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DNA-mediated self-organization of polymeric nano-compartments leads to interconnected artificial organelles

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ABSTRACT. Self-organization of nano-components was mainly focused on solid nanoparticles, quantum dots or liposomes to generate complex architectures with specific properties, but intrinsically limited or not developed enough, to mimic sophisticated structures with biological functions in cells. Here, we present a biomimetic strategy to self-organize synthetic nano-compartments (polymersomes) into clusters with controlled properties and topology by exploiting DNA hybridization to interconnect polymersomes. Molecular- and external factors affecting the self-organization served to design clusters mimicking the connection of natural organelles: fine tune of the distance between tethered polymersomes, different topologies, no fusion of clustered polymersomes and no aggregation. Unexpected, extended DNA bridges that result from migration of the DNA strands inside the thick polymer membrane (about 12 nm) represent a key stability and control factor, not yet exploited for other synthetic nano-object

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3 networks. The replacement of the empty polymersomes with artificial organelles, already
4 reported for single polymersome architecture, will provide an excellent platform for the
5 development of artificial systems mimicking natural organelles or cells, and represents a
6 fundamental step in the engineering of molecular factories.
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14 KEYWORDS. self-organization, polymersome clusters, DNA functionalization, DNA migration,
15 membrane contact sites
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27 Self-organization is a process by which several components become ordered in space and/or
28 time according to interaction rules, and generally characterized by emergent properties that differ
29 from those of the single components. Almost all sophisticated biological functions and features
30 of cells are realized by self-organization.¹ The organization of the position and the connection
31 between organelles determines their functions: for example, the spatial relationship between
32 mammalian Golgi apparatus and the centrosomes changes during interphase and mitosis to
33 achieve distinct signal pathways and functional interactions.² In addition, the connection of
34 specific organelles by membrane contact sites (MCSs) plays a central role in signal
35 transduction,^{3,4} Ca²⁺ storage,^{5,6} monogenesis,⁷ and act as a widespread mechanism operating in
36 the cell's physiology and pathology.⁷⁻¹² A biomimetic approach to self-organize synthetic
37 compartments in order to achieve networks/clusters with a controlled spatial topology as in MCS
38 connected organelles is of huge scientific and technological importance to model sophisticated
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3 biological functions, and to mimic biological systems to create intelligent and “living” materials
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5 or technological devices with application for example in medicine or catalysis.
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8 Various solid nanoparticles (or nanorods), comprising mostly of inorganic materials have been
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10 organized into well-defined super-structures with emergent distinct and collective properties,^{13, 14}
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12 such as fine-tunable optical,^{15, 16} magnetic^{17, 18} and electrical^{19, 20} responses in comparison with
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14 those of the single nano-objects. Among all molecular moieties used for self-organization of
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16 nano-objects, DNA is considered as one of the most powerful tools that favors highly regulated
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18 and complex structures including superlattices,²¹⁻²⁴ colloidal molecules,^{25, 26} asymmetric
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20 nanoclusters^{27, 28} and chiral nanostructures.^{15, 29} The advantages of DNA arise from its
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22 remarkable inherent molecular recognition, feasible structural design by software, and rigid
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24 structure when hybridization takes place.³⁰⁻³² In addition, the self-assembly of small
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26 nanoparticles into larger structures has been reported to improve their *in vivo* tumor
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28 accumulation, and facilitates their elimination after enzymatic degradation of DNA linkage.³³
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34 Despite the aforementioned advantages, the self-organization of solid nanoparticles is only rarely
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36 exploited for biomimetic architectures due to the lack of an aqueous core and potential
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38 cytotoxicity.³⁴ Instead, nano-compartments comprising of liposomes or polymersomes are more
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40 appealing for biological applications and cell mimics upon self-organization because they can
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42 exhibit versatile functions by insertion of synthetic or biological molecules into their membrane
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44 and accommodating various active entities in their cavities.³⁵⁻³⁷ In this respect, we and others
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46 used polymersomes to design mimics of organelles by co-encapsulation of enzymes in tandem
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48 that were able to perform their activity inside the cavity of single polymersomes.^{36, 38} Up to now
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50 the design of artificial organelles has been focused on increasing the *in situ* complexity of the
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52 enzymatic reactions³⁵ or the inner morphology by polymersome-in-polymersome architectures.³⁹
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3 In addition, polymersomes have the advantages of a variety of properties (wall thickness,
4 polarity, non-toxicity or sensor-responsivity)³⁵ achieved by the chemical versatility of the
5 polymer blocks and an improved mechanic stability compared to their counterpart, the liposomes
6 (which contains intrinsic defects and can, depending on their composition, undergo membrane
7 fusion).⁴⁰⁻⁴² The increased stability of polymersomes is due to their significantly thicker
8 membrane (6 - 20 nm) compared to the one of liposomes (3 - 5 nm), which results from the huge
9 difference in the molecular mass between amphiphilic copolymers and lipids serving as building
10 blocks for the nano-compartments. Diverse micrometer-size organized structures based on
11 compartments have been realized by Pickering emulsion⁴³⁻⁴⁵ and microfluidics,⁴⁶ where the
12 biphasic system has to be exploited to stabilize the assembled structures. This limitation can be
13 overcome by linking the compartments in aqueous solution through molecular moieties such as
14 biotin–streptavidin⁴⁷ and DNA,⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ but the self-assembly process is poorly controlled, and leads
15 in various cases to the formation of large aggregates.^{48, 51} Templates are required in order to
16 control the geometry of such micrometer-size assembled structures.⁵²

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18 Here, we present a strategy for self-organization of synthetic nano-compartments with
19 controlled spatial topology based on the hybridization of complementary DNA strands exposed
20 at the surface of the compartments. In addition, as our aim is to take advantage of the intelligence
21 of nature in respect to organelles connected by MCSs, the self-organization of nano-
22 compartments has to fulfill various bio-related requirements: (i) a distance between nano-
23 compartments of up to 30 nm for mimicking the size of MCSs region between two organelles,^{12,}
24 ⁵³ (ii) prevent membrane fusion to preserve the individual organelles,^{12, 53} and (iii) avoid
25 aggregation. These requirements will select synthetic nano-compartments as ideal candidates
26 with properties mimicking those of biocompartments (stable and flexible membrane, hollow
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3 spherical architecture, preserved integrity upon self-organization), such as organelles or cells. To
4 fulfill the bio-related criteria results in a completely different approach compared with those used
5 when other nano-objects (nanoparticles, quantum dots or nanorods) have been self-organized
6 into networks.^{24, 32} To achieve this goal, we selected polymersomes as nano-compartments that
7 are generated by self-assembly of amphiphilic block copolymers, and which were functionalized
8 to expose binding sites at their surface for single-strand DNA (ssDNA) attachment. Upon mixing
9 of the complementary ssDNA-polymersomes, the hybridization serves to self-organize them into
10 spatial supramolecular topologies yet unreported for synthetic polymersomes.
