



BAD AT SPORTS

WLPN 105.5 FM with hosts Ryan Peter Miller, Brian Andrews and Duncan Mackenzie

From the Bad at Sports (B@S) website:

“B@S can be tricky to describe: it acts as a curious investigator, an archivist, oral historian, and occasionally as a provocateur. We produce content that lies somewhere on the Venn diagram of art, journalism, media, intellectualism, and all the naughty bits. We represent artists and their art world through an archive that is text, audio, physical, ephemeral, historical, and constantly evolving through ongoing and unique projects.”

“B@S now features over 20 principal collaborators and is a weekly podcast, a

series of objects, events, and a daily blog produced in Chicago, San Francisco, and New York City that features artists and art worlders talking about art and the community that makes, reviews and participates in it.”

I was told that between the live airing, syndication, and podcast, B@S has a listener base of over 2 million.

Episode 692: Audrius Plioplys

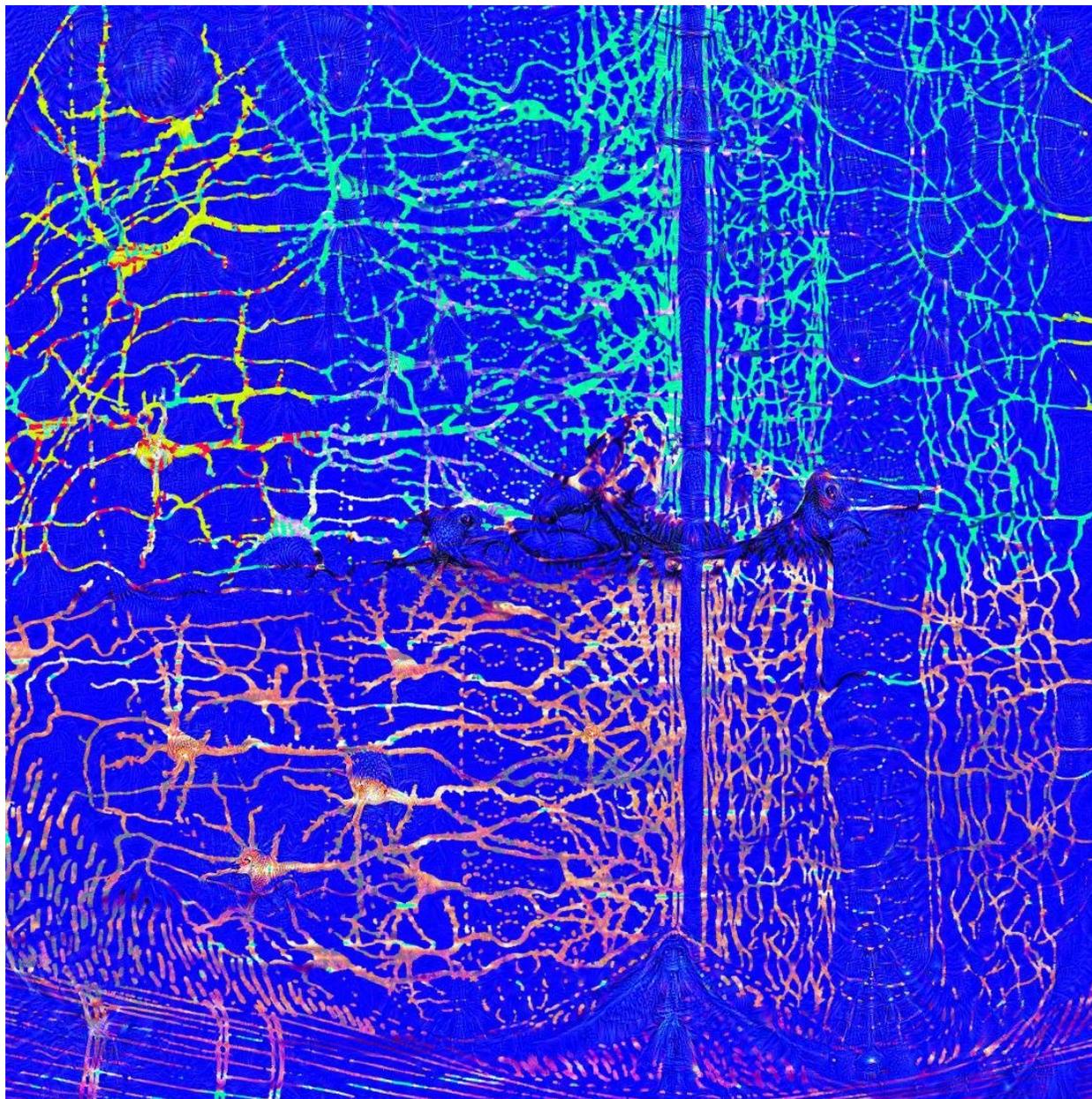
by Duncan

Aired live May 29, 2019

June 5, 2019—Podcast:

<http://badatsports.com/2019/episode-692-audrius-plioplys/>

This week we welcome Chicago-based contemporary artist Audrius Plioplys, practicing neurologist and visual artist for more than 40 years, talks brain, soul, string theory, convergence, and art. We start with his exhibition at the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge at the University of Chicago and lost in the hallways of the mind.



Speaker 1: Welcome to ...

Speaker 2: Bad-

Speaker 3: At-

Speaker 1: Sports Center!

Speaker 2: Over-skilled, under-enlightened.

Speaker 3: Contemporary art talk radio.

Speaker 1: Coming at you every Wednesday on WLPN 105.5 FM.

Ryan: And welcome to Bad At Sports Center. This is Ryan at the beautiful Co-Prosperity Sphere on this fantastic late May day, and I'm here ... Brian Andrews.

Brian Andrews: Hello, hello.

Ryan: Oh, I need to give you some juice.

Brian Andrews: Hey. Oh, I'm on now.

Ryan: And Duncan Mackenzie, DJ Older Brother.

Duncan: Oh, hey Ryan.

Ryan: Hey, how you doing?

Duncan: Good, how are you? How have you been?

Ryan: I've been good.

Duncan: I've missed you.

Ryan: Do you want to catch up after the show?

Duncan: Yeah, for a few minutes.

Ryan: Okay. I can pencil you in.

Duncan: Awesome.

