

# Shimabuku

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## Instrumental

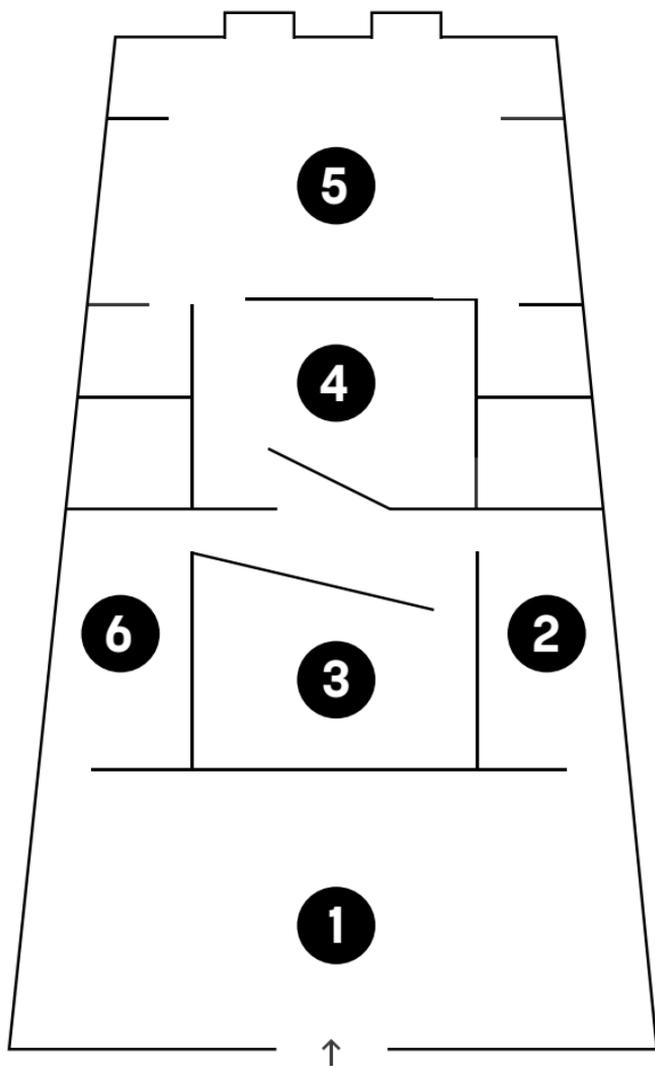
09 – 09 – 2022 \_\_\_\_\_ 08 – 01 – 2023



Shimabuku, *Swan Goes to the Sea*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist & Air de Paris, Romainville

# SWIELS WIE

# PLAN & ROOMS



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## INTRODUCTION

As a young man, Shimabuku hesitated between becoming a poet or a tour guide. “By becoming an artist,” he stated, “I think I have achieved a bit of both.” Travel remains a key aspect in his practice – as can be seen in the videos presented here – as has poetry, which appears in the evocative texts that accompany them. However, this exhibition underscores another important recurring element (hitherto little discussed) in Shimabuku’s work: music. “Conceptual art is often perceived as a purely intellectual pursuit,” he says. “But I became aware of the possibility of making my conceptual art from my heart. I try to think with my heart. I think about conceptual art that’s like music and can resonate with your feelings.”

Music in all its forms appears in Shimabuku's work, from jazz to samba, from pop to experimental. Returning to Japan after 12 years in Berlin, he chose to settle on the pacific island of Okinawa. Many stars of the Japanese music scene are Okinawan, shaped by its mixture of cultural influences, and in the bars and markets of its capital, Naha, live music is very present. Shimabuku's travels have often taken him to Brazil, another culture in which music plays a central role. This and the fact that Brazil has the largest population of Japanese people outside of Japan makes Shimabuku feel at home there, and several of his works include collaborations with Brazilian musicians.