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22 There are already advances in interconnecting liposomes or cell membranes via DNA
23 hybridization.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ We selected polymersomes instead of liposomes as nano-compartments to be
24 self-organized by DNA hybridization to take advantage of their mechanic stability, which will
25 favor translational applications. However, the significant difference in the membrane thickness
26 and thermodynamic properties of polymersomes compared with liposomes induces an increased
27 degree of difficulty in the self-organization process of polymersomes by DNA hybridization,
28 which prevents an extrapolation of the achievements already reported for interconnected
29 liposomes.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ For example, the lateral diffusion in a polymer membrane is more than one order
30 of magnitude lower than the one in a lipid membrane.⁵⁷ For a successful insertion of
31 biomolecules inside the synthetic membrane both the low lateral diffusion and the significant
32 hydrophobic mismatch have to be overcome by careful selection of the chemical nature of the
33 copolymers. Moreover, to control the self-organization process we selected completely synthetic
34 copolymers instead of copolymers that DNA serves as the hydrophilic block,^{58, 59} which does not
35 allow the modulation of the DNA surface distribution at the polymersomes surface, and might
36 assemble without a compartment-like architecture.^{58, 59}
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3 DNA provides high specific recognition between complementary ssDNA-polymersomes and
4 the rigid structure of double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) is intended to control the distance between
5 polymersomes up to 30 nm, suitable for mimicking MCSs. In addition, the dsDNA bridge
6 between polymersomes is intended to act as an isolation layer preventing membrane fusion.⁶⁰ We
7 evaluated the influence of various molecular- (DNA surface density and size of polymersomes)
8 and external factors (amount of polymersomes and hybridization temperature) on the self-
9 organization process of ssDNA-polymersomes to control the size of the resulting assemblies and
10 their topology. The difference between the flexibility of the polymersome membrane and the
11 intrinsic rigidity of nanoparticles induces a completely different scenario of the self-organization
12 process, resulting in clusters with properties mimicking biocompartments (flexible membrane,
13 stable hollow-sphere architecture). On the other hand, the reduced flexibility of the polymersome
14 membranes compared with lipid bilayers will prevent fusion, and mimic the natural organelle
15 integrity as compartments.
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34 In addition, the influence of molecular factors (surface density of ssDNA/polymersome,
35 flexibility of the synthetic membrane and size of the polymersomes), on the specific conditions
36 selected for development of our self-organized polymersomes prevents their aggregation,
37 resulting in a hierarchically controlled assembly. Such polymersome clusters present the unique
38 advantage over the reported networks of nano-objects to allow further development of reactions
39 inside their cavity, by using the artificial organelle models already reported for single
40 polymersomes.³⁵ Polymersome clusters represent an essential step in development of
41 interconnecting artificial organelles because they will topologically favor cascade reactions
42 between different polymersomes and support a biomimetic strategy that is specific for cell
43 signaling or interactions. In addition, our strategy based on synthetic nano-compartments instead
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3 of lipidic ones will serve for translational applications, which might be hindered by the intrinsic
4 instability of the lipid bilayers. The straightforward control over the self-organization process by
5 changing the DNA sequences exposed at the surface of polymersomes will serve for
6 development of more complex and multifunctional architectures.
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12 In order to obtain ssDNA-polymersomes, in situ modification of assembled polymersomes
13 with ssDNA through strain-promoted azide–alkyne cycloaddition (SPAAC) was performed. This
14 strategy avoids DNA pre-functionalization of the block copolymers, which would alter the ratio
15 between hydrophilic and hydrophobic blocks and thereby disturb the self-assembly process. In
16 order to generate polymersomes poly(2-methyloxazoline)-*block*-poly(dimethylsiloxane)-*block*-
17 poly(2-methyloxazoline) (PMOXA₇-PDMS₄₂-PMOXA₇) triblock copolymer and
18 poly(dimethylsiloxane)-*block*-poly(2-methyloxazoline) (PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃) diblock
19 copolymer were synthesized and mixed to self-assemble in dilute aqueous solution (Figure S1,
20 S2). The terminal azide group of the PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ copolymer enables the
21 linkage of the ssDNA *via* terminal dibenzocyclooctyne (DBCO) functionality. In addition, the
22 extended PMOXA part serves both to favor the azide accessibility for the reaction with DBCO-
23 ssDNA and as a spacer between the polymersome surface and the DNA to assure the
24 accessibility of the linked ssDNA for hybridization (Figure 1a,b), in a similar manner as the
25 spacer reported for DNA-functionalized nanoparticles.⁶¹
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46 To maximize the number of azides exposed at the external surface of polymersomes, whilst
47 avoiding to disturb the self-assembly process, PMOXA₇-PDMS₄₂-PMOXA₇ was mixed with
48 different amounts of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ (0.00, 0.25, 1.00, 5.00 and 10.00 mol %,
49 coded as P0, P0.25, P1, P5 and P10, respectively), and self-assembled by a film-rehydration
50 method.³⁶ Vesicular structures were observed in transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and
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3 cryo-TEM micrographs for initial molar contents of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ below or
4 equal to 5.00 mol % (Figure S3a-d, g). They have a hydrodynamic diameter (D_H) of 180 ± 60 nm
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6 (obtained by dynamic light scattering, DLS), independent of the molar fraction of PDMS₇₅-
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8 PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ (Table S1). These values are in agreement with the D_H values obtained by
9
10 analysis of the TEM micrographs (the slight difference being inherent for TEM and DLS
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12 methods). The morphology transitioned toward worms and micelles for PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-
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14 N₃ content of 10.00 mol%, whilst PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ formed rod-like micelles (Figure
15
16 S3e,f). We evaluated the molar ratio of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ in the polymersome
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18 membrane by coupling DBCO-PEG₄-Fluor 545 to the azide groups exposed at the polymersome
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20 surface through SPAAC. The brightness of DBCO-PEG₄-Fluor 545-coupled to polymersomes
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22 was compared with that of the free DBCO-PEG₄-Fluor 545. The average number of azide groups
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24 per polymersome for P0.25, P1 and P5 was determined as: 21 ± 1 , 45 ± 5 to 121 ± 7 , which
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26 corresponds to 0.2, 0.3 and 0.9 mol % of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ present in the membrane
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28 (Table S2).
