

Spaces of Agency

Installation Art in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

References to the visual arts appear frequently in the work of Dionne Brand. Tuyen and the graffiti artists of *What We All Long For* may be Brand's only self-declared artists, but many of her characters engage in artistic production. To name a few, Violet Blackman of *thirsty* forges art out of manual labour—"her gesso was that wood flood" (36); in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Maya transforms peep show into performance art, Kamena makes drawings in the dirt, and his daughter Bola later draws with the sweep of a broom. In Brand's imaginative landscape, artistic production often enables interaction with the socio-political world, becoming a means through which her characters can navigate experiences of (un)belonging. The speaker's pleas in "I Met a Painter" from Brand's first collection *Fore Day Morning* (1978), for instance, value artistic production and connect it particularly to the pursuit of visibility. This speaker demands, "Paint me here. / Painter! Painter! don't forget! / paint me soon!" (24) and insists on describing what can and cannot be painted: "Paint those ladies from the country / [. . .] / but watch that stroke! / Hide that bare foot / hide those worn souls" (22). These comments establish the value of the visual arts as a representational strategy. To be represented or, even more importantly, to create the visual representation is to negotiate one's visibility and potentially counter any previous experiences of exclusion and/or invisibility.

By extension, in Brand's writing, artistic production becomes a way to assert agency over one's circumstances and physical surroundings. The art produced is largely enmeshed with its environment. Marks are made on the floor, ground, or wall, rather than on paper or a canvas. Meaning is created

not by a singular art object separate from its surroundings, but by the orchestration of a whole space. Whether or not overtly named as such, the art produced by Brand's characters most often takes the form of installation art, her most extensive representation being Tuyen's art practice in *What We All Long For*.¹

What We All Long For depicts the friendship of four young Torontonians—Tuyen, Oku, Carla, and Jackie—all of whom are dealing with various personal and/or cultural traumas. Tuyen's narrative, which centres upon her negotiation of past familial trauma, is the main focus of the novel, and the central concern of critical discussion surrounding this text. Although there is a growing body of scholarship which foregrounds Tuyen's photography (e.g., Austen; Cuder-Domínguez; and Lai), Tuyen is not merely a photographer. She is a self-declared creator of installation art. In analyzing Tuyen's art practice, this essay foregrounds her installation art as a negotiation of available spaces. Installation is by nature an art form that emphasizes one's habitation of space; not only is the artist engaged in designing a whole physical environment, but the viewer is also bodily immersed in the work. In *What We All Long For*, Brand establishes installation art as a form which choreographs one's bodily proximity to material objects. As such, installation art provokes a self-aware visceral response. In that Tuyen's projects largely involve an engagement with her family's traumatic history, installation art functions in *What We All Long For* as an attempt to claim a space in which one can negotiate one's relationship to others and to the past. Brand's interest in how the past haunts the present has been well explored in critical discussion (e.g., Dhar; Grandison; Härting; Johnson; and Moynagh), as has her ambivalence regarding the productivity of seeking belonging or rooting oneself in the past (e.g., Goldman). Aligned with this tradition of Brand scholarship, the following discussion will showcase Brand's depiction of installation art as a method for productively engaging the traumatic past. Installation art, as represented by Brand, gives the past a material presence that can be bodily experienced, which thereby allows for the destructive power of the traumatic past to be diminished.

That the visual arts can provide a way of speaking the unspeakable is perhaps not surprising. In the wake of the work of Cathy Caruth, many have acknowledged that traumatic experience "mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency" (Gilmore 6). In cases where words are unavailable or too painful to utter, the visual arts—a more abstract mode of expression reliant on connotative impressions rather than denotative

certainties—can create meaning in suggestive rather than prescriptive ways. Installation art, as a form specifically concerned with spatiality, provides special opportunities for communication. Installation art's foundational characteristic is its engagement of the body and subsequent provocation of visceral experience. To experience the work solely through one's eyes is not enough. Walter Benjamin may have lamented the loss of an art object's aura, but installation art, even more than other forms of art, must be experienced first-hand. It must be walked through, smelt, or touched in order for it to communicate. Julie Reiss observes, "There is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer" (xiii). The viewer is "implicated with [an installation] in a manner that differs considerably from the conventional relationship between viewer and painting or sculpture" (De Oliveira, Oxley, and Petry 13). As Suzi Gablik suggests, installation art is concerned not with monologue or "self-expression" (82), but with "dialogue" (83). It thereby offers what she deems a "connective aesthetics" that precludes the possibility of an audience member remaining a mere "detached spectator-observer" (86).²

