

Mapping the City



as a Super-
organism

Artwork and text: Fanny Spång

Fanny Spång works within a multidisciplinary practice with visual expression through sculpture, installation, and animation. She holds a master's degree in design from the University of Gothenburg and the School of Visual Arts, New York. Originally from Älmhult, Sweden, she is currently based in Berlin.



Mapping the City as a Superorganism is an ongoing project initiated as a proposal for the Fresh A.I.R Scholarship, awarded by the charitable foundation Stiftung Berliner Leben in cooperation with Urban Nation Museum, Berlin 2020.

A superorganism is an organism consisting of a large number of individual organisms. The individuals are interdependent and often specialised with highly developed methods of communication and division of functions. Bees, ants and other social insect communities are common examples of superorganisms. They originate from small scale collaborations between organisms of the same species that develop into distinct patterns which define their interaction with their surrounding environment (cf. Dermody 2019). Comparable to how human societies coalesce into cities, superorganisms adapt to current circumstances and form collaborations and exchange systems to harness local and remote resources. On a larger scale it is possible to argue that the whole biosphere is a superorganism hosting different life forms that coexist and contribute to its survival. Some research also considers the human body a superorganism since it hosts microorganisms in large quantities. The microbiome interacts with the body and influences its development and functions throughout life (cf. Dietert 2016).

These three superorganisms (i) the human body, (ii) the city, and (iii) the biosphere as well as their relationship to one another are the subject of the research project *Mapping the City as a Superorganism*. The intention is to explore the city as a superorganism in connection to the humans inhabiting it. This is done through sculptural installations aiming to transform the space which they are located in. By collecting and visualising information, the ambition is to create a discussion about coexistence and sustainable urban environments. Sub-topics such as human life (microcosm) are set in relation to the city and the biosphere (macrocosm). The individual is an outcome of the community and distinguishes itself from it. Simultaneously, the community consists of individuals that form it. Subsequently, the individual and the community can only define themselves in relation to one another. »What characterizes human beings is thus not membership in one discrete superorganism, but a capacity to create and function in superorganismic structures.« (Kesebir 2012: 44)

