

Globalization as we know it today would be unimaginable without the revolution in information and communication technologies of the last thirty years. Yet have we achieved "one world" as the promotional hype for cellular and digital networks would have it? This collection of essays, *Global Babel: Questions of Discourse and Communication in a Time of Globalization*, explores the current state of communication and discourse in a globalized environment. The essays are united by an awareness that, whether understood technologically, economically, epistemologically, or culturally, globalization is a discursive field with discrepant assumptions, categories and conclusions. As such, globalization is double-edged, and complex. It can certainly enable the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful; in different contexts, or at different moments, it can also facilitate individual and collective agency. It is this doubleness, this complexity, that this collection seeks to bring into focus.

This volume offers an interdisciplinary forum where technological, aesthetic, and ethical issues relating to globalization inhabit the same conceptual frame. Together the essays address the central issue of how the new knowledges of globalization are being articulated, and explore the cultural consequences and success of such communication and knowledge exchange.

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GLOBAL BABEL

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Questions of Discourse and Communication in a time of Globalization

EDITED BY

Samir Dayal and Margueritte Murphy

CHAPTER TWELVE

PLASTI(CITY) OF MATERIAL AND MEANING:
SHIRLEY TSE'S FORMS OF IDENTITY

MARION LEE AND THOMAS BEISCHER

Current discussions of "globalization" are often hampered by misunderstanding because the term has been so widely used that it carries common connotations, but is rarely given a concrete definition. The term seems to encompass a broad range of concerns such as movements of migrant labor, shifts in concentrations of corporate capital, and accumulations of toxic chemical by-products. When the term is defined, it is often with reference to facts, figures, and graphs. In this essay, we argue that plastic, a material so ubiquitous in contemporary life as to be of little interest, provides a material antidote to ideas about globalization caught in the realm of numbers and theories. Moreover, plastic is not simply the result of globalization, but it facilitates globalism in its many forms and, therefore, amplifies the theorized notions of globalization. These characteristics allow Shirley Tse, born in Hong Kong and currently based in Los Angeles, to use plastic to create art in ways that her material offers insights into contemporary global identities.

Shirley Tse's art illustrates larger issues of globalization even though, like the art of others who work with plastic, her art is born in the minimalists' fascination with material and in the repercussions of the ready-made.¹ Her installations, however, argue for more than just using plastic in its myriad forms—packing molds, bubble wrap, drinking straws, vinyl sheets, Styrofoam insulation, or boogie boards. Tse is motivated by a fascination with the cultural and philosophical implications of this ubiquitous denatured material. These implications are deployed in her art as allegory to configure the unstable fluidity of modern subjectivity.²

Working predominantly in Styrofoam, the most recognizable form of foam polystyrene, Tse explores this material's ability, and for that matter the quality of every kind of plastic, to morph its functionality to context. Using the techniques of sculpting, cutting, sewing, and building, she

employs plastic's industrial versatility to confront the common binary—culture and nature—the terms by which contemporary subjectivity is frequently defined. By foregrounding the expressive range of Styrofoam and other plastic forms, Tse's art provides visible evidence of the unstable conditions, impacted by changing geopolitical situations, for identity formations.

These identity formations are shaped by transculturalism and imagination. Pointing to the importance of mass migration, the explosion of technology in the last century, and recently the spread of electronic and digital media, the cultural anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, argues for their "effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity."³ Specifically, he contends that new media has offered resources for "imagined selves and imagined worlds."⁴ Increasingly, the identification of individuals and of groups ("ethnic groups", "sectarian movements", and "political alliances") transcends territorial boundaries and simple historical trajectories, relying on imagination for the understanding of, and access to, their formation and transformation.

Concomitantly, Appadurai also argues that the commodification of time in the global world has led to, paradoxically, the valorization of nostalgia. "The pleasure that has been inculcated into the subjects who act as modern consumers is to be found in tension between nostalgia and fantasy, where the present is represented as if it were already past. This inculcation of the pleasure of *ephemerality* is at the heart of the disciplining of the modern consumer."⁵ Ephemerality and fantasy are therefore essential conditions for modern subjectivity.

An example of how these conditions inform Tse's art is seen in the installation entitled *Isopor* (2003). *Isopor* is the brand name of polystyrene products manufactured by the Knauf-Isopor group in São Paulo, Brazil, and the actual source of the material used is Hong Kong, the place/city where Tse grew up.⁶ Six pale lavender Styrofoam coolers with tops (9" x 12") form the basis of the sculpture that reveals its complex character on closer inspection. (fig.12-1) The figuration of the elegant attaché case, the wheels on the two "carts", the "handle" that mimics a giant Brazilian comb; the decorative designs of sun umbrellas and concentric circles formed by isosceles triangles, the latter reminiscent of the double circles on the local plastic bills, Dez Raris "ten reals" all highlight Tse's investigation of the working of mobility and transnationalism.

