

BROOKLYN RAIL

Diane Severin Nguyen: *If Revolution Is a Sickness*

By **Rachel Remick**



Installation view: *Diane Severin Nguyen: IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021.
Photo: Charles Benton.

Over establishing shots of the countryside, in that transitory state between the overgrowth of summer and the sparse death of winter, a male-sounding voice reads a letter to his comrade Weronika in a foreign language, as English subtitles cross the bottom of the frame. A young girl appears onscreen, asleep on an unknown shore, the water gently lapping toward her closed eyes. Is this Weronika? Her youth and watery introduction conjure images of rebirth or migration as she wanders the countryside and its derelict buildings. Here we first encounter themes of movement that will persist throughout the film that follows: arched back bends, slow lunges, arm raises. The narrator describes to Weronika the processes of politics and collective action. Sourced from various texts on revolution, he laments that the “most pressing issue is how to explain the at-times gruesome experiences we have had in isolation.”

So begins Diane Severin Nguyen’s new film and installation, *If Revolution Is a sickness*. Set in Poland, the film “loosely follows the character of an orphaned Vietnamese child who grows up to be absorbed into a South Korean pop-inspired dance group,” per exhibition press. Conceptually, Nguyen digs into the dynamics of collective action, revolution, and political engagement, all funneled through a pop song with lyrics written by the artist. While dabbling in Cold War politics, dichotomies between East and West, and narratives of migration, the film resonates most for its engagement with the affective registers of revolution and the ways that revolutionary action is innately tied to youth culture—like the South Korean pop music Nguyen uses as scaffolding for the film’s music and dance scenes.



Installation view: Diane Severin Nguyen: *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. Photo: Charles Benton.

To show the film, Nguyen has built a theater-like stage that fills the cavernous main exhibition hall of SculptureCenter. The stage’s armature is swathed in garish yellow and red fabrics, and the floor is covered with red carpet. There are no chairs nor any invitation to sit. Instead, Nguyen’s installation gives the impression of a larger-than-life puppet theater.

After the first sequence of the film concludes, a second monologue begins, and Weronika transforms into a teenager—Veronika, wearing the same distinctive yellow and red clothes as her younger self. Teenage Veronika spends her free time in Warsaw learning K-pop song and dance routines with her Polish friends. The score begins to transform in this passage, from the

predominantly piano-based lullabies of the first act to something that is broken by industrial noises and metallic clangs. The narration shifts as well, to a female-sounding voice in a different language, perhaps representing Veronika's interior monologue. Onscreen with her friends, Nguyen's costuming accentuates Veronika's "otherness" by contrast. Veronika's outfits are yellow, while the others are clothed in black and red. Veronika wonders, "Do they really think I'm cute or just different?" As the teenagers rehearse dance routines on soccer fields or in defunct factories, Nguyen establishes setting through images of urban Warsaw—stoic and squat apartment buildings and unexplained bronze monuments underneath nets of exposed power lines. Elsewhere, Nguyen creates metaphorical images, including musical scores annotated with red ink and then set aflame, Veronika's burgundy acrylic nails plunging into a ripe strawberry, the teens forcibly submerging gold and red Mylar balloons that spell out 1989 (the year the Berlin Wall fell) into a river. These scenes imbue the images of the dance rehearsals with a hint of violence or sensuality—or both. Are they training to dance or to revolt? In exploring revolution vis-à-vis pop music (a fundamentally affective genre), Nguyen is able to reach the structures of feeling which underpin it: youth, desire, violence, history. Veronika asks, "Do they only want my pain while I'm still young?"



These rehearsals crescendo to the third act of the film, which functions as a music video for the song that gives the film its title: “If revolution is a sickness.” Here, revolution is an altered state, an illness, a deviation. Veronika acts as the lead singer, her companions flanking her as they perform a choreographed dance routine. Nguyen and her collaborators borrow heavily from contemporary K-pop and hyperpop music, creating a song that smashes together many distinct melodies and styles, with each verse and chorus taking on a different tempo. Alongside the lunges and slow body rolls of the dance routine, Nguyen mixes in more visual images, most potently one of the teens destroying a neoclassical bust with a hammer. In an action heavy with symbolism, the young dancer’s hammer reduces the old order to shards with every strike. “If revolution is a sickness,” Veronika pleads, “I wanna be sick, sick, sick!”

If I were to level any criticism against *If Revolution Is a Sickness*, it would be that Nguyen’s creation is so dense that it does not end up saying any one thing definitively. Then again, perhaps this is Nguyen’s aim: to cast a net of concepts and feelings that the viewer can draw connections between. This indeterminacy dovetails with pop music’s own tendency toward universalism, emphasizing big feelings and suppressing specific details. Such pop music-cum-social critique brings to mind SOPHIE’s song “Immaterial” which pokes fun at the materialism and consumer culture of pop music with sardonic lyrics about the literal materiality of our bodies. SOPHIE croons, “Without my legs or my hair / Without my genes or my blood / With no name and with no type of story / Where do I live? / Tell me, where do I exist?” In this critique, SOPHIE interrogates not just material culture, but how it allows us to recognize ourselves. “With no name” or “with no type of story,” the narrator is left without a recognizable existence.

Nguyen's film proposes a similarly layered critique, investigating revolution and how it can be historicized, a process that operates here as a form of social recognition. In her song Veronika declares, "Forget history—it is full of pain (pain!)," and later in that verse goes on to say "This is the end of history." Nguyen emphasizes the fundamental connections between history and nation-building (or revolution as a form of nation-building). History is a way in which nations recognize themselves; to create a new history is to start the process of forming a new society. We might see Nguyen's film as an elegy to failed revolutions or the ways in which all revolutions transform themselves and become institutionalized, a memorial to lost histories, or histories that never took root. As the narrator at the beginning of the film asks comrade Weronika, "where is the truth of unremembered things?"