Ryan: We're joined here today by Audrius Plioplys who is a neuroscientist and an artist that currently has an exhibition up at the Stevanovich Institute at University of Chicago. The exhibit is called Cycles of Memory, and it is open through June 21st. Welcome, Audrius.

Audrius P.: Well, thank you very much for having me.

Ryan: Absolutely. Do you want to tell us a little bit about the exhibit that you have up?

Audrius P.: It's a very complex exhibit, visually. It fills the three-story atrium of the entrance of the building, which is sort of all glass encased. It includes LED color-changing lights, sculptures that I have installed, ten columns, and eight other LED light systems, in addition to three large-scale whirling pieces that are eight feet tall, four feet wide, suspended from the ceiling at different heights, rotating round and round.

So the light sculptures themselves cycle through different colors, different moods, different atmospheres, interact amongst each other in different and unpredictable

fashions, as you have the three whirling pieces cycle around and round and round. So, it's a complex space.

When I was invited to exhibit there, when I saw that entrance one, I thought, "Well, this is a challenge. I've never faced this kind of a beautiful, complex space before. Architectural space." The building itself dates from 1897 but it was totally rebuilt, and the architects from Des Moines, Iowa, designed that atrium specialty to be sort of wide open with the glass front to the building, so everything would be seen on the inside, and a very ecological also energy conserving systems there. But the beauty of the space stunned me, and so it turned out that the pieces I put in there just work extremely well with that three-story atrium.

Ryan: And the pieces that are up are going to be part of a permanent display.

Audrius P.: Right. Four of the columns are staying. Those are the ones that are the most prominent from the outside when you look in. They're always on, the colors are changing, and they're quite stunning at night because they're visible from the outside.

Brian Andrews: Now, are these just cylindrical columns, or with lights on them, or is there imagery on them, formed to them? What do they look like?

Audrius P.: These columns are all about six feet tall, about seven inches across in diameter, circular cylinders. They are made ... the light systems on the inside, that I devised, and the LED light system, the colors are constantly changing. And then the cylinders themselves are made out of three layers of polycarbonate that I've put images on them. And so you have each piece has its own set of images, its own set of themes.

Now, the ones that are staying there permanently are from my sequence called Columns of Writing, and it deals with the writings of Franz Kafka, of Samuel Beckett, Sigmund Freud, and then my own one dream that I transcribed myself. So, there are the four pieces that are the most prominently displayed. They're staying there permanently. So, each thing has a theme. Each piece itself has a theme to it.

Overriding all of them is the concept of the mind, the brain. How do we think, where does consciousness come from? So, in all of these pieces you'll see neuronal profiles incorporated, my own electroencephalograms, my brain waves, my brain scans are interwoven, too. So, it's like a very complex, multi-layered pieces. Each of the columns I said are three layers of polycarbonate, and those three layers correspond to three layers of our self-awareness: consciousness, subconsciousness, and unconsciousness. So, there's a lot of thought goes into the actual details of the construction of all of these pieces.

Brian Andrews: So, a lot of thought, pun intended, then?

Audrius P.: Exactly. Pun intended, yes.

Ryan: I feel warm now that a pun has been delivered. Thank you, Brian.

Brian Andrews: Happy to help.

Ryan: Yeah. So, I'm curious if you can talk about the connection of neuroscience with your work. Your career, you had a career in neuroscience before you began making work as an artist. Am I correct with that?

Audrius P.: They're actually parallel together.

Ryan: Okay.

Audrius P.: The neuroscience thing started first. Now, just to kind of go over my history, the seed for art was planted in my heart when I was a child growing up in Toronto, Canada. My best friend, who was about two years older than I, was a real serious mischief maker. At the age of 13, you know, already had his own motorcycle, and was zooming around the city of Toronto.

Duncan: Lawless Canada.

Audrius P.: Exactly. No. You weren't allowed to have motorcycles when you were 13 then or now, but he was able connive it somehow. Well, one summer, his parents, to get him off the streets of Toronto, put him into an art program. So, I come over to visit him and I see him start with this blank canvas. Then the lines would appear, and then colors, and more colors, and before you know it, you have this landscape painting! It just absolutely stunned me. I was about 10 years old then. Couldn't get over it.

Well, when I was in medical school, that seed started to grow. And during the four years of medical school at the University of Chicago, I painted more and more, started to go to more art galleries, more art museums. By the time I finished, I thought, "Well, I've made a major error. I shouldn't have gone into neurology at all. I should have gone into art."

Friends of mine convinced me to at least finish my internship at the University of Wisconsin hospitals, which I did, and then I dropped out entirely, moved out to the East Coast and just did art full time. I thought, you have to choose one. Either art or neurology-medicine. They're not compatible." And so, for three years I worked out there. I had exhibits, sales took place. Had positive reviews, it was going very nicely for a start of art career.

What I did was mostly conceptual art. A lot of installation pieces, a lot of stuff with electrical sound systems, kind of even a little bit similar to what's up now at the University of Chicago.

But I started feeling guilty. I had all this knowledge in neurology and I'm not doing anything with it. It's sort of like, in one of the parables, Jesus says, "You don't take a lit candle and put it under a bushel basket." That's what I was doing.

Then I realized, wait a minute. I'm a smart guy. I'm a University of Chicago alumnus, right? That makes me ... I have a certificate of smartness.

Brian Andrews: This guarantees it!

Ryan: I think it says it at the bottom of the degree, right?

Audrius P.: Absolutely. Money back guarantee. And I figured ... wait a minute, I'm making an error here. I don't have to choose one or the other. I should be able to figure how to put these things together. And so, then I went back to neurology at the Mayo Clinic and for more than 30 years have been working to put together neuroscience issues and art, and basically explore how our thinking comes from. Not in a laboratory, but in an artist's studio. So, I've been pursuing this using many different techniques over these decades. And the most recent installation piece is my most recent attempt at looking at aspects of that.

Ryan: So, as opposed to going through publishing in journals, you decided to take this research that you had and express it through visual art, installation art ... how do you see those two working together to kind of get your ideas across most effectively to an audience?

Audrius P.: Well, in terms of publications, I have almost 80 peer-reviewed publications, but those are scientific-type things, clinical basic investigations that go out to a specific population of people. Researchers are interested in it, or clinicians dealing with specific issues and topics.

