

# 'Sona

## The anthropomorphic alter-ego in furry fandom



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Illustrated research project proposal

Shortened and adapted version

(not for academic assessment)

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Fig. 1: Fisher 2024. *Head study III*

# BACKGROUND

Even before completing an MA in Economic and Organisational Psychology, I was fascinated by the way people behave and present themselves differently in different settings. A suit and tie for a banker, a long white dress for a woman getting married, a band t-shirt (from the correct tour!) and jeans at a rock concert.

The way someone presents themselves (through dress, speech or mannerism) sends signals to the in-group of choice which are decoded according to the norms of the in-group and the personal experience of the decoder (Poggi and D'Errico 2011).



Fig. 2: Fisher 2024. *Head study II*



Online, we often use an avatar to represent ourselves. For furries, who are fans of anthropomorphic art and cartoons (Roberts 2022), the avatar can become a more personal, offline representation.

*They “bring their make-believe characters to life digitally, on paper, or in the carefully crafted fursuits they wear to become the animals of their imagination”*  
(Strike 2017, quoted in Austin 2021).

Fig. 3: Fisher 2024. Lumi



# 'SONA

These characters are their fur-personas, or fursonas, often shortened (at least in Austria) simply to 'sona. The degree of connection with the fursona can range from simple enjoyment of being part of the fandom, to connecting with the chosen fursona on a more spiritual or psychological level (Austin 2021).

In the mind of the general public, furries are associated with the wearing of fur suits, however “suiters”, as they are known, are a minority of furries (Gerbasi et al. 2008).

Even disregarding the fact that a fur suit is expensive, heavy, hot and can be uncomfortable to wear, many furries have no ambitions of wearing one; they are happy to make or commission artwork (drawings, paintings or digital art) to represent their 'sona – often commissioning a number of artists over time and using the artwork both as online avatar and as badges they wear at conventions (cons) or share with their fellow furries in the form of stickers.



Fig. 4: Fisher 2024. Patches

# THEMES AND OBJECTIVE

My objective is to explore the connection between the persona and the fursona, by creating conventional and woven portraits, as well as documenting wider aspects of the community.

I will explore the themes of: identity, masking, belonging, community, fandom and subculture asking

“how can I best represent the duality of persona / fursona photographically?”

and, since the community is often misrepresented in the media

“how can I document the furry fandom and community in a way which is true to the spirit of the community?”

# HOW I WILL WORK

There are three streams to my project:

Stream 1 involves creating a series of collage or woven portraits showing furries and their fursonas in a single picture – represented by a fursuit or other artwork.

If you participate in this stream, I will invite you to a portrait shooting in a studio, at your home or in another location we agree on. Before the shoot, we will talk about you and your fursona, and talk about how you would like to be represented. I will take digital photographs, which will be digitally edited, printed and then hand cut and woven or used in a collage, creating a one-off piece of physical art.

In stream 2, I will be doing more documentary style photography work to picture furries in their everyday lives and/or at home.

In stream 3, I would like to collaborate with artists and fur suit makers to document the collaborative practice that goes into creating a suit or a piece of art which represents someone's fursona.

The work in streams 2 and 3 will be presented on my website and if funds allow, in a physical photobook.



# CONTEXT:

## PHOTOGRAPHING FURRIES

The most prominent photographic works about furries are Tom Broadbent's books "At home with Xavier Fox" and "At home with the furries". Broadbent takes a whimsical, fun approach (O'Furr 2014). However the very rarest of suiters wear their fursuit at home (Plante 2023), meaning the book perpetuates a stereotype many want to shake off.



Fig. 5: Broadbent. Ca. 2018. Photo from series *At home with the furries*



Fig. 6: Broadbent. Ca. 2018. Cover of the book *At home with the furries*



Fig. 7: Broadbent. Ca. 2018. Photo from series *At home with the furries*



Carmen Dobre-Hametner produced a series of 360 degree panoramas to show the world around the furry, often at home. Many of the pictures show furries with no suits or just a few accessories,

