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As told to Ryu Takahashi & Brandon Stosuy, 2974 words.

Tags: Art, Collaboration, Politics, Process, Independence.



# Chim↑Pom on working as a collective

## What projects have you been working on recently?

**Ryuta Ushiro:** We have a lot of projects in parallel, but we were by the border in Mexico last summer in a town called Tijuana. Ellie had a problem entering the U.S., though it wasn't her fault at all, so her visa got denied and we went to Mexico to work on this project. There was this interesting self-built house in Tijuana, and it's literally the closest house to the U.S. They've incorporated the border wall as part of their house. And there was this tree inside the house, so we built a treehouse over the summer of 2016.

**Ellie:** We stayed there for a month over the summer in this area called Colonia Libertad and made it together with this big family.

**Ryuta:** We called this tree house "USA Visitor Center" because most people that live in Colonia Libertad are deported and aren't able to enter the U.S.



U.S.A. Visitor Center 2016 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of Chim↑Pom Studio and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo photo by Osamu Matsuda







LIBERTAD 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of Chim↑Pom Studio and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo

**Ellie:** Not just from Mexico, but people from other countries like Guatemala were there, too.

**Ryuta:** What was that famous musician who's lived there? That guitar player, Spanish, really famous guy... Santana! We made two art pieces which could only been seen from this tree house, one from the U.S. side, and one from the Mexico side. And after that, there was this project in October in Kabukicho, Shinjuku that lasted only for two weeks. Like the Mexico project, this was also DIY without funding.



LIBERTAD 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of Chim↑Pom Studio and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo

Ellie's husband is a businessman in Kabukicho, and he's on the board of Kabukicho promotion association, and they had a building that was going to get rebuilt, so we started to discuss what we could do there. Kabukicho was burned down by the war, so the people that started to create visions for this city eventually turned into



this association. Their building was going to be demolished and rebuilt by the Olympics. This made me think, because the Parco building in Shibuya just got demolished last year, and we had our solo exhibition there a little while ago. Parco is also expected to finish their construction by the Olympics by the same token.

When the Tokyo Olympics happened in 1964, infrastructure was developed, highways were built, many buildings were built, it was the height of redevelopment. That same energy is here again, and since we've been based in Tokyo this whole time, we wanted to capture the changes of our hometown using the Japanese term "scrap & build" as a theme.

When we first started to work on this building project, we found many blueprints of the building when it was first built. The phrase "drawing a blueprint" is also directly translated in Japanese with the same meaning, and we thought we could make many artworks using this blueprint method. And Kabukicho is known for sex clubs, and we found out that there were many sex workers who went by "Mirai-chan" which means "future girl."



SUPER RAT -Scrap & Build- 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo photo by KENJI MORITA

**Ellie:** We invited Mirai-chan to this building, and had her lie down on this big paper with light-sensitive blue liquid.

**Ryuta:** We made a portrait using the ultraviolet light where the painting becomes blue except for the area where she was lying, which was to draw a blueprint of the future. The building had four floors with a basement, and we made a big 2x2 meters square hole on the top three floors.





Build Burger 2016 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo Photo by KENJI MORITA

**Ellie:** We had an insurance guy come in, and we calculated the estimated amount of visitors, and made sure we're good even if someone falls or dies [laughs].

**Ryuta:** And we moved and stacked up all the furniture and everything on the first floor, and called it "build-burger."

**Ellie:** Sofas, plants, desks, and documents. And we found an image of this sofa online where people were having an orgy party. The third floor used to be a "happening bar," and when we started this exhibition and posted images on Instagram, I had someone hit me up saying "Oh, I remember that room!" The floor above that was where the Kabukicho association office was, so it was funny how things were "happening" right below them.



Build Burger 2016 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo Photo by KENJI MORITA

**Ryuta:** "Build-burger" has this fast food sound to it, so the theme of this project is mass production, mass consumption. The exhibition was only up for two weeks, but we organized many events. We wanted to leave every exhibited artwork and experience inside and to be demolished along with the building. And we wanted to pick up those pieces and rebuild again as a second exhibition. Buildings and artworks are objects that will reform their shape, but events and music will remain in memories and experiences, so we wanted to share that. Many of our musician and performance friends came and it became a pretty hardcore and chaotic vibe. There were people from the underground scene, to people like Tetsuya Komuro.

