

UBUD NOW & THEN

Home » Blog » OBITUARY: SYMON

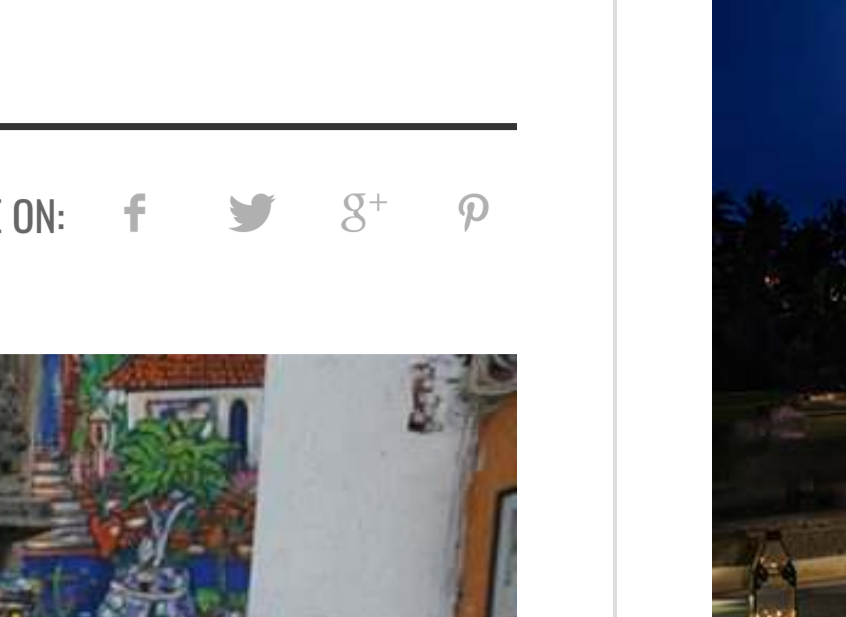
COVID-19 IS FUELLING CONFLICT: NEW WAYS WILL BE NEEDED TO MAKE PEACE
UBUD NOW & THEN, MAY 15, 2020



OBITUARY: SYMON
UBUD NOW & THEN, MAY 6, 2020



COVID-19: INTERVIEW WITH DR. PANDE JANURAGA, DOCTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UBUD NOW & THEN, APRIL 29, 2020



WAWANCARA COVID-19: DR PANDE JANURAGA MD PHD
UBUD NOW & THEN, APRIL 28, 2020



OBITUARY: SYMON

UBUD NOW & THEN — MAY 6, 2020

SHARE ON: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [p](#)



An obituary by Philip Cornwel-Smith

Bali lost one of its most sensational artists and characters with the passing of Symon on 15 April 2020. Arriving here in 1978, he built his famous Ubud studio in Campuhan for over 38 years, overlapping with the past 21 years at Art Zoo, his destination studio in Alas Sari, North Bali. A protégé of the Indo-Dutch painter Arie Smit, Symon ranked among a long line of foreign artists who have helped shape the image of Bali as an aesthetic paradise.

He made thousands of paintings and sculptures, mostly oils of figures in iconic settings. His brilliant palette expressed more than Bali's tropical light, with figures in blue or green being colour coded like gods from Hindu epics – an effect he dubbed "polychromystic." His cartoonist's facility with line enabled him to conjure a likeness from just a few strokes. The models and subjects drew mostly from village life, while his "storeological" paintings revealed hidden histories, like the Japanese wartime adaptation of sacred springs. Faces also emerge nymphlike from images of trees, animals or landscapes. Symon's Bali paintings captured not just the myths and realities of Bali, but also its animist spirit.

Symon was one of many pen names for Ronald Thomas Bierl, who was born on 13 April 1947 in Roseville, near Detroit, Michigan. His remarkable life spanned many cultural movements. As John Ka he illustrated for the Beat Generation and American underground. As Simon White he joined the hippy trail east, traded in Asian artefacts, and revive artisanal crafts. As Symon, he painted pop art, designed high fashion, and distilled iconography for the trend in neo-traditional Asian style. He reinvented many things, but most of all himself, signing his art under variants like Sheyman, Syman or Sy.

