

Plush Love

Animal Anthropomorphism in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Plush Love: Animal Anthropomorphism in Contemporary Art Isa Tousignant

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben writes: “the relation between man and animal marks the boundary of an essential domain, in which historical inquiry must necessarily confront that fringe of ultrahistory which cannot be reached without making recourse to first philosophy.”¹ With this thesis I suggest an investigation of the historical and philosophical contexts of the human/nonhuman animal relationship through the lens of fursuiting and a body of contemporary visual art production that finds inspiration within that subject.

Fursuiting is a practice undertaken by members of a subculture called the “furry fandom,” which centres on the appreciation of anthropomorphized animal characters that find their origins in the traditions of comics and animation. In addition to engaging in their own visual culture production featuring hybrid “humanimal” creatures, members of the furry fandom who don fursuits choose to dress up in full-body artificial fur costumes and perform in characters they feel express alternate identities.

This thesis aims at uncovering that phenomenon, but focuses mainly on the identification and analysis of a secondary body of visual production that has resulted from the existence of fursuiting: the work produced by contemporary Canadian and American visual artists that uses fursuiting as a theme. This body of work has never been examined as a whole.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21.

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Introduction

My mum is one of those mums who made her kids' Halloween costumes by hand. From Dracula to a gypsy queen to *Like a Virgin* era Madonna, every one was thoroughly authentic, fully accessorized and the result of a week's hard work. The most memorable year was when I was 7. Halloween fell on a school day, so we were all invited to show up in costume. Mum had outdone herself: she had made me a full-body, white plush-fur bunny costume complete with towering ears (with pink velvet interior) and gloves for paws. We had painted what showed of my face white, and fashioned a pair of buck teeth out of white cardboard and a pink bunny nose out of a halved and painted ping pong ball, with black pipe-cleaner whiskers jutting out from the sides. The transformation was total – I remember hopping all over the house in a 7-year-old's take on method acting. But the most extraordinary thing was to happen when I got to school. No one recognized me. With every “ooh” and “aah” the costume garnered, there came a “who's in there?” I waved a mute hello to my best friend (it was difficult to speak with the cardboard teeth) – even she was clueless. The teacher guessed a string of names, but mine wasn't among them. As the shy kid in class, it seems no one suspected I could muster up the nerve for such an outlandish metamorphosis.

The effect of that moment, which remains preserved in my memory banks as my first real contact with the freeing power of role play and the joys of fleeting anonymity within a set sense of my social self, may have something to do with the subject of this thesis. It certainly had something to do with how much attention I paid to the growing

presence of fursuiting – an anthropomorphic fetish that entails dressing in full-bodied plush fur animal costumes – as a theme in contemporary Canadian and American art.

In 1999, when Montreal artist Valérie Lamontagne inaugurated her *Advice Bunny* performance (fig. 1), it was an oddity. The performance, which she enacted until 2003, had her sit in art galleries throughout Canada and further afield in full bunny regalia – a costume that closely resembled my own, except for the fact that hers was pink. She invited visitors to recline on a chaise longue and tell her their woes, which, she noticed, they were much more willing to share when she was dressed as a rabbit. At the time, I found the idea intriguing, and unique – but then I noticed the theme elsewhere. Later that year I saw an outrageous solo work by actress Nathalie Claude called *Lapine-Moi*, in which she performed a whole skit in a bunny costume until the last minute, when she stripped to reveal a hunter’s getup beneath (fig. 2); it was like an artistic illustration of the eternal feud between Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. In 2006, while book shopping at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, I chanced upon *Monster-Sized Monsters*, a tome on the work of American artist Adam Wallacavage whose cover features a person performing in a deconstructed, home-fashioned teddy bear costume (fig. 3). Soon thereafter I encountered the humorous photographic series on fursuiter sex by American photographer Michael Cogliantry online (figs. 4 through 6). Lamontagne was not alone – there was a whole bestiary of artists out there who found inspiration in fursuits.

What would become a decade-long research project has necessarily been two-pronged, in that I address “furry fandom” itself as well as its occurrence within contemporary art. Fursuiters are a subset of the furry fandom, a subculture interested in

anthropomorphic animal characters endowed with comic-book features and human personalities.² Members of the furry fandom, known as “furries” (or “furverts,” depending on your viewpoint), form a community that gathers mostly online, on social media networks such as Fur Affinity,³ SoFurry,⁴ Furry 4 Life,⁵ FurNation⁶ and DeviantArt,⁷ except for a few times a year when they meet up at the annual conventions that happen all over North America and the world. These conventions, held in the same sort of inexpensive hotel that hosts get-rich seminars and literary conferences, unite thousands of people at a time⁸ for days on end and invariably culminate in a fursuiters’ parade. It is estimated that 12% of the one million worldwide furry fans own fursuits.⁹ Fursuiters are plushophiles – people with a paraphilia for plush, or polyester fake fur – who express their interest in anthropomorphized creatures by actually transforming themselves into them via full-body costumes and performance.¹⁰ Though sometimes these gatherings might result in “yiffing,” or sexualized play between fursuiters in costume (just one word in the extensive furry lexicon; see Appendix A), many in the fursuiting community maintain that most of their interactions are platonic and that their reputation as sexual monsters is the product of sensationalizing media coverage.¹¹

² “Furry Fandom” entry on Wikipedia, accessed November 12, 2012: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Furry_fandom. Wikipedia remains useful in identifying some of humanity’s more idiosyncratic niches.

³ <http://www.furaffinity.net/>

⁴ <http://www.sofurry.com/>

⁵ <http://furry4life.org/>

⁶ <http://furnation.com/>

⁷ <http://www.deviantart.com/>

⁸ The largest yet, the 2012 Anthrocon in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was attended by 5,179 furries. WikiFur, accessed on April 14, 2013: <http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Anthrocon>

⁹ “The Social Psychology of Furry Fandom,” on YouTube, filmed lecture by Courtney Plante at the Texas Furry Fiesta, February 25, 2012, accessed on February 20, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6zYWmvHnZQ>.

¹⁰ “Frequently Asked Questions” section on alt.sex.plushies, last revised September 22, 1999:

<http://www.velocity.net/~galen/plushlex.txt>

¹¹ *Fanboy Confessional: The Furry Edition*, created by Michael McNamara, produced by Markham Street Films, episode 105, 2011.

Whether platonic or not, communal gatherings play a critical role in the existence of a fursuiter; it is when in costume that fursuiters experience their fully actualized identities.¹²

In addition to its acts of performance, the furry subculture produces and exchanges a large amount of fan-driven visual culture: mostly drawings and comic strips featuring characters such as rabbits, foxes and cats that exhibit anthropomorphized characteristics like human intelligence and facial expressions, the ability to speak and to walk on two legs, and a proclivity toward wearing clothes. The characters are most often set in typical “human” situations, like going to school, hanging out with friends and engaged in sexual acts – indeed, as most of the popular media covering the phenomenon emphasizes,¹³ sex is an important part of the cultural production of the furry fandom. Though furry fan art is included within the purview of this thesis, my primary interest rests in identifying and analyzing a body of contemporary Canadian and American art from the last decade or so that trades in this imagery from a more critical standpoint. It has yet to be theoretically explored as a whole.

To this end I will examine the work of Janet Werner, Gary Baseman, Jamie Campbell, Kathie Olivas, Jon Sasaki, Nate Hill, Nick Cave, Paul McCarthy and Michael Cogliantry. In these artists’ hands, the meaning of fursuiting is enhanced in multitudinous ways; while McCarthy uses it as a springboard for an exploration of the grotesque, Cogliantry ironizes the practice and its sexually loaded imagery and Hill viscerally

¹² *Sex2k: Plushies & Furrries*, directed by Rick Castro, produced by MTV, 2001, uploaded to YouTube on February 10, 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3NQ7D24Pqw>.

¹³ There are many examples of mass media coverage that focuses on the sexual aspect of the furry subculture, including “The Plush Life,” by Kurt B. Reilly, in *Seattle Weekly* (April 7, 1999), “Pleasure of the Fur,” by George Gurley, in *Vanity Fair* (March 2001), and “My Second Vice,” by Marshall Sella, in *GQ* (April 2007).

explores its significance in relation to the delineations of identity. I will support my analysis of their work and the phenomenon of fursuiting as a whole by delving into a range of theoretical areas: humanist philosophy, ranging from Pythagoras to Aristotle to Descartes, in contrast with the posthuman theories of Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway; the concept of becoming-animal by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and its relation to Jacques Derrida's views on our human-centric perceptions; the definition of "cute" in aesthetic terms, as analysed by Sianne Ngai, Daniel Harris, Deidre Barrett and Gary Cross, and how it finds its roots in the history of comics and animation and blossoms in fursuiting today; the definition of self represented by fursuiting as a subculture, according to the sociological theories of Dick Hebdige and Theresa Winge, and affect theories of Sharalyn Orbaugh and France Borel; and sexuality and the fetish object, as defined by Sigmund Freud, retooled by Guattari, and reconsidered along posthuman lines.

Thus, in Chapter 1, *Becoming Animal*, I will address the meaning of "animal" and its relationship to humankind by contrasting humanist and posthumanist schools of thought, and position fursuiting in that landscape. In Chapter 2, *Making Googley Eyes*, I will analyze fursuiting along stylistic lines and locate its cartoonish aesthetic within a historical context. In Chapter 3, *Breaking Skin*, I will examine fursuiting as an act of dissociation with the mainstream, resulting in a subculture driven by the active retooling of its participants' identities through ritual, performance and artifice. And finally, in my fourth chapter, *Romancing the Beast*, I will address sexuality and, in light of the theories explored in the other chapters, propose a particular perspective on the role played by the

fetishization of plush in both the pursuing scene and in the work of the visual artists that it so inspires.

Chapter 1: Becoming Animal

Animals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy – less in their deep anatomy – in their habits, in their time, in their physical capacities, they differ from man. They are both like and unlike.¹⁴
– John Berger

The human/animal relationship has long held symbolic potency. Animality has been used for millennia as a portal through which to escape the physical, spiritual, psychological or sexual constraints imposed by the human body and by human consciousness. And yet the very use of the word “animal” has been problematized in contemporary philosophy, even while the term can be nonchalantly used to mean every living creature – excluding plants – that is other than human. Despite being animals ourselves, the distinction we draw between “them” and “us” has been a foundational principle of Euro-American history stretching back at least to Plato and the Old Testament.¹⁵ In this chapter, I will contrast the humanist view on animality with the posthumanist perspective – an approach that opens fruitful avenues in the examination of how the phenomenon of fursuiting engages with the human/nonhuman animal duality.

While for the pre-Platonic Greek philosopher Pythagoras animals deserved consideration because of the possibility that they could possess a reincarnated human soul, for Aristotle, who did not believe in reincarnation, the animal was below humans because it lacked the power of reasoning¹⁶ – a theory that has permeated our species hierarchy since. In the seventeenth century René Descartes reiterated this argument by

¹⁴ John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin U.K., 2009), 13.

¹⁵ Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

stating that animals were an assemblage of instincts and physics, in other words on par with machines. Despite the opposing views of Rousseau at the time, who argued that though incapable of rational thought, animals shared the same natural law as humans by the fact of their sentience, or ability to feel pleasure and pain,¹⁷ the Cartesian perspective was a founding principle not only for modern agricultural and industrial practices, but for the continued subjugation of non-human animals. In John Berger's mind, by the nineteenth century a process had begun in Western Europe and North America whereby every tradition that had previously mediated relations between man and nature was broken – a development that is seeing its completion in twenty-first century corporate capitalism.¹⁸ He writes: “Before this rupture, animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man. Perhaps that already suggests too great a distance. They were with man at the centre of his world.”¹⁹ That centrality was economic and productive, in the form of farming and transportation, at a time when animals weren't solely the product – meat, leather – but our helping hands in the human chain of production.

Berger believes Descartes created a decisive theoretical break that internalized (within the human psyche) the dualism implicit in our relationship to other animals. In dividing absolutely body from soul, and defining nonhuman animals as soulless, Descartes “emptied the animal of experience and secrets,”²⁰ making those and other “soulful” traits purely the provision of human-ness. That effort to divide or define two aspects of our identity, as if a line could be drawn between raw, rampant instinct and

¹⁷ Ibid., 201.

¹⁸ Berger, 12. “Corporate capitalism” is Berger's term, though he discussed its effects in the 20th century – I have updated it.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Berger, 21.

civilized, controlled decision, has split the Western sense of self into warring camps – what in Freudian terms would be the unbridled id and the commanding ego. As posthumanist theorist Cary Wolfe writes, “the animal has always been especially, frightfully nearby, always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals of self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called ‘the human.’” That dualism created an identity crisis that is at the heart of “Western subjectivity and sociality as such, an institution that relies on the tacit agreement that the full transcendence of the ‘human’ requires the sacrifice of the ‘animal’ and the animalistic²¹”. It follows that any effort to define animality invariably has as a primary motivation the definition of humanity, in contrast. In Boris Cyrulnik’s words,

[...] Philosophers who speak only of animality teach us nothing about animals, since the object of their discourse is to describe living creatures that are not men: non-Men, as it were – lesser beings. Expressed thus, the question contains its own answer, for animality is seen as non-humanity, just as the machine is defined by non-soul and death by non-life. [...] Animals, too, have a history, but it is we who write it, with our affects and our images. Their history is the history of how we see them.²²

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Jacques Derrida have reviewed some of the problematic man-animal relations that have informed many philosophical projects and attempted to dislodge them. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari turn their attention in particular to Jung’s perceptions of the animal as archetypal (as an “analogical representation” of humanity) and Lévi-Strauss’s description of totemism, according to which humans transcend external resemblances to animals to arrive at “internal homologies.” Through their consideration, it becomes clear that both those

²¹ Wolfe, 6.

²² Boris Cyrulnik quoted by Fraser, 200.

systems of perception leave the human being at the centre of the equation, in the position of supremacy and of a unidirectional projection of meaning onto the animal other.²³ In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida sets out to problematize that interstitial space between “that which we call animal” and “that which we call human” in order to move beyond this false dichotomy. He calls this exploration “limitrophy,” not just because it concerns what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises and complicates it. He seeks to open up the discussion “certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply.”²⁴ His philosophical challenge begins with the very fact that theorists as widely ranging as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan and Levinas have drawn a line between humanity and the millions of other species that compose the animal kingdom, known reductively as “animal.” For Derrida, lumping together the cricket and the whale, the mountain lion and the parakeet, the giraffe and the marmot, is remiss and dismissive. “This agreement concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic *asinanities*²⁵ of those who call themselves humans,”²⁶ he writes.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 235-237.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.

²⁵ “Asinanity” is translator David Wills’s solution to the word “bêtise,” a French word that suits Derrida’s purpose to perfection as it etymologically shares the roots of the word “beast” yet means “act of stupidity.”

²⁶ Derrida, 41.

Derrida believes it is imperative that we complexify the understanding of animality we've inherited from millennia of philosophical musings. "Like artists and writers, the cartographers of subjectivity should seek [...], with each concrete performance, to develop and innovate, to create new perspectives, without prior recourse to assured theoretical foundations or the authority of a group, school, conservatory, or academy,"²⁷ he writes. In this desire, he is fully aligned with the posthuman project.

Posthumanism is a school of thought born of the natural sciences, the humanities as well as cybernetics in the late 1980s that has branched out to serve the purposes of animal rights activists, humanities scholars and cultural theorists. The posthuman thinker seeks to rewrite both the construct of "human" as a universal state perceived as autonomous, rational, free willed and unified in itself as the apex of existence, and that of "humanism" as a philosophical system representing those values. From the posthuman perspective, positioning humans at the centre of the symbolic system, as the sole makers of meaning, is as fallacious as positing the Earth is at the centre of the universe. Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, one of the figureheads of posthumanist theory, says that conceiving of nature and culture as either polar opposites or universal categories is misguided. "Instead of opposites, we get the whole sketchpad of the modern geometrician's fevered brain with which to draw relationality,"²⁸ she says.

Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness – i.e. the mistake of, first, taking provisional and local category abstractions like "nature" and "culture" for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations. There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources,

²⁷ Félix Guattari, "The Three Ecologies," in *New Formations* (no. 8, summer 1989), 133.

²⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (London: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 8.

unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler's terms, there are only "contingent foundations;" bodies that matter are the result. A bestiary of agencies, kinds of relating, and scores of time trump the imaginings of even the most baroque cosmologists.²⁹

It is no coincidence that feminist thinkers like Haraway and Butler are proponents of posthumanism. Some gender studies scholars have proposed that the interdisciplinary fields of animal studies and gender studies share a common challenge because of the way sexism and speciesism mutually inform one another. Like sexism, heterosexism and racism, speciesism is the prejudicial view that there is a supreme subject against which all else is judged: in the case of sexual, gendered and racial discrimination, the solitary, unified subject of heterosexual white man. For speciesism, this ontologically distinct marker broadens somewhat to include "others" such as woman and people of different ethnic backgrounds and sexual identities under the umbrella of "human," but the hierarchy remains the same: their supreme value justifies the subjugation of those who are not part of that group.³⁰ Even variations *within* that group are cause for prejudice; throughout history, an oft-recurring justification for violence or abuse to fellow human beings has been their perceived "beastliness," whether simply in terms of physiognomies or their behaviour – as in their lack of control of their animal impulses. This prejudicial hierarchy establishes an ideal at the top of a pyramid, "humanity," and any gradation away from that apex results in a loss of value – and a gain in "animality" – and therefore provides a greater rationale for discrimination. Eloquenty put by W.J.T Mitchell, in his

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Gruen, Lori and Kari Well, "Teaching Difference: Sex, Gender, Species," in *Teaching the Animal: Human-Animal Studies Across the Disciplines* (New York: Lantern Books, 2010), 127.

foreword to Wolfe's book *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory*:

The reduction of the complex plurality of animals to a singular generality underwrites the poverty of a humanism that thinks it has grounded itself in a human essence, a stable species identity to be secured by its contrast with animality. Heidegger's human hand versus the animal's claw, Freud's human eye versus the animal's nose, the Enlightenment's human rationality versus the animal's mechanical reflexes – all these tropes of difference are (like the Elephant Man's cry for human recognition) understandable and inevitable efforts to define and affirm the species identity of human beings. But the claim to humanity and human rights will never succeed until it has reckoned with the irreducible plurality of otherness of nonhuman or posthuman life forms, including those that (like ourselves) wear a human face.³¹

To Haraway, the key to a more equitable future lies in a respect of animals' "significant otherness" – their difference. She has written extensively about what she calls "companion animals," or pets, and she sees domestication as a fallacy. Even when considering the few, lucky animals we choose to free from the product line and adopt into our lives, it is essential to "prevent the kind of literalist anthropomorphism that sees furry humans in animal bodies and measures their worth in scales of similarity to the rights-bearing humanist subjects of Western philosophy and political theory,"³² she writes. In a time when the identity-based issues of race, gender and sexuality have dominated so much of our thinking, agrees Mitchell, it is necessary to raise the even deeper, more intractable question of species identity. Speciesism is a prejudice so ingrained and "natural" that we can scarcely imagine human life without it. "The very idea of speciesism, then, requires some conception of 'the posthuman,' an idea that makes sense,

³¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, foreword to *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, by Cary Wolfe (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), XII.

³² Haraway, 51.

obviously, only in its dialectical relation with the long and unfinished reflection on species being that goes by the name of humanism.”³³

Wolfe has identified four types of animals in the humanist symbolic system. First there are the *animalized animals* – that breed of creature we not only psychologically but systematically enact prejudice against, by situating them at the bottom of the pyramid. As Wolfe describes it, this group, intertwined with the ongoing practices of violence against nonhuman others that are “so vital to our modernity”, in Derrida’s words,³⁴ are victimized by “a logical and linguistic structure that marginalizes and objectifies the other solely based on species, but also a whole network of material practices that reproduce that logic as a materialized *institution* and rely on it for legitimation.” This group includes everything from herds of cattle to pigs on pork farms to minks used for fur and lab rats. This perspective takes for granted the systematized sacrifice of nonhuman animals in the acquisition of what we eat, what we wear, the making of biochemical products, et cetera.³⁵

The second class of animal is *humanized animals*, which Wolfe classifies as pets, and which we exempt from the sacrificial regime by bestowing on them “human” features (exactly the practice Haraway guards against). In addition to applying to Rover, this category includes the animals in zoos, plucked from among their brethren to become icons of their breed or species. The third type, *animalized humans*, is “perhaps the most troubling category of all, since all manner of brutalizations carried out by cultural prescription can serve to animalize humans, as can reminders of human beings’

³³ Mitchell, foreword, XIV.

³⁴ Derrida quoted by Wolfe, 101.

