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An in-depth interview magazine exploring the stories, values and perspectives of the people shaping Indonesia and the world.

## Budi Agung Kuswara – Artist & Co Founder | Ketemu Project

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### **Budi Agung Kuswara**

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Artist & Co Founder | Ketemu Project  
On the appreciating the process, knowing your boundaries, and how artists teach awareness.

In a culture too often governed by reaction rather than creative response, the role of an artist is one that is commonly overlooked and underappreciated within society. Are there lessons to be shared that extend beyond the basic human need for self expression?

To Budi Agung Kuswara, (famously known as “Kabul,”) the artist, just by being, can teach a lot about sustaining awareness in our day to day lives; re-framing static and mechanical mindsets, to ones that continually look out for new and life-enriching perspectives and seek to provide creative solutions to the many social problems that exist within society.

Seemingly quiet and reserved – there is more than meets the eye to this Klungkung native. After studying in the renowned Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) in Jogjakarta, Budi has gone on to explore his artistic potential through residencies in Japan and Malaysia. His art work, known for its playful imagery and replete with satire and symbolism, has graced exhibitions in Indonesia, Philippines, Italy and in the UK.

He went on to Co-Found Ketemu Project, a collective of artists, cultural managers, designers, educators and curators that develop socially conscious projects and interactions in art.

Upon meeting him, there's no denying that Budi's down to earth and warm personal makes it easy to feel welcome in his company. Throughout the interview, he graciously reflected on his challenges of being an artist, common misconceptions about him, and what difficult circumstances in his upbringing taught him about life. He concludes with logical insight into how tourism industry has hindered Bali's artistic innovation and simple advice he would give his 18-year-old self.

Enter Budi,



### ***Budi, how were you introduced to art?***

I grew up in Sanur, in an environment that we can refer to as an “expatriate” community, and by stating that, I mean that I didn't grow up in a traditional Balinese environment. That had a huge impact on the way I think today.

My father worked in ceramics but was also a painter who had a lot of experience – and I often saw him work. Outside of watching him, I wasn't exposed to the arts, and my parents didn't have any specific intentions for guiding me to have a career in the arts.

I just knew that I liked it, and in high-school did I already made a commitment to further my studies in art by learning it here in Sukawati. That was the start of it.



"Anonymous Ancestors" by Budi Agung Kuswara – Official Artwork of the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival 2018

***Artists have different reasons for being who they are. I'm curious to know, why are you an artist?***

If you're asking me right now, it's because I have a need for self-expression that can only be facilitated by the making of art.

But if you want a thorough answer, I see the profession of an artist as one that is flexible. I'm not at the point where I can achieve total freedom from my profession – but it does allow me to be flexible. I get to socialize with all sorts of circles – and as an artist, I feel welcomed.

Furthermore, there isn't much stigma in the arts and in the artistic community. It's the most "neutral" profession in my opinion.



“I get to socialize with all sorts of circles – and as an artist, I feel welcomed.”

***What are some of the professional or personal challenges of having an art career? How do you overcome them?***

Honestly, it was a personal challenge to see art as a *process* – particularly when a piece is finished and is ready to be shown to the public; trying to deliver the concept that a piece is trying to convey is still a challenge for me.

There are two parts to this artistic process that I see. One is studio based, and one lies more in interaction with society.



A studio based process is for a certain section of artists who can sit quietly and enjoy the entire thought process that an artist can experience him or herself. But when their work is brought out into the world, people's reactions and interpretations will often be different to what the artists were trying to convey. As an artist, this expectation can't be applied when you aim to have the general mass as an audience.

But when you have a community based approach, an artist can be automatically appreciated amongst a like-minded audience.

So the challenge is in knowing which audience you need to ignore, and which audience you can select to present the topic of your art.



“When you have a community based approach, an artist can be automatically appreciated amongst a like-minded audience.”

***Artists of any kind have a degree of receptivity and awareness to the world around them. Is that receptivity something you’ve learnt’ or has it been something you feel you’ve always had?***

It’s something that I learned and am continuing to learn, and in my opinion, awareness or sensitivity is something gained from your process. Each small aspect of your process is something that entails a level of good communication with yourself, as well as a sense of appreciation with what you’re doing.

When you can appreciate the smaller aspects of a process that make up the larger whole – like creating an art piece, which can involve meeting people and gaining feedback for your idea beforehand, you can learn a lot.



“What ideas can I facilitate as an artist? From these discussions we can, as a community, find new ways at looking at the day to day nuances of life.”

## ***Has Ketemu Project changed you as a person in a way that you probably didn't expect?***

It forced me to be more coordinated! And a sense of leadership had to be developed whether I liked it or not! Honestly, I hadn't had much experience with team work, and I guess you can say that I have difficulties working in a team – Even team sports like football. I prefer solo sports.

So in the end, I had to change because of the consequence of my decision to make Ketemu Project. Any organization needs strong leadership.

Ketemu Project is actually what opened up a lot of opportunities for me. There was the *Art and Social Entrepreneurship* program from the British Council, in which I was chosen for to represent Bali. There was also the *Creative Climate Leadership* course in Slovenia where Ketemu was one of the chosen members from Asia to go.

All of it changed me in a massive way.



“A sense of leadership had to be developed whether I liked it or not!”

## ***Who do you look up to and why?***

My parents.

