

Diane Severin
Nguyen: IF
REVOLUTION IS A
SICKNESS

Contemporary
Arts Museum
Houston

Diane Severin Nguyen crafts enigmatic and visually seductive images and videos that explore visual culture's central role in the construction of both self-identity and historical knowledge. Across mediums, her work focuses on states of transition and moments of transformation, be they political, ideological, or material.

The titular video installation at the exhibition's center, *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS* (2021) is set in Warsaw, Poland, and follows the character of an orphaned Vietnamese child who is taken in by a South Korean pop-inspired dance group. Widely popular within a Polish youth subculture, K-pop is used by the artist as a means of tracing a relationship between Eastern Europe and Asia with roots in Cold War allegiances. The fraught dichotomy of the East and West is further complicated by Poland's diverse Vietnamese community, which is comprised of both Northerners who migrated before the fall of the Iron Curtain and Southerners who came in the long aftermath of the Vietnam War, especially as economic migrants in the 1990s. Nguyen's video traces how these layered and often unseen inner conflicts are reckoned with in the process of finding shared symbols and naming oneself from within another's regime. The work is also a moody and melodious inquiry into the power of collectivity versus the peril of the clique, one that identifies youth culture as a critical site of revolutionary power. In addition to Nguyen's film, the exhibition includes a selection of related photographs, a site-specific architectural intervention, as well as a billboard commissioned by CAMH in the Midtown neighborhood of Houston. Central to both moving image and photographic work is an understanding of the contingency and elasticity of identity, memory, and meaning, as well as a desire to hold onto the tensions such uncertain states of being might offer.

IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS, 2021

Video installation, 4k video: color and sound, 18:53 minutes

Co-commissioned and produced by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and SculptureCenter, New York. Production in Poland was supported by U-jazdowski Residencies, Warsaw.

Projected into a theater-like stage resembling those found in cultural centers and other sites of political gathering and celebration, Nguyen's video looks at the simultaneously liberatory and propagandistic power of mass action. The video features voiceovers (in Polish, Vietnamese, and English) culled from writing on revolutionary practice by German philosopher Hannah Arendt, anarchist Ulrike Meinhof, and Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, among others. Loosely divided into three sections, the video chronicles periods of early development such as birth/infancy, childhood, and adolescence, wherein we watch the orphaned Weronika move increasingly from individuality to collectivity and from rural landscape to urban space. The final segment takes the form of a Korean pop-inspired music video, in which a dance troupe performs a series of movements with militaristic precision amidst a backdrop of Warsaw's Soviet monuments and Stalinist architecture.

To make the film, Nguyen assembled a crew of K-Pop inspired teenaged Polish dancers who perform original choreography set to music and lyrics co-written by the artist, not unlike videos found on content-sharing applications such as TikTok. The artist found the film's protagonist on Instagram by searching for a combination of a common Polish name for girls (Weronika) with her own Vietnamese surname (Nguyen). In this way, Weronika Nguyen might be considered an emblem, or even a muse, embodying the complex diasporic history between Poland and Vietnam. *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS* probes the uncertain space between revolution and rhetoric to explore the various forms of propaganda that underpin cultural (and self) image making across borders.

Cast:

Laura Błonska
Alina Chołody
Jakub Gryzbała
Natalia Jankowska
Małgorzata Kareł
Weronika Nguyen
Martyna Siedlarz

Voiceover:

Michał Lasota
My Trinh
Patrycja Oleśkiewicz

Music: Ryder Bach

Additional production/music and sound mix: Michael Beharie

Choreographer: Alvin Tran

Assistant Choreographer: Joanna Slowik

Producer: Maria Łozińska

Casting: Iga Niewiadomska

Studio and casting assistance: Hannah Park

Editing: Jacqueline Kramer

Production Assistant: Tymon Nogalski

Behind-the-Scenes Photographer: Dawid Misiorny

Color: Marco Amaral

Stage Design: Grace Laubacher

With gratitude to: Cherisse Gray, Korakrit Arunandochai, Michał Lasota, Suzanna Hadryś, Gabrielle Giattino (Bureau), Alan Segal, Jan Możdżyński, Natalia Sielewicz, Rhiannon Smith, Lily Park, Chomwan Weeraworawit, Philip Huang, Rhiannon Smith, Christopher Schwartz, Michael Bach, gracie (Kim Ga-eun), and Julia Harasimowicz

Kill This Love, 2021

LightJet C-print in steel frame
Collection of J. Patrick Collins



Against the Sun, 2021

LightJet C-print in steel frame
Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York



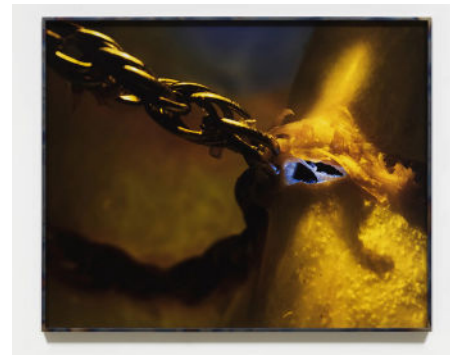
As if it's your last, 2021

LightJet C-print in steel frame
Collection of J. Patrick Collins



Daily Affirmations, 2021

LightJet C-print in steel frame
Courtesy of the Perić Collection



Architectural Intervention (CAMH), 2022

Courtesy the artist



To make her highly-staged, close-up photographs, Diane Severin Nguyen creates assemblages of both natural and synthetic materials such as fruit, hair, chains, homemade napalm, and rubber gloves. Shot entirely in her studio, her photographs capture moments “of becoming or unbecoming”: transitory spaces in which an image is nearly, but not quite, recognizable as depicting a particular thing. While we might be able to identify the constellations of objects, their allusions and effects are often contradictory and multiple: wet, womblike-spaces intermingle with more menacing allusions to bondage, hard becomes soft or inside becomes outside.

This visual complexity, or what Nguyen refers to as “simultaneity,” is paramount for the artist, who is interested in frustrating photography’s documentary status and its historical associations with truth and facticity. Instead, Nguyen emphasizes its capacity to represent in-betweenness and uncertainty. This includes a tendency towards depicting sites and states of rupture such as punctures or wounds—fleshy forms that appear pierced by metal, sutured together, or set aflame. Like her films, Nguyen’s photographs capture temporary and transitional states of being.