



Sofia Karim

Notes on *An Architecture of Disappearance*

In 2018, during her uncle's incarceration, Sofia Karim began an ongoing body of work titled An Architecture of Disappearance. These fragments of her texts, in the form of essays, iPhone notes and letters to prisoners, offer a glimpse into that work.

Writing letters to prisoners has become a precious ritual. Initially I wrote because it is an important form of solidarity. I wanted the prisoners I campaigned for to know they are not forgotten; the worst thing is to be forgotten. But as time went on the letters became more than this. I describe the process as “ritual” because I must confess that sometimes, writing was also a means of relieving my own pain.

As an artist, my urge is to get closer and closer to human experience. Our correspondence gave me access to their existence, a hinterland on the edges of life and death, hidden from our eyes. I always published our letters because my duty was to also bear witness to that existence. Through the letters I developed relationships not only with the prisoners, but with their families who would hand the letters over. I would send my drawings to them too, some created only to be seen by prisoners and never to be seen by the outside world.

How did I choose which prisoners I wrote to? It was determined by whichever way my work and life took me. In 2020, the case of the BK-16 prisoners in India caught my attention—the dark and terrifying manner in which they had been framed by the state. (*Washington Post* and other media revealed that key evidence against the BK-16 was fabricated and planted on their computers through the use of malware.) Held under terror laws, confined for stretches in the notorious *Anda* (egg-shaped) cell, Dr Anand Teltumbde was one of the BK-16 and on his birthday, his family asked the public to send him letters. That was how my correspondence with Anand began until he was released in November 2022. His prison letter to me is still up on my living room wall.



As for Professor G. N. Saibaba, our connection began when I read the poems he'd written in jail. Ninety percent disabled, held in solitary confinement in India, he wrote:

My face shines under the flames of my burning pain,
in the dark entrails of the prison house
of tyranny.

I began making art around his case which his family happened to see. His wife Vasantha and I began a beautiful form of communication which continues. I would write letters to Sai and send them to her to pass him. I wrote to Sai until he was released in March 2024. In October he died, only seven months after his release. I still write to him in my head.

And death row prisoner Tim Young—how was that connection sparked? That arose from a trip to University California Santa Cruz, where I came across some objects on a bookshelf. The objects intrigued me. I was told they were the belongings of Timothy James Young, a wrongfully convicted prisoner. Tim has been incarcerated for over 26 years, much of which was spent in solitary confinement in a 4.5 foot by 10 foot cell at San Quentin State Prison, California.

Essays on Architecture—1

I

The idea came whilst I was swimming, as so many of my ideas do.

When I am weightless.

II

If architecture is an embodiment of humanity, it must confront the pain of the past and present.

Pain's mirror is beauty, or pleasure.

I seek to bring architecture closer to the human condition.

A building can provide shelter, comfort and functionality. It can invoke a sense of liberation and awe.

But it can also make us look at ourselves.

III

This time last year, my uncle was in jail.

When he shut his eyes he saw bars. I drew cages



(2019, notebook)

Essays on Architecture—02

I

Amdani cell (আমদানি সেল), Keraniganj jail, Bangladesh. Bodies pressed against bodies. Poses so intimate I can only try them with my children, in effort to understand.

II

I draw the bodies in various ways: sometimes as solids and sometimes as vectors projected in space. I draw the same thing for months. And after some time I realise that when I'm drawing the Amdani cell, I'm not only drawing this instance, but every such instance:

the stacking of bodies—dead, alive, or barely alive—the final phases of human subjugation.

What if it were my children in that heap? I draw till the lines dissolve beyond recognition.

Then space breaks across my screen.

(2019, notebook)

Egg (Anda)

I rarely have a plan. I'll be cooking the kids eggs for breakfast. The form of the egg will get lodged in my mind. Later, scraping shells off the plate, my interest is aroused once more. I seize it. Draw an egg obsessively. In section, plan, elevation. From multiple perspectives. The fact that the 3D surface of an egg unrolled into a 2D plane looks like two spiral stairs winding into infinity, preoccupies me for weeks. No one else shares my excitement.

“Dim” (ডিম) = word for egg in Bangla. I make a new word: Dimspool (ডিমস্পুল)—noun—a three (or more) dimensional space, volume, object or entity, unrolled into a 2D planar surface.