As Mark Rosenthal observes, installation art requires that "one becomes aware of one's own experience of such objects. That quality of beholding oneself beholding is often a crucial behavior associated with much installation art" (64). Juliane Rebentisch similarly casts installations as "not only objects to be beheld but simultaneously also the site of reflection on the aesthetic practice of beholding" (15). This meta-critical awareness of oneself elicited by installation art can, of course, be extended to the creator's experience of the work as well. Although most artistic production requires a physical proximity between the artist and his/her work, with installation art the artist is utterly surrounded by his/her creation. Furthermore, the installation artist's key purpose is to orchestrate an audience's bodily relationship to the installation, suggesting that the artist's sense of his/her own occupation of space becomes heightened during the installation's creation. Installation art thus demands that both its creator and its audience be keenly aware of their bodily relationship with the installation and its parts.

To see a photograph or painting can, of course, still provoke a visceral response. For instance, consider Roland Barthes' discussion of the photograph's *punctum*—the wounding a photograph can cause—or theories of the sublime that link vision to visceral, even spiritual, experience. Nevertheless, whereas more traditional art forms encourage a viewer's detachment, installation art privileges haptic, physically immersive experience. Jennifer Fisher describes

the haptic sense as “comprising the tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses, . . . aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the capabilities of the visual sense” (6). A work that is experienced primarily through vision may still promote a physical response, but as Teresa Brennan explains, “for the main part, sight is perceived as the sense that separates, where the other senses do not” (10-11). The audience of installation art does not merely see the work, but instead enters into it, becomes a part of it, is surrounded by it. The audience must therefore negotiate a relationship to the installation in a visceral manner. As Claire Bishop argues, “installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision” (6).

Carla's experience of Tuyen's installation *Riot* serves as a wonderful example of the kind of bodily experience made possible by installation art. *Riot*, described as “an installation” (206), consists of a series of photos taken during a protest against globalization that Tuyen attended with Oku. The photographs convey the violence and chaos of the event, an event during which Oku was arrested. This installation may not be as multimodal or performative as Tuyen's other creations; it is, after all, just a series of photos hung on the wall. However, it is Tuyen's choice of space for these photographs that renders this exhibition an installation. The placement of these photos in the stairwell of Tuyen's and Carla's apartment building—versus their placement in a gallery or hanging in a straight line on a wall—suggests that Tuyen is not simply displaying these art objects but is in fact orchestrating the whole space. She constructs meaning not just through the photographs but also through their relationship with their surroundings.

Envision the scenario: one would be climbing or descending the stairs and encountering these images as one moves upwards or downwards. In other words, one's movement on the stairs becomes part of the meaning. A stairwell is a site that, yes, allows for stilled contemplation of individual images, but that does not actually promote such stopping and staring. Stairs are, after all, primarily a site of transit. Stopping involves an awkward balancing act in a constricted space.

