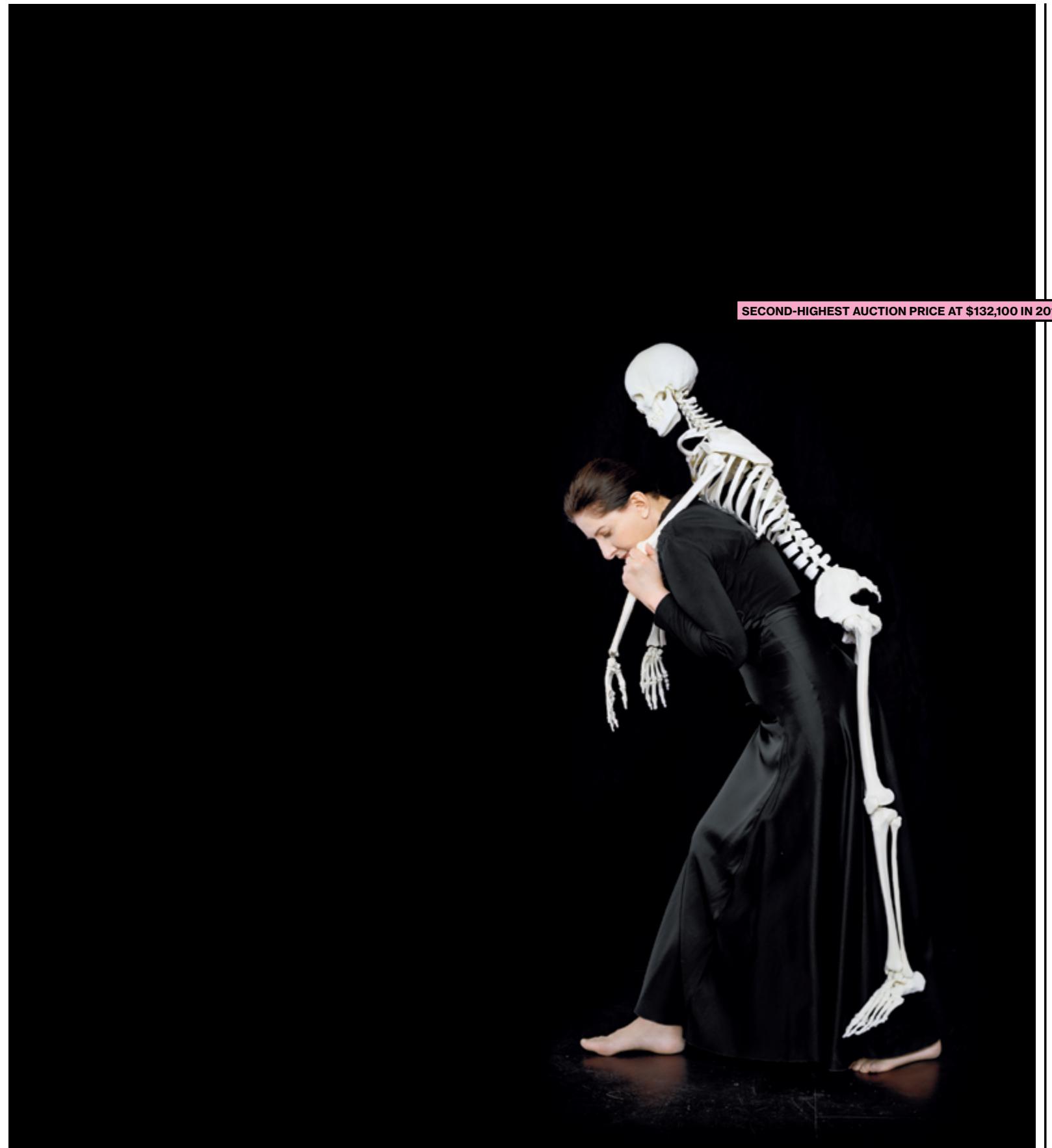


It Ain't Easy Being a Performance Artist

Marina Abramovic's bizarre struggle to turn her art into an institution, a legacy, and decent money
By Caroline Winter

For nearly three months, Marina Abramovic sat on a wooden chair in New York's Museum of Modern Art, six days a week, 8 to 10 hours a day, barely moving and never getting up, not even to eat or go to the bathroom. Her shoulders ached, her legs and feet swelled, and her ribs felt

as if they were sinking down into her organs. The punishing performance transformed her into an international celebrity and one of the world's most famous living artists.