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36 Subsequently, P0.25, P1 and P5 were post-functionalized through SPAAC with 22-mers of
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38 dibenzocyclooctyl-terminated ssDNA (ssDNAa) or the complementary strand (ssDNAb) (Figure
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40 1b). A maximum yield of conversion was reached after 2 days, and no further significant
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42 increase was achieved by extending the reaction time (Figure S4). The reaction rate for the
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44 present system is lower than reported elsewhere⁶² for two reasons: (i) due to the click reaction
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46 being constrained to the polymersome surface and (ii) due to low content of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-
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48 PEG₃-N₃ in the polymersomes, desired to avoid disruption of the polymersome architecture and
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50 overpopulation with DNA. Both ssDNAa and ssDNAb were successfully bound to all P0.25 - P5
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52 polymersomes, with coupling yields ranging from 27 % to 75 % of the initial azide-group
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3 amount (Table S1). The conjugation of ssDNAa to the polymersomes was proven by agarose gel
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5 electrophoresis where the appearance of a new band after cycloaddition reaction corresponds to
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7 the fraction of ssDNA bound to polymersomes (Figure S5). The variation of the coupling yields
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9 results from a combination of molecular factors, such as distribution of the surface density of the
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11 azide groups, their accessibility for SPAAC reaction, and the number of polymersomes
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13 present/solution volume. In addition, the increase of the content of PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃
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15 induces the appearance of a minor population of micelles by self-assembly instead of co-
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17 assembly with PMOXA₇-PDMS₄₂-PMOXA₇. This hinders the expected increase of the number
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19 of azide groups exposed on the polymersome surface, resulting in a lower coupling yield for
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21 ssDNA on P5 (Table S1).
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27 However, the increase of DNA density on polymersomes surface from P0.25-ssDNAa to P5-
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29 ssDNAa is clearly indicated by the raise of the respective zeta-potential values from -3.7 ± 1.0
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31 mV to -9.2 ± 1.3 mV (Table S1). No influence on the polymersome morphology or size was
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33 observed after DNA functionalization both by TEM and DLS (Figure 1c, Figure S6, Table S1).
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37 In order to evaluate the average ssDNA number per polymersome and to determine the
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39 distribution of the DNA surface density (σ), the hybridization of atto550-labelled complementary
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41 ssDNA (atto550-ssDNAb) with ssDNAa on the polymersomes was investigated by FCS (Figure
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43 1b,d). The significant increase of the diffusion time of the free atto550-ssDNAb ($\tau_D = 0.1$ ms) to
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45 values of 4.3 ± 0.2 , 4.7 ± 0.2 and 5.3 ± 0.8 ms for atto550-ssDNAb hybridized to P0.25-ssDNAa,
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47 P1-ssDNAa and P5-ssDNAa, respectively, indicates successful hybridization of the
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49 complementary ssDNAb to the ssDNAa exposed at the surface of polymersomes. Similarly,
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51 atto647N-ssDNAa was hybridized to ssDNAb-functionalized polymersomes (Table S3). In both
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53 cases the hybridization of the complementary ssDNA to the ssDNA-polymersomes did not affect
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3 the polymersome architecture (Figure S7). No unspecific binding of atto550-ssDNAb to P5
4 polymersomes or of atto647N-ssDNAa to P5-ssDNAa was observed by FCS analysis 12 hours
5 after mixing (Table S3). The average number of ssDNA per polymersome obtained by brightness
6 measurements was calculated by dividing the CPM of fluorescently labeled ssDNA hybridized to
7 polymersomes with the CPM corresponding to the free fluorescently labeled ssDNA (Table S3).
8 The number of ssDNA per polymersome increased from 14 ± 1 for P0.25-ssDNAa to 93 ± 2 for
9 P5-ssDNAa, and from 18 ± 2 for P0.25-ssDNAb to 127 ± 9 for P5-ssDNAb, respectively,
10 depending on the amount of azide groups present on the polymersomes surface. The number of
11 ssDNA/polymersome corresponds to an average σ value from 0.1 to 1.2 strands per 1000 nm^2
12 (Table S3). Note that the low values of the surface density of the ssDNA/polymersome were
13 selected to avoid DNA repulsive interactions, and preserve the polymersome architecture yet still
14 allowing hybridization.
