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Step Inside the Factory Where Superstars Make Their Art

Adam Lowe fabricates work for Marina Abramovic, Maya Lin, Anish Kapoor, and many more in a Willy Wonka-style factory outside Madrid.

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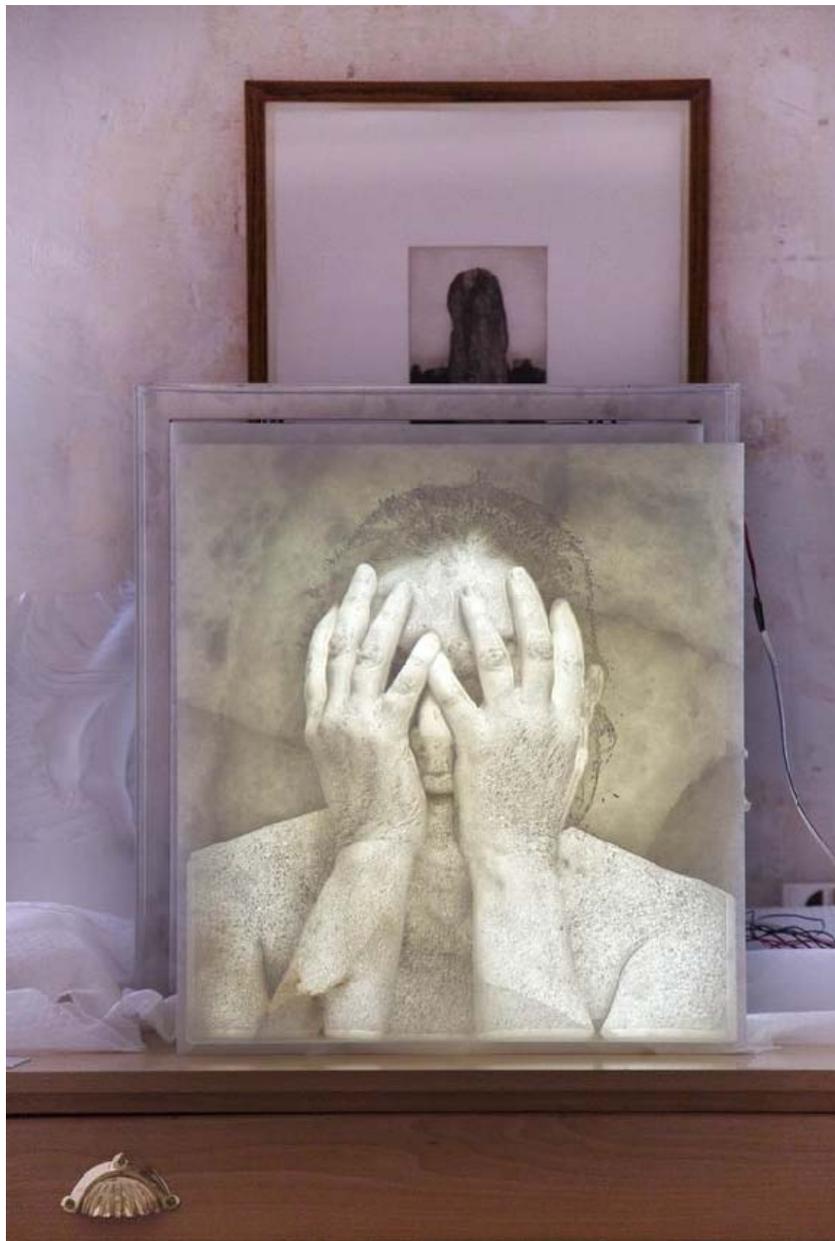
Lowe and Abramovic in the Madrid studio of Factum Arte.
Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

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On a sunny February afternoon in Madrid, the performance artist Marina Abramovic is going over a list of things she wants to create for her coming solo show at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. For starters, there's something she calls a "fountain."

"The fountain is me, made out of glass," she explains, speaking in a Slavic-accented English that's delivered in a soft near-monotone. "But out of everything—my nose, mouth, eyes, breasts, fingertips—comes blood."

Abramovic is most famous for her feats of endurance. In 2002 she lived in a gallery without food for 12 days. In 2010, for a piece titled *The Artist Is Present*, she sat in a chair in the atrium of New York's Museum of Modern Art for more than 700 hours, locking eyes with any stranger who sat across from her.



A three-dimensional rendering of Abramovic, carved in alabaster.
Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

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In Madrid, she's sitting in an apartment above [Factum Arte](#), an art fabrication company, leveling her gaze at Adam Lowe, Factum's founder and the man who'll help her translate her art from performances to objects. For the next several months, she'll work with the company's 50 technicians and artisans to make dozens of artworks, including a table covered with 10,000 glass tears and a statue of the artist eating herself.

Another project will charge Abramovic with enough electricity that she can extinguish a candle by pointing at it. "It's generating a million volts of static," Lowe says. "If it goes wrong, it's a killing machine." In addition to the works that will be exhibited in London, some of what's produced at Factum will be sold through her various galleries.

