Hanna Tuulikki
Seals' Kin, film still,
11″x 6.19″,
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The Ròn Mòr's Touch

Gaelic folklore is replete with instances of the power of skin through touch and its material affect: from the MacCodrum selkies, in which the seal sheds its skin to become human for a time to the water-horse of Poll nan Craobhan, these tales of human-animal transformation are now read as revealing a different form of relationality with the environment that answers the crisis of the Anthropocene. Artists look to access the truths of these old myths and their current retelling as post-anthropocentric ways of being through imitation and mimicry.

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In Gaelic mythology the water-dog (dobhar-chù), also known as the king otter (rìgh nan dòbharan), is a secretive animal with a skin of magical facility. If you should be canny enough to capture it and keep a piece of their skin, your household will be charmed and misfortune kept at bay.[1] This folk myth lays claim to something that more recent scholarship on skin corroborates: it is an armour not limited to the body's borders, and it can be possessed and transformed. An act of sympathetic magic that relies on the affective potential of the materiality of the skin. Hide, pelt, and fur have historically been harvested across cultures and time, and stories reflect these material interactions, with the skin acting as a stand-in for the animal itself and its affordances. Cloaking ourselves in the skin of another has always been a mechanism of transformation. Gaelic folklore is resplendent with instances of the power of skin through touch, and its material affect: from the MacCodrum selkies, in which the seal (ròn in Gaelic) sheds its skin to become human for a time, to the water-horse of Poll nan Craobhan, these tales of human-animal transformation have historically been read as a window onto the psychosocial issues of pre-modern society. In Christian doctrines, animals have been used as symbols of moral truths, such that animals became a metaphorical lens to instruct and guide human relations.[2] Animals are collapsed under the banner of nature more broadly, which has, since time immemorial, been harnessed as a means of providing a template for constructions of the self in which we reign supreme over the land. For Joseph Campbell, famed folklorist of Gaelic culture, these stories are a "way of visualising the unseen".[3] But their supernatural tint was more prosaic than spiritual, and they functioned to aid hardships in life through metaphor. Thus, fantastical animals in Gaelic lore functioned much the same way as those encountered in everyday life: coded symbols to guide. If we look further back to pre-Christian Western society, the animal's strength was revered and sought. However, it was instrumentalised our relationship with animals is couched in tactility and the skin's physicality as the mechanism through which these actions and the stories that feed them unfold.

Captured, pierced, woven, worn, through its treatment, we are reminded of what Constance Classen tells us: "animals are considered virtually all body",[4] or more accurately all surface that gestures back.[5] For Classen

the biting, kicking, and carrying that epitomize our interaction with animals is embedded within a "whole system of tactile acts, each with associated meanings".[6] These map onto the perceived hierarchy of senses that has shaped European civilisation and its development.[7] For whilst the animal's tactility shaped how we lived alongside it, it was also the means through which they were degraded. The centrality of the body denied the animal any inherent agency and subjectivity of its own. Supported by Christian thought that looked to elevate man, the animal and the sensibility of touch were subordinate and doomed. The intimacy of the animal's touch is rendered almost indecent in this reading. If we turn to literature, we are reminded that for many medieval writers, such as Chaucer, "nature was all foreground".[8] Such a sentiment remained until relatively recently. The animal's immediacy to our own bodies was part of its scorned affect, its presence active through how it felt against our skin.

The tide has now turned. Through ecofeminism, new materialism, postcolonialism, and broader shifts towards the posthuman, we have begun to reimagine the role of the body towards an embrace of animality as equal and autonomous to us. Arguably, we are now seeing these tales anew, revealing a different form of relationality with the environment that answers the crisis of the Anthropocene. Contemporary artists are looking to access the truths of these old myths as post-anthropocentric ways of being.[9]

Such works encourage a new materialist model of analysis that recognises a critique of our long-held social constructivism in which our dominion and uniqueness as a species were assured. More than this, due to the crisis of the Anthropocene, which has acted as a backdrop to the development of these discourses, we see a tendency within the West to seek out indigenous cosmologies and rural myths as a means of finding a new way of being in relation to landscape, but also the animals that inhabit it. Animality has become a form of contemporary redemption.

