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R.S.V.P.

No. I immediately was inclined to say no. And in a way I guess I do. But I love invitations. I guess everyone does.<sup>1</sup>

I received the invitation to make a short video for *Texte zur Kunst*'s 30th anniversary during my maternity leave, a time when I did not actually want to take on any additional projects. But I immediately thought of a work by Lisa Holzer, which was uploaded to the Secession website at the end of March this year. It is a four-and-a-half-minute video in which the artist reads a text from her computer screen, reflecting on the politics of invitation, rejection, and content production. For *Texte zur Kunst*, the commission is, quite similarly, a video of three to five minutes in length; like Holzer, I'm writing a text to read out loud. Busy with childcare (and with my dissertation, frankly), I was inclined to say no. But guess I do love invitations too.

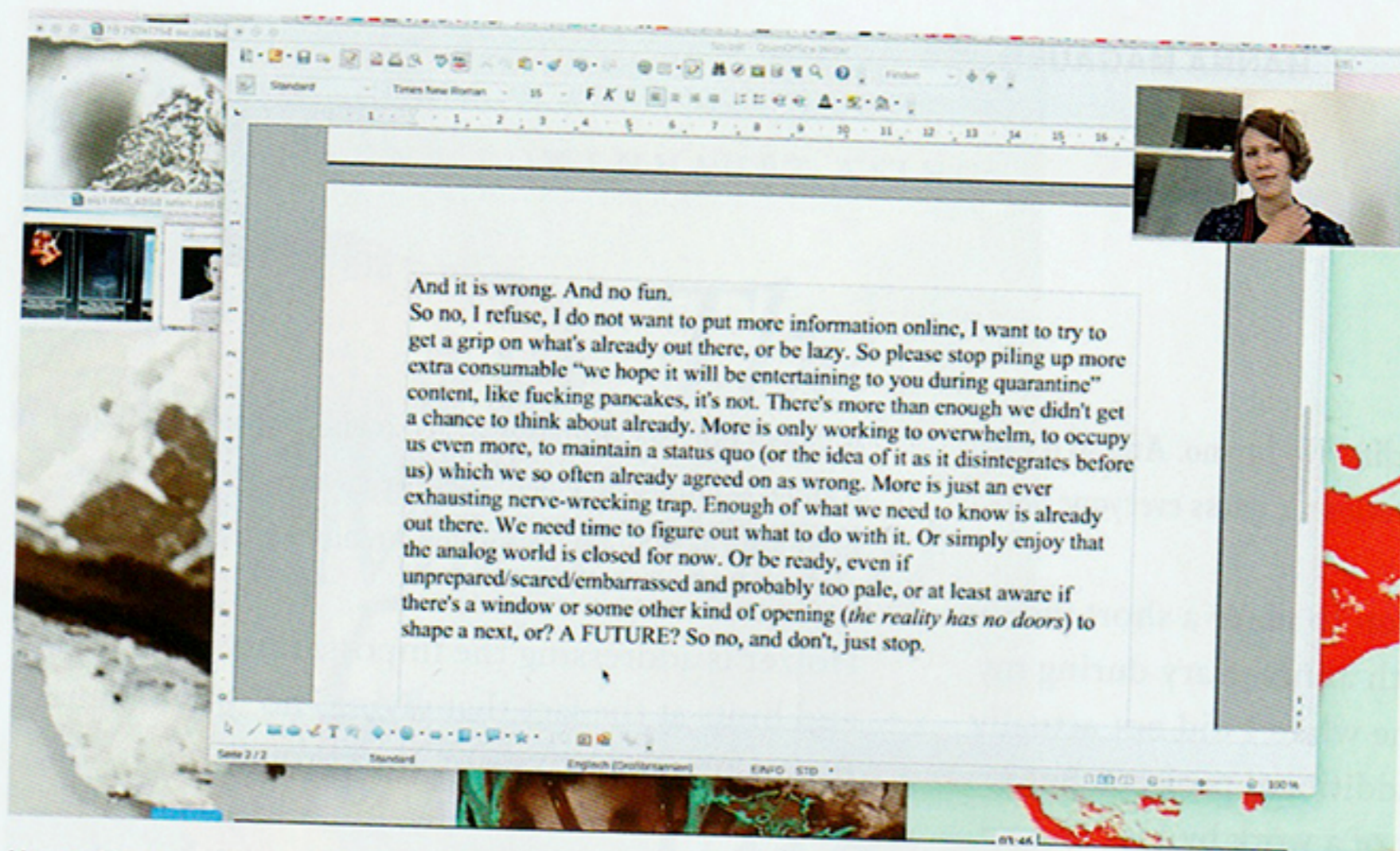
Politics of rejection, refusal, and withdrawal have often preoccupied 20th- and 21st-century art history; at least since Duchamp, artists who have wanted to position themselves at a critical distance from the art world have again and again resorted to rhetorics, attitudes, and actions of refusal. In his book *Tell Them I Said No*, Martin Herbert points to the romanticism that surrounds gestures of rejection (perhaps most strongly those of the "dropout artist"). But while an aesthetics of refusal always remains integrated into that from which it wants to distance itself, Herbert emphasizes the importance of examining in detail how refusal still might be able to create free spaces.<sup>2</sup>