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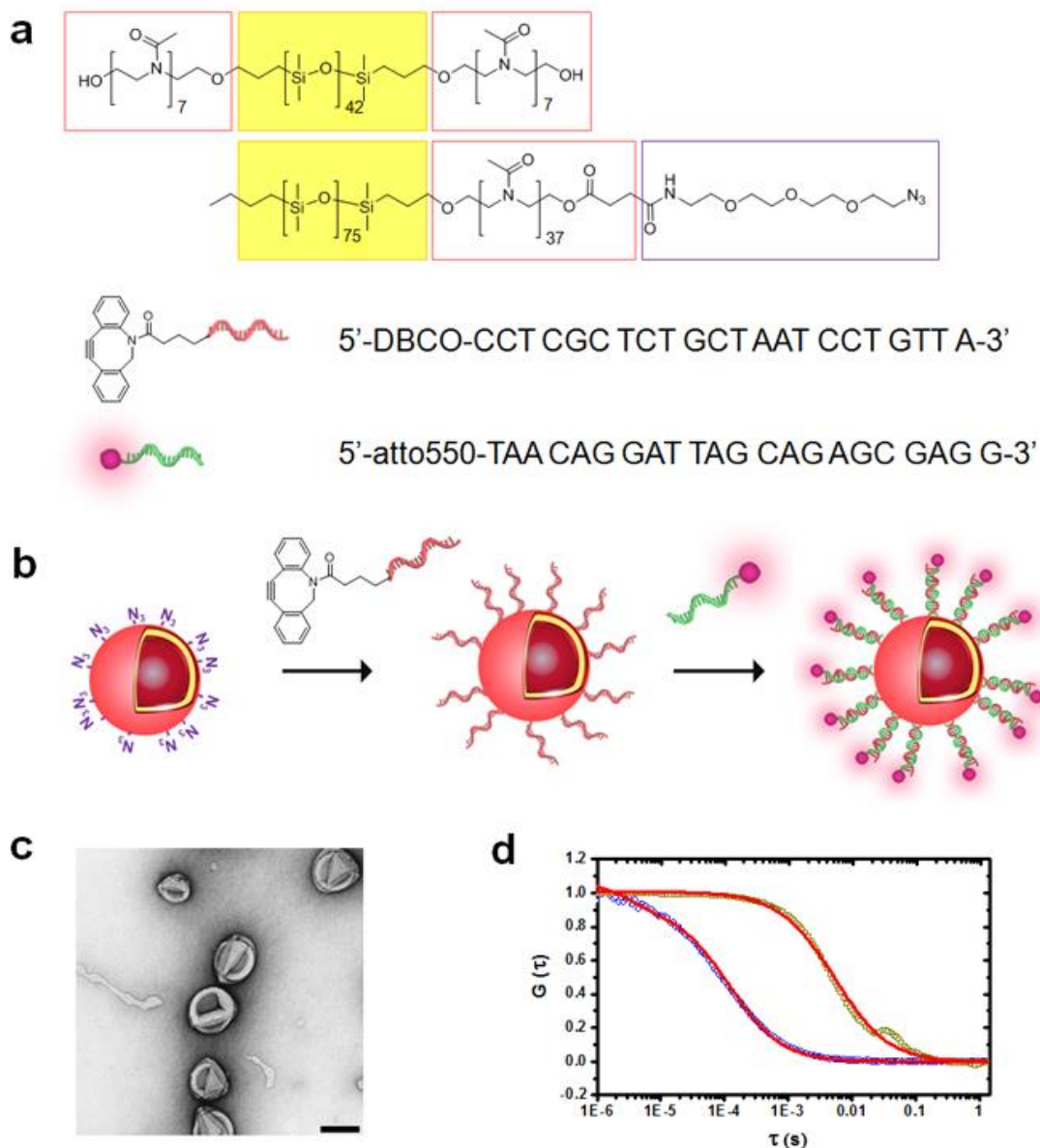


Figure 1. DNA-functionalized polymersomes. (a) Chemical structures of PMOXA₇-PDMS₄₂-PMOXA₇ and PDMS₇₅-PMOXA₃₇-PEG₃-N₃ and the sequences of ssDNAa and atto550-ssDNAb. (b) Schematic representation of polymersomes with azide groups on the surface, to which ssDNAa is bound, and further hybridized with atto550-ssDNAb. (c) TEM micrograph of P5-ssDNAa, the scale bar is 200 nm. (d) Normalized FCS autocorrelation curves of atto550-ssDNAb (20 nM, blue) and atto550-ssDNAb hybridized to P5-ssDNAa (dark yellow) with their respective fits (red).

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3 In order to explore the DNA mediated self-organization of ssDNA-polymersomes, P0.25, P1
4 and P5 were mixed in equal volume fractions with the respective complementary polymersomes,
5 hybridized at 37 °C and characterized by a combination of DLS and TEM (Figure 2). A rapid
6 increase of D_H to a plateau was observed, indicating the self-organization of polymersomes in
7 clusters by DNA hybridization for all ssDNA-polymersomes mixed with their complementary
8 ssDNA-polymersomes (Figure 2b). Interestingly, polymersomes self-organized into sub-
9 micrometer sized clusters (a major population of small clusters and a minor one of bigger
10 clusters), and no aggregation was observed in time (Figure 2d), contrary to previous reported
11 aggregates of DNA-liposomes⁵¹. An apparent D_H of 290 ± 100 nm was measured for P5-ssDNAa
12 - P5-ssDNAb clusters (P5-ab) at equilibrium by DLS ($n = 5$, Figure S8c). The hybridization
13 temperature of 37 °C was chosen to be well below the DNA's melting temperature of 67 °C
14 (Figure S9) and to demonstrate the cluster formation under physiological conditions. Note that
15 the relatively high distribution of the apparent values of the D_H is due to the intrinsic size
16 distribution of polymersomes (Table S1). This appealing architecture of small clusters is exactly
17 the desired one, when internalization of such clusters into cells is intended to develop
18 translational applications.
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41 The distribution of the number of polymersomes per cluster determined from a statistical
42 analysis of TEM micrographs (Figure S10, S11, $n = 200$) corresponds to a binomial distribution.
43 An average number of 2.2 ± 1.5 , 2.0 ± 1.3 and 1.7 ± 1.1 polymersomes/cluster was calculated for
44 P5-ab, P1-ab and P0.25-ab, respectively. The number of free polymersomes decreases with time;
45 after 6 hours, an unbound fraction of 33 ± 8 % was present for P0.25, whilst for P1 and P5 this
46 fraction was 21 ± 11 % and 11 ± 7 %, respectively (Figure S11).
