

Thematic Summary of AANM Discussion Session #3: Diversity with Andi Vicente

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This discussion session was held via Zoom on Thurs, March 14, 2024 at 6:30 pm CST. The facilitator was Andi Vicente (they/them).

Andi is an interdisciplinary visual artist who works with different communities exploring installation, image-making, and collage. Andi is also the child of undocumented Filipino immigrant parents, and has had many jobs supporting folks with precarious immigration status. Topics they've explored in their art include intersectional identities, precarious livelihoods, and the juxtaposition of movements, in order to broaden our understanding of experiences of oppression. They encourage collective empowerment by answering the questions: Who is not here with you? How can I be there for you?

Today's session started with a long slide presentation in which Andi periodically welcomed others' thoughts and questions, followed by a shorter discussion period.

The presentation, titled "Diversity, an Archipelagic Approach", began with a land acknowledgement from the perspective of Filipino people, where Andi, as a second-generation immigrant, talked about *mano po*, the Filipino gesture of respect (putting elders' hands to one's forehead), and addressed the gesture to the "Original Peoples, to their Elders, and to their ancestors", naming the Kanien'kehà:ka and Anishinaabeg nations.

They brought up a slide with a list of topics to be covered:

- Defining "culturally diverse" (racialized) art and artists
- Universality of art and excellence
- Late stage representation
- Traditional binaries of continentalism and islandness
- Reimagining spaces that are decolonial and relational

As Andi spoke and others offered their thoughts, some core ideas emerged.

Core Ideas

Culturally diverse art gets devalued as art because it is perceived as “artifact” or cultural rather than art in terms of Western colonized aesthetics.

- With their background in anthropology, Andi wonders who gets to decide between art and artifact. A piece of art can be both art and a cultural form with practical use, e.g. a woven basket or blanket that reflects a particular historical moment. Instead of judging its artistic merit or excellence in terms of skill, materials, etc., the audience looks at such art through a colonized, socialized aesthetic, seeing it as merely craft or decoration. The artist’s intention is overlooked. In response to this idea, a participant expressed the hope that artists could have “more agency in where they’re situating the art”.
- A participant spoke about how learning about Metis beadwork made them think about how art is active in the world, opening up their way of thinking about their own work. As this artwork is gifted to someone, they asked whether it is an artifact, a gift, or what. Their education in art school had emphasized being a professional artist whose work was in galleries, yet for Metis beadwork, the gallery was just one step along its journey.

BIPOC artists spend a lot of time in the emotional labour of building relationships with institutional gatekeepers and “code switching” in order to make their art more palatable and marketable.

- Andi said that “code switching” is a strategy for BIPOC folks to successfully navigate interracial interactions by hiding parts of themselves and thus conforming to Western ideals of aesthetics and therefore “excellence”. The aesthetic of the art needs to not disrupt the status quo but rather been seen through an exoticized lens.
- Gatekeeping is not exclusive to BIPOC artists, but often means that, for example, the idea of an “emerging” or “established” artist is determined not by one’s practice but by the emotional labour put into building relationships with gatekeepers. The concept of “emerging” and “established” artists is centered on a perceived linear career rather than contribution or impact. One participant pointed out that for granting bodies, you can only emerge once. Andi said that they know artists that say they have been emerging for 30 years, according to the granting bodies.

Decolonization is not achieved with just a little space in a colonized institution, where BIPOC artists are expected to explore traumatic experiences, family history and struggle rather than express joy, curiosity, or a general interest in aesthetics in their work. Andi believes we need the latter type of art.

