

Review of Shimabuku: *Art and Cooking Are Similar* at Wide Open School, 1 July 2012

Japanese artist Shimabuku's 2-hour class entitled *Art and Cooking Are Similar* was held as part of the gallery's Wide Open School, a self-proclaimed 'unusual experiment in learning'. With warmth and humour, the Berlin-based artist begins with an illustrated introduction to his work, highlighting his preoccupation with food and cooking. The surreal encounter between fish and potato in *Shimabuku's Fish & Chips* (2007) evokes some of the delight that the artist takes in the mingling of ingredients in a culinary dish. In the clips he chooses to show, a potato tumbles through watery depths and then bobs along the rocky ocean floor, nudged onwards by a curious fish, in an action reminiscent of little kisses. The audience seems quick to laugh; is it the unlikely subject of an artist's attention that raises ripples of giggles, or is it just the word 'potato' that's funny? 'Potato is a surprisingly good swimmer', the artist quips. Shimabuku thinks that 'fish and chips' is the most poetic word combination in English. It's the perfect example of Shimabuku's ability to step back – aided, in this instance, by his position as linguistic outsider – or slow down, and notice the nuances of the mundane. He scans back along the video clip to show the tumbling potato again, lost in the moment.

If encounters are at the heart of Shimabuku's work, then it is only natural that communication is a parallel concern – the meat of many a meeting. In another film, *Sunrise at Mt Artsonje* (2007), the artist stands on a rooftop holding aloft a huge silvery cutlass fish, its scales glinting in the dawn light. Shimabuku informs us that the fish lives in the sea between Japan and Korea, is eaten in both cuisines and as such could be the perfect tool for cross-cultural communication, a kind of ingestible semaphore. In using the language of food in service to his art, Shimabuku employs the stuff of our lives, rather than imposing his own narratives and definitions.

Next on the lesson plan is Art History. Shimabuku, somewhat generously, places his work in context by providing a select history of food in western art, from the hunting scenes at the Lascaux Caves to Sigmar Polke's paintings of sausages and Alison Knowles's *Make A Salad* performance. It is no coincidence that these early Polke pictures are associated with Pop and that Knowles continues to fly the flag for Fluxus, two movements concerned with the everyday, and the intersection in the Venn diagram of art and life.

On stage, a small portable stove beeps its readiness as 'art' joins hands with 'cooking', in the form of kaiseki chef Daisuke Hayashi from London's Sake No Hana restaurant. The master of the ten-course kaiseki feast arranges food on a plate with as much consideration and significance as if paint on canvas or ink on a scroll, complete with latent rules of geometry and balance. At the particular request of Hayward Director Ralph Rugoff, Daisuke leads the audience step-by-step through a recipe for miso soup. The recipe as a form seems to hold great potential for the way we think, and write, about art: it is laid down as a challenge, left open to adaptation, and reaches its potential only with the active and subjective involvement of its audience.

According to one of Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorisms, 'The more abstract the truth you want to teach, the more thoroughly you must seduce the senses to accept it'. Savoury smells begin to drift across the room in waves and we are promised a sample at the end of the lesson, our attention to be rewarded with taste, perhaps even 'good taste'. Everyone gets a small palm-leaf dish, with a few delectable morsels; skewered strawberry and glazed onion, a bite of sushi with pink and yellow rice, fresh wasabi and an espresso cup of soup. It's miso, but there's a secret ingredient, we're told. Its strange, sharp aftertaste is an enticement to encounter the unfamiliar, to experience the unknown, and to appreciate the incomprehensible.