³⁵ Wolfe, 101.

mammalian, or even merely bodily, organic existence,” writes Wolfe. If we return to the idea of a pyramid of speciesism, this category exists somewhere just below the top segment – close enough to be recognized as human, but monstrous enough to be rejected as the ideal. The history of slavery is a history of human animalization; another example is the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where people from “exotic lands” were displayed in pens, like the zoo animals discussed in the previous category, continuing a tradition of ethnographic display epitomized by the Hottentot Venus earlier in the nineteenth century.³⁶ This class contrasts with the final category, the diametric opposite of the first: the *humanized humans*, who are all civility and soul, fully sovereign and untroubled by base, instinctive impulses.³⁷

That the ostensibly “pure” categories of “animalized animal” and “humanized human” are the merest ideological fictions is evinced by the furious line drawings at work in the hybrid designations. It is as if these two pure poles can be secured *as* pure (and hence immensely powerful) ideological fictions only by constantly revisiting the locales where they cannot be discerned.³⁸

Posthumanism’s major contribution to the human/nonhuman animal discourse is to dismantle this categorical structure, to complicate it to the point that the ideological system is not anchored by a duality between two fabricated polar opposites. In contrast to a humanist philosophy, and in keeping with Félix Guattari’s idea that “we should perhaps not speak of subjects, but rather of components of subjectification, each of which works

³⁶ Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 223-261.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

more or less of its own account,”³⁹ the posthuman has an emergent ontology rather than a stable one. The posthuman is not a singular, defined individual, but rather one who can “become” (an idea I will return to shortly) or embody different identities and understand the world from multiple, heterogenous perspectives. In the words of Cary Wolfe:

By [...] keeping open the incalculability of the difference between reason/the human and its other/the nonhuman (animal), we may begin to approach the ethical question of nonhuman animals not as the other-than-human but as the *infrahuman*, not as the primitive and pure other we rush to embrace as a way to cure our own existential malaise, but as part of us, *of us* – and nowhere more forcefully than when reason, “theory,” reveals “us” to be very different creatures from who we thought “we” were.⁴⁰

Thinking of identity in terms of the infrahuman – or even better, of the “humanimal,”⁴¹ a term coined by Mitchell to encompass *all* animals, human and otherwise – is an extremely fruitful path when thinking about fursuiting. The musings of Deleuze and Guattari, who generally make magic out of categorical interstices, are similarly apropos – specifically their work on “becoming-animal.”

The French philosophers write extensively about the idea of “becoming” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, whether it is becoming-intense, becoming-woman or becoming-imperceptible. Though becoming-animal is the only sort of becoming I am exploring here, all becomings represent a momentum away from the magisterial, authoritative position of man – the white, heterosexual, Eurocentric patriarchal median by which all difference is judged – and that reflects the direction taken by fursuiters. What they are challenging, at heart, is the systemic dominance of the humanist perception of

³⁹ Guattari, 131.

⁴⁰ Wolfe, 17.

⁴¹ Mitchell, foreword, XIII. He coins the term to “designate the hybrid creature that we must learn to think of, a ‘humanimal’ form predicated on the refusal of the human/animal binary”.

humanness. “Why are there so many becomings of man, but no becoming-man?” ask

Deleuze and Guattari:

First, because man is majoritarian par excellence, whereas becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian. When we say majority, we are referring not to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian: white-man, adult-male, etc. Majority implies a state of domination, not the reverse.⁴²

All becomings, as Deleuze/Guattari define them, are attempts to distinguish oneself from that dominating force. Writing from the point of view of sorcerers (though unexplained, I believe they find sorcery an apposite starting point to the discussion of becoming-animal because it involves transformation, mutation, coexistence and inhabitation – things often associated with the supernatural), the philosophers say: “We believe in the existence of very special becomings-animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human.” A becoming is not a correspondence between relations, they warn – “neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification.” Becomings-animal are what happens when an identity loses its grasp – wilfully – on humanist categorizations and engages with a more holistic sense of self. Neither dreams nor fantasies, becomings-animal engage with the real world – but, ask Deleuze and Guattari, which reality is at issue? “For if becoming-animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not ‘really’ become an animal any more than the animal ‘really’ becomes something else.”⁴³ What transforms – or delinearizes – is consciousness.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, 291.

⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, 236-238.

The transformation process itself Deleuze and Guattari term “involution,” which they are careful to specify should in no way be confused with regression. “Becoming is involutory, involution is creative,” they write.

Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation.⁴⁴

Becomings-animal are not affiliated in any way with institutions such as the family and the State apparatus, but the authors nevertheless root the transformation very much in a communal setting.⁴⁵ Just as the sorcerer needs a community to serve and spellbind, so does the process of becoming-animal – like a spell against humanist myopia – need a community to propagate. Deleuze and Guattari speak of the pack, of multiplicities with heterogeneous terms that cofunction by contagion and enter certain assemblages that enable humans to effect their becomings-animal. “The pack is simultaneously an animal reality, and the reality of the becoming-animal of the human being; contagion is simultaneously an animal peopling, and the propagation of the animal peopling of the human being,”⁴⁶ they write. The difference between the pack and other formations one might define as more humanist, like families and the State, is that it unites without the involvement of rational decisions, as if osmotically, and is in constant transformation. “Packs form, develop and are transformed by contagion.”⁴⁷ Packs

⁴⁴ Ibid., 238-239.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

continuously work from within and trouble from without, and are in constant exchange with other forms of content, other forms of expression.

The Deleuze/Guattari concept of becoming can be applied to the fursuiting scene. Unrelated to family and going against the grain of the State, inasmuch as it is distinctly a subculture (a term I will delve into fully in Chapter 3), fursuiting depends on the support and interaction of a strong and active community, or pack. Through constant interaction online (one of the most popular sites for the exchange and discussion of anthropomorphic furry art, DeviantArt, was ranked the seventh most frequented social media site in the world in 2013, with an estimated monthly readership of 25,500,000⁴⁸) and get-togethers in person, sometimes involving throngs of hundreds (like at the fursuit parade at the furry convention Anthrocon in 2012, which united 1,044 fursuiters⁴⁹), fursuiting sets its contagion in motion.

When I began researching the subject in 2003, finding anything on fursuiting online was a feat of patience and ingenuity, often involving the clicking of links embedded in seemingly unrelated web pages – it was seen as perverse then, and was hidden out of sight like web pornography used to be. Today, a simple Google search of “fursuiting” produces some 188,000 results, including a whole wiki encyclopaedia on the fetish called WikiFur,⁵⁰ hundreds of fan pages, webzines and fursuiting tutorials, and even a Tumblr blog titled Fuck Yeah Fursuiting!⁵¹ However, unlike big-budget pornography, which has become increasingly visible online for the simple reason that

⁴⁸ “Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites: March 2013,” on eBizMBA: The eBusiness Knowledgebase, accessed March 14, 2013: <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>.

⁴⁹ “Anthrocon 2012 Fursuit Parade Group Shot,” on Anthrocon website, accessed March 14, 2013: <http://www.anthrocon.org/node/8527/anthrocon-2012-fursuit-parade-group-shot>.

⁵⁰ Wikifur, accessed March 2, 2013: <http://wikifur.com/>.

⁵¹ Fuck Yeah Fursuiting!, accessed March 2, 2013: <http://fuckyeahfursuiting.tumblr.com/>.

money talks – loudly (\$13.33 billion was spent on porn in the United States alone in 2006, exceeding the combined revenues of television networks ABC, CBS and NBC),⁵² fursuiting – even its pornographic elements, to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 – represent virtually no income. Not one of the pornographic furry websites I have encountered charges a membership fee or is sponsored by advertisers. All of the community’s most active web sources, including DeviantArt, are user-based, community-run, free and unfunded. What sexual content there exists is produced by amateurs, for no financial gain. This community, this *growing* community, therefore, is fuelled by motives other than the modes and patterns of consumption. The contagion exemplified by its propagation is a true demonstration of what they mean by “viral” in discussions on Internet popularity: furry fandom is a community based on hearsay.

Before I describe why I believe that is, and what addictive secret it is that furies contagiously share, I want to quickly illustrate how the idea of the pack applies to furry conventions. As Deleuze and Guattari describe it, the pack is a conglomeration of agents based on unusual hierarchical and associative formations. Unlike the family and the State, into which one is born, the becoming-animal pack is based on free agency and does not have solid leadership. Though modelled on the wolf pack, which has its leader, the philosophers’ model assumes a constant shifting of that position of power. The post of leader of the pack is liable to change at any time, based on myriad circumstances: who happens to have joined the pack at that moment, the pack’s shifting belief system, et cetera. It is clear how the amorphous structure of the Internet and the communities of chat

⁵² “Internet Porn Statistics,” on Top Ten Reviews, accessed on April 14, 2013: <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>

rooms can apply to that model, since at any given time the voice of authority – the latest most-read statement on a chat room message board – can be replaced by the next deemed more interesting or apropos by participants in the discussion. Conventions, though, are also demonstrations of the pack in action.

While a convention such as the popular and internationally famous ComicCon in San Diego might give the impression that big money is involved in such fan gatherings, it is an exception that has gained financial clout specifically because it has attracted the involvement of the movie industry, which uses the event to promote films that draw from comics such as the Spiderman, Batman and Avengers franchises. Most other fan conventions, and certainly *all* furry conventions, are amateur events with budgets only as large as their modest participation fees can garner. They boast no celebrity appearances, no sponsorships, and no swag bags for their participants. Though, as I have described, they do involve a marketplace, where trade zines, original art and fursuiting accessories are sold, all are priced extremely low. Hand-drawn, photocopied “comics” are typically sold for between \$2 and \$10. Original artworks can be purchased for \$100. The most expensive things are the costumes, but even then, the average accessory – a pair of plush fur ears, or a tail – can be purchased for anywhere between \$25 and \$200. These marketplaces have more in common with a church basement craft sale than a trade show. The idea that financial gain may be a motivator for the gathering of this pack, and that this community marches to the beat of global capital, then, is incorrect, making it unusual – subcultural – in its *raison d’être*. Similarly, the hierarchical model of the convention network is always in flux. The organizing committee is different depending on where the

convention is. And though many fursuiters travel from one convention to the other, as much as their personal situations allow, the community that gathers is always different, open to newcomers, influenced by trends and generally unpredictable. There is no fixity to these social formations.

I want to argue that what unites this pack is that fursuiting is an act of posthuman becoming that represents a liberation, and one that is contagious. As Deleuze and Guattari state, “the becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not.”⁵³ In fursuiting – and its interpretation in contemporary illustration, painting, photography, performance and installation – the “animal” nature drawn from is completely man-made. Fursuits are fashioned out of unnatural, often candy-coloured polyester fake fur, and sport big googley cartoon eyes; they are cute, in a way I will explore in detail in the next chapter. There is no interest in making the animals seem naturalistic – rather, the plushophilic fetish necessitates a notably artificial sensibility. That means that the freeing power of the disguise, and the sexual (and other) liberation fursuiters attain through the performing of group rituals and role-play, does not refer to “animality” in a humanist way. Fursuiters do not hail to a state of *animalized animalness*, as Wolfe would understand it, as their animalistic aspects are anything but sequestered and helpless, in the image of a herd. They don’t either belong to the category of *humanized animalness*, in that their dominating state is still distinctly human: they walk on two legs, wear clothes, can speak human languages (if they so choose) and *enact* on equal footing with other humans, similarly costumed or not, as opposed to pets who are powerless in the face of their owners. And though some critics may choose to

⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, 238.

“animalize” humans who don fursuits by labelling them aberrations to dominant societal conventions, fursuiters themselves refuse that categorization by positioning themselves as *more* than human, as *posthuman* – what humans could be if they unshackled themselves from the bonds of humanist self-conception. In other words, they play a great trick of limitrophy on the false species distinctions upheld within the Western tradition. Very consciously, through acts of creative involution, fursuiters blur the border between human and nonhuman animal through a constant state of becoming. How they achieve that, what it looks like and what they get out of it are the subjects of the subsequent chapters in this thesis.

“The rat and the man are in no way the same thing, but Being expresses them both in a single meaning in a language that is no longer that of words, in a matter that is no longer that of forms, in an affectability that is no longer that of subjects,” write Deleuze and Guattari. Fursuiters engage with that sense of Being. “The plane of composition, the plane of Nature, is precisely for participations of this kind, and continually makes and unmakes their assemblages, employing every artifice.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ibid., 258.

Chapter 2: Making Googley Eyes

I mentioned cuteness in Chapter 1, and it is a word that warrants further investigation. Janet Werner's oil painting *Bear* (fig. 7), from 2010, displays the distinctly cute flavour of plushophilic anthropomorphism. In the artist's body of work on the theme of plush fursuits – as in the case of Lorraine Simms, Paul McCarthy, Jamie Campbell and indeed all of the artists I am uniting in this study – there is no attempt at reproducing animality as it appears in the natural world. Against the jarring background of a tumultuous grey sky and windswept dune bordered by scraggly vegetation, the female figure in *Bear* – distinguishable as a woman by her long blonde locks, sleek figure and breasts – stands luxuriously adorned in aristocratic foxhunting gear, with her hand on her hip, sporting the head of a bear. There is no fierceness, though, to this animal aspect – the bear head in *Bear* is much closer to a plush toy's than that of a real beast. Lily white and innocent looking, its cranial structure is exaggeratedly curvaceous; it is devoid of teeth, or any other signs of feral power; its eyes are outsized and an unrealistic pale blue; it wears a pretty pink flower on its right ear; and most striking of all, it bears, visibly, the very stitching to which it owes its existence. The mark of man is all over this carefully fabricated, simplified and defanged version of the animal; it is revealed by the hair that protrudes from below the head that this is *not* a transmuted human being, half woman and half bear like a figure out of mythology. Rather, Werner has painted a woman in a teddy bear mask so cute and predatorially ineffectual that it could feature in a Walt Disney movie.

First spotlighted by Daniel Harris in 2000, then analyzed more deeply by thinkers including Sianne Ngai, Deidre Barrett and Gary Cross, the contemporary North American aesthetic category of cute – hand in hand with the Japanese concept of *kawaii* – will provide my starting point for the definition of and theorization on the fursuited aesthetic that follows in the next few pages. My contention is that the cutification that is key to the visual culture this study surveys finds its roots specifically in the media of comics and animated films, both in America and in Japan, beginning in the first quarter of the twentieth century. I will argue that the resulting cartooney – or Disneyfied, if you will – aesthetic entered the mainstream (in contrast to the notion of subculture, which I will explore in the next chapter) with the propagation of comics and cartoons around the globe after World War II. I will then present examples of furry art that plays with the boundaries of both cute and *kawaii*. The question is whether it is possible, due to the constant, fluid and global cultural exchange and influence of our mediatized world, to mesh these two different terms together into a tool appropriate for an examination of fursuited’s bittersweet adorableness. Let it be clear at the outset: cuteness is far from innocent. It makes for very complex cultural artifacts indeed.

Before getting to the question of cuteness more specifically, the bigger issue of comic simplification must be addressed. In the first few pages of his seminal book on comic art, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud poses – and illustrates – the following question: “What is the secret of the icon we call the *cartoon*?” (fig. 8).⁵⁵ In this image he marks the progression of a drawn face from realistic to cartoonified, or simplified to the point of resembling a happy face. McCleod states that

⁵⁵ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993), 29.

the key of cartoons' attraction is their inclusivity, which is created through abstraction. In other words, by simplifying the physical traits that distinguish us all from one another, the cartoon character represents us all equally, and that is a phenomenon that is addictive. "We humans are a self-centered race," he writes, quite sweepingly. "We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist. And we make the world over in our image."⁵⁶ Though McCleod admittedly paints his points with a bit of a broad stroke, he does touch upon some of the dominant humanist theories of the self explored in Chapter 1. He also offers an entry point into my consideration of cuteness, because from its very inception, what has been called the "minor aesthetic" of cute has also been conflated with human self-centredness.

"Cute" was first defined as a minor aesthetic category by Daniel Harris in 2000 because he sought both to distinguish it from "major" aesthetic categories, such as the sublime and the beautiful, that are associated with the so-called high arts, and because the aesthetic subgroups he was examining in his book *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic* then existed primarily outside the realm of rigorous study. The fundamental traits of the cute according to Harris include foreshortened limbs, sad, saucer eyes and a pitiable quality that elicits maternal feelings.⁵⁷ In other words, cuteness is the application onto inanimate objects of proportions and characteristics proper to human babies or puppies: big heads, clumsy movements, impeded speech, a certain squeezability and a large dose of innocence. Authors including Konrad Lorenz, Deirdre Barrett and Thomas LaMarre

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

⁵⁷ Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: 2000), 2-4.

have addressed this physical infantilization, called “neoteny,”⁵⁸ specifically in relation to cuteness, giving the term a fundamentally biological grounding. As Barrett writes, “Evolutionary biologists view ‘cuteness’ as simply the mechanism by which infantile features trigger nurturing in adults – a crucial adaptation for survival. Scientific studies find definitions of cuteness are similar across cultures. So are our responses.”⁵⁹ According to Barrett, the impulse to care for the infantile, or vulnerable, is a biological imperative that crosses cultures. It is a perspective supported by Japanese pop culture analyst Donald Richie when he writes, in the section on cuteness in his book *The Image Factory: Fads & Fashion in Japan*, “I am a small child (or a small animal), I am affectively attractive.”⁶⁰ I have included an illustration (fig. 9) that depicts the softened traits apparent in the young; reverse the progression, from young to old to old to young, and you’ve got neotonization and the infantilization of facial features it represents. It draws interesting parallels to McCleod’s illustration of the mass appeal of comics through the simplification of those same features; both emphasize roundness and the erasure of detail, as if the act of making faces unformed enables us to better project ourselves onto them and thus feel empathy. That is one of the insidious ways the cute – or the Japanese *kawaii* – has of pulling at heartstrings.

As outlined by Japanese scholar Kanako Shiokawa, *kawaii* first appeared as a notion in the eleventh century, when it referred specifically to sentiments of pity and empathy and the persons or things that elicit them. Over the centuries it developed into a

⁵⁸ Defined by *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2nd edition, 2004) as “The retention of juvenile features in the adult form of some animals.”

⁵⁹ Deirdre Barrett, *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 52-53.

⁶⁰ Donald Richie, *The Image Factory: Fads & Fashion in Japan* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2003), 60.

term largely applied to the young, when “compassion for the helpless state of infants and children began to include an undercurrent of charm being exerted by their very helplessness.”⁶¹ In the context of neo-Confucianism during the Shogunate period, girls and women were folded into the category when “the traditional, more animistic vision of women as the stronger sex was replaced by the ideology of docile, dependent and demure virtues of Confucian women.”⁶² But the real transformation of the term came in the 1960s, when it suddenly expanded to convey what Kanako defines as the “message of positive aesthetics” that it represents today:

When someone or something is ‘cute,’ s/he/it is either charming, likable, plush, fluffy, endearing, acceptable, desirable, or some combination of the above. However, the term is also strangely nondescript, for it lacks specific external features that are required in adjectives such as *utsukushii* (beautiful) or *minikui* (ugly). Personal taste is the determining factor for things and persons being described as *kawaii*. In other words, even an ugly duckling is ‘cute’ because of its fuzzy, down covered body and its goofy, waddling steps.⁶³

Kanako introduces the point I will develop later in this chapter – crediting cartoons with the sudden transformation of *kawaii*. “The changing attitude toward ‘cute’ in Japan was in part engendered by the manga tradition in the post war period, and the phenomenal success of the comics medium as a source of public entertainment encouraged the aesthetical appreciation of the ‘cute’ revolution,”⁶⁴ he writes.

In her influential essay “The Cuteness of Avant-Garde,” literary theoretician Sianne Ngai complexifies the notion of cute by applying it to avant-garde literature and

⁶¹ Kanako Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” in *Cute, Cheap, Mad and Sexy: Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning*, ed. by John A. Lent (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 95.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 93-94.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 97.

contemporary visual art, but also by adding sharpness to the term, via a study of the purposefully “punked” *kawaii* works of Japanese artists Nara Yoshitomo and Murakami Takashi, both of whom transform objects of round-edged innocence into metaphorical double-edged swords. Nara’s work is best known for his recurring characters: nameless little girls with big, globular faces and foreshortened limbs who are as cute as they are nasty looking. Though boasting the bodily proportions of innocent dolls, more often than not their wide-set eyes are narrowed into a scowl, their expression is defiant and nefarious, and, in some cases, they exhibit rebellious behaviour like smoking (fig. 10). Murakami, on the other hand, has his own signature character, Mr. DOB, invented as his answer to Mickey Mouse in the early 1990s (or in his words, “to investigate the secret of the market survivability [...] of characters such as Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog [...], Hello Kitty and their knock-offs produced in Hong Kong”⁶⁵). A red and blue mouse-like critter with an oversized head, tiny mouth and body, and exaggeratedly large feet, Mr. DOB has over the years gone from being a symbol of inoffensive sweetness surrounded by flowers (fig. 11) to a cipher of much darker emotions. More often than not in Murakami’s work of the 2000s and onwards, his character is depicted stretched and deformed, with an even larger head and virtually non-existent body, and often with frighteningly pointy teeth (fig. 12). In light of these examples, Ngai adds to her own list of defining characteristics for *kawaii* objects – stylistic simplification, fondling-worthy tactility, smallness and an “exaggerated gaze” – a malevolence or dark side that supports Harris’s central tenet that this seeming innocence exists in many ways to be corrupted.