In addition to composing soundtracks to his videos, musicians have been invited by Shimabuku to remix his works. This generative form of appropriation, sampling and adaptation is typical to music, but remains largely taboo in the visual arts, still too often dominated by narrow ideas

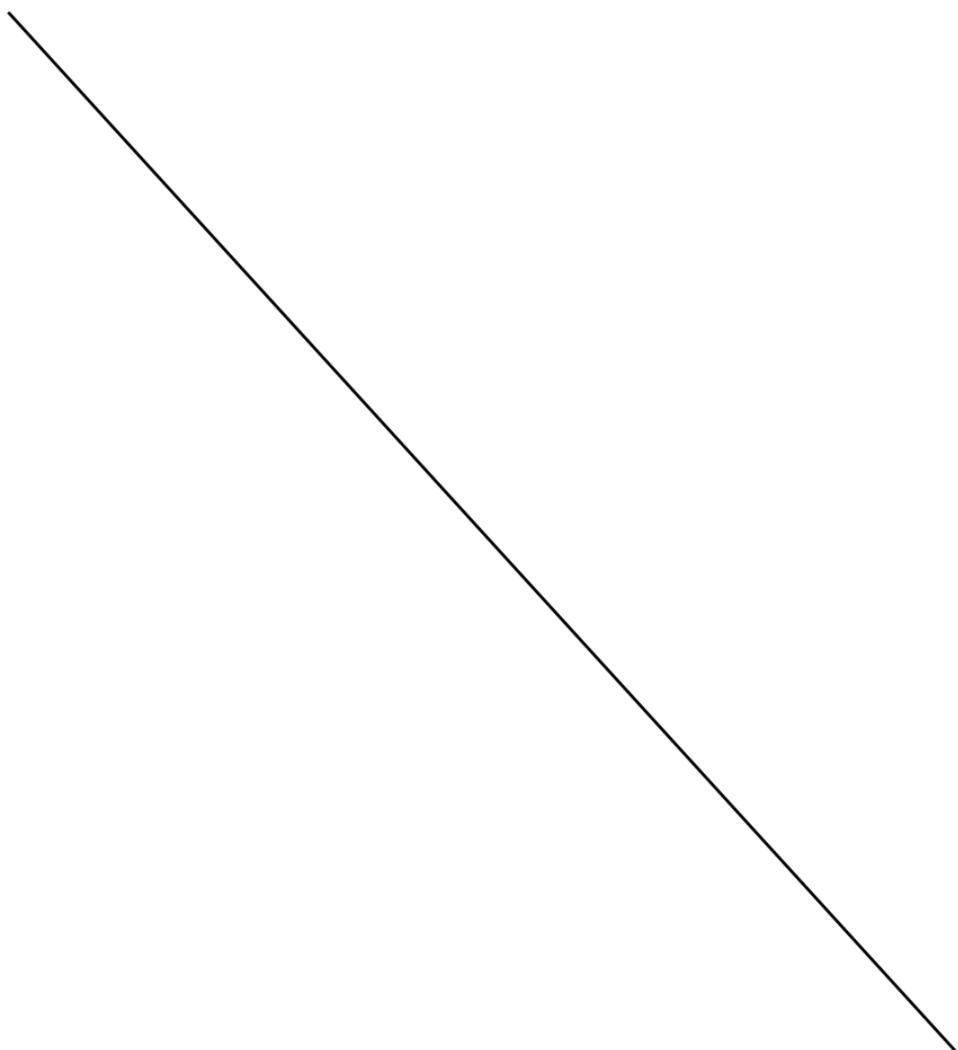
about authorship and originality. For Shimabuku, however, the moment of creative encounter is key, whether as part of a journey or a jam session. As such, his work can be seen as in the context of relational aesthetics, a term repurposed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe artists – many of Shimabuku’s generation – whose work explores human relations and their social context.

Shimabuku’s work can also be fruitfully considered in the lineage of the *détournement* of objects, with its roots in Surrealist poetry Dada and the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. It was also one of the interests of the Mono-ha [School of Things] art movement, whose influence on Shimabuku is combined with that of other Japanese avant-garde groups and artists active since the 1960s, such as Hi-Red Center, Genpei Akasegawa, Shusaku Arakawa, On Kawara and Nam June Paik.

*Instrumental*, the exhibition’s title, refers not only to the musical instruments played in Shimabuku’s works, but to the everyday

tools and instruments that he creates or creatively misuses. It is also a term that suggests a degree of usefulness, thus reopening the age-old art historical debate between form and function, between use and beauty.

Curator: Zoë Gray



## ROOM

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Shimabuku carries out poetic actions in the world, which he often later presents as videos. The exhibition opens with *Bow to Bow*, which begins in the archery field of the Kibitsu Shrine in Okayama. Next, we see two men (one of whom is the artist) plucking at archery bows to create a pizzicato rhythm. The film then explores what happens if a double bass is played using an archer's bow, as two musicians perform a duet composed by Makoto Nomura.

