

Furry Illustration and Representation:  
Negative Press and the Legacy of Rage-Baiting



VISD-3002: Illustration and Rise of Pop Culture

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Furry is a concept surrounding the idea of anthropomorphic characters and art, a long-sustained tradition dating back all the way to Ancient Egypt. Anthropomorphism has existed all through history and only became a coined term in the early 1980s. In fact, Winston Churchill had furry characteristics such as dressing up as a gorilla to entertain children and exchanging letters with his wife that bled into the realm of roleplay as they described themselves as house pets<sup>1</sup>. Anyone can pronounce themselves a furry, as the fandom is a unique case in which no one trademarked media defines the fans, such as Trekkies who engage in Star Trek. The only requirement is to be interested in anthro characters, which brings in people from all walks of life into the community. Although furrys can be fans of the Disney franchise and other companies that have anthro characters, there is an apparent disconnect from intellectual properties in furry fandom. Furrys are not fans of a developing franchise but rather fan-developed fandom. They are both the content creator and the consumer. This creates a close-knit community for furs, as they are fans of each other, not a multi-million-dollar company<sup>2</sup>. And thus, artwork is a strong force within Furry spaces. Cooner, an animator and artist in the furry community, spoke about Disney's attitude towards furrys:

*I remember when I was working at Disney television in the mid-90s, the executives at Disney and the other studios knew about furrys. But they did not particularly like the furrys. And interestingly it wasn't just because of the adult material. It was also because*

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Danielle Guerrier. "Bringing out the animal in me: An examination of art and the individual within the Furry subculture". Senior Honors Projects 2010-2019, 2014, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/419>. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Jake Dunn. "Self as Gem, Fursona as Facet(s): Constructions and Performances of Self in Furry Fandom". *Award Winning Anthropology Papers*, 2019, [https://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/anth\\_awards/5](https://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/anth_awards/5). 18.

*they saw people trading art back and forth freely. And they did not like the idea of property being freely exchanged like that.*<sup>3</sup>

Furry is also a non-exclusive fandom, meaning that anyone from any walk of life may find themselves in this space, no matter who they are. In Jake Dunn's journal about fursonas, he wrote "*Furry Fandom is [...] a 'microcosm' of the United States*"<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>, explaining how LGBT furs and neo-Nazi furs can occupy the same space. When tackling the idea of rage-baiting—a tactic used to garner attention by creating outrage, pushing the subject further into the public eye—furrys are no stranger to the concept.

Artwork that produces visceral reactions in its audience is a popular strategy for contemporary artists—a shocking display creates traction. This method is also used in social media to influence the algorithm. Any engagement is good engagement, and therefore angering an audience will result in an increase in comments and push the content further to more people. This tactic is known as 'rage-baiting'<sup>6</sup>. Famous artists who have shocked audiences in the past, like Damien Hirst with his taxidermy artwork that questions the ethics of organic remains in artwork, benefited greatly from their bad press. Hirst's reputation was never great, but his most well-known work, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (fig. 1), also known as *The Shark*, is a controversial piece that has shaken many art and animal enthusiasts alike. However, Hirst has expressed that he expects criticism to arise and does not let

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<sup>3</sup> *The Fandom*, directed by Ash Kreis and Eric Risher (2020), 50:52, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY?si=tXynZv4pJfkyWYWi>.

<sup>4</sup> Dunn, 11.

<sup>5</sup> The United States is home to the largest demographic of furrys, as they have the most furry conventions in the world with the largest number of attendees.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Gruet and Megan Lawton, "What Is Rage-Baiting and Why Is It Profitable?," BBC News, December 10, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4gp555xy5ro>.

it affect him<sup>7</sup>. In 2017, Hirst was putting on a show at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice when Italian animal activist group ‘100% Animalisti’ dumped forty kilograms of animal feces on the steps of the exhibition building with a sign reading “*Damien Hirst Go Home! Check Out This Work of Art! 100% Animalisti*”<sup>8 9</sup>. This obviously garners a lot of attention, as environmental and animal activists are known for causing disruptive scenes to achieve media coverage, which there was no short of in this occasion. The question to ask now is: Is Damien Hirst creating these controversial pieces for their pure artistic expression or for financial gain? Contemporary art is popularly written off as tax write-offs and money laundering schemes, but there is definitely some artistic merit in *The Shark*. It’s a conceptual piece that forces the viewer to confront the inevitability of life and death as a shark floats in midair, suspended in fluid, like a moment captured in time. This doesn’t excuse the fact that this piece was sold for millions of dollars and Hirst continued to work with dead specimens to create his work, continuing the cycle of public outrage leading to his work to be sold for large sums of money.

