

ARTFORUM

Portfolio: Diana Severin Nguyen

By Lloyd Wise , October, 2021

In Diane Severin Nguyen's portfolio for *Artforum* the artist shares a selection of production stills shot by photographer Dawid Misiorny while Nguyen was filming *If Revolution Is a Sickness*, 2021. The video, set in Warsaw, appears in Nguyen's first solo institutional exhibition, at New York's SculptureCenter. (The show is co-organized with Chicago's Renaissance Society, where it will open in the spring.) Just a few blocks away, at MoMA PS1, Nguyen is participating in the fifth edition of Greater New York, which opens later this month.

If Revolution Is a Sickness begins with an orphaned Vietnamese girl washing ashore in an unidentified European country. Years later, isolated and alone in Warsaw, she is taken in by a crew of teenage K-pop fans. Clad in revolutionary crimson and goth sportswear, the scrappy gang performs sinister, synchronized choreography against a backdrop of Soviet monuments, Stalinist architecture, and illegal skate parks. In one image, two dancers perch on a dilapidated fountain. Spray paint covers the concrete edifice, and though the swirls of graffiti may imply a makeshift public forum—a collision of diverse and competing voices, in harmony and dissensus—violence mars the surface: A vandal has drawn a so-called sun cross, a symbol of the fascist far right. A second picture further alludes to the burst hopes of neoliberal democracy, as four Mylar balloons—cheerfully spelling out “1989”—sink to watery depths.

Underpinning Nguyen's video is the theme of the individual and the group: the need to belong versus the cruelty of the clique, the threat of loneliness versus the anonymity of the crowd. The teens' mundane hazing and bullying, directed against their Vietnamese-Polish peer, are constitutive to the formation of national identity, while the tight choreography may alternately suggest a communal bid for TikTok stardom or a disciplining of bodies into alienated abstractions.

“The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls,” Siegfried Krakauer wrote in 1927. Yet the bodies in *If Revolution Is a Sickness* are no mass ornament, with its links to centralized capitalist rationalization; instead, they point to a new, more elusive kind of emblem—an image of the painful erasure and demands for representation that undergird our networked and atomized present.



Weronika Nguyen is a high-school student in Warsaw, a future artist, and the lead actress of my film. I found her on Instagram by combining a common Polish first name with my own Vietnamese surname. She is the only member of the group who doesn't actually listen to K-pop or make dance videos, but after two weeks of daily rehearsals, we turned her into a dancer anyway. Here, she poses with Martyna Siedlarz and Laura Błńska. It's unclear whether they are pushing her into the water or if she is trying to fall in on purpose, because she feels so different.



Alina Chołody (left) and Natalia Jankowska (right) in front of a defunct fountain at a small local park. Graffitied behind them are the Polish words for *faith hope tolerance*, but *tolerance* has been crossed out. On this day of filming, we improvised group tableau scenes of non-dance movements.



Alina, Jakub Grzybała, Laura, Martyna, and Weronika (from left to right) at the legendary Powiśle DIY, an illegal skate park under a bridge that spans the Vistula River. Jakub is probably the most famous K-pop dancer in Poland; his crew, @majestydanceteam, later returned to this location to film their own video, a cover of the single “First” by Everglow. He recruited Laura after meeting her through our project; she danced in that video, too.



Known locally as the building of spies, Sobieskiego 100 is a mysterious Soviet building in the district of Mokotów. There are many rumors about this property. Though supposedly abandoned since 1989, it is surrounded by barbed wire, surveillance cameras, and roaming security personnel. Apparently, the Russians have kept the building but refuse to pay rent to the Polish government. Since we can't get inside, we film from the outside. In one scene, we sink these balloons into a nearby pond.



Martyna (left) and Gosia Karel (right) hold onto Weronika's head as she pretends to shoot herself. Painter Jan Mozdzyński let us climb through the window of his studio to access the building's rooftop, which offers an unparalleled view of Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science. A "gift" from Stalin, the structure looks almost identical to a building at Moscow State University, with some minor Polish flourishes.