*Swan Goes to the Sea* is the epic adventure of a modest swan-shaped pedal-boat, with a soundtrack again by Makoto Nomura. Indulging in our anthropomorphic tendency to assign human emotions to animals or even objects, Shimabuku imagined the

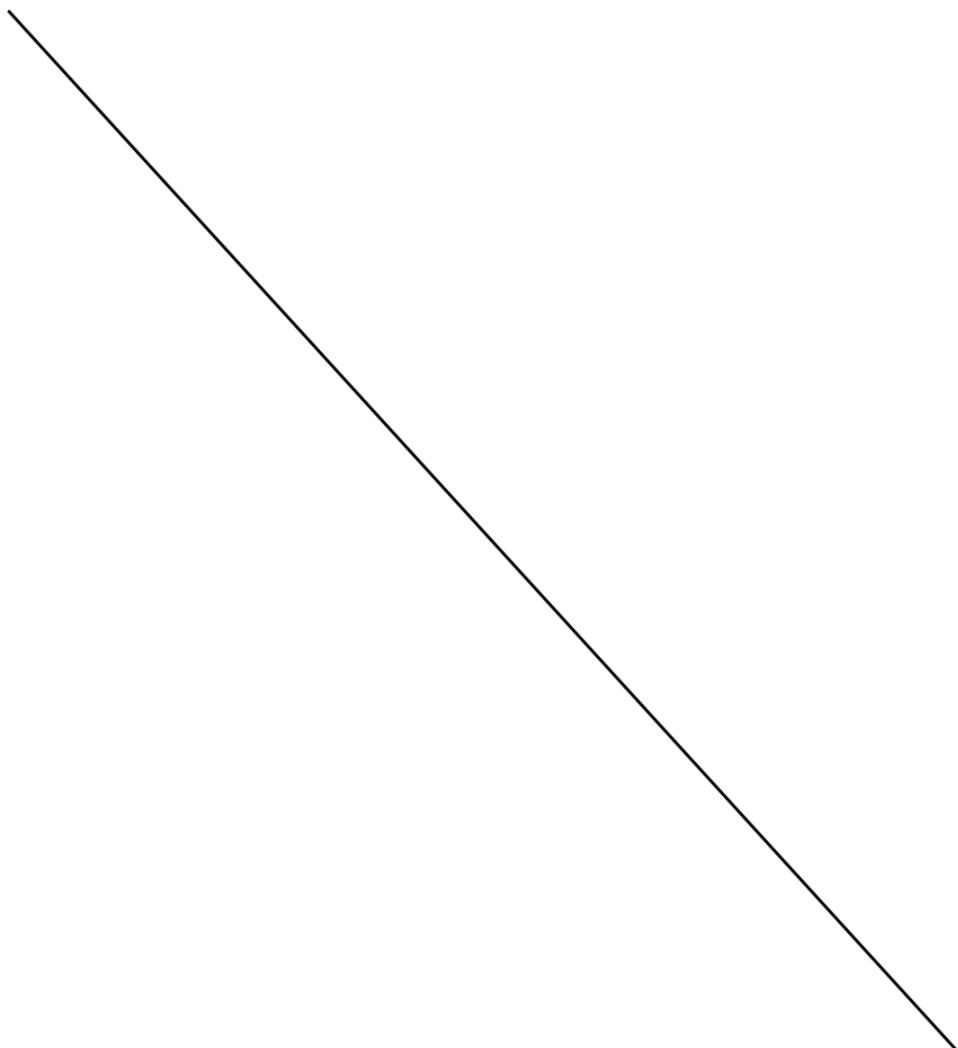
frustration of these swan-boats – who had long been moored on a quiet stretch of river – and decided to pedal one out to sea.

Another work that involves animals, the sea and music took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. It commemorated the end of a long period of isolation, specifically the 450th anniversary of the opening of Nagasaki Port to international trade. At that time, an elephant was brought into this port by Europeans and walked all the way to present-day Tokyo to be presented to the Shogun. In 2001, Shimabuku created an elephant in homage to this historic event. Twenty years later, under the title *Some Things Happen Twice*, he sailed the same model elephant (stored since in a Buddhist shrine in the neighbouring Saga prefecture) into the same port on a small boat. He accompanied the elephant, playing on a trumpet to mimic its trumpeting, in a little-announced performance that may have bemused viewers as much as the original elephant's arrival.