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3 In order to evaluate the influence of molecular- (σ value and size of polymersomes) and
4 external- factors (the amount of polymersomes and temperature) on the self-organization
5 process, the change in apparent D_H of clusters with respect to time was fitted by a double-
6 exponential function (Figure 2b,c, eq 1, Supporting Information). Two rate constants (a fast k_1
7 and a slow k_2 defined according to eq 2, Supporting Information) indicate the occurrence of two
8 different stages during the organization process (Table S4). In the initial stage, polymersomes
9 underwent a rapid self-organization with a short dwell time ($t_1 = 0.12$ s, 0.16 s, and 0.21s for P5-
10 ab, P1-ab and P0.25-ab). The increase of the σ value of polymersomes (from P0.25-ab to P5-ab)
11 accelerated the initial self-organization step, as indicated by a higher k_1 value for P5-ab ($k_1 =$
12 8.33 s⁻¹), in comparison with the values corresponding to P0.25-ab and P1-ab clusters ($k_1 = 6.25$
13 s⁻¹ for P1-ab, and $k_1 = 4.76$ s⁻¹ for P0.25-ab). This behavior results from the increased probability
14 of interaction between complementary ssDNA-polymersomes with an increased number of
15 ssDNA/polymersome.

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34 In order to investigate how the polymersome concentration affects the cluster formation, the
35 polymersome solution was diluted 5 times prior to hybridization. The number of
36 polymersomes/solution volume induced a slight reduction of k_1 (from 8.33 s⁻¹ to 5.55 s⁻¹), whilst
37 k_2 was not affected. The decrease of the number of polymersomes in solution is expected to
38 decrease the probability of their interaction, and consequently the k_1 value for the fast step of the
39 self-organization process. A significant decrease of k_1 was observed when either the temperature
40 for the formation of P5-ab was reduced from 37 °C to 25 °C or when the polymersome diameter
41 was reduced from 180 ± 60 nm to 110 ± 30 nm (Table S4). The reduced hybridization
42 temperature resulted in an expected decrease of k_1 (from 5.55 s⁻¹ to 0.18 s⁻¹) and ended with the
43 same size of clusters as when formed at 37 °C (Figure 2c, magenta vs cyan curves). The latter
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3 effect has as its main cause the difference in the number of ssDNA/polymersome when their size
4 is reduced. As expected, the size of the polymersome clusters decreased when the concentrations
5 of polymersomes, available for hybridization, was reduced five times (Figure 2c, grey and cyan
6 curves).
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12 The second step of the self-organization process is characterized by a plateau in D_H values
13 with a low rate of cluster formation. k_2 values are significantly lower than k_1 values for all
14 polymersomes with no obvious dependence on the σ value, the size of polymersomes, the
15 polymersome concentration or the temperature (Table S4). The plateau indicates a stabilization
16 of the size of the clusters, and explains the lack of aggregation, which has been observed for
17 DNA-liposomes⁶³. This interesting stabilization of small clusters results from the specificity of
18 conditions for the self-organization process based on relatively low number of
19 ssDNA/polymersomes. Various other molecular factors, such as the concentration of
20 complementary ssDNA-polymersomes in the mixture, and the distribution of the DNA surface
21 density play a role in the formation of such small clusters and lack of aggregation. Both a
22 reduced number of ssDNA-polymersomes and a fraction of polymersomes with low number or
23 no DNA/polymersome decrease the probability of interaction between complementary ssDNA-
24 polymersomes, and therefore represent “dilution” factors limiting the formation of clusters in the
25 second step of the self-organization process.
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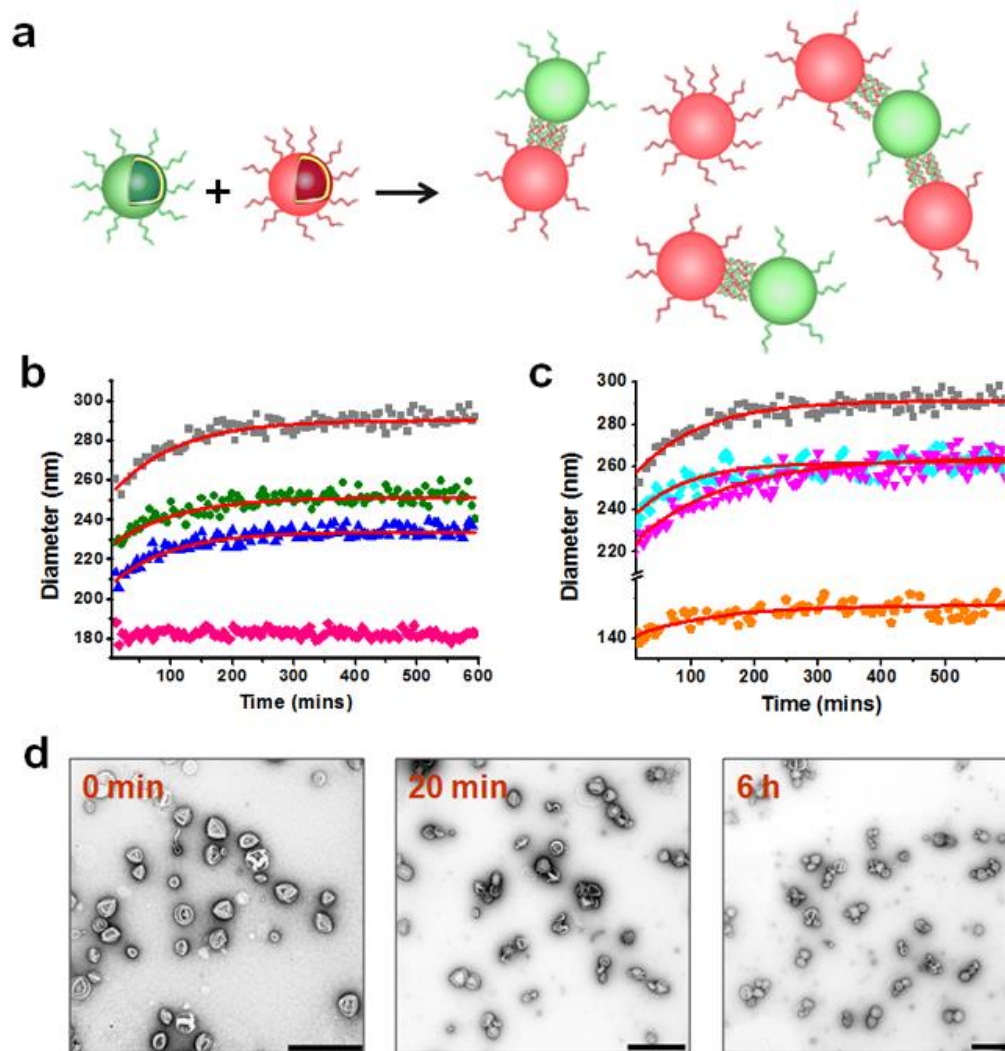


Figure 2. Self-assembly of complementary ssDNA-polymersomes into clusters. (a) Schematic representation of ssDNA-polymersome assembly by DNA hybridization; (b) Self-organization processes of P5-ab (gray), P1-ab (green), P0.25-ab (blue) and free ssDNAa-polymersomes (pink) by change of D_H as a function of the time at 37 °C. (c) Illustration of the self-organization process of P5-ab at five times more diluted polymersome concentration (compared to the grey trace) at 37 °C (cyan), at 25 °C (magenta) and with a size of 110 ± 30 nm at 37 °C (orange) by reporting the change of D_H as a function of the time. The curves were fitted by a double-

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3 exponential function (red lines). (d) Self-organization of P5-ab at 0 min, after 20 min and after 6
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6 h, monitored by TEM. The scale bars are 1000 nm.