**Ellie:** Everyone got paid a flat 30,000 yen to perform. Some people could cost 100 times more going through their management, but this was an artist-to-artist conversation. Many others performed, too, like Nature Danger Gang.

**Ryuta:** They were my favorite punk band. Others include Have A Nice Day, which is another punk band, and rapper

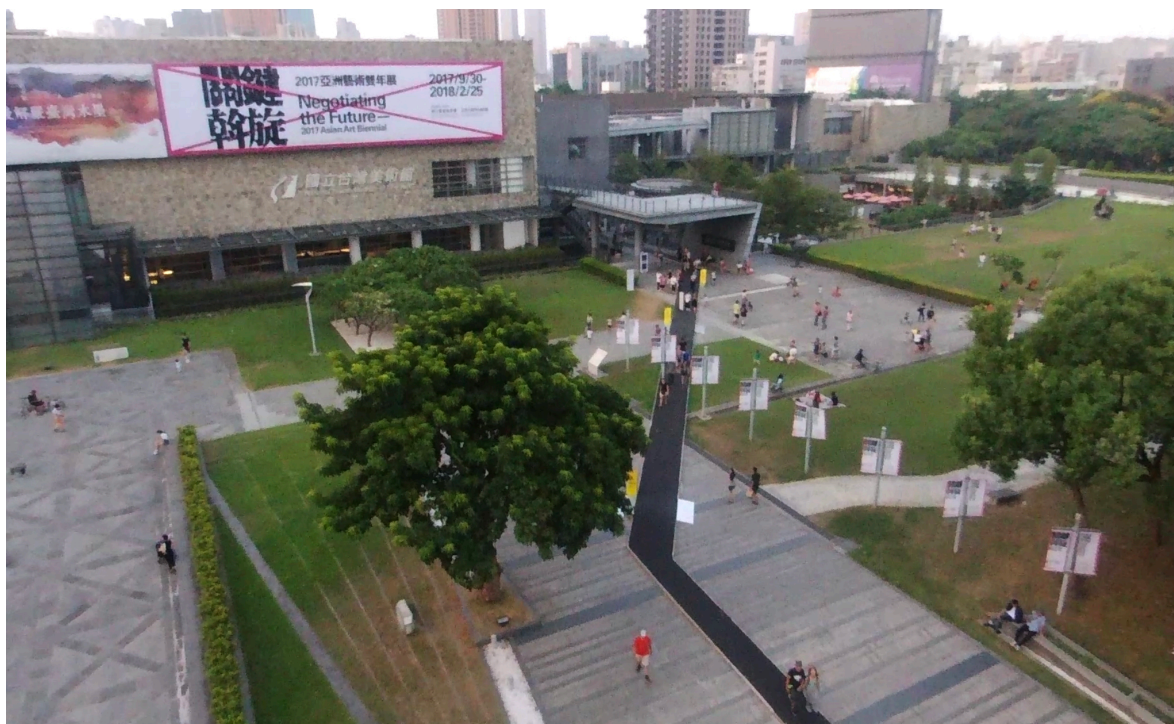


Kan a.k.a. GAMI, Naruyoshi Kikuchi, and also performance group Akumanoshirushi (devil's sign). The leader passed away this year and this became his last performance. Comedian Miracle Hikaru also came by. Weren't there any issues with her management?

**Ellie:** No, because we're friends.

**Ryuta:** So the events were very DIY, and the whole thing was chaotic. The building was then demolished and we documented that whole process. And then we went back to Tijuana over the winter and completed that project. That was when Trump got elected, so many American media, like the *LA Times*, had picked it up. And very recently, we did the second part of this Kabukicho project, which was to pick up the scraps of the building and artworks and use that to "renovate" our studio in Koenji. We demolished the inside of our studio and buried the fragments from the previous building like a landfill, then made an asphalt road inside. And then we connected that road to the public road and made it public and open 24-hours.

