

# Tackling Taboos

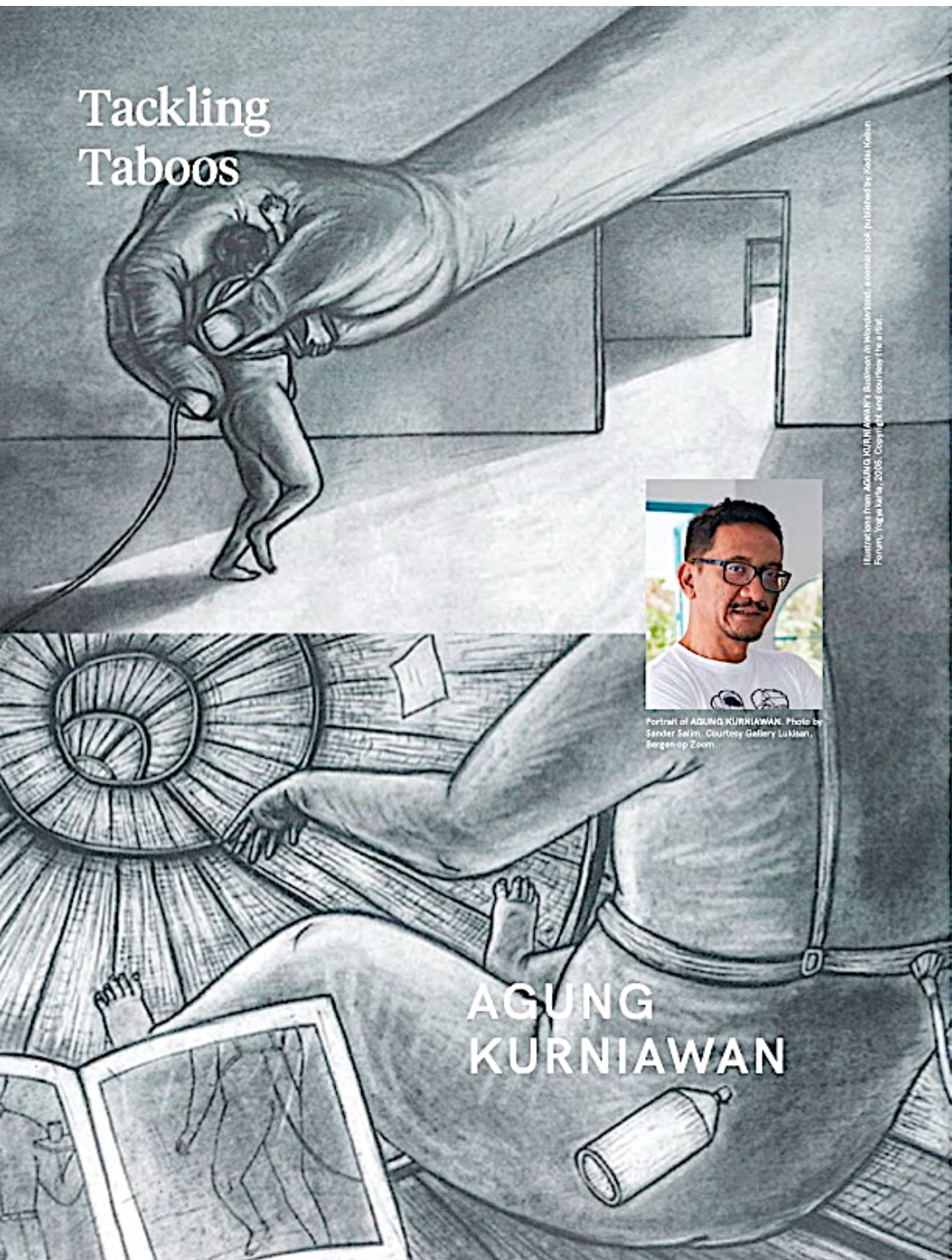


Illustration from *AGUNG KURNIAWAN'S* *Business in Wonderland*, a comic book published by Kodal Forum, Yogyakarta, 2005. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



Portrait of **AGUNG KURNIAWAN**. Photo by Sander Salin. Courtesy Gallery Lukman, Bogenop Zoom.

## AGUNG KURNIAWAN

BY KERSTIN WINKING

In 1996, Agus Kurniawan and his wife, Yustina Neni, founded Kedal Kebun Forum, an art space, shop, and restaurant in Yogyakarta. Their vision was to provide a financially self-sustaining platform where artists could tackle taboo and sensitive issues. I met the couple at the open, two-story building overgrown with tropical plants for the first time about ten years ago, when Kurniawan was also co-organizing the Biennale Jogja and overseeing the Indonesian Visual Art Archive, which he cofounded, all while developing his own artistic practice. As I listened to him talk about his multifarious activities, I was impressed by his abundant creative energy, intelligence, and considerate nature. It was also clear that he is not afraid of putting the cat among the pigeons, so to speak.