SECOND-HIGHEST AUCTION PRICE AT \$132,100 IN 2014

Carrying the Skeleton I, 2008. Some of Abramovic's photographs, like this one, are staged rather than shot during actual performances.

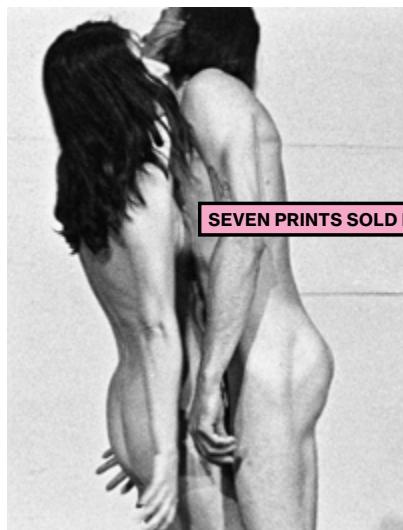
More than half a million people came to see the 2010 exhibit, titled *The Artist Is Present*. In addition to Abramovic herself, the retrospective featured rooms filled with films and photographs documenting works she'd created over four decades. Some 1,500 visitors, including Sharon Stone, Bjork, and Lou Reed, waited in line, and sometimes through the night, to sit across from the artist and bask in her gaze.

"Why did I have to kill myself for three months?" she would later ask. "I wanted to show the power of performance art, wanted to show how it can touch people's hearts."

Despite her fame, an Abramovic original isn't expensive—at least, not compared with contemporaries such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Gerhard Richter. While a single Koons sculpture fetches as much as \$58.4 million at auction, Abramovic's biggest sale to date was one of her material works, a 1996 sculpture called *Chair for Non-Human Use*, which sold for \$362,500 in 2011, according to Artnet, which tracks the art market. The chair has a quartz crystal backrest and iron legs that are 23 feet long. As for *The Artist Is Present*, Abramovic says she prepared for a year, sat for a total of 736 hours, and needed three years to recover from the physical and mental toll. Her fee, she says, totaled \$100,000.

Performance art has never been an easy way to make a living, even by the dire standards of artists. Collectors can't hang it on their walls or, perhaps more important, sell it at a profit. The form is innately ephemeral and self-consciously defies definition; many of the medium's stars, including Abramovic, make works based on time, space, their own bodies, and their relationship to an audience. That's hard to auction, though it's been done.

Most of the early stars of performance art, which has been practiced since the Renaissance but first gained mainstream attention in the 1960s, have retired or refocused on more profitable media, such as sculptures and paintings. At 68, Abramovic is an exception. "Marina has done more than anybody to define what performance art is and what it can be," says Julia



Relation in Space, 1976. At the Venice Biennale, Abramovic and Ulay, her lover and co-performer, repeatedly slammed into each other for an hour.

Until recently, Abramovic's relatively low earning power wasn't a problem. Her art income is enough to support four employees and two freelancers, although she's quick to point out that "Damien Hirst has 240, you know." She owns a loft in SoHo and a star-shaped country home in Malden Bridge, N.Y., acquired with money she made off one lucky real estate play. But now Abramovic, who's never professed much interest in money, is trying to raise some \$31 million for her planned Marina Abramovic Institute (MAI), a nonprofit organization to be located in a derelict 33,000-square-foot former indoor tennis center in Hudson, N.Y. The building's redesign is being led by Rem Koolhaas and Shohei Shigematsu of the architectural firm OMA. They aren't cheap, and they aren't donating their time, as many of Abramovic's famous friends do when she asks for help.

