

Becoming the Megaorganism

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I-95 is the spinal column of a megaorganism. All along its length organic nodes of collective artmaking have grown, each with their function within this vertebrate being. They send and receive messages or impulses back and forth among each other to keep the body moving, without losing (to some extent) their internal logics and workings.

This is the infrastructure that keeps our strange little worlds alive. As individuals and collectives we act as idea-carriers, microplastics in the bloodstream, flowing freely between the nodes of this spinal-nervous system. Each time someone steps off of a Megabus and descends into a basement, it's as if a small synapse has fired from one neuron to another. Forgive the mixed biology metaphors, but we're about to imagine our landscape as a living, breathing thing. One that, so often, can seem like it's on life support.



Figure 1. Saskia Globig, *Foldable Microspine 1*, August 2022. Digital photograph and collage with element by Michael Ipsen, dimensions variable.

We usually call this the Northeast Corridor, the Megalopolis that stretches from New York to D.C., with Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, Providence, and other cities and their suburbs in-between. Cities are the limbs, organs, or nerves that branch out from the spine. The electrical impulses sent between them are trends, ideas, and ways of living. We want to look at the creative content and dimensions of those signals: underground art worlds.

How do people in Philadelphia know that the band from Baltimore is good? Literally, *how*? Ideas move along both digital and physical infrastructure. The internet has its uses for fostering underground art ecologies, because internet networks between individuals form a nervous system bolstering those people's attendance of house shows, gallery openings, craft markets and fairs, screenings, parties, and performances. But the communities we're concerned with are still rooted in physical places. The Northeast Corridor is still a train line and I-95 is still a highway we'll be driving until (and probably long after) our apocalyptic climate contorts with its last rattling breath—so people's physical travel is still important for exchange.

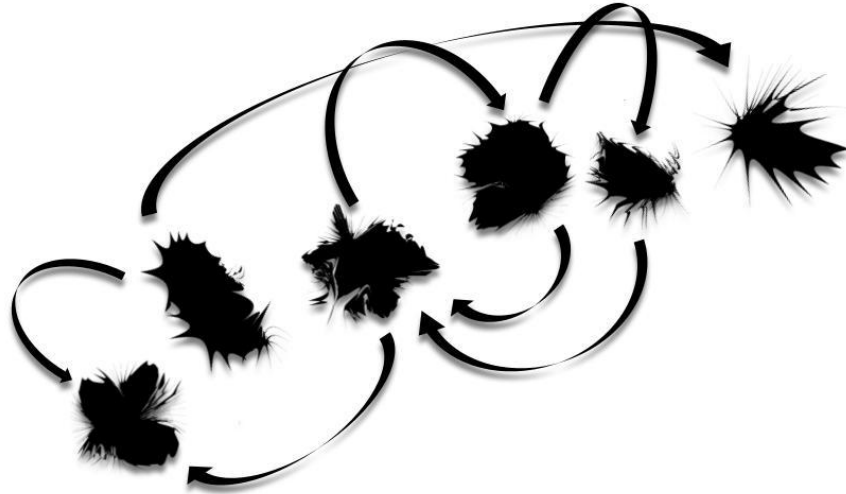


Figure 2. Saskia Globig, *Diagram 1*, August 2022. Digital diagram, dimensions variable.

Why have we always valued the subterranean? Do we aim to emulate decomposing organic environments? To grow like mold on the underside of a fast, violent, hostile world. To seep up through the cracks and lurk in the shadows, pulsing messages through our network that are imperceptible and inaudible to the overworld? Do we prefer to create things in the dark corners, the peripheries, crawling along the underside of the hulking overculture? This is a question many struggle with. We've tried to work out an answer together since we first met, serendipitously, at a meeting for the new media collective Lino Kino.

