

## **Have you ever seen a tortoise yawn?**

### **Conversation between Shimabuku and Chiara Parisi**

**Chiara Parisi:** We will start talking about what is a show for you. As you have said once, in a way, your first exhibition had to do with an octopus that you placed in the refrigerator when you lived in San Francisco with another student who did not really like the idea of having this kind of animal in the house. Against all odds he became the spectator of his own fridge, inviting friends to see an artwork at his place.

**Shimabuku:** Yes, I lived in San Francisco as an art school student. It was already more than 20 years ago. When I started to live with my roommate, he begged me "Please don't put any fish or octopus in the refrigerator". He was from Kentucky; it wasn't at all a custom for him to eat fish in those days.

At the time, I said "OK ", but later, I started to think why couldn't I put what I liked in the fridge? Eating fish is my culture and the refrigerator also belonged to me. So one day, while my roommate was away, I bought some fish and octopus leg at a Japanese supermarket. Shortly after he came home, he noticed the fish and octopus in the refrigerator. As soon as he found them, he yelled "Ugh! ", I wondered if he would get mad, but all he did was call a friend on the phone.

The friend, who lived in the neighbourhood, came over immediately, and both of them took turns opening the refrigerator door over and over saying "Ugh!" each time. They seemed having a lot of fun.

That time something really happened between my roommate and me and even to my roommate's friend. So I called it "Exhibition in a Refrigerator". For me, an exhibition is a thing that makes some changes among people.

**CP:** Since this first experience, you have been working with animals (octopus, monkeys, dogs, birds...) and here, in Vassivière, you decided to bring a tortoise. An emblematic animal that is, among other things, evocative of eternity.

Does the presence of all these animals in your work signify an interest in another kind of reality, another vision of time, another way of communicating?

**Shima:** Animals are interesting because they have quite a different way of life than people. Sometimes, it is difficult to understand why it is so big, why it is so slow etc., but they have their own way, so you just have to accept them the way they are.

And looking at animals is captivating too. I think it is quite interactive. People will receive different things from them. For example, some people will see an octopus as a devil or a creature from outer space, but some will say: "It looks delicious!"

This time in Vassivière, I bring an African spurred tortoise in the Art centre. That is a work called "My Teacher Tortoise". I think people will be surprised when they will see a living tortoise, something they didn't expect in an exhibit room. But what I'm supposed to do is not only to surprise people. People would be able to walk into the tortoise's pen one by one. This way, people can get close to the tortoise; each of them will have a personal relationship with the tortoise.

In those days, I was thinking of making a work about "having a break" or "slowness", and then I had a chance to go to an aquarium. I met a tortoise there. It was a special area for kids, but on a weekday afternoon the place was empty, I could spend time alone with the tortoise for a long time. Of course, a tortoise is a typical creature that symbolizes slowness; actually it is maybe too typical. Because of that, I was looking for something different than a tortoise at the beginning. But after having the chance to look at a real tortoise in the aquarium, I was completely amazed. Have you ever seen a tortoise yawn? It was beautiful.

**CP:** I do hope that we will have the chance to witness the yawning of your tortoise. In the wood of sculptures, there is a billboard work: "Make animals smile". The audience is invited to think about their condition as viewers and, in the same time, about the condition of animals. Your work, especially on the island that is known for sheltering many animals, interrogates us about this possible inversion.

**Shima:** As a matter of fact, if there are people and animals in the same space, animals are looking at people too. But very often, people tend to forget about it. I wanted to mention this with humor. And on Vassivière island, the interesting thing is that the vast majority of the inhabitants are animals. You told me that there are only two people actually living on the island. If I recall correctly, it was you and another person who was taking care of the island, right? But there are quite many animals. So it seemed natural to make something for the island's animals.

**CP:** I also feel that the title of your exhibition *Man should try to avoid contact with alien life forms* is offering an extremely poetic interaction between the public and the animals, closely linked to the presence of the tortoise.

**Shima:** I found the sentence "Man should try to avoid contact with alien life forms" as a newspaper headline some time ago. And it was extremely poetic to me. But at the same time, I took it as a strong message. For me, it meant that we still have many things to do before trying to meet alien life forms. We still have some people to meet on this planet. There are many creature to encounter on this planet. We have to meet tortoise before alien life forms. In our society, we tend to believe something new or far is always better, but I doubt about it. (DELETED 2 sentences here) So I realized that sometimes it is better to stop.