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9 In order to obtain more insight into the molecular factors favoring the self-organization process,
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11 the assembled clusters were analyzed by cryo-TEM (Figure S12). Unexpectedly, the growth of
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13 polymersome clusters induced a deformation of the polymeric membrane of interconnected
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15 ssDNA-polymersomes. The micrographs revealed the formation of an extended region of DNA
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17 bridges between interconnected polymersomes. This observation suggests that the initial binding
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19 of two complementary polymersomes is followed by a migration of DNA bearing polymer
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21 chains within the membrane. Such migration is supported by the flexibility of the PMOXA-
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23 PDMS-PMOXA polymersome membrane, with high lateral diffusion coefficients for polymer
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25 chains inside the membrane.⁶⁴ The concentration of DNA strands to form extended bridge
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27 domains between the interacting polymersomes represents a completely different phenomenon,
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29 not previously observed for other DNA-based networks/assemblies (e.g. nanoparticles⁶⁵) where
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31 the position of the ssDNA is fixed by specific binding sites. In addition, such migration of the
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33 DNA strands is expected to induce an inhomogeneous distribution of the ssDNA/polymersome
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35 surface with a significant decrease of the number of DNA strands present at surface regions
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37 opposite to the binding region. This migration induced asymmetry in the DNA distribution on
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39 clustered polymersomes is one of the key factors hindering further growth of the clusters. It has
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41 been proposed in the case of nanoparticle assemblies that increasing elastic repulsive forces
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43 between linked nanoparticles and their oscillation towards different directions might induce
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45 instability of the assemblies.^{66, 67} However, in case of the very flexible membrane of our
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47 polymersomes the described membrane deformation is not leading to polymersome rupture and
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49 does therefore not affect the stability of the formed clusters. However, the repulsive forces
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3 between the negatively charged phosphate groups in the DNA backbone are expected to play a
4 role in determining the final size of the clusters. Together with the other molecular factors
5 mentioned above it becomes evident that the process of DNA mediated polymersome cluster
6 formation is rather complex. Further experiments are planned to understand and reveal the details
7 of the self-organization process and the role of molecular factors in directing the clustering
8 towards a specific topology.
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18 In nature, it is fundamental to colocalize specific compartments (organelles) in a defined
19 spatial organization to accomplish specific metabolic pathways and cell functions. In order to
20 direct the self-organization of polymersomes we exploited two driving forces, DNA
21 hybridization and steric hindrance created by different sized polymersomes. It has been
22 demonstrated that steric hindrance is a key factor directing the assembly of particles into specific
23 configuration.⁶⁸ Two distinctly different ssDNA-polymersome populations, one with a diameter
24 of 180 ± 60 nm and a second one with a diameter of 110 ± 30 nm, were selected in order to
25 create different steric hindrance (Figure 3a). For the visualization of the resulting clusters,
26 atto488 and DY-633 dyes were encapsulated in P5-ssDNA_b and P5-ssDNA_a (P5-ssDNA_b-
27 atto488, P5-ssDNA_a-DY-633), respectively. The assembled clusters were immobilized on amino
28 functionalized glass slides at pH 7.4 by electrostatic interaction between the negatively charged
29 DNA backbone and the positively charged amino-glass surface. The immobilization of the
30 clusters did not lead to any observable polymersome rupture and allowed to record confocal laser
31 scanning microscopy (CLSM) images to reveal the different cluster configurations by their
32 respective fluorescence patterns. (Figure 3c,e). When complementary ssDNA-polymersomes
33 with a diameter of 180 ± 60 nm were mixed in an equal mass ratio, only clusters with a D_H of
34 290 ± 100 nm and no large aggregates were observed by DLS after reaching the equilibrium
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3 (Figure S13c). Small chains of 2 - 4 polymersomes (2.2 ± 1.5 ; $n = 200$) were observed by TEM
4 and CLSM (Figure 3b,c). The relatively high polydispersity of the D_H of the assembled clusters
5 can be explained by the dispersity of the polymersomes' D_H and the number of the assembled
6 polymersomes. A completely different topology was observed by TEM and CLSM when
7 nonequivalently sized polymersomes were hybridized: 2 - 6 small polymersomes (3.8 ± 1.9 ; $n =$
8 230) hybridized onto the surface of a large polymersome, resembling a satellite like organization
9 around a distinct central polymersome (Figure 3d,e, Figure S14). In addition, the electrostatic
10 repulsive forces generated by DNA on the surrounding small polymersomes result in a large
11 separation between individual satellites without any signs of uncontrolled aggregation (DLS:
12 Figure S13e, TEM: Figure 3d). The distinct cluster topologies and the characteristics of the
13 building blocks used to assemble them identifies steric hindrance, electrostatic repulsion and
14 polymer chain migration as major driving forces behind the cluster architectures. The assembly
15 of linear clusters is driven by polymer chain migration whereas the satellite configuration is
16 governed by steric hindrance and electric repulsion between neighboring satellites.
