

Report on Chim↑Pom's 道 [Street] Project in Taiwan:

A public domain born from a sense of complicity

Interview with Ryuta Ushiro and Yasutaka Hayashi

BIJUTSU TECO MAGAZINE Looking at Chim↑Pom's recent activities, it struck me that from your artist-run space Garter in Koenji to your large scale project in Kabukicho, Tokyo, a lot of your activity has been self-managed.

RYUTA USHIRO Though we've only recently started publicly declaring them 'DIY projects', our style hasn't actually changed since the early days. We've self-funded a lot of our projects, and the idea of being 'complicit' with local people has been our way of working for a long time now. I suppose it's a way of taking responsibility for our own work.

YASUTAKA HAYASHI Our fundamental premise is that we just want to do what we want to do; our aim isn't to win freedom of expression, and we don't set out to antagonise anyone.

RU All the same, the industry as it stands is boring. In which case, we realised, we should use our own projects to create an alternative art scene. There was a particularly strong element of that in *Don't Follow the Wind*. Putting together a team of curators, choosing artists, setting up an organising committee involving gallerists and local people. The very process of putting together a small collective like that was kind of an attempt to create an alternative, ideal art scene.

YH The reason we set up the artist-run space in Koenji was because our activities are based in Tokyo, so we needed a space where everyone could get together in Tokyo.

RU We'd also always had the issue of how to relate to existing institutions. One aspect of creating a new art scene was that it would enable us to act as curators and introduce interesting people who would never be featured in art galleries. I think it was our Kabukicho project *So see you again tomorrow, too?* (2016) that started us using the word DIY. After all, we used Ellie's savings to produce it, and then ran it using money from entry fees [laughs]. One important aspect of it was the way you could directly sense this organic feeling arising from all the people from different walks of life who had been involved with that place.

Historically speaking, Kabukicho was a burnt-out wasteland after the war until people got together to plan a city and a mixture of different businesses started to spring up. Using the Kabukicho Promotion Association building, a symbol of that time, allowed us to internalise the context of the public space.

YH The Promotion Association's stance of not casting judgment as to whether something was good or bad, however shady it might be, but instead acting as a buffer against the authorities and accepting all-comers, was a kind of new invention. And that attitude ended up creating a really unique district. With unique people.

RU By embodying through exhibitions and events the notion of 'public' implemented by this semi-private, semi-public organisation, the site-specificity of the work ended up becoming the work itself. That's why with 道 [Street] we wanted to keep exploring the possibilities brought to the notion of 'public' by the involvement of large numbers of anonymous people.



Top

**Don't Follow the Wind,
A Walk in Fukushima**

installation view at Carriageworks, 2016
360 degree video, headsets,
cafe furniture from Fukushima,
Australian uranium, maps

Above

So See You Again Tomorrow, Too?

Installation view at Kabukicho Promotion
Association Building, Tokyo, 2016

Right

Chim↑Pom Street

installation view, Tokyo, 2017
Waste material from previous
project locations



Connecting road and museum

BT Could you tell us how 道 [Street], the project that opened at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts last September as part of the Asian Art Biennale 2017, came about?

RU The theme of the exhibition was 'Negotiating the Future', and a lot of the participating artists were quite political. One of the curators, Kenji Kubota, got in touch, and we went over to Taiwan to do some research. The theme got us interested in the Sunflower Student Movement (a 2014 protest movement that occupied the Legislative Yuan), and when we met and spoke to some of the young people who had actually been involved, it was seriously fascinating. What made a particular impression on us was the unbelievable fact that when the first protest group got to the Legislative Yuan (the equivalent of the Houses of Parliament), for some reason the last door was unlocked.

YH This thick, heavy door, which it would have been impossible to kick down, was open, so apparently they were able to occupy the building without being arrested.

RU We're talking about the door to the hub of the nation that should normally be locked. Naturally, they were asking themselves 'Why open?' and we thought that was a good question. During their month-long occupation of the Legislative Yuan they sent out daily updates via social media, had parties, and came up with a campaign song. Meeting Betty Apple, a musician who was involved in producing the song, was also significant for us. At any rate, people outside were receiving their updates about the movement, and the whole thing connected inside and outside, state and individuals.

YH We thought maybe 道 [Street] could connect something inside with something outside, just like the last door at the Legislative Yuan.

RU We'd just made *Chim↑Pom Street* at the Kitakore Building, so we had no problem coming up with the idea for the piece. *Chim↑Pom Street* is another *Why Open?* domain that's open to everyone 24 hours a day [laughs]. So in the end we decided to use 道 [Street] to connect the inside of Taiwan's only National Museum of Fine Arts with the public highway outside. In that way, it would connect the Biennale right the way up to the Legislative Yuan, and also pose once again the questions asked by the Sunflower Student Movement: what are national institutions for, and who does the 'public' belong to?