So this is how I joined Lino Kino and this is how I met Michael: Matt convinced me and Vanessa to come with him to this apartment around the corner from our new apartment because it was Friday, so Vanessa and I wanted to go to a party. There was a cramped hallway between the living room and the kitchen and there; there was a framed poster with a bean of a guy drawn with two strands of hair that curled at the ends; googly eyes; and the words "LINO KINO" on his belly. I searched around until I found someone who could tell me what the heck "Lino Kino" was. I had a feeling this was a Cultural Event for Cool Kids, which I should know about if I was going to live in Philadelphia; in the beginning, I was consciously a sponge for events. George, or maybe one of the other Matts—all of whom are in Lino Kino—told me generously that it wasn't a single event but something you could be in, a collective

that was having a meeting in this living room next week. “Kino” was like cinema; the point was video art. So, my friends and I went to the meeting.

An art collective now can look very different than it did in the 1970s, especially with our recently accelerated turn towards remote work and video-meeting. A 200-person Zoom call for an art conference can appear, in its documentation, under one name; one identity. A forum can include how many people in a room, and how many behind one username? It can be impossible to know.

But this is old news to us by now; what isn't is this new question of how high our walls might grow around each of our private gardens. We've blockaded ourselves into richly textured courtyards which tell us what we're seeing is worth seeing, and that people unlike us are just viewing static—belying all this supposed interconnectivity. So, is the internet a failed utopia? Is it just not fun anymore? The “walled garden” metaphor is an overused one, but it seems to aptly describe the enclosing of digital space into highly pleasurable, soporific little capsules of content that don't so much restrict your movement from one to another, but almost make you so comfortable you forget about the existence of the other gardens completely.

The dream of instantaneous connection was realized, but the architectures that might have made it liberatory never materialized. If the internet is the nerve network through, between, and around the bones of the interstate spine, it holds the potential to further alienate and atomize people within the city nodes as much as facilitate making connections within and between nodes.

The approach that we have embodied over the last few years, in our personal and shared practices, is a hybrid mixture of digital and physical modes of embodying collectivity. The gift the internet has given us is the ability to conceive of the malleable, dislocated form of the digital self as something that exists apart from our physically embodied forms. It is online that we can, for the first time, dissolve multiple identities into a single being and experience becoming constituent parts of an imagined whole.

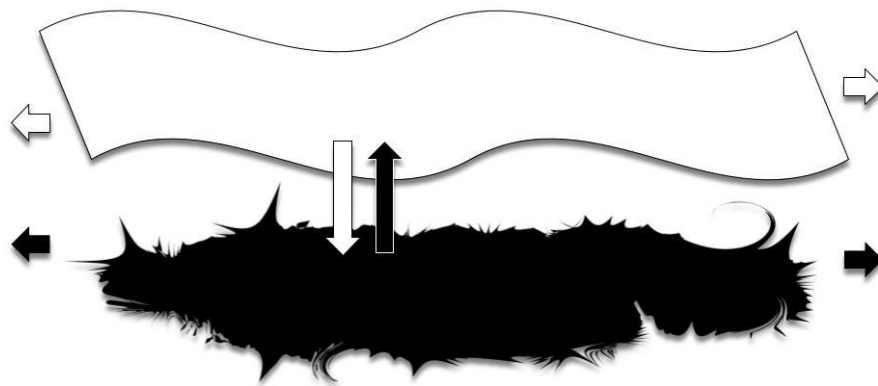


Figure 3. Saskia Globig, *Diagram 2*, August 2022. Digital diagram, dimensions variable.

We could also look at the internet as a kind of archeological project. There's so much added to the web every second that it can be easy to forget about the sedimentary layers that exist far below the surface. Old, dead forums and websites are like bugs frozen in amber, snapshots of life as it once was. However, unlike physical fossils, information on the internet has the problem of needing to be continuously hosted to remain accessible.

So, maybe a more apt metaphor is an abandoned building at one corner of the megaorganism where, improbably, the water still flows from the taps or the electricity is still running. No one lives there anymore, but the infrastructure is still alive. The internet is the vaporous expression of an infrastructure that's just as physical as the interstate. I-95, the endless thoroughfare, is like a winding, snaking backbone that holds erect the hulking leviathan of the northeast Megalopolis. These are horrifying wonders of the modern world, massive in scale, stupefying in their repetition, incomprehensible in terms of sheer tonnage of material.

