

Uniforms for Utopia:
Exploring Dress as an Embodied Practice Through the Expanded Archives of
the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift

By Mattia Zylak

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Abstract

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This exhibition uses the materials of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift as an entry point for considering methods of display of clothing that recognize dress as an embodied practice. A youth movement founded in 1920, the Kibbo Kift employed dress as part of their mission to design a new world. Understanding that the members of the Kibbo Kift saw their bodies as important sites for engaging in their utopian beliefs, the exhibition generates new interpretations of clothing display that minimizes the temporal and experiential distance between the historicized wearer and the contemporary visitor. Rather than present the archival materials of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift in a way that further historicizes the group, *Uniforms for Utopia* proposes an expansion of the Kibbo Kift's archive by incorporating a contemporary response to their garments. These contemporary responses are achieved in two ways: by inviting participants in the exhibition to engage with the reconstructions of the garments, and by including reinterpretations of the garments made by two invited artists: nènè myriam konaté and Sonia Prancho.

Keywords: Embodied dress, Exhibition display, Fashion exhibitions

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The fashion exhibition

The museum is a site of power. By acting as both a guardian and producer of cultural capital, museums define notions of what is worthy of the public's gaze. The way an object is mediated to a museum's audience affects collective ideas of that object's significance and in turn has the power to shape people's understanding of the world. Despite a museum's ability to shape cultural identity, this does not exempt the objects on display from criticism concerning their place within these institutions.

A string of blockbuster shows in New York and London, punctuated by the 1,500 person line-ups in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's (MET) *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2011), seemed to affirm fashion's space within the museum.¹ And yet, headlines asking "Is Fashion Really Museum Art?" and "Fashion may be art, but does it belong in a museum?" still appear on the pages of publications like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.² On the surface, such publications resuscitate the tired debate over whether fashion can, in fact, be considered an art form. But if the art historian Carol Duncan is correct in stating that the museum constitutes the identity of a community by "control[ing] the representation of a community and

¹ A sampling of recent exhibitions includes: *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2015) and *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* (2018) at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; *Giorgio Armani* (2000) at the Guggenheim, New York; and *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (2017) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

² Suzy Menkes, "Is Fashion Really Museum Art?," *The New York Times*, July 4, 2011; Robin Givhan, "Fashion may be art, but does it belong in a museum?," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2016.

its highest values and truths,” then by questioning the presence of fashion in the museum, these critics are also questioning the significance of the social implications of the clothing on display.³

Clothing has been collected and exhibited for a long time by a variety of institutions including museums of art, design, history, and ethnography. The blockbuster fashion exhibition is a relatively recent phenomenon. Yet, for over 150 years, articles of clothing maintained a position within the museum- albeit one much further away from the spotlight.⁴ Despite a willingness to collect and preserve dress history, these same institutions held more complicated views towards the presence of fashion and dress within their exhibitions. While fashion had secured its seat within institutional collections, this did not translate into a willingness to display these objects and their histories to the public. In the context of the increasing acceptance of the validity of fashion in museums it is interesting to delve more deeply into what these high-profile shows say about fashion, dress, and clothes. How are clothes in the museum positioned and framed, and how do the ways that clothing is displayed shape the public’s notion of their relationship to fashion?

The first popular fashion history exhibition was held at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Some 70 years later, the MET’s Costume Institute would develop the fashion exhibition as it is widely known today.⁵ Under the creative helm of former *Vogue* editor and curator Diana Vreeland, the exhibitions put on by the MET would provide the template for a

³ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Psychology Press Ltd., 1995), 8-9.

⁴ According to the fashion historian and curator Valerie Steele, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston received its first example of fashionable dress seven years after its founding in 1877.

⁵ Valerie Steele, “A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-Bag,” *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 4 (1998): 10-11.

growing genre in exhibition making. Renowned for their drama and glamour, Vreeland's exhibitions radically broke from tradition by putting articles of clothing forth, not simply as historical artifacts, but as objects of art. Her exhibitions succeeded in earning increased interest in the Costume Institute, however, not all of this attention was positive; Vreeland's productions were (and continue to be) criticized for their blatant historical inaccuracies and commercialism. Notably, during the exhibition *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of China* (1980), historical garments were mixed and matched to create outfits that would have appealed more to the contemporary museum visitor than the members of the Qing Dynasty who actually wore the clothes. Meanwhile in the exhibition, in a fantastic display of colonial tone-deafness, the scent of Yves Saint Laurent's perfume *Opium* wafted through the galleries. In response to Vreeland's theatrical tactics, the art historian Deborah Silverman wrote that "while Mrs. Vreeland's practice shaped her years of success as a bold and imaginative fashion editor, her exercise of opulent fantasies as art museum historical exhibits is distressing and inappropriate."⁶ To such criticisms, Vreeland retorted: "The public isn't interested in accuracy, they want spectacle."⁷

The discomfort towards fashion in the museum might in part be a reflection of the traditionally low status of objects of craft and design within the hierarchy of the arts. Even at the Victoria and Albert Museum, an institution dedicated to the applied arts, fashion was considered inferior to tapestry, furniture, and ceramics. According to dress historian Lou Taylor, "In the eyes of male museum staff, fashionable dress still only evoked notions of vulgar commerciality and

⁶ Deborah Silverman, *Selling Culture: Bloomingdale's, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan's America* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), xi.

⁷ Valerie Steele, "A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-Bag," 11.

valueless, ephemeral, feminine style.”⁸ Vreeland’s commitment to theatrics certainly produced exhibitions that were more engrossing than the historical dioramas exhibited by most costume collections, however, the extravagance came at a certain cost. Despite their beauty, these types of fashion exhibitions reinforce a particular idea of what fashion is: one that privileges spectacle and craftsmanship over the meanings drawn from everyday dress. Today, most exhibitions of fashion, whether they are staged with the dramatic flair of the MET or the white-walled minimalism of the Guggenheim Museum, are defined by the presence of clothing and other wearable objects. While the presence of garments within fashion exhibitions may seem like an obvious and indisputable fact, in some ways, this reliance on the display of clothing has also become an obstacle in forging connections to the everyday experience of wearing clothes.

Thinking about how the contemporary fashion exhibition stands in contrast to fashion as bodily and lived, fashion historian Marco Pecorari has remarked how museum’s fetishization of the object has hindered viewer’s understanding of the clothing on display: “the supremacy of dress in fashion museums or exhibitions of fashion has also partially limited the understanding of fashion from a curatorial perspective as something other than merely an assemblage of mannequins.”⁹ Unlike most forms of art, fashion occupies a unique and often precarious position as a product of creative labour on one hand, and as an object that is intrinsically related to the body on the other.¹⁰ What then, is sacrificed when curators display clothing using methods that

⁸ Lou Taylor, “Doing the Laundry? A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History,” *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 4 (1998): 341.

⁹ Marco Pecorari, “Beyond Garments: Reorienting the Practice and Discourse of Fashion Curating,” in *Fashion Curating: Critical Practice in the Museum and Beyond*, ed. Annamari Vänskä and Hazel Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 183.

