

Returning into loops of Rousing

A multimedia performance that swims in the reverberating remnants of language and sensation after the moment of shock (and before the next one), 'after aftershock shock' premiered at the Berliner Ringtheater in August 2022. The makers of the work invited Parvathi Ramanathan to immerse herself in its shaking vibrations and reflect on the performance through words.



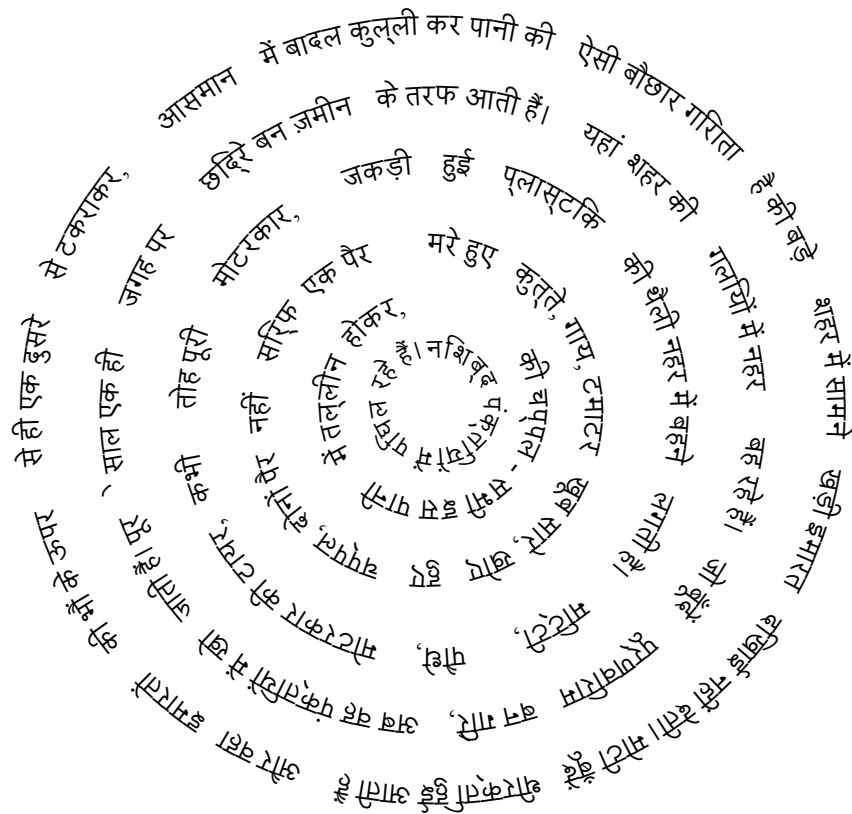
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The performance begins with a series of loud sounds. Is it a boom? Is it a thud? Is it a bang? I shall leave that to your imagination. Even if I mentioned – that to my Hindi ears, it sounded like a Dhoom, and upon my Tamil ears it landed as a Dhamaal – would you understand what I mean? Would you perceive the vibrations it sent across my skin, each time it rung across this hazy blue room, at the Berliner Ringtheater?

So say it aloud, dear reader, in your own language of choice. Speak aloud a sound that signals you of imminent monumental danger, of an earthquake or of a gradually rising tide. Say it aloud a few times and feel its vibrations inside your mouth

‘after aftershock shock’ tunes into the sustained vibrations that remain in the body and in space, long after a moment of shock. All aspects of the multimedia performance, including video, sound and stage-design are infected by these passing recurring vibrations. Language becomes the thread that unspools across these mediums – sometimes with the words uttered aloud – in the three tongues of Japanese, Finnish and German. When the words are left unsaid, one can still hear their wholesome weight through elements in the video projection or by the quality of the performer’s movements. The words are never translated via surtitles or parallel spoken translation. They are simply dropped as they are – in the original tongue – in the only tongue one is truly able to speak about the state of shock. Shaking, vibrating, trembling, jerking, freezing, swinging, falling – all manifestations of shock mark the mis en scene that returns to a state of near-stillness – before the next impact hits again.

For instance, in one moment, a rhythmic spoken Finnish-language voiceover recedes to be occupied by the sound of falling drops of water, conjuring an image of melting stalactites in my mind. In artist Kyoka’s sound design, the notes created by the water create a higher timbre with each drop, in resonance with the lilt of the Finnish language. Arranged in a 12-channel surround system behind the seated audience, the drops of water sound as if they ricochet and circulate across the space. A droplet, like a moment of shock, causes a departing ripple and returns to one’s own body. The body reaches near stillness, when the next drop ---- tip tip ----- tip.



Repetition, rather recurrence, appears as a key theme in 'after aftershock shock' that is knit together by co-directors Jingyun Li and Saori Hala (also the choreographer), and writer So Young H. Kim. They delve into the onomatopoeic quality of the different languages, that also reflect this theme of repetition in some cases. An entire situation or experience can be described with a different language, bringing new references and views. But I, as an audience member may not understand the spoken words at all. I rely on the materiality of the sound of the languages, the movements in the bodies, elements of sound, light and video - and reflect it to you, reader, through my own languages.

The team of 'after aftershock shock' interprets the roots of shock in various ways taking inspiration from the idea of literal and metaphorical earthquakes that shake up lived life. The precarious and battering experience of an earthquake, the dulling experience of living with chronic physical pain, an uprooted feeling that comes from moving to a new place and the loss of familiar routines are perceived as different kinds of shocks. Each of these experiences, some global and some personal, throw the body and environment in moments of suspension. In 'after aftershock shock', a memory that is as sharp as it is blurred, is fully lived, paused at and zoomed in on during the performance.



