# Optional Practical Trainees

Rosaline Dou & Inji Kim

**ALERT:** You have been approved to become a Zygote Artist or a Witness.
Turn to page 12–13 to assess your status and submit your takeaway.

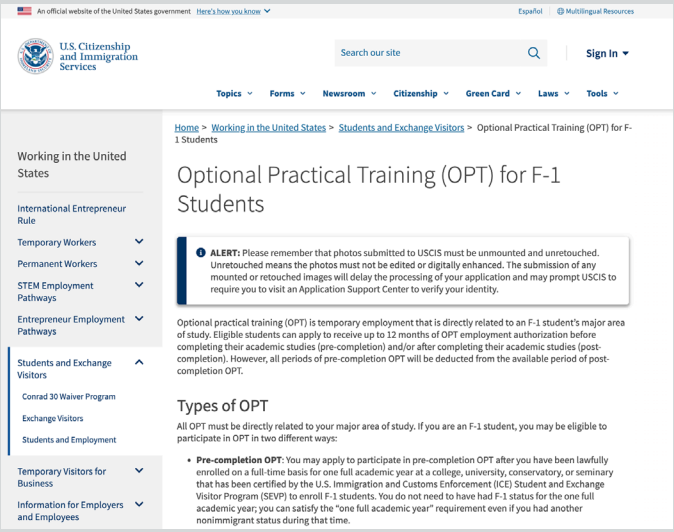
# How to Become Optional Practical Trainees

*Inji Kim*

I. When international students graduate and apply for work in the United States, they enter the "Optional Practical Training" (OPT) program. The organization, application process, and overall implementation reveal both the limited options available to us and their inherent impracticalities. For lack of a better term, those navigating OPT exist at the intersection of soft and hard power. Questions of legitimacy, labor, and cultural production arise at the earliest stages of our careers, compelling us to be resourceful—to think and create both within and beyond the frameworks imposed upon us.

II. *Optional Practical Trainees* interrogates how recent international graduates in art and cultural fields navigate the bureaucratic and vocational precarity of the U.S. post-graduate visa protocol, Optional Practical Training (OPT). Through critical autoethnography, we examine the tension between rigid immigration frameworks and the unstable realities of artistic labor—tracing how restrictive policies shape, constrain, and distort the professional and creative trajectories of international art workers. We began producing this text in early fall 2024, before widespread public attention to F-1 visa and SEVIS status issues. Watching this precarity intensify in recent weeks has been a surreal experience—underscoring how this project's urgency mirrors the very double-bindedness it seeks to address.

III. OPT promises a year of "practical" work experience, yet its vague rules and relentless demand for institutional "approval" turn art into a game of justification. Who are we allowed to become under immigration regimes? What racialized and gendered dynamics surface when personal choices collide with professional aspirations?




*Screenshot from the Webpage on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Regarding Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students.*

This fluctuation inevitably leaves its mark, shaping how we produce and discuss art in both personal and professional spheres. This publication documents the constraints, realities, mediations, and creative adaptations experienced by those operating under this system. Ultimately, we hope these accounts achieve two things: first, to advocate for better support for those facing the multifaceted challenges this regulation poses; and second, to underscore the broader implications of how the administration of artistic labor and immigration policies shape creative practice. Our autoethnographic interventions illuminate the lived realities of navigating OPT and its far-reaching effects on art and cultural work.

# The Choice of a Zygote Artist

*Rosaline Dou*

## Irresistible Wonder

When the opportunity of “Optional Practical Training” is offered, there aren’t really any options. I can’t focus on art when survival demands I beg for “practical” labor.