- Andi spoke about these colonized institutions' attitudes: "If we just hire a BIPOC person, we've healed the harms. If we make space for BIPOC art on the first floor near the bathrooms instead of the main hall, BIPOC artists should be grateful for having any space devoted to them. If we give substantial amounts of grant money, it's expected that BIPOC artists prove their marginalization by digging into their traumatic experiences." They then added: "When we want to talk about our joy it has to be contained and it can't be about, you know, their own liberation."
- To illustrate the alternative, Andi showed Kayumanggi, a National Geographic music video from the Philippines that can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkG-3lv09vk>. To lilting, mellow guitar music, the video shows panoramic nature shots and peaceful, joyful imagery of people of all ages having a good time in a small fishing village: weaving, making nets, surfing, fishing, boating, etc. The lyrics of the video convey love, speaking of people with brown skin embracing themselves and their home. Some of the shots are of girls surfing. Andi said they were taken aback by the confidence of these girls, whom they met during a residency, who were into surfing, drawing, and sea turtles. It was a contrast with the artists they knew back home struggling to take back their own confidence. Andi called these girls "unheralded influences".
- Later Andi said that we need art that doesn't necessarily reflect the times, that BIPOC artists are sick of centering their pain and oppression. "Maybe I want to do art about eighteenth century French curtains. Like why the heck not?" they said.
- Another participant spoke about the differences they see between grant applications from white and BIPOC artists. While white artists tend to be interested in line and colour and movement – aesthetic interests – BIPOC artists tend to say "here's all my trauma or here's all my family's history and here's where we came from and our struggle". The participant felt that BIPOC artists are being told that they have to "sell their worthiness by presenting their representation as a commodity". This makes them sad because they want to know what makes the artists happy, what makes them create art.
- Another participant spoke about an artist who included big beautiful expressionistic paintings of his favourite house plants in a Palestinian exhibition, alongside others' more overtly political work. His decision to be "willfully apolitical" was itself a political act, which

struck the participant. This made them think about who has permission and who doesn't have permission to explore aesthetic, line, humour, beauty, play, etc.

When galleries invest in BIPOC art, they have a responsibility to go beyond tokenism and form a relationship with the artist and their work, going beyond one aspect of their identity.

- Andi described the term “late stage representation”, which they coined, as referring to a situation under late stage capitalism where equity, diversity and inclusion trainings and programs have replaced true reconciliation and equity, which require relationship-building and intentionality. They spoke about someone they knew who worked as a bank director then went into EDI because there was big money to be made.
- One participant spoke about their uneasiness when their art was selected by a craft museum and library, because it seemed as if the institution just went out and bought BIPOC art without enough guidance, and the show became a “hodgepodge of random artifacts”.

Homelands and cultural diversity are being lost in the modern world, e.g. to climate change in the Philippines and Pacific Islands such as Tuvalu, causing people to ask what is most precious to hold onto.

- Andi spoke about a residency they had in the Philippines, where thirty percent of the region will be under water within 70 years. They spoke about how people in different areas of the Philippines are very different, but that this diversity is not celebrated and people are being erased. Oral history, which is hard to document, describes migration and climate change. While there, they interviewed folks about what message they would want to send to the world about who they were, and they found it “so beautiful” that many responded by showing them their art, e.g. a seashell necklace, a print in sand, a woven blanket. “I thought that was like incredibly powerful that the thing that they didn’t want erased most in this world is the thing that they made.”
- Andi brought up the Tuvalu nation, which will be the world’s first “digital nation” due to climate change. They showed participants a video where a spokesperson described the project of moving the land, ocean and culture to the cloud to keep them safe from rising waters that will engulf their physical land. The idea is that a virtual presence will allow the country to continue to function as a state and maintain its sovereignty and borders despite land loss.

The Tuvalu have three-dimensionally scanned their land, are building a “Digital Ark” that is “designed to carry the very soul of Tuvalu”, and are even exploring digital passports on the blockchain. They want to save all manner of culture, including artifacts sounds, dances, grandfather’s stories, etc., as well as core values that include oneness and connectedness (kaitasi), respect for community (aava), genuine care and concern for others (alofa), and treating one’s neighbour like family (fale pile).

Twelve other countries are on board to recognize Tuvalu’s virtual sovereignty and eighteen other Pacific Forum countries have declared their own perpetual statehood.