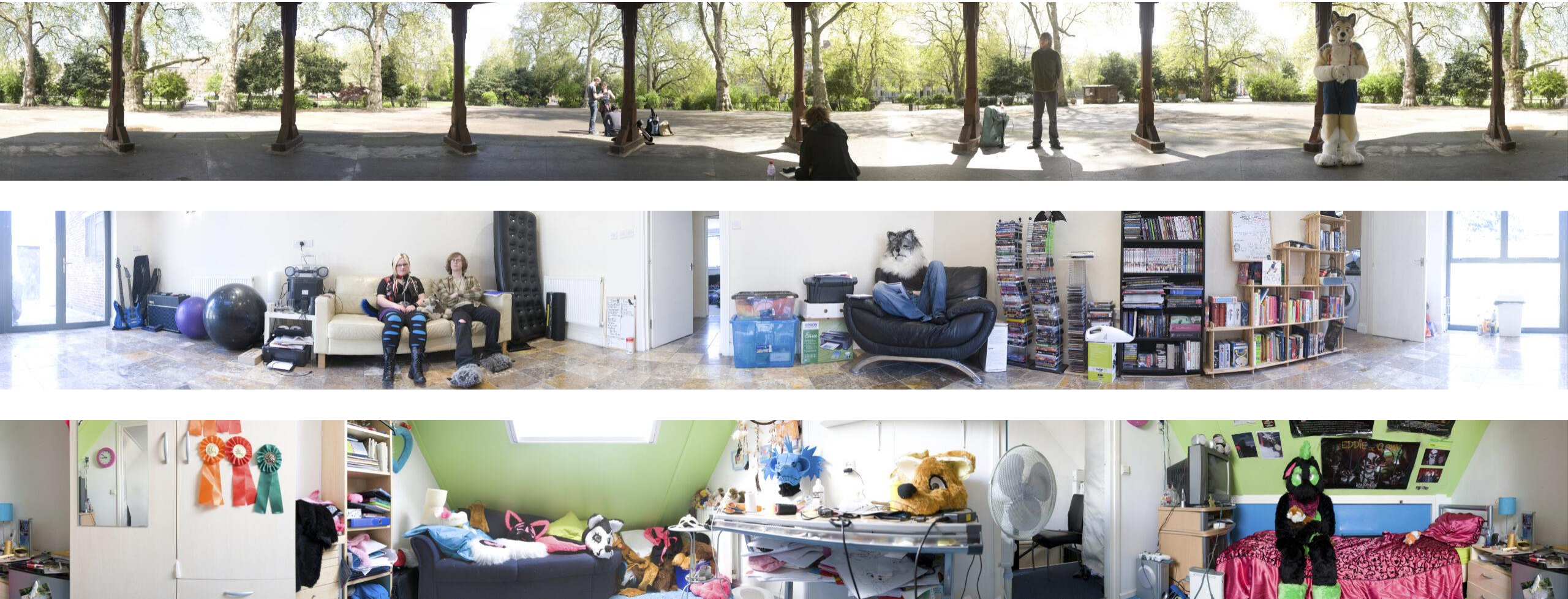


Fig. 8a to c: Dobre-Hametner. Ca. 2010-2012. Photographs from the series *Furries*



# CONTEXT:

## AVATARS AND MASKS

Robbie Cooper created diptychs of online gamers and their chosen avatar, compelling viewers to contemplate the similarities and differences between them.

In the middle of the last century, Inge Morath and Saul Steinberg created a series of photographs of people wearing masks Steinberg created, as a comment on the performant rigidity of society at the time. (Schumann n.d.)



Fig. 10: Morath 1962 Untitled photograph.



Fig. 11: Galembo 2010. *Two in a Fancy Dress, Red Cross Masquerade Group, Winneba, Ghana*



Name: Lee Taek Soo (right). Born: 1973. Occupation: Office worker. Location: Seoul, South Korea. Average hours per week in-game: 10 hours. Avatar name: Crammer. Avatar created: 2006. Game played: World of Warcraft. Server name: 95. Character type: Undead. Character level: 40. Special abilities: Will of the Forsaken, Shadow resistance.

Fig. 9: Cooper. Ca. 2007. Untitled diptych and its original caption from the series *Alter Ego*

Phyllis Galembo documents mask-wearing in many cultures e.g. in Mexico and Nigeria, looking at the role of masks in ritual and tradition.



# CONTEXT:

## IDENTITY AND THE SELF

The concept of the fursona brings up questions of identity. The topics of identity and self have been tackled from different angles photographically, often playing with aspects of truth vs fiction, such as in the work of Cindy Sherman highlighting of the “artificiality of all identity construction” (Gaylord 2016). Or in Gillian Wearing’s works, which feature both literal and metaphorical masks (Kurchanova 2022).