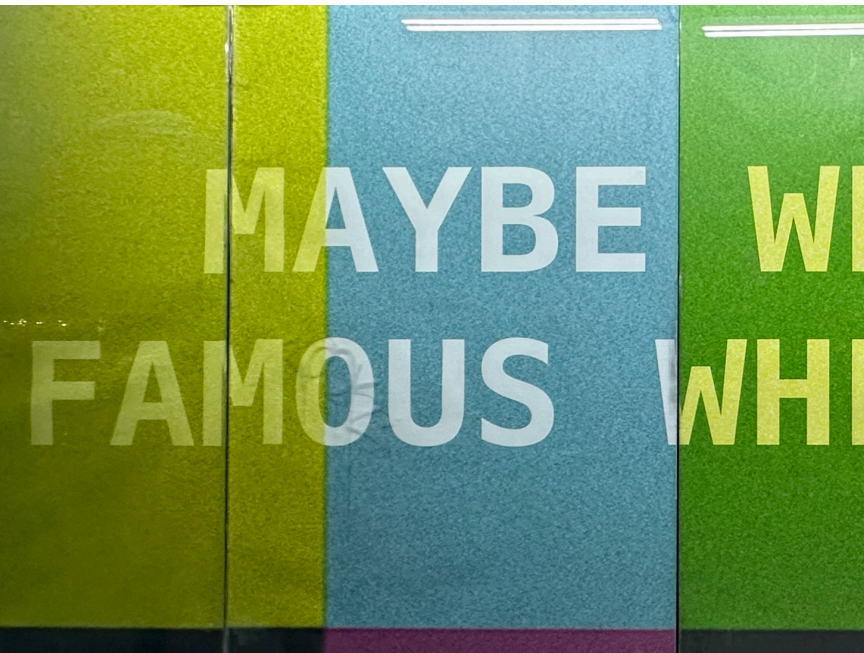
As a zygote, I was offered no womb to grow.

When will I be born?

When will my work deem “related”?

Who decides when a zygote artist emerges?

And why must I wait to be born?



## My Zygote Artist Declaration

I am a zygote artist, not yet born. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) decrees that I, an F-1 student, may seek Optional Practical Training (OPT), a temporary employment authorization "directly related" to my art degree. I may labor part-time (at least 20 hours weekly) or full-time, provided it's "directly related." I cannot just make work; it's not "employment." I cannot only join a residency; it's not "authorized."

All jobs must be art-world-approved, pitting me against art history, curatorial, cultural studies graduates with roots I lack. My art practice is framed as an addition—a labor squeezed between the hours of survival, a side effect of compliance. Seeking professional development, I compete with "emerging artists," those who already possess recognition and presence.

Which confirms: I am a zygote artist.

You are either a Zygote Artist or a witness.

Either way, you are all here. We want to know: what role can you take in this shared, confounding, and still/possible reality?

## Eligibility Requirements for Zygote Artist

A Zygote Artist is a non-born creative entity in the gestational phase of cultural production, whose existence is governed by the following conditions:

- Must not yet be born as an artist in any officially recognized jurisdiction.
- Must exist in a suspended state of emergence, orbiting institutional orbitals such as "recent graduate," "(un)paid intern," "art worker," or "cultural laborer."
- Must not have achieved "emerging artist" status as defined by institutional funds, open calls, or awards.
- Must carry within them the desire to be born—a yearning that is both ineffable and bureaucratically inadmissible.

*Note: Residencies, exhibitions, and fellowships may contribute to your perceived artistic development, but do not count toward OPT compliance. Conceptual labor is not a form of authorized presence.*

If you are a Witness, you have seen what systems do to people. You've felt the static. You've held the question: WHAT NOW?

TAKE AWAY When you show up to view art, what do you want to take away?

TAKE AWAY When you read about others' experiences, what do you want to take away?

TAKE AWAY Are takeaways more about the people who give it, or take it?

TAKE AWAY What should be the take away from questioning what take aways are?

TAKE AWAY Is the opposite of "Take Away" "Bring Close"?

Scan to submit your takeaway

## Key Ideas

*Inji Kim & Rosaline Dou*

Perhaps the most pressing constraint of this scheme is time. OPT grants graduates exactly 12 months of employment authorization, with the option to extend only for those in STEM-designated fields. The language governing this process is both precise and opaque—take, for instance, the requirement that all work must be "directly related to the area of study." For artists and cultural workers, this raises essential questions. What does "directly related" mean in a field where career paths are often nonlinear, collaborative, and multidisciplinary? Who determines this relevance, and by what criteria?

The STEM extension list itself reveals unexpected inclusions, such as Digital Communication and Media/Multimedia and Archaeology, alongside an overwhelming presence of military-adjacent disciplines. The privilege of certain fields over others exposes a hierarchy of perceived value—one that international artists and art workers must navigate, often at odds with their own practices and aspirations.