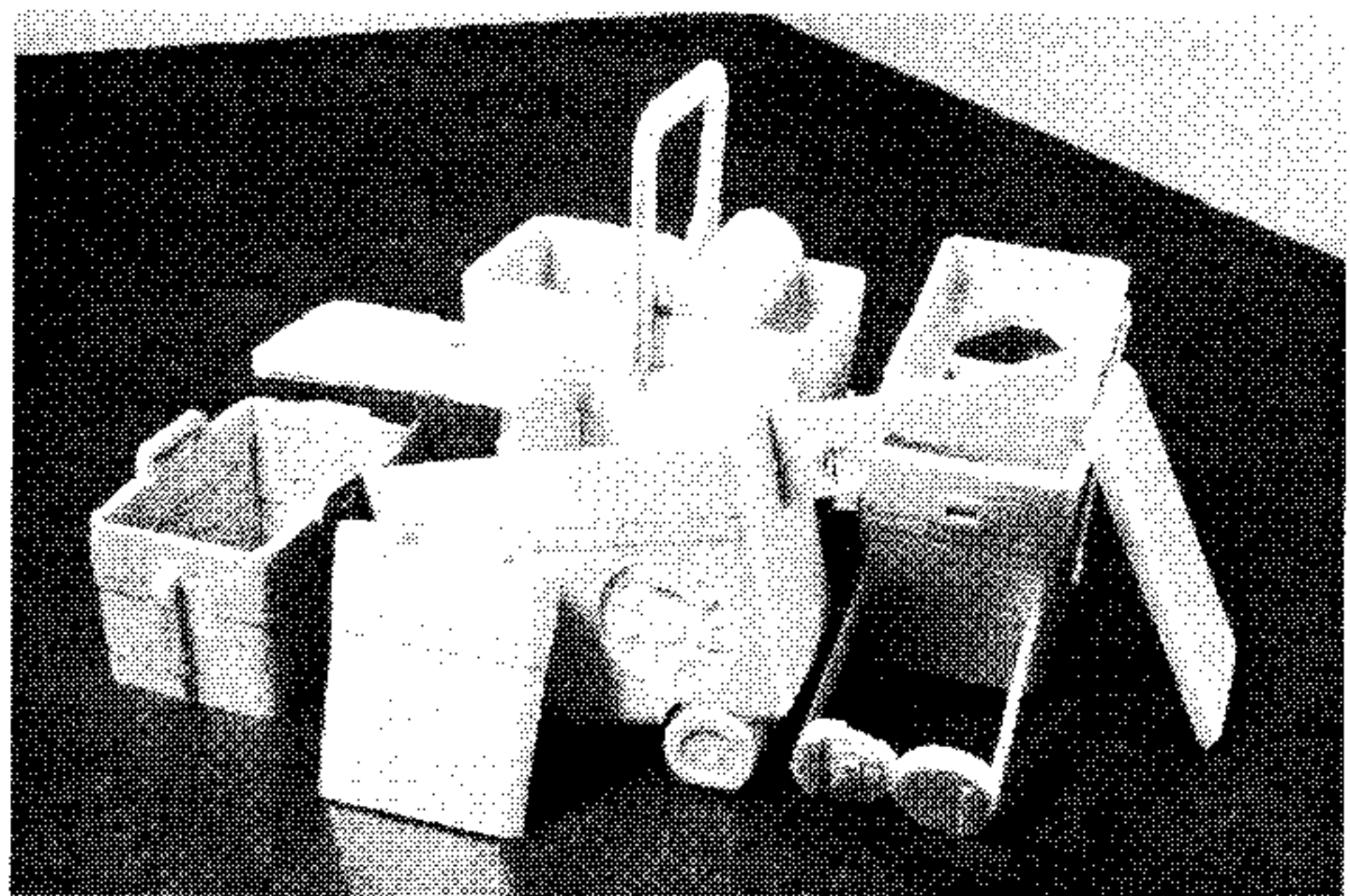


Fig. 12-1 Shirley Tse, *Isopore* polystyrene, dimensions variable, 2003. Carol and David Appel collection (Photo courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery and the artist)

As in the case of *Isopore*, the choice of plastic allows Tse's art to reflect the characteristics of places without representing those sites. The issue of identity being the form of artistic embodiment is also an inflection of Hong Kong. The cultural theorist, Ackbar Abbas, observes that, "Hong Kong is primarily a space of facilitation. It is less a site than a *para-site* in that its dominance in its region is due largely to its geographical proximity to China, together with this accessibility to the rest of the world . . . The *para-site* therefore connotes a position that in some strange way is both autonomous and dependent at the same time, a position in which autonomy is paradoxically a function of dependence."⁷ Hong Kong's character, therefore, may be best expressed by its ability to constantly transform its nature rather than by a stable identity.

With respect to the temporal dimension of Hong Kong, Abbas comments further, "change has no clear distinction but is experienced as a series of anticipation and residues that jostle each other for position."⁸ An illustrative case is the Flagstaff House, an imposing colonial-style building from the 1840's, which has functioned in successive order as the office of a leading importer of opium into China, an army commander base, and currently, the museum for a private collection of Chinese teaware. This historical trajectory has imbued the building with a sense of irony, rising from the association of tea with the Opium War (1839-42) when aggressive British maritime forces helped to secure Hong Kong as their colony.⁹

Imprinted on the building is Abbas' suggestion of "*achronicities*", which are antithetical to a linear historical progression of events and systems formed usually under over-determined circumstances.¹⁰ This simultaneous yoking of different cultures and times is also on display in the "official" logo of the Hong Kong Tourist Association: a Chinese junk in Victoria Harbor framed by skyscrapers on the horizon.¹¹ In this state of competing influences, plastic is the ideal metaphor that continually adjusts its own form and appearance in order to serve the desired need. In the same respect, determining the context, or use, of plastic is akin to understanding identity formations.

Since growing up in this metropolitan space, Tse has been exploring the properties of plastic and the plasticity of meaning in different contexts. At the critical level, Tse's art also transcends the cliché frame of reference, East and West, in which the art of, or associated with, Hong Kong is frequently perceived.¹² Rather than taking refuge in this binary cultural category, her installations configure and narrate the fluidity of identity.

Plastic City

Plastic permeates the culture of Hong Kong—the wide dazzling assortment of plastic bags issued by different shops to customers, the purchased tote bags and backpacks, the multiple forms of packing materials including Styrofoam cushioning that ensures the safe shipping of goods from and to overseas. Plastic formed the daily landscape of Tse's early life located near Kwai Chung port with its multi-berth container terminals, all built on reclaimed land. The constant arrival and departure of containers bearing different corporate names and painted with multi-color logos offered visual evidence of how the artificial could define a natural state of being. Tse has reflected in her writings the ability of the artificial to carry traces of an authentic culture: "If the 'artificial' as the 'unnatural' reflects Westerner's hang ups on the nature/culture binary, wouldn't it mean something different for us who don't see such a binary? . . . New generation Asians were born into a technologicalized society, so technology and its artificial products are our culture. Artificiality for us is better understood as an intensification rather than a copy, an enemy, or a substitution."¹³

