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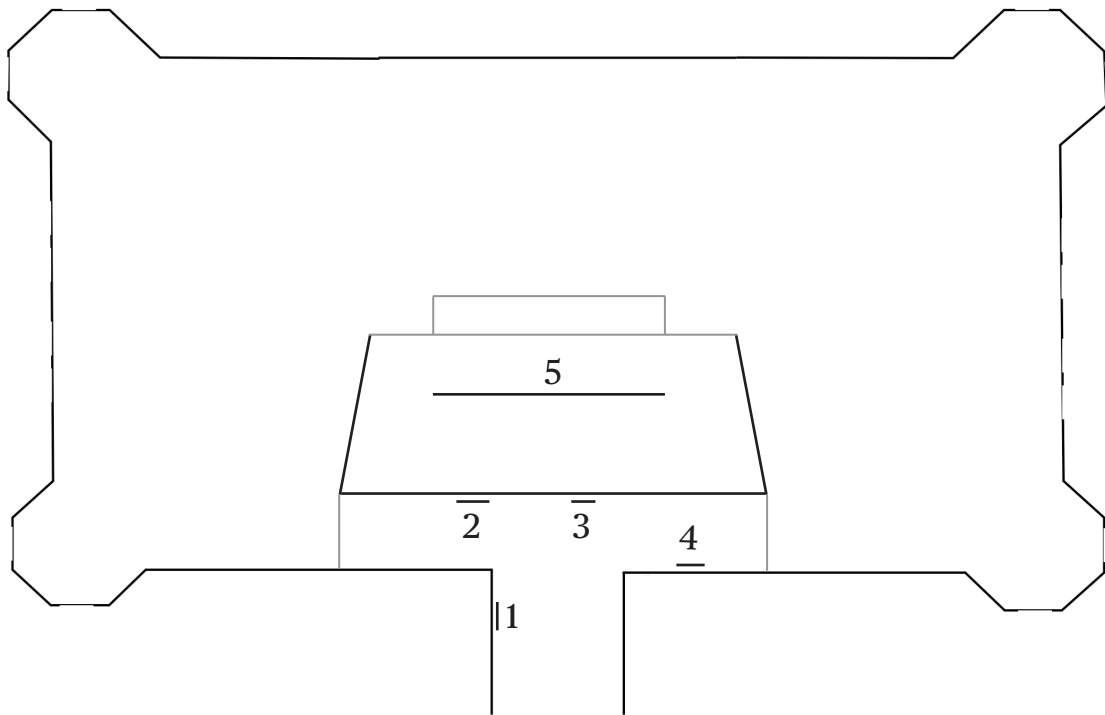
DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS

IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS, Diane Severin Nguyen's first one-person museum exhibition, presents a newly-commissioned 19-minute video of the same title and four photographs in a total installation resembling a theater and its backstage. Set in Warsaw, 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. Widely popular within a Polish youth subculture, K-pop is used by the artist as a vernacular material to trace a relationship between Eastern Europe and Asia with roots in Cold War allegiances. Spilling over from first-person narrative into near-*abstraction and pop music video*, Nguyen traverses the complicated

beauty and multivalent forms of propaganda that underpin cultural (and self) image making.

Nguyen found—or rather realized—her film's protagonist on Instagram by searching for a combination of a common Polish name for girls with her own Vietnamese surname. In this way, Weronika Nguyen might be considered an emblem, or even a muse, embodying the complex diasporic history between Poland and Vietnam. Of the significant Vietnamese diaspora currently living in Poland, they are divided by Northerners who migrated before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and Southerners who came in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Weronika's character in the film



- 1 *As if it's your last*, 2021
LightJet C-print, steel frame
Courtesy of J. Patrick Collins
- 2 *Daily Affirmations*, 2021
LightJet C-print, steel frame
Courtesy of the Perić Collection
- 3 *Kill This Love*, 2021
LightJet C-print, steel frame
Courtesy of J. Patrick Collins
- 4 *Against the Sun*, 2021
LightJet C-print, steel frame
Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York
- 5 *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS*, 2021
Digital video with sound, 18 minutes, 49 seconds
Co-commissioned and produced by SculptureCenter, New York, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

is both alienated and subsumed; her conflicted desires speak to the contradictions of finding shared symbols and naming oneself from within another's regime.

Projected into the pomp of a red and yellow stage, Nguyen's video probes the paradoxes inherent to her distinctive approach to making photographs. As she experiments with improvised assemblages of light and material in the studio, the artist captures moments "of becoming or unbecoming"; liminal instants in which an image is nearly, but not quite, recognizable as depicting a particular thing. This strategy is rooted in Nguyen's interest in individuation and identification, the processes by which we differentiate objects—and ourselves—from the world around us. Installed in a backstage-like corridor through which the viewer first enters the space, the amorphous photographs offer a passage into the show itself, which is guided in part by the overarching question: Can true self-realization take place within the unifying spaces of narrative and representation?

For the project, Nguyen assembled a crew of teenaged Polish dancers who perform original choreography set to music and lyrics co-written by the artist. By arranging these trained bodies—who are invited to "lose themselves to the new image," as Nguyen's lyrics suggest—

into movements of militaristic perfection, the artist considers both the dramatization and the erasure of personal traumas in the process of building personal identity, as well as the formation of a shared nation space.

The melodramatic pull of the spectacle is disrupted by the voiceover, culled from various and often contradictory writings on revolution by Ulrike Meinhof, Hanna Arendt, and Mao Zedong, among others. The text and the image function on two different registers, not in the service of one another. The work uses this internal tension and shows how a single entity could be used for potentially diametrically opposed ends: propaganda or blockbuster, self-actualization or commodification, asceticism or exuberance.

Curated by Myriam Ben Salah.

The project is co-organized by the Renaissance Society and SculptureCenter, New York, where it was on view Sep 13–Dec 13, 2021. The New York presentation was curated by Sohrab Mohebbi.