Even though, I grew up in an expatriate community, in a way, we were limited financially up until the point where I had to find my own means for school and other day-to-day expenses. Though it wasn't good for them as parents, the situation, along with their guidance, allowed me to gain a sense of living as a whole – not just a way to “survive.” Life isn't limited to just surviving



## *What has become more important to you over*

It ties down to what I said earlier. What has become more important is how intensely involved I am in the process. The final result isn't too important to me.

I have many limits in seeing the final outcome of things, but when I focus more on the process, the outcome always gives me satisfaction.

I studied art from an academic lens, and there's a lot of theory and text that you study that



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To feel stressed from this academic process of over-analyzing the theory while making your art is why I didn't want to continue my studies and take my Masters. Instead, I was more attracted to art residencies.

For a few years I was moving around. I was in Japan and Kuala Lumpur, and I was more satisfied with that, because each residency was like a little reset in a way. In those short periods of residency, I had to sum up my experience in a presentation, both oral and visual.

I gain much greater satisfaction from this environment, as opposed to an academic one.



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***In your opinion, do you think artists have a particular responsibility to fulfill in society?***

It's difficult, because there are so many types of artists. Art as a profession doesn't have a single standard that society requires, like being a doctor.

Anyone can become an “artist.” But in my opinion, artists allow society to not only see things from a new perspective, but to be comfortable and used to doing so on a consistent basis.

There are many social problems within society, whether it be race or just ways in which we relate to one other in general, so as an artist who senses new perspectives and possibilities actively, you share that characteristic to society.

It doesn't always have to be through an exhibition, because as an artist just living day-to-day, you already see the world differently – and that's what needs to be shared; the initiative to see different sides of a problem.



“In my opinion, artists allow society to not only see things from a new perspective, but to be comfortable and used to doing so on a consistent basis.”

***How can an artist help the average viewer approach his or her art to appreciate it better?***

This goes back to the expectations of the artist; your audience can't be seen as the same all across the board. When you start thinking they're all the same, that's when you start thinking of ways you can intervene in how the audience approaches your work. If you're doing that as common practice, I think it's difficult.

But one thing that helps a person (understand your art better) is to present the process of creating that piece of art. In doing so, an artist is challenged to be honest.

In the process of creating beautiful work, there can be moments of absolute stress for an artist. Do you want to show that side to the audience as well? It's up to you as an artist.

But the most effective way in gaining wide appreciation is by presenting that process, so the audience better fully appreciate your work.



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***Are there any similarities or differences that you’ve seen in the artistic approach or process for artists in Bali and Jogja? What***

Because Jogja is a university city, it has a more centralized community, and from there the sharing process is done within a more open environment. It’s that environment that creates the atmosphere to share ideas – and it’s been like that since before.

the “visual construction” process there is more influenced by a lifestyle that’s more modern and contemporary.

Though Bali is more rich in tradition, it means you’re therefore more limited when exploring your artistic boundaries. What causes that is the tourism industry itself.

In my opinion, the arts are one of the pillars of the Balinese tourism industry – and it’s a pillar that, in a way, needs to remain the same over the years.



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When you want to start to become truly innovative, this traditional monotone look starts to become a bit “boring.” Yet, it’s this “boring” industry that gives the artists a means to live economically. At the end, the sense of innovation dwindles over the years without us ever realizing.

So the artist’s (sense for innovation) in Bali aren’t really honed, because they produce what the tourism industry looks for. But in Jogja, artists’ innovation are always honed and sharpened without the influence of a tourism industry.



“The artist’s (sense for innovation) in Bali aren’t really honed, because they produce what the tourism industry looks for.”

This is why the new generation of artists here in Bali are beginning to have communities that share ideas on different topics. That’s a positive sign for me, and it’s something that will shape the general public’s opinion on art in Bali.

For the Balinese, besides being an aspect of tradition, art is for tourists. “Good” art is viewed as something that can either add to tradition or can be sold to tourists. But the function of art beyond the visual is much greater. That value isn’t seen as much here, where the mindset has been geared towards the tourism industry.

It starts with the small communities that hold events. That leads to a lot of knowledge sharing, which will play apart in this evolution of art in Bali.



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***What are some common misconceptions about you?  
What are the factors that affect it?***

There’s a lot, to be fair. It depends on what I’m working on! Because I’m active in socially engaged art, or community and participatory art – I’m often seen as an “Artivist” (an Artist-Activist.)

I’m not really attracted to that label because I feel that I have a boundary when it comes to realizing change. Activists have an idea for change and have to oversee that that change is implemented, whereas I present a perspective of a problem from an artistic angle.

Maybe there’s a solution that comes from these perspectives, and if there is a point in which a piece of art can create change, then I feel like that’s already outside of my jurisdiction as an artist.

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That’s the point where the responsibility lies elsewhere, such as with an activist – who will make sure that change will happen.

It’s too big of a responsibility for me to worry about fulfilling the duties of being an activist, because the work of an artist is already heavy – filled with it’s own responsibilities.

There are artists who do make both art and activism possible, like Ai Wei Wei. But like him, you can’t work alone if you want to claim that title. There are people you need to work with who do have that sense of activism that can turn activist art into a success.





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***What is one piece of advice you would give to your 18 year old self?***

Go out more often. Explore and meet more people.

***Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?***

Maybe to be based in many places. Not just in Bali. I hope that Ketemu Project can run automatically, and that I can dive further into other experiences abroad.