

TRANSMOGRAPHY AND LIABILITY

Lukas Strolia and *The Department of Shapeshifting*

Creative economics place a burden of proof on their creator. Societal norms claim progress, that our collective horizons broadened with academic arts' advancement of twentieth-century artistic -isms and relational meaning. These views were radical, before becoming common and foundational to the *laissez-faire* attitudes of business, politics, and fame culture. One does what they like with intention, and whatever conclusions their audience draws are therefore valid.

Today, the breakdown comes in the practicalities of implementing an invested, empathetic life. A living model of self-remove and intellectual responsibility is unworkable if the creator cares about the effects of what they do on others.

Lukas and I discussed his views and ideas weekly for the last five months, with increasing intensity since the beginning of May, as the end of his bachelor course drew near. A cascade of other tasks surrounded our conversations, in all of which he was deeply and artistically engaged—personally and as part of Autarkia, our common link. Building furniture, meeting artists, coordinating exhibitions, installing shows, brainstorming on strategy, Lukas was perpetually motivated to take on a duty of care for those in his creative family.

The question becomes how can one continue to demonstrate this engagement, in a meaningful way, when the demands of professional life coincide and conflict? To whom and with what are we responsible?

The common, purely capitalistic path is to extend one's physical limitations—avoid sleep, work without respite, 'push oneself to the limit' in the name of arbitrary success. For creatives, this concept stems directly from romanticized ideas of the artist-hero, one who sacrifices everything to achieve their dreams. Look only to our supposed Olympian Gods of art history, (masculine) overachievers with single-minded purpose and determination.

Nevermind it was never so. Throughout history, humans remained bound by their human characteristics. While contemporary society's living conditions are improved, life's psychological burdens have not. We are more liable to and more aware of our environments than ever previously, without an increased capacity to manage our synaptic chemical discharges.

With the Department of Shapeshifting, Lukas proposes an empathetic surrogate institution, and a flattening of hierarchy. Humans cannot achieve omnipotence, so there are events in life that demand a combination of automaton and stunt double. The Department spreads the conceptual burden, and moreover activates it so all participants are invested in the outcome without becoming the intellectual property of the mythic and fallacious artist-hero.

These last eighteen months of relative isolation and introspection are popularly purported to have reclaimed the dividing line of work-life balance. The idea is predicated on access to global data-sharing and communication services. While benefits were afforded to the few; the many, primarily the underprivileged social-labor classes—but also those who already execute an integrated philosophy of living their artistic ideologies—faced the increased pressure of producing even more ephemeral content with less resources.

The Department provides an alternative approach. If we believe our work stands for anything, if we are responsible to our collective self, we must all pick up our tools and join in.

— JL Murtaugh, 3 June 2021