Abramovic hopes the institute will be her legacy, a platform for performance art, and a destination for artists, scientists, and thinkers. Admission will be free, she says, and visitors will be invited to don white lab coats and take part in the "Abramovic Method," a series of exercises designed to improve focus, endurance, and sense of self. These include, for example, walking backward through the woods for hours while looking into a hand mirror.

"If I can change human consciousness, even the slightest bit, this is my job," she says.

But changing consciousness and raising millions are endeavors not often in sync, as Abramovic found last December at Art Basel Miami Beach, arguably the world's most important intersection of art and commerce, attended by everyone from billionaire Steve Cohen to pop star Miley Cyrus. There, Abramovic hosted a number of events to raise awareness for her institute, but failed to raise any money. She had visitors take naps on cots in the art fair's convention center, surrounded by billions of dollars worth of art, and taught them



Rhythm 10, 1973. Stabbing between her fingers in this audiotaped performance, Abramovic picked up a new knife every time she cut herself.

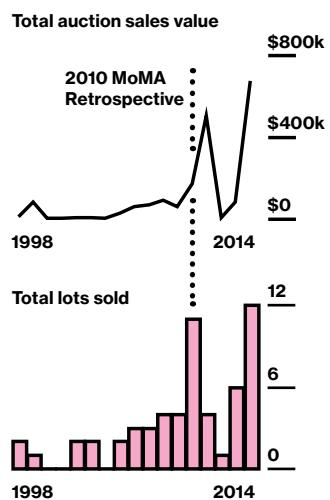
to walk in slow motion, taking up to an hour to complete a loop that would ordinarily take less than a minute. She encouraged them to sit at tables designed for Abramovic by architect Daniel Libeskind and participate in an exercise called Counting the Rice, which involves sorting uncooked lentils and rice grains for a minimum of six hours. ("How do you write 1 million million million million?" asked one 5-year-old girl, looking to document her progress after 10 minutes.)

One evening, select invitees, including artists, music industry agents, and collectors, muted their phones and rode an elevator to the seventh-floor lounge of the National YoungArts Foundation's headquarters in Miami. They spent more than an hour in silence, sipping pinot grigio and munching, as quietly as possible, on truffle oil chips and popcorn. The artist was conspicuously not present, but no one was crazy enough to break the gag order and ask why. Finally Abramovic breezed in, dressed all in black, as she usually is, except for red shoes. "I'm sorry to be late, I'm so sorry," she

"Basically we would go from place to place, and the amount of money for performance was \$150, \$50, \$60, or nothing"



Abramovic at Auction



DATA: ARTNET

PREVIOUS SPREAD: FROM LEFT, ANDREW H. WALKER/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY THE MARINA ABRAMOVIC ARCHIVES. THIS SPREAD: FROM LEFT, COURTESY THE MARINA ABRAMOVIC ARCHIVES (2); PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK FEINREIZMAN FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

declared. It turned out she'd been stuck in traffic caused by protesters for nearly two hours. "I hope you enjoyed your silence," she continued with a sly smile. "Thank you for trusting me to do all these strange things."

Two weeks after Art Basel Miami, Abramovic is back in her SoHo loft, a modern flat with a spacious living room and an enormous walk-in closet filled almost exclusively with neatly hung black clothing. "The best part is the bathtub," she says. "I mean look, it's enormous." In person, Abramovic is motherly, generous in nature, and, for the most part, calls everybody "baby" (as do her assistants). Her pale skin is unlined, and she has long black hair and full, slightly crooked lips. "Do you want a cappuccino?" she asks, before settling into a designer couch made from quilted gray cloth. "Illy gave me this beautiful machine. I'm not making it so perfect yet. I'm learning."