I don't remember a thing I said in that first meeting, but I'm sure I rambled. I was still struggling, at that point, to clearly and concisely run through an agenda without veering off into pointless asides, and the presence of strangers always made me nervous. The one thing I do remember is that I'd never heard the name Saskia before. It sounded made up, and at the time I thought maybe it was. I guess there weren't a lot of Ukrainians in Southern Indiana.

Every meeting, rifling through the list of topics I'd outlined for the evening, I secretly hoped someone would yank my notebook out of my hands and take charge. That's not exactly what you did, but I remember you talking far more than I expected of someone who'd just entered a room full of people she didn't know. I think it was at that moment that I knew, if this whole collective thing was going to continue, I needed you to be a part of it. There was a clear-mindedness to even your most stumbling, convoluted ideas, like your mind was working faster than your speech could keep pace with.

We met through an act of collective creativity. There is a genuine thrill to the struggle of learning how to mix multiple people's ideas into a cohesive whole. We think it's a process that ultimately leads to a better understanding of yourself if you can strike the balance well with other people.



Figure 4. Michael Ipsen, *Foldable Microspine 2*, August 2022. Digital collage with photograph by Saskia Globig, dimensions variable.

Freedom of collaboration is a pocket of closeness in a friendship that could be the envy of the art world because it accesses a true place of play, a third space between people unhindered by marketability and professional networking. This is something that anyone who's been lucky enough to experience a real, thriving underground art scene can understand. Of course clout and capitalism rear their heads at the DIY basement show, but they matter less when they're secondary or coincidental. The moments of thrilling interconnectedness that come from the shared creation and appreciation of art in ad hoc, peripheral spaces are worth fighting for.

The democratization of technology allows every gazer to also vie for the gaze of others. The overculture is now a shattered scrying glass that leaves little room for things not maximally gaze-catching, such as the weird, the slow, the contemplative, basically everything some people might call art. Uploading a single video to YouTube is, at this point, indistinguishable from spitting in the ocean.

Are we content to leave that as it is? Instead, we could return to the primacy of the chance encounter, in-person as well as on our feeds. The one solution we've found to the problem of digital alienation is physical collectivity. You create a community that's both making the art and serving as its audience. The more niche your interest, the more vital this approach is. The internet is uniquely capable of making us feel just connected enough to other people to not feel like we're existing in a vacuum. But that's not good enough. Our placeless devices let us see and be seen by people with no concrete responsibility

towards us. Working with people in place asks us to actually be seen, and therefore makes our work better. So the communal power of art transmitted solely over the net is, in our opinion, dubious.