¹⁰ Fiona Anderson, “Museums as Fashion Media,” in *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*, ed. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (London: Routledge, 2000), 373.

emulate the display of objects of “high art”? By questioning the “supremacy of dress” within fashion exhibitions, Pecorari effectively puts forth a challenge to curators of dress to develop a specific curatorial language for the display of fashion beyond garments.

Given fashion’s unique relationship to the body, museums’ tendency to rely on the presence of clothing within the exhibition can serve to limit the viewer’s experience of the sensorial potential of the garments as well as the understanding of clothing beyond simply wearable objects.¹¹ By seeking to better understand the feeling of fashion that comes from people, not from clothes, *Uniforms for Utopia* presents an alternative curatorial language for displaying and discussing garments within museums.

The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift

In the sense of its most basic function, clothing is used to protect the body of its wearer from the outside world. Much of this protection concerns the environmental threats of rain, snow, or cold. Yet there are also certain existential threats that, while at times abstract and unexplained, can nevertheless have a very tangible impact on how people dress. As a constant mediator between bodies and the outside world, what happens to clothing when the world it is meant to provide protection from becomes increasingly unruly and alarming? This question is one that took on significant importance for a small and short-lived group called the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.

In 1920, a group of youth leaders walked out of the Boy Scout movement in Britain, disillusioned with the increasing militarism of its methods. Led by the former scout

¹¹ Alexis Romano, Ellen Sampson. “The Auteur is Alive and Well-Dressed,” *Vestoj*, accessed February 7, 2020, <http://vestoj.com/the-auteur-is-alive-and-well-dressed/>.

commissioner and artist John Hargrave, the participants styled themselves as the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, adapting a term from the archaic Cheshire dialect meaning “proof of strength.”¹² Whether the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift was a political group, a social club, or a cult is difficult to define given the group’s wide breadth of activities. Hargrave himself hardly knew how to define the movement he had created.¹³ What was clear, however, was that members of the Kibbo Kift believed two things: First, the earth was in need of “human instruments” to act as a “directive force of the progress” for humankind. Second, they were prepared to fill that need.¹⁴

The members of the Kibbo Kift were motivated by the urgent conditions of their time. Declaring that “Britain [had] lost itself in a meaningless and devastating commercial scramble,” Hargrave and members of the Kibbo Kift saw a civilization that had been corrupted and on the brink of collapse in the wake of the First World War.¹⁵ As the facilitator of pollution and mass deaths on a previously untold scale during the War, industrial modernization could no longer be trusted as a force of hope or progress. Following an “initial body-impulse,” The Kibbo Kift advocated for getting “as often as possible out of the smoke-ridden town and cities” to camp.¹⁶ For the Kibbo Kift, overcoming the nightmares of the mechanical age necessitated a return to the natural world.

¹² Annebella Pollen, “‘A Society of Ugly People is an Immoral Society’: Bodily beauty in the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.” *Vestoj*. Accessed July 21, 2019. <http://vestoj.com/a-society-of-ugly-people-is-an-immoral-society/>.

¹³ Annebella Pollen, “Culture,” in *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon Books, 2015), 112.

¹⁴ John Hargrave, *Confessions of the Kibbo Kift* (London: Duckworth, 1927): 11-12.

¹⁵ Hargrave, *Confessions*, 56.

¹⁶ Hargrave, *Confessions*, 57-58

Having admitted that his original attraction to the Boy Scouts had been due to the allure of their cowboy hats, it is perhaps no surprise that Hargrave's new movement would prioritize sartorial appearance.¹⁷ Extending their aesthetic vision beyond endearing accessories, Hargrave designed uniforms for members of the Kift that sought to materialize their idiosyncratic vision for the world. The Kibbo Kift's outfits had to be uncompromising because radical sartorial action was required for total cultural transformation. Members of the Kibbo Kift were required to sew their uniforms by hand according to one of Hargrave's original designs. This was a demonstration of a practical self-reliance on craft as well a symbolic commitment to the cause.¹⁸ Members of the Kibbo Kift could be spotted in the woods and country lanes surrounding London, populating the landscape with bold colours and geometric patterns. The ceremonial garb, fashioned into a simple T-shape tunic and made up of bright, primary-coloured felt, freely jumbled together aesthetic references across cultures and histories.¹⁹

For passersby on the English countryside, the sight of the Kibbo Kift, sporting variations of colourful tunics, jerkins, and cowls, might have seemed slightly absurd. Despite all of their pageantry, the uniforms of the the Kibbo Kift were designed as a serious form of rebellion against the hegemonic culture of England. Writing on the costume of the Kibbo Kift, Hargrave asserted his distrust in contemporary fashions: "The normal costume for men in this period of civilization may be the most suitable for the particular mode of town life which the majority are called upon to suffer, but no one can contend that such a life is either health-giving or

¹⁷ Pollen, "A Society."

¹⁸ Pollen, "Culture," 99.

¹⁹ Anabella Pollen, "Culture," in *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon Books, 2015), 109.

particularly attractive.”²⁰ Their strategic choice of garments not only allowed members of the Kibbo Kift to liberate themselves from the confines of petticoats and trousers, but to also declare the spirit of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift even in silence.

While these vestments served to reinforce group identity, they were also a vital component in the Kibbo Kift’s attempt to remedy the social calamities of the civilized world. Not simply a bold aesthetic statement, the vestments served to guide the mind and body of its wearer to a utopic future. As historian Annabella Pollen has written, the unique clothing designs worn by Kinsfolk were an important first step in realizing a new world: “In designing a new world from the bottom up, members of the Kibbo Kift’s bodies and dress provided privileged sites onto which dramatic new dreams and retro-futurist fantasies could be projected.”²¹ Living in what they believed to be a civilization in crisis, the Kibbo Kift employed radical interventions in their sartorial appearance in order to produce the bodies and minds needed to achieve their utopian project. While the Kibbo Kift’s membership numbers were small (never amounting to more than one thousand in total), and although they are largely forgotten now, they joined a history of counter-culture movements (including the Futurists, Constructivists, and the Bauhaus) who seized on clothing’s potential as an art form that breaks through the traditional boundaries of “pure” art to act directly on life.²² The Kibbo Kift’s members wished for nothing more than to fashion a new world and they did so with the help of their dress and self-representation.

²⁰ Hargrave, *Confessions*, 99.

²¹ Pollen, “A Society.”

²² Radu Stern, “Fashion and Modernity,” in *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 2-3.