For Carla, the experience of these photographs in a stairwell is uncomfortable. Her experience is synaesthetic—she hears sight—and the power of the encounter affects much of her body: she experiences a “flinching ascent . . . her left ear bent to her shoulder as if against the sound of the pictures” (207). Brand writes, “The photographs made Carla queasy. . . . She rushed up the staircase and into her apartment quickly each time she came in. The

photographs, something about the motion in them, their sequence, reminded her faintly of the dream of her mother climbing onto a chair” (206). The photos themselves may foreground motion; they are described as fragmented images: “the arc of a tear-gas canister” (206), and “[t]he arm of the cop entwined with Oku’s flailing arms” (206). But, the “motion in them, their sequence” is actually in large part created by Carla’s own movement up the stairs. Importantly, it is the movement up, not down, the stairs that is emphasized. Tuyen, the focalizer of this section of the text, describes having “mounted these photographs on the staircase *coming up*” (206, emphasis added). Furthermore, no description of the photographs experienced by someone descending is offered. As Heather Smyth argues, Carla’s experience here in part shows her ability to see her own experiences in those of others, which thereby suggests the “nonlogical or provisional linkages between social identifications” (284). Nevertheless, I would argue that Carla’s experience of these photos as an uncanny reminder of her mother’s suicide does not come from the photographs’ content. Rather, her response is provoked by her own movement up the stairs which mimics her mother’s action: the mother climbed onto a chair before jumping off the balcony to her death. In that Carla repeats a climbing action, her body’s motion itself produces the painful uncanniness of her experience.

As Carla’s experience suggests, installation art’s engagement of the body motivates an awareness of one’s habitation of space, and thus a contemplation of one’s relationship both to the materiality of the installation and to its subject matter. Mark Rosenthal observes, “Just as life consists of one perception followed by another, each a fleeting, non-linear moment, an installation courts the same dense, ephemeral experience. Whereas painting and sculpture freeze time and perhaps suggest something eternal, installation abhors such an effect. The viewer is in the present, experiencing temporal flow and spatial awareness” (27). Ronald J. Onorato similarly characterizes installation art as a medium that makes the viewer inhabit his/her present time and space. He writes, “More than anything else, it is a yearning for a sense of ‘being there’ or, better yet, of just ‘being’ that informs our preoccupation with installation art” (29).

Installation art’s ability to motivate this awareness of one’s position in space is what allows it to create productive experiential situations like those addressed by Alison Landsberg as having the potential to forge connections across difference. As Landsberg argues, immersive situations—in her discussion, predominantly those of movies or museums—enable the formation of prosthetic

memories—memories of events one did not experience directly. Such prosthetic memories thereby allow for the development of one's social consciousness and empathetic response to others. Although not referring specifically to Landsberg's work, previous scholarship on Tuyen's art practice frame it precisely in terms of this kind of socio-political potential to form community. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, for instance, addresses Tuyen's final planned project as a means of "tackl[ing] intercultural communication" (158), while both Kit Dobson and Heather Smyth cast this same project as representative of the city. Smyth, in particular, suggests that Tuyen's plan to form a surrealist exquisite corpse—a collage—out of the longings of many becomes a model for city life in which parts can remain parts amidst a whole and in which a unity is realized, albeit a potentially awkward and/or painful one.

My discussion of Tuyen's art practice will similarly conceive of it in terms of negotiating questions of (un)belonging, but my discussion turns the attention away from the broader city and its dwellers towards the function of Tuyen's art for herself. Tuyen may be the creator of her installations, but since installation art is bodily immersive, Tuyen also experiences her art as an audience member. Tuyen's vision for her final project may be to capture a "gathering of voices and longings" (149) so that she can represent the city as "polyphonic" and "murmuring" (149), but her project also reflects her own attempt to locate herself within this "gathering." As Brand scholarship has foregrounded, Brand largely dismisses notions of belonging; she instead offers "a politically-charged alternative to the desire for belonging and possession" (Goldman 14). Nevertheless, Tuyen, while not confirming belonging as an achievable state, does pursue a space she can more comfortably inhabit.³ For Tuyen, whether or not she fits into her surroundings and its social groups proves largely dependent upon her ability to find a more productive way to relate to her family's traumatic past. As someone living in a state of postmemory, which Marianne Hirsch defines as a state experienced by "those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (22), Tuyen struggles to come to terms with the loss of her brother Quy, a loss that has greatly affected her but that she cannot feel first-hand for herself. It is through her installation art that Tuyen attempts to develop a model for positioning the traumatic past so that it remains accessible and yet consumes less space in the present, becoming less destructively haunting and alienating.