The language used throughout the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) OPT webpage is dense, bureaucratic, and often unclear, making it difficult for students to navigate the process with certainty. Reading the website, we see that key terms like "directly related to the major area of study" are not explicitly defined, leaving students to interpret their own eligibility without clear guidance. The heavy reliance on legalistic phrasing, passive voice, and conditional structures ("may be eligible," "must demonstrate," "should submit") creates uncertainty rather than clarity. Additionally, the page often directs students to external forms, supplementary documents, and institutional resources without consolidating essential information in one place. This fragmented structure reinforces the idea that securing work authorization is an opaque, convoluted process rather than a transparent and navigable one for artists.

Equally telling is the language of the OPT process, which hinges on the verb "approval." International graduates are in a

constant state of seeking approval—of work authorization, of visa applications, of their very presence in the country. This framework demands we ask: Whose approval do we seek as international students and emerging art workers? Institutional approval? State approval? Market approval? And at what cost? This cycle of sanctioned legitimacy exposes the underlying tensions between creative autonomy and the bureaucratic structures that seek to regulate it. How much wiggle room do we have when it comes to living out both of these realities? Many contemporary artists have asked this question in movements such as dematerialized art, conceptualism, institutional critique, and so on.

We are here to show that the very conditions to remain in this country as recent graduates in the arts push us, for better or worse, to adroitly manage this system. We are both writing this document in our second and third languages, which also accompanies questions surrounding our various abilities to navigate this system and express our discontentment.

# On Categorizing Artistic Work for Approval

*Rosaline Dou*

The visa process is full of rules—what you are allowed and what you are not. Behind the documents lies a sense of timidity, carefulness, and fear. Its restrictiveness molds the incubating artist or art worker into a rigid framework, one that is fundamentally at odds with the fluidity and unpredictability of creative practice.

I remember being unsure whether my artist residency would count toward my OPT. But no one could give me a clear answer. When I reached out to International Student Services (ISS), their response was: "*We cannot advise on which job satisfies the requirements of employment for OPT*." So who decides? The guidelines mention part-time and full-time employment, and for performing artists, they allow "multiple short-term employers (gigs), provided you maintain a list of all gigs, dates, and durations." But does that logic extend to visual artists? Do exhibitions or residencies function the same way? No one could answer.

The OPT employment section required me to categorize my work. The process of typing and retyping the right words, of aligning my experience with pre-approved labels, felt eerily similar to writing artist statements.

While waiting for my OPT approval, I found myself caught in another cycle of applications—open calls, fellowships, grants. It was an almost identical process of prolonged waiting, a plea for approval, a validation of belonging. It might sound cliché, but I applied to numerous "emerging artist" opportunities, only to realize that many of those selected were already well-established. Where do post-grad artists and art workers truly fit within the art ecosystem? Are we even part of it? If so, where?

It felt like a *Fortress Besieged*: those outside are desperate to get in, while those inside are eager to leave. Perhaps it's just an observation, but it seems that early-career artists and art practitioners are striving to gain entry into the art world, while more established artists are looking for ways to break out—expanding into interdisciplinary practices and alternative engagement.

***Required**

to the degree that qualified you for this OPT.

**Relation to Field of Study:**

Explain how this job relates

*Screenshot from the Webpage on Employment section of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) Portal*

## On Delaying and Compromising Work for Security

*Inji Kim*

Although my training is in art history, it has made me keenly aware of the language and structural logic underlying visa regulations. The vague expectations and lack of clear guidelines within academia often leave students and emerging educators like myself unprepared for the transition from an F-1 student visa to OPT. This uncertainty extends beyond temporary employment—it dictates long-term career trajectories, personal choices, and the compromises required to remain in the country. The precariousness of this system forces international graduates into a prolonged state of negotiation, where professional aspirations and personal stability are constantly weighed against immigration constraints.

For many, the next steps beyond OPT—O-1, H-1B, or marriage—are fraught with limitations and structural inequities. The O-1 visa, meant for individuals with "extraordinary ability," demands a level of institutional recognition that is rarely afforded to early-career artists or scholars. The H-1B work visa, meanwhile, requires employer sponsorship, further restricting the autonomy of artists and researchers whose work does not fit neatly into predefined institutional roles. Marriage, as a legal path to residency, underscores the deeply gendered and racialized dimensions of visa security—revealing how personal and professional decisions are shaped not just by merit or ambition but by systemic pressures beyond individual control.

