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CULTURE

# chim↑pom are the subversive face of japan's contemporary art scene

Chim↑Pom have been working together for ten years, but are virtually unknown outside Asia. As they open their first ever exhibition in the London at White Rainbow Gallery, followed by a solo show at the Saatchi Gallery later this year, is this about...

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Felix Petty

MAY 1 2015, 6:00PM

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Black of Death (above 109, Shibuya, Tokyo), 2007, Courtesy of the artists and MUJIN-TO production, Tokyo

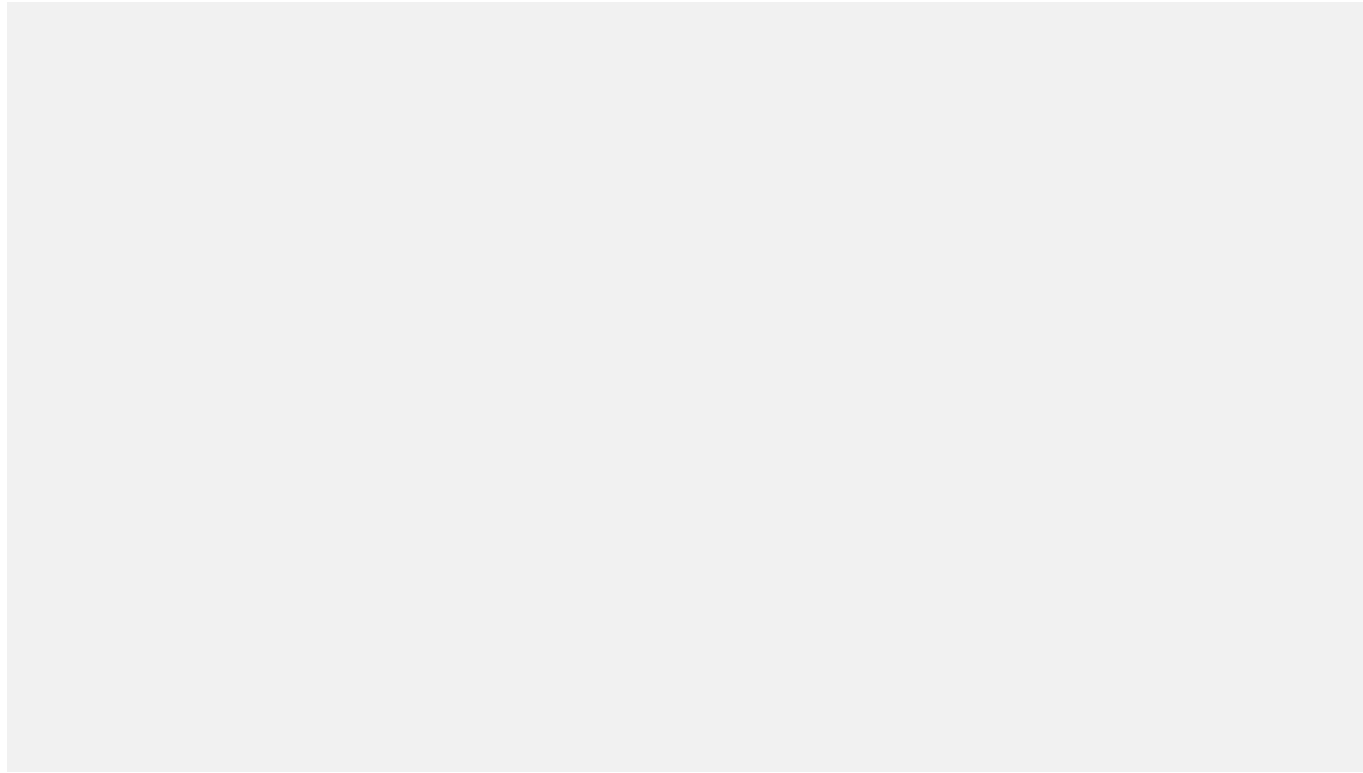
Chim↑Pom have been the satirical heart of Japan's contemporary art scene for ten years now. Their work, which has taken form in videos, installations and performances, has cut a blackly humorous social critique through Japan's cultural landscape.