Tied to this anthropocenic animal is the concept of loss. The Anthropocene is a tale of grief and longing. In so doing, it continues themes that predate this neologism and echo earlier modernist tropes that we can see across the arts. As Rebecca Saunders tells us, "the conception of modernity as traumatic loss or crisis is a significant and frequent motif in literary, philosophical, and social texts from the late 19th and 20th centuries".[10] For Saunders, the arts are more than simply a record of what has been lost, but actually generate it. Within the Anthropocene, how this loss is articulated is distinct from modernist renderings of it. What is clear is that loss is not singular, and whilst it is typically associated with destruction and in the case of the Anthropocene, a kind of failure, what we also see now is a loss that is instructive.[11] It has always, however, been ideologically governed. Within modernist tropes on loss, we see the usual association with malaise, but also for Saunders, critical to its function is how loss is formed through terms such as purity and progress.[12] Saunders links this to modernism's history of nation-building and colonialisation. Whilst it is clear that the task that modernism started is still underway and far from reversed, the loss that the Anthropocene captures offers a new route through this concept that is distinctly its own. This loss is marked by seeking out "others" deemed "pure" that have historically been considered outside of the modernist project, either geographically, conceptually, or temporally. Arguably, this is a revised form of neo-primitivism, in which we seek alternative ways of living and being in the world that we now place on a pedestal. We are also reaching back into myths and folklore to achieve the same goal, with the Gaelic Renaissance of the last twenty years another instance of this resurgence of past stories as routes to new ways of being that will free us from the horrors of the Anthropocene.[13]

The arts lead the way in sharing these stories of alternative ontologies. They reveal a gear change in how we relate to the nonhuman from animal-as-metaphor towards metamorphosis of the human. The figure of the animal has always functioned as other, one that both repulses and also fascinates. Now these tropes are aligned with the climate crisis, such that the sensibility of the animal becomes a means through which the human can be re-naturalised and absolved. How this re-naturalisation occurs is pivotal to a consideration of art in the Anthropocene. Moreover, we can align this re-naturalisation with the objectives of a new form of realism. Josephine Berry's concept of planetary realism leads the way here.[14] Its antecedents can be found in the realist movement of the 19th century that sought to represent the tensions between capitalism and labour. But in its new guise, Berry is concerned with applying it to current conditions around climate change and a whole-world capitalist infrastructure. This realism maps how the ideological utopian objectives of realism as initially envisaged can be realised today, and in the wake of feminist and postcolonial discourses, how we can make "diverse subjectivities and ecologies visible".[15] Berry takes realism as an expansive term that can be set to work beyond its original remit. Informed by speculative realism, it allows art to reject the subjectivity of the person in favour of the reality of things in the world. Wholly dismissive of anthropocentrism, and indeed reading this as the cause of our current climatic conditions, such speculative realism allows us to ask not only what it means to be an animal, which has fuelled these debates from the outset, but goes further and sets the groundwork for taking the agency of an animal's skin when separated from the animal proper. The task for such a realism is to ask how the material world should now be understood, beyond metaphor into actuality. Honing in on Gaelic folklore as remythologised and reapplied to contemporary conditions fulfils this task. Moreover, what we see within Berry's writing is a regard for the future and a sidestep away from dystopic imaginings into something more hopeful. This hope, for Berry, is material and bodily: "we find images of how vulnerability, loss and fear can give way to new sensations and transformation that move across skin, surfaces, identities, histories, scales and borders".[16] This aligns with Saunders' suggestion that loss is also generative. What is of interest here is how this is marked through the skin. But planetary realism is not without its drawbacks. As Berry rightly cautions, there is a potential to collapse its much-needed multiplicity into a 'premodern localism' in an attempt to move beyond Eurocentric universalisms.[17] This potential fate is also recognised by Nicola McCartney when she discusses animal drag and performing animality: "it can often serve to perpetuate species stereotypes, whether by overlooking ethics of consumption and exploitation, or by being used for shallow, anthropomorphic allegories".[18]

A deep dive into an artwork that aligns with these ideas and the layers on which they are built is thus called for to think through these tensions. Specifically, in what follows, I will explore how this new understanding of animal skin beyond metaphor bears out in relation to the work of Scottish-Finnish artist Hanna Tuulikki, and how the tactility in her work returns us to Gaelic tales.

