Situated Waiting Tables

One night in May, during a break from washing dishes, I was sitting in the corridor where we threw out the trash. I turned to the left and saw an emergency exit; to the right, another emergency exit. But somehow, it felt like neither of them could take me away from this place.

In October 2022, I stumbled into this Chinese restaurant inside the mall next to Utrecht Central Station and asked if they were hiring. It had two floors: the dining area upstairs and the kitchen downstairs. When the kitchen finished a dish, they would place it into a small dumbwaiter and send it upstairs. An auntie standing by the dumbwaiter would take the dishes out and put them on the counter, and the waiters waiting there would deliver them to the tables.

During the interview, the boss asked, “What can you do?”
“Anything,” I said.
“We need someone to wash dishes in the kitchen. Can you do that?”
“I can try.”

Then I went downstairs and began a life in which I worked part-time while also making my graduation project and writing my thesis. At the time, besides an 18-year-old Taiwanese girl working upstairs, I was the youngest one there. So everyone called me “xiao mei”—the little sister.

As I slowly got used to the rhythm, washing dishes started to feel almost like meditation. All I had to do was repeat the same set of actions: scrape the leftover food off the plates and bowls that came down from upstairs, sort them into the sinks, then take out the right number of each type from the sink, scrub them clean with a sponge, sort them again, place them into the dishwasher trays, let the dishwasher blast them with high heat, and finally put everything back in its proper place in the kitchen. After four hours of work, I would go home, shower, open my thesis document, write a paragraph or two, shut down my laptop, and go to bed.

I say it felt like meditation, but actually, there were countless thoughts spinning around in my head the whole time.

There were six to eight Chinese labourers in the kitchen of this restaurant. They worked every day from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m., moving only between the staff dormitory and the kitchen, with almost no social life. Many of them couldn't speak Dutch or English, yet had already lived in the Netherlands for more than five years. In Dutch society, Chinese kitchen labourers are almost invisible, even though there are many of them. They're like the mice hidden in the back kitchens of the mall's restaurants—living here, sharing the same space as everyone else, yet being unnoticed; coexisting with the public, but as if in a parallel world.

It seems that many early-career Asian artists in the Dutch art scene are in a similar situation. Without opportunities to exhibit their work, they become just as invisible and silent as the labourers in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants. Their artworks are expected to contain certain "ethnic" or "national" characteristics in order to be recognised or accepted by the Dutch art world. But what about someone who doesn't identify with their original national identity, and also doesn't want to assimilate into the culture represented by the Netherlands? Someone who belongs neither here nor there. Someone who refuses to be reduced to a cultural symbol.

Dishwashers and artists are both invisible labourers. Guests dining upstairs cannot see my labour, just as the general public never know what happened in artists' studios. The difference is that dishwashers clean up after others, while artists have to wipe their own shit. I found myself merging these two identities: thinking about art while washing dishes, and worrying about survival through art while making my artwork.

I even came up a possible project idea. An opening performance held in a space exhibiting my work (perhaps a restaurant inside an art district). Guests in formal evening wear sit around a long table set with pure white plates. A large screen stands at the front of the table. In a kitchen transformed from a white-cube space, I wait beside a silver sink, dressed in a white suit with a black apron, black gloves, and black clogs. Every time a course is finished, a waiter clears the plates, replaces them with new ones, and serves the next course. While the guests eat, they watch a live-stream on the large screen of me washing their dishes. The entire performance would be recorded.

You can earn more and work fewer hours in a Chinese restaurant than being an intern in an art institution. Because of my previous internship experiences in art institutions back in China, even though I hoped to get closer to the Dutch art scene, I no longer wanted to repeat the same kind of underpaid, skill-undervalued internships in the Netherlands.

Back then, I naïvely believed that once I came to the Netherlands and completed a master's degree in art, I would naturally become a professional artist. But as graduation approached, I slowly began to see reality more clearly. First, the school couldn't provide us with any real resources or support for entering the Dutch art world. After graduation, I felt like I had been thrown into an empty void. Second, my artistic practice and style don't really align with the kinds of art the Dutch art industry has favoured in recent years. My work has little commercial value, and I don't have an identity that is easy to sell. Even if I managed to obtain an artist visa, I wouldn't be able to financially support myself through my art.

