

## FURRY

### A Study of the Furry Community (2010 - present)

The furry community is generally based on the idea of having a connection (in most cases of identification) with one or more anthropomorphic animals of choice (called fursonas). The representations of such anthropomorphic characters in terms of physical characteristics as well as moral ones greatly vary from one case to the other. However most of the time, the fursonas are a mix of animal and human features or behavior. In most cases they are based on only one animal but in a few instances they are hybrids of several animals or simply creatures which have been invented without having certain real animals in mind. In all instances the fursonas are described in idealized terms: they hold positive moral values which are culturally attributed to certain species, such as loyalty for wolves, cunning for foxes or wisdom for dragons and they are occasionally endowed with supernatural abilities such as flight (where the respective species does not fly), immortality, time-traveling or inability to age. The basis for identifying with the fursona is either having some features in common with the anthropomorphic character or assigning to the latter traits which the respective furry does not share but would like to have. Many informants included herein reported that the main cultural influences that laid the basis for their fursonas can be traced to pop cultural productions such as Disney animation films or video games. A small number refer back to totemic practices or spiritual beliefs.

In terms identification, I have split the total (thus far) number of 35 case studies into three groups. The first group consists in 7 individuals who have stated a lack of identification with their fursona. These are mostly motivated by finding an environment where they can come across diversity and other people who are interested in befriending them. For them the furry fandom functions as a social platform above all else. In the same group I included one person (Edwolf) who suffers from severe autism and for whom the furry community is a very inclusive environment in which he can exercise communication to the degree he is capable of. Other reasons listed for not having a relationship of identification with one's fursona are: being interested only in participating in the fursuit walk as a means of creating an unusual social situation; being too new to the fandom and not having developed one's fursona sufficiently; being

solely interested in anthropomorphic art.

The second group includes individuals (22) who have a relationship of weak identification with their fursona. The weak identification group exhibited the following features: having a passion for animals, playing a character like an actor would and temporarily identifying with that character; believing or desiring to share character traits which are culturally attributed to the animal of choice (such traits can be loyalty for dogs/wolves, playfulness for cats/dogs etc.); projecting an alter ego which is based on similarities with the respective member or, on the contrary, is completely different; playing a character which allows behavior that could not be expressed in real life; having only one fursona or several at the same time; changing one's fursona in time; being aware that one is human, but wanting to become one's fursona if given the chance; not wanting to become one's fursona permanently. The most frequent explanation given for the weak identification group is reenacting one's fursona in a manner similar to an actor playing a role. This reenactment can be done by means of a fursuit or through role-playing in Second Life or other online platforms. Some informants prefer fursuiting (or even restrict to fursuiting in some cases) as a means of fursona reenactment, while others believe it to be a corruption of pure imaginative powers.

Even within the weak identification group, playing the role can be an experience of varied intensity and commitment. For instance Penpen states that he lacks the detachment proper to a professional actor who enters and sheds his/her character as he/she pleases. Reenacting the fursona has become a reflex for Penpen and so it tends to gradually sink into his identity without resulting into him believing that he is inhabited by an animal (that is without migrating to the strong identification group). Moreover, Baekho sets himself apart from the members of the furry community who treat their fursona like role-playing. By that he means people who are not committed to only one animal and consequently to only one fursona. In Baekho's opinion being a true fur means being loyal to one's anthropomorphic character and exhibiting commitment to developing it through reenactment. On the other hand Hebaxin likens the identification with his fursona to being a football fan. The same happens in the case of Janner who associates his relationship with his fursona to having a hobby. The identification grounds further complicate the matter. Identifying with one's

fursona is achieved on account of: 1. sharing certain features with the anthropomorphic character of choice (in the sense of recognizing shared traits within a certain animal), 2. differing from it but trying to appropriate features thereof which the respective fur values and, 3. incorporating one's character traits into the behavior or nature of the anthropomorphic character so as to facilitate the identification. All cases prompt to a reenactment of otherness within the self, despite the points of commonality between the subject and the object of identification. The sharing of features are paradoxically often the basis for experiencing a break from normal life, in the sense that having something in common with the object of identification facilitates the undertaking of the role, the projection of oneself as different.

Beyond all individual variations and descriptions, the weak identification group is defined by a considerable distance/difference between the subject (the informant) and the object (the fursona) of identification. Although in many cases the practices specific to the furry community span over long periods of time and the subjects exhibit great commitment towards fostering the development of their character, the furs included in the weak identification group never mistake themselves for their anthropomorphic character. Above all else they recognize they are completely human. Even though some state they would like to become their anthropomorphic character if given the chance, they simultaneously acknowledge that transforming into a fantasy creature is an impossibility. Most of the informants point out that they are content and well adjusted to their everyday life outside the furry community. And for this reason, they do not feel the need to fully and permanently become something else.