The point about "intensification" in Tse's comment clearly undercuts the accepted notion of "authenticity" explained by Walter Benjamin that both acknowledges the presence of the "original" and reifies its transcendent attribute.¹⁴ Rather what is at stake here is an art form that responds to the unstable conditions of a globalized world. The cultural

critic, Fredric Jameson, describes the conditions for such forms in his discussion of the relationship between contemporary architecture and economic forces:

...we would do better to elaborate a series of mediations between the economic and the aesthetic; in other words, of why we need a revitalized conception of the mediation as such. The concept of mediation is posited on the existence of what I have referred to as a 'level', or in other words (those of Niklas Luhmann) a differentiated social function, a realm or zone within the social that has developed to the point at which it is governed internally by its own intrinsic laws and dynamics. I want to call such a realm 'semi-autonomous', because it is clear that it is still somehow part of the social totality, as the term *function* suggests; my own term is deliberately ambiguous or ambivalent, in order to suggest a two-way street in which one can either emphasize the relative independence, the relative autonomy, of the area in question, or else, the other way around, insist on its functionality and its ultimate place in the whole: at least by way of its consequences for the whole, if not its 'function', understood as a kind of material interest and slavish or subservient motivation.¹⁵

Jameson readily admits that these "semi-autonomous" realms surely extend into cultural and aesthetic disciplines, but he does not foresee how someone like Tse sees the concept as much as the site of "semi-autonomy" as productive.

Operating during Tse's youth as a colonial city in a post-colonial world and a global economy before the rise of contemporary globalization, Hong Kong provided a unique state of instability to begin the exploration of identity. Abbas points out that the identity of Hong Kong remains in constant flux, "The city is not so much a space as a place of transit . . . A port city that used to be located at the intersections of different spaces, Hong Kong will increasingly be at the intersections of different times or speeds."¹⁶ The "port mentality" and "floating identity" of the city have posited an underlying sense of the temporary and transient, valorizing the import. This mentality was, however, ruptured by two events in the eighties, the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on 19 December 1984 that decreed the return of Hong Kong to China on 1 July 1997, and the Tiananmen Massacre of 4 June 1989 in Beijing. The anxieties about the change to an estranged alien administration brought about the urgency for self-identification and the desire to develop Hong Kong's own cultures.¹⁷ These anxieties are embedded in Tse's art.¹⁸

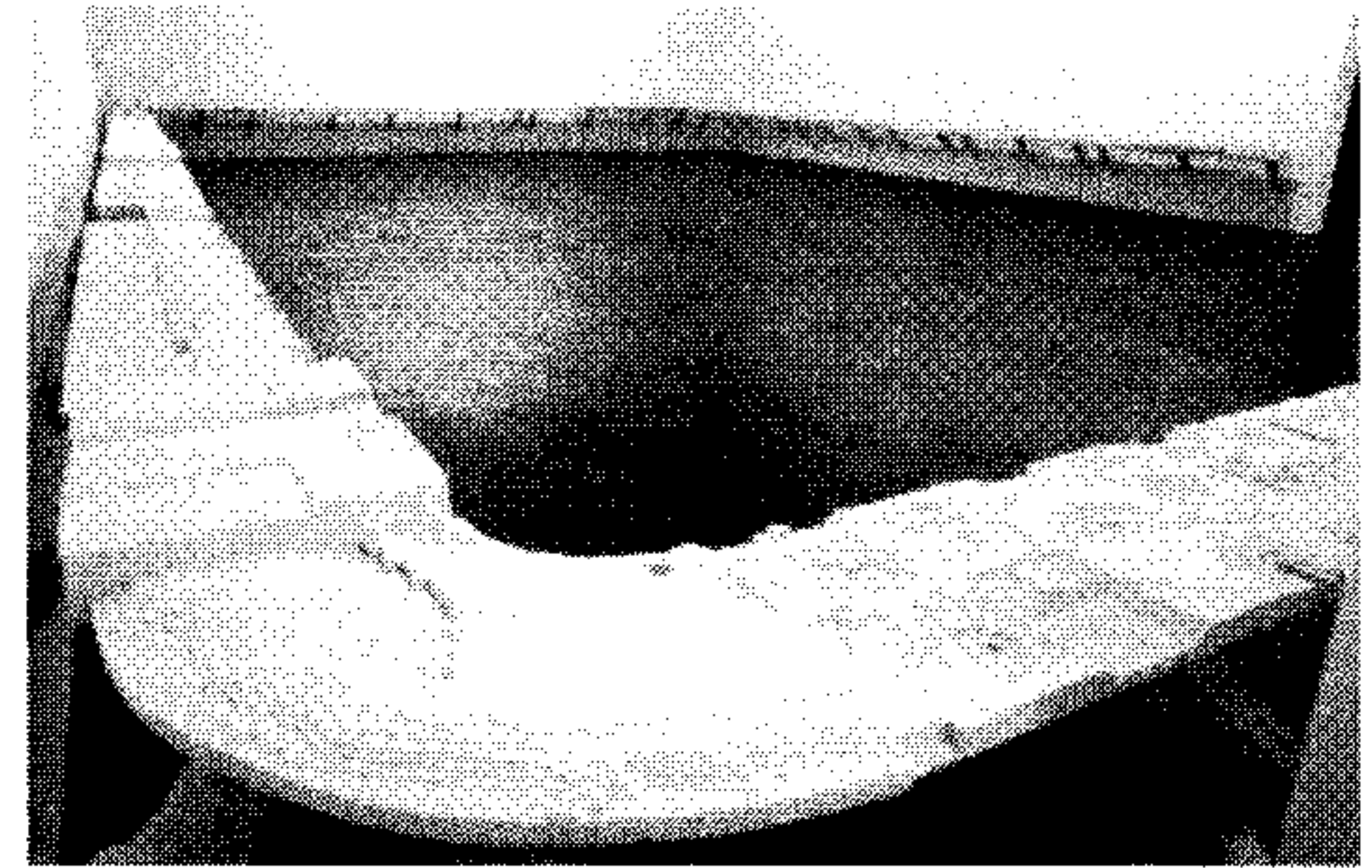


Fig. 12-2 Shirley Tse, *Polymathicstyrene*, polystyrene, dimensions variable, 2000. Collection of Shoshana Wayne Gallery (Photo courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery and the artist)

