

Collective Performative Reading

For More Than One Voice

Collective performative reading

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The collective *For More Than One Voice*

The voice is interrelational: collective, social and subjective in an ongoing exchange with others who listen and speak. *For More Than One Voice* (2016–) is a collective reading that investigates how we might speak and listen in more than one voice by means of resonance, polyphony, dissonance, ambiguity, plurality and embrace. The collective reading is centred around the politics and poetics of the multiplicity of voices in performance and text where the complexities of voice as representation are investigated.

The collective reading is constituted in three different ways: 1) through collective readings of the politics and poetics of voice in the collective *For More Than One Voice*, 2) through workshops with invited artists concerned with voice and listening for a smaller groups of participants organized by the collective, and 3) through a collective performative reading together with participants in public spaces. In the collective performative reading a selected number of quotes from theoretical, poetical, and political texts on voice and listening are read aloud by participants – who are also invited to listen to the multiplicity of voices unfolding in the spaces. The collective performative reading enables the voices of the participants to destabilize ways in which we think and talk about the voice as representation and a marker of a fixed identity.

Affinities

Ci vuole almeno un duetto, un chiamarsi e risponderci: ossia una reciproca intenzione di ascolto, già attiva nell'emissione vocale, che rivela e comunica ognuno all'altro. (Cavarero, 2003)

It takes at least a duet, a calling and a responding – or, better, a reciprocal intention to listen, one that is already active in the vocal emission and that reveals and communicates everyone to the other. (Cavarero, 2005)

The collective performative reading is inspired by philosopher and feminist Adriana Cavarero. In her book *A più voci: Per una filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (2003) Cavarero argues that speech which privileges language and semantic meaning has overruled the sonorous acoustic qualities of the voice. Cavarero argues that we should not only pay attention to what is said, but also to who is saying it and who listens.

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In her critique of western metaphysics and the detached philosophical “I”, Cavarero deconstructs the traditional philosophical gender binary, writing that we should reclaim the voice as being unique and plural at the same time. Cavarero argues for a vocalic relationality “where the uniqueness of each existent is constituted and distinguished as a self – a self-in-relation” (Burgess and Murray, 2006) which is a pluralistic and inclusive form of relation.

The English translation of the book *For More than one voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005) gave our collective its name. The collective performative readings emphasize the voice expressing an interrelationality between speaker and listener. We are interested in the voice as a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon, as a collective of the whos-in-relation that speak and listen to each other. We are interested in the voice as an artistic medium unfolding as a linguistic, auditory, bodily, sensuous, and material phenomenon. In our collective work we explore the complexities of voices as phenomena that constitute, destabilize, and push our ideas about who the voice belongs to and the who that listens. We want to shake the notion of voice as a metaphor for one’s identity, as a representation of a singular speaking subject with a fixed identity and subjectivity. We want to disturb our cultural expectations and existing normative understandings of the voice as belonging to a body with only one history, gender, accent, belonging and affiliation. How can we stage a listening of voices destabilizing our social conventions, norms and experiences of the subject as unambiguous and fixed? How can we create spaces that enable the multiplicity, polyphony, multivocality and variability of voices? Inspired by Cavarero we are interested in the relationship between voice and listening, and how listeners actively participate in the creation of meaning in the who of the voice.

Proprio perché la parola ha una consistenza sonora, parlarsi è comunicarsi nella pluralità delle voci. Detto altrimenti, l’atto del parlare è relazionale: ciò che in esso sempre e prima di tutto si comunica, al di là degli specifici contenuti che le parole comunicano, è la relazionalità acustica, empirica e materiale, delle voci singolari. (Cavarero, 2003)

Precisely because speech is sonorous, to speak to one another is to communicate oneself to others in the plurality of voices. In other words, the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices. (Cavarero, 2005)

We have invited artists we respect and find inspiring to discuss with us the voice’s potential and actualization in the arts through a series of workshops. The workshops represent a way of creating an ongoing process of inquiry in order to open up artistic practices and theoretical discussions for new ways of forming a dialogue about the voice in art. In our discussions with each other and others in the workshops we have explored what the voice can do as an artistic medium and what listening to voices can do. Here we encompass questions such as: what is the role of the voice today? Who has the right to speak or be silent? And what happens when the voice no longer comes from our bodies but is mediated through technologies or systems? What is the poetic and political nature of the voice? What role does the listener have in relation to the voice?