And because I don't know whether or when I'll get an invitation again, I cannot say no to this one, at least not entirely. The Secession invited me to send in a video for their online presence. Like every other institution, the Secession

is closed due to Coronavirus. An invitation to contribute a video – I don't do video. I'll only do this because there might not be any invitation for a really long time.

Holzer is addressing the impossibility of refusal, and hints at the fact that saying "no" often comes from a place of privilege. The coronavirus crisis has hit freelancers brutally; it has hit women harder than men, parents and especially mothers harder than others. As has been sufficiently analyzed, it makes class and biopolitics more visible and tangible than ever. The narrator in Holzer's video cannot be separated from the artist. So, as a woman artist who has been vocal about the double standards surrounding motherhood/parenthood in the art world,<sup>3</sup> of course Holzer knows you have to be able to afford to say no. Art history has sometimes rewarded the decision for a more radical dropout, as made by artists like Lee Lozano, Sturtevant, Chris Reinecke, or Charlotte Posenenske, with a rediscovery in old age or after the artist's death. But what remains invisible is the – I quote Martin Herbert – "shadow history [...] of those artists who drift out of the art world all the time."<sup>4</sup> Female artists, artists of color, and other marginalized groups have always drifted out of the art world without anyone noticing.

In her work, Holzer uses a candy-colored aesthetics that maybe you could call feminized, even girly? The pale pink desktop background, the pastel-colored surfaces into which artificial liquids seem to flow: for me, this calls up associations of a sweet toxicity, a kind of stickiness, maybe (in a very simple analogy) the sticky seduction of the art industry... Her text, spoken in a soft voice, does not, for the most part, sound angry. It rather expresses the deep discomfort of an unwelcome hug: "no, and don't, just stop," she says at the end.



Hanna Magauer on Lisa Holzer, screenshot

The coronavirus shutdown could have been the chance to let go and pause for a moment, she says – or maybe, I might add, to devote more time to other things, like childcare, in-depth research, or protest (at a social distance).

*There's more than enough we didn't get a chance to think about already. More is only working to overwhelm, to occupy us even more, to maintain a status quo (or the idea of it as it disintegrates before us) which we so often already agreed on as wrong. More is just an ever exhausting nerve-wrecking trap. Enough of what we need to know is already out there. We need time to figure out what to do with it.*