Bierl means coffee-maker, and like his carpenter father Leonard he ended up a builder and furniture-maker. His mother Ruth's poetry sparked him aged 15 to solicit new poems to illustrate from the counterculture titans Allen Ginsburg, William Burroughs and William Carlos Williams. Raised as a Catholic altarboy, he fled aged 17 to Rome from his suburban home that, no kidding, was at the corner of Common Road and Normal Street.

He was anything but common or normal. After months in Europe, Ronald returned to study at Wayne State University and Cranbrook Institute of the Arts, often hitchhiking to New York, where he met the likes of Warhol and Dylan, stayed at Ginsburg's home, and auditioned for the choreographer Merce Cunningham. During the Detroit race riots and the Summer of Love in 1967, he worked as John Ka, drawing for underground media (Warlock Studios; 'The Sun' and 'Fifth Estate'), and his own comic strip 'Bloom.'

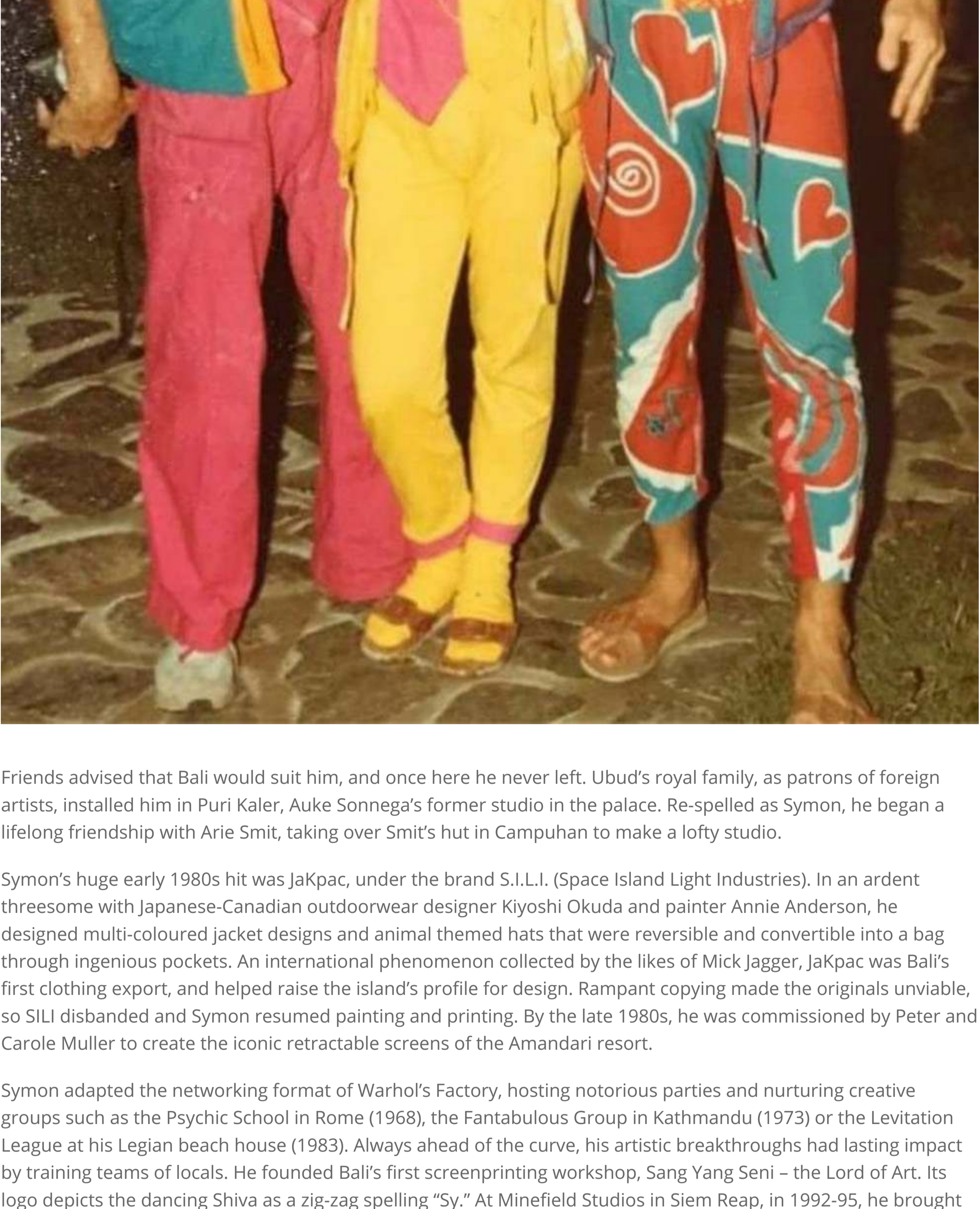
Ka fled back to Rome in 1968, where he studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti under the sculptor Emilio Greco. Paintings he hung on sheets from a crumbling palazzo drew the eye of movie director Federico Fellini, who declared Ka "the magician of the air" and cast him in a bit part at Cinecittà.