Shimabuku has a longstanding fascination with octopuses, which began – as described in his poster *Exhibition in a Refrigerator* – in 1990. In this room, one vitrine presents the stones and shells collected by octopuses, and subsequently collected by the artist. This echoes the Surrealists' keen interest in natural curiosities: the inventory of André Breton's studio lists a large collection of shells and stones and he published "Langue des Pierres" [Language of stones] in his journal *Le Surrealisme, même no.3* (1957).

The other vitrine presents coloured glass balls created by Shimabuku that enable octopuses to explore their favourite colours. And the accompanying digital slide show, filmed at the Kobe Aquarium, shows them doing just that. Octopuses are

themselves able to change colour to adapt to their surroundings, so Shimabuku's gift can alter the animals' very being. Notions of reciprocity and exchange are key for Shimabuku, leading him to ask: 'On the wide reaches of the ocean floor, can a small glass piece connect a man and an octopus?'



*Asking the Repentistas – Peneira & Sonhador – to remix my octopus works* weaves together two recurring elements of Shimabuku's work: music and octopuses. The left-hand video includes *Then, I decided to give a tour of Tokyo to the octopus from Akashi* (2000); and *Catching Octopus with Self-Made Ceramic Pots* (2003), which recounts the artist's successful Italian octopus-fishing expedition. On the occasion of the São Paulo Biennial in 2006, Shimabuku asked a duo of street singers, Peneira & Sonhador, to recount these projects. *Repentistas* are musicians who use the *repente*: a call-and-response improvisation accompanied by tambourines. Considered an ancestor of rap, this popular form originates in the northeast of Brazil, and has its equivalent in folk music across the globe, such as the European tradition of troubadours and wandering minstrels.

Filmed underwater, *Shimabuku's Fish and Chips* presents the meeting of a potato and a fish, the playful re-imagining of a classic British dish. For the artist, the words “Fish & Chips” seen on shop signs across Britain function like a poem, “because there, I see a surrealistic encounter between a potato from the ground and a fish from the water.” This was the first occasion that Shimabuku worked with the Brazilian music producer, singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist Kassin. His soundtrack transforms the video’s aquatic meeting into a meditative reverie, revealing the power of music to enhance a visual experience.

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*Tranquilo, Dreaming, I'm Wishing* and *Universe* are short films made in collaboration with Kassin and fellow Brazilian musician Moreno Veloso (who work together as the group +2) while they were visiting Okinawa with Shimabuku in 2007. Their rough quality fits well with the partly improvised music, creating unconventional video clips that defy narrative or any clear resolution.

*Going to Noto with Takehisa Kosugi* is a video that documents an experimental performance by the pioneer of electronic music. Takehisa Kosugi (1939–2018) began his career as an avant-garde musician, often working in the open air. Shimabuku filmed him walking along a remote pathway, away from a waterfall. The ambient, natural sounds interact with the

sounds he makes using a simple whistle, a metal bowl and an electronic instrument in a bag that changes pitch as it interacts with sunlight. Shimabuku remarked that Takehisa Kosugi used instruments that are not supposed to be musical instruments to make music that is unlike music.

