

Artist welfare policy and the possibility of identity politics: the case of Korean Artist Welfare Act

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1. Aim

For a long time, the definition of artist has been considered vague. The case focused is Korean Artist Welfare Act (KAWA), which aims to provide social protection to artists through economic support as well as legislation on artist status. This article examines the impact of artist welfare policy in determining 'who is an artist' from the identity politics perspective.

2. Data & Methods

Based on the interview with Korean visual artists in relation to their artist definition, as a way to recognize artist status, this article explores a new evolvement of collective artist identity by the category of KAWA recipients. In order to be recognized by KAWA scheme as an artist, individuals must prove that they have been involved in 'official' artistic activities or earned certain level of income from their artistic activities. Until now more than 20,000 individuals passed the criteria; they receive an artist certificate and are entitled to use 'Artist Pass', which includes discounts for the admission of cultural institutions. They also have advantages in applying for other state grants because of the status they are recognized by KAWA. This implementation process of KAWA from 2012 entails recognition process, excluding others who cannot or do not pass the criteria.

3. Results

The interview reveals that individuals began to talk about "being an artist" in relation to the status KAWA endows, regardless of whether they passed the criteria or not. This is true to even those who disagree with or simply show no interest in the scheme of KAWA. That kind of categorization can be understood in terms of identity politics between the artists as political actors. However, categorizing "KAWA artist", the interviewed artists still use ambiguous and subjective terms such as true artist, full-time artist or talented artist, avoiding mentioning KAWA's actual criteria as the administrative definition endowing the legal status as artist.

4. Conclusion

The introduction of administrative definition of KAWA made it possible to construct a discourse on artists' identity and their social status. Under the artist welfare scheme, artists as political actors are seen to be struggling towards the social resource, by taking not only a morally dominant position but also a means to decision making process concerning the distribution of social resources under the name of artists. To conclude, the welfare politics of KAWA is working beyond economic aspect; the members of Korean art world began to participate actively in a public sphere to answer "who is an artist"

References

Korean Artist Welfare Act (2011)

IFACCA (International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies) (2002) Defining artists for tax and benefit purposes. IFACCA. Available at: http://media.ifacca.org/files/01dart_tax.pdf