Listening is never simply a passive, objective and receptive process, but rather an act that plays a

fundamental role in the construction and facilitation of the speech of the interlocutor (whether subject or object). (Abu Hamdan, 2012)

We held the first workshop with Beirut-based artist, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, on the voice of politics, testimony and character. In the workshop with Abu Hamdan we had conversations about the importance of the listener as a powerful interpreter of utterances made by others. With his 2012 article “Aural Contract: Forensic Listening and the Reorganization of the Speaking Subject” Hamdan makes us aware of the role of the listener in relation to the voice. He generates a discussion about how we listen to voices and how this listening connects to broader social and political interests which are also reflected in his artworks such as *The Whole Truth* (2012) and *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012). In the works Hamdan investigates a forensic listening of voice and how this connects to specific historical, social, and political understandings of the speaking subject. We listen to the voice as something that distributes information. But how do we listen to the information the voice transmits? What is the relationship between speaker and listener?

In the workshop by the artist and theorist Brandon LaBelle we discussed the poetic and political potential of the voice.

- the voice stretches me; it drags me along, as a body bound to politics and poetics, its accents and dialects, its grammars, as well as its handicaps. (LaBelle, 2014)

Through our work in connection to the workshop with LaBelle we collectively considered the politics connected to the materiality and imaginary of voice when creating spaces for more than one voice. Which voices are listened to and how are they listened to? In the work *Rehearsal for a People's Microphone* (2013) LaBelle considers the mode of political address through the voice of the crowd as an expression of political issues in the public sphere. In LaBelle's book *Lexicon of The Mouth* (2014) we are invited to think of the materiality of the mouth and how the bodily embodiment of speech comes to matter. He points us to the politics and poetics of micro-oralities such as whispering and stuttering, focusing on the materiality of the mouth as a mediator between interior and exterior; he also indicates how the acts of the tongue, lips and throat are connected to social structures enabling or disabling certain ways of making sound with the mouth, voice, speech, and creating an oral imaginary.

The collective performative reading

The collective performative reading has been performed at NLH Space as part of *Stemmer* (2016) curated by Mette Garfield and Miriam Wistreich at Den Frie Udstillingsbygning as part of *Scripted!!* (2016), edited and organized by Trine Mee Sook Gleerup, Maria Bordorff, and Mathias Kryger in collaboration with Eller med a, and at Sorte Firkant as part of the workshop *Translating Geographies of Displacement* Convened by *Migratory Times, the Institute of (im) Possible Subjects, For More Than One Voice, and at land's edge* (2016).

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*Performance documentation Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, 2016.
Photo: Jane Jin Kaisen.*

For More Than One Voice

Who is speaking to you? Who has the space to speak? How are we, collectively, able to give voice? How do you speak? Who is listening to you? How do you listen? What spaces for speaking and listening do you create together with others?

Curator and art theorist Irit Rogoff writes in the article “We – Collectivities, Mutualities, Participations” that “performative collectivity, one that is produced in the very act of being together in the same space and compelled by similar edicts, might just alert us to a form of mutuality which cannot be recognized in the normative modes of shared beliefs, interest or kinship” (Rogoff, 2002). By focusing on the reciprocity of speaking and listening, and by investigating the voice as language and as materiality as well as performative action, the collective performative reading draws attention to the gaps, otherness and multiplicities. It also questions the authenticity of the voice as a representation of a singular fixed subject(ivity). The voice is not only about speaking but also about listening, as the anthropologist Jenny R. Lawy writes:

Voice (as both political as well as performative) is not only about voicing or speaking; it is also about listening and hearing, for it is in the ways that the audience or listener reacts to, accepts, or rejects what has been put into the social milieu that reveals the (political/social) impact of that voice. (Lawy, 2017)

The collective performative reading is a performative archive unfolding theoretical, political, and poetic texts on the voice and the voice as a marker of identity. It is performative in that the words read aloud do not only describe the politics and poetics of the voice, they also manifest the voice as political, testimony, and character in relation to the listener. According to philosopher John Langshaw Austin’s speech act theory, words can be perceived as more than something describing a situation. According to Austin, language creates situations through performative sentences, that is, sentences that actually act (Austin, 1976). Or, as performance theorist James Loxley explains, “the utterance is not setting out to *describe* a situation, an event or an action: it *is* an event or an action” (Loxley, 2007). Thus, a statement is not merely a description of what was going on at a given time. The utterance, as a performative speech act, constitutes the event anew. The voice is the medium through which the event takes place. When the utterance reconstitutes the event we must not only relate to *what* is said but also to *how* it is said. The *how* gives new attention to the context in which the speech act is performed and how the vocal performance interacts and relates to the surroundings. It matters whether, for example, a testimony is pronounced in a courtroom or in the street. Or as Austin describes it: if a child says “I do” to their friend acting as if they were getting married the utterance is not a successful performative sentence. It is only when the utterance is said in church or in the town hall, where a priest or mayor can act as a witness, that the utterance becomes a performative sentence as the utterance of the words “I do” results in being married (Austin, 1976). Therefore, speech act theory not only has a focus on the utterance as an action, but also on the social circumstances that can confirm the utterance as an act. It makes the relationship between listening and speaking much more complex. For example, if we consider a witness statement in a court case to be a performative speech act, then it is not only *what* is being said and *how* it is said, but equally the context in which it is uttered (in this case the court room composed of the judge and the jury of listeners) that actualizes the event as a performative sentence.