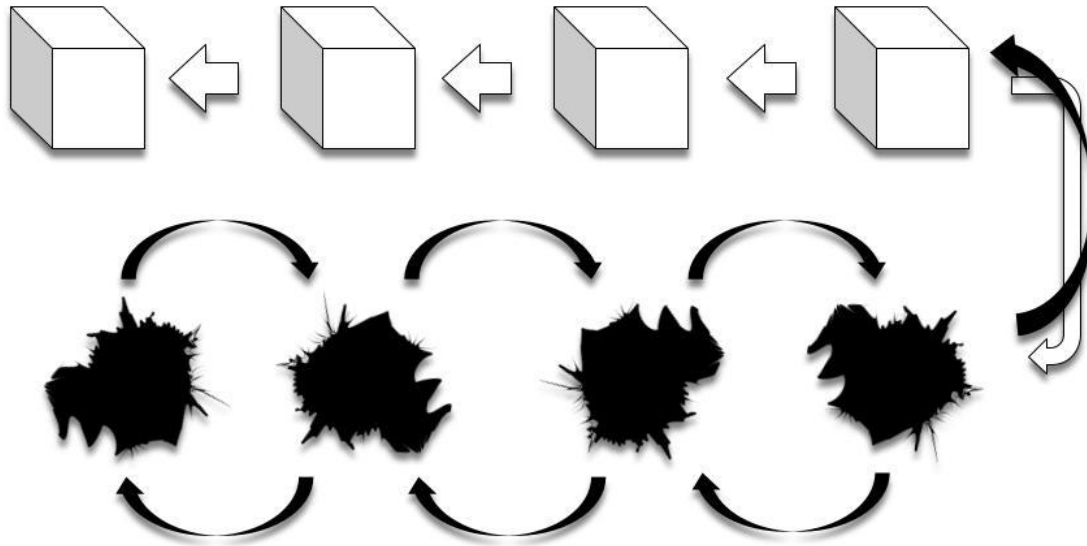


Figure 5. Saskia Globig, *Diagram 3*, August 2022. Digital diagram, dimensions variable.

We want to reassert the importance of the physical space, the communal gathering, the clandestine screening. This is how we create our little hubs, our neurotic little nodes that span the dispersed nervous system of the Northeastern megaorganism. We need these communities now more than ever. We need to keep active, to busy ourselves with the thankless task of making and showing art, in order to keep the signals flowing outward, to ensure that the other nodes know that we exist and will continue to send more matching signals in our direction.

I showed up to help build the modular set for Season 1 of LKTV. When he handed me a Modelo, I kept thanking him profusely and accidentally ate the gold foil. I had hand-lettered the titles for the zine associated with the channel, before I knew who anyone was, and it's so funny to look at those now and let them land again with the weight of all my memories. Working with a handful of people to assemble the zine, I was bemused by Michael's formula for how it should look—boxes of text outlined in black against images so blown-up they were just texture—and I let slide my impulse towards control. It tickled me to welcome direction.

Imagine an alien with a vertical spine but no head, no pelvis, and a series of radially symmetrical brains that are also hearts and also mouths. In this logic, each node is content and proud and continues to thrive off infusions of new information and style from other other nodes; everybody admits that the

underdogs have something to offer. It might be in a way that assimilates them, but imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

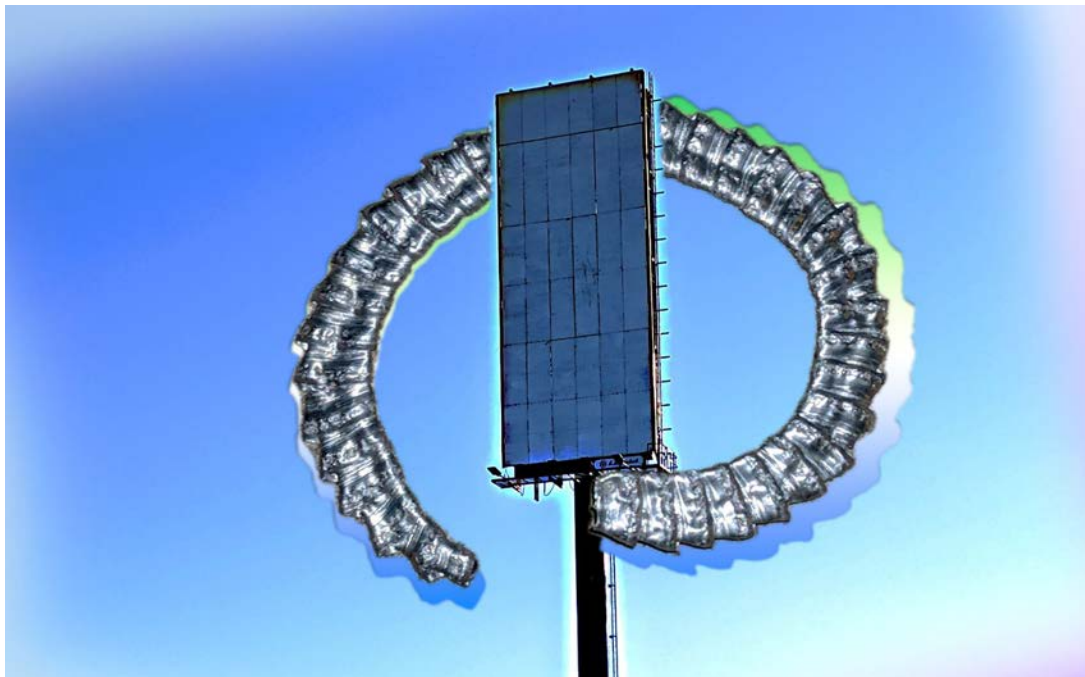


Figure 6. Michael Ipsen, *Foldable Microspine 3*, August 2022. Digital collage, dimensions variable.

