What Makes Something a Fountain?

At first, my project began by observing the fountain in Granary Square. I recorded water marks, sounds and the interaction between people and fountains. However, I find that although these observations can describe the characteristics of the fountain, they cannot answer a more basic question: what is a fountain? Therefore, I will shift my research focus from observing fountains to defining fountains. This article will reflect on my project through Georges Perec's observation method and Agnès Varda's rethinking of the identity and value of objects.

Georges Perec (1997) focuses on spaces and details that are easily overlooked because they are too familiar. His writing helped me rethink my observation method. At first, I mainly recorded the observed phenomena and tried to understand the fountain. However, I gradually realized that this method is based on an assumption that I have never questioned: I already know what a fountain is.

I disassemble the fountain into six characteristics: Material, Action, Space, Interaction, Naming and Language. Then, I applied each feature to other daily objects separately. Through this method, my research has shifted from recording surface phenomena to questioning the conditions that constitute the definition of fountain.

Agnès Varda's documentary The Gleaners and I (2000) focuses on objects that are ignored or considered to have lost their value. By collecting and representing these objects, she shows how the value of objects is affected by the way they look at them and their context. This makes me start to think: can the identity of an object also be redefined?

In my project, I tried to put a glass of water, public trash cans, Duchamp's Fountain, and even the word "fountain" itself into the category of "fountain". For example, if water is a necessary feature of a fountain, can a glass of water also be regarded as a fountain? These seemingly absurd classifications are not to prove that these objects are really fountains, but to reveal the limitations of using a single criterion of judgment.

Varda is more concerned about the value of those neglected objects, while I am more concerned about how classification rules affect our understanding of objects. What we have in common is that we all question the existing classification by changing the selection and presentation of objects. Through these two reference materials, I realized that my project is not only to study fountains, but also to study how we understand objects through observation, language and classification.

When I regard each of the six characteristics as a complete definition, the classification results become more and more absurd. This exposes the limitations of my research method: these rules are based on my personal subjective choice, while ignoring the more complex relationship between objects. But the rules themselves were also affecting the formation of the definition. A single feature cannot determine the identity of an object. On the contrary,

the identity of objects is formed in the relationship between materials, actions, modes of use, language and context.

References

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The Gleaners and I (2000) Directed by A. Varda [Film]. France: Ciné-Tamaris.