



# MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ @ PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

24 September 2022 – 2 April 2023 (Extended until 30 June 2023)

A site-specific installation by Marina Abramović in the Pitt Rivers Museum,  
featuring her new video work 'Presence and Absence'.

In partnership with  
**MODERN ART  
OXFORD**



# Marina Abramović @ Pitt Rivers Museum

## The Artist's Research in the Museum

In the summer of 2021, the pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović undertook a research residency at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) in preparation for an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford (MAO). That residency inspired her 'Gates and Portals' exhibition at MAO and this installation at the PRM, which features new video work and drawings by the artist.

For Abramović, the residency was a kind of homecoming, as she had previously developed an exhibition for MAO in partnership with the PRM in 1995. Her now famous video work, 'Cleaning the Mirror', was devised and exhibited at the Pitt Rivers at that time.



On her return to Oxford in 2021, Abramović spent a month conducting research in the Pitt Rivers, reading, drawing and filming with the objects she had selected from the museum's global collections. She particularly focused on items associated with magic, rites of passage, sites of transition and transformative states of consciousness. When making her choices from among the tens of thousands of objects on display, Abramović stated that she was drawn to certain things by the powerful energies they emit, since she believes that "like human beings, animals and trees", they each have their own aura. Walking among the Pitt Rivers' densely packed displays of material from all over the world, Abramović said that she "did not choose the objects. They chose me".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Follow the artist's path through the displays using the trail at the back of this booklet.

Left: Omabar, smooth rounded pebble used as a love charm, Torres Straits, Australia.  
PRM 1889.34.129

*"The Pitt Rivers Museum is filled with tens of thousands of treasures reflecting the diversity and richness of cultures from all over the world. My research there could be never-ending."*

Marina Abramović

## The Case Display

The results of the artist's research can now be viewed in a large case display in the heart of the museum. Designed as a site-specific intervention in dialogue with the historic galleries of the Pitt Rivers, it presents one of the many objects that Abramović interacted with, the so-called 'Witch's Ladder', alongside the artist's responses to it: a set of drawings and a new video work entitled 'Presence and Absence'. This film was recorded during a day-long shoot behind the scenes in the museum, when the artist engaged with thirteen artefacts she had specifically chosen to take off-display.<sup>2</sup> In line with the intense bodily practice she is renowned for, Abramović interacted performatively with each item. First, she choreographed her hands around it, to sense its aura. Then, once the object had been removed, she held its energy in the empty space left behind.

For Abramović: "Emptiness is so important. I believe that when you sit in one position for a long period of time and then go away, the energy is still there. Energy stays in the space."

<sup>2</sup> Those objects - and the film showing the artist's interactions with each of them - can be viewed on the digital screen.

This concept was fundamental for the artist's celebrated long-duration performance at MOMA New York in 2010, when she sat at a table in silence for eight hours a day for three months and museum visitors took turns to sit opposite her, locking eyes with the artist and often experiencing powerful emotions. It is also related to Abramović's interest in the yogic and meditational practices of Tibetan Buddhism. In her conversations with Tibetan Buddhist teachers, Abramović had been introduced to the notion that emptiness can have a kind of fullness.<sup>3</sup>

When encountering the famously full Pitt Rivers, Abramović said that she experienced it as an enormous force field, replete with the energies of objects and of their former owners and users. In reanimating those energies, her work in the museum gives presence to absences. It also allows us to see the museum differently, through the eyes of one of the leading figures of the international contemporary art world.

<sup>3</sup> For a longer account of Abramović's interest in Tibetan Buddhism see 'Gates and Portals', MAO/Koenig, 2022.



Top: Still from the video *Presence and Absence*, Marina Abramović, 2022.

Bottom: Marina Abramović, *The Witch Ladder*, five drawings on paper, 2021.



## Thanks and Acknowledgements

The Pitt Rivers has been honoured to host Marina Abramović and her work at the museum. Our enormous thanks to Marina, to her Executive Director Giuliano Argenziano, and to all the team at her studio. We are very grateful to Paul Hobson, Director of MAO and his staff (especially Amy Budd, Dominic Czechowski, Hannah Healey, Jess Robertson, Clare Stimpson and Emma Ridgway) for making our partnership such a success. The Lisson Gallery generously loaned the 'Witch Ladder' drawings.


### Marina Abramović @ Pitt Rivers Museum

was curated by Prof. Clare Harris in collaboration with many staff of the PRM. Special thanks to: Nicholas Crowe, Philip Grover, Thupten Kelsang, James Horrocks, Katherine Clough, Louise Hancock, Zena McGreevy, Alan Cooke, Josh Rose, Jeremy Uden, Hannah Bruce, Catherine Booth, Karrine Sanders and the Director, Prof. Laura Van Broekhoven.

### Image Credits

All illustrations in this document are courtesy of Marina Abramović and the Pitt Rivers Museum.

### Photography

Tim Hand @tim\_hand\_photography 

### Book

For a book created by Marina Abramović exploring her PRM residency and the MAO exhibition see 'Gates and Portals', edited by Amy Budd, Dominic Czechowski and Clare Harris, MAO/Koenig, 2022.

*Objects left to right:*

Instrument for curing madness, Tibet.

PRM 1954.6.101

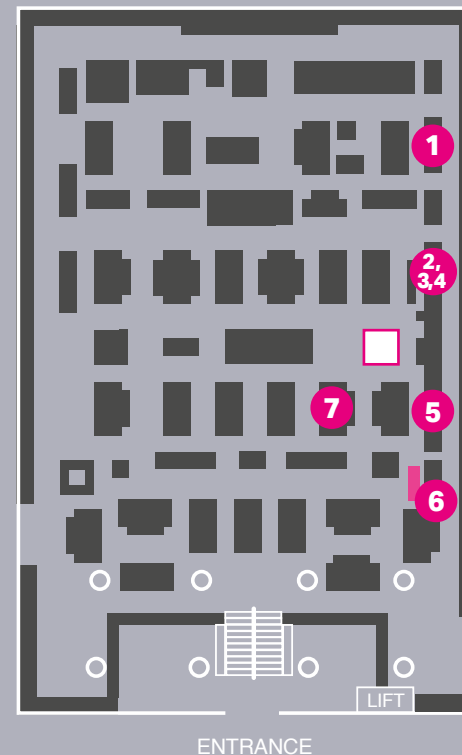
Agu-'nsi, figure used for divination, Nigeria.

PRM 1916.45.115



## Object Trail

Follow the artist's path through the displays to encounter some of the objects that attracted her attention.



1

Omabar, smooth rounded pebble used as a love charm, Torres Straits, Australia.

PRM 1889.34.129. Case C.61.A



2

Agu-'nsi, figure used for divination, Nigeria.

PRM 1916.45.115. Case C.31.A



3

Glass bottle said to contain a witch, England.

PRM 1926.6.1. Case C.31.A



4

Rowan tree crosses and loops used as protection against witchcraft, England.

PRM 1893.14.3-4; 1893.18.1-3 Case C.31.A



5

Instrument for curing madness, Tibet.

PRM 1954.6.101. Case C.27.A



6

Kamyana Baba, stone figure of a woman, Ukraine.

PRM 1890.30.1. Open display.



7

Tsa-tsa, votive object representing Palden Lhamo, the wrathful goddess of Tibetan Buddhism, Tibet.

PRM 1884.59.31. Case C.123.A



Location of installation



Digital screen



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