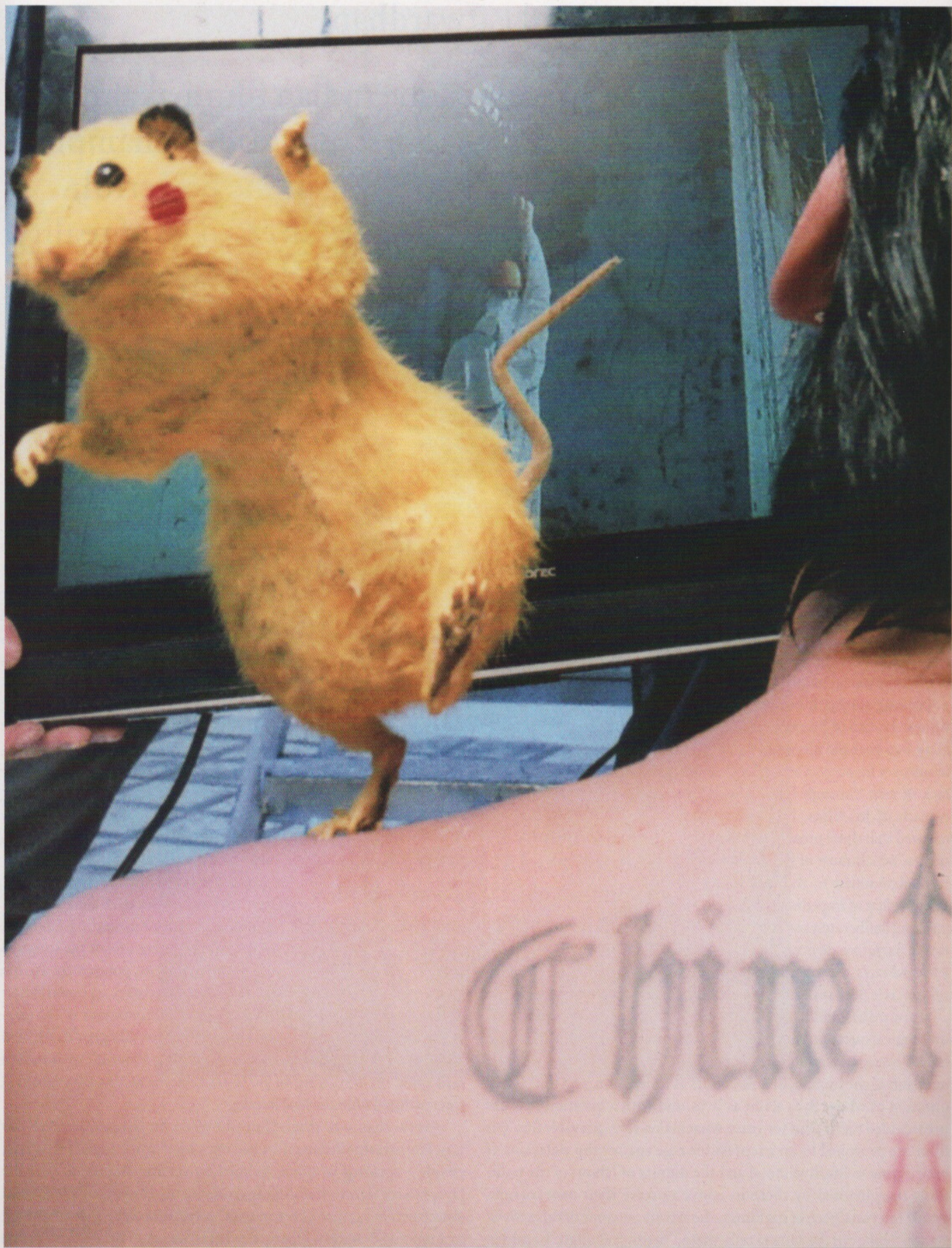


ArtReview Asia





A Chim ↑ Pom Super Rat (2006–), photographed by Monika Mogi in the artists' Tokyo studio



Black of Death, 2007–8, lambda print. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

Inherent in the everyday is the ideological; the everyday is all that we take for granted, and it is difficult to see ideology at work, precisely because, like a spy, ideology stops functioning once it is recognised as such. The events following 3/11 exposed one crucial ideological myth at work in postwar Japan – the safety of nuclear power.