Via Amsterdam, Ka joined the overland trail to India. En route in Turkey, a truck's load slid into his car, crushing his hip. He said that Ronald T Bierl died that day. During his recovery, a mercurial character in an Irish novel, Simon Flowers, inspired his name-change to Simon White.

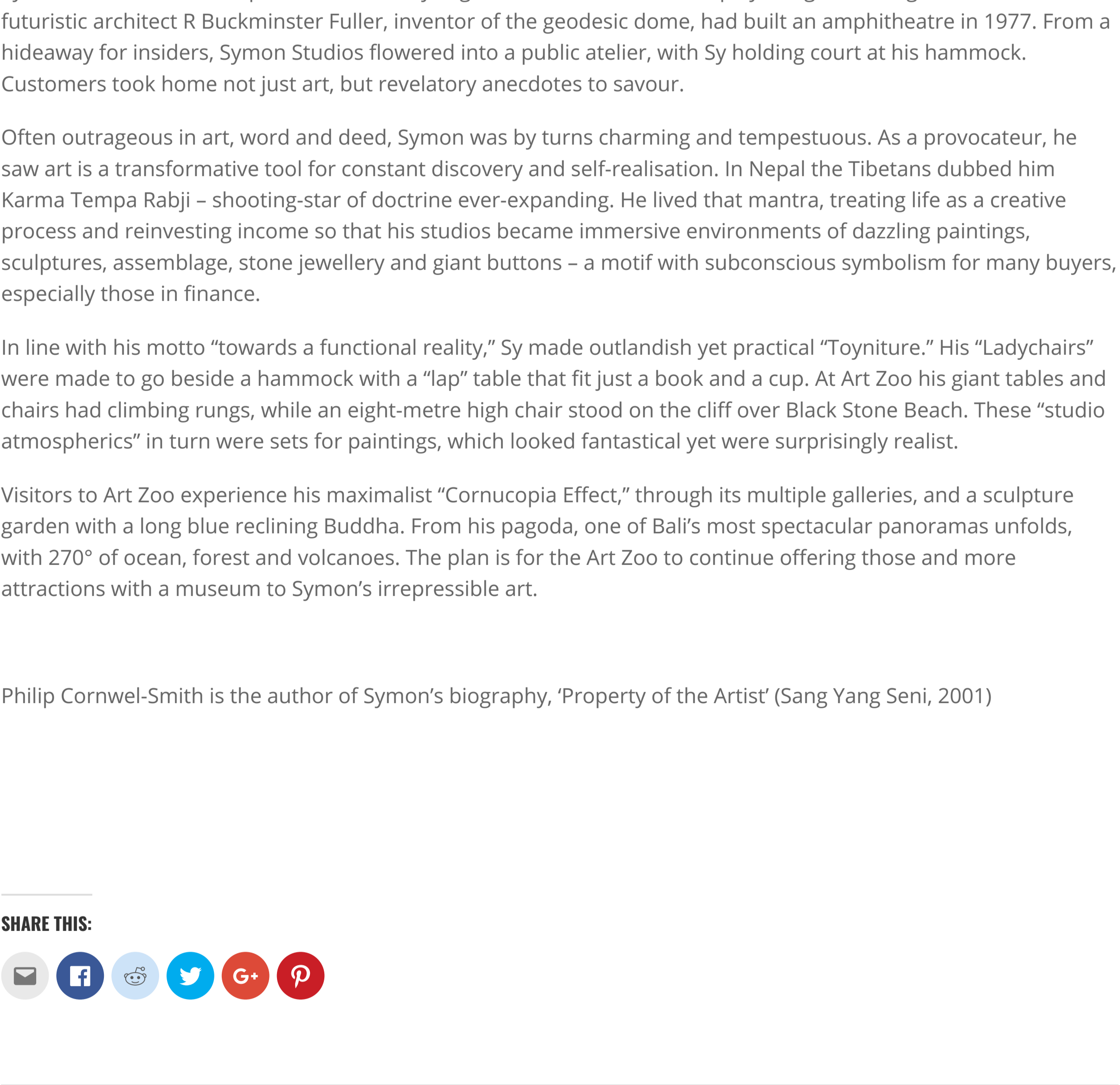
Later in 1968, Simon made it to India. After walking a long Jain pilgrimage in little more than a loincloth, he headed to Nepal. In Kathmandu, Simon founded Earth House Galleries in "Freak Street." In a flourishing partnership with Ian Alsop, he helped preserve Tibetan woodblock art by printing on ricepaper from old blocks and new ones carved by Tibetan refugees.