Throughout *What We All Long For*, Tuyen is engaged in forming an installation project which represents personal and familial longings along

with the longings of others whom she encounters randomly throughout the city. This project involves her recovery of physical documents relating to her parents' search for their son Quy, who was accidentally lost as they fled Vietnam. In addition to this focus on familial loss and longing, Tuyen's project includes transcriptions of oral narratives of longing that she solicits from various individuals, predominantly strangers. Modelling the traditional Chinese signpost called a *lubaio*, Tuyen first intends to have her audience "post messages on the *lubaio*. Messages to the city" (17). At another point, she then sculpts figures in "uneasy positions" into the *lubaio*; "some were headless in an extreme agony, or was it elation?" (43). As the project evolves, she chooses to collect messages of longing herself, producing what she calls a book of longings, and transcribes these longings onto a large cloth. By the end of the narrative, the project has become even more expansive; it will require "a larger space, . . . three rooms really, very high ceilings" (309), her plans involving a "diaphanous cylindrical curtain" at the centre of each room "hung from the ceiling, that the audience could enter" (309). Within the three separate cylindrical curtains, the audience would find, first, the *lubaio*, representing "all the old longings of another generation" (309), second, "twelve video projections, constantly changing, of images and texts of contemporary longings" (309), and finally emptiness and silence (309). This final room might represent the future, but its meaning is unstated. In the end, Tuyen cannot give her project a conclusive purpose; she admits that "[s]he still wasn't quite certain what she was making; she knew she would find out only once the installation was done. Then, some grain, some element she had been circling, but had been unable to pin down, would emerge" (309). Given this unending contemplation of her project and Tuyen's implied need to experience her project not just as its creator but as its viewer, the installation is linked to Tuyen's own psychological development as much as to her desire to represent and thereby unite city dwellers. Even though her project remains an unrealized plan, the symbolic significance of her intentions remains interpretable; her project claims space for the past and fashions this space as welcoming and inclusive.

Considering Tuyen's previous lack of control over how her family's loss of Quy intruded into the spaces of her daily life, her choice of installation art—an art in which she can assert agency over a whole space—is appropriate. While growing up, Tuyen could achieve little command over how her family's past entered into her surroundings. Images of Quy "littered the house" (225), as her parents sent copies of the same one photo "around the

world in [their] quest to find him" (225). For a time, Quy invaded all areas of Tuyen's space: "[t]hroughout her childhood Quy had looked at her from every mantel, every surface" (267). Nonetheless, just as Tuyen possesses no control over the overwhelming presence of Quy's image, she too has no control over its eventual disappearance. As Tuyen describes, one picture in particular—an image of the family shortly after the loss of Quy—would be "removed and replaced" on the mantel by her mother, "[a]s if she could not decide whether she admitted or could bear the reality it suggested but that she occasionally had to face" (223). Even the image of Quy that had "littered" Tuyen's spaces of childhood eventually disappears from her visual landscape: "Over the years the photograph was less and less in evidence until it had virtually disappeared. It was not on the mantel of the house in Richmond Hill. It lay in the recesses of her mother's room now with [Quy's] baby picture. . . . Tuyen hadn't seen the picture in years" (226).

Tuyen's lack of control over the image of Quy parallels her lack of control over how her family's loss infiltrates her home, rendering it unhomey and constrictive. With no control over how this loss is made either visually or psychologically present, Tuyen experiences her family's trauma as an uncanny haunting, one that is both vaguely recognizable and yet unfamiliar because not her own. Much as Tuyen's struggle with the loss involves her negotiation of how the loss is materially present in the home, the family's own handling of their loss is depicted as occurring through a negotiation of space. Not only are Tuyen's parents said to sleep in separate rooms because of their separate struggles with insomnia, but also Tuyen theorizes that they, in fact, need separate rooms "so as not to have to talk to each other, to go over the worn language of disappointment" (60). Tuyen's engagement with the family's loss is similarly materialized through the depiction of her own occupation of space. In particular, her knowledge of the family's tragedy is gleaned through her infiltration of spaces that do not belong to her. Tuyen acquires copies of letters sent during the family's search for Quy—letters that she intends to use as part of her installation—by sneaking into her mother's room. Brand writes that Tuyen "had no idea what she would do with these letters, but she sought them out in her mother's room when she went on visits home and held them like ornate and curious figures of a time past" (25). Tuyen's breaching of her mother's space can be read as a beginning effort to control Quy's presence in her surroundings; by seeking it out, she can at last then control its place in her life. Instead of accepting her parents' attempt to hide away their efforts to find Quy, Tuyen goes into a space where

