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Cutter, Kimberly. "Marina Abramović Saves the World," *Harper's Bazaar*, October 10, 2013.

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ SAVES THE WORLD

For her next trick, the performance artist Marina Abramović wants to do nothing less than change the world.



It's near midnight on a balmy black August night in upstate New York, and Marina Abramović is standing on the front porch of her star-shaped country house (aptly named "Star House") monitoring her Kickstarter campaign. "Vere are ve now, Siena?" she asks Siena Oristaglio, her co-head of communications, in a low Slavic purr. "It's at \$265,000," Siena reports.

"Ah, this is great!" exclaims Abramović, who is often described as the world's greatest living performance artist and who, in recent years, has emerged as a pop phenomenon of near Warholian proportions—dancing at the Pace Gallery with Jay-Z for his performance piece *Picasso Baby*, gracing the pages of countless fashion magazines, and sharing a Manhattan town house with Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci. "You

see, everybody is donating now because of the Gaga video," Abramović continues. "Prada gave \$10,000 today. Dasha Zhukova gave \$10,000. Lady Gaga gave \$100,000 through Haus of Gaga."

The "Gaga video" is something Abramović and Gaga cooked up together when the singer visited Star House this past summer, to help Abramović raise money for her new project, the Marina Abramović Institute. The video, in case you haven't seen it, involves Gaga practicing the Marina Abramović Method, which means a lot of Gaga being naked and a lot of Gaga being blindfolded in the woods, and doing funky things like lying on the floor hugging an enormous crystal. It's easy to see why the video has already been spoofed a million times on the Internet, but it's also quite beautiful and moving. Almost as soon as Gaga tweeted it, it became clear that Abramović was going to reach her Kickstarter goal to raise \$600,000 in 30 days. "It's incredible, the difference it's made," Abramović marvels. "Ever since she put the video up, everyone is donating."

What exactly they are donating to is tough to explain—in part because the Marina Abramović Institute is very ambitious, and in part because it could easily sound very fruity, and in part because it isn't really about art. It's about *using* art, Abramović would say, as a way to access the spirit. "What I want is to raise human consciousness," she says. "Humanity is in huge crisis. People need to change their consciousness about the way they live, about the environment, about spirituality. There is so much confusion. I don't care about making my art anymore; people have lost their purpose. I want to help them find it."

At 66, Abramović is tall, buxom, and youthful-looking in the manner of a fairy-tale queen. Her black hair falls in a heavy curtain all the way to her waist. Her skin is creamy, her eyes dark and hypnotic, her mouth prone to a charming, sulky pout. Even after 12 years of living in New York, her Serbian accent is still in full effect (her assistants like to joke that the accent has actually gotten stronger since she moved to America), and when she gets excited Abramović tends to speak in a low, steady, mesmerizing rush that has an incredible stream-of-consciousness quality to it. This might be unnerving if it wasn't accompanied by a frank, earthy, Borscht Belt sense of humor ("How you describe Serbian beauty? Eyebrows together, teeth apart") and an eager, girlish enthusiasm that's hard to resist. "If you wanted to do the photo shoot tonight, at midnight, Marina would do it," Abramović's curator told me earlier, as plans were being made for the next day's shoot. "She'd be like, 'Yeah baby, let's do it now, in de voods.' "

At the moment, however, Abramović's team is arrayed around her on the porch of her splendid 26-acre estate, in various stages of exhaustion after the long drive up from New York, while Abramović herself stands by the screen door, too keyed up to sit. She's still thinking about Lady Gaga, and the thoughts are coming thick and fast. "Gaga reminds me of myself so much when I was young," she says. "Completely fearless."

The daughter of World War II Yugoslavian partisan leaders, Abramović made her name as a performance artist in the 1970s by doing things that most people would pay good money to avoid. Like whipping herself with a leather cat-o-nine-tails, leaping into a giant roaring star-shaped ring of fire (she lost consciousness and had to be pulled to safety), eating a huge raw onion like an apple, and inviting audience members to hold a loaded gun to her head. The goal then, and for much of Abramović's career, was to explore the physical and mental limitations of the body. But recently her work has taken a dramatic turn; what Abramović cares about now is consciousness.

