

Splendour in the Grass

Tokyo Picnic Club dreaming large



Let's ponder the picnic. Most of us take this form of frivolity for granted, spontaneously dashing out to the park with a blanket and a few provisions whenever we fancy it (as long as the weather complies). Not so in Tokyo. It happens that this modest activity is revered here, which is not all that surprising considering that green patches are scant in the metropolis. With this in mind, a whole movement sprang up and after more than a decade is still going strong. Approaching the subject from various angles and sometimes involving the positioning of small, mobile tracts of lawn (of often wondrous shape) in different places, it is all simply about facilitating the glorious act of picnicking.

FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO

The first use of the written term 'picnic' dates back to the Dictionnaire Etymologique Ou Origines De La Langue Françoise, edited by Gilles Ménage in 1694, referring to a meeting in a restaurant where everyone brings wine. Over the centuries the idea of contributing to a common meal has remained, but since the Industrial Revolution it has been associated with excursions out of doors. Indeed, in modern culture the picnic is a form of escapism from the pace of one's labours, driven by the need for gathering with friends and family, and the desire to rediscover nature, either out of town or in city parks.

Tokyo Picnic Club was founded in 2002 to commemorate the second bicentenary of Pic-Nic Club, instituted in London by Colonel Henry Francis Greville in 1802 as a theatrical experiment. TPC was founded by three people: architect Hiroshi Ota – who, not coincidentally, teaches Urban Regenera-

tion at the University of Tokyo; Kaori Ito, an urban designer; and Tomoharu Matsuda, a planner, but it counts a dozen members in all, and has so far involved more than 80 collaborators with expertise in design, architecture, visual arts, and gastronomy. The goal, the group states, is "to thoroughly redefine the concept and practice of picnicking in the contemporary urban context of Tokyo."

This idea comes from a survey on the management of city parks, conducted in 2003 with landscape architect Hajime Ishikawa, which shows that not only is the amount of green per person in Tokyo minimal (5.2 m² – while in New York it is 29.1 m² and in London 26.9 m²), but that access is complicated due to limited opening hours and bans on treading on certain areas. "We just want places to have our picnic", replies an angry Hiroshi Ota following the survey. "We do not need benches or worthless



waterworks. We simply want a spacious lawn." So TPC then drew up a manifesto, 15 Rules for Picnic, a humorous list of rules that establishes the universal right to picnic and provides practical information. The rules are stated in Japanese, English, French, Spanish, and Chinese, accompanied by Kenji Kitamura's illustrations of happy feasts on the grass. "The picnic is a social activity. Regard the picnic as an informal opportunity for encounter", proclaims rule #1. But the most representative is rule #5: "No hosts and guests at picnics. In principle, everybody should offer food and drink equally."

For more than a decade, TPC has been developing a meta-linguistic production of the concept and history of the picnic, collecting written sources and other materials (the club possesses the world's largest collection of picnic sets, at more than 120), which appears in publications like Picnic Papers, installations

in exhibition spaces, or discussions in academic settings. The club also produces propaganda (tee-shirts, posters, badges) and food products: cakes, sandwiches, beer, and tea bags – Greenfield (for picnics in green areas) and Brownfield (for post-industrial sites). TPC, however, is primarily known for its public demonstrations, built around mobile platforms, rectangular or airplane-shaped, a.k.a. Grass on Vacation, made available for passers-by to have a rest or consume their meal. Since 2008, after successful interventions in Tokyo and Seoul, they organised massive festivals called Picnopolis. The first was born on invitation of the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead, in England: 10 days, 10 sites, dozens of platforms, and with an inflatable kiosk as the information centre. Following those events, there has been a Picnopolis in Yokohama (2009), Singapore (2010), Osaka (2011), and London (2012), but the club's preferred field of action remains Tokyo.



PORTABLE LAWN
Kanda District, Tokyo, 2006
Photo: Tokyo Picnic Club

GRASS ON VACATION
Tokyo, 2005
Photo: Tokyo Picnic Club



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The history of art and design don't lack in references to the picnic, from Édouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862, to Powers of Ten, a video made for IBM in 1977 by Charles and Ray Eames. But projects by TPC are more reminiscent of those of the radical architecture groups of the 1960s (i.e. Utopie, Superstudio), social movements like Occupy!, and that phenomenon known as Guerrilla Gardening, animated by anonymous metropolitan planters. To work collectively, to invest in the public sphere, and to discuss issues such as 'ecology' and 'participation', are indicative of the specific use of art for social purposes, placing TPC's activities in direct relation to those of other recent collectives, such as Los Angeles-based Fallen Fruit. Like Fallen Fruit, TPC doesn't have the power to replace local authorities, despite highlighting the missing gaps, but they certainly help to spread the values of sustainability and encourage a taste for picnicking. Significantly, 10 other such picnic clubs have now arisen in Japan, following in the footsteps... <

picnicclub.org

Tokyo Picnic Club, *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York (due to be published in October 2014)

PICNIC CONTEST (1)
Fukui, 2013
Photo: 'Cloud Camera'

PICNOPOLIS (2)
Osaka, 2011
Photo: Tokyo Picnic Club

BABYPLANES (3)
Saltwell Park, Gateshead, 2008
Photo: Yutaka Suzuki



Enticing forms and alluring architecture are the core concepts of Elements. This modular outdoor seating island has endless arrangement options. A slender strip of illuminating led lights allows Elements to hover. The collection brings even more peace and relaxation with its brand-new sofa, 1 seater and cosy arm cushions.

Designed by the Belgian designer Gerd Couckhuys

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