⁶⁵ Amanda Cruz, “DOB in the Land of Otaku,” in *Takashi Murakami: The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning* (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: Centre for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, 1999), 16.

Ngai associates cute things with a new essential component: pliancy, or “the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject’s feeling or attitude towards it. [...] For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”⁶⁶

Within a fursuiting context, the dark side of cute can be perceived in the works of Kathie Olivas. In her 2008 painting done in collaboration with Brandt Peters, titled *Reunion* (fig. 13), Olivas presents the viewer with a group of figures that have neotonized, child-like facial traits. They are disguised, in a way that hints at Halloween costumes – the red bird’s mask at the top right side of the image, the hood with rabbit ears of the human figure on the far right, the lollipop held by the figure in red in the centre of the image all indicate this is a dress-up party. But there are many more signs that indicate this is *not* a portrait of children in costumes. The fact that two of the figures have skulls for heads, with cavernous eye sockets (one so empty a bird has settled in it) indicate these creatures are not all human, and not all innocent. The character in red, in the middle of the image, does not have a child’s arms – its limbs end in a monstrous point, handless, and akin to the limbs of the four demonic-looking bunnies that populate the image. The other two human-faced figures on the right have a heavy-lidded creepiness to their gaze that is repelling; while the central one in grey seems drugged, with its gaping expression and open mouth revealing pointed little teeth, the one in the rabbit ears stares straight out of the picture plain in what Laura Mulvey would surely qualify as defiance. Another of Olivas’s paintings, *Restraint*, from the same year (fig.

⁶⁶ Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” in *Critical Inquiry* no. 31 (summer 2005), 816.

14), displays a similar mutinous look on all three figures, as well as the unnatural arm-limbs that look more like tentacles, in the case of the figure in the pink dress. In contrast with the emphasis on their regard, their mouths reflect a passage in Ngai's essay in which she states that facial features other than the eyes, mouths in particular, tend to be simplified in cute things to the point of being barely there.⁶⁷ In the case of the bunny-eared figure, the mouth is altogether obfuscated. So despite the cute costumes, cheery party hats and clutched stuffed animal, these infantilized creatures are definitely not benevolent babes. As much as these pictures of button-nosed cuteness draw us in, they display just enough grotesquery to make us recoil.

Though Harris's particular examination of the cute centres on its application to the commodity system, particularly in products aimed at children, such as teddies like the Care Bears or dolls like Shy Sherri, his notion also shares a dark side with Ngai's, which he describes as intrinsic to the cute's marketing power. Cute things "must by no means be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive,"⁶⁸ he warns. In fact, it's an aesthetic closely linked to the malformed.

The grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion in this seductive and manipulative aesthetic that arouses our sympathies by creating anatomical pariahs, like the Cabbage Patch Dolls or even E.T., whose off proportions and lack of symmetry diverge widely from the relative balance and uniformity of ordinary bodies. The aesthetic of cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutations, a ready-made race of lovable inferiors whom both children and adults collect, patronize, and enslave in the protective concubinage of vast harems of homely dolls and snugglesome misfits. Something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone, as if it were an indigent

⁶⁷ Ngai, 832.

⁶⁸ Harris, 3.

starveling, lonely and rejected because of a hideousness we find more touching than unsightly.⁶⁹

This pathetic neediness is what has made the aesthetic so fruitful in the marketplace, Harris says, calling upon consumers far and wide to “adopt” – i.e. buy, possess – these motherless, forgotten souls created in our image. “The cute worldview is one of massive human chauvinism, which rewrites the universe according to an iconographic agenda dominated by our pathetic fallacy,” he writes. “The cute vision of the natural world is a world without nature, one that annihilates ‘otherness,’ ruthlessly suppresses the non-human, and allows nothing [...] to be separate and distinct from us.”⁷⁰

For the sake of this study, then, I will allow myself to combine the terms of cute and *kawaii*. This is both in keeping with Ngai’s approach, according to which one cannot be used without referencing the other, and because as I will try to illustrate in the next few paragraphs, these aesthetic categories were born out of a singular source: comics and animations produced over the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Though sequential narrative art has existed throughout history and cultures (historians cite everything from the Lascaux caves to Hieronymus Bosch paintings as predecessors),⁷¹ the first true comic – in the form that boomed after the First World War into a multimillion dollar market in America, and then the world – is generally considered to be Richard Outcault’s Yellow Kid, published in New York City’s *World* newspaper in 1896.⁷² Portraying a boy, the Yellow Kid strip was typical of the funny-page craze he initiated, in that for years, most strips featured misbehaving youths: Buster Brown, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁷¹ Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: 1971), 2.

⁷² Ibid.

Katzenjammer Kids, Jimmy, Little Nemo, Nisby the Newsboy, to name but a few.⁷³ If they weren't children, the popular characters of the day were infantilized adults (usually immigrants).⁷⁴ Animals were present only as secondary characters; both Buster Brown and Jimmy each had a pet bulldog, but only Buster's, named Tige, was remarkable for his ability to speak (fig. 15).⁷⁵

Tige was a far cry from the first real cat on the block, however: that was Mr. Jack, created in 1903 by James Swinnerton (fig. 16). Featuring a land of cats that talked, walked on their two hind legs and were dressed in full human regalia, the Mr. Jack strip (which ran sporadically until 1905 when it was deemed too racy because of Mr. Jack's rampant womanizing – or should I say femalizing?)⁷⁶ started a trend. Soon followed Chantecler Peck (1911, fig. 17), a universe of anthropomorphized chickens also featuring cats; Dok's Dippy Duck (1917, fig. 18), starring a talking duck who's easily identifiable as the inspiration for Daffy Duck; and The Family Upstairs, which in addition to humans featured a bestiary of talking turtles, birds, mice and a cat, the popular Krazy Kat (fig. 19), who by 1913 would inherit a strip of his very own (and later be among the first animated film characters). All of the above featured the pictorial trends of comics at the time: a caricature style that enlarged some physical features (the eyes, the nose or beak, the head, the feet, hands and stomach) and diminished others (the length of the limbs, the general height) based on the slapstick-gag value of the clearly neotonic transformation.

⁷³ Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, eds., *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (Washington, D.C. and New York: Smithsonian Institution Press and Harry N. Abrams Inc.), 1977, 22-44.

⁷⁴ David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 11-13.

⁷⁵ Blackbeard and Williams, eds., 22-44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

As film historian Joe Adamson puts it, in the early years animated cartooning was primarily a medium for comic-strip creators to overextend themselves in. For the two decades following the first major animated cartoon – a sweet black-and-white short film starring the eponymous *Gertie the Dinosaur*, created by Winsor McCay in 1910 – the medium was a labour of love abandoned by most who attempted it for the very simple reason that it was not financially viable. It took a whopping 10,000 drawings to make up *Gertie*'s five-minute run time, and the intended sound, an interchange between *Gertie* (who was quite a cute dinosaur, by the way, defined by short stumpy limbs, round edges and an unthreatening herbivore's attitude – see fig. 20) and her trainer, had to be created live with each showing. The genre's boom would therefore be dependant on a technological revolution (the introduction of cels, among other things) and organizational reconceptualization (the creation of a chain of command among animators) that was spearheaded by one man of limitless ambition.⁷⁷

The creation of Mickey Mouse by Walt Disney and his head animator, Ub Iwerks, in 1928 positioned Disney at the avant-garde of animation in more ways than one.⁷⁸ With short films like *Steamboat Willie* he established his young studio's experimental daring – *Steamboat* was the first sound cartoon, and though he wasn't the only one to create colour cartoons, Disney shrewdly secured the exclusive animation rights to Technicolor's three-colour process, leaving everyone else in the business in the dust with a limited palette of orange and green (and combinations thereof). More influential still, though, was Disney's single-minded determination to unlock the key of animated movement and express his

⁷⁷ Joe Adamson, *Tex Avery: King of Cartoons* (New York: Popular Library), 1975, 16-23.

⁷⁸ Pierre Lambert, "Walt Disney, the Visionary of Animated Film" in *Once Upon a Time Walt Disney: The Sources of Inspiration for the Disney Studios* (Munich, Berlin, London and New York: Prestel Verlag, 2006), 62-70.

various characters' personalities through individualized body language. At a time when everything animated tended to move in a similar fashion, be it a dinosaur or a teapot, this was an incredibly novel idea, and one that is still central to the animistic magic of animation as we know it today.⁷⁹ As Adamson puts it, for the first time since the art form's invention, animated characters "had the breath of life imparted to them."⁸⁰ And so began Disney's ever-growing menagerie (fig. 21), today populated by everything from deers (Bambi) to bunnies (Thumper), elephants (Dumbo), ducks (Donald), dogs (Pluto), and of course, mice.

In this day and age, it is impossible to imagine animation without animals. From Pluto to *Alvin and the Chipmunks* to Garfield to the donkey in *Shrek*, animated animals continue to inspire what LaMarre calls *kinetophilia*, a "sheer delight in movement," as well as a fascination with plasticity and elasticity that he calls *plasmaticity*,⁸¹ and a "different sense of the powers of the body, which is commonly linked to animal or animalized bodies."⁸² While LaMarre's specialty is anime – Japanese animation – the consensus among researchers of Japanese comics and animation history today is that around 1935, an important dimension of the art form's pictorial techniques took shape in response to the reception of American animation.⁸³ Tezuka Osamu, a pioneer of Japan's

⁷⁹ Adamson, 22-23.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁸¹ LaMarre borrows the term from Sergei Eisenstein, who describes the animated film viewer's fascination with plasticity and elasticity as "plasmaticness" in *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leda, trans. Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1988), 21.

⁸² Thomas LaMarre, "Specism, Part 1: Translating Races into Animals in Wartime Animation," in *Mechamedia Volume 3: Limits of the Human*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 79.

⁸³ Ōtsuka Eiji, "Disarming Atom: Tezuka Osamu's Manga at War and Peace," trans. Thomas LaMarre, in *Mechamedia Volume 3: Limits of the Human*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 118-119.

burgeoning industry in the 1940s (among his illustrious achievements is the creation of Astro Boy), has said the following about his influences:

I was deeply influenced by American manga [comics] around age 15 or 16, around 1937 or 1938. Still, American manga themselves were deeply influenced by the golden age of film comedies, like those of Buster Keaton or Mack Sennett. In many of the gag manga produced over there you see manga characters make faces just like those of Roscoe Arbuckle, Ben Turpin, or other film comedians. Chaplin was especially important, with his crab legs and oversized shoes. These sorts of things make for manga without any alteration. In other words, illustrations by American cartoonists of that era drew from that bunch of comedians. Likewise, I diligently copied them, and my manga were full of crab legs and oversized shoes.⁸⁴

Aside from making an interesting correlation between silent comedy film tropes and those propagated by comics and animation, that quote stresses the direct impact America's film culture had on Japan's. Because of non-existent copyright laws at the time, Tezuka was able to reproduce Disney characters like Mickey Mouse and Bambi exactly to create his own early films – so similar to the originals they could pass for Disney products.⁸⁵ The result was mass-scale post-war bi-cultural cross-pollination.

If we return to the realm of cuteness, then, and consider the impact of comics and animation's history on the development of the aesthetic genre, we can see Kanako's point in action: after World War II, manga and anime spread through Japan like wildfire. Ngai describes post-war Japan as an island nation newly conscious of its diminished military and economic power with respect to the United States in particular, and therefore ripe for the disempowering humility of cuteness – an aesthetic she describes as one of smallness,

⁸⁴ Tezuka Osamu quoted by Ôtsuka, 117-118.

⁸⁵ Ôtsuka, 118-119.

helplessness and deformity.⁸⁶ Marilyn Ivy pushes this idea further in her essay “The Art of Cute Little Things,” in which she associates cuteness with an infantilization of Japanese culture as a whole as a result of “the strange fate of the Japanese nation-state and its particular history: defeated in World War II, bombed atomically (the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was called ‘Little Boy’), and dominated by the looming, fraternally sinister, yet comforting presence of the United States.”⁸⁷ Cuteness had “an accelerated development and impact on the culture as a whole,” agrees Ngai, “not only saturating the Japanese toy market, but industrial design, print culture, advertising, fashion, food, and even the automotive industry.”⁸⁸ From there it bounced back into America, a culture she describes as slower to adopt cuteness because of the U.S.’s self-image as potent and unyielding⁸⁹ (though Cross traces the aesthetic back to around 1900 at least, where it pertains to American children’s commodities).⁹⁰ And so the exchange has continued since.

To illustrate the transformative effects of neotonization, I offer the example of Mickey Mouse. Disney’s central character has morphed slowly but surely throughout the years, in a way that Cross describes:

In his original form, he had a long rodent nose and body and was malicious to boot. In “Steamboat Willie”, the famous cartoon of 1928, Mickey was an irreverent, even anarchic, figure who hit a parrot and used the backbones of animals to play music. He very much followed the pattern of a comic strip figure, Ignatius Mouse, who regularly struck

⁸⁶ Ngai, 819.

⁸⁷ Marilyn Ivy, “The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo’s Parapolitics,” in *Fanthropologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

⁸⁸ Ngai, 819.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Cross, 51.

Krazy Kat (Ingnatius's admirer) with a brick but never got punished for it.⁹¹

However, “by 1934, Mickey had changed. He grew plumper and shorter, with a much more subdued nose and rounder, more prominent ears. In fact, he came to resemble a sweet-looking toddler more than a perky mouse. Mickey’s new personality and roles appealed to parents upset by the ‘amorality’ of cartoons and comic strips of the era.”⁹² I would venture to say that the birth of Astro Boy in 1951, with his big round eyes and polished contours (fig. 22), could also be posited as one of the influences over Mickey’s mutation (figs. 23 through 25). At any rate, mutability is the crux of animated creatures: “Animation’s affection for animals entails an investment in a plasmaticity in which deformation and transformation take precedence over, and appears more fundamental than, representation and figuration,”⁹³ states LaMarre in a passage that reflects exactly Ngai’s assessment of the cute object’s relationship to reality. In her words, “Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects, which have simple contours and little or no ornamentation or detail.”⁹⁴ And so, in animation like in comics, simplified symbols take precedence over resemblance to actual animals, just as we saw in McCleod’s drawing at the outset of this chapter.

The malleability, exaggerated passivity and vulnerability of cute creatures, combined with humanity’s penchant for domination and cruelty, makes them the perfect victims within contemporary culture. It’s a sentiment that Harris introduced: “the process

⁹¹ Cross, 55-56.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ LaMarre, 86-87.

⁹⁴ Ngai, 815.

of conveying cuteness to the viewers disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are.”⁹⁵ This is a particularly interesting idea when you pair it with LaMarre’s notion of the indestructibility of animated characters, whereby he identifies that a common thread between Hollywood comedies and Disney-style animations is that the characters are physically tough to kill.⁹⁶ Even when Wile E. Coyote falls from a cliff and is squashed flat into the ground, he reappears in the next scene without a scratch and ready for another go at Road Runner. From the consumer’s perspective, the “deformation and reformation of characters – stretching, bending, flattening, inflating, shattering – becomes a source of pleasure in itself,”⁹⁷ contends LaMarre. So where does that leave our poor furies?

Certainly, this backstory supplies a context for the eerie slippage that occurs between the seemingly innocent aesthetic of fursuiter cuteness and the emotionally loaded nature not only of the majority of the art works that compose this study, but also, as we will see in the next two chapters, of the furry fandom subculture itself. First, though, I will provide two further examples to illustrate the contentiousness of cute: Gary Baseman’s *Dripping with Desire*, from 2007 (fig. 26), and a series of photographs from 2010 by Jamie Campbell (figs. 27 through 30).

The first impact of Baseman’s painting is cute in the sense of innocent and vulnerable, by virtue of its palette. The sickly sweet bubble-gum tone washes the image in a sense of femininity, of the type generally associated with Barbie or Hello Kitty

⁹⁵ Harris, 5-6.

⁹⁶ LaMarre, 80.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 79.

products. Representing a fantastically sparse landscape with a skyline that recedes from baby pink to dusty rose peppered with abstract polka dots and odd organic shapes resembling cerebral matter, the painting presents four figures: in the centre foreground, a naked prepubescent girl (identified by her budding breasts and lack of pubic hair) and a person in a bear costume, and in the background to the left, a similar-looking fairy girl (also presumably nude and prepubescent, though we only see her upper torso) flying while holding an anthropomorphized bug. The girl in the foreground is reclining, with her right hand immersed in a gummy beehive overflowing with honey and her back cradled by the ursine creature, who is kneeling. The identification of this character as a costumed person and not a bear proper comes from the telltale ridgeline between its head and its body, typical of a plush costume – or any type of mascot costume, at that. The bear’s colours – brown with a severely delineated black face and beige nozzle – and big, googly eyes also differ from any bear nature has produced. We can identify in all the characters in this tableau the “exaggerated gaze” coined by Ngai, not to mention the rounded forms and neotonized proportions indicative of cuteness. And yet, from one’s first encounter with this painting, the notion of innocence is undermined: by its very title this is a work that speaks of sex in all its lubricated glory. The suggestive cajolery between the bear-person – whose “paw” is mighty close to the girl’s left breast – challenges moral standards, mainly, I believe, because of the sexually charged presumptions that accompany the idea of plush animal disguises. I will expand on that subject over the next two chapters.

Campbell's series of photographs similarly introduces moral tension but in a less tantalizing way, perhaps, playing a more subtle game of contrast between emotional binaries like depressed/perky and beloved/lonely. All four works in his series comprising *Tiger Girl*, *Turtle Boy*, *Eagle Girl* and *Shark Boy* present a solitary figure in a room sporting a very cute and outsized plush costume head. Each work distinguishes itself in the details: while *Tiger Girl* is in a state of partial undress, sitting on a bare mattress that hints at rather desolate circumstances, the bright colours of the room around her confer a nearly cheery feel to the image. *Shark Boy*, on the other hand, is fully dressed but seems to have been punished like a child in "time-out" in a depressing grey-carpeted basement office. The dampened energy of the room, created with its bleak emptiness and the harsh whiteness of the lighting, is very much at odds with the bobble-head sized mask.

Common traits between these two works and the other two composing the foursome are a sense of loneliness, communicated partially by the angle of the mascot heads: all are tilted slightly downward, as if the costume wearers are gazing despondently to the ground, bored and listless in their solitary states; or, conversely, as if the weight of their respective masks, the very symbols of the altered identities they've adopted, somewhere between humanity and animality, were figuratively as well as literally weighing them down. The impression is that all these personages suffer from an unrealized purpose; big-eyed and goofy, huge and fondleably fuzzy, their masks are objects that are usually associated with jubilant happenings like sporting events, children's parties and Halloween. Outside of such normative social scenes, i.e. in the furry subculture, by contrast, they carry a much more multilayered and poignant weight. As cute and benign

as they may seem, they imply fetishism, sexual deviancy, subcultural refuge and posthuman transformation. This is what I set out to describe in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Breaking Skin

As explored in Chapter 1, the posthumanist theories developed by theorists Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway attempt to topple the species hierarchy extant since Aristotelian times that places animals as subjugated to humans both physically and philosophically.⁹⁸ In the following pages, I will explore the work of visual artists who have chosen to *embody* the theme of animal anthropomorphism through fursuiting and performance. I will suggest that fursuiters and fursuiting artists use costuming to inhabit the breach between animality and humanity, and thus distinguish themselves from dominant ideologies by creating a subculture predicated on a redefinition of the notions of body and embodiment. By using examples drawn from the performance work of contemporary artists Valérie Lamontagne, Nate Hill and Nick Cave, as well as the less consciously artistic performative actions intrinsic to the furry convention scene, I will argue that the ritual of donning plush and transforming oneself into a cute, neotonized, collaged animalistic being enables fursuiters to go beyond the limits of the human into a territory where not only the physical realities of humanness, but also philosophical principles are rethought.

The vast majority of day-to-day exchanges between members of the furry fandom community happen online, in chat rooms and on fan pages such as the Furry News Network,⁹⁹ Fur Affinity¹⁰⁰ and SoFurry.¹⁰¹ Through these channels, people discuss their love of plush animals, build up their furry alter egos (known as fursonas), trade in art

⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13-16.