These constraints are not incidental; they are structural conditions that shape who can participate in the art world, in what capacity, and with what limitations. While modern and contemporary artistic discourse interrogates the function of art itself—*Is it political? What kinds of liberatory effects does it produce? How does it accrue value?*—these conversations rarely account for the structural realities that determine who can make and sustain creative work in the first place. Museums, collections, academic institutions, galleries, and public spaces have been scrutinized for reinforcing power structures, yet they remain complicit in upholding immigration policies that dictate access

to artistic and intellectual labor.

As an international PhD student, I find myself caught within this paradox. Graduate study provided visa stability, but it also delayed my ability to pursue the kinds of work that align with my strengths—community engagement, critical work with collections, and projects that directly impact audiences beyond academic institutions. The assumption that a PhD is a purely intellectual pursuit ignores how structural barriers push many of us into academia as a means of remaining in the country, even when our ambitions extend beyond scholarly research.

## Navigating Institutional Expectations and Personal Realities

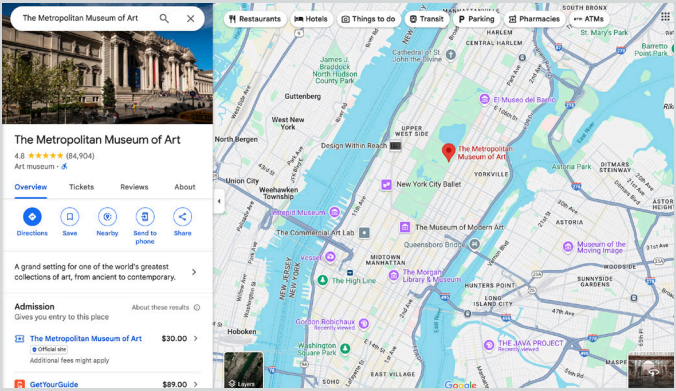
*Inji Kim*

As I began teaching and mentoring students who faced similar struggles, I found myself navigating complicated conversations: *How much should I reveal about how I was able to fund my undergraduate and graduate education? What assumptions am I making about students' financial security and access?* I did not want to discourage them from pursuing their ambitions, but I also could not ignore the reality of financial strain. My parents and I stretched every resource we had to make my education possible, and still, uncertainty never left us.

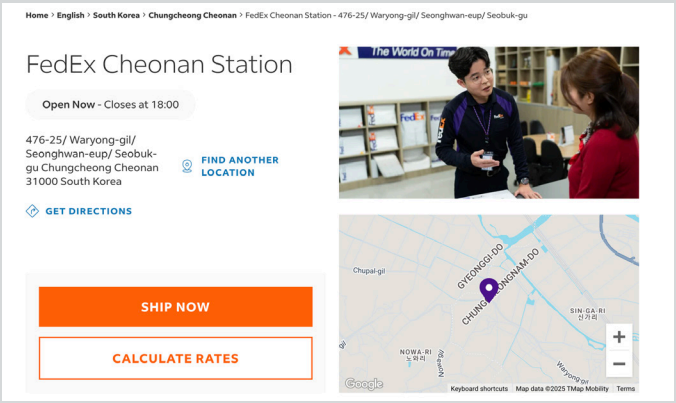
During the pandemic, my father drove me through the rice fields between Pyeongtaek and Cheonan, Korea, so that my OPT could be processed remotely. I had just graduated from my Master's program and secured an internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—the first place my mother and I visited when she brought me to the U.S in 2015. Neither of us had ever been to America before that. It felt significant.

The location of where my dad drove me also holds significance; Camp Humphreys, the largest U.S. military base outside of its territory, is the reason why there is a FedEx shipment center there. I also spent my high school years in an American-run Christian international school in Pyeongtaek making these connections now.

Despite everyone's efforts, my OPT was severely delayed. I spent night after night refreshing my status page, wondering what would happen. Websites like OPTTimeline.com function as virtual third places for international graduates navigating the OPT process. On this platform, users obsessively track their Employment Authorization Document (EAD) case numbers, analyze crowdsourced data, and speculate on processing times through visual graphs and trend lines. It's a digital commons built around shared anxiety—where identity becomes tethered to a USCIS receipt number, and timelines are treated like omens. In this space, the bureaucratic becomes deeply personal, and the act of waiting transforms into a collective ritual of




*Screenshot from the Google Maps showing the location of The Metropolitan Museum of Art*




*Screenshot from the Webpage of FedEx Cheonan Station*

forecasting, guessing, and grasping for control in a system defined by opacity.