The body

The clothes in museum collections are more than just examples of how past and current societies dressed. Through marks of wear, the garments are also imbued with details of individual lives.²³ Despite clothing's intrinsic relationship to the body, when displayed within the context of an exhibition, the presence of the living, moving body for which it was made is often denied. After visiting the 1991 Pierre Cardin exhibition, the sociologist Elizabeth Wilson was struck by the uncanny nature of the displays:

[S]trangest of all were the dead, white, sightless mannequins staring fixedly ahead, turned as if to stone in the middle of a decisive moment [...]. The clothes themselves were brilliantly coloured, clear, incisive of cut, fancifully futurist yet simple. But without the living body, they could not be said to fully exist. Without movement they became oddly abstract and faintly uncanny. Nothing could have more immediately demonstrated the importance of the body in fashion.²⁴

What Wilson's unnerving experience demonstrates is that dress and the body constitute a whole, and when they are separated, as in the case of museum exhibitions, the viewer's understanding of the garment is limited; such displays cannot communicate how a garment moved when on the body, what it sounded like, or how it felt to the wearer.

²³ Bethan Bide, "Signs of Wear: Encountering Memory in the Worn Materiality of Museum Collections," *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 4 (2017): 451.

²⁴ Elizabeth Wilson. "Fashion and the Post-Modern Body," in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 15.

Recognizing that dress cannot be understood without reference to the body and that the body has always and everywhere been dressed, sociologist Joanne Entwistle described dress as an “embodied practice,” a concept that recognizes “how dress operates in a phenomenal, moving body, and [as] a practice that involves individual actions attending to the body with the body.”²⁵ The relationship between the body and dress is so much of the experience of the social world that it is often taken for granted. When museums present objects of dress to viewers in a manner that fetishizes the garment as an art object, focusing more on the designer and how it was made than the embodied experience of the wearer, the garment seems glaringly incomplete.

For members of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, the relationship between the body and its adornments was not only innate but actively seized upon to further their utopian cause. Their garments not only served to imagine what a peaceful and nature-based future might look like, they also served to actualize it. Although the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift no longer exist, their effort to fashion a new world through the use of clothing has been undertaken by many designers, groups, and individuals since. In considering the limits of the utopian body, Michel Foucault offered insight into the potential of clothing: “everything that touches the body – drawings, colours, diadems, tiaras, clothes, uniforms, all that – lets the utopias sealed in the body blossom into sensible and colourful form.”²⁶ Foucault recognizes clothing’s capability to act as a conduit for the futures that reside within the body. Today, amidst relentless threats of both environmental and political catastrophe, contemporary designers from Balenciaga to YEEZY

²⁵ Joanne Entwistle. “Addressing the Body,” in *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 10.

²⁶ Michel Foucault. “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (London: The MIT Press, 2006), 232.

offer sartorial strategies for insulating the wearer from the struggles of the present while determining a path towards the future.

The Kibbo Kift imagined a future founded in peace and harmony among all people. With a utopic vision that hinged on a “conscious organic unity,” the group sought to coalesce cultures across time and space in order to “reinvigorate them through the prism of modern experience.”²⁷ Archival photographs show Kinsfolk donning a variety of clothing and regalia that is at once reminiscent of traditional Catholic ceremonial dress, patterns from Nordic and Western pagan cultures, tabards worn by Medieval knights, and Indigenous cultures of North America.²⁸ As such, within the aesthetics of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, “reinvigoration” was often synonymous with erasure. Their vision of a uniform group identity could not be tailored to individual experience.

With the intention to reflect on and expand the archives of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, two artists have been invited for this exhibition *Uniforms for Utopia* to reinterpret reconstructions of garments worn by members of the Kibbo Kift. Recognizing the continued necessity for clothing that can mediate the wearer’s interactions with the outside world, the artists draw on their own embodied experience to offer alternative solutions for dressing for utopia.

The first artist, nènè myriam konaté is also a writer, creative director, and facilitator whose work focuses on intergenerational learning, embodied knowledge, and coalition. konaté’s

²⁷ Annebella Pollen, “‘More Modern than the Moderns’: performing cultural evolution in the Kibbo Kift Kindred,” in *Being Modern: The Cultural Impact of Science in the Early Twentieth Century* ed. Robert Bud, Paul Greenhalgh, Frank James, & Morag Shiach (London: UCL Press, 2018): 327.

²⁸ Pollen, “Culture,” 109.

reconstruction was initially inspired by the aesthetic similarities between the Kibbo Kift and their own intersecting cultures (Haitian, Malian, Queer, street style). By adding poetry to the garment, konaté thinks through how themes of aesthetic origin(s) and cultural care inform feelings of (be)longing.

The second artist, Sonia Prancho is a designer whose clothing line UN•FORM uses adaptive design techniques to produce clothing specifically for the disability community. Working through the physical and creative restrictions of the uniform, Prancho offers a version of the vestment that can be modified by the individual wearer. Rather than conform to a singular utopic vision, Prancho instead constructed a garment that allows the wearer to decide what is most comfortable for their body or most representative of their identity.

Visitors to *Uniforms for Utopia* can engage in a similar creative exercise as konaté and Prancho. As they move through the exhibition space, beholders become participants and are invited to wear a reconstructed Kibbo Kift vestment. In the process, they will consider questions that acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between their bodies and the garments that were originally designed for and worn by members of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift:

How does the fabric feel on my skin?

How does the garment fit? Is it closer to some parts of my body than others?

How does my body adapt its movements when I am wearing the garment?

What does this garment remind me of?

Do I feel stronger or safer when I am wearing this garment?

What would make this garment more comfortable?

The answers to these questions will be explored at an atelier established in the gallery where participants can engage in their own reinterpretations of the garments. The act of adding and/or taking away elements of the Kibbo Kift garment, allows participants to directly imbued their own experience into the materials and therefore the exhibition. By removing the barriers between the participant's embodied knowledge and the information contained within the exhibition, *Uniforms for Utopia* makes the space for participants to explore multiple possibilities concerning their embodied experience of dress. These adapted garments will form the basis of the expanded archives of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift; a series of mutations made meaningful by the fact that each one is the product of a participant's embodied engagement with the garment.²⁹ While museums continue to mediate objects of clothing, shaping collective ideas of the significance of dress, *Uniforms for Utopia* offers a strategy for rejuvenating these sites of power so that they can become spaces for participation and collaboration.

²⁹ The sociologist Dick Hebdige has referred to subcultures as “meaningful mutations.”

Support Paper

Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2018 exhibition *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*³⁰ attracted 1.6 million visitors, making it the most popular exhibition in the museum's 148-year history.³⁰ As institutions recognize that fashion attracts crowds in a way that few other creative media do, and high-profile fashion exhibitions continue to rise in popularity, museums' inability to address the dressed body has become increasingly obvious. In many exhibitions featuring clothing, the embodied experience of the wearer is erased in one, or both, of these ways: either the body is thought to be self-evidently dressed and therefore beyond discussion, or the clothes are presented as autonomous art objects produced by a singular artistic genius. This thesis addresses the question of how to position the dressed body within the exhibition context by investigating methods of display that reject the construct of the designer as auteur and engage with the embodied experiences facilitated by the clothing on display.