Like several hippies, Simon gained expertise in the Asian artefacts that flooded the markets. By 1972 he began to export antiques with Briton Andrew Rogers and two American women: Rory Rubino and Judy Mulder (who Simon renamed Ohne-Zee). They opened London's first Himalayan antique shop, Gumpa in Camden Passage, then Yantra Gallery in Amsterdam, before Simon and Ohne opened a wilder venture in New York in 1973, Western Paradise. They became an "it" couple, with the art scene frequenting the Sunday parties at their SoHo loft.

Simon and Ohne went to Colombia in 1976 but split up, leaving Simon penniless in a barrio in Barranquilla. Father Tito Mora took him in at the parish house, where his sister Kristine got him to paint again. After an exhibition at the parish bookstore he returned to Michigan in 1977, at Ann Arbor, where he signed each canvas Shey or Sheyman. Kristine travelled with Simon to Crete and left him in Amsterdam, working in a bookstore. He boarded a magic bus to Wales and spent a happy time till 1978, painting the druid culture in Snowdonia.



Below: with Annie and Kyo in the days of S.I.L.I.



Friends advised that Bali would suit him, and once here he never left. Ubud's royal family, as patrons of foreign artists, installed him in Puri Kaler, Auke Sonnegar's former studio in the palace. Re-spelled as Symon, he began a lifelong friendship with Arie Smit, taking over Smit's hut in Campuhan to make a lofty studio.

Symon's huge early 1980s hit was Jakpac, under the brand S.I.L.I. (Space Island Light Industries). In an ardent threesome with Japanese-Canadian outdoorwear designer Kiyoshi Okuda and painter Annie Anderson, he designed multi-coloured jacket designs and animal themed hats that were reversible and convertible into a bag through ingenious pockets. An international phenomenon collected by the likes of Mick Jagger, Jakpac was Bali's first clothing export, and helped raise the island's profile for design. Rampant copying made the originals unviable, so SILI disbanded and Symon resumed painting and printing. By the late 1980s, he was commissioned by Peter and Carole Muller to create the iconic retractable screens of the Amandari resort.