Abramovic isn't known for her sense of humor, but she probably should be. When she notes, "I really hope not to put too much ego into anything that I do. ... I like to keep it light," it's unclear at first if she's joking. But Lowe, who's been pecking away at a laptop while Abramovic talks, bursts into laughter. "You've just talked about making a sculpture of yourself with blood flowing out of every orifice," he says. "You can't then talk about 'keeping it light.'"

Since founding Factum in 2001, Lowe has established a similar repartee with a who's who of the contemporary art world: the sculptor Maya Lin, best known for designing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington; Anish Kapoor, who dreamed up Chicago's famous bean-shaped *Cloud Gate*; and Jenny Holzer, whose conceptual art includes the *Truisms*, one-line sentences splashed across building facades. Like a popular high school teacher, Lowe will bounce around possibilities with visiting artists, helping them to figure out how to make their ideas tangible.

"By pushing boundaries, there's nearly always a commercial advantage"

What comes out of Factum's Madrid factory ranges from giant golf balls made out of marble by Paula Crown to a full-scale olive tree—including its root structure—cast in brass. When I visit, one room holds a towering fiberglass sculpture of interlocked circles by Mariko Mori. Steps away from it is a row of El Anatsui's *Benchmarks* print series, which captures the topography of his work tables.

The vast size of many of the artworks in Factum, combined with the high-tech carving and 3D-printing machinery, gives room after room the air of a Willy Wonka factory, but one where art, not candy, is the treat of choice. Lowe, who presides over all of it, is here to make sure that the artists who enter have the tools, technology, and support staff to make whatever they dream up.

"There's a kind of community that's been built there," says Anatsui, who won the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in 2015. "You explore making art with the team there—it's a process of exploration."

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Workers in the Madrid foundry that Factum contracts with to create many of its artworks; from left: Charles Westgarth, Jenifer Vahos, and Carolina Ruiz.
Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

There's a common perception that "real" artists are in a garret somewhere working in tortured solitude. That idea isn't true today, and it wasn't 500 years ago. Rembrandt had a workshop so robust (and effective) that there's still an ongoing debate about which paintings are by him and which are by his assistants. Tintoretto devoted the last two decades of his life to painting the walls of Venice's Scuola Grande di San Rocco building and the interiors of the Doge's Palace; art historians agree that he rarely touched many of "his" studio's canvases during this period. Even John Chamberlain, the 20th century artist known for his crushed metal sculptures, rarely made them himself—he notoriously hated to weld.

Artists today still have studio assistants, but in the increasingly ambitious and moneyed world of contemporary art, they frequently turn to outside fabricators when the scale, complexity, or cost of their visions exceeds the scope of their studios. There are fabricators around the world: [Prototype New York](#) in Long Island City, Queens; [Mike Smith Studio](#) and [MDM Props](#), both in London; and [Carlson & Co.](#) in San Fernando, Calif., to name a few. Often artists will use a few fabricators based on the location of the project.

Lowe and Factum Arte occupy an unusual place in many artists' practices. But when they work with him, regardless of the final destination of their projects, artists almost always come to the factory in person. "Casting fabricators look very similar to [Factum], but in other facilities, you do it, pay the bill, and it's done," Abramovic says. At Factum, "it's really a process of cooperation and research, which is very different."

Lowe attributes Factum's success to its ability to help artists test the limits of what's possible, sometimes through new technologies and materials but also conceptually. "By pushing boundaries," he says, "there's nearly always a commercial advantage for the people you're working with."

Lowe, 59, is tall with dark hair and is perpetually in motion. "I think I can persist in pretending I'm young quite successfully," he says. "I genuinely feel about 30." He favors loose-collared shirts and khakis, and he speaks, often quite breathlessly, with an upper-class English accent.

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He was born in Oxford, and after studying at the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford, he got a master's from the Royal College of Art in 1985. About that time, his paintings began to appear in the British art scene with the work of the so-called Young British Artists, a group of stars that included Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Rachel Whiteread.



A fibreglass sculpture by Mori.
Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

Lowe's paintings were well-received, and they were acquired by a few British museums, but his career never skyrocketed in the same way that some of his peers' did. By the late 1990s he'd begun to explore different pursuits. "I was always too restless to just spend all of my time in the studio," he says.

He began to experiment with new printing techniques, "and I spent rather a long time doing that." Having found fulfillment in experimentation in artistic techniques, he says, "I didn't want to go on exhibiting in galleries. I'd lost interest in it completely." Instead, to make money, he began to do work for other artists, including Kapoor and the pop artist Richard Hamilton, helping them create prints and editions.

Lowe founded Factum Arte in 2001 with the artists Fernando Garcia-Guereta and Manuel Franquelo—a partnership that lasted "about two weeks," he says, at which point Lowe took over the company himself. Everyone parted amicably.

