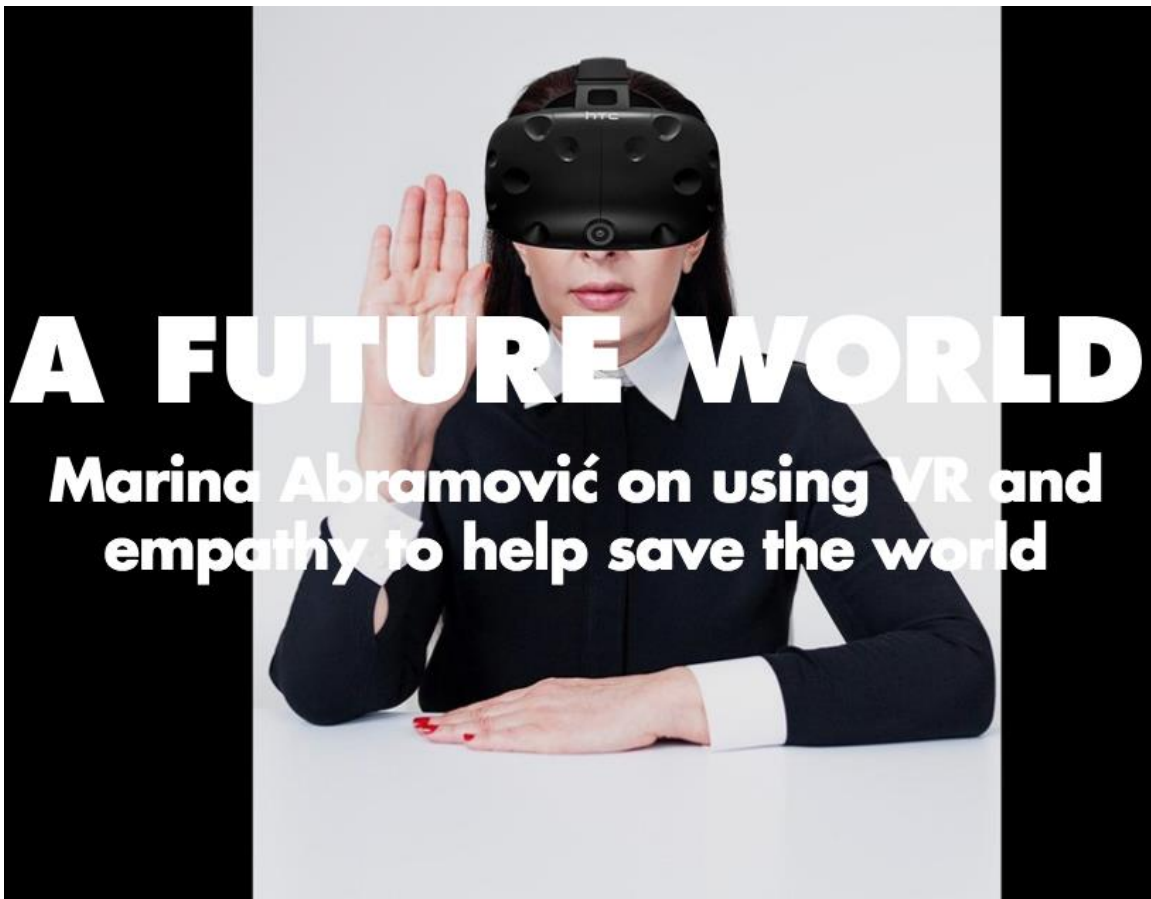


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A FUTURE WORLD

Marina Abramović on using VR and empathy to help save the world

The performance artist speaks on becoming an avatar, her prophecy for the next 100 years, and shares personal advice on how to love the Earth

Marina Abramović is nestled in her bed when the Skype video window opens to her face. It's 10 am in New York City, where she's lived since 2001. "It's such a grey day here," she groans into the microphone. "There are no leaves on the trees." I glance outside my window. "It's raining in London," I reply. But the day's gloomy demeanour is just a blip of concern in our conversation. I've phoned Abramović to gauge her thoughts on the increasing climate crisis as her VR experience *Rising* (2018) goes on show at the Venice Biennale.

Rising summons these fears to the surface as a virtual avatar of Abramović stands in a glass box slowly filling with water. As she beckons to approach her,

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she suddenly disappears and virtual me is dropped into the middle of the Arctic sea, alone on a wooden dock rocking turbulently against the swell as ice caps melt and plummet into the water around me. Back in the room with the glass tank, the water succeeds over Abramović's head. She gasps and gurgles until she drowns. It's frightening and overwhelming, and I've only experienced it via the app on my phone. "It is very different when you are surrounded by the image," she warns. "You really feel it with VR because the brain believes what you see is true. So it is very important that this experience is in the VR space." She adds that the player will be standing on a real moving platform: "So you really feel like you're going to fall into the sea. It makes you really panicky."

