

A Field Report on the Art Movement: The Case of Mulla Arts Village, Seoul

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Abstract

This study takes a deep look at the art movement as cultural practices based on the local community by focusing on the case of the Mullae Arts Village in Seoul, Korea. The study adopts ethnography to explore the characteristics of an art movement grounded in a specific location by pointing out the way art movements occur in the urban space through the example of the Mullae Arts Village. The findings are drawn from participant observation and in-depth interviews of natives, as well as literature reviews. The research examined: (1) the art movement of the Mullae Arts Village originates directly from our daily lives, (2) the “inside members” of the village are skeptical about the integration of artistic practices with cultural businesses, as the “inside” and “outside” members understand the cultural policies of the Seoul City Officials differently, (3) looking at how differently the people of the village consider “art” and “community art” leads us to discuss the very essence of artists’ role and to seek an appropriate direction for art movements. Last of all, members explain that Mullae, where the art movement is held, volunteers as an alternative place for art activities. The opinions of the village members are also sought to identify any possibility for the area to fully perform its role as an alternative art movement site in the future. Each phase of the field research is presented in detail, leading to a consideration of ethnography as the field study. Furthermore, this paper deals with the social dimension of art movements, and offers a discussion on the junction of communication, community and culture.

Keywords: art movement, ethnography, Mullae Arts Village, urban space, cultural practices

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1. Introduction

People are constantly active in their lives, but they do not recognize that their practice can become a culture. People categorize such practices as actions within daily life that are not special and forget that they are acting upon a cultural practice. Various practices within the daily life create the daily lives of people, which in turn create culture for the people. Cultural practice is meaningful because our lives are reflected; therefore, the perspective of this research focuses on the need for a discussion on cultural practices.

There are various forms of cultural practices. This research attempts to examine in focus the art movement as cultural practices. The reason for bringing attention to the art movement is because recently, social problems about the spaces we live in have been raised to attention, and the role of the art movement has been growing regarding such problems. The art movement is a representative cultural practice in which various connotative meanings are conveyed through the sublimation of practices against social problems in art. Currently, the art movements are taking place in various places around Seoul. This particular research focuses on the art movement of Mullae Art Village in Seoul.

Furthermore, this research recognizes the existence of multiple communities within a single area. The research presumes that there is a need to discuss the site of community, based on the increasing attention to the need of community research within the fields of communication and media research. In order to fulfill the need for field research of a community, the research conducted a field research by entering Mullae Art Village. This is important because field research provides an insight into the connotation of social and cultural undertones in the practices of communities that are active around a certain area. Because the site is where members of a certain community such as a group of artists and groups created by local members are mixed together, this method of field research provides a better understanding of these members. Ultimately, this research studies the possibility of whether art movement as cultural practices can lead to a social movement; thus, it will lead to the research on the relationship between communication and community or on synaptic relation of culture and space.

2. Research Method

This research employed a qualitative research method in order to study the social role of the art movement in Mullae Art Village. The research subject region is Mullae Art Village where artists are concentrated and located in Mullae-dong in western Seoul of South Korea. The researcher lived on the site for four months from August to November 2015 and conducted a participant observation field research. Furthermore, for aspects that could not be captured through participant observation, in-depth interviews were jointly conducted in the process of collecting data. In-depth interviews were conducted through snowball sampling, with local activists who are active based on Mullae Art Village as well as artists with studios in Mullae Art Village as the sampling population.

3. Art Movement of Mullae Art Village

1) Aspects of the Mullae Art Village Art Movement

Mullae Art Village is constantly and ceaselessly communicating with reality through the power embedded in art and culture. In the series of cultural practices occurring in Mullae Art Village, the motions of an art movement that is in touch with the daily life are captured. In particular, the cultural practices of Mullae Art Village as observed by the research exposed an aspect of a casual art movement from the perspective of behaviorism and collectivism in art movements. The art movement was being realized through the arrangement of a “field” with a characteristic of borderline crossing, conjoining with the daily life; within this art movement, there was the awareness of the problem of urban ecology.

When one region acts as the field that plays multiple roles, it gives vitality to the various communities and their members which exist in that region. Through observation, the researcher was able to see that the members of Mullae Art Village put in much effort to establish relationships by mutually communicating with people who live inside the region as well as people who visit Mullae-dong through the field that has been created. Some examples of characteristic to cross boarder in Mullae Art Village include: local festivals that became a neighbor-wide event; gatherings of numerous communities such as the neighborhood alpine club; culture and art markets such as flea markets; festivals and meetings; special lectures and seminars. Thus, the forms of the field were diverse in sizes and types.

