

Alice Sun

## A Trap of Being Diverse

*What is an essential trait of artists? Is their background or the content that they have created?*

The bright side of the art world nowadays is clear. As the world has been connected tightly more than ever through the new media, art institutions over the world are slowly influencing each other as they are gradually eliminating obsolete regulations on which type of art they choose to exhibit. The spotlight of the art world does not only shine towards the traditional oil paintings or sculptures any more, but it also brings different types of art such as installations and performances into the front stage of the art world. Students of art around the globe are able to obtain knowledge more equally. The boundaries between those who used to be qualified to define art and those who did not have the power of discourse are now melting down. Those different “territories” in the art domain are also starting to intertwine with each other. Moreover, artists who are from marginalized groups of society can also share their artworks with much less resistance than ever before. We are entering an era of institutional art that allows us to be more open and can co-live in a more diverse society.

In the Netherlands, especially, people from all different backgrounds can easily access to local platforms to show the public what art means to them and bring back beautiful pieces to the public. As far as I have noticed, the system has provided the public with a wide range of freedom in expression in the sense of art forms with little restrictions on the artists’ background. Yes, people can choose to be an artist if they want to. However, on the other hand, the open-minded public is making another turn on their acknowledgment of art. There has been a trend that some local audiences, as well as the sponsors of art projects, are shifting their attention to the backgrounds of artists. Some audiences and sponsors are openly in favor of those artists who are from certain marginalized and always “unusual” backgrounds to the existing art environment. For instance, in the Netherlands, artists who have refugee backgrounds are seldom exhibited without the term ‘refugee artists’ applied to them, this leads to a situation in which these artists have to consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly perform a certain kind of identity in order to meet the expectations of the audience and other important figures in the art world in the Netherlands in order to

pursue their dreams. From another perspective, the audience and the Western media are fond of iconize the artists who have a minority background; they tend to apply pre-designed characters to the artists that are not necessarily true.

Arguably, this trend helps to create a relatively more equal environment for the artists and allow artists to bring up their culture to the Dutch art field. Due to the yet-to-be-amended power of discourse, some people need to have some boosts to reach the same level of opportunity as what others already have due to their identity privilege. The attention that has been put to the “marginalized artists” is indeed much needed and even urgent. But this seemingly protective framework has limited those artists from exploring art further in various ways. By which I mean, when people focus on the “background” and “identity” of an artist, it is actually drawing the public attention from appreciating the content of their artworks to the “criteria” of the artists’ social status. On the one hand, if the trend grows to a more extreme stand, the “poorer” and “more exotic” artists will attract more attention from the founders and art institutions. The reason why I have put quotation marks on those words is that the artists themselves do not necessarily have to be the “poor” and “exotic” ones, but rather perform their artworks in these particular ways to build up and suit their identities to the audiences’ preference. This phenomenon may lead to a situation where the “marginalized” artists need to choose whether to stand in their protected and “othered” position or to fight back against stereotypes of them being “less mainstream” than the other artists.

More often than not, people are expected to stick their identity to their background and present themselves in a certain category in order to fulfill the myth of a diverse society. I believe it would be ideal not to embrace this sense of “Otherness” nor to put attention to the artist’s identity while criticizing the value of an artwork.