

# Art in America

## REVOLUTION, RESTAGED AND TRANSLATED: DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

By *Hiji Nam* December 8, 2021 1:17pm

SculptureCenter



View of "Diane Severin Nguyen: *If Revolution Is a Sickness*," 2021, at SculptureCenter. PHOTO CHARLES BENTON

**Diane Severin Nguyen**'s nineteen-minute video *If Revolution Is a Sickness* (2021) seems paced to the push and pull of tides, the rhythm of the waves. The centerpiece of her first institutional solo show—which begins at [SculptureCenter](#) in Queens, New York, before traveling to the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago—the film was shot in Poland while the Vietnamese American artist was supported by a residency there. It opens with a shot of a sunless shoreline amid a desolate landscape of fallen logs, barren fields, and barbed-wire fences graced with drops of rain. A solitary Vietnamese child populates this post-apocalyptic world, and is first shown sleeping peacefully with her head on the soft, wet sand, held gently by the water's ripples. The click of a camera shutter accompanies a closeup shot of her eyes opening. Too young to be without a caretaker, she nonetheless takes to wandering alone as she stretches, dances, and plays with a strip of red ribbon. The film's script incorporates writings on revolution by Hannah Arendt, Édouard Glissant, and Ulrike Meinhof, among others, though the references are indecipherable composites that make it impossible to trace what is borrowed from whom, and with what logic. In this scene, a Polish voiceover subtitled in English describes "years . . . lived without the sun" and the "truth of unremembered things," experiences that could refer to the catastrophes of the twentieth century or contemporary life. The child seems to be coping, however—or perhaps she does not yet have the language with which to articulate her suffering.

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The film's second chapter hinges on the child's fairy-tale transformation into a woman named Weronika, played by the fresh-faced Weronika Nguyen, a young Vietnamese-Polish art student based in Warsaw. (The artist found her via Instagram, by searching a common Polish first name with her own Vietnamese family name.) Weronika still occupies her world alone, but she is anchored somewhere in the present: her outfit could have been purchased at Brandy Melville, trains and cars traverse the landscape, and she holds a lit-up karaoke mic while practicing Tik-Tok-friendly dance moves. Meanwhile, an anonymous voice muses, this time in Vietnamese: *What do my two natures have in common besides memory? What is a body without clarity? Do they only want my pain while I'm still young? . . . Once I memorize their words will I lose my voice?*

Nguyen's approach to film as a type of semi-autobiographical collage

is evident throughout this work, which shifts not only among the languages of Polish, Vietnamese, and English (she speaks the latter two), but also, with few tonal cues, among the registers of documentary, propaganda, commercial, and psychodrama. In the film's third and final chapter, the protagonist finds community through a Polish dance group that appears, without explanation, to join her in K-pop-inspired choreographies. Polish landmarks like the Palace of Culture and Science and the Warsaw Uprising Monument form the backdrop for the scrupulously synchronized, repetitive, hooking dance movements; in their style, too, the dancers resemble a K-pop group, with their bright, graphic, sporty fabrics and coordinated color schemes. The music and lyrics are original, cowritten by Nguyen and producer Ryder Bach (though some of the text borrows from Mao's *Little Red Book*): *Their hearts were all the same shape, translucent yet impenetrable / They were capable of wasting and destroying without reason / Every sacrifice only made them more attractive to us / Their bodies would inspire millions.* These polyglottal transfers and combinations of voices and vernaculars make ambiguous who is speaking; at times the speaker addresses Weronika by name, but we do not see the actress herself speak, although she sings along to a K-pop-inspired dance song. Her voicelessness amid the din of voices—as well as Nguyen's apparent agnosticism when it comes to upholding or condemning any of the ideologies associated with the loaded historical figures she references—seems to be the point.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *If Revolution Is a Sickness* (video still), 2021, 4K video, sound, 18 minutes 53 seconds. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BUREAU, NEW YORK



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The installation of this work at SculptureCenter heightens the effect of the artist's patchwork of cultural and historical reference points, which do not function as didactic footnotes but instead speak to how the contemporary subject is constantly navigating various scripts, codas, and micro- and macro-narratives. A red-and-yellow stage housing Nguyen's film evokes a platform intended to host the Chairman, an effect enhanced by the architectural intervention of a red filter shadowing the gallery windows—yet the platform could also evoke a halftime show at an American football arena, that bastion of Western consumerist spectacle. Consider, too, the aesthetic and political implications of the seductive spectacle of South Korean pop music resembling the hypnotic sculpted masses of North Korean synchronized dancers. One notices the convergence of syntax and logic from the left and the right, East and West, North and South, which, despite being framed as antithetical, more often overlap and bleed into each other. Nguyen toggles between these codes and histories to reflect on the compromises, failures, and senseless violence of language, ideology, and identity. "My tongue even before it had ever encountered the English language was a site of power takeover, war, wound, deformation, and, ultimately and already, motherless," Korean American poet and translator Don Mee Choi has written. "Even within my so-called mother-tongue, I was already born with a tongue with a task to translate, but motherless and expelled from power." (Remember, the protagonist of Nguyen's film is an orphaned child.)