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In this way, the listener's role has changed from being a witness to being a co-producer of events and truth production. The listener brings to the fore the witness not as a potentiality – but as an actuality. The listener's interpretation of what is said and how it is said is crucial to what ends up appearing as the event or action that took place.



Performance documentation NLH Space, Copenhagen, 2016.

In the collective performative reading we invite participants to read aloud quotes concerning the voice (as a marker of identity). Participants are invited to actualize the quotes about the voice as performative speech acts, changing the quotes from descriptions of the voice to manifestations of the voice as an event or action; reading the quotes slowly, whispering, growling, overlapping other vocal performances of the written quotes. The participants are also invited to listen and actively witness the voice spoken as action and event by others in the room. As such, we ask participants to enable the performative speech act by collectively

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shifting positions between reading aloud quotes about the voice as performative sentences, and listening to and confirming the voices heard as performative sentences. In this way participants enter into a committed relationship between speaking and listening to performative sentences, creating voices as events that unfold across time and space. Participants are invited to listen to the voices of others as events: voices that merge, resonate, dissonate, fluctuate, build upon each other, clash together, intersect, and give space and new meaning to each other. Participants are invited to change positions in the room and give each other a place from which to speak and be heard. We invite the participants to listen to broken pieces of words in Danish, English, French, German, Farsi and Korean that emerge and disappear into a chorus of the different voices of the participants. To listen to different languages that dissolve and become affective sound surfaces, rhythms, and fluid materiality that mingle moving back and forth between participants in the room. We often focus on the voice as speech, which creates meaning through language but in the collective performative reading we ask participants to also focus on the reverberation and texture of voices. We ask the participants, as listeners, to pay attention to the various sound registers of the voices, an emotional resonance, tonality, rhythm, pauses of speech – the performative elements of the utterance of words when they hear the chorus of voices created by the other participants. The participants are invited to listen to the theoretical, political, and poetical descriptions of the voice as well as how these descriptions are uttered affectively.

Through the duet of speaking and listening the voices become events that change from moment to moment. Participants are invited to listen to how words are performed by the voice. To listen to the voice as a material practice and as a metaphor that unfolds and gets its meaning in its relation to the listener as something continuously changing, fluctuating and unfolding in the interrelationality. The participants form a chorus of diverse voices pointing beyond the individual to a collective event of speakers and listeners with the potential to actualize the performative sentences being spoken and heard. It is a collectivity that opens to the complexities of poetic, political, and cultural affinities. By focusing on how a statement is expressed and heard, and how the context of the statement affects the experience of what happened and how this is represented, the collective performative reading also enables a focus on the politics of representation. By working with how we listen to the voices of collective performative reading we can identify and complicate representations. We can enable multiplicity, otherness, and a productive questioning of unidirectional representations through the use of voice in art - and how we listen to it. In the collective performative reading we ask: What voices have the right to speak and be heard as performative sentence? Which listeners have the power and position to confirm the vocalization of the readings as performative sentences, making the reading into an event and action instead of a description?

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Performance documentation Sorte Firkant, Copenhagen, 2016. Photo: Jane Jin Kaisen and Stina Hasse Jørgensen.

