# Noncontact Layer Stabilization of Azafullerene Radicals: Route toward High-Spin-Density Surfaces

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# Non-contact layer stabilization of azafullerene radicals: route towards high-spin-density surfaces

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**Keywords:** azafullerene, radicals, qubit, scanning tunnelling microscopy, near edge X-ray absorption fine structure spectroscopy, density functional calculation

**Abstract**

We deposit azafullerene $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radicals in vacuum on Au(111) surface for layer thicknesses between 0.35-2.1 monolayers (ML). The layers are characterized using X-ray photoemission (XPS) and X-ray absorption fine structure (NEXAFS) spectroscopy, low-temperature scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) and by density functional calculations (DFT). The singly unoccupied $C_{59}N$ orbital (SUMO) has been identified in the N 1s NEXAFS/XPS spectra of $C_{59}N$ layers as the spectroscopic fingerprint of the molecular radical state. At low molecular coverages (up to 1 ML), films of monomeric $C_{59}N$ are stabilized with the non-bonded carbon orbital neighboring the nitrogen oriented towards the Au substrate, whereas in-plane intermolecular coupling into diamagnetic $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimers takes over towards the completion of the 2$^{nd}$ layer. By following the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ SUMO peak intensity with increasing molecular

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coverage, we identify a novel intermediate high-spin-density phase between 1 and 2 ML, where uncoupled $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers in the 2nd layer with pronounced radical character are formed. We argue that the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radical stabilization of this supramonolayer phase of monomers is achieved by suppressed coupling to the substrate. This results from molecular isolation on top of the passivating azafullerene contact layer, which opens further ideas for molecular radical state stabilization and positioning on solid substrates.

## Introduction

Organic radicals – organic compounds possessing one or more unpaired electrons in their electronic ground state – are usually thought of as transient or unstable species, since their unpaired electrons are highly reactive. However, their stability can be significantly improved by either sterically protecting the unpaired electron sites (for example with bulky side groups), or by increasing the delocalization of the unpaired electrons over several atoms.[1] Such stable molecular radicals are, for example, considered as a simple platform to encode bits in the limits of quantum physics (qubits)[2] or are a potential route for the design of novel synthetic and catalytic processes.[3] One candidate for robust organic molecular radicals is azafullerene $C_{59}N$,[4] where one nitrogen replaces a carbon atom in the fullerene skeleton. Due to valence inequality between N and C, $C_{59}N$ is a closed-cage hetero-fullerene radical, where the odd electron resides on the carbon neighboring the substitutional nitrogen.[5] However, due to their high reactivity, it readily forms closed shell dimers $(C_{59}N)_2$ [5] or $C_{59}HN$ [6] in the bulk phase. The spin-active radical species can then be accessed by thermolysis or photolysis of the parent $(C_{59}N)_2$ [7−11] as the two $C_{59}N$ units are weakly bound by ~0.78 eV, but they nevertheless show high reactivity to ultra-rapid re-dimerization (under inert conditions) or oxidation (in ambient environment).

From the perspective of molecular qubit applications, any complex architecture of molecular qubits needs to be ultimately placed in some 2D network, and molecular spin

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manipulation on solid substrates appears to be the next necessary step.[12] The stability of molecular spins then decisively relies on particular interaction with the surface and suppressed intermolecular coupling that prevents formation of non-magnetic oligomer or polymer assemblies. Similar requirements may be defined also for the radical catalytic reactions. Multilayers of azafullerenes on solid substrates have been previously realized in ultra-high vacuum (UHV) by thermal deposition of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers, but the formed layers have been found predominantly in their stable diamagnetic $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer entities.[13] Early studies of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ on reactive Si(111)-(7x7) and Si(100)-(1x2) surfaces indicate that almost no dimerization takes place at submonolayer coverage, proving that azafullerene sublimes as $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers by UHV thermal deposition, yet no direct spectroscopic evidence of the radical character of such monomers on Si was given.[14–16]

Similarly, $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer stabilization was reported for azafullerene monolayers on Cu(111), where strong binding to the substrate was observed.[17] In fact, significant charge transfer from Cu to $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ was reported for the contact layer,[17] which stabilizes monomers over dimers on Cu(111) and at the same time completely quenches the radical character of the azafullerene monomers.

The choice of Au(111) is expected to provide a substrate with sufficiently weak interaction to avoid covalent bonding with $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ and thus preserve the radical state of azafullerenes. In fact, for a similar organic system – 1,2,4-benzotriazin-4-yl radical (Blatter radical) – the radical character of single Blatter molecules could be retained on Au(111), as proven by near edge X-ray absorption fine structure (NEXAFS) spectroscopy[18] and scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) identification of Kondo resonance.[19]

Here, we present a comprehensive experimental and theoretical study of ultrathin azafullerene films deposited in UHV on Au(111) surface. From X-ray photoemission (XPS)

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and NEXAFS spectroscopy we determine the azafullerene coupling and the radical state in films up to 2 monolayers (ML) thickness. Supported by DFT results, we find the direct spectroscopic fingerprint of the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radical state in the nitrogen K-edge NEXAFS, as the occurrence of a singly unoccupied molecular orbital (SUMO) lying close to the Fermi level. Analysis of NEXAFS and the complementary low-temperature topographic STM images prove that initially $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers form hexagonally packed islands where individual azafullerenes orient towards the Au(111) surface with their non-bonded carbon orbital neighboring the nitrogen. The radical character of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer films is elucidated from the analysis of NEXAFS and shake-up structures in the N 1s XPS peak, i.e., photoelectron energy losses due to highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) to lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) excitations. Site selective charge transfer between $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers and Au substrate is found for the monolayer films as the contact strength between monomers and Au substrate varies within the azafullerene islands due to their lattice mismatch with Au(111). Finally, we discover a novel high-density radical phase for the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ supramonolayer (ML+) phase at coverage between 1-2 ML, where $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers are isolated on top of the 1st layer. These molecules exhibit the largest SUMO peak intensity in the NEXAFS spectra and give insight in the nature of efficient stabilization of molecular radicals and their spins.