Symon adapted the networking format of Warhol's Factory, hosting notorious parties and nurturing creative groups such as the Psychic School in Rome (1968), the Fantabulous Group in Kathmandu (1973) or the Levitation League at his Legian beach house (1983). Always ahead of the curve, his artistic breakthroughs had lasting impact by training teams of locals. He founded Bali's first screenprinting workshop, Sang Yang Seni – the Lord of Art. Its logo depicts the dancing Shiva as a zig-zag spelling "Sy." At Minefield Studios in Siem Reap, in 1992-95, he brought screenprinted clothing to Cambodians in the aftermath of Pol Pot. At Art Zoo in the 2000s, his staff, builders, models and collaborators came from neighbouring clans to whom he was the "maestro", who'd speak them in a patois of Balinese, Indonesian, and Symonese bon mots.

Symon Studios was an in-place for Bali's arty cognoscenti, with outlandish plays staged in the garden, where the futuristic architect R Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, had built an amphitheatre in 1977. From a hitaway for insiders, Symon Studios flowered into a public atelier, with Sy holding court at his hammock. Customers took home not just art, but revelatory anecdotes to savour.

Often outrageous in art, word and deed, Symon was by turns charming and tempestuous. As a provocateur, he saw art as a transformative tool for constant discovery and self-realisation. In Nepal the Tibetans dubbed him Karma Tempa Rabji – shooting-star of doctrine ever-expanding. He lived that mantra, treating life as a creative process and reinvesting income so that his studios became immersive environments of dazzling paintings, sculptures, assemblage, stone jewellery and giant buttons – a motif with subconscious symbolism for many buyers, especially those in finance.

In line with his motto "towards a functional reality," Sy made outlandish yet practical "Toyniture." His "Ladychairs" were made to go beside a hammock with a "lap" table that fit just a book and a cup. At Art Zoo his giant tables and chairs had climbing rungs, while an eight-metre high chair stood on the cliff over Black Stone Beach. These "studio atmospherics" in turn were sets for paintings, which looked fantastical yet were surprisingly realist.

Visitors to Art Zoo experience his maximalist "Cornucopia Effect," through its multiple galleries, its unfolding garden with a long blue reclining Buddha. From his pagoda, one of Bali's most spectacular panoramas unfolds, with 270° of ocean, forest and volcanoes. The plan is for the Art Zoo to continue offering those and more attractions with a museum to Symon's irrepresible art.

Philip Cornwel-Smith is the author of Symon's biography, 'Property of the Artist' (Sang Yang Seni, 2001)

SHARE THIS: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [p](#)

PREVIOUS POST **COVID-19: INTERVIEW WITH DR. PANDE JANURAGA, DOCTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH** NEXT POST **COVID-19 IS FUELLING CONFLICT: NEW WAYS WILL BE NEEDED TO MAKE PEACE**