Fig. 12: Sherman 1978. *untitled film stills #10*

# VISUAL STRATEGIES AND METHODS

For the persona / fursona portraits I will experiment with three processes:

- Digital layering
- Diptychs (similar to those produced by Robbie Cooper)
- Weaving



Fig. 13: Fisher 2024. A woven portrait work in progress



# CONTEXT:

## WOVEN PORTRAITS

A number of artists have developed woven portrait techniques which lend themselves well to portraying duality, e.g. Jason Chen, David Samuel Stern and Lou Peralta



Fig. 14: Chen Ca. 2020. G

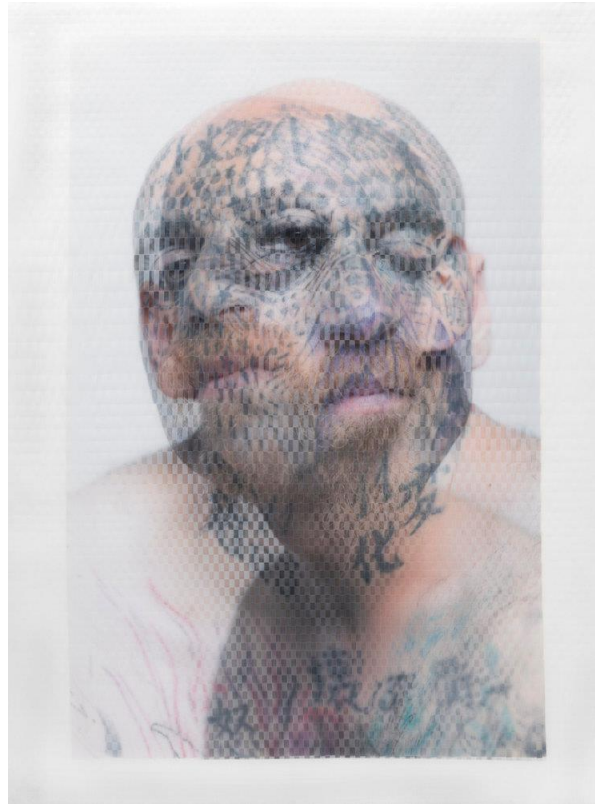


Fig. 15: Stern Ca 2011-2016. Untitled work.



Fig. 16: Peralta. Woven portrait from the series Disassemble Series III

# WORK TO DATE:

I have begun to investigate digital layering techniques and weaving using mock-ups on office paper. The photos on the left were merged with different opacities to give the versions of the image on the right. Photographs used as the basis for the layered or woven images shown below could equally be presented in their original form side-by-side as a diptych.