**Results and Discussion**

Topographic STM images of deposited $C_{59}N$ material on Au(111) surface reveal two-dimensional islands of hexagonally packed azafullerenes that start to grow at the step edges of the Au substrate (Fig.1a). These islands are orientationally commensurate with the Au(111) with close packed rows of molecules aligned with the rows of Au surface atoms running along [0-11], [-110], and [10-1], respectively. A line profile along [0-11] has a height difference of

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~6-8 Å with the substrate (Fig. 1b) showing that the observed island of $C_{59}N$ is a monolayer. Measured average center-to-center ball distances along the three different principal directions are 10.2 Å, 10.4 Å, and 10.3 Å (Fig.1b, Fig.S1b), respectively. These distances are considerably longer compared to the $(C_{59}N)_2$ intradimer center-to-center distance of 9.41 Å and are comparable to interdimer center-to-center distances of 9.81 Å and 10.11 Å in $(C_{59}N)_2$ solid.[20] This suggests that the interaction between the electron in the frontier molecular orbital with the Au surface and π-π interaction between azafullerenes defines the hexagonal packing of the islands as well as their relative orientation.

The interaction of adsorbed $C_{59}N$ with the Au(111) most likely proceeds with the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ non-bonded carbon orbital neighboring the nitrogen that is oriented towards the Au surface. Our NEXAFS experiments as well as DFT calculations presented below indeed confirm this. Interestingly, careful examination of low-temperature STM images suggest that $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ bonded to the substrate are not uniformly adsorbed at the same orientation, nor at a uniform height from Au surface (insets to Fig. 1a). The difference in the Au–C contact angle measured against the normal to the Au surface (Fig. 1c) results in at least two different orbital shapes, holding a 3-fold and 2-fold symmetry, when observed from the top. The orbital shape with a 2-fold symmetry corresponds to the $C_{59}N$ orientation with the hexagon-hexagon bond at the top (6:6-top, inset to Fig. 1a). On the other hand, the 3-fold symmetry of the molecular orbital is approximately reproduced in cases when the azafullerene slightly tilts bringing the vortex between the two hexagons and the pentagon to the apex (5:6-top) or when the displacement of the azafullerene is even larger bringing hexagon to the top (hex-top, inset to Fig. 1a and Fig. 1c). We stress that some tilting of the $C_{59}N$ monomers is necessary in order to accommodate adsorbed molecules to the Au(111) lattice. Similar orbital shape patterns were previously observed also for the $C_{60}$ monolayer films on an Au(111) substrate.[21]

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DFT calculations of a $C_{59}N$ monolayer on Au(111) confirm that there is an energetic preference for the azafullerene to orient with the carbon dangling bond towards an Au-atom in the layer below, at an Au-C distance of 2.22 Å (Fig. S2). This puts the nitrogen atom at a 27° angle from the surface normal. Rotating the $C_{59}N$ about its center of mass in a series of single-point energy calculations shows the binding rapidly drops with angle, reaching >0.5 eV less stable for rotations above 15° (Fig. S2). This suggests monomers will only be surface oriented with relatively small angular variation, in agreement with STM observation.

In contrast to the case of $C_{59}N$ adsorbed on Cu(111),[17] Mulliken population analysis suggests weak charge transfer to the substrate (~0.10*e* per cage). However, projected density of states (Fig. S3) shows the azafullerene states near the Fermi level are strongly dispersed, indicating strong mixing with gold and as such Mulliken estimates are likely to be inaccurate.

We next calculated $C_{59}N$ at 25% surface coverage (4x4 Au supercell). Comparing to isolated gas-phase $C_{59}N$ gives a binding enthalpy of 1.216 eV per $C_{59}N$ to pristine flat Au(111). This rises to 2.837 eV when the $C_{59}N$ are in the 100% monolayer, clearly showing the driving force for close packing as seen in STM. Repeating these calculations without Au present shows that 0.567 eV of this increase in binding comes from interaction between neighboring fullerenes in the monolayer. This does not, however, account for all of the binding increase calculated upon azafullerene close-packing. This suggests therefore that close packing must also increase Au-$C_{59}N$ interaction. Adding a second monolayer of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$, the binding energy per $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ in this layer decreases to 1.392 eV, around the half in comparison with the first monolayer, confirming a strong thermodynamic drive to form complete monolayer surface coverage of Au before $C_{59}N$ will deposit on top. This is also consistent with the STM data where close-packed surface monolayers form in preference to three-dimensional island clusters, and corroborates again the strong Au-$C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ interaction.

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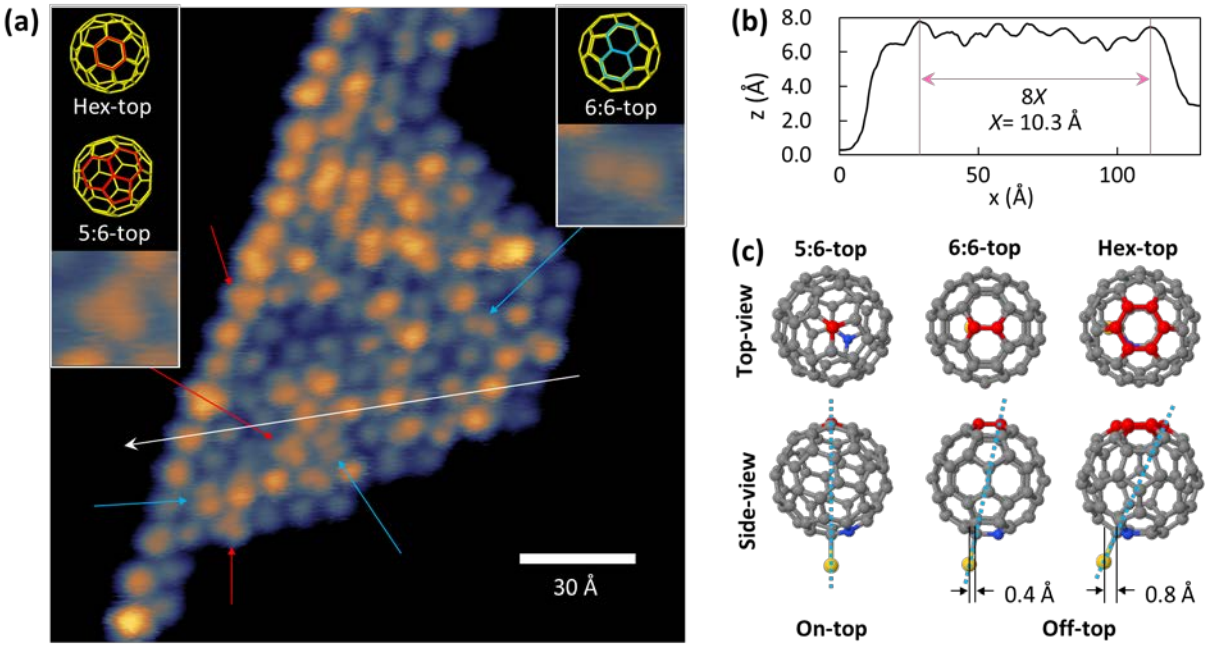