**Ellie:** Oh, and we made a public bathroom, too. There were people doing sexual things in there.



Chim↑Pom 道 (Street) 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

**Ryuta:** The idea was to basically create a public space inside a private space. Our latest project about that is at the National Museum in Taiwan. We're currently participating in their Biennale, and the theme of the exhibition is activism. There's this huge entrance there, and we were commissioned to do an installation. In 2014, there was the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan where they've occupied the legislature for a month, in attempt to connecting the outside and the inside. Usually demonstrations take place on the streets outside, but what's interesting about the Sunflower Movement was that they went inside as well and connected. Inspired by that idea, we created a giant 200-meter asphalt road. And Ellie made a speech during the opening.

**Ellie:** I thought that the streets aren't just there the way it is, but also growing. I said something really nice but I forgot! [laughs]

**Ryuta:** Streets and National Museums are both public spaces, but with completely different natures. You can smoke on the street, but not inside the museum. The idea was to connect these two things to create a new public space, so we discussed with the museum and created a new regulation that could only be applied on this road. For instance, even though the theme for this exhibition was activism, we were informed that no forms of demonstrations were allowed. [laughs]







PAVILION 2012, 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo photo by KENJI MORITA

**Ellie:** But we negotiated with them, and made it possible to do demonstrations if offered through Chimpom, for instance. And figuring out ways to serve any alcohol during the opening.

**Ryuta:** And also things like public indecency. Of course we didn't want that since its a public space with kids, but perhaps allow it if its a romantic act with love. [laughs] We'll be going back there again in February [2018] to throw a big block party on that road. We'll be collaborating with the girl from the Sunflower Movement, and people could either join the block party, or we'll put up some chairs outside on the street too, for those who just want to see it.

**Can you discuss *Don't Follow the Wind*? It's an ongoing project, and there are so many elements involved.**

**Ryuta:** In Fukushima, there's a huge ghost town where evacuation was ordered due to a high-level of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident, and we have an ongoing exhibition there. We started on March 11, 2015, but you can't see it because you can't get in. But the restriction will be released eventually at some point, so then you could actually go see the exhibition. The situation and the environment are changing every day. Every day the weather is different, so the work will be influenced by that. The idea is to imagine about the artworks. We asked three international curators and created a committee. There are 12 artists participating on this show.







Curatorial team on a site visit in the Fukushima exclusion zone Courtesy of Don't Follow the Wind



Flag designed by Naohiro Ukawa with first viewers, Fukushima exclusion zone, Japan Courtesy of Don't Follow the Wind

## What are the benefits of working as a collective?

**Ellie:** That we'll have a lot of ideas. And we can get to places where it might not be possible to reach alone. I think it's similar to being on a snowy mountain.

**Ryuta:** The line of thinking changes compared to making work on our own. In a collective, it's hard to tell where the border is as an individual, so the concept as a collective keeps expanding, and having that mind at its core, we're able to operate spaces, organize events, and do various collaborations.

**Ellie:** And all six of us are totally different, so we start from this little society.

**Ryuta:** We always have collaborators in our projects. In the case of Mexico, it was that family. For Kabukicho, it was the Kabukicho association.

**Ellie:** My husband owns a club, so a lot of night business people helped us.

**Ryuta:** So the results are unexpected. During the Kabukicho exhibition, we had the "host club" people working as bouncers and even staff. Some theater industry people came to visit, and they were wondering how much was actually staged. So perhaps that's the good part of being a collective.

**Does it feel like a collaboration between the members?**

**Ellie:** It's like we're one.

**Ryuta:** Chimpom consists of six cells.

**Ellie:** Even in writing, it's totally different when writing by myself, versus writing as Chimpom.



**How do you start a new project? Does one person come to the group? Or do you decide on it together? Can you talk us through your usual process, or is it different each time?**

**Ryuta:** It's really all about encounters. The Mexico project for instance, we ended up there because Ellie accidentally had a visa issue in the U.S. The Kabukicho project came together because we encountered this building.

**Ellie:** When we first went to Mexico last year in August, no one really thought that Trump would be elected. We had the idea of the wall project long before that, and so a lot of it is incidental too.