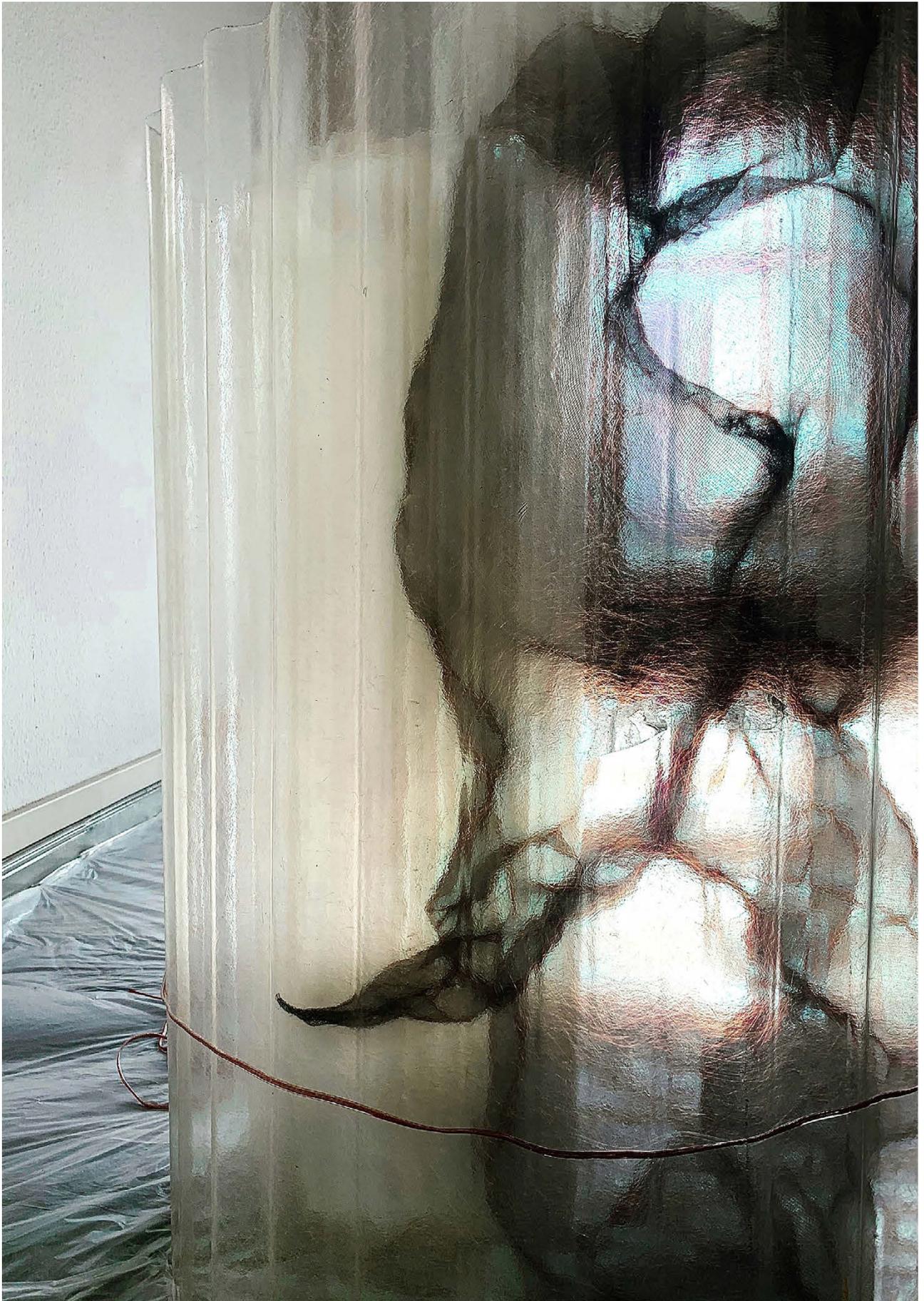
The project *Mapping the City as a Superorganism* touches upon several subtopics. Nesting became a focus of the project for *Stiftung Berliner Leben* – through an exploration of urban housing in relation to nesting habits of synergistically interacting organisms. The connection between resilience theory and self-organising systems can be used as a guideline to understand contemporary societies. For architects, city planners and property owners, new views of urban growth, sustainable development and resilient cities could be understood by adopting the perspective of the building environment as an adaptive system (cf. Eken & Atun 2019). The term nesting refers to how superorganisms such as ants, termites and bees construct their nests in the wild, adjusting the construction to the surrounding environment by using natural cavities or by removing material to achieve the desired shape. By doing so, they create a dynamic construction that is tailored to their specific needs. Organisms in captivity adjust their nest to the given conditions rather than showing instinctive building behaviour. If the nest is restricted in one direction, it will develop by accommodating and adapting to the design restrictions. Despite efforts of modern city planning, most cities have areas with non-conforming urban housing where inhabitants claim abandoned or unused space to create living constructions integrated in the area by adapting to site-specific conditions and materials. The outcome might be less refined than housing areas planned by an external party such as city planners and architects, where the resulting living conditions are produced according to a predetermined vision of the average person's requirements and the idea of how contemporary housing should be constructed and regulated. Instead, these housing areas represent a more dynamic approach to urban housing, ownership and public space.

City planners often have a fixed idea of how the designed housing units and areas are supposed to be used. Their building plans include areas for socialising, recreation, work, transportation and green areas to incorporate nature in the



»In thinking about cities as superorganisms, Spång is interested in the interaction between inhabitants and their relationship to urban space and the biosphere as a whole. As she explains, her objects are inspired by the way people look for niches in cities designed by urban planners and architects, places that they use and interact with – like insects or other kinds of animals that adapt their nests to their surroundings, depending on the given environment and reigning living conditions. Spång's view of urban projects and phenomena are not simply romantic or misty-eyed. The delicate construction of her nests relates to the insecurity of many urban existences or living conditions as well as the dependencies and precariousness that are inherent to every life.«

Interpretation of the project written by Dr. Kea Wienand for Stiftung Berliner Leben, 2020.



000000000000X000000

00000X