

Hanna Tuulikki: *Seals'kin*



## SEALS'KIN

*Single channel moving image and stereo sound, 19 mins 15 sec, 2022*

*Seals'kin (choreographic visual score), Flocking screenprint on somerset antique white, 90cm x 76cm, Edition of 9 with 3 APs, 2022*



Commissioned for the Biennale of Sydney, Hanna Tuulikki's short film *Seals'kin* is a sonic and choreographic meditation on loss, longing, transformation and kinship, shot on location in coastal Aberdeenshire in Scotland. At the mouth of the river Ythan, where the freshwater meets the North Sea, hundreds of grey and common seals haul out on the estuary banks. Here, Tuulikki explores with her body what it might mean to become-with-seal, drawing on myths of human-seal hybridity and folkloric musical practices to offer alternative forms of mourning through sensuous identification with more-than-human kin.

For as long as we have inhabited the earth, humans have shared the seas, coasts and islands with seals – web-footed mammals adapted to life in the water. In places where people depend (or once depended) on the sea for their livelihood, seals are intricately entangled with peoples' beliefs. In Ancient Greek mythology, the eerie calls of grey seals carried on the wind were probably the original siren voices, luring unwitting sailors to their deaths on the rocks. Shape-shifting is a recurrent theme, and nowhere are there more tales of human-seal transformation than in Scotland.

In Scottish folklore, mythical seal people known as selkies are said to shed their sealskins and step from water as humans, until mysteriously disappearing back to sea. The sealskin is essential to the act of transformation and, on visiting the human world, if their skin is lost or stolen, a selkie may end up trapped on land in human form. In their watery domain, a selkie distressed by the slaughter of a fellow seal may seek revenge on a human seal hunter, capsizing a boat in retribution, while a benevolent selkie might take pity on a lost mariner caught in a storm, offering shelter in their kingdom under the sea. Selkie stories were passed down from generation to generation and, embedded within the folklore are a number of musical traditions that appear to blur the line between human and seal, including melodies which imitate their plaintive sounds, and haunting seal-calling songs sung to attract seals to the shore.



Perhaps these selkie stories of loss and longing helped to alleviate the feelings of sorrow brought on by a sudden death in the community, or from relatives lost at sea. Musical practices of singing to or with seals may have maintained a felt connection with the dead through the fostering of kinship with seals and selkies, thought by some to be the souls of the departed. But as folkloric coping mechanisms for grief, how might these stories and songs help us to come to terms with the collective and personal tragedies of the present pandemic? And furthermore, how might they help us to navigate the sorrow of ecological or climate grief?

By virtue of having a body, we are all vulnerable to loss, and the more intense the love was for a person, being, place or thing, the greater the grief. Our response to loss moves us, changing us in ways we could not imagine; it leaves us more open to other bodies, exposes our shared vulnerability and finitude, and fosters meaningful connections. The work of mourning then, is politically and ethically transformative, for it implies empathy, obligation and responsibility. By directing our attention to more-than-human beings and places that are often excluded from the realm of the grievable, we can begin to nurture new forms of kinship and rethink more hopeful futures.

In *Seals'kin*, Tuulikki draws on her own recent experiences of loss to reimagine a contemporary mourning rite. Referencing traditional selkie tales as bereavement allegories and seal calling songs as practices of making kin, she adopts the sealskin as a powerful ritual object to explore how grief can open out new ways of knowing and being that stretch beyond human bodies into a visceral connection with the more-than-human world.

Link to film (PREVIEW to un-mastered stereo version):

<https://vimeo.com/684252463>

password: seal



"A haunting film of beautiful melodies, *Seals'kin* serves as a reminder that folklore need not be relegated to the past and that it can serve a vital purpose in the present when other tools fail us. It's a slow paced tale, in keeping with the traditions of the north, but Tuulikki successfully finds a point of balance. It doesn't drag but instead acquires a hypnotic quality, a stillness around which an ocean of grief might swirl yet do no harm" – ★★☆☆ Jennie Kermode, Eye for Film

"The film is mesmerising: gently-paced, beautifully shot, and with a vocal score for human voice that responds to, and at times merges with, the seals' own singing."  
– Dougie Strang, LESS – a journal of degrowth, radical sufficiency and decolonisation in Scotland.

"When Tuulikki seal calls, she is howling for all the griefs we carry. We are attracted to the call of the seal because in it we feel our own sadnesses. Tuulikki is giving us the latest iteration of the selkie myth... folk tales for the C21st, continuing to communicate important ideas about nature, more important now than ever." – Amy Liptrot, Lux Scotland



Exploring the silhouette as a template for movement, Tuulikki's choreographic visual score combines seal and human-seal forms in a flocking screen-print reminiscent of furry mottled seal skin.

Link to view full edition of visual scores: <https://bit.ly/3CRPitU>



## *Seals'kin: calling for the turning of the tide*

*participatory vocal improvisation, approx 30 minutes, 2021-ongoing*

Facilitated by Hanna Tuulikki, Nic Green and Jude Williams, *Seals'kin: calling for the turning of the tide* is a touring site-specific vocal improvisation based on fragments of traditional seal-calling songs performed by a scratch choir of local singers.

Growing out of an introductory workshop rooted in exploratory vocal practice, participants are invited to perform an improvised lament to the water at the turning of the tide, calling the seals, inviting them to surface.

The workshop and performance are part of a larger body of work exploring myths of human-seal hybridity and folkloric musical practices to offer alternative forms of identification with more-than-human kin.



## SEALS'KIN

### Exhibition history:

- 2023 *Maluw Adhil Urngu Padanu Mamuy Moesik*  
(*Legends from the deep sitting peacefully on the waters*),  
Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
- 2023 *Seals'kin* (solo exhibition), Moray Art Centre
- 2022-23 *When Bodies Whisper*, Timespan, Sutherland
- 2022 Biennale of Sydney

### Performance history:

- 2023 Findhorn Bay, Moray Art Centre
- 2022 British Art Show, Plymouth
- 2022 *Galoshans Festival*, Greenock, Glasgow
- 2022 Full of Noises, South Walney Island, Cumbria
- 2022 The Biennale of Sydney
- 2021 COP26

### Film screening history:

- 2023 Lux Scotland: ONE WORK
- 2023 Cine Astra Film Festival, Gagsow
- 2023 Soundplay symposium, DCA, Dundee
- 2022 British Art Show 9, Plymouth
- 2022 *Galoshans Festival*, Greenock, Glasgow
- 2022 Centre for Human Ecology, Glasgow
- 2022 *Making Oddkin*, The New Phoenix Cinema, GAMIS, Glasgow
- 2022 *Folk Film Gathering*, Edinburgh Filmhouse

### Collections:

- 2024 Acquired by Contemporary Art Society for  
Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum

### Film Credits:

Performed and directed by Hanna Tuulikki  
Produced by Glasgow Artist Moving Image Studios  
Additional vocals: Nic Green and Judith Williams  
Assistant director: Peter McMaster  
Director of photography and first camera: Minttumaari Mäntynen  
Music composer, costume design, editor: Hanna Tuulikki  
Underwater camera and second camera: Lindsay Brown  
Location sound, sound design and mix: Pete Smith  
Sealskin costume textile: Liz Honeybone

### Visual Score Credits:

Produced at Edinburgh Printmakers with Master Printmaker Anupa Gardner

*Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney; supported by Creative Scotland, the British Council, Frame Finland.*

### Participatory Performance Credits:

Facilitated by Hanna Tuulikki, Nic Green and Jude Williams