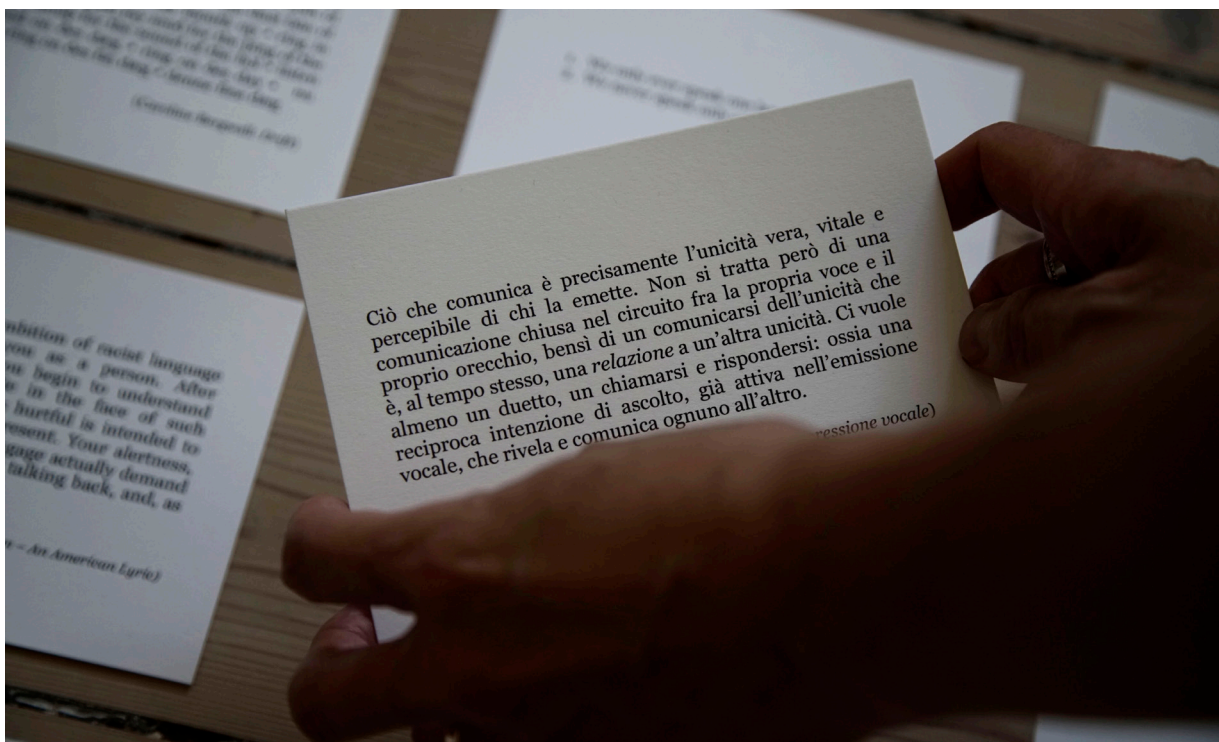
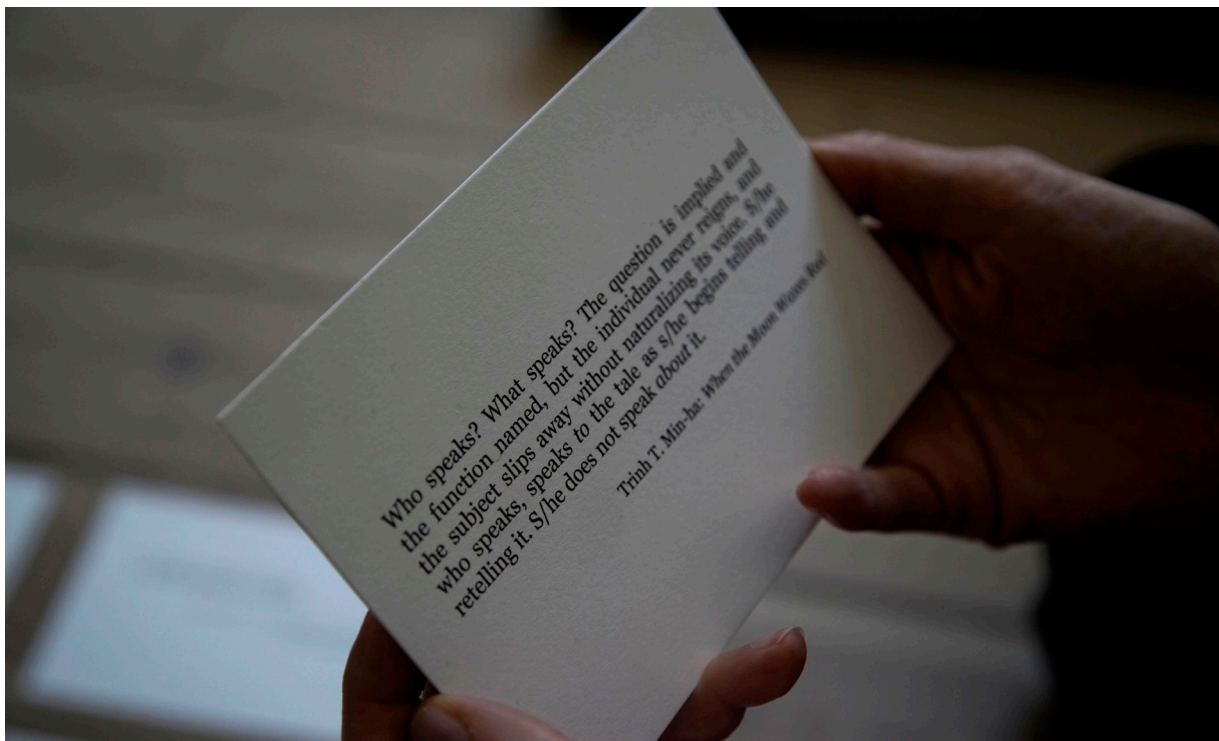
Guide to a collective performative reading