Many of Abramovic's belongings are gifts, it seems. Her close friend Riccardo Tisci, creative director at Givenchy, supplies her with clothing. On the floor in the living room sits a pile of crystals, including one the size of a football, given to her the previous

night by Lady Gaga, who has been using the Abramovic Method to help cut down on smoking and anxiety. According to Abramovic, Gaga now carries rice and lentils with her everywhere. They'd been at a party for James Franco, and David Blaine, an old friend, helped Abramovic lug the crystal home.

Abramovic was born in Belgrade, the capital of what was then Yugoslavia. Her parents were national heroes who fought the Nazis during World War II and were rewarded with high positions in Josip Broz Tito's communist government. Privileges included foreign travel, a seaside villa, maids, and lessons in French, English, and piano. But Abramovic's parents fought incessantly, and her father left the family for another woman. Her mother, Danica, was severe and unsympathetic, subjecting her daughter to a strict 10 p.m. curfew until well into her 20s.

Partly in response to her "militaristic" upbringing and a growing interest in political protest, Abramovic began experimenting with performance art at Belgrade's Student Cultural Center. During the '70s, she performed a series of extreme works. She screamed until, three hours later, she lost her voice. She danced for eight hours until she collapsed. She created

a giant star from wood chips, lit it on fire, then lay amid the flames until she passed out from lack of oxygen and had to be rescued by onlookers. In *Rhythm 0*, one of her most famous pieces, Abramovic placed 72 objects on a table, including nails, a rose, perfume, a bullet, and a gun, and gave her audience permission to use them on her. Over the course of six hours, they kissed her, cut her clothes, and put a knife between her legs. One person loaded the gun and placed it in her hands.

On her 29th birthday, Abramovic met Frank Uwe Laysiepen, a West German artist known as Ulay, and fell in love. A few months later, she ran away to Amsterdam to be with him. They collaborated for the next 12 years, five of which they spent living in a black Citroën van. “We didn’t need to pay electricity, we didn’t have telephone, we didn’t need to pay for apartment,” says Abramovic. “Basically we would go from place to place, and the amount of money for performance was \$150, \$50, \$60, or nothing.”

The couple also worked many odd jobs. “We milked the goats in Sardinia to get sausages and bread.... We made [sweat-

ers] and sell them on the market,” says Abramovic.

For one month, Abramovic even worked as a mail carrier in London—which didn’t end well. “First it took me so long time to deliver all the letters,” she says. “And I decide that every letter who was written with typewriter machine must be bad news or a bill, and I throw them away. And I only deliver letters written by hand and become much faster. Only beautiful letters. After four weeks working, they could not prove anything, but they asked me to give back uniform, which I did.”

Abramovic says she never got money from her family after leaving Serbia but didn’t worry about finances. “I never felt I was poor,” she says. “How can I explain, I always had this feeling that I’m OK, you know? Even if I didn’t have the money, I never had the panic like other people or made compromises.” After Ulay got involved with another woman, the couple agreed to create one last performance together in 1988. Funded with a grant from the Dutch government, they spent three months walking toward one another along China’s Great Wall from opposite ends and finally met to say goodbye. Heartbroken, Abramovic returned to Amsterdam and began teaching at various art academies across Europe. “There were moments where I wake up and wanted to switch on light, and there was no light because I didn’t pay bills, or no heat,” she recalls. “I just lie on the bed and laugh and laugh and laugh and think this is really disaster but, OK, let’s start the day and see what I can do.”

In the early ’90s, Abramovic had lunch with a gallery owner, Sean Kelly, at a cafe on Spring Street in SoHo. “I knew of Marina and had spent a number of years trying to avoid her,” recalls Kelly. After all, her unconventional work was hard to sell. But she persuaded him to



Rest Energy, 1980. Abramovic and Ulay lean back to create tension in the bow. Meanwhile, small microphones attached to the artists’ chests record their quickening heartbeats.

12 PRINTS SOLD FOR \$27,000 IN 2006



The Great Wall Walk, 1988. To end their 12-year relationship with a performance, Abramovic and Ulay started at opposite ends, met, then said goodbye.



