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### Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality

*How recipients of social assistance in the Netherlands are 'activated' for the post-Fordist labour market*

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## Chapter One: Aesthetics of Work-Readiness

Aesthetic judgements and pedagogies for conditional social assistance and post-Fordist labour markets \*

### Introduction

Should a person wearing flip-flops to a job interview for the position of desk-clerk receive a social assistance benefit sanction? Should social assistance recipients be advised on their smell? How to deal with facial tattoos or burqas? These questions are part of the everyday practices of the street-level bureaucrats who are responsible for implementing social assistance policy in the Netherlands. Recent legislation takes conditional social assistance to a new level. In an unprecedented move, aesthetic performances are made an explicit condition for the right to social assistance. In the Participation Act, effective as of January 2015, social assistance recipients are required not to ‘obstruct employment by appearance’ (Article 18, paragraph 4g). The street-level bureaucrats responsible for implementing this, or ‘case managers’, therefore make aesthetic judgements in their assessment of social assistance deservingness. In this chapter, this legislation and its implementation in Dutch social assistance offices is explored as a case

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of the often underestimated importance of aesthetics in contemporary precarious labour markets. If aesthetics have become a legal prerequisite for retaining social assistance rights, the questions that are addressed in this chapter are: 1) just what performances grant this right; and 2) what does this tell us more generally about the politics of aesthetic performances for post-Fordist labour markets?

The Dutch Participation Act fits in an international trend towards more conditional forms of social assistance provision. In the Netherlands, as well as in many other European countries, the welfare state has been drastically reformed since the 1980s. These changes are often described as a development ‘from social assistance to welfare-to-work’ (see for example Peck and Theodore, 2001; Korteweg, 2006; Van Berkel et al, 2017). Social assistance benefits are seen as temporarily bridging the gap between one paid job to another and are conditional on participation in social assistance programmes and the perceived effort social assistance recipients make to find paid employment as soon as possible and to the best of their abilities. Consequently, the right to benefits has to be ‘earned’ (Van Houdt et al, 2011; compare Dwyer, 2008 for the UK context).

One of the characteristics of contemporary policy schemes for unemployed populations is their focus on what is often called ‘activation’ (Clarke, 2005; Newman and Tonkens, 2011a; Adkins, 2012). Problematising the ‘inactivity’ of some populations (Van den Berg, 2016a), ‘activation’ has become a widely used phrase in labour market policy throughout Europe. Although the dominant conception of ‘activity’ in most welfare states is involvement in paid labour (Clarke, 2005), the ‘activation’ of social assistance recipients can mean many things, ranging from physical exercise to following courses or doing mandatory ‘volunteer work’ (Clarke, 2005; Kampen 2014). Lisa Adkins (2012) therefore argues that the materiality of unemployment has changed quite radically. Rather than a period of inactivity, for many, unemployment has become part of “a continuum of productive moments” (Adkins, 2012, p. 622). Unemployment involves work, or is in any case eventful. Meetings, mandatory volunteering, job coaching – social assistance recipients are hardly ‘doing nothing’ in times of welfare-to-work. Employment and unemployment, therefore, are more alike in this economy. Many now move in and out of paid employment, moving from job to job or ‘gig’

to ‘gig’, even when more durably outside of paid employment. A typical week is thus filled with mandatory activities that are oriented towards paid work and the formal labour market. This chapter sets out to show how the work that is expected from social assistance recipients involves aesthetic labour. Our case of Dutch conditional social assistance shows expectations of backstage labour to be performed by social assistance recipients, often in the hope (either on the part of the case manager or recipients themselves) of entering precarious jobs. It builds on the argument made by Adkins (2012) that unemployment is “an important site for the theorisation of post-Fordist labour” (Adkins, 2012, p. 622).