Translation, even purely linguistic translation, is an impossible profession (Freud said the same of psychoanalysis, a body of thought from which Nguyen also borrows liberally). Growing up, Nguyen was constantly interpreting between Vietnamese—her first language—and English for her parents. Referring to the line “What is a body without clarity?” in the film, Nguyen told me the question “expresses itself better in Vietnamese. It’s closer to, ‘What if my body keeps drowning?’ References to water and nature are so much more embedded in Vietnamese.” Like us, language lives, breathes, and changes; it cannot be bound by a single, impermeable skin, without the risk of hardening into a defensive, fortified shell. Nguyen’s deployment of both inter- and intralingual translation throughout her work poses questions with ethical stakes: Aren’t we doomed to misunderstanding in our attempts to comprehend ourselves, much less each other? But isn’t it still worth trying, over and over, as a necessary precondition for life?

Nguyen’s first film, *Tyrant Star* (2019), similarly merged autobiographical narratives with found material. It was set and shot in Vietnam, where she frequently visited while growing up in California, and where she first met orphaned children with birth defects caused by Agent Orange, a chemical used by the US military that is estimated to have disabled or caused health problems for a million Vietnamese. *Tyrant Star* intercuts a melancholy narrative adapted from Ca Dao, Vietnam’s traditional folk poetry; documentary-like close-ups of children’s limbs (sometimes encased in mobility-aiding braces) in a Vietnamese orphanage; and a teenage girl singing Simon and Garfunkel’s *The Sound of Silence* into a webcam alone in her bedroom. While the first shot of Weronika in *If Revolution Is a Sickness* seems to allude to the photograph of three-year-old Syrian Kurdish migrant Alan Kurdi—whose lifeless body, washed up on the coast of Turkey, made international headlines in 2015—and could come off as overly didactic or, alternately, even glib, Nguyen’s referential intent seems to be one of examination, putting under her microscope and pulling into focus the history of emotions implied in the circulation of such images. Isolation, the scars of war, and the search for refuge infuse both of her films, which trace buried memories of spilled blood. She seems to question the didactic finger-pointing of traditional uses of documentary and war photography, while borrowing some of their tools and riffing on their aesthetics.

Nguyen’s work in video shares certain formal qualities with her photographs (four of which hang in a room next to SculptureCenter’s central exhibition space) in their closeup details of spaces and assemblages both familiar and uncanny, like a dream shot in HD. Still, she sees them as functioning in different registers: if the moving-image works are grounded more directly in the terrain of the social, the photos function like visual ASMR, provoking tingles of multilayered sense-based associations. In one scene in the film, red-and-gold foil balloons commemorating events of the year 1989—the fall of the Berlin Wall and of communism in Poland—float listlessly in still water, while in another, red-manicured hands use a knife to carve into a strawberry, revealing its inner wetness. “Is it true that only a photograph can see inside?” asks the narrator. “Where is there a beautiful surface without its terrible depth?” Both formally and thematically, these scenes have the strongest resonance with Nguyen’s photographs, for which she stages materials discernible but abstracted (hair, latex, liquid, and, notably, napalm), sets them aglow with artificial lighting, then captures them at the precise moment of a(n al)chemical reaction. The impervious polish of the finished images evokes the hard varnish of fashion photography, and seems to disavow the process of destruction that went into their creation.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *As if it's your last*, 2021, C-print, 30 by 24 inches.  
PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BUREAU, NEW YORK.

Nguyen's approach to image making is grounded in an aesthetic and ethical reckoning with the historical relationship between the cinematic image and mass violence. "I like approaching photography as a set of limitations, and also as something problematic," she has said. "It forces me to begin artmaking from a non-safe space, and reckon with this very violent lineage of indexicality." Photography and filmmaking have long shaped how warfare and other forms of political violence are perceived and performed, and of course, the **Vietnam War** was one of the first to be televised and disseminated through photography and mass media. Nguyen's dialogic approach to lens-based media—restaging media images, collaging histories—critiques the legacies of empiricism from the inside out, particularly the tyranny of belief systems that claim all values and forms of knowledge must be measurable and visible, a project to which the medium of photography has also contributed. At one point, early in Nguyen's film, a Polish narrator describes the experience of isolation and its destructive effects, and the costs of political participation versus withdrawal. Later on, a voice muses in Vietnamese, "If I don't become an artist then I will just remain a victim," encapsulating the human drive toward transformation. The site of Nguyen's practice is the space where past and present collide; what comes to the fore in her work are the conflicting and contradictory desires within individuals and society, and how such contradictions are reflected, reified, and frustrated. It is ultimately a testament to how the burdens of the past are handed down, and how each of us attempts to master the past—a process from which no one emerges unscathed.