Plastic Material

"...more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformations: as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible."—Roland Barthes observed sometime ago.¹⁹ Plastic's multiplicity in terms of appearance, properties, chemical make-up, technical production, and usage, ("a wonderful material of a thousand uses")²⁰ defies the dichotomy between surface and depth. Take the example of a newly-purchased computer still in its original box from the manufacturer. Plastic is the packing material (large thin vinyl wrapping sheet and bulky packing moulds) as well as the content—essential parts of the machine (circuit board, utility cards, switches, the body, cord, and plug). As Tse writes, "It might seem strange to talk about plastic, now when new technologies are cyber and digital. However, let us not forget that plastic is practically the material condition for most technological innovations."²¹ Plastic's ability to take on so many forms allows it to serve in varying instances as structure and surface. "Plastic, being post-human, renegotiates the hierarchy and challenges such oppositions by forging a simultaneity of both."²²

Tse's most in-depth investigation of the properties of plastic in relation to surface, structure, as well as identity, comes in *Polymathicstyrene* (2000).²³ (fig.12-2) Using a mechanical hand router, she has carved each

of the two hundred pale blue polystyrene blocks, the material used commercially for insulation. Tse literally mines the material for meaning. Displayed at waist height and encircling the four walls of a gallery, segments of the work hover inches away from the wall and are supported by diagonal brackets in the same material. The suspension of the installation reminds the viewer that its material is both strong and light, properties that render it ideal for industrial applications at the same time as they induce an unworldly quality in the piece. Even the title signals that the overlapping of multiple perspectives (polymath-polystyrene) is inherent in the sculpture.

Through the process of handcraft, Tse reveals meanings hidden in the mechanically produced blocks. She provides a key to her process in a single block by creating a series of indentations using different sized router bits. Employing this limited vocabulary, Tse has created a series of connected blocks that altogether function like an unfurled scroll. In the absence of a single perspective, the viewer reads the contiguous blocks as single expressions, diptychs, and sometimes triptychs. The meanings of these sculptural units are as malleable as the materials: some blocks appear like models of archaeological ruins, others like magnified circuit boards, and still others like miniature landscapes rutted by time and natural forces. By collapsing the boundary between substance and scale, as well as merging positive and negative forms, Tse reminds us that a defining quality of plastic is its ability to adhere to any form.²⁴

Polymathicstyrene has emerged from Tse's early small-scale experiment with the construction of Styrofoam packing material, such as *Untitled* (1996), in which Styrofoam packing blocks are used to build a large-scale sculpture. (fig.12-3) In this piece, she has begun to investigate "the space in-between" products and their containers.²⁵ Tse constructs Styrofoam blocks, which normally function as packaging stabilizers of electronic products, into an unstable conglomeration, relying on the non-existent mass of each individual block to hold the entire structure together.²⁶

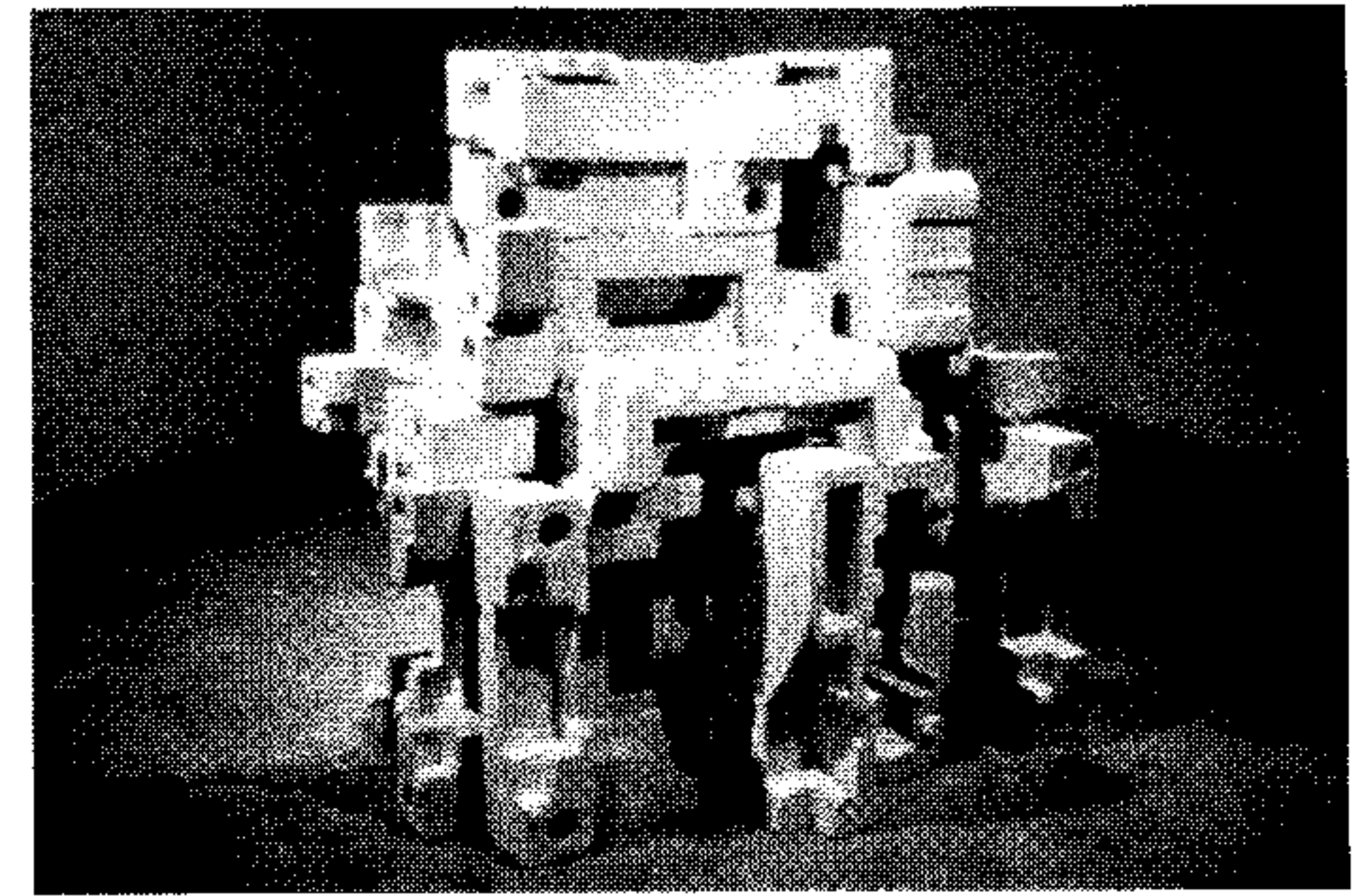


Fig. 12-3 Shirley Tse, *Untitled*, polystyrene, 1996 (Photo courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery and the artist)