This chapter is based on a qualitative and ethnographic study of the implementation of Article 18, paragraph 4g of the Dutch Participation Act. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 18 case managers of three Dutch municipalities were conducted in 2015 and observational data were collected in 2016 during a four-month ethnographic study at one of those municipalities. In these field sites, the ubiquitous discursive category of ‘representatief’ is used by Dutch case managers to describe an appropriate performance by social assistance recipients. ‘Representatief’ can perhaps best be translated into English as ‘presentable’. Reminiscent of the category ‘respectable’ in the British context (the dominant category in Skeggs’ (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*), the category ‘presentable’ differentiates social assistance recipients who are deemed employable from those deemed pathological (compare Skeggs, 1997, p. 13). The term ‘presentable’ in social assistance offices first operates as a negative, as a way to pathologise that which is not ‘presentable’: the slouching, the scarcely dressed, the smelling. Second, it is taken to mean a performance of ‘active’ work-readiness as part of a continuous calibration of the self in potential work contexts. The stress on aesthetics in social assistance offices, moreover, also works as pedagogy: it is partly through aesthetics that ‘work-readiness’ more broadly is achieved.

This study is not the first to scrutinise encounters between citizens and the state in the context of social assistance (see for example Korteweg, 2006; Dubois, 2010; Schram et al, 2010). It is, however, relatively rare for those studies to analyse aesthetic judgements. In Gatta’s (2014) study of the public workforce system in the USA, dress advice in the context of job coaching (and the anger and humiliation felt by participating women)

is briefly mentioned, but not the focus. Other research briefly addresses dress advice as an example of ritualised practices of case managers in which the advice given does not necessarily correspond with what is actually requested from employees in lower wage labour markets (Marchevsky and Theoharis, 2008; Brodtkin, 2015). Nickson et al (2003) are perhaps the exception because they do focus on the aesthetic training of what they term the ‘excluded’. Their study, however, focusses on how to go about addressing an aesthetic ‘skills deficit’ among the ‘unemployed’.

This chapter proposes a different perspective by looking at the aesthetic evaluation and pedagogic practices employed by case managers and their conceptualisations of appropriate aesthetics in the context of welfare-to-work policy. The aim is not to judge the aesthetic performances of social assistance recipients, but to study the way case managers do so. This chapter, thus, aims to understand the new Dutch formal obligation to perform a continuous ‘aesthetic labour’ in the context of aestheticisation of labour in post-Fordism, precarisation and ‘activation’.

## **Aesthetic labour, precarisation and activation**

One important aspect of the post-Fordist organisation of economic life is the surge in service sector employment. Throughout welfare states in Europe (and beyond), the majority of workers today work in (interactive) service sector jobs. Much contemporary work and especially interactive service work requires characteristics *in work* which are usually thought of as personal or private (Leidner, 1991; Wellington and Bryson, 2001; McDowell, 2009). Famously, the flight attendants in Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (1983) sold their smiles as part of their service in interactions with clients; they performed both emotional and aesthetic labour. Coined by Warhurst et al (2000), ‘aesthetic labour’ is often conceptualised as “a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment” (Warhurst et al, 2000, p. 1). In the Glasgow service industry, Warhurst et al (2000) observed that employers hired personnel in large part because of certain aesthetic preferences and the conviction that a staff member who ‘looks good’ and ‘sounds right’ (compare Williams and Connell, 2010), or would otherwise fit their brand, would create more revenue. This perspective

has led to a host of studies focussing on such embodied characteristics and their impact on hiring procedures and employability, such as tattoos (Timming, 2015), accents (Nath, 2011), stammering (Butler, 2014) and ‘aesthetic literacy’ (Sheane, 2012, p. 145).

Warhurst et al’s (2000) conceptualisation focusses on the ‘point of entry’ into a job or labour market position. This chapter builds on this literature but shifts its focus towards the continuous, day-to-day ‘backstage’ work (see Goffman, 1959) that goes into ‘looking right’ (and the expectation of case managers that social assistance recipients perform such labour). Whoever is hired for their looks needs to maintain these looks and continuously stay up to date in order to secure a ‘fit’ between their look and work, with the purpose of remaining employable in this economy. For most workers, therefore, exercise, dress and makeup are part of a continuous labour for labour. Such continuous labour is also required from social assistance recipients as part of a performance of flexibility, employability and a display of a desire for paid labour. This is characteristic of post-Fordism: not only are aesthetics important in new ways in post-Fordism (when compared to Fordism) because of the surge in interactive service labour, but post-Fordist labour is also often much more precarious and discontinuous and therefore necessitates this continuous calibration. At the height of Fordism and Keynesian social assistance politics, full and lifetime employment in unionised jobs with family wages were not only explicit political goals, but also the reality for the majority of men, at least in Western Europe. By contrast, precarity, as Lorey (2015) pointedly puts it, is the norm in post-Fordism: insecure, discontinuous labour and the concomitant adaptation to work-contexts in flux has become a primary concern for paid workers and, as this chapter will show, for social assistance recipients.