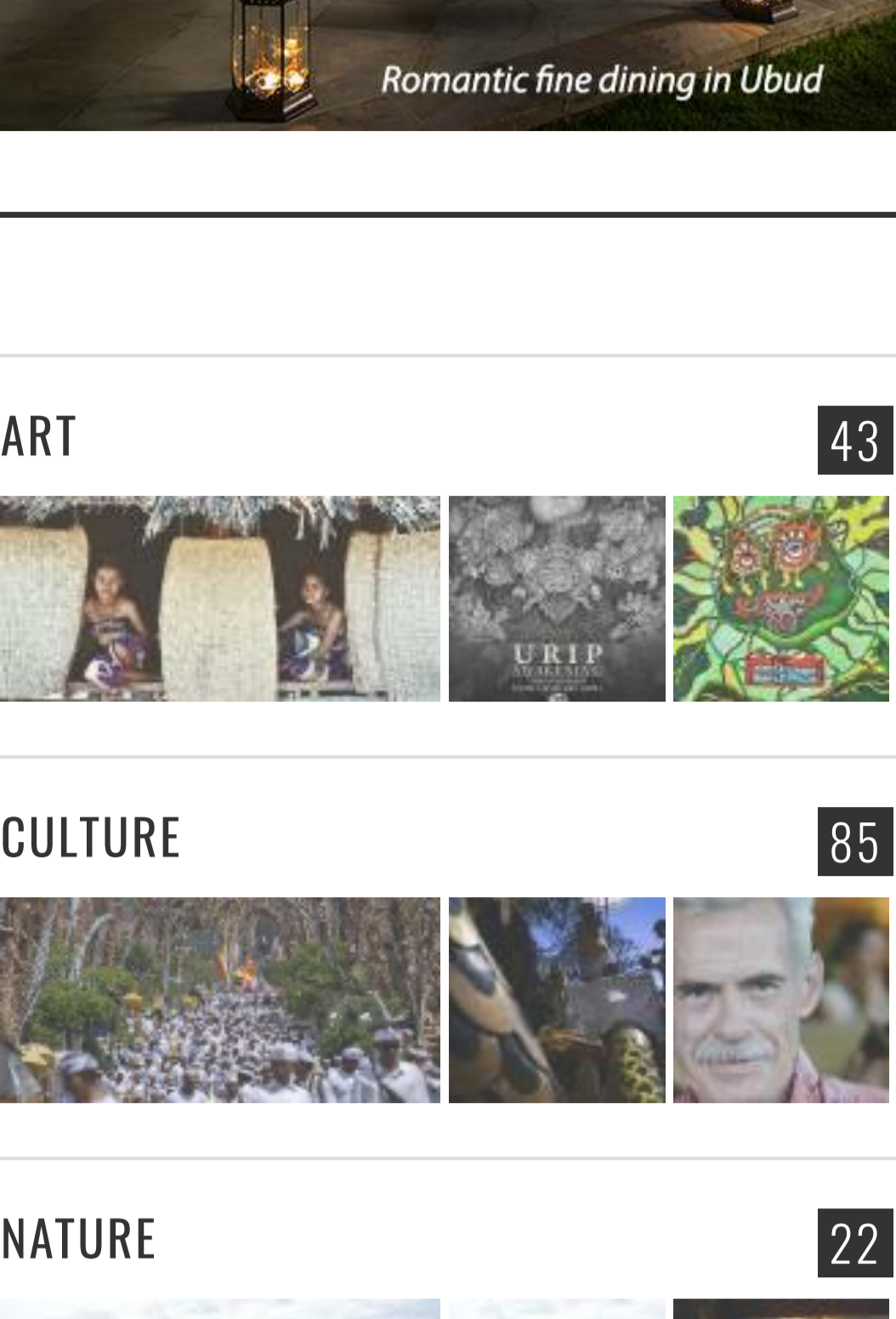
ABOUT THE AUTHOR **UBUD NOW & THEN**

RELATED POSTS

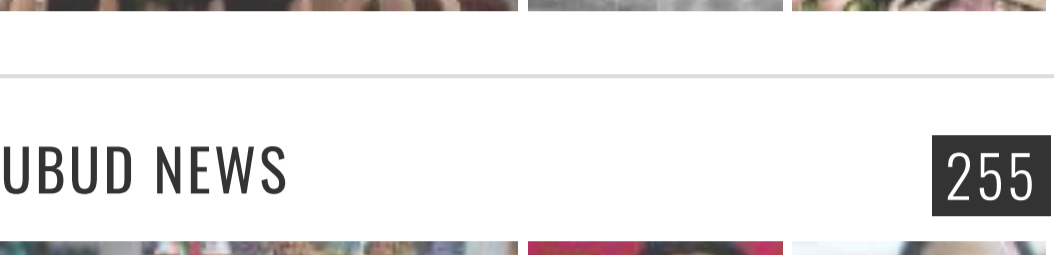
AN ARCHIPELAGO IN THE OCEAN OF CORONA – PART 3
UBUD NOW & THEN, MAY 19, 2020