Hanna Tuulikki
Seals' Kin, film still,
11"x 6.19",
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Seals' Kin

In 2022, Tuulikki performed *Seals' Kin* on the banks of the Ythan River in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, where the estuary is home to a colony of grey (ròn mòr in Gaelic) and common seals. The artist disguised herself as a seal through a whole-body sou'wester costume with mottled patterning to emulate the seal's grey fur and fit the shape of their bodies. *Seals' Kin* is a meditation on loss, transformation, and kinship through a sonic choreographic performance, with the artist's movements designed to, as she describes it, "become-with-seal".[19] The artwork is couched in Gaelic folklore that speaks to human-seal hybrids, where we see a blending across species in the form of the mythological selkie. In *Seals' Kin*, the artist lies prostrate on the banks of the estuary, across the water from the seals, and imitates their actions, gesturing her affinity and calling out to them in song, their barks replying to her as if in conversation. As Amy Liptrot notes, the collective song creates a lament.[20]

The myth of the selkie is pertinent here as a meditation on loss, for it is a figure aligned with sorrow. It is foretold that those who drown at sea will return in the form of seal-men and seal-women.[21] But it is also a tale of human-animal transformation. The selkie is a shapeshifter, and this metamorphosis is recurring, with the human returning to their animal form and then back again by setting aside their animal skin or wearing it once more.[22] More commonly in these tales, the skin of the seal is stolen by humans, as told in the folk legend of the Children of MacCodrum of the Seals. In this story, an islander takes a seal's skin, capturing the creature in her human form, whom he marries and has children with. Many years in the future, his wife finds her old skin and uses it as a means to return home, leaving her children behind, who are believed to turn into seals themselves at night.[23] The Children of MacCodrum has been read as a morality story of a deserted husband abandoned by his feckless wife to the "wilds" of the outside world represented by the sea. An idea is supported by the notion of seals as people of the sea.[24]

For Tuulikki, the selkie is not merely a metaphorical aid, though, but a creature that we must reach out to in actuality. Supporting this shift into using folklore as a new form of realism. The requisite realness of this exchange is premised on the costume that the artist dons, and the role of the skin as a mechanism of transformation. In Peter Ramakers' telling of the MacCodrum seals, the islander captures the selkie by taking her seal's skin, but keeps her captive by making her wear human clothes, ensuring her identity is tightly bound to his.[25] Tuulikki's attempt at becoming a seal does much the same thing in reverse, decentring the human in the story and asking us to think about it from the alternative direction. Can I become you? she seems to ask, and how does that feel? The efficacy of the clothing in *Seals' Kin* accords with Donatella Barbieri's claim that costume can be a co-author, and in this sense a second-skin.[26]

Tuulikki's performance is hinged on the ability to interpret the costume as transformative. An approach that accords with Gaelic lore that gives agentive potential to skin as a surface that enables metamorphosis. The mutability of the costume-as-skin also ensures its liminality. Whilst the tales presented in Gaelic culture are not framed explicitly as ritual moments, their present incarnation through performances' such as Tuulikki's do in fact adhere to ritual liminality and costuming. Victor Turner's articulation of ritual still holds sway here, and Tuulikki epitomises a person within a 'threshold', that is, one who is a 'transitional being'.[27] As Barbieri notes, in early human society, "the first costumes held privileged status in the life of the community as agents of liminal reenactment".[28] Whilst this was commonly at the service of beliefs in an afterlife, now we see liminality used to bridge the gap between species. The ritual moment that the artist presents introduces another important layer to this work. For costume to become skin is an act of sympathetic magic. We can turn to the writing of James Frazer to understand how this new skin operationalises this action. First espoused by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* from 1889, sympathetic magic postulates the laws of similarity and contagion.[29] The first is concerned with imitation, that like produces like, such that to act the animal evokes the animal. The second is premised on the consequence of contact. Something of the original remains materially present even when divorced from its origins. Tuulikki's *Seals' Kin* is concerned with the former. Frazer's sympathetic magic was born from evolutionary anthropology that denounced it as a false non-western construct. But the fallacy of the primitive allows us to reengage with its potential, and in this instance, it offers an operative way of understanding *Seals' Kin's* affectivity. The centrality of contact and imitation to magic is not Frazer's alone and Gaelic lore reflects this convention through its stories and tales.