When they were starting out, and struggling to name the group, Ellie, one of their six members, had a eureka moment whilst waiting at a level crossing in Tokyo as a train went past. She decided on Chim↑Pom, purely because of the way it sounded. Coincidentally, it sounds like

Japanese slang, Chimpō, for penis. They didn't think about it until it was too late, and the name had stuck. "We wanted something that sounded Japanese, we never considered the reality of having to introduce ourselves as Chim↑Pom all the time, and constantly having people laugh and confuse it for penis," she explains. "When we get on the news," Ryuta continues, "and the cute news announcer has to say Chim↑Pom, everyone still laughs, thinking she is saying penis."

The group, which alongside Ellie and Ryuta, contains Masataka, Motomu, Toshinori and Yasutaka, all met around the studio of the Japanese artist Makoto Aida, whose work turns a crude, challenging eye back on Japanese society, its archetypes, stereotypes, and psychological hang-ups. "He's a genius, but he lives like garbage," Ryuta says, "His lifestyle is so terrible. Always drinking, sleeping anywhere. But he is very special, very special." Makoto Aida's outsider spirit informed the group. Largely self-taught, only Ellie went to art school, they've brought a critical rebel sentiment to Japan's cultural landscape, tackling Japan's social problems with a dextrous humour and subversive glee.

They've done up dead rats to look like Pikachu, snuck into Fukushima's nuclear exclusion zone, led a flock of crows through the streets of Tokyo, blown up Ellie's collection of Vuitton handbags on Cambodian landmines, lived in a gallery with a rat and a crow for two weeks, wrote PIKA in the sky over Hiroshima, and staged reverse auctions of their work, where the proceeds were donated to charity, and collector's were challenged to donate as much as possible. The bidding started at £50 million, the same amount of money that Damien Hirst's *For The Love Of God* sold for.



SUPER RAT, 2006, Courtesy of the artists and MUJIN-TO production, Tokyo

But their first piece of work remains one of their most iconic. The group captured rats, taxidermied them, painted them as Pikachu and exhibited them. "This rat is from Shibuya, and one particular street, the main street of Shibuya where all the teenagers hang out, and when I was younger, every day I used to go there to hang out by the MacDonalds," Ellie explains. "Then one day I saw all these girls hanging out there, eating MacDonalds and there were rats everywhere, eating the leftover MacDonald's burgers too. There were so many rats in Shibuya, the pest control people have tried to kill them, but they're becoming resistant to poison and cleverer than the traps. Then one day I saw a girl wandering down this street, dressed up as

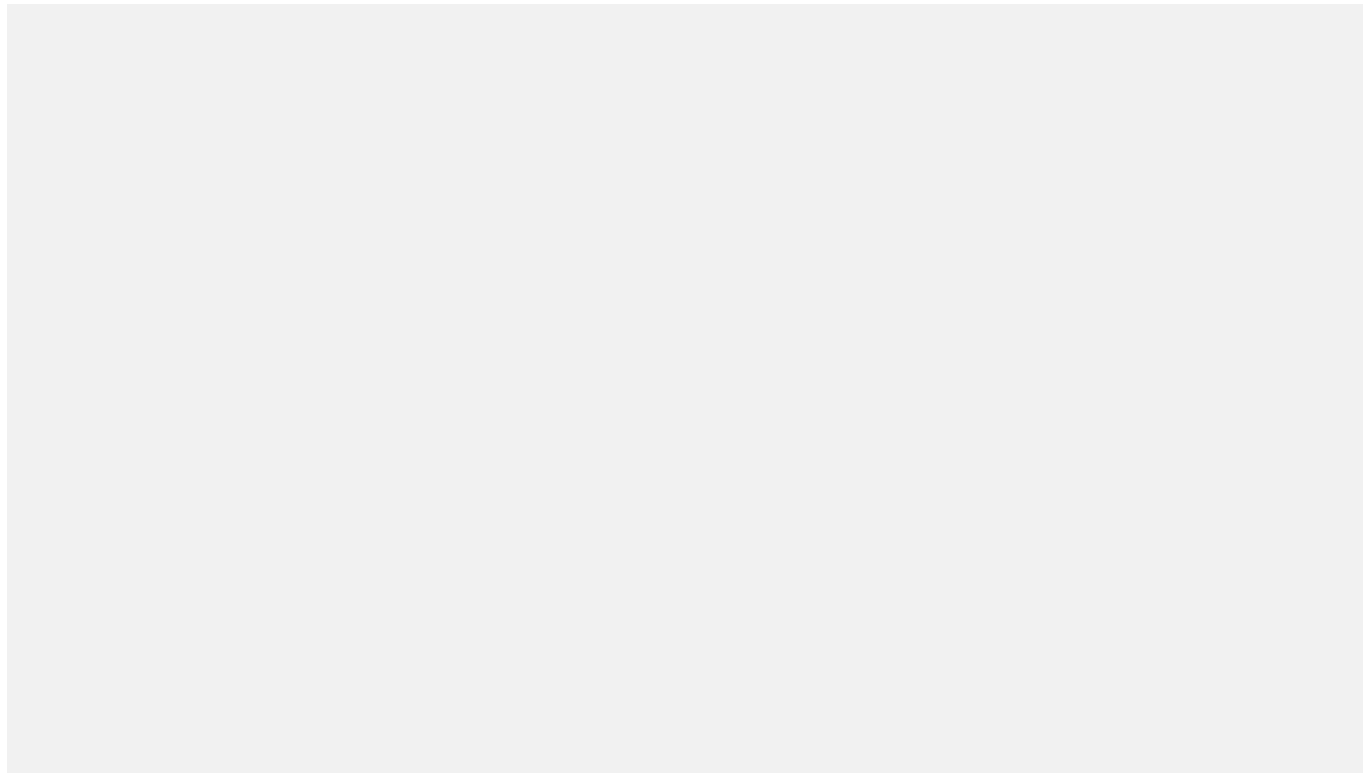
Pikachu, it was so funny, to see this girl dressed up as this cartoon rat, surrounded by all these real, super rats." As a piece of work, it neatly sums up a lot of what Chim↑Pom's work deals with, tackling serious social and political issues, consumerism and capitalism's influence on youth culture, with an iconoclastic attitude and black humour. *SUPER RAT* (the piece's title) is oddly cute, an uncanny memento mori playing on the corporate symbols of contemporary culture, as well as Japan's art history, *SUPER RAT* sounding like Super Flat, Murakami's post-modern take on Japanese graphic art.

