

A Personal Tribute to the Concept of *Home*, as Expressed through my Friendship with Zarina

Nobuho Nagasawa, May 5, 2020

I first met Zarina Hashmi, who is known professionally only by her first name, Zarina, when I started teaching at the University of California in Santa Cruz (UCSC) in 1996. We were both artists who traveled extensively and lived solo lives for long stretches in big cities. We were also both transplant artists from a metropolis; Zarina from New York, and I from Los Angeles. In 1999, Zarina completed a portfolio of 36 woodblock prints, each featuring a geometric monochromatic image with Urdu text, called “Home is a Foreign Place.” In this work, she expressed her visual vocabulary of home, memory, and loss, and suggested geographic boundaries and psychic fault lines, both recurring motifs in her work.

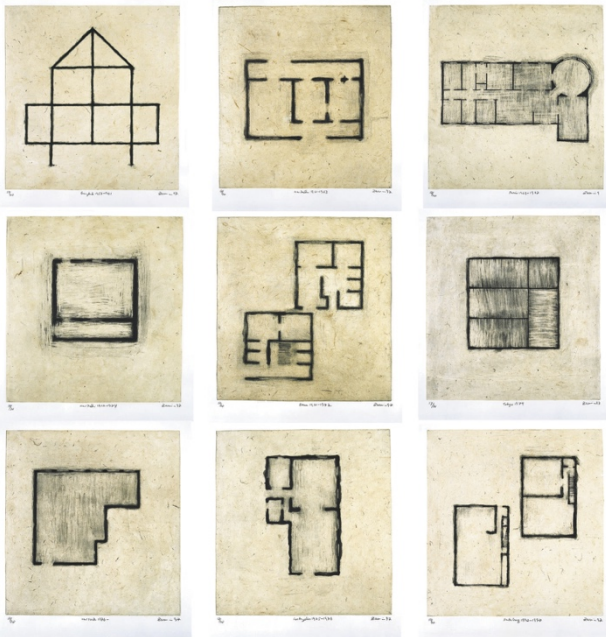
Living in Santa Cruz, our *Home*, a faculty housing complex on the campus of UCSC, was “a very Foreign Place.” We grew close as we taught on the same campus for three years, shared many students, lived as neighbors, and frequently had dinners together. I often cooked simple Japanese dishes: brown rice, vegetables, and miso soup. Zarina was very fond of the fragrance of her basmati rice and she taught me how to cook dal and various curries from scratch. She often told me about the fragrance of the flowers that surrounded the house where she grew up. She enjoyed the green tea I brewed, but Zarina brewed the perfect cup of chai. She would carefully steep the black tea leaves in a large pot of milk that she stirred with a large ladle, adding a mixture of aromatic Indian spices and herbs: whole cloves, crushed green cardamom pods, star anise, and cinnamon stick. Zarina knew that I loved cooking and she brought back for me spice containers from Pakistan where her beloved sister Rani lived. The cardamom pods and cinnamon sticks she gave me are still in a small metal container with a lid that doubles as a mirror.



Spice containers from Zarina.

Zarina was born in Aligarh, the United Provinces of British India, in 1937. She was happy as a child but when she was ten years old, the 1947 partition of the British Indian Empire into independent dominions, India and Pakistan, affected the course of her life and her artwork greatly. I was not born yet when her journey to the wider world started in 1958. She was twenty-one years old when she visited the temples at Angkor in Cambodia. Zarina traveled the world with her Indian diplomat husband, though he passed away at the age of forty-five. She studied printmaking in Bangkok, Tokyo, and Paris before settling in New York in 1976. In New York, she read Lucy Lippard and joined the Heresies Collective, a group of feminist political artists that was founded in 1976 in New York City. Zarina and I had more than a few things in common. She was the youngest child of her family and had two sisters who lived far away, as I do. She lived in Tokyo, moved to Los Angeles, then settled in New York, but moved to Santa Cruz to teach, and finally returned to New York. I was born in Tokyo, left Japan when I was four years old, and traveled widely for the next four years because my father was a diplomat. When he passed away at the age of forty-four shortly after I turned eleven, my mother, sisters, and I moved and sold our family house. I left Tokyo when I was eighteen years old and studied sculpture in the Netherlands and in West Berlin during the Cold War era in the 1980s, where I lived in the midst of the tension of a divided city. In Berlin I read Lucy Lippard's *Overlay*, a book on contemporary art and its connection to prehistoric sites and symbols, and I dreamed about visiting the Earthworks of the Wild West. Through the invitation of the California Institute of the Arts, I arrived in the US in 1986, ten years after Zarina arrived in New York City. Zarina also considered herself a sculptor. She gouged, punctured, rubbed, scratched, sewed, and wove on paper. She carved lines on wood, rather than drawing, and created sculptures in a variety of materials, such as aluminum, bronze, steel, tin, marble, onyx, wood, paper pulp, and gold leaf. We both shared the love of touching our materials and digging deeply into them. The process of hand labor was the core of our art-making practice.