Art goes out into the art world, to the general public, which is meant to be understandable to anybody and everybody, and it's very satisfying to see one exhibit installation I had at the Lubeznik Center here in Michigan City. I filled up the second floor, ceilings and walls and everything was filled up with my pieces, installation there. They have school groups coming in of all different ages, coming through there. That's very satisfying to hear about kids who immediately walk in, look around, they say, "Oh, this about the brain! And the mind!" It connected up even with little kids.

So that art communicates with the general public. That's what I look at it. And if there is a communication that takes place, if it arouses some kind of internal ideas or feelings in the viewer, that's a successful work of art.

Brian Andrews: You're smarter than me. You just declared that. Because I actually [crosstalk].

Ryan: What does it say at the bottom of your degree?

Brian Andrews: But before that, I actually was a double-major in neuropharmacology and visual art in my undergrad, and very much had a similar dichotomy but found that I couldn't put the two together. So, I'm actually very curious. For me, I always felt ... I could never figure out if I was responsible to teach science through art, or give other instructions ... the differences between those audiences, for me, was always something I could never overcome. So, I just ended up doing art.

But I'm very curious to see how you sort of parse between those two different worlds and what kinds of scientific information you want to either communicate or educate or is it just entranced. That relationship is really curious to me.

Audrius P.: Well, I doubt my certificates prove that I'm smarter than you at all.

Brian Andrews: But you've done it. Guys put your certificates away, please.

Audrius P.: What I do not do is I'm not using my art to illustrate specific points in neuroscience. That would be like textbook illustrations. And those textbooks are full of illustrations. Yeah, Museum of Science and Industry, "How The Brain Works", those are very beautiful installations, but that's not the kind of art issues that I'm dealing with. In my mind, I delve into fundamental philosophic issues, to raise the questions of ... you know, we have this organ in our head, which is smaller than our liver, less cells than our liver does, that is interconnected, neurons interconnected, and out of this mass of tissue, our brain, we arise. I mean, we have self-awareness. We're aware of other people. We produce society. We produce culture. Now, how does that happen? Our livers don't do it, even though livers are bigger.

It's absolutely amazing. So, I'm just trying to explore just how this kind of thing happens. It's not that I'm setting up a specific experiment in my studio, and I'm going to look. That's in the laboratory. I've done that. But this is looking at it more philosophically, more metaphorically, into these kinds of questions and issues, and trying to raise the same wonderment in the viewers that I have.

Brian Andrews: You should see what Duncan's liver is capable of doing. It really, it's amazing.

Duncan: I have tested that thing. And I'll drink to wonderment. So then, I'd love to sort of see how this then comes out specifically. So, then you talk about these four columns. You have your dream and then these very large luminaries, right? Freud and Beckett and Kafka. I mean, that's a huge role as an artist to place yourself in, but also then how do we see these lights in the brain in this very sort of literary sculptural space?

Brian Andrews: And I also wondered about that, so I kind of want to nuance it a little bit, because I wondered how much of the text or its original source is available to us as we experience those pillars? Which particular brain scans come into play in which pieces, and how do all those signs and symbols sort of come together for us?

Audrius P.: Well, there's a number of different questions you raised here. I'm trying to keep this straight a little bit. The-

Ryan: Well, that degree says you can juggle all of them.

Audrius P.: The text in each of the columns, the writing is there but it's sort of scattered amongst the neuronal profiles. Then if you come up close to it and you look at it, you'll see segments of words appearing. It's not the entire text. In the Kafka piece, it's a segment from The Trial. In Beckett, it's from Waiting for Godot, a segment there that's interwoven. And if you look carefully, you'll see segments of words popping through there. My dream, Freud's, also. So, they're there, but I'm not taking a literary work and simply enlarging it and showing, "Well, this paragraph is what the person wrote or said."

In terms of the brain scans, they're my own brain. My own anatomical brain, I have parts of it interwoven amongst the images there. Just like my own brain is used to produce the artwork, I'm incorporating it in the artwork itself. Now, that's the physical brain. The electroencephalogram is the physiological brain, the active brain, the electrical waves that are taking place in the brain. They're interwoven and interconnected through there. There isn't any one-to-one correlation at all between the words of Kafka and my brain scans and electroencephalograms.

Even though that, let's say for the Kafka piece, my electroencephalogram was done when I was thinking about Kafka's Trial, so that there is that correlation, but there isn't any one-to-one kind of a correlation there at all. This is more a sort of philosophical, metaphorical things, involving many different aspects. Just like when we experience something or think or contemplate something, we're incorporating, using many, many different aspects from our previous experiences, our own memories, our own person backgrounds. We always incorporate many different elements in the way we respond to the world around us.

Duncan: So, is that what you mean by a neuronal profile?

Audrius P.: Well, literally, you'll see, these are neurons, drawings of neurons.

Duncan: Oh, drawings of neurons.

Audrius P.: Drawings of neurons that were done by Cajal over 100 years ago. He was a Spanish neuropathologist. He's the guy who really discovered the existence of neurons, and he won the Nobel Prize for his work, I think it was in 1912. So, I'm using his drawings for the neuronal profiles, and within them, then all the other elements are included.

Duncan: Got you, got you.

Brian Andrews: You're bringing a lot of other artists' work together for these pieces, right? You're using some of the text from these authors, you're using these other drawings. Can you talk about your relationship of appropriation or the confluence of all of these different inciting elements for your pieces?

Audrius P.: Well, it's sort of like my art sort of tries to emulate how we think. Our thought process, where we as beings come from. We appropriate everything from around us and we incorporate it in our beings. From childhood, growing up, education, our parents, our environments. We absorb it. So now I'm absorbing elements from my own background, experiences, Kafka and Beckett were the most important literary figures, inspirations in my art when I started more than 40 years ago. So that's why they're so seminal in there.

Freud is a person that I just tremendously respect because of what he accomplished. Not so much because of the psychoanalysis stuff, but what's not known is everything else that he did. So, one of the basic ear, nose, throat anesthesia procedure that's used now all the time, every hospital, was invented by him, for example. He wrote the first book in child neurology, for example. I'm a child neurologist, primarily. So, his accomplishments are incredible. So, I had to incorporate his in one of pieces.

And of course, I'm self-centered, so my dream had to be included. All artists are self-centered, aren't they?