I was fortunate—my supervisors and internship coordinators were willing to accommodate a two-month delay so I could still participate. It was a stark reminder that institutions are not faceless bureaucracies; they are made up of individuals whose decisions shape policies, for better or worse. Acknowledging this complexity is part of why I remain invested in conversations about institutional accountability and support.

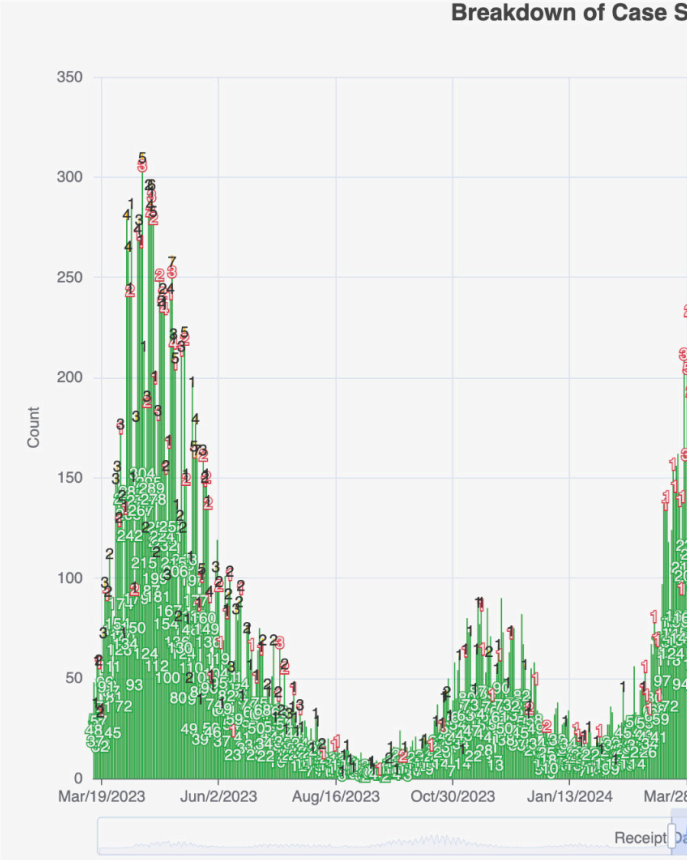
Yet, I hesitate when students see me as someone with options. Most of the time, I feel cornered, pulled further from the work I truly care about. My research has always been driven by the belief that looking at, thinking through, and living around art is a powerful way to understand ourselves. But I find myself distanced from that, trapped within visa requirements, academic expectations, and career paths dictated by institutional legitimacy. Two seemingly unrelated places; they act as grounds to visualize the distance between my realities, and how my body and memory, mediated by the pressures of the expectations of governmental and institutional regulations, remain somewhat autonomous, sitting here and asking us to look at the meaning that arises from putting these two places together, and why the conditions I experienced in these two experiences matter, as representations of the transitions and paradoxes I face.

My parents were South Korean Presbyterian missionaries in a country that they ask me not to disclose. My proximity to American culture, the English language, and Western work ethics and logics was shaped by displacement and adaptation. I had never been to an art museum before moving to the U.S. to study International Relations.

The first time I visited the Whitney Museum and the MoMA—on free trips—I began to feel the weight of how institutions shape our bodily experiences, our sense of belonging. Art became a

way to make sense of the dissonance I felt. I did not set out to study art history. I wanted to understand others, to understand myself through the process of looking, thinking, and questioning. The inexplicable feelings of disconnection began making sense when I stood before artworks, politically charged works. I wanted to share that sense of discovery with others. That's why I pursued this work in the first place.

But the inability to fully engage with curatorial practice or public-facing work without institutional sponsorship reveals how art and academia remain tethered to systems of control that dictate who can access opportunities and under what conditions. My trajectory, like that of so many international artists and scholars, has been shaped not only by intellectual and creative ambitions but by the necessity of securing legal status.