We also shared the joy of travel, an interest in architecture, maps, poems of the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi, and the sense of *Home*. In the process of moving to New York in 1976, Zarina rented a car and drove back and forth across the country from New York to Los Angeles with her sister Rani and her two young children. She later told me that this was one of the most adventurous trips she had ever done. I traveled from West Berlin to Beijing and back on the Trans-Siberian railroad alone in 1984 and 1985, and another round trip in 1986 before I relocated to Los Angeles. When Zarina was in Santa Cruz, she often traveled between Santa Cruz, New York, and Pakistan — all three places she considered *Home*. I also traveled between Santa Cruz, Europe, and Japan, and we often discussed the concept of borders, displacement, and *Home*, because we both made our *Home* in a foreign place.



Homes I Made / A Life in Nine Lines, 1997

Portfolio of nine etchings and one cover plate printed in black on Arches Cover white paper, Chine-Colle on handmade Nepalese paper Dimensions: 21.5" x 19"

Zarina gave me one of her etchings before she left Santa Cruz permanently in 1999. It is a print from one of my favorite works of hers, "Homes I Made / A Life in Nine Lines," that depicts floor plans of the different homes she inhabited since leaving Aligarh, her birth-town in India in 1958. In a series of nine prints, Zarina traces her peripatetic existence in early adulthood in the cities of Bangkok, New Delhi, Paris, Bonn, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, and New York, where she finally settled in 1976. The print she gave me (center, right image) depicts her four-and-a-half tatami mat "tea room" (approx. 8 x 8 square ft.) that she lived on in Japan in a town called Yurigaoka in 1974. Coincidentally, Yurigaoka was a town I visited often around the time Zarina lived there to see my uncle who became my surrogate-father after my father's sudden death in 1970. After Zarina left UCSC to be in New York in 1999, I followed her, left Santa Cruz, and took a position to teach sculpture at the State University of New York, Stony Brook University, in 2001. Zarina offered her loft for me to stay in before I found a place two blocks away.

In 2002, when I finally found a live/work studio I could call my *Home* just one block away from Zarina's *Home*, I created the exact four-and-a-half tatami mat space Zarina had lived on in Japan in my Chelsea loft. Since Zarina always made me feel at home in her *Home*, I wanted Zarina to feel at home in my new *Home* as well. She met my mother there who visited me from Japan a few times, and they exchanged letters until my mother passed away six years ago, at the age of eighty-three. When Zarina's health declined in her final years, I cooked for her Japanese food that she used to like, but she preferred her dal and rice, the comfort food she used to offer me whenever I visited her. I saw Zarina's work in February at the Center for Book Arts and brought a group of young students visiting from Japan to see her work in the gallery. Zarina was not present at the opening of her solo show at Luhring Augustine Gallery in 2018. I feared that this would be her last show while she was alive, and I knew then that I had to prepare for her departure, her final journey.



Tea room in my Chelsea loft.