she does not belong in order to negotiate her relationship with a past in which she also cannot belong.

Beyond her negotiation of spaces within the home, Tuyen's plan for her installation also functions as an attempt to assert agency over her family's past and determine for herself its place in her surroundings. Tuyen's history of not being able to control the intrusion of the family's loss, and her subsequent feelings of confinement, results in a pattern of behaviour whereby she seeks to claim more and more space for herself, a claiming of space that is realized because of and through her art practice. Brand offers an important juxtaposition: the first mention of Tuyen's trespass into her mother's room is directly followed by the revelation that Tuyen had "surreptitiously broken down the wall [in her apartment] between her bedroom and the kitchen, making one large room for her installations" (25). This juxtaposition contrasts Tuyen's experience of a confining space in which she does not belong with her ability to control her own living space and give her art—and herself—more room. Carla, Tuyen's neighbour, even worries that Tuyen will one day want to destroy the wall separating their apartments so that she could "extend her sculpture through to Carla's place" (40).

This voracious need for more space can be charted in the evolution of Tuyen's plans for her installation project as well. A project that is at first located within Tuyen's apartment becomes a project needing the space of friend Jackie's store as its exhibition site and then an even "larger space" (309). The expansion of the space required for the installation is a measure to ensure that the site is accommodating rather than confining. The features of Tuyen's planned installation too suggest a desire to craft a welcoming space that not only gives the audience room to move but also is flexible enough to adapt to everyone who enters. Consider, for instance, the symbolic significance of Tuyen's choice of the "diaphanous cylindrical curtain, hung from the ceiling, that the audience could enter" (309). Firstly, its circular and fluid nature represents a distinct contrast to the hard, solid edges that Tuyen, in particular, has confronted elsewhere. In other acts of artistic creation, Tuyen has resisted the solidity of straight lines. Beyond her actual destruction of the wall in her apartment, even her early artwork, purposefully or not, avoided the rigidity of linearity. Tuan, her father, may have given "her pieces of paper and a ruler" so that they could draw "boxes, bridges, pipelines, buildings" (115), but "Tuyen's drawings quivered on the fantastic, first because she was a child and her lines would become wavy, or as her mind wandered she would include a face here and a kite there" (115).

Although unstated by Tuyen, straight lines and their solidity come to signify exclusionary borders that separate. Importantly, the objects that Tuyen would draw with her father are all objects that divide space: bridges, though tying two spaces together, simultaneously draw attention to their innate separation; boxes, pipelines, and buildings all function as containers, delimiting an inside and an outside. The waviness of her lines, although at first a product of her lack of dexterity, also suggests a discomfort with the separations imposed by the linearity of such objects. As Tuyen's drawings evolve, these borderlands dividing spaces are precisely what she destroys: "A head grow[s] out of a drainpipe, a river flow[s] through the roof of a house" (115). Both these images suggest an unwillingness to let divisions persist: the head escapes from inside the pipe, the river penetrates the house. Both images thereby render the division between inside and outside fluid.