Brian Andrews: The artist must be present.

Ryan: Should we ask you about your dream?

Audrius P.: Well, if you want to.

Ryan: Yeah.

Brian Andrews: Yeah.

Audrius P.: It's astounding, you know?

Ryan: Tell us about it.

Audrius P.: This is some 15 years ago, this happened. In the afternoons often I take a nap, but I don't usually dream during them. I took a nap and I'm in this dream, I'm walking on the Mediterranean coast. Beautiful, sunny, warm day. I'd been there for a week doing photography, in those days, using the 36mm film. I have a knapsack full of exposed film. My camera. And it's hot. I go into a café to get something to drink. It's empty. I put my knapsack down, walk up to the counter. There's nobody there. I turn around. My knapsack's gone! An entire week's worth of work, photography, disappeared! My camera's gone. I'm in a panic.

I go run outside, up and down the sandy coast there looking what happened to it and I wake up in a panic. So, I'm waking up. The phone rings. It's my daughter calling. She was a student at the University of Wisconsin, at that time, semester abroad in Italy, and she was calling from Milan. It's the nighttime there, and she had gone to a concert with friends of hers. She had put down her knapsack beside her at the end of the concert—knapsack's gone! Her knapsack's gone, which included her passport, all her identifications, all her money, traveler's checks, everything. So, she was in a panic.

And I just ... so this occurred simultaneously. My knapsack being stolen in my dream same time as her knapsack was really stolen. So, there's connections that take place, and this is across continents. And this was sort of a ... we've had other events, not as dramatic as this take place. Connection with my wife's mother, and downturns in her health, simultaneously things taking place in Chicago.

So, there are these threads of connections that take place and I'm convinced that they exist, and they're very uncommon, infrequent, but they do happen. There's something there taking place.

Ryan: So, this is kind of a phenomenological occurrence that happened, but you're saying that there is a way of measuring this or a way of kind of asserting that these things exist more than just serendipity or coincidence?

Audrius P.: Oh, yeah, definitely. I think it's beyond coincidence. I think these are real things that occur. And in terms of a physical explanation to it, my training when I went to college was in physics, and I've still kept up my interest in it. It's in the world of string theory and the multi-dimensional aspects of it. Lisa Randall, a theoretical physicist, out of Harvard University, published a number of popular textbooks about multiverses in the background of string theory. That is how you can have interconnections taking place between different universes and different existences. So, I think if you're going to look

for a physical explanation it would be through the world of string theory or some ramifications of it.

Ryan: So, to some degree, this is more than just being about a dream, it's a larger aspect of ... I mean, did this show up earlier in your work as part of your content, or is this the first time? You said it happened 15 years ago.

Audrius P.: Yeah. There's a sequence of large scale works, four pieces that are 5' by 12' paintings on canvas, called Chromodynamics that deals with this particular issue that's been exhibited a number of times, including at the University of Chicago a few years ago, and the dealing with the issues of string theory, quantum world interconnectedness, that take place.

And these pieces when you go further down in smaller, smaller, smaller and strings are these ultimate small ... you end up leaving the world, you go into smaller dimensions, and then within the piece itself, you end up back in the real world. You end up with a painting that looks like Claude Monet's waterlilies.

So, this has been an issue that I've been sort of dealing with. The whirling pieces themselves, when I did them originally about eight years ago, they were ... again, to play on the issue of multiverses and our universe being a two-dimensional brain floating and spinning in a multidimensional other complex, much more complex existence.

In the pieces right now that are whirling, the two lower pieces deal with the Sybils. These are from the ancient world, oracles. There are oracular writings and prophecies, and these were felt, these women had connections with the past, with the future, and were able to advise people and make predictions. They had these powers of prophecy, and they were consulted for these abilities.

So, they're part of the current exhibit right now, and they're whirling round and round.

Brian Andrews: This kind of ... the weird sort of string theory spiritual connection space seems really fertile from the position of artist. How did you deal with that interest as a scientist? How do you test for our interconnections and how do you stretch your interest in the ... how does that impulse manifest in your scientific work at the same time it's manifesting in your artwork?

Audrius P.: Well, my scientific work that I've done had its specific purposes, for example, basic neuroimmunologic research into brain development and development of Alzheimer's disease. There were very specific or clinical studies that I did. They were very specific, focused issues. Now, the question that you're raising is nothing that I've

ever tried to address scientifically, but something that happens so infrequently would be very, very difficult to set up any kind of a study to do that. I would think.

Ryan: Are the works trying to bring about some kind of way of pinning down these circumstances in these events? Is the work a gateway to kind of bigger, broader understanding of it? Or is it still just a purely intellectual visual experience? Is there something that you're trying larger, like spiritual, or to actually access this kind of string theory content?

Audrius P.: I'm trying to raise these issues in the viewer in some fashion or other. If you just walk in, take a look at it, hopefully the experience will raise questions and ideas. The things about string theory, you'd have to go ... in terms of how it interplays, you have to go onto my website, see my own ideas a little bit, and try ... because it's not self-explanatory. It's not meant to be.

So visual art has, at least the work I do, has many levels. The art has to communicate directly to the viewer. There's got to be something there that connects them up in the world of thinking, consciousness, and if that happens, the art is successful. The more layers of things that I look at myself when I incorporate it, those are nice, and those are available for anyone who wants to pursue them further.

Brian Andrews: So, then you mentioned these panels, as sort of alluding then to the string theory. What images are on the panels?

Audrius P.: Well, we're talking about visual art now.

Brian Andrews: Right.

Audrius P.: We're not talking about words.

Brian Andrews: Of course, of course, yeah. How do the panels manifest? If I was standing in there, what would I see?

Audrius P.: They're very colorful, very wonderful. You know.

Brian Andrews: I also describe my work as wonderful when people ask.

Audrius P.: Actually, they're stunning.

Brian Andrews: Okay, even better. But so-

Audrius P.: The series is called Chromodynamics, and they're on my website, so you can find it and see. There's four of them. They're 5' by 12' in size.

Brian Andrews: And so, the color and light, is that also LED as well, or is there fixed abstract color?

Audrius P.: These are on canvas.

Brian Andrews: Okay.

Audrius P.: On canvas. So, they're fixed. You just put them up on the wall.

