

**ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS**  
**Echo Ballads // Pasián Esba**  
**11.–27.4.2025**

*Actually, we do have karaoke but you mustn't breathe a word about it to anyone. Ever.*

If there is to be singing in Utopia, we have to make room for false notes, too! We can't imagine getting to the new world and all of us being perfectly in tune. Utopia can't be an excuse for musical fascism. It's a place for wild singing under the moon. And the moon doesn't care what you sound like. We lost all the old lyrics but we made up better ones – in the new language, using brand new words, singing about things we actually care about. We wear special costumes we made from old cloth, stitching magic into the threads since the Dark Days ended. Karaoke is our revolution and finally it's Commons.

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS are Aslan and Chris. We make performance, film and publications from our home in Outokumpu, North Karelia. We spend our days imagining Queer futures so we can do our bit to help find a way out of the mess we are in.



**Sounds of the future**

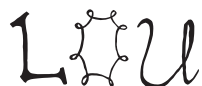
Songs are small treasures, carriers of values and emotions past. In this utopian future, created by the collective ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, the original lyrics of once-known songs bear no meaning. They are like endearing relics of a time when communities formed in dimly lit bars and in private. Behind closed doors, the songs there were sung back and forth, echoing what was popular, what was nostalgic, what told your story.

Chris and Aslan tell me how queer experience is often defined by leaving—moving away from hometowns where community was absent or conditional. Living a queer life often means constructing a life for yourself from scratch. While that holds immense potential, it can also be incredibly lonely.

If we're to leave, the question becomes: where are we going?

Damiá is a queer language created by Aslan, with a fully developed grammar and vocabulary. It serves as a tool and a portal through which the collective explores and imagines queer pasts, presents, and futures. Decoupled from dominant narratives, language becomes liberatory. It can, too, become a place to arrive.

The work (and lives) of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS form, together, a world-making method—one that unfolds across places and through time. They write and perform within the reality of a utopian future already arrived. Bliss doesn't come solely from discarding the horrors of the old world, but from mending and surviving together in the shadow of the ruins.



we-fri 14-18  
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Reality – as well as fiction – is shaped and reaffirmed by everyday performances. Ideas like currencies are real as long as they are continuously accepted and practiced as part of the systems of the world. Disability scholar Sami Schalk describes these as “rules of reality”, which are culturally and historically specific social narratives. These rules determine both what is possible and what is meaningful for bodies and technologies, thereby constructing the understanding of what is “real”. They also shape ideas of what constitutes a “real” disability, gender, race, and more, as described by Schalk. These rules are always tied to specific conditions that constantly change.

Thus, the systems governing value and belonging could be otherwise. Abolishing existing systems doesn’t mean destruction, but the making of new practices. Everyone can take part in creating fictions that could someday be real. Every slip in the rules of reality can bring the utopian future closer.

The slips, in this exhibition, are the karaoke songs, performed by the artists. When Chris and Aslan sing karaoke in Damiá, they simultaneously create speculative oral history and a kind of utopian fiction spoken into being.

Trans and gender studies scholar Wibke Straube refers to these kinds of moments in film as exit scapes—emancipatory scenes in which trans characters experience a temporary escape from the negative affective frameworks that often dominate their cinematic representation. These moments are their own, as they enter the imaginative, the dreamlike—they might sing, dance, or be immersed in music.

To further emphasize the temporal and performative dimensions of utopian moments, the artists wear different costumes for each karaoke song. Clothing itself is a temporal object – or, as Straube describes it: “part of a person’s archive of chronopolitical wandering through the world.” A garment can be seen as something made of time. It can evoke love, care, and intimacy just as easily as it can symbolise power, control, or dominance.

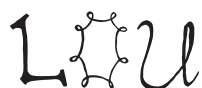
Just like with clothing, we often use language to express ourselves in different registers. We move through these shifting modes constantly and navigate in the in-between, some with more ease than others. What’s interesting, then, is what happens in these in-betweens: in the small gestures in the fabric of the everyday, the conversations between songs, in the rush and the ease of performing a song.

Reaching Utopia requires leaving things behind. Changing one’s way of living, letting go of a privileged position, replacing old words with new ones. It won’t be easy; why would it be? Revolutions, neither, are singular, closed events. One possible key is to see Utopia’s effects in the present: the potential changes in the material reality of the now. One of them might as well be karaoke.

Remi Vesala  
Curator, *Lou*

Schalk, Sami. (2018). *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Straube, Wibke. (2014). *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film*. Linköping: Linköping University Press.



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Lyrics and translations of the songs:

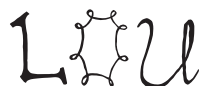


Performance, text, video, costumes: ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS

Sound support, live recording: Arvid van der Rijt

Karaoke backing tracks: [karaoke-versio.fi](http://karaoke-versio.fi)

Echo Ballads // Pasián Esba represents the Seventh Chapter of the constellation artwork With Forests in Our Mouths (2024/25). With Forests in Our Mouths is a ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS production, supported in 2024 and 2025 by the Kone Foundation, and part of the Metsän puolella community of arts and research projects.



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