



DUCKS AND DAUGHTERS: STORY-MAKING WITH ANDREW OMODING

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In 2015, Marchand was commissioned by the Birmingham-based charity Craftspace to carry out an anthropological study with artist Andrew Omoding. His assignment was to document Andrew's processes of making and ways of problem solving. Marchand's findings were shared publicly in a feature essay for the Radical Crafts exhibition catalogue and in a short documentary film that travelled with that show to galleries across the United Kingdom in 2016-17.



“Okay, everything’s ready,” I announced from behind the camera tripod.

“Yeah!” exclaimed Andrew gleefully.

I pressed the record button and then walked around the table where artist Andrew Omoding was comfortably seated and pulled up a chair beside him.



On the table before me was a modest stack of A1-sized paper and a thick black marker. Both of us—I hoped—were evenly framed in the camera lens.

“Everything’s okay?” he asked in readiness, giving me two thumbs-up and a broad grin.

Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has been president of Uganda since 1986. He was involved in rebellions that overthrew Idi Amin and Milton Abote. However, his government has been condemned for its role in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Northern Ugandan conflict; for its oppression of the opposition alongside constitutional amendments to extend his presidential tenure; and for gross human rights abuses and the use of excessive force in suppressing dissent.

Andrew is a British-Ugandan artist living in London, UK. In 2015, at the time of this recording session, he was 28 years old. Andrew’s early childhood was spent in Uganda where he grew up in the care of his maternal grandmother. She had reportedly shielded him and his older siblings from the violence and volatility of **President Yoweri Museveni’s** era. Before bedtime or during times of upheaval, she comforted the children with bedtime stories drawn from daily life and the region’s rich oral tradition. At the age of seven, however, Andrew began showing signs of irregular cognitive development. His sister (now also living in London) contends that his sudden turn was triggered by a fever. The boy’s verbal communication skills deteriorated and his performance at school declined. As a result, Andrew spent increasing time in the company of his auntie, who taught him to sew. That trade skill would come to play an important role in his later work as an artist, as would the art of storytelling learned from his grandmother.

“Okay, Andrew. Writing time! So, how does it work?” I inquired eagerly.

“Ummm...” he paused, unsure of what I was asking.

“How do you do it with Lisa?” I clarified.

“Lisa writing,” he answered. Lisa was Andrew’s mentor at the **ActionSpace** art studio where he regularly attends Friday sessions.

“Lisa writes?” I asked, seeking confirmation.

He lightly tapped my shoulder with his right hand. “You write,” he directed.

“Okay,” I agreed. “And you tell me the story?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t tell me too quickly,” I requested teasingly, “because I don’t write very fast!” This made Andrew laugh. “And tell me how big you want the letters.”

He smiled and answered with a sweeping gesture across the width of the sheet of paper that he wanted me to fill it with his words, which I would do in large printed letters.

In 1999, at the age of twelve, Andrew left behind his village to join his mother on a housing estate in busy central London. Coming to the UK was traumatic. Andrew did not know his mother (who, shortly after giving birth to him, migrated abroad to find nursing work); he did not conform to the norms of adolescence in his new neighbourhood, and he desperately missed home, familiar food, and the warmth of the African sun. In short, Andrew experienced a seismic break in his sense of wellbeing and personal security.

ActionSpace (<http://actionspace.org>) is a charity that supports individuals with learning disabilities who are motivated to enhance their creative skills or become professional artists. ActionSpace operates three studios across London, UK, including one in the lively Cockpit Arts Building in Bloomsbury, where Andrew works weekly.

Life on a London housing estate for an adolescent with learning difficulties and cultural differences was a challenge. Andrew routinely experienced harassment and violent confrontation. He progressively became withdrawn and was soon afflicted with **selective mutism**, which lasted for nearly a decade. His mother recalls that despite his verbal silence her son expressed his inner thoughts, imaginings, and emotions through drawing and by making things. At the age of 22, Andrew joined an artist program operated by ActionSpace. With time, he began generating simple utterances, progressively building to basic conversation, boisterous laughing, merry bouts of singing (and dancing), and telling stories.