To cross the border between art and life extends beyond the simple use of the space; it encompasses the accomplishments of daily practices that are close to livelihood. The social positions of the members that compose the field were different, and they respected each others' individuality and also came together for activities over various categories. This resulted from the communication between people of various fields without drawing invisible borders by the people participating or forming the field. In particular, it seemed like the individual artists of the so-called first generation who came into Mullae Art Village formed Mullae-dong as a site as their creation and thereby maintaining and continuing the characteristic of border crossing.

The art movement of a creative village can be seen through the contents that are being produced in the field, but it is also very mundane. Being mundane is not trivial or petty. For us, the ordinary and the mundane is the site of life and life itself. Therefore, the ordinary and the mundane cannot ever be over-emphasized in art. The ordinary is a material in the domain of art and helps to unravel the stories close to daily lives as a piece of art work.

Recently, many seminars and lectures are being held in Mullae-dong with the theme of awareness of urban ecological problems. Many people were the audience. This indicates that many people are attentive and shows interest in the discussions of the art movement and ecological perspectives of Mullae Art Village. However, there has yet to be expert or academic discussions on urban ecology. This is not because there are not enough contents to discuss about within the boundaries of urban ecology, but it is because all the stories of all of our daily lives are within urban ecology. The fact that people are starting to recognize and notice the urban ecology of Mullae-dong and

the ecology of an art village can be perceived as the starting point for the discussion of urban ecology. In other words, their start is significant because they examine urban ecology, art, and ordinary life without boundaries from the perspective of the humanities.

2) The gap between autonomous art movement and the cultural art project/policies of Seoul

The generations who experienced the decline of neighborhood due to gentrification in many areas of Seoul conduct village movements to return to their original form before gentrification. These village movements are also not government-initiated standardizations. The reason why Mullae Art Village caught the attention of the media was because it was not a case in which art was introduced and instrumentalized in the process of conducting a local-related project. The people of Mullae Art Village voluntarily brought in art which was their own essence in order to coexist or for well-being of the neighborhood.

The various types of projects that go through this region are not that different. All parts of Mullae-dong, including the area of Art Village, were planned to be redeveloped. However, the redevelopment plan has been put to a halt currently. If we do not overlook the industrial aspects that Mullae-dong was for a long time, we notice the purpose and when the buildings were built.. Mullae-dong, in particular the Art Village, has a mix of small-scale manufacturing factories. Walking on the streets, most of the buildings are manufacturing factories. Thus, the number of small-scale manufacturing factories still makes up a large portion of Mullae-dong. For the most part, the second and third floors of such factory buildings are rented out to artists who use them as their workspaces or studios.

Because there is a plan for redevelopment that is currently on hold, the buildings cannot be renovated or demolished and rebuilt. Perhaps due to this fact, many artists who come to Mullae Art Village come in at a low rental rate, but they only get the physical space and have to provide for themselves basic facility equipments. Ironically, the greatest push for the redevelopment plan of Mullae-dong came from the Art Village. The department related to culture at the *gu* office is promoting Mullae-dong as a tourist site by using the image of it as an art village. The voice regarding this matter within the community has been increasing.

It can be seen that a majority of the members in Mullae-dong do not prefer that the original image of the Art Village and Mullae-dong to become a fixation that represents the entire region. Furthermore, many participants in the interview voiced similar opinions; from this, it can be deduced that by and large people in the community are skeptical about the image fixation of Mullae Art Village.

No matter which measure is taken, it is essential to institute a policy or project that takes the local residents into consideration; however, it can clearly be seen that the government that plans to invest a large capital to institute policies and project are not concerned with the local residents. In particular, it can be seen that the local residents harbor antipathy towards the approach of the government-led measures to promote the area to the public through the fixation of an image that the locals do not prefer. It is clear that the people who want to create an image of this area through such

measures are not from the area and live in other regions. Therefore, it is regrettable that their ultimate purpose can only be to brand the region as a product through revitalization using large capitals.

It only seems fair that the members of the community are antagonistic about the government's administrative attitude by looking at their cultural practices that they are already creating voluntarily from the economic perspective. In other words, the attitude of the administrative personnel towards the art movement appears to be an attempt to retroactively use the creations of many artists and activists of Mullae Art Village. Resistance to this push from the government expands beyond protecting the base of life that one lives in and is a problem that encompasses the history about the art movement and the meaning and role of that region. Thus, it is not simply a fight within the economic perspective. We need to give it time and continue to watch its developments, but since this problem is not just unique to Mullae-dong but is occurring in many regions in Korea, there is a need to reconsider various policies and projects regarding art and culture in Korea from multiple dimensions.

