How to wear utopia:
A dress manual for a convivial future

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ABSTRACT

This research explores utopian dress as a theoretical concept and artistic and curatorial practice, using dress as a tool for imagining alternative futures. Situated at the intersection of visual art practice, dress and utopia, the thesis adopts utopia as a method to foster reflexive engagement, creating a dialogue between theory and practice. Within this framework, dress becomes a medium that connects utopian ideals with human aspirations and dreams, transforming abstract concepts into tangible, embodied experiences. This interdisciplinary crossover is what I define as utopian dress.

Utopia, in this context, is understood as a form of social dreaming, inviting imaginative exploration of future possibilities without prescribing a singular path. Central to this inquiry is the question of how notions of commonality and conviviality might manifest in dress practice, offering an alternative to the individualistic and hierarchical paradigms that dominate present society and clothing. The research asks whether a utopian approach to dress could offer new ways of thinking about the body, society and the role of clothing in fostering commonalities.

The thesis is structured into two complementary parts reflecting the research process: firstly, a theoretical and historical examination of utopian thought, and secondly, a practice-based investigation focusing on curatorial practice and art-based research. This dual approach allows for a broader exploration of the subject from multiple perspectives – both subjectively and emotionally through visual art practice, and more objectively as a historian and curator.

The investigation draws upon the theory and history of utopian dress outlined above, focusing on three art and design movements: Russian Constructivism, Neoconcretism in Brazil and Radical Italian Design of the 1960s and 1970s. The study also examines workwear, historically regarded as the most prominent form of utopian dress, both as a functional tool and as a symbol of utopian ideals such as equality and solidarity. It further explores how artists have used workwear-inspired garments to engage bodies in new forms of art. These findings informed the curation of the exhibition *Workwear* at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam (March – September 2023). The exhibition serves as a key practice outcome, exploring the cultural and aesthetic significance of workwear while highlighting its utopian qualities and potential to inspire social change.

The art practice-based research investigates how utopia can be embodied and practised through dress. Using a multifaceted methodology, it explores the concept of dress as a tool and examines utopian work-dress scenarios. Outcomes include speculative 'glove-tools', collages, drawings, sculptures and a film titled *Dresstopia*. The film documents the interactive participation of adults and children as they transform flat canvases into wearable forms. These canvases, free from cultural or historical references, offer a blank slate for imagining new possibilities for dress, demonstrating their potential as tools for creative exploration.

The critique and construction of utopian dress possibilities as an art practice suggests that utopia is not an end goal but a reflective method – a continuous re-engagement with the present to envision alternative futures. Through this lens, the study proposes that utopian dress can serve as a catalyst for rethinking social structures and fostering convivial connections in an increasingly fragmented world.

This thesis posits that *Dresstopia* is a practice in equality, seeking to educate desire rather than create objects of desire. It aims to transform the way individuals engage with clothing, emphasising the act of participation and creation over consumption, fostering a shared, egalitarian vision of embodied practice.

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Author's Declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature: _____ Date: 27 July 2025

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CHAPTER ONE: HOW TO WEAR UTOPIA

Introduction

Utopian dress was first introduced as a literary concept by Thomas More in his seminal 1516 novel *Utopia*. More envisioned a form of dress that reflected an egalitarian ethos and recognised clothing's significant role in shaping society. Since then, dress has remained an important facet in the depiction of utopian societies in fiction. In these imaginary societies, dress takes on multiple critical roles: it promotes a more inclusive and sustainable community by eliminating social distinctions, enhancing equality, fostering commonality and prioritising environmental care. Dress plays an essential role in the organisation of fictional societies that idealise forms of communism.

Utopia has always been a highly controversial concept because of its inherent contradictions. It is both a place and a non-place. Coined as a deliberate pun, the term has multiple meanings: it refers both to a *good place* and a *no-place* or even a *place outside of time*. Historically, it has inspired socialist movements but has also been criticised for its associations with totalitarian regimes. Marx and Engels famously dismissed it, using *utopian* as shorthand for the unrealistic and impractical (Engels 2019). In everyday language, the term often evokes notions of unattainable ideals or failed societal models. Ultimately, utopia has always been a polarising idea, embodying a vision of a perfect society for some, and a dystopian nightmare for others.

However, as a concept, utopia serves a much more complex function. As we confront ecological and economic crises fuelled by overconsumption and the ideology of perpetual growth, it is easier – as the adage has it – to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Envisioning alternative futures has become increasingly difficult. Since the mid-1970s, dystopian narratives have dominated cultural production, reflecting widespread anxieties about what lies ahead. In fiction, film, art and cultural theory, a dark, pessimistic mood has edged out the prospect of hope. Competition has replaced collaboration and companionship. Alongside this pessimism, a temporal mode of immediacy and disposability dominates almost every aspect of life. With the 'end of the world' mindset, the future appears unimaginable, but the necessity to revive hope and optimism becomes imperative.

This research revives the concept of utopian dress and asks how can we wear utopia? How can utopia be a method of dress practice and what would that entail?

As contemporary utopian theorist Ruth Levitas (2013) argues, utopia is not solely a case of envisioning better futures; it is also about embodying utopia in the present through collective and creative practices. Such a perspective shifts utopia from an abstract ideal to an experiential, lived reality.

This study explores the ways in which utopian dress can be practised. It defines utopian dress practice as a form of art practice while moving the discussion away from traditional fashion discourse. Additionally, the research proposes new ways of engaging with clothing, prioritising participation and creation over consumption, and fostering a shared, egalitarian vision of embodied practice.

Utopia is understood as an ongoing practice of questioning the present, challenging the status quo and envisioning alternative possibilities. It fosters communal imagination and collective thought, moving away from individual fantasies of a better world to shared visions of possibility. Utopia, in this context, becomes a creative process: a means of exploring new possibilities for dress and society. This process embraces the humour, playfulness and imaginative potential often found in utopian fiction.

My theoretical approach proposes dress as a tool and utopia as a method. Situated at the intersection of art practice, dress and utopian theory, this research adopts utopia as a mode of critical reflection. In this context, dress serves as a medium that links utopian ideals with lived experience, giving tangible form to abstract visions. This interdisciplinary intersection is what I refer to as utopian dress.

Dress is a tool

It is important to differentiate between the concepts of dress and fashion. With the commercialisation of clothing and the hegemonic dominance of the fashion narrative, imagining alternatives to the prevailing fashion system feels increasingly difficult. Today, nearly every aspect of clothing is subsumed under the umbrella of 'fashion'.

I understand dress as a broad category encompassing all forms of wearables – including clothing, costume, fashion and body art – across cultures and historical periods. Fashion, by contrast, refers to a specific system of dress associated with constant change, consumerism and individual expression, which emerged in Western Europe with modernity.

Several theorists make this distinction between dress as a universal human practice of bodily adornment and fashion as a specific system characterised by novelty, change and commercial circulation. In *Adorned in Dreams* (1985), Elizabeth Wilson observes that while all societies engage in forms of dress – whether for protection, ritual or social identity – fashion entails the deliberate and often rapid introduction of new styles. Dress, then, represents the broader, culturally embedded habit of clothing the body, whereas fashion is tied to consumer culture, trend cycles and the interplay of social status and self-expression within a modern capitalist context. Similarly, Joanne Entwistle (2000, 43) defines fashion as 'a special system of dress, one that is historically and geographically specific to Western modernity', emphasising its historically contingent nature.

While I acknowledge and draw on these definitions of dress as a cultural and social practice, I offer an alternative perspective. Rather than solely situating dress within sociological contexts, I understand it as an artistic practice, viewing dress as a creative and imaginative medium in its own right.

Current discourse predominantly explores dress through the lens of sociology or cultural theory, often overlooking its nature as a form of creative expression led by imagination. My argument seeks to reclaim and emphasise dress not simply as a reflection of social structures and expectations, but as an open, experimental art practice – one that invites imaginative engagement beyond conventional categories.

While creativity in fashion is widely recognised, the field remains largely constrained by commercial modes of presentation. Experimental work is typically limited to the catwalk and retail spaces, both of which are shaped by market imperatives. In contrast, the visual arts are supported by exhibition venues and galleries that actively foster exploration, an infrastructure that fashion lacks.

This situation underscores the need to reclaim dress as a space for embodied experimentation, independent of market pressures. Within academia, practice-based researchers who cross into visual arts or performance often frame their efforts as attempts to broaden the field of fashion. Yet such a framing unintentionally reinforces the dominance (authority) of the existing fashion system, perpetuating its inequalities and exploitative practices.

To disrupt these entrenched structures, it is essential to create a clear separation from the dominant fashion discourse, particularly when considering non-commercial practices. Rather

than further empowering the established fashion system, I suggest shifting the conversation towards the idea of dress. Expanding the field of fashion tends to reproduce its commercial and systemic hegemony, whereas focusing on dress as a more inclusive concept enables a broader, more equitable exploration of wearable forms.

In this research, I introduce 'dress as a tool' to shift attention from clothing as a finished object to dress as a wearable medium that is activated on the body. Dress is approached as a type of wearable, an abstract medium that carries no historical or aesthetic preconceptions; rather, it serves as a blank canvas for creative expression and exploration, gaining meaning through activation, use and encounter. Rather than beginning from dress as a historical artefact or aesthetic statement, the enquiry starts from what dress does: how it enables action, shapes behaviour and organises relations between bodies, environments and institutions. Understood in this way, dress is not only a register of social conditions, but a creative and experiential means of intervening in them, capable of producing new forms of interaction, visibility and collectivity. 'Dress as a tool' is not only a reflection of the social; it is also a creative tool to shape the social.

Utopia is a method

'Utopia as a method' (Levitas 2013) is a theoretical approach that views utopia primarily as a method of practice, rather than as a goal or a plan. Consequently, the function of utopia is not to serve as a static blueprint for a perfect society. Instead, it represents the ongoing critique of the present while imagining a fairer, better future beyond capitalist demands.

Drawing on art history case studies, this research identifies examples of how utopia has been used as a method in visual art. Wearables are approached here as forms of social dreaming, moving away from the limiting assumption that utopia is primarily a literary form. Conceived as a method, utopia is understood as a mode of social practice. Constructivists mobilised it as a tool, Neoconcretists developed it as a participatory and experiential device, and Italian Radical designers treated it as a toolkit for self-made, unisex garments that challenged the fashion system through accessibility, flexibility and the erasure of sartorial hierarchies. Across these contexts, the act of dressing becomes participatory: a process of making and enacting relations rather than a passive act of consumption or display.

In utopian fiction, dress often carries symbolic significance, signalling simplicity, connection and the dismantling of social hierarchies. The question, then, is how such symbolism might operate

in practice. How might dress be reimagined to challenge existing social and aesthetic norms and to embody utopian ideals? Could utopian dress function as both a method and a medium of social imagination, fostering more communal and convivial forms of living?

Contributions

The research aims to contribute to the fields of utopian studies, visual arts, dress and fashion studies, and, to a lesser extent, studies of sustainability.

Within utopian studies, the exploration of dress has been notably limited, especially in relation to theoretical concepts of utopia. This research investigates the idea of utopian dress both in theory and in practice, examining it through historical and cultural theory, as well as exploring its practical implications.

In the field of dress and fashion studies, this research proposes dress as an experimental practice in its own right – as a social, artistic and exploratory tool. The contribution lies in proposing an alternative 'space' for dress practice, removed from commercial forces. The research analyses and proposes new ways of engaging with dress practice that are not tied to the field of fashion and its commercial associations.

With regard to the visual arts, the research positions dress as a form of art practice, akin to performance, body art, sculpture and participatory art. However, I also argue that dress deserves recognition as a medium in its own right. This research expands the understanding of art practices that engage with the notion of dress and embodied practice.

Although I do not address sustainability as a distinct topic in this study, many of the aspects I examine – such as functionality, temporality (including durability and extended use) and commonality (challenging the commercialisation of difference) – have clear links to sustainable practice. Utopian thinking provides a framework that brings together numerous interlinked social and environmental factors, rather than treating them in isolation.

A multifaceted methodology

This study examines the phenomenon of utopian dress using a combination of theoretical and practice-based approaches, embracing a multifaceted methodology.[1] By integrating multiple methods, this approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the topic, traversing traditional academic and creative frameworks. My theoretical framework, which positions 'dress as a tool' and 'utopia as a method', reflects the diversity of my methodology and situates the study within the fields of utopian studies, dress and visual arts.

In shaping this framework, I draw on Levitas' (2013) influential theory of 'utopia as method', which brings together social theory, cultural analysis, philosophical reflection and creative practice. Following Levitas, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that bridges the arts, cultural studies, philosophy, literature and politics. Her concept offers a way of moving beyond traditional definitions of utopia as merely a literary genre or political programme, instead presenting it as a critical tool for analysing, interpreting and transforming society.

A part of the study involved textual analysis of utopian theory, including works of utopian fiction that historically address concepts of social dress. Through this analysis, I identified key themes – such as functionality, conviviality, commonality, temporality and utopian politics – which became central to the study's theoretical framework and to the definition of utopian dress.

These characteristics of utopian dress were then further examined and explored through practice-based research. The practice-based aspect of the research unfolded in an organic and experimental manner, evolving into two main directions.

One strand of the practice-based research involved curating the exhibition *Workwear*, held from 26 March to 10 September 2023 at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.[2] The project explored workwear through the lens of utopian dress, considering its civic dimensions, complex meanings and potential to express utopian ideals. The research drew on art historical case studies, visits to workwear archives, direct engagement with objects and artefacts, as well as conversations with collectors, archivists, artists and designers.

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[1] The term 'multifaceted methodology' is commonly used to describe approaches that integrate diverse practices, particularly within arts and humanities research.

[2] Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam is the national museum and archive for architecture, design, and digital culture in the Netherlands. It manages the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning.

These methods are examined more comprehensively in Chapter Four, where I discuss curating as a research practice. I reflect on how my theoretical and art-historical research informed the curatorial concept of the exhibition and consider the process of curating as an evolving research activity in its own right. Finally, I address how the exhibition display and the audience form an integral part of the research.

The second strand of practice-based research involved my own art practice, which employed reflexivity, phenomenology and participation to explore the possibilities and challenges of utopian dress. Through this process, I used a range of artistic methods, including drawing, collage, glove-tools, sculpture and film. These approaches offered an intuitive and tactile way of engaging with the research, which steered the study in new directions and led to insights distinct from those gained through textual analysis.

Navigating these multifaceted directions presented unique challenges, especially as my original intention was to conduct the research solely as an artist-practitioner. The opportunity to curate an exhibition emerged later in the process, requiring a significant expansion of scope and a reconsideration of how to integrate theoretical and practice-based components. Although unplanned, this dual approach enabled a broader exploration of the subject. It allowed me to investigate utopian dress from multiple perspectives: subjectively and emotionally, through my art practice, and more objectively, as a historian and curator.

This dual role – approaching the research both as a historian and as an artist – is relatively uncommon in academic contexts, but it has given me a unique perspective. It enabled me to contribute an original perspective on the topic and to explore utopian dress in a comprehensive way. This methodology has not only deepened my understanding of the concepts and history of utopian dress, but also allowed me to imagine its future through artistic practice (Figure 1).

Phenomenology

The phenomenology of utopian practice combines the study of lived experience with the imaginative exploration of utopian possibilities. In my art practice-based research into utopian dress, phenomenology serves as a method for examining the lived, embodied experience of wearing, interacting with and conceptualising clothing within a utopian context.

This approach moves beyond theoretical conceptualisations of utopia, aiming instead to explore how people live and perceive utopian practices. Within this framework, dress becomes a medium that connects utopia to human aspirations and dreams. Through phenomenology I explore the connections between dress, embodiment and utopian aspirations, offering critical insights into the potential of dress as a transformative practice.

To understand how these practices are experienced, I draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (2012), which places embodiment at the centre of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are not simply physical objects, but the primary means through which we engage with and interpret the world. Meaning emerges through bodily experience, sensation and action.

A core concept in his work is intersubjectivity – the idea that our subjectivity is always shaped in relation to others and to the world around us. Our perceptions and experiences are formed through these encounters. We are not isolated individuals; rather, we exist within a web of relationships and meanings that shape our understanding of reality. Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity resonates with the communal aspects of utopian thought, where the transformation of society involves rethinking how we relate to one another. Both phenomenology and utopian theory help us understand, but also potentially transform, the structures that shape our relationships with others and with the world.

Embodied practice highlights how the body, in wearing specific *dress*, actively participates in shaping both individual and collective experiences. It draws attention not only to how dress appears visually, but also to how it feels and affects us physically and emotionally. This approach asks how dress might give form to utopian ideals, such as equality or conviviality, and considers how the act of wearing it could shape how individuals perceive themselves, their relationship with dress, their bodies and with others.

The phenomenology of art practice and utopia as method are interconnected in their focus on human experience, imagination and the possibility of transformation. Art practice, in its phenomenological sense, is a form of creative world-making that reshapes how we perceive and engage with reality, while utopia as method uses imaginative thinking to critique and reimagine social structures. Both approaches invite us to envision new possibilities and to explore how the act of creating—whether through artistic practice or social imagination—can lead to a transformation of human experience and society.

In this sense, art and utopia share a common purpose: each involves breaking away from the present to imagine new realities, and both highlight the importance of embodied experience and hope in shaping those possibilities.

Reflexivity

Reflexive art practice-based research emphasises the dialogue between theory and practice, a core process in my study. In the context of utopian dress, reflexivity involves critically examining how utopian theory informs my artistic practice and how the practice, in turn, expands and reshapes the theory. This dialogical approach was a key methodological tool, particularly as utopian theory itself serves as a framework for the research. Reflexivity also facilitates the migration of concepts across disciplines, encouraging critical engagement with how ideas are applied in art practice research (Bal, 2002).

In art practice, reflexivity is a critical method for challenging theoretical and established understandings of the subject. Within utopian inquiry, reflexivity allowed me to question my own ambitions and desires in relation to the ideals of utopian dress.

One advantage of reflexivity in my study of utopian dress is the ability to observe and analyse the inquiry through an autoethnographic lens. Raised in the communist former Yugoslavia (1976–1992) and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–2000), my profound experiences in these unique cultural and political settings greatly shape my research questions and observations. My perspectives, as well as my political tastes and desires, are shaped by my life experience rather than detached theories.

Autoethnography highlights the inescapable role of subjectivity in research, as we cannot fully separate the knowledge derived from our past experiences. Having grown up within divergent political systems, I have developed a sense of political estrangement – being a 'citizen of

nowhere' – which resonates with the concept of utopia as 'no-place'. This perspective has provided insights into diverse social contexts and a nuanced approach to material culture.

Participation

Participatory art is a form of artistic practice in which the audience is actively involved in the creation or realisation of the artwork. Rather than remaining passive observers, participants engage directly with the work – through actions, decisions, movement or dialogue – so that the meaning and outcome of the art are shaped by their involvement.

Neoconcrete artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica were pioneers of participatory art during the 1960s and 1970s. Their practices placed the viewer at the centre of the artwork, transforming spectators into active participants and dissolving the boundaries between art and everyday life. Clark described her participatory works as *vivencia*, meaning 'experience', inviting participants to interact through touch, movement and other senses. Such participation enables new ways of encountering art, both within and beyond the institutional context. The significance of participation was central to Clark and Oiticica's thinking, as evident in their correspondence from 1964 to 1974. Their letters reveal deep reflection on the creative potential and challenges of involving the public in the artistic process. Clark, for example, writes:

> As far as the idea of participation is concerned… it is precisely what you call this "relation in itself" that makes it contemporary and important. (Clark and Oiticica, 2024, 77; also quoted in Bishop 2006, 113)

This exchange is also discussed in Claire Bishop's anthology *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art*, 2016), which brings together key texts on participatory art and highlights how Clark and Oiticica's dialogue shaped the discourse of participation.

Today, the term 'activation' is often used to describe the process of involving audiences in participatory art. It suggests a shift from passive viewing to active engagement, yet its limitations have been debated. At a 2024 lecture organised by the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN), Claire Bishop and others questioned whether 'activation' adequately describes participatory artworks. The term can imply that artworks are inherently passive until 'brought to life' by viewers, or that traditional forms, such as painting, are always passive by comparison.

This distinction between passive and active engagement is deeply rooted in institutional practices. Museums and galleries have historically maintained a separation between artwork and audience, prioritising preservation and security – often reducing the possibility of interaction to mere observation. Sculpture, for example, is created through touch, yet exhibition settings typically confine viewers to a visual experience, diminishing the sensory and phenomenological dimensions central to its making. This separation undermines the instinctive relationship between many types of artwork and audience, though the human impulse to touch, feel and engage with art remains strong.

Artists like Clark and Oiticica sought to overcome these institutional boundaries by creating interactive works that encouraged direct participation. The broader aim of these practices was to dissolve the boundary between art and everyday life. My own research builds on these ideas, using participation as a way to explore the possibilities of utopian dress. In my practice, participants are invited to embody the work, experience it directly and reflect on these encounters. Using wearable, embodied forms, I invite participants into a sensorial, intuitive engagement with the work. Dress, as a medium, offers the possibility of art experienced directly on the body, allowing participants to extend and interpret the work in their own way and fostering genuine engagement beyond institutional rules.

Ultimately, participatory research methodology suggests that utopia is not only about imagining alternative futures but also about enacting utopian ideas in the present, through creative and embodied practice. In this way, utopia becomes an experiential reality rather than a purely theoretical concept. This approach transforms utopia from a theoretical concept into a tangible, experiential reality.

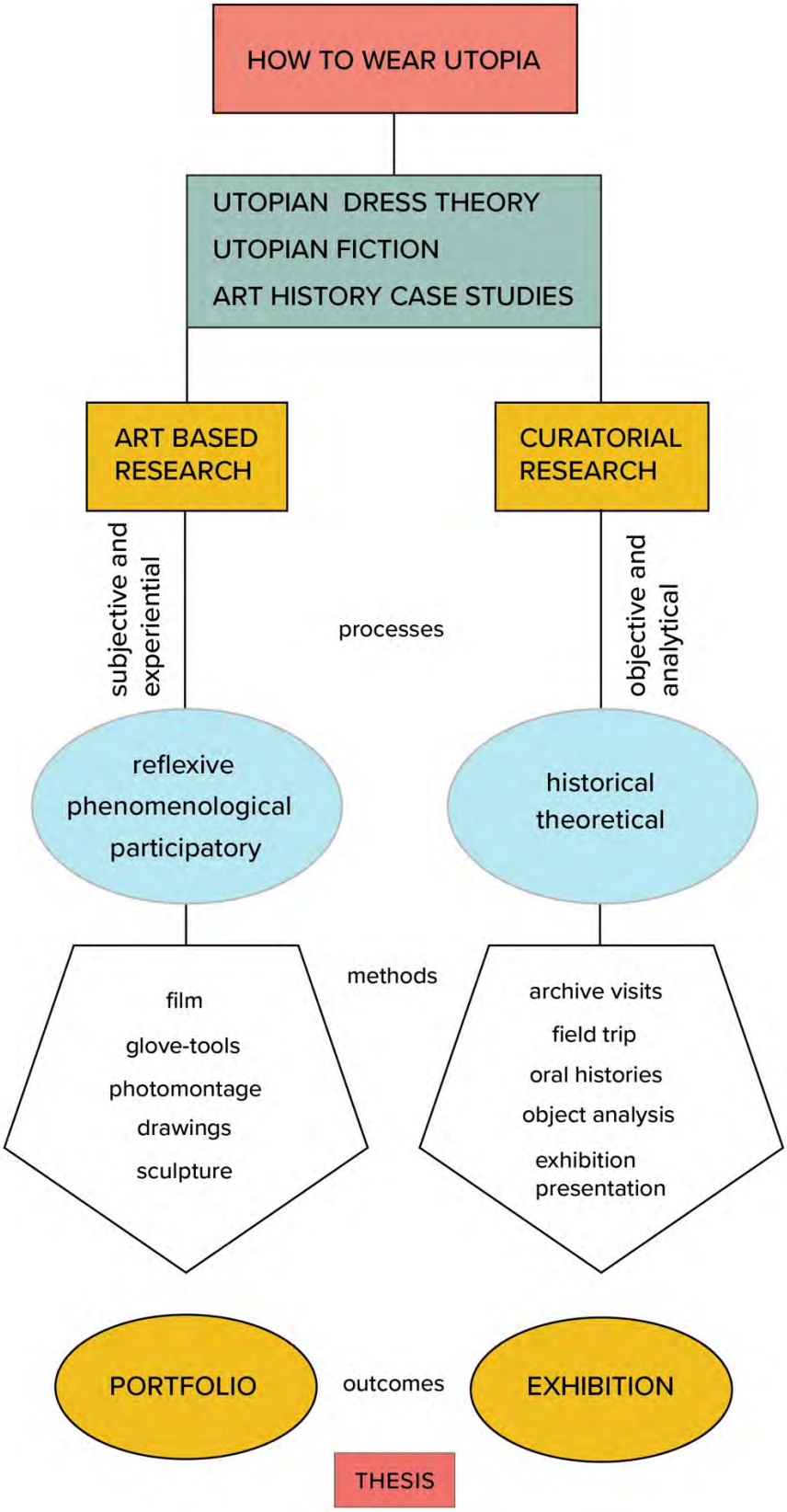

Figure 1. Methodology diagram

Research timeline (October 2015- September 2024)

The project developed through overlapping and iterative strands of theoretical research, visual art practice and curatorial work. For clarity, I divided this research timeline into four phases. The summary below therefore gives a structured account of timing, scale and purpose, while also foregrounding how questions emerged, shifted and returned across different modes of working.

1. *Phase One (October 2015–December 2017): Theoretical framing, contextualisation and historical survey*

The project began in October 2015 with a research proposal that approached utopia not as a distant ideal or a blueprint, but as a practical and critical method for thinking and making (Levitas 2013). The purpose of this phase was to establish a conceptual framework for understanding how clothing might participate in egalitarian social arrangements and to test the proposition that dress can act as a social tool, rather than a commodified marker of identity and distinction.

Methodologically, the phase combined theoretical research with a cross-disciplinary historical survey of utopian dress. Through close readings of utopian fiction in which clothing is embedded in civic organisation and collective life, I identified a set of recurrent attributes that further led the research: functionality, commonality, conviviality, utopian temporality and politics.

Two art-historical case studies sharpened this framework: Varvara Stepanova's *prozodezhda* (Russian Constructivism), which models dress as a tool for everyday activity and labour, and Archizoom Associati's *Dressing is easy* (1973), which proposes dress as a DIY kit and, in effect, an end to fashion as a system. Across these materials, workwear emerged as the key site where the project's concerns converged.

Practice-based research developed in parallel. In 2016 I undertook archival research, including an initial visit to Massimo Osti's archive in Bologna, to examine how he drew on workwear to innovate streetwear. Between February and December 2016, I produced a series of collages and drawings speculating on future work and workwear. Between May and November 2017, these experiments developed into a small set of wearable glove-tool prototypes.

Outcomes and influence: Phase One produced a historical survey of utopian dress and its key characteristics. The findings showed that workwear most closely represented utopian dress and was commonly appropriated as a form of dress that carries a social ethos. Practice-based

research focused on the future of work and workwear and tested 'dress as a tool' through speculative collages and a several glove-tool prototypes, including scissor and brush gloves. These outcomes prompted Phase Two, in which I developed an exhibition proposal as a curatorial method for organising the research and testing its claims in a public and institutional setting.

2. *Phase Two (February 2018–December 2021): Exhibition proposal, field research and methodological reorientation*

Phase Two began in February 2018, when I organised my visual material into an exhibition proposal. The purpose was not simply dissemination, but to test a curatorial method for making workwear visible as a civic form linked to equality, solidarity and collective life. In museums and in dress history, workwear is often overlooked or reduced to narrow interpretations of labour or technology.

This phase expanded the project's empirical base through sustained archival and collection research. Key visits included the Levi's archive in San Francisco (May 2018), alongside conversations with Issey Miyake's archivist (from July 2018), the Vintage Showroom in London (September 2018) and Nigel Cabourn's studio and archive in Newcastle (December 2018). These encounters sharpened the exhibition proposal, especially around value, categorisation and the shifting meanings of 'workwear'.

Practice-based research continued in parallel. Between September and December 2018, I developed glove-tools and produced life-size casts conceived as 'wearable monuments', intended for participant testing and extending the studio work towards embodied and participatory methods.

The timeline of Phase Two was shaped by maternity leave (February 2019–February 2020), later extended by a further six months due to the Covid-19 pandemic and nursery closures (March–August 2020). Despite these interruptions, I secured a travel research grant that enabled a two-week field trip to Japan in May 2019, undertaken with my three-month-old baby. The fieldwork was multi-sited, including Buaisou (Tokushima Prefecture), Kapital (Kojima), 45R (Tokyo), Issey Miyake's archive (Tokyo) and meetings with Visvim and Blue Blue Japan. The findings shaped the exhibition proposal's theme 'Fashion Archaeology', centred on reinvented textile processes and garment ageing, drawing on traditional craft practices as resources for alternative futures.

When I resumed part-time in August 2020, intended participatory methods were no longer feasible. I adapted by conducting online interviews with five professionals across different forms of work. These interviews proved useful for professional and historical context, but limited for future-oriented speculation, prompting a shift towards reflexive practice. In parallel, my studio practice moved away from function towards abstraction and material intelligence. Experiments with 3D scanning and enlarged 3D prints of glove-tools produced a negative result, flattening the hand-made textures and erasing embodied knowledge. This reinforced a methodological pivot towards an embodied, material-led enquiry centred on the 'intelligent hand' and 'thinking with clay'. By the end of Phase Two, the second exhibition proposal was largely complete, although pandemic-related closures made its realisation uncertain as museums and galleries revised their programmes.

Outcome and influence: Phase Two expanded the project through archival research, fieldwork and early lender outreach. It also clarified workwear's entanglement with high fashion, streetwear and craft. Covid-19 constraints, and the limits of interview-based enquiry, prompted a shift towards reflexive, material-led practice and temporality understood as experiential rather than linear. These shifts shaped Phase Three, in which writing-led consolidation and exhibition-making became the primary means of testing the project's civic and political claims.

3. *Phase Three (January 2022–November 2023): Writing-led consolidation and exhibition curating as research*

Phase Three began with consolidation through writing. Between January and April 2022, I drafted the *Worktopias* chapter, clarifying the methodological stakes of the practice-based trajectory. During this process, Neoconcretism emerged as a crucial case study because it offered both a language and a method for thinking about participation, sensory engagement and experience. Returning to Lygia Clark and to Hélio Oiticica's participatory and socially oriented dress experiments helped me articulate utopian dress as an experiential tool rather than a purely symbolic form.

In July 2022, the research shifted when I was invited to curate an exhibition on workwear at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. Given the tight production schedule, I stepped away from formal study to work full-time on the exhibition between September 2022 and March 2023. The exhibition involved sustained object research, conversations and negotiations with lenders, artists, designers and archivists, the development of display strategies and the writing of exhibition texts. Working in a museum context made it clear that workwear is culturally

contested and draws publics into debate about value and civic life. This prompted a closer engagement with Bruno Latour's concept of *dingpolitik* and the 'parliament of things' (Latour 2005) as a way to understand how objects generate attachments, controversy and public engagement.

From April 2023 onwards, I returned to studio experiments, developing glove-tool iterations in wax and clay and reflecting on hand-making in relation to technology. This reinforced the realisation that speculation on future dress practices does not depend on technological novelty, but can emerge through embodied, tactile processes.

Outcome and influence: The main outcome of this phase was curating the exhibition *Workwear* at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. The exhibition deepened my understanding of workwear and clarified its civic role, positioning the museum as a forum in which garments negotiate meaning and status in public. It also made the absence of sustained embodied participation within the doctoral research more visible, strengthening the rationale for Phase Four's participatory study.

4. *Phase Four (November 2023–September 2024): Participatory study Dresstopia and closure*

Phase Four addressed a remaining gap in the art practice strand: sustained participatory and embodied investigation, first interrupted by Covid-19 and later deferred by exhibition demands. The purpose of this phase was to undertake a short participatory study so that the thesis could conclude with embodied evidence rather than reflexive studio practice alone. This work forms the basis of the final chapter, 'Dresstopia', and was conceived both as a conclusion to the research and as an indication of how it might extend beyond the thesis.

Because the study involved three child participants and seven adults, the research ethics process required careful attention. I submitted an initial ethics application in December 2023. After revisions and additional documentation across two rounds of application, approval was granted in March 2024. During this period, I tested and prototyped seven felt canvases for *Dresstopia,* refining them as enabling devices for participation. Filming took place in May 2024, followed by review, editing and analysis. Overall, the phase lasted approximately eleven months, encompassing ethics approval, making the canvases, filming and editing.

Outcome and influence: The outcome is the *Dresstopia* film, which provides embodied evidence of dress as a speculative, participatory medium beyond its commercial associations.

From September 2024 onwards, I focused on writing the thesis in its final form. Writing also functioned as a reflective and integrative phase, in which findings were clarified, organised, synthesised and structured into the thesis.

THESIS PREVIEW

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first is a theoretical and cultural study focusing on the concepts of utopian thought and dress. The second discusses practice-based research in curating and art practice.

The thesis is organised into six chapters. The first three provide a cultural and theoretical overview, including a historical survey of utopian dress. The latter three present the practice-based research, which evolved into two main strands: curating the exhibition Workwear and developing my art practice-based research.

The first chapter serves as an introduction, addressing the research aims and questions, and providing an overview of key terms and general concepts. Here, I clarify the term 'dress' and how it differs from 'fashion'. Although this distinction is well-established within fashion discourse, 'dress' is less familiar outside of this context. I define 'dress' broadly, as a creative medium. Additionally, I outline the research methodology, presenting my multifaceted approach, which includes phenomenology, reflexivity and participation. I also discuss the two main avenues through which my practice-based research has developed. One avenue draws on theory and history used to curating the thematic exhibition *Workwear* (Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam in 2023)., while the other avenue focuses on my art practice-research.

The second chapter undertakes a textual analysis of utopian theory, utopian fiction and the concept of utopia as a method (Levitas 2013). As utopian dress before the twentieth century mainly features in fiction, I explore utopian narratives that discuss ideas of dress. This analysis examines how these narratives address society's organisation, sustainability and social attitudes and values. Additionally, I discuss the concepts of dress and clothing within these literary utopias, highlighting aspects such as aesthetics, materials, design features, symbolism, their temporal qualities and the frequency of change. From this analysis, key themes of functionality, conviviality, commonality, utopian temporality and politics emerge as central to the theoretical foundation of the study. These utopian attributes form the foundation of the theoretical framework, guiding the development of my practice-based research.

The third chapter analyses the attitudes and practices of three historical case studies that engage with the topic of utopian dress: Russian Constructivism, Italian Radical Design in the 1960s and 70s, and the Neoconcrete art movement in Brazil, particularly through the

participatory art experiments of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape. While Neoconcretism drew inspiration from Russian Constructivism, Italian Radical Design has not been studied in relation to either movement. I discuss the sartorial proposal 'prozodezhda', a unique kind of workwear envisioned by Russian Constructivist Varvara Stepanova to combat fashion, contextualising this within the broader philosophy proposed by leading Constructivists. Neoconcretists did not approach clothing purely as design, but their wearable 'propositions' offer an intriguing concept in relation to the body – as a phenomenological and reflective tool. Italian radical design groups proposed a DIY toolbox as a means to personal autonomy and a countermeasure against fashion as a system of capitalist control. Here, dress is also presented as a formula, but one that is convivial rather than industrially produced.

These three independent movements, which emerged in geographically distant locations and at different times in history, all provide examples of intriguing dress practices that resisted the prevailing ideologies. However, I also elaborate on their theoretical and political positions, as these are closely intertwined with their practices.

Chapter Four outlines the curation of the exhibition *Workwear*. This chapter presents the curatorial concept and the themes of the exhibition, which are informed by the theoretical and historical research discussed in Chapters One and Two. I also write about selected exhibits in each section to showcase the diversity of these examples and highlight the originality of these ideas. The exhibits include a mix of artworks, real protective workwear, costume prototypes, textiles, film and performance from various geographical locations, cultures and time periods. Additionally, I reflect on how curating the exhibition expanded and advanced the research and discuss the methods I employed in the process.

Chapters Five and Six showcase a portfolio of my art practice-based research. Chapter Five includes reflections on the making processes, materials and techniques I used. I discuss my experiences working with clay and wax, as well as failed attempts at using 3D printing. These experiences prompted me to explore the dual role of technology as both an empowering creative tool and a limiting imposition. This exploration delves into the concepts of 'worktopias' and wearable tools. The research methods employed include drawings, photomontage, sculpture casting, making 'glove-tools' objects and sculpting in clay and wax.

Chapter Six focuses on *Dresstopia*, a participatory research project on utopian dress, documented in film format. In this chapter, I examine the process of creating a series of wearable canvases and filming participants as they embody and activate the work. I reflect on

the dynamics of filming and participation, including observations on the participants' comments, behaviour and findings. I conclude that the format was less restrictive than anticipated, as it unfolded in many unexpected ways. I also delve into the editing process and the insights gained after repeatedly watching the unedited footage. *Dresstopia* suggests a plausible format of practice that intersects the fields of visual arts, dress and utopia.

The Conclusion chapter addresses the research findings in relation to my research questions, with particular emphasis on understanding dress practice as a process. The theoretical proposal demonstrated the potential of treating utopia as a method and utopian dress as a tool. In this chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to the case studies, considering how these practices engage with the idea of social dress. I also draw conclusions about the exhibition *Workwear* and its civic dimension, and reflect on my practice-based research, particularly *Worktopia*s and *Dresstopia* projects. The final section suggests possible directions for future research, outlining how this work might inform further studies in art, dress and utopia.

CHAPTER TWO: UTOPIA AS A METHOD

Introduction: Concepts of utopia

Utopian theory spans a wide range of disciplines, including literature, philosophy, sociology, politics, economics and environmental studies. Its interdisciplinary nature reflects an ambitious aim: to imagine and design an alternative society that addresses almost every aspect of human existence. This broad scope makes utopian theory both inspiring and inherently complex, inviting diverse interpretations and critiques.

The term 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More (1478–1535) in his 1516 novel *Utopia*, originally published in Latin. The word is a deliberate play on *eu-topos* ('good place') and *ou-topos* ('no place'), or, as Miguel Abensour suggests, *udetopia* – 'the place of no time' (Abensour 2017, 30). This plurality of meanings highlights the satirical and contradictory facets of utopian thought: it is both possible and impossible, strange yet familiar, and situated in both the present and the future.

The definition of utopia, unsurprisingly given its enigmatic and ambiguous nature, remains the subject of ongoing debate. In common usage, the term refers to an ideal but unattainable society, sometimes regarded as totalitarian or static, and largely impractical. The lack of a definitive concept has made utopia an ideological battleground. However, as Abensour argues, 'Utopia is neither a kind of plan nor any kind of model', and the artistry of its writing is often misunderstood or oversimplified (Abensour 2017, 20–22).

Ruth Levitas stresses the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of utopias, drawing on art, literature, philosophy and the social sciences to deepen our understanding of utopian thought. This perspective reveals the values, aspirations and possible avenues for social change embedded in utopian visions. Levitas recognises utopian studies as a distinct field and argues for structural pluralism, defining utopian thought in terms of form, content and function. She contends that utopias are active rather than passive, as is often assumed (Levitas 2011).

Several theorists associate the utopia with desire. Levitas (2013, xii) defines utopia as 'the expression of the desire for a better way of being or living'. This definition closely resonates with Ernst Bloch's idea of utopia as an educated or learned hope – what he calls, in Latin, *docta spes* (Bloch, 1995). Fredric Jameson (1994, 90) describes the utopian process as 'desiring to desire, a learning to desire, the invention of the desire called utopia in the first place'. In a similar vein,

Abensour describes utopia as the 'education of desire' – the aspiration to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way' (Levitas 2013, 5).

Nevertheless, the concept of *utopia* originated in literature, which is why it is often examined from the perspectives of intellectual history, political thought and social theory. Literary approaches to utopia emphasise imagination – a quality often overlooked in social, political and economic theories. Like art, utopian fiction relies on using the imagination to critique the present and propose alternative futures.

As noted in the Introduction, in its early articulation the idea of utopian dress emerges most clearly in utopian fiction. In this research, such fiction therefore provides the starting point for exploring utopian dress, offering a framework for examining its design features, symbolism and social roles within imagined worlds.

Darko Suvin (b. 1931), a pioneering science fiction theorist, argues that utopia is best understood as a subgenre of science fiction: 'Strictly speaking, utopia is not a genre in its own right, but rather the socio-political subgenre of science fiction' (Suvin 2016 [1979], 61). Building on Suvin's influential theory, Jameson explored the political potential of science fiction and expanded the theory of utopia.

Several theorists understand utopia as a method. This approach encourages the imaginative exploration of alternative futures without prescribing any single path. In this sense, utopia becomes a creative process, embracing humour, play and open-ended imagination. This poetic, daydream-like dimension of utopia echoes Lyman Tower Sargent's idea of 'social dreaming' (1994) and Bloch's (1995) concept of daydreams, in which possibilities unfold in the space between reality and aspiration. In *A Philosophy of the Future*, Bloch (1970, 86) writes:

> Dreams come in the day as well as at night. And both kinds of dreaming are motivated by wishes they seek to fulfil. But day-dreams differ from night-dreams; for the day-dreaming 'I' persists through, consciously, privately, envisaging the circumstances and images of a desired, better life.

Both Jameson and Levitas understand utopia as a method for reimagining alternatives, rejecting static endpoints. Jameson regards it primarily as a critical tool in literature – one that disrupts and questions, providing a radical alternative to capitalist realism. In his essay 'Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future', Jameson (Gordin, 2010, 21–23) writes:

> We ordinarily think of utopia as a place, or if you like a nonplace that looks like a place. How can place be a method?
>
> The utopia, I argue, is not representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our society and world.

Levitas goes further, developing a theory of 'utopia as a method' (2013) and introducing the concept of utopia as the 'Imaginary Reconstitution of Society' (IROS), emphasising utopia as a tool for social analysis and critique. She presents utopia as an active methodology –a means of critically examining and reimagining society. Rather than remaining static, utopia becomes a process of questioning, imagining and proposing alternatives to existing systems.

Levitas (2013, 153–197) identifies three interconnected dimensions of the utopian method:

1. Archaeological Dimension: This involves uncovering implicit desires and visions for a better world embedded within existing societies and ideologies. By analysing what is considered normal or acceptable, we can reveal hidden aspirations for change.

2. Ontological Dimension: This dimension explores the nature of human existence and examines how social structures support or inhibit human flourishing. It considers the interplay between material conditions and individual well-being.

3. Architectural Dimension: This refers to the imaginative construction of alternative social arrangements. It involves envisioning how society might be organised differently to better meet human needs and values.

The theory of utopia as a method can be applied across various domains, including visual art practice, where artists use utopia as an imaginative tool to critique society and envision alternative realities. Both Levitas and Bloch argue that art plays a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and creating space for new visions of the future.

When applied to dress practices, clothing becomes a medium for envisioning and expressing new possibilities, both for individuals and for collective ways of living. This approach underscores the importance of reflection, interdisciplinary dialogue and imaginative exploration in addressing the complexities and challenges of everyday life.

In my research, I apply these ideas to the visual arts and dress practice as a framework for exploring the imaginative and social potential of dress. The utopian method serves as a foundation for visual arts and dress practices, as well as for cultural critique, by:

- Examining and critiquing the cultural and social values embedded in dress.
- Envisioning how clothing can expand human potential and challenge norms.
- Experimenting with dress as a medium for imagining and enacting better alternatives.

By integrating these approaches, this research investigates how dress and art practice can employ the utopian method to critique the present and explore possibilities for shaping different futures.

Suvin introduced several key concepts that have significantly influenced the criticism of utopian fiction. Most notably, his theory of 'cognitive estrangement' explains how fiction critiques reality through contrast (Suvin 2016 [1979]). Through estrangement, utopian fiction exposes contradictions and proposes alternatives.

Suvin (2016, 54) identifies two primary characteristics of literary utopias: first, imaginative removal from the author's empirical environment, and, second, sociopolitical perfection. He also introduces the term 'novum' to describe the innovative yet plausible fictional worlds depicted in novels. The defining feature of the novum is its alienation from reality, while still remaining conceivable.

Fredric Jameson builds on Suvin's concept of science fiction literature into a utopian theory. In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), he explores utopia and science fiction as intertwined cultural forms. He positions utopia as a dynamic method of critique and imagination rather than a static blueprint, highlighting the role of speculative thinking in challenging dominant capitalist ideology. Influenced by Ernst Bloch's concept of the 'Not-Yet' (1995), Jameson reimagines utopia as an ongoing process of critique and hope, revealing the limitations of the present while pointing to future possibilities.

Bloch's 'Not-Yet' is central to his philosophy of hope and futurity, and has provided a foundation for several theorists. In *The Principle of Hope* (1995), Bloch argues that the present is incomplete and the future remains an open space shaped by human creativity and action. It is this sense of incompleteness that prevents utopias from becoming static or finished.

Jameson (2005) similarly argues against utopia as a static plan for a perfect society. Instead, he positions it as a critical method for examining both the limitations and the possibilities of the

present. By reframing utopia as a dynamic tool for inquiry rather than a fixed end-goal, Jameson encourages us to question the ideological limits of existing systems. This perspective builds on Bloch's (1995) assertion that utopia is an ongoing process of critique and hope – a continuous journey rather than a final destination.

These arguments contrast with a common claim in fashion and dress studies: that utopia represents a perfect, achieved society – one that is static or 'timeless' (Bartlett 2006, 64). However, in utopian fiction, the treatment of time is less definitive. While many authors agree that clothing should be durable, there is little consensus on how long garments should last. Even in More's *Utopia*, clothing is designed to endure but is replaced every two years.

These timeless or static interpretations of utopian dress within fashion and dress discourse often arise from comparisons between utopian ideals of time and the rapid cycles of contemporary fashion. In recent debates on fashion and sustainability, time is typically discussed in terms of fast and slow fashion, or through the 'one-dress' proposal, all of which draw on linear, teleological accounts of temporal change (Burcikova 2019). These are valuable contributions to dress studies, not least in demonstrating how utopian thinking can be mobilised towards concrete interventions. However, the approach I develop here treats utopian practice less as a solution than as a method, grounded in non-linear, non-teleological temporalities that sit alongside, rather than within, fashion discourse.

When set against the backdrop of fast fashion, static clothing is positioned as its dialectical opposite. However, this perspective risks undermining the creative and imaginative potential of utopia, which, in my theoretical reading, is an ongoing and dynamic process rooted in the contrast between the present and the future. I will return to the question of utopian temporality later in this chapter, as it offers a new perspective on utopian dress.

An often-overlooked element in utopian theory is conviviality – the quality of fostering friendly, lively and socially cohesive interactions. This concept plays a significant role in utopian fiction, particularly in the way communities are depicted as organising themselves and relating to one another through everyday practices.

Also central to utopias is the reimagining of the relationship between the individual and the collective. I will examine the idea of commonality in relation to individuality, which is often framed in creative discourse as a symbol of personal freedom and autonomy, and is frequently positioned in tension with the notion of the common.

In summary, my research explores how these utopian ideals and theories might shape dress and its practice. Could dress serve as both a method of practice and a medium for social fantasy, contributing to more egalitarian and convivial models of collective living? While utopian fiction provides historical accounts of utopian dress, the focus of my inquiry is on how these ideals can inform contemporary dress practices and foster new possibilities for connection and imagination.

Utopian fiction

The main tenets of utopian literature are social and gender equality, planned and stable economics, reduced working hours, optimism, happiness and well-being, free labour and endorsed creativity, living in perfect harmony with nature but, most importantly, high levels of social consciousness. The concepts explored are drawn from novels that idealise forms of communism.

Egalitarianism is a central theme in utopian novels, where authors envision societies founded on fairness in wealth distribution, gender roles and political power. These stories examine various facets of equality, depicting visionary communities and their daily life arrangements. By addressing economic disparity, gender equality and environmental sustainability, these works encourage readers to envision a world free from existing hierarchies and systems of power.

Thomas More famously advocated the abolition of private property and money (More 1964 [1516]) to eliminate greed, which he described as the root of all evil. In his vision, goods are stored in communal warehouses and distributed according to need, ensuring no one experiences poverty or accumulates excessive wealth. Officials are elected by the people, and decisions are made collectively, resembling democratic governance. More also presented the concept of labour equality, where everyone contributes to society through work. However, thanks to efficient labour organisation, the workday is kept short, allowing time for both education and leisure.

Aleksander Bogdanov's science fiction novel *Red Star* (1984 [1908]) presents several radical utopian visions of a communist society on Mars. It is one of the earliest sci-fi novels to imagine the disappearance of both social and physical gender distinctions, along with traditional gender roles. Martian society reflects communism in that there is no private property, and all goods are distributed according to need. Citizens work for the collective good, and the planet's economy is

meticulously planned based on scientific principles. Mars is portrayed as an ideal world where socialism has been fully realised; workers have complete control over their working hours, and tools are displayed in art galleries as aesthetic achievements.