Furthermore, Tse emphasizes the industrial production of Styrofoam by meticulously hand cutting vinyl and covering each oddly-shaped form with machine-like precision. The particular process reminds one of Donald Judd in his mimicry of the industrial process, but the sense of abstraction in Judd's work is denied through the reference to familiar packing shapes.²⁷ Despite their shared attention to technique, Tse's art implicitly alludes to matters about transportation in the global economy and Judd's focus remains in the process of production. By using material identified with transportation and shipping containers, Tse articulates that space cannot simply be described as filled or empty. In an attempt to give Styrofoam that occupies "the space in-between" a new identity, she highlights its normally forgotten role as well as its means of production. The shapes of the packing blocks, which are contingent on the forms of the objects they support, reveal Styrofoam's hyper-dependence on its context for meaning.

Plastic Context

Tse's art dwells on the process of transit and the theme of movement that are seen in her use of packing molds in *Untitled* is also alluded to by *Isopor*, already mentioned, with respect to the destination Fortaleza in the coastal Ceara state of north-east Brazil. (fig.12-1) Tse visited the beach resort as an exhibiting artist at the 2003 *Bienal Ceara America* and

described the culture there as “saturated with Styrofoam.”²⁸ From colorful boogie boards used to surf the local waves to beverage coolers encasing beer and other drinks in the tropical heat, plastic molds itself to the needs of a particular culture. By investigating the multiple forms of plastic’s saturation, Tse believes the substance also “provides numerous vantage points from which we can look at technology.”²⁹

Paul Virilio, the French philosopher who theorizes how technology has fractured society and broken the border between the city and its periphery, provides further insight into Tse’s engagement with nature (the America Southwest, deep snow and ice, to be discussed later) as a strategy to present plastic’s denatured character. He argues that the expansion of urban space beyond its traditional limits has created a sense of dislocation:

*Since that which is interactive is interchangeable, the urban no longer has a form with the exception, however of this “form-image” without dimension, this point, this punctum that is everywhere such that the measurable expanse is nowhere, following the example of this nodal, this Pascalian node, center that excludes all “circumference,” the very idea of any “periphery,”... the resultant crisis of territorial citizenship, of localization, is a circumstance beyond measure affecting simultaneously places, men, justice and law, politically comparable to the crisis of the notion of dimension. . . .*³⁰

In similar respect, Tse observes that natural landscapes, which have not been impacted by urban sprawl, highlight plastic’s instability of form – an instability rarely noted in the urban context where plastic is ubiquitous.

At the same time, Tse’s art critiques Virilio’s concepts that are largely centered on the digital rather than the material. While Virilio laments the loss of the traditional notion of the “local,” Tse attempts to put its new meaning into form, or at the very least, to propose a material that can respond to, or is an analogue to, global mobility. About the local and global, Virilio explains that: “A global de-localization, which affects the very nature not merely of ‘national’ but of ‘social’ identity, throwing into question not so much the nation-state, but the city, the geopolitics of nations.”³¹ In comparison, Tse locates the “dislocation” not in place, but in the material of plastic.

Virilio appears to share a common perspective with Tse in his writing about film rather than the urban landscape. In writing about Étienne-Jules Marey’s film technique, he comments on Marey’s ability to reveal the importance of light in making the invisible visible in film: “He makes it [light] the leading lady in the chrono-photographic universe: if he observes the movement of a liquid it’s due to the artifice of shiny pastilles in suspension; for animal movement he uses little metallicized stripes etc.

With him the effect of the real becomes that of the readiness of a luminous emission, what is given to see is due to the phenomena of acceleration and deceleration in every respect identifiable with intensities of light. He treats light like a shadow of time.”³² Like Marey’s ability to foreground light’s role in film, Tse’s art removes plastic from its everyday use, manipulates it, and by doing so, reflects on its very ability to adapt to so many common uses.