**Figure 1**. (a) STM image of $C_{59}N$ island formed on Au(111) substrate taken by 100 pA tunneling current and 500 mV bias voltage. Red and blue arrows are pointing orbitals of 3-fold (5:6- or hex-top $C_{59}N$, left inset) and 2-fold (6:6-top $C_{59}N$, right inset) symmetries, respectively. White arrow shows the direction of [0-11] and is the cross-section used for x-z analysis (b). (c) When $C_{59}N$ shifts away from the position exactly above the Au atom in the substrate layer (side-view), the top view of the molecule changes from the approximately 3-fold to 2-fold and back to 3-fold symmetry (top). Grey, red, blue and yellow balls represent atoms of C, C at the top, N and Au, respectively. Dashed cyan line shows the tilting of azafullerene.

The STM and DFT results demonstrate considerable interaction between the adsorbed $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ and the Au(111) surface within the 1$^{st}$ monolayer, but do not provide a clear insight into the radical state of the $C_{59}N$ entities. We thus next turn to X-ray spectroscopy. In Fig. 2a we compare the C 1s and N 1s photoemission peaks for 10 Å and 17 Å thickness azafullerene films on Au(111). For the 17 Å film thickness, the 1s core levels of C and N are observed at binding energies of 285.0 eV and 400.6 eV, respectively, in agreement with the values for thick $(C_{59}N)_2$ films reported in the literature.[13,22] Relative to these two reference binding energies, the C 1s

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and N 1s peaks are systematically shifted to lower binding energies by about 0.25 eV and 0.35 eV for film thicknesses up to 8 Å (inset to Fig. 2a), respectively. This energy shift is attributed to core-hole screening by the Au(111) surface and predominantly applies to the molecules closest to the Au surface, i.e., molecules within the 1st monolayer. The change of binding energy observed beyond 8 Å can be associated with the crossover from the 1st to 2nd layer where core-hole screening by the Au substrate is suppressed. The relative sharpness of the binding energy change indicates that $C_{59}N$ initially uniformly covers the Au(111) surface up to 1 ML (8 Å) before the 2nd layer growth sets-in, just as observed by STM (Fig. 1a) and DFT calculations. We also note that the N 1s XPS peak displays a constant peak profile throughout the 0-8 Å coverage range without significant broadening, indicating that the distribution of $C_{59}N$-Au contacts remains nearly the same throughout the monolayer coverage range. In fact, any significant reorientation of the N within the fullerene cage in the 1st layer would introduce a different spread of binding energy shifts due to Au screening, which is not observed. We finally note that XPS spectra does not change within the experimental time of several hours implying that $C_{59}N$ films are very stable under inert conditions for all coverage thicknesses.

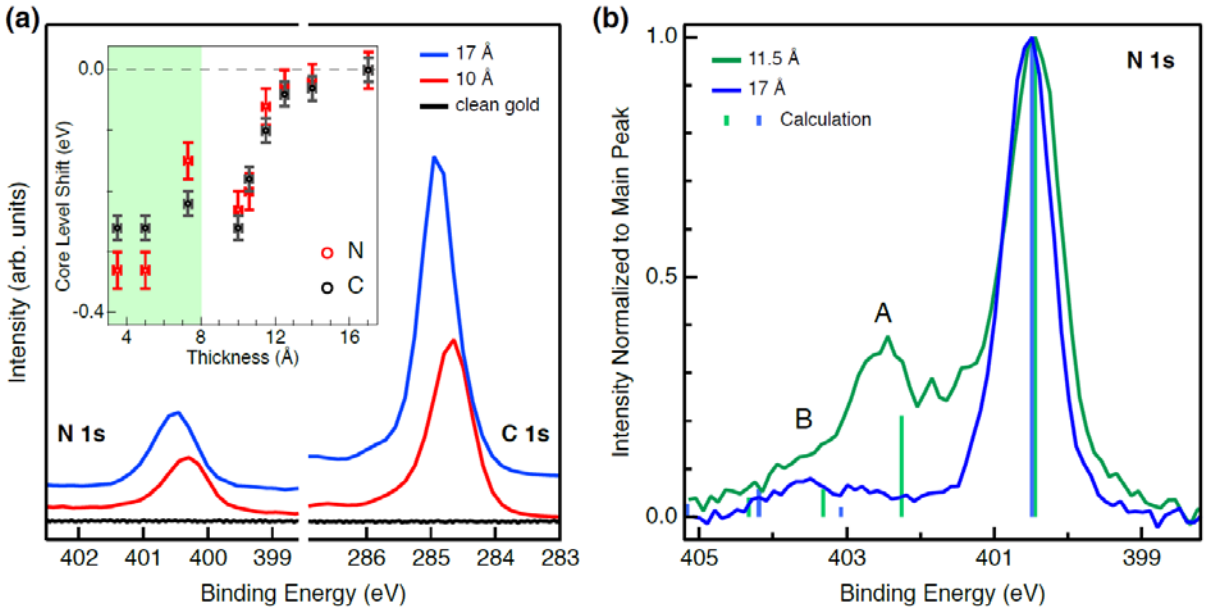

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**Figure 2.** (a) XPS of C 1s, N 1s measured for 10 Å deposited $C_{59}N$ film (~1.2 ML red curve) and for 17 Å film (~2.1 ML, blue curve). Inset: the C 1s and N 1s screening shift with respect to the Au(111) for increasing coverage. Crossover from 1st to 2nd layers is indicated at 8 Å by the green-white shading boundary. (b) XPS N 1s shake-up spectrum for 11.5 Å (green line) and 17 Å (blue line) thick layers of $C_{59}N$/Au(111). Theoretically calculated peaks for $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer and $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer taken from ref.23 are marked with green and blue vertical lines, respectively. The spectrum of 11.5 Å thick layer (green) shows a prominent satellite peak at 402.3 eV (feature A) and a smaller satellite peak at 403.1 eV (feature B) which qualitatively match with the calculated satellite peaks for the radical monomer, whereas the spectrum of 17 Å (blue) displays two peaks at 402.7 and 403.5 eV that match closely the calculated satellite peaks for the $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer.