I removed the marker cap. “Nice new pen!” I noted aloud. I was ready to transcribe whatever story he might conjure this morning. Andrew would later copy out my printed text with great patience—letter-for-letter, space-for-space. He did so with a black Sharpie pen onto an old linen bed sheet. The finished ‘storybooks’ were then attached to the landscapes of his stitched fabric tableaux or to the elaborate sculptural pieces that he engineers with all manner of found objects.

Andrew leaned-in closer with both elbows resting on the table top and hands softly clasped. “Story...” he began.

“Uh huh,” I replied, reassuring him that I was ready and waiting.

“Mom, Dad...” Andrew declared. I began writing at the top of the page, making a concerted effort to produce well-formed letters. As I transcribed his words, I audibly vocalised each one in turn to better synchronise the pace of his dictation with the speed of my writing and, importantly, to ensure that I was producing a faithful recording.

“Saying...” Andrew continued, slowly and deliberately. “Talking about it...”

“Saying what Andrew?” My mind scrambled for the syntax in his utterance. From Andrew’s perspective, my picky concern was probably pointless, but I had in mind his future audiences who might take the time to read the stories that bedecked his artworks.

“Talking about it,” he repeated.

“Okay,” I concurred. “Let’s put a comma there.” I added a bold comma after the word “saying.” Andrew smiled. Lisa had told me of Andrew’s fondness for **punctuation marks** in his text. “Talking... about... it...,” I repeated as I wrote.

“Is... Is asking Dad...” As Andrew added to the narrative, his gaze periodically lifted and softened in deep concentration.

“Mom is asking Dad?” I inquired.

“Yeah,” he responded flatly. I nodded and continued with my task. “She want say... and Dad say, ‘Where do you want to go?’”

Selective mutism is a complex childhood anxiety disorder that is diagnosed in people normally capable of speech, but are unable to speak or communicate in specific social settings in which they feel insecure or uncomfortable. It is not a form of shyness and is not intentional, but rather is believed to have a neurological basis in the over-compensation of the part of the brain known as the amygdala, which regulates the body’s reactions to danger and fear.

Punctuation marks were first introduced in the third century BCE by Aristophanes, a librarian in the great Library of Alexandria, as a means to ease the reading of ancient Greek scrolls, which were written with no marks or spaces between words. His proposed system of adding dots of ink to indicate pauses and stops, did not immediately take hold, however, and were abandoned by the second century CE under Roman rule, only to be resurrected by Christian scribes in Europe during the sixth century. These days, in the age of digital readers, punctuation marks share screen space with emojis and emoticons.

“Where do you want to go?” I repeated to be sure I was writing what Andrew wanted. I paused to look at him and probed, “So, we put a question mark? Okay?” He was happy with my suggestion: the more marks on the paper, the better.

“Where do you want to go...,” he continued. “Go airport...” Andrew watched the pen in my hand as I progressively covered the white surface of the paper with his words.

“Airport,” I repeated. “Very exciting.”

Andrew’s story then took a detour into the costs for getting to the airport, with “Dad” enquiring whether it would be “A lot? Bigger? Or much?” His declaration of each possible sum was simultaneously accompanied with rhythmic hand gestures that dramatized the quantities.

Next, the narrative elaborated a somewhat intense negotiation, presumably between a child and mother. The child endeavoured to convince its mother to visit Dad, but the mother was resolute that she would not. In voicing the mother’s firm “No!”, Andrew’s face grew serious and his tone stern.

“Do I put an exclamation?” I asked. I comically mimed the intended power of the punctuation mark to brighten his sudden mood by bringing my right clenched fist down with force onto an imaginary surface and raising my eyebrows in exaggerated alarm. Andrew shrieked with laughter. Shortly after, we were back in cheerier territory with Andrew now weaving “Africa” into his tale. We were also halfway to filling a second sheet of paper.



