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Chim ↑ Pom Comes to ABC No Rio

by [Whitney Kimball](#) on March 15, 2013 [Feature](#)

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Ryuta Ushiro meets the filthiest toilet this side of the Pacific

“I think it was two months after [the Fukushima meltdown], I got an email from a friend in New York saying you gotta see this,” Columbia grad student [Nat Andreini](#) told me on Tuesday night. “I was just totally blown away. I had been teaching English in Japan for a couple years, and there was nothing quite like [Chim↑Pom](#).”

Nat was referring to a series of street performance videos by the collective of six young Tokyo-based artists. Their series of public actions around the fallout site in Soma City [polarized public discussion](#) around the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and resulting Fukushima nuclear meltdown, [the worst since Chernobyl](#).

Two years later, Nat brought Chim↑Pom leader Ryuta Ushiro to ABC No Rio’s basement for a screening of those works. Early Chim↑Pom footage, circa 2005-2010, introduces the group in an MTV-style interview, mixed with an *Almost Famous*-style montage: five guys, one hot girl (Ellie) posing around the city, making big sculpture, a couple gratuitous facepaint shots. For an early work [Super Rat](#), they run around the streets with little fishing nets in order to capture, stuff, and dye city rats to look like Pikachu. City rats are free, and the streets are their playground, the subtitles explain; Chim↑Pom could sympathize with that.

But then Fun’s anthem “We Are Young” switches to a darker theme, as pedestrians look to shaking buildings in horror.

“That the radiation was leaking into the air like that...it was just horrible,” Ellie says to the camera at a bar. “As artists, we have to leave something behind.”

Watch [Real Times](#) on PBS. See more from [FRONTLINE](#).

The later works (which you can [find online](#)) get right to the point. They [use a battered frame](#) from Fukushima to contain the motto of a Hiroshima and three-time cancer survivor Sunao Tsuboi: “Never give up!” They paint black, radioactive clouds on Taro Okamoto’s Guernica-esque public Hiroshima mural, [Myth of Tomorrow](#) (an instant twitter hit). They trespass on the Fukushima observatory, across from the mangled power plants which are still venting a thin white mist; with some quick spray painting, they transform a white flag into the Rising Sun, and then into a red hazard symbol. It’s an obvious, but powerful statement. When did we accept radioactive sewage as the general state of affairs?

Watch [100 Cheers](#) on PBS. See more from [FRONTLINE](#).

The following video may have earned Chim ↑ Pom the most recognition both publicly and in the New York art world: [KI-AI/100](#), referring to the martial arts practice KI-AI, of gathering strength before attacking. The group huddles amongst the wreckage in Soma City and starts cheering like you would before a football game. They start out serious– *Thank you to volunteers!* and *We can beat this!*– and quickly get silly– *I want to see swimsuits!* Near the end, they start to run out of breath.

Radiation is great!

Is radiation great?

Is radiation really great?

I wanna take a bit more!

Radiation is not great!

Stop screwing around!

Against the crater that was Soma City, their dumb, blind enthusiasm feels like a collective purge. Somebody needed to do something– anything.

I asked Ryuta what the public response had been prior to their videos. “There was a media blackout around the radius of Fukushima,” his friend Kentaro Ikegami translated. “And no artists were making works that were reacting to it because it was so close. This is pretty much immediate, it was in a month. So, similar to 9/11 in America, artists were very sensitive to whether they could make work about it or not…there was a real lull in artistic production.”

“In terms of the public response after artworks, they don’t really claim to be the source or catalyst or anything,” Kentaro told me, “but there was a small swell of public response, especially amongst the youth generation. People in their twenties, I guess. But as of now, yeah, all that has quelled down and is almost non-existent.” But, he added, “As an artistic response, there has been a marked rise in young artists taking more socially responsible roles.”

Nat had told me that Chim↑Pom’s directness was considered foreign in Japan, which perhaps explains their uniqueness. “The energy…the hybridized sort of activist-meets-pranks. You know, like the Yes Men, who we have in the States– I just hadn’t seen that. And had been looking for it.”

The work was, then, shocking. “I showed it to my junior high school students and high school students [in Japan]…their first reaction was to laugh. And they never assumed that the artists were Japanese. I told them yes, they’re Japanese, and they couldn’t believe it; for them, they identified this kind of work with the United States.”

Watch [Level7](#) on PBS. See more from [FRONTLINE](#).

Even here, unless you're Ai Weiwei, social responsibility rarely fits neatly into New York's commercial gallery system. Ryuta told me that it's not a problem because there isn't so much of a commercial gallery world in Japan to begin with; Chim ↑ Pom functions more like a rock band, with a personal manager. "Since [a lot of young Japanese artists] know that the art market in Japan is quite different from New York anyhow, they rather not make only salable works," Kentaro translated. "So he subjectively believes, surrounded by this scene— but there is a generation of young Japanese artists, if they're not gonna make any money anyways, why not go big?"

Be it party culture, the defiance and the optimism is sorely needed to get the job done. We have a right to party; we have a stake in this. Ryuta said it wasn't so much fear of government that worried Chim ↑ Pom, but it was questioning their

right to the territory. “In this moment of crisis, can we go forward with what we do normally?” Kentaro translated. “Can we use this as subject matter for our own practice when there’s a huge amount of chaos around us?” At ABC No Rio, that question seemed to answer itself.

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