TEPCO promoted the safety myth beligerently by paying off the media. When Chim↑Pom saw that the media had failed adequately to report the aftermath of the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, it took matters into its own hands with admirable speed. For *Real Times* (2011), the group's members travelled down the broken roads to Fukushima, penetrating the boundary of the 20km exclusion zone, and videotaped themselves walking, in hazchem suits, up to an observation tower located just 700m from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. Once there, they planted a white flag signifying defeat (while echoing expeditions to the moon or Mount Everest), spraypainted a red dot in the centre to create a Japanese flag, then added three blades to it, transforming it into the international symbol for radioactivity.

While Chim↑Pom's works have increasingly taken a more explicitly political bent, explicit politics is no guarantee of artistic effect. In this context, Ushiro considers *Real Times* a product of 'journalism', a method needed at the time, but one he no longer sees as the most viable. Today, he is interested in "less literal, and more artlike" methods.

Post-3/11, the collective has left an uneven track record in this regard. This, however, is also a testament to their willingness to take risks. A recent work, *It's the Wall World*, shown in various forms since 2014, and planned for inclusion in their upcoming solo exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, trades puzzle-piece-shaped cutouts of the gallery wall with those taken from various locations in the 'outside world'. The metaphor is easy and the work is visually humdrum. The integration of art into the 'real world' is something Chim↑Pom already achieved with *Super Rat*, and has successfully made a cornerstone of their practice since. As a result, *It's the Wall World* feels redundant.

In their best works, Chim↑Pom deftly employ artistic techniques of gestural economy, moving spectacle and estrangement to poetic and even alchemical effect. For their most controversial work to date, a 2009 video piece entitled *Making the sky of Hiroshima 'PIKA!'*, Chim↑Pom hired a skywriter to form the onomatopoeic *pika* (flash) above the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome. Due in large part to a local newspaper's muckraking efforts, the event became, in Chim↑Pom's words, a



Real Times, 2011, video. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

The group travelled down the broken roads to Fukushima, into the exclusion zone, and videotaped themselves planting and spraypainting a white flag near the damaged power station

'social phenomenon'. Though compared by its detractors to an attack on the survivors of the atomic blast, the work attests to the unrepresentability of the trauma of the atomic bomb. One is reminded of the opening sequences of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), in which the Japanese architect repeatedly tells the French actress, "You saw nothing in Hiroshima." The simple action of inserting the onomatopoeia flattens 'Hiroshima' and turns the scene, as critic Noi Sawaragi suggests, into a comic book panel. In lieu of depth and seriousness, which could never be adequate to the event, the wispy text set against the bright blue sky works in the insurmountable gap between the weight of the event and utter lightness of its representation, literally weightless. Here Chim↑Pom successfully points to the unexamined, quotidian acceptance of 'peace' and the simultaneous forgetting of the Pacific War in postwar Japan.

Chim↑Pom will return to the Hiroshima theme in a characteristically iconoclastic new work planned for their Saatchi Gallery exhibition. The piece revisits the mountain of origami cranes, sent to



Super Rat (still), 2011, HD video, sound, 2 min 28 sec. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