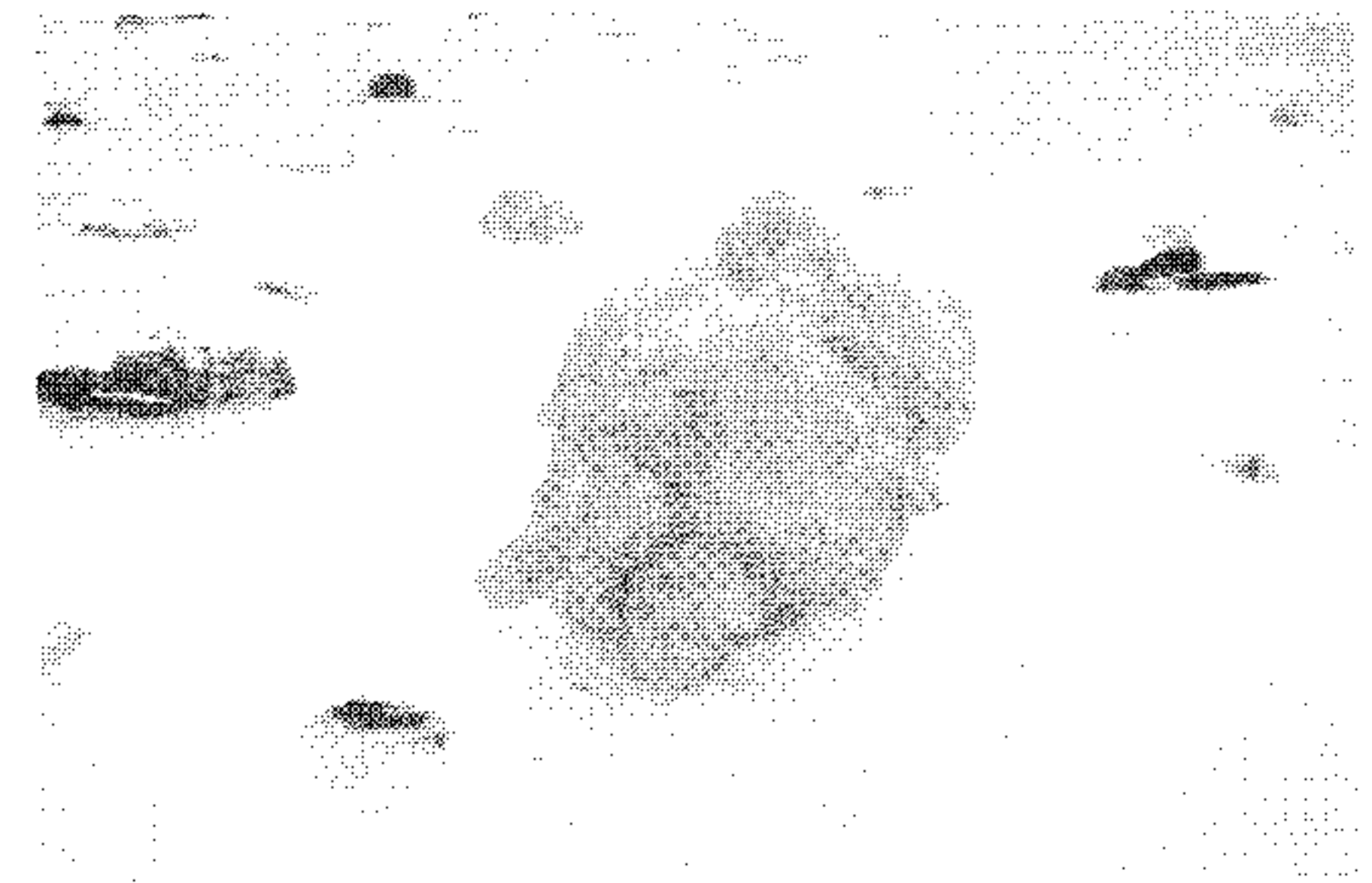


Fig. 12-4 Shirley Tse, *Not Exactly A...*, C-print, 20 inches x 30 inches, 1998, Dale Anderson collection (Photo courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery and the artist)



Fig. 12-5 Shirley Tse, *Diaspora? Touristy?*, C-print 26 inches x 40 inches, 2000, Collection of Shoshana Wayne Gallery. (Photo courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery and the artist)

In *Not Exactly A...* (1998) (fig. 12-4) and *Diaspora? Touristy?* (2000) (fig. 12-5), Tse places plastic sculptures in “nature”, such as on icy ground or the rocky surface in a red rock cliff, both away from traces of human dwellings, to emphasize the “nature” of plastic. The point made is that in human society, so saturated by its presence, plastic’s nature is naturalized or ignored. *Diaspora? Touristy?* shows a series of simple box sculptures sown from pieces of bright blue bubble wrap. They stand out starkly in the Southwestern desert, traversed by Tse on a cross-country trip. Analogous to the imposition of handcraft on the Styrofoam blocks in the *Untitled* and *Polymathicstyrene*, the monotonous desert landscape with its odd rock formations and the lack of vegetation highlights the manufactured status of the sculpture’s hand-sown translucent surface. A dialogue is established between the unnatural qualities of nature and the properties of plastic that adapt to its surroundings.

Similarly, in *Not Exactly A...*, Tse places humanoid looking forms constructed from shocking pink smooth plastic onto the icy Canadian landscape during her artist residence in Banff, Alberta. Even though the plastic seems to share iridescence similar to that of the surrounding ice, its ability to adapt to this otherworldly natural landscape is amplified. Tse seems to replay, as demonstrative that plastic’s ability for expression lies in its context, or more appropriately, in its ability to adapt to contextual demands.

Tse’s confrontation with the natural, as construct, is seen most clearly when she creates her own world in *Shelf Life* (2002)—her only installation built from custom-fabricated parts.³³ (fig. 12-6) The environmental installation recalls a small segment of *Polymathicstyrene* magnified multifold into human scale.³⁴ *Shelf Life* is designed for audiences to walk on and across its Styrofoam form—an undulating central platform connected to a smaller irregular island by a serpentine ledge. Tse hints at the evolution of her work in writing, “Plastics are mutants of nature, and in their course of mutation, they redefine nature altogether.”³⁵ The main platform and its umbilical extension provide receptacles of soft plastic that give way to individuals sitting or lying down before the gradual regression of the surface on the release of external pressure by departing audience. The yoking of the monumental scale and the inviting malleable surface in the landscape points to a new environment that is alien and seductive. In negotiating the plastic landscape, we are reminded of the brittleness of Styrofoam, normally used in protecting objects that now squeaks and gives way under our body parts and bare feet. At the same time, even the illusion of the unique plastic environment is belied by the over-determined saturation of plastic in our daily life.