⁹⁹ <http://www.furrynewsnetwork.com/>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.furaffinity.net/>

¹⁰¹ <http://www.sofurry.com/>

featuring anthropomorphized characters (figs. 31 through 33) and generally enjoy the freedom to express their fetish. Though some subgroups meet periodically in person for parties and get-togethers, the main social events occur during annual conventions all over North America (among the most widely attended are Anthrocon in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, FurTher Confusion in San Jose, California, and Midwest FurFest in Rosemont, Illinois¹⁰²), as well as in Europe, Australia and a smattering in South America. (Interestingly, in Japan, the furry fandom – called kigurumi – is generally subsumed into cosplay conventions, where thousands of fans dress up as their favourite manga and video game characters. The focus at these conventions is not on animals, however, and the performed personae are quoted from pop culture rather than invented – a fundamental difference with the fursuited I’m discussing here.) Teeming with up to 5,000 anthropomorphization fans, furry conventions are where members of a very unique subculture (a term I will expound on shortly) take centre stage in the theatre of public life and act out invented identities. Set in the same hotel meeting rooms and convention centres that may well have hosted the latest self-help guru, financial whiz or preacher the night before, these reunions involve the tropes of all conventions: lectures, trade fairs, workshops, buffet meals and after-hours dance parties. One peculiarity, however, is that they all invariably culminate in a furry parade,¹⁰³ a great public gathering of fursuiters for the purpose of photo snapping, hand shaking with the crowds and a general sense of communion for the participants. (For photographs of the parade I attended during the Furnal Equinox furry convention in Toronto in 2012, see figs. 34 through 36.)

¹⁰² “List of conventions by attendance” entry on Wikifur, accessed on March 14, 2013: http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/List_of_conventions_by_attendance.

¹⁰³ “Fursuit parade” entry on Wikifur, accessed on March 14, 2013: http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Fursuit_parade.

Fursuiters can spend a lifetime and thousands of dollars developing their unique plush fursonas. As explained on the website Squidoo, “almost everything you see in Furry Fandom is a custom-made piece of artwork and costuming.”¹⁰⁴ Though some fursuiters make their own, most costumes are fabricated by professional outfits like Fun Fur All, Luskwood Creatures and Mango Island Creations, who peddle their wares online and at convention merchandise tables. Their costumes will run anywhere between \$3,000 to \$10,000.¹⁰⁵ Like an actor who develops a character, each fursuiter chooses their phenotype – the animal species that best represents them – and decides on the characteristics that allows them to situate themselves on the humanimal spectrum. It is when in costume that the performance of fursuiters’ alternate identities can take full form. Though some costumes represent animals in their natural, furry nakedness, the vast majority of fursuit characters represent animals wearing human clothing – whether it’s just a T-shirt with nothing else (like Donald Duck, fig. 37) or a whole three-piece suit. As described on the Anthrocon website, the annual Anthrocon Masquerade – their costumed parade – “is an event designed to provide amateur and professional costumers and visual artists a showcase in which to demonstrate creative performance and presentation skills. The Masquerade is the prime location to express yourself through these particular talents”.¹⁰⁶ Or as fursuiter Yote says in *Sex2k: Plushies & Furrries*, a 2001 TV documentary produced by MTV, about his first convention in costume: “I think everyone

¹⁰⁴ “Furry Fandom: The Ultimate Guide,” on Squidoo, accessed March 14, 2013: <http://www.squidoo.com/furry-fandom-tutorial>

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “The Masquerade,” on Anthrocon, accessed March 2, 2013: <http://www.anthrocon.org/masquerade>

has an animal in them, whether they know it or not. Yote is me being myself, looking like myself, only different. Sort of an inside/outside sort of thing.”¹⁰⁷

Furry conventions are tremendous displays of performativity. I’m using the term as it is used in a feminist context by Judith Butler, described by Erika Fischer-Lichte in *The Transformative Experience of Performance* as bodily acts that “do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through these very acts.”¹⁰⁸ Although performance encompasses performativity, Butler distinguishes between performance and performativity by defining the former as a “bounded act” predicated on the conscious application of the performer’s “will” or “choice” as a humanist subject, while the latter “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer.”¹⁰⁹ Though like all performances, performative acts express the context of the agent or person acting them, they also hold the promise of going beyond the planned, beyond the controlled, and beyond the limits of that context. Thus they allow individuals the possibility “to embody themselves, even if this means deviating from dominant norms and provoking social sanctions,” writes Fischer-Lichte. Helmuth Plessner claims that the nature of performance dictates that agents-in-action cannot be severed from their material, i.e. their bodies, or what he calls “the material of one’s own existence”;¹¹⁰ for fursuiters, that material includes plush.

¹⁰⁷ Yote, quoted on *Sex2k: Plushies & Furrries*, directed by Rick Castro, produced by MTV, 2001, uploaded to YouTube on February 10, 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3NQ7D24Pqw>.

¹⁰⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: Re-Enchanting the World*, trans. Saskya Jain (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 24-27.

¹⁰⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 234.

¹¹⁰ Fischer-Lichte, 76.

It is anthropologist France Borel's belief that adornment is the vehicle through which the body becomes a *charnier des signes*.¹¹¹ As she puts it, "costume only exists if it is on a body and the body only exists if it is costumed."¹¹² By this she means that whatever adornment humans choose to put on themselves, whether it be clothing, ritualistic garb, a suit of armour or jewellery, it informs the meaning we seek to convey through our bodily form. If the tension between the phenomenal body of the actor – their bodily being-in-the-world – and their representation of the dramatic character is what Plessner says makes the actor particularly symbolic of the *conditio humana*,¹¹³ then clothing is essential to the process, as it is "physically autonomous, absorbs odours and heat, and offers the body status," says Borel. "The body is protected by this intermediary layer between itself and the world, the soft shell that solidifies it and lessens the impact," she states.¹¹⁴ I chose this last quote for two reasons: firstly because it is particularly germane to the consideration of furry conventions, where the idea of "protection" already exists in the strength-in-numbers strategy of the gatherings; fursuiters, still deemed deviants in dominant culture, can brave derision thanks to the growing mass of their subcultural community – estimated at one million members worldwide¹¹⁵ – and the anonymity of their full-body disguises. (As fursuiter Shadow Walker says in *Sex2k*, "I'm not comfortable telling my coworkers why I needed to take Friday off, to drive down here

¹¹¹ France Borel, *Le vêtement incarné: Les métamorphoses du corps* (Phalsbourg, France: Calmann-Lévy, 1992), 20. Borel borrows the term from Baudrillard.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 55, translated by the author. The original French reads: "Le costume n'existe que s'il est sur un corps et le corps n'existe que s'il est costumé."

¹¹³ Helmuth Plessner paraphrased in Fischer-Lichte, 76.

¹¹⁴ Borel, 55, translated by the author. The original French reads: "Physiquement autonome, [le costume] s'attribue odeurs et chaleur, et auquel il offre, en échange, un statut. [...] Le costume n'existe que s'il est sur un corps et le corps n'existe que s'il est costumé. [...] Le corps est protégé par cette couche intermédiaire entre lui et le monde, carapace souple qui le solidifie et amortit le choc des agressions."

¹¹⁵ "The Social Psychology of Furry Fandom," on YouTube, filmed lecture by Courtney Plante at the Texas Furry Fiesta, February 25, 2012, accessed on February 20, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6zYWmvHnZQ>.

[to the Midwest FurFest convention], but I will remember that I did, I will remember the fun I had, and I will remember playing around backstage with someone that was a six-and-a-half foot tall black tiger who did a Village Person dance routine!”¹¹⁶) Secondly, it introduces the idea of two different bodily locations – the inside-body, which I will argue exists on one side of that vestimentary layer, and the outside-body, on the other.

In her text entitled “Emotional Infectivity: Cyborg Affect and the Limits of the Human,” Sharalyn Orbaugh describes the mainstream modernist conceptualization of selfhood (“still one of the dominant ways of understanding affect”)¹¹⁷ as based on a carefully maintained distinction between the outside of a person and the inside. Contrary to non-human animals, for whom “body and selfhood are identical,”¹¹⁸ the human body

is conceived as being self-contained, autonomous, with the skin serving as its outer boundary – both holding in the person’s “insides” and preventing (or at least hindering) the invasion of elements from the outside. The somatosensory organs on the surface of the body – eyes, ears, skin, and so on – allow for impressions from the outside world to enter the body as data. Similarly, the skin may register on its surface information about a person’s internal affective state – a blush or shame, for example – which can be read by an observer. *Communication* between the outside and inside is thus possible: the boundaries of the body act as gatekeepers for the movement of information (conceived here as nonmaterial) from exterior to interior or vice versa, but those boundaries are not physically violated in the process. Moreover, a person’s emotions and attitudes are believed to arise from the mind, soul, or heart – or, in scientific discourse, from the neurophysiology of the tissues, fluids, and electrical charges – that make up the person’s/body’s “insides” and create a sense of “interiority.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Shadow Walker quoted on *Sex2k: Plushies & Furrries*, directed by Rick Castro, produced by MTV, 2001, uploaded to YouTube on February 10, 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3NQ7D24Pqw>.

¹¹⁷ Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Emotional Infectivity: Cyborg Affect and the Limits of the Human,” in *Mechamedia Volume 3: Limits of the Human*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 152.

¹¹⁸ Orbaugh, 160.

¹¹⁹ Orbaugh, 152.

And yet I want to argue that skin is not sufficiently powerful to be the barrier Orbaugh describes. The modernist perspective she mentions draws on the theories of Didier Anzieu, who reformulated Freud's notion of the "body ego" – the mind's projection of its own physical boundaries – into the "skin ego," which Anzieu defines also as a mental projection of the self's physical boundaries, but one based on the infant's experience of skin as the marker of separation between self and other. Authors such as Borel have since argued that adornment is a much more significant gateway, as it is a preternaturally *human* creation. No other animal decorates itself as intently, nor displays such complex social systems through attire. As Jacques Derrida wrote in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, "with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself. Clothing would be proper to man, one of the 'properties' of man. 'Dressing oneself' would be inseparable from all the other figures of what is 'proper to man,' even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, etc."¹²⁰

In fact, I propose that if skin *were* the most meaningful threshold between the bodily interiority and exteriority and their interaction into the creation of selfhood, it stands to reason that we should attribute non-human animals with the same sense of self. They have skin, after all (and much more of it is exposed than us) – as well as eyes, ears, and complex systems of communication between themselves. The reason Orbaugh only provides one example for the skin's capabilities for expression, i.e. the blush of shame, is because it is one of the few expressions that would be perceptible by others on the skin of

¹²⁰ Derrida, 5.

the average clothed person. When covered with fabric, the skin is one of the most muted communicators among humans' expressive palette.

In Borel's book *Le vêtement incarné*, she quotes Paul Schilder, an Austrian contemporary of Freud's who spoke of *l'image du corps*: "If a woman wears a feather in her hat, her body will extend to the extremity of that feather and, automatically, she will adapt her gestures and attitudes to her new dimensions," he writes. "The artifice of clothing, of ornamentation, gets fully integrated and interiorized by the subject."¹²¹ The feelings of the body are modified by artifice, and in general terms those feelings seek to attain the subject's idea of what their body *should* or *could* be, based on motivations that can vary from fetishes to, as Borel puts it, "conventions that are more or less systematized and structured."¹²² Dick Hebdige, in his 1981 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, describes the purposeful alienation of the "deceptive innocence of appearances" that subcultural "deviants" express through their choice of adornment as the impetus to move from man's "false nature," in the Barthesian sense, to a genuinely expressive artifice.¹²³

Indeed, systematized vestimentary conventions have proven essential to the codification of various subcultures – to the very *definition* of subculture, in fact. "Style in subculture is [...] pregnant with significance," writes Hebdige. "Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures,

¹²¹ Paul Schilder quoted in Borel, 18-19, translated by the author. The original French reads: "Si une femme porte une plume à son chapeau, son corps se prolongera jusqu'à l'extrémité de la plume et, automatiquement, elle adaptera gestes et attitudes à sa nouvelle dimension. L'artifice du vêtement, de l'ornement s'intègre et s'intériorise parfaitement."

¹²² Schilder quoted in Borel, 19, translated by the author. The original French reads: "La sensation du corps est modifiée par le travail des artifices et ce travail s'effectue afin de satisfaire une 'idée' de ce que le corps devrait être, idée exprimée le plus souvent pas l'intermédiaire de critères de beauté et de canons plus ou moins systématisés et structurés."

¹²³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981), 19.

movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.”¹²⁴ From the hippies studied by sociologist Jock Young in the 1960s¹²⁵ to Hebdige’s punks, teddies and mods to, most recently, the Japanese Lolitas examined by Theresa Winge and mentioned in the previous chapter, clothing has made the man, so to speak; but there is also more to it. As Winge puts it, the Lolita presents her aesthetic for display in public spaces in order to define and redefine her identity within mainstream Japanese culture. “But while the aesthetic is achieved through the use of clothing [...], the Lolita identity is accomplished through a ritualized performance – poses and mannerisms – in combination with the designated dress.”¹²⁶ Winge adopts Victor Turner’s description of ritual, which he says comports three phases: a *preliminal* phase, in which the participant seeks to separate themselves from their dominant culture or society; the *liminal* phase, whereby the subject transitions into otherness; and the *postliminal* phase, during which the subject “reincorporates” in their new context and forges themselves a space within a given community.¹²⁷ In these spaces, writes Winge, Lolitas experience a sense of the carnivalesque – a celebration of space where there is temporary release from established order and norms, time and space. That ritual in effect describes the birth of a subculture.

Fursuiters, especially when united *en masse* in their very own carnivalesque conventions, represent a break from dominant culture because they personify

¹²⁴ Hebdige, 18.

¹²⁵ Jock Young, “The Subterranean World of Play,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 71-80.

¹²⁶ Theresa Winge, “Undressing and Dressing Loli,” in *Mechamedia Volume 3: Limits of the Human*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 56-57.

¹²⁷ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 20-59.

independence and personal reinvention. As we saw in Chapter 1, the human/nonhuman animal divide is a fundamental issue in man's self-conception. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, "it is as if determining the border between human and animal were not just one question among many discussed by philosophers and theologians, scientists and politicians, but rather a fundamental metaphysico-political operation in which alone something like 'man' can be decided upon and produced."¹²⁸ In the wake of posthumanist thought, though, "no longer can nature's elemental forces and wild beasts be seamlessly reproduced in the Western imagination to function as timeless Other for a universal Man,"¹²⁹ to use art historian Johanne Sloan's words. And that is a very off-putting idea, to many. The slippage between the civilized and the bestial relativises the natural world's value system and threatens human supremacy. The whole of furry fandom, but none more than the fursuiters, use a cute, anthropomorphized homology to mash together aspects of animality and humanity and make a spectacular – and monstrous – collage.

Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, "the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them," Max Ernst wrote in 1936.¹³⁰ In *The Crisis of the Object*, André Breton theorized that the collage aesthetic is an assault on the syntax of everyday life that could instigate "a total revolution of the object: acting to divert the object from its end by coupling it to a new name and signing it. [...] Perturbation and deformation are in demand here for their own

¹²⁸ Agamben, 21.

¹²⁹ Johanne Sloan, "Fake Animals, Anthropomorphism, and Other Travesties of Nature," in *Parachute*, no. 72, October-December 1993, 18.

¹³⁰ Max Ernst, "Au delà de la peinture," in *Écritures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 252-256. The original French reads: "accouplement de deux réalités en apparence inaccouplables sur un plan qui en apparence ne leur convient pas."

sakes.”¹³¹ The fursuited *bricoleur* juxtaposes two apparently incompatible realities to create an explosive junction, or metaplastm – a term Donna Haraway uses to describe the blurring of lines between dog and human flesh in companion-species relating. As a generic term, “metaplastm” means something altered through addition, omission, inversion or other. It’s a word Haraway uses because it is appropriately biological (plasm): “flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds: they are joined in naturecultures,”¹³² she says. This is what happens to a plush costume wearer: a metaplastmatic merging between the human within and the animal they depict. But more than that, the original collage-transformation has taken place long before the donning of the costume. Its conception is a neotonized metaplastm of the *idea* of, say, dog, rabbit or bear, after it has gone through a thorough process of Disneyfication and pop culturalization. What relationship does a big pink fuzzy bunny have with Mother Nature’s original conception of a rabbit? Fursuiters purposefully employ an aesthetic that symbolically “repossesses” everyday imagery, to use Hebdige’s word, and endow it with implicitly oppositional meanings.¹³³ Subcultures, in offering alternative usages of the same objects and subjects employed in dominant culture, have an intrinsically oppositional nature. Hebdige describes “spectacular subcultures” as the expression of forbidden ways of being through sartorial transgressions and broken behavioural codes. “They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as

¹³¹ André Breton quoted in Hebdige, 104-105.

¹³² Haraway, 20.

¹³³ Hebdige, 16-17.

‘unnatural’.’¹³⁴ One need only consider the performances of American artist Nate Hill to experience the ritualistic breaking of behavioural codes.

Nate Hill created two performances between 2007 and 2011 that involved him dressing in full-body fuzzy animal costumes. The first was *Free Bouncy Rides* (fig. 38), for which he wore a baby blue felt dolphin costume and sat on public benches and subway seats all over New York City, holding a sign reading “Free Bouncy Rides.” He invited all and sundry to sit on his knees and get bounced, like toddlers on their parents’ laps. The second was *Punch Me Panda* (figs. 39 and 40), for which he dressed in a panda costume with oversized head and giant twinkly eyes straight out of the stylistic traditions of manga. He wore a chest protector and advertized himself as a “safe place to punch someone,” welcoming passersby to slip on boxing gloves and take a swing at him.

Like the performance by Valérie Lamontagne discussed in the introduction, *Advice Bunny* (fig. 1), performed between 1999 and 2003, both these works by Hill use the animal costume as a site of catharsis. There are two key differences between the artists’ approaches, however: the first is that while Lamontagne invites gallery goers to engage in a verbal confession of their woes, to which she responds similarly verbally with advice and encouragement, Hill demands of people that they participate bodily. He is not there to listen, as Lamontagne is, nor necessarily sympathize – he is there only as a conduit to their physical release. The second is that while Lamontagne opens herself up to strangers, she nevertheless is in the very controlled environment of a contemporary art gallery that she has previously furnished with a comfortable seat for herself and a chaise longue for the participants. Both of Hill’s performances, conversely, involve the

¹³⁴ Hebdige, 91-92.

unpredictable masses that inhabit New York City's public places, and involve physical suffering, or effort, on the artist's part. For *Free Bouncy Rides*, he must not only bear the bodyweight of the participants, but bounce that weight up and down in a carefree manner, to provide them with the buoyancy they might have known as children. While for *Punch Me Panda*, he must suffer through the violence of participants' punches – a process that took its toll, as the artist describes in a text posted on the blog *Young Manhattanite* in March 2011,¹³⁵ in which he chronicles – in the third person – the panda's experience, and analyzes the character's morphing mandate as the performances add up, from generous, jolly healer, at the beginning, to irascible, aggressive punch-addict at the end. It seems the panda's emotional state becomes detached from that of the man within. (The text is accompanied by video footage from each performance as proof, in a way that recalls the empirical evidence provided by a zoologist observing a new species in the wild.)

Both Hill's and Lamontagne's performances rest of the power of the fursuit as an enabler to otherwise forbidden displays. It is frowned-upon to recline in a public space and share your problems with someone you don't know. It is seen as regressive, or childish, or misplaced to bounce on the knee of a complete stranger, especially as an adult. And public punching is a criminal offence. One could posit that the difference between Lamontagne and Hill's levels of engagement with their costumed identities is reflective of their degree of costuming; Lamontagne's costume, though covering her from head to toe, has a cutout that lets her human face show. The mouth, the eyes, engage with others in the usual affective way, and as such she retains more of her humanist self-

¹³⁵ Nate Hill, "How Punch Me Panda Changed," on *Young Manhattanite*, posted on March 21, 2011: <http://youngmanhattanite.tumblr.com/post/3999857468/how-punch-me-panda-changed>.

control, and evidently her ability and desire to converse. Hill, on the other hand, keeps his inner humanity hidden under layers of plush fabric and, in the case of the panda, a thick chest protector as well. He is so encased and subsumed by the plush entity, by this vestimentary expression of an alternate identity, that it takes on a life of its own.