In this world, there are always levels of the “mainstream.” And since we already made our single-use plastic ideas, and they aren’t going to decompose anytime soon, watch them be swallowed by the mouth at each urban node. They float out through the spinal network of throats, breaking down smaller and smaller into colorful little chips of microplastic culture, more fractured and extrapolated every hour in each new place they land.

The purpose of an art exhibition is to act like a gravitational center, to pull in disparate individuals and their plastic (malleable) ideas to form a cohesive whole. Each time we enact this formative process, we create a new hot-point. When the show ends, the whole dissolves and the composite parts float back to their points of origin. But the bonds remain, like dendritic links, and weave together what we come to call our artistic networks.

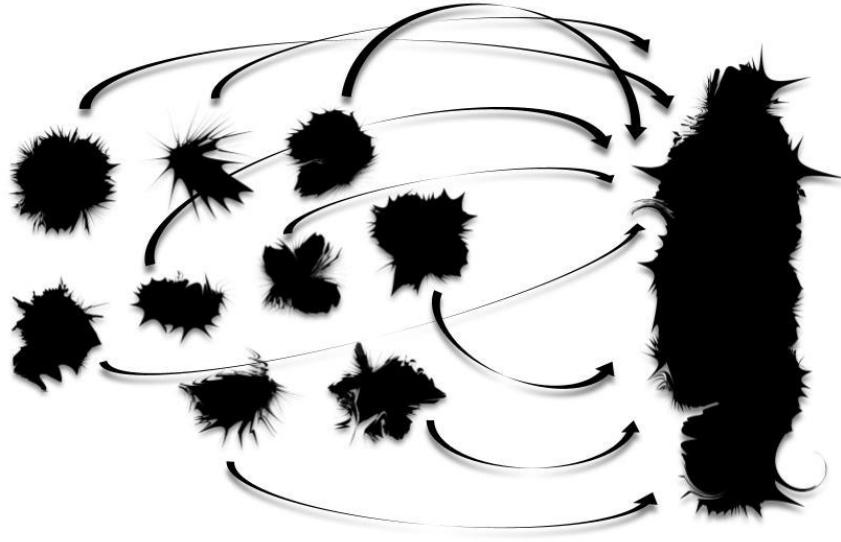


Figure 7. Saskia Globig, *Diagram 4*, August 2022. Digital diagram, dimensions variable.

Core ideas break down and flow through the bloodstream of the regional macroorganism, continuously subdivided through the friction of continuous movement. Eventually, the constituent parts look nothing like the original object, but they still retain some trace of their origin. Likewise, creative inspiration, though it may have a singular origin point, ultimately belongs to the collective mass of those people who are inspired by it. Those indestructible little fragments of ideas circulate through the system endlessly, emerging and reemerging in the most unexpected places.

That winter it felt like we were coming back to life. Being reborn out of a hibernation. It was in the gallery that we first got the chance to purge the sleep from our limbs and minds and engage in a once-ordinary moving and talking that, in this new context, felt liberatory. I sat in my kitchen day after day sketching out sets, making shopping lists, writing essays and guides, and designing promotional material. Imagine my excitement when I realized how eager you were to do those same things and more. It was the kind of reciprocation I'd been searching for, someone with reserves of energy and motivation deeper than my own who wanted to work with wild abandon.



Figure 8. Saskia Globig, *Foldable Microspine 4*, August 2022. Digital photograph and collage with element by Michael Ipsen, dimensions variable.