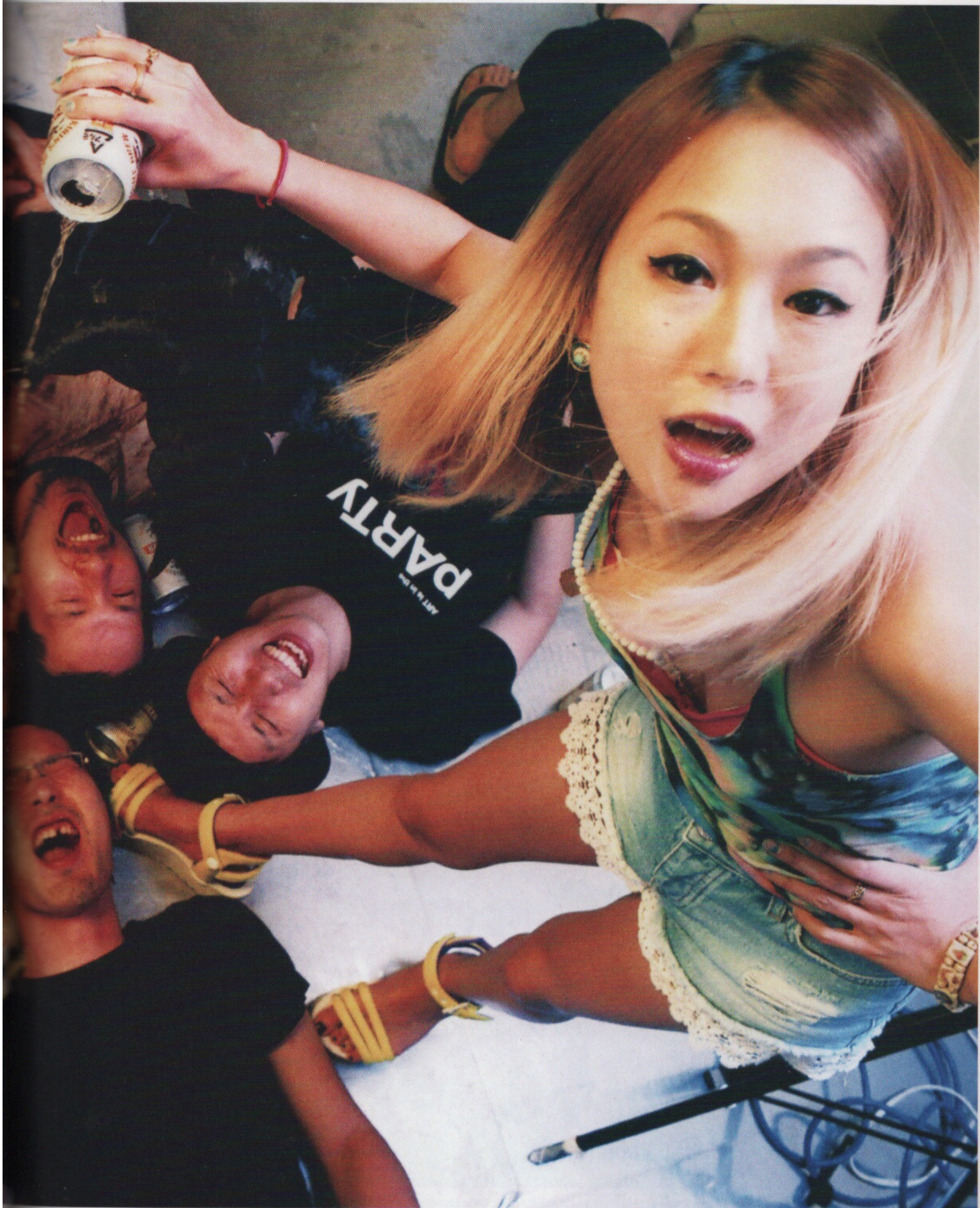
Chim↑Pom

by Taro Nettleton Photographed by Monika Mogi



In January this year, the six-member Tokyo-based art collective Chim↑Pom won the Emerging Artist of the Year Award at the 2015 Prudential Eye Awards for Contemporary Asian Art. The group was established a decade ago, when its members – Ushiro Ryuta, Hayashi Yasutaka, Ellie, Okada Masataka, Inaoka Motomu and Mizuno Toshinori – were in their twenties, and their youth is a prominent factor in writings about their work. Yet today, the oldest member is thirty-eight. It may thus be more apposite to characterise the group's work as youthful. The overwhelming image that Chim↑Pom has diligently cultivated, however, is one of the 'bad boy'. Somewhat predictably then, in response to winning the prize money, they told *The Straits Times*, 'We are going to drink 10,000 gallons of alcohol with it.'

A household name in Japan, Chim↑Pom has thus far received relatively scant critical attention abroad. The collective is known for its provocative works, which frequently incite situations that point to local, contemporary, social concerns. Domestically, they have laboured to construct a critical discourse for their output. In 2012 Chim↑Pom published *Geijutsu jikkohan* (*Art As Action*, 2012), a book explaining their works and placing the group in the milieu of 'artivists' from around the globe, such as Banksy, JR, Voina, the Bruce High Quality Foundation, Gelitin and Double Fly Art Center, with whom they feel an affinity. There is also an entire volume of contributions from prominent art critics, curators and artists dedicated to the controversy that erupted around a work they produced in Hiroshima.