Breakdown of Case S
Count
350
300
250
200
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50
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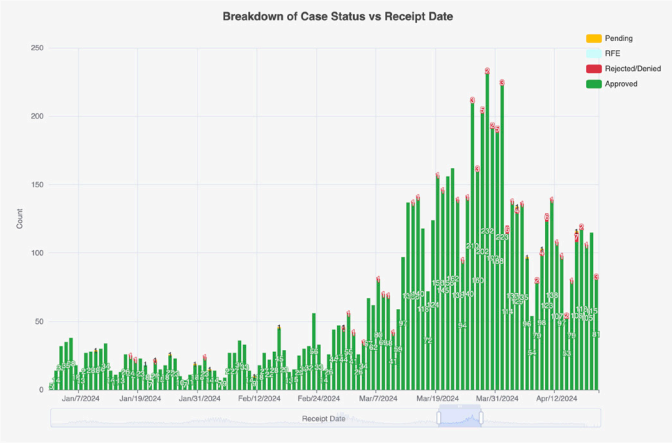
Mar/19/2023
Jun/2/2023
Aug/16/2023
Oct/30/2023
Jan/13/2024
Mar/28
Receipt Da


Breakdown of Case Status vs Receipt Date
Pending
RFE
Rejected/Denied
Approved
Count
250
200
150
100
50
0
Jan/7/2024
Jan/19/2024
Jan/31/2024
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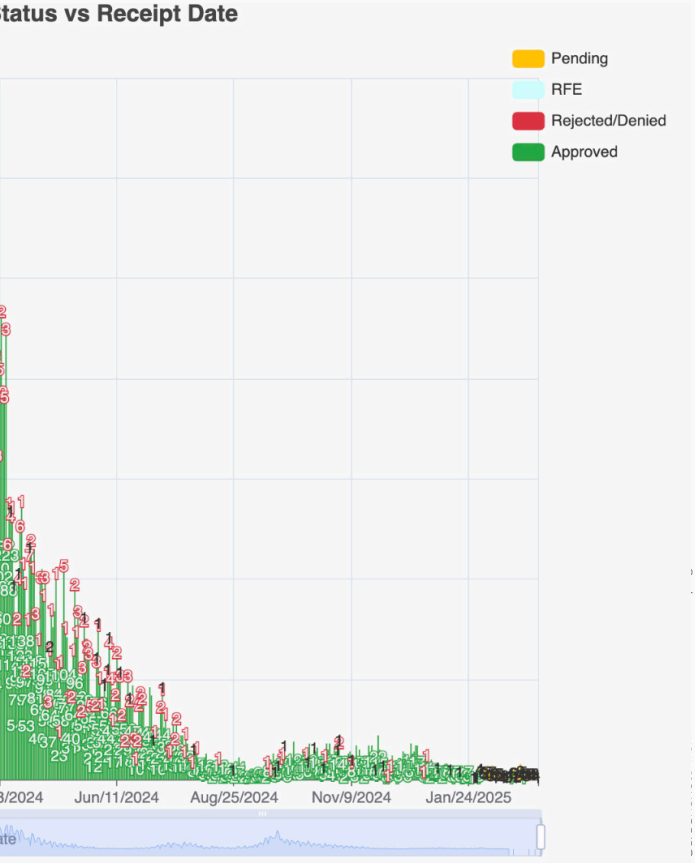
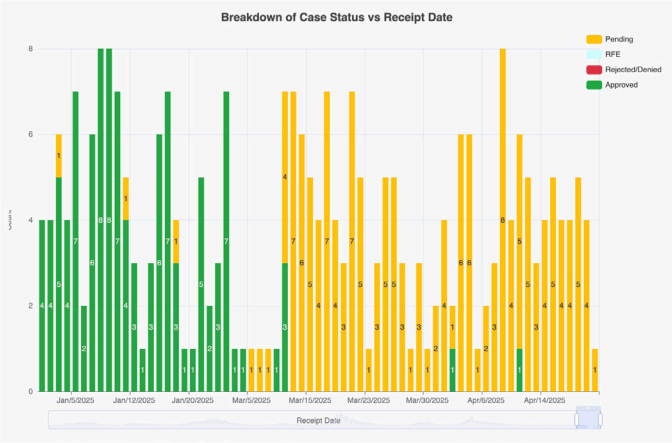
Mar/7/2024
Mar/19/2024
Mar/31/2024
Apr/12/2024
Receipt Date




*Case Status vs Receipt Date" charts across three periods*



# The Urgency of Receiving Approval

*Rosaline Dou*

The timeline is unforgiving. And you cannot afford uncertainty:
"*Up to 90 days of unemployment allowed.*"
"*You may apply up to 90 days before completing your degree, but no later than 60 days after.*"

There is a lot of waiting. Once you apply for OPT, you cannot officially work until receiving Employment Authorization Document (EAD). Your life is basically dictated by visa processing times.

And then, there is the money.