BT At the same time as being a work of art, *Chim↑Pom Street* is also an actual public space and an event space. There are gigs, drunk people come in to use the toilet; I'm surprised how far it's expanded whilst retaining the concept of a 'work of art'.

RU The weekly conversations we had with the architect Takashi Suo as we worked on the idea had a lot to do with it. When he suggested we free the closed atmosphere of the Kitakore Building and create a space inside where people could get together, we thought a 'street' would be the way to go. It didn't feel like a square would be as chaotic.

Regulating 道 [Street]

BT Could you tell us about the reaction to your having created a new 'street' in Taiwan?

RU Firstly, even if you manage to connect inside and outside using a load of asphalt, the concept of 'creating a street' involves it actually being used as a public space,



ART is in the pARTy 2018
Block party on 道 [Street]

you know? And when we imagined how it might be used, we came up against the fact that 道 [Street] was still part of the art museum and as such was subject to various restrictions.

YH No alcohol or smoking. But how about demonstrations? How about sleeping?

RU Every public realm has its own unique rules. But when we thought about it, the difference between each of them was intriguing. For example, in Taiwan you can drink and smoke on a public highway, but inside the public art museum you can't, even though they're both in the public realm. Extreme art is allowed in the museum, but not on the public highway. So how about on the street that connects the two [laughs]? The solution we reached was to negotiate with the gallery and come up with a set of independent regulations for 道 [Street] as a third type of public space.

BT How did you come up with the regulations?

RU We started by writing a draft and then negotiated each individual regulation with the museum. For example, graffiti isn't allowed inside the museum, but materially speaking 道 [Street] is our work, so it was permitted there. When we said that since it's on the road, people should have the right to demonstrate, they said they wouldn't permit any kind of demonstration within the museum. After negotiating, though, they said that as long as it was under the auspices of Chim↑Pom, people would be allowed to 'express themselves'. In a reversal that could only happen in art, if the museum were to interfere they would be guilty of censorship. When we put up a poster in the exhibition space asking for ways to use the street, we received several suggestions by email.

Our next strategy was to hold a block party,



道 [Street] 2017–18
Site-specific installation

as a showcase for different activities, and as an opportunity for Taiwanese people to really use it as they saw fit. We asked the musician I mentioned, Betty Apple, to come and curate the party. She'd been involved in the Sunflower Student Movement and the anti-nuclear movement, and had various connections with subculture in the form of art spaces and collectives, so we wanted her to come up with a line-up that would let the Taiwanese people create 'the street' for themselves.

As a result we even got the go-ahead to have food and drink, which we'd been told weren't allowed, as long as they were for the purposes of artistic expression [laughs]! The event itself was amazing: bursting with energy, as though we'd put on an alternative performance biennale [laughs]! Another thing we did was to put theatre style seating around the part of 道 [Street] that was inside the museum, so

that visitors could watch the party. We wanted to make people aware of the border between inside and out, so we created another layer outside of the party, in the form of a spectator zone.

道 [Street] as a medium for new connections

RU One of the most memorable things about the Biennale was meeting Xigangogreen: a collective from Tainan. Two days before the party one of the collective, who was in his twenties, came to see us and made a proposal for what they wanted to do on 道 [Street]. It ended up being a special moment in my life as an artist. The collective was based in rural Tainan, and was the type of collective that shared a cultural way of life with its neighbours, surrounded by nature. At the time, a certain street in their village was being targeted for redevelopment and



道 [Street] 2017-18 (detail)
Site-specific installation



Xiganggogreen collective, 2017

they were involved in protest activities. The street still housed the railway tracks that had been used to transport sugarcane during the period of Japanese rule, and for the people of the village it had historical and cultural significance. They weren't city types, and weren't used to the spotlight, but they wanted more people to know what was going on. They'd visited the Biennale several times, and seen our work, and realised that if they used 道 [Street] as a medium, they could make their case in the public space that was the National Museum of Fine Arts. Maybe they also felt that Chim↑Pom might sympathise as a fellow collective. Their approach was to hold an unplugged party and a ten-minute silent demonstration on 道 [Street], followed by a press conference. I thought a press conference was a smart idea, and I really felt that they needed the museum and our art, so I agreed wholeheartedly, and then the guy burst into tears! I guess he was really invested in the idea, and it was a big moment for us, as well, because it showed us that this piece was powerful in a way that was different from traditional works of art.

YH We realised that without us even noticing, it was now the only place of its kind in the whole of Taiwan.