The challenge of balancing society with nature is an overarching theme of the book. The ecological crisis faced by Bogdanov's Martian society serves as a key catalyst for social revolution. Here, technological advances have had a significant impact on shaping society. The Martians have used technology to remove scarcity, with everything from manufacturing to distribution geared towards the common benefit. This reflects Bogdanov's belief in the importance of scientific management and planning as essential components of socialism.

One of the most compelling descriptions of attitudes towards ownership in utopian literature is found in Ursula K. Le Guin's sci-fi novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (2017 [1974]). The novel presents two planets as metaphors for the Cold War stand-off between Western capitalism and Soviet-style socialism. On the anarchist planet Anarres, there is no property ownership of any kind. The language spoken, Pravic (derived from the Russian and Serbo-Croat word *pravda*, meaning 'justice'), is constructed to discourage the use of the possessive, a feature reflected in the novel's title.

As More did in *Utopia*, Le Guin reinvents the language of utopian society to fulfil a social purpose. These changes in vocabulary, alongside neologisms and other linguistic variations, serve as methods for altering people's relationships to things. Anarres, lacking natural resources, particularly water, envisions a society where human potential is realised through cooperation, empathy and shared responsibility. In contrast, the planet Urras, which resembles Earth's Western capitalist societies, is rich in natural resources and exploits them with a consumerist and wasteful attitude.

A Modern Utopia by H. G. Wells (2020 [1905]) was the first novel to propose the concept of a world state, featuring free movement and a universal language. In this vision of utopia, humanity has been largely liberated by technology and freed from the need for physical labour. Wells introduces the concept of meritocratic equality, envisioning a society governed by individuals who earn their positions based on merit rather than inheritance or privilege. This ruling class, known as the 'Samurai', oversees a society where wealth is evenly distributed, ensuring that all citizens have equal access to resources. Although the Samurai function as an elite group with authority and status, membership is theoretically open to anyone who can meet the demanding moral, intellectual and physical criteria. Utopians here were all strict vegetarians, and the

genders were very much alike. Economic equality is maintained by the state's provision of everyone's basic needs, including housing, healthcare and education.

Similar concepts of a technologically advanced and centralised society have been described in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (2011 [1888]), which depicts a successful American socialist utopia. The plot describes an immensely technocratic society, in which highly efficient production and distribution are state-owned and -controlled. Such belief in technology as a driver of societal change contrasted sharply with William Morris's romantic, anti-industrial idealism.[3]

Morris openly disliked and criticised Bellamy's book, which he reviewed in *The Commonweal* on 22 June 1889.[4] This reportedly inspired him to write *News from Nowhere* (Snodgrass 1995, 379). In contrast to Bellamy's rigid and prescriptive utopias, Morris – a romantic as well as a socialist – valued individual freedom, creativity, and the human and environmental connection.

The central theme of Morris' 1890 ecotopia *News from Nowhere* is the idea of work as pleasure. In this vision of the future, the division between mental and manual labour has been overcome. All money is outdated in the communist future and most of the population is doing creative work. People work for free because they love working. Morris introduces the idea of the 'banded workshop', which is smoke-free and equipped with tools; there, people gather to enjoy making crafts. Use of machinery is not banned, but it is so advanced that it liberates humans from all tiresome and physically demanding work. Although some advanced technology is mentioned, it is only used to alleviate tasks that are tedious or difficult to do by hand (Morris 2023, 82).

In Morris' utopian vision, art, nature and labour were harmoniously intertwined. He viewed the Industrial Revolution and its consequences as dehumanising and harmful to society.

News from Nowhere envisions a utopia free from politics, embracing an anarchist society where governance is abolished, and the parliament buildings are derelict and overgrown with ivy. Rather than focusing on technological innovation, Morris' description of the future emphasises restoration. Large, polluting factories have been replaced by fields, woodlands and a decentralised network of workshops.

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[3] William Morris (1834–96) was an English writer, poet, artist and designer. Morris was an inspiration for the Arts and Crafts Movement and a committed socialist with a deep attachment to art, craftsmanship and the aesthetics of pre-industrial society.

[4] Morris, May, and George Bernard Shaw. 1936. *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist. Volume 2, Morris as a Socialist; William Morris as I Knew Him*. Basil Blackwell, 501–507.

Morris' utopia takes an unusual reductionist approach that has become highly relevant in the context of today's ecological crisis. It emphasises the importance of slowing down economic growth so as to meet human needs while staying within the planet's environmental limits. His vision is particularly inspiring when considering the role of work, as it promotes a more fulfilling, less exploitative approach to labour. As Suvin (2010, 182) elaborates: '*News from Nowhere* sacrifices human productivity in order to get rid of statism and technocracy'.

Utopian fiction has long been criticised for its idealism, often depicting societies that appear too perfect and detached from the complexities of real human experience. Critics argue that these portrayals can obscure the uneven and challenging nature of social change. For instance, Marxists, including Karl Marx himself, dismissed utopian socialism for presenting abstract visions of ideal societies without addressing the material conditions and class struggles necessary for systemic transformation (Engels 2019).

This tension highlights how utopian frameworks can inadvertently undermine the very ideals they seek to endorse. A common critique of utopian fiction is its tendency to depict static and homogeneous societies, where social change is portrayed as unnecessary or even undesirable because the society is imagined as having already achieved perfection. Darko Suvin (2010) offers an important distinction between traditional utopian literature (such as Plato, More, Tommaso Campanella and Bellamy) and science fiction, suggesting that science fiction provides a more flexible and productive framework for exploring utopian ideas. According to Suvin, utopian literature can become rigid and prescriptive, while science fiction's speculative nature allows for a more nuanced engagement with social issues.

In my reading of selected utopian fiction, the time, dynamics and social idealisations differ. There is no single reading or characterisation that applies to the entire genre. Some narratives are describing a linear future, some approach time as cyclical; some are idealised, while others are ambiguous; some are centralised, others anarchist; some endorse technology, others find technology destructive.[5]

Perhaps the most interesting aspect is how these plots relate to the concept of time differently. In Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (2011 [1888]), the protagonist falls asleep and wakes up in the year 2000, finding that America has transformed into a socialist utopia. The narrative is distinctly linear, portraying a future state as the culmination of societal progress and

[5] See Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. 1995. *Encyclopaedia of Utopian Literature*. ABC-CLIO, 524.

technological advances. This linear conception of time is teleological, suggesting that human society is moving forward towards an inevitable, improved state.

H. G. Wells pioneered time travel in his novel *The Time Machine* (2011 [1895]). The main protagonist travels using a mechanical device called a 'time machine'. Wells proposes the idea of time as the fourth dimension, in which the protagonist can travel back and forth. While Wells appears excited by technology and its possibilities, he is also aware of its negative implications, particularly when the main character travels far into the future to witness the death of the planet due to heat. Wells' narrative explores the philosophical implications of time travel, particularly the idea that time is unchangeable and that each moment exists only once. The pessimistic outcome of the story is that the time traveller struggles with his inability to alter the past or the future, highlighting the deterministic constraints of time within which humans operate.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (2017 [1974]), time is described differently on two different planets. On the capitalist planet Urras, time is linear, associated with progress. In contrast, its moon Anarres, home to a utopian society of anarchists, adopts a cyclical view of time that emphasises sustainability, repetition and community. There is no idea of (linear) progress on Anarres. This cyclical perspective implies that utopia is not a static endpoint but a continuous process of struggle in order to achieve sustainability, equality and survival. Also, there is no definitive conclusion as the novel's protagonist re-evaluates his ideals and assumptions about both societies, suggesting that the concept of time is dissociated from technological advances and is instead flexible, ambiguous and mouldable.

In William Morris's 1890 novel *News from Nowhere* (2023), the concept of time is different because his utopia arises not in some distant future, but from a revolution that takes place within the protagonist's own era, making it feel both immediate and attainable. Morris' utopia rejects both the idea of technological progress as a means of creating a better future and the structured, calculative and oppressive concept of time. This is, from my understanding, the most radical aspect of it. Morris' concept of time serves as a critique of the capitalist-industrial complex and its reduction of time to a commodity. This position intersects with Karl Marx's theory of the capitalist commodification of time. But, while Marx proposed a future in which workers owned the means of production, Morris imagined a more radical transformation of labour, focusing not just on ownership of production but also on the nature of work itself. He offers a vision where time is measured more by natural and human-centric rhythms. Work is not separated from leisure in the harsh, structured manner of industrial society; rather, it is

integrated into life as a joyous, creative activity that contributes to personal fulfilment and community well-being. Morris argued that 'the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself'.[6]

Morris doesn't completely reject technology. He does not simply propose a return to a pre-industrial past, but instead suggests a reintegration of the best aspects of past practices with the ethical and social insights of the present.

Decolonial perspectives

Recent work in utopian studies has scrutinised understandings of utopia from decolonial perspectives, asking not only what utopias imagine but what histories and power relations make those imaginaries possible (Edwards 2023; Hardy 2012). This scholarship is often framed as a disciplinary self-critique, prompted by the field's long-standing tendency to centre European and North American canons while marginalising Indigenous, Black and decolonial thought. A key claim is that colonialism is not merely a 'theme' within some utopian texts but a structuring condition of modern political imaginaries. In 'Hope Draped in Black: Decolonizing Utopian Studies', Edwards (2003) argues that race, empire and the afterlives of colonial modernity are constitutive questions for utopian studies, not peripheral context, and she calls for the field to learn from Black utopian traditions and Black futurity. The consequence is that these histories do not simply inform interpretation but actively condition what can be imagined as an 'elsewhere', and which futures are allowed to appear universal.

Even long-standing scholars of utopianism such as Sargent and Jameson acknowledge links between utopian literature and colonialism. Sargent shows how colonies, especially settler colonies in the Americas and the Pacific, have functioned as privileged 'laboratories' for utopian experiment, and he notes that many canonical utopias, from More onwards, are entangled with domination, dispossession and, in some cases, slavery (Sargent 1983, 2010a, 2018). Jameson is equally direct. In *Archaeologies of the Future* he characterises classical utopia as 'the prototype of the settler colony and the forerunner of modern imperialism', arguing that colonial violence is embedded in the genre form and is a more serious problem than the internal discipline or conformity depicted within utopian societies themselves (Jameson 2005, 205).

[6] Article published in *The Commonweal* on 22 June 1889.

These colonial entanglements are present from the genre's inception and have been most intensively debated in relation to Thomas More's *Utopia*. The text situates its 'elsewhere' in the imaginative geography of the 'New World' by linking Raphael Hythloday to Amerigo Vespucci's voyages. Utopian speculation thus emerges alongside early modern travel writing and its colonial epistemologies, which often translated Indigenous worlds into European fantasies of knowledge, improvement and possession. Tracing this genealogy matters, but it does not exhaust what utopia can do as a critical and creative practice.

Jameson's distinction between the historically specific genre of utopian fiction and a more diffuse 'utopian impulse' persisting within and against late capitalist culture clarifies my own usage. Rather than treating utopia as a historical object or a political programme to be adopted, I draw on it as a method (Bloch 1995; Jameson 2005; Levitas 2013): a way of reading how desires, constraints and horizons of possibility are organised through imaginative reconstruction rather than as a blueprint to be endorsed. This conceptual precision matters because, if 'utopia' becomes a loose synonym for modernising ideology or any politics of improvement, it loses analytic force and collapses into a vague label for developmentalism or imperial projects. Understood as method, utopia denaturalises the present by showing it as contingent, directs attention to the conditions under which an 'elsewhere' becomes thinkable and helps show how critique can coexist with colonial world-making within the same narrative structure. The question, then, is not what a better world is, but how social dreaming can be practised without reproducing colonial and capitalist premises, and how such imagining might rework inherited norms and unsettle entrenched relations of power.

Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) provides a useful example of how utopia can be reworked in decolonial terms. He criticises classical utopias, from Plato to More, for imagining the ideal society as closed and stable, and he notes how utopian writing can reproduce colonial ideals by projecting Western values as universal and flattening cultural difference (Glissant and Obrist 2013, 11). From the mid-1990s onwards, however, Glissant increasingly takes up the term *utopie* in order to reshape it. Rather than a singular, static vision, utopia becomes relational, oriented towards open-ended becoming. He describes an 'utopia that never settles and that opens tomorrow, like a sun and a fruit both shared' (Obrist and Raza 2017, 162). From *La Cohée du Lamentin* (2005) through to *Dans un monde imprévisible, l'utopie est nécessaire* (2024), he defines utopia as *ce qui nous manque dans le monde* ('what is lacking in the world'), a mobile, 'trembling' orientation grounded in relation rather than achieved static perfection. Recent readings of Glissant's late engagement with *utopie* stress this non-classical and non-normative orientation and its refusal of closure and totalising accounts of the world (Azérad 2020; Bonasia

2024; Selao 2012). Glissant's work is therefore useful for my approach because it treats utopia as a poetic and critical practice that can be reworked as a decolonial tool to shape alternative futures.

Dressing in utopian fiction

The wearing of uniforms is one of the most common clothing concepts in collectivist utopias. Drawing on egalitarian ideals and the disappearance of class distinctions, utopian clothes often emphasise comfort and functionality.

In the ideal society outlined in More's *Utopia* (2012 [1516], 45), 'they wear the same sort of clothes without any distinction', and these clothes are described as practical and pleasant. 'Every man there is content with one [outfit], which very often serves him two years' (More 2012 [1516], 50). Utopians wear wool and linen for everyday clothing and 'these are all of one colour and that is the natural colour of the wool' (More 2012 [1516], 48). As More adds, 'The fashion never alters, and it is neither disagreeable nor uneasy, so it is suited for the climate, and calculated both for their summers and winters' (More 2012 [1516], 45). For work, they cover their clothes with leather and skins, and this workwear is designed for durability.

These clothing customs sit within the Utopians' commitment to equality and their wider rejection of luxury and status. Decoration is despised: those convicted of serious crimes are forced to wear gold jewellery as a mark of disgrace, while gold is used for humble domestic items such as pots. Pearls and diamonds are given to children as toys, and they eventually lose interest in them (More 2012 [1516]). More uses these inversions to show that value is cultural and learned rather than inherent.

Wilson (2003, 220) reads More's account of dress in *Utopia* through Vespucci's representations of Indigenous 'simplicity' in the Americas. More broadly, Aileen Ribeiro (1992, 225) argues that the 1507 publication of Vespucci's voyage account 'almost certainly' helped to inspire *Utopia* (1516). At the same time, she suggests that the clothing custom itself is better understood through European religious and sumptuary contexts, proposing that More 'apparently had in mind the capacious cloak of the Grey Friars, or Franciscans' (Ribeiro 1992, 234–35). [7]

[7] Ribeiro attributes this phrasing to Thomas More's letter to Erasmus (December 1516), quoted in J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 59.

This connection is most persuasive if treated as influence at the level of political imagination and world-making rather than as a direct visual reference. Vespucci's descriptions rarely offer detailed garment forms and often rely on the shorthand of 'nakedness'. Yet his letters also describe adornment and value, noting 'wealth' in feathers and 'paternosters', as well as stones worn on 'necks, lips, and ears', and suggesting an ethic of contentment with 'what nature has given them' (Vespucci 2011 [1502], 'First Voyage'). Read alongside the rich material record of Indigenous textile production before Columbus, this points to 'nakedness' as a comparative category rather than an absence of sartorial culture.

Within this discourse, More's clothing can be read as an ideological translation of attributed 'New World' values into a European utopian idiom. Equality and sharing are expressed through uniformity and minimal differentiation, and contentment through durability, natural colour and the abolition of fashion cycles (More 2012 [1516], 45, 48, 50). The 'New World' frame matters here not because it supplies a stable ethnographic model (indeed, Cave 1991 cautions against reading *Utopia* as straightforwardly modelled on Indigenous customs), but because it provides a comparative horizon through which European norms can be challenged and reorganised into a systematic social design. In this sense, *Utopia*'s dress code sits at the intersection of critique and colonial world-making. Similar clothing attributes recur in later utopian fiction.

In *The City of the Sun* (Campanella 2019 [1602], 26) clothing is both unisex and uniform: 'they wear white under-garments to which adheres a covering, which is at once coat and legging, without wrinkles'. The undergarment described resembles an all-in-one garment like jumpsuit or overall. Campanella extends the concept of communal ownership to clothing. In this utopian society, garments are shared among citizens rather than privately owned, and they are uniform, available in different thicknesses to suit different seasons. But there is symbolic value associated with clothing. Citizens wear white garments during the daytime and red in the evenings, made out of wool or silk (Campanella 2019 [1602], 31). They dislike black and change their clothes for different ones four times a year, when the season changes and to align with the horoscope, which is a decision made by the 'officer of the health'. Wearing make-up or high heels is prohibited (Campanella 2019 [1602], 31): 'if any women dye her face, so that she may become beautiful, or uses high-heeled boots, so that she might appear tall… she is condemned to capital punishment'. He further explains that utopians get a clear complexion from exercising, so there is no need to paint their faces.

In H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (2020 [1905]), utopians wear neat, colourful clothing, creating the impression of a cheerful, well-dressed population. Apart from the Samurai order, who wear black, everyone enjoys a full spectrum of colours and fabrics, with dyers producing hues 'fuller and purer' than any found on Earth and white garments being especially common. There is no distinction in dress between male and female Samurai: women may wear the same utilitarian uniform as men, or a simple, high-waisted wool dress. Two decades later, in *Men Like Gods* (1923), Wells would imagine his utopians to simply be naked – describing them as sun-browned, healthy and graceful.

In Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (2011 [1888]), citizens can select their clothes from central warehouses as needed, ensuring that resources are efficiently distributed. People use credit cards to shop and goods are delivered to their homes by means of a system of 'pneumatic tubes'. Bellamy goes on to explore fashion in his novel *Equality* (2012 [1897]), a sequel to *Looking Backward*. Unlike the typical uniform, plain or monotonous clothing found in other utopias, here he presents a limitless variety of styles, each customisable according to personal preference. The superintendent in the book explains to Mr West the logic of this system: the *fashion* system was a response to the masses imitating style of the rich. Equality gave everyone power to set fashions, which could thus be highly original and individualised:

> Because you were not equal, you made yourself miserable and ugly in the attempt to seem so. The aesthetic equivalent of the moral wrong of inequality was the artistic abomination of uniformity. On the other hand, equality creates an atmosphere which kills imitation, and is pregnant with originality, for everyone acts out himself, having nothing to gain by imitating anyone else. (Bellamy 2012 [1897], 53)

Despite so many individualised styles, this seemingly ostentatious system does not have a negative impact on the environment. Bellamy (2012 [1897], 44) describes clothing made of strengthened paper, which is recycled when dirty and replaced at very little cost. Utopians do not wash their clothes; instead, they dispose of them and replace them with new ones. With the help of technology, they neither create waste nor pollute the environment.

Like in *Equality*, several utopian novels propose new technological solutions. One of the earliest references to elasticated fabric is in *The City of the Sun* by Campanella (2019 [1602]), where he describes clothing that fits any shape and size. Bogdanov (1984 [1908], 98) introduces innovative manufacturing ideas that eliminate the need for sewing machines, thread and needles:

> The pieces were laid evenly edge to edge and moistened with a special chemical solvent which transformed the material into its previous semiliquid state. A moment later this very volatile solvent had evaporated, and the pieces of fabric were fused together more solidly than could have been done by any stitched seam. All necessary fastenings were soldered on at the same time, producing ready-to-wear suit pieces in several thousand models of different forms and sizes.

Bogdanov describes hundreds of models for each age group, ensuring nearly everyone can find their size, especially since Martian clothing was generally loose-fitting. If no exact fit was available, measurements were taken and a custom suit machine-made within the hour.

In Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, clothing reflects the stark contrasts between the two societies depicted: Urras and Anarres. Each society's clothing symbolises their respective values and social principles. On Anarres, clothing is utilitarian and functional. The inhabitants wear uniform, unadorned garments that are simple, practical and in muted colours, reflecting the society's focus on communal living and conservation of scarce resources. Due to the limited natural resources, particularly water, all clothing on Anarres is made from the 'holum' tree, a versatile plant that provides grain, wood, food, alcohol and fibres for textile and paper. When the main protagonist, Shevek, first travels to the capitalist, wealthy planet Urras, he is shocked to see his 'sleep clothing' thrown into a rubbish bin and immediately incinerated.

> 'The clothes are burned?' Shevek asks.
> 'Oh, those are cheap pyjamas, service issue – wear 'em and throw 'em away, it costs less than cleaning.' (Le Guin 2017 [1974], 11-12)

On Anarres, clothing is communal property, distributed according to need rather than personal ownership. Inhabitants change their clothes only when they require cleaning, and, when garments are worn out beyond repair, they are recycled and remade. As clothing is not considered private property, people simply take what is available, wear it until it is worn out, and then return it to be reprocessed. For example, Shevek owns only two pairs of boots and two sets of clothing: one for work, one for clean wear and one for cold weather.

The fictional population of Anarres recycle their clothing as part of their resource-conscious, communal society. Due to the scarcity of materials on their barren planet, nothing is wasted, and clothing is worn until it is no longer usable. When garments are worn out, they are returned to communal depots to be reprocessed into new fabric or repurposed for other uses.

In contrast, the clothing on Urras is diverse in style, colour and material, reflecting the society's wealth and class system. The A-lo population, which represents the richest class, wear a wide range of styles and colours, signifying their social status and personal wealth. The clothing of Urras' inhabitants is often luxurious, symbolising the significant disparity between the wealthy and the working class. Clothing serves as a marker of social stratification and personal identity, contrasting sharply with the uniformity on Anarres. On Urras, particularly among the wealthy elite, citizens change clothes frequently, often multiple times a day for different social occasions, reflecting the wastefulness and material excess of their society.

From the very beginning of the novel, clothing is used to describe two different attitudes to sustainability and material culture – one treats clothing as disposable, and something that can be changed it as often as the wearer wishes; the other, the access only to very limited resources, wears just a couple of outfits that are recycled after they fall apart.

Overall, Le Guin uses clothing as a kind of metaphor to illustrate and critique the different values and social structures of the two worlds in a way that reflects on the Cold War. The contrast between the plain, functional clothing of Anarres and the varied, luxurious garments of Urras helps to highlight her novel's themes of sustainability and social justice, as well as the impact of clothing on personal identity and the sense of community.

Sustainability is central to William Morris' utopian vision. He famously advised, 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.' Regarding clothes, he noted in *News from Nowhere*:

> As to their dress, which of course I took note of, I should say that they were decently veiled with drapery and not bundled up with millinery; they were clothed like women, not upholstered like armchairs, as most women of our time are. (Morris 2023, 52)

The notable difference from the functional approach to clothing in previously discussed novels is the emphasis on the arts and human creativity as key aspects of well-being. Unlike other utopian fiction writers, Morris associates beauty with functionality, treating clothing as an artistic medium, a form of creative expression and an expression of fine craftsmanship. The garments he proposes are more convivial – not only practical but also aesthetically pleasing. In his vision, sustainability of clothing is linked to the quality of materials and craftsmanship, which contributes to prolonged use.

> you should insist on having materials for your dress that are excellent of their kind, and beautiful of their kind, and that when you have a dress of even moderately costly materials you won't be in a hurry to see the end of it. (Morris 2023, 420)

The clothing is both elegant and well suited to the wearer's work, made with care to highlight the natural beauty of the materials. This is an interesting underlying concept that envisions workwear crafted from refined, durable fabrics, produced with close attention to detail. It can be compared to the artisanal workwear I encountered within the context of revived Japanese textile traditions. The garments are made from premium materials with meticulous craftsmanship, reflecting Morris' broader critique of industrial mass-production and his preference for artisanal, handcrafted goods. Unlike other examples of proposals for utopian clothing, which prioritise commonality, Morris' vision provides for a unified simplicity in design that nonetheless allows for individual expression. The garments are designed to be practical for various activities, striking a balance between standardisation and personal choice. However, Morris' society shares with other utopian visions the rejection of wastefulness and the ever-changing fashion trends that were prevalent in the 19th century.

In contrast, uniformity and functional dress in dystopian fiction often symbolise oppression and totalitarianism. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Outer Party members wear blue overalls, while Inner Party members are dressed in dark suits, reflecting a rigid social hierarchy. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1958) uses clothing to reinforce societal stratification and control, with each class's attire reflecting and perpetuating their role and status in his highly structured, dystopian world.

Two contradictory meanings can be extrapolated from the same aesthetic principle of utopian dress – one where uniformity, anonymity, simplicity and functionality offer liberation; the other where the lack of personal expression, distinction and difference is associated with the lack of freedom. A tension between individual and collective values, and between oppression and freedom, is characteristic of most utopias and, equally, most dystopias.
Archetypal dress characteristics in utopian narratives can be grouped under the following themes:

- Functionality – comfort, workwear, simplicity.
- Commonality – shared aesthetics, uniformity, gender fluid (non-binary) clothing, clothing that accommodates a variety of body shapes and sizes.
- Conviviality – sharing resources and responsibilities in a spirit of friendship, hope and optimism.

- Utopian temporality – prolonged use, durability, sustainability, estrangement (not referential to history or progress).
- Utopian politics – since dress is part of social arrangements, utopian clothing is inherently political.

I will discuss each of these themes in turn below.

Functionality

Functionality and uniformity are often defining characteristics of clothing in utopian literature. From Bellamy's technocratic society to Morris' anarchist vision, ideal clothing is consistently described as *functional*. However, the specific nature of this functionality is often not clear – what kind of function, precisely, does utopian dress entail? Utopian societies are typically depicted as having relaxed lifestyles and reduced working hours, prompting the question: what role does functional clothing play in these contexts?

In utopian literature, functional clothing reflects the ideals of the imagined society, balancing practicality, equality and collective identity. These descriptions align with the broader social, political and economic philosophies of utopia, where clothing is seen as a means of integrating body and labour, reflecting the harmonious relationship between daily life and work. However, utopias also describe idleness, the work-free society or creative work as pleasure.

Functional clothing is often positioned as the antithesis of fashion, rejecting ornamentation, luxury and trend-driven aesthetics in favour of simplicity and practicality. This approach reflects a commitment to collective values over the individualistic excesses often associated with fashion.

The question of functionalism in dress emerged distinctly with early modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as artists, architects and intellectuals began to challenge traditional fashion. They advocated clothing guided by utility and clarity of form rather than decoration or frequent stylistic changes. Modernism introduced the principle that form follows function. However, fashion has responded to modernism and functionality in more complex ways. Unlike the Bauhaus and L'Esprit Nouveau ideals of perfect form, fashion approached modernity along two distinct paths. As Georg Simmel (1904) observed, modernist fashion highlights the present and emphasises change, revealing a dialectic between change and stability. Similarly, Roland Barthes (1985) recognised that fashion embodies both innovation and conformity which, in practice, translates into a tension between standardisation and novelty.

Across varied contexts – from Victorian England and bohemian Europe to Bolshevik Russia – early modernist critics united in opposing the commercial logic of fashion, viewing its constant stylistic shifts as wasteful and morally questionable. Prominent figures such as William Morris, Oscar Wilde and Varvara Stepanova criticised fashion's lack of functionality. Wilde, in his

influential essay 'The Philosophy of Dress' (1885), argued for simplicity, condemning ornate clothing as impractical and costly. He famously remarked:

> A fashion is merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that we have to alter it every six months… A well-made dress is a simple dress that hangs from the shoulders, taking its shape from the figure and its folds from the movements of the girl who wears it… A badly made dress is an elaborate structure… covered with frills and bows… execrable to look at, expensive to pay for, and absolutely useless to wear. (Wilde 2022, 93–102)

The Rational Dress Society, founded in London in 1881, declared war on any fashion 'that either deforms the figure, impedes the movements of the body, or in any way tends to injure the health'.[8]

In Italy, in 1920, the Futurist designer known as Thayaht (Ernesto Michahelles) introduced the TuTa, a universal, easy-to-make jumpsuit intended to overcome class and gender distinctions and to be worn on all occasions. In 1921, in post-revolutionary Russia, Constructivists including Varvara Stepanova proposed 'productivist clothing', *prozodezhda* – functional work dress that was designed to replace fashion.

The concept of workwear as a distinct category of clothing specifically designed for work environments developed during the Industrial Revolution. Prior to this, most garments were handmade and tailored to individual needs – including those related to work – but did not form a separate category of 'workwear'. With industrialisation, however, the nature of labour changed dramatically. Factories and mechanised workplaces required clothing that could endure harsh conditions and offer protection to workers. This demand led to the development of garments that were durable, practical, and suited to the specific demands of industrial and manual professions. Materials such as heavy wool and denim were used to create clothing that safeguarded against machinery, sparks and chemicals. Design features like reinforced stitching, functional pockets and ergonomic fits became standard, reflecting the evolving needs of the workforce.

Workwear, with its utilitarian and egalitarian qualities, embodies many of the ideals associated with utopian dress. Its emphasis on durability and simplicity challenges traditional sartorial hierarchies by prioritising function and collective identity over status or ornamentation.

[8] Rational Dress Society, *Rules and Aims of the Rational Dress Society* (Rational Dress Society, 1881).

Throughout the 20th century, many artists and political figures championed workwear as a symbol of shared social values, drawing on its associations with labour and collectivism. This emphasis on common purpose makes workwear a compelling expression of the utopian aspiration to dissolve class-based distinctions in dress. At the same time, it highlights a compelling contradiction: while fashion typically signals individual identity and social status, workwear often effaces these markers, promoting solidarity instead.

For this reason, workwear became a substantial part of my research. Workers' clothing is not only a source of technical innovation but also a carrier of utopian ideals. As the nature of work shifted – from industrial labour to the service, communications and creative industries – the definition of workwear also expanded. Today, it encompasses a wide range of garments, from office suits and branded uniforms to baseball caps and space suits, often blurring the line between function and image.

In this study, I define workwear as distinct from ordinary clothing worn for work. Rather than garments simply adapted for labour, workwear refers to items intentionally designed with specific materials, features and modifications to meet the practical demands of manual or specialised professions. I limit this definition to clothing that has emerged since the Industrial Revolution, which I argue marks the point when workwear began to exhibit unique design characteristics. Unlike repurposed everyday attire, workwear integrates job-specific elements – such as tool pockets, protective layers, insulation and high-visibility detailing – and is tailored to shield the wearer from occupational hazards, ranging from physical impacts to chemical exposure.

The utility of workwear often overrides traditional markers of identity, status or gender. Its symbolic power lies in its capacity to unify, shifting the emphasis from identity politics to solidarity politics. Ultimately, workwear represents more than just practical clothing: it encapsulates cultural, historical and political narratives. From its industrial origins to its recontextualisation in contemporary fashion and art, workwear continues to operate at the intersection of form, function and meaning.

I will return to the discussion of workwear in Chapter Three, where I consider Russian Constructivism, and again in Chapter Four, where I explore how the utopian qualities of workwear helped shape the conception and design of my *Workwear* exhibition.

Commonality

One of the great anti-utopian themes, as Jameson argues, is the 'loss of (bourgeois) individuality' (2005, 7). Today, the prospect of cooperation is often discredited, and the idea of commonality widely regarded as a threat to individuality.

> Not the fear of non-conformity but the impossibility of conforming. Not the horror of transgression but the terror of boundlessness. (Bauman 2001, 43–44)

In *Individualized Society* (2001), Zygmunt Bauman explores the evolution of individuality and how its meaning has shifted over time. In the early modern era, individualism represented the emancipation of people from communal dependencies – freedom from social customs and external scrutiny. It was seen as a liberating force. Today, however, individualism often leads to isolation and the loss of social connections, resulting in widespread anxiety.

Bauman (2001) further reasons that, in contemporary society, the pressure to be individual is a daily, ongoing process. Individuality is no longer a stable condition but a continuous project – a task we must constantly perform, striving to distinguish ourselves from others. This continuous production of individuality, while promising freedom, has produced a paradox: the more we focus on self-distinction, the more alienated and anxious we became.

We can easily associate the pressure of individualisation with consumer culture, where identities and social status are often constructed through consumption patterns. People curate their identities based on the products they buy, leading to a sense of self that is constantly upgraded. In this context, fulfilment and happiness are often linked to material possessions, which can create a cycle of desire and dissatisfaction.

A similar observation is offered by Stuart Hall (2016), who argues that capitalism promotes a specific form of individuality that is closely linked to consumerism. Individual identities are largely shaped by advertising and the media, which portray consumption as a means of expressing personal freedom and uniqueness of style. Fashion, in particular, thrives on appropriations – ethnic, racial, subcultural – which are rendered into commercial outputs and sold back as a means of expressing personal freedom and individuality. These appropriations of singular notions of identity serve capitalist interests by encouraging continuous consumption.

Hall (2016) further argues that there is no single identity. Instead, he contends that identities are fluid, complex and constructed through multiple discourses. Fashion is not only a powerful means of exploiting individuality but also quickly adapts to social changes, seizing on any emerging forms of identity. Such commercial articulations of individuality lead to the reduction of identity into a marketable commodity. In doing so, certain dimensions of identity are marginalised, while others are turned into aesthetic codes for consumption.

> The conditions within which people are able to construct subjective possibilities and new political subjectivities for themselves are not simply given in the dominant system. They are won in the practice of articulation which produce them. (Hall 2016, 206)

This dynamic extends to clothing, where the construction of individuality becomes a driving force in the capitalist market. What was once a means of autonomous expression, emancipation and freedom – such as through the radical aesthetics of street style or high fashion – is now often a mirror of conformity and market aesthetics. In his 1944 essay 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (Adorno 2001), Adorno claims that mass culture under capitalism reduces all forms of expression to commodities, stripping them of their transformative potential and reducing them to instruments of societal control. Even when fashion or popular culture appear to offer novelty, that novelty is often merely a superficial variation within a standardised system. This results in pseudo-individuality, where consumers believe they are making unique choices, but in reality are simply selecting from commodified options.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) makes a similar argument on individuality, which in fashion is intricately tied to his concept of 'cultural capital' – a resource that individuals use to assert themselves within a social hierarchy. Fashion, in this sense, is not just about personal preference or aesthetic choice: rather, it functions as a form of symbolic distinction. While fashion can be understood as an expression of individuality, Bourdieu highlights that even the most *individualistic* fashion choices are shaped by broader social forces.

It is interesting to observe this in terms of the formation and expression of subcultures, which resisted conforming to dominant styles. Dick Hebdige explores in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) how, historically, subcultures such as punk, goth and mod emerged as responses to specific sociopolitical contexts, like class struggles and youth unemployment in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s. These movements utilised fashion and style as ways of establishing common identity and resistance. Hebdige (1979, 95) further explores the way in which mass media and

the culture industry attempt to neutralise these subcultural styles by incorporating them into commercial products and diluting their original rebellious or resistant meaning:

> both mod and punk innovations fed back directly into high fashion and mainstream fashion. Each new subculture establishes new trends, generates new looks and sounds, which feed back into the appropriate industries.

The rise of global consumer culture and the commercialisation of subcultural styles, particularly in the 1990s, diluted the distinctiveness of these movements. What was once considered rebellious or alternative (for example, punk, goth, rave) became part of mainstream fashion and media, blurring the lines between subculture and mass culture. Fashion brands and the music industry commodified the symbols of these subcultures, stripping them of their original oppositional values. Emergent cultural forms are continuously seized, appropriated and altered. According to Hall (2016, 206):

> It's as if the era of mass production and mass culture has now yielded not standardisation, but a proliferation of difference, of otherness. Corporations don't advertise to a mass public anymore. It's now niche advertising – addressing the subtle differentiation between one consumer public and another, exploiting cultural fragmentation.

Bauman (2001) observes negative consequences of this constant pressure to perform and prove our individuality. When someone fails in this constant race, the blame often falls on the individual rather than the system that created these demands. Such personal 'failures' can lead to social isolation and mental health challenges. We now live in a society where freedom has expanded so far that the negative effects of individualism, like loneliness, anxiety and weakened community bonds, are felt more than ever. Decline in communal bonds and forms of collective identity have led to an increase in social fragmentation. This fragmentation can result in feelings of alienation, as individuals struggle to find meaningful connections in an environment that prioritises profits over autonomy. Today, 'interest groups' often exist virtually within the rigid framework of digital tools, leaving little room for the experimentation of real experience.

Apart from the appropriation and commercialisation of expressions of individuality by systems of power, there is also the political category of 'belonging'. Paul Gilroy (2004) argues that individual identities are often shaped by collective experiences related to race, ethnicity and history. These essentialist notions of identity tend to prioritise fixed categories, compressing individuality and overlooking the complexities and fluidity of identity. The culture industry, as well as the fashion

system, readily exploits these narrow definitions of identity. In an interview with Jameson, Hall (Jameson and Buchanan 2008, 116) summarises the point:

> Music and style and dress. Exactly where ordinary people, without necessarily knowing the name, live the postmodern. Maybe they don't have much sense of what it is in the system that is creating these openings, or how constrained they are. Undoubtedly what is experienced, and ideologically constructed, as freedom may not necessarily be freedom at all. But it does lead to a sense of difference.

Hall is making an important argument here about how a 'sense of difference' is produced that is ideologically constructed and falsely associated with liberalism, originality and infinite creative possibilities.

However, the heart of this argument is not a critique of individual expression or individuality in the broadest sense. In fashion and dress discourse, there is a sense that exploring commonalities and social connections might threaten individuality and limit personal freedom. Yet, 'commonality' is not the opposite of individuality; rather, it refers to what individuals have 'in common'. While the terms 'commonality' and 'collective' are often used interchangeably, they have distinct meanings, particularly in academic contexts.

Jameson (2005) claimed that reimagining the relationship between the individual and the collective is crucial to the concept of utopia and any utopian prospect. Therefore, it is also important to understand the meaning of individualisation today, particularly its associations with freedom.

How can an individualised society, which often struggles to build bonds, confront challenges such as sustainability? The problems of overconsumption and inequality are deeply linked to social fragmentation. Reimagining commonality – rather than seeing it as a threat to individuality – offers the potential for new social connections.

Utopian dress offers the possibility of exploring these connections beyond the narrow confines of identity and culture. It rethinks the use, aesthetics and meaning of clothing, making space for more empathetic and transformative approaches. Such practices reject competition, exclusion and the pursuit of status, embracing all bodies and identities, and propose new forms of value rooted in ecological awareness, empathy and shared experience. Rather than viewing dress as a marker of wealth or power, this approach seeks to bridge the psychological distance between ourselves, our environment and other living beings. Most importantly, it challenges the idea that

commonality leads to conformity, suggesting instead that collective experience can coexist with individual freedom.

Indeed, commonality can prompt an exploration of dress practices that foster new forms of social connection, offering alternatives beyond commercial norms. Such practices reject distinction, competition and exclusion, accommodating all shapes, sizes and gender identities, while at the same time moving away from viewing dress as an expression of power, wealth or luxury. They seek to redefine luxury through ecological awareness, empathy and shared values, aiming to reshape desires. By integrating individual and common interests, as well as human and environmental concerns, utopian dress aims to reduce competition and promote sustainability through cooperation.

What exactly are these commonalities? In our society today, anything communal or shared is often regarded as unpopular, as if it inevitably leads to uniformity or standardisation, or is simply dismissed as a form of conformity. Communism and commonality are frequently perceived as pathways to homogenised cultural expression, a cliche that can provoke both ridicule and anxiety. Yet my own experience of growing up under communism suggests otherwise: there was no shortage of individual expression. We did not all wear uniforms or produce unoriginal art; rather, our forms of cultural expression were largely unknown or marginalised in the West, and I find it both inspiring and creatively challenging to consider how dress practices might nurture collective bonds and serve as a form of creative resistance to the pressures of individualistic production and the fixation on static, narrow identities.

It is easier to speak of the commons in relation to shared spaces or resources than in the context of dress, which is ‘private’ and not typically considered shared. However, proposing dress as a tool, rather than simply an object of use, changes this relationship. Even if a particular dress is not itself passed from person to person, the resources needed for its production, distribution and consumption are shared. The language of fashion, as well as its aesthetics, is collectively shaped, too. By recognising that dress is part of a shared system, we can see it as more than a personal choice – rather, it is a shared entity embedded within wider social and ecological networks.

Conviviality

Theories of conviviality explore how humans create social, cultural and political spaces to live together, particularly in diverse and pluralistic societies. Here, I explore conviviality as a form of sociability – a non-systemic, organic mode of social interaction that emerges naturally between individuals. Conviviality emphasises spontaneous and genuine connections that are not dictated by formal structures or institutional frameworks.

The word 'conviviality' originates from the Latin *convivium*, meaning a gathering for a shared feast – literally 'living together' (*con-* 'with' and *-vivere* 'live'). The term passed through Late Latin and evolved into Middle French as *convivialité*, carrying the sense of sociability and festivity. By the 17th century, it entered English as 'convivial', meaning sociable, and later gave rise to 'conviviality', referring to the quality of being festive, friendly, or enjoying social gatherings.[9] Its coinage is notably linked to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, whose 1825 book *Physiologie du goût (The Physiology of Taste)* describes conviviality as the experience of people gathering over a long meal and engaging in lively conversation. It celebrates the authentic relationships that develop through shared experience, mutual engagement and the simple act of being together. By focusing on these organic (as opposed to systemic) interactions, we can foster a sense of community and collective identity that transcends prescribed roles and societal norms.

Ivan Illich was among the first to use 'conviviality' in a sociopolitical context. In his book *Tools for Conviviality* (2009 [1973]), he critiques industrial society and its overdependence on modern technology. Illich defines conviviality as autonomous, creative relationships between individuals, free from the control of manipulative or coercive institutions. He argues for the development of tools and systems that empower people to control their own lives, fostering more cooperative and equitable social structures. For Illich, conviviality stands in opposition to alienating, hierarchical technologies and bureaucracies dominated by experts.

> I choose term 'conviviality' to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and,

[9] See *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. 'convivial', under 'Word History and Origins'.

> as such, an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that, in any society, as conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members. (Ilich 2009, 11)

In contemporary sociological discussions, conviviality extends beyond Illich's original focus on technology to describe how people coexist, collaborate and build social cohesion, particularly in multicultural or diverse societies.

Paul Gilroy expands this concept to explore how individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds coexist and interact in postcolonial contexts. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2004), Gilroy explores conviviality as a lens through which to examine how diverse communities navigate everyday life. He highlights the 'ordinary virtues of interconnection' in urban spaces, where people, despite histories of colonialism and racism, negotiate shared existence. Gilroy (2004, xi) defines conviviality as 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life'.

For Gilroy, conviviality refers to the ordinary, often mundane ways people live together, not necessarily centred around identity politics or multicultural policies. Instead, it reflects a practical, lived coexistence that arises organically. Everyday practices such as food, clothing and music can become mediums for convivial interaction and exchange, helping to forge bonds between individuals. Gilroy (2004) points out that forms of conviviality are usually self-organised, beyond the reach of government and market forces, and are often shaped by a sense of utopian possibility. Interestingly, the spirit of conviviality is rarely considered in the theory of utopian fiction.

Utopias are typically discussed as a form of political and social organisation, focusing on structures and ideologies. However, in my reading of utopian fiction, many works portray convivial societies, where everyday aspects like clothing, housing and food are described in terms of cooperation, as ways to bring people together. These everyday elements are more egalitarian because they are accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and levels of education. As opposed to political and social theory, these everyday practices connect individuals across social classes, embodying a more utopian spirit – conviviality seamlessly woven into social structures.

A key feature shared by both conviviality and utopias is the principle of sharing – not only possessions but also resources. While the idea of sharing may be idealised in utopian contexts, it encourages us to consider how we might adopt a more convivial attitude in our everyday

practices. This prompts a provocative question: how can we radicalise conviviality in our daily lives and how might this be expressed through dress practice? How would absence of social structures that mediate expressions through dress affect the aesthetics, taste and practice of dress?

Utopian temporality

Utopian concepts of time are often understood as timeless or static, representing a perfect, unchanging state that has been fully realised. Similarly, utopian dress is frequently characterised as *timeless*, implying a static, perfect design meant for prolonged use, or even a singular, universal garment for life (Bartlett 2006; Burcikova 2019).[10] [11]

However, in key utopian theories (Bloch, Jameson, Levitas, Suvin) as well as utopian fiction narratives discussed earlier, the notion of time resists such interpretations as static. Instead, these theories challenge linear or conventional understandings of time, emphasising the future as a space of possibility, while critically examining how past and present structures constrain or shape that future. For instance, Jameson (1994; 2005) understands utopia as a dynamic tension between the real and the possible, between present limitations and future potential. By reframing utopia as a tool for critical inquiry rather than a fixed end-goal, Jameson encourages us to think beyond the ideological boundaries of current systems. Thus, the utopian process is not primarily about creating a detailed picture of an ideal society or offering a perfect solution; rather, it is about engaging in a process that challenges the temporal logic of late capitalism. Suvin (2016 [1979]) explains utopian time as a vantage-point deliberately placed in the future to let us think historically about now. Although it is oriented towards the future, it is critically engaged with the present.

Utopian fiction, for example, constructs a rupture with existing temporal logic, offering not just a different sense of time but a critique of how time is commodified and experienced. The problem

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[10] For project JUMPSUIT by the Rational Dress Society (2018), see Bartlett, Djurdja (2020) 'The Constructivist Sartorial Utopia and Its Revolutionary Potential: Then and Now'. In Aga Skrodzka, Xiaoning Lu and Katarzyna Marciniak (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, Oxford Handbooks,https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190885533.013.18 (accessed 24 February 2025).

[11] I acknowledge Bartlett's and Burcikova's important contributions to scholarship on utopian dress. Bartlett frames utopian dress ideologically within a specific historical conjuncture, whereas Burcikova's 'One Dress' proposal addresses questions of temporality and transformation in dress through the lens of sustainability.

of saturated cultural production in both high and late capitalism is that time appears to be fast-moving. In his book *The Seeds of Time* (1994)**,** Jameson explores the complexities of temporal representation in postmodernity. Saturated capitalist cultural production and the focus on immediacy and rapid change produced a temporal paradox and the 'persistence of same through absolute different' (Jameson 1994, 16–19). Jameson here observes massive standardisation of everything that is happening simultaneously with what appears to be rapid, constant change. However, he further argues that, in this postmodern condition, 'it is crucial to distinguish between rhythms of change inherent to the system and programmed by it, and change that replaces one entire system by another altogether' (Jameson 1994, 16).

This is interesting observation when applied to fashion, which appears to be constantly and rapidly changing under a standardised system of production and representation. Yet radical and real change of the entire system is absent.

Utopian time is critical and creative. It is disruptive, as it is fundamentally non-linear and not static. Rather than following a predictable progression from past to future, it opens up multiple potential futures, allowing for the reimagination of social, economic and political systems. This challenges traditional notions of time and progress, and suggests that utopia operates outside dominant historical narratives.

For Ernst Bloch (1995), utopia embodies 'not-yet-conscious' possibilities, where the future holds unarticulated potentials that are not strictly bound by the present. Such a perspective invites a fluid understanding of time, where past, present and future intersect in creative and transformative ways. As Bloch (1995) further theorises, the daydreaming and 'anticipatory consciousness' of utopian thinking allows us to project desires for change into the future while remaining grounded in the present. Hope is a mode of *temporal awareness*, it is a cognitive and emotional openness, a form of utopian practice imagining the future as possibility.

This is evident in various utopian practices – such as in art, architecture, or social experiments – which pursue to bring the future into the present by enacting or modelling utopian ideals here and now. These practices blur temporal boundaries, allowing elements of a utopian future to be actively experienced in the present, but they also enact resistance against established norms.

This prefigurative time is a space in which we consciously entertain visions of a different future, where hope takes on imaginative form. Utopian time represents a disruption of the existing temporality by creating a rupture in conventional understandings of time. Utopian theories,

therefore, challenge teleological conceptions of time, which assume history is moving inevitably toward a fixed outcome, such as progress or modernity.

Bloch (1995) argues, too, that both modes of temporal reasoning – looking backward and looking forward – are essential for fully understanding the complexity of any given moment in time. He emphasises the need to fuse memory with hope, advocating an integrated perspective that does not privilege one temporal mode over the other. For Bloch, part of 'learning hope' involves developing the capacity to navigate time in both directions.

This fusion of memory and hope, and the refusal to prioritise one temporal mode over another, offers a valuable perspective for dress practice. In fashion discourse, time is often discussed in relation to fast and slow fashion, drawing from a predominantly linear perspective. By proposing alternative temporal modes and following the rhythms of nature, new possibilities for dress practice can emerge.

In more recent discussions, decoloniality offers different arguments on time and progress. Within many Indigenous frameworks, time can be cyclical, relational but never linear, emphasising continuity with ancestors or living memory rather than being conceived of as a march forward. In this sense, decolonising the concept of time involves reclaiming and validating diverse temporalities that Western modernity once dismissed or suppressed.

In Jameson's (2005) perspective, capitalism distorts our experience of time by collapsing it into a perpetual present, leaving little space for alternative futures or for believing that another world might be possible. In this context, Francis Fukuyama's famous phrase 'the end of history', coined after the fall of the Eastern bloc, becomes an unsettlingly apt description, albeit one that feels deeply dystopian.

Jameson's observation that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' is perhaps more relevant than ever, as we are stuck in the pessimistic framework of immediacy characteristic of what Kornbluh (2024) calls 'too-late capitalism'. Immediacy has become the predominant temporal mode, making it increasingly difficult to imagine a future beyond the seemingly inevitable outcomes of ecological collapse and extinction.