The spokesperson implored larger countries to stop fossil fuel emissions and increase financing for climate change mitigation efforts.

It is important to build relationships beyond borders and the binaries they produce, relationships that are decolonial and relational, mutual and symbiotic.

- In a discussion of the “binaries of islandness and continentalness”, Andi spoke about borders and how they can constrain us. Being the child of undocumented immigrants, and knowing others in a similar situation, Andi has shared resources for, for example, professionals who can be paid directly. In working professionally with people with precarious immigration status, they have seen a parallel between “people sort of like striving to break free from those confines of being able to leave and return and stay at will in the same way within our own art practices” where borders keep us within a particular set of values and aesthetics.
- Andi provided the example of musicians who have been relegated to the status of “world musicians”. These folks can be amazing instrumentalists and musicians who have been working for a long time, but they’ve been assigned to a “cultural heritage art festival type of space” rather than society “really valuing [the music] for what it is”. Some of this is due to language barriers that determine who gets access to a space.
- Andi expressed a belief that people can build spaces and relationships that steer away from territoriality, statehood, borders, and perceived identity. They saw their Philippines residency and the Tuvalu digital nation as examples. The Tuvalu video “warped [their] perception of borders and nationhood and what constitutes somebody’s identity” and also gave them a sense of possibility. If a tiny nation could do something so ambitious, what could we do?
- Andi talked about how they valued being surrounded by people from different walks of life in their Philippines residency, where everyone looked after each other’s children, cooked together, visited each other’s studios and learned about each other’s art practices and

histories. Although the residency was only a week long, it left them wanting to do this all the time. The experience left them open to understanding where people are coming from and why they create what they do.

- A participant reflected that the Tuvalu putting their country into the cloud felt problematic and complicated to them because the resources that go into the cloud are “part of the problem” (i.e. climate change), and Andi responded by talking about how they deal with cognitive dissonance through listening to their bodily reactions and forming relationships with those who have different experiences than they do.

Art in general can be political and activist – and there is a pressure to make it so - but it can also be “willfully apolitical”, giving artists permission to explore aesthetics, humour, line, beauty, play, etc.

- A participant who started out as an activist before becoming an artist asked whether we have an obligation to make activist art. “Or is it okay that art is just what we live *for*?” They wondered if others could speak to how they balance their obligations and their artwork.
- Another participant said that, after asking what art is *doing*, for example through Metis beadwork or in this climate change situation, it strikes them that what the nationhood building that the Tuvalu are doing is artwork. They felt that art school got them stuck in a particular way of thinking of art and that it’s important to be curious about other ways art is active in the world.
- Andi said they didn’t like that the choice was between art and activism. They said that in these times, even making art at all is resistance, “because people are so focused on producing other things”. The art of joy, versus suffering, is particularly valuable.
- Thinking about choosing to focus on aesthetics, one participant reminisced about how, when they were coming of age (they’re in their forties now), “the milieu was quite a bit different and there was a lot of work that was intentionally like funny or self-effacing or like kind of provocative”, more “unserious” work.
- Several participants expressed that idea that other kinds of creative acts, like making sweaters, cakes and soup, could be just as nourishing to both self and others, and more pragmatic. Andi brought up how they and others have been bringing soup to pro-Palestinian protests. They spoke about how their partner is doing their Master’s thesis about how people can work for change while still considering their mental health. They expressed how important it is to be aware, informed and care about people. They also talked about how the actual process of making their art with people was “fun and silly”, even though it was serious work.

Artists' work is a reflection of their ongoing journey as a whole person, and even making art that represents oppressed experiences and intersectional identities can mask other aspects of who we are and limit our topics to issues like representation.

Andi's artistic journey provided one case study of this point. Some of the slides in the presentation contained examples of their artwork, and they explained the pieces to the participants. You can view some of this artwork at: <https://andivicente.com/>.