I need to take care of my body and mind before I can even think about my practice. But the paradox is that, in today's society, regardless of your profession, nobody cares about your condition —only whether you produce something. No matter in China or abroad, being an independent artist means putting yourself in a precarious situation, while being constantly expected to produce, to squeeze yourself until you're emptied inside out.

After washing dishes downstairs for half a year, I also started working upstairs as a waiter, serving customers directly. Thanks to its central location, the restaurant drew anywhere from a few dozen to over a hundred diners each evening. As a waiter, the feedback from customers is immediate and tangible. This job satisfied my desire to earn money by helping others. But how many people have ever seen the work of an unknown artist? Does it mean that, as an artist, I can only become part of society when I am performing roles that have nothing to do with art?

I remember visiting West Den Haag once, where I met a middle-aged staff member in the library. We chatted about the public reach of art. He said that even in the Netherlands, the popularity of art could never compare to football, there will

always be more people watching matches than visiting exhibitions. I think it is similar to how food brings joy to far more people than art ever will. Maybe it’s just me, but in the Netherlands I get “museum fatigue” very easily, and I rarely encounter exhibitions that truly move me. Often, after seeing a show, I feel completely drained, as if something has been hollowed out inside me, and only a good meal can soothe my soul. I’ve grown tired of seeing beautiful objects floating in clean white spaces. I want to see work that feels grounded, approachable and rooted in real life. For me, good art should comfort people the way yummy food does. This is the kind of work I want to make.

At the beginning of this year, I learned that a classmate living in Arnhem had also begun working at a chain Asian-fusion restaurant known for its huge portions and low prices. He told me that three of his co-workers there were art students too. I also introduced two of my classmates to work at the Chinese restaurant I was in. We joked that the final destination of Dutch art students is restaurant, and that the school should launch a new “culinary arts” program with three specializations: post-contemporary dishwashing, situated waiting tables, and ecology service. Who would have thought that this part-time job would become the longest-lasting work I’ve ever held?

Now I understand that living your life passionately—truly taking care of myself—is what matters most. Art-making is just a seasoning for life, or a channel for thinking about life. Working in the Chinese restaurant also helped me realize that I’m actually more suited to simple, physical work that doesn’t require much brain work. But jobs like this in China wouldn’t pay me enough to support myself, nor can they provide a visa for me to stay in the Netherlands.

Maybe it’s better to make art my hobby. If it becomes a profession, then having no exhibition opportunities or no income from my art would only make me anxious and even full of self-doubt. Art and life should nourish each other. Many people treat art-making as a business, but how much of the work produced that way truly touches people? Even without an artist residency, without exhibitions, without funding—if you want to create, you will still create, won’t you? You’ll always find a way. Living sincerely is the only way to create sincerely.

After giving up on the idea of applying for an artist visa, I went online, found some résumé templates, and redesigned my CV to look as professional as possible. Then I applied to every position I could reasonably understand that did not explicitly rule out Highly Skilled Migrant (KM) visa sponsorship.

But I never received a single interview invitation.

That path seemed closed as well.

As I write this, I'm reminded of something I wrote in my notebook during my master's program, my little "artist manifesto," scribbled in pencil:

If one day I stop making art,
I will still be grateful for the nourishment art has given me,
for the way it has taught me to see things differently.
I am happy that I chose to study something that brings me joy.
Even if I lack the technical skills the profession demands, even if I never mastered modern, cutting-edge software.
I will not make art for the sake of art.
I don't want to grab attention or be deliberately obscure.
I will not make pretty or clever art.
I want my art to ask questions,
to provoke thought—art that is gentle and approachable.
I hope I can turn whatever I do into my art.

One night, after I had washed every plate in the sink, I stared at the empty basin and the bubbles floating on the surface. They suddenly looked like the Milky Way. I thought to myself: I guess I'm finally crazyyyyy!

This essay was originally written in Chinese in September 2024.