But in fact, the article's meaning was quite different. Cosmologist Stephen Hawking coined the phrase. What he meant was more realistic. He said: "If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, with the catastrophic consequences we all know about."

I decided to use the sentence "Man should try to avoid contact with alien life forms" anyway, as a metaphorical way to say that stopping or turning back can be a positive experience.

**CP:** I am very touched by the extraordinary and beautiful coincidence of your name's meaning; 'Shimabuku' means both 'island' and 'bag'. This is also linked to your personality and your passionate need for creating and telling stories.

**Shima:** Actually, my name Shimabuku consists of 2 Chinese ideograms, the one for "Shima" means "island", and the one for "buku" means "bag" or "sack". It is very normal that Japanese names are made of 2 or 3 Chinese signs, but normally it makes sense. For example, famous Japanese novelist's name, Mishima means 3 islands. "Mi" means "3". "Shima" is the same ideogram than mine. The Artist's name Ono means "small field". "O" means small. "No" means field. Like these, most of Japanese people's names make sense, but my name doesn't make sense. I don't understand the combination of island and bag. It is quite mysterious to me since my childhood. Maybe it was my first real surrealistic experience. Something I can't understand about myself. I have lived with this feeling all the time together. I think it is very influential when I make a work. As you know, my work is often about special encounters between things.

**CP:** You often say that when you were 18 years old, you wanted to be a poet or a tour guide. It's true that your work deals with language, with the notions of fable, legend, and narrated stories.

**Shima:** Yes, I wanted to be a poet or tour guide when I was a teenager. For me, poet and tourist guide are similar, because they are showing something special to people. They lead the way to reach special places. So I feel what I am doing now is also similar to that.

**CP:** Thinking about your work, I see a lot of similarities between art and the culture of a given country. I especially thinking about the video that you present in the Studio here in Vassivière; you say about its title "Fish & Chips" that it is the "most poetic word combination in English cityscape."

**Shima:** "Fish & Chips", maybe it is a very normal combination for most people, but I think it is quite beautiful and poetic, because there is a meeting of the sea and the land here. And English cities are filled with those words! You will see "Fish & Chips" signs everywhere in England. For me, it is like a huge installation work made by people over a long period of time. When I was invited to the Liverpool biennial, I wanted to make a work relating to this "Fish & Chips" idea. So I decided to make a video work where chips, in essence a potato, are going to meet a fish underwater. I wanted to make my own "Fish & Chips".

**CP:** Did you shoot the video by yourself? Did you dive?

**Shima:** Yes, I dived by myself with an underwater camera. Though there were other divers assisting me.

**CP:** How did you make the potato swim so well?

**Shima:** Many people ask this question, but actually a potato is quite a good swimmer! That also amazes me. You should try to swim together with a potato once. It is a beautiful experience.

If I go back to your question about the relationship between my work and language, sometimes, some words become the starting point of my work. "Onion Orion" is a typical one. Maybe, some people or writers enjoy this kind of words playing on notebooks or in their head, but very few people realize it in reality. It becomes my art. "Onion Orion" is an interesting work. Ever since I made this work, whenever I look up at a starry sky, I see onions floating. And I think about ancient people who put names to constellations, people who saw Great Dipper and so on in the sky.

**CP:** I like this idea of constellation very much and I feel it is something that goes through your entire work with, along with the idea of taking some time apart to look at things which are close to us. In fact, I see all your works (such as "Flying me", "Leaves Swim", "Something that Floats / Something that Sinks") as the construction of a constellation that requires us to be slower, more contemplative maybe. Would you agree with that, to consider your work as a constellation?

**Shima:** I was never conscious about my whole work as a constellation. It is a beautiful and interesting metaphor, and maybe it is true. I am interested in constellation, because it is something where people see the relationship between stars, certain forms in the nothingness, in the abstract starlit sky. And it is something to put a name on something that didn't have a name before. I think my work is similar to that.