The aim of this chapter is to shift the focus in our understanding of aesthetic labour from paid labour and employment to aesthetic labour for unemployment and as part of ‘activation’ to find paid work in what Standing (2011) terms the ‘precariat’. In much research on aesthetic labour, the focus is on (middle-class) performances for paid work, for example on career women in positions of power (Rucker et al, 1999), on image consultancy for professionals (Wellington and Bryson, 2001), on the modelling industry (Mears, 2011; Holla, 2015) or on interactive service

work in urban economies (Warhurst et al, 2000; Sheane, 2012; Timming, 2015). This chapter argues that aesthetic performance is an increasingly important part of labour in low-wage interactive service jobs like it is in other, frequently better paid and more stable sectors. Standardisations of the presentation of self for work such as uniforms (an aesthetic symbol of Fordist times) are becoming less prevalent and, consequently, aesthetic labour in post-Fordism is becoming more ambiguous and fraught with uncertainty, especially in precarious labour markets.

Social assistance recipients in the Netherlands often move in and out of social assistance and precarious jobs. Temporary, discontinuous, badly paid and highly insecure employment is often all that case managers have to offer recipients: call-centre work; maintenance jobs; and hospitality positions. These types of employment are considered typical of work in the precariat (Standing, 2011) or even typical for a new class altogether (e.g. in Savage et al's (2015) classification of class in the UK; see Skeggs (2015) for a discussion). Unemployment and employment in post-Fordist conditions, at any rate, are usually stages in a continuous situation of precarity (compare Adkins, 2012; and Lorey, 2015 for this focus on continuity). Lorey (2015) writes of precarisation as a mode of government that destabilises employment and destabilises life itself. It includes ideas of freedom and self-determination in subjectivation: the idea that the most private self and work should align. The focus on autonomy in work and the idea of work as a project of the self has become much more widespread today and is not only expected from professionals and artists (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Consequently, much 'activation' focusses on the self as a project in which individuals are coached to 'invest' and which they can then 'market'. Those in welfare-to-work programmes, therefore, are called upon to mobilise aspects of their self that are usually thought of as private: their desires, caring nature or risk-taking character for instance. In the welfare-to-work programmes studied here, assignments involve emotional soul-searching and therapeutic work to discover a 'true talent' or 'dream'. As shall be shown in the analysis below, this mobilisation of the most private aspects of life for work contexts also translated into calls for aesthetic investments and a continuous aesthetic labour. Precarisation does not only touch those in the precariat and indeed, many who consider themselves 'middle class' now have to deal with similar insecurities,

including aesthetic insecurities. This chapter, however, focusses on social assistance recipients who move in and out of what can be termed precarious ‘bottom-end’ jobs.

Aesthetic judgements in social assistance offices are not new. In fact, especially in the Netherlands, there is a long history of civilising offensives, particularly in the context of the welfare state (Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012; Van den Berg, 2016b). Disciplining ‘the poor’ and ‘working classes’ to be ‘clean’ and ‘proper’ and holding that as a condition for help can in fact be considered part and parcel of paternalism (Van den Berg, 2016b). What is different in the context of post-Fordism and the current situation created by the Participation Act is that aesthetic labour in unemployment is not just appearing clean and decent (though it most certainly is too), but entails participating in a continuous calibration of aesthetic appearances to ever-changing and insecure work contexts. Moreover, on an emic level, what is different in the situation created by the Participation Act for individual case managers in the Netherlands when compared to before is that the act gives them “a stick to beat with” (*een stok om mee te slaan*), as they put it. In other words: the explicit mention of appearance in the Dutch law offers case managers an instrument to use in interactions with social assistance recipients.

