

Donatien Grau, "Picnic in Carrara," *ArtReview Asia*, Spring 2016

# ArtReview Asia

## Picnic in Carrara

Yutaka Sone invites Luc Tuymans and Rirkrit Tiravanija

### Creating Space

In late March 2015, three of the world's most eminent artists met for a picnic in the marble quarries of Carrara, Italy. During the meal, served out of the spotlight, away from public attention, Yutaka Sone, Luc Tuymans and Rirkrit Tiravanija spoke about their lives, their endeavours, their aspirations

by Donatien Grau

#### *A situation and its relevance*

Yutaka Sone called Luc Tuymans: he was upset that they did not speak any more, did not have any real personal contact; furthermore, he felt that no one really spoke about art these days from the point of view of the artist. There was a need for discourse, conversation, dialogue, he said; there should be some statement, and the two of them, alongside fellow artist and friend Rirkrit Tiravanija, should make it. Then came the idea of presenting this statement in the form of a picnic. So the three of them went into the quarries to eat, drink and talk; to have a good time.

It may seem absurdly simple. The pictures, the film and the sculpture that came out of it present a situation in which the three artists seem to be asking themselves what they are doing. In their behaviour, in their words and in their body language, we can sense a great ambition as well as a feeling of doing something that may seem gratuitous to some. At the heart of the situation lies a problem. Why would we commoners care about three guys having a picnic in a wonderful setting, drinking fine wine and eating what seems to be very tasty food?

Here's why the public should care: this is a statement; it is a proposition, an offer made to the world, in consideration of what art is. Every detail of it is a sign from a discourse presented to the public, in order to reengage with the thinking of the positioning of art. It is a gesture and it is an initiative. It breaks the flow of meaninglessness that governs so much of the integration of artists' participation within the artworld.

#### *A network of meaning*

Everything has been constructed to make this situation mean much more than a private encounter: it is an elaborate network of meaning. Firstly, it is a picnic: something that seems to be lighthearted and friendly. It is a moment that artists share as a consequence of their personal affinities. Here we find a counterpart to the functioning of the separating structures of the artworld: artists can still be friends; they can see each other; the friendliness of their connection is not only a private matter. It can express itself in a constructive discussion on art. The ethics of the picnic also counters the structures of the artworld: the opening, the dinner, public events involving a large number of people that become a mass unable to confront actual

issues. This gathering involves three individuals, together to confront the reasons behind their very practice.

Art lovers, living in the dream of the continuation of the avant-garde, would tend to consider such an encounter – such a conversation – natural. After all, artists used to speak to each other all the time – or at least this is how we see the avant-garde. Whether their art was similar or different, whether they were of the same generation or of different generations (but particularly if they came from the same generation), they would talk, collaborate, discuss their works and lives, and, together, move the project of art forward. We cannot help but be reminded of the perpetual dialogue in which Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, André Breton, Pablo Picasso and so many others engaged, in order to redefine the formats of art.

But it says a lot about our world today – and the place art has in it – that such a dialogue does not appear natural. The situation has changed: artists, from the moment they are successful, become part of a conditioning process in which money, power and productivity play the crucial roles. When they emerge and are not yet successful, they are required, as part of their training as artists, to think of success as a goal – even sometimes the ultimate goal. And when they are not successful, or not successful enough, they are induced to look at these flows of power, money and art with contempt and envy.

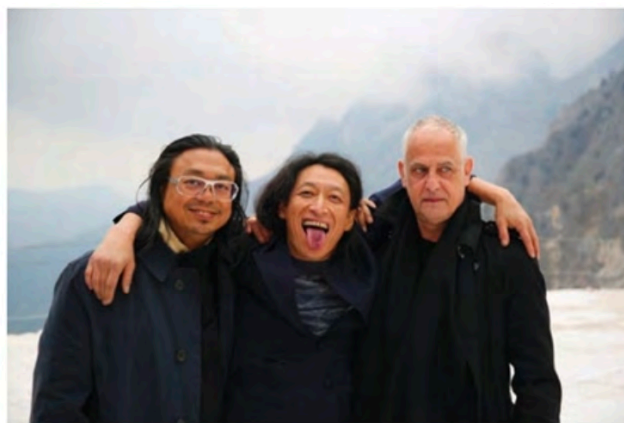
#### *Refocusing the art*

Part of the nature of art has changed. Because of the flows of the market, it has taken on some of the characteristics of an industry, designed to serve the needs of a global culture in which art remains one of the few forms of belief left to humans – and one of the few (money is another) that is universally shared. This industry functions according to an integrated model, in which artists play a role that is certainly important but is to be included in a chain with multiple entries. The artworld is not fundamentally focused exclusively on artists: curators, collectors and dealers have become as influential – and perhaps more influential – than artists. Artists have lost some of their power through isolation from each other, rendering them unable to constitute an actual force. What Yutaka Sone, Luc Tuymans and Rirkrit Tiravanija have initiated is a move to regain that power.