"I had a vision while I was performing *The Artist Is Present*," Abramović says of her now legendary 2010 piece, which involved sitting motionless at a table at New York's Museum of Modern Art for up to nine and a half hours a day (no eating, no bathroom) every day the museum was open for almost three months, looking silently at anyone who sat down across from her. The piece became a full-blown cultural sensation, breaking attendance records at MoMA by attracting 850,000 visitors—including Björk, Isabella Rossellini, and Sharon Stone—many of whom waited in line all day for the opportunity to sit across from Abramović, and many of whom found themselves in tears. "For the first time, I saw the enormous need of the public for the art experience," Abramović continues,



"which I never really understood before." Something cracked open inside of her. "When I stood up from the chair, I was not the same person; I had this sensation of heart opening. There were lots of different people. Even the people who were angry, I loved them anyway—I did not plan it, but they broke down. And I understood that long-duration works of art can change your life."

Enter the Marina Abramović Institute—or MAI, as everyone calls it—a gigantic project based in an old brick theater in Hudson, New York, that will be dedicated to "opening the mind through long-duration performance art," and is slated to open in 2015. Rem Koolhaas and Shohei Shigematsu are designing the space, which will cost \$20 million to get up and running, and when it's done, anyone—artist or civilian—will be able to come inside, surrender their cell phone, put on a white lab coat, and partake in Abramović's "consciousness-raising exercises" (these range from slow-motion walking to counting grains of rice to

meditating inside a "Crystal Cave"), along with more standard artistic fare like opera and dance and music.

"MAI will be a kind of cultural laboratory," says Abramović, whose only requirement is that visitors pledge to spend six hours at the institute because, she believes, there are certain changes that can only happen over time. "What you get is the opening of your mind. I'm not preaching any new religion; I'm ritualizing everyday activities. You drink the water. You count the rice. You sit in Crystal Cave. You lie in Levitation Chamber. You push yourself to a new level."

Here's where the ambitious part kicks in. Ideally, Abramović wants to push the entire city of Hudson to a new level of consciousness. "Hudson is perfect because it is a small city that has every problem of the big city—corruption, black and white racism, poor and rich, good things, bad things," she explains. "I want every person in Hudson to experience the chambers because if I can change that community consciousness, then I can create a model society," she says, "and that would be really crazy."

If it all sounds a bit ... purple, well, it is. But one of the interesting aspects about Abramović is that when you're hanging out with her, you don't tend to think about the purpleness—all you really want to do is *try it out*. Check out that Levitation Chamber. Sit for a while in that Crystal Cave. Find out what it's like to go a few hours without touching your iPhone. See if you don't feel a bit clearer and calmer at the end of the whole thing.

Lady Gaga, apparently, had a similar reaction to Abramović, because she called her up this past summer and basically said, "Can I come do what you do for a few days?" "This kid is under so much pressure, so she came to me for a three-day retreat to learn to deal with it," says the artist, who gave Gaga, among other tasks, two pounds of lentils and rice all mixed together and made her separate them and count them all. ("She loved it," recalls Abramović. "She took a huge box on her plane to do it everywhere she is, when she gets nervous.") "Gaga has 40 million followers looking to her for how to live, and she thinks if she can find balance in her own life, she can help them find balance in theirs."

Whether Gaga's little monsters will count grains of rice and ascend to new levels of consciousness remains to be seen (as does the question of what the art world will make of Abramović's latest adventure), but Abramović herself does not seem concerned. "Daring is about not being afraid to experiment, and not being afraid to fail," she says. "It's about pushing yourself to get to the next level. It's always a possibility that we will fail," she adds, smiling, "but what if we succeed?"