Tuyen's choice of the diaphanous cylindrical cloth functions within this context of making borders more porous and hence space less divided and exclusionary. While the cloth does suggest a portioning of space—it is something that the audience will be either inside or outside—its flexibility and translucency render it a shifting border. As cloth, the curtain can, for instance, adapt to those who seek entry, its circumference growing as needed, the space expanding to give room. In fact, Tuyen's insistence on "very high ceilings" (309) also ensures maximum flexibility: the longer the curtain, the more its circumference can expand. Furthermore, the curtain's translucency suggests that its division between an inside and an outside is not definitive. From outside the curtains, one would be able to see the hint of what is inside, and vice versa. The two spaces remain tied. The viewers, thus, are never total outsiders nor total insiders in relation to the curtains and what they contain. As a result, the space that Tuyen envisions symbolically suggests inclusivity and a promotion of one's belonging, rather than exclusion. Importantly, Tuyen's intended use of the curtains, along with her potential covering of the floor with "sand" or "water" (309)—both amorphous substances—suggests that she is fashioning a space that adapts to the bodies which inhabit it, rather than the bodies having to adapt to the space.

Beyond this crafting of an accepting and accommodating space, Tuyen's installation also must be seen as a response to her family's treatment of their loss as something both literally and metaphorically boxed-up and put away, that is, until it again hauntingly surfaces. It is no wonder that Tuyen seeks to destroy the borders that separate, and by extension, that permit repressive secrecy. Her experience has been one of facing spaces,

again both literal and metaphoric, where she cannot go, and yet the family's trauma does not stay politely confined to its given place. Much as the "head grow[s] out of a drainpipe" (115) in her drawings, her family's loss appears where it does not belong and is not wanted.⁴ I would argue then that Tuyen's need to "apprehend *the seepages* in her family's life" (115, emphasis added) informs her choice of a diaphanous cylindrical curtain for her installation. This curtain remains a border apportioning space, but its translucency and flexibility not only acknowledge the difficulty of containing what one wants to hide but also, and more importantly, offer a more enabling model for negotiating one's relationship with trauma. Things like her parents' letters and the picture that she has taken of the man believed to be the adult Quy are envisioned to be inside the diaphanous curtain, which thereby becomes a protective covering and yet one that can be seen through or entered. The trauma, thus, can be accessed, and accessed, in particular, by choice; it is no longer repressed or hidden away, nor does it have to be a constant presence.

Furthermore, since installation art is an ephemeral, rather than permanent form, Tuyen's constructed relationship with the past is one that can be experienced and yet eventually put away. As Onorato asserts, "[m]uch installation art is transient and does not survive in the form of permanent objects" (15). Tuyen's installation thus offers an experience to be had but it does not suggest that this representation of the past will achieve a permanence that will constantly have to be confronted.

Nevertheless, this potentially more enabling model for confronting one's pain and the pain of others does not eliminate all discomfort and hurt involved. Tuyen's approach to her installation suggests she is attempting to achieve agency over how the past enters into her life and how it dictates her relationships with others. However, any feeling of control that the installation offers is suggested to be a rather arbitrary and fleeting achievement. The fact that Tuyen's final installation will be structured in a manner akin to her own apartment reveals this fickleness. Tuyen's apartment is described as follows: "One thing with Mrs. Chou's slum apartments—the ceilings were high. Tuyen's dark room [*sic*] was a thick black velvet curtain" (25). Although Tuyen does not acknowledge the connection, in envisioning the rooms of her installation as recreations of her darkroom—albeit using diaphanous cloth rather than the opaque black velvet—she suggests that what is possible in the darkroom, both good and bad, is possible in the installation.

The darkroom for Tuyen is clearly a space of orderliness and a space where she is in control, despite the unruly nature of her materials. The darkroom

is described as “the only neat space in the apartment” (221), a space where Tuyen handles her tasks with precision. All of the descriptors of Tuyen in her darkroom confirm the level of control she maintains within this space: “The lights off, she pulled the film out, cutting it smoothly from the spool, then with a dexterous motion she pulled it onto the reel in the light-tight tank” (221).

