

BOMB

The Presence of the Perfect Image: Diane Severin Nguyen Interviewed by Alec Recinos



Still from Diane Severin Nguyen, *Tyrant Star*, 2019, single-channel color video, fifteen minutes, fifty seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

In Diane Severin Nguyen's 2019 video *Tyrant Star*, an aspiring YouTube performer sings a haunting rendition of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence." Even as it remains recognizable, the cover song reconfigures the affect and meaning of the original, opening up new possibilities while centering the circumstances of the song's making. Nguyen's photographs, included in the ongoing *Made in LA 2020: a version* biennial, work similarly, creating cover songs out of colloquial dross. In the process, any easy reading is complicated. The photograph no longer simply points to a subject, and instead the very act of viewing and understanding—and all of the extra-aesthetic baggage it entails—comes into focus.

—Alec Recinos

Alec Recinos

I've been struggling a bit with figuring out where exactly to start, and I think that might have something to do with the way your work insists on being understood as enmeshed among so many things at once: political, aesthetic, ethical, historical. It exists in excess of its material, and there is always too much to say. How do you approach this commingling?

Diane Severin Nguyen

Your question provokes an insecurity, coming from a binary which feels outdated and yet persists: Is my work capable of political labor, or am I asking too much when I push everything through it? Is it all just projection? Or do I feel misunderstood about the political because I refuse the linguistic? Art and politics are not supposed to be opposed to each other, but they sometimes are, and maybe even more so than usual.

I like thinking through insecurities because I am handling this medium which is really the substance of the mass unconscious. Photography is very dirty and promiscuous and not safely "art" to begin with, not unlike some of the materials I might work with. This excess you speak of, the commingling, is inherent to the medium but also an ideological longing on my part to reveal codependencies so that we stop denying one thing in order to absolve another thing. I'm working with all these binary splits, because that's how the technology was formed; and I am trying to force them to face each other, intertwine, and admit to one another their flaws and desires.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *Shattered Tribes*, 2020, LightJet C-print, steel frame, 15 x 10 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

AR

Do you think a wholeness is possible? With photography, this rift seems almost inherent, tying ordinary feelings (like how weird it can feel to encounter a picture of ourselves when it contradicts how we thought we looked) into something more fundamental like the classic Cartesian division between body and mind.

DSN

Rather than seeking redemption, I just want to allow for the possibility of total negation, which is to acknowledge that everything happening outside of the frame is what holds you still in this moment, and that without it your sovereignty is broken. On purpose, I keep this division between inside and outside very unclear, which obscures where the intellect is coming from. It also allows the interior space to seep outward or vice versa and more relations to accumulate. The risk is that I'll never have the appearance of authority that conceptual art might have; either the materials are too seductive or the image is too manipulative. Or I'm speaking too much on their behalf. Again with the excess, but I think it's also just the natural surplus of a Western thought paradigm, which divides stimuli in a fairly reductive way.

AR

I love what you say about the need to stop denying one thing in order to absolve another and how this can open the possibility for more relations to accumulate. For me I think this gets perfectly at why conversations about the relationship between art and politics tend to go nowhere. So often people are only capable of focusing on one of these two terms at a time—which is already such a myopic approach—while holding the other constant, resulting in a “political art” that is highly legible as such but can be vacuous in form and content.

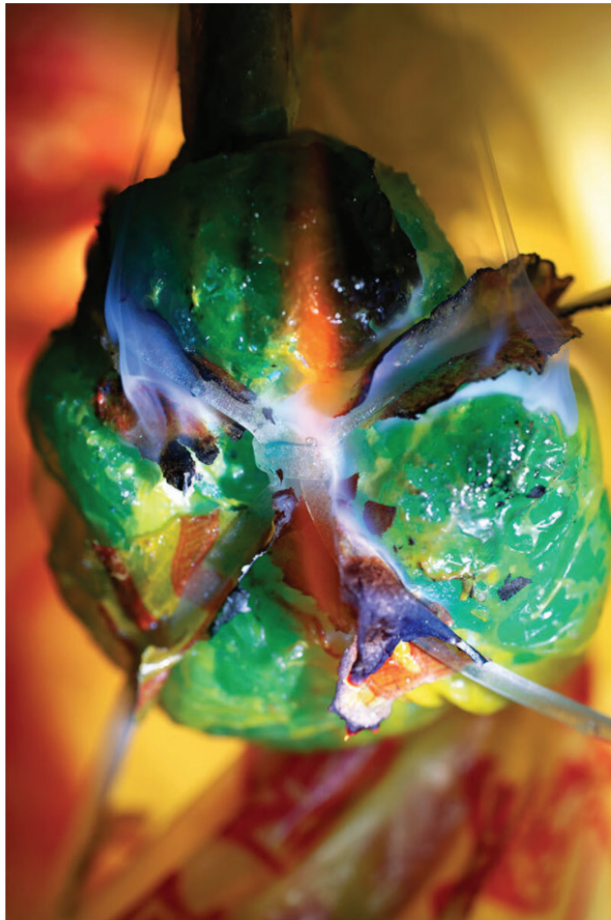
I'm curious about the question you posed concerning the capability of your work to itself perform labor, whether political or otherwise. The way you've previously spoken about your studio process has sounded focused around labor, not only with creating the situations that are then photographed, but also ensuring the performance of the objects themselves. Do you look for a specific relation between the labor that goes into making an artwork and then the way the art works in the world?