Nick Cave also makes all-encompassing plush costumes, but for other people rather than himself. The American artist began creating what he calls his “soundsuits,” based on the noise they make when worn, in 1992. Except for the series of bunnies he fabricated in 2009, it is true that their reference to animal physiognomies is generally more indirect than the standard issue fursuit (figs. 41 to 43), engaging more with the stylings of abstract art rather than comics. But even the more amorphous do display a certain monstrous beastliness while reminding us of Sianne Ngai’s belief that “the more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes.”¹³⁶ Though most still adopt a basically bipedal structure, the human form within is altogether consumed under layers and layers of shaggy plush and mixed fabrics covering a mesh shape, some of which extend above the wearer’s head by a good three feet (see fig. 44). The individual wearer is obscured; the soundsuits either entirely cover their wearers’ heads, or they include masks that guarantee anonymity. As stated on Cave’s website, the artist

is as interested in fashion and cultural, ritualistic and ceremonial concepts as he is in politics, a domain that has always been part of his work as demonstrated by acts of collecting and reconfiguring elements and concealing the identity, race, and gender, of those who wear his suits. Rendering them faceless and anonymous, the suits help these individuals transcend the political realm in order to enter the realm of dreams and fantasy.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ngai, 81.

¹³⁷ “Exhibitions,” on Soundsuitshop, accessed December 2, 2012: <http://soundsuitshop.com/scene/exhibitions/jack-shainman-gallery-january-2009>

Cave travels his soundsuits far and wide around the U.S. and the globe, in an on-going parade that can be situated in the street, in a museum or in a school, but regardless aims at bringing his art to people rather than people to art in a celebration of the spectacular. While he has exhibited the suits hanging as sculptures on mannequins, their most common usage is in action, worn by local participants. Wherever he goes, he invites people to wear and dance in his movable sculptures, because it is through their activation that these works really *exist*. They are the fursuit, deconstructed; they are at once shaggy rainbows, man-sized pompoms, amorphous interpretations of abstract paintings and animalistic entities, like one wearer said in a report filmed by PBS Newshour. “You put on this costume and you become this thing... this animal, almost.”¹³⁸

Just like for fursuiters at conventions, as well as Lamontagne and Hill, vestimentary transformation is key to the playing out of Cave’s soundsuit wearers’ rituals of distinction. But in all those cases, it goes beyond that threshold layer of adornment. It involves the interiority of embodiment through a transmutation of their sensorial interaction with the world.

As Rebecca Schneider puts it, “our cultural ways of knowing [have been] traditionally wrapped up with visuality, with vision set forth as proprietary, transcendent of tactility, omnisciently disinterested, and essentially separate from the object which it apprehends.”¹³⁹ In the Cartesian conception that “has dominated thought since the

¹³⁸ “Nick Cave Brings Art, Sculpture to Life with ‘Soundsuits,’” on PBS Newshour, 2012, uploaded to YouTube on April 24, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEJ3eKSlm04>.

¹³⁹ Rebecca Schneider, “After Us the Savage Goddess,” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 1996). 157.

Enlightenment,” seconds feminist writer Jayne Wark in her book *Radical Gestures*, “the subject ‘I’ is constituted throughout knowledge derived from the disembodied and objectifying ‘eye’ of vision.”¹⁴⁰ The significance of this in the *différance* of the soundsuiter or fursuiter’s sense of self is that, factually, their vision is obscured. When wearing a full-body costume, one’s sensorial relationship with the world is completely transformed. At the Toronto Furnal Equinox furry convention in March 2012, I attended an hour-long lecture titled “Performing in Fursuit,” given by Canadian fursuiters Flow, Horlequism and Clouwy. They described in detail the challenges of wearing a garment that is ultimately as encumbering as a snowsuit over their entire body. The heat is such that fursuiters can lose weight at conventions just from how much they sweat (consequently conventions boast an incredible amount of water stations, to meet the fursuiters’ need to hydrate). While wearing big padded paw-gloves and heavy stuffed shoes, mobility and dexterity are largely impeded. Hearing is virtually obscured by the mask, and despite fursuit designers’ best efforts, and the giant size of the fursonas’ *artificial* eyes, vision is limited to at the very most 40 degrees – through mesh. (The eyeholes in fursuits are generally dissimulated behind a mesh section located in the fursona’s mouth.) This desensitization introduces an irony. It is difficult to imagine a more unthreatening interpretation of animality than the residual vestiges that shine through the plush aesthetic, in all its clawless and fangless glory. The parallel is clear

¹⁴⁰ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 125.

between fursuit fursonas and the helplessly cute victims of violence in the animated films discussed in Chapter 2.¹⁴¹

Since the cave paintings at Lascaux, one of the most persistent powers of non-human animal imagery has been the implication of beasts' mythical physical prowess and sensorial abilities. Just like the typologies of Chinese astrology and the menagerie in Japanese anime,¹⁴² the phenotypes chosen by fursuiters (among the most popular are foxes, dogs, cats and rabbits)¹⁴³ are extensions of the symbolic importance we've projected onto foxes' cunning, dogs' scent, cats' hearing and rabbits' reproductive potency. And yet in these neotonized versions, fursuiters mute even the limited sensorial range they have as humans. While in character, fursuiters are blind, deaf, overheated and slow. Not only that, the sensuality associated with fur, the soft tactility, is only felt from the outside – from within, plush is scratchy polyester. It is as if the act of performance is one of projection; not only is it a gesture of prosopopoeia, as Ngai understands it (i.e. the personification of an inanimate cute object by its user), it is an identification of self through the eyes of the other – as if one *becomes* through how one is *perceived*. In other words, one is soft and cuddly because one looks it, just like one feels tall because one is wearing a feather in one's hat. It is a true expression of the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, according to which a coherent body image only emerges in an infant

¹⁴¹ Lamarre, 82-83.

¹⁴² Lamarre, 75-95.

¹⁴³ "List of most popular phenotypes" entry on Wikifur, accessed on March 14, 2013: http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/List_of_most_popular_phenotypes

through identification with an externalized image, either of themselves or of others, on which they project's their own image.¹⁴⁴

Cary Wolfe believes that a posthuman perspective radically changes our discussion of body and embodiment, as it means “we can no longer talk of *the* body or even, for that matter, of *a* body in the traditional sense.” He writes:

It must be reiterated that character cannot exist beyond the individual phenomenal body, *nor* can it eliminate this body. [...] By emphasizing the bodily being-in-the-world of humans, embodiment creates the possibility for the body to function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscriptions.¹⁴⁵

His conception, which places the body not at the start of a phenomenological experience, but at its middle, end, beginning and all-over-ness, allows for the possibility to extend embodiment into a collective occurrence. Wolfe is a great advocate of the term “autopoiesis,” literally “self-creation,” that was introduced in 1972 by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to express a fundamental interrelation between structure, mechanism and function in the creation of identity¹⁴⁶ – putting the onus on the individual psyche to construct a social self, in other words. He suggests that, neurophysiologically, different autopoietic life forms “bring forth a world” that can be different, indeed sometimes radically different, from one another, so that “the environment, and with it ‘the body,’ becomes unavoidably a virtual, multidimensional space produced and stabilized by the recursive enactions and structural couplings of

¹⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 2005), 1-7.

¹⁴⁵ Fischer-Lichte, 89.

¹⁴⁶ Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realization of the Living* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co.), 1980.

autopoietic beings who share [...] a ‘consensual domain.’”¹⁴⁷ Each living thing creates and reshapes its own *Umwelt* when it interacts with the world, to put it differently, and since according to Thure von Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory the mind and the world are inseparable, because it is the mind that interprets the world for the organism, the *Umwelten* of different organisms differ too because of their intrinsic uniqueness.¹⁴⁸ When two *Umwelten* interact, this creates a semiosphere, or, in the case of furry fandom, a posthuman, subcultural, and *communal* identity – blending human, animal, self, other, interior and exterior into an encompassing experience that caters to each organism’s individualism.

The way fursuiters construct their semiosphere is through ritualized performance. According to Wark, who works within a feminist context and deals specifically with gender issues, the manipulation of roles and the enactment of self-transformation in performance can enable resistance to imposed and stabilizing determinations.¹⁴⁹ And though she’s examining cultural phenomena through an anthropological lens, Borel’s description of the ritual (which supports Turner’s) confirms Wark’s statement and applies to the universe of furry conventions – in both senses of the word. “Through ceremony, the body melds with the sacred, eros aligns with the mystical, flesh is present but tamed, and physical love appears as a forbidden category of the sacred,” she writes. “Each gesture is controlled by conscience; the latter stages and organizing passions. [...] In its raw form,

¹⁴⁷ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), XXIII.

¹⁴⁸ Thure von Uexküll, “The Sign Theory of Jakob von Uexküll,” in *Classics of Semiotics*, ed. Martin Krampe et al. (New York: Plenum, 1987), 147-179.

¹⁴⁹ Wark, 126.

the body is unacceptable: only ritual makes it bearable.”¹⁵⁰ The argument is that rituals exist to couch moments that can create anxiety in the comfort of a community.¹⁵¹ At furry conventions, fursuiters withdraw from an over-categorized mainstream and enact their own ritualized behaviour by passing from their uncostumed, human appearance (preliminal stage) into their costumed fursona (liminal stage) and convening in a group for days on end, solidifying their liminal identity, enriching their collective imaginary and building new interrelations that are fully accepting of new definitions of humanity (postliminal stage). Part and parcel with that ritual, though, is a level of suffering, or of what Cary Wolfe would term “artifactual” violence: the inescapable violence and disfiguration of representation itself.¹⁵² To achieve their altered state of identity, to break first with an aspect of their “self” and then with society, fursuiters must undergo a spectacular endurance test: hours and hours of blindness, deafness, heat, heft, immobility. In Borel’s words, “it is suffering that gives awareness to the body and converts it into a spectacle.”

Suffering represents a concentrated experience of tearing; the organism is threatened, but will become stronger for the sacrifice. This is the paradox of pain... the whole body explodes, the anatomy fragments, some parts hypertrophy, symbolically and physically. Then arises the hybrid, at once comforting and worrisome – comforting because it reveals the divine powers of creation, worrisome for its powers of destruction.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Borel, 45-46, translated by the author. The original French reads: “Par la cérémonie, le corps se soude au sacré, l’éros s’aligne sur la mystique, la chair est présente mais domptée, l’amour physique apparaît comme une catégorie interdite du sacré. Chaque geste est orienté par la conscience; c’est elle qui met en scène et organise la passion. [...] À l’état brut, le corps n’est pas acceptable : seul le rituel le rend supportable.”

¹⁵¹ Borel, 46.

¹⁵² Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, 151.

¹⁵³ Borel, 47, translated by the author. The original French reads: “C’est la souffrance qui donne conscience au corps et le convertit en spectacle. [...] La souffrance est l’expérience condensée de la déchirure; l’unité organique y est menacée, mais ne s’en reconstituera que mieux à l’issue du sacrifice. Paradoxe de la douleur... la totalité du corps éclate, l’anatomie se morcelle, l’un ou l’autre fragment s’hypertrophie, tant dans la sensation que dans la réalité. L’hybride se réalise, à la fois sécurisant et inquiétant, sécurisant car il prouve la force du pouvoir démiurgique, inquiétant par sa faculté de destruction.”

After the sacrifice of physical comfort, what fursuiters end up with is a relativistic sense of self and a world of posthuman “compossibilities” – where the human and nonhuman are spaces we inhabit with others,¹⁵⁴ and where what abounds are humanimals exhibiting a refusal of the human/animal binary.¹⁵⁵ As Wolfe writes:

[Posthumanism] forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of “bringing forth a world” – ways that are, since we ourselves are human *animals*, part of the evolutionary history and behavioural and psychological repertoire of the human itself. But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human – its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing – by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically “not-human” and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is.¹⁵⁶

The fantasy of plush is about blurring the borders between species, between nature and culture, deconstructing the hierarchy of the senses, of minds, of “civilization” and of the Cartesian order. When John Berger wrote about “the interstices between sets of the visible,” he was talking about the insights one can get from peering between two frames in a film, but it is oddly apt for the subject at hand. “We come upon a part of the visible which wasn’t destined for us,” he writes. “Perhaps it was destined for night-birds, reindeer, ferrets, eels, whales... Our customary visible order is not the only one: it

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Bolton, “Introduction: The Limits of ‘The Limits of the Human,’” in *Mechamedia Volume 3: Limits of the Human*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), XIV-XV.

¹⁵⁵ Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, XIII.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, XXV.

coexists with other orders. Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this coexistence.”¹⁵⁷ And so is the fetish of plush fursuits.

¹⁵⁷ Berger, 10.

Chapter 4: Romancing the Beast

Whether online or at conventions, one of the most striking aspects of furry fandom is its double identity. While on the one hand the scene is crisscrossed with sexuality in myriad ways, on the other there are militant efforts to clean up the furry image and ensure it projects innocent, family-friendly fun. In 1998 a group of furries called Burned Furs united against the fandom's sexualized image; they began their mission statement with the line "Anthropomorphics fandom is being overrun by sexually dysfunctional, socially stunted and creatively bankrupt hacks and pervs."¹⁵⁸ As mentioned in the introduction, the spicy articles printed in publications including *Vanity Fair* and *GQ*, as well as sensationalistic television coverage on talk shows like *Tyra Banks* or in documentary series like *Taboo* or *Sex2k* continue to be vilified in furry chat rooms to this day because, as journalist Shaun de Waal puts it, they voyeuristically pathologize the fandom "in a Jerry Springer sort of way, alongside other compulsions such as ritual hand-washing or obsessively eating toilet paper."¹⁵⁹ But none of the mass-culture depictions has been as reviled as the episode of the popular crime show *CSI* that was dedicated to the subculture.

Wittily titled *Fur and Loathing* (the show is set in Las Vegas), the episode – originally aired on October 30, 2003 – paints the furry scene in lurid colours. At one point, a door opens onto a darkened convention room to reveal a veritable sea of full-bodied plush costumes on the floor, "yiffing" away in a giant writhing orgy, dubbed a "furpile" (see Appendix A for a furry lexicon). The episode is admittedly entertaining,

¹⁵⁸ Nate Patrin and GothTiger, "Mission Statement," on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, accessed March 14, 2013: http://web.archive.org/web/20000619152635/members.tripod.com/burnedfur/bf_missn.html. The group was active between 1998 and 2001. In November of 2005 a new group was created using the same name by persons unaffiliated with the original group. They have since changed their name to Improved Anthropomorphics.

¹⁵⁹ Shaun de Waal, "OMG!!! *sobs* Your furry is giving me feels," in *Mail & Guardian*, posted online on December 12, 2012: <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-21-00-omg-sobs-your-furry-is-giving-me-feels>

touching upon the salaciousness and blurring of borders that, I want to argue in this chapter, help confirm fursuiting's cultural potency even for non-participants (known in the scene as "mundanes"). But evidently the episode became the bane of many furies' existence, as it made them fear they'd be forevermore pictured as degenerates by anyone who knew of their penchant. As one fursuiter says in the TV documentary series *Taboo*, "The biggest misconception people have about furies is that we're all [...] sexual deviants and perverts and we're doing this only for sexual gratification. Like there's some weird underlying tone to it, where it's just really primarily about fun. It's a fandom. You see people going to sci-fi conventions – do you think they're going home in their alien costumes and getting it on? They're *not*."¹⁶⁰

The veracity of that statement cannot be confirmed, and in fact it is quite possible that sci-fi fans also seek out sexual companionship, especially as fan conventions take place in hotels and are designed as sites of communion. In his project *Bridges of the Unknown: Visual Desires and Small Apocalypses*, queer photographer Eron Rauch attempts to capture his sexual experience of cosplay conventions, which share their raison d'être with furry gatherings. "[F]or fans, these conventions are their pilgrimage," he writes. "All across North America, nearly every state has a yearly convention of thousands of people packed into the same type of hotels, awake for days, moving through simultaneous moments of lucidity and uncertainty in terms of what exactly they are trying to enact."¹⁶¹ Rauch depicts these events as celebratory get-togethers of like-minded

¹⁶⁰ "Secret Lives," in the documentary series *Taboo*, executive producer Martyn Ives, produced by Beyond Entertainment Ltd for National Geographic Channels (2012), accessed on March 14, 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYwEYOP_BVQ

¹⁶¹ Eron Rauch, "Bridges of the Unknown: Visual Desires and Small Apocalypses," in *Mechamedia Volume 2: Networks of Desire*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 146.

people hungry to explore the limits of their identity. According to the biggest (and only) academically driven survey on the furry fandom to date, the International Anthropomorphic Research Project,¹⁶² a partially completed doctoral project headed by University of Western Ontario psychology PhD candidate (and fursuiter) Courtney Plante, the vast majority of the furry conventioners willing to participate in the survey are between the ages of 18 and 30.¹⁶³ It is also significant, in relation to the idea of “queering,” which I will address a bit later, that of those respondents, most identify as bisexual, gay or “other.”¹⁶⁴ As is evidenced by the physical expressions witnessed in the hotel hallways at conventions and the tenor of much of the art and video content produced by the furry scene, sexual encounters certainly do occur within its community. Two-tailed Fox/Wolf, an insightful member of the scene, writes in a furry chat room that “Furries have the property of being furry to relate to, enabling the social recognition and low-level trust required to initiate social interaction. Anything else built upon that can be related to any other cultural effects – art, sex, interaction, whatever. It all comes down to people being people, just not in the way other people are used to.”¹⁶⁵

The spirit of conventions aside, the sexually loaded public image of the furry fandom has surely emerged because of its own visual culture. Though there are certainly many examples of furry drawings and comics online that are strictly PG13, it takes only a few clicks of the mouse before extremely sexually explicit images grace one’s screen.

¹⁶² International Anthropomorphic Research Project, accessed March 14, 2013: <https://sites.google.com/site/anthropomorphicresearch/>

¹⁶³ “The Social Psychology of Furry Fandom,” on YouTube, filmed lecture by Courtney Plante at the Texas Furry Fiesta, February 25, 2012, accessed on February 20, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6zYWmvHnZQ>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Two-tailed Fox/Wolf comment on “National Geographic profiles furries on ‘Taboo’” on Reddit, accessed on March 2, 2013: http://www.reddit.com/r/furry/comments/nja0p/national_geographic_profiles_fursuiters_on_taboo/.

There is a name for this body of cultural production: “spoooge art,” which describes any drawn pornography that involves highly detailed genitals, vaginal fluid, semen and lurid sexual poses (see figs. 45 through 49). As exhibited in Appendix A, the furry scene has a copious vocabulary for sexual things, including expressions like “carpet burn” (the result of vigorous contact with the rougher side of plush fabric), “meat sex” (sex with biological partners) and “plush plunging” (engaging in intercourse with a plush toy).

Furry spoooge art is everywhere online, as well as on the merchandise tables at conventions. Images such as the untitled work signed *Hatii*, in fig. 45, with its idyllic, Disney-worthy landscape and typically cute, rounded, big-eyed bird (on the top left hand) and fish (on the lower right-hand side) illustrates perfectly the shocking contrast between the wholesome and highly sexual extremes of furry imagery. The central figures, a sort of dog/hyena and a two-tailed fox (a recurring theme among fursonas) sport enlarged eyes and sweet, smiling expressions, and at first glance, because of the viewer’s tendency to expect innocence out of such a pastoral cartoon scene, seem to be intertwined in a friendly tussle. Within a split second, though, the shocking pink scrotum in the middle of the work points us in the right direction – this image has been subverted. A third, fourth and fifth look may be inspired by the genital complications at work; whose testicles are those, in fact? They seem attached to a shaft that is entering the fox, but is that the fox’s vagina or anus? What is the orientation of this sexual encounter? For a moment the viewer might settle on the understanding that this is a simple gay love scene, but the grey beast already seems to have a scrotum, situated right below the pink one – there is a proliferation of scrota which complicates the image. Then again, the fox does have two

tails, so perhaps real-world biology is not an appropriate gauge here. In this image and others, animal characters like those familiar to all children exposed to children's books, anime, lunch-box designs, stuffed toys and Saturday-morning cartoons are suddenly made adult, engaged in sexual play or intercourse with themselves, or one or multiple partners.