Nevertheless, despite this agency, the darkroom remains a space of possible threat. One's control over his/her materials may fail at any moment by, for instance, pouring the developer out “too quickly, leaving some silver on the film” (222). Even more importantly, the darkroom is a space where one must constantly confront the unknown and its revelations. Not knowing what the emergence of the film's image will bring, one enters into an unsettling uncertainty. Tuyen, for instance, experiences trepidation while waiting to see if the face of her lost brother Quy will be revealed in the photographs she has taken of her brother Binh in conversation with a mysterious stranger. As well, Tuyen's control over her materials in her darkroom is juxtaposed with her mind's wandering. She may be concentrating on developing the photographs that will confirm whether she saw Quy, but in the midst of this process, “[h]er mind ran to her mother in another photograph” (221-22), a photograph showing her mother pregnant with Quy, thereby a photograph signifying what the family lost. The installation itself similarly would not be able to prevent such mental wanderings; in fact, it would likely promote them, much as Carla's mind had wandered to her own trauma while encountering the unrelated images of the protest. The audience, and Tuyen too, thus, would remain unsafe in the vagaries of associational thinking brought on by the experience of the installation.

Beyond this significance of the installation's similarity to Tuyen's darkroom, the use of the individual rooms to separate the “old longings” from the “contemporary longings” (309) suggests a desire to experience time in a more orderly fashion whereby the past no longer intrudes into the present but rather has a space of its own. Nevertheless, her description of her plans for the installation confirms that this desire to segment time cannot be realized. Tuyen's description of the installation begins as follows: “she felt for the photographs of Quy still stuffed in her bag. She would make tiny copies of the image, yes, and insert them among the records of longing in her installation. She would take photographs of the people of the city too, and sprinkle them throughout” (308-09). The photographs of Quy are of an adult man Tuyen assumes, without confirmation, to be Quy. As such, these

photographs already signify a complex relationship with time. Not only do they reveal a face that seemingly has not aged, but if Tuyen did make “tiny copies” of the image, she would be repeating her parents’ earlier copying of Quy’s boyhood image, thereby tying her contemporary longing for Quy to the old longings of her parents. Furthermore, the positioning of the copies of Quy’s image remains unspecified; they will be placed “among the records of longing” (308), but which “longings”? The old or the contemporary or both? Will they, like the images of “the people of the city” be “sprinkle[d] throughout” (309)? Despite Tuyen’s desire to render time more manageable and the past less intrusive, her plans for her installation reveal that separating the present from the past may not be possible.

Nevertheless, even with the necessary failure of Tuyen’s project to eliminate completely the past’s power over the present, her project still imagines a disarming of the past’s destructive influence, and hence, envisions the possibility of personal healing. By not only making her family’s tragic history public, but also doing so in a way that links it to the losses and longings of others, Tuyen can construct a stronger sense of belonging for herself. Although Tuyen’s final plan for her installation involves representing her family’s experience of loss, this installation reveals an important movement away from the self-focus of prior installations.⁵ Her previous installation *The Traveller* along with her unrealized plan for an installation about her family both feature Tuyen as the performer. In *The Traveller*, Tuyen appears “in bubble wrap, with stickers from various countries pasted on her naked body” (64). She is lifted by the audience and “pass[ed] . . . around the room in silence for ten minutes” (64). In her unrealized plan for an installation representing her family, Tuyen would walk around, bumping into invisible boxes that would release such things as “spikes and keys and mouths and voices” (126). *What We All Long For*, however, concludes with a vision for an installation that removes Tuyen from personal, physical involvement in the installation. The installation may still be autobiographically expressive, but the personal revelations are offered anonymously. Tuyen makes no mention that captions will be used either to anchor the meaning of her familial documents/images or to attach the other depicted longings to specific individuals. Consequently, this installation enables the release experienced through confession, while also offering the safety granted through one’s anonymity in a crowd. Tuyen can thereby escape being the spectacle that she has been before, both in her past art and in her daily life: note that the novel even introduces the character of Tuyen as someone “you want to look at” (2).