The lack of a parallel discourse in English makes Chim↑Pom's work, in many cases, difficult to appreciate outside Japan. The group's obvious desire for transgression also often overshadows other merits of their output. Seen as an oeuvre, Chim↑Pom's works alternately address the trivial and the profound. And in their most successful pieces they bridge the gap between the two. One of their first works, *Super Rat* (2006–), is a case in point. For this, the artists used fishing nets to hunt the titular creatures (so-called by exterminators due to their seemingly supernatural adaptation to the urban environment, both in cunning and physical resilience), in Shibuya's Center-Gai, a street known for its grit and youth culture. They then taxidermied

response to a work it proposed for an international exhibition that the Abe administration will not allow the foundation to fund any works involving the keywords 'Fukushima', 'nuclear' or 'comfort women'. As of this writing, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government are pressuring the group's mentor Aida Makoto to either remove or alter two of his works – one criticises the Ministry of Education and the other spoofs 'a man calling himself the prime minister of Japan'.

To address the question of visibility in post-3/11 Japan, Chim↑Pom has recently initiated *Don't Follow the Wind* (11 March 2015–), a group exhibition currently displayed in the exclusion zone of Fuku-

shima, where, for all practical purposes, it remains invisible. In September, *Don't Follow the Wind – non-Visitor Center*, a satellite exhibition, will open at Watarium in Tokyo. As Chim↑Pom's leader Ushiro explains, the show comprises works by an international group of artists, including Ai Weiwei, to address the nuclear meltdown as a problem that needs to be considered on a global scale. Furthermore, Ushiro hopes that the satellite exhibition will provide the kind of alternative public relations work needed to challenge the Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) own formidable PR efforts. Asked whether making the show visible detracts from its message, Ushiro answers, "The satellite show is a practical necessity to avoid the pitfall of self-satisfaction. We also need to provide a catalyst to spark the [public's] imagination."

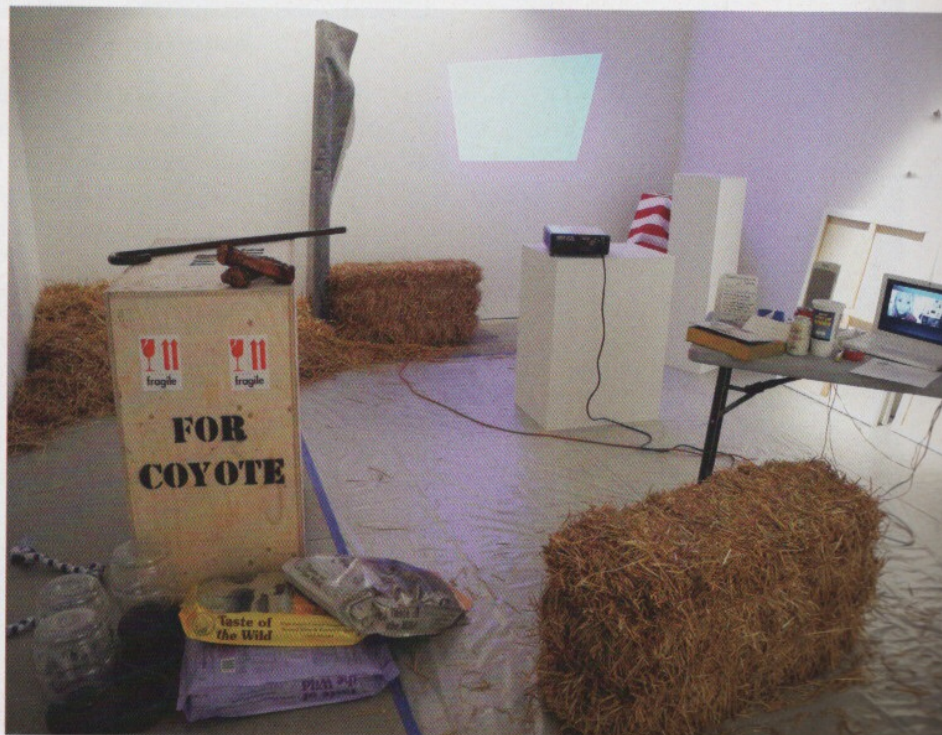
Throughout the last decade, Chim↑Pom has continuously interrogated the everyday, a particular type of the invisible. In this, they carry on the tradition of Japanese 'Anti-Art' artists of the 1960s, such as the Neo Dada Organizers (active 1960–63) and Hi Red Center (1963–4), who, amid the political and social turmoil that characterised that decade, saw their work as social agitation.