Andrew Omoding with his work, 2015, photo credit: Trevor Marchand

“Dad said to Mom...,” continued Andrew.

“Uh huh,” I spurred him on.

“To come... Africa. Where do you want to go? Africa.”

Repeating as I transcribed Andrew’s words: “Dad said, ‘Do you want to come to Africa?’”

“Yeah.” Andrew smiled with satisfaction, then leaned back deeply into his chair and softly folded his hands on his belly. He continued, “Dad said, uh... talking to t’ childrens, adults...” He demonstrated the height of the children by raising his left hand, suggesting that they were grown up.

“Uh huh. Two adult children?” I inquired.

Andrew nodded. “Yeah, adult childrens. You want to go; you want to go... Africa?” He gestured with wide outstretched arms above his shoulders. “Want to go to visit...” Andrew paused for a moment. “India,” he added with a big smile as he moved in closer to the table to monitor my writing.

I let out a burst of laughter: “Ha! India too? Wow!” I hurriedly got on with writing as Andrew’s stride quickened.

“And boy say that...,” Andrew added with a contented smile. “Boy say that, ‘Yes, I’m happy to go.’” He paused pensively before continuing: “And the daughter said... to boy..., ‘I want to go... I want to go holiday.’”

Andrew’s stories do not have distinct beginnings or endings, nor do they contain linear narratives in a conventional sense. Instead, they comprise series of short, ambiguously-related sentences. Like Andrew’s tableaux, sculptures, and mobiles that entice viewers to touch and handle their materials and forms, his written words overtly invite readers to join in travel (usually to Africa), go on picnics or partake in other forms of commensality, attend parties, go shopping (with won money), and participate in singing and dancing. Ultimately, the stories convey the artist’s aspirations for security, home, happiness, and, above all, community.

“Mom; Mom singing.” Andrew’s story now moved to song.

“Sounds happy,” I commented while writing it down. “Okay.”

“Yeah. And *duck* was singing...”

I hadn’t clearly heard who was singing. “And *daughter*?” I asked.

My query went unanswered as Andrew became immersed in the song. “Wey, wey, wey! Wey, wey, wey!” he bellowed out with a broad grin and slapping his palms down on the table top in time.

“So, the *daughter* started singing that?” I asked once again when he finished.



Andrew Omoding copying out a story, 2015, photo credit: Trevor Marchand

“Yeah,” he agreed glibly. In fact, Andrew had indeed said “duck.” I discovered this later when reviewing the recording. The repetitive quacking-like noise that he produced for the tune also suggests duck, not daughter. He was unperturbed by my suggestion that “daughter” was singing, however, and blithely proceeded with that. My understanding and interpretation had been constrained by my own notions of a fixed cast of characters already introduced, whereas Andrew’s story was open-ended and inclusive of whatever new people and animals came to mind. Like the mutable titles that he gives to his artworks, the interpretations and the meaning that Andrew ascribes to his stories fluidly change over time in response to changing context, circumstances and audiences.

He sang the song again, chanting the “wey, wey, wey” refrain.

Unsure how that might be transcribed—and stubborn in my thinking that it must be a word spoken by a human actor and not merely a sound—I enquired whether the single lyric was ‘why’.

Again Andrew concurred.

“Why?” I restated quizzically with furrowed brow.

“Why... Why you singing?” Andrew proclaimed.

“Oh, okay...” I said. “So it’s ‘And daughter started singing ‘Why, why why.’” Andrew nodded and I wrote it down.

“And boy...,” Andrew added shortly after, “say to Dad... I want to go swimming!” Yet another recreational pursuit had been incorporated.

“Hmmm. That’s fun,” I uttered in a subdued voice, my hands busied with recording the sentence. I then paused, turned to Andrew and beamed, “Gosh, I hope I can go on this holiday too!”