We can begin to question design traditions premised on linear, teleological notions of progress. How, for instance, would practices like dress design evolve if their relationship with time changed? Could we imagine a practice that doesn't depend on time-bound notions of progress or new-therefore-better? Can we introduce novelty outside the parameters of individual consumption? What does 'new' need to entail to feel new?

This idea of utopian time in an expanded mode seems the most stimulating aspect of 'utopia as a method', because it breaks our reliance on technology or economic growth as the standards by which progress is measured. It also invites us to reimagine progress itself away from colonial perspectives or technological determinism, opening space for alternative ways of thinking about the future.

In this vein, we can imagine time, change and novelty of dress differently. This can be explored from multiple perspectives: as therapy, as play, as a group practice, as a way of connecting and socialising – not as a static decorative statement one wears to fulfil social norms but as an active tool for engagement.

I will return to the concept of utopian time and its possibilities when discussing the 'Workwear' exhibition, where I examine how certain artists, designers and makers engage with time in their creative practices and research. Additionally, I address this notion of open time within my own practice-based research, particularly in *Worktopia* and *Dresstopia*, where the interplay between past, present and future shapes the exploration of dress and its utopian potential.

Utopian politics

Historically, utopian fiction introduced the idea of social equality, which became a central theme in left-leaning politics. As a result, the term 'utopia' has often been associated with communism and has been used as a metaphor for particular historical events.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the collapse of communist governments in the Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, marked a moment of triumphalism in Western political discourse. This period was characterised not only by the end of the Cold War but also by what Francis Fukuyama (1992, 4a) described as 'the end of history' and the 'universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'. The perceived failure of the so-called 'utopian project of communism' continues to be invoked to discredit aspirations for alternative forms of social organisation that might be labelled 'utopian' in the broadest sense (Levitas 2011).

Frederic Jameson understands utopia as a profoundly political concept that challenges the limits of our collective imagination, particularly under late capitalism. But unlike the theorists who identify literary utopias with political plans, Jameson understands utopia as a tool for political critique and radical transformation. In his analysis of utopian science fiction, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson provides political and social readings that allow us to assess fictional

ideas as more or less plausible in the real world. He uses utopian science fiction to debate and critique the possibility of alternatives to capitalism.

Jameson (2005, xi) observes that the term 'utopia' has taken on polarised meanings: 'on the left, it serves as a code for socialism or communism, while on the right, it is equated with totalitarianism or even Stalinism'. Consequently, the utopia has frequently been reduced to a symbol of political failure, overshadowing its role as a vehicle for political and social imagination.

While these arguably utopian political projects (that dismissed the utopia's role of imagination) sought to introduce new social and political systems as alternatives to capitalism, it is important to distinguish utopia as a political concept from the failed politics of the USSR. Utopianism, in this sense, is affirmative and positive, and it remains a framework for imagining transformative social possibilities.

The popular distillation of Jameson's quote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, most likely originates from *The Seeds of Time* (1994, xii):

> It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.[12]

In this quote, Jameson not only refers to the destruction of the environment but also to the weakness of our imaginations, part of what he is saying that is often diminished or removed when reducing the argument to politics. As I argued in Chapter One, the aspect of imagination is frequently overlooked in broader discussions, illustrating how the power of imagination is not taken seriously within theoretical or sociological contexts. Jameson essentially implies that social and political imagination are constrained by the logic of late capitalism, pervasive pessimism and 'the end of history'.

Today, on both sides of (binary) political discourse, the concept of utopia frequently carries negative connotations, typically synonymous with failure or the impossibility of its realisation. However, it is important to move beyond these simplistic associations and recognise the critical

[12] The Jameson quote is commonly cited as coming from his 2003 essay 'Future City' or his 2005 book *Archaeologies of the Future*, as well as being linked with Mark Fisher's 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, although the precise wording does not appear in any of his published texts. Instead, it seems to be a popular distillation of the quote given here.

role utopian thinking plays in challenging existing political and social structures. As Levitas (2013) points out, any colloquial use of the term is unhelpful and detrimental to utopian discourse.

Édouard Glissant's poetic theory becomes useful here in representing a different politics, a politics of relation. He (Obrist and Raza 2017, 120) argues for a position of political non-affiliation to be replaced by a relationship with all the world: 'We need to move beyond divisionary discourse of oppositions, binary divisions, species and genres'. Glissant's concept of 'relation' emphasises interconnectedness and the dynamic, shared relationships between cultures, people, animals and places. This mirrors a worldly perspective that values diversity and sees the world as a web of relationships rather than isolated entities. 'Relation' rejects the idea of a singular universality (a single truth for all) and embraces multiplicity, complexity and the entanglement of histories and identities. Glissant's term for the totality of the world as a living, evolving, interconnected entity is *Tout-Monde* ('all world, the world in its entirety'). It is a space where cultures, languages and histories interact without being reduced to a single narrative (Glissant, 1997). Glissant also comments on Marxism: 'Whereas the Marxist imaginary, if it had been separated from its obsession with seizing power, would have had the opposite effect, providing for Relation' (Glissant 1997, 223).

For Glissant, opacity is the right of individuals and cultures to remain unknowable, unquantifiable and irreducible to stereotypes or simplified narratives. This challenges a certain colonial worldview that sought to dominate and catalogue the world through knowledge and power. Glissant (Obrist and Raza 2017, 121) reasons that difference is more constructive when viewed as a by-product of solidarity and conciliation between two and more elements of that 'all the world mentality'. Indeed, the 'all the world mentality' can be understood as a concept of commonality, within which numerous individual relationships can form.

We know how political interests can utilise and manipulate art, architecture and rhetoric for nationalistic spectacle, with a view to maintaining ideological control over state narratives. But I am more interested in how creative ideology can influence our values, aesthetics and desires ultimately to affect tastes in politics and social organisation.[13]

[13] I use the term 'tastes' here instead of 'judgements' because many choose their politics by instinct or from a gut feeling, rather than by any process of reason or judgement.

CHAPTER THREE: EMBODIED UTOPIAS – CASE STUDIES

Introduction

This chapter explores three art movements – Russian Constructivism, Brazilian Neoconcretism and Italian Radical Design – and their main protagonists. Each of these movements emerged in a distinct geographical and historical context and, though different in origin, they all developed radical approaches to the concept of utopian dress.

As noted earlier, the work of these movements has rarely been examined within fashion or dress theory, highlighting the limited cross-fertilisation between fashion, art, design and architectural discourse. In this research, I draw on case studies from across a broad range of fields, including art, architecture, dress, literature and furniture design, regardless of method, specialism or outcome.

It is important to recognise that each movement arose during periods of considerable political upheaval: revolution in Russia, military dictatorship in Brazil and widespread workers' protests in Italy. Despite their differences, all three were driven by utopian ambitions: Constructivism sought to build a socialist society, Neoconcretism aimed at a 'molecular revolution' by directly engaging people, and Radical Design envisioned new forms of social life. Each pursued a vision of a more open, egalitarian or participatory society. While their strategies and outcomes varied, their experiments with the body and dress have significant similarities, both formally and socially.

Case Study I: Constructivism – objects as friends and helpers

> I shall make things live like souls and souls like things.[14]
> (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 59)

In the early 20th century, Russian Constructivists revolted against the phenomenon of fashion, but they also saw it as a new art medium to engage with. Constructivism, a Russian avant-garde

[14] See Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Letters, 1915', in *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E Bowlt and Matthew Drutt (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000), 121.
A sightly different translation of the same quote is given in Aleksandr Rodchenko and John E. Bowlt, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters and Other Writings*, ed. A. N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 59.

movement, is also the key historical reference for this research, as it was one the first cultural movements to engage with the practice of utopian dress. This was an attempt by artists and intellectuals to unite two revolutions – artistic and social.

The origins of Constructivism are difficult to pinpoint. Anecdotally, Kazimir Malevich first used the term 'Construction Art' in 1916 to describe Aleksandr Rodchenko's work in the exhibition *The Store (Magazin)* (Lodder 1983). Early Constructivism is often linked to Vladimir Tatlin's 'painterly reliefs' – three-dimensional constructions initially attached to canvas, later developed into free-floating 'counter-reliefs' suspended from the wall by cables and wires. Tatlin called these pieces a 'selection of materials', assembled from industrial debris, distinguishing his practice from Cubism (Gough 2005). Despite establishing many Constructivist principles, Tatlin never identified as a Constructivist; he referred to his own practice as 'the culture of materials' and his role as assistant of materials (Gough 2005; Kiaer 2005, 43).

Christina Lodder (1983) draws an important distinction between early non-utilitarian constructions – associated with figures such as Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Vladimir Tatlin and early Aleksandr Rodchenko – where the formal language of Constructivism developed, and the later, utilitarian Constructivism, which explicitly sought to serve a social and utopian function. The latter applies to work produced after the Revolution that embodied the ideals of a new society; the former did not embody these ideals. This distinction is crucial to understanding the trajectory and aims of Constructivist art, particularly in relation to the concept of utopia, which is the focus of my research.

Constructivism emerged as both a term and a practice during the winter of 1920–21, proposing a new relationship between the artist, the artwork and society.[15] Lodder (1983) argues that it was not simply an artistic movement, as early Western scholars tended to suggest. Rather, it had a broader and more ambitious aim – utopian in character – emphasising a social dimension that

[15] The definition and conception of the term 'Constructivism' is generally attributed in Western scholarship to Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, particularly through their *Realistic Manifesto* (Moscow, 1920), in which they described an art grounded in construction rather than composition, aligned with scientific and technological principles. Christina Lodder, however, draws a distinction between 'non-utilitarian constructions' – artistic experiments without ideological or social commitment, treating Constructivism primarily as an aesthetic approach – and a more radical, utilitarian Constructivism that rejected the artwork as a product of bourgeois, individualistic culture. The term 'construction' had already appeared in the work and writings of Tatlin and Rodchenko in 1917–18; Rodchenko referred to these early experiments as 'laboratory work'. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (Yale University Press, 1983).

was often overlooked or reduced to questions of aesthetic formalism by Western art historians.[16]

The first explicit use of Constructivism in relation to functionalism was formulated by the First Working Group of Constructivists, established in March 1921. The group included the artists Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksandr Vesnin and Karl Ioganson, and theorists Boris Arvatov, Aleksei Gan and Osip Brik, who co-authored a manifesto in January 1922. Gan was appointed the group's spokesperson and drafted its key principles, later summarised in his 1922 publication *Konstruktivizm*. This functionalist definition of the term also appeared even earlier: in Stepanova's contribution to the *5×5=25* exhibition catalogue in 1921, which famously proclaimed the end of painting and easel arts, and the merging of art with life.

The opening line of the Constructivist manifesto was that 'the ideological must go hand in hand with the formal', so the group adopted 'the communist expression of material structures' as its first slogan (Gough 2005, 69).

Constructivism was as much a utopian project as it was an artistic movement. Constructivists saw themselves as agents of social change, aiming to transform everyday life by promoting industrially produced, functional objects as tools for building an egalitarian society. Rather than viewing objects as private possessions or status symbols, they treated them as collaborators in shaping a new social order.

Boris Arvatov, a Marxist theorist, art historian and critic associated with Constructivism, explored socialism's relationship with material culture in his pivotal 1925 essay 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing' (*Byt i kul'tura veshchi*). He asked how passive capitalist commodities might be reconfigured as 'active socialist things' (Kiaer 2005, 30). Leon Trotsky had already introduced the concept of everyday life (*byt*) in his 1923 *Pravda* articles – later collected as *Questions of Everyday Life* (*Voprosy byta*) – in which he contended that reshaping daily habits, objects and domestic practices that shape quotidian consciousness was crucial to wider social transformation.

[16] Lodder gives as a reference Camilla Gray's influential book *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (1962). Gray, an art historian who pioneered the study of Russian art of this period, produced a groundbreaking but flawed study. Notably, she grouped Gabo and Pevsner – who never embraced an aesthetic of utility – with Constructivists such as Tatlin, Rodchenko and Liubov Popova. A similar confusion appears in George Rickey's 1967 account, where Constructivism is said to include Malevich, El Lissitzky and even, briefly, Kandinsky – an interpretation Lodder considers highly inaccurate (Lodder 1983, 1).

Arvatov opens his essay by critiquing early Soviet Marxists who, he argues, addressed culture 'on a purely ideological level' because 'they have known only [the] bourgeois world of things' (Arvatov 1997 [1925], 119). Bourgeois material culture, he argues, is formed by a classical dualism between matter and spirit, the material and the ideal. In contrast, the new socialist object would establish a transformed relationship between people and things – one in which material culture no longer reflects alienation but instead facilitates collective life. Arvatov proposed that the new socialist object would embody the material culture of everyday life by altering the relationship between the object and the subject. Since objects, in his view, have a psychological effect on individuals, they can be designed to influence and educate mass consciousness. As he writes (1997 [1925], 121):

> The construction of proletarian culture… requires the elimination of that rupture between Things and People that characterized bourgeois society… Proletarian society will not know this dualism of things either in practice or in consciousness.

In *Common Places* (1994), Svetlana Boym argues that Russian culture distinguishes not so much between public and private life, but between *byt* – the material, mundane aspects of everyday life – and *bytie*, which represents a more spiritual or existential existence. Traditionally, *byt* has had slightly negative connotations, linked with routine tasks like cooking or cleaning, while *bytie* is associated with higher philosophical or spiritual pursuits. Traditionally, Russian thinkers have tried to move beyond *byt* in search of deeper meaning. Later, Constructivists and revolutionaries sought to elevate *byt* itself, merging the functional with the social to give everyday life a higher purpose.

Arvatov continued that the material world – whether a uniform, a chair, or a building – constitutes a form of culture and thus acts as a 'co-worker' in the construction of socialism (Arvatov 1997 [1925], 124-26). Therefore, politics can be changed only by first transforming culture. The socialist object, then, must embody 'convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene and so on – in a word, everything that is described as the adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling for the needs of social practice. (Arvatov 1997 [1925], 126)

Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956) played a foundational role in the development of Constructivism and remained one of its most prominent figures. More explicitly than Arvatov, Rodchenko emphasised the emotional aspect of socialist objects, describing them as 'comrades' to humans or as active participants in the collective project of building a new society. His first

and only trip abroad was to Paris in 1925, when he was commissioned to design and oversee the Soviet pavilion for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts. From Paris, he wrote almost daily to his wife, fellow Constructivist Varvara Stepanova, reflecting on his ideas about *byt* and material culture (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 169):

> The light from the East… not only the liberation of the working class… The light is from the East – in a new relation to man, to women, and to objects. Objects in our hands should also be equal, also be comrades, and not black and gloomy slaves like they are here.[17]

Rodchenko frequently described capitalist objects metaphorically as 'slaves' and contrasted them with utopian objects, which he called 'comrades'. This metaphor serves as a sharp critique of Western culture's exploitative relationships with both humans and non-humans, highlighting how capitalism fosters domination and alienation – a master/slave dynamic – rather than genuine collaboration. Although not stated directly, his critique also gestures towards colonialism and broader patterns of capitalist exploitation. In his view, the luxurious consumer goods of Paris appeared passive and 'mournful', reduced to mere instruments of profit or status, stripped of genuine human meaning. In contrast, Rodchenko imagined a world in which, 'Objects will take on meaning, will become people's friends and comrades, and people will begin to know how to laugh and converse with things…' (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 169).

In the writings of both Arvatov and Rodchenko, the new socialist object was imagined as more than just utilitarian; as Kiaer puts it, the 'object-as-comrade' became 'an active, almost animate participant in social life' (Kiaer 2005, 1). For the Constructivists, committed to an egalitarian society, the aim was to popularise industrially produced utilitarian objects as tools of social renewal – partners in shaping collective culture, rather than private possessions or status symbols.

What sets Arvatov and the Constructivists apart from classical Marxism is their conviction that socialism requires not only new relations of production, but also the transformation of the objects themselves. Arvatov specifically emphasises the psychological and emotional function of the new socialist object by insisting on the need to reveal its true purpose – exposing its mechanism and function (Arvatov 1997 [1925], 126):

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[17] See his letter, dated 4 May 1925, in Rodchenko, Alexander. 1927. 'Rodchenko v Parizhe. Iz pisem domoi.' *Novyi Lef* 2: 20.

> The new world of *Things*, which gave rise to a new image of a person as a psycho-physiological individual, dictated forms of gesticulation, movement and activity. It created a particular regimen of physical culture. The psyche also evolved, becoming more and more *Thing*-like in its associative structure. The purely formal, immaterial, stylized perception of *Things* disappeared as the latest industry revolutionized the forms that objects could take, laying bare their constructive essence.

How would this new relational object manifest itself in the material and formal characteristics of things? In his early series of Spatial Constructions (1918–21), Rodchenko emphasised method over style. These hanging sculptures, made from metal that could be folded flat and then opened out into three-dimensional forms, embodied the ideas of transparency and dynamism that would later shape the principles of Constructivism. According to Gough (2005), the Constructivists shifted their focus in 1921 from letting the qualities of materials decide the shape of objects ('form follows material') to making objects that served practical purposes ('form follows function'). Instead of materials shaping the design, design now aimed to fulfil specific uses and express utopian ideas. In other words, the Constructivists moved from emphasising materials themselves to prioritising how things functioned and what they represented politically. In this sense, the experimental artistic phase of Constructivism laid the groundwork for the movement's subsequent engagement with design in everyday life. Drawing inspiration from such developments, Arvatov (1997 [1925], 126) describes a dynamic world of utilitarian fantasy, evocative of utopian fiction:

> Collapsible furniture, moving sidewalks, revolving doors, escalators, automat restaurants, reversible outfits, and so on constituted a new stage in the evolution of material culture. The *Thing* became something functional and active, connected like a co-worker with human practice.

When discussing the physical and material qualities of the new socialist everyday life, Arvatov often emphasised the idea of object transparency in relation to its expedience (*tselesoobraznyi*), which embodies much more than technical efficiency or utility. The socialist object, in his view, should expose rather than conceal its structure and mechanism (Arvatov 1997 [1925], 126–27):

> Glass, steel, concrete, artificial materials, and so on were no longer covered over with a 'decorative' casing but spoke for themselves. The mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent, compelling people practically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them, and only with them.

Kiaer further explains that Arvatov's notion of the transparent, expedient (*tselesoobraznyi*) object should not be understood too narrowly in terms of simple utility or technical rationality. It is better interpreted as an 'object formed in relation to, or in accordance with, a specific goal' (Kiaer 2001, 190). This means that the new socialist object was as much about process as it was about product – an ongoing negotiation between creative form, function and ideological aspiration.

Prozodezhda: *How would socialism transform fashion?*

More than any other design discipline, fashion was debated in post-revolutionary Russia, as dress both symbolically and historically maintained class distinctions. Since the new political system aimed to abolish class differences, fashion was regarded as socially harmful. Bartlett (2006, 311) argued: 'utopian dress during the socialist period was informed by an urge for a total change of taste and for a total change of the previous gender order'.

Among the Constructivists, only Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova – and, to a lesser extent, Tatlin and Rodchenko – were involved in dress design. Moreover, it was Stepanova and Popova who approached this field in a distinctly radical way, closely adhering to Constructivist design principles.

Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), who often used the pseudonym 'Varst', was also a theorist and influential teacher, renowned for her diverse contributions to art, graphic design and fashion. In the early 1920s, Stepanova introduced her radical dress concept: *prozodezhda*, which is widely translated as 'production clothing' or 'workwear'.[18] In an article published in the second issue of *LEF* magazine in 1923, she famously declared: 'Today's Clothing is Production Clothing'.[19] [20] Her earlier text, which introduces these concepts and terms, appeared in 1920 under the title 'On the Provision with *Prozodezhda* and *Spetsodezhda* of Workers in Coal Mines', and was endorsed by Lenin (Strizhenova 1977, 53).

Stepanova argued that fashion should be replaced by clothing that could be worn in any setting and, like a tool, serve the needs of the wearer. She described a new kind of dress that she

[18] The word *prozodezhda* is an abbreviated combination of two words: *proizvodstvennaya* ('production, industrial') and *odezhda* ('dress').
[19] *LEF* stands for *Left Front of the Arts.*
[20] Here I use Kiaer's translation (2005). Alternative translations of this quotation appear in Lodder (1983) as 'Present-day dress—production clothing' and in Bartlett (2006) as 'The Clothing of Today: Production Clothing'.

named ‘productivist clothes’, whose design would vary according to different types of work. As she explained, workwear should be tailored to specific professions and industries (Stepanova 1923, 65–68). Developing this utilitarian approach, Stepanova wrote: ‘Fashion, which psychologically reflects our everyday life [*byt*], habits and aesthetic taste, is giving way to clothing organised for working in various branches of labour’ (Kiaer 2005, 110). This new clothing reflects the Constructivist principle of transparency, making the stitching visible and eliminating decoration (Stepanova 1923, 65). Stepanova stressed that decorative elements should be replaced by features that reveal the garment’s construction: zips, stitching and pockets become prominent aspects of the dress design.

In addition to *prozodezhda*, Stepanova proposed another category *spetsodezhda*: specialised safety clothing, intended for high-risk occupations such as those involving fire, chemicals or extreme cold. She cited professions including surgeons, pilots, acid factory workers, firemen and members of Arctic expeditions as requiring such clothing (Kiaer 2005, 110). A third category was *sportodezhda*, or sportswear, designed for various sporting activities and characterised by bold colours and patterns intended to enhance visibility from a distance (Figure 3).

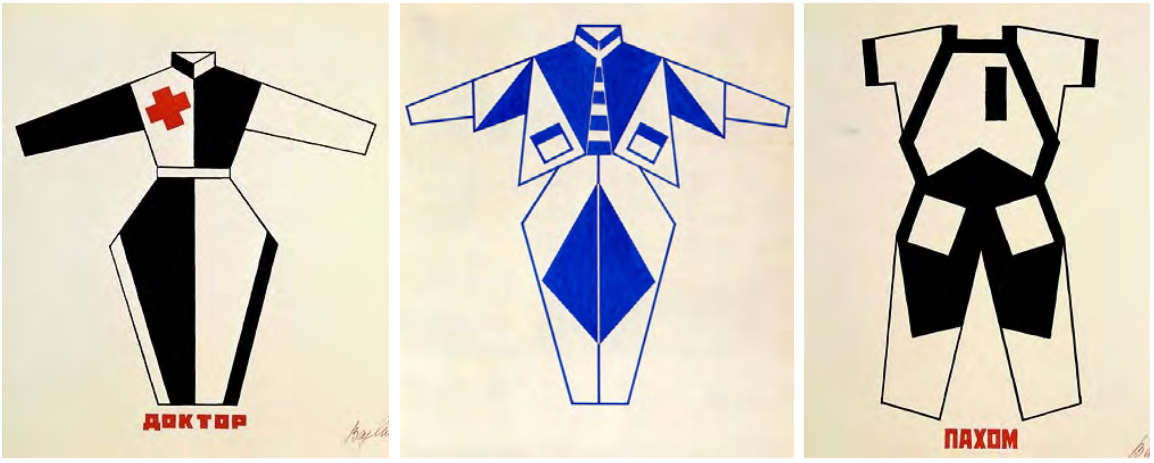

Figure 2. Varvara Stepanova, costumes for the theatre play *The Death of Tarelkin*, 1922. Gouache on paper, 43 x 31 cm. Courtesy of A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum.

The aesthetics and core principles of *prozodezhda* can be traced directly to Stepanova’s work in theatre. Her concept first appeared on stage in 1922, when she designed both costumes and set for Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin’s play *The Death of Tarelkin*. Rejecting traditional approaches to costume design, Stepanova created unisex overalls from sturdy calico and drill, decorated with bold diagonal lines, numbers and circles in black, white, red and blue (Lavrentiev and Stepanova 1988). These graphic motifs visually broke up the body into distinct segments, making the actors’ movements clear and legible, even to those seated at distance from the stage (Figure 2).

Working in tandem with a skeletal, multi-level set, Stepanova's garments became an extension of the stage. The costumes acted as portable machinery, transforming the actor's body into a dynamic, kinetic form – able to climb ladders, swing from gantries and articulate the biomechanical gestures developed by director Vsevolod Meyerhold without having to resort to the clichés of traditional masquerade.

Figure 3. Varvara Stepanova, designs for sport clothing, 1921. In *LEF* 2.

Crucially, Stepanova introduced a new approach to costume design that placed function at its heart. Actors were encouraged to wear these costumes not only during performances, but also in rehearsal and everyday life, aligning with new methods of acting that sought to break down the barrier between stage and reality.[21] In this context, the costumes became more than mere disguise: they served as tools – integral to both the creative process and daily existence (Lavrentiev and Stepanova 1988).

Stepanova was actively involved in staging agitational performances at the pedagogical faculty of the Academy of Social Education in Moscow. Then in 1924, for the student theatre-production *An Evening of the Book*, which promoted literacy, she designed costumes as *sportodezda* at the Academy of Communist Education (Figure 4 and Figure 5). These costumes featured bold geometric patterns that created a dynamic and lively optical illusion when worn by a group – an effect she favoured in her textile designs (Figure 3). Kiaer (2005, 113) wrote that *sportodezda* designs 'evoke human bodies conforming to geometric order'.

[21] What is now called 'method acting' had been introduced by Konstantin Stanislavski in Russia around 1906. It is a style of performance in theatre where, rather than merely imitating a character, actors seek to inhabit the role as fully as possible, both mentally and physically.

Figure 4. Students wearing Stepanova's sport costumes during a performance of *An Evening of the Book*, 1924.

Figure 5. Students in sports clothing designed by Stepanova, spelling out *antrakt!* ('intermission!') during a performance of An Evening of the Book, 1924.

The ensemble of young women in Stepanova's sports costumes thus embodied a version of dress made possible on stage, though not yet experienced in the everyday life of Moscow in 1924, where women continued to wear skirts (Kiaer 2001, 220). As Bartlett (2006, 57) observes: '*Prozodezhda* was supposed to bring a huge rupture with the pre-existing sartorial practices'.

This range of clothing was designed as a system or formula, to be industrially produced, abolishing clothing as an expression of individuality or another mode of capitalist ideology. Stepanova believed in the creation of clothing that was both practical and socially conscious. This meant rejecting decorative bourgeois fashion in favour of streamlined, utilitarian clothing that could be mass-produced for everyday use. Her designs were seen as a form of workwear for the people, reflecting the belief that art, architecture, design and fashion should be tools for societal transformation. According to Stepanova, shop-window displays with wax mannequins would become obsolete, as they reflected the old bourgeois *byt*; in contrast, contemporary clothing could only be fully understood through action. Drawing a parallel with machines, she argued that clothing is meaningless without the activity it enables (Lodder 1983, 149).

Figure 6. Liubov Popova, 'Designs for Production Clothing for Actor No. 7' for the play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922. Gouache, cut-and-pasted coloured paper, ink, and pencil on paper, 32.8 × 23.1 cm. Courtesy of the Merrill C. Berman collection.

Liubov Popova (1889–1924), a central figure in Russian Constructivism, made significant contributions to utopian dress through her pioneering work in avant-garde theatre. Initially, Popova was associated with Suprematism and explored what she termed 'painterly architectonics', a concept influenced by Malevich's architectonics.[22] She later turned to Constructivism, moving away from easel painting to focus on costume and textile design. One of Popova's most renowned works was the costume and set design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold (Figure 6). Here, Popova rejected the traditional symbolic and decorative functions of theatrical costume and instead designed utilitarian overalls that allowed actors greater freedom of movement (Lodder 1983, 149–50).

Beyond her manuscript 'The Costume as an Element of the Material Design', written for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Popova offered little written commentary on her work with costume or

[22] Suprematism is a Russian abstract art movement founded by Kazimir Malevich in 1915. It is characterised by the use of abstract geometric forms and a limited palette, abandoning representational art in favour of the expression of pure feeling. Suprematism had a profound influence on Constructivism, as well as on modernist movements across Europe, notably De Stijl and the Bauhaus.

textiles. Consequently, her approach to the Constructivist object is best understood through her extant drawings and realised stage designs. Her work for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* represented a radical departure from both Russian and Western theatrical traditions, introducing a fundamentally new approach to stage design (Bowlt 1977, 80).

It is important to note that neither Popova's nor Stepanova's clothing and costume designs were gender-specific. Stepanova, in particular, rejected the prevailing gender stereotypes in dress, creating garments intended for wear by anyone, regardless of gender. Popova echoed this sentiment, stating that she was unconcerned with such distinctions; often, the only variation was a simple matter of changing trousers for a skirt. Popova (Kiaer 2001, 233) wrote about androgenous costumes and lack of gender distinction: 'there was a fundamental disinclination to making any distinction between the men's and women's costumes; it just came down to changing the pants to a skirt'.

Both Stepanova's and Popova's approaches evoke a kind of gender neutrality reminiscent of Aleksander Bogdanov's utopian fiction *Red Star* (1908), where physical expressions of gender have disappeared. Their work reflects the broader Bolshevik aspiration to overcome gender stereotypes and promote equality – a vision that, although rarely realised in everyday Soviet life, found expression in the radical aesthetics on the avant-garde stage.

Bolshevik observations regarding gender are vividly reflected in Rodchenko's letters to Stepanova from Paris. Throughout his correspondence, Rodchenko remarks on the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes and the objectification of women that he observed in Parisian society. He referred to it as the 'cult of women as an object', using striking metaphors such as 'the cult of a woman as wormy cheese and oysters…' to emphasise the exploitative nature of these attitudes (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 155). Rodchenko frequently returned to the notion of 'woman-as-thing' (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 167–68):

> I can't even write exactly to what extent *that's all there is,* to what extent this is when, it turns out, that only a man is a person, but women aren't people, and you can do whatever you want with them – they are objects.

Utopian dress in post-revolutionary Russia represented a radical break from previous norms of clothing and fashion, particularly in relation to class, history, gender and social change. Both Popova's and Stepanova's costumes are characterised by graphic, flat and geometric forms, employing sharp angles, bold lines and blocks of colour to create visually striking, almost mechanical designs. This abstraction reflected the Constructivist movement's rejection of

traditional aesthetics in favour of a modernist and technological aesthetic. There is also a pronounced interest in workwear, especially visible in Popova's costumes, whereas Stepanova's designs are generally more abstract and speculative, but also highly original.

Tatlin and Rodchenko

Even before he turned to designing clothes and objects, Tatlin had already adopted workwear as his everyday attire. As Rodchenko notes in his diaries, Tatlin's preference for simplicity and durability left a lasting impression:

> He liked everything simple but well made and sturdy… He wore a sailor's shirt, sailor's pants and also simple English military boots with metal taps, wool jackets and socks… His studio was unusual, made out of plywood sheets. (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 79)

While leading the Department of Material Culture in Petrograd, Tatlin became actively involved in developing prototypes for mass-produced clothing and other everyday objects (Lodder 1983, 147). Among his best-known designs are simple, utilitarian prototypes for a coat and a worker's suit. The coat, for example, was modular and designed for year-round use, consisting of several layers: a flannel lining for autumn and spring, and a heavier fur layer for winter (Figure 7).

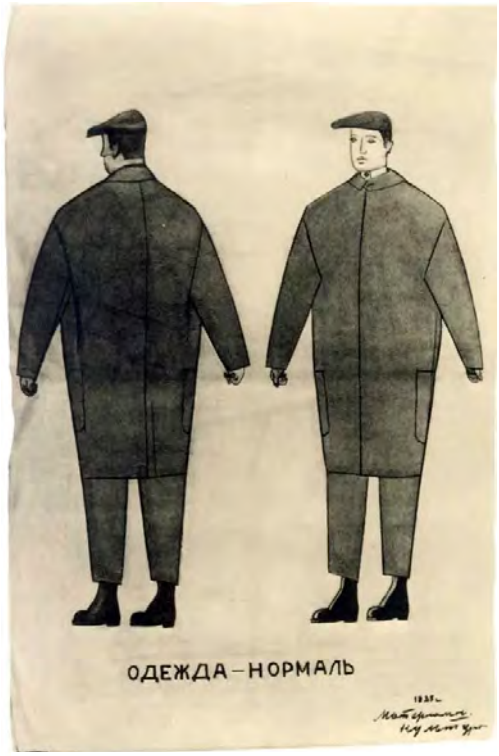

Figure 7. Vladimir Tatlin, *Design for man's coat*, 1923. Charcoal on tracing paper, 107 × 71.5 cm, courtesy of the Bakhrushin Museum.

Its shape was wide at the shoulders and tapered towards the legs to help retain heat. Tatlin explained that this design was functional, allowing freedom of movement while also conserving warmth. The interesting caption on the simple and ordinary drawing says 'clothing-normal' (*odezhda-normal*). The suit was extremely simple, too, and a familiar shape, closely resembling standard workers' suits. It was made from calico.

To promote his clothing, Tatlin created a poster in which he modelled the productivist suit, collaged against an image of a man in a Western-style suit. In the photomontage illustrating his designs, Tatlin explained: 'This clothing is made with the advantage of being warm, not restricting movement, being

hygienic and lasting longer' (Kiaer 2005, 44). He contrasted this with images of men in aristocratic suits: 'This clothing restricts movement, is unhygienic, and they wear it only because they consider it beautiful'.

However pragmatic, Tatlin's clothing designs never entered production. A significant aspect of his approach is the 'absence of the author', yet the clothing lacks the conviviality and originality found in Stepanova's and Popova's costumes and textile designs, which to me signals his lack of real interest in the field of dress.

Rodchenko also designed his own worksuit, which, according to his grandson, was sewn by Stepanova on a Singer sewing machine. This suit was a more interesting and original design than Tatlin's. It took the form of an overall, featuring large woollen pockets reinforced with bold leather trimmings, with matching leather trim at the collar. The pockets were specifically designed to carry a drawing compass, ruler and other tools for the artist-Constructivist. In many respects, it appeared futuristic, particularly in the use of geometric black lines as reinforcements on the pockets and collar. Drawings of the suit also reveal distinctive diamond-shaped trousers, reminiscent of Stepanova's *prozodezhda* (Figure 8 and Figure 9).

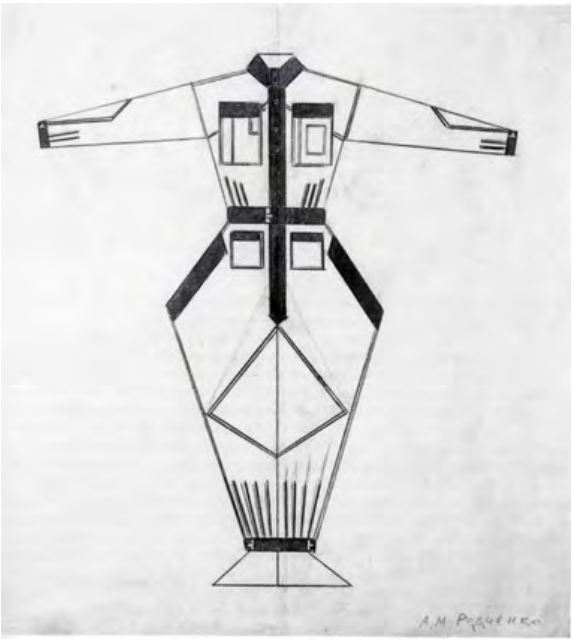

Figure 8. Aleksandr Rodchenko's design for a worksuit, 1921. Courtesy of Alexander Lavrentyev archive.

Figure 9. Rodchenko posing in working overalls, in front of dismantled spatial constructions, 1922. Photograph by Mikhail Kaufman. Courtesy of Alexander Lavrentyev archive.

However, the final version of the suit was more conservative, presenting straight-cut overalls reminiscent of a worker's boiler suit, sightly associated with American overalls.

It is evident that this version was adapted from the original sketch, unlike Stepanova's designs, in which the trousers were realised exactly as depicted in her drawings. This suggests that neither Tatlin nor Rodchenko were prepared to adopt more radical *prozodezhda*, ultimately opting for a more familiar silhouette.

Although Rodchenko was not overly engaged in clothing design, his Paris letters to Stepanova include keen observations on dress codes and the prevailing dominance of fashion. He recounted his efforts to adapt to local expectations, noting:

> I bought a damned hat because you can't wear a cap, since Frenchmen don't wear them, and that's why they look at me with such displeasure everywhere, thinking I am German. … Really, here everything is all one way. Women also dress alike, so you couldn't even find your own wife. (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 157)

Rodchenko's observations offer a revealing glimpse into Parisian fashion in 1925, where dress codes were strict and social expectations closely followed prevailing trends. He noted that, rather than encouraging individual expression, Parisian fashion enforced a form of conformity. Eventually, Rodchenko himself adopted the local style: 'I have twelve collars and two ties now. You can't just get by here without all this. Even so, I feel that I still don't look like others, and here you need to be like everyone else' (Rodchenko and Bowlt 2005, 158).

This is particularly interesting, as it challenges the common association between fashion and individuality. In 1920s Paris, Rodchenko's experience highlights how the fashion system reinforces uniformity rather than producing personal difference.

Rodchenko's letters are more than just personal reflections. They serve as critical and comparative tools for imagining utopian values and exploring a new relationship to women, to art, to objects and to clothing. These documents offer valuable insights into the distinctions between other modernist developments in Europe and the unique aims of Constructivism.

Temporality and change

Constructivism, at its core, embraced dynamics and change. In his essay 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing', as well as in the 1921 Constructivist manifesto, Arvatov insisted that the

socialist object must embody dynamism – explicitly rejecting the static, passive commodities he associated with capitalism. Emerging from the legacy of Russian Futurism, which celebrated speed and flux and even proposed an 'end of history', Constructivism carried forward this fascination with movement and transformation. Arvatov (1997 [1925], 126) observes that 'the thing was dynamized' and describes a world animated by innovations such as collapsible furniture, moving sidewalks, revolving doors, escalators and reversible clothing, all serving as examples of this 'dynamized' environment.

This preoccupation with speed and dynamism was not unique to Constructivism, as other modernist movements in the early 20th century shared the obsession. Across media such as photomontage, photography and textile prints, artists sought visually to encode optical illusions of perpetual motion and velocity.

However, the experience of capitalism's temporality was perceived differently. From a Soviet perspective, capitalist time appeared cyclical and repetitive, sustained by the illusion of endless consumption – most evident in the continual turnover of fashion and commodities. By contrast, Constructivism approached dynamism and change as a means of purposeful transformation, rather than an end in itself. Its dynamism was directed towards the creation of a utopian society. In this sense, Constructivist temporality was rapid yet future-oriented: its velocity sought to break decisively with the repetitive cycles that defined capitalist modernity.

When considering the Constructivist concept of *prozodezhda*, which aimed to disrupt these illusory changes, one is prompted to ask: how would such change actually be made manifest? How could dress itself reflect and embody this dynamism? Djurdja Bartlett (2006), in her extensive study of fashion in the USSR, argues that these experiments articulated a temporality fundamentally different from the seasonal rhythms of Western fashion. This invites a further question: how did Constructivism imagine a relationship with clothing that not only embodied change, but also resisted obsolescence and the pace dictated by the market?

For Constructivists, emancipation demanded the invention of new rhythms and a new temporal order. *Prozodezhda* sought to unsettle both historical references and the representational function of clothing, recasting change as a process of continuous adaptation to the evolving conditions of everyday life. This utopian vision of temporality was deliberately ambiguous: it was future-facing and experiential, not calculative.

Within capitalism, time is commodified, and life is governed by calculative, market-driven rhythms. Constructivists, by contrast, envisioned emancipation through new social rhythms oriented towards transformation and collective progress. Their utopian temporality was adaptable, prioritising purposeful change over repetition. In this vision, clothing would evolve to meet real social needs and technological advances, with its dynamism understood as a process of ongoing, practical improvement rather than constant novelty or planned obsolescence.

Walter Benjamin, in Convolute B of *The Arcades Project*, explored fashion as a phenomenon inextricably linked with time, change and ephemerality. He posed the question: 'Does fashion die (as in Russia, for example) because it can no longer keep up the tempo – at least in certain fields?' (Benjamin 1999, 71).

Fashion journals in Moscow at the time even questioned whether fashion itself would come to an end. In Constructivism's early years, Stepanova predicted that *prozodezhda* would gradually replace fashion altogether. Later, she revised this view, acknowledging that fashion would persist, but with a fundamental difference:

> Clothes would still fall out of use, not because they start to look funny when the market generates novel fashions, but rather because the conditions of *byt* will have changed, necessitating new forms of clothing. (Kiaer 2005, 123)

This reflection goes to the heart of the Constructivist attempt to imagine a different temporality – one in which speed and change serve as tools for collective transformation, rather than mechanisms for the perpetual renewal of consumption.

Constructivism as a non-capitalist form of modernity

Constructivists were frequently compared to modernists from movements such as the German Bauhaus or the French L'Esprit Nouveau. However, they consistently distanced themselves from these currents, criticising them for producing 'aesthetic versions of capitalist industrial objects in the tradition of applied art' (Kiaer 2005, 37). Instead, the Constructivists sought to create 'an entirely new order of objects within socialist production' (Kiaer 2005, 37).

Central to Constructivist practice was a redefinition of the artist's role: moving away from elite 'high art' towards the purposeful design of everyday objects. Unlike their Western counterparts, whose designs often reinforced consumer culture, Constructivists aimed to transform possessive

relationships with material objects, not to eliminate them. Objects were seen as having social agency – they were meant to be adaptable, shared and functional, rather than fetishised.

Yet these ambitions were constrained by the severe limitations of Russia's pre-revolutionary industry. The early years after the Bolshevik Revolution were marked by outdated factories, an undertrained workforce and a lack of resources, making large-scale production of utilitarian art largely impossible. As a result, much of Constructivist practice remained speculative, imagining possibilities that the industrial base could not yet realise.

This historical context brings into focus Walter Benjamin's enduring question: 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?' (Benjamin 1999, 222).

As Kiaer observes, 'the socialist object as it was developed in the early 1920s was therefore of necessity a transitional one, anticipating a future socialist culture that had not yet arrived' (Kiaer 2005, 4).

The Constructivists' ideas remain relevant today, raising important questions. How can we redefine our relationship with material culture, especially in the context of high capitalism? How do different social ambitions shape material culture when production and consumption are controlled by capitalist corporations? Finally, how can well-intentioned efforts avoid being reduced to 'mere representation', becoming images rather than genuine expressions of intent?

Constructivism marks the beginning of utopian dress practice and also what could be understood as one of the most ambitious utopian dress proposals in history. The pivotal idea that emerges is the concept of 'dress as a tool', or imaginary workwear that proposes a change in its relationship to clothes in general, to the body and society. This new socialist dress was envisioned as a novel form of workwear – a hybrid designed to serve the needs of both work and daily life. The formal and social characteristics of utopian dress proposed by Constructivists informed this research, in particular the curatorial concept for the exhibition 'Workwear', which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Case Study II: Neoconcrete Utopia – Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape

While Russian Constructivism and, in the 1960s and ’70s, Italian Radical Design (explored below, in Case Study III) explicitly addressed utopian ideals and openly engaged with political questions, Neoconcretism was less overt in its politics, instead favouring more autonomous and ambivalent forms of engagement. However, this thesis argues that the participatory dress practices of three artists – Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape – most closely align with the idea of utopian dress, even if this connection is not immediately apparent.

Neoconcretism (Neoconcretismo, 1959–61) was a Brazilian art movement that arose as a critique of the formalist approach of Concrete Art. Rooted in Gestalt theory, Concrete Art prioritised geometric abstraction and mathematical precision, whereas Neoconcretism sought to bring a more human, emotional and experiential dimension to abstraction, emphasising the active participation of the viewer.

Neoconcretism emerged in 1959, during a period of rapid modernisation in Brazil that was marked by President Juscelino Kubitschek’s ‘fifty years in five’ project and the creation of the city of Brasília – a symbol of national progress and optimism. While Neoconcretism was neither directly political nor linked to Brasília, the movement arose from the same spirit of hope and belief in the transformative power of art and design. For this reason, art historians often describe the period as ‘utopian’. The term ‘utopia’ has predominantly been used in the context of art history as if it is synonymous with ideology and politics or to signify hope, impossibility and failure (Brito 2017 [1975]; Asbury 2003).

During this time, artists acted as public intellectuals, engaging actively with the media and reflecting the openness and dynamism of Brazilian society before the military dictatorship. Unlike the earlier Constructivist movement, which often assumed explicit political functions, the Neoconcretists sought a different kind of engagement. Art critic and theorist Mário Pedrosa, despite his leftist affiliations, championed art as ‘the experimental exercise of freedom’ (Carvajal, Ruiz, and Martin 1999). He argued for an autonomous and experimental approach to art, one capable of transforming people’s perceptions and offering new ways of seeing the world. This notion became a guiding principle for Neoconcrete art.

In this research, however, I approach utopia as a theoretical concept – a method for imagining alternatives to the present – rather than as providing a metaphor for left politics or specific

historical events. Through this lens, I consider Neoconcrete practices as embodying utopia as a critical and creative method.

The Neoconcrete movement pre-dates Global Tools and Italian Radical Design by nearly a decade, yet its works feel strikingly contemporary. This lasting relevance – despite the movement's brief existence – complicates its historical categorisation, as Neoconcrete art continues to influence and challenge the strictly historical and chronological boundaries of art history.

The Neoconcrete movement officially began with Ferreira Gullar's publication of the *Manifesto Neoconcreto* in 1959. This manifesto critiqued the 'cold and mechanical' tendencies of Concrete Art, advocating a return to the expressive and experiential potential of the artist. Gullar was influenced by phenomenology, particularly the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasised perception and the body's relationship with space (Gullar 1959; Brito 2017; Asbury 2005).

Initially drawn to geometric abstraction, Neoconcrete artists such as Clark, Oiticica and Pape moved beyond the rationalism of Constructivism. For instance, Clark's *Planes in Modulated Surface* (*Planos em Superfície Modulada*, 1957) began with geometric forms but later evolved into something more organic and interactive. Similarly, Oiticica's immersive installations and Pape's participatory public performances shifted the emphasis from object-making to creating relational experiences between the work and its audience.

This rupture with traditional art forms happened gradually, through experimentation, as Neoconcretists felt compelled to move beyond the 'plane' of painting and into everyday life. This transition marked a profound exploration of the connection between art, the body and lived experience.

Ronaldo Brito provides the most comprehensive analysis of the rupture of Neoconcretism and the period preceding its formation. In his essay, Brito writes of Neoconcretism's 'well-known apolitical manifesto (and its liberal and at times latent anarchic-utopianism)…' (Brito 2017, 126). The phrase 'latent anarchic-utopianism' can be interpreted as an implicit or underlying tendency within Neoconcretism to align with anarchic and utopian ideals, even if these are not clearly expressed as such. Brito (2017, 140) understood the radicalism of the 'apolitical' Neoconcrete movement from this perspective:

> Concretism, following the constructive tradition, was characterised by its reformist social-democratic positions. Apolitical Neoconcretism was nearer to a utopian and anarchic refusal of established reality.

In this study, I emphasise several aspects of utopia that relate to the practices of Neoconcretism in Brazil. I begin by outlining key concepts within Neoconcretism, including its relationship to time and space—particularly the idea of a 'rupture from the plane'—as well as the 'Theory of the Non-Object'. These ideas are closely linked to the concept of utopia explored in the theory chapter. I then focus on the work of Clark, Oiticica and Pape, examining how their practices engage with ideas of the collective, the body and social dress.

Neoconcretism and time

The first aspect, as mentioned above, is the movement's relationship to time – particularly temporal openness and or absence of non-linear, calculative time, which Bloch (1995) describes as 'not yet'. Neoconcrete art resists closure, maintaining a dynamic vitality that complicates understanding it as merely a historical phenomenon. This quality of temporal openness – where the creations resist being confined to the 'past' – strongly aligns with utopian concepts that envision time as non-linear and expansive. Neoconcrete art shares with utopia the characteristic of being an open-ended process. These works were not conceived with fixed goals but were realised through participation and engagement, moving continually through interaction. As such, Neoconcrete works are not 'finished' objects; they remain in flux, perpetually 'becoming'. Brito (2017, 134) identifies this temporal difference as a key aspect of utopia:

> Concrete time is operational; it has an objective dimension. Neoconcrete time is phenomenological, a recuperation and recharging of lived experiences. It is in this sense that Neoconcretism was a precursor to the dominant tendencies in the 1960s, which represented an effort to abolish the distance between art and life.

In contrast, Russian Constructivism and Italian Radical Design, while equally visionary and influential, are more clearly situated within historical frameworks. They evoke a sense of resolution or closure that allows for more definitive historical analysis. However, the works of Neoconcrete artists like Clark, Oiticica and Pape resist such finality. Their open-ended nature defies fixed interpretation, making them feel dynamically alive and perpetually relevant. They

are not merely references to a past moment but continue to embody an ongoing process of discovery, challenging conventional boundaries between history and contemporary relevance. Lygia Clark (Clark and Bois 1994, 104) conveyed this alternative experience of temporality:

> We are a spatio-temporal totality. In the immanent act we see no temporal limit. Past, present, future, mix together. We exist before the afterward – but the afterward anticipates the act. The afterward is implied in the act in the process of happening. If time lives in the instant of the act, what comes out of the act is incorporated into the perception of absolute time. There is no distance between the past and the present. When one looks backward, the distant past and the recent past fuse.