The electronic nature of the adsorbed $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ may be further understood from analysis of the shake-up satellites of the C 1s and N 1s XPS peaks. In the C 1s shake-up spectrum of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ films on Au(111) we observe a shoulder in the high energy tail of the C 1s peak at around ~1 eV from the main elastic line (Fig. S4). The energy difference between the elastic line and the shake-up satellite (photoelectron energy loss) corresponds to electron excitation from the occupied to unoccupied states (*e.g.*, HOMO to LUMO) and has been previously observed in bulk films of $(C_{59}N)_2$ but not for $C_{60}$ films. Therefore, it can be related to the $sp^3$ carbon next to N in the azafullerene cage, which in monolayers bonds to the Au and in multilayer films crosslinks to form a dimer.[22]

However, according to the calculated C 1s shake-up excitations for different $C_{59}N$ derivatives [23,24], the C 1s shake-up peaks are not sensitive to the radical state of the azafullerene films (Fig. S4). We thus rather turn to the shake-up satellites of the N 1s XPS peak (Fig. 2b)

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where we observe a noticeable difference between the films of 11.5 Å and 17 Å film thickness (~1.4 ML and ~2.1 ML, respectively). For the ~2.1 ML film a faint peak (A) shifted by ~2.2 eV and a second peak (B) by ~3.1 eV from the main elastic peak are measured. On the other hand, the shake-up spectrum for 1.4 ML sample shows a pronounced peak centered at ~1.8 eV from the N 1s main line. The nature of these loss peaks can be explored with the help of theoretical calculations for the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer and $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer structures.[23] The calculated positions of A and B peaks and the overall shape of the loss structure for the $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer agrees well with our spectrum for the film-thickness of 17 Å, confirming that $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ forms dimers at 2.1 ML. This is also in agreement with the previous report for the azafullerene multilayer films.[13,14] In contrast, the N 1s shake-up spectrum of 11.5 Å film closely resembles the calculated shake-up structure for the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers in their radical state. In particular, the loss peak at ~402.3 eV binding energy, which matches the calculated position and relative intensity, is exclusively predicted for the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer, but not for other candidate species like $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimers. Both the shift and the relative increase in intensity of this peak are consistent with the radical character of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers in the monolayer. Namely, the radical orbital, although primarily centered on the C site neighboring N, exhibits significant overlap with the nitrogen.[23] This overlap is for example also evidenced by the characteristic hyperfine splitting in the EPR spectra of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radicals.[7−9] So, we conclude that the measured shake-up structure of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers reflects their radical state (Fig. 2b).

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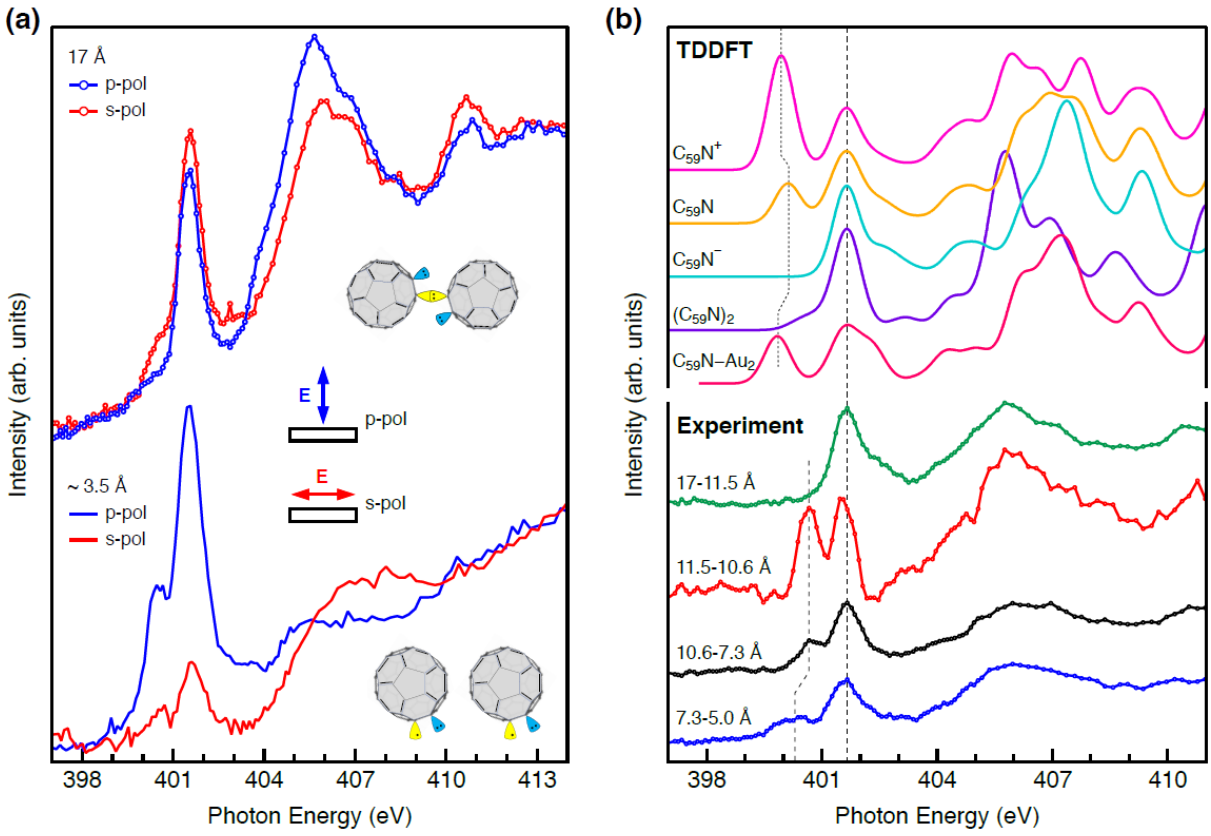