RU We've been involved with a lot of groups and individuals in the past, but the series of encounters we've had through 道 [Street] has been completely different from any of them. The work itself became the medium that gave rise to new art scenes and organic movements from amongst the audience. The creation of a piece of art that has turned audience members into conscious practitioners has been an important turning point not just for the museum, but maybe even for art itself.

BT I thought it was wonderful that your intervention in the system didn't stop at the usual criticism, but went on to mediate

between people and practices that had nowhere left to go and the existing system, and what's more that it all took place within the framework of art.

YH We've always put a lot of thought into the question of how to face up to common sense and logic, and how to balance that with art. Because if you don't get that right your art won't work.

RU The concept of 'public' is one of the most easily influenced by our changing notions of logic and values over time. You can see extreme examples of that in cities; for example our concept of 'public' in the 90s when Masato Nakamura of Command N created *The Ginburart* and *Shinjuku Shonen Art* was completely different from what it is now, and people's reactions would have been different. The continual challenge of artists is to attempt to introduce an outside element to the times they live in. Chim↑Pom is known for producing that kind of work in the street, but somehow we've now ended up making our own piece of city infrastructure: our own 'street' [laughs]! And as both a stage and in terms of its relationship with the audience it's ended up being something completely different from an alternative space, or relational art. It's not something we expected. So now we feel that this project has even more potential. We could take this method anywhere, and it would have the ability to tangibly express each country's own rules around public highways and art museums, so I think we could do it in different countries.

BT Just as the extreme Japanese art of the 1960s led to the introduction of restrictions around the exhibition of art in museums that are still adhered to today, there's a sense in which the avant-garde work of the past ended up actually limiting our expressive possibilities. 道 [Street], on the other hand, is expanding the scope of what's possible in an art gallery.



Level 7 feat. 'Myth of Tomorrow' 2011
Video documentation, 4'32"

RU You're right that avant-garde art back then took to the streets to escape from the art galleries. And the art galleries responded by getting stricter. Maybe 道 [Street] has managed to repair the connection between the public highways and the galleries. Chim↑Pom is often seen in an avant-garde context, but I think this project has broadened the role of the gallery and the concept of art for us. I also think, though, that the way avant-garde art pioneered art literacy is also important in thinking about the notion of 'public'. For example, our piece *Level 7 Feat. Myth of Tomorrow* was widely debated based on the artistic interpretation that Taro Okamoto would have welcomed it. Even though popular logic was enraged by it. Which is to say that because of public art, there is clearly a double standard when it comes to the concept of 'public' [laughs]. There were two contact points

for 道 [Street]: the art museum, and Chim↑Pom.

If 道 [Street] were *Myth of Tomorrow*, then Xiganggogreen who 'attacked' it would be in the position Chim↑Pom were in back then, and the art museum would be 'popular logic'; and the artist, Chim↑Pom, would be Taro Okamoto, right? Hence their interpretation of the situation was that Chim↑Pom would be fine with what they wanted to do, and out of the two doors available to them they chose to approach us. But actually, an art museum is a place that has accumulated a vast store of art DNA. Which means that rather than deifying these stiff regulations and shutting themselves off, I think they ought to be able to pull out some of the rich diversity of art from their stores and open themselves up as a grey zone: an alternative public space.

The influence of Chim↑Pom's 道 [Street]

Interview with Hsiao-Yu Lin

BIJUTSU TECO MAGAZINE What did you think when you first heard the idea for their piece?

HSIAO-YU LIN At first I thought they were joking. To be honest, it was such a challenging concept that we had a lot of trouble deciding whether to accept it or not, but the curatorial team talked about the fact that the museum ought to have the courage to support this ambitious project, and we decided to go for it. It actually turned out to be quite tricky and difficult. Through the project, and through the reaction of the artists, the museum, and the public, we realised how difficult 'negotiation' can be; it really made us think about the role of the art museum, the definition of contemporary art, and the responsibility of the curator.

BT What did you feel was the biggest challenge for you in the process of negotiating with the artists?

HL As the in-house curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts, I found it complicated, psychologically. The essence of this project was to challenge the Art Museum as a symbol of power: the very thing that I rely on. As we were working with them, I found myself constantly questioning whether we ought to accept the artists' demands. Of course, it would have been possible to say 'no', but that would have robbed the art of its meaning. But if we said 'yes', the museum risked losing its power. Making that call was the biggest challenge for me.

BT What was the audience response like in Taiwan?

HL The response to the piece was split down the middle. It went down well in the art world, where they said the concept was an excellent response to the theme of 'Negotiating the Future', but some of the public were critical because they think art should be beautiful to look at and don't like political statements in art. But the block party was a success. I think it brought a breath of fresh, energetic, youthful, air to the museum.

Hsiao-Yu Lin is Curator at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and co-curator of the 2016 Taiwan Biennale.