Rupture with space

Another utopian aspect of Neoconcretism is its relation to space. Neoconcretism created a rupture with the concept of 'space' as it was traditionally understood in the history of art, which was evident in relation to Concrete Art. While Concrete Art was deeply rooted in geometric abstraction and focused on the object as a static entity within a defined, rational space, Neoconcretism introduced a more fluid, participatory and dynamic engagement with space, challenging the formal, mathematical rigour of its predecessor.

The rupture with space in Neoconcretism can be seen as a rejection of the purely visual, geometric and static concepts of space that defined earlier movements like Constructivism. Neo-Concretism's emphasis on space as relational – where the viewer and the object coexist and interact in an ongoing exchange – marked a departure from the more formal, detached relationship with space found in Concrete Art.

The concept of displacement in utopian literature and theory often refers to the ways in which utopias are imagined as existing outside conventional spatial, temporal, or ideological boundaries. Utopias are frequently portrayed as physically distant or isolated places – such as an island, different planet, remote region or an inaccessible community. This spatial displacement enables the suspension of existing social norms, providing a 'blank slate' on which to critique contemporary practices and envision an alternative society.

In similar way, Neoconcretism addressed space in an abstract, metaphysical way, as Brito (2017, 135) elaborates:

The rupture with representational (metaphorical, allusive) space meant a break with the established rules of art, freeing the artist, to a certain extent, to act more directly within the social field'. He also notes that 'This was Neo-concretism's radicalism: to oppose the established system of art and its dominant conventions through experimentalism. This was achieved practically not theoretically.

'Theory of the Non-Object'

'Teoria do Nao-Objeto' was a text written by Ferreira Gullar in 1959, inspired by Lygia Clark's artwork *Breaking the Frame* (*Quebra da moldura*, 1954).[23] Clark began to challenge the spatial conventions of the image plane in the series *Planes in Modulated Surface*, created between 1957 and 1958, which integrated the frame into the body of the painting to render it a three-dimensional object. Instead of traditional canvas and paint, she started using industrial paint and wood.

The concept of the 'non-object' emerged spontaneously during dinner at Lygia Clark's home, where she presented her new works to her guests.[24] Struggling to find an appropriate term to describe them, Clark tentatively referred to pieces as 'reliefs'. Gullar observed that, because the works lacked a background plane, they did not fit the traditional definition of reliefs. However, they could not be classified strictly as paintings or sculptures. Realising the limitations of existing terminology, Gullar described them as 'objects', but he found this term insufficient, as it failed to distinguish the works from everyday items like tables or chairs. As a result, he humorously coined the term 'non-object', which effectively conveyed their unique and ambiguous nature (Asbury 2003, 131).

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[23] Originally published as 'Teoria do Nao-Objeto' in Suplemento Dominical of *Jornal do Brasil*, 19–20 December 1959. I used the English translation by Michael Asbury 2005.

[24] Gullar, 'Entrevista', *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira* 6 (6, September 1998), 36:
Gullar had the following conversation with Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa: 'Once we arrived, Lygia showed us a work that did not bear a name. It was not a sculpture. I kept looking at it; Mário Pedrosa also. She said: "I do not know how to name it." Mário Pedrosa said: "It is a type of relief." I contended: "This is not it – there is no surface. If there is no surface, it is not relief." He left, dinner was served – and I stayed there. I remember that I thought: "It is not painting, it is not sculpture; it is an object. But if I say that it is an object, now the table is an object, the chair is an object. Therefore, Lygia's work is not an object." I met the others and said: "I know the name. It is non-object." Mário Pedrosa contended: "Non-object does not exist. Object is object of knowledge." I explained that he was philosophically right. "But the problem" – I replied – "is that this is an object-no; it is not a work of art within the traditional categories but continues to be an object."

In his 1959 essay 'Theory of the Non-Object', Gullar formalised his concept. The non-object, he argued, was not simply an absence of form but rather an art form that exists beyond physical structure or aesthetic formality. It is a type of art that is fully activated only in the presence of a viewer, engaging them in a direct, experiential and often participatory manner (Gullar, cited in Asbury 2005).

Gullar's theory of the non-object is not defined by opposition or negation of ordinary objects; rather, it is a special kind of object that serves no practical purpose (Asbury 2003). This lack of utility makes it uniquely open to direct, sensory experience. It exists purely for perception, without any function beyond being experienced, allowing it to be fully appreciated as a 'pure appearance'.

The non-object was the result of the exhaustion of representation as a function of art, but it also signalled the limits and conventions of painting and sculpture. Perhaps Gullar's non-object can be thought of as an experience rather than an object in the conventional sense. The concept draws on phenomenology, in particular the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who emphasised the embodied nature of perception. This theoretical grounding encouraged artists to consider how viewers' physical presence and sensory engagement with an artwork contribute to its meaning. Gullar's non-object theory moved away from treating art as a static, aesthetic object and instead defined it as an experience that goes beyond its physical presence. This shift has since influenced the way many contemporary artists and curators think about art as an experience to be activated or 'completed' by the viewer.

In the context of study of utopian dress, it is interesting to observe theoretical connections between Gullar's theory of non-object and utopia as no-place. A utopian object could be considered a non-object in the way it transcends fixed form, challenges traditional materiality and invites interaction or imagination in place of tangible presence.

In a similar way (as discussed in Chapter Two), 'utopia'– rooted in the Greek words *ou* (meaning 'no' or 'not') and *topos* (meaning 'place') – refers to the idea of a perfect society that, paradoxically, exists as 'no place': a place that can only exist in the imagination or as an ideal. Utopia is envisioned as a hypothetical, imagined place that allows a critique of existing societies, presenting a space where ideals of justice and equality can be 'realised' in theory, even if they are not attainable in practice.

Likewise, Gullar's 'non-object' theory explores art that transcends conventional forms of representation. For Gullar, the 'non-object' exists in a realm that goes beyond mere physical

form or function: it represents an ideal or a conceptual entity that is more than an object, something that cannot be contained within traditional categories of art. This concept resists the physical definition of object, pointing toward experiences or sensations rather than concrete forms. Both concepts deal with the limits of representation, reality, and the idea of the ideal or the intangible.

Non-object has a distinct utopian function of 'a critique within', as Bloch and Adorno (1964, 10) both agree: 'the essential function that utopia has, and its very existence, is a critique of what is given!' and 'utopia lies essentially in the determinate negation… of what merely is which, as it concretizes itself as a falsity, always points at the same time to what should be'.[25] Similarly, according to Brito (Asbury 2003, 185), Neoconcretism's peripheral status in society was a key characteristic, as it facilitated a critical reassessment of both the principles of Constructivism and the fundamental nature of art itself.

Utopia, especially in modern interpretations, is not a final destination but a dynamic process of constantly striving toward improvement. This view suggests that utopia is more of a journey than a destination – a state of mind or an ongoing pursuit. Non-object, likewise, is not a static or finished product. For Gullar, the non-object only fully exists when it is engaged with and experienced by the observer. It is less about the finality of an artwork and more about the relational and temporal experience it creates.

So the utopian object relates to Gullar's concept of the non-object in many respects: it transcends physicality, invites relational interaction and emphasises a process of becoming rather than a fixed end state. Both concepts inhabit a space of potential, resisting commodification and material boundaries. Therefore, a utopian object can indeed be considered a non-object in the sense that it embodies the core qualities Gullar emphasised: open-endedness, immateriality and experiential engagement.

It is not an object in the traditional sense but rather a vision that activates ideas, interactions and aspirations – making it more a catalyst for experience than a defined, material entity. This connection affirms the idea that the utopian object (like the non-object) functions as a space of transformation and potential, inviting viewers to co-create its meaning and existence. Gullar (Calirman 2012, 7) notes:

[25] Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, 'Possibilities of Utopia Today' (Radio-Debate, Südwestrundfunk, 1964)', https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/utopia1313/files/2023/03/Ernst_Bloch_and_Theodor_W_Adorno_Possibi.pdf (accessed 20 July 2025).

> Without the spectator the work of art only potentially exists, waiting for a human gesture to actualise it.

This idea can be expanded into a broader inquiry: does the Neoconcrete concept of the non-object, which emphasises a departure from traditional, fixed forms to embrace fluidity and interaction, represent a utopian process aiming for transformative possibilities? Additionally, can this concept be applied as a method or framework in utopian dress practice, challenging conventional boundaries and fostering new ways of engaging with clothing as a medium of expression and experience?

In other words, does the non-object in Neoconcretism offer practical potential for reimagining dress as a site of utopian experimentation?

Collective body

Brito (2017) acknowledged that in seeking to move beyond the technicist focus of Concretism, Neoconcretism found two paths. One, seen as the peak of Brazil's Constructivist tradition, included artists like Willys de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Hércules Barsotti, Aluísio Carvão and, to some extent, Amílcar de Castro. These artists prioritised aesthetic research and the sensibility of the artwork, preserving its specificity. The second, more disruptive approach, replaced this sensibility with a dramatisation of the artwork, as exemplified by artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark (Asbury 2005, 9).

Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica later moved beyond geometric experimentation into everyday life, engaging with environmental art, clothes and therapy. This thesis explores the disruptive and transgressive practices of Clark and Oiticica – as well as Lygia Pape – emphasising their role in challenging traditional boundaries in art. Neoconcrete artists believed that art could dissolve the divisions between the individual and the collective, creating a more liberated, egalitarian and participatory experience.

Although Neoconcrete artists did not explicitly identify their work as 'utopian', their vision of art as a vehicle for social change and personal transformation reflects a distinctly utopian attitude. I will discuss these works through ideas of social dress, the collective body and positioning dress as a tool for embodied and convivial experience of art.

Wearable utopias – Clark, Pape and Oiticica

Lygia Clark (1920–1988), a pioneering Brazilian artist, is also known as a founder of Neoconcretism and for her groundbreaking approach to art as an experiential and participatory practice. Throughout her career, Clark focused on dissolving the traditional boundaries between artist, artwork and viewer. She envisioned art as a collective, participatory process in the creation of which the audience plays an integral role. Clark's 'relational objects' and 'propositions', as well as participation and collective experience, are concepts that I am particularly interested in as a focus of utopian dress.

Figure 10. Re-enactment of Lygia Clark's *Corpo Colectivo* (*Collective Body*, 1970) at Clark Art Center, Rio de Janeiro, 2011. Photograph by Nuno Franco de Sousa. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

In *Corpo Colectivo* (*Collective Body*, 1970), participants dressed in different coloured, stretchy jumpsuits sew each other's outfits (Figure 10 and Figure 11). During this action, they form physical connections as they attempt to move together in a colourful, intertwined mass. This performative and interactive work brings participants together to explore the collective nature of the body. The piece is rooted in Clark's interest in dissolving the boundaries between the individual and the collective, emphasising the communal aspects of human experience. *Corpo*

Colectivo reflects the dual nature of utopian dress—being at once restrictive and liberating—as previously discussed in utopian literature.

Figure 11. Detail from Figure 9: participants sew each other's bodysuits. From a re-enactment of Lygia Clark's *Corpo Colectivo* (*Collective Body*, 1970) at Clark Art Center, Rio de Janeiro, 2011. Photograph by Nuno Franco de Sousa. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

In *Corpo Colectivo*, the bodysuits are plain and identical in shape, yet each is a different colour, evoking the concept of commonality in utopian dress. The work explores group behaviour through restriction, as the suits facilitate connection but limit individual movement. As Clark wrote in 1975 (Borja-Villel 1998, 266):

> I have lost my identity; I am diluted in the collective. I see myself through all people independently of sex or age. I try to reconstruct the architecture of my face, by appropriating the physiognomies I see. I am the other.[26]

This aspect of otherness is evident in Clark's phenomenological approach, especially in how she sees the body – not just as a site of thought and perception, but as something that mediates between the self and the world. The body is not just a vessel for cognition but a bridge between ourselves and the world (Borja-Villel 1998). Clark explores this group practice through a series of performance-activations, which she refers to as *vivencia* (loosely translated as 'experience').

[26] Manuel J. Borja-Villel. 1998. *Lygia Clark: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 21 Octubre–21 Diciembre 1997*.

The connection between individual bodies is similarly explored in *Elastic Net* (*Rede de elásticos*, 1974), a work involving a sprawling web of elastic bands. Participants connect elastic bands and interact with the net, bouncing, pushing and pulling as they test its physical boundaries. In a 1974 video documenting *Elastic Net*, one participant remarks, 'Instead of wanting out, I wanted in.' *Elastic Net* is part of her exploration of the relationship between art, the body and the social environment. Clark was interested in how art could transcend traditional boundaries and engage the viewer directly, inviting them to experience the artwork not only as an observer but also as a participant.

In her text *The Death of the Plane* (1960), Clark elaborated on this major rupture and transition from fine arts towards participation. She remarked, 'By eliminating the plane as a support of expression, we become aware of the unit as a living, organic whole' (Borja-Villel 1998, 96). This was not only about making the spectator aware of their own body but also about emphasising our shared existence as human beings (Clark et al. 2014).

Figure 12. Lygia Clark. *Dialogue of Hands (Diálogo de mãos)*, 1966. Elastic. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

In the later stages of her career, Clark focused entirely on the body as a site of cognition. This led to her creation of wearable art forms, including masks, goggles, gloves and suits. Her ideas were influenced by Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories, particularly his concepts of play, transitional objects and the role of creativity in psychological healing and self discovery.[27] These concepts profoundly shaped Clark's shift from traditional art forms to participatory and therapeutic practices. Clark introduced terms such as 'relational objects' and 'propositions' to differentiate her work from conventional art forms like sculpture and traditional objects. Clark's propositions are engaging and thought-provoking. In addition to their participatory and relational aspects, these

[27] Donald Winnicott was English psychoanalyst influential in the field of object relations theory and developmental psychology. See Donald Winnicott (1953) 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: a study of the first not-me possession',: *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34: 89-97.

works often make use of industrial materials and forms that evoke associations with workwear or protective clothing.

Clark's 1966 proposition *Dialogue of Hands* (*Diálogo de mãos*) is a piece of elastic stitched into a band and forming a Möbius strip, the simple yet puzzling ribbon that has only one side, turning inside into outside and vice versa. In the most famous image of this work, the connected wrists belong to Clark and Hélio Oiticica (Figure 12).

The two interconnected suits with hooded masks of *The I and the You* (*O Eu e o Tu*, 1967) closely resemble workwear, akin to hazmat suits. Similarly, *Goggles* (*Óculos*, 1968) adopts the aesthetic of welding goggles (Figure 16). *Sensorial Masks* (*Máscaras sensoriais*, 1967) incorporates often ephemeral, mundane materials such as fabric, metal, plastic and mirrors, chosen for their capacity to engage the senses in unexpected ways (Figure 14). In Clark's work, metallic mesh or metal eye-patches cover the eyes, or she deploys rubber gloves and exhaust pipes, all of them contributing to her complex engagement with the body and sensory experience (Figure 15 and Figure 18). Collectively, these elements create a micro-environment that heightens and transforms what is sensed; formally, the masks evoke the visual language of heavy-duty protective workwear.

Figure 13. Lygia Clark, *Breathe with Me (Respire Comigo)*, 1966. Diving air tube, 0.4 x 40 cm. Photograph by Sergio Zalis, 1983. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

Figure 14. Lygia Clark, *Sensorial Masks (Máscaras sensoriais)*, 1967. Fabric, metal mesh, aromatic spices. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

Figure 15. Lygia Clark, *Luvas Sensoriais* (*Sensorial Gloves)*. 1966. Industrial rubber. Courtesy of Associacão Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

Figure 16. Lygia Clark, *Óculos (Goggles)*, 1968. Aluminium, rubber and mirrored glass. Photograph by Eduardo Clark. Courtesy of Associacão Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

Figure 17. Lygia Clark, *Caesarean Section (Clothes – Body – Clothes series)*, 1968. PVC suits. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

Figure 18. Lygia Clark, *Luvas Sensoriais* (*Sensorial Gloves*), 1968. Workwear gloves, industrial rubber, leather, balls. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

This area is fascinating for my research, not only from an aesthetic perspective but also in terms of function and how these artworks were used. There is an enigmatic quality to them: the works serve a sensory role, emphasising the embodied nature of clothing. Yet, aesthetically, they appear highly technical. Removed from their original context, the objects could easily be thought

to be for industrial or technical purposes. The choice of materials is not simply a residue of Clark's Constructivist and Concretist past; it is also bound up with a wider sociopolitical context.

Because Clark never wrote explicitly about the industrial aspect of her materials, we are left to interpret their significance ourselves. She began producing these works just after the military coup in Brazil in 1964, continuing for more than two decades – a period marked by political repression, censorship and human rights abuses. The coup itself was closely linked to the Cold War, fuelled by US fears about President João Goulart's left-leaning policies and the possible spread of communism in Latin America, particularly following the Cuban Revolution (Calirman 2012).

Given this context, it seems plausible that Clark's use of hazmat suits, masks, goggles and gloves may allude to wider anxieties surrounding the Cold War, including the threat of nuclear conflict and a pervasive culture of surveillance. The use of such industrial materials is therefore not only a trace of her earlier engagement with Constructivism and Concretism, but also resonates with the sociocultural climate of the period.

Sensorial Masks (1966) comprise a series of six masks crafted from brightly coloured fabrics – blue, green, red, orange, white and black – intended to stimulate and alter perception (Figure 14). Various materials are integrated throughout: the eyes are obscured by steel wool or spoons, while the nose features pockets infused with essences such as chamomile, rosemary or lemon balm. Around the ears, materials including steel wool, broken glass and sponges further engage the senses.

Clark's artworks draw formally on workwear and highly specialised protective garments, yet she shifts their function from the industrial realm to the sensory. There is something captivating, even contradictory, about how these heavy-duty objects are used not only for sensory exploration but also for therapy. Her adoption of industrial aesthetics and workwear-like materials reflects deeper cultural currents of her time. When unzipped, the suits reveal a layered mix of industrial and organic textures – foam, water, rubber, straw and sponge – which invite participants into a deeply tactile experience. This absurd Cold War-era 'equipment' is given an entirely new purpose: it becomes therapeutic. Whether intentional or not, there is a political message embedded in this transformation. By merging industrial formality with sensory experience, Clark's work addresses tensions arising from the Cold War. She positions these robust, utilitarian materials at the intersection of personal embodiment and broader social critique.

Walking through the exhibition *Lygia Clark: The I and the You* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London (2 October 2024–12 January 2025), I noticed labels listing materials such as 'automotive paint on chipboard', 'industrial ink on wood' and 'aluminium'. Even the titles of works – like *Bichos* (*Animals LC2, Animals LC3*) or individual parts of *Bichos* marked as 'R10', 'R9' and 'R7' – reflect this duality, pointing to a tension between technological references and the deeply personal, sensory nature of the works. These are perhaps residue of Constructivism and the use of industrial debris in the work of Tatlin and Rodchenko, where Tatlin's approach to his own practice as a 'culture of materials' negates any involvement of the author and instead makes his role into being an 'assistant to materials'. But Clark's industrial references are deeply infused with emotional and convivial qualities – *Bichos* (1965), for instance, are hinged sheets of metal designed to be played with; the hinges themselves become the key element of the work.

One of the reasons I find Clark's works so evocative is that they bridge the individual and the collective at a deeply personal level, much like clothing, which embodies a paradox of being both private and public, personal yet shared. These works exhibit a dual, lateral character, fostering connections between individuals by altering their perception. In this sense, the social aspect is achieved through shifts in individual awareness. This aligns to Suely Rolnik's (Borja-Villel 1998) argument that Clark's practice reconfigures subjectivity, rather than simply offering a form of therapy. Clark herself denied that her sessions were merely therapeutic. According to Rolnik, these are hybrid events – neither strictly therapeutic nor traditional artworks – but 'territories' in which artistic practice fundamentally transforms subjectivity. These are transformative shifts occurring at the level of both individual and collective desire, rather than being confined to large-scale political movements.

In Clark's work, I find direct reference to utopian dress. The idea of the collective body – a key theme in utopian fiction – is explored as an experiment in social interaction, where dress becomes a way to connect people. Clark's distinctive 'specialist workwear' functions both therapeutically and as clothing for sensory exploration, while also recalling the longstanding utopian tradition that links workwear to utopian dress.

In this thesis, Lygia Clark's practice will be revisited in the chapter on the exhibition *Workwear*, where her piece *The I and the You* (*O Eu e o Tu*, 1967) is contextualised within the theme of workwear.

Divisor (Divider)

Lygia Pape (1927–2004) was another key figure in the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement. Her practice spanned a range of media, including sculpture, printmaking, painting, film and performance, often exploring the intersections of geometry, abstraction, the body and social engagement.

Pape's *Divisor* (*Divider*), first performed in Rio de Janeiro in 1968, is a pioneering work of public participation (performance-activation) that has been revisited many times since. In *Divisor*, participants immerse themselves in a vast white sheet, each placing their head through a separate slit so that only their heads are visible while their bodies remain hidden (Figure 19).

Pape originally envisioned *Divisor* as an indoor piece, with individuals inserting their heads through slits in a large cloth. However, logistical constraints led her to adapt the work by bringing the cloth to the nearby favela, Chácara de Cabeça, where she invited local children to engage with it. She documented this first iteration on film, also capturing her own participation. The children instinctively understood the work, quickly embracing the cloth and its possibilities. Together, they formed a collective body, simultaneously united and separated by the slit fabric, moving as one. Later, Pape 'activated' *Divisor* with adults at various locations across the city, transforming it into a powerful symbol of collective protest that echoed the crowds on the streets during Brazil's dictatorship (Pape 2022).

The participants move collectively, their movements creating a dynamic tension between division and unity. This piece has been re-enacted across the world, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2017) and in Hong Kong (2013), underscoring its lasting influence and its capacity to generate a shared, embodied experience that questions and challenges social norms around individuality and collectiveness (Pape 2022). The re-enactment challenges linear time and it can be read as a utopian act. In this sense, re-enactment aligns with a *utopian method*: it tests, revises and reimagines the possible, keeping the utopian impulse alive.

The title *Divider* is ambivalent, as the piece simultaneously separates individuals within a grid structure while uniting them as a collective body. This has always intrigued me, as my interpretation of the piece is that it unites rather than divides participants. This double meaning has a utopian resonance, as the fabric simultaneously partitions individuals within a grid while connecting them as part of a unified whole. Like in utopian fiction, the piece uses dress as both a

physical and social connector, revealing the simplicity of human connection and our interdependence through embodied experience. In this way, the activation of public space becomes a metaphor for social connection, embodying a subtle yet powerful political statement.

Figure 19. Lygia Pape, *Divisor (Divider)*, 1968. Performance from 1990 at Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Paula Pape. Courtesy of Projeto Lygia Pape.

Parangolé – social dress

Parangolé refers to a series of wearable artworks created by Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) between 1964 and 1979, taking the form of capes, flags, banners and shelters. These pieces were crafted from vibrant materials, such as coloured fabrics, nylon, jute, rope and gauze. Oiticica designed them to be worn, turning the viewer into an active participant rather than a passive observer. Worn as flags or banners, the *Parangolés* evoke ideas of identity and collective expression; as garments, they encourage spontaneous movement and performance, exploring the possibilities of dance, colour and texture.

Yet the *Parangolés* are more than just costumes or props: they embody Oiticica's broader vision of art as a participatory, lived experience (Oiticica and Witte de With 1992). When someone puts on a *Parangolé*, they become part of the artwork itself. The layers of fabric shift with every

movement, constantly revealing new forms and possibilities as the piece comes alive in action. Oiticica famously described them as ‘social dress, for dancing samba’, emphasising their spirit of participation and collective energy (Brett and Figueiredo 2007). These are works that transcend any single function, reflecting Oiticica’s broader, holistic vision (Oiticica and Witte de With 1992).

Figure 20. *P 21 Parangolé capa 17* 'Guevaluta' (detail), 1968.
Fabric, towel, acrylic on nylon mesh and cotton mesh, 100 x 96 x 4 cm.
Collection Cesar and Claudio Oititica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Oiticica often incorporated words and phrases into the capes, combining written language with visual and performative elements. Well-known inscriptions include: ‘Of Adversity We Live’ (1966), ‘I Am Possessed’ (1966), ‘I Am the Mascot of the *Parangolé*/the Mosquito of Samba’ (1967), ‘I Embody Revolt’ (1967) and ‘We Are Hungry’ (1968). These works reveal Oiticica’s ongoing exploration of the connection between art, politics and the body, positioning the *Parangolé* as a tool for both personal expression and social bonding (Figure 20, Figure 21 and Figure 22).

The concept of social dress emerged from Oiticica's close engagement with favela communities, who were living in conditions of severe poverty. He immersed himself in samba, becoming a *passista* (lead dancer) and forging strong connections with the Mangueira samba school – frequently crediting its members as his inspiration for the *Parangolés*. Through these works, Oiticica addresses social marginalisation by linking the lived experiences of these communities to the emancipatory and transformative potential of dance. His embrace of Afro-Brazilian popular culture was itself a political gesture in 1960s Brazil, challenging both elite artistic norms and the military dictatorship's preference for sanitised nationalism (Calirman 2012).

As an unaligned leftist, Oiticica found his raw inspiration in the everyday lives of the marginalised in the favelas and samba schools of Rio de Janeiro. He found in the favela an alternative space of communal connection, which had been absent from his own middle-class, sexually repressive upbringing. As a gay man, he experienced a sense of liberation in this environment, which was less judgemental and more accepting. He wrote (Oiticica et al. 2020, 269): 'The bourgeois conditioning to which I was submitted from birth was undone as if by magic.' The favela represented a space without rigid rules, where he felt free and found a sense of belonging. He further emphasised, 'The demolishing of social prejudices, of the group barriers, classes etc. would be inevitable and essential in the realization of this vital experience' (Oiticica et al. 2020, 269).

What initially appeared to be an act of artistic experimentation soon became a controversial political provocation. In 1965, Oiticica invited dancers from Mangueira to wear *Parangolé* at the *Opinião 65* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ). However, the dancers and Oiticica himself, dressed in *Parangolé* and singing, were refused entry to the museum. This incident exposed the institutional racism and deep social divisions of the period. The work confronted class and race prejudice: the presence of poor, working-class, predominantly Black samba dancers from the favelas was considered too disruptive for the museum's elite public. Oiticica, in solidarity with the dancers, was also denied entry. This collision of two worlds marked a significant moment in Brazilian avant-garde art, highlighting the tension between Oiticica's social dress experiment and the establishment art world of the time.

The *Parangolé* does not fit traditional artistic categories, nor did it conform to the structures of art institutions. Instead, it belongs to the community, the streets and the people. As a form of utopian dress, it is a social garment and a tool for fostering connection. As Oiticicia (Brett and Glazebrook 1969, n.p.) notes:

The cape is not an object but a searching process, searching for the roots of the objective birth of the work, the direct perceptive moulding of it. This is why its constructive method is popular and primitive, referring to flags, tents, capes, etc. It is not a finished object and its spatial sense is not definite.

Figure 21. *Mosquito com Parangolé, P10 Capa 6*, 1966. Black and white photograph, 18 x 12 cm, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Oiticica used this concept to move art into life, shifting from art as a static object to art as a living experience or situation. Distancing himself from the role of the career artist and the traditional art exhibition format, Oiticica focused on creative works or propositions that were partly controlled by the artist, with the remainder left to the audience. Oiticica (Oiticica and Witte de With 1992, 100) further emphasised that the *Parangolé* represented a rejection of the intellectualisation of art, advocating direct, embodied participation instead.

Figure 22. Nildo of Mangueira wearing *P15 Parangolé capa 11*, 'Incorporo a revolta', 1967. Photograph by Claudio Oiticica. Courtesy of Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil.

He referred to it as 'anti-art, in which the artist understands his/her position not any longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator of creation… this process completes itself through the dynamic participation of the "spectator", now considered "participator"… Anti-art answers the collective need for creative activity which is latent and can be activated in a certain way by the artist' (Oiticica and Witte de With 1992, 100).

The notion of anti-art resonates strongly with the Russian Constructivist movement. In 1921, Rodchenko declared the 'death of painting' when he exhibited three monochrome canvases, *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour and Pure Blue Colour*, at the exhibition *5x5=25*. This pronouncement did not mark a literal end of painting but rather signalled a shift away from traditional easel painting towards the integration of art with everyday life and industry. Similarly, in formal and conceptual terms, the *Parangolé* embodied Oiticica's belief that art should return to the body, marking a progression from his wall paintings of the 1950s to his later *Bolides* and *Penetrables*, and culminating in the *Parangolés* (Brett and Figueiredo 2007). The image showing three dancers in red, yellow and blue *Parangolés* is evocative of Rodchenko's three monochrome paintings and symbolically marks the shift from easel art to an art becoming everyday life (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Dancers wearing red, blue and yellow *Parangolé* at the *Parangolé* event in Recife, 1979. Photography credits unknown.

Guy Brett (2007) claimed that the *Parangolé* stands as one of Oiticica's most radical and daring proposals, marking a time when Oiticica was deeply engaged with social and political themes. *Parangolé* proposes utopia as a method in relation to body, dress and politics, as it evokes ideals of social and gender equality alongside a sense of hope and conviviality. As Oiticica himself put it, 'Don't allow tragedy to consume you; it already exists every day – it passes and is present'

(Brett and Figueiredo 2007, 100). These works reflect Oiticica's conviction that art has transformative potential, particularly with regard to body politics, social and racial equality, identity and liberation. The *Parangolé* combines these utopian features, evident in their conviviality, commonality and optimism.

The *Parangolé* also aligns with Oiticica's broader philosophical concerns with Tropicália, spontaneity and the fluidity of identity.[28] The wearability of these artworks encouraged participation and inclusivity, inviting viewers to embody the art and experience it in a personal and intuitive way. Caetano Veloso, musician and co-founder of Tropicália, described the *Parangolé* as 'impossible clothing' and 'anti-fashion':

> His *Parangolés*, transcendental clothes and robes, were the most sublime anti-fashion clothes design; quasi-impossible to wear, they first seem to be nothing, then you would try them on and, in the process, discover multiple meanings. You'd become overexcited with the myriads of suggestions; they produced thoughts, feelings and inspirations. (Brett and Figueiredo 2007, 27)

While living in New York in the 1970s, Oiticica continued making *Parangolés*, now using materials such as transparent fabrics, PVC and even newspaper, which resulted in more structured, geometric works that were reminiscent of Constructivist design, particularly Popova and Stepanova's costumes. The *Parangolés* of Brazil (1964–68) and those of New York (1972) can be seen as two chapters of a continuing narrative, shaped by dramatically different settings. This shift from the organic, politically charged Brazilian *Parangolés* to the more static, rigidly shaped New York versions reflected Oiticica's engagement with themes such as language, signage and urban anonymity. While the earlier *Parangolés* were expressive and explicitly political, the later works adopted the Constructivist emphasis on functionality and everyday participation. *Parangolés* that take a more rigid form – worn like sandwich boards and featuring bold graphics – evoke Constructivist dress, with their flat, graphic features (Figure 24).

[28] The Tropicália movement (1967-1969), also known as Tropicalismo, was a short-lived yet influential Brazilian cultural and artistic movement that emerged in the late 1960s. Tropicália sought to challenge the status quo and revitalise Brazilian identity through a dynamic fusion of the global and the local, the traditional and the avant-garde. It reached across multiple disciplines – music, visual arts, theatre, poetry, film and more – offering a radical reimagining of Brazilian culture. Key figures involved in the movement included musicians Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé and Gal Costa, as well as the collaborators who included the band Os Mutantes. In the visual arts, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape were significant, while writers and poets like Torquato Neto also contributed.

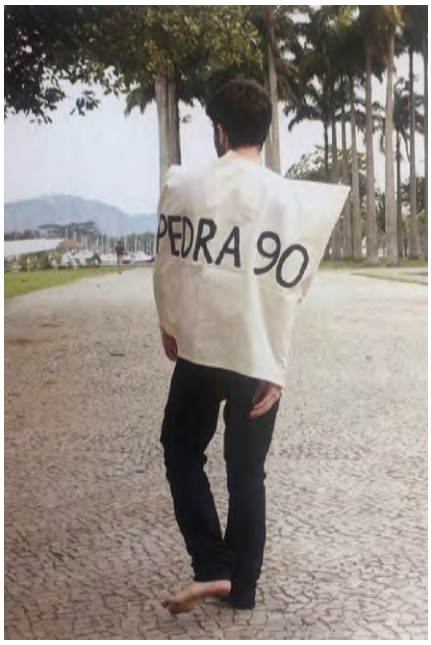

Figure 24. *Parangolé 'Eu sou pedra 90' (I am Stone 90 Parangolé)* circa 1960.
Plastic paint on fabric. Collection Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

There are evident traces of technological and Constructivist influences in Oiticica's work. The *Parangolés*, for example, incorporate pragmatic and utilitarian elements, as seen in their systematic titles such as *P6 Capa 3* and *P10 Capa 6*. This method of classification adopts a scientific, almost formulaic approach, which can be understood as Oiticica's objectivization of marginalisation. Both Oiticica and Clark were drawn to such referencing and naming, as were earlier artists like the Suprematists and Constructivists, who frequently used numbers for their works and exhibitions. I believe Oiticica's use of these titles is an attempt to categorise that which resists straightforward classification or scientific understanding. In that sense, *Parangolé* dress is like a formula or an open system (Figure 25 and Figure 26). This approach to naming resonates with the 'dress formula' proposed by Russian Constructivism (1920) and later echoed by groups such as Archizoom Associati (1973), who sought to reinvent the clothing system based on different values. The *Parangolé* thus functions as a variation of a single form, almost formulaic in conception. Yet this geometry is softened by fabric and movement, and ultimately disappears once the work is worn.

While the Constructivist *prozodezhda* was conceived for work, the *Parangolé* was created for what Oiticica termed *crelazer* or 'creative leisure'. Oiticica's concept brings together creativity, pleasure and leisure. He invented the concept of 'creleisure' in 1969 while living in London. For Oiticica, leisure was not a passive or idle state, but rather an active, liberating and creative condition capable of empowering individuals socially, politically and creatively. In his view,

leisure could serve as a site of resistance and transformation, where creative participation disrupts oppressive routines and the restrictive norms enforced by society – especially during periods of political repression, such as Brazil's military dictatorship. Idleness, after all, is a central theme in utopian fiction, where labour is minimised and pleasure takes precedence. In this context, Oiticica's practice aligns leisure and creativity as a means to envision utopian, alternative ways of living (Oiticica and Witte de With 1992, 136).

While living in London in 1969, Oiticica wrote about the concept of 'hermaphrodipothesis', a striking neologism about which he wrote very little. The idea emphasises fluidity, hybridity and the rejection of rigid binaries in gender identity. Oiticica wrote that 'everyone should hermaphrodise' and that 'sex doesn't exist as a concept'. He also asserted that 'clothes are and always were unisex… homo and hetero are the same; they never existed as something real; they are the shadows cast by social oppression' (Brett and Figueiredo 2007, 18). The concept of 'hermaphrodipothesis' aligns with the utopian notion of gender fluidity, commonly presented in utopian fiction and also present in Constructivist dress.

The interactive nature of the *Parangolé* challenges conventional notions of passive spectatorship, creating a dynamic experience in which the work is activated by the participant. Through this participatory framework, Oiticica encourages a deeper connection between the body, the artwork and the social context, embodying his broader vision of art as an immersive and transformative experience. In this way, Oiticica's approach resonates with the modernist desire to transcend traditional art forms, drawing on both the functional and artistic legacies of Constructivism while expanding them into experimental, participatory and immersive practice.

Parangolé is not simply a garment or sculpture, but an embodied, participatory work – a process rather than an object. 'The viewer becomes this new entity who is a "participant" when he sees the work and a "participant-work" when he is seen by others' (*Anotações sobre o Parangolé*).[29] The dress becomes a tool for collective practice, an open system, endlessly transformed through movement and interaction. As Oiticica observed: 'The experience of dance (samba) therefore gave me the exact idea of what creating a corporal act is: continuous transformability' (Oiticica et al. 2020, 297).

[29] Hélio Oiticica, "Anotações sôbre o 'Parangolé'," 25 November 1964, p. 2 (AHO/PHO 0070.65), in Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame, ed. Irene Small (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 218, 276.

Figure 25. Unidentified person wearing *Parangolé P12 Cape 8, Freedom Cape* in Rio de Janeiro, 1966. Black and white photograph, 24 × 18 cm. Photograph by Desdemone Bardin. Courtesy Projeto Hélio Oiticica.

Figure 26. Unidentified person wearing *Parangolé P12, Cape 8, Freedom Cape* in Rio de Janeiro, 1966. Black and white photograph, 24 × 18 cm. Photograph by Desdemone Bardin. Courtesy Projeto Hélio Oiticica.

Case Study III: Anti-design – Radical Italian Design in 1960s and 1970s

In 1969, a group of young Florentine architects and artists declared war on consumerism. The most prominent were Archizoom Associati and Superstudio, part of the so-called Italian Radical Design movement of the late 1960s and early '70s. Disillusioned by the adverse effects of capitalism on culture, in particular design and architecture, these groups developed visionary scenarios in the form of photomontages, sketches, collages and storyboards of a new 'anti-design' culture in which everyone is given an equal and functional space to live free from superfluous objects. For them, design had the potential not only to produce aesthetic objects but also to serve as a political instrument. They attempted to articulate a new vision of the world by using design to redefine our relationship with material culture.

Several aspects make this case study significant for my research. The Radical Design movement utilised utopia as a tool for critical reflection, which design theorists identify as the foundation of critical and speculative design practices (Dunne and Raby 2013; Malpass 2017). Most notably, these groups adopted a holistic approach to envisioning an alternative society, expressed through designs for clothing, furniture, cities and more.

Their practice rejected traditional cultural norms, embracing an anti-fashion and anti-design stance. What is particularly intriguing is how this utopian thinking, emerging fifty years after the Russian Revolution, shifted towards a critique of industrial production, technological rationality and the nature of work itself. Rather than proposing a new kind of workwear, they introduced a DIY dress toolkit, which is also an expression of their rejection of the traditional clothing system of production and consumption.

Italian Radical Design's utopia advocated abolition of work, the rejection of architecture and fashion, and the abandonment of conventional cultural representations. These ideas were framed as pathways to achieving social equality and total freedom, representing another bold attempt to reshape culture as a means of transforming society.

Dressing is easy

In 1973, at the XV Milan Triennale, Archizoom Associati presented their sartorial manifesto *Dressing is easy* (*Vestirsi è facile*), part of a broader movement by Italian radical architectural groups in the 1960s and ’70s to challenge the capitalist mode of production through design and thereby change the culture.

Similar to the Constructivists, Archizoom questioned whether clothing could begin from zero. Published in the magazine *Casabella* in March 1974, *Dressing is easy* was conceived as an anti-fashion project, responding to rigid sartorial traditions, seasonal trends, gender-specific clothing and mass production. Designs were unisex and one-size-fits-all, reflecting ideas drawn from earlier utopian narratives (Figure 27 and Figure 28).

The garments were conceived as a grid system or formula: three pieces of square fabric presented in a toolkit containing threads, needles, scissors and illustrated instructions for assembling different types of clothing (Figure 28 and Figure 29). This simple system could produce over sixty different garments, including skirts, overalls, blousons, trousers, aprons and jackets. For Archizoom, sartorial design was an opportunity to invent a new way of using clothing, one that rejected conventional rules and shapes. *Dressing is easy* proposed an autonomous new clothing system, independent of the fashion system.

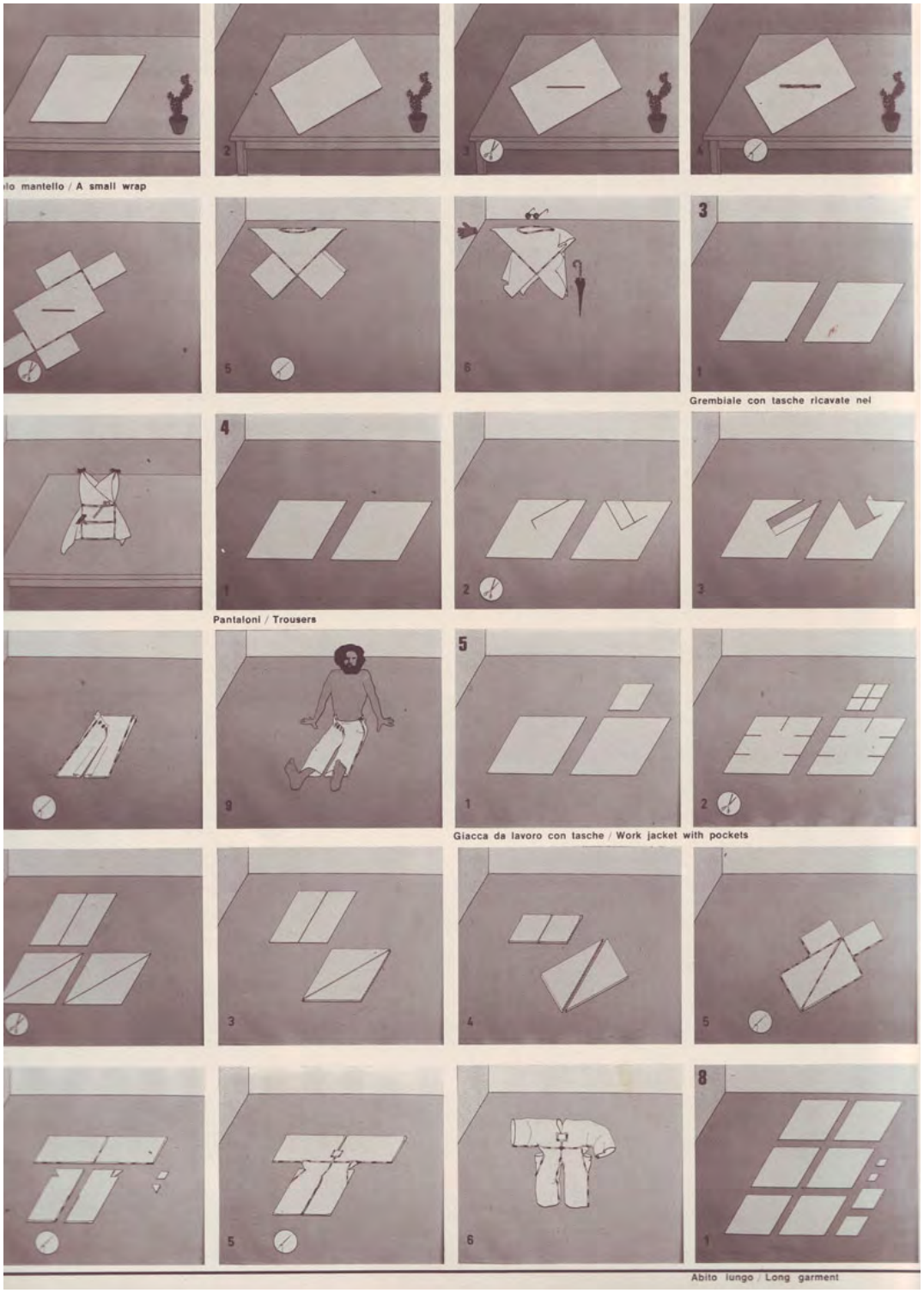

Figure 27. Archizoom Associati, *Dressing is easy,* cutting and folding instruction manual, published in *Casabella* 387, March 1974, Milan. Courtesy of the *Casabella* archive.

Figure 28. Archizoom Associati, *Scatola di montaggio: Vestirsi è facile (Assembly Box: Dressing is easy*), 1974. Courtesy of Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive, Bologna.

Archizoom further elaborated that, when architects approached clothing design, they typically applied traditional design methodologies, treating clothes as 'objects' with fixed forms. Their focus was often on reducing the human body to simple structural elements, rather than emulating more complex and original design approaches (Figure 29). This abstraction of the body shape and object-oriented clothing design is a significantly different fashion practice, which I will examine further in the Chapter Six 'Dresstopia'.

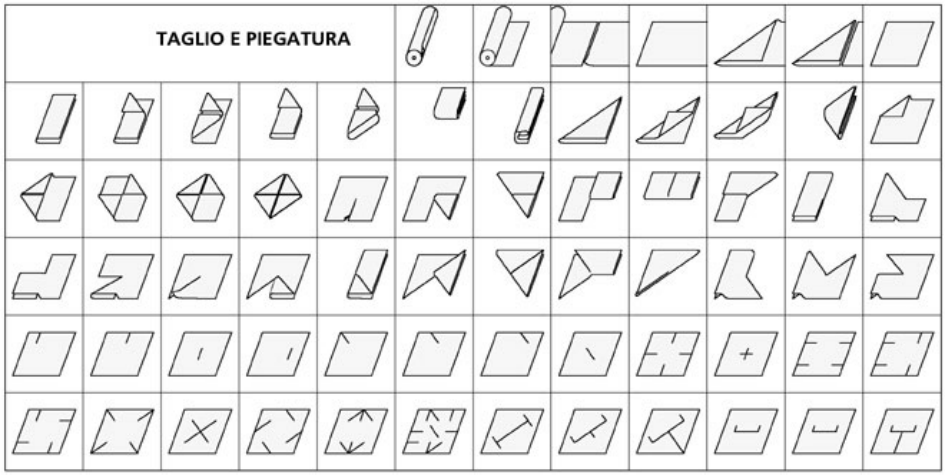

Figure 29. Detail of cutting and folding instruction manual by Archizoom Associati, *Scatola di montaggio: Vestirsi è facile (Assembly Box: Dressing is easy*), 1974. Courtesy of Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive, Bologna.

The clothing designs of the Italian avant-garde from this period have rarely been studied in the context of dress history. The only documented evidence of *Dressing is easy* appears in *Casabella* magazine in 1974. Similarly, there are just two known photographs of the Superstudio group wearing Quaderna-printed jackets (Figure 30).[30]

Figure 30. Superstudio group wearing Quaderna-print jackets, 1970s. Photograph credit unknown. Courtesy of Zanotta archive.

Superstudio addressed the issue of fashion in *Argomenti e immagini di design* 8 (1972), which was dedicated to fashion and society.[31] In their opinion piece titled 'Superstudio à la mode', they argue that fashion is essentially just another superstructure that society could do without. However, they acknowledge that fashion is a real language and, as such, is 'an ideology created and imposed on everybody by capitalist dynamics' (Angelidakis, Pizzigoni and Scelsi 2015, 134).

[30] The Quaderna pattern builds on Superstudio's 'Istogrammi' concept, introduced in 1969. The designs use an orthogonal grid that adapts to different scales, from product design to urban planning, culminating in the famous *The Continuous Monument* (*Monumento continuo*). This envisions an endlessly expandable artificial landscape, symbolising infinite continuity. Istogrammi inspired the idea of creating limitless objects, ranging from flat surfaces to furniture, architecture and even clothing (Superstudio 1969, 22–25).

[31] Superstudio, 'Superstudio à la mode', *Argomenti e immagini di design* 8 (November–December 1972): 43–47.

Similar to their approach to architecture and design, Superstudio proposed eliminating fashion and encouraging others to do the same. They argued that modern clothing should not be used for class distinction but should evolve in a way that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing. They believed that, by removing the need for fashion, the demand for money and work would decrease, thereby accelerating the disappearance of work itself. The goal, they stated, is to 'eliminate the designer as an image maker, as a supporter of this system of violence that is design' (Superstudio 1972, 91). In a 1969 interview with Italian *Vogue*, Superstudio's Adolfo Natalini stated:

> Every manual of spiritual exercises for serene living should advise abandoning the desire to always be 'in fashion', or to be stylish, amusing, or immediately liked. This means advising an immediate abandonment of false problems, manias and hysteria. (Lang and Menking 2003, 37)

Superstudio's methodology at the time was both innovative and multifaceted. Their practice extended beyond architecture to include speculative scenarios for film, storyboards such as *Twelve Cities* (1971), and the use of interdisciplinary methods that challenged conventional boundaries within their field.

Living is easy

The easiness of clothing, as well as living, is what defined Radical Design's utopia. The designer provides infrastructure, a shelter, a convenience or a tool for living and dressing. Archizoom's most radical proposal, *No-Stop City*, is the 'city without architecture' (Branzi 2006, 153), where a house as a commodity no longer exists. The scheme reduces the city to a homogeneous, infinite structure which, like a continuous factory, contains no representation of culture, tradition or hierarchy. As Archizoom's Andrea Branzi explains (2006, 163), 'the aim was to propose a scheme that would be as anonymous as possible', which was the opposite of much modernist architecture at the time.

In *No-Stop City*, the social dimension transforms into a spatial dimension, creating a metropolis that is a single, continuous, generic space – similar to a factory or warehouse, with artificial lighting. The initial city plan was drafted on a typewriter, and architectural models featured

mirrored walls to create an illusion of infinite space.[32] This continuous city aimed to integrate all aspects of life within a productive reality.

Similarly, Superstudio proposed 'architecture without the city' envisioning a continuous monument composed of a Cartesian grid extending over both urban and natural landscapes (Branzi 2006, 153). Natalini (Lang and Menking 2003, 23) elaborated on their intentions:

> By the elimination of the city, we mean the elimination of power structures and hierarchy, in search of a new egalitarian state.

In Superstudio's 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux… a Statement', they describe their work as operating in a 'rarefied area', a 'space for reflection' and a 'space for critical activity'. They critique the increasing specialisation of cultural professions, comparing them to 'closed and concentric circles, revolving around a central nucleus'. Superstudio argued for moving beyond these rigid divisions, insisting that 'it was impossible to begin any architecture without first having changed the structures of society' (Lang and Menking 2003, 164).

