



Art

Visiting Japan's Provocative Art Collective

In conversation with Japanese artist Ryuta Ushiro of
Tokyo's trendy Chim↑Pom collective



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Written by

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The Tokyo-based art collective Chim↑Pom has been known to raise a few eyebrows thanks to their oft-provocative performances. But the words of Ryuta Ushiro, one of the über cool members of the trendy sextet, aren't quite as tongue in cheek as the artworks. Departures' Hiroko Kamogawa caught up with the artist to discuss the pandemic, Tokyo Olympics and Chim↑Pom's projects in Fukushima.

DEPARTURES: It has been a turbulent year to say the least. How has the pandemic affected you and your work?

RYUTA USHIRO: I think it was the first time ever since we started Chim↑Pom that I didn't travel abroad at all. But most of our communications are usually done remotely anyway, so it felt as nothing has really changed. As Chim↑Pom, we couldn't see one another for about a month, inevitably preventing us from working together. Come May, though, we were back to business as usual, working on a new piece.



Mandarin
Paris





Build Burger, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, ANOMALY and MUJINTO Production. Photo by YUKI MAEDA.
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DAWILION 2010-2017. Courtesy of the artist, ANOMALY and MUJINTO Production. Photo by KENJI MORITA



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That would be the new installation, May 2020 Tokyo - Drawing the Blueprint?

Yes. We wanted to do something outside again. Working 'outside' has always been our approach – producing guerrilla-style works and viewed by random passerby. But 'outside' as we knew it had changed its face during the lockdown, and also its meaning had shifted. The streets of crowded Tokyo, the familiar cityscape, was no longer there and our usual audience was all gone. Everyone turned to online, but we felt this extraordinary 'outside' space is exactly what we should continue to utilise, and that is how the work started to evolve.

This idea of showing, for example, at art fairs, theatres, museums or galleries, was fundamentally challenged this year. The existing business model of a typical blue-chip art environment was forced to explore alternative possibilities.

What you are talking about is a very typical side of 'showing'. There are so many different platforms nowadays, just by looking at types of exhibitions we have out there. *Don't Follow the Wind*, Chim ↑ Pom's project in Fukushima, for example, has been challenging this notion of 'seeing'. With three international curators of our choosing, we brought together 12 artists to produce new works, and Chim ↑ Pom installed them inside the restricted Fukushima Exclusion Zone. It is an ongoing exhibition that is inaccessible both for potential viewers as well as those who used to live there.

The void there is different from the lockdowns we have been experiencing this year, but there is a conduit – and it deals with restrictions, limitations and impositions. This year, so many events and exhibitions were either forced to cancel, postpone or have gone completely online. But I feel that they were all just temporary responses. Being inaccessible and remaining unseen was not their intention. Experimenting with many different approaches of 'showing', for me at least, is an integral part of contemporary art practice. Just like what

happened to Fukushima, we learn to continue while responding to changes – and that whole process happens constantly.



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KI-AI 100, 2011. Courtesy of the artist, ANOMALY and MUJIN-TO Production.

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REAL TIMES, 2011. Courtesy of the artist, ANOMALY and MUJIN-TO Production.

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For the upcoming exhibition at the Mori Museum next year, could we then expect not just a typical retrospective, but also something new that conveys this turbulent year in some way and reflects the changes we have been experiencing?

The older works will be read differently when the mood of the time shifts. Even we look at our own works differently. Our perspectives are inevitably influenced by flux as a response. I would like to embrace this transience by revising the earlier works. I have been thinking about how to avoid turning it into a space where our works are simply placed chronologically but rather making the whole experience as a takeover – an invasion of Chim↑Pom. Funnily enough, this exhibition was initially scheduled to start in April 2021 to showcase a critical perspective on Tokyo at a reasonably well-positioned timing of post-Olympics. And Chim↑Pom was chosen for the task.

For the installation, *May 2020 Tokyo - Drawing the Blueprint*, we used a technique called [cyanoprint], commonly known as blueprint. This is a medium we started to use for works revolving around ideas on urban, cityscape or metropolis, since it was decided that the Olympics are to take place in Tokyo. It was around that time when gentrification in Tokyo had accelerated and the presence of sponsors and the government involvements became evident everywhere. Drawing blueprints, in its idiomatic sense, has two conflicting sides – it embraces a sense of disappointment, unknown and longing for brighter future. You know, the name of the Olympics is apparently going to remain as 'Tokyo 2020'. Funny isn't it? That just says it all.

We are now living in this world where we have no idea what is going to happen next, yet somehow struggling to let go of certain things. Going back to the exhibition at the Mori, we are thinking of showing our earlier pieces in a way that reflects the status quo of October 2021 when the exhibition is now planned.





May, 2020, Tokyo (Okubo Station), 2020. Courtesy of the artist and ANOMALY.

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What does the future hold for Chim↑Pom?

There are two things that come to mind. After the Aichi Triennale last year, public interests on censorship have significantly increased. Through the activities of Chim↑Pom, we have had to deal with that a lot. On one occasion, I think it was in 2013, we were told by The Japan Foundation, a producer and sponsor of a biennale we were taking part then, not to show any work that includes anything remotely to do with Comfort Women, North Korea, Fukushima or radioactivity. Otherwise, there would be a 'threat' by the government.

A couple of years after that experience, we did a solo show, exhibiting five so-called 'controversial' pieces in our own space in Tokyo, to leak what was going on in the contemporary art scene in Japan. This show was basically an official statement from us to establishments and to say, 'thank you for your past support, but no thank you – we will now do it on our own', and to whistle-blow. It was important to address, how disrespectful it is to artistic practices to censor for the political reasons, but to also to point out how extremely common it is. Being true to our own form of expression should always be the priority.

Another thing about us. As an art collective, we are a group. But there shouldn't be a hierarchy or top-down communications. Six artists working and conceptualising individually as

residents of this biotope called Chim↑Pom; however, never attempting to create 'Chim↑Pom-like' works. That, I find it extremely important, to resist Chim↑Pom.

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