SOLD FOR \$362,500 IN 2011, AN ABRAMOVIC HIGH



Chair for Non-Human Use, 1996. Roughly 23 feet tall, the chair has a quartz crystal backrest.

represent her, and they have worked together since. (She’s also represented by three other galleries around the world.)

“I knew that if I met her, I would end up working with her,” he explains. “And I hadn’t figured out how the hell I could support that practice.”

Early on, they began mapping out a strategy for her career. Their first move was to print and frame 12 stills from Abramovic’s pre-Ulay performance pieces, which sold to “enlightened, philanthropic collectors” for as little as \$3,500, says Kelly. Early investors were likely looking to support Abramovic rather than turn a profit, but those same works now fetch about \$45,000.

With Kelly’s guidance, Abramovic also began creating objects to sell alongside her performances. “Sometimes it would be a photograph, some-

times a video.... The scale would change and whether it was in

black and white or color.” Over the next decades, Abramovic’s prices rose considerably. “The early video pieces in small editions are €150,000 or €250,000,” says Kelly. “The photographs are normally up to about €100,000.” In October the gallery staged her latest New York exhibition. Viewers were made to put on blindfolds and headphones before being led into a space and left there, blind and deaf, to do as they pleased. They couldn’t see or buy anything. “There’s nothing to capitalize on,” Kelly points out. “It was free to the public, I paid all the bills...but we recognize that it’s a big-picture long-term investment in her as a brand.”

It is possible for “immaterial” artists to make money off the performance itself, of course. In the late 1950s and early ’60s, French conceptual artist Yves Klein sold a series of “immaterial zones,” or empty spaces within Paris, in exchange for gold. His patrons would then watch as he threw half of the payment into the Seine; the transaction was completed when the purchaser burned a certificate of authenticity confirming the amount of gold transferred. Contemporary British-German artist Tino Sehgal has sold several performance pieces to museums, including MoMA and the Guggenheim. He provides no written contracts, insists that the directions for reenacting his works be delivered via word-of-mouth, and requires that collectors never photograph or film his “constructed situations.” Online auction house Paddle8 last year sold a one-time performance by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson for more than \$36,000.

Like many artists, Abramovic has taken the corporate dollar. Last summer she collaborated with Adidas, lending the shoe company one of her and Ulay’s 1970s works, *Work/Relation*, for a World Cup commercial. In the three-minute, black-and-white film, 11 performers wearing Adidas sneakers demonstrate that the most efficient way to carry stones from point A to point B is through teamwork. “Marina Abramovic, sellout?” asked *New York* magazine after the commercial aired. The magazine was not her only critic.

\$2,500+ PER SEAT DINNER



An Artist’s Life Manifesto, 2011. For this event, Abramovic created human table décor.

Abramovic was surprised by the reaction and insists she did the ad primarily for exposure and to reach an audience that might not yet know about performance art. She was paid about \$150,000, she says, and spent \$50,000 producing the film, a pittance compared with Kanye West’s reported \$10 million contract with Adidas or basketball star Kevin Durant’s \$300 million deal with Nike. “I’m not sorry,” says Abramovic. “It was the right thing to do for my institute.” In the past, she points out, art was sponsored by the pope, aristocrats, and kings. They don’t seem as interested in art anymore. “Now it’s sponsored by industry and

“People have very old-fashioned view that artists should have nothing”

by individuals—that’s the reality.” As for endorsing Adidas, she says, “People have to wear shoes, so what’s the problem with black shoes with three stripes. I don’t get it.... People have very old-fashioned view that artists should have nothing, for some reason. But I don’t understand why I should be paid less than the plumber who comes to fix your toilet.” Unlike most plumbers, however, Abramovic is in demand on the lecture circuit, and her fee is around \$15,000.

It’s in real estate, however, that her appetite for strange situations truly pays off. “I have an intuition for real estate, just like for art,” she says. “You know, it’s so interesting, the basic money, it doesn’t come from my sales. It comes from completely another story.” In the late ’80s she bought a run-down, six-story house in Amsterdam that had been seized by a bank. “It was terrible,” she remembers. “I mean, baroque ceilings, beautiful cast marble fireplaces, but like 35 heroin addicts living there.”