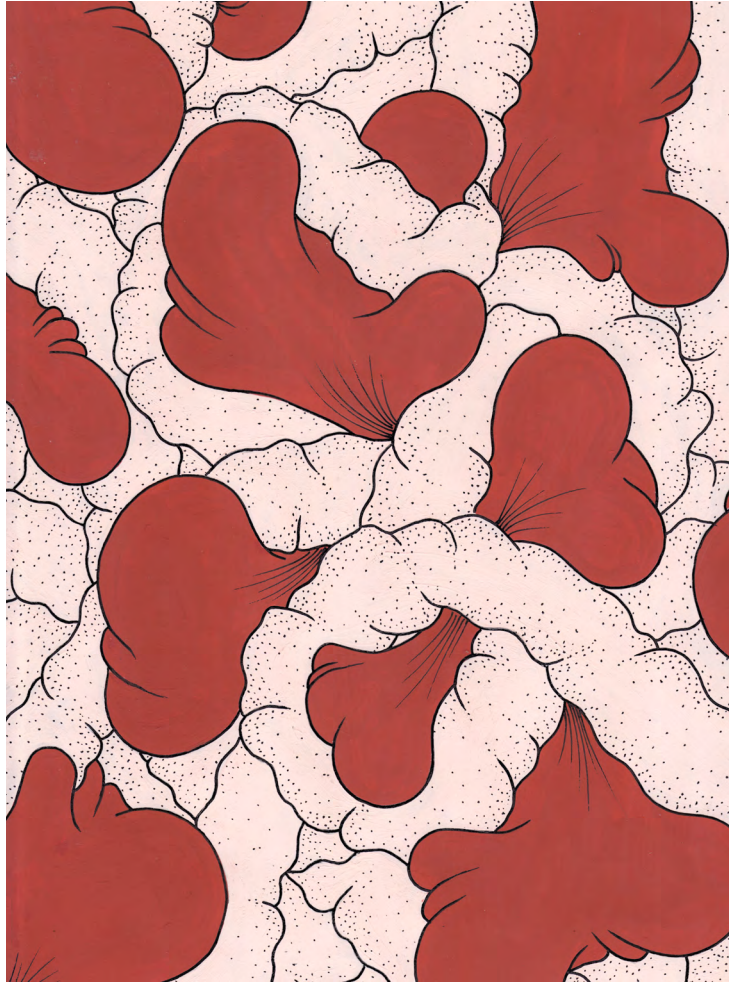
I sense that one day, this word will come back into my work. But I don't know how.

Three years later: Professors Saibaba and Teltumbde are confined in the notorious *Anda* Circle high security cell. I ask audiences in Germany to sign letters calling for their release.



What does *Anda* mean?
It means egg.

(June 2022, iPhone notes, “*Anda Cell*”)



Letter from Sai

Dear Sofia

I received your letter written to me on the 5th July 2022. It brought to me the fragrance of your art. I wanted to write a reply immediately but fell ill seriously. Next two months I could not focus my attention on anything. It was probably Swine Flu. All of us got contracted the same virus. Somehow I survived but my co-accused succumbed to the pathogen. I couldn't recover from this tragedy. Pandu Narote was from most primitive tribes" of central India as such designated by the UN. He did not know what law, court and a case meant till he was implicated in this. (...)

Vasantha wrote asking me to tell you what colour I love seeing through my prison cell. I cannot see any colours through my prison cell except the rusted iron bars and dilapidated dirty walls.



The colour I like since my childhood is green, parakeet green. Green is the colour I long to see from this prison cell where no colours are around. Green is the colour of planet earth's life. The colour of freedom that I see in my dreams in the last five and a half years is green. (...)

(c. September 2022, extracts of a letter from jailed Professor G. N. Saibaba to Sofia Karim. Saibaba was sentenced to life imprisonment in India under UAPA terror laws. Held for ten years, he was released in March 2024 and died in October 2024.)

My Exploding Pain

Dearest Professor Saibaba

Today is New Year's Day. I have been thinking about you lots, wondering what you and your fellow prisoners might be doing on this day.

As everyone rejoices on this day amidst fireworks and good cheer it hurts to think of you confined in Anda. I often feel a lingering sadness on New Year's Day but this year it is more pronounced.

Forgive my delay in writing to you. Your letters, including the one about parakeet green, the colour you long to see, the colour you dream of, moved me profoundly.