**Figure 3.** (a) N K-edge NEXAFS linear dichroism for 3.5 Å thick film $C_{59}N$ (lower panel) and 17 Å thick film (upper panel). The average orientation of the N site of the azafullerene cage is indicated in the insets. (b) Layer resolved sequence of differential NEXAFS in "magic" superposition of p-polarization and s-polarization spectra are compared with the calculated ones for the $(C_{59}N)_2$, $C_{59}N^-$, $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$, $C_{59}N^+$ molecules and the artificial $C_{59}N–Au_2$ complex with 2.0 Å coupling distance, respectively. For the calculated spectra we used time-dependent DFT (TDDFT) calculations (see Methods for details). All spectra are intensity scaled to the probed coverage, and offset vertically for clarity.

We now turn to the NEXAFS spectra. Both, C 1s and N 1s NEXAFS for the 17 Å (~2.1 ML) $C_{59}N$ film (Fig. 3a and Fig. S5a) closely resemble those reported earlier for $(C_{59}N)_2$ thick films.[13,22] The principal peaks are due to the transitions from core level to the LUMO and above. We note that the C 1s → LUMO (LUMO+1) resonance at the photon energy $h\nu$ = 284.9

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eV (286 eV) aligns with the N 1s → LUMO (LUMO+1) resonance at 400.7 eV (401.6 eV), see Fig. S5b. The same alignment has been previously reported also for $(C_{59}N)_2$ bulk films.[13,22] The N 1s → LUMO peak at 400.7 eV shows up only as a shoulder, indicating a weak LUMO resonance with the N 1s core level (Fig. 3).

Next, we compare the N 1s NEXAFS spectra for 3.5 Å (0.4 ML) and 17 Å (2.1 ML) films. The spectra shown in Fig. 3a have been taken with the photon polarization along the surface normal (p-polarization) and parallel to the surface (s-polarization). The pronounced linear dichroism of the main absorption lines (π* symmetry resonances) at 3.5 Å indicates that molecules of the 1st layer adopt a rather uniform adsorption configuration with N site of the azafullerene cage oriented towards the substrate at 30±3° average angle from the surface (inset to Fig. 3a). This is in excellent agreement with the low-temperature STM experiments and DFT computations discussed above (Fig. 1 and Fig. S2) and experimentally demonstrates that $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ indeed couples to Au(111) via the cage orbitals on carbon next to the substitutional nitrogen atom.

Interestingly, the N 1s NEXAFS spectra taken with the same photon polarizations on 17 Å film with two completed layers of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ lack this strong dichroism indicating that the 2nd layer adopts very different geometry (Fig. 3a). Instead, the intensity of these N π* resonances in s-polarization even exceeds that of p-polarization, pointing to an average orientation of nitrogen atoms in the completed 2nd layer close to 60° from the surface. This agrees well with $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer formation of the 2nd layer molecules with C-C bond oriented in-plane and thus with N orbitals oriented predominantly at ~60° from the surface.

In order to follow the evolution from the radical monolayer to the second layer of $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimers, we next perform differential N 1s NEXAFS analysis by sequentially subtracting spectra taken with increasing coverage (Fig. 3b). In total, five films in the thickness

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range between 5-17 Å have been investigated. All spectra have been taken in two orthogonal polarizations (s- and p-polarization) and then added by a linear combination (*p* + *2s*) into a synthetic spectrum corresponding to the magic angle. Such "magic" spectral representation has the advantage of being independent of molecular orientation, which as we have just argued, changes with coverage, and therefore reflects only the orbital structure of the added film. Fig. 3b shows the resulting sequence of four "magic" NEXAFS spectra resolved in thickness: (7.3 Å–5 Å), (10.5 Å–7.3 Å), (11.5 Å–10.5 Å) and (17 Å–11.5 Å), respectively. The spectra show a strong variation especially in the low energy absorption line at ~400.5 eV. This peak displays the largest intensity for the supramonolayer coverage (11.5 Å–10.5 Å), whereas it is completely quenched for the (17 Å–11.5 Å) when the coverage approaches the completion of the 2$^{nd}$ layer. The sub-monolayer film (7.3 Å–5 Å) displays only moderate intensity of the 400.5 eV peak and even a small shift (~0.3 eV) to lower energies.

The observed evolution of differential N 1s NEXAFS spectra can be corroborated with DFT calculations of N 1s NEXAFS spectra for the $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer and neutral and charged $C_{59}N$ monomers (Fig. 3b). Calculated N 1s NEXAFS spectrum for the $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimer yields excellent agreement with the experimental (17 Å–11.5 Å) spectrum, confirming dimer formation at the completion of 2$^{nd}$ layer. A close inspection of DFT results reveals that the LUMO of $(C_{59}N)_2$ is mainly delocalized across the carbon sites with minimal overlap with the N sites.[22] This agrees with the observed low intensity of the N 1s → LUMO peak at 400.7 eV measured in the ~2 ML films. Considering instead the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer, our DFT calculations show that the LUMO of the monomer now spreads also over N (see also Ref. 10). This indicates that the LUMO orbital of the dimer turns into SUMO for the monomer, which also agrees with the observed intensity increase of the lowest energy peak at 400.7 eV in the NEXAFS for the monomer films.