Bringing the conversation back to furrys, there is an interesting case to be said as furrys do not benefit from the greater art world in the same way a fine artist can at the Venice Biennale. There of course is an economy of commissioning artists for illustrations or fursuits<sup>10</sup> of ones fursona<sup>11</sup>. What would be the greater purpose of gaining major notoriety in the furry fandom by rage-baiting? Other than perhaps an increase in commission sales for an artist — ‘blowing up’ online can have much darker undertones. One of the most notorious illustrations in furry history

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<sup>7</sup> Will Gompertz, “Damien Hirst Says Criticism Is ‘to Be Expected,’” BBC News, April 2, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-17589754>.

<sup>8</sup> Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, “Damien Hirst’s Planned Venice Exhibition Targeted by Animal Rights Group... with Poop,” artnet, March 15, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-hirst-venice-exhibition-animal-rights-group-892277>.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from original Italian: “Damien Hirst Go Home! Beccati Questa Opera D’Arte! 100% Animalisti”

<sup>10</sup> A mascot style suit created by an artist.

<sup>11</sup> Furry Persona. A character created by a furry which they believe represents them in some way.

is "The Cheese Grater Image" (fig.2) created by e621.net user Arcturus — a grotesque image of the mascot of Fur Affinity, a popular furry fandom website, being anally penetrated by a cheese grater<sup>12</sup>. The gore-y representation of a beloved icon is an easy way to achieve great negative attention, which is exactly what happened in this case, lending the "cheese grater incident" to become a meme upon itself. There is also a deeper analysis of this incident, as the creation of this image could either be written off as an edgy artist who wanted to make people upset, or a type of sadistic fetishistic practice that non-consensually exposes others to extremely shocking imagery for the pleasure of the exposor.

Another notorious presence in furry history are the Furry Raiders, a conservative furry group who are "*committed to upholding the values of free expression within the furry community by providing an open and welcoming organization free of exclusion and prejudice based on race, sex, creed, gender, identity, sexual orientation or political affiliation*"<sup>13</sup>. Being based on the philosophy of free speech, Furry Raiders have attracted an unsightly demographic of neo-Nazis — the founder of the Raiders, Foxler Nightfire, being a neo-Nazi and pedophile himself<sup>14</sup>. The most controversial aspect of the Furry Raiders are their signifying armbands (fig 3.), eerily similar to Nazi armbands, replacing the swastika with a paw print. While the Furry Raiders do not call themselves Nazis and do not technically hold those ideologies as a group, the emblem is directly taken from the Furzis, a group of Nazi furs who have an interest in WWII and realistic roleplay. This group has an extremely awful reputation online, doing things such as banning all Jewish people from their Second Life<sup>15</sup> space<sup>16</sup>. The Furry Raiders use of this symbol creates a

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<sup>12</sup> The image in this essay has been heavily censored.

<sup>13</sup> "Mission Statement," Furry Raiders, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://furryraiders.org/pages/about-us>.

<sup>14</sup> "Foxler Nightfire," Wikifur - the furry encyclopedia, accessed August 13, 2025, [https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Foxler\\_Nightfire](https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Foxler_Nightfire).

<sup>15</sup> Second Life is an online multiplayer digital world popular in the furry fandom for congregating and roleplaying.

<sup>16</sup> "Furzi." Wikifur - the furry encyclopedia. Accessed August 13, 2025. <https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Furzi>.

preconceived notion that associates them with the Furzies in a sick type of rage-baiting that angers the general audience but doesn't bother the Raiders, as they still use these armbands to this day.