Today I re-read your poem, *When is the New Year*, and realised that I included several words and spatial concepts from this particular poem in my early architectural drawings for a body of work titled *An Architecture of Disappearance*. It is an ongoing body of work in which I explore architecture as a language of struggle and resistance.

prison clock
my exploding pain
mass of time gathers
monstrous machine

All these words appear in the drawings which depict architectural space as a system of "The whole tiny universe with all its planets and stars of galaxies" which you said appeared behind your closed eye-lids. The drawings are mainly black and it is this sense of the void that I feel so strongly today. What this notion of the void represents even in my own drawings, I cannot say. I am unable to decipher meaning. (...)

(1 January 2023, extract from a letter to Professor G.N. Saibaba.)



Thin Place

Dear Dr Teltumbde,

I am writing to you from the island of Iona on the south-west coast of Scotland. I made this postcard for you. It shows Iona Abbey (a structure I see from the kitchen window) built on the site of a monastery founded in 563 AD. Beside this structure is a small, stone chapel (drawn beside the map on the other side of this letter). The chapel was empty with unlit candles left beside a simple wooden cross. I lit 16 candles—for all 16 of you including Father Stan Swamy. After his death you all held a one-day hunger strike. In solidarity I also fasted that day, in London. Close to the chapel is Martyr's Bay where 68 monks were massacred in 806 AD.

This island is known as a “thin place” where the boundary between the physical world and the spirit world is said to be thin.

The rocks are 3.5 billion years old. I wrote “FREE ANAND” in the sand and watched the ocean carry the message away. Last year I carved those same words into Ben Vorlich, a mountain in another part of Scotland, where the rocks are 60 million years old.

Sometimes I wonder if drawings are “thin places”. Perhaps that is why I send you drawings, as a means to escape into the image and enter another world. A world on the other side of this planet, or a world even beyond this where Father Stan resides. I don't know. (...)

(July 2021, extract from a postcard to Prof. Anand Teltumbde who was imprisoned in India under UAPA terror laws and released in November 2022.)

“What makes a wrong note right, is the note you play right after”

Dear Tim, brother

Four months have passed since I last wrote. Yesterday I listened to a recording where you spoke about your grandmother, how you could not mourn her death (I will come back to this later). I know you've been ill. They didn't give you adequate care. You lost consciousness and flatlined, but some force of nature sent you back to this world, where white-washed state cruelty blooms like flowers.

A few hours after I listened to your recording they executed Marcellus “Khalifah” Williams, in Missouri. I tried to imagine how this news might affect you but of course, I couldn't. All I could go by was the fragment of something you'd written, which I often return to for its luminosity:



“If you can smile through the pain...the psychological and punitive mind games...you have succeeded. You have not been defeated.”

Somehow one has to survive. To go on. To resist. When I turn on the news, the state’s psychological mind games operate at a scale which is unreal. Israel is blowing up Lebanon and apparently the West is “powerless” to stop it. Western powerlessness—that grand deceit. Every corporation from my banking app to the supermarket had it within its power to assist the “blonde haired, blue eyed” refugees of Ukraine. But all we can offer in this spiritual abyss is more arms to Israel. It is almost a year since October 7th. 41,000 Palestinian corpses as collective punishment for 1,200 Israeli. I believe every life is sacred. But I also know when racist double standards are being rubbed in my face. (...)

Sometimes I’m asked why I campaign for prisoners. I’d have to search myself deeply to give a full answer—the obvious reasons for why we do things are not always the real reasons. But one thing I know is that I get more from all of you than you get from me. At 1hr 25 in the recording, Albert Woodfox reminds us that, “art can be more than the consumption of beauty”.

I opened this letter with a quote which is attributed to Miles Davis,

“What makes a wrong note right, is the note you play right after”.

I’ve yet to verify the precise wording of this quote, but Herbie Hancock describes a live performance where Miles actually enacted it: Herbie made a big mistake, live, in the middle of Miles’ solo. Miles paused for a second then came back with notes which made Herbie’s chord right, revealing to us in an instant, a solution for life as much as art. As I trip and stumble through life, I strive for that note. A wrong note made right is like your “smile through the pain” and Miles Davis was an “old veteran” at his art, just like Albert Woodfox. All of them up there at the council of ancestors, in your solitary garden where sweet flowers bloom.

My hugs and wings of friendship, brother

Sofia Karim

(September 2024, extracts from letter to death row prisoner, Timothy James Young, USA.)



BIO

Sofia Karim is an architect and activist based in London. Her activism focuses on human rights across Bangladesh and India. Her work has been exhibited at venues including Tate Modern, the V&A, Arthshila Ahmedabad and documenta fifteen.



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