Abramovic had \$5,000 for a down payment, which she’d earned selling Polaroids she shot with Ulay, but she needed a mortgage. Banks weren’t interested, she says, explaining that Dutch law is protective of squatters. Abramovic went to neighbors for help, and finally someone explained that a drug dealer lived on the second floor and kept the addicts there so no one would buy the place. As Abramovic recalls, “The next day, I go, and I ring the bell, and this guy opened the door, and I go up, and there is like a table full of every kind of coke, heroin, grass, LSD, ecstasy, and a pistol on the floor. And he’s looking at me with bloodshot eyes and says, ‘What do you want?’”

CONSTRUCTION COSTS UNCLEAR



Future site of the Marina Abramovic Institute in Hudson, N.Y. The former community tennis center, which Abramovic bought for about \$1 million, may cost up to \$31 million to renovate.

Marina sat down and poured out her heart. Finally, as she tells it, the dealer said, “OK, I think I like you, so this is the deal we’re going to do: I will get the old guys out. You will get the mortgage, and you buy this house, but then you have to come to me with a contract for the lowest social rent, and I can stay forever.”

Abramovic took the deal, and when she returned the next day the heroin addicts were gone. “I take the huge rubbish container, and I throw everything out: old curtains, furniture, s---,” she says. “The third bank I call gave me the mortgage.” To make sure no one snapped up the house before the contract was signed, Abramovic had the drug dealer temporarily move a few heroin addicts back in. “I told him, about 15 will do.” Over the next 25 years, Abramovic says she put roughly \$30,000 into the place. The drug dealer and she became friends; he cleaned up and ultimately moved out. Years ago, she sold the house for roughly \$4.5 million and bought a series of New York properties, some of which she later sold at a sizable profit, including one apartment that earned her at least \$350,000.

She also bought the institute, a grand brick building in Hudson, a formerly down-on-its-luck upstate town now haggling with gentrification. The structure was previously a theater, then a sports center, and the inscription above the entrance still

reads “Community Tennis.” White paint is flaking off its four Corinthian columns. Abramovic has donated the structure, which she bought for close to \$1 million, to MAI, her nonprofit, which is currently headquartered in a shared office in Manhattan. In terms of fundraising for the project, Abramovic says she’s “nowhere. Seriously.” In 2013 she completed a successful Kickstarter campaign, in which donors were awarded with hugs and Marina swag. The posted reward for those who gave \$10,000: “Marina will do nothing. You will do nothing. You will not be publicly acknowledged.” The campaign raised more than \$661,000, but that money won’t even cover Koolhaas’s preliminary designs. Proceeds from the Adidas commercial, meanwhile, covered only a few months of operational costs.

In November, Thanos Argyropoulos, a Greek financier who is producing one of Abramovic’s film projects, volunteered to come on as MAI’s managing director. His résumé includes a stint as adviser to Greece’s Ministry of Culture, where he says he helped slash the budget. “Wherever I show up, it means there’s trouble—something needs restructuring,” he says.

Argyropoulos is donating his time, because he’s a fan of performance art and says Abramovic could use the help: “To put it in business school terms, Marina would ace strategy but fail corporate finance.” He thinks the \$31 million figure is, maybe, a bit high and that building costs can be reduced to as little as \$7.5 million. “We perhaps did not need such a pharaonic, spectacular headquarters,” he explains. To pay for upkeep and operations, Argyropoulos says MAI will earn money by hosting international performance art events and workshops abroad.

In the meantime, Abramovic abides, undaunted. “If I’m not able to get the money to make the institute run, I will make workshop with entire city of Hudson, for free of course,” she says. “I can always go back to immateriality.”

ONE SOLD FOR ABOUT \$100,000 IN 2014



Counting the Rice table, 2014. Daniel Libeskind designed this desk for free to help raise money for the Marina Abramovic Institute.