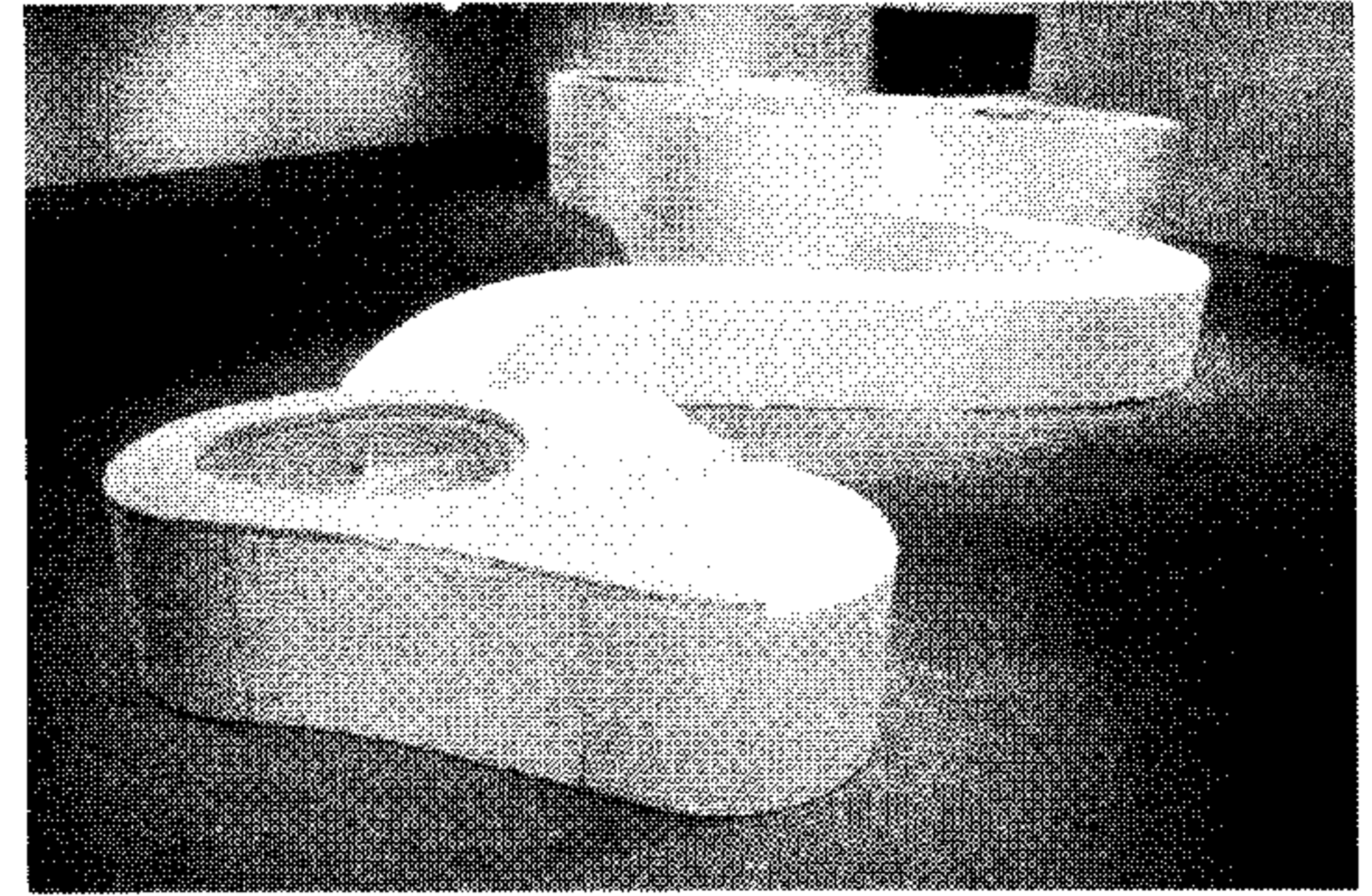


Fig. 12-6 Shirley Tse, *Shelf Life*, polystyrene, memory foam and acrylic, dimensions variable, 2002 (Photo courtesy of the Capp Street Project, the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, California College of the Arts)

Plasticity of Meaning

If, as we argue in the introduction, one of Tse’s important contributions to the discussion of globalism is to give form to ideas that often remain undefined or in the realm of theory, then how does her reification of these concepts help our understanding? To answer this question it is helpful to again turn to Jameson and his discussion of contemporary forms in architecture. Jameson argues that contemporary architecture presents the subject with a newly mutated space that requires the subject to transform him or herself. “My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space.”³⁶ Tse did not have to overcome traditional perceptual habits that Jameson describes because her world in Hong Kong was dominated even in her youth by the very forces that define our globalized world.

By discounting the traditional binary models that are still in effect in many discussions of globalism, especially in regards to Asia, Tse offers a new paradigm for discussion. Her forms do not simply stand as symbols

or signs of a new way of thinking about identity in a globalized world, but they are products of the very forces she seeks to illustrate. Jameson describes how Tse's ability to put these ideas into form can affect change when he states that the new forms create "an imperative to grow new organs to expand our sensoria and our bodies to some new, as yet, unimaginable perhaps ultimately impossible, dimension."³⁷ Tse's art makes a strong argument that this new dimension will not be Cartesian, but rather plastic, and therefore demand a new means for understanding its impact on our identity.

Notes

¹ For a recent survey of artists investigating different aspects of plastic, see Nancy M. Doll, *One Word: Plastic* (Greensboro, NC: Witherspoon Art Gallery, 2003).

² Among well know artistic efforts for their critique of global economy on modern or postmodern subjectivity are the research activities of *Multiplicity*, the Milan-based collective of artists, architects, photographers, and urban developers with focus on contemporary Europe; the photography of human migrations by Sebastiao Salgado; the photography and writings of Allan Sekula on transformations shaped by movements of labor forces. See *Multiplicity, Uncertain States of Europe: A Trip through a Changing Europe* (Milan: Skira, 2003); Sebastiao Salgado, *Migrations: Humanity in Transition* (New York: Aperture, 2000), and Allan Sekula, *Allan Sekula: Performance under Working Conditions* (Vienna: Gerneralli Foundation, 2003).

³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3. From the outset, Appadurai probes the basic Marxian belief "commoditization" and "religiosity" being causes for the diminishment of human imagination and agency in industrial economy—(pp.1-22).

⁴ Appadurai, 3.

⁵ Appadurai, 83.

⁶ Tse completed *Isopor* in February 2003, two months after her return, as an exhibiting artist at *Bienal Ceara America, De Ponta-cabeca* held at Centro Dragao Do Mar, Museu de Arte Contemporanea in Fortaleza, Brazil.

⁷ Akbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 74. Abbas' comments are conceived in a "culture of disappearance" that connotes "more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else" (page 7).