Brian Andrews: All right. But you said they're rotating also, so on the wall, sort of, I'm imagining sort of a big flat mobile or something that's happening with them spinning, is that ...

Audrius P.: Right now, they're spinning, yeah. They're different. These are different.

Brian Andrews: Oh, okay.

Audrius P.: Chromodynamics was a different series. 5' by 12'. The whirling pieces are 8' tall, 4' wide, and they are literally spinning from motors installed on the ceiling.

Duncan: So, the pieces on the wall, the panels, are part of Midwestern Souls, right? So I think part of what-

Audrius P.: No.

Duncan: ... Brian's asking is how are the photos picked for those things?

Audrius P.: No, no, no. Chromodynamics is not on display anywhere right now.

Duncan: Oh, okay.

Audrius P.: We just discussed the issue of string theory and so that was a key issue in that series of four pieces. So those are in storage, put away. They have been displayed at several exhibits in the past.

Brian Andrews: Oh.

Ryan: I'm curious what your studio practice looks like. What does it-

Brian Andrews: Day-to-day operations-wise?

Ryan: Yeah. I just want to know. Talk us through a day of making, fabricating, what does that look like for you?

Audrius P.: Well, a lot of my images are processed through Photoshop. So, I spend an awful lot of time working on it. The layers of my own art images, neuronal profiles, brain scans, electroencephalograms. These are all different layers or working on interwoven through Photoshop. Eventually with exhibits that are on display right now, these are all printed out, and the printer ... digital prints on polycarbonate. Everything is archival quality, but so that most of the work that you'd see me doing is very boring. I'm sitting by

this computer screen and scanning and manipulating images, and then eventually printing things out, assembling things, and then deciding whether it works or not.

The columns themselves are on display now, really was a challenge in terms of what's not visible, it's the amount of work that went into them. All of them had to go through many re-dos. I had a vision of what the piece is supposed to look like. When you're dealing with three overlapping layers which are separated in space and how they interact with the light, you get unpredictable results. So, I'd do the entire thing, build them, and look and say, "This is not acceptable." Scrap it, start over again.

So, a lot of these pieces have gone through like eight cycles of finally, "Oh yeah, this is what I like." Finally got that down. So, there's an awful lot of repetitive, over and over work takes place in it as part of the process.

So, if you saw me working, it would be rather boring.

Ryan: Well. Speaking of boring. Let's bore some of our-

Brian Andrews: Support is not boring.

Ryan: No, I was going to bore into the support.

Brian Andrews: Nice!

Ryan: Yeah. Not suggesting it's boring, but we're going to bore into that content.

Brian Andrews: That great content. That important content.

Ryan: Does that work?

Brian Andrews: That vital content.

Ryan: Okay. Thank you. So, you're listening to Bad at Sports Center, this is WLPN LP Chicago, 105.5 Lumpen Radio, we'll be right back after these messages.

Speaker 8: If you enjoy listening to Bad at Sports and other programs like this on Lumpen Radio, consider becoming a member today. More information is at lumpenradio.com.

Ryan: And we are back. Thank you for joining us again. We are here today with Audrius Plioplys. I'm sorry, Audrius. I apologize for that. We were talking about your studio practice, but I think we were going to jump off into another direction.

Duncan: Well, yeah. We've been unpacking the show but we've only sort of hit two out of the three. So, there's another artwork, Midwest Souls. Could you just sort of let us into what an audience would see if they came and experienced it?

Audrius P.: Well, the Midwest Souls is a series of six LED light sculptures in one location on an upper level in the atrium. Again, half of them are color-changing. The other half are not. They incorporate photographs, cabinet photographs that I picked up at flea markets decades ago. Possibly you've seen them yourself. They're sort of cards, very heavy stock cards, most of them from the late 1800s. People would get all dressed up, go to the photographer. It was a big day. You'd have to sit there, long exposures, you couldn't move, so a lot of the faces are strained, and they'd come home with their pictures.

Now, 100 years later, they're in flea markets. Pick them up, and I picked up a large number of them. And to me, it's sort of sad. You don't have any idea who these people are. There's no names on these cards. People wouldn't put their names on them.

Duncan: I love those photos, though, because they give you a sense that everyone was cranky around the ... that no one could be happy, because nobody could smile for that long, right? So physically you couldn't keep your face like that long enough to kind of indicate pleasure, so our sense of our history is through these cranky, cranky faces.

Audrius P.: Yeah. I wouldn't use the word cranky. I say authentic.

Ryan: I still take photos with that in mind. I try to emulate those photos.

Brian Andrews: I try and look as confused as possible. I want all memories of me to be just like, "He was lost most of the time."

Duncan: I overcompensate the other way. I make the stupidest, biggest grin I possibly can just to completely embrace and ridicule the moment.

Ryan: Does it work?

Duncan: Sometimes.

Ryan: Okay.

Duncan: Yeah.

Ryan: So, back to these photographs.

Audrius P.: Well, anyway. So, they have these ... I know where they were done, because the photographer put his studio name and city, so you know where it was. And these are from the upper Midwest, mostly Chicago area, and Minnesota. But every person in that photograph had a life. They had a family, they contributed to society. They took care of others. They were active individuals, and now they're gone, and I have no idea who they are.

So, one idea that I have ... other people have said this before, obviously: if you look at immortality, one way to be immortal is if people remember you after you pass. So here I'm taking these individuals who have been lost to memory, and I'm bringing them back, visually, into the current world, bringing them back into life. And our memories are stored in our central nervous system, our neural pathways, our electroencephalograms. So that they're all hidden, in part, a little bit behind my neural pathways. So that you see them encased. I'm trying to bring these people back to life, back to existence, give them a little bit of honor.

Brian Andrews: It's like Coco. Sorry. But very much, it's, yeah.

Duncan: The Disney film? Is that what you're talking about?

Brian Andrews: The whole core of that is remembering people through their photographs and their spirit, soul stays alive as long as that photo is there, and people can remember their image.

Audrius P.: Yeah. Well, there's a professor at the Oriental Institute, an Assyriologist, who just absolutely loves these pieces because in ancient Assyria, if anyone remembers your name, you are automatically immortal. And so, she sees my pieces as literally bringing people back to life.

Ryan: But how does she connect with the ... because there aren't names, it's just images.