I paid for premium processing for my OPT simply because I couldn't wait any longer. Three months had already slipped away. My situation was tricky: I used an extended CPT for an artist residency over the summer. I don't technically know if this is *allowed*—always unsure if I was bending the rules too far. I operate in a gray area where clarity is a privilege I cannot afford.

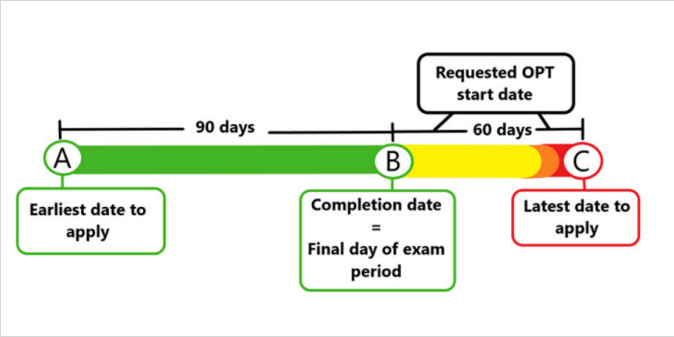
OPT is only the beginning. The O-1 visa reveals another layer of transactions. At a recent exhibition, the gallery offered me a list of press they collaborated with, complete with pricing:
$750 for an article in *Art Daily*
$1,500 for *The New York Times*
$9,000 for *USA Today*

I was shocked—this felt like a pay-to-win game. A friend, who recently secured her O-1 visa, had to pay significant sums to participate in exhibitions, secure press coverage, and win awards. Many advised me to do the same: *Just build up your portfolio, get the O-1, stay first—figure out the rest later*.

If money can solve the problem, is it really a problem?

But I hesitate. Paying for visibility feels like leaving a black stain on my record. Yet, the system rewards those who play the game.

So how do you play the system without losing yourself?

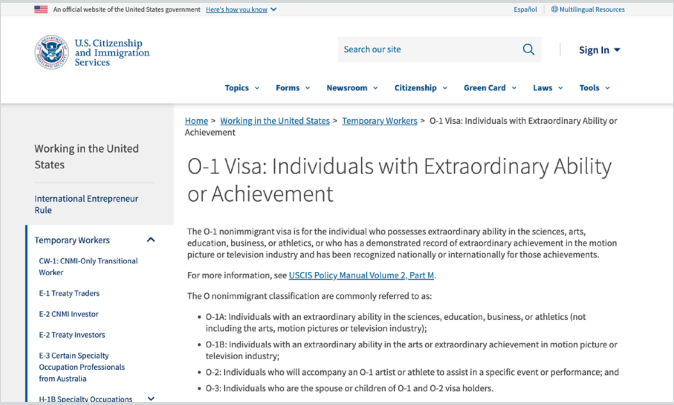



*Screenshot from the University of Washington's Post-Completion OPT webpage*

Case history

| Status | Date |
|---|---|
| Card Was Delivered To Me By The Post Office | September 11, 2024 |
| We produced your new card for your Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization. | September 11, 2024 |
| Your Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, has been approved. | September 8, 2024 |
| We changed your case from standard case to a premium-processing case. The premium-processing clock started. | August 27, 2024 |
| We started the premium-processing clock for your Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization. | August 27, 2024 |
| We received your Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, and sent you a receipt notice. | May 24, 2024 |

*Screenshot from my personal Case History page on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) website*




*Screenshot from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) webpage on the O-1 visa: Individuals with Extraordinary Ability or Achievement*

Optional Practical Trainees

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**Designed by**
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**First Copy**
April 2025

This copy is a part of "A Pain That Is Not Private," an exhibition in Specialist Gallery, Seattle, WA, opening May 1, 2025.

**Rosaline Dou** is an art thinker and cultivator whose work explores the numbing toll of repetitive daily routines. Through art, curation, and writing, she reveals how unconscious habits reinforce structures that process us. Dou reimagines everyday ritual as acts of resistance to disrupt constrictive narratives. Dou is pursuing an MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and holds a BA in Art from the University of Washington.

**Inji Kim** is a Turkish/Korean writer, researcher, and educator. She has extensive experience working with and for artists, students, and audiences around the world. Notable institutions include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York, and AORA, a London-based virtual platform. Most recently, she made the decision to leave her PhD program at the University of Washington, Seattle. Inji holds an MA in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University.