It must be recalled that the furry aesthetic has its roots in highly sexualized aspects of comic art (this is described in Chapter 2). In comic historian Maurice Horn's words, "The early American comic strip is now nostalgically recalled as an embodiment of innocence, but this is a recent view. It was certainly not considered so innocent by the legions of turn-of-the-century critics who assailed it for, among other sins, bad taste and vulgarity."¹⁶⁶ Mr. Jack, the comic strip I mentioned whose main character was a cat on a relentless prowl for sexual conquests, was among the first strips to run in a national newspaper, and was created by James Switherton, one of the art form's founding fathers. Though severe censorship initiatives over the conservative 1930s ensured that Mr. Jack and other more sexually explicit strips were cut from newspapers, the kinky side of comics simply relocated into alternative magazines like *MAD* and in underground zines and small-print comics – until publishers like Fantagraphics, Last Gasp and Dark Horse and their authors (Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Dan Clowes) became so popular they rejoined the mainstream. "In recent years the motto of the comics might well have been 'Anything goes' as far as the erotic expression is concerned, with some themes seemingly straight out of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*," writes Horn. "Since comics to a certain extent are still beholden to the 'funny animal' tradition, the sight of such creatures

¹⁶⁶ Maurice Horn, *Sex in the Comics* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 14.

as Howard the Duck, Cerebus the Aardvark or the White Ape comingling freely with women is hardly noticed in the context of perversion.”¹⁶⁷

The same sexualization exists in the history of animation, from the early days of Betty Boop, who informed 1932 audiences well aware of the phrase’s sexual innuendo that “He couldn’t take my boop-oop-a-doop away!”¹⁶⁸ She was referring to the very active Motion Picture Production Code headed by Hollywood’s chief censor at the time, Will H. Hays. As if in reaction to the tightening codes of conduct, sex seems to have been on every cartoonist’s mind in those years. The Fleisher Studio animators who created Betty Boop put together a private pornographic reel that included a sequence of Betty sexually assaulting Popeye.¹⁶⁹ As a subversive way around the rules, Warner Brothers slipped in a good one in the 1943 short *An Itch in Time*, featuring a helpless dog under attack from a particularly aggressive flea: as he rubs his hindquarters all over the room in an attempt to relieve his itch, the dog stops for a brief moment to tell the audience: “Hey, I better cut this out! I might start to like it!”¹⁷⁰ As Jim Korkis and John Cawley write in their book *Cartoon Confidential*, sex was everywhere: “One of Tex Avery’s most beloved characters was the sexy Red (Hot Riding Hood). Warner’s Pepe LePew was one of the most insistently romantic characters ever created. Bugs Bunny cross dressed. Daffy Duck wanted to date human female movie stars.”¹⁷¹ Even Mickey has raunchy roots – his early appearances onscreen included a good dose of barnyard humour, including the

¹⁶⁷ Horn, 153-155.

¹⁶⁸ Jim Korkis and John Cawley, *Cartoon Confidential* (Westlake Village, California: Malibu Graphics Publishing Group, 1991), 32.

¹⁶⁹ Korkis and Cawley, 33.

¹⁷⁰ Korkis and Cawley, 34.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

abuse of farm animals, such as yanking on piglets attached to their mothers.¹⁷² When the Hays office eventually disbanded in 1968, films were allowed greater freedom, but by then most of the studios had dropped their animation departments. The only major theatrical animation company left was Disney. But there came one noteworthy exception: *Fritz the Cat*, made in 1971, and produced by Cinemation Industries. The animated feature directed by Ralph Bakshi was promoted as “X-rated and animated,” a combination that wasn’t new, but at this point had become reserved to private screenings in darkened back rooms. Loosely based on the popular character created by Robert Crumb (fig. 50), the film featured animals in human clothing living human lives, doing drugs and having sex.¹⁷³ Fritz the Cat is an iconic character in furry culture for good reason.

The place of sex in both comics and cartoons is easily understood in terms of the creative freedom afforded by both art forms. Compared to photography or live action film, the scenarios are limited only by the extent of their creators’ imaginations, dexterity with a pen and, nowadays, access to rudimentary software like Flash and Photoshop. Sean Rabbitt, the furry-friendly owner of American comic publisher Rabbitt Valley, stresses the freeing nature of erotic furry art and its ability to depict things that can never be real. “It’s theatre of the mind,” he says.¹⁷⁴ The fact that the most popular characters in both media are “cute” animals, in the way defined in Chapter 2, confirms Sianne Ngai’s point that part of cute creatures’ appeal is the malleability that makes them the perfect

¹⁷² Korkis and Cawley, 33.

¹⁷³ Korkis and Cawley, 35.

¹⁷⁴ Sean Rabbitt quoted by Melissa Meinzer in “Animal Passions: The furies come to town... and our correspondent tails along,” *Pittsburg City Paper*, first posted on June 29, 2006: <http://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/animal-passions/Content?oid=1337258>.

foils to our whimsical wants. In comics, goopy encounters between pink, pregnant ponies and monstrously sized black bulls, as depicted in fig. 49, are completely within the realm of possibility, liberated from issues of intent or consent. Though static, images like this one touch upon the same scopical pleasures described by Thomas LaMarre in relation to the plasmaticity of animated animals: “Animation doesn’t fret over the fragility and mortality of animals but celebrates their apparent invulnerability and immortality (lyrically and violently),”¹⁷⁵ he writes. This analysis can be extended to include the sexual acts undertaken by these creatures, whereby situations of potential danger, depravity and surrealism are similarly celebrated for both their creativity and lack of consequence. Animation and comics delight in constructing zones where identity is destabilized, and “where the animal opens into the human, and the human into the animal,” in LaMarre’s words. In this world, cats can have a human woman’s breasts (albeit silicone-enhanced, by the looks of most) while lizards can have a man’s penis. The zones are so blurred between species, genders and sexual orientations that a whole new panoply of unlikely pairings is born within this bestiary of promiscuous mixed breeds.

Though connected to the cultural productions described above, fursuiting has its particularities when it comes to the exploration of sexuality. These cute, man-sized costumes of funny fake-coloured animals evoke some of the associations with childhood that comics and animated films do: outside of the fandom context, such costumes exist for use at children’s birthday parties, at Walt Disney World, as kiddie TV characters or as mascots at sporting events. When relocated into the context of fandom, though, whether in the pornographic production available online (here I am speaking not of spooge art but

¹⁷⁵ LaMarre, 81.

of free, live-action amateur porn videos like those found on The Yiff Gallery,¹⁷⁶ featuring people having sex in fursuits that have generally been modified with strategically placed holes or appendages, or STHs and STAs for short – see lexicon in Appendix A) or simply gathered in large groups at conventions, their cultural identity is not as easily understood.

Both spooge art and fursuit porn share as many stylistic similarities with Disney's manufactured innocence as they do with the centrefold spreads of *Hustler* or *Just Us Boys*, pointing to a desire to rewrite certain childhood tropes. Sexuality arises in a somewhat different way amongst the kissing cousins of furies, plushophiles (plushies for short). Plushies are people who have a paraphilia (an atypical sexual desire) for plush fabric, the polyester pelt that is used to construct both fursuits and most stuffed animals. This affection for plush toys can go far beyond the average person's.¹⁷⁷ Though some feel platonic love for one or many plush toys, others identify them as their ideal sexual partners, and go to extreme measures to modify them to that end (also with STHs and STAs). There is no clearer defamation of innocence than the photos and videos one can find at Plush.Yiff,¹⁷⁸ and with their contextual slippage, fursuiters touch upon that same sense of the inappropriate. Just as it is shocking to see videos of teddy bears like those cuddled by children be defiled in sexual encounters with adult humans, so can it jar to see adult humans dressed up in fursuits with nary a sporting event or children's birthday party in sight.

As art historian Johanne Sloan expresses it, "children in their 'primitive' stages of development are permitted fetishistic, non-visual relationships with their possessions,

¹⁷⁶ <http://vids.theyiffgallery.com/>.

¹⁷⁷ "Plushophilia," entry on Wikifur, accessed on March 14, 2013: <http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Plushophilia>.

¹⁷⁸ <http://plush.yiff.ru/>

[but] maturity and civilization are inevitably associated with a (primarily visual) mastery of the object-world.”¹⁷⁹ Plushies and furrries refuse to take that step away from the childishly fetishistic; indeed, they develop whole lifestyles around that refusal. Marilyn Ivy asks some relevant questions in her consideration of cute objects:

What, indeed, are stuffed animals, plush toys, doing for all those two-year-old kids? They are, in the thinking of the psychoanalysts D.W. Winnicott, objects that help the child move away from the Mother by operating as substitutes for the maternal presence. They are loved fiercely, and, in the strongest instances, they never leave the child, even to the point of the disintegration of the soft object itself [...]. As a certain moment, however, they must be overcome, discarded, expelled from the household and from the physical attachment and love of the child, if the child is to transition into the world of the adult, so object-relations analysts contend. [...] What happens when one does not give up the transitional object? Then we might find the perpetual child, the one who transfers transition, who defers transition, from one beloved object to the next.¹⁸⁰

This disavowal of a fundamental humanist “evolution” or queering of the supposed progression towards “civility” by fursuiters is, I believe, both what most troubles its critics and inspires artists to delve into its rich imagery. The ability to toy with such categorical opposites as child and adult, human and nonhuman, dog and cat, real and imagined, not to mention straight and gay, creates an immense sense of unease, unsettledness and unclassifiability that can be titillating, shocking and also aesthetically productive.

In 1997, David Halperin wrote: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer,’ then, demarcates not a

¹⁷⁹ Sloan, 18-21.

¹⁸⁰ Ivy, 19.

positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.”¹⁸¹ Seen that way, queer applies the defiance against the normative humanist, white and male dominating class discussed in earlier chapters to the sphere of sexual orientation. It refuses the strictures established by heterosexuality, but also those established by fixed alternative categories like “homosexual,” “lesbian,” even “fetishist.” As discussed, in the furry subculture’s own art production there is an evident effort toward and enjoyment of the disruption of predictable gender and sexual roles. It boasts a proliferation of bisexual group sex scenes and cross-gendered representations (creatures sporting both phalluses and breasts) – of sexual encounters that do not fit a biological imperative or express clearly delineated social stereotypes. In furry fandom, there is a celebration of difference; or as Judith Butler might put it, a shared joke.

It’s not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It’s all sexual norms. I think that every sexual position is fundamentally comic. If you say ‘I can only desire X’, what you’ve immediately done, in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity. Now, I take it that one of the essential aspects of comedy emerges when you end up actually occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable. That is funny. There’s a terrible self-subversion in it.¹⁸²

Self-subversion is a standard of the furry pack, and not just in the fantastical world of its visual culture, which as examined in both figs. 45 and 49 relishes in outlandish sexy scenarios. It is a subculture – its fursuited subset most of all – that enjoys parody (the fakeness of its animal representations), exaggeration (the garish colours and caricatured shapes of its Disneyfied aesthetic) and transformation (the

¹⁸¹ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

¹⁸² Judith Butler quoted by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal for an interview originally published in *Radical Philosophy* (no. 67, summer 1994), accessed online on April 14, 2013: <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>

rendering of the human self into animal hybrid). As mentioned earlier, University of Western Ontario psychology doctoral candidate Courtney Plante is in the midst of a large-scale project attempting to define the demographic of the furry subculture internationally. For two years, he and a team of researchers have been conducting a series of polls at furry conventions far and wide for this purpose and among the questions, which range from fans' reasons for participating to their favourite animal likeness to their age, one pertains to sexual orientation. At the 2012 Anthrocon, for example, the survey posed the question: "Are furies more gay than the average person?" Writes Plante:

"We asked participants to indicate, on a 7-point scale ranging from 'Exclusively Heterosexual' to 'Exclusively Homosexual,' where they felt they fell with regard to their sexual orientation. [...] Furies were far less likely to report being exclusively heterosexual than the general population (in which 80% of the population reported exclusive heterosexuality as their sexual orientation [*the survey polled 800 non-furry participants to obtain those statistics*]). Additionally, furies reported being 4-5 times more likely to consider themselves exclusively homosexual than in the general population, and were much more likely to report varying degrees of bisexual sexual orientation. Additionally, furies were more than 6 times as likely to report 'other' as their sexual orientation than the general population of Americans (15.0% versus 2.4%), with other representing orientations such as 'pansexual', 'asexual', and a variety of self-identified orientations."¹⁸³

Based on the answers received, it seems that though a large part of the community is happy to define itself as homosexual, the better question to ask may have been whether furies are *queerer* than the average population. Because in addition to being the positional identity described by Halperin, reactive to the Western sexual identity norms just as the posthumanist responds to humanist norms, *queer* and *queering* are terms that have been adopted by many of its proponents to represent a politicized and empowering

¹⁸³ International Anthropomorphic Research Project, subsection on the Anthrocon 2012 statistics, accessed on April 14, 2013: <https://sites.google.com/site/anthropomorphicresearch/past-results/anthrocon-2012-iarp-2-year-summary>

act of conscious and concerted othering. The distinction that began to be made in the 1990s by activist organizations like Queer Nation in the United States and Outrage! in the United Kingdom was between queer as a quality (essentialism) and queer as an attribute (constructionism). The former posits sexual orientation as immutable and unchanged across time and culture: people did – and do – desire and have sexual relations with others of the same gender. The latter, however, defines sexuality as a product of social relations and thereby suggests that the history of sexuality is the history of a subject whose meaning and content are in a continual process of change.¹⁸⁴ There is agency in the constructionist use of the term; the act “to queer” is a purposeful rejection and redefinition of unquestioned standard practices and perceptions. It is significant that such a large range of sexual identities were claimed by furies polled by Plante; fursuiters’ constant “becoming,” their intangibility and in-between-ness, rejects the rigid, stifling categorizations that characterize our white, heterosexual and patriarchal dominant culture, and instead invites a blossoming of the imagination, and a sexual permissiveness akin to that expressed in animation and comics. Though fursuiters’ enactments remain in the realm of fantasy, via role-play and the tool – or “posthuman appendage,” as I will soon argue – of artifice (plush), the possibilities seem limitless in this sexual sphere.

That is the fertile ground artist Paul McCarthy treads with the furry inspired work *Spaghetti Man* (fig. 51), from 1993. This 10-foot-tall figure with a bunny head, four digits on each hand and foot, a green pullover (and nothing else) and a “penis” so long it coils around him on the floor, is a demonstration of perverse pleasure. This sculpture

¹⁸⁴ P. Dilley, “Queer Theory: Under Construction,” in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 12, no., 5, 20 October 1999, 457-472.

trades in the eerie and often grotesque manipulation of pop culture that typifies McCarthy's work. The character draws directly from the traditions of comics and animation in a number of details: the fact that it is (partly) a bunny, a species endemic to the art forms since Thumper and Bugs Bunny; its four digits, a standard for cartoon and comic characters, presumably because of the desire to simplify forms; and its incomplete state of dress, which recalls, among others, Donald Duck and his shirt-only policy referred to in Chapter 2. *Spaghetti Man*'s head is a classic fursuiter's mask – made of mousy-brown plush and outsized like a bobble-head – except for the fact that it has no eyes; “all the more to be inscrutable with,” the figure might say, if it were the Big Bad Wolf. It towers over even the tallest of its viewers by at least a couple of feet, thus putting them in the child-like situation of peering up. As referentially familiar as this fuzzy-faced figure may be, it is thoroughly destabilizing with its alienness, the most astonishing aspect of which is its monstrous phallic excess. Just to ensure its anatomical incorrectness, the 50-foot member starts from between the figure's legs, at the perineum. Both its square, glans-less end and flaccid ineptitude paint it as more of a liability for its owner than anything (no wonder he doesn't wear pants!). Contrasting sharply with the furry head, the lower half of the body perverts the Donald Duck acceptability of partial nudity with its flesh colour and dewy skin texture. Also, McCarthy's sculpture promises to reveal the hidden side of fursuiters; were they to take their bottoms off, perhaps this kind of monstrosity would be evident under *all* fursuits. The only comfort rests in how this abstraction of the male sexual organ, and as such, the very symbol of patriarchal

potency, is literally too big for its britches – it is rendered harmless through its ridiculous superabundance.

McCarthy had explored fursuiting the year before with the work *Bear and Rabbit On a Rock* (fig. 52), featuring a larger-than-life bunny and bear fursuiting couple caught in flagrante delicto. It is an image that was later reflected in the work of artist Michael Coglianry, who in 2006 pushed the idea of fursuit couplings to its most ridiculous extent with a photo series and video titled *Furry Kama Sutra* (figs. 4 through 6). Shot in various locations in Las Vegas, the three short videos (viewable on YouTube) feature 10 cross-species fursuiting couples – there’s a bear and a rabbit (an interesting reflection of McCarthy’s pairing), a chicken and a fox, a dog and a cat, a lion and a turkey, et cetera – played by actors engaging in talking-head interviews, like those typical of reality TV. They sit together on couches answering unheard questions from the “interviewer,” generally addressing subjects of mundane coupledness – pet peeves about their partners and the like. They act like archetypal, if argumentative, couples, but in a way that is scripted and generally humorous, even goofy – reminiscent of a prime-time sitcom, up until the sex, that is. Every video features a brief sex scene, which I will address by discussing the photographic portion of the project.

The series of photographs show each of the 10 couples engaged in sexual positions worthy of the *Kama Sutra*, as the title would have it – but they are as mechanical and un-erotic to today’s audience as the book from which they draw inspiration. To an audience familiar with pornographic films, videos or web cam sessions, the illustrations in the original *Kama Sutra* seem wooden and devoid of the

messy passion of real sexual encounters. Cogliantry's *Furry Kama Sutra* similarly reduces sex to its mechanical elements to the extent that it parodies the real thing. In contrast to the mostly LGBT identities that characterize the actual world of furry fandom, in interviews Cogliantry stated that he conceived of all his couples as heterosexual. He paired the species based on which ones he thought would be the girls, and which the boys (cats are girls, dogs are boys, et cetera) – radically *unqueering* furry fandom, in other words.¹⁸⁵ The sexual acts pictured, too, are rudimentary compared to anything from the spooge art category – all are variations on two-partnered, straight sexual intercourse, with the exception of two photographs that represent oral sex. The ridiculous aspect of the images, reflective of the parodic humour present in the video, is that these fursuits have not in any way been altered for sexual use; they are full-bodied, devoid of strategically placed anything, and therefore entirely cover the participants' genitalia and erogenous zones. With this project, which at first view seems so overtly sexual (there is a warning sticker keeping kids away from the resulting photo book, titled *Furverts*), Cogliantry in fact neuters fursuiters, heterosexualizes them and cleanses their loaded sexual imagery. Setting the scenes in mundane hotel rooms with chintzy décor, peopled with couples engaged in acts of thwarted physical intimacy more worthy of a laugh than shock, Cogliantry comments on the ludicrousness of fursuits as sexual implements.

McCarthy and Cogliantry each contribute very distinctive interpretations of the place of sex in the fursuiting landscape. While McCarthy enhances the potential for perversity so feared by the more puritanical strains of the scene itself (*Burned Furs* and

¹⁸⁵ “Michael Cogliantry shows Furry Kamu [sic] Sutra at Nemo,” video directed by Trevor Graves, produced by Nemo Design in Portland, Oregon (2008), originally posted on May 3, 2008: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-t6Jx-3EE4>

the like), not to mention its external deterrents, Cogliantry nullifies it by choosing to point and laugh. These examples help to demonstrate the wide span of artistic reactions to the fursuiting phenomenon; but also, they illustrate how visual art participates in the cultural dialogue surrounding the scene. Though intended to reveal and comment on the existence of this subculture and its sexual habits, Cogliantry's *Furry Kama Sutra* created a fictionalized account of fursuiting wherein its participants are mostly heterosexual couples who perform sexual acts while fully clothed in un-modified fursuits. Both these presumptions are unrepresentative of the reality of furry practices, so the photographer not only misrepresents the sexual practices that actually *do* occur within furry fandom, he takes control of the visual imagery associated with the scene outside the confines of its own empowered queer self-representation. Because once someone has seen this project – which became a book, as I mentioned, and a sensation on YouTube in its video form – it becomes difficult to divorce fursuiters from the sexual situations Cogliantry has depicted.

I previously alluded to the sensorial deprivation of fursuits in Chapter 3, but it bears repeating in light of Cogliantry's work – and as an introduction to a psychoanalytic discussion. As Félix Guattari puts it, “There was once a time when Greek theatre – or courtly love, or the courtly romance – were the standard models of, or modules for, subjectivity. Today it is Freudianism whose ghostly presence is visible in the forms in which we maintain the existence of sexuality, of childhood, of neurosis.”¹⁸⁶ Though we may choose, as Guattari did in “The Three Ecologies” and many others have as well, to discard aspects of Freud's theories as representative of a fixed time, place and

¹⁸⁶ Guattari, 132-133.

phallogocentricity, his definition of fetishism does hold some interest in relation to fursuiting, in particular because of its explicit reference to fur.

Fetishism according to Freud amounts to a subconscious act of substitution that aims at overcoming the difference between male and female anatomies.¹⁸⁷ The child, in reaction to the trauma of realizing its mother doesn't have a penis, would compensate for that "lack" by psychologically latching onto an object, and endowing that object with symbolic power throughout their life. "The replacement of the [sexual] object by a fetish is determined by a symbolic connection of thought, of which the person concerned is usually not conscious,"¹⁸⁸ he writes. Though the fetish can take any form, Freud suggests that fur and velvet constitute natural fetish textures since they mimic the feel of pubic hair and thus refer to the primal scene of trauma. And what are fursuits if not celebrations of fur? They are also the sites of a fundamental irony, however: that fursuiters' fur is not for the wearer's own consumption. From the inside, these scratchy, heavy costumes are detached from the image they project. As furry Michael Arthur puts it on his blog, *Hooded Utilitarian*, "I don't have the words to describe just how uncomfortable these suits are, how disorienting the limited vision can be, how HOT they become in a matter of minutes. Groans of agony, maybe."¹⁸⁹

Sexologist JacoPhillip Crous has suggested that the fursuit offers its wearers a sense of "enwombment," a "tactile humidity" that provides a "near-perfect juxtaposition of vulnerability and safety".¹⁹⁰ It may be. But apart from the potential comfort of physical

¹⁸⁷ Sally O'Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 167.