- *Art from Pagkakaisa Exhibit (2020)*: A project with Salteaux-Cree friend RJ Jones, this exhibit was about building relationships between migrant communities and indigenous folks, who didn't have a positive perception of the former because "BIPOC folks are pitted against each other in systems of scarcity and competitiveness", according to Andi. They wanted to share space and talk about how their experiences and struggles are linked to imperialism and colonialism. Andi made pieces that hung on either side and they worked with their collaborator on items for the middle part of the exhibit, using birch bark and leather, and a woven mat from the Philippines. This was a hard time for Andi, as they found the online aspect of the exhibit difficult to navigate, and had just moved in with their collaborator.
- *Geena (2019)*: This was an example of Andi's design work, a picture of Geena Rocero, trans Filipina American model, actor, and activist. Andi heard Geena's story of being a trans migrant, contacted her and they chatted. The piece speaks to intersectional identities, portraying Geena as an empowering icon (complete with a circle of light around her head). In discussing Geena, Andi talked about how celebrating identities is great but can also mask other aspects of who we are.
- *Bittermelanin book (2022)*: This book, which started as a zine, has material from 20 Filipino Diaspora contributors from various countries, and includes poetry, photos and drawings. Andi had reservations about making it a book because they really just enjoy doing zines, but they were okay with it in the end. However, now, 2 or 3 years later, they look at some of the content they wrote and they find they don't think like that anymore.
- An archival image of a mestiza (mixed-ancestry) Filipina woman with the quote "I am not exotic I am exhausted" above it, a quote taken from a North African artist. Andi explained that this was about the struggle of colorism – a resentment of light-skinned Filipinas who have platforms – in BIPOC communities, as well as affirming the exhaustion that BIPOC folks feel code switching, reaffirming who they are, and not knowing their worth. After describing this picture, however, Andi said, "I'm beyond representation right now. I'm more focused on like, 'Guys, we need to talk about the climate more.'"

In the discussion, a participant said they appreciated Andi presenting their works and articulating how their relationship to their work has changed, and how the things we make are markers of time

and place. They appreciated Andi's "candidness". Andi responded that they feel more candid now, and that in order to get real responses they have to be real about what they're presenting.

Artists spoke about how they have gone through various phases and their work has changed. One artist has gradually incorporated more of their identities (queer, disabled, etc.) and art practices into their work. The BIPOC artist whose work was purchased by the craft museum in an unintentional way spoke about how the piece they sold years ago reflected who they were back then, not who they are now.

However, several people agreed that they are still themselves. One said that although their artforms have seemed to shift radically, when looking back they can see a clear through-line: "I'm still the same person." In response, Andi held up a picture of themselves at age 3 that they keep on their desk as a reminder that they're still the same person.

Andi reflected that people will develop a fixed perception of your work, despite you wanting them to know where you are now. Another participant spoke about how in art school you're encouraged to find your "one style", "one voice", and that this is the same for BIPOC artists – that people don't want to see a rich diverse life that has evolved through experiences, they just want this one window, into struggles, trauma and ancestors. People are richer than this one style or identity.

Closing Thoughts: Solutions

In closing out the session, participants came up with a few ideas for how to improve the situation for BIPOC artists.

Participants spoke about how just like there are "accessibility riders" and "technical riders", there could be "interpretive riders" saying, for example, how a work is to be categorized, what the show can be called, what you can't say about someone's work, etc. One person, who came from a museums and galleries background, said institutions should be taking the lead here, just like they should with accessibility standards, i.e. readable labels, and general accessibility negotiations, which can be complex. They said artists have already approached them to ensure they're not putting together a tokenistic show.

One participant asked: "Is the solution to tokenism just like having big diverse networks of people that you know and learn from and then in that way you're introduced to genuinely good art that's interesting, that you are generally invested in and want to show?"

Andi responded that they thought the solution to tokenism is relational building, not just purchasing art solely based on one aspect of someone's identity. "And obviously that takes time and stuff, but yeah, like all good things. You can't bake a cake in like 5 minutes, can you?"