It's possible for artists to be too much of their place. Sometimes their work can't be shown decontextualized in a gallery. Yet sometimes actors and ideas in the scrappy circuit make it to the big-leagues. The mechanism by which this happens is murky, so it's easy for artists and performers to wonder if they just haven't perfected a slick enough way of talking about themselves. You could choose to divide the "real weirdos" from the art-world weirdos by asking who's been trained to pitch themselves, their work, and their lifestyle in appealing ways to boards, grants, and galleries.

So, maybe it's not about whether we've learned to speak about our work but whether or not we feel like it. It's usually best indulged only when strictly, materially necessary, such as when remembering why the hell you're making your work in the first place (which will probably involve explaining it to people in your immediate community). Do you arrive in the underground because you were rejected by the mainstream, or did you never even consider pursuing traditional measures of success?

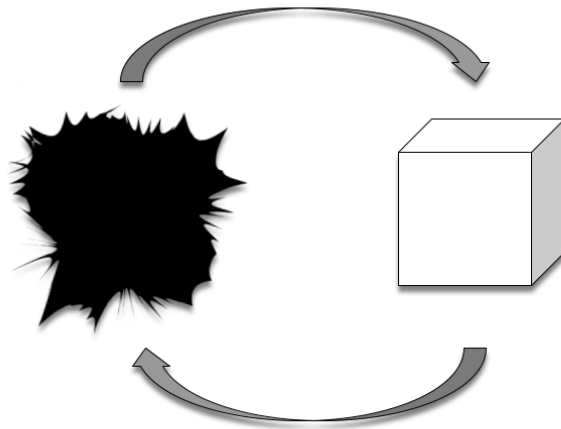


Figure 9. Saskia Globig, *Diagram 5*, August 2022. Digital diagram, dimensions variable.

But as we question the transmission and transfiguration of the Do-It-Your(plural)self into the Do-It-Alone, it's important to ask if artists and projects lose their origins in that process or if the communal, cutting-edge spirit lives on. The networks in the body, bone, and nerve, play off each other, allowing one to exist in opposition to the other. Is DIY kind of a paradox in a place like NYC, or is it even more vital since it's existing in the shadow of the real-deal, big, bad institutions of all institutions? Maybe it takes on a different character, since so often it can function as a farm system for success in the major leagues.

Like a living thing, heaving breath and pumping blood, the megaorganism has no real purpose beyond living. The underground is the fast-moving, fast-dying prey or predator that darts across phone lines and scurries through rotten holes in the roof, desperate to live another day. There is little time for memory or mythologizing when a thing is so busy living. This is ultimately what truly divides the under from the overground, the DIY from the institutional. The latter is the 500-year old tortoise, rare and celebrated for its longevity. It has no fear of being forgotten, because its rate of decay is slow enough to allow it to make its own myth while it's still living.

The fast thing, the cobbled-together thing, the impulsive thing, risks being forgotten the second its heart stops beating. It lives on only in the scant memories of those who experienced its brief life. All of us who've made a point of being a part of these fast-moving cultural organisms are carriers for thousands of ideas that live on only as faint flickering memories at the edge of our perception.



Figure 10. Michael Ipsen, *Foldable Microspine 5*, August 2022. Digital photograph collage, dimensions variable.

The canon of Art History is getting longer as we speak. We receive mixed messages from across timelines about what's underground and what's not, what was and is no longer, what was and is still. That's left us only with the conviction that there's a DIY flavor, born of generous and generative connection, that foments within and beyond artistic infrastructure. Some of the best shows we can remember seeing as teenagers kind of felt like cries for help in an uncaring world. People gathered in a place to prove to each other that yes, there are others like you.

We may get caught up in the happenings and politics of our scenes and their interactions with the artistic overstructure, but in the megaorganism, no part can exist without the other. We're all seeking a shock and a joy and an introspection we can only reach together. And we can build these subterranean art communities thanks to the superstructure of the Northeastern nervous system. We flow freely up and down the spinal interstate network, carrying our ideas from one node to the other.