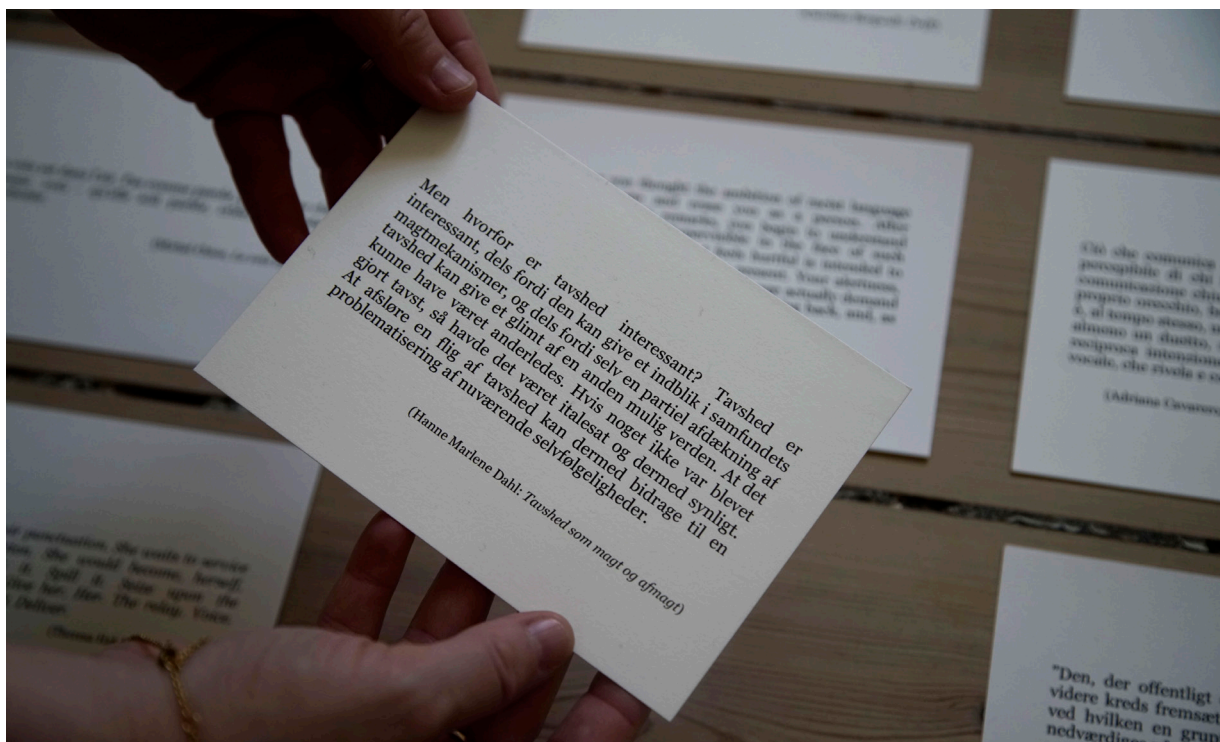
(A series of cards with quotes, statements, definitions, and reflections on Voice written in different languages are distributed on the floor. They can be placed in any desired configuration.)

(Speaker): *For More Than One Voice* is a collective performative reading that investigates the relationship between the written and the spoken word. Specifically, how we can read, perform and listen to *more than one voice* in ways that allow resonance, polyphony, dissonance, ambiguity, plurality, and embrace.