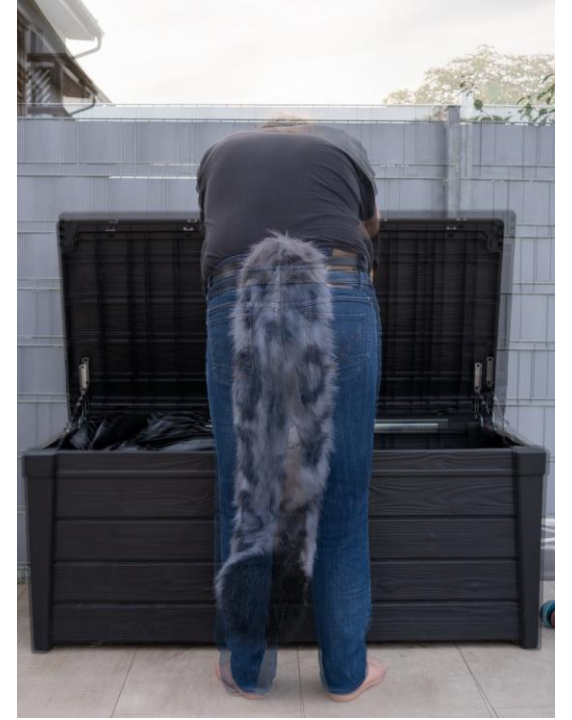


Fig. 17: Fisher 2024. *Tail study I to IV*



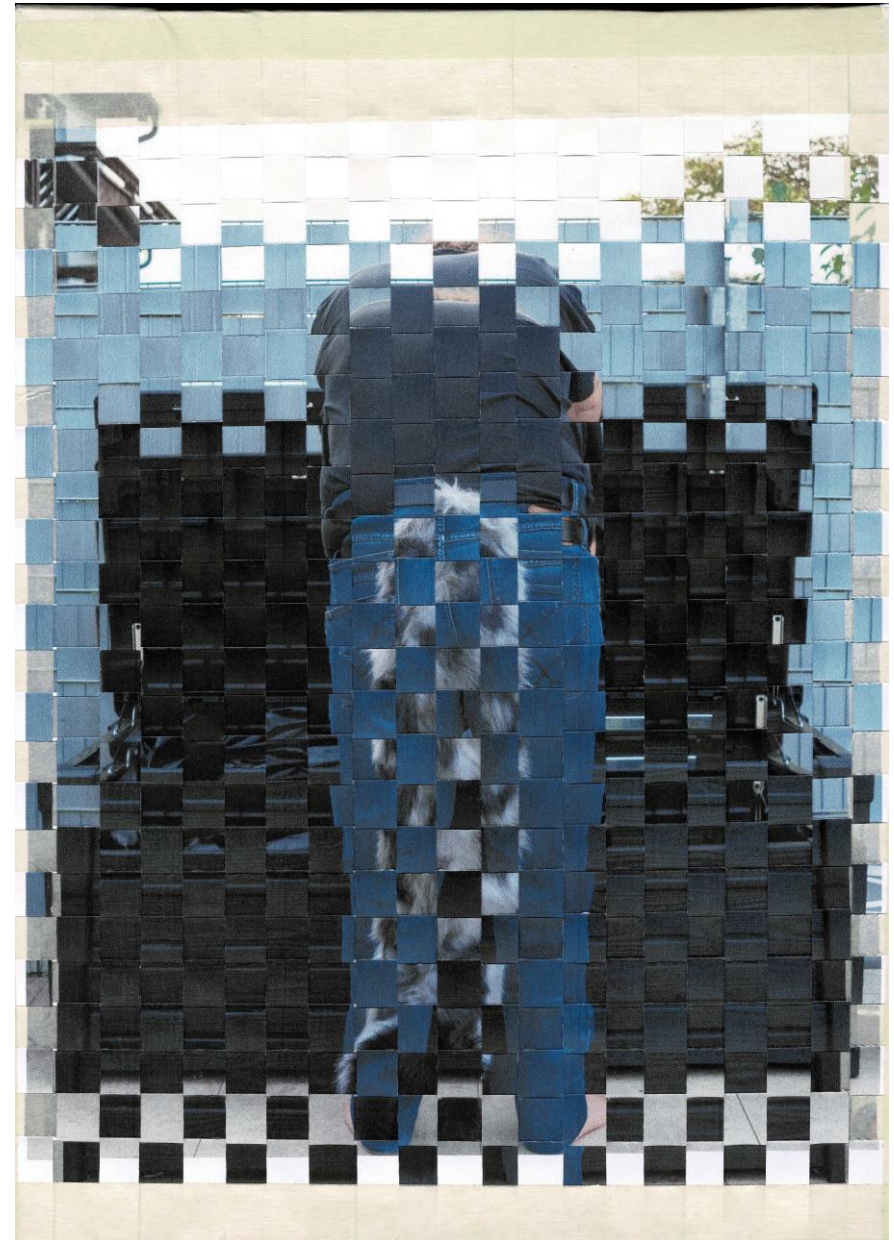


Fig. 18: Fisher 2024: *Tail study I and II*, and scan of mock-up woven photo



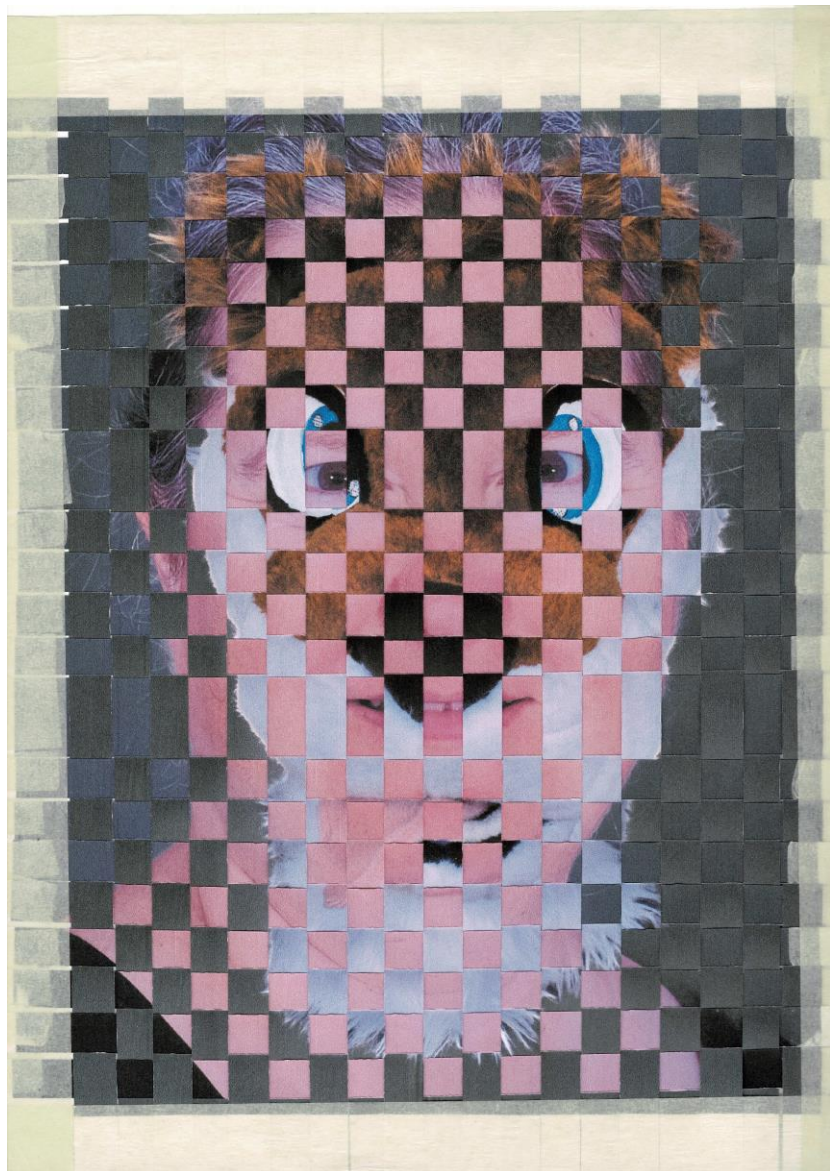


Fig. 19: Fisher 2024: Scan of mock-up woven portrait I

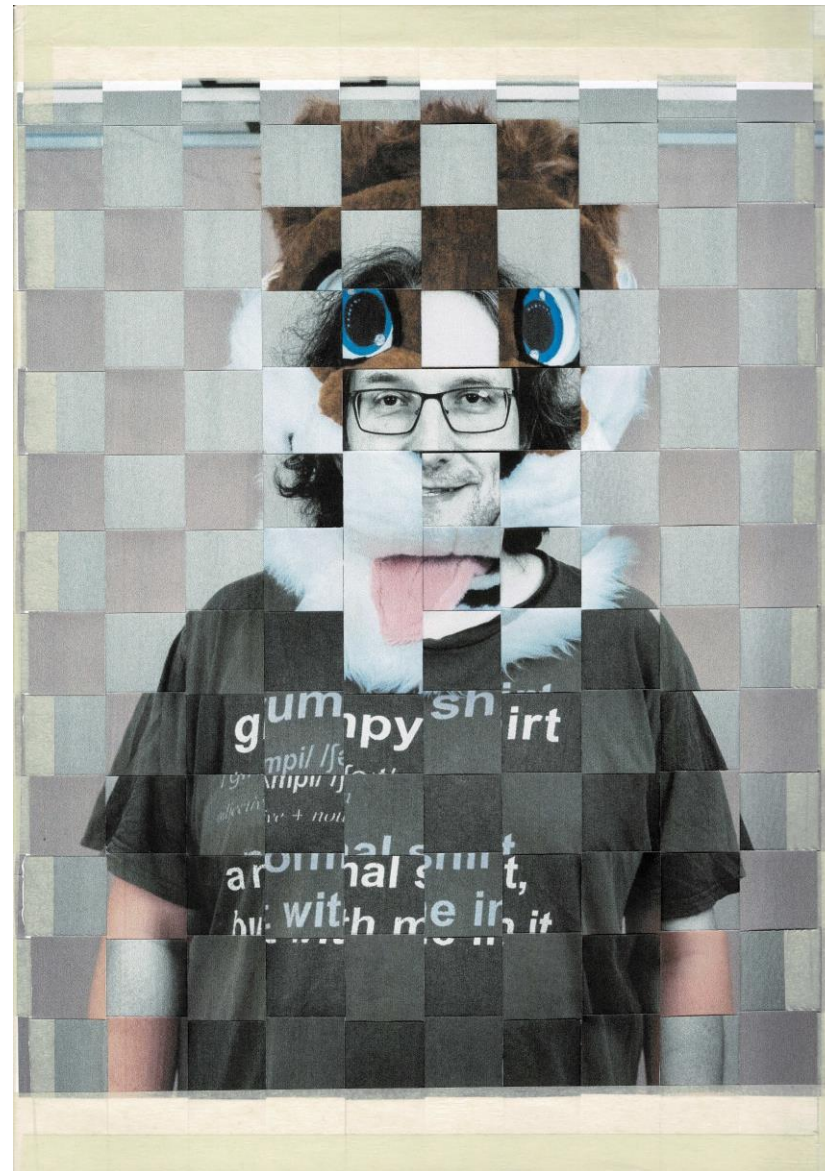


Fig. 20: Fisher 2024: Scan of mock-up woven portrait I





Fig. 21: Fisher 2024. (anticlockwise from top left): Poodling study I, poodling study II. Poodling study III (merged), Poodling study IV (woven)

# PARTICIPATION

If you'd like to participate in this project, in any of the three streams, drop me a line at

**photos.kayfi (at) gmail com**

or contact me via

**telegram @Fiska\_42**



Fig. 13: Fisher 2024. A woven portrait work in progress



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# FIGURES

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Fig. 2: Kay FISHER. 2024. *Head study II*

Fig. 3: Kay FISHER. 2024. *Lumi*