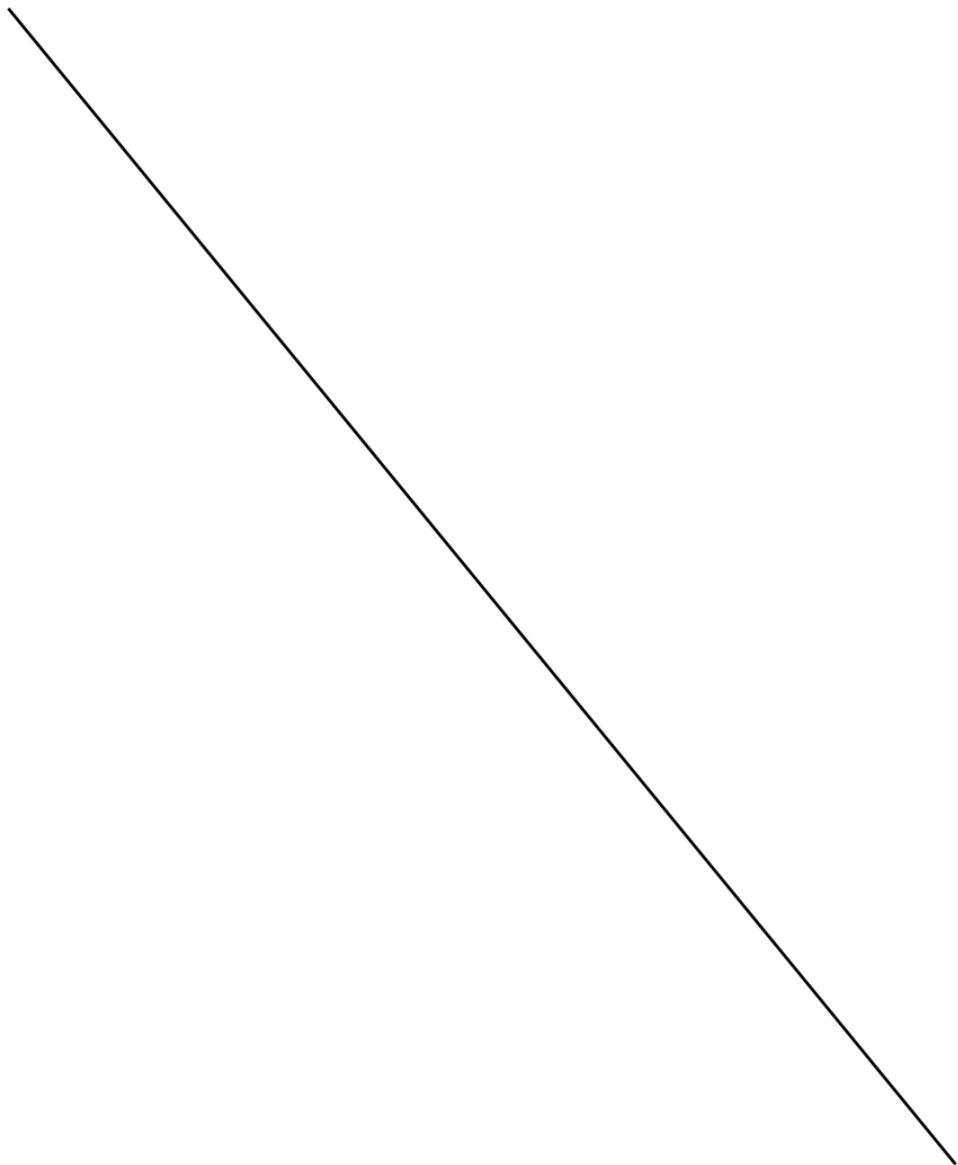
At the back is installed the work *Cuban Samba Remix (Remix by Kassin with Arto Lindsay)*, its soundtrack dominating the space like the rehearsal of a garage band. While participating in the 2015 Havana Biennial, Shimabuku discovered a water leak in the venue. When he and the other artists asked for repairs to be carried out, they were told “You want to stop water flowing? It’s not possible, this is Cuba!”. Instead, he placed tin cans of differing sizes under the leaking piping, in a gesture reminiscent of the Fluxus performance *Drip Music Event (1959-1962)* by George Brecht. Shimabuku noticed that the rhythm of the falling drops of water resembled a samba. He took the footage of his installation to Rio where he invited Kassin and Arto Lindsay to make a remix

of his impromptu soundtrack, just as he had previously invited the *repentistas* to remix his earlier works.

Three other works shown in this space are ingenious inventions, the most recent, *Fish Spin-drying Device*, made by attaching bicycle wheels to a motor. The artwork reveals a DIY attitude of upcycling while simultaneously connecting to avant-garde history by its evocation of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Bottle Rack* (1914), adapted here to serve the fish culture of Japan. Also rotating are the fruits in *Something that Floats / Something that Sinks*. Born out of the artist's curiosity about the different properties of seemingly similar objects (in this case lemons and limes, although the work exists with tomatoes too), it resembles a homemade science experiment, exhibiting a childlike fascination with the unexpected in the everyday.

