

Critical reflection

Category: Uncategorized

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1. Introduction: From Looking to Perceiving

At the beginning of this semester, my understanding of the countermeasure exhibition is mainly at the level of visual arrangement: selecting works, placing them in space, and creating meaning through sorting. This assumption began to shift during a visit to the SSA 127th Annual Exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy, where I noticed that the institutional scale of the space did not automatically produce a stronger experience for the viewer.

As Terry Smith argues, Contemporary curatorial practice is no longer limited to the institutional framework of museums, and no longer strictly distinguishes between curatorial work with collection and protection as the core and simple exhibition production. On the contrary, the connotation of curation has been extended to a variety of practical forms, including project planning in different alternative spaces and associated with experimental art space.¹

This observation reminds me of a more fundamental question: what kind of experience can the

exhibition bring to visitors?

This reflective essay examines two curatorial projects developed this semester. The first is *Our Shell*, a group exhibition presented at Summerhall, Edinburgh, produced collaboratively by the Ji Ju Collective. The second is *Awareness Through Materiality*, an individual curatorial proposal for a group show at Custom Lane, Edinburgh, centring on works by Jiang Miao, Suyon Huh, and Guo Puyi.

These two projects together make me realize that curation is not a visual perception, but a physical practice: it focuses on how space, time and materials shape the attention and senses of visitors.

2.The Collective Shell: Curating as Spatial Habitation

The Ji Ju Collective takes its name from the Chinese concept of Ji Ju (寄居), which describes the condition of living away from one's original home, in a space that belongs to someone else. This condition shaped every decision in *Our Shell*, from the choice of title to the spatial arrangement of works inside the Summerhall gallery room.

The exhibition brings together the paintings, textiles and mixed media works of the collective members, and physically connects them through the

red line that runs through the entire exhibition hall. The red line is a low-cost material device, but its function is spatial and relational: it makes the distance between the works visible and crossable.

Gaston Bachelard's writing on the poetics of intimate space offers a useful framework for reflecting on what the collective attempted.

Bachelard argues □“With nests and, above all, shells, we shall find a whole series of images that I am going to try to characterize as primal images; images that bring out the primitiveness in us. I shall then show that a human being likes to “withdraw into his corner,” and that it gives him physical pleasure to do so.”²

The shell, for Bachelard, is not a fixed residence, but movable. It moves with the creatures that carry it. *Our Shell* drew on this logic directly. Ji Ju Collective temporarily built a gallery to fill the space with items from the members' respective cultural backgrounds, and connect these items through red lines to create a collective atmosphere. However, the curation process is not smooth sailing, and team members need to weigh between their personal artistic style and the coherence of the common theme to decide which works to be exhibited.

Jean-Paul Martinon describes this tension as intrinsic to all curatorial work: exhibitions

always give the impression of cohesion when in fact what is displayed is the result of compromises, concessions, and trade-offs between contributing parties.³

The candy installation Sweetness Within the Shell, which I contributed to the exhibition, added another layer of reflection. Visitors can use the shell-shaped candies on the wall at will. As they use candy, the shape of the shell will gradually change and eventually disappear.

Sandra Umatham notes “Instead, these installations put into perspective the traditional subject-object relation. They divert attention away from themselves and share it with, or distribute it to, the inter-subjective encounters taking place at their edges.”⁴

This candy work fits this logic, but also complicates it. The access behavior introduces the concept of absence, and the slow disappearance of the placed object shows the time in a way that static objects cannot reach. This shows that the exhibition is not only a space to stay, but also a place that changes in the process of use.

3. Curating Attention: Material Friction and the Slowing of Time

The curatorial concept for Awareness Through

Materiality grew from a concern with how attention operates under conditions of urban acceleration.

Hartmut Rosa points out that the widespread perception of time scarcity and the accelerated pace of social life in modern society cannot be fully explained by objective or quantifiable definitions alone, but should be understood as a complex socio-psychological phenomenon influenced by cultural factors.⁵ Against this background, the exhibition proposes a different model of perceptual art: in this mode, the material is slow and durable, and requires continuous viewing. The three artists selected for Awareness Through Materiality each work with materials that resist quick reading.

Jiang Miao repeatedly smeared acrylic paint on aluminum plates and wooden boards and painted them. In order to understand the content of the work, the viewer must approach the work, adjust the angle, and take time to observe it carefully. This does not invite the audience to view images in the traditional way, but requires the audience to pay attention to the physical surface of the object.

Tim Ingold describes □“Whenever we read that in the making of artefacts, practitioners impose forms internal to the mind upon a material world ‘out there’, hylomorphism is at work.”⁶ The surface of the artworks portrayed by Jiang Miao retains the evidence of this process, while the curation

arranges the artworks in a way that allows the audience to enter the slow perception.

Suyon Huh works with paper pulp, hanji, rope, and string to build installations that are visually delicate but spatially tense. In *Phone Phobia*, the telephone is fixed by pulp and wire rope in a frame composed of wooden pillars, and its configuration makes the tension of the whole structure visible.

Jane Bennett suggests that materiality possesses its own vitality, not as something animated from outside, but as an active force that disrupts the idea of matter as inert and passive.⁷ In this work, the rope is tightened, the pulp is glued, and the wooden frame is fixed. This structure highlights the power rather than the form. The device does not express tension, but embodies the tension, which can make the viewer truly perceive how the matter itself exerts its power.