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This does not mean that they are trying to take it from others – the picnic is not directed against curators, gallerists or collectors. Rather than displaying negative energy, it is a constructive proposition, a manifesto stating that artists today can still get together, and together articulate a proposition.

This event was not open to the public. In the same way as Marcel Duchamp with *Étant Donnés* (1946–66) only allowed the viewer to peep into his imaginary world, we are only allowed into the picnic through a video, drawings, traces. We were not there to watch it at the moment it took place. This disconnection from the public space is a crucial part of the project: not everything needs to be public at the moment it happens. When an event takes place secretly, it gains mystery; and from gaining mystery, it is granted the potential to enter history. This event performs the tension between what is private and what is public: it was private, but designed to be public. Therefore, it carries within itself an emphasis, the possibility of attracting attention. The artists are aware of the strategies needed to gain attention at an age in which losing track has become a rule. They are using those strategies in order to appeal to the public's attention.

## Articulation

Scale is one of the very resources at hand. The film shows the contrast between the height of the quarries and the small space inhabited by the three artists. They seem tiny, in a grand decor. In that sense, the

spatiality of the scene functions as a metaphor for the intervention itself: that these three tiny figures can intervene in a space of that size conveys the sense of possibility given to individuals who accept existing within their space and seizing what is at hand. There is no attempt to negate the limitations of the space devoted to each, but from this acknowledgement comes the possibility of fully inhabiting the space they find themselves in. By sharing it, they also increase their own importance, their own relevance, their own power.

In order to have a full grasp of this initiative, the question of power also needs to be raised. These three artists seem to be looking for power – for a visibility to their initiate, while using mystery with considerable skills. But what is the point? What power are they seeking? Here the topic of the conversations they are engaged in is particularly relevant. It is art. The choice of this topic is highly significant – they could have chosen to discuss politics, the world order, their respective work. What they decided to devote themselves to instead was art. As such, they are using the methodology of propaganda and using it for what they truly believe in.

The political nature of the endeavour is evident. They are ready to fight for the idiosyncrasy of art, and of the word and vision of artists; they are seeking power for art, attempting to reestablish its centrality rather than the status of a link in a chain; describing a solar system in which the artwork, the artist, are the stars that everything else circles around. The artists are the initiators, and what comes

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after them is secondary – both chronologically and ethically. This is the fundamental reminder the very structure of the picnic provides to the public.

## *Time and space*

This statement of artistic preeminence is at once local – the Carrara marble quarries – and global – these three artists encircle the globe. Yutaka Sone is Japanese-born and has been living in Los Angeles for decades while keeping studios in Mexico, Belgium and China; Rirkrit Tiravanija, of Thai descent, was born in Buenos Aires and lives in Chiang Mai, Berlin and New York; Luc Tuymans, Belgian, has spent an important part of his life and work engaging with the countries of the world. Not only do they cover large parts of the world biographically, but their work too deals with the nothing of worldliness: Tuymans has been very engaged, since his early work, with the imagery of the world's culture and politics, from local to global, from Flemish politicians to American leaders, to narratives of power. Tiravanija has ceaselessly been opening up spaces for the public to rediscover itself, for people to enter in a community. Yutaka Sone, too, reflects on spaces, dreamlike and real, placing civilisations in visual dialogue. These three artists share a deep interest in the fabric of communities, how they interact, how elements are shared across all communities.

Where the conversation occurred is, of course, of considerable symbolic value: a place where nature offers itself as a resource for art.

Looking at the images of the picnic, one cannot help but be strongly impressed by the presence of the marble. Not only do the artists appear as tiny creatures, but they find themselves in a landscape of whiteness. Carrara, for millennia now the source of the most sacred sculptures – those of the gods and the saints – adds another layer to that narrative of time. Setting the picnic here manifests a desire to reconnect with that sacredness, and to the history of art as a continuum. It also relates to the genesis of the figure of the artist: Michelangelo, one of the major models for the modern artist, took his marble from here.

Opening up time is the corollary of opening up space: the picnic is a moment of leisure, designed for the participants to enjoy themselves. It is not a time for work. Today, being an artist is a profession: many more students go to art school than ever before, and as they leave art school they go looking for galleries as if they were workers seeking jobs. The gold standard of art sometimes gets lost in all this. In organising the picnic, the artists have proved that, as humans, they can enjoy themselves; they also prove that art functions on a different temporality than the one usually in effect in the world of business and efficiency. Being an artist is a mission, and it is also something you truly express yourself in. The very idea of a picnic represents free time: art is a space of freedom, and that freedom manifests itself in many different forms, time being the most immediate. In that sense, these artists are challenging conceptions that increasingly prevail in the artworld.