It's hard to imagine that these two polite, friendly, stylishly dressed individuals, part kawaii, part punk, are the same people *CNN* once labelled as "the enfant terribles of Japanese art", and that, over the past 10 years, they've consistently shocked Japanese society with their stunts and projects.

They've also been described as neo-Dada, and they are engaged in pulling apart the absurdity of the world, like Dada was, but Chim↑Pom are born out of the political background of the Japan that they grew up in, so it seems slightly reductive to pigeon hole them into a history of Western avant-garde art. But their politics are almost always espoused through the group's anarchic sense of humour and earnest endeavour. It's surprising then, that with work that's so funny, and so politically engaged, that they are only just exhibiting in England.

Maybe it's because their work is so engaged with the unique and peculiar obsessions of Japanese society? Whether it's the long and dark shadow nuclear weapons and energy have cast over Japan, from Hiroshima to Fukushima via Godzilla, or simply Pokémon, the make-up of

Japan's society, the peculiarities of its youth and consumer cultures. But as Ellie explains it's not like nuclear apocalypse wasn't a worldwide paranoia for much of the second half of the 20th Century, it just casts a darker shadow over Japanese history. And it's not like capitalism, globalisation and environmental disasters haven't affected most of us.

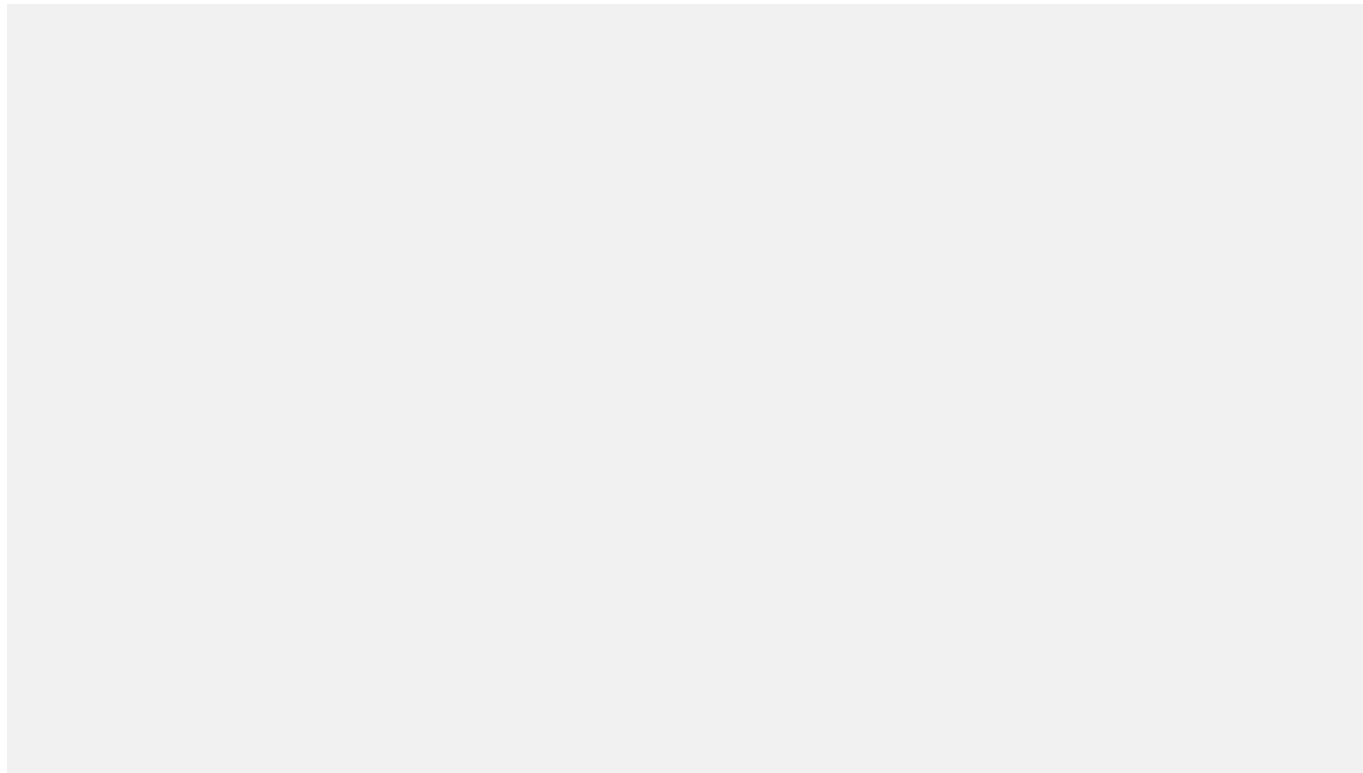


Real Times, video still, 2011, Courtesy of the artists and MUJIN-TO production, Tokyo

After the earthquake in 2011, and the meltdown at Fukushima, the group embarked on a series of works that examined this peculiar moment in Japanese history, seeking to "create something that people will look back on" Ryuta says. One performance saw them enter the exclusion