3) The gap between an art movement and community art

An art movement does not coerce the participation of art works. Everything is natural and ordinary. On the other hand, community art is based on the participation of consumers and therefore the art work requires the participation of the audience. However, community art is not completed by the participation of unspecified consumers of all range in the production of an art work. Community art is based on a specific area. If that is not the case, artists who are active in a specific area produce art works that have been created based on that area. However, the art work is not necessarily exhibited in that area. An art work is categorized as community art if it includes the factor of participation by a certain region or the residents of the region in the process of the enactment or completion of that art work.

There is an intersection in the relationship between community art and an art movement, but the two are distinctive concepts in quality. Art movement encompasses the characteristics of community art, but an art movement is different in the practical aspect. Particularly, the case of an art movement that is achieved through union with the ordinary life is fundamentally different from community art which speaks only through the art work. If an art movement is considered as a concept, community art can be interpreted as one of the means to conduct an art movement. From this context, the researcher was able to recognize in art movements that all phenomena and activities that occur in our society can become symptoms of an art movement; furthermore, they can be seen as a symptom of social movements. This was observed particularly in the series of cultural practices occurring in Mullae Art Village that display a variety of forms of art movement.

In recent years, we have seen cases in which art has been used to revitalize a region or community. Not all of such cases have the form of an art movement. When art is being used for the community, the biggest problem is that it is too separated from the daily lives of the region. If art is fundamentally incorporated in a region, the primary benefactors of art must be the local residents; however, more often than not, local residents are pushed down in priority due to outsiders. Art movements precisely occur in antithesis to this aspect. Art movements through which such struggle occurs within

the daily life does not signify art that is pleasing to the audience but signify the artistic practices that exist within the daily lives of people.

4) Mullae Art Village as an alternative space for art movement

There needs to be a consideration whether most things that seek an “alternative” have become an alternative for the sake of alternative. The image that is created by the word “alternative” often seems insubstantial. From the perspective that it is an alternative, the prejudice that the cost must be reduced to name as an alternative that it is acceptable even if it is not refined because it is only an alternative makes one feel uncomfortable. In this context, there is an intersection between “alternative” and Mullae-dong. Therefore, the people of Mullae Art Village are ceaselessly questioning what alternative truly means and the directionality of Mullae-dong, and thereby conducting cultural practices in ordinary ways to constantly find new alternatives.

Mullae Art Village is a region that can be an alternative space as a whole in juxtaposition to the urban centers to which it is conjoined. This is not only the opinion of the researcher, but an opinion that has been expressed in agreement by many interviewees of the research. The researcher was able to observe a sense of pride regarding this aspect. The people of Mullae Art Village knew that Mullae is not refined because it is outside of the mainstream but that such aspects of Mullae make the neighborhood an attractive place that is charming.

For a space to exist, not only is a physical place needed, but people who will continuously occupy that place are needed. The person or people who creates and operates the space displays to others for a certain purpose, so it cannot simply be maintained by the effort of one. The role of the people participating in the space and the cognition of the space are essential to deciding what the space is. If art is put at the fore, people who participate in art will gather; as such, fundamentally for the existence of the region, the support of local residents is a key factor in maintaining alternative spaces that attempt to put meaning to the existence of a place.

This is the outcome of the drive of the space. The owner of the space is not the person that created it, nor is it the person who operates it; the owners of the space are the people who are participating in it. From the perspective that the awareness for the need of such a space needs to be spread through participating in the space for artistic practices and that people must understand that the success or failure of the space is in their hands—the hands of the people that participate in it, it can be concluded that the various spaces in Mullae Art Village need such efforts over time.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This research is a case study conducted as a field research in which the researcher went into the field to examine the conditions of an art movement as cultural practices based on urban space and local community. Based on the significant results of the research, Mullae Art Village appeared to be in the form of cultural practices where the art movement as cultural practices based on a specific region merged with the daily life. Furthermore, it was discovered that the series of struggles occurring within the conditions came from the fundamental questioning of the desire for an improved space and the formation of the space. Although this research does not encompass the

entire region of Mullae-dong and does not encompass all spaces in which the art movement occurs, it has important implications as a case study that can exhibit the perspectives that various members of Mullae Art Village have.

One limit of this research is that it could not secure diversity in the participants of in-depth interviews during the process of selecting participants. When the premise that the informant is a member of a diverse community is assured, a more rich range of testimonies can be acquired. If follow-up studies are to be conducted in the future, in-depth interview materials collected through the testimonies of various members will allow for a deeper depiction, and in addition, the reliability of the collected data will also be increased.

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