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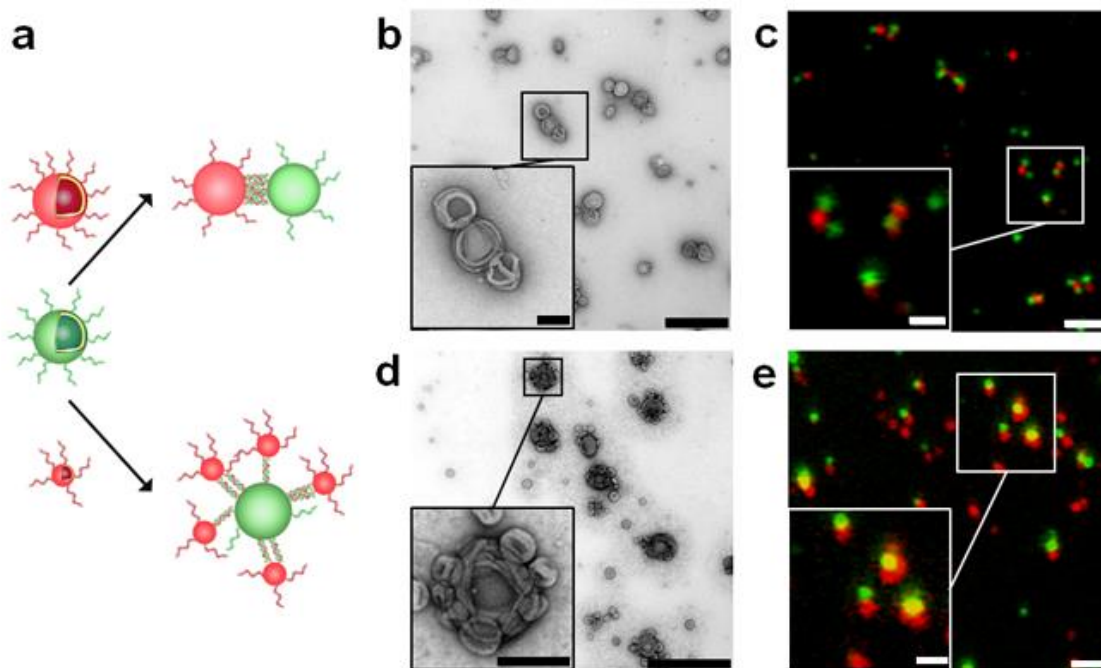


Figure 3. Self-organization of complementary ssDNA-polymersomes. (a) Schematic representation of distinct spatial topology resulting from mixing differently sized complementary ssDNA-polymersomes. TEM and CLSM micrographs of chain-like (b, c) and satellite-like polymersome clusters (d, e). The scale bar for TEM micrographs is 1000 nm and 200 nm in the inset, in CLSM micrographs it is 2000 nm and 1000 nm in the inset.

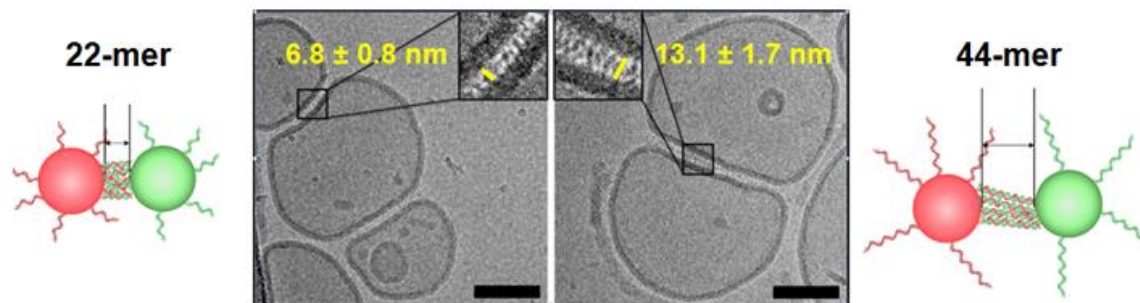
The spatial distance between ssDNA-polymersomes was manipulated by the length of ssDNA on the polymersomes exploiting the rigid nature of dsDNA⁶⁹ (Figure 4). Complementary ssDNA with a length of either 22- or 44-mer were coupled to large P5 (180 ± 60 nm), and subsequently hybridized. The distances between ssDNA-polymersomes sustained by 22-mer dsDNA and 44-mer dsDNA were determined as 6.8 ± 0.8 nm and 13.1 ± 1.7 nm by the analysis of cryo-TEM images (Figure 4, $n=132$), in good agreement with the theoretical values of 7.48 nm and 14.96 nm assuming 3.4 nm per 10 base pairs,⁷⁰ respectively. Detailed image analysis of the region of the bridges between connected polymersomes revealed the presence of dark thin bands, which

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3 can be associated with the dsDNA strands.⁷¹ Mean distance between them was estimated as: 5.83
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5 ± 1.81 nm, in agreement with the value of 5.29 nm, which has been theoretically obtained based
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8 on a length of the DNA strand with 22-mer of 7.48 nm, and the hypothesis of a homogeneous
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10 distribution of DNA (Supplementary Information). We obtained the number of dark bands
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12 corresponding to dsDNA strands as 15.7 ± 2.2 (four connected polymersomes were measured).
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14 The mean value of the radius of the contact area between two connected polymersomes was
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16 measured as $R = 37.6 \pm 3.35$ nm, which corresponds to a circular contact area of 4442 ± 35.3
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18 nm^2 . The resulting density of DNA strands/contact area was obtained as 13.9 DNA strands/1000
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20 nm^2 (with the hypothesis of homogeneous distribution of the DNA strands), which is one order
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22 of magnitude higher than the average σ value from 0.1 to 1.2 strands per 1000 nm^2 (obtained for
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24 uncoupled ssDNA-polymersomes). This huge difference in the density of DNA strands before
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26 and after the formation of the bridges clearly indicates the migration of the DNA strands to
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28 support the polymersomes coupling. In order to determine the density of dsDNA in the bridge
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30 region we calculated the force responsible for the polymersomes deformation upon their
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32 coupling via DNA hybridization (in the limit of small deformations), and divided it by the force
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34 corresponding to the formation of hydrogen bonds in a dsDNA strand with 22-mer
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36 (Supplementary Information). We obtained a maximum density of DNA strands/contact area of
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38 16.2 DNA strands/1000 nm^2 . Both the calculated value of the DNA density in the contact region
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40 based on cryo-TEM micrographs analysis, and that obtained from a simple model of elastic
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42 deformation of the polymersomes indicate a significant migration of the DNA strands to form the
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44 bridges between the connected polymersomes.