With an academic background in archaeology and visual communications, Kurniawan began his career as a graphic artist in the mid-1990s, while Indonesia was still under Suharto's autocratic rule. The drawings that he produced during this time distinguished him as a politically avant-garde voice. For example, in the charcoal rendering *Pseudo History* (1995), screens conceal innocent figures; in the foreground, people wearing conical hats are bent over corpses, as if caught in the act of killing. The image alludes to how Suharto's New Order regime crafted historical narratives, framing others for its crimes. Depicting prisoners hanging by their feet, bound with ropes but still smiling like clowns, *Very Very Happy Victim* (1996) reflects people's inability to recognize the importance of free expression for their lives, instead tolerating torture. At their heart, these dark images contain the artist's raging anger about oppression.

Under Suharto, history could only be told in the regime's way. Critical remarks about its version of events were mercilessly punished. This applied especially to inquiries about how Suharto had come to power. An open secret is that Suharto's ascent was the result of a staged coup d'état on the night of September 30, 1965, when six generals loyal to the sitting president, Sukarno, were killed. Suharto and his entourage blamed the Indonesian communist party for these murders and so-called communists were killed by militias stoked up by Suharto and his followers.

Toward the end of the '90s, however, Indonesia began to change, with the fall of Suharto's dictatorship in 1998 ushering in an era of sociopolitical reformation, more open access to information, and freedom

of expression. This allowed Kurniawan to expand his creative practice by engaging with and facilitating explicit discussions of previously buried histories and societal taboos. He locked his sight on the events of 1965—a subject that he continues to obsessively unravel.

When asked what fuels his interest in this period, he recounted being forced to watch the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* [Treachery of G30S/PKI] (1984) as a teenager. The propaganda—financed by the Suharto regime and shown at schools, universities, cinemas, and on TV annually on September 30—blames the 1965 coup d'état on the communists. Kurniawan recalled that the violence in *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* terrified him; the fact that his parents were unwilling to talk to him about its contents aroused his curiosity.

One of his projects exploring the verboten topic of the 1965 coup is "September Something" (2004). The titular "something" emphasizes society's lack of words for what had happened. The challenge, which Kurniawan issued to a group of young artists, was to articulate what the generation who lived through the oppression still could not, remediate the trauma that was passed down the generations. At Kedal Kebun Forum, the artists challenged the New Order's master narrative of "communist treason" through an exhibition, performances, screenings, and talks.

Around the same time, Kurniawan was probing other sensitive subjects. In the charcoal drawing series *The Dictionary of Sexuality and Politics* (2002–04), penises appear in different formats and sizes, invading figures' spaces, bodies, and heads. In Kurniawan's words, these scenes illustrate society's "masculinity complex" under the New Order regime, which glorified patriarchal values such as the domination and strength of men, and falsely labeled homosexuality as a degeneracy. Kurniawan similarly critiques Suharto's reign with *Budiman in Wonderland* (2005), a series of drawings that was later compiled as a comic, in which a male protagonist is held captive, raped, and then transported into warped, fantastical dimensions, including a penis-shaped cocoon. Holding this loopy realm up as a disturbing mirror, the artist unabashedly conveys how Indonesians were dragooned into a twisted world.

Even though Kurniawan never stopped drawing, since the 2010s his art projects have often been installations and/or performative, collectively realized, and ephemeral. This stems from his discontent with art world developments in the 2000s, when Indonesian

art experienced a commercial boom. The feeling that he produced his drawings mainly for an international art market and the amusement of collectors frustrated him immensely. Looking to create something more satisfying than commodities, he invested much of his time in performance art and community projects. Many of these home in on life under autocracy and are realized in collaboration with survivors of the 1965 violence and their families.

One such work is *Sri: Sebuah Biografi dalam 65 Kata* [Sri: A Biography in 65 Words], a performance staged at Jakarta's Museum Macan in 2017. In the 1960s, Sri Wahyuni was an admired singer and a member of Gerwani, the communist party's organization for women. After Suharto seized power, she was arrested and imprisoned in Semarang until 1972. When she was released, she learned that all her property and land in Yogyakarta had been taken by the army. She was forced to live on the streets for much of her life. Kurniawan met Sri at Kiprah Perempuan, a women survivors' group in Yogyakarta, and decided to create a performance with her. The work entails audience members singing one word each to form a 65-word biography for Sri. In a polyphonic improvisation orchestrated by Kurniawan. The format enables participants from different generations to speak about the trauma of 1965 in a public space and as a community of individuals.

This strategy also informed *Gejalak Makam Keramat* [Sacred Grave Unrest] (2017), a play performed by members of Kiprah Perempuan at the Gadjah Mada Theater in Yogyakarta. The piece was adapted by Kurniawan from another script, *Leng*, and is about a group of women fighting against corporate greed. The production promoted the process of healing through community and celebrated grassroots resistance.

In February, Kurniawan and I spoke to each other again digitally, locked down in our homes in Yogyakarta and Amsterdam, respectively, because of the pandemic. To my question about how he is holding up under these circumstances, he responded with a deep sigh. After a while, unwilling to dwell on the misery that Covid-19 has caused, he started describing the new turn in his practice. Prompted by the pandemic's restrictions on people gathering, he has taken his collaborations tentatively to the virtual realm, working with a digital animator to tell the story of a communist party leaders' surviving family member via moving image. Though Kurniawan did not disclose the name of the figure, this much is certain: The completed video will release disquieting truths.