

Shimabuku
PRESS



Review: Born as a Box, Wilkinson Gallery, 2004
By Tom Morton

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Shimabuku

Wilkinson Gallery, London, UK

Sometimes it's all about intonation. So it was with the text stencilled onto the wall of the Wilkinson Gallery by Japanese artist Shimabuku, which read: 'Feel free to take a rubber band out of the box [below] and pass your body through it'. Lacking any element of compulsion, of closed-down possibilities, these words weren't precisely an instruction, but rather an invitation to engage in one of those pointless, oddly pleasurable activities that involve perverting everyday objects from their everyday uses (other examples might include scribbling biro lines on the sole of a slipper, or fashioning a set of false teeth from a strip of orange peel). From the number of mostly broken bands that massed beneath the text, it seemed like a lot of people had taken Shimabuku up on his offer. Artists commonly employ heaps of abandoned objects to speak about the big-deal stuff of obsolescence, loss and enforced flight. Shimabuku's *Passing through the Rubber Band* (2000) was different. Here the viewer was presented with the residue (curling like vulcanized pubic hairs) of moments of apparently meaningless, uninflected fun.

Shimabuku's rubber bands are thin and taut, and manoeuvring through them was something of a stretch. As I tugged one over my head, two things came to mind. The first was that this was one of the most corporeal, most thoroughly sculptural, art experiences I've ever had (it left squaring my body with, say, the volumes of a Carl Andre in the dust). The second was how my own interaction with the work compared to that of the gallery-goers who had preceded me. Did the band snap painfully at their upper arms? Did they suffer a pang of self-consciousness as it bisected their bellies? Did they feel an unaccountable sense of achievement once they'd shucked it, intact, from their feet? Transforming its audience into a pan-temporal community through its sheer, sunny-tempered simplicity, *Passing through the Rubber Band* is what happens when relational aesthetics (so often a dysfunctional mode of art making) goes pop – or rather, ping.

There's something whimsical about much of Shimabuku's oeuvre, and *Born as a Box* (2001) was no exception. The piece comprised a cardboard box printed with the words 'Yamato Transport', and was spotted with various stamps, stickers and pieces of packing tape that suggested many years' use. Concealed behind its stiff flaps, a CD recording played, in which the box meditated on its own box-ness. By its own account, it's a pretty contented object, albeit one that's no stranger to the hazards (stains, dents, careless handling) that beleaguer its kind. As the recording neared its end, the box began to wax philosophical, stating that 'if you think life is happy, it becomes happy', and then wrapping up, apropos of nothing, with the words 'I love to take elevators also. I like the feeling. Sometimes, I take it, but I wanted to take it longer one day.' This is where the work really kicks in. Having suspended disbelief to the point where we accept the box's sentience, we're asked to also accept its apotheosis, its hinted-at entry into heaven. Karl Marx wrote about this type of anthropo-psychism and its metaphysical implications in *Capital* (1887), where he argued that a table, as 'soon as it steps forth as a commodity ... is changed into something transcendent'. The difference, of course, is that whereas Marx's table is securely a commodity, Shimabuku's box is not. Rather, it is a commodity's shed skin, something to be not fetishized but forgotten. Maybe that's why, for all its whimsy, the piece has a faint atmosphere of melancholy. In the logic of late capitalism boxes are always the bridesmaid, never the bride.

To take slight things as the subject of one's work is to risk that work itself being slight. Sometimes, as in the case of *Swansea Jack Memorial Swimming Dog Competition* (2003), which saw Shimabuku organize an aquatic gala to commemorate a long-dead lifeguard pooch, the artist comes out on top. Sometimes he does not. The newest work in the show, *Eating with Eyes* (2004), was a series of 80 slides of different meals, from paellas to sushi to pork chops, taken over the past four years. Its point, I guess, was to map the world through its population's palates, but like so many pieces that employ pile-ups of related images, it never really exceeded the sum of its parts. Shimabuku's work is best when it thinks small, which allows it, perhaps paradoxically, to think big. **Tom Morton**



Shimabuku
Born as a Box
2001 Box, CD and CD player Dimensions variable



Shimabuku
Passing through the Rubber Band
2000 Platform, rubber bands, vinyl 90cm diameter