Fig. 4: Kay FISHER. 2024. *Patches*

Fig. 5: Tom BROADBENT. Ca. 2018. Photo from series *At home with the furies*. Available at: <https://www.tombroadbent.com/furies> [accessed 06 August 2024]

Fig. 6: Tom BROADBENT. Ca. 2018. Cover of the book *At home with the furies*. Available at: <https://www.tombroadbent.com/furies> [accessed 06 August 2024]

Fig. 7: Tom BROADBENT. Ca. 2018. Photo from series *At home with the furies*. Available at: <https://www.tombroadbent.com/furies> [accessed 06 August 2024]

Fig. 8a to c: Carmen DOBRE-HAMETNER. Ca. 2010-2012. Photographs from the series *Furies*. Available at: <https://carmendobrehametner.de/portfolio/furies/> [accessed 07 August 2024]

Fig. 9: Robbie COOPER. Ca. 2007. Untitled diptych and its original caption from the series *Alter Ego*. Available at: <https://robbiecooper.com/project/alter-ego> [accessed 09 August 2024]

Fig. 10: Inge MORATH. 1962. Untitled photograph. Available at: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/inge-morath-saul-steinberg-masks/> [accessed 09 August 2024]

Fig. 11: Phyllis GALEMBO. 2010. *Two in a Fancy Dress, Red Cross Masquerade Group, Winneba, Ghana*. Available at: <https://photographmag.com/interview/march-april-2020-interview/> [accessed 09 August 2024]

Fig. 12: Cindy SHERMAN. 1978. *untitled film stills #10*. Available at: <https://artlead.net/journal/modern-classics-cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills/> [accessed 09 August 2024]

Fig. 13: Kay FISHER. 2024. A woven portrait work in progress

Fig. 14: Jason CHEN. Ca. 2020. *G*. Available at: <https://thatchineseid.com/G-I> [accessed 25 July 2024]

Fig. 15: Samuel David STERN. Ca 2011-2016. Untitled work. Available at: <http://davidsamuelstern.com/wovenportraits-2011-2016> [accessed 02 August 2024]

Fig. 16: Lou PERALTA. Woven portrait from the series *Disassemble Series III*. Available at: <https://www.louperalta.art/7215936-disassemble-ii-iii-2019> [accessed 08 August 2024]

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