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When adsorbed on Au, the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomer will align its SUMO/SOMO (SOMO=singly occupied molecular orbital) energy to the Fermi level, opening the possibility of charge transfer with the substrate. From our DFT calculations we observe that the dangling radical is a half-filled electronic state at the Fermi level. Removing further charge empties this state and causes a downshift in its energy. In contrast, adding a second electron completely fills the state and hence quenches its signal in NEXAFS (Fig. 3b). The N 1s NEXAFS peak at ~400-401 eV can therefore be attributed to the N 1s excitation to the LUMO/SUMO level, depending on the occupancy of this level, *i.e.*, charge state. The energy position and relative intensity of the N 1s NEXAFS peak at ~400-401 eV is therefore a very sensitive probe of the LUMO/SUMO orbital population of the $C_{59}N$ radical state. To corroborate this finding, we finally computed NEXAFS spectra for artificial $C_{59}N$-$Au_2$ complexes to emulate the interaction between adsorbed $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ and Au substrate. Computations were performed for different C-Au bond lengths ranging from 2 Å to 4 Å (Fig. S6). We report here results with Au-Au distance fixed at 2.6 Å. For the largest C-Au distance of 4 Å, the $C_{59}N$-$Au_2$ interaction is weak and thus its N 1s NEXAFS spectrum resembles that of the $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ in gas phase. On the other hand, as soon as carbon of $C_{59}N$ approaches Au at distances smaller than 3 Å, we notice a systematic shift of the SUMO peak to lower energies. Therefore, increasing the interaction between $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ and Au results in the increase of SUMO-LUMO splitting. These additional calculations thus finally explain the fine variations in the differential N 1s NEXAS spectra. For the (7.3 Å–5.0 Å) spectrum the first layer of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ interacts with the Au surface and thus the SUMO splitting is larger than for the (11.5 Å–10.5 Å) spectrum where the second layer of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ is already distanced from the Au surface and thus the interaction with the substrate is negligible.

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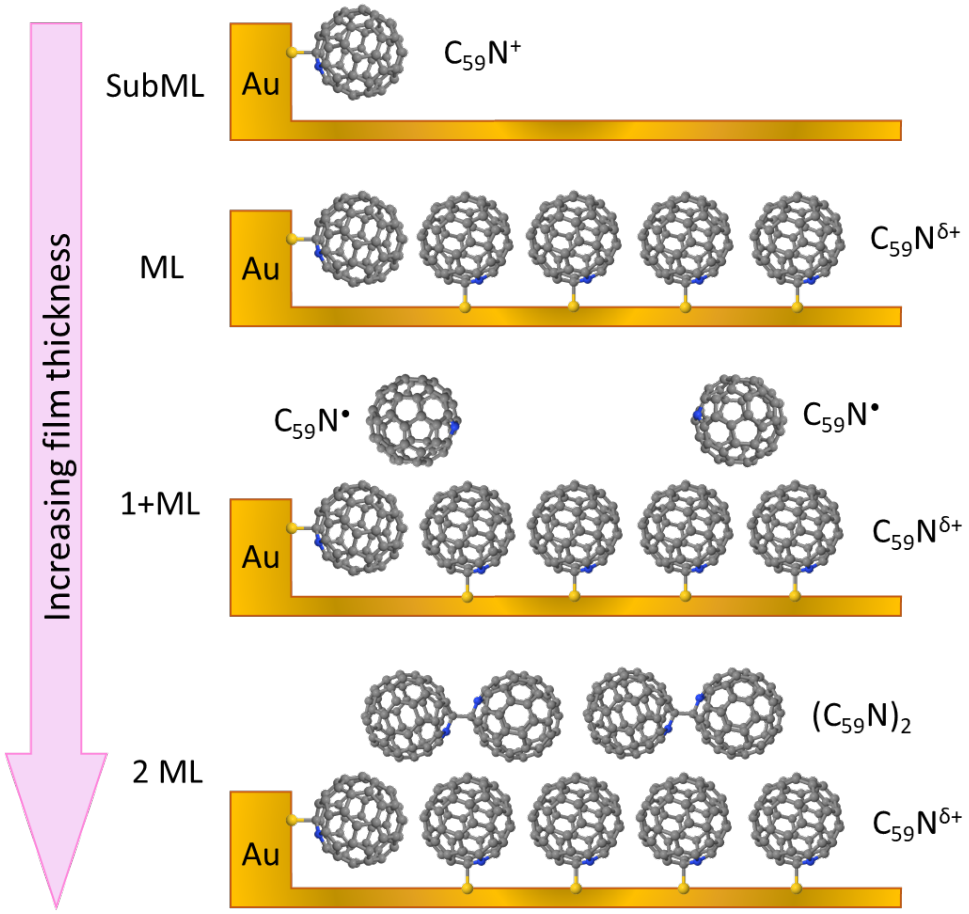


**Figure 4**. Evolution of $C_{59}N^\bullet$ radical character as a function of azafullerene film thickness on Au(111). Grey, blue, and yellow spheres represent C, N, and Au atoms, respectively.

We can now build a complete picture of $C_{59}N^\bullet$ radical state evolution as the thickness of film on Au(111) surface increases (Fig. 4). At very low $C_{59}N$ coverage, *e.g.* (7.3 Å–5 Å), the differential N 1s NEXAFS spectrum, shows a broad SUMO peak around ~400 eV indicating different charge states of the adsorbed species. This is due to partial quenching of the radical character of selected $C_{59}N^\bullet$ monomers, induced by site dependent $C_{59}N$-Au coupling and possibly accompanied by a partial charge transfer (see section SA in supplementary information for an extended discussion of the $C_{59}N$ radical state within the 1$^{st}$ monolayer). The coupling to the surface may be particularly favored at Au sites with reduced coordination, such as step edges, where molecules preferentially adsorb as observed by the STM.

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Addition of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers promotes the growth of the hexagonally packed islands of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers that orient their reactive carbons next to N predominantly towards the Au. Due to their incommensurability with the Au(111) surface azafullerene islands display significant variations in the Au-$C_{59}N$ contact distance. We stress that the Au lattice mismatch imposes some tilting and lifting of fullerene cages directly seen in our STM images (Fig. 1c). According to the DFT calculations, such local contact variations tune the charge transfer between the substrate and $C_{59}N$ (section SA in supplementary information), yet they keep the nitrogen of the azafullerene cages oriented toward Au at ~30 deg from the (111) normal. This interacting contact layer of $C_{59}N$ monomers then serves as a buffer layer and a template for the growth of subsequent 2$^{nd}$ layer of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radicals. In this 2$^{nd}$ layer, the coupling to the substrate is negligible as concluded from: (*i*) both C 1s and N 1s XPS binding energies reproduce those of a multilayer system and (*ii*) the lack of linear dichroism in N 1s NEXAFS spectra, which indicates that $C_{59}N$ are no longer orientationally locked and can now orient freely in space. Provided that the $C_{59}N$ filling of the 2$^{nd}$ layer is low as is the case for (10.5 Å–7.3 Å) and (11.5 Å–10.5 Å), these 2$^{nd}$ layer molecules remain mostly isolated monomers with highly expressed radical character. They are therefore recognized as a novel high spin-density phase. Upon further increase of the 2$^{nd}$ layer filling (approaching 2 ML as is the case for (17 Å–11.5 Å)) statistically, more and more azafullerenes in the second layer find themselves in next neighbor positions, where they are able to reorient and couple in $(C_{59}N)_2$ dimers. Upon dimerization they lose their radical character and the N 1s NEXAFS resonance at 400.5 eV disappears. The dimerization into non-magnetic $(C_{59}N)_2$ therefore starts as early as the 2$^{nd}$ layer approaches full completion.