Audrius P.: It's images. Well, yeah. We don't have the names. We have the images. They're the ... civilization has evolved.

Ryan: Okay. So, the photo is a stand-in for the person's name in a way, then?

Audrius P.: Correct, yeah.

Duncan: In the way that the name was a stand-in for the person before.

Ryan: Sure.

Audrius P.: Exactly. Sort of stunned me how she loved those pieces.

Brian Andrews: And then talk a little bit more about the affect ... these are the images that you've started with, but there's further work that's been done with them?

Audrius P.: Well, yeah. Well the images themselves, when you see, look at them ... these are the faces of individuals. They're not distorted or changed at all. They're sort of, since we're dealing with three layers of semi-transparent media, their faces are on the second layer, and over it there's my neuronal profile.

Duncan: So, a similar motif to the columns, then, right? Where you have the multiple physical layering.

Audrius P.: Exactly. Three layers. Exactly. Same thing taking place.

Ryan: And so are you ... are the images of the neuronal ... the neuronal images, I'm sorry.

Brian Andrews: Yeah, it doesn't roll off the tongue, does it? No.

Ryan: It does not, it's really sticky. Are you thinking about the images as you're making ... are you looking at the people who are being represented by these neuronal images? Does that make sense? I'm failing to ask the question correctly.

Audrius P.: Well, aesthetically, as I'm creating the piece, I am blending the neuronal profiles, the other layer, to work with the images of the individuals. So, I'm actively working aesthetically to make it work visually as an interest-engaging piece of art. So, there's always changes, modifications. It's not some sort of random, slap one thing on top of the other at all.

Ryan: I guess I'm asking, because you had mentioned that in the Kafka image, that was you thinking about Kafka as that image of your neurons was from you thinking about Kafka. So, I was just trying to see if there was one more layer of excavation. Like, now this image is being transferred into an image of your neurons, and that is a new way of that person being represented.

Audrius P.: No, no. I did not do that in these cases.

Duncan: It does, it seems to be almost more, potentially, an invitation to the audience to make that discovery, that by including this anatomy of thought and being over these disconnected images, it's inviting us to look at them as, truly as fellow human beings, and then perhaps wonder their actual stories and lives.

Audrius P.: Yeah. Exactly. I am trying to bring back individuals.

Duncan: I'm kind of curious about that. A) the title, Midwestern Souls, and that notion of authenticity that is presented in a kind of neutral face, and I am kind of thinking about the overall scope of your practice as I think through this space, where we as artists get called to talk about soul and human passion and affect, and that kind of ... the sort of stupefied space of things that exist beyond words. And you're in an interesting, and fairly unique place to kind of think about what we mean when we talk about some of those things, right? What do we mean when we talk about the human soul through your artistic research and through your scientific research?

Audrius P.: Well, when you raise questions about the soul, you're getting into sort of philosophic, theological questions in addition. But my work sort of does interface with those issues, definitely. Like I said, the Midwest images here, to bring people back to life. Bring their souls back into our current world in a sense.

Now, in terms of, you know, if you're asking, do souls exist?

Ryan: Just ask that question, Duncan.

Brian Andrews: Do I have to see my priest?

Audrius P.: No. Those kind of questions aren't readily answerable. I mean, if there were ready answers, you wouldn't even be asking that one. So, that-

Ryan: But are they questions that you're interrogating in your work?

Audrius P.: They're incorporated, yeah. They're incorporated in there. Particularly people from the past that are being incorporated. And as I mentioned, when you start getting into this current physics, okay, string theory, aspects of it, and the dimensions of flexibility of time, which is part of it, too, you're getting beyond the wildest of science fiction. You're talking about real theory. You know, Harvard professors talking about this kind of stuff.

Are there aspects in this multiverse thing for souls to exist? Well, why not? I mean, we're talking about the world which is massively more complex than what we see and experience. Could there be dimensions there of spiritual existence? Why not? You know.

So I wouldn't say, "No," to anything, especially when I've had these kind of connectedness take place repeatedly in my own life. There are things there that are not understandable, that are not part of our visible world that we live in day-to-day, but they're really there. They're real and they're not coincidences. So, why not? Why can't you have souls?

Ryan: Why not? Duncan?

Duncan: I was imagining you imagining tiny universes where there were strings, and Jesus was wandering down one of those strings. That's where I went.

Ryan: Were there footsteps next to Jesus while he was wandering down one of those strings?

Duncan: Like in the string dust. Yeah, there was ... well, like the blank ones that just ... who was walking with Jesus?

Ryan: I don't know that. I can't answer that question. It sounds like you are, Audrius, taking a lot on in these works and asking a lot of the audience to kind of reflect both on spiritual, historical, scientific, also your personal story as they are images of your neurons and your encephalograms. What kind of response do you get from an audience that's looking at your work, and is it ... are they telling you that they're getting the things back from your work that you're hoping that they get?

Audrius P.: Your question's a very good one, because I put in many, many different elements and aspects into the concepts behind my work, and I've always considered my work to be, essentially, conceptual, even though it's very visual and very dynamic. So, I incorporate a lot of these kinds of things.

As I mentioned earlier, it's a visual art, and the idea is, with visual art, to have some kind of communication with the viewer. Person comes in, looks at the piece, looks at the installation, and if there's some kind of connectedness that takes place, that's wonderful. It's a successful work of art. Many times, people will see things there, their own personal background, their own personal history in there, and they tell me about it, which is wonderful! Nothing to do with what I thought of, okay? And that just expands the art experience quite a bit.

So, that's a successful work of art. If people walk in there, they're totally uninterested, then it's not successful.

My art is not intended to communicate a whole bunch of my ideas. That's not the point of it. If I wanted to do that, I'd be writing books. I wouldn't be doing creating art. Art is to be on the immediate level, on the emotional level, and if people are intrigued with what they saw, they can go into my website and look, and look into it further.

It's like you meet a new person at a cocktail party. You get acquainted and you say, "Well, this is a very nice person. I'd like to get to know them better." Well, what is that better part? Well, that their education, where they grew up, what they did, what they are doing, on and on and on, and on. They're very, very complex, our own world, life is very, very complex. Involves many, many different aspects over the years, have accumulated.

It's the same thing in my art. It's there. It's all accumulates. But the point isn't to lay it all out and have somebody understand it immediately. That's not the point of it. It's like when you meet somebody at a cocktail party. They're a nice person. That's wonderful, right there.