Anti-design and life without work

In much the same way that the Constructivists imagined a life without possessions by reconfiguring the possessive relationship to material culture, Archizoom proposed to transform production by returning to the functional origins of objects. They believed this would ultimately transform 'man's needs and therefore man's behaviour' (Lang and Menking 2003, 164).

Influenced by the Italian labour movement *operaismo* ('workerism') and the writings of architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, the Italian avant-garde took a decisive stance against industry and against work.[33] Drawing from these influences, Archizoom incorporated the concept of the 'refusal of work' into their theoretical framework.[34] Archizoom's perspective

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[32] Archizoom's 1969 *No-Stop City* plans were created on a typewriter, shaped by the constraints of typesetting – leading, tabs, indentation and spacing. Fittingly, this project, envisioned as *architectureless* architecture, is presented as a *planless* plan. Functioning more like a piece of graph paper, the plan was deliberately incomplete, inviting occupation (Branzi, 2006).

[33] *Operaismo* was a radical political and theoretical movement that emerged in Italy in the late 1950s, focusing on workers' autonomy, direct action, and the critique of traditional labour institutions and capitalist production.

[34] The *refusal of work* in *operaismo* refers to workers' direct resistance to exploitative labour conditions as an immediate tactic within capitalism. In contrast, the *abolition of labour* is a broader Marxist concept aiming at the systemic transformation of society, envisioning the ultimate elimination of wage labour itself.

began with refusal to work, and thus the abolition of work as a necessity for living as well as culture.

In *Architecture and Utopia* (1976), Manfredo Tafuri argued that the Russian Constructivists' attempt to merge art with industry ultimately compromised their project. He believed their collaboration with industry meant their revolutionary aims were overtaken by the logic of production and state planning, leaving their radical potential unrealised.

With the elimination of specialisation and the simplification of modes of production, it would be possible to enter a future that no longer depended on the capitalist system perpetuated by the Industrial Revolution, thus significantly reducing the amount of work shared by society. Branzi clarified that the role of the avant-garde was the destruction of culture, meaning the morals, values, religion and aesthetics of the society in which we live, without substituting new values or meanings. The final goal of these groups was a non-designed community (Ambasz 1972).

In the first of several articles Branzi wrote for *Casabella* between 1972 and 1976, he contextualised the projects and objects created by Archizoom. The idea of a 'technical destruction of culture' would be manifested as the technical dismantling of objects, achieved by abolishing the distinction between producer and consumer, and by simplifying production techniques. This was intended to reduce the high levels of specialisation required to produce Western culture and the increasingly complex objects it fetishised. Branzi also noted that, historically, each attempt at such transformation resulted in bourgeois culture simply becoming another culture – a process akin to the destruction of one language by another. A crucial point he makes is: 'The working class, in fact, does not produce an alternative culture but uses the patterns produced by the bourgeois class as strategic steps in its own economic escalation' (Branzi 2006, 183).

Natalini, a founding member of Superstudio, also described the destruction of objects as a means of destroying their 'power status', so that objects are reduced to the 'condition of neutral and disposable elements' and so that 'we live with objects, not for objects'. He also explained that the only avant-garde position is 'not to search for useless originality, but for a necessary return to our origins' (Lang and Menking 2003, 23).

In a lecture at London's Architectural Association in 1971, Adolfo Natalini (Lang and Menking 2003, 167) announced the group's position regarding design practice by stating:

> If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of the bourgeois models of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning is merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities – until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then design must disappear. We can live without architecture.

What makes these design collectives truly radical is the open rejection of design – its system of production and consumption, its 'superficial styling' – as well as the attempt to establish an alternative design culture that opposed the 'fast pace of fashion and empty aesthetics void of content' as well as the 'cult of personality and useless experimentation' (Natalini 2012, 5).

The apparent minimalism in Superstudio's work was not a stylistic or aesthetic choice, as it was in mainstream modernism, but rather a deliberate rejection of styling and superficial aesthetics that could be co-opted by bourgeois culture. Natalini (2012, 9) explains:

> My work aspires to a timeless normality. I would like to vanish into my buildings. I would wish that these buildings vanish into their city context and become a landscape in which we could all live without stress.

The concept of 'timeless normality' could also be used to define both anti-fashion and anti-design. This idea resonates with my own struggles concerning the role of design more broadly, and dress and fashion in particular. Fashion, through both its systems of production and consumption, is inherently political, and questioning it inevitably means confronting the realities of global capitalism. However, instead of placing the onus for change entirely on political systems – while ignoring our own complicity and dependence on the industry – Toraldo di Francia (Lang and Menking 2003, x) reminds us: 'It is the designer who must attempt to re-evaluate his role in the nightmare he has helped to conceive.'[35]

[35] Cristiano Toraldo di Francia (1941–2019) was co-founder with Adolfo Natalini of Superstudio in 1966, while both were studying at the University of Florence. They were later joined by Gian Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro and Roberto Magris, and Alessandro Poli.

Global Tools' body experiments

In 1973, members of the Italian Radical Design group took their ideas further by founding Global Tools, a multidisciplinary experimental art, design and education group based in Florence.[36] Influenced in part by the principles of Arte Povera, they advocated the study and use of natural materials and their 'poor' qualities to simplify the design process, as a counter to the widespread adoption of plastics.

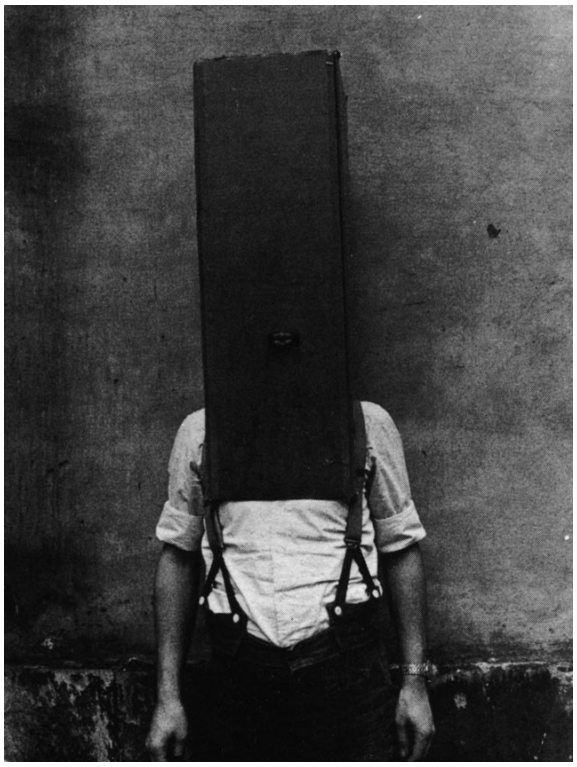

Figure 31. Franco Raggi, The body and the bonds, Body Group performance, June 1975. Milan. Courtesy of Franco Raggi and *Casabella* archive.

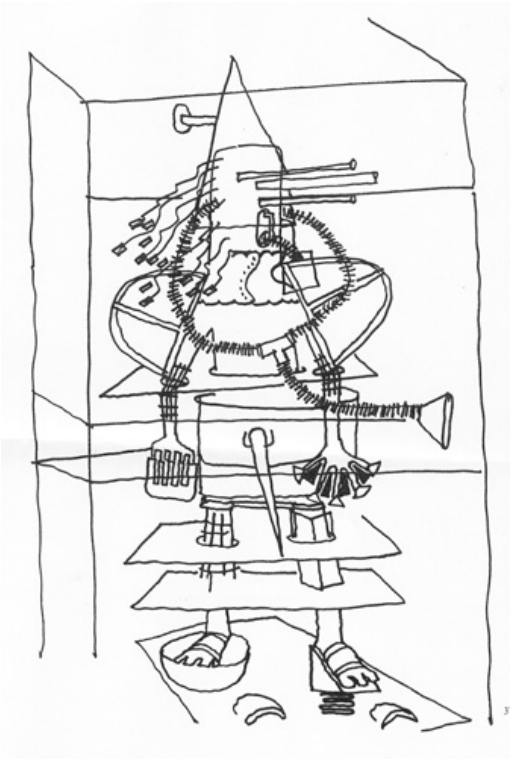

Figure 32. Davide Mosconi, *The body as an instrument,* sketch. Courtesy of D. Mosconi archive.

Global Tools aimed to redefine the relationship between design and Italian industry. Although it was a short-lived experiment focused on reforming design education, it remains significant for recognising the dominant role of industrial production in shaping design practices. The initiative sought to reclaim control over production by reducing the design process to basic materials and techniques, offering a critique of mass production. The tool, symbolising craftsmanship, represented the designer's agency in contrast to the control exerted by industrial design.

[36] The founders and participants were members of the avant-garde groups Archizoom, Superstudio, UFO, 9999 and Ziggurat, as well as independent architects and designers. Key figures included Ettore Sottsass, Andrea Branzi, Alessandro Mendini and Gaetano Pesce.

The philosophy behind Global Tools was influenced by Ivan Illich, who criticised the social benefits of modern technologies and the mass education system. In *Deschooling Society* (1977), Illich challenged institutionalised education, advocating self-directed learning and 'learning webs': informal networks through which individuals share knowledge outside formal schooling. This approach resonated with Global Tools' aim of creating alternative, workshop-based educational formats.

Global Tools, like other groups within the Italian avant-garde (as among them Archizoom and Superstudio, as previously discussed) proposed the 'rejection of work'. They sought to reveal an alternative purpose for creativity – one that is intentionally 'non-productive' – and envisioned a scenario in which labour itself might ultimately be abolished. In a document produced by Global Tools, one of the listed experimental themes is: 'Work – how to find it, how to abolish it, how to reinvent it' (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018).

Under the hypothesis of a workless society, creativity becomes a liberated energy, valued for itself rather than for its economic outputs, therapeutic in nature and free from predetermined meanings. The conditions for this society without work arise from two seemingly opposing forces: the growing refusal to participate in labour and the increasing automation of production. Their overarching aim was to promote individual liberation and creative autonomy, envisioning a context in which the designer or individual was not materially or psychologically dependent on industrial systems. This is evocative of Oiticica's concept of 'creleisure' (discussed above), as well as the reduction of work and working hours – recurring themes in utopian fiction.

The group's ambitions included the 'ideological revalorisation of manual labour', the promotion of 'poor technique' and the use of 'simple technology' (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018).

The body and its constraints

Figure 33. Global Tools, *Untitled performance*, Body Group workshop, 1976. Milan. Courtesy of Alessandro Mendini archive.

In June 1975, a group of artists, designers and architects gathered in Milan to participate in the first workshop of the Body Group. This was a part of Global Tools – a 'therapeutic' design school with no teachers, no students and no fixed location (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018). The workshop, titled *The Body and Constraints*, challenged the established norms of technological, comfortable and functional design. Instead, it proposed a nomadic approach to archaic, dysfunctional design, aimed at questioning design certainties and fostering dialogue between art, design and the body.

> Experiments on the body are written from the same global and 'de-intellectualized' perspective: the declared ambition is to analyse the body as a 'primary instrument', untamed by cultural conventions, destined to survive, construct, communicate and think, therefore associated with each of the collective's research areas. (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018, 107)

The workshop aimed to disrupt conventional logic and design methods by creating seemingly impractical, restrictive and provocative objects that encouraged critical reflection on the role of design.

The objects made and performed at the workshop included:

- Tube eyeglasses that restricted vision to only the eyes of others
- Leg constraints (Figure 35)
- Blindfold masks that emphasised the mouth, nose, or ear (Figure 31, Figure 36 and Figure 38)
- Clogs designed to prevent movement on slopes, whether uphill or downhill
- Elastic garments that triggered involuntary interactions with nearby individuals (Figure 34)
- Constraining shoes for stable, enforced frontal juxtaposition.

The constraining shoes, originally made in clay and later replicated in stoneware in 2006, were formed by casting the fronts of two different pairs of shoes. This design made walking impossible and forced wearers into regulated proximity, particularly emphasising the gaze.

In workshops and collaborative projects, Global Tools invited participants to engage in experiments with movement, gesture and posture. These sessions encouraged designers and students to think of design as something that begins with the human body's interaction with space, rather than the creation of static objects.

Figure 34. Alessandro Mendini, *Elastic garments to trigger involuntary synergies in nearby persons*, 1975. Milan. Courtesy of *Casabella* archive.

Figure 35. Alessandro Mendini, *Leg constraints*, 1975. Milan. Courtesy of *Casabella* archive.

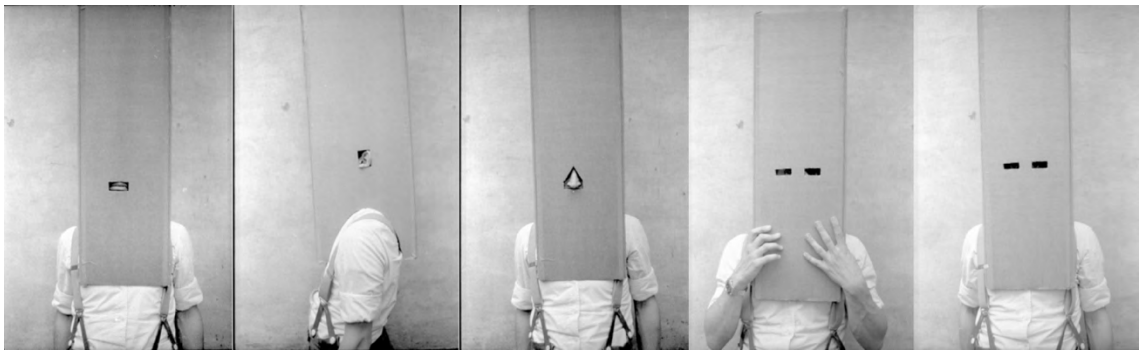

Figure 36. Franco Raggi, *Blindfold masks to display a mouth, a nose, an ear*, 1975. Milan. Courtesy of Franco Raggi archive.

Figure 37. Franco Raggi, *Constraint for the open palm,* 1975. Milan. Courtesy of Davide Mosconi archive.

Figure 38. Detail of *Blindfold masks to display an ear*, 1975. Milan. Courtesy of Davide Mosconi archive.

According to Ugo La Pietra, artists seeking their most meaningful role should rediscover manual making as an immediate means of expression. Simultaneously, the crisis of consumption demands a shift towards durable, lasting products (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018, 23). He suggests that 'the moment of learning' functions as a form of group therapy, initiating a series of 'reductive processes' that range from sensory deprivation to the relinquishment of cultural norms. These processes include practices such as humble approaches to nutrition (practising to eat less), homemade cinema and books, repurposing second-hand objects, and adhering to the principle of 'doing without one more thing every day'.

For my research in the context of utopian dress, it is particularly compelling to examine how the body was treated as a design tool – a primary instrument for creation and exploration – rejecting the notion that design should be dictated by mechanical tools, technology or history. By centring

the body, Global Tools aimed to connect human experience directly to the phenomenological, emphasising movement, sensation and the physical presence of the body in space.

Global Tools' experiments with the body were a cornerstone of their radical design philosophy, challenging traditional approaches that focused solely on objects or spaces. Franco Raggi, a member of Global Tools, described the project:

> as opposed to the established and accepted practice of technological, comfortable, useful and functional design, the intent is to posit a nomadic practice for an archaic, dysfunctional design. (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018, 126)

These experiments explored the body as primary instrument, 'de-intellectualised', free from cultural conventions, and inherently capable of survival, construction, communication and thought. This approach integrated body experience directly into each of the collective's research areas (Borgonuovo and Franceschini 2018). Although the Global Tools collective has recently gained renewed interest from the art and design community, its contributions have remained largely overlooked since the 1970s.[37]

[37] I will revisit these concepts in the chapter on my practice-based research, where I critically explore the limitations of this experiment and engage with the idea that craft is the only viable alternative to technological and industrial domination. I will also examine the phenomenology of embodied practice in the chapter 'Dresstopia'.

Conclusion

Although they emerged in different geographical contexts and periods, Russian Constructivism, Brazilian Neoconcretism and Italian Radical Design each developed radical responses to the sociopolitical realities of their time. Their tactics – ranging from anti-art and anti-design to the refusal of work – point to a broader utopian impulse: the desire to reimagine the relationship between individuals, society and material culture.

What connects these movements is not a single style or aim, but a commitment to methodological diversity and ongoing experimentation. Neoconcrete artists explored public participation and therapeutic processes; Constructivists sought to dissolve boundaries between art, design and everyday life; while proponents of Radical Design experimented with art practices as a way of reclaiming creative autonomy from industry and technology. These movements resist simple categorisation, and it is precisely their varied and experimental approaches that made their methodologies so compelling for this research.

1. *Utopian dress as an art practice*

What emerges clearly from all three case studies is that dress operates as an art medium in its own right. Even the Constructivists, who proposed 'production dress' akin to workwear, approached dress in a manner fundamentally different from prevailing clothing practices. Their designs – abstract, flat, graphic and unisex – were more reminiscent of the abstract painting styles of Constructivism and Suprematism, particularly in the work of Popova and Stepanova. This lack of reference to traditional dress, and the deliberate departure from fashion, makes it clear that *prozodezhda* was conceived as an artistic medium.

The Neoconcrete artists, in particular, used dress to move beyond the canvas and into everyday life, involving the viewer through participation. Here, dress functioned as a phenomenological tool.

Within the Radical Design group, many key figures were regarded as both artists and designers. Although primarily trained in architecture and labelled as 'designers', they drew heavily from visual art practices, especially the body experiments of the Global Tools group. As a result, their work was both formally and theoretically dissociated from what is generally understood as clothing design.

2. *Dress as a social practice*

Constructivism recognised that objects have a psychological function, and that transforming this function could, in turn, help to change culture and society. Within this framework, the socialist object – including dress – was imagined as a comrade, a friend, a helper. Constructivists proposed a new kind of dress, designed for work but also with an emancipatory function: clothing for a new socialist society. The dress they proposed was clothing designed for work, with different subcategories depending on use: everyday workwear, specialist workwear for protection, and sports dress.

Artist Hélio Oiticica referred to his *Parangolé* as 'social dress'. This unique form of wearable art is associated with flags, banners, capes and shelters, and sometimes features large, bold political slogans. It can be carried like a flag or used as a tool to encourage collective participation and dance. Formally, Oiticica described the *Parangolé* as painting leaving the canvas and 'returning to the body'. He used the *Parangolé* to forge connections between marginalised favela communities and the art world. For him, the *Parangolé* was a tool for conviviality. Situated within precarious communities, the *Parangolé* made a strong political statement without being aligned to any particular party or ideology.

It is interesting to observe how the idea of Constructivist workwear appears formally in Clark's 'propositions', yet is reimagined as something resembling real, heavy-duty industrial workwear, though with an entirely different purpose. The social aspect is that the artwork is activated and experienced by the audience, with no formal separation or limitation to 'viewing'. Here, the function becomes therapeutic and exploratory, centred on the investigation of subjectivity and collectivity. The formal language of workwear and industrial materials is repurposed to explore the body and the senses – objects such as welding goggles, hazmat suits, rubber gloves and breathing tubes are used not for labour, but for self-exploration and therapy. Clark also experimented with shared and collective forms of dress, creating both physical and psychological bonds between participants. Similarly, in Pape's work *Divisor*, she brings together large groups of people to wear an enormous, shared canvas. Here, dress becomes a physical link between individuals, coordinating their movements within the group. It divides participants into a grid, yet at the same time keeps them connected.

The Italian Radical Design group took a strong socialist position, rejecting all power structures embedded in society – whether in art, design or architecture – seeing them as forces that perpetuate social division. Their dress proposal was a DIY toolbox: a flexible system that enabled

a variety of clothing types to be made. Rather than being based on the principles of traditional clothing, this system took the form of an abstract, geometric grid composed of linear cuts that could be folded, wrapped or assembled in numerous ways to accommodate the body. Dressing became an easy, adaptable act, intended to minimise the needs associated with clothing and ultimately to abolish the fashion system altogether.

Interestingly, both aesthetically and formally, none of these dress proposals draw from historical or familiar contemporary forms of clothing. The Radical Design dress system, based on a grid and square shapes, does not resonate with traditional dressmaking – it is entirely abstract, constructed from square pieces of fabric. Constructivist dress is almost completely flat and graphic, and the *Parangolé* is assembled from flat sheets of fabric, folded or formed on the body.

What these groups have in common is a radical reimagining of the role of dress – as a field of experimentation in its own right, not unlike existing practices of performance, body art or the happening. They also recognise the potential of the dress medium as a social tool. Thus, dress appears as a new field of exploration in its own right. In Oiticica's words, it represents the idea of dress as a tool of emancipation, not an instrument by which to seize power (Brett and Figueiredo 2007).

3. *Anti-art, anti-design and the rejection of traditional practice*

Russian Constructivists adopted an 'anti-fashion' stance, Italian Radical Design championed 'anti-design' and Neoconcrete artists promoted 'anti-art'. In each context, artists and designers reconsidered their social role, moving their practices out of the studio or gallery and into daily life, politics and the public sphere.

A central similarity among these movements lies in their deliberate rejection or critique of traditional forms – whether art, design or fashion. Russian Constructivists declared the 'death of painting' and sought to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, treating objects not as precious commodities but as tools for collective transformation. Neoconcretists also abandoned traditional forms of art, moving beyond static, object-based practices in favour of participatory experiences and 'non-objects' that only came into being through the viewer's engagement.

Italian Radical Design advanced this critique by calling for the 'technical destruction of culture' and the suspension of design, fashion and architecture as instruments of capitalist power: 'until all design activities are directed towards meeting primary needs. Until then design must disappear' (Lang and Menking 2003, 167).

The Neoconcretists also abandoned conventional visual art formats, seeking instead to fuse art with everyday life through what they called 'propositions' and participation. Here, the object was no longer static, nor limited to visual experience mediated by art institutions and galleries. Within this framework, utopian dress was reimagined as a participatory and phenomenological tool, its function extending beyond mere utility to encompass therapy, sensorial experience and communal bonding.

What their tactics – ranging from anti-art and anti-design to the refusal of work – share points to a broader utopian impulse: the desire to reimagine the relationship between individuals, society and material culture.

4. *Dress as a tool*

The concept of 'dress as a tool' first emerges in Constructivism, where clothing is conceived as functional, adaptable workwear – emphasising transparency, utility and collective identity over individual expression or ornament. For Stepanova and Popova, *prozodezhda* and theatrical costumes functioned as practical instruments for everyday life and collective performance. Decades later, Archizoom's assembly dressing box *Dressing is easy* reactivates this idea in a radically different way, offering a toolkit for self-made, unisex garments and undermining the fashion system through accessibility, flexibility and the erasure of sartorial hierarchy. Similarly, Neoconcrete artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark extended this logic beyond utility. Oiticica's *Parangolés* and Clark's participatory propositions transformed dress into an experiential and relational practice, inviting collective participation and blurring the boundaries between art, life and community. In all cases, the act of dressing becomes participatory – a process or a tool rather than a passive adoption of style.

5. *De-intellectualisation of art, refusal of work and creleisure*

All three movements problematised the intellectualisation and professionalisation of art and design. For the Italian radicals, de-intellectualisation involved dismantling the authority of the designer and promoting direct, embodied experimentation – as seen in Global Tools' workshops and body constraints. The Constructivists, while more closely aligned with intellectual ideals of social transformation, also insisted on the fusion of manual and intellectual labour, aiming for a culture in which creative work was accessible and collective. 'Art into production' was their motto, or, in other words, art integrated into everyday life. Neoconcretism, in its own way,

sought to dissolve the boundary between art and life through embodied, sensorial engagement – a form of de-intellectualisation that privileged lived experience and relational practice.

Perhaps most distinctive is the Italian avant-garde's refusal of work, articulated not as mere resistance but as an imaginative reconfiguration of social life. The proposal to abolish work altogether – echoed in Archizoom, Superstudio and Global Tools – sought to liberate creativity from productivity and capitalist logic. Here, Oiticica's concept of *creleisure* (creative leisure) is especially resonant: envisioning leisure not as idleness but as a generative state where new forms of sociality and subjectivity might emerge. This utopian ideal of unalienated, collective play and creativity runs through all three case studies.

6. *Time and endless transformation*

Whether in the Constructivists' vision of continual transformation in response to the needs of everyday life, the Neoconcretists' emphasis on process and ongoing change (as in the *Parangolé*), or the open-ended, systematic approaches of Radical Design, there is a consistent insistence on temporality as open, unfinished and subject to continual reinvention. The utopian moment is not a static destination, but an ongoing negotiation – a space for potential, critique and collective imagination.

7. *Technology – between embrace, refusal and re-signification*

Constructivists saw technology and industry as crucial engines of emancipation; Italian radicals viewed them as systems of domination to be refused or subverted; Neoconcrete artists like Clark appropriated the forms and materials of technology, but re-inscribed them with alternative, often intimate and collective, meanings. This shifting relationship to technology marks a key axis of difference – and creativity – in 20th-century utopian art and design.

These movements, though distinct in geography and time, each mobilised anti-art and anti-design tactics, challenged established hierarchies, and reimagined the roles of dress, work and creativity. Their shared emphasis on process, participation and the collective foregrounds a utopian practice that remains relevant for any attempt to rethink the politics of art, design and everyday life.

In seeking autonomy from the oppressive forces of technology and industry, Italian Radical Design returned to manual making. Their body experiments and tactics often centred on reduction and limitation, regarding these as essential strategies for reclaiming autonomy and

liberating oneself from the dependencies of consumption. One such strategy was the reduction of needs: as a result, many objects designed for exploration were deliberately restrictive and not comfortable.

From this conclusion, I have drawn several concepts that I will explore further in my practice research chapters. These are:

- Dress as a tool: an extension of the body, experience and therapy
- Dress as a field of artistic practice
- Social dress and collective forms of practice
- Exploring functionality in relation to work, the body and the senses
- Gender fluid and non-binary approaches
- Dress as a constantly transforming, phenomenological tool
- Formal qualities: abstract, geometric, graphic and flat
- Dress as an expanded medium, including the assembly box, mask, banner, flag or shelter
- Modes of making: DIY, industrially produced, ready-made or made directly on the body

The aesthetic principles, formal language and social body experiments discussed here inspired and informed my exhibition *Workwear*, which I will examine in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: CURATING THE EXHIBITION *WORKWEAR*

Introduction: The parliament of things

Workwear has long been linked to utopian dress, carrying associations of equality, uniformity and collectivity. Yet how is it that such a significant aspect of dress culture, one that has profoundly shaped the ways we dress, has been so overlooked by exhibitions? When workwear is shown in galleries or museums, is typically presented as military or work uniform or as a reference for fashion, rather than approached on its own terms as a form of dress with contested meanings and values.

As my research developed, I began to see the potential of exhibiting the material I was studying. Many of the garments and artworks had never been shown or examined in this context. This led me to develop an exhibition proposal on workwear, organised around five thematic strands, supported by visual material and a preliminary list of potential exhibits. The project set out to address a narrative at the intersection of dress, labour, art, identity, politics and society, while also foregrounding the inventive and highly creative aspects of garments initially designed for utility and protection. In 2022, I was offered the opportunity to realise the exhibition at the Nieuwe Instituut. *Workwear* ran from from 25 March to 10 September 2023, bringing together over 120 exhibits from more than 40 lenders across garments, films, prototypes, photographs, sketchbooks, textiles, books, installations and a live performance. For the full list of exhibits, see Appendix 4.

The curatorial approach draws on Bruno Latour's concepts of the *parliament of things* and *dingpolitik*. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1993) argues that modern institutions have tended to separate nature from society and facts from values, treating objects either as neutral evidence or as cultural symbols. In practice, however, many objects do not fit these divisions. They are hybrids shaped by material properties, technical mediation and social meaning, and as such participate in collective life. Latour's position is that such entities should be treated as part of public debate rather than held outside politics. To reconfigure the collective, he argues, we need to extend political consideration and representation to non-humans, hybrids and 'quasi-objects'(1993). But what are quasi-objects? Drawing on Michel Serres, Latour uses the term to name entities that are neither simply 'natural objects' or merely 'social constructions' (Serres 1995): they move between people and settings, mediating interaction and reshaping relationships as they go.

In curatorial terms, this supports an approach that begins not from pre-established explanatory frames such as 'society', 'labour', 'class' or 'capitalism', but from specific garments and their attachments, including tools, documents, standards, art histories and textile experiments, and then follows the links and associations they generate. This perspective is reinforced by Latour's later concept of *dingpolitik*, a deliberately awkward Germanism for 'thing-politics' that shifts attention from politics understood primarily as the clash of human interests or ideologies, to politics as the practical work of assembling publics around issues that are materially entangled and technically mediated. Latour asks what an 'object-oriented' politics might look like (Latour and Weibel 2005, 14), noting that ding originally referred to an assembly, a gathering around a matter in dispute (as in the Icelandic *Althing*) (Latour and Weibel 2005, 23). A 'thing', in this sense, is not a mute object but a site of controversy that draws together human and non-human actors.

For Latour, museums are not neutral spaces for displaying objects. They can become forums in which the status and meaning of objects are negotiated in public (Latour and Weibel 2005). From this angle, workwear appears not only as a category defined by original purpose and formal characteristics, but as a 'thing' that gathers controversies. Bringing it into the museum matters because it creates conditions for those controversies to become visible and discussable, enabling audiences to interrogate and debate the transitions through which workwear becomes culturally and politically charged. Seen in these terms, workwear is especially suited to a Latourian reading because it repeatedly moves between technical function, political symbolism and aesthetic appropriation.

Workwear can therefore be approached as a Latourian matter of concern rather than a stable category of dress. From its emergence in industrial modernity, it has been assembled through competing interests and heterogeneous actors, including employers and workers, regulations and safety standards, trade unions and state institutions, manufacturers and materials, as well as the symbolic economies of class, gender, migration and citizenship. Its complexity is not simply a question of definition, but of continual redefinition through use, dispute and recontextualisation. This becomes especially visible in workwear's afterlives: as garments such as denim jeans moved beyond the workplace and into everyday streetwear, workwear became available for appropriation and re-signification within street fashion and high fashion. Functional features can be retained, exaggerated or aestheticised, while relations to labour are muted, romanticised or politicised, so that the 'same' garment can operate as different spokespersons depending on where it appears, who wears it and what claims are attached to it.

Workwear's political charge is central to this parliamentary reading. Its repeated alignment with utopian dress projects reflects how garments do not merely symbolise politics, but help organise it by distributing visibility, legitimacy and belonging, and by marking whose labour is valued, whose is obscured and whose bodies are imagined as fit for particular kinds of work. At the same time, workwear enters art as a repertoire of forms and codes that can be mobilised for critique, identification or experimentation, while high fashion intensifies these translations through appropriation and revaluation, remaking workwear as luxury and shifting its status, access and meaning. More recently, designers and textile makers engaging historic traditions and vintage workwear foreground a different temporal politics by privileging repair, ageing and slow processes, producing garments that aim to sit 'outside' fast-fashion time. The exhibition embraced this instability of meanings, uses and histories as a way of unsettling the common perception of workwear as limited either to labour or to its relationship with fashion.

This framework informed how I approached the objects on display. I aimed to treat each item, no matter how humble, as an active participant in the conversation. The exhibition was not conceived as a taxonomy of garments but as a set of provocations that invited visitors to reflect, debate and reconsider what belongs in a museum and why. As Latour writes, 'each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements' (Latour and Weibel 2005, 15). In this assembly, the boundaries of what is considered 'museum-worthy' culture are opened to negotiation. Rather than reproducing established hierarchies in which fine art is privileged and everyday objects are marginalised, the presentation aimed to give workwear the same platform as artworks and designer clothes.

What made this project more 'parliamentary' was that it deliberately emphasised the different idioms through which workwear can be articulated and, crucially, brought them into contact with one another. By displaying utilitarian garments alongside artworks and fashion, the exhibition did not merely add context, it exposed competing systems of valuation: workwear as tool, as aesthetic form, as political symbol, as artistic method, as fashion resource and as speculative material future. Each theme therefore convened a different cluster of actors and mediations, and each cluster raised a different set of questions that cannot be settled by a single discipline or interpretive framework. For example, the theme 'clothing is a tool' invites visitors to recognise non-human agencies and constraints (tasks, risks, materials, environments, standards) as co-authors of dress. Garments are shaped through attachments to tools, bodies, hazards and institutions, not only by human intentions. In public discourse, this enables a shift from 'fashion as individual expression' to 'clothing as a tool embedded in collective life'.

Workwear in museums

Workwear has only rarely been exhibited in a museum context on its own terms. Most commonly, it features workwear as part of historical displays, such as those focusing on military uniforms from the Second World War or the histories of labour. Technical innovation has also provided a lens for exhibiting workwear. For instance, *The Great Cover-Up Show* at the Science Museum in London in 1982-3 presented developments in highly technical workwear, highlighting advances in textile innovation and engineering (Smart 1985). Workwear has also featured in exhibitions about space exploration, such as *Cosmonauts: Birth of the Space Age* (Science Museum, 2015–2016), where Soviet-era space suits were displayed as technological achievements and as examples of specialised clothing for extreme environments.

In the context of fashion and dress exhibitions, workwear has historically been underrepresented. Fashion museums have traditionally focused on haute couture and high fashion, which have long been seen as the primary sites of innovation and craftsmanship. As Lou Taylor notes in *Establishing Dress History* (2004), dress history has long concentrated on exceptional garments, celebrated wearers and renowned designers, while largely overlooking the clothing of ordinary people. Such blockbuster exhibitions tend to privilege couture and major designers, overshadowing vernacular and minority dress traditions. As Valerie Steele observes, 'Until fairly recently, exhibitions consisted of a display of upper-class women's fashions, organised to show the temporal succession of styles' (Steele 2008, 10). Critics such as Angela McRobbie have called out fashion curation for fetishising the exceptional, arguing that the museum world struggles to see the everyday (McRobbie 1998). This ongoing difficulty in valuing the ordinary is rooted in institutional priorities, which often favour elite or historically significant works over more accessible or mundane cultural expressions. Nonetheless, as McRobbie (1998, 182) points out, 'fashion design in Britain exists in a milieu largely defined by the values of popular, rather than high, culture'. Thus, while museums over the past two decades have started to recognise the influence of everyday style and begun to give more attention to street style and non-Western dress, their exhibitions remain largely devoted to Western high fashion.

Although workwear has occasionally appeared in exhibitions over the past two decades, it has typically been presented within the context of fashion, often framed as a counterpart – emphasising the ways in which fashion appropriates and reinterprets utilitarian clothing.[38] However, such framing tends to validate workwear primarily through its relationship with fashion, thereby reducing it to a subcategory rather than recognising its distinct and intrinsic significance.

Only recently has workwear begun to gain greater visibility, as curators and scholars turned their attention to the significance of everyday dress and the stories of ordinary working lives. In this context, I argue that it is necessary to foreground a parallel, horizontal history – one that offers a new perspective on the profound influence of workwear across art, fashion, craft and politics. This approach aligns with Piotr Piotrowski's notion of 'horizontal art history' (2009), which challenges the traditional hierarchical, or vertical, focus on the the art of the West. Rather than treating Western art history as the default narrative, Piotrowski advocates an approach that situates it alongside other histories, giving equal weight to marginalised and non-Western experiences. In my view, workwear represents an 'unwritten' chapter in the broader history of clothing – one that is urgently in need of recognition and scholarly exploration.

Both the conceptual framework and the selection of the majority of the exhibits were directly informed by my research into the utopian dimensions of workwear, explored previously in my theoretical and historical case studies (Chapter Three). I was struck by how deeply workwear is woven into everyday life, yet how marginalised it remains within broader cultural discourse. Workwear has often been relegated to the margins, perceived as utilitarian, dull, uniform and unimaginative – myths I felt compelled to challenge. In fact, there is significant technical innovation that underpins the design and production of many workwear garments.

What I found even more fascinating was discovering that the most comprehensive and significant workwear archives are held by fashion brands. A notable example is the 45R archive in Tokyo, which houses a substantial and, in my view, remarkable collection of workwear. Another exceptional example is the Massimo Osti Archive, which holds more than 30,000 workwear garments. These collections serve both as design resources and as sources of inspiration for new fashion lines.

[38] See, for example, the exhibition *Workwear – Lavoro Moda Seduzione*, which explored the relationship between workwear and fashion design, co-curated by Olivier Saillard and Oliviero Toscani, held in Florence from 13 January to 8 February 2009.

Researching workwear presented its own challenges, as it is primarily collected by private enthusiasts or preserved within designers' archives. The literature on the subject is limited, and private collections often give only a partial perspective.

Curating as research: Challenges and advantages

The scope of curatorial work can vary considerably; while some curators focus primarily on oversight and conceptual direction, my role in the case of Workwear required a distinctly different, much more hands-on approach. Because many of the exhibits were sourced from non-museum archives, I adopted unconventional methods and strategies. One of the main challenges was securing loans for the exhibition. The concept required me to borrow not only from established museum collections and the archives of high-fashion houses, but also from private collectors and independent designers – many of whom had never previously exhibited their work in a museum context. Bringing together such a diverse array of exhibits made it essential to cultivate relationships with a wide range of lenders, respond to their questions and, most importantly, establish trust.

There was a risk that some lenders might feel their objects were being regarded as less valuable or significant when presented within the context of workwear. Workwear, as commonly understood, is often regarded as mundane and lacking in value: it is plain and functional, without the creative or artistic qualities usually considered necessary for museum display. It is not typically associated with art or design excellence. I wanted to challenge this view by highlighting the extremely creative aspects of workwear and demonstrating its power to inspire.

It was crucial to assure the lenders that the exhibition would treat their pieces with respect and present them within an appropriate and meaningful context. My strategy involved tailoring the exhibition narrative to align with each lender's perspective, emphasising aspects that would resonate with them while minimising elements that might seem less relevant or appealing. For instance, the exhibition integrated both highly valued works from museum collections and uninsured objects from private archives, spanning the creative fields of both art and fashion.

This process exposed existing hierarchies and divisions within the world of collecting, as well as the ways in which the museum context can help bridge such differences. Workwear, for example, does not always evoke a sense of value in the same way as high fashion or art, and it can be less appealing for fashion brands or artists to see their work exhibited alongside utilitarian garments.

Interestingly, obtaining loans from major museum collections and established artist estates was relatively straightforward, as these institutions have well-established lending protocols. The real complexity arose when negotiating with private archives and niche designers who had never exhibited their work in a museum context. In some cases, there was a palpable hesitancy or concern about having work contextualised alongside workwear. By contrast, smaller design collectives were often enthusiastic about participating but faced significant barriers, including limited financial resources and little prior experience with museum exhibitions. Many of these collectives lacked staff and were unfamiliar with exhibition processes; some struggled to provide documentation that illustrated the making of the work in question, as such material had never been prepared for museum display. A significant portion of my time was devoted to dialogue with these lenders – explaining how their works would be contextualised within the exhibition's overarching theme, how they would be displayed and what potential benefits could arise from their inclusion. This process expanded my understanding of how the concept of workwear is perceived both by experts from different fields and by the general public.

To convey the scope of my research for the exhibition, I visited twelve archives in person, six of them in Japan during a 2019 field trip, including the Buaisou indigo farm and studio in Tokushima. In addition, I engaged in substantial email correspondence with staff at more than 26 archives, private collections and foundations, and directly with designers and artists themselves. The information gathered for this stage of the research was extensive and included more than 300 photographs, 40 conversations in person and hundreds of emails (see Appendix 1, 2 and 3).

My initial research into workwear relied heavily on photographic books, vintage workwear archives and periodicals, which provided useful background but naturally lacked the materiality of garments themselves. Curating the exhibition gave me direct access to physical archives and collections, allowing me to engage with workwear and artworks first-hand, and to understand how they are classified, stored and interpreted by different institutions and individuals. To give some examples, the Sammlung Hoffmann collection in Berlin holds replica costumes of Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova, as the originals have been lost. I felt this was a particularly significant discovery, especially as these pieces have not been exhibited in the last 30 years. In addition, the archive owned by G-Star is substantial (20,000 items) and has never previously lent any pieces for public exhibition; in fact, hardly anyone has had access to this archive.

This process revealed not only who collects workwear and for what reasons, but also how these objects are used and understood – whether as artefacts of labour history, markers of identity or sources of creative inspiration. Such insights directly informed and enriched my academic research, significantly deepening my understanding of these garments and related practices.

In conversation with certain fashion brands, I observed a marked hesitancy – and, at times, outright refusal – to be contextualised within the narrative of workwear. While fashion readily borrows from workwear, it often resists being displayed alongside authentic examples, exposing a tension between the two realms. This engagement with fashion brands allowed me to examine the works and their conditions more closely, while also making me aware of the concerns of collectors and makers. My archive visits and dialogue with collectors and creators helped to fill gaps left by existing literature.

There are many examples, but fashion archives in particular were often reluctant to have their collections exhibited under the theme of workwear. While I found that art lenders were generally less concerned, it is interesting to note that some galleries – such as Alison Jacques Gallery in London, which represents Lygia Clark – did not include *Workwear* in the list of exhibitions that it has participated in on its website.

However, my work with lenders and the team at the Nieuwe Instituut clarified and helped me communicate the significance of workwear to diverse audiences, ultimately broadening the impact of my research.

The exhibition concept and themes

Conceived as a survey of workwear, the exhibition considers these items and artefacts through the lens of their utopian qualities – particularly conviviality, solidarity, commonality, functionality and politics. Drawing on the idea of the parliament of things, the exhibition foregrounds the social and communal dimensions of workwear. The concept underpinning the exhibition was to give dress a civic perspective by dissolving pre-existing assumptions about hierarchies and values. It encourages us to reflect on how our clothing connects us to our communities, shapes social norms and expresses shared values about living together.

The exhibition celebrates functional clothing – clothing as a tool. From industrial garments to denim, workwear has had an enormous influence on the way we dress. But less explored are its social and utopian dimensions. As a symbol of equality and solidarity, workers' clothing has long been adopted by artists and progressives, not only for practical reasons but also for ideological ones.

Beginning with clothing designed for highly specific types of work, from fishing to space travel, the exhibition explores the functional characteristics of such garments. From there, we move on to the ways workwear has been adopted as an emblem of utopian ideas promoting equality and social change. Uniquely, this exhibition also explores how garments resembling workwear have been used by artists to engage bodies in new forms of artistic practice.

Throughout, workwear is revealed to be at the forefront of radical ideas about what kind of society we desire. With the mainstream fashion culture trapped in a destructive cycle of disposability and individualism, workwear offers an antidote – clothing that is about durability and collectivity. The utopian qualities of workwear offer a blueprint for a different kind of fashion. Above all, the exhibition celebrates the inspiring and empowering quality of these clothes, which is often overlooked.

The exhibition was divided into five themes, each designed to explore a distinct aspect or characteristic of workwear:

1. Clothing is a tool
2. Workwear and utopia
3. Art and utility
4. Workwear in fashion
5. Fashion archaeology

1. *Clothing is a tool*

Certain kinds of job demand highly technical clothing. Firefighters, fighter pilots, astronauts, fisherman waste collectors and mechanics all wear clothing engineered for functionality, to offer protection or, indeed, to ensure survival. The garments featured here have a tool-like quality, designed specifically to facilitate a body at work. This section includes both historical and contemporary examples, demonstrating the unique materials and construction methods required to clothe different professions (Figure 39).

These technical characteristics yield distinct aesthetic outcomes and obscure features, making it difficult to understand how the garments were used. It is as if they are machines that enable the body to perform dangerous or otherwise impossible tasks. But this is precisely what makes them attractive: these enabling features support actions in hazardous conditions, such as surviving freezing cold water or exposure to dangerous radiation. It is this association with toughness and action that has given workwear such a marked influence on streetwear, from jeans to jumpsuits.[39]

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Figure 39. Exhibition view of the section 'Clothing is a Tool', *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut

[39] The best-known example of workwear becoming streetwear is the combination of blue jeans and white T-shirt. The T-shirt was introduced in 1913 as an undershirt for sailors. Later, it was adopted by the U.S. Army to be worn under uniforms to absorb sweat and keep outer garments clean.

This exhibition theme explores clothing that often incorporates technology, such as heating and cooling systems, body-pressure regulation, or the capability to handle hazardous waste and even space travel. The focus is not only on its unique aesthetics but also on how technology can be adapted and advanced to serve various purposes, including reducing the impact of environmental destruction.

The exhibition opens with *Labour in a Single Shot*, a documentary film project by renowned German film-maker Harun Farocki in collaboration with curator Antje Ehmann. Inspired by *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), the first piece of film footage ever recorded, Farocki and Ehmann conducted workshops in 15 cities between 2011 and 2014. Participants were tasked with producing 1- to 2-minute films using a single continuous shot to document labour. This formal constraint required careful consideration of how work is represented visually, emphasising the subtleties, rhythms, and physicality of everyday tasks. These films capture labour in its many forms – manual, intellectual, paid, unpaid – while reflecting the evolving nature of work in different cultural and socio-economic contexts.

The films feature a variety of workers – cobblers, cooks, waiters, window cleaners, nurses and waste collectors. However, much of the labour depicted occurs behind closed doors, highlighting the invisibility of many essential forms of work. Farocki and Ehmann aimed to acknowledge and make visible these often-overlooked activities, such as unpaid domestic tasks or informal labour, emphasising their critical role in sustaining societies. Ultimately, *Labour in a Single Shot* serves as a powerful visual archive of 21st-century work. It reflects Farocki's enduring interest in the politics of work and its representation in media, revealing labour's often invisible presence in everyday life.

For the exhibition, I viewed a large number of videos from the collection *Labour in a Single Shot* and selected those that feature workwear. When I approached Ehmann to explain my curatorial interest, she was surprised – admitting she had never considered this perspective and saying that she immediately found the idea intriguing.

The films present diverse narratives. One depicts a group of unemployed workers in Johannesburg, dressed in blue overalls, sitting at the roadside holding signs that read 'Looking for Work'. Another, filmed in Rio de Janeiro, features a group of waste collectors rehearsing for a samba performance during their break, singing together as a choir. What makes this scene particularly striking is that the choir is led by a conductor in a white shirt and black trousers,

highlighting the contrast between the workwear worn by the street sweepers, the informal setting and the formality of his attire.

These evocative films challenge our perceptions of labour, especially when viewed through the lens of workwear. What becomes apparent is the uniformity of workwear across the globe: despite cultural and geographical differences, workwear remains strikingly similar, with only minor variations in detail. Yet, while these garments are ubiquitous, the manual labour they represent is often invisible or overlooked in society.

Figure 40. The EMF Radiation Protective Coverall, 1974. Photograph by Dejan Vekic. Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam.

Among the many forms of specialised workwear, some garments are rarely seen and possess remarkable technical qualities. I discuss them here because they display curious characteristics that may inspire designers. One example is the EMF Radiation Protective Coverall from 1974, a protective mesh suit designed to shield personnel from radiation hazards associated with high-power radars (Figure 40). The coverall is made from a 'silverised' nylon mesh, which creates a Faraday cage around the body – an uninterrupted conductive surface that cancels out the effects of external magnetic fields. For the suit to function correctly, the holes in the mesh must be significantly smaller than the wavelength it is designed to protect against. A similar technology is used in the windows of microwave ovens (G-Star archive, Amsterdam). The piece at first appears to have been sewn incorrectly, with the feet pointing in the opposite direction to the hood that covers the face – head and feet are seemingly misaligned. Because documentation for such garments is rare or often non-existent, such errors are easily made. Subsequently, I had to reconstruct an understanding of the garment's function from fragmentary sources. What initially seemed a mistake – the hood covering the face – was, in fact, an intentional design feature.

The Liquid Cooling Garment, developed in the 1990s to keep the body cool, is another example of clothing that echoes ideas found in utopian fiction. This top – part of the Portable Active Ice System – is made from flame-resistant DuPont Nomex (Figure 41). Two tubes in the centre of the chest let cooling fluid circulate around the torso and arms.

Figure 41. Liquid Cooling Garment, 1990s. Photograph by Dejan Vekic. Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam.

Liquid-cooled suits like this are extremely rare. While it is relatively easy to heat clothing using electric wires or circulating warm liquids, cooling requires much more energy and a more complex system. This garment works with a frozen water bottle and a battery pack. Originally, it was designed for astronauts and pilots, but it was later adapted for military use, such as for helicopter pilots and mine rescue workers. By the 1980s, its use had spread to recreational and industrial settings, as well as medicine – for example, helping people with multiple sclerosis, peripheral neuropathy, epidermolysis bullosa, or spina bifida. This type of clothing is particularly intriguing, as it could inspire innovative designs that use technology to cool the body more efficiently, reducing the need to cool entire spaces (G-Star archive, Rotterdam).

Early high-altitude flight in the 1930s revealed the dangers of low atmospheric pressure, including hypoxia (oxygen deprivation) and decompression sickness. Pilots required protective clothing to survive in thin air, where the pressure is too low for normal respiration. Initial solutions included oxygen masks and basic pressurised cabins, but for unpressurised aircraft or emergency situations, a wearable solution became essential.

Figure 42. Polish flying suit, 1960s. Courtesy of the Vintage Showroom archive, London.