## Conclusions

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In conclusion, we explored the sensitivity and high resolution of low-temperature STM and the XPS/NEXAFS spectroscopy supported by DFT computations to study the stability of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radicals on Au(111) surface when deposited in vacuum by thermal sublimation. In the first monolayer of $C_{59}N$, adsorbed azafullerenes form a hexagonal lattice of monomers, where they retain their monomer character, but on average partially lose their radical character due to interaction with Au. Although the particular molecular orientation where the azafullerene carbon dangling bond directly faces a Au atom while at the same time the nitrogen orients towards the substrate at 30±3° average angle remains robust over the 1$^{st}$ monolayer, local variations in the Au-$C_{59}N$ distance result in the variations in the charge transfer between $C_{59}N$ and the substrate. Such first contact monolayer with non-uniform quenching of the radical state nevertheless serves as a passivating template layer for additional azafullerenes that are deposited on top. Isolated orientationally disordered $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers in the 2$^{nd}$ layer are uncoupled and fully retain their radical state. The sacrificial role of the 1$^{st}$ layer can then be exploited to form stable radical monomers in the second, non-contact layer. In-plane dimerization of the 2$^{nd}$ layer molecules only begins for higher coverages, on approaching the completion of the second layer.

The discovery of a supramonolayer phase of azafullerene monomers with expressed radical character on top of a passivating $C_{59}N$ monomer layer/Au(111) therefore demonstrates that spin active azafullerene radicals may be formed when weakly coupled to the substrate. Due to the extremely long coherence times of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ spin states,[10] the possibility of having stable two-dimensional $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ lattices may open intriguing opportunities for the coherent manipulation of molecular spin qubits. Moreover, the robustness of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ radical states for film thicknesses is important for the design of surface fullerene synthetic and catalytic processes. This simple approach of first forming a stable non-radical sacrificial layer before

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subsequently depositing spin active molecules may also be applicable for other molecular radical systems.

## Methods

### *$(C_{59}N)_2$ synthesis and characterization*

Powder samples of azafullerene dimer $(C_{59}N)_2$ were synthesized following the standard procedure described in the literature.[5] The sample purity was followed with the high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) where HPLC trace after recycling shows a single peak (Fig. S7). Next, $(C_{59}N)_2$ samples were characterised with $^{13}C$ nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) in deuterated ortho-dichlorobenzene. The $^{13}C$ NMR spectrum (Fig. S8) shows a number of sharp peaks in the range between 136.4 ppm and 148.7 ppm and separated peaks at 155.8 ppm and 125.1 ppm, all of them due to $sp^2$ carbons. The separated peak at 108.0 ppm is due to the inter-azafullerene bonding carbon sites with carbon orbitals close to $sp^3$. All these peaks are fingerprints of $(C_{59}N)_2$ and are in full agreement with the data reported in the literature[25] and at the same time confirm high purity of our samples.

### *Low-temperature scanning tunneling microscopy*

Prior to deposition and low-temperature STM measurements, special care was taken to thoroughly clean the Au(111) surface and the azafullerene sample material. Au(111) surface was cleaned using the standard $Ar^+$ sputtering (10 μA, 1kV) and annealing (up to 800K) cycles until a clean and well-ordered surface showing Herringbone reconstruction was obtained. The azafullerene molecules were deposited from a $(C_{59}N)_2$ powder using a homemade evaporator, consisting of a quartz tube with a tungsten filament wrapped around it. Due to the design of the evaporator, it was not possible to reliably measure its temperature during deposition. Thus, to ensure good reproducibility, the heating current was used as a measure of the evaporation

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rate. First, the molecules were degassed for several days at 1.6 A in UHV. For each deposition the current was ramped over the course of several hours to 4.0 A, keeping the pressure in the evaporation chamber in $10^{-10}$ mbar range.

After the deposition, the samples were immediately transferred to the Specs low-temperature JT-STM with a base temperature of 4.2 K. Measurements were performed using electrochemically etched W tips, reconditioned in-situ by controlled tip-sample interaction and characterized on a clean Au(111) or Ag(111) surface. Topography images were taken in constant current mode ($I$ = 10-200 pA). At negative bias voltages electrons dominantly tunnel from the sample into the tip, allowing us to image occupied states while using positive bias voltages probes the unoccupied states of the sample. In order to precisely determine intermolecular distances the microscope calibration was verified using known herringbone reconstruction parameters.

*XPS and NEXAFS spectroscopy*

The XPS and NEXAFS measurements were performed at the ALOISA beamline of the Elettra Synchrotron Facility, Trieste.[26] The Au(111) substrate surface was cleaned by repeated cycles of sputtering (1.5 kV $Ar^+$) and annealing up to 723 K. The $(C_{59}N)_2$ was sublimed from a homemade boron nitride crucible, at a starting temperature of 670 K, up to 830 K; the increase in the sublimation temperature in order to deposit the same amount of material is possibly due to $C_{59}N$ polymerization reactions inside the crucible. The overall film thickness of the deposited $C_{59}N$ has been determined from the intensity attenuation of the Au 4f peak due to inelastic scattering of photoelectrons passing through the organic overlayer.[27] Core level photoemission data were acquired in normal emission geometry with a constant 4° grazing angle of linearly p-polarized light beam with respect to the Au(111) surface plane. The C 1s and N 1s XPS spectra were acquired at a photon energy of 515 eV with a total energy resolution

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of 160 meV. Binding energies were calibrated with respect to the bulk spectral component of the Au $4f_{7/2}$ peak at 84.0 eV.[28] C-K edge and N-K edge NEXAFS spectra were acquired in partial electron yield mode by means of a channeltron multiplier equipped with a negatively biased grid to filter out low energy secondary electrons, in order to improve the signal to background ratio. In order to investigate the sample linear dichroism, the NEXAFS spectra were acquired at two different orientations of the synchrotron beam with respect to the surface plane, namely transverse magnetic (p-polarization) and transverse electric (s-polarization) geometry, by sample rotation around the photon beam axis. The beam grazing angle was kept constant at 6°. The photon energy calibration and photon flux normalization methods are described in detail elsewhere.[29] Both XPS and NEXAFS measurements were carried out with the sample temperatures between 300 K and 430 K.

