

Some Informal Remarks on a Wicked Problem

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Axioms:

let us assume, for now, –

1. that an art practice is anything done regularly with care and attention
2. that anything done, is done together
3. that an exhibition practice is the systematic sharing of things with an irregular community
4. another name for an irregular community is a public

SHAPE.

For the temporary purpose of this text let's say an exhibition takes its general metaphysical [1] form from the relationship between art practices and exhibition practices. An exhibition can be described by a power diagram of two intersecting circles [2]. The power diagram of two unequal circles gives a useful model for the relationship between art practices and exhibition practices in the current art world [3]. The smaller circle (representing art practice) intersects with the larger circle (representing exhibition practice) such that the overlapping areas create a third, non-circular union called the exhibition. A power diagram partitions this plane to produce two half planes each defining the relative contribution of each circle to the total union. The computational geometry of intersecting unequal circles implies that the smaller circle contributes a greater part of its own area to the union than the larger circle.

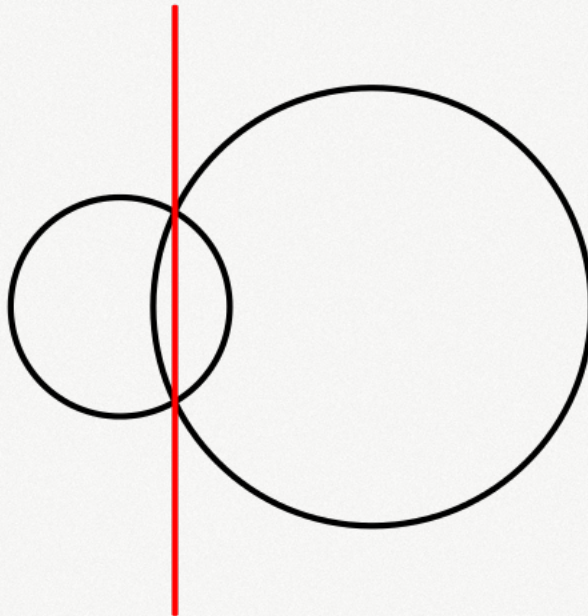


Fig. The radical axis of two intersecting circles

SHOP.

This text is probably more about what it feels like to work through exhibitions than a rigorous analysis of existing modes and avenues of exhibition [4]. The key idea is a sense that exhibitions make, more or less, overt demands on art practices that transform art practices toward fulfilling the (shifting/not-shifting) desires of exhibition practices. Of course art practices make similar demands on exhibition practices, but the distribution of power which structures the relationship between art making and exhibition making has certain tendencies which privilege the desires

of exhibition makers over those of art makers. In power diagram terms, the smaller circle (representing art practice) gives more of itself than the larger circle (representing exhibition practice) in the construction of an exhibition.

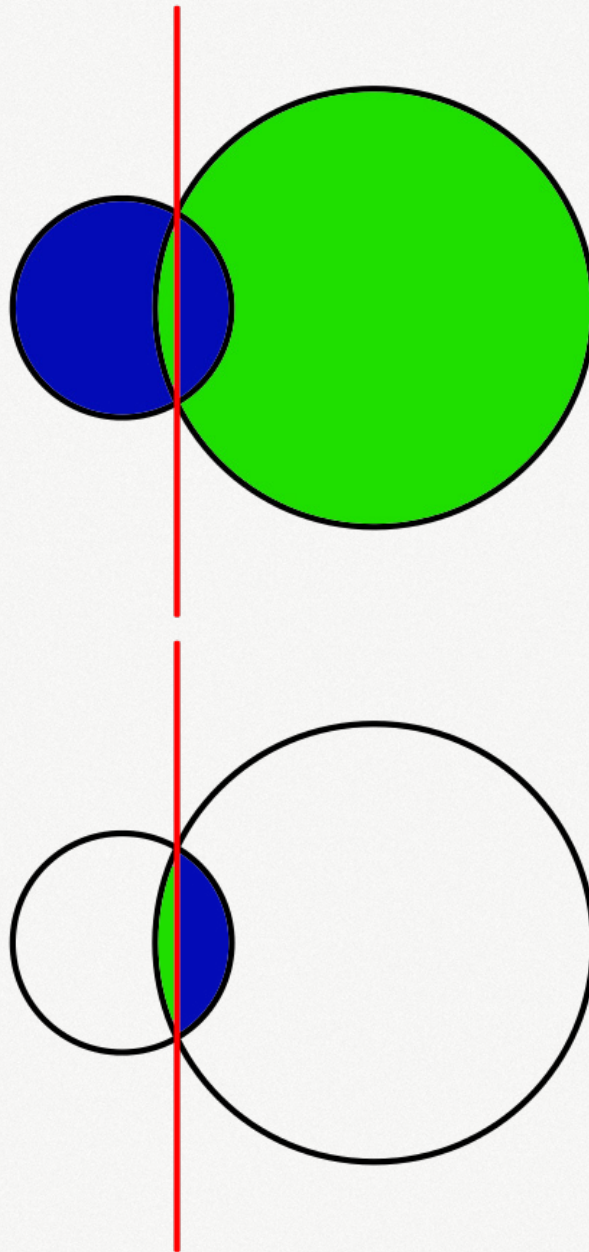


Fig. relative contribution of two intersecting circles

An obvious question arises: why is exhibition practice represented by the larger of two unequal circles?

I've been thinking of an exhibition as a platform. In late capitalist terms, a platform is the collective noun for a compound entity that owns the physical and virtual foundations upon which others operate [5]. Let's call this the captured social infrastructure of bourgeois exhibition practice which is fundamentally about access: to physical space, other people's time, stored energy, to finance, display items, display strategies, canonical memory, apparent and hidden agendas, the promise of a public. The

practice of exhibition making sits between art practice and some latent potential community. In our general neo-colonial reality exhibition practices are a buffer zone between art practices and an irregular community which recognizes exhibitions primarily as a marketplace. A marketplace where ideas, styles, stories, forms and symbols compete for access to limited resources [6].

A manifold expression of this platform dynamic is the art fair [7]. In SA we have the remarkable and banal situation where alongside commercial galleries in the ordered modular booths of the Johannesburg and Cape Town art fairs, you find not-for-profit galleries, private museums, project spaces, and municipal and national museums. In this elaborately engineered environment the specific variants of exhibition practice generated by these diverse institutions are disciplined [8] by the spatial and experiential demands of the platform. Lets just say the art fair gives very little in this instance: some drywalled booths, electricity, and an irregular community of potential buyers [9]. The galleries, projects and museums must provide the bulk of the material that makes the art fair possible: the art - but must do so in a way that conforms to the limitations set by the art fair. They must find within themselves [10] some work that works in that context. In actuality this determines the type of art practices which are suitable, legible and rewarded through the platform. This traditional IRL platform dynamic is the paradigmatic model for the emergency (and emergent) shift to online exhibition recently. More importantly this intra-exhibition dynamic is the macro structure that emerges from the marketplace relationship between an art practice and an exhibition practice.

The basic form of this relation is reactionary and diminishes the relative power of **art practice** in the negotiation with **exhibition practices** toward any given **exhibition**.