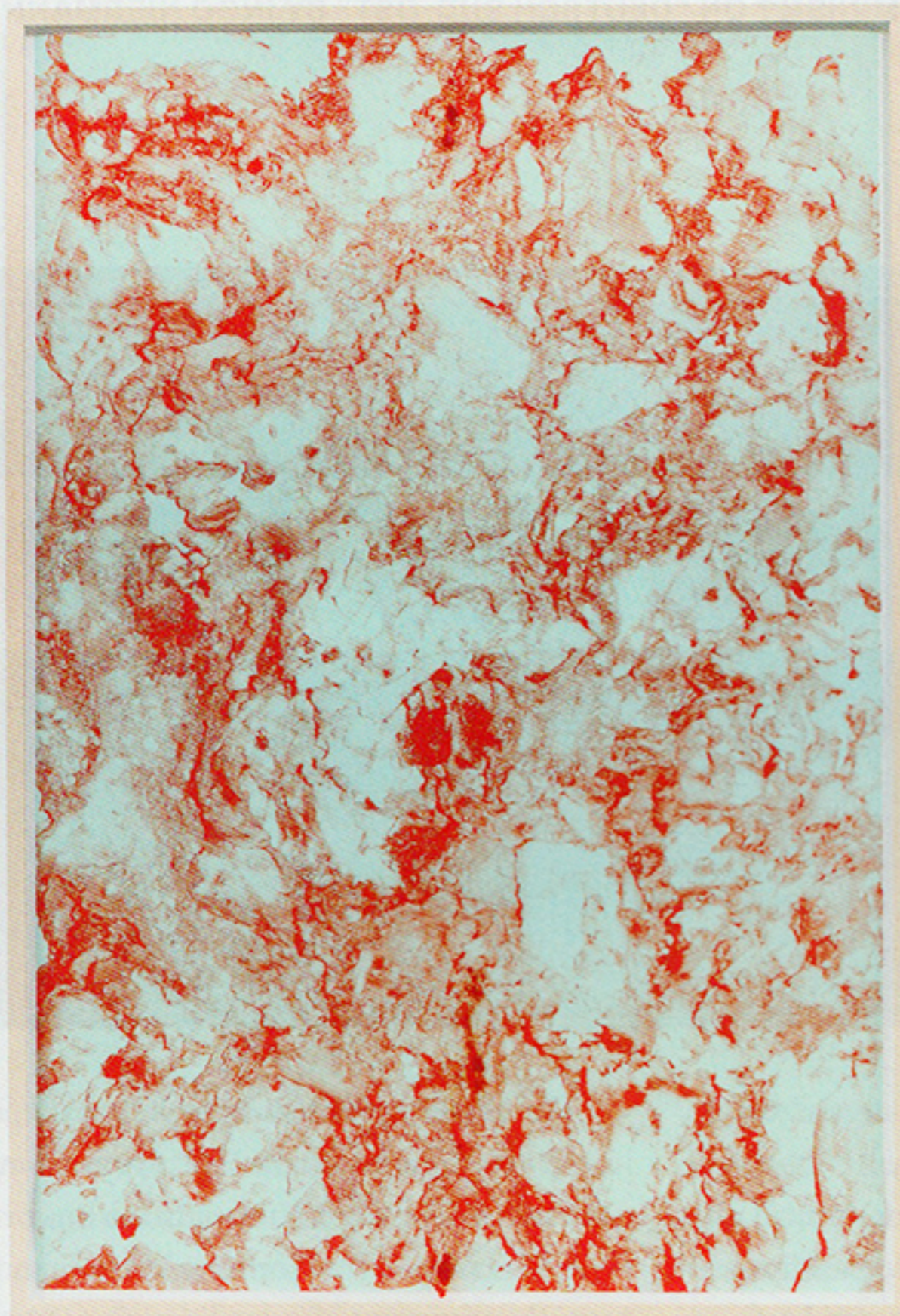
Since Duchamp, withdrawal and rejection have been understood as modes of individual artistic critique, but this is not the argument Holzer makes. Claire Fontaine, in a text about the precariousness of living and working that COVID-19 made visible, describes how “rather common strategies for governance [...] nowadays [...] are experienced as deeply individual, depending on personal failures [...]. People of all classes sense that they have personal responsibility for an order of things that is destroying them as human beings” (emphasis mine).<sup>5</sup>

To criticize the system again and again, individually, by rejecting it with a grand gesture

in this sense cannot be the solution. After all, as Holzer says, we have long agreed that the art world's status quo is wrong. So why can't we all do less or nothing, if only for a little while? In this way, Holzer's video speaks to a contemporary feminism: from the isolated computer screen, she calls for doing things differently, collectively. And what awaits in this different art world might not be a void – but more reward for other forms of labor.

#### Notes

- 1 All quotes set in italics taken from: Lisa Holzer, *NO*, video for #ArtistClips, Secession website, March 30, 2020, <https://www.secession.at/lisa-holzer/>.
- 2 Martin Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 14–15.
- 3 Lisa Holzer, *I Sweat* (Vienna: Galerie Emanuel Layr and Westphalie Verlag, 2018), p. 5.
- 4 Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No*, p. 14.
- 5 Claire Fontaine, “The Virus is Our Idea of Ourselves,” Notes from Quarantine, *Texte zur Kunst* website, July 29, 2020, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/claire-fontaine-idea-ourselves/>.



Lisa Holzer, "Guts," 2019