¹⁸⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Stachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 21.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Arthur, "Yiff in Hell, Hipster (the author gets over furrself)" on *Hooded Utilitarian*, accessed on March 14, 2013: <http://hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/01/yiff-in-hell-hipster-the-author-gets-over-furrself/>

¹⁹⁰ JacoPhillip Crous quoted by De Waal.

deprivation, the wearing of a fursuit offers virtually no sensual seduction or sultry release for their wearers. Even “scritchings,” the affectionate act of scratching one another’s pelts, which is commonly practiced between fursuiters of varying degrees of intimacy throughout conventions, is done with gloved hands that cannot feel the texture of the artificial fur they are pawing. Fursuits dangle a false sensuality before their wearers’ (obstructed) eyes, one that dazzles with its cute pop colours and tactile textures but that, paradoxically, deprives them of actual physical pleasure. In that way, they *do* exist in the adult, visual realm mentioned by Sloan; they exist as portals through which their wearers’ identities, sexual and other, are exhibited, to be visually consumed by others. They are quintessential examples of artifice as understood by France Borel: as the foundational structure for our visual communication of selves. “Voyeurism [...] is baited by the strangeness of artifice,” she writes. “Artifice enhances the body, enhances its symbolic power. Through it, the body defines and occupies space. In many cases, this symbolic aggrandisement correlates to an actual physical augmentation.” In the case of fursuiting, layers of thick plush covering every bit of skin extend the human form into a larger-than-life humanimal shape – a brand new silhouette created expressly to “correspond to an imaginary desire,”¹⁹¹ in Borel’s words. More than that, though, I want to argue that plush and its role in the creation of this new silhouette extends beyond the artifice and into the realm of the posthuman appendage.

¹⁹¹ Borel, 21, translated by the author. The original French reads: “Le voyeurisme – dont l’attraction inquiétante pour les anomalies et autres handicaps est bien connue –, est aussi appâté par l’étrangeté de l’artifice. L’artifice gonfle le corps, lui donne une dimension symbolique plus vaste. Par lui, le corps signale et occupe l’espace. Dans de nombreux cas, l’augmentation symbolique s’accompagne d’une augmentation physique réelle.”

As Jon Bailey puts it, “the way we interact with technologies isn’t only through their depth within the body, but rather the ubiquitous connections between tools and neural functions, where offloading processes onto [...] non-biological props becomes essential to our being human.”¹⁹² The concept of the posthuman appendage arises from the idea that the human body no longer functions independently from inanimate tools – in fact, what is special about the human brain is its “ability to enter into deep and complex relationships with non-biological constructs, props, and aids.”¹⁹³ Examples of such tools include the wristwatch, the cell phone, the bicycle, the computer – all are tools devised to enhance the limits of what it is to be human, to enable us to be faster, more agile and more intellectually ambitious. The posthuman appendage is aligned with a subtler idea of the cyborg than any Arnold Schwarzenegger film might portray; “this concept of the cyborg sees us not as separate entities, man or machine, but rather the interconnectedness between these identities,” writes Bailey.

What matters is not the physical merger between flesh and machine (our traditional image of the cyborg), but the ubiquitous and invisible connection between mental processes which are offloaded onto non-biological scaffolds. [...] Brain and body begin to be viewed as an interconnected system (conversely to humanism which sees our body as a shell for the mind; i.e. two separate systems, polarities of mind and body); an assemblage of multiple parts. The human is no longer a unique being (a totality), but rather part of the interconnected network of living species and of the geological cycle of matter (in assemblage theory).¹⁹⁴

It is my contention that for fursuiters, plush, this man-made material synthetically fabricated from purified terephthalic acid and monoethylene glycol, is the scaffold onto

¹⁹² Jon Bailey, “Posthumanism, Cyborgs + Interconnected Bodies,” lecture from A505 Interconnected + Technologically Enhanced Seminar, reprinted on *Archimorph*, accessed on March 10, 2013: <http://archimorph.com/2011/04/05/posthumanism-cyborgs-interconnected-bodies/>

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

which they build their more-than-human self-perception, enabling them to go beyond the self they are when in their uncostumed, human form. By acting as what Deleuze and Guattari understand as the “borderline” in the becoming-animal (that necessary, dark-souled motivator that pushes one beyond what is),¹⁹⁵ the appendage of plush becomes the portal between two states of selfhood.

These notions of *building* and *transitioning* through the appendage suggest that a fursuiter’s desire may extend beyond the imaginary and scopic into the field of affect, particularly as conceived by Teresa Brennan. As Brennan sees it, affect does not arise solely – or even primarily – from within a self-contained, autonomous body. Rather, it moves between, into and out of bodies in a literal, physical sense. This she calls the “transmission of affect.”

Is there anyone who as not, at least once, walked into a room and “felt the atmosphere”? [...] The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and the neurology of the subject. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual.¹⁹⁶

This is a reality of furry conventions; at these massive gatherings, furies use their posthuman appendage to generate their own vocabulary of meanings and affect. In photographer Eron Rauch’s words, at fan conventions “visual forms of communication are the most powerful initial sparks that lead to deeper meanings: costumes, signs, haircuts, t-shirts, shoes, poses, gestures, key chains... all are ephemera produced by both the fans and the industry that function as signifiers of desire in a sophisticated system

¹⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 243.

¹⁹⁶ Teresa Brennan quoted by Orbaugh, 81.

called fandom that exert the gravities of depth and identity on the masses.”¹⁹⁷ At furry conventions, whose showpiece is invariably the fursuit parade, the shared affect is transformative in more ways than just appearance: this is the moment when all these people from all over the world break out of their suppressed existences as humanist-style humans, LGBT or straight, and flaunt their queered humanimal expansion en masse, for a short, ecstatic moment. Conventions are nothing short of pilgrimages, and thus function as the communion of a pack, as Deleuze and Guattari define it in their writings on becoming-animal: “A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity. [...] It is at this point that the human being encounters the animal. We do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity.”¹⁹⁸ In blogger Michael Arthur’s words: “In the internet age, where there can be no underground, [the fandom] is my refuge from respectability, my own polymorphously perverse tribe.”¹⁹⁹

To the non-participant, that pack, or tribe, can seem threatening. As I mentioned earlier, all non-fandom contexts for fursuits (TV shows, birthday parties, theme parks) represent highly controlled environments. Even a fursuiter alone walking down the street without clear justification will garner quizzical looks; add a few hundred of his compatriots, and you’ve got a scene that can be utterly unnerving. Massive furry gatherings wield a unique power that stems from this second sort of contextual slippage, not only out of the confines of childhood but into an inappropriate or uncalled-for uniting of characters usually isolated and relegated to the sidelines of sporting events. This is

¹⁹⁷ Rauch, 148.

¹⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 239-140.

¹⁹⁹ Arthur, “Yiff in Hell, Hipster (the author gets over fursself)”.

what Toronto artist Jon Sasaki capitalized on in 2008 with his work *I Promise It Will Always Be This Way* (fig. 53), which constituted a 12-hour, all-night endurance performance by 26 fursuiters attempting to whip a crowd of onlookers into a frenzy at Lamport Stadium. Not only did the artist reverse the usual role of the sports team mascots by putting them in centre-field, he also reversed the numbers. Seeing fursuiters congregate like that can feel, at best, exclusionary to us “mundanes,” witnesses to a self-sufficient clique with its own vocabulary, dress code and affective environment. At worst, it can feel like the potential for a revolution – a revenge not of the nerds, but of the herds.

In his consideration of Freud, Guattari writes the following:

What is now on the agenda is a “futurist” or “constructivist” opening-up of fields of possibility. The unconscious remains bound to archaic fixations only as long as no assemblage exists within which it can be oriented towards the future; and in the future that faces us, temporalities of both human and non-human nature will demand just such an existential reorientation. With the acceleration of the technological and data-processing revolutions, we will witness the deployment or, if you will, the unfolding of the animal, vegetable, cosmic, and machinic becomings which are already prefigured by the prodigious expansion of computer-aided subjectivity.²⁰⁰

For the purpose of this thesis, I would replace the terms “futurist” and “constructivist” in that statement with “posthuman,” in that the latter addresses the pluralism and malleability Guattari deems necessary to a useful reinterpretation of Freud’s writings. In her consideration of fetishism in the work of queer artist Leigh Bowery, art historian Sally O’Reilly points out some categorical differences between Freud’s fetishism and the fetishism that parades the streets: the latex-and-leather fetish clubs Bowery frequented, far removed from notions of phallic trauma, sought a “declaration of difference,

²⁰⁰ Guattari, 132-133.

transgression, and hybrid or mutant identities.” Their most significant divergence from the Freudian concept lay “in the multiple possibilities offered by clubland fetishism rather than the binary, gender-based nature of Freudian analysis.”²⁰¹ The same is true of fursuiting. What at first can seem like a formulaic material fetish of polyester fur, with all its associations to lack and sublimation, seeks in fact to go leagues beyond materiality into a redefined future of sexual expression.

“For us [...], there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion,”²⁰² write Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Contagion, as discussed in Chapter 1, is the way the philosophers conceive of the transmission of becoming-animal within a pack. In the pack of fursuiters, the state of becoming aims both at openness and individuation. Each fursuiter dons the costume for a unique set of reasons: some to entertain children, some to reach new sexual heights. As Arthur writes, “There is no furry monoculture. There is room in the polymorphous furple for everyone’s social baggage.”²⁰³ To some, this relativism is alarming; to others, it is rapture.

²⁰¹ O’Reilly, 167.

²⁰² Deleuze and Guattari, 242.

²⁰³ Arthur, “Yiff in Hell, Hipster (the author gets over furrself)”.

Conclusion

Though it undoubtedly harkens back to a tradition of liminality between human and nonhuman animals that has existed in mythology, ceremonial practice and fantasy across cultures and since the dawn of time, I hope to have successfully argued over the last four chapters that fursuiting is incontrovertibly contemporary in its blurring of species categories. What distinguishes it as an act of anthropomorphic performance is its self-conscious self-actualization – there is an awareness, an agency, in its enactment that makes it unique.

In the highly mediatized age of information of the twenty-first century, never has the adage that “all things old become new again” rung truer. There is so much documentation available, via the plenitude of screens and information portals that populate our lives, about the natural world and our relationship to it that to claim fursuiting is a result of a primitivistic, unconscious expression of id can only be misguided. The simple fact of the time and care that goes into the ritual of fursuiting, from the belabored conceptualization of the fursona to the expert crafting of the costly posthuman appendage of the plush costume, distinguishes it as the result of a thoughtful and extensive personal philosophy of otherness that goes well beyond the unconscious. Fursuiters choose, very intentionally, to temporarily but *regularly* become-animal, to engage in rituals and dress year after year that will position them in a chosen pack situated firmly outside dominant Euro-American, i.e. humanist, ideological system. They do not enact short-lived ceremonies, or enter into temporary trances – they become other, through and through, a little bit every day.

Fursuiting's appeal as a theme for contemporary artistic musings, therefore, is easily understood. In addition to the longstanding inspirational potency of the human/animal relationship, obvious since the cave paintings at Lascaux, fursuiting exists within the imaginatively liberating traditions of comic art and animation, and touches upon themes of sexuality, hybridity, role-play, artifice, identity and agency. Each of the artists examined within this study has found their own entry point into the subject, and while some have stayed on the fursuiting sidelines, like Jamie Campbell and Kathie Olivas, who choose to depict it from a safe distance, others, like Valérie Lamontagne and Nate Hill, have engaged viscerally with its othering powers.

When I began my foray into this subject in 2003 after noticing examples of fursuit-influenced art pop up around me, the idea was to write a book. I eventually decided an academic route would be more fruitful for my research, and I have mused about this subculture and the cultural production it inspires in a completely different and enriching way as a result. Now, though, the need to make this into a more widely encompassing publication project seems more necessary than ever. The theme of fursuiting is increasingly prevalent in pop culture, be it in fashion magazine editorials (*Vogue*),²⁰⁴ store windows (Louis Vuitton, Fifth Avenue, New York City) or advertizing (Solestruck, see fig. 54). In terms of contemporary art production alone, the artists I was able to fit into this study constitute a small segment of those I have identified in my research. Montreal painter Lorraine Simms was among the first to capture my interest in the theme with her extensive series of paintings of fursuiters, based on photographic self-portraits she culled from furry forums online in her continuing engagement with digital

²⁰⁴ Alexis Jetter, "Lust,Caution," in *Vogue* (February 2010), 206-209.

cultures and their impact on our social and emotive landscapes (figs. 55 through 57). One of my favourite furry-ish works is a video by Montreal artist Vincent Lafrance titled *Raton* that has him performing in a full-body raccoon costume along rural Quebec roads, involving themes of consumerism, animal endangerment and species hierarchy. American artist Annette Messenger warrants in-depth investigation in this context for her constant use of plush as a medium (fig. 58), while Toronto's Allyson Mitchell (fig. 59) and Los Angeles's Marnie Webber (fig. 60) both create complex and grandiose installations populated by human-sized plush characters. This thesis is only scratching the surface of a subject I hope to continue to mine for a while yet.

If this thesis were to have three additional chapters, I would name them Objects of Devotion, Suit Yourself and Plush Love, after the title of this thesis. The first would investigate whether a Marxist conception of the fetish object is fruitful for an analysis of fursuiting. I suspect the integration of fursuiting into one's daily lifestyle in this consumerist time of insatiable production is a reaction to the mindlessness of the rat race, where personal identity is rejected from the workplace and thus more desperate for expression in the little free time that remains. Along those lines I was also fascinated by Tezuka Osamu's line of thought, mentioned in Chapter 2, that related Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton's brand of humour to an infantilization of Man caused by the industrial revolution;²⁰⁵ I see promising parallels between that comedic tradition and comics and animation, and therefore fursuiting. The second additional chapter would be a historical account of the fursuit, which I have found partially explored in two engrossing documents online: a segment on the *TV Tropes* blog that illustrates the rise of the fursuit

²⁰⁵ Tezuka Osamu quoted by Ōtsuka, 117-118.

on television, mostly in children's programming,²⁰⁶ and a section called "The Furry History Project," on the blog *Spectral Shadows*, which chronicles the advent of fursuiting in a furry context.²⁰⁷ Finally, the third chapter would be a formal analysis of the material of plush fabric and its use in the history of art since its invention in 1941, by the likes of Iain Baxter & Annette Messenger, Marcel Dzama, Claude Cormier and many more.

Ultimately, what remains to be done, but will perhaps remain eternally *undone*, is to answer the question: why now? It is the implied inquiry at the root of all the artistic ventures I have examined in this thesis, after all; that indefinable nugget of fascination that exists within the phenomenon of fursuiting that draws "mundanes" like me and artists far and wide to dive into its guts. Among the few thinkers that have mused about fursuiting, some have posited Lacanian motives, while others have associated it to totemism; I have contributed my own perception, much more aligned with posthumanist becoming than psychoanalysis. What I hope for the future is for many other voices to join the handful that have ventured under the layers of plush pelt in an attempt to find the squishy centre. Only then will a meaningful discourse about this hitherto unnoticed hobby, fetish or means of escape – and the visual art that blossoms out of it – begin to find its place within the realm of critical thought.

²⁰⁶ "Furry Fandom," on *TV Tropes*, accessed on March 15, 2013: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki.php/Main/FurryFandom/>.

²⁰⁷ "The Furry History Project," on *Spectral Shadows*, accessed on March 15, 2013: <http://spectralshadows.livejournal.com/45778.html/>.

Appendix A: Lexicon²⁰⁸

Arctophile: A lover of teddy bears.

Baptize: The first time one goes all the way with a plush lover.

Biosexual: A person who prefers sex with biological partners.

Boink: Kinder, gentler, gender-neutral term for plush lovemaking.

Boinkable [by design]: Term applied to a plush toy that is seemingly custom-made for pleasuring. A “talented” plush.

Boink space: A place on a plush toy that’s pleasing to poke.

Carpet burn: What vigorous contact with rough fabric can give to a plushophile.

Floof/Floofy: Affectation of “fluff/fluffy” that implies sexiness. Also: “foof/foofy.”

Furless lackey: An uncostumed escort/handler who accompanies a costumed fursuiter for assistance and/or security purposes.

Furry: A fanciful animal character with human (anthropomorphic) attributes, or a person who likes such characters. Many plushophiles have at least some affinity for furies.

Fursuit: An anthropomorphic animal costume.

Fursuiter: A person who wears and/or makes fursuits.

Furvert: A person who is sexually attracted to “furry” characters.

Gift: To give something precious to a plush lover, such as one’s sex or a bodily essence.

Handlebars: Legs or arms used to grip onto during sex.

Hug: A collection of teddy bears or other plushies.

Living plushie: 1) A fursuited person, usually in the context of cuddling, boinking or being treated as a giant living plushie would be. 2) A real life furry, that a normal plushie can only represent. 3) A real animal.

Matting: What happens to a plushie’s fur after months of cuddling. Generally caused by

²⁰⁸ Adapted from “A Plushie Lexicon” on Velocity, accessed March 14, 2013: <http://velocity.net/~galen/plushlex.txt>

the tangling of plush fibers and accumulation of body oils, skin flakes and lint.

Meat sex: Sex with biological partners.

Morphic plushie: A plush toy with its body, arms, and legs configured like a person, e.g. teddy bears.

Pile-o-plush - A common feature in a plushophile's residence.

Plush: Artificial fur made of fine strands of polyester plastic.

Plushboink: Having sex with a plush toy.

Plushgasm: An orgasm elicited by making love with a plushie.

Plushisexual: A person whose primary sexual preference is for stuffed animals.

Plushophobe: A person who feels threatened by the notion of an adult loving stuffed animals, and who reacts with hostility as a result.

Plush plunging: Poking a plush toy.

Pokable: Same as 'boinkable', but applies to men, specifically.

Poke: Kinder, gentler term for what some male plushophiles do with their plush toys.

Sleeve: 1) A fabric sheath worn around one's penis during insertive plush sex. 2) A synonym for "insert."

Smoosh: To lay on top of and compress something, e.g. a person may enjoy smooshing plushies, or being smooshed by them.

Soak: To get a plush toy or fursuit wet with a bodily fluid.

SPA ("strategically placed appendage"): a penile attachment used for receptive plush or furry sex or anatomical correctness.

SPH ("strategically placed hole"): an opening in a plush toy or fursuite (usually a modification) used for insertive sex. Also: "love hole."

Spooge/spooge: Meaning highly variable, depending on context. When used by plushophiles, the word "spooge" typically refers to the depositing of sexual fluids (semen, vaginal secretion) on a plus toy. To "get spooge" with something/someone is to have sex with it.

Squick: To disgust someone.

Yiff/yiffy: Meaning highly variable, depending on context. To “yiff” someone/something is to have sex with it.

Zoo: A short form of “zoophile,” a person who has a deep personal love for real-life animals.

Zoot: Synonym for “fursuit.”

Zootaphile: A person who has a strong personal attraction to fursuits.