The initial aim of Factum was to "build bridges between specific new technologies and high levels of craftsmanship," he says. If the mission sounds vague, that's because it was. Lowe generally is open to doing anything, even if—especially if—he's never done it before. "If he can't do it, he'll figure out and invent a tool for you to do it," Lin says. "He's a bit of a mad scientist."

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Lowe brings a sophisticated understanding of what certain technologies can accomplish, but the connections he makes with artists come from a deeply esoteric knowledge base. He bonded with the artist Shezad Dawood, who's made work at Factum, around their shared interest in ancient Egyptian magic.

His first clients were drawn from his existing relationships—Kapoor, British sculptor Marc Quinn, Russian photographer Boris Savelev—and eventually through word-of-mouth he began to gain clientele beyond that first coterie of friends. His staff started at 4 people and now numbers 50 employees, along with about 60 contractors, including those who work at nearby foundries.



Inside the Factum studio.

Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

Such a substantial operation requires significant overhead, but Lowe doesn't talk about what it costs to produce work at Factum. "It's kind of like asking, 'How long is a piece of string?'" he says. "What I can tell you is that certain works' budget is not enough to cover their cost, while with other works, there's a profit margin in the job, because it's a repeat job—making an edition." When the factory makes editions, he says, "you can use the first [artwork] to work out a cost, and then you can say, 'Well, every other one will cost X.'"

But given that Factum is largely an extension of Lowe's own interests, he'll occasionally find himself paying for projects—or at least parts of projects—when they exceed their initial budget. Hrair Sarkissian, a Syrian-born, London-based artist, came to him with an idea for a work commissioned by a museum in Saudi Arabia, titled *Final Flight*. Sarkissian intended to chronicle the slow destruction of the northern bald ibis, a highly endangered bird whose nesting place was, to the horror of ornithologists, in the desert near war-torn Palmyra, Syria. His project entails a line of painted casts of the bird's skull in front of a laser-etched map of its former migratory route.

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For most artists, the cost would be fairly manageable—€15,000 (\$18,700) to make the casts of the birds’ heads—but for Sarkissian, who isn’t a well-known artist, that price tag “exceeded the budget by a lot,” he says. The museum that commissioned the work said they’d have to scale it down. Rather than ask the artist to compromise on his vision, Lowe made the work at a steep discount.

“I still get emotional about Adam’s gesture,” Sarkissian says. “He felt like there was something really important in the work and said, ‘We’ll do it. Don’t worry about the money for the moment.’ ”

In 2009, in part to offset such costs, Lowe founded the [Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Conservation](#), which uses the company’s resources to conserve and re-create some of the world’s greatest cultural works. “We were doing more work on a bigger scale, and we needed the Factum Foundation to find its own identity and raise its own finances,” Lowe says. It’s grown to four full-time employees, who work on projects that can range from scanning the tomb of the Egyptian King Seti I to reconstructing a shattered plaster equestrian statue by the neoclassical master Antonio Canova. After scanning the pieces of the latter, the foundation used software to create a 3D model of the original in order to reproduce it.

Factum Arte and the Factum Foundation share floor space in the facility, and the endeavors benefit each other. If Lowe develops software or technology for one, he’ll apply it to the other. The sheer variety of projects—and getting to feed off Lowe’s enthusiasm for those projects—contributes to the appeal for artists. “I love all of the foundation’s work,” says Dawood. “That’s part of what attracts me to Factum.”



Lowe and Abramovic in the apartment above Factum, going over their to-do list.

Photographer: Bego Antón for Bloomberg Businessweek

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There's always a lot riding on each of Factum's projects, but even in this rarefied art world air, Lowe's current work with Abramovic will be an historic achievement when it's complete. Her exhibition at the Royal Academy will be the first time a woman has had a solo show in the institution's 250-year history.

Inside the factory, Abramovic steps into the Veronica Choreographic Scanner, a machine that does a 360-degree body scan, as Lowe stands off to the side, observing. The data gathered will be used to create a 3D cast of her face. The room is also filled with tapestries, computer equipment, plaster busts, and two different teams of technicians.

While assistants help Abramovic extricate herself from the machine after the process is complete, Lowe wanders to a group behind him working on a 3D map of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. The project has been commissioned by the Bodleian Library at Oxford as part of the exhibition "[Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth](#)," which opens on June 1.

The map, Lowe says, "is actually four dimensions." The topography of Middle-earth has been created out of translucent Perspex, a material similar to Plexiglas, and sits between two digital screens that project images and colors from above and below. The hills are green, the oceans are blue, and animations, including the path that Bilbo Baggins takes on his journeys in *The Hobbit*, appear to rise out of the ground.

Abramovic walks by and peers over Lowe's shoulder. "So if I wanted to make my own journeys through the world, with all the countries I've been to, I could do something like this?" she asks.

Lowe loves the idea. "We could do it large-scale," he says. "It could fill a whole room! And we've got the data to make the relief." As he figures out how he would make it, his voice keeps rising. "It could really be something special."

"See? This is how it works," Abramovic says. "We talk, then comes the work, then it goes back again. It's endless, and it's wonderful."