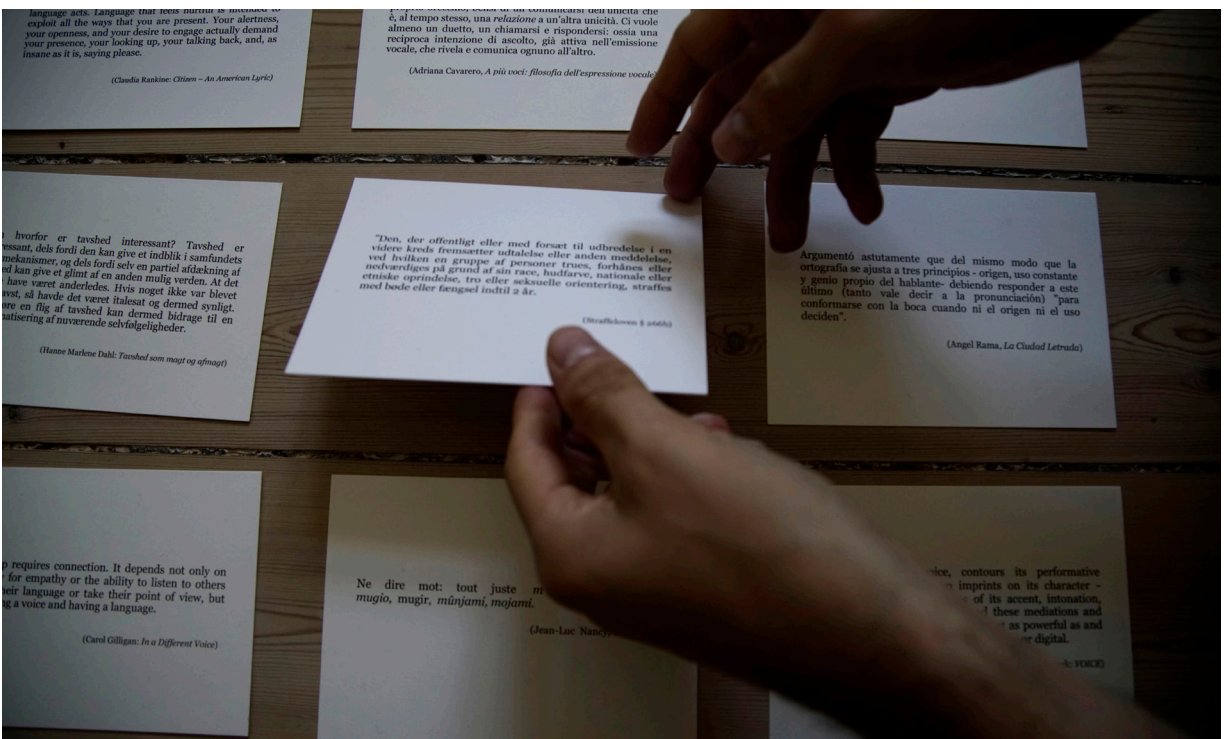
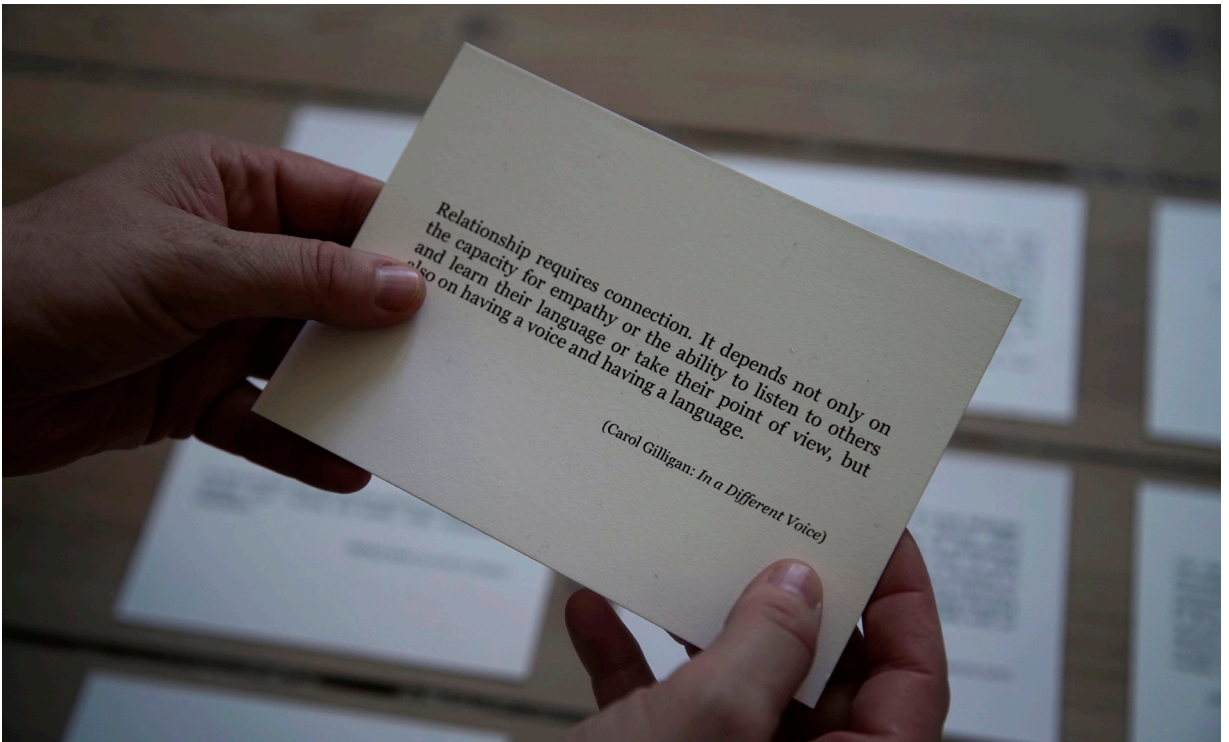
(Another speaker): We invite you to read the quotes on the cards (or what you are able to read of them – the rest you have to voice in your own way). You are welcome to cut out the cards and place them on a floor or a table. Then you can choose and read out a quote at any time and at your own pace. You can shout, sing, yell, scream, murmur, mumble, or whisper the words you read. You can stick out your tongue and think about the feeling it installs. You can gasp, cough, burb, grunt, (whistle) sigh, pause, or yawn as you like. You can choose to read the text on the cards simultaneously, one after the other. You can listen to your collective readings together. Hear how your voices resonate, dissonate, fluctuate, oscillate, overpower, overlap. You may keep the quote, pass it on to another participant or put it back on the floor or table for someone else to possibly read. You can read more than one quote. We also invite you to take a quote that you are unable to read or pronounce. Think about how this makes you feel. Please also feel free to listen and be actively silent. Once you hear that all the voices have come to rest the collective performative reading has come to an end.