Zarina told me that she grew up playing hide and seek in piles of books around her house, and her work was inspired by the Urdu poetry that everybody in her family read. The words in Urdu repeatedly appear in her works when she expresses diaspora and memory in her connection to *Home*. We discussed the ephemeral nature of beauty and a classic Japanese aesthetic *Mono no aware*, literally "the pathos of things," or "a sensitivity to ephemera." This term is also translated as *mujō* (無常) — the awareness of impermanence, or transience of things, and gentle sadness about this state being the reality of life. Zarina said the biggest loss for her was language, specifically poetry in her mother tongue, and she would often listen to the recitation of poetry in Urdu before she went to bed. For Zarina, Urdu was her language *Home*. Zarina introduced me to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore when I was selected as the Japanese representative for the Asian Art Biennial in Bangladesh in 2002. She warned me, though, that Tagore's poems in the original Bengali are so beautiful that translations in any language do not do justice to them. After reading extensively in Tagore's poetry, I chose one of his poems titled "On the Edges of Time" to be the title of my work for the Biennial. The idea of this installation developed during my conversation with Zarina as a response to the terrorist attack of 9/11, which I witnessed shortly after moving to New York. The Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation had just awarded me a rent-free studio, but it was impossible to work in this studio in Tribeca near Ground Zero. 9/11 and this studio suddenly made me aware that the times had shifted, that the unthinkable had become a reality, and that this tragic event marked the start of the 21st century, and my life in New York.

My installation in Bangladesh consisted of 5,000 terra-cotta eggs and local white flowers symbolizing the nature of life, death, and rebirth. The eggs were made in collaboration with a Hindu family using local earth mixed with iron oxide, a red earth pigment known as *bengala* in Japanese, derived from the word Bengal, which Zarina has also used in her cast paper sculptures. A small mound of 500 eggs represented the number of ova a woman releases during her reproductive years, symbolizing an individual life. The large mound of eggs represented multiple lives, a global landscape. I created a landscape of life in an ovoid mound, to express our sorrow, to encourage healing between people who embrace different social, religious, and political beliefs, and to evoke the ultimate fragility and resilience of life.



On the Edges of Time, 2002, Nobuho Nagasawa
5000 Terra-cotta eggs with iron oxide glaze, white flowers.



Phool, 1989
Cast paper with terra-rosa pigment
sizing with the same pigment
22.5" x 18.5" x 3.75"

After 9/11 we were all *on the edges of time*, the world was undergoing a transition with conflicts stemming from social, political, and religious differences and claiming countless lives. When I brought back one of the red terra-cotta eggs, Zarina showed me her cast paper sculpture "Phool." She told me that phool is a plant native to India and Pakistan which is used in Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine of India that seeks to treat and integrate body, mind, and spirit using a comprehensive holistic approach. Phool is also used to make terra-rosa color incense which has a distinctive fragrance. I recently learned that many of the sacred flowers discarded into the rivers from temples after funerals pollute the Ganges River and others, but some companies are currently making incense, hand-rolled by women, by recycling these sacred flowers. I understand now, why Zarina chose this flower and this particular terra-rosa pigment for her works.

In her recent publication "Directions to my House," Zarina tells her life story through words, photographs, and art. In one of her poems, she describes detailed directions to the house where she grew up and ends with the sentence "It should not take you very long to get there. It is only seven thousand four hundred and thirty-eight miles away!" Zarina used to say, "Home is the center of my universe. I make a home wherever I am." She also said, "I understood from a very early age that home is not necessarily a permanent place. It is an idea we carry with us wherever we go. We are our homes." Her words about *Home* being where you make it resonates even more at this shelter-in-place time during our current pandemic.

Zarina was my *Home* when I moved to teach in Santa Cruz. She lived a few steps a way in the faculty housing complex. We drank green tea and chai together and made each other's home *Home*. (1996)

Zarina was my *Home* when I moved to New York. She offered me her home as a temporary shelter when I didn't have a *Home*. (2001)

Zarina was my *Home* when I found a space two blocks away from Zarina's home, my first *Home* in New York. (2001)

Zarina was my *Home* when I found a loft that I could finally call my *Home*, just one block away from Zarina's home, and this is still my *Home*. (2002 to the present)

Zarina continued to be my *Home*, and when I visited her, she always made a large pot of chai with aromatic Indian spices and herbs.

Zarina was my *Home* when she taught me to treasure imagination, especially after my mother's death, even when we were both away from a *Home* that no longer existed.

Zarina was my *Home*, and she always said, "Home is where you make it."

Although we lost Zarina, I believe that Zarina is at the *Home* that she so beautifully captured in her works: in lines, geometric shapes, and the Urdu language of her mother tongue. Although she no longer lives one block away from me, I still wave from my terrace at *Home*, facing her *Home*.



My terrace facing Zarina's *Home*.

Nobuho Nagasawa is an artist living in New York and teaches at Stony Brook University.