**Ryuta:** Timings and encounters come in fortuitously, but we also try to be conscious, and also spontaneous.

**Ellie:** We often go visit the shrine [laughs]. We try to point to the right direction.

**Ryuta:** I think it's important to be flexible so we don't become square.



Don't Follow The Wind A Walk in Fukushima, 2016 360 degree video, headsets, cafe furniture from Fukushima, Australian uranium, maps installation commissioned by the 20th Biennale of Sydney view at Carriageworks Courtesy of Don't Follow the Wind

**How do you know when a project is done?**

**Ryuta:** We watch as we go. In the case of Mexico, we just went down to the border and drove from Mexicali to Tijuana, not knowing what would happen or whom we'd meet. When we encounter, and start thinking, and then start acting, we begin to see the framing. Once we see that, we begin to understand, and we then we just go towards there.

**How important are politics to your work?**

**Ryuta:** Well, when we're discussing between the six of us, it naturally won't enter into one's fetishism. We do things that all of us collectively think its the right thing. Therefore common subject matter becomes the theme, so things like society or politics will come into place. But if we get involved with direct political act, it has the potential to have a very limited expiration date. For example, let's say we speak out against Trans Pacific-Partnership (TPP), but then it went through so that activity is over. We think that creating artwork and political activity are different.

**Can you talk about the importance of [radical Japanese artist] Makoto Aida in your work as artists? What did you learn from him? Do you see him as a mentor?**

**Ryuta:** He's here today, actually. [looks out to audience] Oh, he's sitting down. I heard that he came under



fire on Twitter again [laughs]. Aida-san's importance is not just for us, but the whole Japanese art scene.



The pussy of Tokyo 2017 © Chim↑Pom Courtesy of the artist and MUJINTO Production, Tokyo photo by KENJI MORITA

**Ellie:** Yes not just us, but everyone.

**Ryuta:** He's someone who's dealt with extreme subjects that can't be framed, and expanded the line of what's ok in the Japanese art world. If it wasn't for that, I think Japanese art would have been different.

**Ellie:** And he used buy dinner for Ryuta when he was younger, so Ryuta always talks about how he needs to pay back to his younger generation.

**Ryuta:** That's really important, actually. I was helping Aida-san back then, and we were all really poor. He took me out the day we met, and I saw him take out loans to do that [laughs]. But since then he would cook for me if I went to visit his home, so he's more like a really close relative, than a mentor.

**How has social media influenced or affected your work?**

**Ellie:** What is social media again?

**Ryuta:** Like Instagram.

**Ellie:** You mean things that we share publicly online? (One of our members) Hayashi and I are the only ones who have an account. Most of us aren't good at social media. For me it's like having a memo pad.

**Do you think it's ok to abandon a project that isn't working?**

**Ellie:** We haven't given up, right? But I think we'd really try hard to seek a way out.

**Ryuta:** I think that's because we really believe that it's gonna work out. There's a point where we know that it's gonna work. Then we have a firm conviction.

**Ellie:** I think it's totally naturally that we fail 5, 6, 7, or 8 times. But I don't think we're often convinced that we've failed and need to abandon it. Though I think it's totally fine to quit, too.

**For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?**

**Ryuta:** Our members and staff. The conversations between our members becomes the core, so it all starts there.

Another thing is who and what we meet. For example, Ellie's life itself is a source. When she got married, we turned her wedding into an art piece.

**What do you do when you're creatively stuck?**

**Ellie:** Mahjong [*laughs*]

**Ryuta:** Oh yeah, you started, right?

**Ellie:** No, I restarted! [*laughs*] We're six of us, so we often do get stuck. But we're not often still stuck after 100-hours of meetings.

**Ryuta:** Meetings can get really difficult.

**Ellie:** It's so painful. It's like hell on earth... hell is even better.

**Ryuta:** But we believe that there must be an answer. We want to find that one answer. And we eventually will find that.

**Ellie:** It's like going to rescue that one gleam of light.



Name

Chim↑Pom

Vocation

Artists, Collective

Fact



Photo by Leslie Kee

Ellie recommends 5 night spots to drink in Kabukicho, Shinjuku:

Kabukicho Book Center

Miso Soup

Brian Bar

Red

Snack Scola