The definitive criterion for selecting those in the strong identification group is not feeling entirely human. This may result in the following reported perceptions: experiencing discomfort towards being in one's human body and in the company of other people; feeling like two people rather than a single entity; leading two separate lives; perceiving the emergence of one's fursona as an occurrence independent from one's will; experiencing a feeling of freedom when in character; being fully dedicated to only one fursona; identifying with one's fursona is based on recognizing it as the true self rather than fashioning it; giving a spiritual significance to one's anthropomorphic character; wanting to fully and permanently become the anthropomorphic character. Some of the

features enumerated above were also encountered in the weak identification group, however the furies included therein feel entirely human. Some of the informants in the strong identification category relate or derive from two other subcultures, the Other Kin and the weres. The Other Kin includes individuals who believe they have the soul of another creature or they have been that particular creature in a past life. Their object of identification is not necessarily an animal. The weres (as in werewolf) are persons who turn animal behavior into a life-style and try to spend as much time as possible appropriating animal gestures in their daily routine. In many cases they also believe to be possessed by an animal spirit. Some participants to my study who have reported discomfort with their human nature admitted escapism as a motivator for identifying with their fursona. Since escapism is also listed for some of the furies in the weak identification group, it cannot be considered a decisive criterion for separating the two categories.

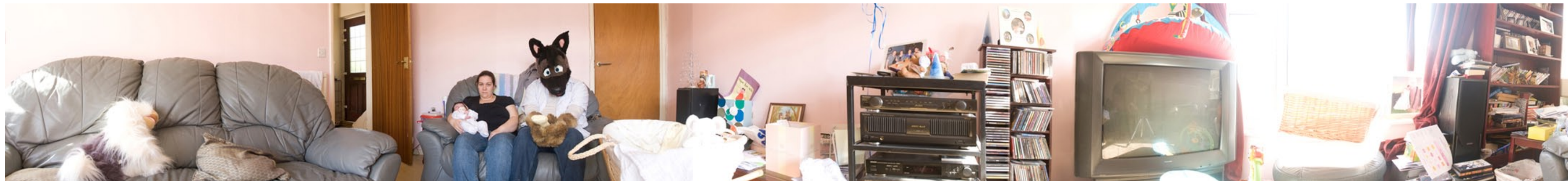
Thirteen individuals from both the weak and the strong identification groups have listed escapism as a motivator for identifying with their fursonas. Four of these ten stated that it is escapism as long as any hobby can be deemed an escape from the monotony of daily life. The rest of nine identify with their fursona in order to forget about worries, troubles or unhappiness. However, in the strong identification group, the opportunity to escape in an anthropomorphic character is never assimilated to having a hobby but to resolving the inner conflict of not feeling entirely human.

Irrespective of the identification type, none of the participants to my study stays in character all the time. The fursona as an alternate identity seems to be more a matter of conscious choice rather than the spontaneous manifestation of the self which we have grown accustomed to call identity. Leaving aside the very complicated discussion of identity which has greatly developed with the advent of post-structuralism and cultural studies, identity is generally construed as the naturalized or internalized. It thus allows a person to be whom that person is without thinking about it or without deploying identity behavior. This is not the case with the fursona identification. Even for the individuals included in the strong identification group the desire to become one's fursona or the discomfort experienced with being human expresses the lack of actuality/realization of such identity projections. In consequence one can speak of

identification rather than identity.

I have enclosed a selection of images (360 degree panoramas) relevant for the current stage of research/photographic documentation. I find the panorama as the most appropriate photographic format for expressing the idea of difference as part of everyday life. Panoramas approaching 360 degrees are informed by the following representational issue: they are de-centred and a-compositional. The reason for this particularity is the fact that the panorama records space without selection. Furthermore, it gives way to a different kind of viewing: one can either see its entirety but not grasp the details right away, or one can concentrate on the details progressively, thus experiencing a sequenced and anticipatory viewing mode. In both these viewing instances, the "indifference" of the panoramic format treats every element as the next. Thus, the costumed subject is integrated in the wide field of the panorama and consequently the viewer perceives him/her as part of a spatial continuum of various ordinary objects such as household items, buildings or trees. As a result, being different appears as a common occurrence, as the norm in the age of individualism.