One example is a Cold War-era Polish flying suit from the 1960s that belongs to the Vintage Showroom archive in London (Figure 42). Designed for high-altitude flight, the anti-G suit was manufactured for the Polish Air Force during the Soviet era. Like the Z-2 space suit, it is a partial pressure suit, designed to inflate tightly around the body to counterbalance the pressure inside the pilot at high altitude. Rapid acceleration or deceleration during flight can cause a pilot to black out as blood pools in the abdomen and legs; this suit was specifically designed to prevent that by maintaining proper blood circulation.

The spacesuit and helmet X-ray print from the 1960s, shown in the *Workwear* exhibition, gives a unique look at how early space exploration garments were engineered. During the Space Race, designers worked quickly to create suits that could handle microgravity, extreme temperatures, radiation and the vacuum of space. Space suits from this era, like those worn in NASA's Apollo missions, were complex, multi-layered systems combining pressure control, insulation and protection from space debris. X-ray photography was used to check for defects by revealing hidden details like pressure bladders, cooling tubes and helmet seals. The suit featured here is Neil Armstrong's Apollo 11 spacesuit, one of the most famous garments in space history. It belongs to the Smithsonian Institution Archives (Figure 43).

Remarkably, these high-tech suits depended on the precision work of highly skilled seamstresses who had previously made bras. Their expertise and attention to detail were vital to crafting suits that kept astronauts safe during space missions (De Monchaux, 2017).

Figure 43. X-ray print of the spacesuit worn by Neil Armstrong during the 1969 moon landing. NASA Space Suit Collection: X-Ray Photography. Image by Roland H. Cunningham and Mark Avino. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

In this exhibition, the spacesuit is classified as a type of workwear. However, it is arguably the most expensive piece of clothing ever made, challenging the common assumption that workwear is necessarily cheap or low-quality.

Not all examples in this section of the exhibition feature highly engineered technical elements. A notable piece is the Japanese firefighters' *noragi* from the 1920s from the Westminster Menswear Archive. These garments are crafted using traditional *sashiko* stitching, a Japanese embroidery technique that dates to the Edo period (1603–1868). Originally used by working-class farming and fishing families, *sashiko* reinforced fabric, making it stronger and more practical for workwear.

Hikeshi banten were specifically used for firefighting, because of their good water absorbency and retention. Before confronting a fire, the jackets were soaked in water to protect the wearer from the flames. The bold, legible patterns on the back – often in kanji (Japanese ideograms) – identified the firefighter's brigade and served as a mark of pride and affiliation.

While urban centres such as Tokyo began adopting Western-style firefighting uniforms and equipment by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rural brigades often continued to use

traditional *noragi* well into the 1920s. These communities relied on manual firefighting methods and bucket brigades, making water-soaked *noragi* both functional and effective.

Figure 44. Exhibition view of the section 'Clothing is a Tool', *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

Figure 45. Exhibition view of the section 'Clothing is a Tool', *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

2. *Workwear and utopia*

Many artists and politicians championed workwear for ideological reasons. Artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and László Moholy-Nagy wore workwear to embody their political and social ethos – the idea that clothes should be an egalitarian uniform for everyday life.

The Russian Constructivists, who saw artists as serving society, proposed a new type of workwear for everyday life, known as the 'productivist' suit, in the 1920s. These were designed in part to abolish fashion and the inequalities it produces. What these approaches have in common is the utopian ambition to wear clothes that are not only comfortable and functional, but also erase class distinctions. Throughout this section, workwear is used as a symbol of social change.

Looking to stimulate the political and social imagination, this section poses the question: why has workwear been the most appropriated type of clothing in the history of utopian dress? I particularly enjoyed creating this section of the show, as it brings together unexpected historical and contemporary examples from diverse fields such as literature, architecture, typography and history.

I was especially excited to discover replicas of Russian Constructivist costumes by Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova. The original costumes no longer exist, but the replicas featured in the exhibition were commissioned by Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in 1971 and have since formed part of the Sammlung Hoffmann collection in Berlin, with whose staff I corresponded by email. These pieces were last displayed in the early 1980s. The exhibition included five costumes by Stepanova and Popova, which provided me with the long-awaited opportunity to examine them closely.

Another notable exhibit was a replica of one of Aleksandr Rodchenko's suits (Figure 48). At first, the only example I could locate and potentially secure was on permanent display at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Unfortunately, the maker had since passed away and the original patterns proved difficult to trace. After an intensive search lasting nearly two months, I made progress with the help of Alyona Sokolnikova, a Moscow-based curator now working in Germany. She generously offered her assistance by contacting Aleksandr Lavrentiev (Rodchenko's grandson) and, through several conversations in which I was copied, she identified another authorised replica held at VKhUTEMAS, which was ultimately included in the exhibition [40]

[40] VKhUTEMAS is an acronym for 'Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops', founded in 1920 in Moscow.

This experience offers a clear example of the often improvised and unpredictable methods involved in research and curatorial practice.

A more recent example of how workwear remains closely tied to politics and utopian ideals can be found in the work of South African denim designer Tshepo Mohlala. His politically charged collection *We, The People* (2021) features dungarees crafted from patchwork denim made using offcuts and waste fabric (Figure 46). Mohlala incorporates the first three words of the South African Constitution – 'We, the People' – directly into these garments. As he explains, 'we acknowledge that it was the people's revolution that brought down the apartheid regime, and it is the people who will bring the promises of the Constitution to life. *We, the People* reminds us that, as a nation, our victories have never been achieved alone; they have always been achieved together'.[41]

Figure 46. Dungarees by Tshepo Mohlala from *We, the People*. Photographs by Dejan Vekic.

Other works in this section also explore the intersection of utopian ideals and clothing design. Ernesto Michahelles (1893–1959), also known as Thayaht and later associated with the Italian Futurist movement, invented the jumpsuit, or TuTa, as a 'clothing formula' intended to replace fashion (Figure 49). The TuTa was modelled on the workwear overall as a universal garment –

[41] Text by Tshepo Mohlala, quoted in exhibition label, *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. The text comes from an email to the curator, 21 December 2023.

cheap, simple to replicate, and suitable for anyone, on any occasion. The pattern and instructions for the suit were published in 1920 in the Florentine newspaper *La Nazione* (Stern 2004). In the exhibition, we featured digital versions of the patterns, drawings and photographs.

Figure 47. William Morris' painting smock, 1870s. Photograph by Dejan Vekic. Courtesy of William Morris Gallery and Vestry House Museum, London.

William Morris, whose utopian concepts and clothing were discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, is represented in the exhibition through a replica of his painting smock from the 1870s from the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, London. The smock Morris wore for painting symbolises the utopian, romantic idea of reviving traditional arts and crafts as both work and pleasure. While Morris is not typically associated with workwear in its industrial sense, displaying this smock highlights his vision of a society where the division between mental and manual labour no longer exists. This garment stands as a testament to his ideals, merging creativity and craftsmanship (Figure 47).

Hungarian artist and film-maker László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) was also an admirer of workwear, famously wearing a red overall as a symbol of his utopian ideals. The only documented reference is a photograph taken by his wife, showing him in workman's overalls at the entrance to the Master's House at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where he was a professor. After emigrating to the United States, Moholy-Nagy established the New Bauhaus, later known as the Chicago Institute of Design. His practice was profoundly influenced by Constructivism and its utopian vision of integrating technology and industry with the arts. In the exhibition, we displayed the photograph of Moholy-Nagy wearing his overalls.

Figure 48. Exhibition view of the section ‘Workwear and Utopia’, showing a costume by Liubov Popova (left) and productivist dress by Aleksandr Rodchenko (right), *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

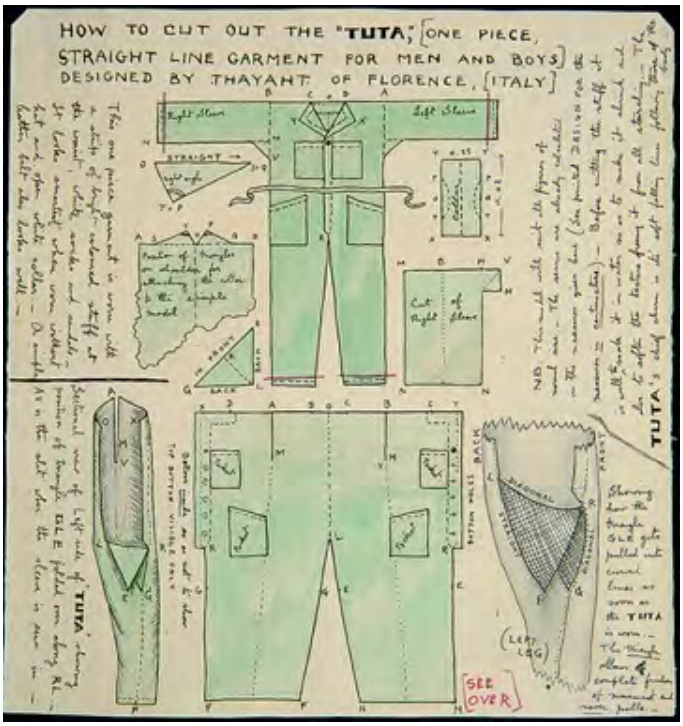

Figure 49. Thayaht, *How to cut TuTa,* overall drawings, 1920. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM archive, Florence.

3. *Art and utility*

Numerous artists have used the properties of workwear to explore ideas about the body. Their wearable sculptures and environments borrow the language of workwear in part to encourage interaction. Lygia Clark used two connected PVC overalls with masks as 'relational objects' that create a different sensory relationship between the wearers. Lucy Orta joins multiple work suits together to suggest the potential for collective action. Meanwhile, Franz Erhard Walther's wearable sculptures use a utilitarian language that invites the spectator to inhabit the works.

Rather than proposing workwear as actual garments, these artists treat it as a language. Here, workwear takes a form that encourages different experiences – of alternative bodies in alternative spaces. These works use simple, workwear-like patterns to stimulate playful, exploratory behaviour.

The work of Lygia Clark has already been extensively discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The exhibition featured her suits *O eu e o tu: Roupa-corpo-roupa* (*The I and the You: Cloth-body-cloth*, 1967): two overalls made from industrial rubber. Inside each suit are pockets containing various materials, such as foam, vinyl, acrylon, zippers and fabric (Figure 50).

Clark created participatory artworks that invited the audience to interact. She often made jumpsuits, goggles, masks and gloves to create sensory experiences, which she believed could serve as a form of therapy. Two participants, regardless of gender, could explore these materials by touching and unzipping each other's suits. Their eyes were covered with sensory masks, leading them to experience each other's bodies differently, to 'lose' their gender and become, instead, a purely sensory presence. *Óculos* (*Goggles*, 1968) is another of Clark's exhibits, consisting of distorting goggles that can be worn either by one person alone or by two people facing each other. The lenses are reversible, with one side mirrored (Clark et al. 2014).

The theme of collective dress is also explored in Lucy+Jorge Orta's featured work *Nexus*, part of the *Modular Architecture* series (1996). The jumpsuit-cocoons are connected by fabric umbilical tubes, linking one person's stomach to another's back. These interconnected suits both literally and symbolically highlight the connections between individuals, emphasising their interdependency (Orta and Pinto 2003). Orta draws on workwear elements and other functional artefacts throughout her practice – such as life jackets, stretchers, tents that transform into raincoats, sleeping bags and protective gloves (Figure 51). However, in her hands, these utilitarian items acquire a convivial, playful tone, subverting their usual association with disaster.

The vivid colours and ambiguous functionality of the pieces suggest an exploration of alternative living concepts, rather than offering purely practical solutions.

Like Lucy+Jorge Orta's explorations of collective dress, Franz Erhard Walther's soft sculptures are designed to be activated by the viewer, making participation central to their meaning. Viewers are invited to touch, wear or manipulate the materials, transforming the work into a collaborative performance. In this way, the artwork is only complete when it is 'performed' by the participant (Filipovic and Walther 2014).

A central idea in Walther's practice is that the viewer's participation is integral to the creation of form. He approaches art as a process that unfolds over time, rather than as a static object. For example, the series *1. Werksatz* (*First Work Set*, 1963–69) consists of textile-based objects that viewers can handle and use in various ways. Throughout Walther's terminology, *Werk* (work) is the recurring root, linking his titles and concepts to labour, making and tools. He calls the individual elements *Werkstücke* ('workpieces'), a term that recalls *Werkzeug* ('tools'), while *Werksatz* ('set of works') also suggests *Bausatz* ('kit of parts'). When activated, the *Werkstücke* combine with the participant to form *Werkfiguren* ('work figures'), before returning to their *Lagerform* ('storage form'), the state in which they are exhibited. References to work and tools recur across his practice and, when researching his early works, I also encountered a series of drawings of work tools.

Between 1978 and 1986, Walther developed the *Wallformations* series – monochrome installations in red, yellow and black, made from heavy sail canvas. These works feature flaps, windows of colour and wearable components, evoking the functionality of work uniforms. The installation in the exhibition belongs to this series, but the audience was not permitted to interact with the piece.

Walther's practice consistently merges art and utility, using practical materials and forms to explore artistic expression. These wearable elements invite viewers to interact, positioning art as something to be experienced and activated, rather than simply observed.

Figure 50. Exhibition view of the section 'Art and Utility', showing Lygia Clark *O eu e o tu: Roupa-corpo-roupa*, 1967. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

Figure 51. Lucy+Jorge Orta, *Modular Architecture – Nexus Architecture x 3,* 1996. *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photography by Dejan Vekic. Courtesy of Studio Orta, Paris.

4. *Workwear in fashion*

Workwear has been an endless source of inspiration to fashion designers – often as a way to challenge fashion itself. Elsa Schiaparelli created a collection featuring enormous 'cash and carry' pockets in response to wartime air raids (1939–40), while Yohji Yamamoto's designs were heavily inspired by August Sander's photographs of labourers (Figure 52). Helmut Lang's work in the 1980s and 1990s drew on workwear and military clothing and proved a major influence on later designers such as Martin Margiela and Raf Simons.

Perhaps the most influential designer to bridge technical workwear and fashion was Massimo Osti (1944–2005). Inspired by workwear, adventure gear and military uniforms, he pioneered high-performance clothing as everyday fashion. While the influence of workwear on fashion is considerable, for this exhibition I chose to feature only those designers whose engagement with workwear went beyond the superficial.

The selected designers deploy the toughness and practicality of workwear as a style to challenge conventional silhouettes and traditional notions of beauty. But why include fashion at all, given that workwear and fashion are ontologically different, with workwear often seen as the antidote to fashion? The aim was to question hierarchies and disrupt conventional ideas of value. I included only a few fashion examples, and only when they genuinely engaged with workwear in ways that shaped their style and design language, rather than simply appropriating its aesthetics.

Osti was a visionary inventor and fashion designer who approached design of clothing like a product designer, pioneering high-performance clothing (Figure 53). Osti patented numerous textiles and manufacturing techniques, such as rubber flax, rubber wool, thermogenic sealing and Technowool.

Osti amassed a large collection of workwear to study materials and patterns, using them to create innovative designs. By approaching clothing as a product designer, he revolutionised streetwear with military- and workwear-inspired pieces.

During my visits to his archive, which is based in Bologna in Italy (2018 and 2023), I was struck by how his design process diverged from traditional fashion, focusing heavily on experimentation. He used methods like photocopying to create jacket collages and applied screen prints to T-shirts – innovations at the time. Osti paid attention to every detail, from buttons and labels to textiles,

with a remarkable collection of handmade samples showcasing various finishes, coatings and dyeing techniques.

Inspired by Japanese Civil Defence hoods, Osti created a prototype jacket with integrated lenses, collaborating with Baruffaldi, a sports optics manufacturer, to create custom frames. He also researched safety vests for delivery workers, which led to a commission from Italy's Department of Transport. By the late 1990s, Osti began researching shockproof materials and safety gear, resulting in designs for shockproof jackets and life-saving vests (Osti and Facchinato 2016).

In 1999, Osti created the prototype for an Imaginary Survival Suit, designed for a fictional 'superhero' surviving in a dystopian future. The design featured survival tools, such as heating coils, wrist computers, a TV and satellite receiver, headphones and a microphone integrated into the collar. The hood included an anti-smog filter and a flexible visor, reflecting a science fiction approach to world-building through speculative design in clothing.

Figure 52. Yohji Yamamoto in 'Workwear in Fashion' section, *Workwear*. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

Figure 53. Massimo Osti's Zeltbahn cape, *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn.

5. *Fashion archaeology*

Like archaeologists, the designers and makers featured here meticulously research the history of workwear, rediscovering lost patterns and techniques. Seeking the qualities of the original, authenticity of process is all important. These designers eschew trends and seasonal fashion cycles in favour of the timelessness to be found in vintage workwear.

Japan is a hub for such tendencies, with brands like Buaisou and Kapital reviving traditional dyeing techniques for workwear using indigo, mud, or persimmon juice. In the UK, Nigel Cabourn takes an archival approach, accurately redesigning vintage pieces related to Arctic expeditions or defunct workwear items, which I was able to view in person in his archives based in Newcastle. The work is slow and labour-intensive, and that is part of the point. These designers may fetishise historical events, garments or techniques, but they do so with a view to reclaiming an ethos of craftsmanship and longevity.

The utopian aspect of this theme lies in its relation to time, looking to history to shape the future. This section also presents an approach that stands in sharp contrast to commercial textile practices. It is archaeological in nature, drawing from the past to propose something new. This process blends and distorts time, resulting in workwear that is not bound by trends. The ageing of the garment is embraced, with the belief that it improves with wear over time.

Buaisou is a relatively young collective of artisans based in Tokushima Prefecture, Japan, devoted to reviving and promoting the traditional craft of indigo-dyeing, or *aizome*. Established in 2015, Buaisou distinguishes itself by overseeing every stage of the indigo-dyeing process internally – from cultivating their own indigo plants (*ai*) to producing natural dyes by fermenting *sukumo* and hand-dyeing textiles. This farm-to-fabric ethos underscores their commitment to both sustainability and skilled craftsmanship.

As well as engaging in each phase of production, the collective has adopted a dyeing practice that extends beyond yarn and fabric to include furniture, illustrating the adaptability of their craft. Since its foundation, Buaisou has developed its own line of workers' clothing, and in 2018 fulfilled their ambition of producing hand-dyed indigo jeans. On my research trip to Japan in 2019, I visited their indigo farm and studio, where I was able to observe their processes at first hand.

For the exhibition, Buaisou created an installation titled *100 Shades of Blue*, featuring 100 strips of fabric dyed in 100 distinct shades of indigo (Figure 54). Each vat used to dye the fabric was

carefully calculated and measured by hand, and Buaisou's diaries, which documented the process, were displayed as beautiful artefacts in their own right.

The processes of indigo-cultivation and -fermentation were also presented on film. Working with and at the pace of nature, the collective's practice offers an antidote to the speed of industrial textile-dyeing, reviving the understated beauty of *aizome* in a distinctly contemporary context.

Figure 54. Buaisou installation *100 Shades of Blue,* consisting of 100 hand-dyed indigo textile strips, *Workwear,* Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, March–September 2023. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

Figure 55. Sam Cruden*, 0 to 12*, installation, *Workwear,* Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

Figure 56. Sam Cruden, *0 to 12*, installation detail, *Workwear,* Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

Exhibition presentation as method: The politics of display

Exhibition design played a large role in communicating the concept to the audience. As most of the exhibits were garments, I was concerned that using traditional mannequin displays – common in clothing and costume exhibitions – would undermine the exhibition's intentions.

In exhibition-making, display is not a neutral component but a form of public assembly. An exhibition can be understood as a temporary institution that convenes objects, bodies, labels, lighting, circulation routes, loan conditions, conservation rules and audience behaviours, organising them into a staged forum. The terms of that forum can either reinforce familiar ways of seeing, or they can reconfigure relations so that garments operate less as commodities and more as civic artefacts, with labour, politics and social disparity re-attached to their material presence.

Although display design is not always acknowledged as a curatorial method, I approached it as both artist and exhibition-maker, considering the design inseparable from the exhibition concept and essential for communicating ideas experientially. Drawing on Latour's concepts of *dingpolitik* and the parliament of things, I aimed to make the exhibition itself function as a parliament of *things*: an accessible space in which garments could be encountered as participants in public debate, rather than as mute evidence or market objects.

Latour's idea of *dingpolitik* (thing-politics) is helpful here because it insists that politics does not only form through human speech and opinion, but through the arrangements and mediations of things. Objects do not simply illustrate already-formed positions: they assemble publics, shift what people notice and prioritise, make disagreements visible and demand representation in public. In the context of *Workwear*, this perspective shifts the focus from presenting garments as stable 'matters of fact' (known, classified, contained) to staging them as 'matters of concern', whose meanings depend on networks of making, wearing, maintaining, regulating and interpreting (Latour 2005). From this perspective, exhibition design becomes part of that network, shaping what can be noticed, what counts as evidence and how objects become knowable in public.

For this reason, a retail-inflected mannequin display risked distracting from the core message, which centred on the utopian and transformative potential of workwear. I was wary that 'idealised' bodies would direct attention towards form and fit rather than use, labour and civic

meaning. Workwear is designed not to accentuate the body, but to fulfil practical functions of protection and utility, and its civic dimension can easily be overwritten when it is presented through familiar commercial conventions of taste and aspiration.

Inspired by utopian dress practices, which privilege abstraction and simplicity, I envisioned mannequins stripped of human characteristics – rendered flat and reduced to symbols. This approach drew on Gerd Arntz's Isotype system, developed for Otto Neurath, which used simple, universally recognisable forms to communicate with a broad audience (Figure 57).[42] A minimalist, symbolic mannequin enabled creative variation and treated the 'body' as a medium of visual communication rather than an object of display.

Translated into mannequin form, Isotype reinforced the idea that workwear – like the simplified visual language of pictograms – does not depend on, or highlight, specific body shapes (Figure 57). Instead, it shifted attention away from 'fit', encouraging viewers to consider the garments' creative and social dimensions as civic objects. In Latourian terms, the mannequin is not a neutral support but a mediator that scripts what counts as relevant: conventional mannequins tend to stabilise garments as visual commodities, whereas the reduced silhouette was intended to keep open what the garments are for and what they do in the world. The aim was not to remove the body, but to refuse the idealised body as the primary interpretive frame (Figure 59).

Another significant influence was Lina Bo Bardi's pioneering display design for the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in 1968. Bo Bardi's use of glass easels, which presented paintings on free-standing panels rather than hanging them on walls, allowed viewers to circulate freely and see each work from multiple angles. This principle – placing glass supports in concrete bases – transformed the museum environment, loosening hierarchies and fostering a more egalitarian and immersive experience. Building on this idea, I considered how independent display elements could support the mannequins in the gallery, enabling flexible arrangement, circulation and multiple viewpoints. I also wanted the mannequins to read as part of a 'crowd', blurring the boundary between audience and display.

Redesigning the mannequin system was technically demanding: it needed to be modular, adaptable across a wide range of garments and demonstrably safe for the objects. Many lenders hesitated when first shown the visualisations, and I had to reassure them of the system's

[42] Gerd Arntz (1900–1988) was a German artist and graphic designer who, in collaboration with Otto Neurath in the 1920s, developed the Isotype system – a visual language of pictograms intended to make statistical and social information accessible to all. Influenced by his leftist politics, Arntz's geometric designs became foundational for modern infographics and continue to shape contemporary data visualisation.

viability. Some only committed after seeing a working prototype. However, reducing the three-dimensional body to a flat silhouette proved both bold and practical. It was cost-effective, easy to produce and transport and enabled material reuse, with offcuts repurposed as display panels for prints, photographs or screens. The system was developed with Cookies Architecture, who designed and tested the prototype to ensure stability, safety and lender confidence. They also proposed using hired Ballard blocks, a road-building base system that was returned after the exhibition. This approach reduced waste by enabling the recycling of materials, while also making the display's support infrastructure visible, so that the exhibition disclosed the material negotiations and constraints through which garments are brought into public view.

Interpretation was structured through a hierarchy of exhibition texts. The entrance panel set out the exhibition's central questions about workwear and its relation to utopia, while section panels introduced each theme (Figure 58). Throughout, the texts were written in accessible language that did not assume prior knowledge. My intention was for the exhibition to feel approachable for audiences of different ages, regardless of their familiarity with fashion, dress studies or art history. Object labels provided focused points of interpretation for individual exhibits. In some cases, they addressed technological innovation and performance in use, explaining how particular garments functioned in specific working conditions. In others, especially within the utopian theme, they foregrounded the social and political role of workwear, framing design within its ideological context. In the art and utility section, labels drew connections between the formal language of workwear and the ideas embedded in each piece. Overall, labels were kept concise and practical, intended to inform and guide visitors without over-determining meaning.

The gallery space is organised as a rectangular loop around a central void, effectively forming a series of connected long and narrow spaces. The entrance functions as both threshold and exhibit, so that the beginning of the exhibition also becomes its return point (Figure 60). This layout allows visitors to circulate continuously, encountering the display from different angles while following a single linear route. The plan was developed in coordination with the museum's requirements for accessibility and collections care, including wheelchair movement, minimum distances between exhibits and measures to reduce touching. In this sense, the spatial arrangement can be read as partially 'parliamentary': it supports circulation, comparison and return. At the same time, it is assembled through the practical constraints that structure museum display, which shape what kinds of encounter are possible and how the exhibition's publics is formed.

To what extent, then, did *Workwear* constitute a *parliament of things* or an experiment in *dingpolitik?* If a parliament implies visibility, representation and the possibility of disagreement, the exhibition's claim is necessarily partial. The museum remained a framing institution, loan conditions restricted handling and activation and workers were present mainly through traces, documentation and contextual material rather than as direct speakers. Yet *Workwear* nonetheless operated as an assembly by treating garments as matters of concern whose meanings were neither stable nor self-evident. Freestanding displays and a clear modular system encouraged visitors to think with the garments' material presence rather than through the spectacle of idealised embodiment. By staging utilitarian dress alongside artworks, designer garments and specialist protective clothing, the exhibition brought into contact competing systems of valuation and made the category itself open to scrutiny. In doing so, it did not resolve the controversies that cling to workwear but rendered them legible, allowing objects, materials, standards, risks, bodies and institutions to appear as co-authors of dress. In this sense, *Workwear* approximated Latour's parliament across its five themes by presenting garments as mediators in collective life rather than as settled artefacts, less by claiming to 'give voice' to things than by arranging conditions in which their attachments could be seen, debated and reassembled in public.

Figure 57. Gerd Arntz, Isotype for Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, 1925–34. Courtesy of Municipal Museum, The Hague.

Figure 60. Entrance/exit signage at the exhibition threshold, *Workwear*, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of Nieuwe Instituut.

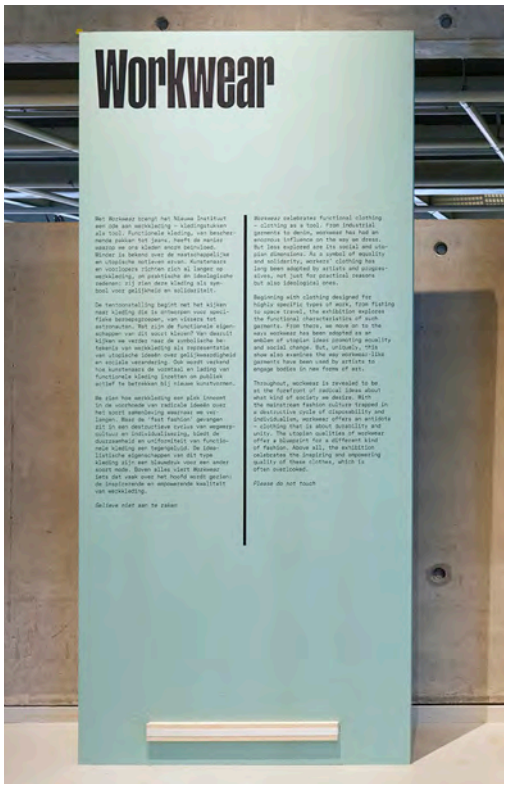

Figure 58. Introductory panel text. Graphic design by Isabelle Vaverka.

Figure 59. Buaisou mannequin display showing hand dyed threads and worn-out jeans in 'Fashion Archaeology' section.

Conclusion

Workwear gave dress a civic perspective. It prompts us to consider how what we wear connects us to our communities, shapes social norms and expresses shared values about living together. By giving prominence to workwear, the exhibition encouraged visitors to view these everyday garments as touchstones for reflecting on labour, class, value, community and citizenship. This curatorial approach also challenged established hierarchies, bringing together objects associated with different registers of cultural value, from items often dismissed as trivial to those of recognised cultural and historical significance. In doing so, it sought to unsettle distinctions between privileged and everyday forms of dress, artworks and artefacts, and to reassert an egalitarian ethos. Framed through Latour's *parliament of things*, the exhibition treated the museum as an assembly in which objects could enter public discussion and provoke critical debate.

The curatorial process began with debate and those conversations continued throughout the entire process of exhibition-making, including at the opening and beyond. It is the complex and multi-layered meanings associated with workwear that attract discussion, provoking numerous questions from both museum staff and the public. Because workwear cuts across so many categories and disciplines, many people felt they already had a way into the subject. As one colleague put it, workwear is simply something people find relatable.

The narrative posed challenges not only for lenders and their institutions, but also for the audience, encouraging critical engagement with assumptions about value, especially in relation to visual art, fashion and workwear. The exhibition brought together diverse objects, specialist technical workwear, Constructivist costumes, art installations, films on labour and textile processes from niche makers in Japan, to illustrate a broader narrative and assemble a public around questions that are too often neglected. Why have these objects been excluded from museum spaces? What does it mean to value everyday labour and its artefacts in a cultural institution? How do hierarchies of taste, class and expertise operate within museums?

The exhibition advanced my research, offering a unique opportunity that included visits to private archives, museum collections and design studios, as well as a field trip to Japan in 2019 to locate original works and engage in critical conversations. Collaborating with the museum team and a diverse group of lenders required me to distil and communicate complex ideas, ensuring they resonated with a wide range of audiences. This process validated and enriched the research, enhancing its clarity, relevance and impact in a public context.

Read through Latour, *Workwear* functioned as a temporary assembly in which objects, protocols, bodies, risks and values could appear together. Its achievement was not to settle what workwear is, but to make the terms of that question visible and contestable. In that sense, the exhibition most closely approached a parliament of things.

CHAPTER FIVE: *WORKTOPIAS* – PRACTICE RESEARCH

Introduction

My practice research began with experiments exploring the idea that dress is a tool. As discussed in Chapter Three, the idea of dress as a tool first emerged with Russian Constructivism, which saw dress not only as a functional object but also as a medium for imagining an alternative, fairer society. A related notion – the 'dressing tool' or assembly clothing tool – was later introduced by Archizoom as a DIY kit designed to reclaim autonomy from the capitalist and industrial domination of both culture and fashion. The Neoconcretists further expanded the idea that dress or wearables can serve as 'propositions' to be experienced by an audience, whether as therapeutic tools or as a way of exploring collectivity.

Viewing dress as a tool opens up new way of thinking about wearables, encouraging a re-evaluation of their use and inviting exploration of alternative approaches within the practice. It suggests that clothing can evolve in response to changes in work, but it also points towards the development of new systems in which individuals can create and experiment with their own wearables. The idea goes even further in the context of Lygia Clark's propositions, however: here, dress becomes a means of inviting the wearer or participant to engage with the artwork both physically and experientially. In this sense, dress serves as a therapeutic, sensory and phenomenological tool.

Guided by these practical experiments in utopian dress, I began to investigate the functionality of clothing in relation to the future of work, while speculating on what a utopian dress practice might involve and what it could entail. Utopian literature and historical accounts often use workwear as a model of utopian dress, a theme I discussed in earlier chapters. These reflections led me to consider alternative forms of workwear and to explore how clothing might function as a tool for proposing alternative futures aligned with utopian ideals such as functionality, commonality, temporality and conviviality. In this sense, the concept of workwear became a starting point for this inquiry.

Alongside my practical work, I engaged with a wide body of literature – mainly from social scientists and economists – on the future of work and professions. The breadth of this writing was such that it almost constituted a genre in its own right. Yet the approach across much of it was largely similar, with a strong emphasis on data-driven predictions to forecast the future of work. My aim, by contrast, was not to predict but to speculate and reflect on new forms of work.

Here, work would be shaped by what we wish to do, rather than by what we are obliged to do. Within this speculative framework, dress emerged as a utopian tool, bridging the imaginative and the functional. In this envisioned future, fulfilment and creativity take precedence, dissolving the traditional divide between intellectual and manual labour – or, in terms drawn from dress, the distinction between 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar' roles.

In this 'Worktopias' chapter, I analyse my practice-based art research, including reflections on making, process and materials. I also refer to practices and ideas that draw on similar concepts or techniques, or are simply evocative of them. In relation to the concept of worktopias ('work utopias'), I imagine a fusion of disciplines, ideas and methods that could represent a utopian model for the future of work. This notion of worktopias suggests the hybridisation of different kinds of work into more experimental forms, embodying William Morris' idea of work as a pleasure.

As a proposition, I introduce the concept of the 'intelligent hand' as an integral component of future worktopias. Rather than replacing the hand with artificial intelligence or advanced technology, this idea elevates manual skills to a form of interdisciplinary thinking, integrating methods from science, cooking, hairdressing, therapy, art and philosophy. In this envisioned *worktopia*, hand and tool function as companions, coexisting in a symbiotic relationship.

Reflecting on art practice produced in the early stages of my research, I analyse the concept of worktopias and hybrid professions, which I explored through collage. I also reflect on the process of making 'glove-tools' and my use of 3D scanning and printing. These early tests prompted me to change the direction of my practice. This shift took me from what I initially described as 'speculative objects' to making nearly a hundred small-scale wax and clay glove-tools between 2020 and 2022.

Since the Industrial Revolution, which marks the beginning of workwear as defined in this research, I reference several artists and designers in their ongoing negotiations with technology. For example, László Moholy-Nagy grappled with his utopian vision and the challenges of technological power during his exile in the USA from 1937 to 1946. Italian Radical Design groups that emerged in the 1960s responded to the technological dominance of capitalism by rejecting mainstream design and culture. In 1974, the Italian designer Enzo Mari released the handbook *Autoprogettazione*, in which he proposed the use of simple manual techniques and materials as a means of liberating consumers from the obsolescence engineered by the Italian furniture industry.

Reflecting on the process of making large-scale casts of the glove-tools, I revisit the idea of the monument, focusing on how monuments in Yugoslavia differed from others. These monuments possessed a distinctly futuristic dimension, yet were built to commemorate the past, effectively conflating past and future – a utopian conception of time. In this context, I outline why the idea of the monument of the future is such an intriguing concept.

Collaging futures

It is difficult to think of a method in art practice more closely associated with utopia than photomontage or collage. This technique, which involves cutting and combining images to construct and propose alternative realities, was celebrated by Russian Constructivists and Dadaists at the beginning of the 20th century. Russian Constructivists such as El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Gustav Klutsis used photomontage as a tool for propaganda – a practice that continued for decades (Margolin 1997).

The appeal of collage and photomontage lies in its ability to imagine and visualise alternative realities in a compelling way. While photography is often seen as an objective medium, photomontage and collage challenge this perception by cutting and recombining realistic images. Collage, as a utopian medium, continued this Constructivist legacy, exemplified by the striking collages of Superstudio's *The Continuous Monument* series from 1969.

My earliest practice-based research used collage to visualise speculative future working scenarios. Software offered flexibility and access to a wide range of images and scales sourced from the internet, allowing me to digitally assemble them. These collages allowed me to imagine future professions and offered a glimpse into how such scenarios might unfold in real-world contexts. As a method of worldbuilding, collage has proved to be a valuable tool for visualising alternative futures (Figure 61 and Figure 62).

Collage is particularly appealing as a thinking tool because it requires no advanced skills or technical expertise. It is widely accessible, free to practise and inherently intuitive. For me, collage was an instinctive method – abstract enough to allow space for open-ended conversations. By decontextualising and recontextualising imagery, it invites spectators to reflect on and construct alternative realities. Its accessibility also makes it an invaluable method for collaborative work, whether with students or wider groups, providing a powerful medium for exploring speculative futures.

Using collage, I set out to speculate about the future of work and workwear. Initially, my research focused on three speculative future hybrid professions: the hairdresser-psychotherapist, chef-scientist and Mars-construction worker. In this chapter, however, I reflect on just one hybrid profession, as the direction of my research subsequently shifted.

Figure 61. *Worktopias (hairdresser-psychotherapist),* collage, dimensions variable, 2016.

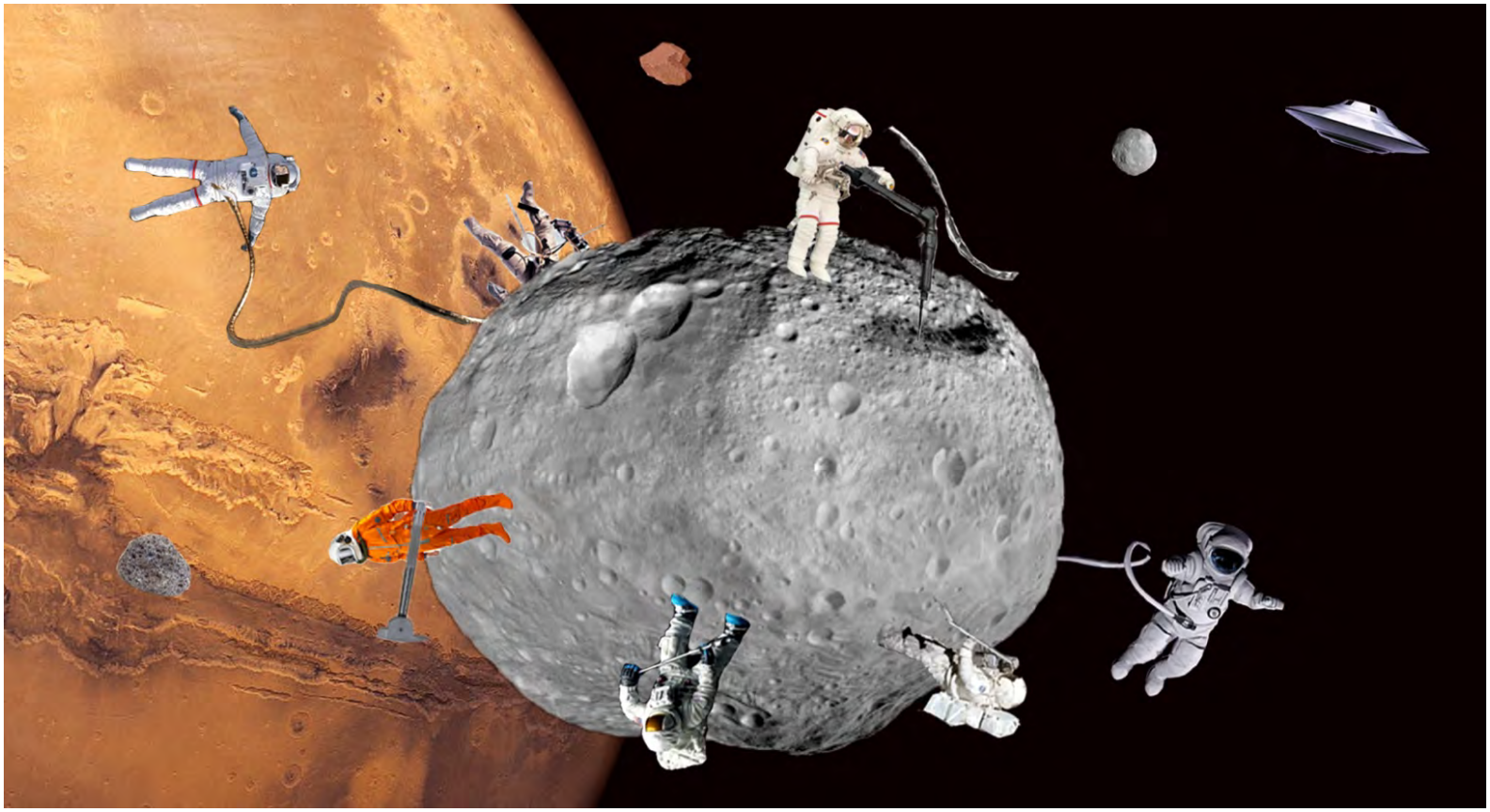

Figure 62. *Worktopias (Mars-construction worker)*, collage, dimensions variable, 2016.

Worktopias: Hairdresser-Psychotherapist

My initial idea for a future profession combines the roles of hairdresser and psychotherapist. These two professions have several similarities, making it easy to imagine them merging. Both involve a setting – whether a salon or a therapy room – in which the professional and client engage in a focused, often personal, one-to-one interactions (Figure 61). For instance, a hairdresser touches the client's head and often asks questions during the haircut. The presence of the mirror creates a sense of distance, subtly shaping the interaction.

Thinking about dress as a tool led me to focus on the role of 'intelligent hands' in this scenario, particularly the potential of gloves. A glove is essentially a protective tool worn on the hand, which led me to imagine how gloves might replace the traditional tools of a hairdresser, such as brushes and scissors.

One of my first experiments involved making a hairbrush in the form of a glove. This object would give the hand greater control over the pressure than a traditional brush and make brushing feel more like stroking, educing a smoothing, therapeutic effect (Figure 63).

Figure 63. *Hairbrush glove*, pig bristles and rubber, 2016.

Figure 64. *Scissor gloves*, felt and scissor blades, 2016.

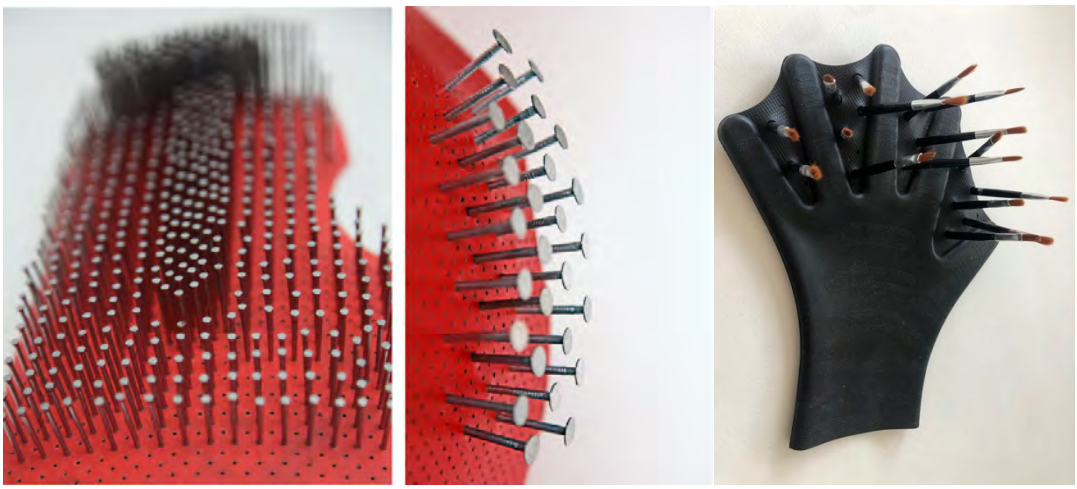

Figure 65. *Pinbrush glove*, pins and rubber, 2016.

Other experiments included scissor gloves, with blades attached directly to the fingers, extending the functionality of the hand (Figure 64). I also explored using unconventional materials, such as panel pins and nails, to replace traditional hairbrush bristles (Figure 65). Although these materials might appear unsettling, they could nevertheless produce a surprisingly relaxing effect when I tested them on myself. This phase of experimentation felt like entering an entirely new area, which I began to think of as 'therapy tools'.

Glove-Tools: Making, materials and meaning

Taking the human hand as my starting point, I investigated wearable tools and how these might evolve to propose different worktopias. These glove-tools, which I describe as sketches or propositions, serve to explore alternative social narratives. They propose possible scenarios for the relationship between work and dress in speculative futures. Rather than finished objects or artefacts, they function more as thinking tools – forms of worldbuilding centred on ideas about the future of work and workwear.

The glove-tools I propose subvert the conventional understanding of a tool as purely utilitarian or technical, instead treating each as an entity with its own language and infinite (poetic) potential. In a world shaped by machines and robots, I am interested in what the future of work might look like if we reimagine the hand as a 'super-tool', with endless possibilities for morphing, extending, mutating, transforming and mimicking. This concept seeks to embrace imperfection and emotion within the idea of the tool, moving away from the industrial logic of precision and standardised forms.

The body of work titled *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)* comprises a series of small-scale glove-tools made from clay and wax, assembled and placed in archive boxes (Figure 66). Initially, however, I created small objects with the intention of 3D scanning, enlarging and printing them at life size. The idea was that these life-sized tools could be worn on the hands and tested by participants. My intention was not merely to engage with current technology, but to explore and experiment with ways to amplify the small, intricate gestures performed by the hand. These wax and clay models were shaped by genuine, uncompromised hands. I imagined that if these models were 3D scanned and printed, the result would be a strange hybrid – neither fully handcrafted nor purely technological.

Figure 66. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)*, detail, modelling wax, 10 × 4 x 2 cm, 2020. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

By using 3D scanning, I was interested to see how a machine might read and interpret my gesture. It is perhaps this possibility of contradiction within the work that I find most compelling: the way a small, handmade gesture can be enlarged and transformed through technology. What intrigues me is this act of translation – from an authentic, artisanal gesture to a machine-processed interpretation. It is a journey from the hand's small, original act to its artificial enlargement, transforming it into something suited to manufacturing. This process is a translation, rather than a direct reproduction, of the original gesture.

When I began working on the first models, using software for conceptualisation felt unnatural to me. Computer programs, with their clickable instructions, translate our thoughts and mental images into shapes. Tools that we traditionally understand as manual – such as scissors or knives – are reduced to icons, a language of clicks. The hand, by contrast, is a multisensory tool. It can respond to music through movement and embed rhythm in material. What might seem like a simple, intuitive action for the hand actually represents a level of complexity that remains inconceivable within the realms of computing and AI.

The tools offered by 3D software are designed to mimic hand tools, replicating actions we are familiar with, such as cutting, marking, extruding and slicing. However, I wanted complete freedom and did not want the software to dictate the aesthetics of the piece, so I needed a

different approach. Instead, I began by making a model in clay to define the size, proportions and aesthetic language – but, above all, to allow myself to think through the design. Hand-shaping small-scale clay and wax models gave me the time and space to reflect and to search for the qualities I wanted my future 3D model to retain. I was shaping imaginary tools directly with my hands, rather than using another tool – such as software – to create a tool.

Limitations of technological tools

I selected one of the gloves-tool models to be 3D scanned. My initial understanding of 3D printing was that it would be convenient, precise and allow for easy prototyping, as well as quick copies and iterations. However, I found the process surprisingly time-consuming and dependent on expensive equipment. Each scanning attempt lasted several hours, and the software frequently crashed. Even when the model was successfully scanned, the software often misinterpreted the hand-modelled shapes, resulting in holes in the digital mesh image that had to be filled manually (Figure 67 and Figure 68). Ultimately, these areas were merely 'patched', pretending to represent the actual shape of the object.

Figure 67. Scanned 3D model.

Figure 68. Original glove artefact used for 3D scanning.

It became evident that all of this extensive effort was required merely to translate a single 3D shape into computer language – a shape that could easily be made by hand in a matter of minutes. This form was then subjected to vector interpretation, an abstract translation into mathematical terms. Put simply, any aesthetic quality achieved through direct contact with the material must be mediated through the language of technology, suggesting that the original aesthetic is likely to be diminished or even lost in the process. Ultimately, I found that

technology is no match for the human hand, with its boundless potential for creativity and its inherent capacity for making mistakes.

What I encountered here is reminiscent of industrial production, where design is often dictated by the limitations of technology. The costs associated with sophisticated equipment capable of more complex printing and scanning are prohibitively high, making such technology accessible only to a select few. This exclusivity stands in stark contrast to the egalitarian ideals at the heart of utopian concepts. Conversely, art practice can adapt to new tools and technologies, but it also has the capacity to create something original with them, holding the potential to become something entirely new in the process. What interests me is how this ‘translation’ – this hybrid between hand and machine – might be made manifest, and whether it could allow for the peculiarities and ambivalence found in a good work of art.

Furthermore, the range of materials suitable for 3D printing at the university facility was limited, consisting mostly of plastics, which resulted in pieces that were depersonalised and simplified, intended for replication. In order to translate an idea into machine language, many details had to be compromised or were simply lost. The idea had to adapt to 'machine thinking', with all the limitations that entails.

Eventually, with the assistance of a technician, I managed to scan and print a small-scale glove-tool model which, in the end, resembled a rather dull, manufactured piece of resin, stripped of the expressive qualities inherent in the original. During my collaboration with the technician, we had informal conversations about the challenges I was presenting to the technology. He suggested creating and visualising the artwork using software, attempting to imitate the hand-shaped surface – which, notably, he had never physically touched. For someone who uses software as their primary means of expression, this was not a concern; for him, it was simply a 3D shape, a visual image translated into a three-dimensional object. To me, this approach seemed counterintuitive, as my intention was to explore how the machine could interpret and translate my gesture. Simulating this process in software to imitate a hand-shaped object in wax or clay would not provide the insights or outcomes I was seeking.

I find this particularly intriguing in the context of 3D printing, where the interpretation of complex materiality is reduced to an image – linear and rational. Once printed, the image becomes a tangible object again, though with material qualities that are markedly different from the original.