COVID-19 IS FUELLING CONFLICT: NEW WAYS WILL BE NEEDED TO MAKE PEACE
UBUD NOW & THEN, MAY 15, 2020

COVID-19: INTERVIEW WITH DR. PANDE JANURAGA, DOCTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UBUD NOW & THEN, APRIL 29, 2020



ART 43



CULTURE 85



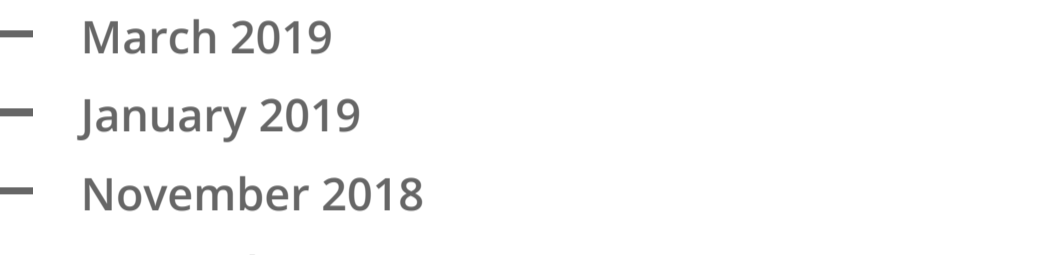
NATURE 22



NURTURE 25



UBUD NEWS 255



ARCHIVES

- May 2020
- April 2020
- March 2020
- February 2020
- January 2020
- December 2019
- October 2019
- August 2019
- July 2019
- June 2019
- April 2019
- March 2019
- January 2019
- November 2018
- September 2018
- August 2018
- July 2018
- June 2018
- May 2018
- April 2018
- January 2018
- December 2017
- November 2017
- October 2017
- September 2017
- August 2017
- July 2017
- June 2017
- May 2017
- April 2017
- March 2017
- February 2017
- January 2017
- December 2016
- November 2016
- October 2016
- August 2016
- July 2016
- June 2016
- May 2016
- April 2016
- March 2016
- February 2016
- January 2016
- December 2015
- November 2015
- October 2015
- September 2015
- August 2015
- July 2015
- June 2015
- May 2015
- April 2015
- March 2015
- February 2015
- January 2015
- December 2014
- November 2014
- October 2014
- September 2014
- August 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- April 2014
- March 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- December 2013
- November 2013
- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013
- May 2013
- April 2013
- March 2013
- February 2013

TAGS

- AGUNG | ARMA | ART | BALI | BALINESE CEREMONIES | BALI SPIRIT FESTIVAL | BUMI SHAH | CEREMONY | CHILDHOOD MEMORIES | CONTEMPORARY ART | CULTURE | DANCE | DIANA DARLING | ECO | ENVIRONMENT | ERUPTION | GALUNGAN | GOOD MORNING UBUD | GUNUNG AGUNG | HEALTH | INSPIRATION | JANET DENEETE | LEMPAD | LITERATURE | LOCAL | MODERN BALI LIFE | MT AGUNG | MUSIC | OFFERINGS | PENOR | PERSONALITIES | RECYCLING | RIO HELMI | ROBIN LIM | ROYAL CREMATION | SOCIAL INNOVATION | TEDXUBUD | TOURISM | TRADITION | UBUD | UBUD FOOD FESTIVAL | UBUD WRITERS & READERS FESTIVAL | UWIR | VOLCANO | YOGA

MOST COMMENTED

BUDAYA TEMBOK: THE NEW UBUD? 40

NEWS FROM UNDER THE VOLCANO 26

THE RELEVANCE OF LIVING DINOSAURS IN BALI TODAY 20

FIND US ON...

960 FOLLOWERS

44,078 FANS

235 SUBSCRIBERS

MORE INFO

- Advertise With Us
- Disclaimer
- Terms & Conditions
- Privacy Policy
- About Us
- Contact
- Home