*DFT calculations*

Ground-state density functional (DFT) calculations were carried out using the AIMPRO code [30–32] using the local density approximation for exchange-correlation energy.[33] Kohn–Sham wave functions for C and N are constructed using localized Gaussian orbital functions multiplied by polynomials, with 38 and 40 independent functions respectively ($l \leq 2$), with plane-wave energy cut-off of 175 Ha. Calculations were spin optimized and polarized with different integer spin states tested (only the most stable are reported here). Relativistic pseudopotentials given by Hartwigsen, Goedecker, and Hutter (HGH)[34] with a finite electron Fermi temperature of kT = 0.001 eV were utilized. Systems were geometrically converged within $10^{-5}$ $a_B$ in position (here $a_B$ is Bohr radius) and $10^{-6}$ Ha in energy. To investigate angle-energy dependency of the adsorbed $C_{59}N$, single point energy calculations were carried changing only the angle of the $C_{59}N$ molecule with respect to its center of mass, without letting

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any atoms relax (i.e., optimize their positions). This constraint is imposed in order to avoid unintended cage movement.

For the hybrid system calculations, 2x2 supercell $Au_{36}$ triple-layer Au(111) slabs were created in hexagonal supercells, allowing atoms and lattice parameter to vary with a 6x6x1 k-point mesh, until reaching convergence ($a_0$ = 9.72 Å). A cell c-axis spacing of >26 Å is chosen and fixed, to ensure there is no interaction between $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ and the base of the neighboring slab. The $C_{59}N$ spacing is essentially imposed by the choice of supercell, and as such should not be compared directly to the experimental STM spacing. A single $C_{59}N$ was added in close-packed direction oriented along [1-10] on the unreconstructed Au(111) trilayer (9.72 Å $C_{59}N$ spacing, i.e. 1 $C_{59}N$ per 2×2 Au supercell), all atoms allowed to fully relax, with lattice parameters fixed. Once converged, the $C_{59}N$ was then rotated about its centre of mass in steps of 5°/10°, and single point energy calculations were performed to explore the energy barrier for molecular rotation. Azafullerene charge state was determined through Mulliken population analysis.

To model the 2ML system, a radical $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ was added on top of the first monolayer with the radical facing towards the Au layer. We assume AB azafullerene stacking and a cell c-axis spacing increase to >32 Å. All atoms were allowed to relax. To explore the effects of coverage density, a 144 atoms 4×4 Au supercell was created, where a single $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ was added on it (25% coverage), as well as $(C_{59}N)_2$ for a 50% coverage. All atoms were again relaxed with a 3x3x1 k-point mesh.

NEXAFS spectra for $C_{59}N^{+}$, $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$, $C_{59}N^{-}$, and $(C_{59}N)_2$ were calculated using the ORCA code [35,36] within a hybrid time-dependent DFT framework (TD-DFT). The hybrid TDDFT calculations were carried out at B3LYP[37] / ZORA-def2-TZVP[38–40] level with def2/J auxiliary basis set, spin-unrestricted SCF and RIJCOSX approximation, after DFT geometry optimization and frequency calculations at B3LYP / 6-31G** [41–46] level. The default setting

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was used for the other parameters. For $C_{59}N$-$Au_2$ complex, def2-TZVP basis set was instead used for NEXAFS calculations.

**Supporting Information Available:**

Figure S1: STM image of $C_{59}N$ island on Au(111) substrate and its cross-section analysis along 3 different directions.

Figure S2: DFT calculations of close-packed $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ monomers on Au(111).

Figure S3: Projected density of states (eV) for $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$ on Au (111) at low surface density calculated by DFT.

Figure S4: C 1s shake-up spectrum of $C_{59}N$ films on Au(111).

Figure S5: Polarization NEXAFS spectra of C 1s and N 1s at different layers of $C_{59}N^{\bullet}$.

Figure S6: Calculated N 1s NEXAFS spectra of artificial $C_{59}N$-$Au_2$ complex with different C-Au bond lengths.

Figure S7: HPLC trace of $(C_{59}N)_2$ sample.

Figure S8: Solution $^{13}C$ NMR spectrum of as-prepared $(C_{59}N)_2$ sample.

Section SA: $C_{59}N$ radical state within the 1$^{st}$ monolayer.

Figure S9: N 1s NEXAFS spectra for increasing $C_{59}N$ coverage.

Figure S10: N 1s NEXAFS spectra of $C_{59}N$ with different film thickness and after annealing.

Figure S11: Calculated bonding orbital and charge density plots of $C_{59}N$ on Au substrate.

Figure S12: Plot of calculated total system spin as a function of Au-C distance.

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**Author contributions**

YT, BA and CE performed DFT calculations; YT, MvMM, and EZ performed STM observation; YT, GK, LS, GB, LF, AM, DC and DA performed NEXAFS and XPS experiments; RCV, NT, and HAW synthesized and characterized $C_{59}N$. This work was conceived and developed by HAW, NT, CE, DC and DA. All authors contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data and editing of the manuscript.

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## Abbreviations

ML, monolayer; XPS, X-ray photoemission spectroscopy; NEXAFS, X-ray absorption fine structure spectroscopy; STM, scanning tunneling microscopy; DFT, density functional theory; SUMO, singly unoccupied molecular orbital; UHV, ultra-high vacuum; HOMO, highest occupied molecular orbital; LUMO, lowest unoccupied molecular orbital; TDDFT, time-dependent density functional theory; SOMO, singly occupied molecular orbital.

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