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## Art guerrillas Chim Pom stage show in a box

*Attention-seeking artists know a thing or two about Tokyo's rat race*

By [C.B. Liddell \(/author/cbliddell\)](#) 8 November, 2011



As five of Chim↑Pom's six members sit opposite me, two of them in wheelchairs, in an abandoned ward where there are still some items of medical equipment, I try to get behind the fast-developing myth of the group.

What are they up to? What drives them? And why does Ellie, the group's only female member, look like a trashy angel but talk with a voice like a cute drain?

## Cute 'n' sleazy

Since their debut on the Tokyo Art scene a few years ago with their "Super Rat" project, Chim↑Pom -- whose name, incidentally, sounds like "penis" in Japanese -- have worked hard to maintain their avant-garde edge and position as the enfant terrible of Japan's art world.

In these terms, "Super Rat" was a hard act to follow. It involved catching live rats in Shibuya's notoriously scuzzy Center Gai, and having them stuffed and made into cute, Pikachu-themed sculptures -- apparently a comment on the conflation of cuteness and sleaze for which Shibuya is justly world-renowned.

**More on CNGO:** [\*Center Gai reborn in dumbest marketing stunt ever\*](#)

<http://www.cngo.com/tokyo/shop/tokyo-tourist-draw-shoots-self-foot-bizarre-name-change-587773>

Subsequent projects have served to maintain their status as Japan's premier "art terrorists." In 2008 they hired a skywriting plane to write "Pika" -- the Japanese term for a blinding flash -- in the sky above Hiroshima during the commemoration period for the atomic bombing.

Then, in April this year, they "assaulted" one of the nation's art treasures, "Myth of Tomorrow" by Taro Okamoto, secretly adding an image of the broken Fukushima nuclear reactors to the giant sprawling mural that is displayed in Shibuya Station.

## Trick or treat?



*ChimPon hit the headlines with this post-Fukushima addition to “Myth of Tomorrow” by Taro Okamoto in Shibuya.*

With such a reputation for notoriety, the first bit of cognitive dissonance that strikes you when you meet the group is how sweet and down-to-earth they are.

The group’s youthful-looking leader Ryuta Ushiro is far from the surly avant-garde artist angered by the world’s inability to understand his art.

Beer can in hand, the amiable 33-year-old suggests that we just chat rather than have a formal question-and-answer session, while Ellie stops proceedings for a moment to don a pair of flashing plastic horns -- quite appropriate, as an upcoming ArtGig, organized by the Israeli-born promoter Shai Ohayon, has a Halloween theme, with many of the attendees in costume.

Maybe Ushiro’s aversion to a formal interview has something to do with the fact that he has an appointment the next day at the public prosecutor’s office to answer some quite different

questions about the addition to Okamoto's mural.

**More on CNNGo:** [9-11 meets 3-11 in altered metal art \(http://www.cnn.go.com/tokyo/visit/miya-ando-9-11-meets-3-11-altered-metal-art-661403\)](http://www.cnn.go.com/tokyo/visit/miya-ando-9-11-meets-3-11-altered-metal-art-661403)

An addition, it must be said, designed to be removed without damaging the original.

"We do respect the law as a kind of masterpiece of humanity," Ushiro says in slight penitential mode. "But still there are some things that might be more important than the existing legal system."

But while skirmishing with the law or offending certain sensibilities -- the Hiroshima stunt drew the ire of survivor groups -- may be part of what they do, the essence of Chim↑Pom is their rejection of the narrow confines of Japan's art world.

With its rules and conventions it can at times resemble a ghetto, effectively limiting its interaction with the wider citizenry. Much of the group's work can be seen as an attempt to break through these barriers.

## Reloading the myth

"When we started Chim↑Pom, we wanted to appeal to people outside the art world and I am now confident in achieving our first mission," Ellie pipes up in her trademark husky voice, a bottle of pink Zima in her hand.

Despite the official brouhaha, the "Myth of Tomorrow" stunt is a case in point.

"Many people came to know about the artwork because of the incident," Ushiro expounds.

"Our act, in a way, reminded people of the work. Because of the scandal people understand that Okamoto's work was the chronicle of the Japanese nuclear experience. Before, people were just passing by in front of the artwork, without knowing what it is, but after the earthquake, after the nuclear accident, and after our stunt, people came to understand it."

As for understanding the group, the key is Ellie -- with her dyed hair and eclectic fashion sense, she is an unpretentious Shibuya "gyaru;" exactly the kind of person alienated by the conventional art world in Japan.

**More on CNNGO:** [Is Shibuya Tokyo's own Jersey Shore? \(http://www.cnn.go.com/tokyo/visit/shibuya-](http://www.cnn.go.com/tokyo/visit/shibuya-)

[tokyos-own-jersey-shore-402984](#)

Rather in the same way that the 19th-century Japanese essayist Yukichi Fukuzawa ran his writings past a poor woman from his neighbourhood to make sure they would be understood by the common people, Ellie, in addition to her other contributions to the group, also seems to function as a kind of sounding board for Chim↑Pom, helping them to keep their art on a populist and accessible level. Whether we like it or not, Ellie, is the younger generation's everywoman.

## Controversy welcomed



*The group is no stranger to controversy, as in this piece entitled "King & Queen."*

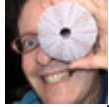
"Whenever I'm speaking to other people, I'm also listening to her," Ushiro says with a combination of mock and sincere reverence. "The reason I am the leader is because I am the best person to recognize her signs."

At ArtGig, Chim↑Pom displayed an extremely lifelike cast of group member Motomu Inaoka from their 2009 show "Good to be human," when he starved himself for the duration of the exhibition in a manner reminiscent of the self-mummification of certain Japanese monks in the past -- a perfect piece of Halloween entertainment, but with deeper cultural resonances.

The group also have a small exhibition called "K-I-S-S-I-N-G" on the theme of "ultimate love." This includes a video animation, a large photographic print of Ellie kissing a statue of Jesus, and broken glass.

In accordance with the group's mission to break art out its cozy ghetto, it is being held at Ohayon's "The Container" -- not so much an art gallery, as an actual shipping container (485x180x177 centimeters) inserted into a working hair salon.

**Getting there:** You can see Chim↑Pom's "K-I-S-S-I-N-G" show at "The Container" until December 19. It's inside Bross hair salon, 1/F Hills Daikanyama, 1-8-30 Kami-Meguro Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0051, [the-container.com](http://the-container.com/) (<http://the-container.com/>)



[../../author/cbliddell](http://the-container.com/)

C.B. Liddell is the Art and Architecture Editor of "Metropolis" magazine, a regular writer on art for "The Japan Times," and the Far Eastern Editor of the "Erotic Review."

Read more about **[C.B. Liddell](http://the-container.com/)** ([../../author/cbliddell](http://the-container.com/))

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