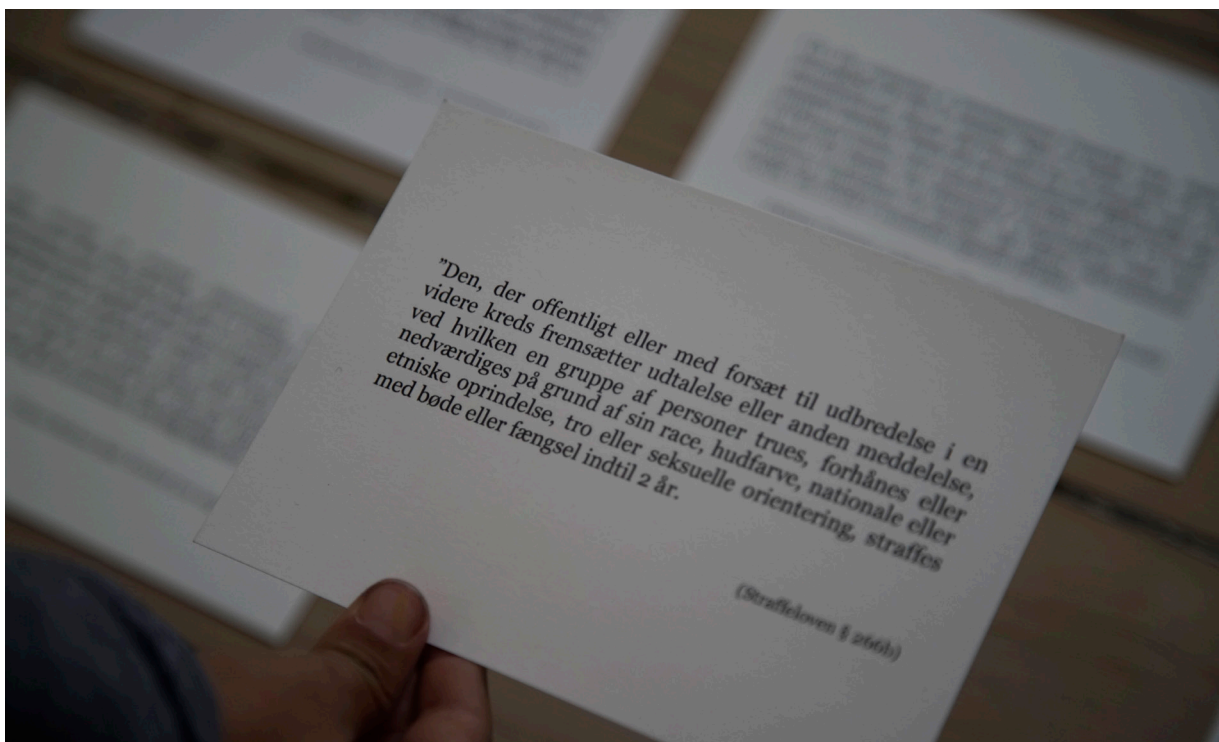
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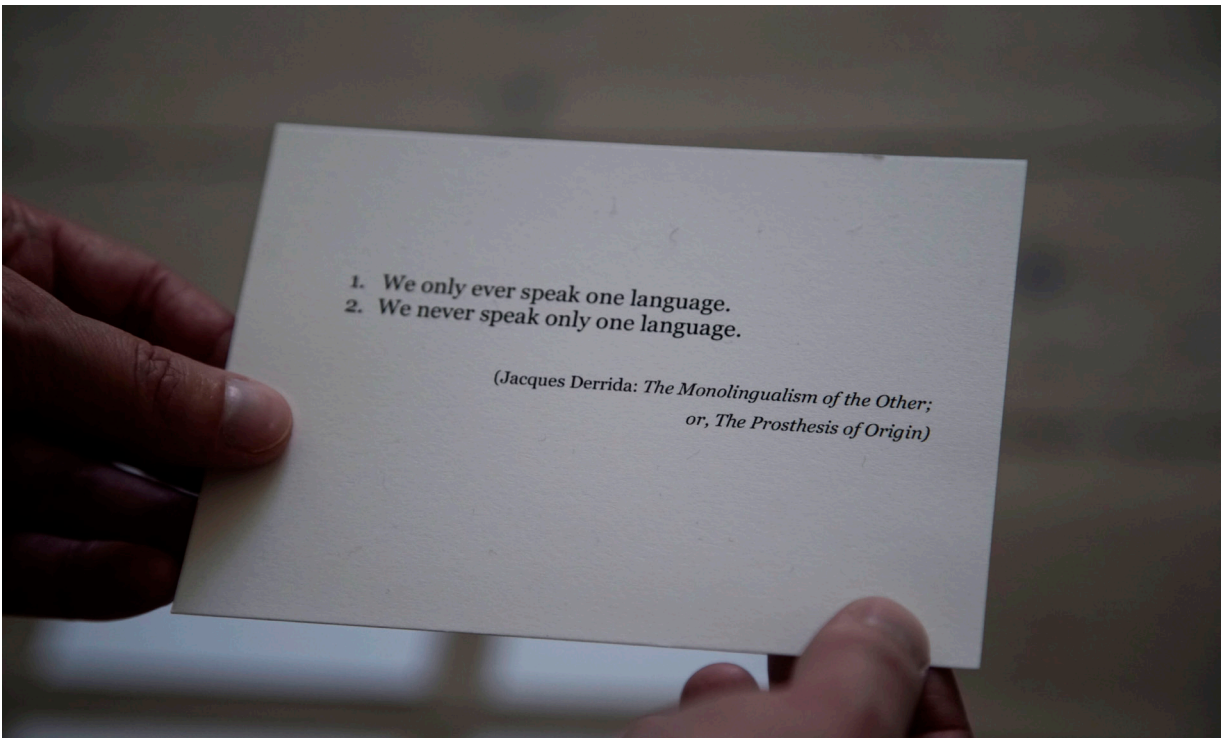
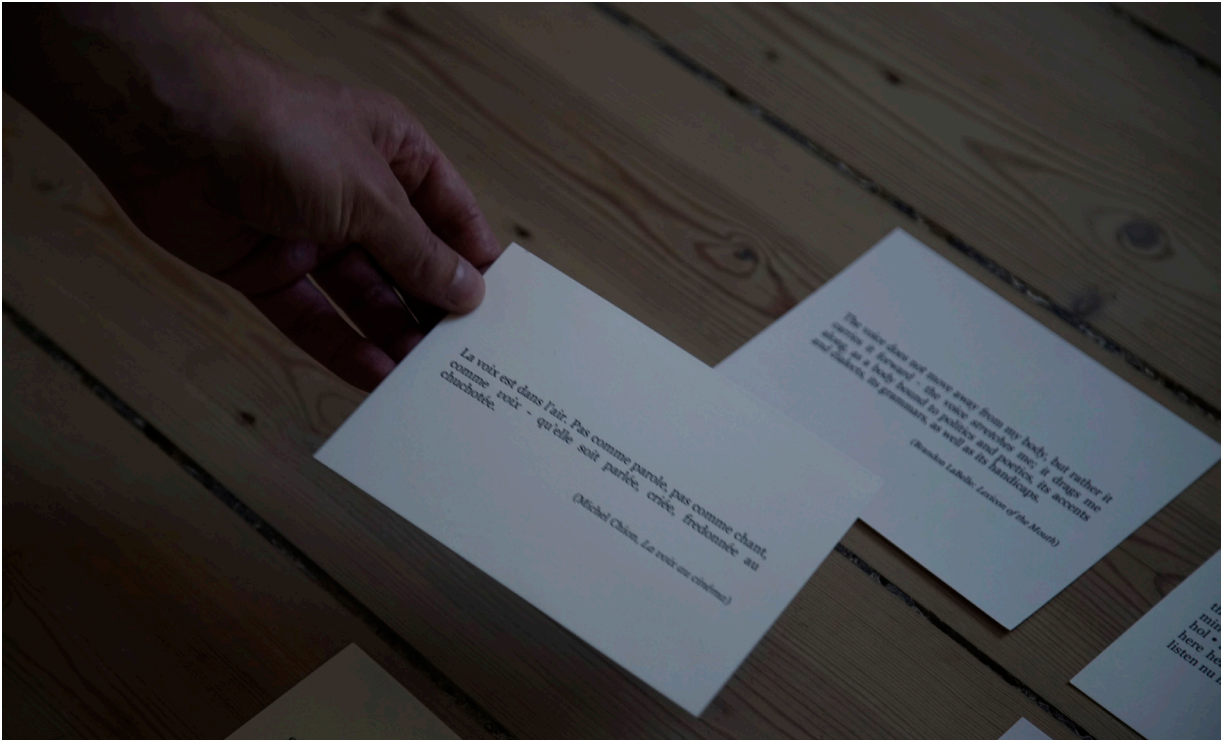


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Abstract

For More Than One Voice (2016–) is a collective reading that investigates how we might speak and listen in more than one voice by means of resonance, polyphony, dissonance, ambiguity, plurality, and embrace. The collective reading is centred around the politics and poetics of the multiplicity of voices in performance and text, where the complexities of voice as representation are investigated.

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