DSN

I'm definitely not trying to disorient anyone for phenomenological pleasure or enact the “poor image” in order to prove my critical distance. I think I'm actually dismissing legibility so that I can access a *new* kind of clarity, one that is immanent to the image, a lucidity that cannot be usurped by someone's “knowledge” of the thing being photographed.

AR

It's funny how this kind of clarity simultaneously circumvents and highlights the limitations of the way in which most people approach photographs, where the focus is placed on the things you can recognize or see in the image, while everything else (the process, medium, or form of photography) is bracketed out.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *No New Idols*, 2020, LightJet C-print, steel frame, 15 x 10 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

DSN

The thing you are seeing does and doesn't matter. It's only made "real" by the conditions of a photographic moment, and it only makes "sense" because of the layers of photographic consciousness—other images and dreams—stratifying said moment. But it's not random; maybe desperate is a better word, and the desperation is twofold. Firstly, from this moment must emerge a new idea. It is crucial to this labor to make an image that has never been made before, because meaning, like a word, can only be invented in opposition to the thing it's not. The "not" in this case are the remains of a billion other images, fragmented and mutable, so the newness is a bit of a necromantic act.

AR

I'm interested in how you're conceptualizing newness in photography, especially at a point when the discussion seems to be more focused on a kind of image fatigue—the idea that at this point there are way too many images, and there isn't really anything meaningful or "new" that could even be done.

DSN

I think there's a revolutionary potential in summoning new ideas through such a contaminated medium, partly because Western postmodernism tells us there are no new ideas. I'm thinking here of newness not as an outcome, or a thing that's never been seen or felt before, but more as a set of conditions from which the emergence of difference can occur and

be perceived as such. For instance, a sensorial element could feel similar, but it's the awareness of an origin point, or the corruption of an origin point, which creates that contemporary layer. The most certain thing I know about the new is that it is capable of seeing the old. And it's this perspectival advantage that can actually disrupt and subvert hierarchies of time.



Installation view of Diane Severin Nguyen, *Summer Cuts*, 2020, LightJet C-print, steel frame, silicone. The Huntington. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

AR

It also feels like what often passes for “newness” isn’t even that. It’s not so much something actually “new,” but rather the next step in a process where preexisting ideas become increasingly refined or developed.

DSN

The tension is in what you exclude or subordinate in order to define yourself more clearly and obtain a coherent ideology or photograph. But even if the unity is illusory, at the root of it all is some kind of desire to exceed oneself, and I find this sense of lacking to be very generative for image-making. I think being honest about this is more productive than trying to make the invisible “seen” on the visible’s terms.

So the drive for perfection is the second fold of my desperation, partly because the notion of the “perfect” is such a major photographic concern, both as an affect and as a tool. To crave the perfect body, the perfect “life,” a perfect dog, a perfect birthday, etc., isn’t just an ahistorical human

desire, but it's contoured by photographic conditions and their demands for seamlessness as well. I think the mistake is to believe we've subjugated photography as a tool of labor and objectivity without considering how we could not convey life itself without it. So in my pursuit of the perfect image (and I hope that desperation is felt), I realize that the perfect image cannot be seized by the photograph in front of you; the most the photograph can do is admit to the presence of the perfect image that will never appear.

Diane Severin Nguyen's work can be viewed in Made in LA 2020: a version; Tyrant Star can be viewed on the Carnegie Museum of Art website until February 14.

Alec Recinos makes work: <http://www.alectrecinos.com>.