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53 The deformation of the membrane upon cluster formation does not induce membrane rupture,
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55 and the polymersomes preserve their overall architecture inside the clusters with the
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3 encapsulated fluorescent dyes well separated in distinct cavities, as observed by a combination of
4 cryo-TEM and CLSM (Figure 3, Figure 4). To determine whether the hybridization of ssDNA-
5 polymersomes induces membrane fusion between the respective polymersomes we mixed
6 ssDNA-polymersomes containing a fluorescent dye in a self-quenching concentration with
7 complementary ssDNA-polymersomes containing only PBS (Figure S15, Figure S16). When
8 ssDNA-polymersomes containing self-quenched sulforhodamine B (SRB, 25 mM) were mixed
9 with the complementary ones without dye, no increase of the fluorescence was observed after 5
10 days. Therefore, the clusters were stable for several days, with no leakage of the encapsulated
11 content and no mixing of their content as it might result from their fusion. FRET analysis
12 indicated the hybridization of DNA strands upon formation of clusters (Figure S17).
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27 In comparison with polymersome aggregates linked by β -cyclodextrin and azobenzene, which
28 undergo membrane fusion,^{72, 73} the stability of DNA-polymersome clusters indicates that DNA
29 acts not only as a linker to connect the polymersomes and to control the spatial distance, but also
30 generates a protective layer, preventing efficiently the fusion of the polymeric membranes. This
31 is an exciting property because it will allow encapsulation of different catalysts (enzymes,
32 mimics) inside each type of polymersome to perform reactions either inside the polymersome or
33 between different polymersomes from the same cluster (appropriately permeabilized to allow
34 exchange of molecules) to gain multifunctionality in a controlled manner.
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3 **Figure 4.** Schematic representation and cryo-TEM micrographs of DNA-polymersome clusters
4 connected by 22-mer (left) and 44-mer (right) dsDNA, resembling the neuronal gap. The scale
5 bars are 100 nm.
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11 Self-organization of nano-objects is a key tool to generate complex networks with novel
12 topology and properties. We were interested to go one step further in using this process by
13 adding new properties in a biomimetic approach based on connected organelles inside cells,
14 known as essential super-structures involved in various metabolic processes. Our strategy
15 consists in self-organizing artificial nano-compartments, specifically polymersomes composed of
16 a completely synthetic membrane, in a controlled manner to mimic the organization of organelles
17 with MCSs, and generate clusters with a topology according to design. By selecting DNA as the
18 linkage molecule to drive the self-organization between polymersomes, the clusters generated by
19 self-organization of complementary ssDNA-polymersomes exhibit features for mimicking
20 connected organelles, such as high stability, no membrane fusion, no aggregation, and control
21 over the distance between polymersomes due to the rigid feature of dsDNA. Interestingly,
22 extended DNA bridges that result from the migration of the DNA strands inside the thick flexible
23 polymersome membrane (about 12 nm thick) were revealed in the gap between connected
24 polymersomes by cryo-TEM micrographs. They generate an asymmetry in the DNA distribution
25 at the surface of polymersomes, and represent an important factor to stabilize and control the
26 architecture and size of clusters, which has not yet been exploited for other synthetic nano-
27 objects networks. Interfacing polymersomes by reorganization of DNA strands to generate
28 extended bridges is expected to allow further development of complex architectures by the play
29 between compact and incompact DNA distribution together with the length and surface density
30 of the DNA strands.
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3 In addition, by using artificial organelles (resulting from encapsulation/co-encapsulation of
4 active compounds inside the clustered polymersomes) instead of empty polymersomes makes
5 them ideal candidates for further development of in situ cascade reactions between different ones
6 that cannot be achieved within other networks/clusters of nano-objects, such as nanoparticles,
7 micelles or nanorods. This is a unique advantage for the development of novel materials
8 exhibiting biomimetic features inside their hierarchical organization and a controlled architecture
9 based on the straightforward change of molecular factors affecting the organization process (size
10 of polymersome, surface density of DNA/polymersome, length of DNA strands, concentration).
11 For example, these small ssDNA-polymersome clusters can be further optimized to provide by
12 their architecture a highly promising platform for further cell mimicking such as emulation of the
13 synaptic gap, signal transduction and Ca^{2+} storage considering the negative nature of DNA. In
14 addition, our strategy provides control over the cluster formation by changing the DNA sequence
15 in terms of size and specificity, in order to gain more complex architectures.
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34 Spatial organization and arrangement of such DNA-polymersomes with different functions in a
35 defined order is of essential significance both for mimicking the integration of organelles in
36 living cells, and for further development of translational applications, required in domains such
37 as medicine, catalysis and, technology.
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45 ASSOCIATED CONTENT
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48 **Supporting Information**

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52 Material and Methods and supplementary figures and tables. This material is available free of
53 charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.
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11 **Author Contributions**
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15 J.L. contributed to the clusters formation and characterization, and the writing of the
16 manuscript; V.P. contributed to the writing the manuscript; S.L. contributed to triblock
17 copolymer synthesis and characterization, and the writing of the manuscript; J.L., V.P., S.L.
18 contributed to the preparation of graphics; D.W. contributed to functionalized copolymer
19 synthesis and DNA binding to polymersomes; M.C. contributed to Cryo-TEM experiments;
20 W.M. contributed to synthesis of copolymers and writing the manuscript, and C.G.P. contributed
21 to the self-organization concept and writing of the manuscript.
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32 **Notes**
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35 The authors declare no competing financial interests.
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