Juhani Pallasmaa argues :“However, the privileging of sight does not necessarily imply a rejection of the other senses, as the haptic sensibility, materiality and authoritative weight of Greek architecture prove; the eye invites and stimulates muscular and tactile sensations.”⁸

This argument shaped the sequencing decision in Awareness: Jiang’s surfaces come first, demanding closeness and time; Huh’s tension-based works follow; and Guo Puyi’s modular installations close the exhibition. Each part prepares for the next part by adjusting the rhythm of the audience’s

movement in space.

4. Decentring the Viewer: Object Agency and Spatial Reorientation

The third section of *Awareness* was designed around the work of Guo Puyi, whose practice sits at the intersection of sculpture and what Lambros Malafouris describes as MET: an approach in which understanding emerges through direct interaction with materials rather than through detached analysis.⁹

A cage that holds nothing, a rocking horse made from iron that cannot be ridden: these objects perform their expected forms while refusing their expected uses. At the same time, these elements evoke associations with family life, games and restraint, but they cannot be fixed by a single interpretation.

As Bill Brown suggests, things are not simply objects, but emerge through a shift in the relationship between subject and object.¹⁰

The meaning of the work comes from the movement of the viewer around the work. Through changes in scale, balance and distance, the work reveals the interdependence or confrontation between various components.

Alfred Gell argues that the agency attributed to

artworks is inherently social and relational: art objects do not act as autonomous agents, but acquire a form of secondary agency through their entanglement with human actors and specific social contexts.¹¹

Guo's installations work in this way. The arrangement of cages, rocking horses and steel geometry creates a situation in which the viewer must explore the relationship between these objects by himself, rather than accepting the pre-set interpretation. This active identification process itself is a concern.

Miwon Kwon argues that modernist conceptions of neutral, idealised space were displaced by an understanding of art as situated within real, everyday environments, where works are experienced through the viewer's embodied presence in space and time rather than through detached visual perception.¹²

In summary, this reflects the transformation of curatorial mode from watching to spatial participation. The audience is no longer a bystander who is out of the matter, but a participant who is constantly affected by material relationships through physical movement, perception and judgment. Therefore, the exhibition no longer provides the established meaning, but builds an interactive field in which things, space and the audience create experiences together.

5. Embodied Encounters: The Physicality of Curation

Changing from a passive observer to an active participant requires a deeper understanding of phenomenology in the context of the gallery.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty established that the body and the senses reveal a form of collective existence in which embodied subjectivity, while remaining singular and situated, extends beyond itself to generate meanings that structure perception, thought, and experience.¹³ In my project, this means not to regard the gallery as a container of images, but as a place where matter and consciousness meet.

In *Our Shell*, the red line acted as a haptic guide, forcing the body to navigate the space in relation to the distance between objects.

Claire Bishop argues that contemporary participatory art reconfigures artistic production: the artist is no longer understood as a sole maker of discrete objects but as a collaborator who produces situations, the artwork shifts from a bounded and commodifiable object to an open-ended process, and the audience is repositioned from passive viewer to active co-producer.¹⁴

Similarly, in *Awareness Through Materiality*, the sequencing of Jiang Miao's works can be understood

through David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese's theory of embodied simulation, the theory believes that aesthetic perception triggers the viewer's automatic physical reaction, especially the perception of action, stress or potential movement in the work, thus producing simulated resonance at the physical level.¹⁵

6. Curatorial Sites as Social Assemblages

The experience of planning these two exhibitions made me realize that exhibitions are never neutral; they are a collection of human and non-human participants.

Bruno Latour argues that the social should not be understood as a fixed domain, but as a set of shifting associations, in which relations are continuously reconfigured through changing connections and arrangements.¹⁶

In this sense, curatorial practice can be understood as an assembly structure, in which space, materials, curatorial decision-making and the audience jointly produce meaning.

However, looking back at my two projects from this theory also reveals the problems in them.

Graham Harman argues that art does not simply strip away an object's contingent qualities to

reveal its essence; rather, it actively brings the viewer and the aesthetic object into relation, producing a new, composite entity.¹⁷

In Our Shell, the red thread was intended to connect works and symbolise collective inhabitation. However, by trying to plan a sense of intimacy, am I inadvertently ignoring the artist's personal emotions just to pursue a unified narrative?

In addition, using familiar items to evoke a sense of common home may simplify the complex life experience. Sara Ahmed argues "The work of inhabitation involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space."¹⁸

In *Awareness Through Materiality*, the rhythm of viewing is slowed down through the slowness of materials, but this strategy also has limitations.

As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues "The right to look claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously invents new forms."¹⁹ Therefore, the expectation of long-term viewing may exclude audiences who are not familiar with such perceptions.

At the same time, the emphasis on materiality may also weaken the diversity of interpretation.

Rancière cautions that the impulse to draw

spectators out of passivity and into active participation can itself become a form of imposition: the assumption that viewers require a carefully constructed situation in order to know what to do, or how to feel, reproduces the very hierarchy it claims to dismantle.²⁰

Reflecting on *Awareness Through Materiality*, this tension becomes difficult to ignore. By constructing deliberate material progression in space, I assume that a specific sequence is necessary, which can guide the audience to a slower and more focused perception.