

OCTO_HASI BALKAN PICNIC: Mobility, Transmission, and Transformation

A giant rabbit made of black balloons, spread out on a colorfully striped carpet. A story plays on a screen in the back, while the walls are covered with myriad drawings. Visual family documents crossed with Balkan beat! All these things are part of the boisterous picnic that OCTO_HASI, BLACK HASI (black rabbit), GIOVANNA and her OMA (grandma) celebrate at TWS after navigating their flying carpet over from the Balkan Peninsula.

With the "OCTO_HASI BALKAN PICNIC", artists/curators Natalija Ribovic and Toru Fujita present the Tokyo art audience with their first installation as part of a spectacular project showcasing their personal, border-crossing views. According to the artists, the BLACK HASI stands for technology, while GIOVANNA embodies spirit, and OMA is a personification of nature, whereas the balance between these three elements, they explain, constitutes a crucial factor for the world right now.

Populated by a multiethnic, multi-religious and multilingual mixture of citizens, the peninsula known as the Balkans looks back upon a fairly complex history, powered and inspired by the magnificent, border-defying ecosystem and infrastructure that is the Danube. The "OCTO_HASI BALKAN PICNIC" portrays the area as a cultural sphere that is tied together by the majestic river regardless of national differences. From the Balkans comes "OCTO_HASI" the mysterious hybrid rabbit on its mission to spark up communication around the world.

For people in Japan, the Balkans are a "virtual" place of sorts, and even though we still remember vividly the news reports of the conflicts in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, these were mainly brought to us via mass-media and without providing much directly accessible information. The flying Balkan picnic that lands in Tokyo with a basketful of superb fantasy will take visitors to a land somewhere between dream and reality – though derived from the latter – where anyone is welcome, and where imagination is enough to erase national borders and other limitations from the future map of the world and its inhabitants. Playing elemental roles here are the aspects of mobility, transmission of information, and as a result, possible transformation of the state of things.

The picnic is a mobile event that anyone can stage, and a temporary party setting that invites guests to opt out of daily grind for a moment. Here it functions as a vehicle for exchange of information, which ultimately caused transformation. One can in fact call it a hands-on variation of the "T.A.Z. (Temporary Autonomous Zone)" – a zone for political resistance that appears briefly in extreme or critical situations – that Hakim Bey once proposed. In reality, two very T.A.Z.-like picnics have been held in the Balkan region. The great migration of people from Hungary after the opening of the Austrian-Hungarian border following an agreement between both countries in August 1989 turned the scenery in Austria into a huge "Pan-European picnic", and in reference to this phenomenon, the "Trans-European Picnic" festival organized by individuals engaged in media culture was staged in Novi Sad, Serbia, in 2004. The former is said to have triggered the fall of the iron curtain, while the latter was a practical occasion to express critical thoughts on the historical event of eight Eastern European nations being admitted to the EU, happening a few kilometers outside the new EU territory around the day of the joining. Against the backdrop of interrelated social, political and cultural issues, the "picnic" can also be considered as a form of resistance against a critical situation by forming a self-sustaining network of individuals.

The fable of the "OCTO_HASI BALKAN PICNIC" with its symbolic characters seems comparatively utopian and somewhat naïve, but Ribovic and Fujita have surely sensed that the "picnic" is a valid format when it comes to demonstrating how art when it focuses on the severity of the situation is able to create new realities. Being exposed, being variable, and offering a hospitable and charitable platform for contact and charity is what has to be defining qualities of true power.

Mobility, transmission and transformation... An advocate of "Eurasia", Joseph Beuys suggested a spiritual presence in the form of a rabbit that travels across borders and ideologies in order to connect Europe and Asia, and it is needless to mention that OCTO_HASI is a 21st century variant of that very idea.

(Yukiko Shikata, Senior Curator, NTT InterCommunication Center [ICC])