zone around the power plant and document what they saw, and engage in pieces of performance art. At a time when no other media organisations dared to go within 30 kilometres of the reactor, Chim↑Pom were getting up close and personal with it. "In our work," Ryuta explains, "maybe what you can point to is interacting with reality. That's why we called it *Real Times*. There are many artists who represent society through a painting or making a sculpture. I believe that art can influence society, but only because art can go to places other things can't. And we've always gone to the heart of things."

In Shibuya Metro station there's a giant mural by Okamoto Taro, 6 metres high and 30 metres long, called *The Myth of Tomorrow*, it's like a Japanese *Guernica*, a tribute to the horror of war, and Chim↑Pom snuck in and under the watchful eyes of security guards managed to insert a panel referencing the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima, and Japanese social media went mad. "We didn't know how people would react," Ellie says, "but it's such an important piece of art for Japanese society, we didn't want to damage it, so we made the work in a way that was very easy to take down. But no one realised at first. So it stayed there overnight."



It's *The Wall World*, Installation view: "Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh 2014," Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Bangladesh, 2014, Courtesy of the artist and MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo

Their fascination with Fukushima continues in another project, *Don't Follow The Wind*, a group show they've initiated within Fukushima's exclusion zone. They've described it as "art for future" as no one will be able to see it until the radiation around the nuclear reactor dies down enough for the area to be visitable again.

The piece they are exhibiting, at London's White Rainbow gallery, is uncharacteristically subdued. A wall sized combination of puzzle pieces embedded into the gallery's white cube



space. Each puzzle piece is taken from a wall from around the world, and replaced with a piece from the gallery, from Hiroshima, to Liverpool, to Dhaka in Bangladesh, exploring the relationship's that make up the world we live in, from it's wall pieces taken from Tokyo and London's fashion stores juxtaposed next to pieces of wall from the Bangladeshi factories that make these clothes.