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In a sonic simulation of an earthquake, the room is engulfed in percussive beats, shuddering earth ----- Dhd dhd dhd dhd dhad ----- clattering wind-beaten windows. A smooth mechanical voice delivers safety instructions via a public announcement system. The three performers – Asuka Julia Riedl, Saori Hala and Susanna Ylikoski – are jolted into action. Their bodies curled up fetus-like, jerk frantically and cling together, remainaing bent close to the floor that is no more reliable. The earth sends it shudders up their bodies and spine. The audience watches this unfold through a dense curtain of thin-white strings that hang down from a frame. This square frame dominates the centre of the performance space in Kathrin Sohlbach's stage design in the performance. Now as the three bodies shudder within the confines of this porous structure, everything appears disjointed by their shock. The parallel lines of the ropes appear ever so shaken.

ஒரு பரெய நகரத்தில், ஒரு சிற மலே மாபி
ஜன்னல். அந்த ஜன்னலில் இருந்து வர
வெளிச்சம். அறக்கை உள்ள உக்காந்திருக்கிறது
ஒரு பரெய நகரத்தில் ஒரு வாலிப பண்ணை நடுஞ்சில் வீரம்,
கணங்களில் ஒரு கற்பனை, உதடுகளில் உண்மை.
இந்த உண்மை கண்ணாடி மாளிகையில்
நாட்டை தன்னோட உருவத்தை காட்டி
வகைக்கிறது. ஜன்னலில் இருந்து வர வெளிச்சம்,
இரவோட இருட்டில் உடகைக்கிறது. அந்த சிறை
அமைதி ஊரை அழுத்தும் ஊடுவிகிறது.
சப்தத்தை குத்தி

What strikes me, though, is the moment after the shock – the moment immediately after, and the moments long after the shock. The moments immediately after seem to be invested in care and composure. The performers pause and trace their eyes across the space observantly – but the gaze doesn't carry far. In this moment immediately after the shock, they run their fingers through the ropes in slow strokes, straightening up the shock-induced dishevelment. The shock has seemingly subsided but its residual tension tinges the air. It makes itself felt in Julia Wycisk's video work that forms part of the movement in the performance now and then. On the monitors we see the video of a landscape of skin, perhaps of someone's back that is being caressed and massaged with cream. At first it appears to be an ordinary act of grooming. But the extended duration and insistence of the hands, as they rub this greased skin, indicates something more. It is the repetition of it, beyond the point of saturation, that hints at something nearly obsessive in the act. Like the performers attentively comb through the hanging strands of rope, so too does the image of the skin being massaged give an impression of -----pach pach -----pach pach----- wet excess.

And then there are the moments long after the shock. The shock has seemingly long subsided, but its unannounced upsurge is around the corner. On stage, a performer slightly parts the curtain of white ropes, with a quick tentative peep. She is seen checking, looking behind, looking beyond. "Will it come again? Is it about to come any moment?", the body seems to ask. After shock, when the environment reaches apparent equilibrium, it doesn't ever return to what it was before the shock. This is an altered body. The bodies in 'after aftershock shock' respond to the experience of shock and imminent uncertainty with repeated motifs of shaking in different pulses. A swinging of the hand passes on to the swaying of the torso, going further to a swinging hip, slipping down to a twitching knee. After a seeming pause - - - - - the pulse becomes visible elsewhere in the body. Starting with a nodding head, it slips to the shoulders, and then to the elbows. The shaking remains in the body, slips into the environment and is felt in the air, catching on to other bodies. Throughout the performance, I find my own mirror neurons kicking in – my leg swaying to the metronome of the performers' shaking bodies.



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During a conversation with the team later, we talk about each person's strategies or rituals to cope with an experience of shock. Many answers come up— having a warm drink, laughing with loved ones, eating good food, or going for a walk in nature. There are also polar opposite strategies where one is preparing for the next shock while another immerses themselves in the feeling of aliveness that comes with shock. One of them mentions that they like to go to a hot spring, the onsen that are sprinkled across the islands of Japan. Interestingly, they point out, Japan is susceptible to earthquakes because there are so many hot springs, but these hot springs are also their soothing balm. I am struck by this answer and notice that this paradox is true of the shaking too. Bodies in shock go into pulses of shaking, and this very movement also serves as a self-soothing swaying to deal with the shock.

After swimming in these multimodal loops of aftershocks for about an hour, I leave the Berliner Ringtheater and notice the many passing pulses that carry this city. Nearby, the Spree is lulling itself to impossible sleep, constantly rousing itself with the next wave. The Jannowitzbrücke S-bahn bridge above me shudders under a passing train.



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Credit list

Production and Co-direction: Jingyun Li

Choreography and Co-direction: Saori Hala

Text and Artistic Co-creation: So Young H. Kim

Research: Jingyun Li, Saori Hala, So Young H. Kim

Framing Concept: Jingyun Li

Dramaturgy: Thore Walch

Dramaturgical Outside Eye: Dandan Liu

Performance: Asuka Julia Riedl, Susanna Ylikoski, Saori Hala

Choreographic Support: Asuka Julia Riedl, Susanna Ylikoski, Deva Schubert

Sound: Kyoka

Video: Julia Wycisk

Stage and Costume: Kathrin Sohlbach

Light: Haesoo Eshu Jung

Additional Voices: Bell Kossma

Photo: Toni Petraschk