### **‘Presentable’: The proper aesthetic performance**

The term most often used by case managers to describe what aesthetic performance they look for in social assistance recipients is ‘presentable’ (*representatief*). Almost all the respondents talked of the need for recipients to dress ‘presentable’ when going on a job interview or even of their own practice of dressing ‘presentable’ for their job and interaction with social assistance recipients. ‘Presentable’ proved to be a rather vague category: when pressed to make explicit what ‘presentable’ means exactly, many were unable to respond adequately. In practice though (as observed in the ethnographic research), the category ‘presentable’ worked, first, as a negative: to point out what was not appropriate and not ‘presentable’. Therefore, what became clear was that certain concrete aesthetic performances (and material objects) were on the wrong side of this ‘non-presentable’/‘presentable’ dichotomy. In the following, these



meanings of ‘presentable’ and ‘non-presentable’ are first investigated based on interview data. Second, the ethnographic data show the actual practices in the social assistance offices and offer the opportunity to further develop a perspective on how ‘presentability’ is taken to mean a performance of ‘active’ work-readiness. For case managers, the ‘right’ aesthetic labour pointed towards the required flexibility and subjectivity for labour more widely. ‘Looking right’, in short, did not just involve neat shoes and ironed shirts, but an aptitude for and proven capability of continuous change and adaptability.

### *The ‘non-presentable’: Pathologies*

While class was never explicitly mentioned, specific classed and gendered aesthetic performances were mentioned to be on the ‘wrong’ side of ‘presentable’. As van Eijk (2012) has argued, class in the Netherlands often operates as a latent category: not explicitly addressed yet important. Unlike in the UK context, therefore, both case managers and recipients are unlikely to explicitly identify as ‘working’ or ‘middle class’. Nonetheless, the pathologising ways in which case managers talked of ‘non-presentable’ aesthetic performances shows remarkable resemblance to familiar repertoires of ‘middle-class disgust’ at the aesthetic performances of those in the working class (Lawler, 2005). Three salient examples of the ‘non-presentable’ are dealt with here: flip-flops; cleavage; and smell. These were notably not the only examples given in the interviews, but they were selected because they were given often and by many respondents. Moreover, they can stand as qualitative examples for an argument that was applied to various other aesthetic appearances which were potential grounds for social assistance penalties.

For the case managers, wearing flip-flops was an obvious example of not looking ‘presentable’. In the interviews, it was the first example used of legitimate grounds for a financial penalty. Flip-flops were often spontaneously brought up in the series of interviews and in several cases even the brand Adidas was frequently mentioned, for example in this excerpt (CM and I are short for Case Manager and Interviewer):

CM: “Oh, you know, the standard stuff, like men coming in with

Adidas sports flip-flops (...).”

I: “So why are flip-flops inappropriate?”

CM: “Well, (...) that depends, I guess, on what kind of flip-flops. I’m wearing sandals myself now (the interview was done on a hot day in June). So I bought these, with open toes and I guess some of my colleagues think that this doesn’t ‘go’ either. But... sometimes you have these flip-flops that are more like sandals, you know? That’s a different category. Then I think it is a little more dressed, but maybe it is still inappropriate. But Adidas flip-flops: no. They belong on a poolside, at home or on the beach. That is just very obvious like: ‘Hey, there’s a line there!’ (...) So it is important that it’s presentable somehow.”

Adidas flip-flops, for this case manager, are associated with the typical leisure activities of swimming and sports. Crossing the boundary (“Hey, there’s a line there!”) can result in serious repercussions, ranging from (more or less obligatory) dress coaching to financial penalties implemented by case managers.

A second recurring concern of case managers was the showing of skin. This was most often voiced with direct reference to women. For them especially, it seemed, showing skin was ‘non-presentable’. To quote one (female) case manager:

“Just too naked (bloot). Sometimes you see a photo on a CV and you see too much of a woman’s cleavage. Then, in interaction with the client, I try to show her: ‘Look, do you see the difference between when I put my hand over your cleavage in the photo and when you can see the cleavage? This is how you learn how you come across.’ (...) It maybe shouldn’t be like this, you know, but I try to make women conscious of that, you know, men, you know, you just dress very revealingly and they try to look away and it does have an impact (...).”

Very clearly gendered, this quote reveals that an excess of femininity or skin is ‘non-presentable’. Moreover, there is a clear pedagogy at work here (“This is how you learn”): this case manager strives to teach women to show less skin by showing them on their own picture what that would look like.