⁸ Abbas, 75. Abbas refers to the imperative of "jostling for position" among changes that connote "desire", "memory", and "anticipation". Imbricated in buildings and the architecture of Hong Kong, is different changes "without clear distinction". A similar imperative is staged in another instance when the same

term "Para-Site", used by Abbas in the earlier cited comment (note 7), is chosen, but for a different purpose.

Para-Site Art Space is also the artist-managed exhibition space for installation art in Hong Kong, founded in the 1990's. According to its co-founder, Warren Chi-Wo Leung, the name alludes to the device of intervention raised by the cultural critic and theorist, Rey Chow. In her discussion of the current (post-colonial) positioning of intellectuals including those engaged in Chinese studies in the academy, Chow suggests "diasporic consciousness" as the "reality of being intellectual". The recommended "tactic" engaged to circumvent borders for being hegemonic conceives of borders as "*para-sites* that never take over a field its entirely but erode it slowly and *tactically*". Chow comments the notion of "tactic" distinguished from "strategy" is informed by Michel de Certeau. (Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics off Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993,16; and email communication with Warren C. Leung on 13 October, 2003.)

In addition, Parasite Collective is a group of international artists based in America. For references on Tse and/or the art of Hong Kong, see Draza Fratto O'Brien, *Shirley Tse: Sculpture and Photography 1996-2000* (Hong Kong: Para/Site Art Space, 2000); and David Clarke, *Hong Kong: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 70-99.

⁹ Abbas, 63-76. The "historical association" of tea with the Opium War (1840-42) refers to the cultural changes as well as disruptions in territorial administration after opium began to be imported in increasingly large quantities into China in the eighteenth century by British traders in collusion with their court. Until then China had a trade surplus from exports, among which tea was a popular item since the sixteenth century.

¹⁰ Abbas, 75-76.

¹¹ Abbas, 71.

¹² For an insightful critique of the troubling binary East/West and its "kin", hybridity, see Joan Kee, "Art, Hong Kong, and Hybridity: A Task of Consideration," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2:2 (June 2003), 90-98.

¹³ Shirley Tse, "Post-colonial mutation and artificiality: Hong Kong a case study," unpublished manuscript presented at the Chance Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada, 8 November 1996, unpaginated.

¹⁴ See Walter Benjamin, "The Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn trans., Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-51.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation," reprinted in Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 164.

¹⁶ Abbas, 4.

¹⁷ Abbas explains that, "It is not true, as some might wish to believe, that if you scratch the surface of a Hong Kong person you will find a Chinese identity waiting to be born... This suggests that 1997 will not be simply the moment of liberation

from colonial rule; it will also mark a moment of transition to a form of governance that has no clear historical precedents." Abbas, 2.

¹⁸ Tse experienced first-hand the democracy movement symbolized by the event on 4 June 1989, having gone to Beijing with a delegation from Hong Kong sometime before the fateful day. Disenchanted with the disintegrating movement for a number of reasons, she made her own way back on land to Hong Kong. (Authors' interview with Shirley Tse, 26 April, 2003.)

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, "Plastic," in *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 97.

²⁰ Andrea DiNoto, *Art Plastic* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 24, quoted in Shirley Tse, "Technology, plastic, and art," unpublished manuscript presented at *Art and Technology*, 22nd annual conference of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, University of California, Irvine, May 1998, 6.

²¹ Tse, "Technology, plastic, and art," 3.

²² Tse, "Technology, plastic, and art," 9.

²³ For reviews of this installation see Ralph Rugoff, "Ralph Rugoff on Shirley Tse," *Artforum International* 39, 5 (Jan. 2001), 122; Lisa Panzera, "Shirley Tse at Murray Guy," *Art in America* 89, 1 (Jan. 2001), 119; and Draza Fratto O'Brien, "Shirley Tse and Tran T. Kin-Trang at Shoshana Wayne Gallery," *Artweek* 31, 6 (June 2000), 21-22.

²⁴ Jessica Bradley, *Provisional Worlds* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002), 18.

²⁵ Draza Fratto O'Brien, "The Flow of Plastic," *Shirley Tse, Sculpture and Photography 1996-2000* (Santa Monica, CA: Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 2000), 2.

²⁶ O'Brien, "The Flow of Plastic," 2.

²⁷ In a his essay on Judd's work, Rudi Fuchs describes the dilemma seen in Judd's work on materials that are visible in everyday life, "The critical debate about Minimal art became a somewhat philosophical debate: what does this art actually mean? What moved artists to make this kind of object? The discussion took place, and is still going on, without most participants taking the trouble to actually *look* at these objects. There was not reason to look. The work was simple and minimal; we see that, but then what?" In reference to Fuchs' comment, we might add Tse's art with its familiar packing forms and plastic materials challenges the viewer in a similar fashion to go beyond the material and question how the installation or sculpture functions as a whole. Rudi Fuchs, "Donald Judd (Artist at Work)," in *Donald Judd*, Nicholas Serota, ed. (New York: Distributed Arts Publishers, 2004), 19; see also Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: 1955-1968* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002).

²⁸ Authors' second interview with Shirley Tse, 26 August 2003.

²⁹ Tse, "Technology, plastic, and art," 4.

³⁰ Paul Virilio, "Critical Space," in *The Virilio Reader*, James Der Derian, ed. (London: Blackwell, 1998), 59-60.

³¹ Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, Chris Turner trans. (New York: Verso, 2000), 10. For another position counter to Virilio's anxiety over digital technology, see Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

³² Paul Virilio, "The Aesthetics of Disappearance," in *The Paul Virilio Reader*, Steve Redhead, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 64.

³³ *Shelf Life* was exhibited at the Wattis Institute, California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) in late 2002, followed by another showing at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica. Subsequently, the installation was dismantled. See Ralph Rugoff, "Fantastic Plastic," *Shirley Tse: Capp Street Project Shelf Life* (San Francisco: CCAC Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2002).

³⁴ Rugoff, "Fantastic Plastic," 1.

³⁵ Tse, "Post-colonial mutation and artificiality."

³⁶ Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 10-11.

³⁷ Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 11.