In the instances explained earlier, rage-baiting seems to take the worst out of people as they jump to extremes to gain exposure. *Pleasures of the Fur* is a Vanity Fair article written in 2001 by author George Gurley as he interviews furrys at the yearly Midwest Furfest convention in Illinois. Gurley is not a furry himself and at this point in the early 2000s, furrys were not a well-known subculture, so Gurley was in fact the one to introduce furrys to the mainstream. He did the only thing he knew to get instant recognition in his writing, which was to upset the readers by highlighting the negative aspects of the furry fandom. Gurley interviews a man named Marshall Woods, or Ostrich, who shares that he is a plushophile, a type of paraphilia in which one is attracted to sexual acts that include plush toys. Another furry he interviews is Fox Wolfie Galen who is also a self-described plushophile and has dabbled in bestiality. His thick glasses and unemployment are greatly emphasized to make the reader disgusted by their NEET<sup>17</sup> qualities. The column then takes a drastic turn to interview Katharine Gates, a sex researcher, who speaks about unrelated fetishes such as "crushing". This occurrence indirectly labels the entirety of furrys as a group of fetishists, creating a long-lasting negative stereotype that labels majority of furrys as sexual deviants that need to be locked up in a cell.

Rage-baiting in the artistic world has a long history that found itself extremely relevant in the furry fandom by both furrys and non-furrys alike. As a fandom that prides itself in the freedom to express oneself away from overbearing trademarks, some people have weaponized this and used it to express Nazi rhetoric and assault unsuspecting viewers with shocking gore art. Anger is a powerful emotion and it can sway a generation as the early 2000s continued to see

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<sup>17</sup> NEET is an acronym that stands for "Not in Education, Employment, or Training". These people tend to be classified as lazy, sexually perverse, geeky, and awkward.

negative representations of furrys. “Fur and Loathing” (2003) is the fifth episode of the fourth season of the TV series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, which is another landmark in showing a negative portrayal of furrys to the mass media. Here they are portrayed as sex-obsessed deviants who enjoy fursuit orgies. Although these types of people do exist, they only represent a small portion of the larger furry community. It is now that these questions are raised: Is it at the fault of the furry community that rage-bait is a largely popular technique to gain attention? What does the future of the furry fandom look like in terms of public perception? What can be done to reverse the damage of exposure done by Gurley and *CSI*? Do furrys need to take action to repel the appeal of rage-bait? If so, how and what is the next step?

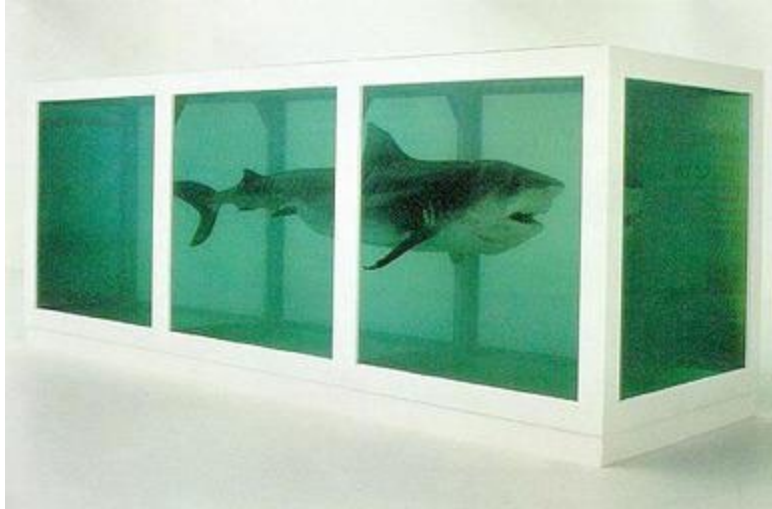


Figure 1. Damien Hirst. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

1991. Tiger shark, glass, steel, 5% formaldehyde solution. 213 × 518 × 213 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 2. Arcturus. *Fender the Ferrox*. 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2007. Digital Illustration. Originally uploaded to e621.net. Censored from original image.





Figure 3. KodyWulf. *Foxler at a local meet.* 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2016. Photograph.

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KodyWulf. Foxler at a local meet. 2nd June, 2016. Photograph.

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