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In this construction of time, food plays an important role: the artists are sharing bread, they are in each other's company. The fact that the food and wine are of great quality – we can see bottles of Ornellaia in the video – is a statement in its own right: the artists are acknowledging the possibilities offered by money. In this gesture lies a revolution: for a long time, money was not seen as a positive value for an artist. An artist whose work sold for considerable amounts was suspicious – notably to other artists – of having sold his or her soul to the capital. As a consequence, the world was divided between the 'haves', whose artistic seriousness could be questioned from the point of view of artists, and the 'have-nots', who would be 'artist's artists' and embody the stuff of legend. The quality of the food, the drinks and the service – there are waiters serving the meals – is a statement: it signifies that it is not bad for artists to make money, as long as they pour it back into the energy of artmaking, and of reflecting on what it is exactly they do. Besides, the excellence of the food and drink relates to another tradition in the figure of the artist: throwing great dinners, governed by conviviality.

## *Who is the artist?*

This conviviality consecrates the conception of the artist as a human being. Sometimes, artists are considered in a sort of disembodied fashion. The documentation of the picnic shows them as deeply human beings. Tuymans smokes continuously and laughs intensely;

Tiravanija is shy, and more reflective; Sone is a dreamer and talks with great enthusiasm about the necessity of this gathering. The three of them are very different, and we get to see them in a sort of public intimacy, which gives us entry into the point of view – the existence – of artists as they spend time with peers.

We should not be entirely naive: there is, in the format chosen for this encounter, something slightly tongue-in-cheek, at the same time as quite extraordinary in its understated quality. A picnic to change the way we look at art? Really? What does that even mean? There is certainly something lighthearted about the time they spent together: when we look at the videos, they clearly seem to be enjoying themselves. And one might wonder: is it that often that artists enjoy themselves together? Get some free time? Create a space for themselves to reflect, and therefore renegotiate their relation to their practice and to the world? What seems to be the most mundane is actually filled with meaning and possibilities.

Their gesture very clearly signifies that art can come from anywhere, and take any form, from the moment it is initiated by artists, who can make a picnic the most metaphysical form of interrogation possible. Artists, in order to get somewhere, are required to accept the limitations of their endeavour: art is a joke. A deadly serious one. From the moment that its quality as a joke is accepted, it becomes even more serious, because it is a joke that has the possibility of making the most intense impact upon the world. In that

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sense, the picnic signals the status of art as a whole. It also reveals that artists can have a picnic just like any other human, but that they often take it further than what others would do. With the picnic, we see art's membership in the society of humans, and at the same time its distinction from that very society.

## *The event*

The picnic is an event. An event is something that happens, and dramatically changes the fabric of reality. It disrupts a certain monotony and unveils the realities that have been prepared by time. It proves that action is possible, and that there is no such thing as simple fate. Therefore, while we understand the picnic's status, we should not underestimate its potential as a space for conversation between artists, where they can discuss their status – their lives; their work; their positions in the world at large; their place in the history of humans and outside the existence of humans. All these issues are raised through the minimal gesture of a picnic.

As all three artists have stated, this is not an ending. It is a starting point, leading to a process of opening up a space for art and artists within the public sphere at large. Yutaka Sone, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Luc Tuymans are undoubtedly three major figures of the arts. But they have decided not to stay on their own: they are initiators, and their ultimate purpose is to create new connections,

to weave a new network of interactions between artists and everything that surrounds them. They are to be joined by other artists, and the dynamic initiated in Carrara is to expand and take many forms. This is just the beginning.

The artworld, because it has opened such a safe haven for people coming from everywhere, from all disciplines, from all countries, has absorbed everything and therefore become – or considers itself to have become – self-sufficient. It is an island where many have arrived, and sometimes they have forgotten that there once was a continent. The contribution made by these three artists marks a wakeup call: there is a continent; there is a society; there is a world at large. And if the artists manage to leave their island and go back to the continent, while staying as close to each other as they were on their island, perhaps they will get even closer, and they will actually fulfil the great modernist mission of art, which is to change the world. Yes, a picnic can change everything. And if it can, then the many possibilities artists embrace can enable them to be truly themselves, and to truly change the lives of others.

*The project Picnic in Carrara by Yutaka Sone was realised in the framework of Ornellaia Vendemmia d'Artista, an annual art commission curated by Maria Alicata and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, and will be presented at the Hammer Museum in LA in May*

*all images*  
Yutaka Sone, *Picnic in Carrara*, 2015.  
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York & London,  
and Tommy Simoons, Antwerp