In that the installation represents the experiences of many, Tuyen and by extension those who feel represented by the installation's various parts are offered the chance to evade being the uncomfortable centre of attention. The felt exceptionality of one's experiences can be dispelled. In motivating an awareness of the commonality of exceptional experience—the traumatic, the out-of-the-ordinary, the so-called abnormal—Tuyen's installation enables an alternate, though still uncertain and uncomfortable, experience of belonging. Tuyen's vision for her installation, therefore, reveals the possibility for installation art to offer an inhabitable space of interaction whereby walking through the losses, desires, and other such exceptional experiences of others, one can defuse the destructive power of one's own felt differences.

In *What We All Long For*, installation art comes to signify a negotiation of the spaces one has available and an attempt to forge new more productive and comfortably habitable spaces. Tuyen's installation functions as a model, unsuccessful though it may be, for Tuyen to develop a more stable and supportive relationship with the past and its inhabitants. Her installation attempts to offer her family's traumatic past a space in the present where its presence and influence can be respected and yet its destructive power be limited.⁶ Nevertheless, although Tuyen does suggest the possibility that she will overcome the alienation previously resulting from her relationship with her family's trauma, Brand does not suggest that the past can be easily or utopically tamed through its treatment in installation art. Installation art may suggest that it can offer producers and audience members a certain agency over the space that they design and traverse. It may involve a claiming of space when other spaces have proven restrictive or unavailable. Still, in *What We All Long For*, these promises of installation art remain largely unrealized potentialities. In Brand's depiction, there is a demonstrated need and desire to manage how the past is located within the present, and yet Brand's portrayal of Tuyen's art practice simultaneously reveals a continued ambivalence about what such a space will look like and whether it will be as productive or as healing as promised.

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NOTES

- 1 A longer discussion than can be pursued here would include a consideration of Alan's artistic production in *thirsty*. Not only does he sign the pavement that he helps produce, rendering it akin to artistic creation, but his spilled blood itself is described as a form of art: "A deliberate red, like *Ethiopian henna*, / seeped into the floor grooves when Alan fell" (55, emphasis added). Furthermore, beyond Kamena's and Bola's drawings in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, the Younger Bola is even more a producer of installation art than her elders. Using the first Bola's drawing, the Younger Bola produces a room-sized installation that replicates the first Bola's rock off the coast of Culebra Bay.
- 2 Gablik's ideas are more valuable to a discussion of Tuyen's art than I cover here. Her casting of installation art in terms of "connective aesthetics" also involves her sense that installation art "cultivates the intertwining of self and Other" thus producing "modes of reciprocal empathy" (82). Unlike art that promotes a separation between an art object and spectator, installation art can be community-building and provide "a model for connectedness and healing" (86). Although this focus on art as community-building is somewhat tangential to this article, I would note that other scholars, namely Pilar Cuder-Domínguez and Heather Smyth, have contemplated Tuyen's art practice as promoting community formation.
- 3 The matter of belonging is notoriously complex. It depends both on whether the social group seeks to include an individual and on whether the individual perceives this group as inclusive and actually desires to be a part of it. In this way, although Tuyen may not find a social group to which to belong and although she may still not find herself easily accepted, she does, in the end, experience a sense of belonging in that she can perceive others who are like her. Whether or not she and those others actually unite to form a cohesive collective does not prevent Tuyen from sensing that she does fit somewhere and that is a form of belonging.
- 4 Her other not-yet-realized installation meant to represent her experience of family uses precisely this imagery of overflowing containment. Tuyen would walk through a room, running into various boxes out of which objects like "spikes and keys and mouths and voices" (126) would fall.
- 5 Interestingly, the graffiti artists' work also demonstrates a movement away from self-representation towards an expression of the longings of others. While the art is initially limited to their own personal tags, the culminating example of graffiti art is Kumaran's mural depicting the various "places where Angela Chiarelli [Carla's mother] dreamed of going" (302).
- 6 Emily Johansen offers a similar interpretation, suggesting that Tuyen's intentions for the *lubaio* specifically are "to make the past useful but to avoid becoming marooned there as her parents and older sisters seem to be" (n. pag.).

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