Finally making a splash in Europe seems a fitting way to celebrate their tenth anniversary as a collective, "We haven't really changed," Ellie explains, "I guess you could say we're as fresh as we were when we started, or maybe we just never grew up?"

[chimpom.jp](http://chimpom.jp)

## Credits

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Text Felix Petty

Images courtesy Chim↑Pom and MUJIN-TO production, Tokyo

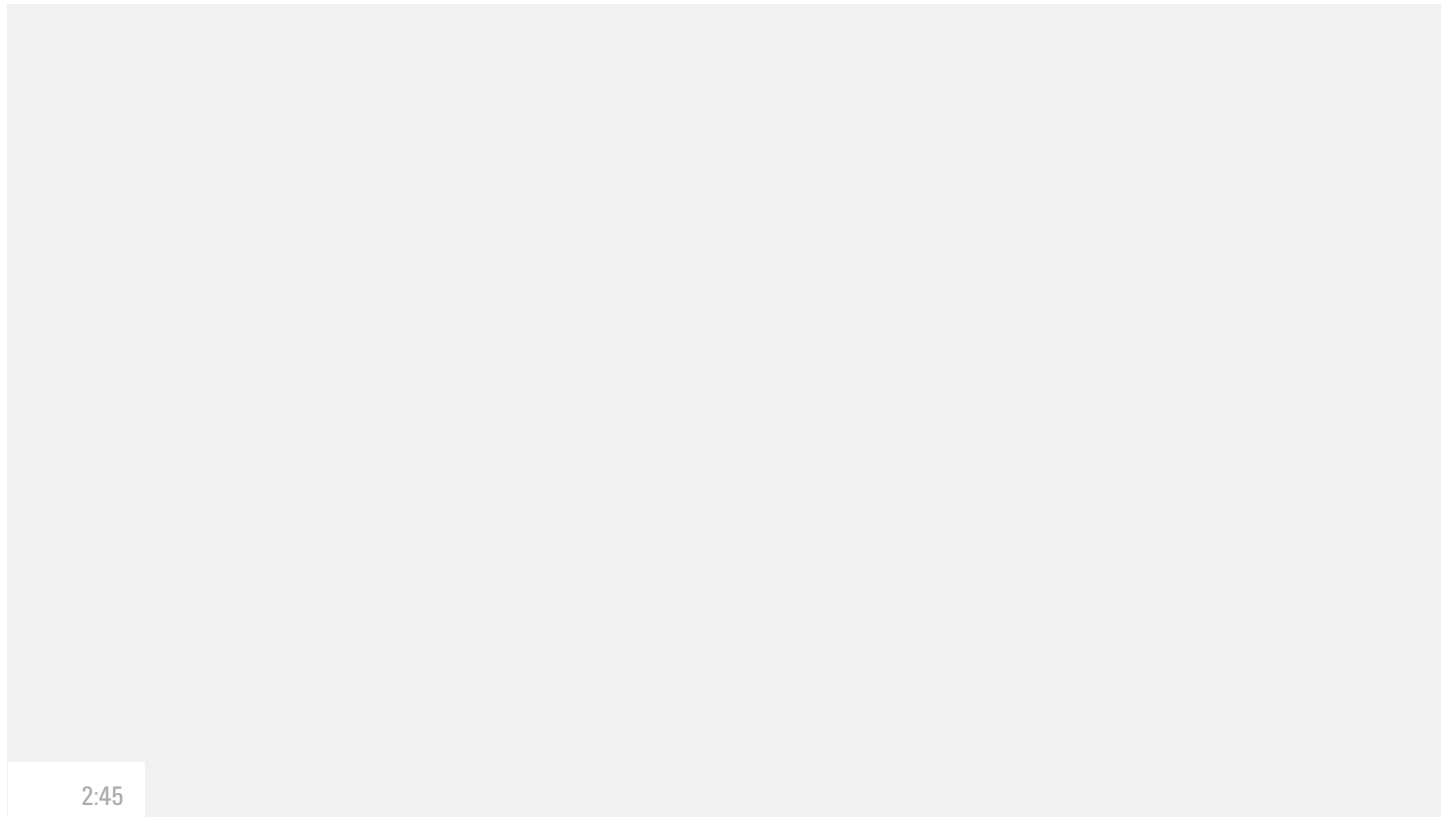


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