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Savants in Their Pants

A new Philly art zine says it's all about the photos.

by Erik Bader

Megawords is a magazine published in Philadelphia. It's free and contains no ads. There are very few words. Everything in it depends on images.



An expressionless elderly couple, the Al-Aqsa Islamic Society, abandoned cars, graffiti, a gas mask, a sign that reads "Welcome to Hatboro"—the color photographs in *Megawords* are a hodgepodge mosh pit of seemingly random images juxtaposed at an amphetamine rate, like a print version of a Flickr slideshow.

Dan Murphy and Anthony Smyrski are the two guys behind the magazine. I meet Murphy at the Megawords Bazaar, held upstairs at the 700 Club in Northern Liberties on a Friday afternoon.

The Bazaar consists of video projections of homeless men rolling blunts and a bootleg documentary about an '80s gang—infamous for stealing Polo gear—set to the soundtrack of the online radio show *Megawords* recorded at West Philly's Radio Volta, the music as eclectic as the magazine. The current issue is available, as are CD-Rs,

cassettes of the radio show, zines by peers, prints of Murphy's photographs and copies of his book *Stuck on the Map*.

Murphy's a soft-spoken guy with rusty-red hair, paint-splattered pants, black Reeboks and a T-shirt picked up earlier that day at a Hare Krishna festival. His explanation of the shirt could double as a pocket thesis for *Megawords*: "Nah, I'm not into the religion. I just like the imagery."

In 2002 Murphy dropped *Stuck on the Map*, a book-length compilation of color-copied zines he'd been self-publishing since 1999. It's a template for what *Megawords* would become—mixed-media meditations on media-mixed images with an unmediated focus on the immediate.

"I've been taking pictures of graffiti since the early '90s," says Murphy. "I'd shoot a roll of 24, and 20 would be shooting walls and the last four would be shots of who was with me or what was around. I started getting attached to those last four—the non-graffiti flicks."

Anthony Smyrski is the guy who funded *Stuck*, and it's his freelance graphic design work that subsidizes *Megawords*—as well as donations from Free News Projects, an independent publisher.

Three weeks earlier I'd attended another *Megawords* event—the opening for an installation inscrutably located within (and without) Powell House, an 18th-century mansion in Society Hill. The swarming crowds included everybody from the DJ cognoscenti to jaded hipsters, gallery buyers and the dude who works at the deli on my block. Amid video projections of Philly streets, Sun Ra footage, '60s gang documentaries and My Bloody Valentine montages, I met Smyrski, who was talking to a friend he grew up with. The guy would've seemed out of place at an art opening, but not here.

We discussed the process behind each issue.

"It's very organic. We rarely know what an issue will turn out like when we start. Dan will bring over a stack of photos, I'll have some of my own and we'll often have some pieces from outside contributors that we've curated. We also like to use a lot of appropriated graphics. That's one of my favorite aspects of doing the magazine: taking something out of its original context."

Like his scrappy childhood neighbor at an art opening in Society Hill, perhaps.

In the courtyard amid a crowd mingled around a makeshift tent colony, I spot Murphy.

"What's the point of the tent colony?" I ask.

He shrugs and smiles. "I dunno," he says. "Makes a good flick." This is the presiding criterion as to what makes it into a page of *Megawords*. Like Duchamp's museum in a valise, each issue could fill a gallery full of "good flicks." Devoid of any advertising or a price tag, the idea of *Megawords* as a free library of images is further cemented. Think of it as legal graffiti.

Is *Megawords* just a bunch of graffitidiot-savants recycling the only world they know—or are they sublime poets celebrating the local as universal and elevating it to art? Is it mechanical reproduction in the age of art? Do the smashed-out windows of an abandoned building offer the same gaze as the cool eyes of the *Mona Lisa*?

I ask Murphy if *Megawords* needs any intellectual or critical explanation.

He shakes his head vigorously, "Absolutely not. We're just trying to make cool fucking magazines."