Gaelic culture, like Celtic culture more broadly, has its lineage in the Anglo-Saxon pagan world, and in particular its magic. When artists tap into these stories they are working with a history of magic that saturates the Scottish landscape. If we follow David Abram's suggestion that magic is another way of understanding nature,[30] we can see that magic and the routes upon which it is based function to reimagine our relationship to nature in the era of the Anthropocene through a material literalism. The use of Gaelic folklore is representative of the wider collapse of alternative cosmologies into an indigeneity that is now taken seriously as a means to correct the West's mistreatment of the planet. When writing on fantasy in the Anthropocene, Alexander Popav suggests that there has been a gear change in our treatment of the non-human that has gone beyond allegory towards a fully-fledged nonhuman subjectivity. The consequence of this leads us to ask "what if they [nonhumans] were capable of narrating their own stories?"[31] As he goes on to point out, which we could characterise as a form of literal realism: "these nonhuman characters and narrators do not bear typical trappings from earlier fantasy: anthropomorphism, supernatural origins, allegory".[2] In singing alongside seals, Tuulikki moves towards platforming this nonhuman subjectivity. In this instance, the stories that the seals appear to be telling are ones of loss and grief.

The collective lament that Tuulikki shares with the ròn mòr is a leitmotif that has held sway across pre-modern and modernist imagery.[3] In Gaelic, the practice of caoineadh, or keening, lies at the heart of *Seals' Kin*. Caoineadh was a ritual of vocal lament usually performed by women involving mournful wailing, chanting, and weeping to display collective grief, often at a wake or at a graveside. Ritualised mourning for those lost, it was the norm for obsequies in Gaelic Scotland, with records suggesting its practice circa 1642, dying back by the end of the 19th century with the rise of the power of the church.[4] Keening was usually improvised and is best understood as an elegiac poem performed by women as a form of liturgy. As Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart describes it in relation to Irish practices of similar type: "their versus not only praised the departed but also criticised, cursed, and threatened revenge upon those who had offended them. Keening sanctioned

otherwise disruptive, taboo behaviour".[5] What is interesting is that keening was a form of commentary, as well as mourning. A public mordant appraisal that gave women a voice usually denied to them in daily life. In this, it ties into the wider role of song in Gaelic culture, which has preserved its oral history and in particular the labour and lives of women working on the land.[6] In *Seals' Kin*, we are reminded that the voice of women and animals has historically been collapsed together and denied. But art, and in particular performance, has given women an authoritative voice to speak with and on behalf of others.

American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham's seminal *Lamentation* from 1930 is strikingly analogous to *Seals' Kin*. The cocooning of the lamenting body in the first is echoed in the second. The pulling and stretching of Graham's second skin reads as a form of grief that lives on the body's surface. The taut lines and protruding limbs create a tension that seems to be captured by the limits of the material's give, restricting and determining both artists' movements. The effect is one of stricken vulnerability. Barbieri likens the material's restriction in *Lamentation* to something akin to a shroud, but one that is not merely covering the body and protecting it, but attacking: "as if the body is lacerating its own skin, trapped in the hollowness of its form, created in a costume/body interplay".[7] There is a link to be found here with death masks, which were not restricted to those who had just died, but historically were also made from the living. If done incorrectly, the procedure could cause the death of those they were seeking to commemorate. Suffocation and damage to organs through pressure on the body are recorded as taking place on a number of occasions.[8] Thus, the slippage from homage to threat was ever-present and can also be read into the tightly-wrapped body in performance. This threat is not as evident in Tuulikki, due in part to the deliberate slowness of her movements that depart from the frenzy of Graham. Nonetheless, her seal skin can be read as a funerary shroud. The sense of wrapping and loss that pervades both works supports this association. The purpose of the shroud is care and reverence for the deceased body. They also enable a material trace of the decaying corpse to be captured on the fabric itself, which, for some cultures, is used as an artifact of memorialisation.[9] In the shroud, we see the loss of the body materialised into a concrete form. Graham declared *Lamentation* to be the "personification of grief itself".[10] Much the same could be said for Tuulikki's seal-shroud. But is this their loss or ours? Tuulikki's work does not proffer a distinction, but mingles us with them in a collective lament.

Tuulikki is not alone in exploring the edges of the non-human. What cannot be disarticulated from these presentations is how seeking solace in other creatures' ways of being is tethered to the material realism of the world, of bodies and skins. But the artist's adopted skin is not necessarily relinquished from its owner and should be caveated with a nod to the dilemmas of a one-sided empathetic comingling. The animal skin, in its delicate patterning, is after all the means through which it hides.

Endnotes

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[5] See Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
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