Aside from the limitations and costs of using 3D printing technology as a creative medium, there are numerous invaluable applications for it in fields such as medicine and engineering. However, to use it effectively in an artistic context, one must either adapt to its constraints, engage with it within the discourse of technological processes, or possess the skills to employ the technology as a means of subversion and critique. In my own case, however, technology functioned merely as a tool, yet I found that it constrained both my creative process and the outcome, while also limiting the work's phenomenological and relational qualities. However, as technology changes rapidly and is quickly superseded, these observations may not remain significant in the future.

In 3D computer modelling, the creative process becomes numbing; relying on a computer tool to translate my intentions into digital language felt mechanical and unfulfilling. It was as though I was avoiding the natural act of using my hand. I yearned to touch and manipulate the shape and material directly, yet instead found myself merely clicking and engaging with machine language. Surrendering the power and expertise of the hand as a super-tool to a machine left me feeling like an extension of technology. Although I do not consider myself a technophobe and am proficient with software, I believe we must urgently reassess our relationship with technology, particularly in the context of the future of work and workwear.

Thinking with hands

Until the recent advent of AI, everything in the material world around us had, at its core, been shaped by human hands. A single pair of hands is capable of crafting a spacesuit, building a boat, constructing a house or assembling a car – tasks that demonstrate an extraordinary adaptability and range of skills. This raises critical questions: how can two hands perform such diverse activities using an equally varied array of tools? Moreover, in a contemporary context characterised by increasing work specialisation, how does an individual manage to develop such a wide skill set – spanning home renovation, home economics, personal administration, accountancy, childcare, housework and DIY, alongside hobbies, sports and other leisure pursuits? Where does this extensive knowledge originate if it is not formally taught? These questions point to the complex interplay between embodied knowledge, informal learning and the adaptability inherent to human creativity and labour.

With the growth of the service sector and the decline of production in industrialised economies, we are witnessing the disappearance of 'intelligent hands' – manual and craft skills that are

gradually fading away. In emerging economies, hands continue to play a vital role in professional life, but in developed countries their role is becoming increasingly redundant, replaced by automation and digitalisation. With the growing presence of machines in both work and domestic settings, we are reducing the use of hand skills, relegating them to little more than performing a series of clicks: clicking on kitchen gadgets, clicking to open a door, clicking to boil an egg, clicking to brush our teeth – the list is endless. Automation was originally intended to replace repetitive and tedious tasks in mass industry and, more generally, to assist with demanding daily activities such as laundry. While this technology arguably makes our lives easier, it simultaneously discourages us from using our hands and, as a result, diminishes our cognitive engagement.

We once relied on our brains and practised our skills for manual tasks when handling tools. Over the past 2.6 million years, we have co-evolved with these tools. The kind of creativity required to mend and make things involves significant cognitive effort, resulting in a highly rewarding sense of accomplishment and joy (Crawford 2009). As we become increasingly alienated from our own actions, we do not simply lose the skills involved in making; we also lose the knowledge of how things are made, how they function, how they can be repaired and, ultimately, how to replace them when they are broken. Human hands once held the knowledge and understanding of the world they helped to create (Sennett 1998). As this connection is eroded, we lose our ability to distinguish between concepts of value and waste. How can we evaluate or classify something as waste if we do not fully understand its value? The consequences of this loss of knowledge are profound. As the knowledge of making vanishes, we lose our ability to make informed judgements based on an understanding of quality, value, ideals and aspirations. Without an understanding of the labour involved in making things – the materials, time and energy consumed in production, distribution and exploitation – our relationship to material culture becomes obsolescent, vague and ultimately precarious.

As technology is closely tied to capital ownership, its continued existence depends on constant reinvestment. This dynamic propels technological development independently of genuine human needs or purposes. Ultimately, technology generates its own obsolescence to perpetuate its relevance. Beyond this familiar cycle, what is particularly noteworthy is the way in which technology persistently seeks to eliminate human skills related to making, repairing or otherwise engaging our hands. Numerous examples illustrate this trend, but perhaps the most evident are digital tools, which have progressively removed the possibility of repair, part exchange or upgrade over time.

This takes me back to the 1980s in former Yugoslavia, to a magazine called *Galaksija* (*Galaxy*). In a special issue in 1983, *Galaksija* published instructions on how to build a personal computer using standard off-the-shelf parts, enlightening and educating computer enthusiasts. How did we get from there to here? The age of tool companionship has been replaced by the age of tool dictatorship.

Tools, archetypically, have been companions to the hand, designed as extensions of our skills. However, the 'new tools' – such as personal computers, printers and phones – have become adversaries of the hand, designed in a way that prevents repair or upgrade, imposing a determined lifecycle.

Yugoslavia, with its cultural tradition of self-taught expertise, experienced a surge in its computing industry during the 1960s and 1970s, driven by market demands and rising living standards following the split with Cominform in 1948. Despite this, consumer computers available at that time were prohibitively expensive for personal use. In the early 1980s, engineer and digital electronics enthusiast Voja Antonić devised a solution: a DIY computer utilising affordable CPUs readily available in Yugoslavian electronic shops. Rather than seeking profit, Antonić chose to distribute his computer design, named the 'People's Computer' for free, through the special issue of *Galaksija*, which was titled 'Računari u vašoj kući' ('Computers in Your Home'). This issue not only provided diagrams but also comprehensive assembly instructions, store locations for purchasing parts, mail-order addresses for DIY kits and legal channels for ordering accessory parts from abroad (Ebi, 2020).

The enthusiastic response from readers led to the creation of numerous DIY personal computers, shaped by sci-fi and New Wave subcultures. Despite the prevalent anti-copy protection measures of the time, Antonić deliberately chose to omit such protections, encouraging the free sharing of software through tape copying.

The attitudes reflected by these two examples (one of which – the option of freely sharing a DIY computer – is no longer available) could not be more different. One, originating from the 'free world' of democratic values, represents an authoritarian tool that limits and controls its use. The other, developed in a communist society, functioned as a tool for the people – a companion that it was free to share and adapt.

Subsequently, these ideologically divergent political attitudes have influenced tools, technology and the way we share knowledge. The concept of a shared tool was meant to foster individual knowledge and capability. In contrast, contemporary computing tools are designed to limit and

prevent adaptation or the sharing of software – tools on which we have become entirely dependent – resulting in a diminished understanding of how these tools actually function. Although this discussion might appear to have strayed off topic, it is, in fact, highly relevant to this research – particularly in relation to tooling and the possibility of reclaiming autonomous control of our tools. The debate about technological control and its influence on tools is especially pertinent when considering the idea of 'dress as a tool' and how such control shapes our relationship with this idea.

I can take the argument further by mentioning that, in 1977, Langdon Winner formulated the hypothesis of autonomous technology, arguing that, while humans are not in control of technology, they also cannot maintain autonomy in the face of technological control. In this well-argued and persuasive theory, Winner (1977, 15) explores 'technological determinism' – a term originally coined by Thorstein Veblen – as a force that shapes social outcomes through the momentum of technological change. He also discusses technological politics, defining it as a 'collection of technology-related conditions that tend to transform and overwhelm conventional political structures and practices' (Winner 1977, 16).

According to Winner, technology has become a dominant force shaping all aspects of modern thought and activity. He further contends that the approach of seeking technological solutions is applied ubiquitously, even to issues that are neither technological nor scientific in nature. Winner concludes that the critical factor is not the technology itself but rather the social or economic system within which it operates (Winner 1977).

The political and social implications of technology have been widely studied, and one of its most prominent contemporary critics is Evgeny Morozov. In his book *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2014), Morozov argues against digital solutionism – an attitude and belief that there is a digital fix for everything, including our social and political problems – and examines how dependent we have become on digital tools. In Heidegger's view, modern technology is not simply a collection of tools but represents a way of understanding and interacting with the world – a 'mode of revealing'. As a result, technological, or calculative, thinking has become the leading form of thought (Harman 2002; Heidegger and Lovitt 2013).

Today, major concerns regarding the impact of technology on society centre on the loss of human autonomy and the loss of mastery – particularly the diminishing role of emotion in work (Sennett 1998). Initially, during the earlier stages of this research, I had no intention of framing this discourse as a dichotomy between technology and craftsmanship, nor did I aim to advocate

handmade versus technological approaches. At no point did I consider analysing or expressing preferences for different mediums, as, in my practice, I simply use whichever medium best serves to convey the idea.

These reflections stemmed from the practical challenges I encountered during my research. One major issue is that cutting-edge technology – potentially capable of supporting creative practice – remains largely inaccessible, reserved for those with privilege and resources. Globally, these social and technological divides are even more pronounced. This situation led me to question how the future of work (and, by extension, workwear) is shaped by technology, and why such dynamics persist. As dress frequently overlaps with design discourse, I also began to consider how technological determinism influences and shapes the field of design itself.

Technology features prominently in my research because most discussions about the future of work place technological innovation and AI are at the centre of debate. However, I advocate a more imaginative approach, one that foregrounds happiness and well-being over technological determinism and the relentless pursuit of economic growth. Within the vast literature on the future of work, technology is often highlighted as the defining factor, overshadowing other vital considerations. While much of the conversation revolves around anxieties about machines replacing human labour, very few ask why technology might, in a sense, 'fear' our uniquely human capacities – especially those of our hands.

Ultimately, the challenges we face are human, not technological. Despite technology providing the means to feed, clothe and shelter entire populations, we still confront a profound paradox: 2.37 billion people are starving, while a similar number suffer from obesity (Steel 2020). Perhaps it is time to reconsider how we relate to one another, to non-human life, and to technology itself – exploring how it might be used more empathetically. What would it mean to form companionship with technology? How might we shift from a model of techno-driven consumerism towards one based on cultivation, care and meaningful connection?

This call to reimagine our relationships with humans, non-humans and the role of technology echoes the Constructivist vision of tools as comrades. The ongoing struggle between capital-driven technology and the skill of the human hand is hardly new: it dates back to the Luddites and the Industrial Revolution. Even the Constructivists, who saw technology as an ally, faced challenges – none of their designs entered mass production, instead remaining theatrical prototypes or artworks.

When László Moholy-Nagy was preparing to give a speech at a 1946 conference on industrial design as a new profession – organised by New York's Museum of Modern Art in association with the Society of Industrial Designers – he wanted to make a statement about the place of art education. He said:

> Somehow I have to make it clear that if there is such a relationship as to guidance and being guided, it is the industry that follows vision, and not the vision that follows the industry. (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 241)

Even though he saw technology as part of future design, the reality was different. Technological powers were not prepared to follow the vision of designers and artists; instead, they expected the opposite. Moholy-Nagy opposed market surveys and planned obsolescence, and he criticised 'appearance' design that was divorced from the real value of a product. And this was 1946.
In Chapter Three, I discussed Italian Radical Design of the 1960s and 1970s, and how its practitioners rejected both technology and mainstream design in response to industrial and capitalist domination. In the 1970s, designers, artists and architects similarly resisted techno-dominant capitalism, sometimes even abandoning their professional status and conventional practice to return to more basic tools and methods.

In 1974, Italian designer Enzo Mari published *Proposta per un'autoprogettazione* (*Proposal for a Self-Design*), an instruction manual for a DIY collection of furniture that could be assembled from the most basic materials using just a hammer and nails (Mari 2014). This was a radical gesture from an established designer who was highly respected within the Italian furniture industry. The construction method was based on an archetypal and very simple technique commonly used by joiners to make their own workbenches. Mari made the manual available by mail order for the cost of postage alone. It was not simply a comment on the democratisation of design; it also offered a provocative alternative to the capitalist model of mass consumption. This approach closely resembles Archizoom's *Dressing is easy*, which similarly proposed accessible, do-it-yourself solutions as a form of resistance to consumer culture.

Mari's work remains relevant today in many ways but, for me, it demonstrates the possibility of a different form of dress practice. Rather than a product, the designer produces a manual that empowers the individual. The implication is that design can function not only as a set of aesthetic choices, but as a set of open instructions or frameworks. This shifts the designer's role from sole creator to facilitator, encouraging users to become active participants in the process.

> ‘Utopia is not a place’, says Mari, but an ‘ethical handrail’ to hold on to ‘in the labyrinth of contradictions and compromises of this world’. ‘By making a chair’ and using the ‘right nail’, for example, ‘you can communicate a set of values’ to be realised in daily life, such as responsibility, awareness, care, agency and manual skill. (Mari 2020, 37)

His work was rediscovered by the design community not only as an early example of open-source design, but also for its rough, handmade aesthetic. This reflects designers’ search for a voice outside established channels and a renewed appreciation for the more human side of design. *Autoprogettazione* encapsulates the ongoing struggle of artisans, craftspeople and designers to resist the monopoly and constraints of technology. Mari sought to redefine the designer’s role as an autonomous figure, communicating values rather than merely serving or relying on industry. This stands as a significant example of design attitude and resistance – not only against technological monopoly, but also as a way of reimagining the designer’s role. Such questions are particularly relevant in today’s age of technological autocracy, which may help explain the renewed interest in Enzo Mari. It also demonstrates how the future can be shaped using the most basic tools and materials – a hammer, nails and simple planks of wood. In my own search for autonomous tools and methods, I have likewise turned to primal materials and the gesture of hand-making. In the following subchapter, I will reflect on hand-making through the use of clay and modelling wax.

Thinking with clay

Between 2020 and 2022 I made a series of glove-tools**,** best described as three-dimensional sketches created from wax and clay. I wanted to produce something tangible – an object I could hold and feel – rather than relying on computer visuals or two-dimensional sketches. These speculative, tactile objects allowed me to explore ideas in a direct, physical way, using materials that respond immediately to the hand. This led me to use clay and wax, both organic, hand-mouldable materials, which I found to be effective thinking tools (Figure 71 and Figure 72).

Clay is a rather unconventional choice of material in my research context (exploring wearables), but my move into working with clay and wax developed organically, as I have never enjoyed using synthetic materials. When I use natural materials, the artwork acts as an extension of nature, possessing the capacity to disappear and degrade back into the earth. The hand imprints the gesture in clay, allowing it to lose its connection to a specific moment in time. Materials such as clay and wax offer much better contact with the hand; they feel more familiar and immediate.

The gesture, the imprint in clay or wax, becomes an extension of the hand itself. When we look at the work, it is impossible to tell when it was made, as it bears no reference to technology or history.

My interest in clay has more to do with the idea of a material that can be a tool to think with rather than any ambition to produce a utilitarian object. In this aspect, I found resonances in the use of clay by other artists.

In 1991, Gabriel Orozco took a picture of his hands making an imprint in clay in the shape of a heart. Orozco uses his hands as a mould, and the clay imprint itself becomes a gesture. While repeating this movement, he replicates the action, performing like an organic machine. The poetics of the piece arise from the modesty of the material and the simplicity of the gesture.

Figure 69. Gabriel Orozco, *My Hands are my Heart*, 1991. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Orozco explains that it is crucial for him to approach this process as if the body itself operates like a machine, with the hands serving as tools (Figure 69). Even when making simple imprints with his hands, he views the repetitive, almost mechanical movement as central to the practice.

What matters most is not the production of a single object, but the embodied experience of the body-machine continuously engaging with the material.[43]

Orozco works with clay sourced from a brick factory – the same material that Mexican workers use to produce rectangular building bricks. He draws inspiration from observing these brick-makers as they shape bricks by hand, a process of intense manual labour that concludes with the workers passing the bricks to one another in a synchronised, almost choreographed sequence. For Orozco, his practice involves a dynamic interplay between the geometric and the organic: the geometric is embodied by elements such as the bricks or spheres, while the organic aspect is represented through his own hands and body (Orozco 2003).

Orozco's gesture in clay recalls the work of Giuseppe Penone, particularly his hand and body imprints from the 1970s. Penone referred to these bodily imprints in clay as 'fossilised gestures' (Penone 2009). In these works, the simple act of grasping clay preserves the fleeting movement of the hand, capturing the encounter between body and material.

In a similar vein, in 1970 Cildo Meireles created *Espelho Cego (Blind Mirror)* to address the multi-sensory perception of clay (Figure 70). He filled a white frame with a clay-like, grey mastic gum to prevent it from drying out. By touching and pressing the gum in the blind mirror, Meireles explores the perception of one's image through touch. Rather than simply looking at a reflection, the viewer is invited to shape the clay with their own imprint. In this way, the mirror becomes a phenomenological tool, shifting the focus from sight to the embodied experience of touch.

[43] Art21, 'Gabriel Orozco: Thinking with Clay' ART21, accessed 16 June 2022

Figure 70. Cildo Meireles, *Espelho Cego (Blind Mirror*), 1970. Wood, rubber and reversed metal in text relief, 48.9 x 35.9 x 18.1 cm. Photograph by Pat Kilgore.

In my own practice, the process of hand-shaping small, wearable tools became my primary research method. I intended to use these sketches, or transitional objects, as a step towards translating these gestures into full-sized wearables with the help of technology. My plan was to 3D scan and enlarge them, then 3D print them using a flexible rubber material. These 3D-printed glove-tools could then be worn, embodied and tested in real situations – functioning much like performative artefacts or even diegetic prototypes, as described by critical and speculative designers.[44]

However, I was concerned that the work would be compromised and confined to a technologically aided model. It risked becoming an exercise in meeting expectations rather than an authentic expression of inquiry. Wanting to maintain my creative autonomy, I decided to step back and reconsider my method to preserve the integrity of the experimental process. It seemed essential to protect my ability to explore freely, without feeling pressured to conform to predefined standards. I also missed the sensory and creative dimensions of working directly with materials. For me, clay was the starting point for discovering the language of the work and defining its aesthetic. Instead of serving as a blueprint for 3D printing, as I had initially intended, the small clay and wax models became the work itself. The work now embodies the process – unfinished, ambivalent and difficult to categorise.

[44] The term 'speculative design' was coined by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in their work at the Royal College of Art in the early 2000s and was formalised in their 2013 book *Speculative Everything*. Speculative design was inspired by the attitude and position of Italian Radical Design.

In the early stages of my research, I assumed it would rely mainly on interviews, given their prominence as a research method. I treated interviews as necessary to test and validate my findings. In retrospect, this assumption was naive. I initially imagined that conversations about the objects would naturally generate reflection and feed back into the research process, but I soon recognised the limitations of this approach in my particular context.

When I interviewed professionals from different backgrounds, I found that as soon as I showed them an object with an obvious function – something that appeared to be a designed or speculative tool – they immediately focused on evaluating how it might work in practice. It was almost impossible to move the discussion away from the object's practicality and towards the underlying concepts or arguments, which I had hoped to explore. My intention was to use these objects as prompts for conversations about the future of work and workwear, encouraging them to imagine a utopian future. However, when I showed more abstract works in clay or wax, the conversation flowed much more freely around the underlying ideas, rather than becoming fixated on questions of 'purpose'.

For me, art practice proved to be an effective medium for exploring concepts related to utopian dress. These clay and wax propositions for the glove-tools were abstract and organic, almost like impressions of thoughts in material, left unedited. The less rigid and pre-planned my approach to making them, the closer I felt to finding answers. The predictability of the tool was not helpful; the abstraction of the form was. I think this is where art and design diverge, or perhaps where a different kind of design emerges.

Wax softens with the warmth of the hands, then hardens, retaining a strange duality as its texture shifts – it is both fluid and solid. The texture is matte and powdery, yet also translucent. The fluidity of wax gives a sense that the work is in a continuous process, without a fixed end. It keeps morphing, then pauses, waiting for the thinking process to reach a point of resolution. It was not simply a linear process – from start to finish – but rather a process of transformation. Shaping small glove-tools became an ongoing activity, with archival boxes serving as containers to organise and protect them. Over time, these boxes became integral to the work itself. They were initially included for practical reasons – to protect and store the pieces, and to offer a way for others to handle the work.

Figure 71. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* modelling wax and A4 archive box, 2018. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

These toolboxes functioned as a portable gallery that I could carry in my bag, ready to be opened to spark conversations. They embodied non-linear narratives and were intended to be handled, touched, performed, reassembled and reconfigured**.** The emphasis was not on the aesthetic value of their contents, but on their conceptual potential. They were never meant to be precious; instead, they were designed to provoke thought, humour, interaction and reflection, making the art accessible, playful and participatory. The boxes were also practical, allowing me to organise and reconfigure the objects they contained.

The box contained a narrative of the research, examining the concept of wearable tools and the idea of a 'toolbox'. As I began to organise and classify these tools, they started to resemble archaeological finds – handmade objects categorised and stored. This was not my original intention; rather, it emerged from a search for a system, a toolbox with a different purpose. Interactivity and tangibility encouraged an ongoing process of reinterpretation, allowing me continuously to investigate and rethink the meaning of the work. The connection to everyday life introduced new dimensions to the experience.

Figure 72. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)*, wax, pins, copper nail and A4 archive box, 2020. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 73. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* clay and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 74. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* modelling wax and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 75. *Collective gloves*, modelling wax, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 76. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)*, modelling wax and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 77. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)*, clay and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 78. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* clay and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 79. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools)*, clay, modelling wax, beeswax, pins and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 80. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* red clay and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 81. *Worktopias (Glove-Tools),* white clay and A4 archive box, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 82. Selection of archive boxes containing glove-tools, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 83. Selection of archive boxes containing glove-tools, 2020-2022. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Wearable monuments

Figure 84. *Wearable monuments*, Jesmonite casts and black pigments, 2018. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

The life-sized glove-tool casts presented here are intended not as sculptures or artefacts, but as propositions, drawing on Clark's idea of object propositions. Although they are produced using traditional casting methods, these works are designed to be handled, tried on or activated by participants, rather than simply viewed as conventional sculptures (Figure 84).

Initially, I anticipated being able to test flexible materials such as rubber to achieve a sense of softness and to experiment with various other materials. However, after completing the first moulds and Jesmonite casts by the end of 2018, I took time off from my studies for maternity leave. When I was due to return, the workshops closed due to the pandemic, meaning I could no longer access the casting facilities at the university. This situation prompted me to explore alternative methods of experimentation that did not require specialised equipment or access to workshops.

Figure 85. *Wearable monuments*, Jesmonite casts and black pigments, 2018. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Considering how much time is required to cast large moulds, this was a relatively short-lived experiment, lasting only three months. The glove casts pictured here are made of Jesmonite, a casting material composed of gypsum and acrylic resin (Figure 85 and Figure 87). Visually, it resembles concrete or plaster, but it makes the pieces rigid and heavy, which makes them difficult to animate.

The association with monuments emerged soon after I began making the first clay gloves, likely due to the weight and appearance of the material itself. It was an intriguing, and perhaps somewhat controversial, idea – could monuments be wearable?

In Yugoslavia, where I grew up, *spomeniks* ('monuments') were futuristic structures that combined abstract sculpture with architecture. These forms represented a synthesis of sculpture, architecture and public space, and could be accessed and used as performance spaces or meeting points. My own mental associations with monuments always return to these *spomeniks*, rather than to the more conventional type depicting public figures. Such associations evoke ideas of futurism, utopia and abstraction.

At the time I was making the casts, I wanted to give the gloves the appearance of a monument, albeit on a smaller scale. My initial idea was to merge the hand and a tool into a wearable object – an extension of the body.

Although the origins of the fist as a symbol or gesture are unclear, it has been used in many contexts throughout history as an emblem of solidarity and social struggle. The glove fists were, in some ways, satirical, sci-fi probes, imagined as being worn on Mars by fictional space construction workers. An acquaintance once remarked that the idea was interesting because of its 'future thinking in retrospect', though this was never my intention. A monument does not necessarily have to be historical. Monuments are typically understood as structures built to commemorate specific people or events from the past, with Yugoslavian monuments being a notable exception. But is it possible to create monuments that look forward – to commemorate and inspire the future? Could monuments serve as signposts towards utopia, rather than simply as memorials to history?

Yugoslavian monuments, mainly built in the 1960s and 1970s, were symbols of antifascist national liberation battles during the Second World War, erected at the sites where these battles occurred. Their purpose was to commemorate the partisans and victims of the war, while promoting the values of brotherhood and unity. The most accomplished sculptors and architects were commissioned to design these memorials, resulting in a unique hybrid of art, architecture and public space. The *spomeniks* were abstract and distinctive sculptural forms, unlike any other monuments built elsewhere in the world. Their significance lies in their utopian dimension and purpose. Visually, these structures bore no resemblance to anything previously seen, with no clear links to either local or global contexts – almost as if they were architecture and art from the future (Stierli and Kulić 2018).

Since the 1950s, abstract art had been the dominant form in Yugoslavia. Rather than imposing state-approved stylistic regulations for public art, the authorities embraced contemporary tendencies and adapted them to suit their needs (Piskur 2016). The result was a style that could loosely be described as 'socialist modernism', characterised by abstract forms, strong symbolism, bold designs and an otherworldly quality. In this way, the political and diplomatic climate influenced the aesthetic language. After the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, most of the *spomeniks* were either destroyed or neglected due to their association with the communist regime.

In his video trilogy *Scene for a New Heritage* (2004–6), visual artist David Maljković revisits the memorial at Petrova Gora, placing it in a futuristic context. He questions what happens to an art form when the ideology that inspired it dissipates, and how we might re-engage with its abstraction (Maljković and Aikens 2012). The work's temporal context is particularly striking: a historical monument that once symbolised a particular ideology is projected into the future. By conflating past and future, Maljković speculates on the meanings these monuments might hold in a different context and time. The question that arose was whether time itself becomes irrelevant when we think about the future.

This does not mean that time is negated or has stopped (as utopian time is often framed), but, as in the work of Maljković, time flows and circulates around the past and future, conflating and merging them. Time as a reference to history and progress is less compelling, particularly in relation to the future of work and dress. While the conflation of time is not an unusual approach in the context of art, it is controversial and rare in discussions about the future of work or dress. How can we think about dress without referring to time, history or progress?

It is not commonly recognised that mixing history with the future can make future scenarios more persuasive. I am reminded of numerous sci-fi films that avoid familiar visual elements, depicting the future as if it begins from nothing. This approach often elevates technology as the primary tool for exploring speculative futures and worldbuilding.

In visual art, time is treated as an abstract and subjective concept, shaped by individual experience rather than external markers. Artists often use time as a medium to explore themes or ideas, yet time itself is rarely the central factor that defines the relevance or contemporaneity of their work. Art aspires to transcend specific moments, seeking instead a sense of timelessness that resonates across eras.

Design, on the other hand, is deeply intertwined with the flow of time. It operates within a continuously changing context and demands constant validation to remain relevant. Designers often ground their work in modernity by referring to trends, technological advances or cultural shifts tied to particular points in time.

These different approaches to temporality make art practice feel closer to utopia. Art creates space for the expansion of time, enabling the exploration of ideals without the constraints of temporal relevance. In contrast, design's focus on defining modernity through time can limit its ability to engage with utopian thinking, as it remains anchored to the present and the immediate future.

Wearable monuments – life-sized casts of glove-tools – led me to see that utopian time is fluid and non-linear, and that referencing the future does not require technology. In fact, I wanted utopian dress and wearables to move away from the notion of linear, calculative time altogether.

Figure 86. *Wearable monuments,* Jesmonite casts, 2018. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Figure 87. *Wearable monuments*, Jesmonite casts, 2018. Photograph by Eva Herzog.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my practice-based research, I explored the idea of dress as a tool – not only as a functional object but also as a medium for speculation, social engagement and utopian thinking. In the early stages, I imagined participants wearing speculative glove-tools as I interviewed them, using them as prompts to reflect on the future of work and workwear. These glove-tools were conceived to help imagine utopian dress scenarios. Through visual arts methods – including collage and sculpture – I examined how wearables might propose alternative futures for work and collective life.

I referred to these speculations about the future of work and workwear as 'worktopias'. The notion of worktopias – hybrid, imaginative professions – was explored through both collage and the hands-on making of glove-tool objects.

These early experiments marked a methodological shift in my research, moving away from technologically determined forms towards a more embodied, material-led enquiry. I began by attempting to enlarge handmade glove-tools, shaped in wax and clay with a deliberately rough

texture, using 3D scanners and printers. However, the results from these 3D printing tests were disappointing, prompting me to return to the original, hand-shaped objects. Although this phase did not go as planned, it became a crucial learning curve, revealing that exploring utopian dress required autonomous methods not limited by technology, either aesthetically or materially.

Technology, I realised, erased the phenomenological knowledge embodied in these objects. I wondered why I chose such primal, hand-shaped techniques when imagining a utopian future, instead of using technologically advanced tools, which are often central to utopian narratives. The abstraction of the forms proved crucial: familiar elements, such as scissors or brushes, actually limited imagination during interviews, while abstract forms allowed for new ways of thinking about dress and its function. By removing these anchors, I aimed to create a relationship with dress that was unburdened by prior knowledge or preconceived ideas.

Through this process, I embraced the concept of the 'intelligent hand': manual skill elevated to an interdisciplinary practice, where hand and tool coexist in creative partnership. I came to understand that my research needed to move into a space free from references to culture, history or time. To achieve this, I stripped away any connection to familiar function, making functionality difficult to imagine.

Wearable monuments – life-sized casts of glove-tools – led me to see that utopian time is fluid and non-linear, and that referencing the future does not require technology. In fact, I wanted utopian dress and wearables to move away from the notion of linear, calculative time altogether.

It was also during this period that I shifted from interviews to participation. Phenomenology offered a more effective way of understanding the potential of utopian dress practice than traditional conversation. This idea forms the foundation for my project *Dresstopia*, which I will elaborate on in the following chapter – a vision of dress as a speculative, participatory and transformative tool for exploring new social and creative possibilities.

CHAPTER SIX: *DRESSTOPIA* – PRACTICE RESEARCH

Introduction

Dresstopia is the title of my practice-based study, which uses participative research to investigate the embodied and sensory aspects of utopian dress. The study focuses on understanding the meanings participants assign to their embodied experiences while they are interacting with works of art.

Participation serves as a primary method of inquiry, complemented by observation and reflection, to explore how individuals interact with designed felt canvases with incisions, made for the purpose of this study. In *Dresstopia*, participants engage with the canvases, with the intention of making them wearable. The process is documented on film, capturing how participants handle and manipulate the artworks during their engagement.

Dresstopia consists of seven flat, square felt canvases, each featuring different simple linear incisions (Figure 88Figure 88 and Figure 91). Participants were invited to enter them physically by inserting their head, arms, torso and legs through the cuts. This act of 'entering' and embodying the canvases facilitated a transformation from two-dimensional forms into three-dimensional, sculptural shapes. The participants' movements and interactions animated the canvases, creating a dialogic process between the artwork and its wearer.

The project sought to document adult participants' curiosity and the questions that arose as they attempted to engage with and wear the flat canvases. In addition, three 12-year-old children were observed interacting with the artworks, playfully exploring them while sharing associations and thoughts that emerged during the process. The perspectives of the children proved particularly valuable, providing insight into the canvases as a forward-looking proposition, offering a glimpse into future-oriented interpretations of the work.

The outcome of this study is an artwork comprising seven canvases and a 23-minute edited film that documents and synthesises participants' interactions, questions and conversations. The film was made with the help of camera director and editor N. K.; the brief was simply to use a static camera positioned in front of the background and capture the process.

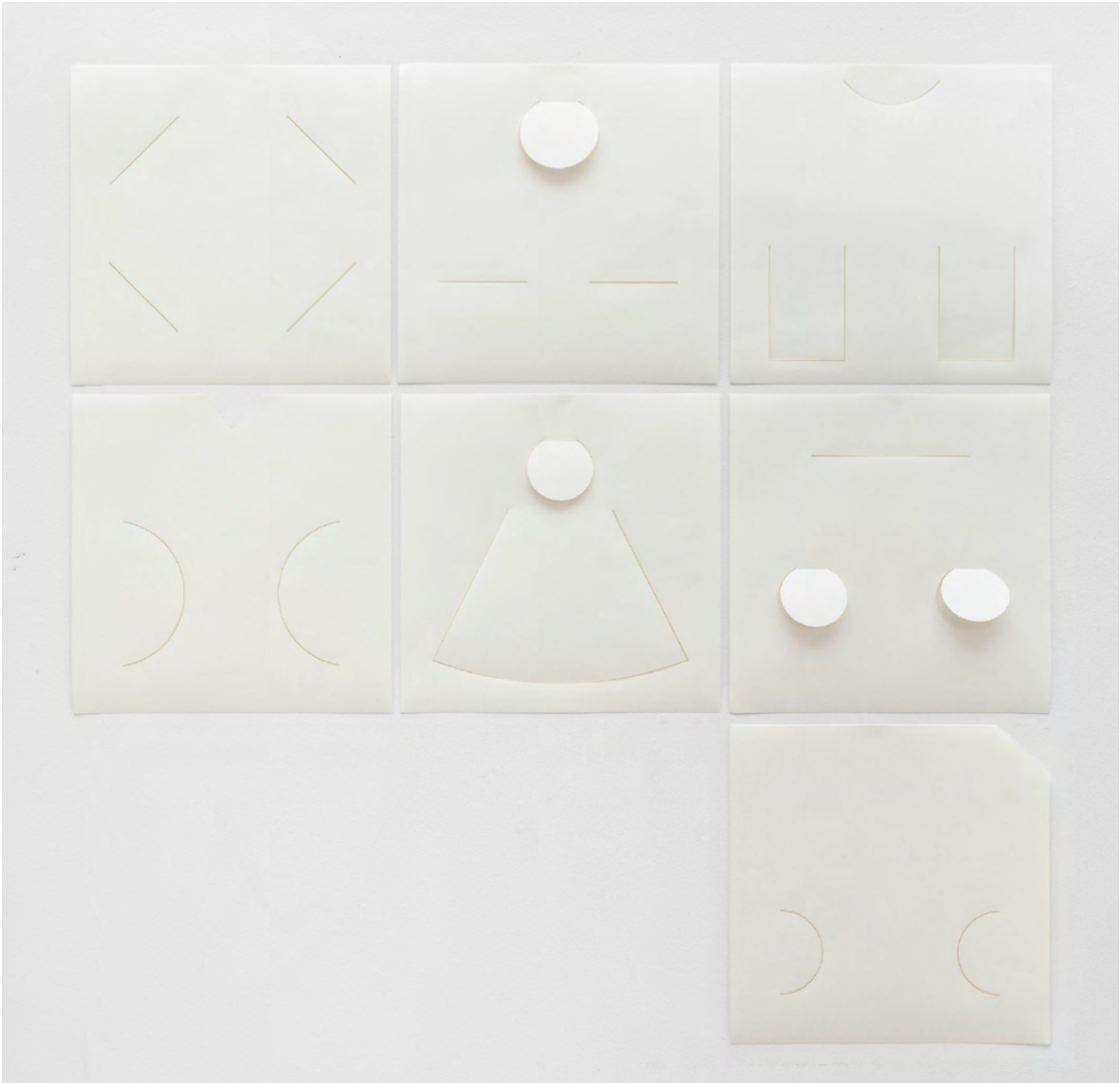

Figure 88. *Dresstopia* paper model, 30 x 30 cm

Wearing the square

The inherent three-dimensionality of clothing has always intrigued me, prompting an exploration of how to challenge or even reverse it by transforming three-dimensional forms back into flat shapes.

The design process for clothing typically begins with a flat sketch or drawing, which is then translated into a pattern and transferred on to flat fabric. In the final stage, through stitching and assembly, the fabric pieces are shaped into a three-dimensional form to accommodate the body.

My intuitive approach seems to focus on returning to flatness – the point where the concept and idea originate – creating a deliberate dialogue between the initial flat design and its eventual three-dimensional form.

In my early practice (1998-2000), I experimented with origami-inspired patterns that could fold flat while retaining geometric forms when worn on the body. However, this fascination with flatness extended beyond the body to encompass the 'art form' more broadly. An example is my public installation of 107 large origami penguins, positioned within the ruins of a 15th-century public bathhouse in the old town of Sarajevo (Figure 89). In another project, I suspended black-and-white 'flags' on flagpoles, exploring the three-dimensional effects created as these flat, graphic forms moved with the wind (Figure 90). Only later I recognised a potential connection between these early projects and my current investigations into flatness and dimensionality in body and wearables. These black-and-white planes and origami forms later made me think of Lygia Clark's work with planes and her *Bichos* series, even though I was not familiar with her work at the time.

Figure 89. *Meeting Point*, 107 origami penguins, card, 50 x 30 x 20 cm, 1997. Sarajevo.

Figure 90. *Flags*, plain wooden boards, 120 cm x 100 cm x 5 mm, 1998. Sarajevo.

The concept of wearing flat canvases posed the ultimate challenge. I wanted to design linear patterns that would not only retain a flat form but also offer the possibility of being worn. Each cut was carefully designed with a clear vision of how the wearer would interact with it. For instance, in one design, the arms would slip through top slots while the legs would pass through a lower slot. In another, the legs would fit into a 'skirt' opening, with the head going through a slot at the top.

This same flatness is evident in the works of artists discussed in Chapter Three, such as Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, and in *Dressing is easy* by Archizoom. Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé*,

constructed from layers of flat fabric sheets, also evokes this idea, creating a shape that resembles human billboards. Their interest in ‘body-planes’ is probably what initially drew me to explore these artists in greater depth as case studies and to learn more about their methodologies.

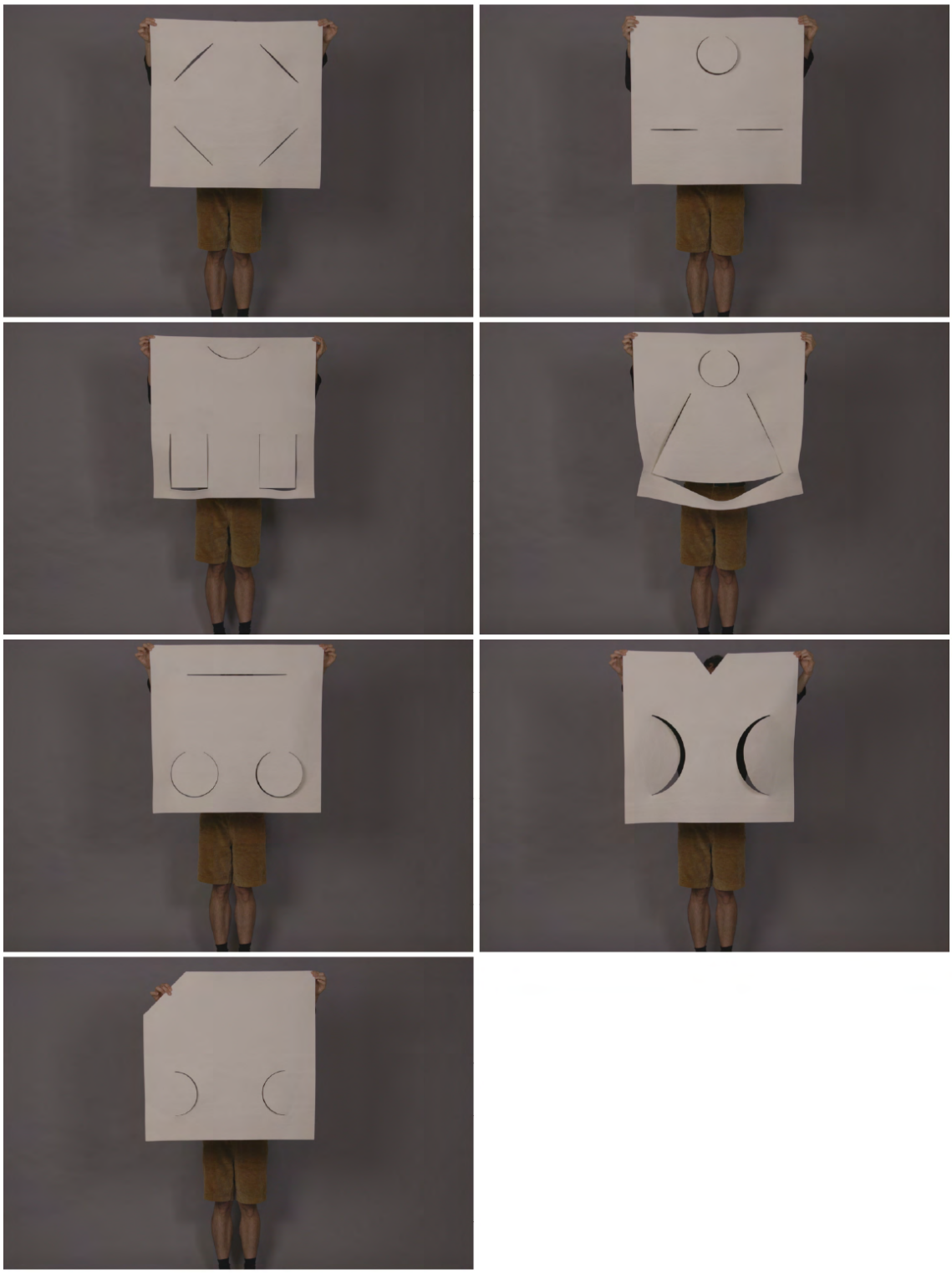

Figure 91. *Dresstopia* canvases, showing seven different patterns, 2024. Wool felt, 90 x 90 cm.

For the canvases, I used quality, natural-coloured wool felt, 3mm thick. I deliberately chose a fabric that would not draw attention to its texture, aiming for a neutral, almost architectural quality – like a flat sheet of building material. The fabric needed to be both stiff and smooth, so I selected a flat-pressed material that could maintain its rigidity. Wool felt was ideal because it comes in various thicknesses and colours, and it can be cut cleanly without fraying or requiring hemming, which would have implied traditional sewing techniques. It was crucial that the piece did not refer to conventional clothes-making techniques. I prefer to use wool, as it is a natural material with a lower environmental impact. Beyond its ecological benefits, natural materials possess an inherent connection to the body; they feel more familiar to touch and smell. Both the material itself and the work produced from it can become, in a sense, an extension of the body. Given that this is a phenomenological study, the tactile engagement with the material was a significant consideration. For instance, while materials such as EVA foam or neoprene might produce a visually similar effect on film, their interaction with the body is entirely different. The material's qualities are significant on multiple levels – affecting sound, weight and, most importantly, the sense of familiarity.

While I could alter wool felt by ironing on a stiffener, synthetic materials do not tolerate high temperatures and are prone to melting. After numerous tests with different types of material, I found that only wool felt offered the right combination of weight, stiffness, sound and familiarity to meet the needs of this project. I designed the slit patterns for the canvases using Vectorworks, an architectural design software, to ensure precision. For the cuts, I collaborated with British Felt (CNC specialist in cutting textiles), as my earlier attempts using laser-cutting left burn marks on the felt.

The dimensions of the canvases were based on the average human height, ensuring they could be worn by both children and adults. I envisioned them as perfect squares, allowing them to either hang flat on the wall or lie on the floor like a stack of sheets. These pieces were conceived as planes that would interact with the body in restrictive ways, without disrupting too much their linear form.

When I began drawing the shapes of the slits, I did not start with a specific number in mind. I explored various patterns, but only seven shapes felt essential and natural – it could not be more or less. Any additional designs felt unnecessary or forced, so I ultimately settled on these seven distinct pieces.

Initially, I created smaller-scale versions out of paper and hung them on the wall in my studio as references (Figure 88). However, the real challenge arose when translating them to human scale and testing them on the body. Due to the high cost of material and transportation, I did not have the opportunity to test a single canvas before committing to the full-scale pieces. Once the canvases were finally cut, I realised they were softer than anticipated. To address this, I applied a stiffener while ironing at a high temperature to give the canvases more rigidity, aiming for a more sculptural, flatter effect. I wanted the pieces to feel restrictive, forcing the body to adapt to the canvas. The final *Dresstopia* pieces are flat canvases with sculptural properties – they are not paintings, sculptures, wearables, or costumes, but somehow embody elements of all these forms, while simultaneously being none of them.

Inviting participants

Involving participants in a research study is always challenging, particularly when no financial incentives are offered. I did not have rigid criteria for selecting participants, nor could I predict how individuals would respond to the material. The primary aim of the study was to observe and understand participants' natural reactions, rather than to direct or influence their behaviour. The main selection criteria were participants' willingness to engage, their interest in the project and their availability. That said, I considered it beneficial if participants felt comfortable or had some familiarity with unconventional projects in an unusual creative context. Additionally, since the study involved filming, I considered that not everyone might feel at ease in front of a camera. This was an important consideration when selecting participants. Furthermore, there was no opportunity for rehearsal, as I sought to capture spontaneous, unfiltered responses.

In addition to including adults with varying physical characteristics and backgrounds, one aspect of the study was clear from the outset: I wanted to involve child participants. This idea was integral to the project from its conception. Observing children, including my own, I noticed that they engage with their clothing in ways that differ significantly from my own approach. It seems that adults are less free in how they relate to their bodies and clothing, while children approach dress and objects with a playful, uninhibited attitude. Less bound by social expectations, children are typically less self-conscious and more willing to experiment creatively (Vygotsky and Cole 1978; Winnicott 1953). As Lev Vygotsky and other notable psychologists have argued, play allows children to explore identities and use clothing as a medium for imagination, rather than simply as a marker of conformity or power.

Some of the participants in the film were acquaintances, whom I approached early on as I knew they would be interested in an experimental project like this. Additionally, I recruited a few extra participants at the last minute as a contingency in case someone withdrew and to ensure I had sufficient material. Since I only had access to the studio and equipment for a single day, there was no opportunity to reshoot if anything went wrong.
I chose not to give participants specific instructions, and had no predetermined plan to follow. The goal was to observe how participants interacted with the canvases when given the freedom to wear them in their own way. Participants were only informed that they would try on the canvases and be filmed.

This approach presented challenges, particularly with adults, who tend to prefer having a clear plan and often ask many questions in situations that require intuitive responses. By contrast, children were far less concerned, but instead were curious and immediately agreed without hesitation or enquiries. Ethical considerations required that I follow a structured process, including sending consent forms and maintaining clear correspondence with participants.

I did not aim to select participants based on professional background, as I did not believe it would significantly influence the results. However, it is likely that the creative backgrounds of my participants – spanning visual art, dance, choreography, music, costume design and art history – shaped the interactions in some way. It would be interesting to explore how participants from more diverse professional contexts might respond in a public setting, as this could potentially yield different interactions and perspectives, providing insights into the relationship between body, clothing and social conditioning.

This aspect of the study is particularly intriguing: when the dress itself becomes a tool rather than the outcome. By allowing participants to engage with the canvases without instructions or expectations, the dress transcends its conventional role and becomes a medium for exploration. This ambivalence – where its use and purpose remain undefined – creates a space that fosters personal expression, unfiltered reactions and unique interactions between the body and the dress, making the process as revealing as the outcome.

Research ethics

Working with children in the final phase of my research brought ethical considerations to the forefront, particularly those outlined by the University of the Arts London (UAL). I followed UAL's

codes of conduct, which emphasise respect for participants, protection of personal data and the principle of beneficence – prioritising participants' well-being.

Before filming, I ensured all participants and their guardians fully understood the project and how their data would be used and protected. This was especially important when working with children, where additional risks are present. Information sheets and consent forms were adapted into clear, child-friendly language (see Appendix 6).

The main challenge was to provide enough information, as required by research ethics, without shaping or influencing how participants responded. I aimed to strike a balance by giving the necessary details while still preserving the spontaneity of their reactions. I also tried to present the information in a way that encouraged participation, rather than deterring potential participants. The process made me more aware of my responsibilities, both towards participants and in protecting myself as a researcher. Ultimately, my study received ethics clearance from the UAL Research Ethics Committee.

Reflections and observations

Each participant was assigned an individual time slot for filming, except for two children who were accompanied by their parents, and a couple who arrived together. However, people often do not follow the rules: the two children arrived at the filming with a friend, and they were accompanied by three parents, which resulted in a large group of six people.

This shifted the dynamics of the filming and enhanced the atmosphere in the room. Individual performances appeared less relaxed and exploratory compared to group interactions. Observing and reflecting on each other's performances added energy and a sense of fun to filming.

The children showed no interest in defining or naming the piece; none of them questioned what it was or its purpose. As anticipated, their approach was free, playful, humorous and exploratory. They engaged with the canvases without hesitation, immediately interacting and exchanging ideas. Before two 12-year-old children M. R. and L. S. began filming their segment, they asked, 'What are we supposed to do?'. This indicated that they had not read the information sheet and had forgotten our previous conversation. I simply replied, 'Whatever you want!', gesturing toward the canvases laid out on the floor. Their faces immediately lit up in

disbelief, as they seemed surprised by the lack of instructions or expectations. It was the freedom to act as they wished that excited them. In their group, they spontaneously shared canvases, inserting their arms or legs through each other's canvas slots, creating a lively and collaborative atmosphere filled with inspiration and enjoyment.

Before she stepped in front of the camera, L. S. transformed the canvas into a futuristic-looking 'costume', evoking imagery from a sci-fi movie (Figure 92).

Figure 92. L. S. wearing the canvas, resembling a futuristic costume. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

For one sequence L. S. and M. R. held hands the entire time they were interacting with the canvases. They whispered instructions to each other, such as, 'Now you move your leg through this slot, and I'll turn.' This added a layer of complexity to their movements, as they had to manoeuvre while holding hands (Figure 93). Despite the challenge, they giggled and appeared to enjoy the process. They ended the sequence by falling to the floor, where they remained lying, entangled in the canvases but still holding hands and laughing.

