

Sensing Spaces: Aesthetic Intelligence and Exhibition Making

Over the last few months I've been thinking a lot about exhibition design — experimental exhibition design, new materials and access. Technology as a medium and as a mediator versus simple and direct encounters with artworks. Exhibition design of course affects the reception and perception of artworks displayed, but is there a moment when the artwork might become secondary to the design? If so, when, how and why would the curator and/or exhibition designer do that, and how would the artist feel about that?

Sitting with those thoughts I've been reflecting on my curatorial practice and the number of times people have said to me that an exhibition I've curated has the mark of me on it. I've always been very careful when making exhibitions to ensure that I do not devise some sort of 'big installation' made up of other people's artworks. So what do they mean when they say my exhibitions (no matter what the theme or subject) are quintessentially me? I assume it means I have an identifiable style in terms of making exhibitions. Is that something I should accept, or should I be looking for ways to challenge my own sensibilities and exhibition design aesthetic? Should I be asking AI to take my exhibitions and make some sort of critical evaluation of repeated forms/formats with the aim of avoiding those things which are quintessentially me?

The artworld, like almost everyone else it seems, is obsessed with artificial intelligence, and I certainly find it a useful co-pilot for many things. But there is another AI that I feel a greater natural affinity to despite it being born from the brand retail industry. Aesthetic Intelligence — the other AI — is a term that was first coined by Pauline Brown, a former head of French luxury goods conglomerate Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton. Her definition of 'aesthetic intelligence' can be summed up as: sensorial awareness, aesthetic calibration and creative integration and while Brown's definitions don't chime directly with how I see my practice in exhibition making the core principles do.

Making exhibitions that offer a sensorial experience, beyond a purely visual one is important to me. Spatial harmony, (visual) rhythm, (visitor) flow and in general the strategic use of aesthetics to enrich environments are all interconnected and critical. Linda Duke (former Director of Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University, USA), has argued that museums should facilitate aesthetic thought and engagement, enabling visitors to process and learn through non-verbal, sensory encounters, ideas that align with broader discussions in museology around the significance of non-verbal learning — seeing, feeling, and engaging aesthetically, not just absorbing textual information. In practical terms, Brown's ideas parallel how museum exhibitions use aesthetic intelligence: combining sensory-rich environments, carefully curated visual narratives, lighting, object placement, and materiality to form emotionally resonant and engaging experiences.

So, I began to look more closely at the aesthetically intelligent aspects of my exhibition-making practice that were/are important to me, stripping it down to the essentials and accounting for where I am and what I seem to be doing now: creating exhibition environments, systems, and experiences that are felt, designing not just the curated content

in the exhibition, but also how that exhibition is entered, how the experience unfolds over the time a visitor spends in the space, how (and when) it holds the visitor's attention, how the space accommodates different bodies, moods, and thresholds, how it avoids friction without becoming bland, and last, but by no means least, how I might incorporate a moment of surprise, curiosity or wonder for the visitor.

Critical to my thinking, and something that always challenges me, is light and lighting as both content and condition. It is quite easy to allow oneself to be seduced by light as spectacle, or to focus on the technology and the pure visual impact, but light can also be used as a structuring condition, something that governs pace, perception, and emotional temperature, light and colour can be used as regulators or separators of experiences. That is aesthetic intelligence at work: understanding that light is not just an object or means of display, but a behaviour-shaping force. Meaning is very important, but I'm not content with meaning alone, I care about how meaning arrives and is received.

In a lot of curatorial practice, exhibition design and aesthetics are often treated as surface-level concerns — sometimes out of necessity. Independent curators, or those working for smaller organisations often act as curator and exhibition designer, the latter usually arising out of the curatorial decisions and the pragmatics of conservation, while curators working in larger, well-funded institutions sometimes have the luxury of working with exhibition designers. Still, the design element is something that comes after the 'real' decisions about which artworks to include have been made. It becomes something applied rather than structural. My approach is usually more integrated. Aesthetic decisions — about light, scale, pacing, rhythm, density, tone — often determine whether a project makes sense to me long before questions of final selection, messaging or interpretation come into play. Usually I'm working on exhibition design at the same time I'm diving deep into the themes or discussing with artists and lenders what works to include. Perhaps this also stems from my background in dance and performance, where the body, or rather the embodied experience — meaning an almost instinctive understanding that arises through the lived body (not through abstract thought or visual interpretation) — is the norm. Most people do not encounter museums, exhibitions, or institutions as abstract ideas. They encounter them bodily. Spatially. Temporally. They feel their way through them just as much as they see their way through them.

Working now in an institution that explores the intersection of art and science, and having worked on a recent project that explored neuroscience as a theme, has made this 'exhibition-experience' aspect especially apparent. Scientific accuracy alone does not guarantee comprehension. Visual drama alone does not guarantee insight. What matters is how visitor perception is scaffolded. So my slight reinterpretation of the term aesthetic intelligence, in relation to exhibition-making specifically, is that the experience I want visitors to have, what I want them to understand and take away from an exhibition, does not arrive all at once and how that message is communicated is in turn shaped by the environment just as much as it is shaped by the artworks and artefacts that are in the space.

I have visited many exhibitions and I have often been left exhausted by the experience. Both an intellectual challenge and often a physical one too. Every designed environment — physical or organisational — makes demands on attention. Some are generous. Others are extractive. Cultural institutions are not exempt from this. When we overload exhibitions with text, sound, or spectacle, we are not necessarily offering more. We may simply be asking too much. In exhibition-making I would argue that restraint is not absence. It is a form of care. Designing experiences that allow people to breathe, pause, and disengage without feeling they have missed something, I would suggest, is an ethical act.

We live in a period saturated with stimulus and urgency. While many institutions — cultural and otherwise — are struggling to survive, others are responding by amplifying themselves. More buildings. More content. More engagement. More visibility. Aesthetic intelligence offers a counter position — how can we support depth rather than acceleration? What endures beyond novelty? These are not fashionable questions, but they are increasingly necessary ones.

For a long time, aesthetic intelligence was something I practised without being able to give it a name. Finding a name for it has been useful. The ‘other AI’ is not a soft skill. Nor is it purely intuitive. I see it as a form of literacy: the ability to read environments, anticipate experience, and design curated content with care. How something is encountered matters as much as what is encountered. Aesthetic intelligence is the practice of taking that seriously, in order to create conditions in which meaning can arrive — and stay.



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