On the other side of the masculine–feminine binary, the third

concrete example of ‘non-presentable’ performances was smell, or, in the words of one respondent: “clients that smell of poverty”. Much more linked to ‘pathological masculinities’, smell came up frequently in the interviews: “Mostly, these are people that are alone, single. And usually they are men. Women take care of themselves more. But a single man, middle-aged: no one warns him!” In the eyes of the case managers, ‘being presentable’ involves ‘not smelling bad’. The wrong smell could, in their view, ‘obstruct employment’ (to refer to the phrasing in the Participation Act).

These examples show that ‘being presentable’ involves not wearing flip flops, not showing too much skin and not smelling bad. The category ‘presentable’ here works as a negative: as a set of ideas of what not to do. These judgements are more than a simple evaluation of looks: they constitute a moral judgement (compare Lawler, 2005). The inadequacy is interpreted as a deep set of wrong preferences and knowledge that presents itself aesthetically in the social assistance office, but is indicative of wrong ways of being and doing more generally: “An assumed ignorance and immorality is read off from an aesthetic which is constituted as faulty” (Lawler, 2005, p. 437). This is why certain social assistance recipients are deemed unfit for work: the way they look symbolises a whole range of other things wrong with them.

Furthermore, these examples show that what becomes seen as a problem in aesthetic performances for labour is the body’s materiality itself. There are clear gendered and classed meanings here. Both women and those classified as ‘working class’, or ‘the precariat’, have often been depicted as being too material (Lawler, 2005). This surplus of materiality is then often presented to indicate a deeper, underlying pathology. This was a recurring response of the case managers when they talked about smell especially, but also when talking about showing too much skin. They would refer to someone’s financial problems, loneliness or, ultimately, psychiatric illness as underlying causes. This analysis, therefore, shows important continuities in the narratives of case managers with the abovementioned historical civilising offensives and disciplining welfare states in Fordism. What is different in post-Fordism, though, is the interpretation of aesthetics as a performance of activity and adaptability.

In post-Fordism, social assistance is restructured through ‘activation’

which pressurises social assistance recipients to (aesthetically) present themselves as active job-seekers rather than rights bearers. Importantly, they have to continuously adapt this active presentation in order for it to be in accordance with the work-situation at hand. In the interviews, when the category of ‘presentable’ became positive – a description of ‘do’s’ – it referred to a performance of adaptability and activity. Focussing on this theme of adaptability, the following excerpt is important (though this theme generally came up much more clearly in the ethnographic data explored below). Here, a case manager explains why wearing a three-piece suit can be inappropriate in certain settings and therefore a potential basis for a sanction. What is important here is the stress on the ability to read a situation and adapt an aesthetic performance accordingly:

- CM: “I did sanction someone last year because (...) he [wanted] to work in the asbestos [removal]. (...) Well, fine. A colleague of mine was responsible for the recruitment and selection and had discussed with him and a group of others to wear decent but relaxed clothing. This man showed up in a three-piece suit. So they really thought: ‘what are you doing?’ (...) They sent him away.”
- I: “Really?”
- CM: “Yes.”
- I: “That was considered to be so inappropriate that...”
- CM: “Yes, but look, this was just not the idea. You have to look good, but you’re not supposed to... you’re not applying for an office job. You are going to do construction work, that is very dirty and dangerous.”
- I: “But maybe he thought ‘I will make a special effort for that interview’.”
- CM: “Well, he was told to, yep... I don’t actually remember whether I really sanctioned him for it. I don’t actually remember.”

Interestingly, in the ethnographic observations ‘presentable’ as a category of active performances of work-readiness and adaptability (as opposed to ‘not presentable’ as a pathology) was a much more prevalent theme. Moreover, it is in these ethnographic observations that aesthetic pedagogies come into clearer view.

## Presentability: Aesthetics as pedagogy of work-readiness and adaptability

On their first day of the programme, social assistance recipients had to attend the general information meeting. The objective was to inform new social assistance recipients about what was expected of them. Recipients were told that looking for paid employment is like having a job. This includes aesthetic requirements, as one case manager formulated it:

“We are hoping you will display the behaviour and attitude you would display at an employer. Also with regard to clothing (...) that you present and dress yourself in such a way that you are always ready to have a job interview.”