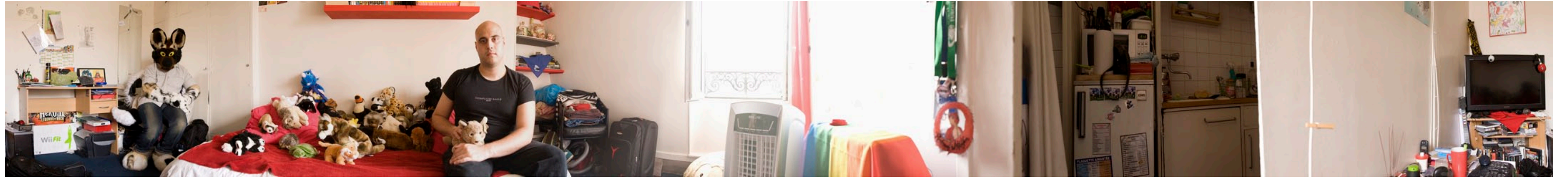
This project is the object of my PhD research. Thus far I performed the documentation in five countries: the Netherlands, the UK, France, Germany and Romania. The reason for choosing an interdisciplinary approach is the fact that photography can only show what is already visible and can only attest to the presence in front of the camera of a singularity in a past moment. Matters such as identification processes and the social context which accounts for these do not lie on the visible surface of things and as such must be investigated by other means than photography.



Janner and his family at home in Plymouth, UK, 2010



Spikey at home in Rotterdam, NL, 2010



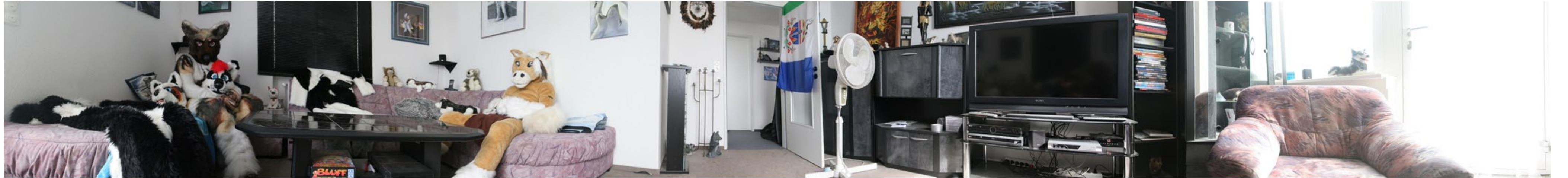
Red Washiegel (left) and Red Moon (right) at home in Paris, 2010



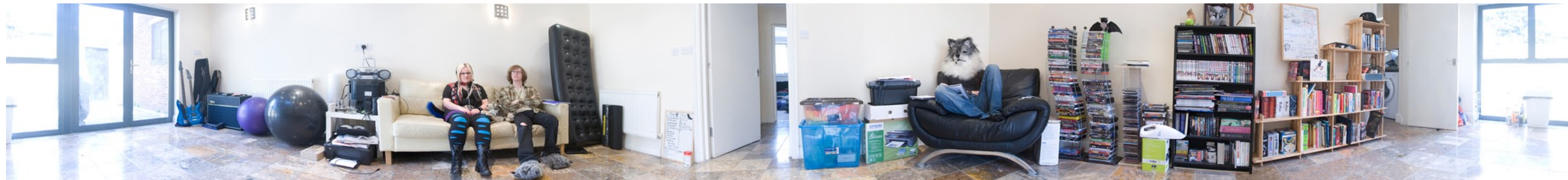
Ozone in a park opposite the John Soane Museum in London, 2010



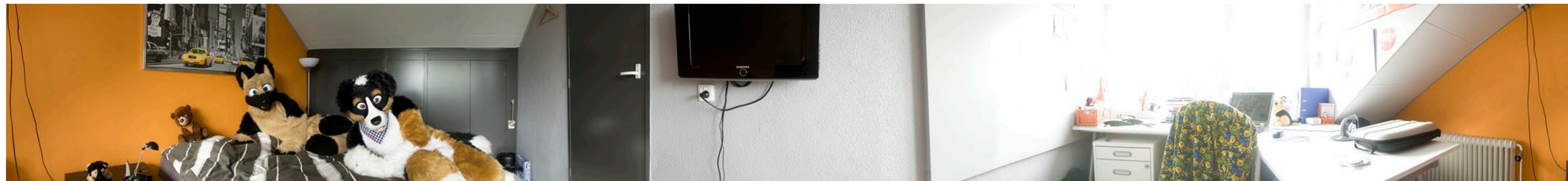
Fursuit walk in Rotterdam, 2010



Fjordwolf (left) and Kashjew (right) in Fjordwolf's home in Hamburg, Germany.



Zipwolf (right) in his home in London, 2010



Ace and Noodles in the former's home in Vianen, NL, 2010