Shimabuku's animistic approach to seemingly inanimate objects is taken

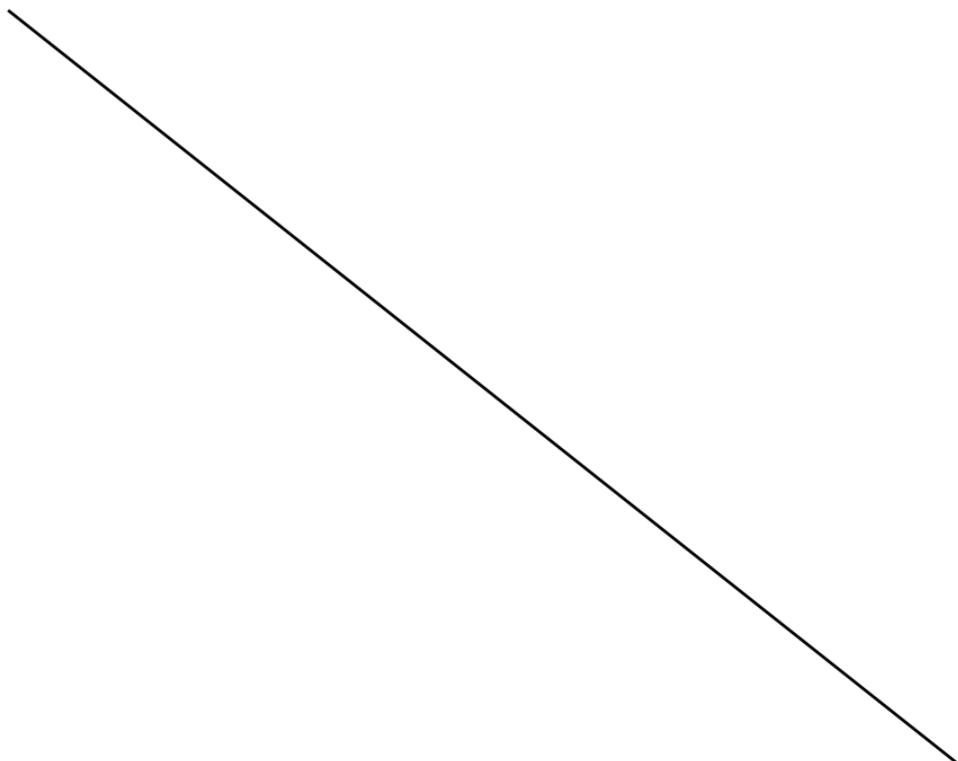
further in his work *Born as a Box*. Discretely tucked into a corner of the exhibition space, this speaking box muses on its own existence, jokingly alluding to Robert Morris' seminal work *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961).



A museum vitrine displays stone tools, each paired with a mobile phone, titled *Oldest and Newest Tools of Human Beings*. Shimabuku chose stones that closely resembled the phones in their shape and colour. By emphasising their common size and ergonomic form, he provokes us to examine both as extensions of our bodies. This work was preceded by the action *Exchange a Mobile Phone for a Stone Tool* (2014), where Shimabuku asked participants to carry around a stone all day in place of their phones, these ubiquitous tools that are now seldom far from reach.

The 2003 Motorola RAZR mobile phone was advertised as being almost as thin as a razor blade, a claim typical of technology companies who continue to

strive for the thinnest device that can slip almost unnoticed into (and out of) our pockets. Shimabuku took the suggestion of razor sharpness literally when he created *Sharpening a MacBook Air*, the video and result of which are presented here. Having employed a stone tool to sharpen the edge of his Apple laptop, in an age-old technique used across the world to sharpen a blunt edge, documented in the style of an online tutorial, Shimabuku then used it to cut – what else? – an actual apple.



## BIOGRAPHY

Shimabuku (b.1969, Kobe, Japan) lives and works in Okinawa. Recent solo shows include le Nouveau Musée National de Monaco (2021); le Crédac, Ivry (2018); Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Kunsthalle Bern (both 2014); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (both 2013); and Le Centre international d'art et du paysage de l'île de Vassivière (2011). His work has featured in many international exhibitions, including 14<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Lyon (2017), 27<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Venezia (2017), Okayama Art Summit (2016), Havana Biennial (2015), Taipei Biennial (2014), Sharjah Biennale (2013), and Yokohama Triennial (2011). Shimabuku is represented by Air de Paris (Romainville), Amanda Wilkinson (London), ZERO...(Milan), NoguerasBlanchard (Barcelona/Madrid) and Barbara Wien (Berlin).

## THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT

### Project partners

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