In addition to this, social assistance recipients were invited to participate in dress workshops (provided by *Dress for Success*, a local foundation) for social assistance recipients in order to inform, advise and help them to look ‘presentable’. While participating in the welfare-to-work programme, social assistance recipients were continuously coached to behave the way they would in their workplace. This explicitly included personal care and dress and was formalised into a kind of contract that was called ‘working agreement’ which stated the following:

“We expect you to look decent and well-groomed (*netjes en verzorgd*). During the programme you will not wear a cap, overcoat or sportswear. You will not wear a headphone and/or earphones either.”

In some cases, indeed, recipients were asked to take off their cap, overcoat or headphones. Most case managers addressed social assistance recipients who were wearing sportswear by saying that it is not allowed and should not happen again. One time, a case manager sent a social assistance recipient home in order to change his clothing and come back right after. The immediate pedagogy at work here is correction and it is relatively punitive: recipients are always at risk of losing their benefits if they do not comply.

After the general information meeting, social assistance recipients were assigned to a group and a specific case manager. The case manager

would repeat what was expected of participants in a small group or individual meeting once they started participating in the workshops. As one case manager told the new recipients in such an event:

“What we are actually saying is that this programme is like having a job. You don’t have to wear a business suit, but you shouldn’t wear a tracksuit (*trainingspak*) either. We have job hunters walking around here. They are like employers and they say: ‘I won’t talk to people who look horrendous (*die er niet uitzien*)’.”

Other case managers also referred to the job hunters, who were in fact their colleagues and employed by the municipality as part of the welfare-to-work programme. It was their job to contact employers and find vacancies to which the social assistance recipients could apply. Sometimes the word ‘job hunter’ and ‘employer’ were used interchangeably, as is the case in the following example where a case manager informed a small group of newly arrived social assistance recipients:

“Sometimes employers, job hunters, will visit our group. Make sure that you always look presentable (*representatief*). Wash yourself regularly, take a shower, put on clean clothes: that makes you look good (*dat ziet er goed uit*).”

The logic behind this (besides the assumption that social assistance recipients do not shower regularly) is that in order to get a job you have to aesthetically present yourself as if you have a job already. As one case manager told a group of recipients: “I want to see, smell, feel that you intend to get back to work.” The stress on the aesthetic experience of participants is crucial here: it is through smelling, seeing and feeling that the assessment of ‘work-readiness’ and ‘deservingness’ is made. It goes beyond just smelling right, though: the performance the case managers were after is not just one of ‘decency’, but of ‘activity’ in the sense of ‘readiness’: always ready to enter paid employment.

Importantly, this stress on aesthetics does something else too: it is part of a pedagogy to *become* ‘work-ready’. The objective is not only to ‘look good’ for potential employers, ‘looking good’ also serves the purpose of, as one case manager put it: “getting you into the work-mode”. Social

assistance recipients were encouraged to feel and look like they were already working because that would help them to, in fact, become a ‘work-ready’ subject. Aesthetics were part of a responsabilising pedagogy: for social assistance recipients, ‘active participation’ meant displaying an eagerness to find work and to actively participate in the labour market as a job-seeker, mimicking the behaviour of actual paid workers. Looking ‘presentable’ while receiving social assistance benefits was interpreted as being committed to work and becoming independent from social assistance. An aesthetic performance was thought of as a concrete way in which a recipient can be ‘transformed’, more broadly speaking, into being more ‘work-ready’. A further concrete example of this pedagogy is the problematisation of posture and especially of slumping in one’s chair. One case manager told a group of recipients what he did when he received vacancies from the job hunters:

“When I receive vacancies, I close my eyes and picture all my clients and visualise which of them fits the job description. And I know I am not the only one who does this, intermediaries at employment agencies work like this as well. If you are always slumping in your chair (*onderuitgezakt zit*), then that’s the image I have of you.”

Again, aesthetics are crucial here, since it was primarily through *visualisation* that deservingness was evaluated. The work-readiness that was aimed at in this pedagogy was also a display of adaptability. This adaptability was required, it was often explained, because in a precarious labour market and in the wake of an economic crisis, all that is on offer is short-term work in varying fields. Consider, for example, these field notes about a workshop in which a case manager had invited a recruiter from an employment agency, specialised in construction work and engineering. The recruiter explained the importance of ‘fitting into the organisational culture’ of the company where you are applying for a job:

RC (Recruiter): “Your character has to suit the company. You might fit the job requirements perfectly, but that is not enough, you have to match the company culture. [That can be] more or less formal for example.”

