Lucy Lippard's Feminist Labor" within her book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴ Brooks, Rosetta. "Rip it Up, Cut it Off, Rend it Asunder" in *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, ed. Mark Sladen & Ariella Yedgar (London: Merrell Press, 2007), 46.

Exhibition Checklist

My Love is an Anchor, 2004
single-channel video, sound, 7:05 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

With open arms, 2005
single-channel video, sound, 5:39 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Main Squeeze, 2006
single-channel video, sound, 4:59 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Wallflower, 2006
single-channel video, sound, 16:49 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Star Bright, Star Might, 2007
single-channel video, sound, 7:20 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Between a Hard Place, 2008
single-channel video, sound, 9:00 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Built to Burst, 2011
single-channel video, sound, 5:54 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

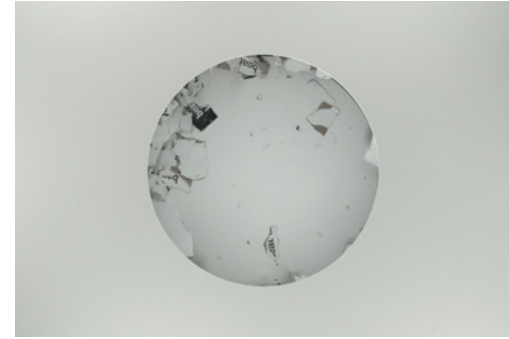
Love Em, Leave Em, 2013
single-channel video, sound, 60:32 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Beat It, 2014
single-channel video, sound, 15:47 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Beat It, 2014
sculptural installation and performance for video
Courtesy of the artist and H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute

Special Thanks

Kate Gilmore, Caitlin Horsmon, Jason Milford, Kevin Mullin, Joey Watson, Adriane Herman, Ben Gould, Ethan Heberer, Mark Spencer, E.G. Schempf, Cory Imig, Beverly Ahern, Michael Schonhoff, and Danny Orendorff



Beat It, 2014
installation view
Photo: E.G. Schempf

H&R Block Artspace
at the Kansas City Art Institute
16 East 43rd Street
Kansas City, Missouri 64111
www.kcai.edu/artspace

tel 816-561-5563

Hours
Tuesday-Friday, 12:00-5:00 pm
Saturday, 11:00-5:00 pm

Artists. Art. Ideas.

Celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2014, the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute is dedicated to artists, art and ideas. The Artspace presents exhibitions of contemporary art and a range of public programs for a growing audience of students, educators, artists, arts enthusiasts and the general public. Support for these programs has been provided by the H&R Block Foundation and the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency.