**CP:** Can you also talk about another work of yours "Ice Cream with Salt / Ice Cream with Pepper"?

**Shima:** That is the work I presented for the first time in my show with Pierre Joseph at Air de Paris in 2010. Then, after that, I had a little event to serve ice cream with salt and pepper at a gallery space in Today museum in Beijing. It was in a group show. Having some vanilla ice cream with salt and pepper, it sounds bad, but actually the taste is quite good. It is quite a miracle taste. You should try! "Ice Cream with Salt / Ice Cream with Pepper" is a small adventure and revolution in our daily life, but it can also be a metaphor. It is a kind of statement and a message for our whole life.

**CP:** It is not only this work, you often make works about food or cooking: "Cucumber Journey" in 2000, for example. What is the relationship between food or cooking and art for you?

**Shima:** I think cooking and art are similar. They are both about unexpected meetings of far away ingredients to create something delicious, something good. Both in art and in

cooking, a single ingredient can be used in so many different ways. You need creative imagination to question what's edible and what combinations might result in something delicious. It's also necessary to have the courage and openness to try them out.

**CP:** "Something that Floats / Something that Sinks", is also a work related to cooking.

**Shima:** Yes, when I was washing tomatoes in my kitchen, I discovered that there were floating ones and sinking ones. And I was wondering why. Maybe there was a scientific reason, but I decided later to show this as a mysterious thing. It is not interpretation, I want people to have the same experience I had in my kitchen. It may be such a little thing really, but in that respect, one thing I am doing throughout my art is giving a place for such little things.

**CP:** Can you tell about the work "Doing something you didn't plan to do"?

**Shima:** A golf practice cage is installed in the Art centre's Little Theatre. And visitors get to play golf, something that they didn't plan to do in a museum. There's always something that opens up when you do something you didn't think about doing. Even me, I never imagined to play golf. But one day, a friend asked me to play together, so I did it. I found it interesting. What was interesting is while I was starting to know a bit about golf, I also started to talk with some an man who had talking difficulties before.

**CP:** About the event you organized in Wales "Swansea Jack Memorial Dog Swimming Competition", you told me that many people thought you just documented an existing local event when they looked at the video and photos.

**Shima:** It became a really natural event, so I was also feeling that I was just documenting an event that's been going on for generations. Someone asked me "What's the purpose of organizing a dog swimming competition and call it art?" I answered I didn't have a choice, it actually had to be art because we live in a sad era in which things like this are only possible under the context of art. There used to be a time when the community leader or the goofy neighbour took it upon themselves to organize events and festivals around town. But now, in the name of efficiency, there are less and less people doing things that at first glance seem pointless. For that reason, especially in this day and age, I feel that art should take on a broader role in our society.

**CP:** You also have melancholic photo works, showing things like a red apple seemingly out of place in a snowy landscape, fragile boughs in the snow, some withered tree branches, an empty basket, a container being hoisted caught in a beam of sunlight.

**Shima:** I like photographs very much. I always have old film cameras. And I am taking that kind of photos. Photography is interesting to me, because it is a media that can catch something you don't understand as you don't understand it. I didn't know why there were apple and tangerine on the snow. (DELETED ", but anyway I thought they were beautiful ") I took them without understanding. With photography, you can take a mystery as a mystery. And specially, using old cameras, something unexpected is sometimes happening. You see the rainbow light reflections of the lens. You have to accept and enjoy something you don't understand.

**CP:** Your whole work but also your way of working, of thinking about exhibitions, offer the public another kind of relationship with time which seems to allow us to create a pace of our own, to install a sort of tranquillity.

**Shima:** I like to do things softly and quietly. Actually, I am often moved by this kind of behaviour. I am not moved by a big voice so much. And I know there are some people who like it this way. And I think revolutionary things don't have to be always loud.

**CP:** One last question, in Vassivière, the whole exhibition leads the visitor through a metaphorical vision of your work. You said that you think about it as “a forest” with “many, many points of entry, and many paths running through it”. Most of the time, you are very careful towards the public and its apprehension of your work.

**Shima:** When I make a show, I think it is important to leave some space for the audience to freely think and imagine. I think seeing an exhibition is not only about understanding the artist’s idea. More than that, I think that seeing an exhibition is a chance to feel and think by yourself. This is not only a place to see but also a place for experience.