My inquiry into current exhibition practices has resulted in an exhibition that employs display techniques specifically designed to communicate the embodied nature of dress to the visitor. As a vehicle to explore the relationship of the body to clothing, the exhibition engages with the materials of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, an all-ages group founded in Britain in 1920 that sought to attain the "picturesque" in all aspects of personal, social, and political life.³¹ Using the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift as a case study, this exhibition exemplifies how display strategies

³⁰ Alex Wexelman, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art broke its all-time attendance record for a single exhibition," *Artsy*, accessed Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-metropolitan-museum-broke-all-time-attendance-record-single-exhibition>.

³¹ Annebella Pollen, "Movement," in *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon Books, 2015), 24.

can communicate the nature of the dressed body to the viewer, how fashion curation can be informed by contemporary art practices and curation, and how the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift can be used to draw links between current notions of the dressed body and utopia.

Theme: Social and Aesthetic Context

The lush landscapes of Vreeland's MET exhibits may seem worlds apart from the strict minimalist approach taken by more recent exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art's *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (2018). However, both institutions rely on the same tactic for displaying objects of dress: spectacle. Whether the piece of clothing is surrounded by a dramatic built environment or simply placed on a plinth under a glass case, the message to viewers remains the same: the objects on display are works of art. You can look, but do not touch.

While the bulk of criticism surrounding fashion exhibitions within popular discourse pertain to concerns around the presence of commercialism and superficiality within the museum, fashion historians, scholars, and curators have been questioning the nature of clothing itself and the limitations of display practices.³² Unlike art forms such as painting or sculpture, whose presence within the museum is uncontested, clothing is the one form of art that literally everyone partakes in by the simple act of getting dressed. Why then, do most fashion exhibitions present the clothing on display as objects of design separated from the lived, embodied experience of the wearer?

³² Criticisms of the commercialism of fashion exhibitions within popular discourse have come from writers such as Blake Gopnik, Jed Perl, and Geraldine Visco while academics who have focused their criticisms on the nature of display techniques include Amy de la Haye, Jeffrey Horsely, and Ingeborg Philipsen.

Uniforms for Utopia addresses the question of how to position the dressed body within the exhibition context by investigating methods of display that reject the construct of the designer as auteur and engage with the embodied experiences facilitated by the clothing on display. In an effort to expand the understanding of what fashion is and what fashion can be, this project considers fashion as something that exists beyond clothes, as something that surrounds clothes, as a performance or immersive experience that allows us to reflect on the everyday experience of wearing clothing.

Methodology

Fashion exhibitions typically focus on the role of designers. In order to better understand the generative relationship between clothing and the body, *Uniforms for Utopia* focuses on the position of the wearer. Recognizing that there is no universal wearer, and therefore, no universal embodied experience of clothing that can be communicated to the viewer, the exhibition positions itself as an experiment that provides a space for participants to actively engage with notions of embodied dress. By prioritizing the position of the wearer, the project necessitates a departure from the object-based approach that defines the vast majority of clothing focused exhibitions. As such, in developing *Uniforms for Utopia* it became essential to seek out theorists, precedents, and artists who have provided alternative frameworks for experiencing clothing within the museum that consider the experience of clothing beyond the garment itself.

The experimental nature of this project is facilitated by adhering to what the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the “reparative approach.”³³ Sedgwick contrasts the reparative approach to the much more ingrained paranoid approach. In an effort to avoid pain or humiliation, the paranoid approach “requires that bad news be already known.”³⁴ As such, paranoia requires the reader to read a text with the intention of finding the faults and inconsistencies within it at the expense of being caught off guard. In contrast, the reparative approach is motivated by a desire to seek pleasure, rather than the avoidance of pain. According to Sedgwick, “to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a preparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.”³⁵ While many critiques have been put forward regarding the nature of the fashion exhibition and its failure to address the dressed body, the purpose of this thesis is not to add to this list of faults. *Uniforms for Utopia* seeks to be reparative in the ways it discusses the current fashion exhibition experience by creating a space that generates possibilities for the display of clothing rather than supplying predetermined solutions.

The process of developing *Uniforms for Utopia*, involved engaging with fashion curation on both a theoretical and physical level. In addition to relevant texts by fashion historians and curators such as Fiona Anderson, Lou Taylor, and Elizabeth Wilson, I also spent time in displays such as the Royal Ontario Museum’s costume collection as well as exhibitions such as the most

³³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁴ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 103.

³⁵ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 146.

recent Thierry Mugler exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Reading a survey of reviews of fashion exhibitions was also critical to better understanding the breadth of contemporary fashion exhibitions as well as their points of perceived strength and weakness. Additionally, I made an intentional effort to extend beyond the realm of fashion curation for examples of alternative methods to display and discuss wearables. This included considering mass and high-end fashion retail environment for examples of how they invite the public to engage with the clothing on display.

In seeking to maintain a contemporary approach the notion of embodied dress as it relates to the designs of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, I also conducted studio visits and initiated collaborations with two artists: nènè myriam konaté and Sonia Prancho. These collaborations involved ongoing discussions with artists regarding the how to situate their interests and practices within the context of The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift. Combined, these methodological approaches were used to achieve a nuance understanding of embodied dress as it relates to the fashion exhibition.

Literature Review: Relevant Theoretical Fields

Since Joanne Entwistle developed the notion of embodied dress twenty years ago, many scholars have investigated the relationship between fashion and the body.³⁶ Fashion historians including Ingrid Mida, Alexandra Kim and Bethan Bide have engaged in slow-looking practices within archival collections as a way of acknowledging the memories worn into the materials they

³⁶ Joanne Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice," *Fashion Theory* 4, no. 3 (2000): 323-347.

study.³⁷ Beyond the museum collection, the sociologist Lucia Ruggerone has offered theoretical reflections concerning the agency of clothing and the “feeling of being dressed,” while the designer and fashion theorist Todd Robinson has explored non-textual or verbal ways of describing the somatic experience of being dressed.³⁸ Scholars are also increasingly engaging in material experimentation as a mode of research in fashion studies. The artist and curator Ellen Sampson has proposed methodologies for “wearing as a means of doing research” while Hilary Davidson has proposed methods of recreating historical clothing so as to explore their construction techniques and how they work with the body.³⁹

Considerations of embodied dress have also occurred specifically within the context of the fashion exhibition. Scholars such as Jeffrey Horsely, Alexandra Palmer, and Elizabeth Wilson have all written about the ways in which traditional museum displays alienate articles of clothing from the living body they are meant to adorn.⁴⁰ Despite the breadth of interest concerning the nature of embodied dress, specifically as it is expressed in the fashion exhibition, it is worth noting that these enquiries have rarely extended beyond the scope of the fashion exhibition and

³⁷ Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Bethan Bide, “Signs of Wear: Encountering Memory in the Worn Materiality of Museum Collections,” *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 4 (2017).

³⁸ Lucia Ruggerone, “The Feeling of Being Dressed: Affect Studies and the Clothed Body,” *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 5 (2017); Todd Robinson, “Attaining Poise: A Movement-based Lens Exploring Embodiment in Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* (2019).