Ryan: I guess, I'm curious, as we're talking about the idea of connectivity with string theory and now, we're talking about the connectivity with the audience, does any of your

work come about through active collaboration? Do you have any other artists that you work with, that you make things that you ... what is your network of artists, and do you have a collaborative process that you maybe engage in?

Audrius P.: Basically not. I've had several collaborative installations that I've done in the past but not an ongoing basis, no. These are just my own personal creations.

Ryan: Okay.

Duncan: I want to come back to knowledge for a second and what goes into work, and thinking about that space of ... because what you're charting is kind of effectual experience, where you want us to come to the work with our guts, not our heads, necessarily? Does that make sense?

Audrius P.: Hopefully both, yeah.

Duncan: But then, I wonder ... so there is this sort of stream of art discourse about art as a way of knowing, as that field of knowledge in and of itself, and that the works themselves and that kind of effectual response is itself a kind of knowledge, and I wonder how your works speak to that space of knowledge as a kind of ... well, as an overtly learned scholar in an unrelated discipline. How we know art? If we're ... I don't know. I don't know that that's a question, actually. It's more of a ... I'm just back with Jesus. I am the silent figure.

Brian Andrews: Let me sort of pick up on that, because I'm actually kind of curious about where these arts are and the kind of artworks are, I should say, and in the kind of audience that's going to be there. Duncan brought up knowledge, and it's at the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, a very epistemological name, a very university-sounding name, but at the same time, I'm like, "Are there scientists there? Philosophers these? Is this primarily a classroom?" Where is this space, and then who's this audience that are then experiencing these works?

Audrius P.: Well, the Institute itself, the building itself has been there since the original origins of the University. Recently rebuilt and reopened a year and a half ago with the beautiful atrium in the space that I'm ... my exhibit is in there. In terms of the faculty members, this is an interdisciplinary group. In other words, there's nobody on faculty there specifically that wasn't already in some other department, and that does include biologists, physicists, mathematicians, historians. So, it includes the entire spectrum across the University of Chicago, people who then collaborate.

The whole idea was to have people come together and to discuss this idea, where their knowledge comes from in their own disciplines and how that can interrelate, and they do have classes there. They have a large number of graduate students

working there, but in terms of more detail, you'd have to ask the Institute people themselves.

Brian Andrews: But it does, then, seem like kind of a very, almost Renaissance kind of idea of pulling in all these arts and sciences together to look at the bigger picture, which seems to be exactly what you're kind of trying to manifest in your works.

Audrius P.: Absolutely. I love the word Renaissance, and it's no accident that in the whirling pieces that you see, there are four faces of the Oracles straight from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, purposefully to reflect on the Renaissance. I included that. There's another dimension there, you see my art. It's very complex!

Brian Andrews: And it's, I mean, no small questions. Only really, really big questions, seem to come out of that, then. And also, I guess, then, expanding that being at a university, so also, the foundation is the spirit of inquiry itself, which is interesting for that. So then, where do you then go from here? I mean, this seems to be like you've sort of put all these artworks out there that seem to make these connections between who we are in the past and who we may be in different places, and our own consciousnesses and relationships to the other.

Where do you go from here? What's after this exhibition, or what kind of ... what's the next big, big question?

Audrius P.: Well, I just say, "Plod along." You know? See how things goes. Step by step. Currently I don't have any big master plan to look into the future, and usually I don't. Things just seem to evolve on their own as I'm sort of working and struggling coming up with ideas, and so I'll see what happens. There's nothing there to specifically point to right now.

Duncan: You are no longer a practicing neurologist. You're a full-time artist these days.

Audrius P.: Correct. Correct. I had two parallel careers simultaneously for almost 40 years.

Brian Andrews: That sounds exhausting.

Audrius P.: You should ask my wife about how irritated she was with me. So, these are two careers together. About 10 years ago, I sort of gave up on the neurology, neuroscience world, and just doing art full time.

Ryan: So, why put the one away but not the other?

Audrius P.: Well, you know, I went back into neurology out of a sense of guilt that I wasn't doing, helping people. 30 years later, you know 30 years of providing clinical service, I figure, "Okay, that's fine. My sense of guilt is allayed. I've done something. I've contributed to society." And some of the things that I've done, actually ... well, one thing, in child neurology, for very severely disabled cerebral palsy children was a major advancement in their medical care, which is in use now across the ... at least North America, I know, probably across the world, too, to prevent pneumonia. So, my contributions have taken place and so now I can sort of get back into a little more self-centered interest.

Brian Andrews: You didn't feel guilt about your knowledge in art also? It wasn't the candle under a different basket a little bit, to go with your metaphor?

Audrius P.: Well, no, I had ... I was doing both, and had exhibits, and I was doing art but at a slower pace during that time, of course.

Brian Andrews: What did that practice look like with the neurology, with children. How did that ... what was the day-to-day practice there?

Audrius P.: Well, over the past ... largest period of time, most recently before I sort of gave up on clinical practice. Most of my work was with children with severe cerebral palsy in skilled nursing facilities as medical care needs were too complex to be able to ... for families being able to provide for them. So, these are all in the Chicago metro area. And so, I would visit these different centers every week and take care of them, and I was on-call 24/7 for any kind of medical emergencies or medical status changes that took place. So, this was very, very busy. Some days were like 50 phone calls a day coming in, in terms of managing issues for them.

Ryan: I guess I'm curious, so, your neurology has crept into your art practice, was there any point where your art practice was creeping into your neurology practice?

Audrius P.: No.

Ryan: No.

Audrius P.: No.

Ryan: There was a gatekeeper there.

Audrius P.: Well, not that there was a gatekeeper. I think when you're dealing in a fundamental sense, if you're a good clinician, okay-

Ryan: I'm not, by the way. No one's ever said that to me.

Audrius P.: Okay. If you're a good clinician, you have to have a creative mind in approaching people's problems, okay? People come in and they explain their problems they're having in their own language, which may not be your language. You have to be able to interpret it and figure out and come up with solutions to help them. From the world of child neurology dealing, I would not just ... children dealing with families, that fit the families.