One of the social assistance recipients responds by saying that he gets

rejected regularly on the basis of “not matching the company culture”, which he does not understand. He asks the recruiter what it means.

The recruiter replies by saying that “feedback like that lacks specificity and is not very helpful. The question is what that company actually refers to. For example, whether they mean to say that their company culture is formal. It is sensible to present yourself in accordance with the position you are applying to. This means wearing a suit to a job interview if the position requires you to wear a suit.”

The recruiter underpins her advice by giving an example: “A man once applied for a position as general manager wearing jeans. (...) I don’t want to have to tell you to wear a suit.”

The phrase “It is sensible to present yourself in accordance with the position you are applying to”, is exactly what makes the aesthetic presentation so complex for social assistance recipients. Sometimes this entails wearing a suit, as the recruiter explained above, but sometimes it means *not* wearing a suit, as the case manager explained in relation to a job interview for construction work. Wearing a suit can be fitting in, showing adaptability *and* it can be a cause for a sanction. This indicates that part of the performance of ‘presentability’ and ‘work-readiness’ is not only looking like one works already, but also to display an ability to calibrate dress continuously for varying work contexts.

## Conclusions

This chapter set out to investigate the implementation of the Dutch Participation Act as a case of the importance of aesthetics for both welfare-to-work programmes and precarious labour under post-Fordist conditions. It asks: 1) just what performances grant the right to social assistance benefits; and 2) what does this tell us more generally about the politics of aesthetic performances for post-Fordist labour markets? From the qualitative interviews, it appears that the right to social assistance benefits is granted to those who look ‘presentable’. This omnipresent category works primarily as a negative: case managers were well able to give examples of what is considered *not* ‘presentable’ and therefore potential grounds for sanctions – wearing flip-flops, showing too much



skin and smelling. When looking more closely at the daily practices of case managers through ethnographic methods, however, it appears not only that aesthetics are a continuously recurring concern in case managers' practices, but also that aesthetics can operate as pedagogy: sitting up straight and dressing 'as if' working is to get social assistance recipients into the 'work-mode' more generally. Performing 'presentability', then, is to give an aesthetic performance of responsibility and work-readiness as well as pedagogy through which this work-readiness is to be achieved. Not only should an aesthetic performance communicate activity and work-readiness, it is also meant as a technique of self-development to become more 'work-ready'. This is an important difference from earlier disciplining and civilising offensives in Fordism: the stress is, to be sure, on cleanliness and decency, but is ultimately much more on pedagogies to become a 'flexible', adaptable subject.

Related and on a more conceptual level, this study shows the importance of understanding the concept of aesthetic labour in post-Fordist labour markets as a continuous backstage labour. In contrast to conceptualisations of aesthetic labour as embodied characteristics at the 'point of entry' into labour, the analysis presented here shows how in post-Fordist labour markets, in which increasing numbers of people move in and out of precarious employment and unemployment, a continuous calibration of aesthetic appearances is at stake. Aesthetic labour is a daily backstage practice in which paid workers and, as it turns out, social assistance recipients engage in work-self calibrations. The crucial ability for precarious workers in post-Fordism is therefore not just to present an attractive appearance or to understand that flip-flops are a 'no-go', but the ability to adapt to work contexts in flux: potentialities, company cultures and ever-fluctuating opaque assessments of aesthetics by case managers for social assistance benefits.

Unemployment and employment, in a much more continuous fashion, are both states in which individuals have to deal with the imperative to work on their self as a marketable product. Aesthetics are an important aspect of this ongoing marketing and an integral part of labour. Far from a lofty or trivial pursuit, then, clothing and personal appearance are increasingly constitutive of social inequalities and even access to citizenship rights, as this study shows. In post-Fordist labour markets, it

may be expected that inequalities will increasingly go along aesthetic lines. Indeed, for social assistance recipients in the Netherlands, performing aesthetic labour is possibly even more important than for those in paid employment because of the looming risk of financial penalties.