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Figures



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

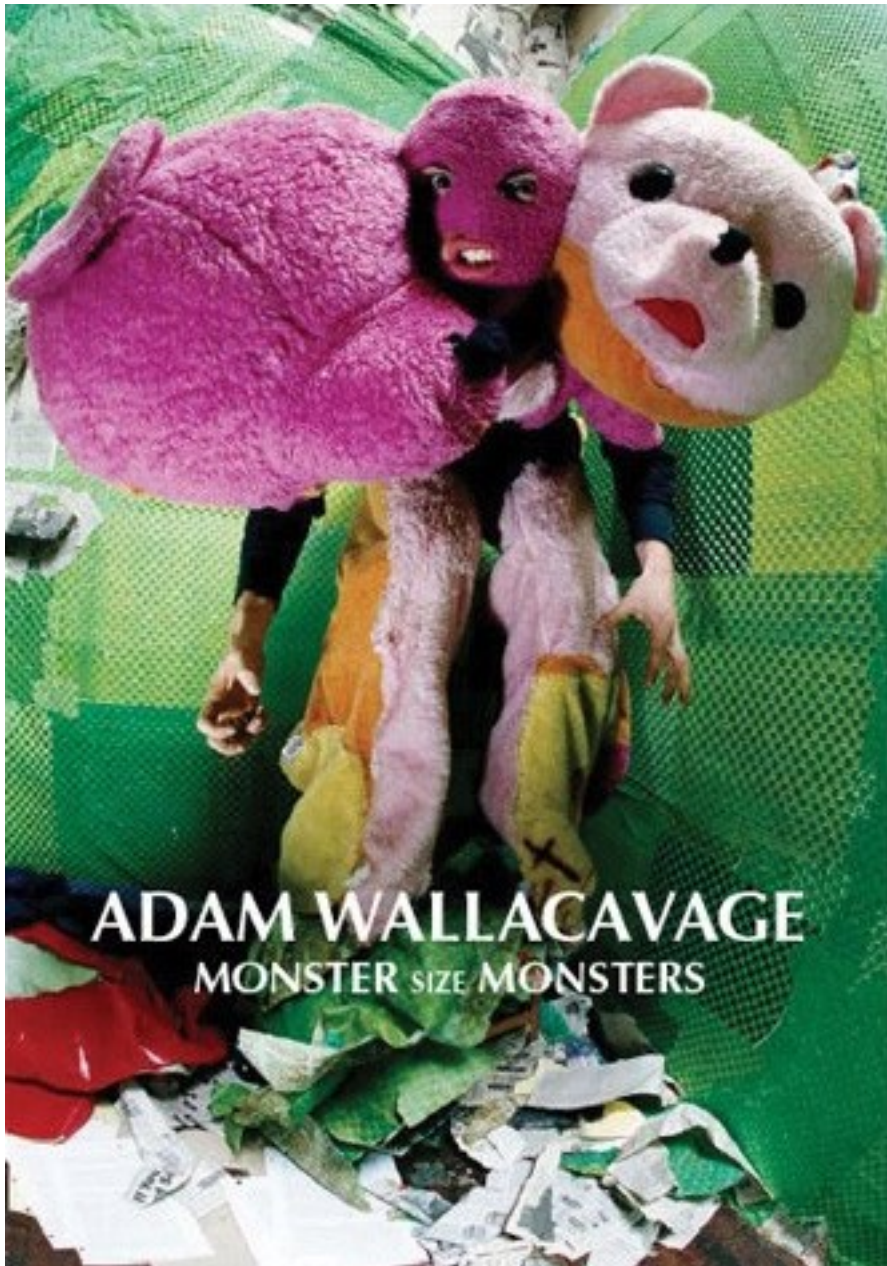


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

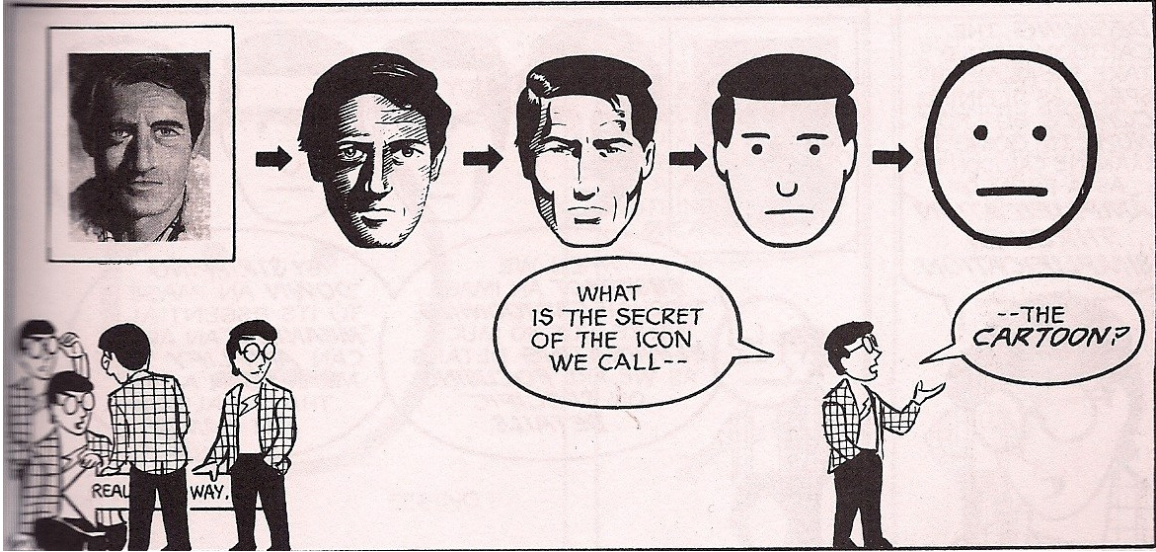
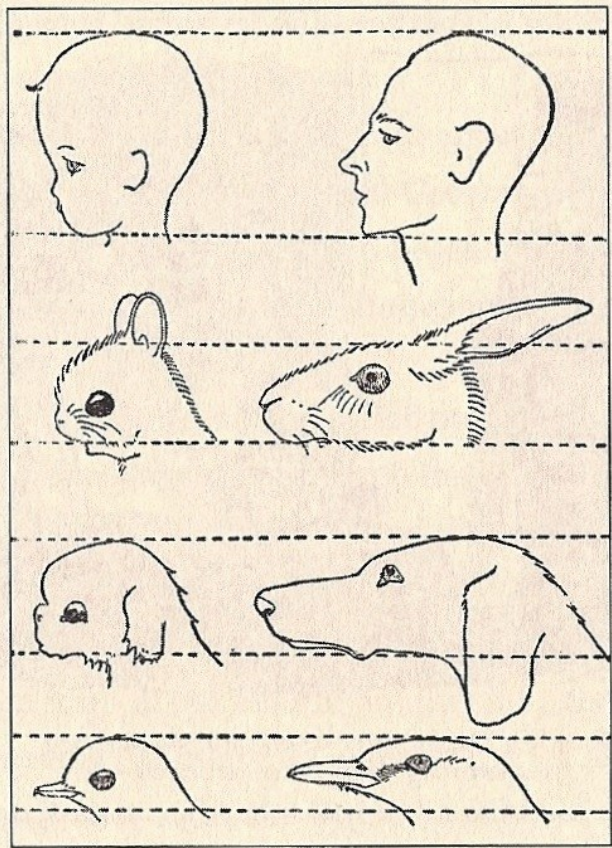


Fig. 8



Konrad Lorenz's sketch shows the consistent changes in facial proportions from infancy to adulthood.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10

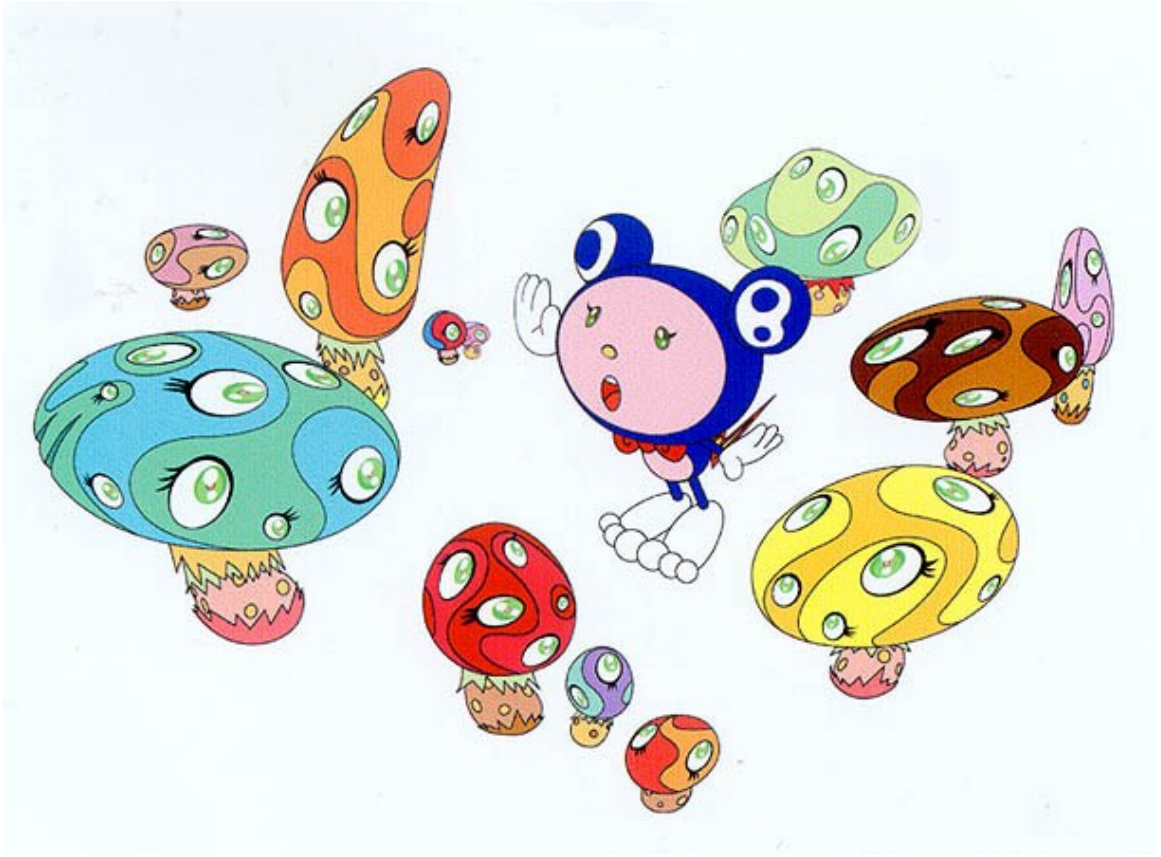


Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

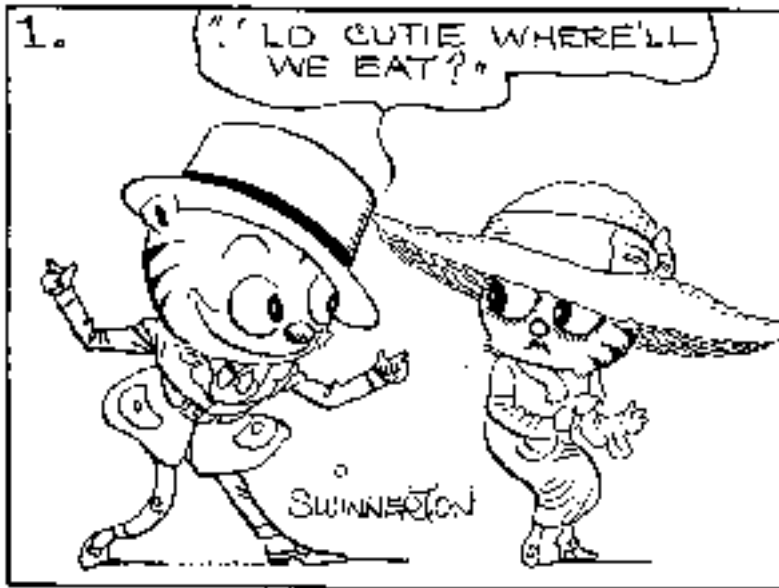


Fig. 16

Chantecler Peck

By F. G. Long

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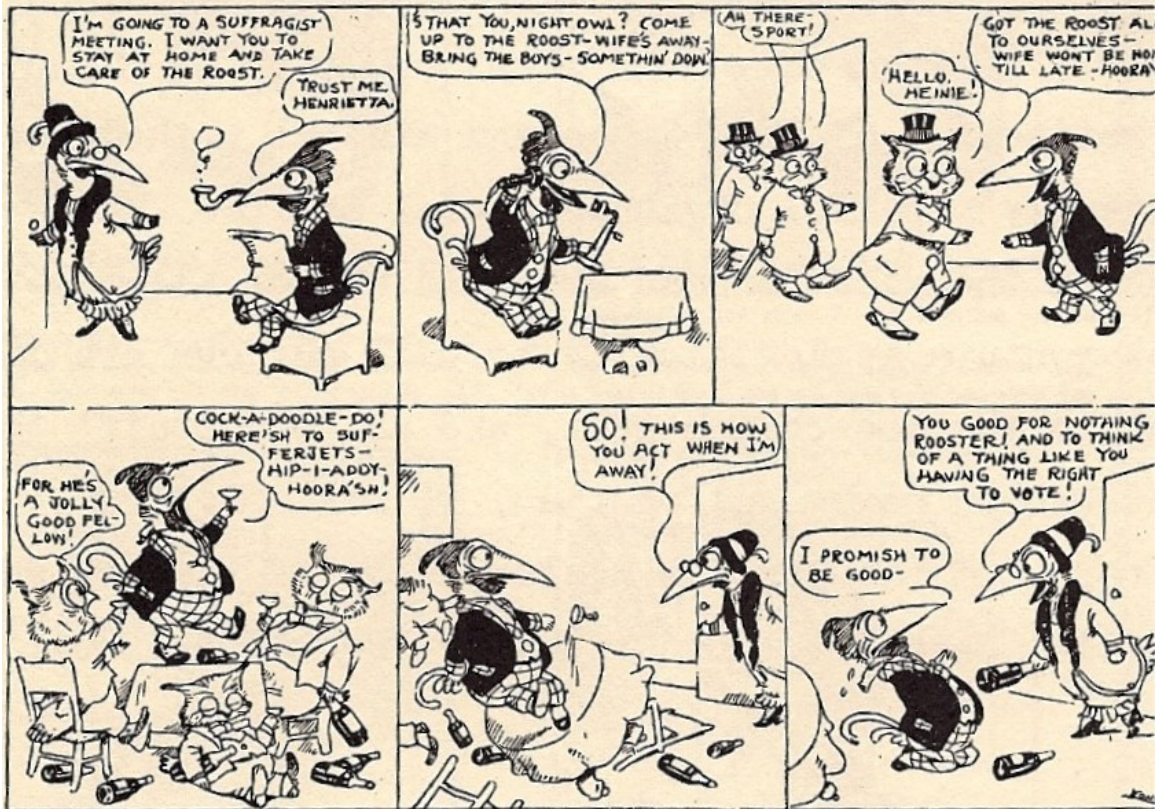


Fig. 17

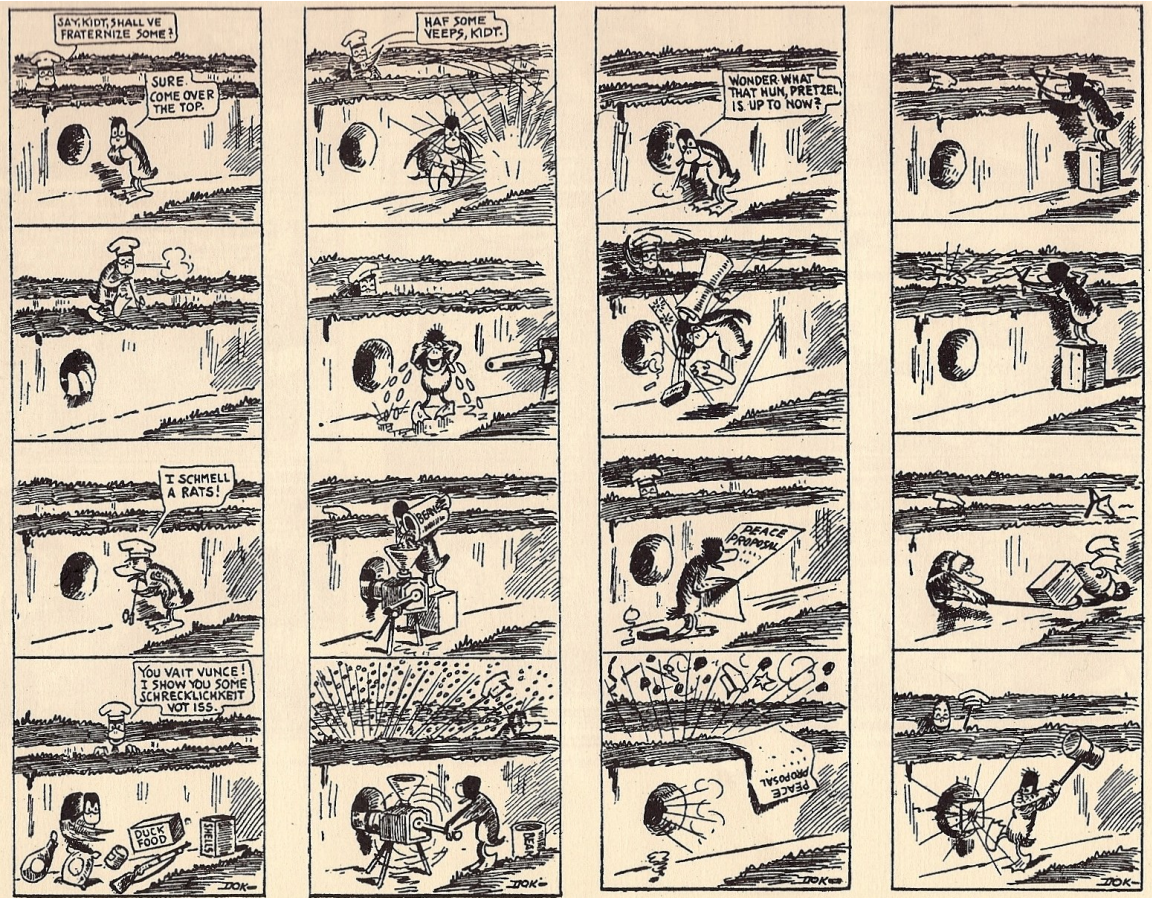


Fig. 18

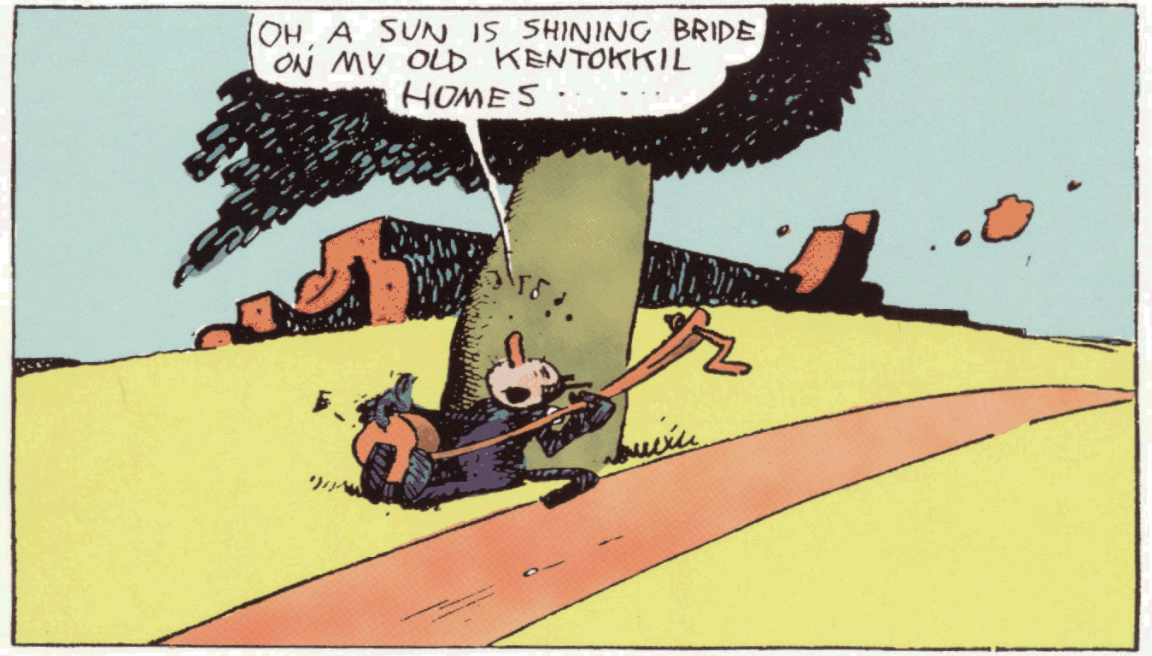


Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

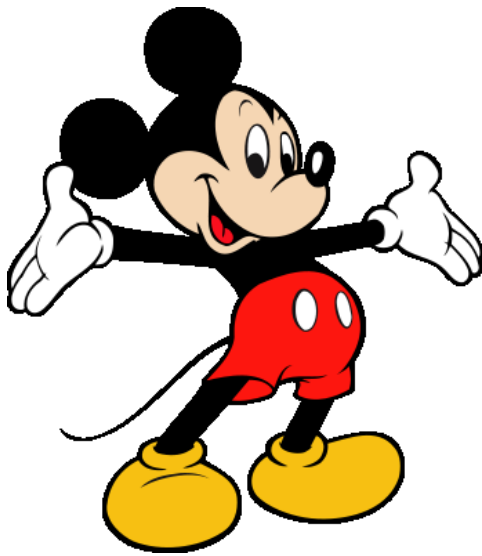


Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43



Fig. 44



Fig. 45



Fig. 46



Fig. 47



Fig. 48



Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Fig. 52



Fig. 53



48
HOURS
HIGH FASHION
DEEP DISCOUNTS

SOLESTRUCK FLASH SALE

SHOP INSANELY CHEAP STYLES FROM
AUSSIE LOVE SENSO.

Fig. 54



Fig. 55



Fig. 56



Fig. 57



Fig. 58



Fig. 59



Fig. 60