³⁹ Ellen Sampson, “Entanglement, Affect, and Experience: Walking and Wearing (Shoes) as Experimental Research Methodology,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018); Hilary Davidson, “Reconstructing Jane Austen’s Silk Pelisse, 1812-1814,” *Costume* 49, no. 2 (2015).

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Horsely, “Re-presenting the body in fashion exhibitions,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014); Elizabeth Wilson, “Fashion and the Post-Modern Body,” in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Alexandra Palmer, “Untouchable: Creating Desire and Knowledge in Museum and Costume and Textile Exhibitions,” *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008).

into the parallel discourses occurring in the realms of contemporary art and contemporary art theory.

Entwistle's interpretation of clothing's relationship to the body prompts a pertinent question: if a piece of clothing is created for the purpose of being worn, when it is isolated from the wearer as is the case in a museum display, at what point does it cease being a piece of clothing and become something else entirely? A similar concern was presented by the feminist and performance art scholar Peggy Phelan in 1993. Thinking about the ways in which performance art is documented, Phelan asserts that once performance art is documented "it becomes something other than performance."⁴¹ Phelan argues that it is impossible to present performance art without the ephemeral elements of time, space, and context that are essential to the work. This notion can be expanded by the feminist art historian Amelia Jones who presents the truth of performance as lying in the mind/body of the original performer, a notion that can be extended to fashion exhibitions that rely on the presence of historical objects rather than the engagement of viewers.⁴² Seeking an alternative to the authoritative power of the art object, Jones argues for installation and display techniques that rely on the physical and sensory experience of the viewers.

The conundrum of documenting an object of performance art or experiencing it from a historical distance parallels the difficulty of communicating the nature of the dressed body in exhibition displays. As Entwistle describes the dressed body, it is "always situated in a particular

⁴¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

⁴² Jones, Amelia. "'The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence." *TDR* 55, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 16-45.

context.”⁴³ By understanding the dressed body as a constant negotiation between the body of the wearer, their identity, and the social world, it is also possible to understand the dressed body as a performance that, similar to works of performance art, is defined by time, space, and context.

The fact that documenting or archiving a piece of clothing can alter its very nature echoes theories put forward by Roland Barthes concerning the distinction between “real” and “represented” clothing. According to Barthes, whereas “real” clothing is defined by the practical concerns of protection, modesty, or adornment, “represented” clothing only *signifies* modesty, protection, and adornment.⁴⁴ As a physical object, “real” clothing is tangible whereas “represented” clothing exists in photographs and text. Considering Phelan’s assertion that performance art becomes something else once it is frozen in time, it is possible to see how an article of clothing, once removed from the body and placed into a static exhibition display can make the transition from “real” to only representational of the function it once served.

The considerations put forward by contemporary art theorists such as Phelan and Jones are not only aligned with discourses happening within fashion theory and curation, they also offer a curatorial motivation for displacing the focus from the object back onto the experience of the viewer.

Exhibition Review: Relevant Curatorial Precedents

Uniforms for Utopia is defined by the thematic concern of acknowledging the embodied nature of dress and the practical concern of the unique constraints that exist when reproducing archival

⁴³ Joanne Entwistle, “Fashion and the Fleshy Body,” 328.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, “Written Clothing.” In *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 8.

materials. As such, the curatorial precedents most relevant to the project are those that shift viewer's focus away from the garments themselves and towards the experiences and relationships facilitated by the garments on display. Exhibitions that present an interest in developing ways of talking about fashion that eschew the tropes of linear timelines, discussion of the designer as singular artistic genius, and, above all, mannequins as forms of display are the most relevant to my curatorial process.

Two precedents exist of exhibitions that have engaged with the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift. In 2009, the British artist Olivia Plender developed *Machine Shall Be the Slave of Man, but We Shall Not Slave for the Machine* as part of the Tate Triennial. The multimedia installation featured reconstructions of Kibbo Kift archival materials (including their vestments) in an effort to have viewers imagine the group's nature and motivations. More recently, in 2015, the Whitechapel Gallery of London exhibited *Intellectual Barbarians: The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift*, an archival display featuring woodcarvings, furniture, and designs produced by the group. *Uniforms for Utopia* is the first known exhibition that has studied the group exclusively with regard to their relationship to clothing and the body.

Shifting the focus of an exhibition from the object of clothing to the embodied experiences it facilitates requires curators to determine alternative points of entry for viewers to engage with fashion. Het Nieuwe Instituut's *Temporary Fashion Museum* (2015-2016) was a temporary experiment in which the museum, which typically focuses on architecture, design, and digital culture, turned itself into a fashion museum for a period of eight months. Rather than simply exhibit fashion, *Temporary Fashion Museum* was motivated by an impulse to explore "what the fashion museum could be" and how it can enable new knowledge of our own evolving

relationship with the clothes we wear.⁴⁵ Included in the experiment was *New Haberdashery*, an atelier aiming to promote a re-appropriation of material knowledge of fashion. The atelier facilitated workshops responding directly to the everyday experience of wearing clothing, such as tutorials on how to remove a stain, how to repair a garment, and how to re-use an old garment. By designing an installation that focused on an exclusively material experience of fashion, *Temporary Fashion Museum* offered a remedy to the purely visual experience that viewers receive in most fashion exhibitions. With the *New Haberdashery*'s strikingly simple concept of an atelier where visitors can learn the basics of how to make and care for clothing, they designed a space where viewers' embodied interactions with clothing were augmented, rather than substituted.

The importance of physical, material interactions as a way of enhancing viewers' intellectual engagement with the garments on display is one that is also iterated in the work of contemporary visual artist Lucy Orta. Since 1995, Orta has been organizing the *Identity + Refuge*, a co-creation workshop conducted with the Cité de Refuge Salvation Army homeless shelter in Paris. The project makes use of the Cité de Refuge's surplus of second-hand clothing, to teach the residents of the shelter how to create their own tailor-made wardrobe. Through the process of studying the abandoned garments, participants in the workshop also had to consider their own needs and desires in order to transform their raw materials into pieces of clothing that they found comfortable and fashionable.⁴⁶ By providing participants with the support to make

⁴⁵ Marco Pecorari, "Re-fashioning the Institution: Reflections on the Temporary Fashion Museum," *Het Nieuwe Instituut*, accessed Feb. 17, 2020, <https://tijdelijkmodemuseum.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/refashioning-institution-reflections-temporary-fashion-museum>.

⁴⁶ Bradley Quinn, "Identity + Refuge - Work Bench," accessed Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.studio-orta.com/en/artwork/189/Identity-Refuge-Work-bench>.

their own clothes, Orta facilitates a space for creative expression that might not have existed if the residents were instructed to follow a pre-chosen pattern or style. Within the context of the fashion exhibition, Orta's workshop emphasizes the potential for creativity and the productive results that come from offering meaningful strategies for viewers to imagine garments on their own bodies instead of the plastic frame of a mannequin.