Real Times, 2011, video. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

the super rats and painted them into real-life (or real-dead) 'Pikachu'. In these garishly coloured rodents, members of Chim↑Pom saw a reflection of themselves: they too made Shibuya their home, and they found the super rats' adaptability and strength inspiring. They also suggest that it cemented the social and public orientation of their practice. Perhaps not coincidentally, in the hit song *Linda Linda* (1987), released almost exactly 20 years prior to the creation of *Super Rat*, sentimental Japanese pop-punk sensation the Blue Hearts sang, "I want to become beautiful like a sewer rat, because there is a kind of beauty that does not appear in a photograph."

In 2011 Chim↑Pom recreated *Super Rat* to address the possibility of mutation, particularly of the nuclear kind, which had for so long captured the Japanese imagination but had suddenly become a very real possibility, for the first time since 1945, in the aftermath of the nuclear meltdown caused by the great northeast earthquake and tsunami of 11 March that year. Like the beauty of the sewer rat, radiation cannot be seen. The question of what one can and cannot see, and the correlative of what one is shown and not shown, have thus become a central concern for many living in post-3/11 Japan, and the Abe administration's brazen censorship of journalists and artists has compounded the issue. Chim↑Pom was recently told by a Japan Foundation official in



Coyote, 2014 (installation view). © the artists. Courtesy Friedman Benda, New York

Hiroshima from around the world as prayers for peace, which the group exhibited in *Hiroshima!!!!* (2013, the fourth in a series of exhibitions developed by Chim ↑ Pom on the subject of 'nuclear power in our age', the first of which was titled *Hiroshima!*, with each subsequent iteration acquiring an additional exclamation mark). In the upcoming work, however, Ellie will sit atop the mountain and unfold the cranes individually, giving viewers an opportunity to refold them. Following 'PIKA!', the piece will deploy a simple, yet venomous and unnerving gesture to problematise the discursive production of 'Hiroshima'.

In an earlier work, *Black of Death* (2007), which foreshadows 'PIKA!', Chim ↑ Pom herded a murder of crows with the use of a stuffed crow and a loudspeaker amplifying a recording of crowing. Like 'PIKA!', the work involves an aerial manoeuvre. In the most interesting version, the crows circle above the National Diet Building, creating a magical and eerily suggestive picture. In 2000, then Tokyo mayor Shintaro Ishihara declared war on crows, calling them a public nuisance. Is *Black of Death* an act of revenge enacted on behalf of the crows or something more symbolic? In both 'PIKA!' and *Black of Death*, the works' ambiguity and visual punch refutes easy categorisation as mere prank.

Ambiguity is also at work in Chim ↑ Pom's 2011 video *KIAI 100*. Filmed in one improvised take in Soma, Fukushima, a city not only devastated by the quake and tsunami but also by a shortage of volunteers due to its proximity to the Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, group



Real Times, 2011, video. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

the piece, a local yells, "Radiation rules!" and another answers, "I want some more!" Here too, the image of the victim is refuted in surprising ways. Even more troubling, however, is the chant "Japan rules!", as it sublimates the subversive character of the event/video into something like the Japanese state's official call for Japan and its northeast region to 'do your best' in the aftermath of the disaster, showing that calls to emotion can be a dangerous game that usurps genuine action and lends itself to uncritically nationalist sentiments.

Chim ↑ Pom's practice can be understood as artful ways of 'making do'. Lacking art training (Ellie is the only member who attended art school), they've primarily employed performance and video to produce their works. Faced with an oppressive administration; a mass media that fails to function critically; a gallery system that lacks the collectors it requires to function properly; and conservatively run museums, the direct actions that Chim ↑ Pom have taken are best understood as necessary tactics of survival. The collective's opening

of Garter, an artist-run gallery, earlier this year is another of its attempts to gain some autonomy. Ushiro says he has noticed among his students a "strong sense of frustration", similar to that which initially inspired the members of Chim ↑ Pom to start making art. Whether younger Japanese artists will follow in their steps remains to be seen, and Chim ↑ Pom's nearly-ten-year career is a testament to the fact that tactics need to be continually renewed for efficacy. For Chim ↑ Pom, complexity and poesis, already hinted at in its strongest works, will be key to gaining relevance in the global context as the collective grows out of its youth. ara

Work by Chim ↑ Pom is on show at the Saatchi Gallery, London, 9–20 September, and will be included in the 3rd Ural Industrial Biennial in Moscow, 9 September–10 November. *Don't Follow the Wind (DFW)* is on show at Watari-Um Museum, Tokyo, from 19 September



Making the sky of Hiroshima 'PIKA!', 2009, c-print. Photo: Cactus Nakao. © the artists. Courtesy MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo