

ON INFORMAL

Text by Marialaura Ghidini and Gil Leung

Informal attire, also called international business attire or Western business attire is a dress code, typified by a suit and necktie, for men. On the scale of formality, informal attire is more formal than casual but less formal than semi-formal. It is more presentational than semi-casual, but offers more room for personal expression than semi-formal dress. Informal should not be confused with casual, not even smart casual – in loose common usage, many people refer to informal dress as semi-formal or formal and formal dress (in the technical sense – that is, white tie, black tie, and similar) as very formal; this usage is not accepted by authorities on dress codes.

From *Informal Attire*, in *Wikipedia*¹

The materiality of the artwork has been at the centre of critical discourse at least since it was understood as contemporary art – from the dematerialised work, to immaterial labour to the materiality of an image. Yet to understand an artwork only as matter, whether concrete or jpeg, might be to constitute what matters about it as only formal. A work is rarely experienced only formally, its value, why it matters, it is in the relation between it and you. More so, this relation is not only in the encounter with the form but with all the disseminated representations of this form. This is why distribution is not just about the transportation of a form – it is about the set of social relations around a form. It is about the discourse around an object and about the thing-in-itself, the object. But how can we begin to talk about what we cannot see, what we cannot measure, what does not fall into form?

Perhaps we cannot talk about what we cannot see but we can talk about a movement, a change, when one thing stops being what it is and becomes another thing. The limit, the frame. And here we begin to see something else, the movement between forms. The distribution of a form immediately problematises the valuing of an artwork on purely its formal, physical qualities because of this movement. The question becomes where the work is, where the value of the work lies rather than what the work is. At the same times, this does not mean it is just the idea of the work that is important because it needs to be made, to be expressed. Even a so called purely conceptual work is perhaps at the least a text, an instruction, a domain. A content needs a form and a form needs content. Distribution, the movement of a work from one form to another could be a useful way of looking at what we cannot see, what we nebulously might call content or perhaps even value, what is not form and not only content, perhaps what we could call for the sake of argument, the informal.

Informality occupies a peculiar place as an idea, it is defined by an absence, a removal, a slackening but not to the point of complete difference. In the realm of fashion, the word informal attire indicates “a dress code, typified by a suit and necktie, for men”, defined as “more formal than casual but less formal than semi-formal.” In this sense, Informality is an absence or surplus of formalised characteristics; an expression without formal language or in an excess of formal attributes to the point of near illegibility. To inform implies the movement of information, circulation. It means to impart or disclose information, to give form or character to something, to imbue with a quality or an essence. According to Flusser, the act of informing takes place when empirical tools “tear an object from the natural world to the human one”, and in this

¹ See definition of *Informal Attire* in *Wikipedia*,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Informal_attire#cite_note-0>

process from the natural to the human dimension such an object acquires "an unnatural improbable form; it becomes cultural"². For instance, shoes - as traditionally produced with "empirical tools" - are "strongly informed" objects: they have a form that derives from the original material used, such as the animal skin, the devices employed to inform them, such as needles, and - one would probably add - by human skills. So, the act of informing implies a sort of qualitative enhancement of the original thing, be it just a material or a thing from the natural realm. But it also involves a process for which that initial material change, and this change not only concerns its form but also its intrinsic value. If informality then is an indeterminate characteristic, an absence, quality might then be the defining attribute by which informality is measured - a low quality reproduction versus a high quality original. This is perhaps because quality is a formal attribute in some respect, so the more informal something is, the more illegible it becomes. While for Flusser the act of informing is looked at in relation to a process of improvement, such as product utility - shoes -, there also exist its reversal, that is a process of degradation which sees a movement from the ideal to the inferior. And both processes seem to highlight the metamorphic nature of informality.

The sliding scale from ideal to inferior probably contains an informal portion; something that just about signals the ideal form without having deteriorated to an inferior byproduct. Within this qualitative hierarchy from high to low the object might slide from being an original, as an assumed ideal form, to being a version of it; undergoing a change in its form affecting the dimension, the pattern, the rhythm or more than one of these occurrences at the same time. This movement is complicated by contemporary digital circulation - be it within networked web systems, to and from the realm of the online, or outside it. The speed of movements questions the very hierarchy assumed. If the act of informing as such, that is imparting and disclosing information, already implies the circulation of attributes, characteristics and data that give life to an object, with digital distribution an object might very often become a 'derivative' because in the digital realm it travels to/from/through a variety of channels. Digitally-induced circulation gives prominence to the operation of versioning³ in that the latter is a consequence of its characteristics of flexibility, connectedness and adaptability. The digital realm relies on releasing an object across multiple platforms and sites which are easily accessible to the many, encouraging "contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur"⁴. It is a processes of transformation in which a high quality original, for instance, might circulate as a low quality reproduction; and in this, it breaks the relationship between informing and enhancing the formalisation of something, so that the notion of quality requires a renewed contextualisation.

Within this framework of widespread, multi-format and almost effortless circulation, unsurprisingly quality and access are poles apart; very often the more accessible something is the worse quality it is likely to be. It is

² Flusser, V., 2005. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, p.23. Vilém Flusser distinguishes between tools in the usual sense, "empirical" - which operate as an extension of the human body -, and tools after the Industrial Revolution, "technical"; i.e. "tools that function as functions", the former, and "human being as functions of the machine", the latter. According to the philosopher, both tools inform the object but if the intention of empirical tools is to change the world, that of the technical tools -the machine, the apparatus - is to "change the meaning of the world". This last definition be a point that intertwines with a part later on in this text about informal production and labour.

³ See for example *Vvversions* by artist Oliver Laric. Available at: <<http://oliverlaric.com/vvversions.htm>>

⁴ See Seth Price, *Dispersion*, 2001-2002; Available at: <www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf>

the most popular movies that are copied, compressed and uploaded in barely watchable forms. These bad versions are widely circulated and they are valuable not because of their high quality but because of their availability, their easy access. They are often tolerated by both producers and consumers because they allow a wider distribution of the product under the rubric 'no publicity is bad publicity'. The visibility of a product demarcates the demand, it measures value in foot fall. It is not about producing something, it is about that thing being consumed. At the same time, quality is the very thing that separates something from nothing, the high resolution, the high gloss finish, the particularity of the display, which are all integral to the thing. So there is a push and pull between quality and access as the arbiters of value. Hito Steyerl explored the relation between quality, access and circulation in her essay *In Defence of the Poor Image* in which, after introducing the concept of the poor image" she discusses it as "the copy in motion [...], the ghost of an image, [...], the itinerant image [...] copied and pasted into other [and digital-related, one might want to add] channels of distribution"⁵. Steyerl's essays aims to define the quality-loss inherent to the travelling digital object, which mutates during the course of its movement between networks, software and hardware, and 'in the hands' of its consumers and argues that this poor image, the bad version of something else, "is about its own real conditions of existence", thus about its own circulation. And this might suggest another type of informality of the object; an informality that might be located in the movement rather than within a comparison; in the multiform modes of aggregation of the quintet form, content, context, distribution and consumer. In this travelling-of-the-objects new cultural material is in/formed, thus produced; coming into being as result of the tools employed for such circulation, the channels, software, and hardware that have been entered, 'inhabited' and left. This material is then informed by digital tools, not only in terms of its form but its inherent state of being (or becoming)⁶. In fact, these low-quality objects are intrinsic to new processes of production, which are not located in the work of an individual anymore, but in the work of the social body. And this system of production has reached a point in which 'making' runs in parallel to 'communicating'⁷; the more a thing is communicated, exchanged, the more is distributed, the more it changes generating a series of 'derivative products', each of which somehow appears to holds a value on its own.

The informal sector of employment or informal employment, is the section employment that is not visible, not formalised, it is not illegal activity, it is just not formal employment. The term *The Informal Sector*⁸ was introduced by anthropologist Keith Hart in his study of developing countries in 1973, but it is also came to be used to describe de-industrialized labour forms like the black market, the hidden or underground economy. The definition of informal employment from the International Labour Conference, Geneva, 2002 defines it as follows "[it] refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are - in law or in practice - not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements. Their activities are not included in the law, which means that they are operating outside the formal

⁵ Steyerl, H., 2009. *In Defence of the Poor Image*. *e-flux journal*, [online] 10 November. Available at: <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>>

⁶ See Steyerl, 2009. *Ibid*.

⁷ For an exploration of production in relation to forms of communication see Maurizio Lazzaratto's *Immaterial Labour*, available at: <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmaterialallabour3.htm>> (Lazzaratto, M., 1997. *Lavoro Immateriale*. Verona: Ombre corte.). Lazzaratto has extensively written about immaterial labour in relation to the transformation of the Post-Fordist era along with Antonio Negri. See also Hardt, M. and Negri, A., 2000. *Empire*. London: Harvard University Press.

⁸ Hart, K., 1973. *Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana*. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11(1), pp. 61-89.

reach of the law; or they are not covered in practice, which means that - although they are operating within the formal reach of the law, the law is not applied or not enforced; or the law discourages compliance because it is inappropriate, burdensome, or imposes excessive costs."⁹ The use of the term informal employment extends beyond the notion of a sector to that of a mode of employment; self-employment, secondary jobs, housework, home care, contract-less labour, and on and on. The range for the term is wide and continuously shifting, dependent, it seems, on the argument for or against formalisations. Informal employment then is a negative definition as it can only be measured in relation to a formal unit, what can be defined seen and measured. In fact, it is the most highly abstracted modes of labour that are visible, such as exchange rates, shares, indexes, which are the most common, ubiquitous forms that remain invisible. In this sense, artworks, not to mention artists' work, could be seen to operate in the informal sector if not within informal employment. Most artists sustain two jobs in order to support their art practices, more specifically, where their invisible formal labour sustains their visible informal practice. This is not to say that all informal labour should be formalised but just that in looking at the relation between them we can discern that which we cannot see, the distributed movement between forms or the life of a thing.

How then can we speak about a thing like informality then without being reductive to some binary or negative position? Especially if one of the issues is nominalism or the assertion that only that which can be named can be valued, or only what is material can be acted upon. There is perhaps a direct correlation, not just in terms of semantics, between value and language. This is not to posit some deferral to utterance and nonsense, not at all; perhaps informality, in terms of distribution, can be understood as the relations and movements between objects. In literary theory this is often advocated as parataxis - "Parataxis (from Greek for "act of placing side by side"; fr. para, beside, to arrange; contrasted to syntaxis) is a literary technique, in writing or speaking, that favours short, simple sentences, with the use of coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions"... "It is also used to describe a technique in poetry in which two images or fragments, usually starkly dissimilar images or fragments, are juxtaposed without a clear connection. Readers are then left to make their own connections implied by the limits of a paratactic syntax"¹⁰. In this sense, informality here might be understood as the non-subordinating or pre/indeterminate relations between words in that each section is read in relation to another. As in Getrude Stein's *Rooms in Tender Buttons* - "If comparing a piece that is a size that is recognised as not a size but a piece, comparing a piece with what is not recognised but what is used as it is held by holding, comparing these two comes to be repeated. Suppose they are put together, suppose that there is an interruption, supposing that beginning again they are not changed as to position, suppose all this and suppose that any five two of whom are not separating suppose that the five are not consumed. Is there an exchange, is there a resemblance to the sky which is admitted to be there and the stars which can be seen. Is there. That was a question. There was no certainty. Fitting a failing meant that any two were indifferent and yet they were all connecting that, they were

⁹ INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE, 'Effect to be given to resolutions adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 90th Session (2002) (b) Resolution concerning decent work and the informal economy', GB.285/7/2, 285th Session Governing Body Geneva, November 2002.

¹⁰ See definition of Parataxis in Wikipedia; <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parataxis>> and in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines parataxis as "The arrangement of clauses or propositions without connectives, [Gr. para, beside, beyond, taxis, arrangement]". Also see Theodor W. Adorno, *Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry*. In *Notes to Literature, Volume II*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. pp. 109-49.

all connecting that consideration. This did not determine rejoining a letter. This did not make letters smaller. It did.”¹¹

The question is not so much what informality is then but what it relates to. The radical and mute importance held in the idea of informality is that it questions the assumption that only measurable and formal visibility can be synonymous with value. From Fair Use¹² to conservation¹³, codes have been established in an effort to capture that something which is an indefinable loss. And the informal, not quite nothing, not really anything, situates itself problematically here, where things are plastic and in movement. The movement of distributed and circulated matter, as a discourse. It is the space where ideals of accessibility and community can be made manifest and the absence where fair labour and rights can be disregarded¹⁴. In short, it is freedom, in all its forms.

On Informal is the editorial of the online exhibition *Informal* featuring artworks by Stefano Calligaro & Pond & Karin Hueber, Richard Healy, David Horvitz, Michael Kargl, Marc Philip van Kempen, Bruce Lowerly, Paul Pieroni, Mike Sperlinger and Ignacio Uriarte + guest bloggers Daniela Cascella, Dead Days Beyond Help and Florian Wiencek; <http://or-bits.com/informal.php>



the authors and or-bits.com, March 2012

¹¹ Gertrude Stein(1874-1946). *Tender Buttons*. 1914.

¹² See definition of *Fair Use* in *Wikipedia*; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_use>

¹³ Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, in their discussion of the ephemerality of new media art, suggest that “the best way to preserve artwork in ephemeral format is to encourage artists to describe them in a medium-independent way, potentially including the option to translate them into a new media once their current medium become obsolete”. Blais, J. and Ippolito, J., 2006. *At the edge of Art*. London: Thames and Hudson. See also Pip Laurenson's *Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations in Tate Papers*, Autumn 2006 and available at: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm>>

¹⁴ See a recent article by Gareth Cook in *The Boston Globe*. Cook, G., 2011. *How crowdsourcing is changing science*. *The Boston Globe* [online] 11 November. Available at: <<http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2011/11/11/how-crowdsourcing-changing-science/dWL4DGWMq2YonHKC8uOXZN/story.html>>