Admittedly, it is not always within the scope of an exhibition to provide audiences with hands-on workshops. In such cases, curators can also take advantage of exhibition design techniques to create more immersive forms of display. *North: Fashioning Identity* (2017-2018) was an exhibition at London's Somerset House that explored contemporary artistic and stylistic representations of the north of England. Despite a limited amount of clothing on display, fashion was the central focus of *North*. As opposed to employing a traditional strategy of placing outfitted mannequins as representations of the original wearers, the exhibition was comprised of a series of multilayered installations that materialized the bodies of the historical wearers in a much more playful and convincing way. Rather than relying on objects (including video, photography, and clothing) to communicate the culture and lived experiences of the northern England, co-curator Adam Murray has stated that it was important to "develop a display system that both hinted at overarching themes in the exhibition as well as [allow] audiences to be as close to the clothing as possible."⁴⁷ This was achieved by creating immersive environments that responded to the theme put forward by the objects on display. In the final room of the exhibition, there were several long form video interviews. Viewers were invited to watch these interviews in settings such as a bedroom, a cinema, a front room, and a karaoke bar. Rather than limit the

⁴⁷ Dan Thawley, "It's Grim Up North - and Oh So Chic," *Artnet News*, accessed Feb. 17, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/north-fashioning-identity-somerset-house-fashion-1151150>.

viewer's interaction with the exhibition, and thus the reality of life and style of northern England, to a purely visual one, viewers were provided with a means to become a part of the exhibition and act out the routines of everyday northern life.

Each of these case studies provides strategies for inviting viewers to become a part of the exhibition and installations. By asking viewers to handle clothing directly while considering their own needs as it relates to the garment, or by asking them to maneuver their movements around the idiosyncratic details of someone else's personal space, these exhibitions speak to the fact that being dressed is a consistently mediated experience between the body and space. These exhibitions do not confine fashion to a series of static displays, but instead establish the potential for multiple possibilities concerning the viewer's embodied experience of dress.

Installation Concept/Design

Fashion exhibitions usually tend to focus role of the designer, while subtly ignoring the broader creative contexts in which fashion is made and consumed. Distinguishing itself from exhibitions of fashion, *Uniforms for Utopia* is an exhibition of *dress*. Thinking through the experience of being a clothed body in space, the sociologist Lucia Ruggerone defines dress as “something that will morph into my body and into which my body will change when I go out into the world.”⁴⁸ Understanding that our relationship with clothing is one that is generative and implies a mutual transformation of both the body of the wearer and the garment, *Uniforms for Utopia* focuses on the position of the participant.

⁴⁸ Lucia Ruggerone, “The Feeling of Being Dressed: Affect Studies and the Clothed Body,” *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 5 (2017): 585.

Despite the fact that the exhibition does not employ the original vestments worn by members of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, this does not mean that it is impossible to meaningfully discuss the notion of embodied dress. As the fashion theorist Marco Pecorari has pointed out, using the structures and feelings connected to articles of clothing can often serve as a more engaging point of entry than the objects themselves.⁴⁹ Through curatorial strategies that offer imaginative exercises for the viewer, it is possible to embrace the role of different senses in exhibitions and propose a more embodied approach to both the understanding of fashion and the exhibition.

Through the conventional process of entering into the museum, members of the public go through a process in which they transform into a viewer.⁵⁰ Through the design of the installation for *Uniforms for Utopia*, I substitute this process in favour of the viewer becoming a participant. This is accomplished partially by transforming the exhibition space into an exhibition *landscape*. The exhibition landscape, as described by the designer and scholar Jeffrey Horsely, refers to the design of installations that are “inhabited by both the viewer and object.”⁵¹ *Uniforms for Utopia* invites the viewer to inhabit the landscape of the exhibition designing an exhibition layout that mimics the archival photography of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, specifically the setting of the British countryside that recurs throughout their imagery. In this way, once viewers enter the exhibition space, they immediately become participants in the literal and figurative landscape of the exhibition. Additionally, by inviting viewers into a landscape that is clearly imagined, the

⁴⁹ Marco Pecorari, “Beyond Garments,” 183-197.

⁵⁰ Guus Beumer, “Temporary Fashion Museum,” filmed 2016 at Het Nieuwe Instituut, video, 8:04.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Horsley, “A Fashion ‘*Muséographie*’: The Delineation of Innovative Presentation Modes at ModeMuseum, Antwerp,” *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 1 (2015): 52-53.

installation draws an awareness to the amount of artificiality in the methods of display. The exhibition space is a built environment that offers only one of many readings of the nature of embodied dress and the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift to the participant.

Sedgwick's notion of the reparative approach also influenced aspects of the installation concept and design of the exhibition. While the Kibbo Kift saw the body's potential in asserting their utopian beliefs, the affirmation of their bodies nevertheless required the erasure of others. In their romanticization of pre-modern Europe, the appropriation of various cultures across time and geography was essential to the aesthetics developed by the group and expressed throughout the various media and garments they produced.⁵² While the aim of the exhibition is not to provide a focused analysis of the gender, racial, and colonial dynamics of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, it was nevertheless important to make a meaningful effort to address the ways in which the Kibbo Kift's served to simultaneously erase and elevate the bodies it served to adorn.

Rather than present the archival materials of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift in a way that further historicizes the group, *Uniforms for Utopia* proposes an expansion of the Kibbo Kift's archive by incorporating a contemporary response to their garments. These contemporary responses are achieved in two ways: by inviting participants in the exhibition to engage with the reconstructions of the garments, and by including reinterpretations of the garments made by two invited artists.

Upon entering the gallery, participants in the exhibition will be invited to wear a reconstructed garment as they move through the exhibition space. The garments have been produced according to the original patterns designed by the Kibbo Kift, the same instructions

⁵² Pollen, "Culture," 109.

that the original members would have followed to produce their own uniforms. Having spent time in the exhibition space and engaging with the materials on display, participants are then invited to alter and adapt the garment they have been wearing as they see fit. Allowing participants to wear the garments provides them with a direct and tangible way of experiencing what it feels like to wear the uniforms worn by members of the Kibbo Kift. Additionally, by asking participants to experience the designs of Kindred of the Kibbo Kift by wearing the clothes as opposed to looking at them, the exhibition proposes a shift the understanding of fashion from a primarily visual and aesthetic experience to one that is somatic and ephemeral.⁵³ Understanding that the experience of being dressed is largely non-verbal, by asking participants to then adapt the garments, the exhibition also provides a tactile method for reflecting on the feeling and interactions that the clothing provokes as well as the everyday experience of wearing the garments.⁵⁴ The adapted garments are collected and displayed throughout the run of the exhibition.

In addition to providing opportunities for viewer participation in the exhibition, two artists have been invited to offer their interpretations of the Kibbo Kift garments. néné myriam konaté and Sonia Prancho both have practices that consider how dressed bodies move through the world. The artists' adaptations not only serve as inspiration for participants in the exhibition to offer their own versions of the Kibbo Kift's costumes, they also offer a link between the Kibbo Kift and current notions of the dressed body and utopia. Rather than stand in direct opposition to

⁵³ Todd Robinson, "Attaining Poise: A Movement-based Lens Exploring Embodiment in Fashion." *Fashion Theory* (2019): 2.