Figure 93. M. R. and L. S. holding hands while interacting with canvases. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

At one point, a third child, who had arrived at the set with their friend, wanted to join in. I asked them why they were whispering and reassured them that it was OK to talk if they wanted. Almost immediately, the energy shifted, and the atmosphere became much louder (Figure 94).

Figure 94. Three children interacting with canvases. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

Rather than acting individually, all three continued to hold hands and engage in the entangling game. It was interesting to observe how they helped each other during these manoeuvres – M. R. would move L. S.'s hair out of her face while E. W. pushed her head through the canvas slot. These small, but natural gestures between the children would be unusual to see among adults.

Adults would probably keep their distance, with spontaneous touching or holding of hands not likely to be considered appropriate.

Figure 95. Children exploring canvases while holding hands. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

The three children continued to push their arms and legs through the canvas slots until they became so tangled that they could not move. They seemed to find the process incredibly entertaining and kept suggesting new ideas to try. The energy they brought to the activity was infectious – they were loud, laughing and giggling throughout. At one point, all three fell to the floor in a fit of laughter, still tangled in the canvases (Figure 95). However, their entanglement became so intense that I became concerned for their safety and had to assist in freeing a leg that was stuck in the same slot as another child's neck. The children who performed together concluded their sequence by lying on the floor, though they never explicitly indicated that the performance had ended.

Their chaotic and spontaneous actions inspired one of the observing parents, E. R., voluntarily to join the experiment. She spent an additional 20 minutes engaging with the canvas in what appeared to be the most immersive approach (Figure 96Figure 96). E. R. seemed entirely absorbed in the experience and later reflected that she had been unaware of her appearance or the canvas's outward form during the interaction. Instead, she focused solely on the physical connection between her body and the canvas, finding it fascinating to perceive the experience from within the canvas rather than from the outside. She also added that she never wanted to stop.

Figure 96. E. R. immersed in canvases. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

M. S. introduced an interesting aspect by holding the canvas flat while revealing only glimpses of his hair, body parts, or toes (Figure 97 and Figure 98Figure 97). This participant had a very large head of hair, which seemed to play a significant role in his interaction with the canvas.

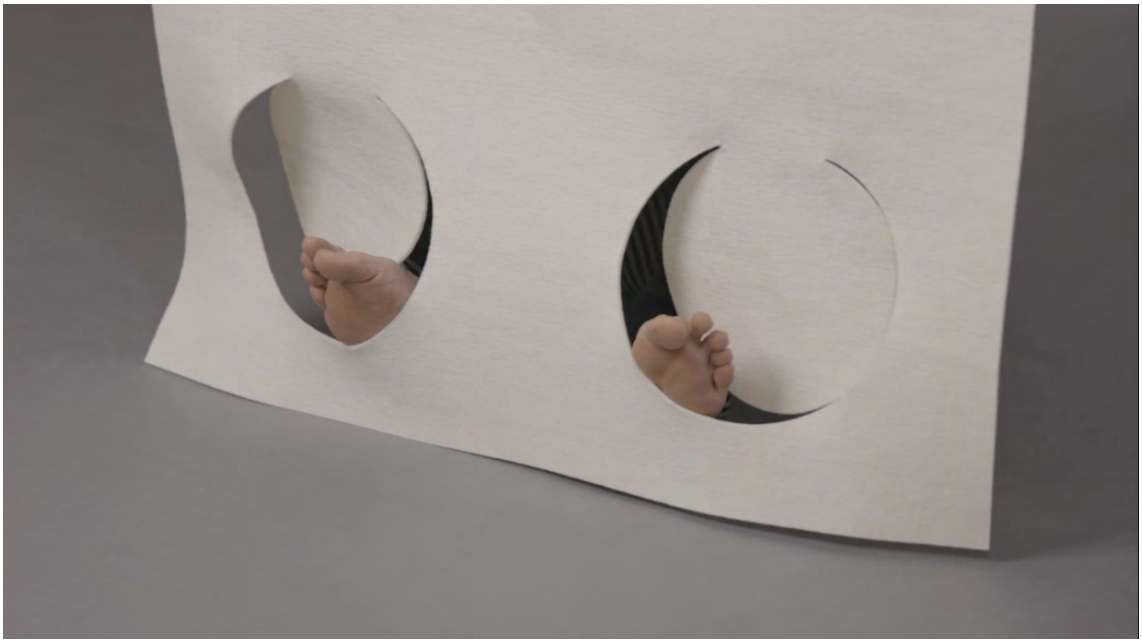

Figure 97. M. S.'s feet poking through holes in the canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

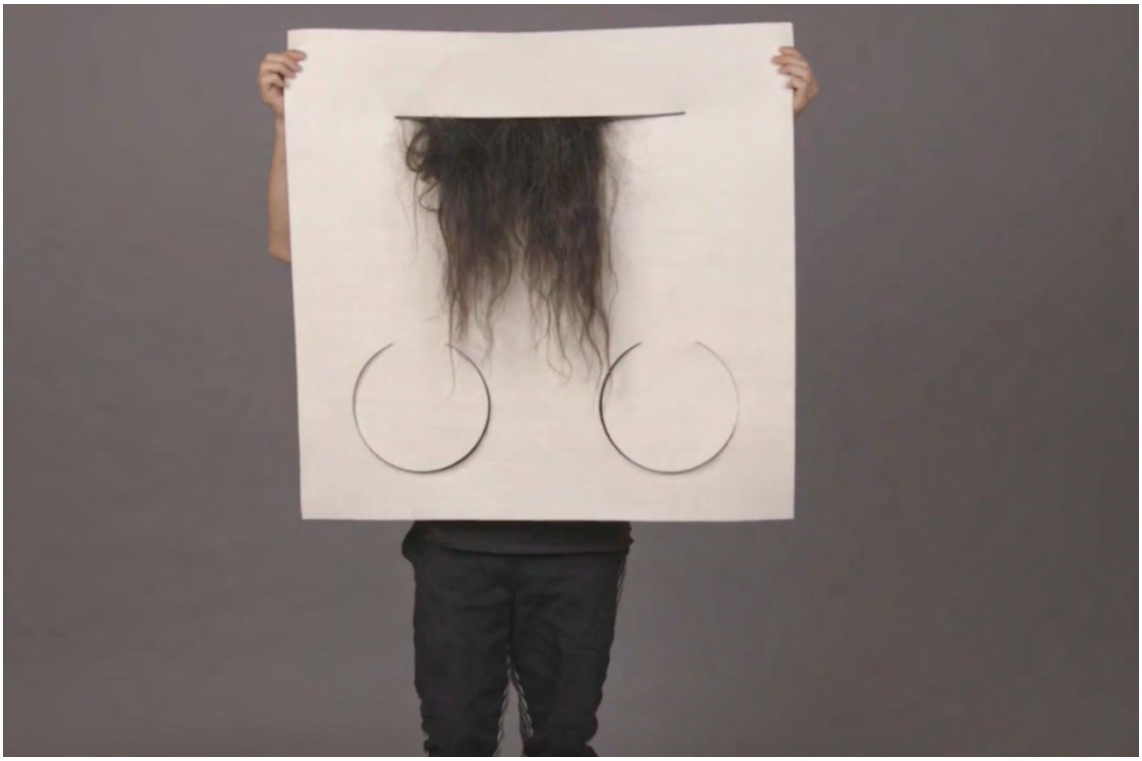

Figure 98. M. S.'s hair hung through the slot in the canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

Figure 99. M. S. wears a canvas on his head. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

Figure 100. M. S. rolling on the floor, trying to get in and out of the canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

Participant Y. L., who has a background in fashion, found it challenging to engage with the fabric without looking at the mirror. She explained that she could only see half of her body, which hindered her ability to fully interact with the piece. When I enquired further, she elaborated:

> My background is fashion, so I relate to it as [if] it's a fashion. I think about how [you] can make it wearable. It's interesting from that perspective, as it's not sure as clothes but you can still make things that feel like clothing.

Figure 101.Y. L. exploring different ways to wear the canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

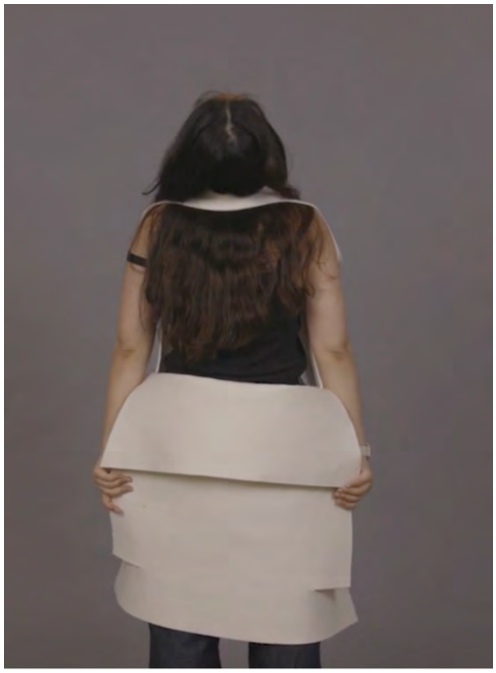

Figure 102. Y. L. making the canvas into something wearable. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

For a few minutes, I held a mirror for her, but then she decided to remove it and her interaction with the canvas became more immersive. She mentioned that she began to feel the material more, rather than focusing on her reflection (Figure 101 and Figure 102). This raises the question of how dressing might manifest itself if we were not reliant on its appearance. The image we see in the mirror is a static reflection that becomes the primary reference for how we perceive ourselves or our clothing. In the broader context of the countless images that we encounter and exchange daily, this single mirror image is shaped and informed by the visual world around us. We probably compare our reflection to the countless other images that circulate around us – whether through social media, advertising, or everyday interactions. What if dressing were to become a more immersive experience, less dependent on reflection and more focused on physical engagement with the materials?

B. F.'s performance was incredible and unexpected, resembling an improvisation that only an experienced actor could deliver. From the start, the 'performance' was flawless and difficult to edit in the final film; there was a sense of confidence and a captivating gaze at the camera – a rare gift.

Figure 103. B. F. staring from behind the canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

B. F. avoided manipulating the canvases with their hands, instead using their body to move them around. This led to many unique and humorous moments, such as peeking from behind the canvas or resting their head on it. Later they remarked, 'I turned myself into a sculpture; I wasn't aware of my body' (Figure 103 and Figure 104).

Figure 104. B. F. with head covered by a canvas. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

Most participants did not talk while interacting with the canvases, as it proved challenging to concentrate on what to do with them. However, there were some conversations and comments during breaks or after they had finished their part.

P. J. was visibly inspired by his partner's performance and appeared to be trying to match it. It took him some time to fully engage and find his own immersive response. He brought a flamboyant approach, incorporating what seemed to be deliberate posing. At one point, he cradled a folded canvas as though it were a baby (Figure 105). Later, he remarked:

> These are amazing… they feel like you have to find a use for them… but it's kind of like, do I try to wear it, or do I use it as a prop? That's what I like about it.

He also commented: 'Because they're just like homogeneous shapes and forms, they have this sense of, oh yeah, it's cold, and this is cosy.'

Figure 105. P. J. cradling and swinging the canvas as if it were a baby. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

A. R. was alone on the set, which probably heightened the pressure of standing in front of the camera. She moved constantly and at a fast pace, explaining that she felt pressured to avoid appearing boring on camera. I reassured her that she could take her time and encouraged her to focus less on the camera. She experimented with several canvases, stating that using just one felt insufficient – she wanted to wear all of them simultaneously (Figure 106). A. R. also attempted to

fold a canvas into something she could carry, treating it as a prop. Occasionally, she murmured to herself, 'Hmm… what can I create?'.

She remarked that it reminded her of Josef Albers, who, during his tenure at the Bauhaus, often assigned students creative, hands-on tasks to encourage them to explore materials and design principles more intuitively. She specifically referred to Albers' paper-folding exercise, where students were tasked with folding a single sheet of paper to create a building or architectural structure. She added that the experience felt like being in a playpen, describing it as a kind of play or game.

Figure 106. A. R. making a layered costume from several canvases.
Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

B. O. was the last participant to join. A former dancer, choreographer and now Pilates instructor, their movements were refined and fluid, demonstrating a body awareness that comes from years of training. Watching them was both relaxing and soothing. I replayed their performance several times, captivated by the stark contrast between their movements and those of the other adult participants. Their embodied knowledge was striking – so well-articulated and apparent. Years of training had enabled B. O. to internalise the ability to express thoughts and emotions through movement, creating a kind of bodily memory. It was as though their body held a reservoir of poses, drawn on to respond creatively when interacting with the canvas (Figure 107).

B. O. was the only participant who treated the canvases as precious objects, handling them gently and folding them carefully at the end. This contrasted sharply with the approach of the other participants, who mostly handled the canvases roughly, often struggling with the material as they interacted. On several occasions, I worried that the canvases might tear. This was particularly interesting because I had expected participants to be more cautious with the materials than they were.

Figure 107. B. O. immersed in a pile of canvases, finishing his scene. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

When B. O. finished his part, he neatly piled each canvas, a gesture that stood out from what the others had done. Puzzled by the form they made, B. O. reflected: 'I can imagine these canvases as artwork hanging on the wall. It's not clothes, but it has some reference to clothes. It's not a costume, but it could be… It's kind of everything and none of these', and said: 'I can imagine it being hung on the wall as piece of art, but also a tool for a dancer.'

Figure 108. Close-up of a pile of canvases. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

Film editing as reflective, observational and analytical practice

The raw footage filmed during the sessions is an extensive 2 hours and 40 minutes long, and the editing process involved making difficult decisions about what to cut out of the final film. The goal of the edit was twofold: to create a version suitable for sharing with participants and potentially for public screening, and to eliminate mistakes, such as random interruptions and technical issues.

Editing was an invaluable part of the research process, as it allowed me to view the footage from a phenomenological and analytical perspective. While the raw footage focused on individual responses and reflections, the editing process encouraged me to see the film as a collective, interlinked performance. Suddenly, the director and I were comparing and summarising responses, highlighting both differences and similarities. Working with the editor was also instrumental to the decision-making process, as their observations and feedback contributed significantly.

The editing process was predominantly reflective and observational, with less emphasis on technical aspects. Before filming began, my intention was to preserve long takes, keeping each participant's segment intact without cutting or mixing parts. The edit had to follow the documentary narrative of the footage, maintaining the natural pace of the participants. No

special effects were added, and the documentary integrity of the film was preserved. My aim was to maintain the raw, observational nature of the footage.

One aspect I particularly appreciated was how the frame (of the camera) pays a role and remains dynamic. The camera was positioned in front of the set, and due to the small space available for participants to move, they often stepped outside the frame. I enjoyed how this shifting frame added life to the footage, subtly reminding the viewer of what was happening both within and outside the frame. It made the viewer aware that what occurs beyond the camera's reach is equally significant. Additionally, there is honest aspect to what is being filmed when the participants are moving around, if they walk in and out of the set.

In several scenes, participants were partially cut out by the frame (Figure 109 and Figure 110). Notably, in a scene with children lying on the floor, they gradually lifted their heads until their whole bodies appeared within the frame. I found this movement added dynamism and a sense of excitement to the film.

In the editing process, I did not strictly adhere to the chronological order of participants' appearances, as this was not critical to the observations. Instead, I followed a logical progression, ensuring that each participant's entry flowed naturally from where the previous one left off. This approach created smoother transitions. Additionally, I aimed to maintain a neutral and slightly flat tone in the imagery (see Appendix 5).

Sound editing was minimal. We cleaned up some background noise and interruptions, such as a ringing doorbell, but retained other ambient noise to preserve a sense of environmental authenticity. For the version shared with my supervisors and participants, I kept the final edit to 23 minutes long. However, this length may change depending on the exhibition context. For instance, displaying the work across several monitors would require a different editing approach.

Similarly, B. O., while navigating the small set, frequently disappeared from view. The fluidity of their movements, combined with the interplay of the frame, felt natural and engaging. While editing, I referred to this as a 'play frame', as the framing itself seemed to participate in the action. This framing technique emerged as one of the most interesting features of the edit, and I plan to incorporate it into future film projects.

Figure 109. Scene showing children at the edge of the camera frame. Film still from *Dresstopia*, 2025.

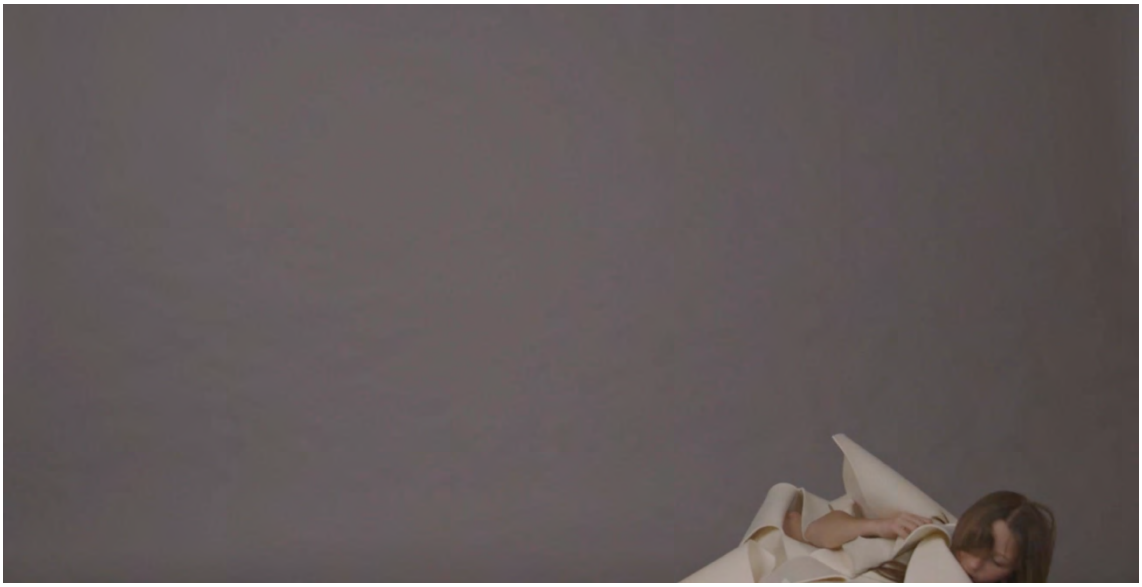

Figure 110. Scene showing children at the edge of the camera frame. Film still from *Dresstopia,* 2025.

Conclusion

The activations or experiences felt more spontaneous and exciting when seen live, offering a dynamic immediacy that the film could not fully replicate. However, if *Dresstopia* were to be exhibited, it would not be limited to a film presentation; instead, the exhibit would invite audience participation. By simply displaying the canvases and allowing viewers to wear them, the piece could extend its interactive and experiential potential to a wider audience.

Although the film was initially created as a form of research documentation, it transcended its purpose to become an engaging, participatory experience in its own right. It fosters reflection that emerges from within, without relying on external representations, such as mirrors or comparative images of the body and attire. The process resembles an infinite game of exploration or daydreaming, evoking a hypothetical 'new thing' tied to utopian fiction – one that challenges consumer-oriented desires and invites imaginative reinterpretation.

Dresstopia becomes even more captivating in the presence of others, as the shared experience creates a collective energy. Ideas and reflections resonate among participants and audience members, amplifying the piece's impact. This communal experience is central to its design; *Dresstopia* is meant to be experienced and appreciated in a group.

Initially, before observing participants interact with the canvases, I anticipated that the piece would be more restrictive – less open to interpretation and more physically limiting. The canvases appeared stiff, and I imagined there would only be one or two ways the body might adapt to them. However, participants defied these expectations, demonstrating remarkable determination to push boundaries and experiment with their movements and interactions.

I had initially expected that the ambivalence and restrictiveness of the canvases would encourage more reflection and less interaction. However, the opposite proved to be true: the canvases revealed limitless potential. These wearable objects, devoid of historical or cultural references and lacking the functional elements of traditional clothing, became tools for imaginative experimentation – an exploration of how to wear the 'impossible'.

The otherworldly nature of the canvases seemed to captivate participants, engaging them as if they were solving a puzzle or searching for the perfect form. The constraint of each canvas acted both as a challenge and an invitation, keeping the mind and imagination actively engaged. In this

way, the restrictiveness and ambivalence of utopian dress played a key role in stimulating creativity and fostering imagination.

As noted earlier, participant B. O. found himself intrigued by the nature of the piece. He questioned whether it was art for the wall, a costume, or clothing. He observed that, like art, it could be all three – or none of them. It was the ambivalence itself that drew him in, making the piece feel both limitless in its possibilities and deceptively simple in form.

This aspect of the study is particularly interesting because it shifts the role of dress from a final product to a tool for engagement and exploration. By removing predefined instructions or expectations, participants were free to interact with the canvases in intuitive and unstructured ways. This allows dress to transcend its traditional role as mere attire, becoming a dynamic part of the creative process.

The ambivalence in this approach – where neither the purpose nor the manner of use are predetermined – creates a unique and open-ended framework. It fosters a creative space where participants can express themselves personally, engage in unfiltered reactions, and form dynamic, unexpected interactions between their bodies and dress. In this context, the emphasis moves away from the final result or image and instead highlights the unfolding process. Here, dress is viewed not as a finished object but as a tool for exploration.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to explore how to wear utopia – investigating the concept of utopian dress, its main characteristics, and how these might manifest in practice. My theoretical proposal demonstrated the possibilities of the idea that utopia is a method, and that utopian dress is a tool. The project explored the possibilities of utopian dress as both an artistic medium and a tool for social engagement.

Through theoretical research and engagement with utopian fiction, I identified the key qualities of utopian dress: functionality, shared identity, conviviality, a unique sense of time and a political dimension. Together, these characteristics suggest new and inspiring ways to approach dress as both practice and concept.

My practice-led research evolved into two distinct yet interconnected processes: a curatorial approach, grounded in historical, theoretical and analytical methods; and an artistic practice, combining reflexivity, phenomenology of embodied experience and participation. This dual approach, which remains relatively uncommon in research, offered a broader perspective on utopian dress. By integrating these methodologies – one focused on historical context, the other on speculative futures – I gained a deeper understanding of the field while actively reimagining its possibilities through artistic practice.

As a result, this multifaceted approach opened up new and inspiring directions for my research: it encouraged me to treat dress as an art medium in its own right, to experiment with alternative modes of dress and fashion practice, and, most importantly, to recognise the many unexplored possibilities for engaging with dress.

Theoretical research draws on Ruth Levitas's concept of utopia as a method (2013), and approaches utopia as a mode of creative and embodied practice. This view understands utopia as a dynamic, critical and creative medium, rather than a static, idealised state of perfection. Such a perspective stands in sharp contrast to the common, colloquial notion of utopia as a fixed or accomplished ideal.

It is tempting to conclude that utopia is simply a colonial form, given its historical proximity to exploration, settlement and the projection of universal norms. Yet that conclusion risks reproducing the very closure it criticises by ceding the terrain of possibility to colonial realism. I therefore approach utopia as a method rather than a blueprint. Utopian narratives can hold conflicting impulses at once: they may criticise existing conditions while also reproducing forms

of colonial world-making. This means reading utopian narratives as places where critique can sit alongside colonial world-making, sometimes uneasily, and using those tensions to ask what kinds of futures are treated as imaginable, and for whom. From this perspective, decolonial work is not about finding a 'pure' utopia, but about shifting imaginative practice away from control and totalising visions, and towards futures that are situated, relational and plural.

Within this static framework, utopian dress is often envisioned as a singular, perfect garment designed for prolonged use – perhaps even the notion of a single dress for life. However, this view is associated with a limited, prescriptive format of dress, which does not offer an alternative framework for creative exploration or expression. Such colloquial interpretations of utopian temporality undermine the creative potential of utopia, which lies in its ability to critique the present while imagining radically alternative futures.

Utopian temporality, as explored in this research, disrupts the calculative, linear concept of time that views the future as predetermined by the past or bound by history. It presents itself as a form of daydreaming, as a practice in hope and imagination. For that reason, one of the key revelations of this study was the recognition of utopian dress as a process (or a method) rather than a destination or a goal.

In my film *Dresstopia*, the process itself became the work: it had no definitive beginning or end, nor did it draw on past references or align closely with reality. This disruption of traditional temporal structures, and its disconnect from the present, invited participants to engage with the process on their own terms, fostering deeply personal and unique responses. Time did not stop, but it also did not matter. In utopian dress practice, the perception of time is elongated, distorted, merged and non-sequential. As a result, dress no longer serves as an indicator of time or progress, as it typically does in fashion. This realisation of the different temporal dimension of utopian frameworks offers an opportunity to reimagine our relationship with time and change, inspiring innovative approaches to dress practices.

This approach to temporality has a profound effect on how we understand progress and contemporaneity – especially within design practices, which are often seen as future-oriented and closely tied to notions of change and advancement. If we remove the concept of linear time and instead understand design as experience, our perspective shifts significantly. As a form of dress practice, it offers us an opportunity to re-evaluate this medium and to inspire different ways of practising that do not involve change linked to patterns of consumption and production. For example, this altered relationship to time could serve as a form of pedagogy, enabling us to

educate and shape our desires for fairer and kinder forms of dress practice outside commercially driven paradigms.

As mentioned above, the research identified commonality and conviviality as characteristics of utopian dress. Both have the potential to inform new practices of dress, influencing their aesthetics and underlying values. In particular, I am interested in convivial ways of practising commonality, and the way that these two qualities are interlinked.

Today, in the West, the prospect of commonality is largely discredited and viewed as a threat to creativity and individual expression. However, commonality is not inherently opposed to individuality; rather, it stands in contrast to the cult of individual distinction promoted by late capitalism. As many theorists have argued, individualism has been appropriated by consumerist industries not only to create distinction, but also to exploit and capitalise on narrow definitions of identity, often through racial, ethnic or cultural stereotyping.

By conviviality I refer to unstructured ways of socialising and connecting formed around common interests linked to dress, food or music. Conviviality involves reclaiming creative autonomy, resisting dependence on technological tools, industrial systems or any form of systemic control. Dress, in this sense, can serve as a tool for facilitating convivial experience.

In this research I explored how radical art and design movements – Constructivism, Neoconcretism and Italian Radical Design – reimagined dress as a site of social practice, experimentation and collective engagement. Rather than viewing dress solely as functional or decorative, these movements treated dress as a tool for social transformation and as a medium for creative exploration.

Constructivism recognised the psychological and cultural function of objects, proposing new forms of workwear that were both utilitarian and emancipatory – clothing for a new socialist society. Similarly, Oiticica's *Parangolé* and Clark's participatory 'propositions' transformed experiential dress practice, inviting collective participation and blurring the boundaries between art, life and community. In each case, the function of dress was extended from utility to a form of therapy, self exploration and social bonding. Italian Radical Design proposed a toolkit approach, enabling adaptable, DIY garments that challenged dependence on industrially made goods. Dress as a DIY toolkit was a way of empowering individuals and reclaiming their creative autonomy.

Dress is framed as a process, not a product – a field of possibility for conviviality, embodiment and shared experience. What these approaches shared was the adoption of anti-art, anti-design and anti-fashion tactics, aimed at dissolving the separation between creative practice and everyday life.

Through researching utopian fiction, as well as art and design history, I came to understand that workwear embodies utopian dress ideals more profoundly than any other form of clothing. This is why workwear has been the most commonly appropriated form of utopian dress. Workwear gives dress a civic perspective. It prompts us to consider how what we wear connects us to our communities, shapes social norms and expresses shared values about living together.

Curating the *Workwear* exhibition was one of two strands of my practice-based research, bringing together this social perspective on workwear with the artistic case. This curatorial approach challenged conventional museum hierarchies by bringing together objects typically framed as 'high' and 'low' culture, prompting visitors to reconsider how dress is valued and understood. Informed by Latour's ideas of *dingpolitik* and the parliament of things, I approached the museum not as a neutral container but as a site of assembly in which objects, interpretive frameworks and institutional conditions gather a public. By highlighting workwear – ranging from everyday garments to historically significant artefacts – the exhibition positioned these objects as active participants in critical debates about labour, class, value, community and citizenship. In doing so, the project made complex ideas accessible, encouraged critical reflection and promoted a deeper appreciation of workwear's creative and social significance.

The exhibition attracted significant engagement, attracting over 50,000 visitors, extensive press coverage, educational initiatives and scholarly attention. These responses validated the exhibition's core objective of questioning assumptions about value, taste and museum practice. Curating the exhibition enriched my understanding of dress's social role and demonstrated the power of exhibitions as platforms for critical inquiry and meaningful public engagement.

Through my other strand of practice-based research, my art practice, I found that approaching dress as both a tool and a speculative medium offered new possibilities for reimagining notions of work and workwear. Early experiments with wearable glove-tools and the concept of 'worktopias' revealed the importance of material-led, embodied methods over technologically driven processes. The tactile, hand-shaped qualities of these glove-tools proved crucial, allowing for greater imaginative freedom and phenomenological engagement. Moving away from technologically determined forms, I embraced abstraction and hand making as central to

exploring utopian dress, ultimately recognising that utopian time is fluid and that technological reference is not essential for envisioning alternative futures. This shift towards participatory and phenomenological methods now forms the foundation for my film *Dresstopia*, which proposes dress as a transformative tool for speculative, collective exploration.

Dresstopia demonstrated the potential of dress to function as a form of play – not as a fixed product, but as an interactive tool for creative exploration. The canvases, with their ambivalent and restrictive shapes, were not easily wearable, yet served as effective thinking tools. These wearable objects, stripped of historical or cultural references and lacking the functional elements of traditional clothing, became instruments for imaginative experimentation – an exploration of how to wear the 'impossible'. Participants were intrigued by the ambivalent nature of the piece, uncertain if it was artwork, costume, clothing or all of these at once. This ambiguity allowed dress to move beyond its usual role as a finished object, becoming instead a dynamic tool for open-ended exploration.

This ambivalence – the absence of predetermined purpose or instructions – was critical, freeing participants to respond intuitively, creatively and imaginatively. Furthermore, *Dresstopia* emphasised the significance of communal experience, as the collective energy generated during live interactions surpassed what could be conveyed through film alone. By challenging traditional perceptions of dress practice, in particular the ways we use it, the project revealed that utopian dress practice thrives when it is open-ended, embodied and shared.

Further research directions

During this research, I identified a significant gap in workwear literature. While technical encyclopaedias discuss specialised aspects of workwear, its role as a social and cultural phenomenon, is largely overlooked.

This study highlights a gap where clothing is predominantly analysed from a fashion perspective, rather than a civil one. More research is needed on how workwear is appropriated and reinterpreted, and it is important to understand why this trend persists.

Additionally, there is a need for more accessible literature that connects specialist workwear, which is often hidden in technical encyclopaedias not available to the public or students. Workwear deserves to be compiled in a comprehensive, publicly accessible workwear encyclopaedia.

The research presented in the *Workwear* exhibition was limited in geographical scope, and this is an area I would like to expand. Here I refer to art, dress and textile practices that treat dress as a tool and engage with workwear and related forms, as discussed in this research. I am confident that there are many lesser-known utopian dress practices in the Global South and in regions beyond my current knowledge, which I hope to explore in future work. Further research beyond Western contexts is needed to broaden and enrich the study of utopian dress. I am particularly interested in exploring the connections between Indigenous dress practices and utopian dress. While it would be premature to propose a direct genealogy, I think it is worth asking whether utopian dress imaginaries were informed by Indigenous dress traditions of the Americas, and I plan to pursue this question in future work. Andean textiles such as Wari tunics provide a productive starting point, not as origins to be claimed, but as evidence of long-standing design logics of abstraction, modularity and collective signification that later designers and writers may have encountered and reinterpreted.

I am interested in a broader examination of other concepts of utopian dress, including those different from my own. This could involve exploring technological advances in workwear that offer more sustainable solutions. In general, it would be valuable to see these technical patents, such as body cooling suits, further explored and adapted for use in everyday clothing.

In the field of the arts, I would like to expand this research to consider utopian dress as an artistic medium, particularly with a view to embodied or interactive artworks. Unlike projects that envision fashion futures as solutions to existing problems, these approaches should encourage the blending of artistic methods with wearables, not simply as solutions but as a way to challenge existing and inspire new possibilities.

In studies of sustainability, the concept of utopian dress has received scant attention. This oversight is striking, given that sustainability has been a central feature of utopian dress since its earliest representations in utopian fiction. Sustainability has consistently been an overarching theme, especially in explorations of the relationship between environmental balance and clothing.

If we accept that ecological degradation arises from a fractured relationship between the individual and the environment, then it is worth considering how utopian thinking addresses this divide. A defining feature of utopian models is the subordination of individual needs and desires to those of the collective. In these contexts, equality is envisioned not only among humans, but also in the relationship between humans and non-humans. Given the vast environmental impact

of clothing, there is considerable scope to examine the potential of utopian dress practice in relation to research on sustainability.

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APPENDIX

1. Archives and collections visited in person
2. Archives, collections and art and design studios consulted with by email
3. Exhibition commissions, commissioned by Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam
4. List of exhibits
5. Link to a film *Dresstopia*
6. Participant consent forms

1. Archives and collections visited in person:

- G -Star vintage workwear archive in Amsterdam, 2022
- Levi's archive in San Francisco in 2018
- Massimo Osti archive in Bologna in 2016 and 2023
- Nigel Cabourn workwear archive in Newcastle, in 2018 and 2023
- Nieuwe Instituut archive Rotterdam
- Vintage Showroom archive in London, in 2018 and 2022
- Westminster University Menswear Archive, London, 2022

Field trip to Japan, 2019:

- Buaisou indigo farm and studio, Tokushima
- 45R workwear archive, Tokyo
- Kapital Japan, studio, Kojima
- Issey Miyake archive, Tokyo
- Blue Blue Japan, Tokyo
- VisVim archive, Tokyo

2. Archives, collections and art and design studios consulted with by email:

- Alexander Lavrentiev's archive (Alexander Rodchenko's grandson in Moscow via Russian curator based in Germany Alyona Sokolnikova)
- Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile, Hong Kong
- Costakis Foundation, Thessaloniki
- Dario and Lucia Bartolini from Archizoom, Florence
- Harun Farocki estate
- Helmut Lang private archive, Berlin
- Kunstmuseum Den Haag collection, The Hague
- Lucy+ Jorge Orta, Studio Orta archive, Paris
- Lygia Clark cultural association ('O Mundo de Lygia Clark'), Rio de Janeiro
- Maria Blaisse collection, Amsterdam
- Museum Rotterdam collection
- Photographic Archive Museo del Tessuto, Prato
- Rijksmuseum collection, Amsterdam

- Sammlung– Hoffmann collection, Berlin
- The Smithsonian Institution Archives
- Tate Modern In London
- The Moholy-Nagy Foundation
- Tshepo Mohlala studio, Johannesburg
- Van Abbe Museum collection, Eindhoven
- Yohji Yamamoto archive, Paris
- William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.

3. Exhibition commissions, commissioned by Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam:

- Sam Cruden, 0 to 12, installation, 2023
- Elten Kiene, Workwear Manifesto, 2023

4. List of exhibits

5. Link to a film *Dresstopia*

https://vimeo.com/1087766825?utm_source=email&utm_medium=vimeo-email&utm_campaign=44349

6. Participant consent forms

4. List of exhibits

1. *Clothing is a Tool*

Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki, *Labour in a Single Shot,* 2011-2014
Selection of short films
Courtesy of Harun Farocki Filmproduktion & Goethe-Institute

Globe Firefighter Proximity Suit, 2010
with Oberon Radiant Heat Proximity Helmet, 2010-2018
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

Beekeeper Overall with Removable Protective Hood, 2018
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

Chainmail Butchers' Apron, 1970-1990
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

Strentex Immersion Suit Mark 7a, 1993
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

B.T.C. Foul Weather Coat, Waders & Hat, 1950s
Courtesy of The Vintage Showroom, London

WW2 US Navy Deep Sea diving Jack Browne 'Bunny' suit, 1940s
Courtesy of The Vintage Showroom, London

Royal Canadian Airforce Para Rescue jacket & trousers, 1995
Courtesy of The Vintage Showroom, London

Cold War Era Polish Flying Suit, 1960s
Courtesy of The Vintage Showroom, London

Anti-G Garment, Cutaway CSU-3/P (USAF), 1980s
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

EMF Radiation Protective Coverall, 1974
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

Royal Australian air force Sidcot flying suit, 1942
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

Insulation Liner for USN USAF Mk-4 Anti-Exposure Suit, c.1952
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

Liquid Cooling Garment, 1990s
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

Swedish Work Overall, 1980s
Courtesy of G-Star archive, Amsterdam

Japanese Firefighter Noragi, 1920s

Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

Electrically heated American pilot suit, WW2
Courtesy of Massimo Osti archive, Bologna

The Spacesuit and The Helmet, X-Ray print, 1960s
Courtesy of Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C.

GGD Lice Suit, ca. 1935
Courtesy of Museum Rotterdam

Thyrza Coenraad, Working Clothes (Werkende kleding) 2021
Courtesy of Thyrza Coenraad, Rotterdam

Thyrza Coenraad, Working Clothes (Werkende kleding) 2021
Photographic prints
Courtesy of Thyrza Coenraad, Rotterdam

2. *Workwear and Utopia*

TSHEPO, *We, The People*, Dungaree, 2021
Courtesy of Tshepo, Johannesburg

Alexandr Rodchenko, *Productivist Suit,* replica, 1922
Courtesy of RT Creative Lab, VKHUTEMAS, Moscow

Varvara Stepanova, costume design for the play *The Death of Tarelkin*, 1922
realised by Erika Hoffmann-Koenig in 1979
Courtesy of Sammlung Hoffmann Collection, Berlin

Lyubov Popova, *Production Clothing for Actor No.7*, 1921
realised by Erika Hoffmann-Koenig in 1979
Courtesy of Sammlung Hoffmann Collection, Berlin

László Moholy-Nagy portrait by Lucia Moholy, reproduction 1926
Photographic print
Courtesy of The Moholy-Nagy Foundation

Archizoom, *Scatola di montaggio Vestirsi è facile*, reproduction, 1973
Courtesy of Dario & Lucia Bartolini Archive, Bologna

Elten Kiene, *Workwear Manifesto*, 2023
Spoken word, live performance and video
Commissioned by the Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam

William Morris, *Painting Smock*, replica, 1870s
Courtesy of William Morris Gallery and Vestry House Museum, London

Winston Churchill wearing Siren Suit at Chartwell, Kent, reproduction, 1944
Photographic print, Courtesy of illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans

Thayaht wears overalls, Photographer P. Salvini, Florence, reproduction, 1920
Courtesy of Photographic Archive Museo del Tessuto, Prato

Thayaht Men's overalls project,
Daily newspaper "La Nazione", reproduction, Florence 17 June 1920
Courtesy of Museo del Tessuto, Prato

Seated Thayaht wearing overall, Photographer: P. Salvini, reproduction, Florence, 1920Courtesy of Photographic Archive Museo del Tessuto, Prato

Gerd Arntz, Collage Isotypes, reproduction, 1929-1969
Courtesy of Collection Kunstmuseum Den Haag

3. *Art and Utility*

Nicola L, *Red Coat- Same Skin for Everybody,* 1969
Video of performances
Courtesy of Tate © Tate 2022

Lygia Clark, *O eu e o tu: Roupa-corpo-roupa (The I and the you: Cloth-body-cloth)*, 1967
Courtesy of the Cultural Association “O Mundo de Lygia Clark”, Rio De Janeiro

Lygia Clark, *Óculos (Goggles)*, 1968
Courtesy of the Cultural Association “O Mundo de Lygia Clark”, Rio De Janeiro

Frantz Erhard Walther, *Gelbe Antwort*, 1984
Installation
Courtesy of Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven

Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Modular Architecture - Nexus Architecture x 3*, 1996
Installation
Courtesy of Lucy+Jorge Orta, Paris

Iris de Leeuw, Space Suit (Speespak), 1966-1967
Installation
Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Iris de Leeuw, *Certificate of Authenticity Space Suit (Echtheidscertificaat Speespak)*, 1966-1967
Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Iris de Leeuw, *Order Form (Bestelkaart Speespak)*, 1966-1967
Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

4. *Workwear in Fashion*

Maria Blaisse, Flexicaps, 1985-1989
Courtesy of Maria Blaisse, Amsterdam

C.P. Company, Beekeeper jacket, aw 2002
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

C.P. Company, Transformables series, Shoulder Pack, 2000
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London

Massimo Osti, Stone Island Zelthban Cape, ss 1982
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, Explorer jacket, ss 1988
Stone Island, *Stella Tela dungarees*, ss 1983
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, Safety Vests, 2000-2001
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, ICD Goose Down Prototype Jacket with foam anatomic inserts, aw 2000-01
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, ICD vest prototype with foam anatomic inserts, aw 2000-01
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, Prototype for Imaginary Survival Suit, aw 1999
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Massimo Osti, Hood Prototypes, 1987
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive, Bologna

Yohji Yamamoto, *Homage to Schiaparelli* collection, aw 2004
Courtesy of Yohji Yamamoto Archive, Paris

Yohji Yamamoto, *Military collection, ss 2003*
Courtesy of Yohji Yamamoto Archive, Paris

Yohji Yamamoto, *Military collection, ss 2003*
Courtesy of Yohji Yamamoto Archive, Paris

Yohji Yamamoto, *Military collection, ss 2003*
Courtesy of Yohji Yamamoto Archive, Paris

Helmut Lang, *Séance de Travail* collection, aw 1999-2000
Courtesy of Endyma Archive, Berlin

Elsa Schiaparelli, *Cash and Carry collection*, monograph 1939

About a Worker x Shenzhen / UABB, film, 2021
Courtesy of About a Worker, Paris

4. *Fashion Archaeology*

Buaisou, film, 2020
Courtesy of Buaisou in cooperation with CHAT, Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile, Hong Kong

Buaisou, *100 Shades of Blue,* installation, 2022
Natural indigo dyed ramie
Courtesy of Buaisou, Japan in collaboration with CHAT -China Textile Museum, Hong Kong

Buaisou, Kakuo Kaji's diaries of indigo dye vat*,* 2018-2022
Courtesy of Buaisou, Japan

Buaisou, Kaji's worn jeans, 2018
Courtesy of Buaisou Japan

Buaisou, Indigo dyed denim treads, 2022
Courtesy of Buaisou, Japan

Kapital Japan, Century Denim (mud dyed sashiko), 2023
Courtesy of Kapital Japan

Kapital Japan, *Boro* Jacket and Textile, 2022
Courtesy of Kapital Japan

Sam Cruden, *0 to 12*, installation, 2023
Commissioned by Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam

Nigel Cabourn, *The Ascent of Cabourn* collection*,* Parka and a Sleeping bag*, 2003*
Courtesy of Nigel Cabourn Archive, Newcastle

Nigel Cabourn, *The Ascent of Cabourn*, book, 2003
Courtesy of Nigel Cabourn archive, Newcastle

John Hunt, *The Accent of Everest*, book, 1953
Courtesy of Nigel Cabourn archive, Newcastle

Sir Vivian Fuchs & Sir Edmund Hillary, *The Crossing of Antarctica*, 1958
Courtesy of Nigel Cabourn archive, Newcastle

Additional accessories (part of *Clothing is a Tool*)*:*

Footwear

Bekina Boots, Food Industry Wellingtons

Dutch Wooden Clogs

Canvas Novesta Star Master Shoes

Canvas Tabi Shoes

Maison Martin Margiela Tabi Boots

Nike Air Rifts

Strauss Safety Shoes

Borosana Shoes, 1969

Vintage Safety Boot

Birkenstock Modern Work Clog

Blundstone Work Boots

Protective White Overboots
Courtesy of G-star Archive

Vintage Military Overboots
Courtesy of G-star Archive

Police AirBoss CBRN Overboots, 2017
Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London.

Gloves

True Touch Pet Grooming Gloves

Acid-Resistant Chemical Gloves

Heat-Resistant Gloves

Metal Oyster Glove

Goggles

Dapro Iris Safety Glasses

Magnifying Binocular Glasses

WWII Vintage Flying and Driving Goggles
Courtesy of G-star Archive

Headwear

Yohji Yamamoto, Military Collection, s/s 2003

Margaret Howell Military Hat, a/w 2022

Safety Helmet with Attachable Balaclava

Helly Hansen Sou'wester Hat

Rattan Safety Helmet, 1979

Folded Italian Newspaper Hat for Painting and Decorating

Farmer's Red Neckerchief (Boerenkiel)

KidSuper Wool Balaclava

Trapper Shearling Cap with Ear Flaps
Courtesy of G-star Archive

Vintage Face Shield
Courtesy of G-star Archive

C.P. Company Detachable Hood Prototype, 1987
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive

WW2 Anti-Gas Hood
Courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – CHILDREN

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and consent form to keep. Taking part in this study is voluntary. This means you can refuse to be a part of this study. Also, you can decide to withdraw from this study at any point without anything bad happening. If you wish to stop at any time, you can tell your parents or Eldina.

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated [.....] for the above research study. I had the chance to think about it, ask questions, and got answers that made sense to me. MRN
2. I understand I don't have to join in if I don't want to. If I decide to join, I can change my mind at any time. I don't have to explain why, and it won't affect me. MRN
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5. I understand that this project has been checked by University of the Arts London and said it's okay to do this study. MRN
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7. I understand how this research will be written up and published. MRN
8. I understand that the film may be shown in public exhibitions in the future MRN
9. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. MRN
10. I'm okay with having my picture or video taken for the study. MRN
11. I agree if they want to use my own words in the report. They won't say my name if I don't want them to [my name will not be mentioned / against my name] – *please delete appropriate.* MRN
12. I agree to take part in the above study. MRN

Mae Ruckl Noel
Signature of Child Giving Consent

mae ruckl noel
Printed Name

EVA Ruckl
Name of Parent Guardian

11.05.24 London
Date Place

11.05.24

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – CHILDREN

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

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12. I agree to take part in the above study. LSS

Signature of Child Giving Consent
Luna Suzuki Istah
Printed Name
Luna Suzuki Istah
Name of Parent Guardian
MAKI SUZUKI
Date 11/05/24 Place London

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated [11-05-24] for the above research study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. BF
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up to four weeks after seeing the final film edit without giving any reason, and without my legal rights begin affected. BF
3. I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of the Arts London where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to access my data. BF
4. I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of the Arts London Research Administration and Management Section. BF
5. I understand who will have access to personal data provided (video/sound), how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project. BF
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7. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. BF
8. I consent to being audio recorded, I understand how audio recording will be used in research outputs. BF
9. I consent to having my video taken – I understand how video/sound documentation will be used in research outputs. BF
10. I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication [my name will not be mentioned / against my name] – *please delete appropriate*. BF
11. I agree to take part in the above study. BF

BRYAN FLAVIN — Name of Participant
11.05.24 — Date
Signature

Eldina Begic — Researcher
11/05/2024 — Date
Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated [11/5/24] for the above research study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. PJ
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11. I agree to take part in the above study. PJ

PAUL JESZKE 11/5/24
Name of Participant Date Signature

Eldina Begic 11/05/2024
Researcher Date Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated [11.5.24] for the above research study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. [BL]
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11. I agree to take part in the above study. [BL]

Benjamin Ord — 11/5/24 — [signature]
Name of Participant — Date — Signature

Eldina Begic — 11/05/2024 — [signature]
Researcher — Date — Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

Please initial box

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11. I agree to take part in the above study. ER

Eva Rucks — 11/05/24 — [signature]
Name of Participant — Date — Signature

Eldina Begic — 11/05/2024
Researcher — Date — Signature [signature]

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

Please initial box

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10. I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication [my name will not be mentioned / against my name] – *please delete appropriate.* [MS]

11. I agree to take part in the above study. [MS]

MAKI SUZUKI 11/05/2024
Name of Participant Date Signature

Eldina Begic 11/05/2024
Researcher Date Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

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9. I consent to having my video taken – I understand how video/sound documentation will be used in research outputs. ☑
10. I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication [my first name will ~~not~~ be mentioned / ~~against my name~~] – *please delete appropriate.* Anver. ☑
11. I agree to take part in the above study. ☑

Anne REIMERS — Name of Participant
11/05/24 — Date
Signature
in credits full name

Eldina Begic — Researcher
11/05/2024 — Date
Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – ADULTS

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

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10. I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication [my name will not be mentioned / against my name] – *please delete appropriate*. ✓
11. I agree to take part in the above study. ✓

Yunpei Li — 11 May — Yunpei Li
Name of Participant — Date — Signature

Eldina Begic — 11/05/2024 — Begic Eldina
Researcher — Date — Signature

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – CHILDREN

Title: Dresstopia
Researcher: Eldina Begic

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11. I agree if they want to use my own words in the report. They won't say my name if I don't want them to [my name will not be mentioned / against my name] – *please delete appropriate.* [x]

12. I agree to take part in the above study. [x]

Signature of Child Giving Consent
Eloisa Watkins

Printed Name
Eloisa Watkins

Name of Parent Guardian
Stephanie Schultze-Westrum

Date 22 June 2024 Place London

Signature of Researcher Gaining Consent

_____

Printed Name

_____ _____

Date Place

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to Eldina Begic, e.begic1@arts.ac.uk. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of the Arts London's Research Management and Administration Section, which will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner: researchdegrees@arts.ac.uk; Address: Research Management and Administration, University of the Arts London, 5th Floor, Granary Building, 1 Granary Square, King's Cross, London, N1C 4AA.