It's not simply A plus B equals C, which is terrible. Which is taking place more and more in medicine, now, these kinds of dogmatic things where you have guidelines. This, this, this, has to be done. No, no, no. That's wrong. You have to be able to think and apply things to individual people and their families.

And so, there is creativity involved in it. So, in a sense, artistic ability is part of good quality medical practice, just built in.

Ryan: So, there's creative practice. This is a thing that I think probably both Duncan and Brian could also speak to, that there's critical thinking and problem-solving in art-making, and when you're ... as an instructor at a liberal arts college, that is kind of at the core of what we end up teaching. Many of our students of like, "What are you getting out of this one art course that you might be taking as part of your studies?"

I know that you did not study art in school, and I'm curious what that has given you access to. Your non-academic position in art, what has that allowed you to do and become as an artist that maybe we don't experience, of people who studied ... specifically went to study art.

Audrius P.: That's an interesting question, interesting story. When I decided to leave medicine, towards the end of medical school, and I had to set up internships and one of my friends convinced me at least to do that. I set up internship interviews across the northern US and in Canada, from Boston to Seattle, Vancouver. Multiple cities, and I visited them for the official process for the internship.

Every city I went to I would then find, where's the local reputable art school. Because I thought, "I have to go to art school." Just like medical school, you go to art school. So, I visited them myself, and I thought instead of setting up appointments, I would just walk in off the street, walk through the building, and see what people will do.

Now, we're talking 1974, around that year. Now this is quite a long time ago-

Duncan: Do they just pass you a joint? You walked through the door, they're just like, "Here!"

Audrius P.: Well, I wasn't looking for that, actually. I was looking at what they were teaching, not what they're consuming. To me, it was absolutely stunning. Every single city I went to from Boston to Vancouver, you walk in there and what's dominating was abstract expressionism. Everywhere. And I thought to myself, "Well, this is idiotic. Conceptual art is what I'm interested in and is taking off. I have absolutely no interest to waste spending time and money to learn something I absolutely don't want to do." Not that abstract impressionism is bad, but just not my future. And I couldn't believe the dogma of art in Canada, US, coast to coast. It stunned me. You have a dogma, now.

It's like going to a church, you know? You have to believe all the following things. Sorry. I'm not going to accept this stuff. I'll go out on my own and do it. So, I've been doing it independently my entire life, and that's the reason it started that way. It wasn't ... I did not intend it, but I just had to do it that way. Have there been limitations? Tremendous, yeah. World of art looks at, "Where's your MFA from?" And not having those credentials closes lots of doors.

And so, things have been limited in my own art world, in my own art career. Very much so. But you know, do you want ... at least, from my time, at that time period, I did not want the constraints of what the schools of art provided.

Ryan: Yeah. It's interesting that you refer to it as dogma, and I don't think that I would disagree with that. Going back to an earlier question about your art community, I think that is one of the things that I would say is the most valuable experience that I had from any of my art schooling. Is not what I learned, but the community that kind of got built to support me and my ideas, and how those get developed through conversations with other people that are doing similar critical thinking about visual culture. So, I completely understand. I'm currently in these weird conversations with students about, "Should I go to graduate school?"

And part of me wants to say, "Yes," and part of me really wants to say, "Definitely do not." Because of that dogma. But at the same time, I know that my embeddedness in art is in part because of this community that I've built. So, you chose to kind of walk into those schools, see it mostly as a visual response to what was being created, and walk away from that.

Is there part of you, though, that thinks that you would have enjoyed having that community of other artists to speak with, to share with, to develop your ideas?

Audrius P.: Oh, absolutely. Yes. Yes, that is a loss. That is correct.

Ryan: Okay. And do you seek that?

Audrius P.: Well, I have. We live on the south side of Chicago in the Beverly neighborhood. I've had a lot of contact with the local artists and have dealt with them. Oh yes, absolutely. But in terms of collaborative art projects, you know, outside of participating in group shows, I'm not actively creating art with somebody else. But I've tried to incorporate myself in our local community.

Brian Andrews: Beverly might be the new Oak Park. A lot of the old artists are moving all down there.

Duncan: Oak Park is still the new Oak Park.

Audrius P.: And Beverly does have an art walk every year which is wonderful.

Duncan: We do have a number of staff and faculty who live down in Beverly, so it ... I mean, we. No, it's Columbia College. I apologize. Yeah, but it is a thriving art community.

Ryan: So, we're coming to a close on the program. Audrius, I want to give you a chance to talk one more time about Cycles of Memory that's currently up at Stevanovich Institute. I know it closes on June 21st. But there's some pieces that will remain. Where can we find more information about the work currently?

Audrius P.: Well, if one wanted to visit it, it's available. It's on University of Chicago campus. Address is 5737 South University Avenue. The doors are open at regular business hours, basically 9-5 Monday through Friday. The-

Duncan: But we can see those light sculptures through the big atrium, right?

Audrius P.: Exactly.

Duncan: Any time!

Audrius P.: The light sculptures are visible 24/7, yeah. Particularly the four pieces that will be remaining. Those are the most prominent ones.

Brian Andrews: Is there any web addresses or anything, that people, if they had more information, like your website?

Audrius P.: Well, my own website. That's my last name. www.Plioplys.com.

Duncan: Nice. That's a good registration.

Ryan: And it's spelled exactly as we expect?

Audrius P.: Exactly the way you pronounced it.

Ryan: That is P-L-I-O-P-L-Y-S.

Audrius P.: Perfect.

Ryan: Got it. Nailed it the first time.

Brian Andrews: Dot com.

Ryan: Dot com. Well, guys. This has been a fabulous show. Thank you for joining us. Thank you Audrius.

Audrius P.: Thank you very much for having me.

Ryan: Have a great day.

Audrius P.: You too, thank you.

Speaker 1: You have been listening to Bad At Sports Center on WLPN 105.5 FM.

Speaker 2: Bad At Sports Center is brought to you by:

Speaker 3: Brian Andrews, Dana Bassett, Ryan Peter Miller, Jesse Malmed, and Duncan Mackenzie, AKA DJ Super Older Brother.

Speaker 2: Thanks to our friends at Lumpen Radio for all the support and airtime.

Speaker 1: If you want to hear this episode podcasted, or over 10 years of the oral history of contemporary art, check us out at badatsports.com.

Speaker 2: We'll see you on the other side, Chicago.