⁵⁴ Robinson, "Attaining Poise," 3.

the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, konaté and Prancho's contributions heighten the awareness that objects of dress often contain multiple narratives.⁵⁵

Conclusion

As fashion exhibition rise in popularity, so too does the need for curatorial strategies that recognize the embodied experiences of the wearer. This gap in practice is especially urgent considering who is most associated with clothing and fashion: youth, women, queer, and BIPOC communities. Groups who have historically and systematically been denied a voice often rely on their body and its adornment to shape their identity and community. The rise in fashion-focused exhibitions means it is more essential than ever that viewer's ability to comprehend the unique embodied experiences facilitated by garments is not hindered by a purely visual display. For these reasons, research on the embodied nature of fashion is necessary. By generating a new interpretation of an exhibition of dress, *Uniforms for Utopia* contributes to the essential task of the curator of material culture: minimize the temporal and experiential distance between the historicized wearer and the contemporary visitor while serving the the broader political and social function of contributing to a body of knowledge concerning the display of clothing that honours the embodied experience of its wearers.

⁵⁵ Bide, "Signs of Wear," 469.

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Appendix A

Addendum

Uniforms for Utopia is an exhibition of dress that considers methods of display of clothing that recognize dress as an embodied practice. By framing clothing not as objects of art or desire but as a partner in a symbiotic relationship that mediates much of our experience of the social world, *Uniforms for Utopia* began to ask the question: How can we imagine an art exhibition that does not rely on the art object? Within the case of *Uniforms for Utopia*, the answer to this question relies on the public and their participation in the exhibition. The participation imagined by this project seeks to be both an intellectual and physical experience through which the creative agency traditionally bestowed upon the object of art is transferred to the participant. I highlight the importance of participation for *Uniforms for Utopia* because, although it was possible to briefly install the exhibition displays, given the circumstances which drastically limited people's access to the exhibition as well as any form of physical interaction, without any participants *Uniforms for Utopia* was unable to take place.

While it was not possible for participants to experience the exhibition as intended, throughout the process of installing the displays I did have some helpful conversations with colleagues who were able to see the space:

Exhibition landscape

Although the forms themselves were quite minimalist in their approach, I received positive feedback about regarding the “landscape” set up in the gallery. Visitors to the gallery communicated that the landscape was successful in creating a sense of space in which their own

movements and comportment had to adapt. One visitor remarked that the landscape made them feel as if they had inhabited a painting, while another visitor pointed out that it gave them the impression that they were not in an art gallery but another setting entirely. After installing the exhibition, I worried that perhaps the space was lacking something in terms of the displays. Indeed, it was a far cry away from most exhibitions of dress which tend to be quite extravagant. Given my initial concerns, it was encouraging to hear that the landscape did have an impact on the visitors who passed through the space. The exhibition was designed to have participants moving through and interacting in and with the space. In this way, I hoped to make a space for the participants' creativity rather than force a specific scenario or narrative on them. I remain curious as to the ways in which the space would have been enlivened with participants.

Participant reconstructions

The atelier where participants can engage in their own reinterpretation of the Kibbo Kift tunics was originally conceived of as an opportunity for tangibly expressing one's experience of wearing the tunic. A nice result of the atelier is that it also served as a space for communal creativity in which participants were able to socialize and inspire one another's work. A question that did come up from one of the participants producing a reinterpretation was whether there was a space in the exhibition where they might be able to explain the rationale behind their reinterpretation (for example: "I added small charms because I wanted the tunic to have a sonic element."). Beyond adapting the garments, I had not considered providing participants a space to discuss their creative process or reactions to the Kibbo Kift. It was encouraging to hear that participants felt invested enough in their creations to want to share their work with others. I also

received positive feedback on the artist's interpretations of the tunics with visitors appreciating having an example of how to go about their own reading of the Kibbo Kift tunics.

Wall texts

An aspect of the exhibition that I would have appreciated more feedback on was the wall texts.

Overall, I received positive reactions to how the wall texts were presented and the content.

Specifically, visitors found that the information was informative and the choice of images was especially helpful in imagining what the time and place of the Kibbo Kift looked like. I am curious to know the reaction of a participants who would have been able to go through the exhibition with the time to wear a tunic and move through the space. I continue to wonder if the information provided in the wall texts was enough (or too much) to express both the specific intention of the exhibition and how it is related to the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.

Appendix B

Postscript

Even if it was only for a brief moment, having the opportunity to install *Uniforms for Utopia* was extremely valuable in seeing how an abstract idea translated into a physical gallery space.

Especially since the exhibition focused on the embodied experience of dress, being able to actually move through the installation brought insight into the ways in which the exhibition was successful and where it was lacking. This thesis project was born out of a dissatisfaction with mainstream fashion exhibitions and a desire to expand upon and trouble the genre. That being said, when developing *Uniforms for Utopia* I was conscious in not attempting to offer a solution or answer for the absence of the body in many contemporary fashion exhibitions. As my first solo curatorial endeavour, and acknowledging that my understanding of embodied dress could never speak to/for the multiple dress it is experienced by a diversity of people and bodies, I very much approached the exhibition as an experiment- the results of which relied entirely on participants. Due to circumstances out of my control, the experiment was unable to fully take place. However, after having some time to reflect on the exhibition as well as thoughtful feedback from my thesis committee, I have identified two key sites of improvements for the project:

The relationship between fashion and dress in the context of the fashion exhibition

While *Uniforms for Utopia* explores the notion of embodied *dress*, it does so within the context of a *fashion* exhibition. The thesis offers a definition of dress, however, it does not consider a definition or concept of fashion as closely. Providing a definition of fashion would have been

helpful especially given the notion of achieving utopia through clothing. Fashion, as it is perceived and discussed today is laden with contradictions- it holds a potential that is both creative and destructive. Fashion is essential for creative expression, however, the clothing industry is also one of the most damaging one's to the environment. Fashion has the power to build cultures and identities, however, it is also viewed as a superficial commodity. Having a clearer understanding of how the exhibition relates to fashion would also be helpful in addressing many of the preconceptions and frustrations that viewers might hold towards contemporary fashion and the industry. A productive definition of fashion is one that acknowledges, rather than ignores or denies, these frustrating contradictions in order to better understand its significance as an object of study. By honestly exploring the role that fashion plays not only in our culture, but in our economy, environment, and social structures, we can move towards more meaningful conceptions of fashion exhibitions that seek to connect to their audience before glamorizing their subjects.

Expanding participatory practices to further reflect on race, gender, disability, and other identities influence embodied dress practices

At the end of the exhibition, participants are encouraged to adapt and reconstruct their Kibbo Kift garment as a way of working through their experience of wearing the clothing as well as commenting on how the uniforms can more accurately reflect their own identity and/or needs. Despite the intended focus of participation, the exhibition design could have done more to explicitly invite participation. For example, as suggested by my Internal-External Examiner JJ Lee, the addition of a changing room would be helpful in making the space more inviting for

potential participants by clearly carving out a space in the gallery for them to try on the tunics. Additionally, for the workshop component, including tools such as a sewing machine would make it clear to participants that they are invited to make structural changes to the garments rather than simply re-decorate them.