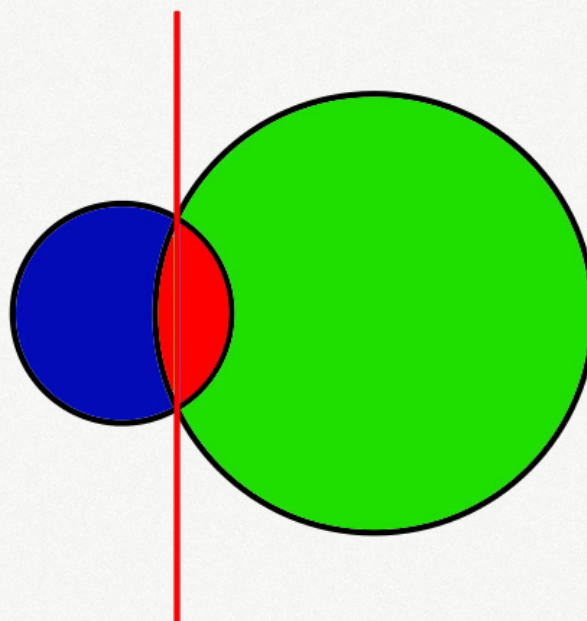


Fig. a non-circular union and two unequal circles

TOUCH.

Artists are also exhibition makers, we also have exhibition practices. Artist-exhibition compound practices also operate through negotiating a complex set of forces, some of which are architectural (the wall makes its demands), others technological (the screen, the projector, the .mp4, the .jpeg all make their demands), others historical (our collective expectations and ambitions make their demands) others financial (who paid, or will pay, makes their subtle or crude demands) and so on. The aggregate of these forces present a kind of general polity of exhibition making [11], one in which artists are simultaneously constituent members as well as adversarial dissidents (a part of and apart from).

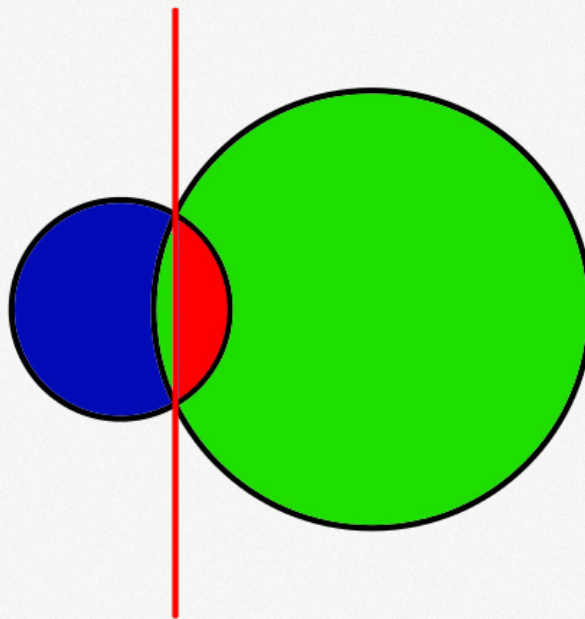


Fig. absolute contribution of a halfplane

A dissident might understand exhibitions more modestly as simply a way to share things. A cunning plan to improvise an encounter between some art work and some people you probably don't know personally. The chance assembly which an exhibition convenes is also a protocol for transfiguration [12]. An exhibition itself may or may not be transformative, but, as an arrangement of people and stuff that provokes contact, it creates conditions for transformation.

A systematic provocation of contact is a political act in the style of Octavia E. Butler [13]- a transfiguration of parts. Unsurprisingly, the transformative disposition of exhibitions simultaneously opens them to dissident exhibition practices as well as establishes the zone from which all the reactionary trouble emerges.

We're thinking about exhibitions as provisional and proximal communities made up of *artwork*, *artists*, and *exhibition-public*, which, through the choreography of their contact temporarily reorganises [14] the meaning of all three. Let's break it down like this, in an exhibition:

a) the *exhibition-public* [15] assumes some agency for the meaning of the *artwork*. The *exhibition-public* contributes to making meaning out of the *artwork*, in ways that might be in tune, or at odds, with the artist's intentions or desires.

b) the *artwork* assumes some agency for the nature of the *exhibition-public*. The encounter with the *artwork* gives the *exhibition-public* an additional purpose: making meaning together (with each other and the *artwork*)

c) the *artist* is probably dissolved into a troubling probability field between the status of being an *artwork* themselves - and therefore subject to the same meaning-making power of the *exhibition-public* - and being themselves a part of this meaning-making *exhibition-public*, neither of which are remotely desirable [16].