Rising first debuted in 2018 at Stockholm's Brilliant Minds conference (an arm of Stockholm Symposium), as part of the launch of VR arts platform Acute, with Jeff Koons and Olafur Eliasson. After decades of working in the real world with her groundbreaking, time-based performances, Abramović traded her human form into the digital realm to create an avatar of herself. She realised that if she wanted to impact the next generation of policymakers, she had to voice the call-to-action in a language most familiar to them; cutting edge technology. "I was really interested in the idea of videogames and how children are playing the games that are based on aggression, violence, and fear. I was thinking about how I could reach a young audience," she explains. "You need to use their tools; VR and video games. That was the best way for me to reach the audience I might not have been able to reach. I created a situation when they could experience fear and the imbalance of certainty, to see what we can do individually about this."



Marina Abramović, still from the behind the scenes of Rising Courtesy of Acute Art

Her tactic is not only to target new audiences with the experience but to tap into their emotions, and Abramović thinks that empathy evoked in the virtual world

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could drive them to real-world action. In *Rising*, her avatar contemplates: “If immersive play will increase empathy for the present and the future victims of climate change, and how this experience with affect players’ consciousness and energy. In real life, when someone rescues another person or offers aid of any kind, there is a transfer of energy. The recipient of the help and the provider of aid are both affected by the experience. Will the same happen in virtual reality?”

For decades, Abramović has used art as a tool to confront us with truths we often don’t want to accept. As an artist living in a country whose president denies that climate change is occurring, it’s unsurprising that she has lent herself to the growing crisis. “Even with all the data, Donald Trump doesn’t want to say it exists. It’s alarming. I’m so afraid that we will actually experience this in our lifetime,” she observes. “The world is racing towards the effects of global warming.” And while *Rising* may feel like a dystopian world far from our own, Abramović’s vision could be closer to reality than first appears. In fact, the artist predicts that in the next 100 years, we might have to live digitally, experiencing the world only through our own avatars. “I believe the science fiction of the 1970s has become a reality,” she says, her tone ominous. “It’s not actually fiction anymore. I am living in New York and it’s going to be flooded. We will all be in boats around here.”

Despite mounting evidence of rising sea levels, raging wildfires, and increasing surface temperatures, the world at large, including its leaders, has failed to act effectively on climate change. Although Abramović is wary of mixing the roles of artist and activist, she is aware that she holds a responsibility. “I really believe that artists are servants of society who have a duty to communicate certain messages,” she says. “Artists need to convey a message that can have multiple layers, and art can definitely say words and influence the way our society thinks.”

She offers *Rising* as an example. “Everybody who has done (*Rising*) had an emotional experience. I think this emotional experience can actually turn into action on their side – this is the basic idea. That you can be emotionally touched because of your own experience of seeing the melting (ice) in front of your eyes. You start thinking about what you can do on your own to change that.”

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Marina Abramović, still from the behind the scenes of Rising Courtesy of Acute Art

Abramović cites a video game she played in a restaurant in the north of Japan during the 90s as having had an influence on her desire to work with technology. “They had a video game where you could actually be a firefighter. You ran into an orphanage to save the babies before they got burnt. I remember having like 15 babies in my art and running out of the fire and being so incredibly proud,” she recalls. “This feeling of accomplishment. Even if you know it was a videogame and even if you know it was not true, the video game was still so strong and emotional that it never left me. When I was thinking about this videogame, I was thinking the same thing. That you can actually do something good. This feeling of accomplishment and of achieving something is waking up something in you to change the world.”

While the outcome of *Rising* is currently just a fantasy, Abramović’s outlook on our reality is just as bleak. “I really don’t feel hopeful about the future,” she sighs. “I think that our planet’s evolution is going through natural processes of self-destruction. There is so much damage that is irreplaceable. Only when there is some serious natural disaster, then we can wake up. It is like we are sleeping. In evolution, there have always been wars when millions of people die. Then history changes and we become optimistic again. This time, it looks like it is going to be a natural disaster to change something.”

But it doesn’t mean she’s given up on an individual level. She shares that she is “really aware of switching off the lights”, given the amount of energy consumed in a 24-hour city such as New York. Although she reveals that this behaviour stems back to growing up in communist Yugoslavia. “It comes from poverty,” she says. “But I still have the same principles, even if I can pay my electric bills.” Abramović is also conscious of plastic bags, running water, and food waste. “This is stuff I’ve

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started processing which I didn't do before. To apply this to everyday life is what it is all about," she says. "You need consciousness in everyday life. There are billions of people, so we can definitely change something."

"Wake up every morning and really generate love for the planet," she advises. "Sign the contract with our planet; to do something every day that is good. At least one good thing that can help heal it."

Rising, a virtual reality artwork by Marina Abramović and produced by Acute Art, is being presented by Phi during the 58th Venice Biennale at Palazzo Ca' Rezzonico



Marina Abramović, still from the behind the scenes of Rising. Courtesy of Acute Art Courtesy of Acute Art