In order to more fully address the erasure of individuality as it existed within the practices of the Kibbo Kift, Uniforms for Utopia could benefit from expanding its participatory practices in order to further reflect on the identities and bodies that were not included in the Kibbo Kift's notion of utopia and how race, gender, disability, and other identities influence people's experience of embodied dress. For example, rather than relying primarily on wall texts to communicate information to the participants, a sonic component would not only increase the accessibility of the exhibition but also help to deactivate the uneven power dynamic that traditionally exists within galleries/museums where the viewer is considered the student who is educated by the curator by way of didactic panels. Additionally, including an option for participants to share their experience within the exhibition and wearing the tunics would add to a sense of inclusivity within the space. This could be done through a workshop or panel discussion or by giving participants a space to explain their their own reconstructions and what influenced their decisions in modifying the Kibbo Kift uniforms.

Appendix C

Artist Biographies

nènè myriam konaté

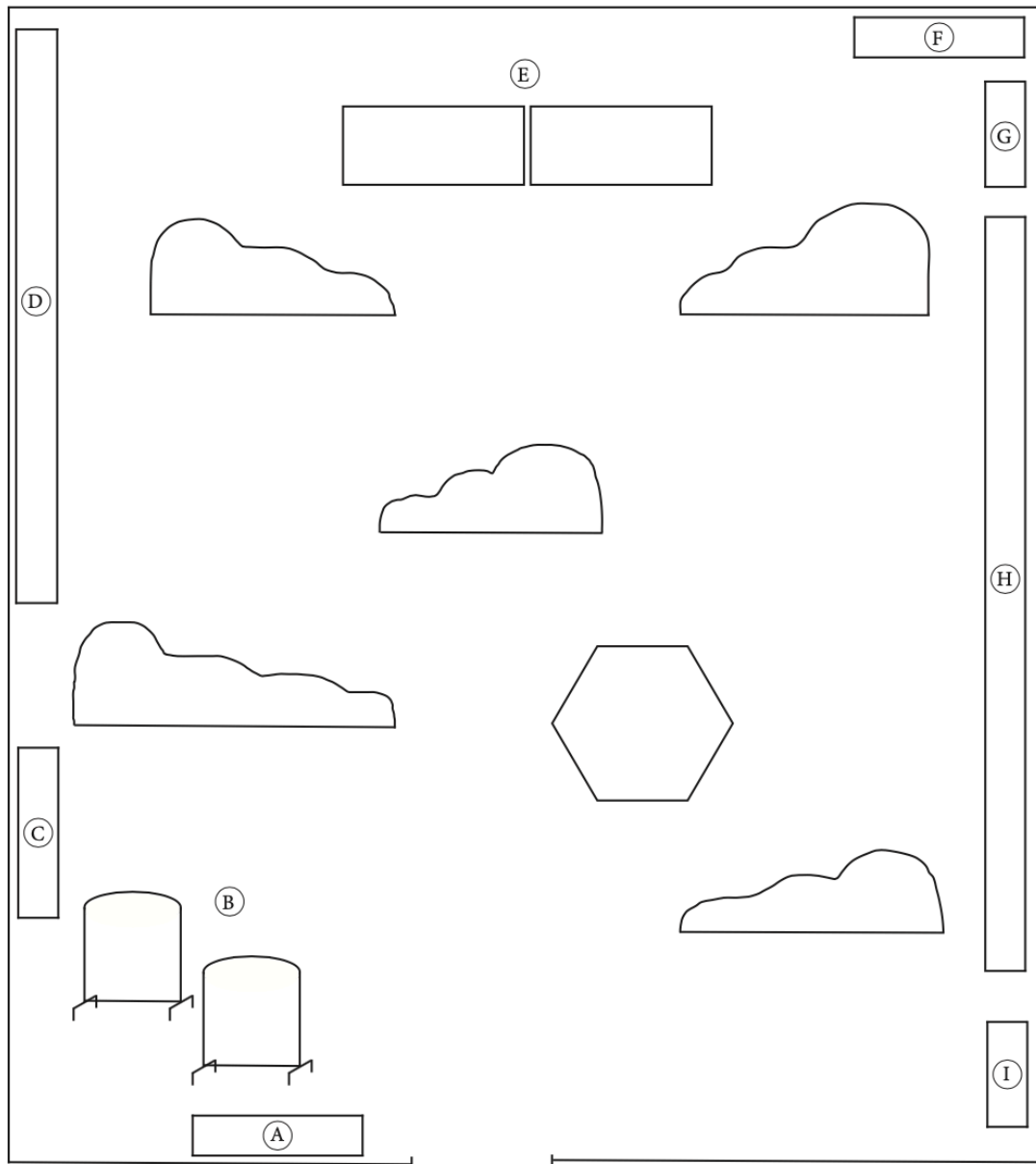
Born to Haitian-Canadian and Malian-Canadian parents, nènè myriam konaté is an artist, writer, creative director and facilitator whose work focuses on intergenerational learning, embodied knowledge and coalition. In August 2016 Nènè co-founded Collective Culture Montreal, an interdisciplinary festival that celebrates the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. Nènè's work has been featured at Writers Read's Off the Page Festival, at Article Artist Run Centre, and in Sophomore Mag. Nènè's collaborators include McGill University's Social Equity and Diversity Education Office, Two Hungry Children, Womb Cxre, Black Love Matters Montreal, The Woman Power, HerDay, SoHo House Toronto and Centre Never Apart.

Sonia Prancho

Sonia Prancho is a designer based in Toronto. Her label, UN•FORM, is an accessible clothing line that seeks to change the form of disability aesthetics in fashion through adaptive design techniques and forward thinking branding. UN•FORM is reclaiming space for the disability community in fashion with a focus on un-forming, instead of conforming to traditional body and beauty norms. This brand is inclusive of all identities and does not place emphasis on gendered clothing. Designer, Sonia Prancho, is working interdependently with the disability community to highlight disability in a stylish, comfortable and accessible way. While Sonia does not identify as disabled, she is dedicated to practicing allyship and creating space for people with disabilities in the fashion industry.

Appendix D

Figure 1. Gallery Floor Plan



A. Wall Text 1, Curatorial Statement

B. Tunics

C. Wall Text 2

D. Wall Text, 3-7

E. Atelier

F. Wall Text 8, Artists

G. Artist reconstruction, nènè myriam konaté

H. Participant reconstructions

I. Artist reconstruction, Sonia Prancho

Appendix E
Documentation



Figure 2. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), exhibition entrance March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 3. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 4. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 5. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 6. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), artist interpretation by nènè myriam konaté March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 7. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 8. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 9. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), installation view March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.



Figure 10. *Uniforms for Utopia* (2020), artist interpretation by Sonia Prancho March 16. Photo by Mattia Zylak.