The possibility of being rendered into an object or being assimilated into the objectifying machine is aggressively intensified for the black, indigenous and queer artist.

TACTIC/US.[17]

Axioms:

let us assume, one last time, –

1. that an art practice is anything done regularly with care and attention
2. that anything done, is done together
3. that an exhibition practice is the systematic sharing of things with an irregular community
4. another name for an irregular community is a public

Too often it feels like exhibitions are an extension of the colonising logic of property; that to participate in exhibition culture is to accept practices that assign value in harmful ways. That the competitive process of valuation which determines access to exhibition possibilities is also a process that devalues our practices and ourselves. This is not untrue. How sad that a system for sharing is governed by the logic of the marketplace.

When I was asked to write this text I wanted to write about how rethinking what counts [18] as an exhibition can open other possibilities of art practice. That if the metaphysics of an exhibition are described by the unequal relation between art practice and exhibition practice, then art practices can transfigure those metaphysics by diving deeper into exhibition practices, by making contact with the administrative potential of art practices [19]. That we might make some political and spiritual space by transforming the technical space of exhibition making. I wanted to write about how I think of my own practice as a bookkeeping practice [20] and how paying attention might unmake the racial economy of colonial value. I wanted to write about an exhibition practice of small gardens and pot plants [21]. Now all I can remember is that dissent is also an acknowledgement of halfness: there is a thing with which we are not one.

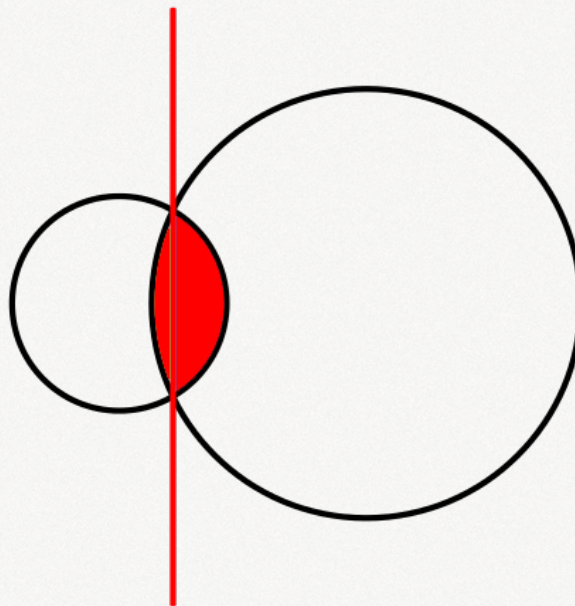


Fig. boolean intersection

[1] Here *metaphysical form* refers to the structuring relationship of an exhibition: the shape and disposition of its political and spiritual flows

[2] The power diagram of two circles is the partition of the intersecting plane into two convex halfplanes formed by a line (radical axis)

[3] Or at least what it feels like for me

[4] Although these two things are not necessarily separate.

[5] For more on this see: Platform Capitalism by Nick Srnicek

[6] Sometimes attention, sometimes exposure, always equated to money

[7] Which is a collection of points forming a certain kind of set – ie. the superplatform

[8] restrained by the disposition of that environment

[9] we can call them a public audience

[10] Meaning in their program, collection and/or network

[11] What I call a general polity of exhibition making refers mostly to the formal cultural industry – European cultural institutes, commercial galleries, academic programs and state and privately funded museums. It is the art world which has developed in the wake of colonial acculturation and is obsessed with reproducing white, western, patriarchal, capitalist notions of culture.

[12] a particular kind of changing

[13] Earthseed:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

[14] transfigures

[15] Which is an irregular community

[16] To me

[17] OR HOW TO SURVIVE UNDER SIEGE

[18] Lol, counting was going to play a big part in this text

[19] And that some of my favourite artists do this, but they don't like it when I say that

[20] For better and for worse

[21] that even these are land, and we still have access to so little